



Research Paper

# Menas Enforcers: Toxic Masculinity and Patriarchy in Elena Ferrante's

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## Abstract

This paper examines the roles of male figures in Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend* as embodiments of toxic masculinity. The novel is set in Post-war Naples, primarily in poor, working class neighbourhood. Toxic masculinity and patriarchy not only marginalize women but also restrict man's emotional and psychological development. Patriarchy, understood as a system of male dominance rooted in social, political and familial structures, add to these behaviours, continuing gender inequality across generations. This paper uses Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend* as a literary case study to explain how these forces operate in both private and public areas. Ultimately, this paper contributes to ongoing conversations about gender and power highlighting how literature can be used as an important tool in understanding the impact of toxic masculinity and patriarchy in contemporary society. Through a generalized but grounded analysis, it highlights the importance of reexamining cultural narratives that shape our understanding of gender roles and human relationships.

**Keywords:** toxic masculinity, patriarchy, gender roles, gender and power, gender inequality

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## I. Introduction

Toxic masculinity and patriarchy are deeply rooted in the way our society, culture and minds are shaped today. These ideas affect not just institutions and relationships but also how individuals see themselves and behave. Toxic masculinity and patriarchy are two ideas that often go together. They both describe how society expects men and women to behave and how these expectations can hurt everyone. Patriarchy is the system that supports male dominance and female inequality. It creates an environment where toxic masculinity can grow. Toxic masculinity is a set of rules about what it means to be a man, focusing on dominance, hiding emotions, being aggressive and controlling others. While society sometimes rewards these traits, they can cause harm by strengthening strict ideas of gender and looking down on qualities like vulnerability and empathy. It has existed for a very long time in most societies. In a patriarchal society, men are often seen as leaders, decision makers and providers while women are expected to take care of the home and family. Because of patriarchy, women have often been denied equal rights such as education, job opportunities and political power. Even today, in many places, women are paid less than men for the same work or are judged more harshly for their choices. It limits women's freedom, but it also affects men by forcing them to act in certain ways. Both patriarchy and toxic masculinity create inequality and unhappiness. Women face discrimination, harassment and violence. Men, on the other hand, face pressure to act tough and hide their feelings. This can lead to loneliness and emotional pain. Society also suffers. When half the population is treated unfairly and the other half is forced to hide their emotions, people cannot live freely or cooperate fully. In *My Brilliant Friend*, Elena Ferrante shows how the neighbourhood in Naples is controlled by patriarchy. The men make most of the decisions, use violence to keep control and expect women to obey them. The women are often judged by how they behave, how they look and who they marry. Toxic masculinity harms both men and women. They grow up trapped by certain unrealistic expectations, unable to express feelings or show kindness. Ferrante uses the friendship between Lila and Elena to show how they both try to break the patriarchal of this world. Their fight for freedom, education and respect is a way of resisting the patriarchy and the toxic masculinity that surrounds them. Elena Ferrante is a pseudonymous Italian novelist. Ferrante's books, originally published in Italian, have

been translated into many languages. Her four-book series of *Neapolitan Novels* are her most widely known works. Ferrante has kept her identity secret since her 1992 debut. Speculation and several theories as to her identity, based on information Ferrante has given in interviews as well as analysis drawn from the content of her novels, have been put forth and routinely denied.

## II. Review of Literature

Bell Hooks, in her book, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*, highlights the internal damage patriarchy inflicts on men by suppressing their emotions by saying, “the first act of violence that patriarchy demands of males is not towards women. Instead, patriarchy demands of all males that they engage in acts of psychic self-mutilation, that they kill off the emotional parts of themselves.” (66)

Tom Winton emphasizes that while it harms women most, men are also trapped and damaged by the misogyny perpetuated by this system. He says, “Toxic masculinity is a burden to men... It narrows their lives. Distorts them. And that sort of damage radiates.” (Guardian 1)

Allan G. Johnson's *The Gender Knot: Unraveling our Patriarchal Legacy* (1997) offers one of the foundational analyses of patriarchy as a social system that privileges men while limiting emotional and relational freedom for all genders. His work sets the groundwork for later discussions about how patriarchy shapes men's identities and emotional behaviour, even if it does not use the specific term toxic masculinity. (27)

Clementine Ford's *Boys Will Be Boys: Power, Patriarchy and the Toxic Bonds of Mateship* (2018) directly link toxic masculinity to the patriarchal system that defines and limits gender expression. Ford argues that patriarchal culture “creates a disturbingly limited idea of what it is to be a man”, leading to emotional harm for men and reinforcing social inequality.

Her analysis focuses on contemporary media and politics, showing how male privilege and fear of vulnerability sustain gender hierarchies. (18)

Elizabeth Pearson's (2019) article “Extremism and Toxic Masculinity: The Man Question Re-posed” in *International Affairs* examines how patriarchal and toxic masculine ideals intersect with toxic ideologies. (1251)

Ben Almassi's *Nontoxic: Masculinity, Allyship and Feminist Philosophy* (2022) offers a constructive perspective, proposing models of masculinity that reject patriarchal values while embracing empathy, equality and emotional awareness. Almassi reframes masculinity not as inherently toxic but as socially shaped identity that can be reimaged through feminist ethics and allyship. (1-13)

### Objective

To understand how male dominance and gender expectations affect the lives, relationships and personal growth of women, in the selected text

## III. Methodology

This research uses a qualitative approach to study how toxic masculinity and patriarchy are shown in *My Brilliant Friend*. The novel is read closely to find references of male behaviour, gender roles and power relations. Important scenes, dialogues and character actions are analyzed to understand how these themes affect the main characters, especially Lila and Elena. The study also uses ideas from feminist literary theory to explain how Ferrante shows the struggles of women living in a male-dominated society. To support the analysis, secondary sources such as literary articles, reviews and interviews are also used.

### Analysis

#### Forms of Patriarchal Enforcement

Every individual has their own personality and individuality and that's goes same with the woman. Woman herself only have to stand for their rights like Sita did and ends all the injustice which was happening to her. Women are not an instrument in hands of men but they are equal of men with equal and important status in both personal and social life (Priya 152). Ferrante showcases how the fathers, brothers and husbands use violence to stay in control. They hit women and girls to punish them and teach them. For example, Elena's father hits her when she disobeys and Lila's father throws her out of the window when she argues. Men say they hit out of love or to educate. As a result girls learn to think this is normal and believe that they must obey men to be safe or loved. Men in the novel use violence to show power in public. They fight or threaten each other to gain respect in society. Don Achille is feared

because he lends money and is strong. The Solar brothers use violence and fear to control others.

### **Sexual Domination and Gendered Shame**

Male characters showcase their power through sexual violence or exploitation (rape, molestation, forced power). Girls internalize fear of becoming like abused women. For instance, Elena's fear of becoming like her mother is a symbolic shaping while Lila's marriage is ruined by rape and beatings. In a stark dialogue, Lila describes sex and male anatomy to Elena in terms of violence and contamination: "Those guys don't just kiss- they bite like mad dogs. And instead of the little thingies' boys have, they've got purple snakes that squirt poison in your belly". This quote encapsulates the girls' fear and perception of sex as an inherently violent and scary obligation imposed by men.

### **Women's Response, Resistance and Internalization**

In *My Brilliant Friend*, Ferrante's female characters, Elena and Lila, respond to toxic masculinity and patriarchy in varied and complex ways. Lila stands out as a symbol of defiance. She resists traditional gender roles with her intelligence, wit, and refusal to submit quietly to male control whether it's in school, business, or marriage. Her challenges to male authority, though sometimes subtle, show a powerful inner resistance. Elena, by contrast, often internalizes patriarchal values. She doubts herself, feels inferior to Lila, and sees her own worth through male approval. Her pursuit of education and beauty are both genuine and shaped by external expectations of success and femininity.

The female characters are often caught between resisting male control and reinforcing it.

Sometimes women judge or compete based on male-defined standards (e.g., beauty, modesty, obedience), showing how patriarchy works not just through men, but through internalized beliefs and social pressure. "You're my brilliant friend, you have to be the best of all, boys and girls". This line, spoken by Lila to Elena, is full of support and unfulfilled yearning. It's a dialogue that shows Lila channeling her own blocked ambition into Elena, urging her to resist the limits placed on women and excel beyond the expectations of their community.

### **Toxic Masculinity's Toll on Men**

While men in *My Brilliant Friend* follow strict male roles, the book also shows that these roles hurt men too. Men are told they must be strong, angry and never show feelings. This stops them from growing or having close relationships. Stefano Carracci, for example, first seems kind and respectful. But, after marriage, he becomes violent with Lila. This shows he feels he must act tough to be seen as a "real man". Don Achille and Solarà brothers use violence and power to dominate others. But, this makes them lonely. People hate them and their power goes away. Elena's father is cold and strict. He acts like his only job is to provide for his family and punish them. He cannot show love or talk to his daughter in a kind way. These men are always taught to be strong and in control. They cannot be soft, kind or grow as people. They are stuck in roles which stop them from changing. For instance, Elena's father is challenged for not being man enough to beat his daughter. When Elena's mother, in an argument over Elena's schooling, tells her husband, "You don't even know how to hit your daughter", it is a direct challenge to his perceived masculinity. In response to this goading, he snaps and slaps Elena savagely, demonstrating how men are forced by community expectations to perform aggression, even against their will and nature in order to maintain honor and authority.

### **Possibilities of Transformation**

Ferrante shows that patriarchy is very strong and hard to change. But small changes can happen, even if they are difficult and cause problems. Elena thinks education and writing can help her escape. Doing well in school and leaving her neighborhood shows she can grow and be independent. Lila is stuck in a bad marriage. But she fights back in her own way—by being smart, strong, and later by starting a business. Still, her fighting does not free her completely. These examples show that change can happen, but it is not easy. Leaving the system means giving up things. Even people who fight against it are still affected by it. Maestro Oliviero, the girl's teacher, tells them, "If we don't start showing the boys now that you're like them, better actually, they'll crush you". This statement highlights the explicit understanding that women must constantly fight against male dominance and education is one of the few tools they have to resist being crushed by the patriarchal system of their quartiere.

## **IV. Conclusion**

This text shows how patriarchy and toxic masculinity affect the lives of men and women in a poor neighborhood in Naples. Men keep a strict system where they must be strong, controlling, and sometimes violent. But this system also hurts and traps the men themselves. Women respond in different ways—they sometimes fight back,

sometimes follow the rules, and sometimes accept the way things are. They try to find their own identity while dealing with unfair rules. There are moments when change seems possible, like through school, standing up for themselves, or friendship. But these changes are weak and full of problems. Ferrante's story does not give easy answers. It shows a complicated world where power, pain, and strength all exist together. The book shows the hard fight to change ideas about gender and identity in a society ruled by men.

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