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AN EXISTENTIALIST FEMINISM ANALYSIS IN KRISTIN HANNAH'S NOVEL *THE WOMEN* (2024)

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Abstract
This study aims to analyze the struggles of women veterans in Kristin Hannah's novel *The Women* (2024) through the lens of Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism. It focuses on the portrayal of women veterans, particularly Frankie (Frances McGrath) while analyzing the construction of gender roles and the dynamics between men and women within the society. Drawing from De Beauvoir's seminal work *The Second Sex*, which critiques the historical marginalization of women as the "Other" in patriarchal societies. It analyzes how the novel critiques patriarchal structures while celebrating women's resilience and agency. A descriptive qualitative method emphasizing narrative analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of Frankie's emotional journey and the broader societal issues faced by women veterans. Frankie's experiences during and after the Vietnam War highlight the marginalization and lack of recognition faced by women veterans. Her journey illustrates core existentialist feminist principles, including the rejection of patriarchal norms and the assertion of self-definition. The study underscores the novel's depiction of women's solidarity and mutual support as tools for resisting oppression and reclaiming identity. By emphasizing the relevance of De Beauvoir's philosophy, this research contributes to feminist literary studies, encouraging a reevaluation of patriarchal systems and greater recognition of women's contributions.

Keywords: existentialist feminism, inequality of women and men, marginalization, patriarchal society, women veteran

Introduction

In the 1960s, the United States experienced significant upheaval both domestically and internationally. Among the most notable challenges was the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. Although it was not the sole cause of the Vietnam War, the Cold War provided a critical geopolitical backdrop for the conflict. Concerned about the spread of communism in Southeast Asia, the United States took active measures to support South Vietnam's government to stem the influence of communist ideology in the region (Herring, 2001; Logevall, 2012).

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During this period, domestic upheaval within the United States further complicated the nation's position. Social movements, including the Civil Rights Movement, the feminist movement, and the anti-war movement, challenged traditional power structures and called for significant societal change. These movements placed immense pressure on the government to address both domestic and international crises (Anderson, 1995; Hall, 2005). Kristin Hannah's historical novel *The Women* (2024) offers a poignant portrayal of this era, shedding light on the sacrifices made by young men and women during the Vietnam War. The novel particularly highlights the experiences of women who served in Vietnam, whose contributions were often overlooked or dismissed. Many women recounted being told, "There were no women in Vietnam," a phrase that encapsulated the erasure of their service and sacrifices (Collins, 2023; Stur, 2011).

In *The Women* (2024), Kristin Hannah crafts the story of Frances "Frankie" McGrath, an idealistic young nurse from Coronado Island in Southern California. Raised in an affluent family, Frankie's father was a successful contractor, and her mother was a socialite. Her brother, Finley, had recently graduated from the Naval Academy. Determined to prove herself both as a professional nurse and a patriot, Frankie joined the Army Nurse Corps during the Vietnam War. However, her experiences profoundly transformed her. After two years of service, Frankie returned home deeply affected by her time in Vietnam, grappling with depression, anxiety, and agitation. Through Frankie's story, Hannah sheds light on the struggles of Army nurses and the lack of recognition they received from both the government and society upon their return (Hannah, 2024; Jeffords, 1989).

This lack of acknowledgment for women's contributions during the Vietnam War inspired my interest in analyzing Kristin Hannah's novel through the lens of Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism. De Beauvoir, a prominent French philosopher and feminist, explored gender inequality in her seminal work *The Second Sex*. She argued that society conceptualizes women as objects within a patriarchal system, perpetuating their subordination to men (de Beauvoir, 1949; Moi, 1994).

As a combat nurse, Frankie exemplifies the bravery and dedication of women who served alongside American soldiers in Vietnam. Although they did not wield weapons, these women worked tirelessly to save lives under harrowing conditions, demonstrating extraordinary courage and resilience. As the soldiers' creed declares, "No man left behind," it is imperative to extend this principle to the women veterans of the Vietnam War: "No woman should be forgotten" (Stur, 2011; Vuic, 2010).

This research focuses on Frances (Frankie), the main character, as she presents herself as a military veteran during a time when women received different recognition than men for their contributions to the war effort. The sociology of literature can be described as an exploration of the relationship between literature and society, focusing on readers of literary works, the societal context of literary creation, and the public's reception of these works. It examines literature through a social lens, emphasizing society, its environment, and culture. Literary works crafted by authors are shaped by their origins, the society in which they reside, and their own imagination (Eagleton, 1996; Griswold, 1993).

Literature Review

Several studies have employed Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism theory to analyze literary works. For instance, Martinus et al. (2022) examined E*xistentialist Feminism in Acevedo's with the Fire on High,* highlighting how women achieve equality through knowledge, transformative agency, and autonomy. Similarly, Silani (2023) explored E*xistentialist Feminism in Because This Is My First Life*, critiquing gender roles and emphasizing women's struggles for autonomy and equality. Mustika (2022) analyzed W*omen's Struggles in Kristin Hannah's The Great Alone,* using a feminist existentialist lens to explore themes of freedom, identity, and gender relations in a patriarchal world. Suhadi et al. (2022) applied de Beauvoir's theory to *Andrea Hirata's novels Padang Bulan dan Cinta di Dalam Gelas*, revealing how women are often positioned as cultural objects, constrained by societal expectations. Lestari et al. (2023) analyzed E*xistentialist Feminism in the Film Bombshell (2019),* identifying three aspects of women's lives as "the other": unequal gender roles, violence against women, and sexual harassment.

These studies collectively underscore the relevance of existentialist feminism in understanding women's struggles for autonomy and recognition in patriarchal societies. They provide a theoretical foundation for analyzing Frankie's experiences in *The Women* (2024) and her journey toward self-creation and empowerment.

Method

The qualitative descriptive method is a research approach that examines phenomena, characteristics, and quality. This strategy is used to define characters or figures based on the behavior they exhibit in their environment. The qualitative descriptive method aims to describe the female main character's autonomy, gender inequalities, and oppressive environment (Creswell, 2014; Sandelowski, 2000).

Qualitative research is descriptive and tends to use an inductive approach. The researcher uses theory as explanatory material for the data being analyzed. Generally, qualitative research describes a phenomenon that occurs naturally without interference from an experiment or a special planned treatment (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Data analysis technique

According to Faruk (2017) and referenced by Savitri (2024), data analysis techniques comprise a collection of research methodologies that extend human cognition, as their purpose is to uncover interrelationships within data that remain concealed without such analysis.

This research uses narrative analysis to analyze the novel *The Women* (2024). Narrative analysis is a qualitative research method that aims to understand how people develop stories based on their personal experiences (McLeod, 2024). It focuses on the interpretation of these stories rather than seeing them as accurate depictions of reality. Researchers examine narratives to learn how people make sense of their lives through storytelling and the meanings they derive from their experiences (Riessman, 2008).

Findings and Discussion

Through de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism theory, four key concepts emerge: oppression and objectification, freedom and choice, self-creation, and the idea that existence precedes essence.

Oppression and objectification

Frankie's experiences during and after the Vietnam War highlight the marginalization and dehumanization of women. Her story reflects the broader societal tendency to objectify and oppress women, particularly those who defy traditional gender roles (de Beauvoir, 1949; Jeffords, 1989).

Gender expectations

Frankie is frequently scrutinized for going against traditional female roles by serving in a war zone.

> Every birthday and Christmas, Frankie had received something for her hope chest. The message then—and now—was clear: marriage made a woman whole and happy. (Hannah, 2024, p.191)

> It felt strangely discordant to Frankie that this staid, unchanging world of flowers and champagne and women in summery dresses persevered while men—and women—were dying in Vietnam. (Hannah, 2024, p. 223)

> Becky looked frightened. "Uh. How was Florence? Chad and I are going for our anniversary." "I wasn't in Florence, Bex," she said slowly, trying to calm down, pull back, be okay. Be normal. But she wasn't okay. She was standing with a bunch of debutantes and sorority girls who were planning a wedding with fresh flowers and honeymoons abroad while men their age were dying on foreign soil. Not their men, though, not their rich, pretty college boys. "I was in Vietnam." (Hannah, 2024, p. 225)

Her father's displeasure, as well as society's lack of acknowledgment, represent the restrictive attitude that women should remain in domestic or nurturing duties rather than actively participating in battle. When she returns, Frankie is pressured to adhere to traditional standards of femininity, such as marriage, motherhood, and passivity. Her rejection of these responsibilities further isolates her, as she is labelled as "unwomanly" or "broken."

Her family's point of view

On the other hand, Frankie's father does not consider her to be a whole person and considers her servitude to be a source of shame.

> Another world. Now no one welcomed you home, let alone celebrated your leaving. Suddenly she felt suffocated by the scent of lemon furniture polish and expectation. She'd been raised to be a lady, always, serene and calm, smiling, but that world, and those lessons, felt far, far away. (Hannah, 2024, p. 192)

> Frankie stood up abruptly. "I can't believe you're ashamed of me." "I have no idea who you are anymore," Dad said. "You don't want to know," Frankie said. "You think it means nothing when a woman, a nurse, goes to war. You think it's glorious that your son goes to war and embarrassing when your daughter does. (Hannah, 2024: 199) That left Frankie alone at the heroes' wall with her father. They stood there a long moment, staring up at the pictures and memorabilia. "Why isn't there a picture of me

> up there, Dad?" "We'll put your wedding photo up. That's what we do for the women in this family. You're a hero for putting up with the men." How many times had he made that joke? "Nurses died in Vietnam, Dad. (Hannah, 2024, p. 305)

> You're upsetting me with this jabble, Frankie. You're my daughter. You had no business going to war and I told you so at the time. (Hannah, 2024, p. 306)

Because he refuses to hang her picture and his rejection of her accomplishments, she is reduced to an extension of his expectations, which denies her autonomy and the successes she has achieved.

Society stereotyping nurse profession

As a nurse, Frankie's position is frequently reduced to that of a caregiver, supporting the notion that her worth is based on traditionally "feminine" attributes such as caring and sympathy.

> She'd been told for years, by the nuns, by her teachers, by her mother, that nursing was an excellent profession for a woman. Teacher. Nurse. Secretary. These were acceptable futures for a girl like her. (Hannah, 2024, p. 13)

This objectifies her by portraying her job as a natural extension of her gender rather than a competent and necessary vocation. Society limits her liberty by considering her as a nurse first and then a veteran (if at all), reducing her contributions to something passive and expected of women.

Dismissal of female contribution

Frankie's work as a nurse is perceived by society as inferior to that of male combat soldiers. Her work is perceived as "support" rather than central to the war effort, which diminishes the emotional and physical toll it had on her.

> She'd put up with the initial prejudice and disregard for her Vietnam training and become determined to show her skills. She'd worked harder and longer than most of the other nurses, put in the hours, and had taken specialized classes. In time, she'd become a surgical nurse; now she was working toward a specialization in trauma surgery. (Hannah, 2024, p. 243)

Women who participated in the Vietnam War were frequently disregarded as "volunteers" or "helpers" rather than recognized as indispensable contributors to the conflict. This devaluation perpetuates their oppression and reinforces their invisibility.

Freedom and choice

In Kristin Hannah's novel The Women, the concepts of freedom and choice are intricately entwined with the issues of gender, societal expectations, personal sacrifice, and resiliency. Through the lens of Frances McGrath, a female nurse who defies convention by serving in a war zone and struggling with the implications of her choice, the narrative delves into the challenges women faced during the Vietnam War.

Breaking gender normss

Frances McGrath's decision to serve in the military and work as a nurse in Vietnam contradicts society's expectations for women throughout the 1960s. This decision reflects her desire for independence and belief in the significance of her work, even in the face of a hostile and dominated environment.

> Women can be heroes. No one had ever said such a thing to her. Not her teachers at St. Bernadette's, not her parents. Not even Finley. Why had it never occurred to Frankie that a girl, a woman, could have a place on her father's office wall for doing something heroic or important, that a woman could invent something or discover something or be a nurse on the battlefield, could literally save lives? (Hannah, 2024, p. 13)

The decision Frances made highlights the limited freedom women had in terms of being recognized as equals in military and civilian life. Her journey represents the effort to reclaim space and voice in a system that marginalizes women.

> How did a woman go about opening up her world? How did one begin a journey when no invitation had been issued?
> It was easy for Finley; the path had been laid out for him. He was to do what all the McGrath and Alexander men did: serve his country with honor and then take over the family real estate business. (Hannah, 2024, p. 14)

This scene depicts Frankie's internal conflict: how does one create possibilities in a world that fails to provide them. It connects to the novel's greater topic of women struggling for their rightful position in history and society. The quote shows how hard it is to find a way when there are not clear roles or expectations for women in her situation. Frankie, as a female veteran, feels her experience is overlooked in a war narrative that focuses on men, making it hard for her to find her own identity.

After coming back from the war, Frankie feels really lost and disconnected. Women like her were mostly overlooked, while men received recognition for their service, even if it was controversial. This made her wonder how she could progress when society did not acknowledge her journey at all.

Consequences of freedom

After returning from Vietnam, Frankie finds a society that refuses to recognize women's contributions to the war. This highlights the contradiction in her decision: although she was free to serve, her actions cause her nation to lose understanding and a sense of belonging.

> They saw her, coming their way in her skirted Army uniform, and thrust their signs at her, as if to convince her. Someone spat at her. "Nazi bitch," one of the protesters yelled. "Go back to Vietnam!" someone yelled. "We don't want you baby killers here." Baby killers? (Hannah, 2024, p. 187)

Another scene in the novel depicts Frances and her mother meeting Dr. Benner over lunch at The Club. Frankie's mother knew him because they shared the same social circles.

> She pushed her hair out of her face, felt the sweat on her forehead. It took effort to smile. "I'm sorry. I just got home from Vietnam and…" And what? Dr. Brenner let go of her hand. "There are no women in Vietnam, dear." "There are, sir. I did two tours." (Hannah, 2024, p. 196)

Dr Benner's comment about "there are no women in Vietnam" highlights his dismissiveness, which is one of the many obstacles Frances must overcome on her journey towards self-acceptance and empowerment.

Friendship as liberation

There is a sense of solidarity and shared strength that is provided by Frances's relationships with other women throughout the story, particularly with her fellow nurses and war survivors.

> I've made two friends over here. Ethel Flint, an ER nurse from Virginia, and Barb Johnson, a surgical nurse from Georgia. They're keeping me sane. (Hannah, 2024, p.60)

> My doctor and group are helping me understand that. I should have talked about things a long time ago, I should have told you…" Frankie drew in a steadying breath and looked at her friend. Her whole body felt shaky, fragile. Vulnerable. "I should have told you that I was struggling with memories of 'Nam, been honest, but you seemed so damn okay. I thought it was all me, that I was weak or broken." (Hannah, 2024, p. 363)

> They learned to breathe, and then to talk, and then, if they were lucky, to hope. Frankie taught them the healing power of words and the joy of finding quiet. Peace, at least the beginning of it, was the goal. (Hannah, 2024, p. 381)

This highlights the fact that communal relationships can provide independence from social criticism and also from feeling isolation. After Frances returned to America, it was difficult for her to return to normal life. Her family and neighbors are unable to acknowledge the contributions and assistance women provide to their nation during the Vietnam War. They are not considered.

Self-creation

Frankie's journey toward self-creation involves acknowledging her trauma, resisting societal expectations, and redefining her purpose. Her transformation reflects the existentialist belief that individuals create their own essence through their actions and choices (de Beauvoir, 1949; Moi, 1994).

Acknowledging the trauma

In the process of self-creation, Frankie must acknowledge the influence of her experiences in Vietnam, which is a significant milestone. She begins to acknowledge her own trauma, rather than dismissing it as trivial due to her lack of combat experience.

> Alone in her childhood bed, she lay awake, battling her need (addiction—had she ever thought of it in those terms before?) for a sleeping pill, and her overwhelming guilt, as well as this new and eviscerating fear that she had wanted to end her own life. (Hannah, 2024, p. 348)

> "Vietnam," he said. "That's why you went to the VA. You know Vietnam is the beginning of it all. Do you have memories that are more than memories, that feel like you're there again?" "You mean, like…" "Like a flashback in a film." Frankie was stunned. She'd assumed it happened only to her, that she was crazy. "How do you know that?" "The Fourth of July party, remember?" She couldn't answer. "It's called post-traumatic stress disorder. It's a bit controversial, they haven't added it to the APA manual yet, but we're seeing similar symptoms in your fellow vets. What you're experiencing is a familiar response to trauma." (Hannah, 2024, p. 359)

This approval enables her to commence the process of healing and reestablishing her sense of identity. Frankie's journey toward self-creation entails acknowledging that her emotional wounds do not render her vulnerable. Rather, they are an integral component of her narrative, providing her with resilience and profundity.

Not accepted external judgment

Frankie gradually develops the ability to resist the societal and familial constraints that require her to adhere to conventional gender roles, such as that of a homemaker or wife.

> Back in the world, when Frankie had told her friends that she'd hoped to make a difference over here, hoped to make her family proud, they'd rolled their eyes and acted impatient with patriotism; but out here, sitting beside this woman she barely knew, Frankie remembered the pride she'd felt on joining the Army. (Hannah, 2024, p. 51)

> Back in the world, it had seemed important to be a good girl, to make her parents proud, but honestly, the horror she saw here every day made the rules of polite society seem unimportant. (Hannah, 2024, p. 80)

A critical component of her self-creation is her refusal to conform to these molds. Frankie resists her father's shame and judgment, asserting her right to be proud of her service and experiences. This act of defiance represents an important moment in her personal development.

Recreating a new purpose

In the aftermath of the war, Frankie faces the challenge of locating her purpose in a society that does not acknowledge her value.

> The minute the doors opened and welcomed her in, she smelled the familiar scents of disinfectant, alcohol, bleach, and for the first time since coming home she felt like herself. This was where she belonged, who she was. Here, she would find a path through her grief. (Hannah, 2024, p. 214)

> Standing tall, shoulders back, chin up, as she'd been taught by her parents and the nuns at St. Bernadette's, she walked up to the door that read MRS. DELORES SMART, DIRECTOR OF NURSING, and knocked. (Hannah, 2024, p. 2015)

As part of her process of self-creation, she is redefining what it means to her to be successful and fulfilled, irrespective of the conventions that society has established. Frankie starts to investigate new methods to contribute and make a difference in the world, whether it is through advocacy, education, or personal

development. The importance of this reinvention of her future cannot be overstated on her transformation.

Existence precedes essence

Frankie's story illustrates the existentialist idea that identity is not fixed but is shaped through lived experiences. Her struggle to assert her identity as a woman veteran challenges societal norms and highlights the importance of self-definition (Sartre, 1946; Moi, 1994).

The choice she lives in

Frankie's decision to serve as a nurse in Vietnam is an important turn in her life, allowing her to assert her independence and uniqueness.

> How could she leave this hospital and the casualties—American and South Vietnamese—who needed her? She'd come here to make a difference, to save lives, and God knew lives still needed saving. As much as she sometimes hated the war, she loved nursing more. (Hannah, 2024, p. 158)

This action distinguishes her from societal conventions and demonstrates her will to live truthfully, even in the face of criticism. After returning home, Frankie must decide how to exist in a society that rejects her. Her path to rehabilitation and self-definition includes repeated decisions to express her worth and humanity, even when the world dismisses her.

The search for her authenticity

Frankie's honesty stems from her willingness to tackle the deepest aspects of her past, such as her trauma and remorse.

> No one gives a shit about the women." Frankie lit the cigarette, drew smoke into her lungs, and exhaled. "Why do you say that?" "I went to the VA for help. Twice. They brushed me off, told me to run along, that I wasn't a real vet, I guess." (Hannah, 2024, p. 359)

> Well. It's been a rough patch. I almost killed a man because I drove drunk. Then there's the baby, the miscarriage … Rye coming back, lying to me. Our affair. And now I'll lose my nursing license. There's nothing of me left." (Hannah, 2024, p. 359)

Instead of denying or concealing these aspects of herself, she incorporates them into her identity, resulting in a more genuine sense of self. Frankie lives more truly by rejecting the roles that society imposes on her. She refuses to pretend to be "fine" or to meet others' expectations, even if it means confronting more rejection.

Freedom to changes

Frankie's journey represents the existential idea that identity is not fixed. She grows from being weighed down by shame and remorse to embracing her identity as a veteran and survivor.

> Nothing you feel is wrong or abnormal. It doesn't matter what your friends did or didn't experience. You're allowed to be uniquely affected by your wartime experience. Especially you, someone who was idealistic enough to volunteer. You have nothing to be ashamed of, Frankie." (Hannah, 2024, p. 360)

> "It hit Frankie hard, that word. She had let herself become ashamed; maybe it had started when she'd been spat on in the airport, or when her mother asked her not to talk about the war, or maybe as news of the atrocities began coming out." (Hannah, 2024, p. 360)

> Almost every civilian she'd met since coming home, including her own family, had subtly or overtly given her the message that what she'd done in Vietnam was shameful. She'd been a part of something bad. She'd tried not to believe it; but maybe she had. (Hannah, 2024, p. 360)

Her change demonstrates her freedom to redefine herself. Frankie regains control of her life by taking ownership of her story and seeking healing. Her metamorphosis is not linear, but it represents her continual dedication to self-creation.

Conclusion

The Women (2024) aligns its core themes closely with existentialist feminism. Frankie, the central character, is a combat nurse and retired veteran who struggles to reintegrate into civilian life. As a representative of women veterans, she faces societal rejection, familial alienation, and emotional trauma stemming from her wartime experiences. Upon her return to America, Frankie is haunted by the horrors of Vietnam, yet she receives little to no support from institutions like the VA, her community, or even her own family. This neglect reflects a broader societal failure to recognize the sacrifices made by women in the Vietnam War. Dr. Benner, a figure emblematic of societal attitudes, dismisses the contributions of women like Frankie, perpetuating the notion that only male soldiers deserve honor and respect. Frankie's own parents reinforce this marginalization her mother silences her by discouraging any discussion of Vietnam, while her father feels ashamed of her choice to serve, as women in the 1960s were expected to do a domestic role.

Frankie's journey toward self-discovery and a redefined identity is emotionally and physically draining. Her struggle illustrates the core tenets of existentialist feminism, particularly the rejection of patriarchal norms and societal expectations. Through her resistance to imposed labels and assumptions, Frankie exemplifies women's capacity to assert their individuality and agency.

This research contributes to the understanding of sociological literature, particularly existentialist feminism as articulated by Simone de Beauvoir. It is hoped that this study will assist readers and scholars in appreciating Kristin Hannah's *The Women* (2024) and its profound exploration of women's experiences in war. By doing so, the research highlights the narrative's broader message about the resilience, solidarity, and agency of women veterans, as well as the importance of challenging the patriarchal systems that have historically silenced their stories.

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