

Existential Feminism in *Priscilla*: Patriarchy, Identity, and The Making of “the Other”

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ABSTRACT

Patriarchy systematically constructs women’s identities through control and subjugation, often reducing them to “the Other” or a secondary figure defined by men. This research applies existential feminist theory to analyze Sofia Coppola’s *Priscilla* (2023), focusing on how patriarchal systems fabricate the identity of the female subject as “the Other,” a subordinate figure defined by men. The research investigates how the film portrays Priscilla’s character and transformation from a passive figure into a self-aware individual who reclaims her identity, exploring how systems enforce power, identity, and gender roles. Findings suggest that the film visualizes Priscilla’s internal and external conflicts in the context of love and fame under Elvis Presley’s dominance, utilizing narrative to critique forms of systemic othering while opening a space for female subjectivity and resistance. Positioning the film within feminist discourse, this research challenges patriarchal ideologies that marginalize women and instead foregrounds identity as a site of performance and resistance.

Keywords: Existential feminism; *Priscilla*; patriarchy; identity; the Other

INTRODUCTION

Moving images in the film repeatedly strike the viewer’s retina and shape their perception of each scene as they engage with both imagination and reality (Nafsika et al., 2022). Through the ability to portray multiple narratives, films show empathy, challenge stereotypes, and stimulate critical discussions on gender, identity, and the patriarchal system. Sofia Coppola’s *Priscilla* (2023), adapted from Priscilla Presley’s memoir *Elvis and Me* (1985), presents a compelling case study as it tells the real-life story of Priscilla Presley, living in the shadow of Elvis Presley’s fame and dominance. The film foregrounds a female perspective that is often

overlooked—the experience of a wife navigating restrictive gender roles shaped by patriarchal structures within the entertainment industry and society at large. Focusing on Priscilla’s transformation from a naive teenager into a self-aware and autonomous woman, the film opens a critical space to reflect on how women’s identities are made and controlled in unequal social contexts. Through its intimate story, *Priscilla* critiques the mechanisms of “Othering” that reduce women to objects of male control while celebrating their freedom and self-discovery. Combining Coppola’s signature exploration of girlhood with feminist cinematography, *Priscilla* represents biographical narration and dismantles cultural beliefs surrounding love, fame, and gendered hierarchies.

The theoretical framework for this research draws on several key works: Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949) remains foundational in this discourse, critiquing the construction of women as “the Other” and emphasizing the importance of individual freedom in overcoming patriarchal ideas. Jean-Paul Sartre’s concept of “bad faith” from *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946) offers insight into moments where Priscilla appears to conform outwardly to imposed expectations while internally suppressing her sense of self. Michel Foucault’s theory of power and discipline, particularly in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), provides a lens through which to view the roles of family, media, and celebrity culture as mechanisms that regulate behavior and shape identity. Additionally, Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990) deepens the discourse by introducing the concept of gender performativity. Butler argues that gender is not an innate trait but a constructed identity formed through repeated behaviors dictated by social norms. These intersecting theories show how *Priscilla* (2023) critiques patriarchal systems, portrays the construction of gendered identity, and exposes the subtle operations of power through which a woman becomes “the Other.”

There has been limited exploration of these frameworks intersecting in contemporary films. Previous studies have explored existential feminism in various contexts, such as Lestari et al. (2021), who applied the theory to analyze the contemporary film *Bombshell* (2019). However, there has been no specific study that applies existential feminist theory to analyze *Priscilla* (2023). This study looks fresh at *Priscilla*, placing it at the intersection of existential feminism, feminist film theory, and gender performativity. It analyzes how Sofia Coppola reclaims biographical narration as a feminist act, pushing back against patriarchal ideas that celebrate men while sidelining women’s voices. Furthermore, this research reveals how the film captures patriarchy, identity, and the formation of femininity. It also represents the significance of female-directed films in reforming cultural memory and displaying new ways to see women’s empowerment and freedom on screen.

This research analyzes how *Priscilla* portrays Priscilla Presley’s struggle for independence within a patriarchal society, revealing her

transformation from a passive figure to someone who reclaims her identity. The film challenges cultural, traditional gender roles and the social norms that define women as “the Other.” Beyond the film, this study also considers how patriarchal systems form identity and self-determination in real life. It explores how individuals, particularly women, navigate social expectations, resist imposed roles, and redefine their identity in a world that often seeks to control them.

METHOD

This research draws its fundamental material from *Priscilla* (dir. Sofia Coppola, 2023). The method centers on scenes that present transformation, tension, and internal conflict. The scenes feature Priscilla’s interactions with Elvis Presley, her daily routines, and moments where she appears alone, reflecting on her thoughts in silence. The goal is to capture the tension between who she seems to be and who she may be becoming. This study briefly refers to Propp’s 31 narrative functions, as outlined in *Morphology of the Folktale* (1965), as a structural guide to support the selection of essential narrative moments. This approach systematically presents recurring patterns and underlying meaning beyond description (Darajat & Badruzzaman, 2020). This method has also been previously applied in film studies by Giswandhani (2022), Suwarno & Suparto (2023), and Fajrin & Lestari (2023) to examine the structures of filmic narratives. The analysis is grounded in existential feminist theory, particularly in ideas about constructing women as “the Other,” the tension between freedom and social roles, the controlling function of the gaze, the performative nature of gender, and how norms influence personal conduct and self-perception.

The analysis applied Simone de Beauvoir’s concept of “the Other,” from the book *The Second Sex* (1949), to define how the film forms Priscilla’s identity under the weight of patriarchal control. Particular scenes portray her as a teenager, wife, or public figure to underline the use of visual and verbal limits in maintaining control. These roles reduced her potential for self-perception, resonating with de Beauvoir’s idea that women’s identity often appears as “the imperfect man” or the “incidental” being, defined by men. Jean-Paul Sartre’s concept of “bad faith” from *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946) helped reveal moments where Priscilla appeared to align with external expectations while concealing inner conflict in silence. Moreover, Michel Foucault’s theory of power and discipline, as presented in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), provided a perspective on how family, media, and celebrity culture operate as mechanisms that regulate behavior and shape self-perception. Lastly, Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, as presented in *Gender Trouble* (1990), informed the reading of femininity in the film as something repeated, unstable, and open to disruption. These ideas reveal how *Priscilla* (2023) underlines

patriarchal systems, explores the search for identity, and exposes the mechanisms through which a woman becomes “the Other.”

Table 1
Propp’s Thirty-one Narrative Functions

No.	Narrative Functions	Description
1.	β Absentation	One family member is absent
2.	γ Interdiction	A prohibition is addressed to the hero
3.	δ Violation	The prohibition is violated
4.	ε Reconnaissance	The villain attempts to obtain information
5.	ξ Delivery	The villain obtains information about the victim
6.	η Trickery	The villain tries to deceive the victim
7.	θ Complicity	The victim is deceived
8.	A Villainy	The villain causes harm to a family member
	a Lack	A family member lacks or desires something
9.	B Mediation	The misfortune is made known; the hero is dispatched
10.	C Counter-action	The hero agrees to or decides upon counter-action
11.	↑ Departure	The hero leaves home
12.	D 1st donor function	The hero is tested and receives a magical agent or helper
13.	E Hero’s reaction	The hero reacts to the agent or donor
14.	F Receipt of a magical agent	The hero receives the function of a magical agent
15.	G Guidance	The hero is led to the object of the search
16.	H Struggle	The hero and the villain engage in direct combat
17.	I Branding	The hero is branded (receives a mark or recognition)
18.	J Victory	The villain is defeated
19.	K Liquidation	The initial misfortune or lack is resolved
20.	↓ Return	The hero returns
21.	Pr Pursuit, Chase	The hero is pursued
22.	Rs Rescue	The hero is rescued from pursuit
23.	O Unrecognized arrival	The hero returns home or to another place unrecognized
24.	L Unfounded claims	The false hero presents unfounded claims
25.	M Difficult task	A difficult task is assigned to the hero
26.	N Solution	The task is resolved

27.	R Recognition	The hero is recognized/honored
28.	Ex Exposure	The false hero or villain is exposed
29.	T Transfiguration	The hero is given a new appearance
30.	U Punishment	The villain is punished
31.	W Wedding	The hero marries or ascends the throne

(Darajat & Badruzzaman, 2020).

The analysis organized the results according to the core concepts of identity, power, gender, and the construction of “the Other” by closely examining the film’s narrative and utilizing Vladimir Propp’s 31 narrative functions. The discussion will connect these elements to broader patriarchal systems and social expectations, incorporating the supporting theories mentioned earlier. This structure enables the readers to follow how the film’s narrative arc portrays internal and external pressures, highlighting the complexities in constructing identity, particularly as a woman.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

“The Other” and Identity Formation Under Patriarchal Control

Priscilla (2023) follows the protagonist’s transformation from an ordinary teenage girl into someone caught up in the pressures of patriarchal celebrity culture. This transformation unfolds in ways that align with Vladimir Propp’s narrative functions, revealing how the film’s narrative contributes to the development of Priscilla’s identity. However, the structure alone does not tell the whole story. Priscilla’s journey assumes an underlying significance when considering Simone de Beauvoir’s concept of “the Other” and Jean-Paul Sartre’s idea of “bad faith,” revealing the inner conflict between who she appears to be and who she may be becoming. Priscilla’s initial narrative position corresponds to Propp’s function of Absentation (β), where the film introduces her as a young girl living a disciplined life in a military family in Wiesbaden, West Germany. Her daily routine primarily consists of attending school and adapting to the frequent relocations caused by her stepfather’s career as a U.S. Air Force officer. At just fourteen years old, she enters Elvis Presley’s orbit through a close acquaintance of Elvis, Terry West, who works with her father in the military. During their first conversation in the film (04:04), Terry casually asks, “Do you like Elvis Presley?” to which Priscilla replies with wide-eyed certainty, “Of course. Who doesn’t?” This moment not only reveals her awareness of Elvis but also demonstrates how his influence, arguably the most significant in rock and roll, had already permeated global youth culture, revolutionizing not only the sound and look of popular music but also how young people connected to it (Schinder & Schwartz, 2008). Shortly after, Terry seeks permission from Priscilla’s father to take her to a party at Elvis’ home. At the party, she meets Elvis for the first time; an encounter that seems occasional, yet loaded with meaning. This detail presents the

Interdiction (γ), as unspoken social norms about girlhood and imbalance of power begin to surface, especially within her relationship with Elvis Presley, regarding Priscilla's age and gender, setting up her initial proximity to fame not as something she seeks, but as something that finds her. The Violation (δ) of these norms happens as Priscilla enters Elvis' world, signaling the beginning of her transformation.

De Beauvoir's concept of "the Other" vividly focuses here: the film portrays Priscilla not as an independent subject but as someone whose identity depends on Elvis, the male "self." The narrative frames her as secondary, "the imperfect man" or the "incidental" being, whose existence gains meaning only through the male figure (de Beauvoir, 1949). Propp's functions of Branding (I) and Lack (a) further dramatize this process as the story symbolically marks Priscilla as Elvis' wife and strips away her individuality under the weight of this role. She lacks power, experience, and independence. In contrast, Elvis occupies an almost iconic position, older, famous, surrounded by a circle shielding him while managing access to his private world. The imbalance of power is clear, and the film uses that gap to illustrate how external definition immediately subjects Priscilla's identity.

The film's narrative draws on Sartre's concept of bad faith, which refers to people's self-perception to escape the weight of freedom and responsibility (Sartre, 1946). Priscilla does not openly rebel; instead, she appears to go along with Elvis' expectations and the image of a perfect celebrity wife. However, inside, she is struggling. In scenes that align with Propp's Complicity (θ) and Struggle (H), her silence during struggles hides underlying thoughts. She tries to live in a private world of suppressed desires and fears, trying to find herself beneath the role the society expects her to perform. When Priscilla first moves into Graceland, she seems cheerful, despite Elvis' frequent absences due to work and filming. At this point, she has not yet questioned the world she is stepping into. However, indirect mechanisms of control soon emerge.

At 42:37, for instance, a woman associated with Elvis says to her, "Oh, honey. You can't be here making a public display of yourself," indicating how others begin to impose behavioral expectations on her. This moment illustrates the social scripting that Priscilla begins to internalize, not just as Elvis's partner, but as someone required to demonstrate a polished, silent femininity that others have formed. The film mirrors visually the internal conflict. For example, the scenes of Priscilla wandering alone in Graceland, the dim corridors symbolize her existential isolation. These scenes serve as a visual metaphor for the growing disparity between her public persona and her true nature. They resonate with Sartre's idea that bad faith involves living according to expectations rather than letting one's freedom to define oneself.

At 48:34, Elvis invites Priscilla to try on dresses while being watched and commented on by about five male friends. When Priscilla says that a gown feels too elegant, Elvis dismisses the comment, saying even something

as simple as feathers looks elegant on her, prompting laughter and agreement from the men around him. In another instance, Priscilla chooses a dress with a nature-inspired pattern, which she likes. Still, Elvis criticizes it for resembling military camouflage, saying he dislikes the brown color because it reminds him of the army. He later insists that black hair and wearing heavy makeup will mold her into his ideal of feminine beauty. This scene corresponds to Propp's Trickery (η), where Elvis and those around him pressure Priscilla to turn her femininity into a spectacle for male approval. This kind of objectification operates as a tool of patriarchal control, limiting her potential to define herself and emphasizing her role as "the Other."

Gender Performativity Through Power, Discipline, and Resistance

Priscilla (2023) shows more than recounting a relationship; the film interrogates the indirect, everyday mechanisms through which power engages in women's lives, particularly within spaces of patriarchal control in domestic and celebrity culture. Through the frameworks of Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary power and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, the film illustrates how external pressure and expectations permeate the core of Priscilla's life. Foucault's concept of power, which is productive, diffuse, and exercised through discipline rather than force, is evident throughout the film, particularly in the space of Graceland. Rather than a sanctuary, Graceland becomes a controlled environment that monitors Priscilla.

At 44:47, she asks for permission to work part-time at a boutique after school—an ordinary teenage desire for independence. Elvis refuses, saying, *"I just want you to be there whenever I call."* Her time no longer hers; her presence must remain tethered to his needs. The denial is not dramatic; it is casual, like much of the control in their relationship. However, it clarifies that her freedom should be negotiated, not assumed. Elvis lowers Priscilla's desire for self-definition to his needs, illustrating Foucault's seminar on Technologies of the Self (1988), which explains technologies of power 'determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject' (Foucault 1988b, p 18 as cited in Besley, 2005).

This system of control also appears in Propp's narrative functions. The Pursuit (Pr) is not a physical chase, but the constant pressure Priscilla faces from others' expectations and judgments. The Rescue (Rs) rejects the idea of an external savior and instead focuses on breaking free. Long shots of Priscilla alone in grand, empty rooms emphasize her isolation and show the emotional weight of constant surveillance. The film shows normalization of control in the scene at 1:07:51, when Elvis tells Priscilla, *"I wanted a woman who understands that things like these might happen. Do you want to be her or not?"* after he tells her to return to Memphis, warning that the press will link him to Ann-Margret, his co-star. The suggestion is

not just that Priscilla must endure rumors; it is that she should accept emotional betrayal as part of her role. Elvis frames his manipulation in the language of love, *"I swear to you it's over. I got caught up in a situation that was out of hand in the beginning. Let's just forget it. You're my girl. You're the only girl I have ever loved."* However, as Foucault argues, power operates most effectively when it disguises itself as care.

The disciplinary logic reaches its peak at 1:11:36. After a confrontation in which Priscilla finds a letter from Ann-Margret to Elvis, calling him by a nickname: Scoobie, Elvis tells Priscilla to return to her parents, labeling her as "aggressive" and "demanding." He frames her emotional expression as misconduct and turns her attempts at self-assertion into a threat. This scene illustrates how power controls behavior and redefines resistance as a problem. The threat of exile becomes a way to reassert dominance, reminding Priscilla of her fragile place in his world and her dependence on his approval. At this point, the Branding (I) function takes on a literal meaning: Elvis marks her not only as his possession but also as a problem to correct whenever she steps outside prescribed boundaries.

By the time the film reaches 1:15:15, when Priscilla critiques one of Elvis' songs as not "catchy," his response is violent; he throws something across the room. He briefly apologizes: *"I got my momma's temper."* The tension builds as he reacts impulsively, demonstrating his quick temper and his need to maintain dominance in their relationship. This scene corresponds to how, in her memoir, Priscilla Presley shared an incident where Elvis used his physical strength against her during a playful pillow fight. After she threw pillows too hard, Elvis became angry, grabbed her arm, and threw her on the bed. In the process, he accidentally hit her in the eye, causing a swollen, bruised eye. Elvis joked about the situation to everyone, claiming he had to show her who the "boss" was (Crosbie, 2023).

Furthermore, Judith Butler's theory is that gender is performative, formed through repeated acts rather than a fixed trait. This idea helps explain how Priscilla's femininity changes throughout the film. The film shows how Priscilla creates her identity by applying makeup, selecting clothes based on Elvis's preferences, and adjusting her voice and mannerisms. She does not express herself spontaneously but performs these actions influenced by the expectations and desires of others. However, Butler also argues that performing gender opens space for disruption. The final act begins to show these cracks.

At 1:23:53, the film corresponds to Propp's Wedding (W) as Priscilla and Elvis finally marry. Traditionally, this function signals narrative closure and the heroine's integration into a new social order. However, in *Priscilla*, the wedding immediately destabilizes the expected narrative. Priscilla's pregnancy, often coded as the fulfillment of feminine destiny, coincides with news of Elvis' rumored affair with Nancy Sinatra. This reveals the Villainy

(A) not as a singular act of evil, but as a pattern of betrayal and neglect that Elvis often reemerges from.

Soon after, at 1:29:04, Elvis tells Priscilla he “needs time to think” and suggests a temporary separation, reenacting the Absentation (β). This withdrawal not only disrupts the family but also exposes the imbalance in their relationship: while others expect Priscilla to give consistency and support, Elvis shows a commitment that feels unstable. As he continues touring and growing more successful, he leaves Priscilla to raise their daughter, Lisa Marie Presley, essentially alone, her isolation and emotional labor corresponding to the Lack (a), as her needs for partnership in marriage and recognition go unmet.

At 1:38:18, a family photo marks the passage of time: Elvis sits on the sofa holding Lisa, while Priscilla kneels beside them. The visual arrangement corresponds again to Propp’s Branding (I) as Elvis claims her as part of the family but places her in a lower, “other” role. The image represents Butler’s idea that femininity involves repeated acts that often position women as secondary and supportive. The scene illustrates how Priscilla assumes the emotional burden and maintains the household dynamic, yet people continue to overlook her contributions, even in public displays of family.

Later at 1:39:29, Priscilla tells Elvis she wants to live in Los Angeles with Lisa for a while, marking the Departure (↑) function. Elvis’s indifference to her request reveals a lack of reciprocity and emotional investment. As he continues his tours, the film shows that Priscilla begins to reclaim herself, learning martial arts, bonding with Lisa, and building friendships. These moments correspond to the Struggle (H) and Transfiguration (T) functions. Her acts of self-perception are small but significant disruptions of the gender script, which forced her to perform. She is no longer a figure orbiting Elvis’ world but carving her own.

Finally, at 1:44:47, Priscilla declares, *“I am leaving our marriage.”* This moment corresponds to Exposure (Ex) and Return (↓) functions: Priscilla’s words expose the emptiness of the role Elvis and others forced onto her, marking her return to her sense of self. Elvis reacts by calling her *“out of your mind,”* claiming *“you have everything a woman could want.”* His reaction marks a broader patriarchal script: the idea that possession and privilege are substitutes for freedom and love. However, Priscilla does not argue; she walks away from Elvis, Graceland, and the role Elvis forced her to perform. Her exit remains quiet but resolute. In walking away, she performs a final act of resistance. She no longer follows the script, illustrating Butler’s point that performances of gender can be interrupted, refused, and rewritten. The film stages this refusal through a series of Propp’s functions. Together, these stages trace Priscilla’s journey and reveal the possibility of resisting the gendered roles and patriarchal systems that have defined her life.

CONCLUSION

This research emphasizes how patriarchal systems' mechanisms in the context of popular culture crucially shape Priscilla's identity. Using an existentialist feminism approach combined with the theory of power, the controlling function of the gaze, the performative nature of gender, how norms influence personal behavior and self-perception, as well as Vladimir Propp's functions, this research shows that patriarchal domination in the film not only appears explicitly through the power relationship between Priscilla and Elvis, but is also present in the narrative and cinematography representation that build the existential experience of female characters. In line with Simone de Beauvoir's concept that women are often seen as secondary beings or "the imperfect man," Priscilla's identity is reduced to "the Other," a figure who is only meaningful in her relationship with a man, Elvis, with little regard for her individuality or freedom outside the relationship. This reduction is shown narratively and visually through the dialogues and cinematography, such as spatial placement (isolation in Graceland), dialogues indicating pressure to follow certain appearance and behavioral standards, and the prohibition of Priscilla's independent desires, such as her desire to work or to express personal opinions freely.

The findings of this research show how patriarchal power works through disciplinary mechanisms, where control over Priscilla's body, time, and choices is subtle yet consistent through continuous forms of surveillance, labelling, and naturalization of norms that marginalize women's subjectivity. The denial of Priscilla's productive activities and the negative labeling of her emotional expressions show how the system perceives women's resistance as a norm violation and disobedience. Theoretically, by reading Priscilla's silence, obedience, and emotional suppression, this research expands the scope of de Beauvoir, Sartre, Foucault, and Butler thoughts in the context of biographical cinema with Propp's structural narratology to show how romance in popular culture can mask control, showing how personal relationships in popular culture often wrap patriarchal power in romance and opens up new interpretations of forms of resistance; sometimes it is not loud or dramatic, but quiet and hidden in plain sight. Therefore, the research invites consideration of the expansive implications of how social expectations are ingrained and normalized in our culture, especially regarding women. It asks how these expectations affect how women build their personal and public lives, both in real life and mediated realities of film. Finally, methodologically, this combination of approaches can serve as a reference for similar research in exposing the layers of power hidden in popular narratives. Ultimately, by revealing how patriarchal power operates beneath the surface of romance and fame, this research challenges the romanticized narrative of celebrity

relationships and provides a foundation for further studies on the representation of women's resistance and subjectivity in the media.

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