



A Psychological Violence and the Silent Control of Women in the Modern Society

Jay Prakash Vishwakarma^{1*}, Poonam Kumari², Ravindra Kumar Das³

¹ Assistant Professor, Noida International University, Uttar Pradesh, India

Email: Jayprakashbhu20@gmail.com

² Assistant Professor, Noida International University, Uttar Pradesh, India

Email: poonam.pui91@gmail.com

³ Department of French, Pondicherry University, India E-mail: frenchravindra@gmail.com

Abstract: This research paper explores the issue of psychological violence and the silent control of women in modern society through the play of Marie Ndiaye like *Hilda*. Unlike psychological abuse, physical violence often remains hidden because it happens through manipulation, emotional pressure, fear, authority, and dependency rather than visible physical harm. The research examines how the character Madame Lemarchand sluggishly dominates Hilda, a domestic worker who is always absent. Her absence from the stage becomes a powerful symbol of erasure, silence, and loss of identity. Although Hilda never appears in the play physically, her life is controlled through language, surveillance, emotional blackmail, and social power. The paper analyses how gender hierarchy, and economic dependence make women more vulnerable to emotional abuse. It also highlights how psychological violence is often normalized within families, workplaces, and social structures, making it difficult for victims to recognize or resist oppression. Using feminist theory, psychological analysis, and textual interpretation, the study focuses on dialogue, silence, and dramatic absence to reveal hidden forms of domination. The study further argues that psychological violence is not an individual problem alone but it is a social issue supported by patriarchal and institutional systems. The paper concludes finally that *Hilda* presents psychological violence as a modern form of oppression that destroys a woman's identity and independence without leaving physical marks, while questioning society's silence toward the emotional suffering of women.

Keywords: *Psychological Behaviour, Violence, Silent Control, Emotional or Mental Abuse*

1. Introduction

Sexual violence to women is in a variety of ways other than physical. The United Nations identifies any gender-based violence that results in mental harm or distress as any form of violence [1]. This involves insults, threats, manipulation, and control, which are commonly referred to as psychological or emotional violence [2]. These are not physical violence and may not produce external wounds, but they cause psychological harm in the long term and deep-seated trauma [3]. Psychological violence is supposed to be common, and it goes as far as humiliating a partner and intimidating her to isolating her or manipulating her social connections [4]. Its subtlety and the fact that it is sometimes disguised in love or humour may make victims and society fail to name it as abuse. As an example, most victims do not report any psychologically abusive behaviour of their partner as violent, and the police do not pay much attention to it when there is no clear physical harm [5]. This category of emotional abuse

© The Author(s) 2026

B. Choudhary and V. V. Singh (eds.), *Proceedings of the Anubhuti 4.0: Discourses in Indian Knowledge Systems – Pathways of Culture, Inclusion, and Sustainability (ICIKS 2026)*, Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research 1030,
https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-615-4_33

is dangerous, as it creates a loophole in safeguarding women, and it supports repeated revictimization and institutional invisibility [6].

Such abuse is often marked by patriarchal and economic power structures in modern society. There is a cross-cultural association between gender inequality and sexist norms and increased rates of intimate partner violence [7]. According to the sociological theory of patriarchy, gender domination frequently works through the so-called symbolic violence, a more subtle and invisible pressure so that even the victim would not consider it violence [8]. The feminist theory also believes that the source of violence against women is the social and economic hierarchies that justify the power of men over women (Molina & Matud, 2024). The lack of economic independence or social status in a woman adds to the power of the abuser, especially in the circumstances of the marginalization of classes and races, when the structural disparities support the domination of the individual [9].

The play *Hilda* (1999) by Marie NDiaye is a dramatization of these dynamics within the framework of a theatrical absence and erasure. In *Hilda*, the main character is an African housemaid in France whose mistress, Mme Lemarchand, slowly eliminates the independence of Hilda by manipulating her emotions and forcing her to become a dependent individual. It is astonishing how Hilda does not even appear on the stage, just by being reported and talking through the telephone. It is such absence that serves as a strong dramatic image of her deprivation and agency, her deprivation of her agency [10] that portrays the character as an undead theatre, where the characters will be socially and psychologically invisible. The paper employs *Hilda* as a prism through which the systems of psychological violence of unequal power relationships are studied, especially those that are prone to class, race, and gender. We discuss how the vocabulary of Lemarchand, the alleged maternal imperative, and her possessiveness are subtle tools of domination and that these patterns align with the existing patterns of coercive control in the real world in other studies of psychology [11].

This study is approached in the qualitative, textual approach, which is based on feminist, sociological, and psychological theory. We interpret speech and stage directions to find the elements of hidden violence within the daily speech and societal practices. Some of the major questions are: How does Mme Lemarchand control Hilda? What are the dramatic devices that depict the idea of psychological abuse on the stage? What does the oppression of Hilda have to do with class, gender, and economic dependency? The paper is intended to fill a gap in the available literature on psychological abuse by placing it in a theatrical, symbolic context, in addition to connecting NDiaye's portrayal to more general legal and societal discussions on the topic of coercive control and victim protection in modern-day society [12]. Finally, we claim that *Hilda* demonstrates a contemporary type of domination that puts down a woman and her identity and voice without any physical evidence, illustrating the still ongoing failure of society to fully realize and address silent ways of psychological violence [11].

2. Literature Review

2.1. Psychological Violence: Definitions and Features

Psychological violence (also known as emotional or mental abuse) is any deliberate behaviour that hurts the psychological integrity of a person. According to the European Institute of Gender Equality, it can be described as behaviour that has a serious adverse effect on the psychological integrity of another person by acting coercively or threatening it, which includes intimidation, humiliation, gaslighting, social isolation, economic deprivation,

and verbal harassment [2]. Such practices work by disrupting the victim's identity, undermining autonomy, and creating an atmosphere of fear and dependency.

The available empirical evidence constantly shows that psychological abuse in intimate and dependent relationships is high and serious. A substantial percentage of women survivors testify that coercive control and emotional manipulation are the most sustainable and harmful types of abuse, which can be even more traumatic than single acts of physical violence. Psychological violence is the least reported and is often downplayed both in legal and social circles, in spite of its effects. Procedures of law enforcement and the judiciary are more prone to focusing on manifested physical harm, thus neglecting the trends of emotional harm and coercive actions [12].

This invisibility is strengthened through social myths and cultural stories that calmly or frivolously accept emotional abuse [5]. believe that psychological abuse can be very subtle and contextualized in such a way that the severity of the abuse should be downplayed so that the victims view the behavior as a normal conflict in the relationships, rather than abuse. This normalization also helps to revictimize and postpone help-seeking since the survivors are unable to name and legitimize their experiences. Instructed on a structural level, [9] theorize this pattern to be a type of structural violence in which social institutions and economic inequalities indirectly perpetuate the vulnerability and reliance of women, who lack the capacity to challenge or escape abusive relationships.

Psychology and clinical models also contribute to the fact that coercive control works. Referring to the grounded theory approach, [11] offer a cognitive-behavioral model, according to which the survivors internalize the abuser narratives as time goes on, which leads to reduced self-efficacy, chronic anxiety, and learned helplessness. Similar results about the psychological subtype of intimate partner violence: meta-analytic studies also support the close relationships between enduring emotional abuse and future mental health consequences such as depression, post-traumatic stress, and poor social functioning [13].

2.2. Feminist Views and Power Relations:

The feminist theory has placed psychological violence in the context of larger structures of gendered power and inequality. Violence against women is not just a personal pathology but a habitual social practice based on the patriarchal system, which endorses male power and female submission [7]. In this view, abuse as a means of social control is upholding the status quo by restricting the autonomy and resources of women.

The concept of so-called symbolic violence developed by Pierre Bourdieu can be applied especially well to the interpretation of the normalized and subtle character of psychological domination. Symbolic violence is also defined as the type of power that is in place by means of language, norms, and daily practices that even become invisible and unnoticeable to the victims of such violence because it is ingrained into them as being a natural state of affairs or its correctness [8]. In this way, domination is recreated not just with the help of explicit coercion but also through the fact that the victim embraces the identities and expectations that are imposed on her. Simone de Beauvoir also remarked that women in the oppressive circumstances tend to have no conceptual resources to describe their oppression to the full extent, since the cultural discourses construct dependency and sacrifice as feminine virtues.

Intersectional feminist research also underlines that a female experience of abuse depends on how gender, combined with class, race, migration, and economic status, creates the result. The economic dependency, insecure jobs, and marginalization further increase the vulnerability to psychological violence, since they limit the agency to confront, report, or abandon abusive living conditions [3]. Comparative analysis performed in the context of various national settings shows that high gender inequality and lack of access to economic facilities by women in society have a higher prevalence rate of intimate partner violence and coercive control.

These theoretical implications are played out in *Hilda* by the uneven relationship between the wealthy employer, Madame Lemarchand, and the economically disadvantaged domestic worker, Hilda. The unequal balance of classes and economic forces makes the psychological domination of the employer possible, showing the interaction between material conditions and social status with gender to generate stratified modes of subjugation. This situation can be associated with the general trends of the global society, where migrant and working-class women who work in domestic labor become especially vulnerable to the exploitation and emotional abuse in the name of care and good nature.

2.3. The issue of psychological violence in modern stories:

Emotional abuse and coercive control have become more and more predicted in literature and theatrical manifestations with the reflection of their widespread use in modern social realities. The book *Hilda* by Marie NDiaye is often mentioned as a paradigm example of bloodless or invisible abuse in modern drama. According to [10], the dramaturgy of NDiaye is characterized by the performance of absence and spectrality because through this the suffering is made tangible, specifically through its non-performance. In *Hilda*, the protagonist is never shown at the stage, but her identity and independent thinking are gradually stolen by the language and fantasies of Madame Lemarchand, becoming the strong sign of the extermination.

The withholding technique in drama of depriving the audience of the main character is used to externalize the process of symbolic violence. According to [10], the frustrated intentions of the audience to see *Hilda* resemble the obsessional intention of Lemarchand to have and define her, which makes the spectatorship and domination similar. This haunting presence compels the audience to engage with the ethics of seeing, knowing, and controlling, so the very form of the theatre becomes connected to feminist arguments about objectification and power.

These themes are supported by comparative literary examples. Similar cases of relationships formed on the basis of class, race, and dependency that turned into zones of psychological manipulation and control are discussed in *Ourika* by Claire de Duras (1823) and in *Une Chanson Douce* by Leïla Slimani (2016). In such stories, maltreatment is frequently masqueraded as safeguarding, nurturing, or religious schooling, which is the perniciousness of paternalism. The devastating impact of forced isolation and medicalized power on the women's emotional state has been described in earlier feminist texts, including *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, which was published long before the current debates on gaslighting and coercive care.

These representations can be further analyzed with the aid of social scientific frameworks. The concept of coercive control is a cumulative pattern of tactics such as surveillance, isolation, economic control, and emotional degradation to entrap the victims in a relationship over time [4]. Learned helplessness psychological theories describe how the longevity of exposure to the uncontrollable stressors may make people feel that their resistance

is pointless, thus leading them to become passive and compliant [11]. These models find a strong echo with the character of Hilda, who remains to be an unseen form of influence, but nonetheless, one that is characterized by submission and dependency, as if it were formed by the continuous symbolic and emotional threats instead of the physical ones.

All these literary, feminist, and psychological interpretations highlight that psychological violence is not an accidental or peripheral form of harm but a key mechanism by which gendered, classed, and institutional power is practiced and reproduced in social life as well as in representation.

Physical and sexual violence against women has been well documented in the existing literature, but the psychological violence is not well researched. Women are emotionally abused at such alarming rates, and the cultural myths make it an issue of trifles. Very little feminist critique addresses non-physical forms of domination in the modern literary world or makes the connection between them and socio-economic power relationships. Specifically, the issue of the overlap of the class with the gender and the psychological manipulation has not been discussed in the academic literature on NDiaye's *Hilda* exhaustively. The themes of *Hilda* are observed in some studies or compared to other texts; however, a specific focus on the depiction of silent abuse in this piece is not made. Furthermore, the law and policy (such as the Istanbul Convention) only recently started categorizing coercive control as a crime; academic literature should also lag behind and enlighten people on the nature in which control is practiced in culture.

In short, the research gap is the knowledge about the way the psychological violence is committed and normalized primarily in the domestic arena of employer/servant relations. Neither do we have built-in analysis towards interrelating these dynamics with modern structures of society that render such abuse invisible. This paper fills those gaps by presenting a textual, in-depth case study of *Hilda* and connecting it with the greater sociological theory and its insights on how individuals can recognize and avoid emotional abuse in the present day.

3. Research Methodology

In this work, the qualitative textual analysis is used based on the feminist theory and the psychological aspects. The text is mainly the script of *Hilda* (1999) by Marie NDiaye (translated to English). The main aspects that are examined are dialogue, interaction of characters, and stage directions (particularly, the lack of *Hilda*). We proceed as follows:

3.1. Feminist Theoretical Lens: We perceive the text using the notions of patriarchy, inequality of power, and intersectionality. This assists in determining gendered assumptions and power dynamics of the way the characters behave.

3.2. The Psychological Abuse Framework: We use the notions of coercive control and emotional manipulation. We consider such uses of language as a weapon (insults, possessiveness, threats) and such control of isolation as confining *Hilda* to contact with her family by Lemarchand. We read in terms of key indicators of abuse (gaslighting, dominance, and subjugation).

3.3. Discourse Analysis and Dramatic Analysis: Dialogue and stage directions are analyzed as far as subtext is concerned. We are keen about what is unsaid, the silence and offstage presence of *Hilda*. The form of

the play is interpreted by means of the theories of theatre (e.g., staging, spatial absence), and that is how the ghostly position of Hilda is disclosed.

- 3.4. Contextualization:** Secondary literature (academic studies about NDiaye and related articles) and social science research (research about IPV and structural violence) are combined to contextualize Hilda. Citations of other academic materials available in support of our interpretations are provided.

There is no quantitative data or survey in the study; it is only a purely text-based interpretive study. Ethical implications are very low, since everything is public fiction. We are not seeking to generalize our analysis but to have depth and nuance. The methodology is based on the principles of feminist literary criticism and historical qualitative social research, which allows it to be regarded as rigorous due to a systematic coding of themes and a subsequent comparison with the existing theories of abuse.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Psychological Control Mechanisms.

The main conclusion is that Mme Lemarchand plays with coercive domination with Hilda through systematised psychological oppression. The words used by Lemarchand are full of contempt and demands. At the very beginning of the play, she states that should she not become a good mother, Hilda should take the children under her care:

This monologue puts Hilda in the context of a commodity that is bought to work on emotions. The fact that Lemarchand insists that Hilda should be a warm and loving person makes Hilda the replacement mother and servant. The name of Hilda (Hilda will...) is also possessively used many times, and it makes her a functioning object instead of a personality. This tendency implies what the scholars call the concept of coercive control, where domination is maintained using words, monitoring, and emotional bonding as opposed to force [11].

There is an oscillation between how Lemarchand compliments Hilda as being *tres passant* and how she criticises her as *froide et taciturne*, which suggests a gaslighting effect. Lemarchand maintains Hilda off-balance by saying other things to people that contradict her true condition (she is happy, she has no love for my children, etc.), not knowing what to do. This kind of manipulation corresponds to studies that reveal that psychological abuse is frequently based on disrupting the perception and reality testing of the victims, making them more emotionally dependent and obedient [5].

On the same note, Lemarchand poses a threat to the job security of Hilda: as Lemarchand is afraid that Hilda is not alive and motherly enough, she dreams about the death of Hilda as the solution to her personal anxiety. These imaginings and verbal abuse (*Hilda n'a pas d'amour pour mes enfants*) frighten Hilda into submission with no physical violence. This is indicative of what the coercive control literature refers to as non-violent entrapment, where fear, insecurity, and emotional punishment are the major instruments of control [12].

The habits qualify as official descriptions of forced dominance. According to the European Institute of Gender Equality (2022), this control is called oppressive behaviour targeting control, isolation, degradation and intimidation of victims. Lemarchand is an example of this; he socially isolates Hilda (he does not want her to see her family members), forces strict working requirements on her, and demeans her. It is also emotional blackmail: Lemarchand shames Hilda by referring to the happiness of the children as her priority in life, and she feels that

she should be happy, or she would be accused of hurting the children. As all of them are not violent on the face of it, they cause what is recognised as a sign of psychological abuse in both legal and clinical literature; they cause a serious impairment to the psyche of Hilda [6].

4.2. The Socioeconomic Scope of Domination.

Notably, Lemarchand has taken over in an even larger way beyond the kitchen. Though she is technically only an employer, she dictates everything about the life of Hilda. Hilda is particularly vulnerable in terms of her socioeconomic status and being an immigrant. Hilda is financially reliant on the job, and that is why she cannot refuse the overloading demands of Lemarchand (i.e., work long hours to watch children as Lemarchand goes to social gatherings). Lemarchand is playing her fortune as a secret trump card: her money will always make her superior to Franck in terms of finances. Hilda does not have any other carer role to do and therefore remains quiet even when Lemarchand encroaches on her personal life.

This is reflective of sociological research findings that economic dependency and inequality of classes increase the exposure of women to exploitation and abuse. Domination is a part of the day-to-day relationships, especially in the case of the marginalised and working classes [9]. Lemarchand is able to practise just a soft power within a Bourdieusian framework, in which it seems natural and unrelated to question because, even though it severely restricts the agency of Hilda, it is enabled by her symbolic and economic capital [8].

This suggests that Hilda loses her identity outside her work, as suggested by the play. In the last scene Lemarchand states, 'Hilda is dead now...' Il n'y a plus d'Hilda." This terrifying sentence actually proclaims Hilda dead, which is the destruction of her previous sense of self-identity and independence. The Hilda is unable to avoid this fate due to economic dependency; it does not say anything about the institutional protection, intervention of legal authorities or collective support. This is consistent with the real-life trends where the victims of coercive control do not have access to efficient social or legal solutions, especially when inequality and vulnerability to immigration are factors [12].

4.3. Psychological and Sociological Consequences.

The discussion reveals that the effects of such silent abuse are disastrous. Hilda is not harmed physically; however, her whole self is ruined. She dies as an empty mother of Lemarchand, deprived of independence and any pleasure. The psychologically prolonged abuse is closely linked with the anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, and learned helplessness [3].

The psychological violence prevalent in the society at large implies that many women live with it unknowingly or without a remedy. Cultural myths and male traditions tend to underestimate controlling behaviour as care, authority or emotional intensity instead of abuse. Empirical researchers correlate increased gender inequality rates with increased social acceptance of domination and intimate partner abuse [7]. Such a setting is one reason why neither Franck nor the surrounding social world in the play openly criticises the actions of Lemarchand. The domination remains unchecked, which reflects the real-life trends according to which institutional silence and the inaction of the bystander help the coercive control to thrive [12].

The story of Hilda therefore cautions against the greater social effects. Psychological violence is not only a domestic tragedy but also a systemic issue involved in the relations of classes, gender and power. It turns into a

modern-day kind of oppression where it destroys individuality without leaving tangible evidence. The last sentence of Lemarchand's statement, 'There is no Hilda anymore', is a metaphorical sentence of judgement: abuse has metaphorically murdered Hilda as a social and moral subject. The play will eventually provoke the audience to acknowledge that the lack of visible injuries does not imply the lack of injury, but besides, the triumph of the psychological domination [11].

5. Conclusion

This investigation brings some new knowledge about silent psychological abuse, associating a literary description with actual social trends. To begin with, it highlights how language and presence/absence on the stage are used to represent abuse. Through linguistic analysis and silence in *Hilda*, we unveil the strata of oppression that would otherwise remain unseen in a casual reading of the novel. Secondly, the paper indicates the overlaps between the notions of class, gender, and economic power in psychological violence, a field that has never been thoroughly addressed in the literature field. The story of *Hilda* is an example of how present-day society, which is secular, can still harbour overt domination beneath the doors of normality.

Our results reflect sociologically the calls to expand the understanding of violence. The current systems (e.g., coercive control) can no longer be disregarded, and it is important to understand that emotional abuse is just as harmful as physical abuse. The psychological consequences are deep: the victims can internalise the abuse (Beauvoir suggests that the oppressed are not able to perceive the fact of oppression) and be silent. Ndiaye makes *Hilda* be literally invisible to force us to envision the unseen painful experiences of many real women.

This, in practice, implies that more awareness and intervention are needed. Social services, communities and law enforcement need to be taught how to recognise the symptoms of controlling behaviours and assist victims of emotional abuse as aggressively as they do victims of physical abuse. Feminist theorists state (and we concur with the analysis of this fact) that structural change is needed to break the patriarchal norms and economic injustices that enable such abuse to flourish.

Acknowledgments: I am thankful to all the Co-authors and institutions for their valuable suggestions and guidance. I also acknowledge the intellectual inspiration drawn from Marie Ndiaye's play *Hilda*, which formed the foundation of this research.

Disclosure of Interests: There is no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] World Health Organization. (n.d.). *Violence against women*. [World Health Organization](#)
- [2] European Institute for Gender Equality. (2022). *Understanding psychological violence against women*.

- [3] Molina, J. E., & Matud, M. P. (Eds.). (2024). Special issue: Intimate partner violence against women. *Behavioral Sciences*, 14(10), 940.
- [4] *Journal of Family Violence*. (2025). Women's experiences of coercive control in intimate partner relationships: A qualitative systematic review. [DOI Link](#)
- [5] Cinquegrana, V., Marini, M., & Galdi, S. (2023). Psychological abuse is not a problem! Exploring the role of domestic violence myths in psychological revictimization. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, Article 1228822. [DOI Link](#)
- [6] Crown Prosecution Service. (2025). *Rise in coercive control charges marks a decade of progress*.
- [7] Saunders, D. G. (2022). Patriarchy's link to intimate partner violence: Applications to survivors' asylum claims. *Violence Against Women*, 29(11). [DOI Link](#)
- [8] Von Holdt, K., & Burawoy, M. (Eds.). (2018). *Conversations with Bourdieu*. Cambridge University Press.
- [9] Sinha, P., Gupta, U., Singh, J., & Srivastava, A. (2017). Structural violence on women: An impediment to women empowerment. *Indian Journal of Community Medicine*, 42(3), 134–137. [DOI Link](#)
- [10] Asibong, A. (2014). Ghouls, ghosts and bloodless abuse: NDiaye's undead theatre. In *Marie NDiaye: Blankness and Recognition* (pp. 109–141). Liverpool University Press.
- [11] Choudhury, A. A., & Luzón, O. (2025). Towards a cognitive behavioural model of women survivors' psychological experiences of coercive control: A grounded theory approach. *The Cognitive Behaviour Therapist*, 18, e53.
- [12] Fitz-Gibbon, K., Walklate, S., Meyer, S., & Reeves, E. (2024). *The criminalisation of coercive control: Victim-survivors' views on legal responses*. Australian Institute of Criminology.
- [13] Dokkedahl S, Kok RN, Murphy S, Kristensen TR, Bech-Hansen D, Elklit A. The psychological subtype of intimate partner violence and its effect on mental health: protocol for a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Syst Rev*. 2019 Aug 9;8(1):198. doi: 10.1186/s13643-019-1118-1. PMID: 31399073; PMCID: PMC6688298.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

