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### **Unveiling the Surreal and Subversive: Interrogating Gender, Patriarchy, and Everyday in *Poor Things***

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**Abstract:** Yorgos Lanthimos in *Poor Things* has created a world where the audience's sensory perception is immediately shocked by the eerie and surreal ambience of it. Godwin Baxter, a Frankenstein-like doctor, in the narrative has created a mansion removed from the everyday reality of the world outside. The surreality of Godwin's world is in stark contrast with the world that Bella Baxter (a 'woman' Godwin created) encounters outside. Godwin has created Bella, or given life to Bella, by inserting the brain of an embryo into the body of a grown woman; thus Bella is born into an everyday life which is created by Godwin (or God as Bella called him). Bella goes on a journey of self-exploration, a journey of self-awareness, where she interrogates her gender, sexuality, sexual pleasure, morality, and constructs her everyday identity. Bella consolidates her gender through various performative acts all through the movie. Everyday life has been an important element of cultural studies in the twentieth century; a critique of everyday life is a result of interrogating the prevailing structures in all segments of life: how a 'person' is constructed, becomes a part of the everyday through various performances is one of the aspects of investigating everyday life in cultural studies. This paper aims to read Bella's everyday life before she leaves Godwin's mansion and Bella's encounter with the everyday realities of different cities, in other words, the diversified everyday life of the world. This paper will further explore how Bella constructs her gender identity, femininity, sexuality, and class consciousness gradually

as the narrative progresses. Bella's investigation of the prevailing structures of everyday life and subsequent subversion of it is what this paper aims to explore. This paper uses some feminist and cultural theorists to study Bella's interrogation of different structures and cultures. This paper is an attempt to capture Bella's transformation from infancy to adulthood, from innocence to experience, from a docile individual to a rebel.

**Keywords:** *Gender, Patriarchy, Sexuality, Everyday Life, Performative.*

Some people cry out against the acceleration of time, others cry out against stagnation. They're both right.

— Henri Lefebvre, 'Everyday and Everydayness'

At the 2024 Oscars, Emma Stone secured her second Academy Award for playing the role of Bella Baxter, who is a creation of Frankenstein-like doctor Godwin Baxter (Bella refers to him as God). Yorgos Lanthimos, in *Poor Things*, creates a universe devoid of temporal markers; imbuing it with an eerie and surreal ambience. The cinematic world can be read as divided into two parts: the insular world of Godwin and the world outside; a world of stagnation and another of acceleration. Godwin's unorthodox experiment involves transplanting the brain of an embryo into the body of a mature woman, thereby initiating Bella's odyssey—a narrative tracing the trajectory from infancy to maturity, from innocence to experience, and from the Real to the Symbolic stage (Lacanian terms for different stages psychosexual development). Bella is born into Godwin's world, a world contained within Godwin's mansion, a world insulated from the external world. In Godwin's world, there is amalgamation of disparate anatomical features such as a duck's head

atop a canine torso—manifestations of Godwin's unconventional interventions. The film opens with Bella slamming the piano keys. Bella does not know how to sit properly, does not know how to speak, and has not learnt table manners. Bella has not gone through toilet training. She acts like an infant, but she has the body of an adult woman. If one remembers Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) famous dictum "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (p.283) in the context of Bella, it gets quite clear that Bella has not yet "become" a woman. Bella looks like a woman: if by 'woman' one means 'long hair', 'a face with no facial hair', and other bodily organs which seem to be distinctive markers of a woman's identity; but Bella doesn't act like a 'woman'. Bella does not know what it means to be a woman, her 'womanly-look' is in stark contrast with her femininity. Watching Bella forces the audience to get out of their comfort zones: the audience sees the growth of a woman who has not learnt 'performing' her gender yet, who has not learnt the 'moral' codes of the world yet, who has not learnt the taboos around sexuality and sexual desire yet. Looking at the world through Bella's perspective forces the audience to interrogate the everyday life that they are a part of. However, everyday life is a force which allows the possibility of strangeness and surrealism as well. Therefore, the audience gets pulled back into their everyday life right after the film is over and they realize that the incidents are fictional and not happening in their day-to-day life. Nevertheless, Lanthimos's *Poor Things* constitutes a cogent feminist critique of patriarchal hegemony, as embodied in Bella's interactions with various male figures, including Godwin, Duncan Wedderburn, and Alfie Blessington. This paper does not in any way suggest that patriarchy is functioning only through these men in Bella's life, but patriarchy is a structure that seeps through the pores of most of the characters or the institutions that Bella comes across. The patriarchal individuals in Bella's life are tools of the structure which they are a part of; mere clogs in the machinery of patriarchy. And patriarchy, like any other structure, is

consolidated minutely through the actions of everyday life. Failing to examine one's everyday life entails overlooking the forces that shape, structure, and contribute to the construction of one's identity. Henri Lefebvre (1987) writes, "the concept of everydayness does not therefore designate a system, but rather a denominator common to existing systems including judicial, contractual, pedagogical, fiscal, and police systems" (p.9). Bella is born into the structure of everyday life, the everyday life of Godwin Baxter. She acquires some skills at Godwin's place to adjust to his world, but later on decides to explore the world outside and subsequently undergoes a journey where the existing everydayness of the world reshapes her everyday life. However, Bella's everyday life is not an unquestioned adoption of the structures that she comes across or was born into, her everyday life is what she at the end of the film subversively and politically curates. This paper, therefore, is an attempt to point out her subversive acts and note how through subversion she constructs her gender identity, embraces her sexuality, questions patriarchal and capitalist institutions, and interrogates the everyday life of the world outside Godwin's house.

Let me begin with the surreal world of *Poor Things*, the world of Godwin Baxter, is where the familiar is made unfamiliar. Surrealism is an important topic of discussion in any conversation about everyday life as surrealism is at its heart dedicated to actively transforming the everyday life, the daily life, the quotidian. In Lanthimos's depiction, the surreal world of *Poor Things* is imbued with political undertones. Ben Highmore (2001) argues, "In its [surrealism's] juxtaposing of disparate elements...it generates a defamiliarizing of the everyday" (p.46). Dr. Godwin Baxter, in *Poor Things*, creates a world by sewing together disparate elements and Bella is a result of that experiment. Notably, Godwin's visage bears scars, the marks of stitches are visible on his face. Godwin's facial scars and body structure reminds one of Frankenstein's Creature from the 1931

adaptation of *Frankenstein*; and this resemblance might be an indication that society's ignorance and cruelty may have resulted in his disfigurement, compelling him to withdraw into his own laboratory. As the audience is thrust into this peculiar realm, they confront a defamiliarised landscape, wherein the commonplace is rendered strange. This defamiliarisation is most effective when applied to familiar objects intrinsic to daily life. Indeed, Godwin's resemblance to Frankenstein's creature, coupled with the laboratory setting wherein he manipulates "disparate elements", exemplifies a surrealist tactic aimed at unsettling the familiar (refer to Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: The surreal world Godwin Baxter

Highmore (2001) further states that the methods of defamiliarisation "allow the everyday to become vivid again by making the ordinary strange through transferring it to surprising contexts and placing it in unusual combinations" (p. 46). The everyday life tends to hide the marvellous and the strangeness of the world, surrealism is just an attempt to make the latent content manifest: "the everyday is where the

marvellous exists" (Highmore, 2001, 46). The surrealism of Godwin Baxter's world stems from its close proximity to reality, retaining the quirkiness and eeriness inherent in everyday existence. In this narrative, Lanthimos offers the audience a world that is simultaneously strange yet familiar—a realm whose concerns mirror the political issues of daily life. Through *Poor Things*, Lanthimos jolts the audience out of their stupor, forcing them to notice and identify the familiar in strangeness. The technique of surrealism is subversive as it internally reconfigures societal frameworks. The film critiques patriarchy and capitalist class structures subversively by defamiliarising Bella's world. The audience is not a passive receiver of the message of the film, they are actively participating in decoding the message, in making sense of the strangeness of the message. The unexamined everyday life is a product of the capitalist, bourgeois system which tries to push the marvellous to the "marginal pockets"; surrealism is an attempt to expose the bourgeois power structure by systematically attacking the "mental bureaucracy" (Highmore, 2001, p.49). Lanthimos employs this technique to unveil not only the capitalist constructs shaping individuals' realities but also the unquestioned acceptance of patriarchal norms. The surreal world of *Poor Things* dislodges the audience from the mundane, igniting a "spark," as elucidated by Highmore:

The production of the 'spark', generated by the juxtaposition of different materials, juxtaposition possible in a range of spheres... The more difference there is between the two (or more) ingredients, the greater the spark. Slight differences remain within a familiar world; massive differences produce shocks and sparks that jolt us out of the familiar. As such it becomes the perfect foil for habits of mind that have blinkered by routinized thought. (p.51)

Lanthimos alienates the audience from their conversant worlds in his film and forces them to reconsider their “habits of mind”, forcing them to seek the pattern of the overarching structure. Thus the audience witnesses Bella’s journey not empathically but critically. The audience participates in the growth of Bella to witness and point out which parts of their everyday life needs to be questioned and examined. The external world portrayed in the film, beyond Godwin’s mansion, bears striking resemblance to the audience’s own reality. From the outset, Lanthimos presents two distinct worlds: the familiar external realm and the unsettling internal domain of Godwin’s mansion. This dichotomy highlights the interplay between surrealism and the politics of everyday life. An exploration of Bella’s character and her metaphorical journey unveils the intricate dynamics at play within the nexus of surrealism and daily existence. Within the fabric of everyday life, patriarchy moulds compliant bodies and orchestrates a “mental bureaucracy,” yet it also harbours spaces for resistance. Bella Baxter’s surreal existence serves as a vehicle for subversion and resistance against the patriarchal forces inherent in everyday life.

Before delving deep into Bella’s encounter with the different everyday realities of the world, it is essential to analyse her life, her daily life at Godwin’s place. Bella Baxter elucidates that attributes such as kindness, morality, and sexual decency – often presumed to be natural – are, in fact, products of cultural conditioning and performative acts. Godwin confines Bella in his house and employs Max McCandless to “meticulously note her progression” (Lanthimos, 2023, 7:48). For Godwin, Bella is a project to be studied, an object of analysis. Bella’s resilience lies in the assertion of her subjectivity. When Godwin introduces McCandless to Bella, instead of shaking his hands Bella punches his face, which indicates Bella has not yet learnt the culturally accepted standard forms of greeting. Bella is created in a world which is

governed by a set of principles and codes, a world of symbols, a world of her every day; but she resists becoming a part of it. Bella initially does not have access to language to express what she feels, to codify her desire. She does not readily become a part of the Symbolic stage which is the nexus of patriarchal and capitalist structures. The Symbolic stage is where everyday life gradually takes over the life of an individual, makes them a part of it, teaches them the codified manners and sets of rules to function in their day to day life. Bella, however, resists being assimilated into the Symbolic stage. Bella asserts her subjecthood by forcing Godwin to take her out of the house, where Bella first gets a sneak peek of the world outside, of the everyday life of the world outside Godwin's mansion. Godwin's house is not a microcosm of the macrocosmic world outside, which traditional houses tend to be. Godwin tries to keep Bella away from the charm of the everyday. To keep Bella constrained in the house, Godwin tells Max McCandless to ask for Bella's hand. Bella, unaware of the meaning of "take one's hand in marriage", agrees to get married to him. Right at that moment Duncan Wedderburn appears in Bella's life, who introduces Bella to a new world of sexual pleasure which Bella had recently discovered in herself. Bella does not understand monogamy or heterosexuality or marriage, she is a sexual being who performs sexual acts as any other pleasurable acts: "Bella discover happy when she wants" (Lanthimos, 2023, 26:58). When Wedderburn proposes to flee with her, she readily accepts to explore the world with him: "you are a prisoner and I aim to free you" (Lanthimos, 2023, 36:05). She doesn't call off the marriage with McCandless because she is unaware of the performative rituals of marriage. When McCandless attempts to prevent her from leaving with Wedderburn, she renders him unconscious using a chemical and departs. McCandless's futile attempt to exert marital control over her fails miserably. She refuses to be tamed by Max McCandless and instead chooses to embark on a journey of self-discovery and pleasure with Wedderburn. Bella resists patriarchal structures that

seek to dominate her, she resists everyday structures that aim to assimilate her, she resists codification, remaining an enigma.

The assumption that women are inherently kind is severely challenged in the film when Bella stabs a corpse in the eyes with a scalpel, exclaiming "Squish! Squish!" with joy on her face. Her character defies the so-called "feminine virtues": she occasionally masturbates at the breakfast table, works as a prostitute, and is inclined to punch babies in the face when they cry. As a feminist film, Bella's character undoubtedly compels one to reconsider how certain codes and sets of rules are imposed upon a body with "female" genitalia to dictate certain behaviours and define womanhood. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) critiques the notion of inherent femininity and masculinity. Butler argues that individuals construct their gender through performance: "gender proves to be performance— that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be" (p. 25). Both sex and gender do not inherently determine a person's femininity or masculinity. Bella's character shocks the audience out of their complacency, compelling them to deconstruct the patriarchal structure and examine life's intricacies. She has not yet conformed to the Symbolic stage, leading a life of guilt-free sex and pleasure. She does not harbour shame for her sexual desires, as 'shame' and 'guilt' are not inherent emotions of humanity, but rather culturally imposed constructs.

Bella embarks on a "grand adventure" with Duncan and travels to Lisbon. While in Lisbon, Bella engages in frequent intercourse with Duncan, viewing him merely as a means to satisfy her sexual desires. She does not mince words or offer false hope when he begins expressing his love for her. Despite being engaged to Max McCandless and having her hand claimed by another man, Bella fails to grasp the implications, questioning whether marriage is a form of bodily imprisonment: "You do not just take the hand, but all, do you not?" Bella's frequent sexual encounters with Duncan, even while considering herself engaged to

McCandless, raise questions about her views on monogamy. She discovers that sex is often romanticised, regulated by societal norms, and moulded to conform to everyday life. Driven purely by pleasure, she engages in sexual acts with anyone who approaches her, all the while unaware of the societal stigma associated with such behaviour. Wedderburn becomes attached to Bella and attempts to control and dominate her. When Bella explores the city without Wedderburn, he becomes enraged and decides to kidnap her, taking her on a cruise ship bound for Athens. *Poor Things* examines how women are often coerced into submitting to patriarchal norms in the name of 'love' and 'marriage'. For example, Duncan justifies his actions by claiming his kidnapping of Bella was an act of love: "forgive my kidnapping of you, but it was for love" (Lanthimos, 2023, 1:05:01). Bella, through her innocence, compels the audience to confront the toxicities normalised by the institution of 'love' and 'marriage' in patriarchal society.

Bella's exploration of the city of Lisbon can be analysed as her encounter with the everyday life of the city. Bella is overwhelmed by the hustle and bustle and the noise of the city. Bella's overwhelming experience can be examined through George Simmel's critique of modernity in his essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life". Highmore notes, "For Simmel, the modern everyday presents a continual assault on the nervous system, but the effect of such assault is radically ambivalent: 'drifting between hypersensitivity and lack of sensitivity'" (p. 41). Bella's chance encounter with the everyday life of Lisbon takes a toll on her nervous system, ultimately leading her to vomit (as shown below in figure 2).



Fig. 2: Bella's nervous overstimulation in Lisbon

Nevertheless, it is a significant element in forming Bella's identity in everyday life. Simmel argues that city life is a space of overstimulation, and there are certain tactics that an individual must employ to lead a life in the city. An individual must block out the noises and become blasé to maintain sanity in the disorienting everyday life of the city: "the everyday life of the metropolis is experienced as disorienting, aggressive — a continual barrage of shocks" (Highmore, 2001, p. 42). Lisbon, for Bella, "is a space... where stimuli force the nerves to make such violent responses, tear them about so brutally that they exhaust their last reserves of strength" (Highmore, 2001, p. 42). Bella returns to Wedderburn exhausted and asks him to calm and console her after this overwhelming experience, but Wedderburn had other plans: he kidnaps her and attempts to strip her of her agency. However, Bella refuses to succumb to the patriarchal social order and expresses her protest in whatever forms and ways possible.

On the ship, Bella befriends two passengers who introduce her to a world of books and philosophy. Duncan's attempts to thwart her education are in vain. Her philosophical affiliation can be closely tied to Diogenes of

Sinope, considered as one of the founders of Cynicism. Accounts of Plutarch suggest that Alexander the Great was deeply impressed by Diogenes' eccentric nature. Once, Alexander approached Diogenes as he slept in the morning sun, asking if there was anything he might do for the philosopher; to which Diogenes replied by asking Alexander to step out of the sun. When Wedderburn interrupts Bella's morning reading session with the two fellow passengers, Bella tells him, "You are in my sun" (Lanthimos, 2023, 1:07:30), referencing the philosophical encounter between these classical Greek figures. Duncan opposes her reading, discarding Bella's books and seeking control over her. He believes that the influence of the fellow passengers is turning Bella into a rebel. Despite his efforts to persuade her otherwise, Bella refuses; she now sees the world in a new light and begins to recognise Wedderburn's faults. Frustrated, Duncan turns to gambling and drinking, prompting Bella to spend time in Harry Astley's chamber. Harry, who describes himself as a cynic, introduces her to a new world of suffering and class disparity during their sojourn in Alexandria. The difference between bourgeois and poor classes is vividly portrayed in Alexandria. Bella, previously unaware of the evils of capitalism, is confronted with the sight of dead babies and poverty-stricken slum dwellers juxtaposed with the wealthy enjoying fancy meals in the dining hall. Lanthimos depicts a mansion-like hotel where the upper section is reserved for the rich while the lower section, outside the hotel, houses a slum for the poverty-stricken (see figure 3 for reference).



Fig. 3: The fancy hotel for the rich and the slum-dwellers outside

Bella's encounter with the everyday life of slum-dwellers and the indifference of the upper class towards their plight shocks her deeply. Bella attempts to descend the stairs to offer assistance to the impoverished, but Astley intervenes, recognizing that the systematic oppression of the lower class by the upper class cannot be remedied by the actions of one person alone. Despite this, Bella resolves to aid them using the money Wedderburn earned from gambling. She takes all the money without informing Wedderburn and shares it with two men who deceive her, stealing the funds. Bella is devastated by this turn of events; the sight of the impoverished breaks her down completely, leading her to cry out: "Who am I lying in a feather-bed while dead babies lie in a ditch!" (Lanthimos, 2023, 1:21:51). Additionally, it is worth noting that Wedderburn and the other crew members remain unmoved by the cries of the slum-dwellers. Bella endeavours to bring justice to the world by redistributing the money to the poor that Duncan had earned through gambling, but her efforts are futile. The capitalist class revels in the privileges afforded to them by the existing societal structure, insulating themselves from disturbances that could upset their comfortable

everyday lives. Long before Bella's exposure to socialism in France, her encounter with the exploitation of the poor class in Alexandria profoundly shapes her understanding of everyday life. Bella's resistance finds a place within the everyday, just as the indifference of the capitalist class does. The everyday offers a space for both individuality and an individual's engagement with the 'totality'. Bella's defiance prevents her assimilation into the totality of everyday life and opens up possibilities for dialectical movement within its intricate web.

In France, Bella turns to prostitution to earn a living. Bella has no preconceived notion of the world; she learns about its different facets as she navigates through the narrative. Wedderburn cannot accept that Bella has bought him food with the money she earned from having sex with another man. Bella, however, is confused by Duncan's behaviour. She finds pleasure in sex, and getting money for sex is convenient for her. Eventually, she parts ways with Duncan and pays back the money Godwin had given her at the time of their departure. The film re-examines the institution of prostitution: it does not portray it as necessarily bad, nor does it portray it as good. Maggie O'Neill (2001), in an analysis of prostitution and feminism, writes about the nuanced perspectives on the matter:

In the initial stages of feminist analysis of prostitution in contemporary society, prostitution has been treated in a reductionist way as a deviant activity and as sexual slavery. More recently, it has been treated as an understandable (and reasonable) response to socio-economic need within the context of a consumer culture, and within a social framework that privileges male sexuality. (p. 15)

Drawing from O'Neill's line of analysis of prostitution, Lanthimos seems

to be forcing the audience to confront and reimagine the institution of prostitution through Bella, who performs sex just as an act of pleasure and has not sentimentalised sex or equated it with love. Bella initially finds her role as a prostitute quite fascinating; however, she soon realises that women are treated as objects and they do not have much agency in the institution of prostitution that she is a part of. She starts questioning the institution: "As God, my father, says it is only the way it is until we discover the new way it is, and then that is the way it is until we discover the new way it is, and so it goes until we discover the world is no longer flat, electricity lights the night, and shoes are no longer tied with ribbons" (Lanthimos, 2023, 1:34:41). She actively tries to subvert the structure of prostitution and fight for more agency for women. It is in the brothel that she discovers sexual pleasure with another fellow worker, Toinette. Bella's sexuality is not codified. Her sexuality is fluid; she is a woman with desire, she challenges the boundaries of patriarchal structures; she is queer. Toinette introduces her to the socialist world, and she continues her work as a prostitute. She thinks prostitution gives women opportunities to be their own means of production: "we are our own means of production" (Lanthimos, 2023, 1:43:41). The character Duncan is not an antagonist in the narrative. The world of *Poor Things* does not have antagonists as such. Duncan reacts as any patriarchal man would react, given the circumstances they were brought up in, a structure where sex with multiple people is considered 'sin' and socially unacceptable. Duncan tries to gain control over her multiple times in the narrative, but he fails to sustain it. Duncan thinks that he is in a morally superior position to "forgive" Bella for her work as a prostitute. But Bella finds nothing morally wrong in her work and tells Duncan to leave. Bella has now fully grown; she has quite a firm grip on language, has understood the ways of the world, and has discovered her selfhood.

The last patriarchal figure who Bella encounters in the narrative is

General Alfie Blessington, the former husband of Victoria Blessington, whose body Bella inhabits. Alfie takes Bella to his place and tries to confine her in her chambers. It soon becomes clear that due to the toxicity of his behaviour, Victoria tried to kill herself. Alfie is a racist and capitalist man who mistreats his slaves. Alfie wants to ensure that Bella remains 'pure' and does not engage in any bodily activities with anyone else but him, so he orders her to undergo genital mutilation. Bella protests and tricks him into consuming the sedative he had prepared for her. In the last scene, we see Bella married to Max McCandless, residing in Godwin's house, where she has learned surgical skills. She uses these skills to transplant a goat's brain into Alfie's. This section of the narrative can be interpreted as Bella's retaliation against patriarchy and capitalism. Throughout her life, Bella has been consistently pressurised to suppress her sexual desires. Feminist history indicates that the suppression of women begins with the suppression of desire. Patriarchy permits only reproductive sexual acts, while sexual promiscuity in women is often labeled and pathologized to exert control and subjugation. However, Bella refuses to comply and seizes control from patriarchy, establishing a feminist space for herself and her admirers.

Bella's gender is not fully formed in the narrative because gender is never a "fully-formed" product. Gender is constructed through performances, the performances which are considered 'feminine'. Bella challenges patriarchy by being a rebel; she subverts the structures of patriarchy and pushes the boundaries of society. She is not a docile body ready to be assimilated into unexamined everyday life. Despite performing the act of marriage with Max, she resides with Toinette at Godwin's mansion, refusing to accept the 'codes' of the institution of marriage. She repeatedly prompts the audience to question what it means to be a 'woman'. She becomes a woman only after subverting the contours of gender in everyday life. Everyday life, at the end of the narrative, is a

collection of subversion and surrealism. She challenges the patriarchal boundaries and subverts them by not giving in to the patriarchal demands of Godwin Baxter, Max McCandless, Duncan Wedderburn, and Alfie Blessington. She recalibrates her relationship with Godwin and McCandless, accepting them only after she has forced them to change their patriarchal mindset and embrace a feminist way of living. Everyday life is a dialectical space that offers the existence of both extremes: patriarchy and feminism. It is only through subversion that the latent content becomes manifest in everyday life. Bella Baxter interrogates her gender identity, discovers her sexuality, and alters the everyday life she was born into through a systematic subversion of the structures that shape the everyday life of an individual.

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