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## The Art Of Forgetting Domestic Labour

How Patriarchy treats Female Labour as ineffective in Thea Astley's short story Taking Five from Drylands

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### Abstract

One of the best Australian writers of the 20th century is Thea Astley, a four-time winner of the Miles Franklin Award. Focusing on depicting the lonely, marginalized, and outsiders is one of her works' major topics. The final book written by Astley is Drylands. The chapter "Taking Five" examines the impact of domestic violence on victims' mental health and well-being. It explores how prolonged exposure to abuse can lead to depression, anxiety disorders, and even suicidal tendencies. Additionally, it discusses the intergenerational cycle of violence perpetuated within families affected by domestic abuse. It represents women's desire to reject old gender norms and discover their own freedom and dignity in gender and family relationships, as well as Astley's severe denunciation of patriarchy.

Keywords: Domestic labor, gender inequality, mental health, patriarchy, female labor.

### Introduction

There are very few 'truths' in the social sciences that are completely unquestionable. In the modern industrialized world, however, it may be said to be "true" in essentially all cases that women perform more domestic labor than males. Domestic Labour can be defined as the labor or physical work done in a domestic setting i.e. duties and activities (that) are concerned with the running of a home and family. (Collins). Women and their responsibility as the representative of Domestic labor is extremely ingrained in the patriarchal society so as to it being a part of the collective subconscious. Drylands published in 1999 captures the nuances of this state of affairs with diverse voices that Thea Astley brings in through her narrative style. The story Taking Five chronicles the journey of Lannie Cunen living in the town of - a rather burnout housewife who goes completely against societal norms to salvage her sanity. The reason for her distress however amongst many was the inability of her family to provide her with the acknowledgement and assistance in her domestic drudgery. Thesis statement: The short story Taking Five highlights how patriarchy devalues and forgets the significance of domestic labor performed by women while being completely dependent on it.

### II. Patriarchal perception of domestic labor as ineffective

There is a widespread belief in society that other forms of work are more essential than domestic work. The undervaluing of traditionally female-dominated tasks and historical gender norms are the root causes of this public disposition. Comparing domestic work to professional occupations or jobs outside the home, domestic labor—which includes child rearing, caring for others, and household chores—is sometimes perceived as lowly and unskilled. The undervaluing of women's contributions to the home is one factor contributing to this view. In the past, males were expected to pursue occupations outside the home, while women were expected to handle household duties. The idea that a paid job is more valuable or significant than household work has been sustained by this division of labor. Furthermore, the fact that domestic work is frequently done by women in their homes for little or no pay contributes to the notion of its insignificance.

Heidi Hartmann suggests that while 'patriarchal relations tend to bolster capitalism', they are separate frameworks that have evolved through a partnership with each other. The division between the "public sphere" of the job and the "private sphere" at home—both arenas of feminist struggle—is one way that this division is expressed. The

division has restricted women's activism to the home sphere, leading to an internalized personal battle instead of a cohesive public one (2). The story begins with our protagonist Lannie Cunneen fixing her “ nine thousand, three hundred and twenty-eighth school lunch” and realizes that “(she) can't do this anymore” The ‘this’ implying the grueling unpaid labor that she has been doing since ages for her husband and their six sons. This results in an emotional breakdown where she escapes her house in her car only to be found by a police official on the request of Lannie's husband insisting she had gone crazy. Her dealings with the psychiatrist also don't make things better for her mostly due to the extremely varied worldview between her and the psychiatrist. He is unable to understand the dilemma that surrounds Lannie. “ But surely the boys give a hand?” he inquires, not understanding Lannie's turmoil. To which she replies

“My husband won't allow it. , he says it's women's work. He believes a woman's place is in the home. Permanently. He's keen for the boys to be footballers and drinkers. That's manly.”

Lannie's husband- Fred fails to understand the significance of her work in the household which manifests into him not only driving away the kids from helping her but also from acknowledging her struggles and sacrifices that enable them to have domestic bliss. This perception reinforces gender inequality as it is the man of the house who decides what is “ manly” and what is not. It is also the man who will make all the significant decisions that will always benefit him more. In *The Problem With Work*, Kathi Weeks develops a gendered theory of work. She begins by arguing that ‘work produces not just economic goods and services but also social and political subjects’, ‘not just income and capital, but disciplined individuals, governable subjects, worthy citizens, and responsible family members’(3). While at first one may consider them insignificant and part of a general societal routine they are essential in perpetuating Patriarchal power structures.

### III. The invisibility and erasure of female labor in society

When Fred tries to guilt Lannie into coming back and resuming her role as the complacent housewife using her love asking “ Don't you love them?” implying the kids she replies, “Of course I love them. I don't think they love me. They just miss what I do for them.” It highlights how even the love of her kids like her husband is subjective to what she can provide them with and not an unconditional sort of love one ought to have for their mother or the very least respect. This erasure contributes to the marginalization of women's work and reinforces traditional gender roles. Betty Friedan, reflecting on the ‘problem that has no name’ in the midtwentieth-century US, said ‘The problem [of domestic labor] lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. [...] Each suburban wife struggled with it alone’.

Thea Astley creates Lannie not as a character of fiction but as a representative of all the unheard female voices lost under the weight of domestic duties. Domestic chores are designed to be isolating while men can go out and interact not only for leisure but for their careers where the social aspect remains a constant; women are simply denied this privilege. Even popular female leisure activities such as reading, knitting, embroidering are done solitarily and have an underlying productive output in comparison to the male leisure activities of drinking, gambling, watching sports, etc which are rather counter productive. Outside of fiction women still go through the same perils, not only is their domestic input overlooked and considered an innate part of their being; they are also expected to work and constitute to the overall “productive” economy. After the Second World War there was a rise in women entering the workforce however there was not a decline in their performance of their traditional roles.

### IV. Consequences of devaluing domestic labor for women

To be needed and acknowledged in a core human desire and when it is not provided to half the population on the basis of gender it can lead to serious mental turmoil. This is intolerable to Lannie Cunneen, who decides to break free from her family's tyranny and her own. She makes the firm decision to leave the Drylands, her husband, and her six sons in order to pursue the freedom and dignity that are rightfully hers. The novel also reveals the underlying reason for gender-based violence: "They told her the police wouldn't act The police always took the husband's side in these matters. The police drank with them” (Astley, 1999, p. 62). Hence, it is evident that, given the social context of the time, the perpetrators (men) of this gender-based violence were shielded from societal authority, which accepted its presence.

It is imperative to know that Men's privilege depends on this female sacrifice. When Fred realizes it, it's rather late. Lannie who's gotten a minimum wage job at the town's Radio station and was displaying a “ new businesslike quality.” For there was no way that hannie was going back to the old ways, minimum wage is still wage compared to her no wage job that she has been doing in her 20 year marriage. It is only when Lannie is free from her domestic bondage that we see her thriving.

“ She settled in at work. She was efficient. People thanked her. She enjoyed a day spent in the company of adults, even those as spurious as radio personalities. She could take that with a laugh! They raised her wages.”

One can only wonder how much Lannie would have been able to accomplish had she been given the same liberties as Fred at the beginning of their marriage. Clearly, she would've excelled more than him whose highest achievement had been becoming the Department Clerk. The readers along with her current employers see Lannie's potential in advancing her career. Another significant female character in the story is Norma, a naive young colleague of Fred who sympathizes with his misery and they end up falling in love. Astley seems to be hinting that Norma would be the new Lannie, replacing her position but also her labor but it is at the very end that Astley changes the narrative and makes Fred accountable for his actions. Norma gains her wits and realizes the possibilities for her and rejects the gendered roles she would have to perform and how it would cage her. Thus, she leaves her illegitimate child with Fred to be raised by him, alone. Another woman that makes Fred realize he has to suffer the consequences of his actions albeit it didn't take her twenty years to do so.

#### V. Conclusion

The way patriarchy has treated women who work has always been a problem. Women have experienced discrimination and unfair treatment in the workplace throughout history, from ancient civilizations to contemporary communities. Patriarchal structures have frequently reduced women to household responsibilities, undervaluing their contributions and preventing them from achieving equal opportunity for financial independence. Women's labor has historically been valued less than men's in many civilizations, which has resulted in lower pay and less opportunities for advancement. Traditional gender norms are upheld and gender inequity is sustained by this systemic bias. Women's professional advancement is further restricted by the societal expectation that they should put family obligations ahead of their jobs.

Astley highlights through this short story how patriarchal norms often undermine women's autonomy in decision-making processes regarding their work lives. They face barriers such as limited access to education and training, lack of representation in leadership positions, and workplace harassment. Remembering women's contributions is essential for creating an inclusive narrative that accurately reflects our shared history. By acknowledging the accomplishments of women alongside those of men in textbooks and historical accounts, we ensure that their stories are not forgotten or overshadowed. This recognition fosters a sense of empowerment among women today while challenging societal biases that perpetuate gender inequality. In conclusion, recognizing, valuing, and remembering women's contributions within both literature and real life is crucial for a more accurate representation of our collective history. In order to properly address this issue, it is vital that patriarchal attitudes that support gender-based discrimination in the workplace be challenged. In order to loosen patriarchy's hold on female labor, regulations against workplace harassment, equal pay for equal effort, and education for women are crucial first steps. All people, regardless of gender, can only flourish in a more fair society if we acknowledge the contributions made by women.

#### References

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3. Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011) 8–11.