

Prestige, Recognition, and Social Rivalry in California in Kristin Hannah's *The Women*

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Abstract:

This study examines the representation of prestige, recognition, and social rivalry in Californian society in Kristin Hannah's *The Women*. This research analyzes how family prestige influences Frankie's decision to participate in the war, how recognition is constructed for returning veterans in Californian society, and how social rivalry produces acceptance and exclusion that affect the protagonist's identity formation before and after the Vietnam War. The study applies René Girard's mimetic theory to examine how the desire for prestige and recognition emerges through social imitation and develops into rivalry in postwar society. The findings show that Californian society functions as a social arena in which prestige motivates participation in war, recognition is unequally distributed between male soldiers and female nurses, and rivalry over legitimacy shapes the protagonist's postwar identity transformation. The study concludes that prestige, recognition, and rivalry serve as central social mechanisms that influence both personal motivation and social acceptance in the novel.

Keywords: Prestige; Recognition; Social Rivalry; Mimetic Theory

Abstrak:

Artikel ini mengkaji representasi martabat, pengakuan, dan persaingan sosial di masyarakat California pada novel *The Women* karya Kristin Hannah. Penelitian ini menganalisis bagaimana martabat keluarga memengaruhi keputusan Frankie berpartisipasi dalam perang, bagaimana pengakuan veteran dibentuk oleh masyarakat California, serta bagaimana persaingan sosial menghasilkan penerimaan dan penolakan yang memengaruhi pembentukan identitas protagonis sebelum dan setelah Perang Vietnam. Dengan teori mimesis Rene Girard, studi ini meneliti bagaimana keinginan untuk meraih martabat dan pengakuan muncul melalui imitasi sosial dan berkembang menjadi persaingan pada masyarakat pascaperang. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa masyarakat California berfungsi sebagai arena sosial di mana martabat mendorong partisipasi pada perang, pengakuan diberikan secara tidak setara bagi tentara pria dan perawat perempuan, serta persaingan untuk legitimasi membentuk transformasi identitas pascaperang protagonis. Dengan demikian, disimpulkan bahwa martabat, pengakuan, dan persaingan menjadi pusat mekanisme sosial yang berpengaruh pada motivasi individu maupun penerimaan sosial pada novel.

Kata kunci: Martabat; Pengakuan; Persaingan Sosial; Teori Mimesis

INTRODUCTION

Literature is often recognized as a complex representation of society rather than merely as a product of creativity. Literature captures the norms, conflicts, and ideologies that occur in a society of a given period (Sawhney, 2020). Moreover, Keerthika (2018) suggested that readers can explore through the characters how they interact with the community and how the social structure is constructed in the story. Therefore, literature becomes an essential medium to perceive prestige, recognition, and even societal competition.

It is known that the social status of a person is not constructed individually, but is shaped by their interaction with society, along with the practice of the social structure that underlies. This is demonstrated in certain works of literature, in which the characters endeavor to obtain recognition or a particular status. In the context of a hierarchical society, the characters often struggle with societal expectations and norms that conflict with their personal ambitions.

In the tradition of American Literature, issues of identity, social recognition, and conflict often emerge in literary works that explore the theme of war, especially Vietnam War literature (Beidler, 2018). Walter (2018) explained that the Vietnam War has caused collective trauma and shock that lasts for years from military tensions, political issues, and individual conflicts. Moreover, in the tradition of Vietnam War literature, they mostly explore war experience, criticism against the government, and post-war trauma that are mostly told from the male soldiers' point of view.

The Women by Kristin Hannah is a contemporary novel that offers a unique perspective on the Vietnam War. Published in 2024, *The Women* presents the journey of Frankie McGrath, a young woman who serves as an Army nurse in the Vietnam War and then faces societal rejection and trauma upon her return home. In the story, California is important for literary study of society rather than merely as a geographical setting. Set in the 1960s - 1980s, Frankie's community places a high value on societal recognition and family honor. Prestige, recognition, and rivalry become central social mechanisms that trigger conflicts in the story. Frankie pursues her ambition to demand women's rights to gain family prestige and be recognized as a legitimate veteran.

Studies on *The Women* so far have mostly explored trauma, feminism, female subjectivity, and war experience. Rashid et al. (2025) examined the character's psychology through the lens of

trauma theory. They found that the experience of war and traumatic events became the major causes that resulted in Frankie's PTSD. Another study analyzed female subjectivity as portrayed in *The Women* and how Frankie challenges patriarchal structures through the lens of De Beauvoir's Existentialist Feminism (Ullah et al., 2025). Merkulova & Lutsyk (2025) also studied the rendering translation of Kristin Hannah's style in Ukrainian translation. Moreover, Achankunju (2026) examines how women nurses, as ecological subjects in wartime, were undervalued and neglected, while men were granted privileges.

Nevertheless, no one has explored social mechanisms, particularly in prestige, social recognition, and rivalry, which are the central concerns in the story. Through the lens of René Girard's mimetic theory, this article offers a different approach from previous ones by analyzing how prestige, recognition, and social rivalry operate in the novel. Theoretically, this study contributes to the expansion of the application of mimetic theory to understanding contemporary American war literature in the context of post-war society. In addition, the practical significance of this study is to advocate for legitimate recognition for women, especially in society and the military, which has long been overlooked.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative method with a textual analysis approach to discuss the depiction of prestige, recognition, and social rivalry in the novel entitled *The Women* by Kristin Hannah. The qualitative approach is applied because this study focuses on social relations, understanding meaning, and the construction of identity that arises through dialogue, narrative, and the experiences of characters in literary works. According to Creswell, qualitative research aims to understand social and human events using an understanding of the text and the experiences of the subjects (Creswell, 2014). In the context of literary research, this method allows researchers to explore how social relations and values of power are depicted in the novel.

The primary data source of this study is Kristin Hannah's novel *The Women*, published by Ballantine Books in 2024. The data consists of dialogues, monologues, narratives, and character depictions related to family prestige, social recognition, and social rivalry in California society. Data were collected using a close reading technique to determine which parts of the text

demonstrate imitation of desire, conflict of recognition, social relations, and the struggle for legitimacy of female veterans.

This study uses René Girard's mimetic theory as the main theoretical basis. In *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, Girard explains that human desire is not free, but rather mediated by others as mediators or models of desire (Girard, 1976, pp. 2–4). Girard states that “the disciple pursues objects which are determined for him ... by the model of all chivalry.” (Girard, 1976, p. 2), which shows that individuals form their desires by imitating figures who are considered to have social authority or prestige. In addition, Girard also explains that the prestige of the mediator can increase the value of the desired object, thus resulting in potential rivalry between subjects and social imitation (Girard, 1976, pp. 17–18). The concept of triangular desire is applied to examine the relationship between the mediator, the subject, and the object of desire in the novel.

In this study, mimetic theory is applied to examine three main focuses. Firstly, family prestige as a mimetic model is examined by examining how Frankie forms her desires based on military prestige within the McGrath family. Secondly, the recognition crisis in Californian society is examined by examining social rejection of female veterans and the inequality of legitimacy between women and men after the Vietnam War. Thirdly, social rivalry and veteran legitimacy are examined through social conflict and the struggle for recognition that can influence Frankie's identity as a female veteran.

The data analysis technique was carried out in four stages. Firstly, the researchers read the novel's contents thoroughly to understand character development and social context. Secondly, the researchers grouped text excerpts related to prestige, recognition, and rivalry. Thirdly, the data were examined using René Girard's main concepts, such as mimetic desire, mediator, triangular desire, and rivalry. Finally, the research results explain how California society in the novel's literary work can shape social structures that influence the social acceptance, identity, and legitimacy of female veterans.

DISCUSSION

A. Family Prestige as Mimetic Model

In *The Women*, family prestige becomes an important mimetic model that influences Frankie's identity and decision to join the Vietnam War. The idea of prestige is closely related to military honor, elite Californian social identity, and the tradition of the "heroes' wall" in the McGrath family. Frankie grows up in a family that highly respects military service, and this environment shapes her understanding of achievement and social value. According to René Girard, people often form their desires by imitating individuals whom they admire or consider prestigious. In the novel, Frankie's father becomes the mediator of desire because his values and expectations influence Frankie's ambition to gain recognition through military service.

The first important symbol of prestige in the novel is the "heroes' wall" in her father's office. Frankie observes that "Her father believed that one had to earn their way onto this wall" (Hannah, 2024, p. 12). This wall represents more than family decoration because it symbolizes honor, achievement, and social legitimacy within the McGrath family. Only family members who have served the country in wartime are considered worthy of being displayed there. The wall therefore, creates a symbolic social hierarchy inside the family. It also reflects military masculinity because the honored figures are male relatives connected with war and heroism. Through Girard's mimetic theory, the wall functions as a prestigious object that shapes Frankie's desire. She does not naturally desire war itself; instead, she desires the honor and recognition associated with military service. Her father acts as the model, military honor becomes the object of desire, and enlistment becomes the result of this mimetic process.

The importance of prestige is strengthened by the visual representation of family military history inside the office. Frankie notices that "One entire wall of the office was devoted to their family history." (Hannah, 2024, p. 11). The office contains photographs of family members in military uniforms, medals, and war memorabilia from earlier generations. This setting institutionalizes prestige because military service is presented as a permanent family tradition rather than an individual choice. Prestige also becomes historical and inherited since each generation is expected to continue the same values. At the same time, the tradition is masculine-coded because military honor is connected mainly with male family members. As a result, Frankie's identity formation begins through imitation of family prestige rather than through her own independent ambition. She wants to become part of the respected family history that she sees displayed before her every day.

However, the novel also shows that prestige is limited by gender boundaries. This can be seen when Frankie's father says sharply, "The men serve. The men" (Hannah, 2024, p. 23). This statement clearly excludes women from the prestigious military tradition of the family. Military honor is socially reserved for men, while women are expected to remain outside that structure. Frankie, therefore, experiences mimetic tension because she desires the same prestige and recognition given to male family members, yet the social system denies her access to it. Her wish to join the war becomes not only a personal decision but also an attempt to enter a prestigious structure that traditionally rejects women. In this way, social prestige creates both aspiration and exclusion at the same time.

Frankie's desire for prestige becomes even more explicit when she imagines that "She could earn her place on the heroes' wall ... For saving lives in wartime" (Hannah, 2024, p. 19). This quotation shows that Frankie associates military service with recognition, belonging, and personal value. She hopes that by serving in Vietnam, she can finally be accepted as part of the family's heroic tradition. Prestige, therefore, functions as a motivating force that shapes her identity and ambitions. It also becomes a symbolic mechanism of belonging because earning a place on the wall means earning recognition within both the family and society. Overall, the novel portrays family prestige as a powerful mimetic model that shapes Frankie's desire for recognition and influences her decision to participate in the Vietnam War.

B. Recognition Crisis in Californian Society

After returning from the Vietnam War, Frankie faces a serious crisis of recognition within Californian society. Although she has served as a combat nurse and experienced the dangers of war directly, society does not fully acknowledge her contribution. In *The Women*, recognition becomes an important social issue because acceptance and legitimacy are strongly influenced by gender expectations and social prestige. According to René Girard's mimetic theory, recognition can function as symbolic capital that individuals seek in order to gain value and social belonging. In Frankie's case, the denial of recognition creates conflict not only between herself and society but also within her own family.

One of the strongest examples of recognition denial appears when Frankie hears the

statement, "There were no women in Vietnam" (Hannah, 2024, p. 237). This sentence becomes highly significant because it symbolically erases the existence of female veterans from public memory. Although women worked as nurses and risked their lives during the war, society refuses to recognize their participation as equal to that of male soldiers. Recognition failure in this scene operates at several levels. First, it reflects historical denial because women's contributions are removed from the official narrative of the Vietnam War. Second, it shows social denial because California society does not openly acknowledge female veterans. Third, it demonstrates gender-based legitimacy problems because military service is culturally associated with masculinity rather than femininity. Through Girard's perspective, recognition becomes contested symbolic capital. Male veterans are socially accepted as legitimate heroes, while women struggle to gain the same acknowledgment despite making important sacrifices during the war.

The crisis of recognition becomes even more painful because it also occurs within Frankie's family. After returning home, Frankie realizes that her parents hide the truth about her military service from other people. She says, "My parents lied about my service in Vietnam. That's how ashamed they are of me" (Hannah, 2024, p. 198). Frankie also states sarcastically, "Yeah. It's me, Dad, back from studying abroad in Florence" (Hannah, 2024, p. 198). These statements reveal that her parents prefer to tell society that she studied abroad rather than admit that she served in Vietnam. This concealment shows that the family fears social judgment and wants to protect its prestige within elite Californian society. Military service is considered honorable for men, but inappropriate or embarrassing for women. As a result, the family withdraws recognition from Frankie in order to maintain its public image. The conflict, therefore, becomes deeply personal because Frankie is rejected not only by society but also by the people from whom she expects support and acknowledgment.

The importance of recognition can also be seen before Frankie joins the war. When she asks for permission and emotional support, she says, "Give me your blessing. Please. I need you to say you're proud of me" (Hannah, 2024, p. 26). This statement shows that recognition is not simply public approval but also emotional validation connected with identity formation. Frankie wants her parents to acknowledge her decision as meaningful and honorable. She hopes that their pride will confirm her value within the family tradition. In Girardian terms, recognition functions as a symbolic affirmation that strengthens identity and belonging. However, the absence of

recognition creates mimetic instability because Frankie's desire for prestige is not matched by social acceptance. She imitates the military values respected by her family, but she is denied the same legitimacy given to male members of the family. Consequently, Frankie experiences emotional conflict and identity uncertainty after returning from the war.

Overall, the novel portrays Californian society as a social environment where recognition is distributed unequally according to gender expectations and prestige structures. Female veterans struggle to gain acknowledgment despite their sacrifices, while male military service is more easily accepted and celebrated. Through Frankie's experiences, *The Women* reveals that recognition functions as an important social mechanism shaping identity, belonging, and legitimacy in postwar society.

C. Social Rivalry and Veteran Legitimacy

Social rivalry in *The Women* appears through competition over who is considered a legitimate and honorable veteran within Californian society. After and even before the Vietnam War, recognition is distributed unequally according to gender and social expectations. Male soldiers are publicly celebrated and easily accepted as heroes, while women who participate in the war often face doubt, criticism, and rejection. According to René Girard's mimetic theory, rivalry develops when individuals compete for the same recognition and prestige within a social system. In the novel, California becomes a social arena where different groups struggle to define who deserves honor, legitimacy, and public respect.

One example of this rivalry can be seen through the contrast between Finley and Frankie before the war begins. At the farewell gathering, guests openly congratulate Finley by saying, "We are proud of you, son!" (Hannah, 2024, p. 11). Finley immediately receives admiration because military service is socially associated with masculinity and patriotism. He is celebrated as someone who brings honor to the family and society. In contrast, Frankie does not receive the same positive response when she later expresses her desire to join the war. Instead of admiration, she faces questions and resistance. This contrast creates what can be called mimetic asymmetry because both siblings pursue military service, yet only one receives social prestige and recognition. Through this unequal treatment, the novel shows that social rivalry is shaped not only by personal

achievement but also by gender expectations within Californian society.

Another form of rivalry appears in the ideological conflict surrounding the Vietnam War. When Frankie visits the recruitment office, protesters insult her by saying, "This chick is crazy ..." (Hannah, 2024, pp. 20–21). This statement reflects hostility toward those who support or participate in the war. California in the novel is divided between competing ideological groups. On one side, patriotism encourages military service as a symbol of national honor. On the other side, anti-war activism condemns participation in Vietnam as morally wrong. Frankie becomes trapped between these opposing social forces. As a result, rivalry develops not only between men and women but also between competing systems of recognition. Patriotism offers prestige to veterans, while anti-war movements reject and criticize them. California therefore, functions as a symbolic battlefield where social legitimacy is constantly negotiated and contested.

Social rivalry is also influenced by prestige anxiety within elite society. This can be seen when Frankie's mother reacts to her daughter's decision by asking, "What will we tell people?" (Hannah, 2024, p. 23). Her response shows that family reputation is more important than Frankie's personal ambition or contribution. The mother fears social judgment because female military participation threatens the family's respected image within Californian society. Prestige therefore creates rivalry between two competing interests: maintaining social reputation and accepting women's participation in war. Frankie's decision challenges traditional expectations of femininity, and this creates tension within the family itself. Recognition becomes socially negotiated reputation capital because acceptance depends not only on service but also on whether society considers that service appropriate for women.

Through these examples, the novel demonstrates that social rivalry in Californian society is closely connected with prestige, legitimacy, and public recognition. Male soldiers are more easily accepted as heroic figures, while women veterans must struggle for acknowledgment and social legitimacy. The novel, therefore, reveals that recognition is not distributed equally but shaped by ideological conflict, gender expectations, and family prestige structures. Overall, *The Women* portrays California as a competitive social environment in which rivalry over legitimacy strongly influences identity and social belonging after the Vietnam War.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *The Women* portrays Californian society as a social environment strongly influenced by prestige, recognition, and rivalry. Family traditions such as the heroes' wall and military lineage shape Frankie's desire to gain honor and social acceptance through wartime service. However, after returning from Vietnam, she experiences a recognition crisis because female veterans are denied equal acknowledgment by both society and her own family. The novel also reveals how social rivalry emerges through unequal comparisons between male and female veterans, ideological conflicts surrounding the war, and anxiety over family reputation. Through Frankie's experiences, the novel demonstrates that prestige and recognition are not distributed equally but are shaped by gender expectations and social values. Therefore, Californian society becomes a competitive space where legitimacy and belonging are constantly negotiated.

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