

Silent Controllers: Unconscious Emotional Abuse in “The Revolt of ‘Mother’ ”

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Abstract: Violence against women in intimate heterosexual relationships taking different shapes and forms is a highly injurious symptom of structured social inequality. Emotional abuse is one that feminist scholars are indeed committed to eliminating. Mary Freeman also exposes this tricky problem in her classic short story “The Revolt of ‘Mother’ ” in a latent way. Through analysing the manifestation and reaction to the unconscious emotional abuse underlying the father’s aphasia, this paper finds it an undeniable form of androcentrism. Furthermore, we can tell, as the paper reviews the incomplete revolt based on the text and context as well as the reason behind the silence, the gender reversal within the story. This paper, therefore, ascertains Freeman’s attempt to transcend the binary opposition.

Keywords: Mary. E. Freeman, “The Revolt of ‘Mother’ ”, aphasia, emotional abuse, gender reversal

1. Introduction

The short story “The Revolt of ‘Mother’ ” (1890) by Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman (1852–1930) introduces us a revolt staged by a mother on a rural New England farm in the late nineteenth century. Sarah Penn, the mother, eventually finds the new dwelling her husband promised more than forty years ago after enduring all the pains and sufferings. Although the whole community including the minister comes to remonstrate with her, Sarah is steadfast as well as tactful. This event also makes the mother a remarkable character who successfully defeats her husband as the symbol of the patriarchal family’s ruler in literary history.

The powerful reverberations of this mother’s revolt last for hundreds. Although the domestic story is overlooked at first as many early critics and readers call it “funny” [1]²⁷⁹ as a “comic folk tale” [2] or fantasy-like Charles Thompson, Alice Brand, Victoria Aarons and so on, it enjoys considerable popularity. By 1916 the widely reprinted, dramatized, and the performed story had become “such a familiar point of reference for discussion of the hardships of farm women’s lives” [3]¹²⁵ that later critics could stretch their concerns to new territories. In 1917, Freeman even complained that it was the story “by which I consider myself lamentably best known” [4]²⁵. Besides, some critics claim that those who label the story as “comic fantasy” aim to deny a frightening picture—that of a woman who defies gender roles. For instance, Joseph Church affirms its value indicating that Sarah Penn’s daring move “expresses a metaphorical expansion of her selfhood” [5] in 1990. Patricia Dwyer highly praises Freeman for she creates a different type of “penned woman” who is not confined but liberated in 1993 [6].

Nevertheless, speaking of the father’s “aphasia” throughout the conversations initiated by the mother, there are few comments available. Most discussions simply write the silence off or see it as a background to focus on other topics such as Elaine Orr and Martha Cutter on discourse analysis in 1991. The former suggests “the empowering possibilities of women writers’ negotiations with the literary past” [7]⁶⁰ while the latter discovers a “serious subtext” behind the so-called “folksy humor” in which Sarah “merges these two conflicting value systems and gains the power to be a speaking subject” [1]²⁹¹. Moreover, there exists a divergence when interpreting it. Some critics like Zhang Haiyan, Xu Mei and Zhuang Yihui regard it as a signal of male supremacy by indicating the apparent fracture in the dialogue an inequality or imbalance of male and female discourse right. While some see it as a symbol of female power and the father’s “power slide” due to misconduct [8]⁵⁵.

We may ascribe the inadequate and controversial studies to the feminism tradition where “female aphasia” has long been established and studied, devaluing studies on male aphasia to some extent. The clinical definition of Aphasia is “the loss or impairment of language function caused by brain damage”

[9]³. This term has been borrowed to interpret the condition of female silence by many feminists in a psychological or societal context though. As early as Virginia Woolf writes in *A Room of One's Own* (1928) that women are “monsters” having “no existence” for by no possible means could she tell, keep or write [10]⁵⁰. Woolf also says that the resources of the English language are limited with clusters of words to be twisted before women can describe what is happening in the room. This aphasia leads to androcentrism, which infiltrated all especially language. A Woman becomes deprived of discourse right, so she does not have her own language to express “her” unique experiences. French feminism school develops the view, concluding that patriarchy only expresses one gender, which is only the projection of the male Hibido mechanism, and women are absent and silent in it. Compared to this tradition, it is intriguing when Freeman builds up a silent father in “The Revolt of ‘Mother’”, which has been underestimated though.

Thus, this paper will probe into the father’s “aphasia” in “The Revolt of ‘Mother’” from the feminist perspective, trying to ascertain it is an undeniable form of androcentrism. Based on this, the paper will go further on the unconscious emotional abuse underlying the father’s aphasia. Through analyzing its manifestation and reaction to it, this paper explores why the limited success of this revolt can be achieved and to what extent can we say both men and women are victims of patriarchy. Even if the revolt is an incomplete one, its whole process is worth reviewing. Freeman indeed exposes a tricky problem that cannot be neglected.

2. Aphasia: the manifestation of unconscious emotional abuse

Compared to physically aggressive assaults on male to female abuse, psychological abuse is more subtle and often less visible with repugnant forms of emotional or verbal abuse. Emotional abuse is defined as “the patterned non-physical degradation of one person by their partner through the conscious or unconscious gaining, regaining or maintaining of power through the repetitive overt or subtle acts and messages that control or attempt to control” [11]³¹, emotional abuse, therefore, has at its core the misuse of power. Further, the men who silently reject women by emotionally neglecting them are labeled “Silent Controllers”. The women tend to portray themselves as more assertive than their male partners and at times do not conform to their partners’ expectations of traditional gendered roles. “If the women did not fall in line, these men attempted to control their partners by silently rejecting them, refusing to answer their questions, acting coldly towards them, or by withholding help” [11]⁴⁰.

Throughout “The Revolt”, we can find, on the one hand, that the father, Adoniram Penn, is the silent controller. Vivid clues are catering to the symptoms, among which aphasia is a clear manifestation of the abuse. Adoniram’s aphasia includes not only the total silence but the negative response to the mother.

At the beginning of the story, a conversation is initiated by the mother, Sarah Penn, who is wondering what the father and those men are “digging over there”. But the father simply answers with silence—“he shut his mouth tight and went on harnessing the great bay mare. He hustled the collar onto her neck with a jerk” [4]¹. The second call is answered with a silent action—“slapped the saddle upon the mare’s back”. The third one is returned with a cold order—“go into the house...tend to your own affairs”, which reveals his unconscious controlling intention over the mother. It is still silence (“glanced doggedly”) and nonsense (“what is it”) that are answered the fourth and fifth call until the sixth one. The father finally gives a direct answer—“They are digging a cellar, I suppose, if you have to know” [4]².

The second conversation can be the father’s severer control of the mother’s “unreasonable demand” if we take the first one as his control of a wife “crossing the line” for Sarah’s request further as “what I want” than “what are you doing”. There are eleven rounds of dialogue in the second conversation. However, all we read are Sarah’s helpless one-sided shouting together with Adoniram’s habitual “obstinate silence”, “which makes eloquence futile with mocking echoes” [4]⁸. He shuts his mouth tight or simply repeats “I haven’t got anything to say”.

Adoniram indeed punishes Sarah through the aphasia mentioned above. He can be controlling whenever he needs by treating the partner like a servant, making family decisions without consulting her, and refusing to assist or withholding whatever is desired by her—in this case, a new house he promised forty years ago. Ambiguity and reluctance can be felt in his several discourses. “The goal of the abusive behavior is to impose one’s will upon another” [12]⁹¹. The lack of affectionate or affirming behavior is a type of punishment for Sarah who does not conform to her subordinate status or role that her gender dictates in a patriarchal society. And the abuse does work. Then the mother “said nothing more” [4]⁴, “went into her bedroom”, coming out with her red eyes. She can do nothing but cut out “some shirts for her husband” and “hear their hallos”. These indicate the mother’s thoroughly passive feeling of being

neglected without any direct emotional description. Adoniram, as a silent controller, may use these passive-aggressive means to make Sarah feel bad for failing to live up to traditional social standards for women, thus controlling her for more than forty years. “No words were generally used. In this way their criticism of their partner was implied in their behavior” [11]⁴⁹. What is noteworthy is their son, Sammy has exactly inherited his father’s aphasia. “He did not seem to pay any attention to the conversation” [4]³. The boy imitatively responds with silence or actions such as “combed assiduously”, “tying his shoes” and “said reluctantly”, indicating the everlasting inter-generational transmission of patriarchy.

On the other, it cannot be ignored of those more insidious and may not be recognized silent controllers, the community of that town. Apart from the domestic silence, other residents are basically speechless in front of the mother for “many types of emotionally abusive behavior can appear to be socially acceptable” [11]³⁰. The men over in the field are so quiet that “all through the spring months that she heard nothing but the hallos and the noises of saws and hammers” [4]⁹; People keep silent facing Sarah in person but real opinions are discussed behind her back—“men assembled in the store and talked it over, women with shawls over their heads scuttled into each other’s houses before their work was done” [4]¹³; although the minister comes to persuade, he “stood awkwardly...and talked” unnaturally, “then he retreated” [4]¹⁴. The community, being an accomplice of the father and a vindicator of patriarchy, should also take the responsibility for the abuse.

In addition, unconscious—everyone regards the aphasia as a norm including the mother. Adoniram hardly finds aphasia a way of abuse as he simply ignores it. People choose to follow a tradition named patriarchy. Consequently, the women are placed in a subordinate position of care and responsibility, with no reciprocal support provided. When it “is seen as natural, and therefore unchangeable, as opposed to social practices that produce certain behavior, the emotional abusiveness of gendered practices can be obscured” [11]⁵⁷. Similarly, such men are perceived as expecting special privileges, such as being seen to be right, and are often seen as behaving in a self-righteous manner. It is under this collective unconscious Sarah Penn has been spending her miserable half-life.

Aphasia in “The Revolt” is a quite intriguing phenomenon. Even if this term is often used to describe a woman’s power loss due to patriarchy, the author notices it is also a way to emotionally control a woman. Both Adoniram and the community naturally use it to reject Sarah’s unconventional idea. These silent controllers can use it as their wish to maintain the power. Hence, no matter what and how much Sarah has said, under such circumstances, she says nothing.

3. Voice: the incomplete revolt against the silent controllers

As the author has discussed above, Sarah’s voice is, to a large extent, ignored, rejected and despised. Her eloquence is basically futile with “mocking echoes”. So why does she keep voicing?

Sarah’s constant voice helps her to initiate the prelude of the revolt. Women were found to experience constant and acute emotional pain as a result of such rejections. She asks, calls, and argues out of anger, which is an aftermath of emotional abuse. “All of the women had begun to feel angry when they started to make a connection between their partners’ behavior and their own emotional pain...her intense anger reportedly gave her the ‘superhuman strength’ to do the job alone. feeling angry was a form of rebellion against feeling emotionally ‘battered’ [11]⁵³. Upon this realization, Sarah’s long-suppressed feelings of anger explode in a blast of powerful rage that is “often destructive and violent and that may seem to come from nowhere” [4]³⁶. She “stood waiting”, “came promptly”, “plunged her hands vigorously into the water”, “scrubbed a dish fiercely” with a “conclusive air”. Feminist literature asserts that males are mostly the aggressors with women reacting to the abuse in order to resist male oppression. Sarah’s anger, in this case, is veiled under her “meek vigor”, covered with “importunate” questions and lengthy statements. Although there is basically no positive response to her mildly angry voice, Sarah has expressed her discontent and desire for the first time in the past forty years, which is the first step of the revolt.

Voice also plays a significant part in the climax of the revolt. Her voice functions on others including the haymakers, two children as well as the minister even if she tried to touch and move the father in vain. She cries out to stop the haymaker from filling in the new barn, then she gives instructions to the children—“Nanny, I want you to go upstairs and pack up your things; and I want you, Sammy, to help me take down the bed in the bedroom” [4]¹² and they follow her “without a murmur”. They are overawed by the “uncanny and superhuman quality” in her voice. In this way, she obtains children’s support. Moreover, Sarah, genius-like, consolidates her rebellious gains through a tactful voice. She easily convinces the minister of her rightness through two paragraphs of the speech, smartly bringing it to the Lord in prayer

and comparing it to the country's forefathers. Her voice now is becoming more assertive and affirmative to successfully defend the new "house".

Nevertheless, the mother's voice never fundamentally changes the father's and others' deep-rooted traditional thoughts. Or rather, she is the defender of the traditional patriarchal norms, leading to the contradiction and incompleteness of the revolt. As the paradox of the mother sheds light on women's face while attempting to perform and fulfill expected roles", Sarah's voice is a call for a redefinition of those roles within the household and the family instead of advocating "an abandonment of traditional roles prescribed for women" [13]. She asks and reproaches Adoniram in the "expression of meek vigor" [4]⁵, repeatedly stressing that she is not complaining from time to time— "Nobody's ever heard me complain" [4]⁴. Besides, she delivers the submission to her daughter Nanny also by talking— "You should not judge Father, though. He can't help it, because he does not look at things the way we do... You have a good father and a good home" [4]⁴⁻⁵. She wipes the tears and comes out, continuing to faithfully complete her tasks as a "housekeeper" by preparing the dinner, doing the dishes, cleaning the shirt, etc. until the end of the scene. The reason is that women can be criticized for not living up to the social code dictating that women are responsible for maintaining the marriage relationship. Consequently, Sarah's pretending of "all is well" exposes her guilt for failing her partner's and society's expectations. Sarah, as a result, is never a woman asking for "a room of her own" but a mother asking for a new house for her "ladylike" daughter. She fails to recognize any hint of the emotional abuse caused by the silent controller— she fights based on the instinct of a mother. What is the saddest irony is that Sarah never convinces her husband through voice. She applies many tactful strategies, making full use of his "absence" as a "providence" to move into the new barn successfully and stealthily. The unusual revolt is confined within a house-domestic issue without touching the core interest of the whole community, thus an incomplete one.

All in all, despite Sarah's relative perseverance to the traditional norms and rules of patriarchy, Freeman indeed makes her voice out loud and meaningfully. This impetus is reflected in Judith Butler's description of the subversion of injurious speech which can be turned upon itself and subverted into an affirmative force for the target of the injury [14]⁷⁶. According to Butler, because the individual is constituted—and constantly re-constituted—through language, injurious speech (such as emotionally abusive language) can have not only a damaging effect but also an "enabling response" in which the target or "victim" not only receives the words but also takes those words on as a possibility for "talking back" in a broad and transformative sense. In "The Revolt", Sarah constantly uses her voice to initiate the revolt, push it onto the climax and maintain it in a tactful method. Here, traditional female aphasia is subverted by a woman who uses the oppression evident in the language as a signifier of the abuser's own instability and, moreover, as an opportunity for her to remove herself from the oppressive confines of the abusive relationship. This incomplete revolt, in this sense, is an initial step in a process of affirmative transformation.

4. Reversal: an attempt to transcend binary opposition

The author can find a kind of "gender reversal" based on the analysis above. Sarah expands her spatial right through powerful and continuous discourse while Adoniram meets his inability of voicing, either silent or vague with helpless repetition mostly. How come they behave against the traditional gender role or what is Freeman's real intention for this design?

"Gender", different from "genetic sex", is described in a societal context, "thus separating the cultural connotation of gender difference from the biological carrier on which it depends" [15]⁵¹. It was Simone de Beauvoir who put forward the concept of "gender" earlier. In *The second sex*, she clearly rejects the traditional view that women's biological sex and social gender are regarded as "natural integration". "Gender" is a status acquired through psychological, cultural and social means" [16]⁵². Therefore, it is disciplined by different social and cultural factors in different social stages. The so-called "masculinity" and "femininity" are the products of an interplay of such influences, which are formed and interpreted by the patriarchal culture as a predestined thing for a long time, and then becomes an excuse to deprive women of various rights.

It can be perceived as a kind of "gender reversal" in "The Revolt", for it disobeys the disciplines of that age. In the nineteenth century, women were expected to be "the angel of the house", nurturing, silent, and submissive. Men were responsible for the public sphere and women oversaw the private sphere. A woman was confined to a status that stems from "her position in a patriarchal society that through its focus on conquest and colonization often exclude feminine values" [1]²⁷⁹ such as domestic life. Besides,

gender inequality in the control of finances was a longstanding issue in farm life at that time. In brief, most money was spent on technology for the men's domains—on livestock, fields, and barns—while little was done to ease farm women's lives.

Sarah and Adoniram deviate from such expectations. Despite her efforts catering to the traditional role, Sarah is generally acting like a male—straightforward, insistent, steadfast, calm, tactful, all of which are considered part of “masculinity”. Whereas Adoniram is somewhat undermined, behaving like a boy at first and then even a girl. “He hurried the horse into the farm wagon, and clattered out of the yard, jouncing on his seat as a boy” [4]², trying to escape from his duty at any time; “he was weeping” with “shoulders heaved” [4]¹⁶ at the end of the story.

There is some deep-seated reason underlying this deliberate “reversal”, that is, both males and females are victims of patriarchy.

For one thing, women are victimized. Women's rights as human beings are denied when men believe that they are entitled to special treatment or insist on having their way simply because they are male. Emotional abuse from a feminist perspective is, therefore, an expression of and a mechanism of the institutional oppression of women as gender hierarchies guarantee unjust power distributions within heterosexual relationships and promote the oppression of women. Women may experience gender role restrictions, devaluations, and violations of equal rights when men abuse their social power. Adoniram's aphasia has been supported by social and political structures in the form of patriarchy. In this way, emotional abuse occurring within the intimate relations of heterosexual couples has been linked to a loss or denial of women's autonomy, as it is likely to further diminish the agency of the victim.

For another, Adoniram's aphasia, incapable of expressing himself can be seen as an “affective interaction disorder”. Abusive men are often seen as insecure, angry, and impulsive [12]⁸⁷. Given this usage, it seems fitting that a feminist perspective be brought to inform work on emotional abuse. Feminist theorists have documented that intimate relationships are strongly influenced by gendered social roles fostered by societal expectations of both men and women. In heterosexual relationships, this influence can precipitate extreme power differentials in which men have the metaphorical ‘upper hand’ [14]⁷⁴. Adoniram is stuck in the dilemma where society requires him to accumulate much more assets as well as to be a responsible breadwinner following the moral rules of building a better life condition for his family. It is encouraged socially and educationally for compulsive masculinity. Boys are “educated to preserve their masculinity and are ashamed of behavior that society perceives to be feminine or childish” [17]³. Consequently, “inadequate verbal expressiveness or problem-solving skills are found to be the underlying cause of both marital discord and marital abuse” [18]³³⁵. Men also need help in identifying and learning to express their feelings because they have adopted traditional male sex roles that limit emotional growth.

As Selina Jamil deems, Sarah's wholeness of individuality that influences the male characters “elicit certain qualities of mental well-being from within themselves that the society teaches them to suppress and deprecate” [19]. There may be a possible way to the equality and harmony between sexes based on “gender reversal”. Sarah's arrogation of masculinity and Adoniram's of femininity challenge the traditional assignment of different roles to the male and the female, being an ideal reconciliation during that age. As a result, even though the mother's revolt is incomplete, we can find Freeman's attempt to deconstruct the complete confrontation between male and female, thus transcending the binary opposition in gender issues.

5. Conclusions

A subsystem of social patriarchy, often called familial patriarchy, refers to male control in domestic or intimate settings. Feminist scholars, though, put their politics in the limelight for all to view and are indeed committed to eliminating structured social inequality and its highly injurious symptoms, such as woman abuse. Mary Freeman does make a contributing attempt in “The Revolt of ‘Mother’” by proposing this neglected problem early in the late nineteenth century.

We can draw upon the strong philosophical and epistemological underpinnings of our work and use the voice of feminism to inform new approaches to “interventions, advocacy, and theory-building around women's experience of emotional abuse” [14]⁷⁶. In this way, the author penetrates the emotional abuse and its consequences on the mother with the help of Freeman's vivid and detailed description of the father's aphasia. Both the father and the community are the silent controllers who naturally reject a woman's unconventional idea to maintain power.

However, Freeman is not satisfied with only describing the problem. Her real intention can be perceived from the arrangement of the mother's voice, which aims to initiate the revolt, climax and maintain it. Furthermore, "gender reversal" emerges based on these. As Renzetti points out, the goal of feminist scholars is "not to push men out to pull women in, but rather to gender the study" of violence against women and other social problems [20], Freeman's attempt let us see the potential of a more harmonious world. In a world the complete confrontation between males and females can be deconstructed with the binary opposition in gender issues being transcended. Under this circumstance, the mother and the father can obtain a chance to return as Sarah and Adoniram share the utopia as Freeman depicts at the end of the story– "The landscape might have been an ideal one of peace" [4]¹⁶.

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