

A CRITICAL READING: CONTRADICTORY PERSPECTIVES ON PATRIARCHY AS SEEN IN THE FEMALE CHARACTERS OF MARY E. WALKINS FREEMAN’S “THE REVOLT OF ‘MOTHER’ ”

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Abstract

Many students of English Language and Literature study program analyze “The Revolt of ‘Mother’ “, which is a short story written by Mary E. Walkins Freeman, by using a feminist approach. Most of them are trying to focus their attention to its’ female major character, named Sarah Penn. She is seen as a strong woman who has a courage to speak up her mind and break the patriarchal system. However, it is also important to question the point of view of the other female character in Freeman’s short story. A critical reading on this work can give new insights of the women perspectives on patriarchy. Therefore, this paper explores the contrast of women perspectives in relation to the patriarchal system as reflected in one of Freeman’s short stories.

Keywords: A critical reading, patriarchal system, women’s contradictory perspectives.

Abstrak

Banyak mahasiswa Program Studi Bahasa dan Sastra Inggris menganalisis cerpen berjudul “The Revolt of ‘Mother’ “ karya Mary E. Walkins Freeman dengan menggunakan pendekatan feminisme. Sebagian besar dari mahasiswa tersebut memfokuskan kajiannya terhadap tokoh utama yang bernama Sarah Penn. Sarah seorang perempuan yang kuat dan memiliki keberanian untuk mengungkapkan isi pikirannya dan mematahkan sistem patriarki. Namun, penting pula untuk mengkaji tokoh perempuan lain dalam cerpen karya Freeman. Membaca kritis terhadap karya tersebut dapat memberikan perbedaan terhadap sudut pandang wanita akan sistem patriarki. Oleh karena itu, artikel ini akan menggali perbedaan sudut pandang wanita terkait sistem patriarki seperti tercermin dalam salah satu cerpen karya Freeman.

Kata kunci: Membaca kritis, sistem patriarki, perbedaan sudut pandang wanita

A. INTRODUCTION

The setting of *The Revolt of ‘Mother’* is in a late nineteenth century rural New England farm, and it tells about the life of farmer family who has been married for forty years. This family starts to face conflict when Adoniram (the male character) plans to build a new barn on the area set aside for the new house that he has promised to his wife, Sarah Penn, when they are still a new married

couple. Sarah tries to protest, but her husband refuses to listen to her complain. When the build of the new barn is almost complete, Adoniram has to leave the farm for several days. Sarah sees this event as an advantage. She strikes back by conducting a 'revolt'. She asks her two children (Nanny and Sammy) to move to the new barn. Her decision makes her own children and surroundings surprise. Finally, when Adoniram comes back from his journey, he feels confuse (their house becomes their barn, and vice versa) and finally, he promises to grant everything his wife wants. This event makes Sarah as the winner who successfully defeats her husband as the symbol of the patriarchal family's ruler.

Sarah's victory over her husband steals the attention of many readers, especially the students of English language and literature study program, who are interested in the study of feminism, since it can be seen as the fall of the patriarchal power. Moreover, many people also believe that Mary E. Walkins Freeman, as the author of this short story, is an author who gives her support in the development of feminism movement or at least she is trying to give 'voice' to women who have to face injustice in their lives. However, this paper tries to seek further in what way Freeman's "The Revolt of 'Mother'" can be seen as a medium to criticize the patriarchal system and in the same time it also can be seen as her ways to promote the feminist agenda, and in what way this story is opposed to the feminist agenda. By analyzing this short story the writer wants to make readers (especially the students of English and Language Literature study program) realize that they should have broaden perspectives and do not easily be trapped to the stereotype that are given to a certain author.

B. DISCUSSION

1. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman

Reuben (2011) writes in "PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project" that Freeman is trying to explore the live of the New England women in 19th century through her progressive feminist writings. As a female author she discusses various themes related to women's issues. Furthermore, since the 1960s, many readers applied feminist criticism to her writings:

Many critics feel that Freeman's women, whether married or not, when confronted by unreasonable and dominating male demands, muster latent and, to the men, unexpected strengths, and reveal an impressive spirit of independence.' (Westbrook in Reuben, 2011).

Based on the above quotation, it is clear that many researchers are falling in love with Freeman's writings because she actively discusses about women's subjects. Moreover, many of them believe that through her writings, Freeman is trying to encourage women to fight for their freedom.

Reuben (2011) explains further, Freeman portrays the live of women who are trying to struggle to gain betterment in their lives. In many of her

writings, she portrays the lives of women who are not dependent upon marriage, maternity and mothering and some of them even refuse to take role as housewives or home keepers in the patriarchal families.

In line with Reuben, an article entitled “Regional Realism”, also noted that Freeman’s best works are those which focus on the dilemma of women whose lives are bounded by poverty and various forms of social constraints. Those problems emerge because of their strict religious beliefs and also their position as women. Moreover, she often explores the revolts and victories of women in gaining and sustaining control over their domestic situations with humor and sensitivity.

2. Patriarchy and the Feminists

In this paper the term feminist is broadly defined as someone who struggles to achieve equality, dignity, rights, and freedom for women to control their own lives. While in the below section, the writer will give the explanation of the patriarchy’s concept based on several researchers.

Hooks in her “Understanding Patriarchy” defines patriarchy as:

a political –social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence.

Thus, based on Hooks’ definition, male is the ruler of the ‘world’, while female is the one who should obey the rules which the ruler has made for her.

Hooks explains further that the patriarchal system is taught through religion, and even sometimes by the use of violence to reinforce people’s indoctrination and acceptance of this system. In fact, it tries to indoctrinate that men are created by God to rule the world and everything in it and it is the duty of women to help men. Some of the premises of this system are: men as the rulers have to be served, to be strong, to provide, think, strategize and plan, and also to refuse to nurture others. On the other hand, women are the one who have to perform all the tasks given by men and to obey men. Moreover, women have to serve and to nurture others, to be weak and to be free from the burden of thinking.

Ray in his article “Understanding Patriarchy” also has a similar opinion with the previous opinion. He says that “Patriarchal constructions of social practices are legitimized by religion and religious institution as most religious practices regard male authority as superior.” He also mentions that church and state are the examples of male dominated institutions.

Psychotherapist Bradshaw (in Hooks) also stated that patriarchy is distinguished by the domination and power of men. He also argues that most of the world's religious, school and family systems still use the patriarchal rules. According to Bradshaw, commonly patriarchal parents will do patriarchal violence to their own children.

In line with those experts, Rowbotham (in Walby, 1986: 30) also argues: The term patriarchy necessarily implies a conception of women's oppression that is universalistic, ahistoric and essentially biologicistic and that it incorrectly leads to a search for a single cause of women's oppression either in base super-structure model or as quest for ultimate or begins from capitalist relations.

Although, mostly the victim of the patriarchal system is women, however, as stated by Hooks, the contemporary visionary feminists believe that a patriarchal thinker can be male or female. He comments that "Women can be as wedded to patriarchal thinking and action as men."

Furthermore, according to Hooks, many families try to hide their stories related to the bad effect of the patriarchal system and this system has deeply rooted in the values of many cultures. In fact, this is the one which makes the patriarchal culture still exists up to now. Thereby, it is difficult to challenge and change the patriarchal system, which is mostly handed down from generation to generation. According to Hooks, most of people gain the knowledge of the patriarchal attitudes from their own mothers, which then are reinforced in many forms of institutions.

However, the feminists then try to challenge this system. They use the term "patriarchy" to replace the word "male chauvinism" and "sexism" that are commonly used. The feminists want to make people to become aware of the negative impact of patriarchy. Hooks argues that the system of patriarchy brainwashes men to believe that their domination toward women will give them benefit when it is not. Moreover, it also denies men access to 'full emotional well-being' and it has damaged men from generation to generation.

3. Findings

As previously mentioned, this paper tries to discuss Freeman's two female characters and their perspectives on patriarchy as seen in "The Revolt of 'Mother'". By discussing those aspects in the short stories, the writer of this paper wants to throw new light on Freeman as a female author not just on her stereotype as a feminist author.

a. The Character of Sarah Penn and her perspectives on Patriarchy

"The Revolt of 'Mother' " opens with a scene in which the female main character, named Sarah Penn, gets very upset when her husband, Adoniram, refuses to answer her question about what happens in their

fields. Although she cannot get any answer from him, she keeps trying to pursue for the answer:

“Look here, father, I want to know what them men are diggin' over in the field for, an' I'm goin' to know.”

The above quotation shows that Sarah Penn is a female main character who goes against the stereotypical woman. When she states the question repeatedly and even uses a strong statement, “I'm goin' to know.” it shows that she is described as a woman with a high self-esteem who does not easily give up on something.

Adoniram, who does not want to give the answer to his wife, remains silent. This is his way to show that he is the one who has the power to control everything in his house since based on Hook's theory, in the patriarchal society men are given rights by God to control and rule the world and also to think, make strategy and plan independently. Once more time he tries to show his dominance as the leader of patriarchal family by advising his wife to go to the house and stop asking him about the question:

“I wish you'd go into the house, mother, an' 'tend to your own affairs,” the old man said then. He ran his words together, and his speech was almost as inarticulate as a growl.

But the woman understood; it was her most native tongue. “I ain't goin' into the house till you tell me what them men are doin' over there in the field,” said she.

When her husband starts to use a higher tone and forbid her from interfering on his affairs as his attempt to hide the truth, Sarah refuses to listen and even disobey her husband's instruction to go into their house. This event illustrates that she does not only possess a high self-esteem, but also she is described as an autonomous person who cannot be forced even by the head of the family.

In the other part of the story, the readers can see Sarah physical appearances and characterizations. Sarah is portrayed as a woman with tiny figure and straight-waist which makes her look like a child. Basically, she has an ordinary description of woman in her age. Her gray hair and a motherly face illustrate that she is a compassionate and humble person. However, the description of the way she stares at her husband is quite unusual. Her fixed eyes show that she does not afraid of him. It seems like actually she tries to hide her strength on her own free will.

She was a small woman, short and straight-waisted like a child in her brown cotton gown. Her forehead was mild and benevolent between

the smooth curves of gray hair; there were meek downward lines about her nose and mouth; but her eyes, fixed upon the old man, looked as if the meekness had been the result of her own will, never of the will of another.

It is clearly stated in the above quotation that Sarah is illustrated as a women with courage. Through her sparkling eyes, it is very clear that she is a leader of her own life, and no one can force her or rule over her. She puts a compassionate and humble look on her face and hides her powerful-daring eyes on her own free will.

As previously mentioned, the story faces its' conflict when the man of the family wants to build a new barn without asking for permission from the other family members. Sarah, as the wife, gets very upset when she finally finds out that her husband tries to hide the truth that he plans to build a new barn in the area where he has promised her to set up a new house for their family. Then she openly expresses her anger by telling her daughter, Nanny Penn, who is going to get married soon, how men commonly treat women:

"You ain't found out yet we're women-folks, Nanny Penn," said she. "You ain't seen enough of men-folks yet to. One of these days you'll find it out, an' then you'll know that we know only what men-folks think we do, so far as any use of it goes, an' how we'd ought to reckon men-folks in with Providence, an' not complain of what they do any more than we do of the weather."

Based on the above quotation, it is clear that women have no right to make decision. They have to follow the instructions that are given by men. They have no freedom to think and act for themselves. Thus, in a daily life they have to accept men's treatments without any complaint since it is men's fate to be the leader of women.

Actually Sarah is portrayed as a loving and caring figure of wife and mother in the same time. Eventhough she does not in the same boat with her husband related to his decision in building a new barn, she still tries to defend and shows her respect toward her husband in front of her daughter. So, her daughter would not blame her husband for his decision.

You hadn't ought to judge father, though. He can't help it, 'cause he don't look at things jest the way we do. An' we've been pretty comfortable here, after all. The roof don't leak — ain't never but once — that's one thing. Father's kept it shingled right up."

Sarah realizes that her husband has a different perspective than her and she also cannot deny that he has fought to give the best thing for his family all of his life.

She also tries to teach her daughter to be grateful of what she has got because she can have a good life better than the others:

“Well, I don't think you'd better, a good father an' a good home as you've got. S'pose your father made you go out an' work for your livin'? Lots of girls have to that ain't no stronger an' better able to than you be.”

This is a common way that is used by a mother to transfer knowledge and experience to her daughter. Unlike the stereotypical profile of women in general, she can control her emotion in front of her daughter, although she gets very upset to Adoniram as her husband.

Sarah in this story is also portrayed as a good housewife just like the stereotypical housewife in the patriarchal society who has to “take care or nurture others” (Hook). As the queen of the house, she can do her job perfectly. She does the domestic activities and takes care of the household with passion and all of her heart. It is clearly seen from the below quotation:

Sarah Penn washed the frying-pan with a conclusive air. She scrubbed the outside of it as faithfully as the inside. She was a masterly keeper of her box of a house. Her one living-room never seemed to have in it any of the dust which the friction of life with inanimate matter produces. She swept, and there seemed to be no dirt to go before the broom; she cleaned, and one could see no difference. She was like an artist so perfect that he has apparently no art. To-day she got out a mixing bowl and a board, and rolled some pies, and there was no more flour upon her than upon her daughter who was doing finer work.

However, although she is described as a humble and passionate person who always does her job with full of her heart, it does not mean that she cannot express everything inside of her mind with a strong notion. See how confident she is when she instructs her husband to listen to her:

“Father, you come here.” Sarah Penn stood in the door like a queen; she held her head as if it bore a crown; there was that patience which makes authority royal in her voice. Adoniram went.

Mrs. Penn led the way into the kitchen, and pointed to a chair. “Sit down, father,” said she; “I've got somethin' I want to say to you.”

She does not only give him an instruction, but also openly criticizing and questioning the liability of his decision to build a new barn instead of a new house for their family:

"I want to know if you think you're doin' right an' accordin' to what you profess. Here, when we was married, forty year ago, you promised me faithful that we should have a new house built in that lot over in the field before the year was out. You said you had money enough, an' you wouldn't ask me to live in no such place as this. It is forty year now, an' you've been makin' more money, an' I've been savin' of it for you ever since, an' you ain't built no house yet. You've built sheds an' cow-houses an' one new barn, an' now you're goin' to build another. Father, I want to know if you think it's right. You're lodgin' your dumb beasts better than you are your own flesh an' blood. I want to know if you think it's right."

She expresses her feeling plainly and shows her rage to the head of the family. It can be seen clearly through her burning face and her gleamed eyes, "she had ranged from severity to pathos;" In this part of story, it can be seen that she does not possess the image of a common stereotypical woman in a patriarchal family who always has to be able to eliminated her anger (Hook).

Indeed, Sarah is illustrated as a woman with a strong personality. For example, one day when she got an idea which she claims as "the guideposts of the Lord to the new roads of life," she made up her mind and ready to take some actions related to the life of her family. With a high self-confidence she asks her children to move to their new barn. The way she thinks and acts can be seen as evidence that she is a complete break from the traditional stereotyping of woman in patriarchal society that Hook describes in her "Understanding Patriarchy" as a person who has to be free from the burden of thinking. Sarah does not only try to think to find the best solution for her family, but also she manages to take a real action to get betterment for her family.

Sarah decision to move her family and live in their 'new barn' create a strong reaction from her society. Her neighbours gossiping about her 'strange' attitude, and even the minister of her village, Mr Hersey, visiting her house to warn her that she has made a great mistake. However, Sarah can justify her decision and able to break the argument of the ministry, who is known as the manifestation of God's power on earth:

"There ain't no use talkin', Mr. Hersey," said she. "I've thought it all over an' over, an' I believe I'm doin' what's right. I've made it the subject of prayer, an' it's betwixt me an' the Lord an' Adoniram. There ain't no call for nobody else to worry about it."

"Well, of course, if you have brought it to the Lord in prayer, and feel satisfied that you are doing right, Mrs. Penn," said the minister, helplessly.

The ministry has lost his power over Sarah. He cannot defend his own argument and he fails to restore the social order which believes that women always have to listen to men's order, especially the words of God's representative. Sarah has made up her mind and she knows the consequences well. She disobeys her husband's instructions and even surprisingly, she challenges his power over her as the head of the family.

As a person and also as a member of the church, she knows that she has freedom to express her own opinion and to decide the best thing for her family and herself, and no one can deny that:

"I think it's right jest as much as I think it was right for our forefathers to come over from the old country 'cause they didn't have what belonged to 'em," said Mrs. Penn. She arose. The barn threshold might have been Plymouth Rock from her bearing. "I don't doubt you mean well, Mr. Hersey," said she, "but there are things people hadn't ought to interfere with. I've been a member of the church for over forty year. I've got my own mind an' my own feet, an' I'm goin' to think my own thoughts an' go my own ways, an' nobody but the Lord is goin' to dictate to me unless I've a mind to have him.

When the story comes to its end, it is obvious that Adoniram, as the head of the family, has been defeated by his own wife, the one who is actually has to obey the head of the family's rule. His wife is more powerful than he is, and he cannot deny that:

Sarah bent over and touched her husband on one of his thin, sinewy shoulders. "Father!"

The old man's shoulders heaved: he was weeping.

"Why, don't do so, father," said Sarah.

"I'll — put up the — partitions, an' — everything you — want, mother."

Sarah put her apron up to her face; she was overcome by her own triumph.

Adoniram was like a fortress whose walls had no active resistance, and went down the instant the right besieging tools were used. "Why, mother," he said, hoarsely, "I hadn't no idee you was so set on't as all this comes to."

The above quotation clearly illustrates that men are not superior to women, and unlike one of the premises in the patriarchal systems which stated that men have to be strong and should not be emotional (Hook), in fact, men can be as emotional as women do. The way Adoniram act shows that he can be so vulnerable and becomes very emotional. At the end of the story the powerful Adoniram has changed into an inferior one who cannot defend himself. As the manifestation

of the leader in the patriarchal system, Adoniram cannot show his domination.

The characterization of the female main character of this short story obviously points out that she is not typically a woman commonly found in a literary text during the era in which it was written. Unlike a stereotypical woman at that time, she does not do what she is dictated to do. In this short story, Sarah is presented as a woman with a high self esteem, autonomous, and does not afraid to express her feelings and opinion. In fact, she can make an important decision on her own free will, although it means that she has to break the patriarchal rules who always place men as the decision makers.

b. The Character of Nanny Penn and her perspectives on Patriarchy

Nanny Penn is portrayed totally different from her own mother, Sarah. She has "a pretty girl's face, pink and delicate as a flower" that looks very tender, and she also has "sweet, slow voice". In fact, she possess the stereotyping physical appearances and attitudes attributed to many woman:

Her tender, sweet face was full of a gentle distress. Her forehead was as bald and innocent as a baby's, with the light hair strained back from it in a row of curl-papers. She was quite large, but her soft curves did not look as if they covered muscles.

Furthermore, she is also illustrated as a very naive woman who learns many things from her mother. As a daughter she has to obey her mother's instructions and does all the household tasks without complaining:

The girl went to the sink, and began to wash the dishes that were piled up there. Her mother came promptly out of the pantry, and shoved her aside. "You wipe 'em," said she; "I'll wash. There's a good many this mornin'."

The mother plunged her hands vigorously into the water, the girl wiped the plates slowly and dreamily.

The way Nanny wiped the plates (slowly and dreamily) illustrates that she is described as woman with full of fantasy. This is a conventional stereotyping of women in the patriarchal society, which believes that there is no need for women to use their brains to think. However, they can use them to daydreaming and live in fantasy. She does not complain when her mother asks her to do those domestic duties and lets people to rule over her, since she has not got enough courage and self esteem to refuse those orders.

Another case which can be seen as evidence that Nanny is a naive person happens when she seems very surprised and tries to deny the truth related to her future husband. Her mother tries to warn her that there is a high possibility that her future husband oneday will act just like the other men do. It is possible that he will try to be superior and she always has to obey his instructions:

“I don't care; I don't believe George is anything like that, anyhow,” said Nanny. Her delicate face flushed pink, her lips pouted softly, as if she were going to cry.

She cannot defend herself, she cannot give her best argumentation toward her mother's opinion. The only thing she can do is denying those possibilities and hoping that her future husband will be an exception.

Nanny, who plans to get married in the fall, does not realize that men always try to show their power over women since based on the patriarchal system men are the ruler. Unlike her mother, Nanny's mind is full of the ideal portrayal of marriage (that a husband will always love his wife and will never try to dominate the life of his own wife), which is possibly because the society has successfully indoctrinate her mind through the religious practice.

C. CONCLUSION

From the discussion above, it can be concluded that “The Revolt of ‘Mother’” is to some extent self-contradictory. Freeman as the author cleverly explores the revolt and victory of her main female character in gaining and sustaining control over her own domestic situations, and in the same time promotes the feminists' agenda. In fact, in this short story she discusses women's issue and challenging the patriarchal system. She is aware that the patriarchal system is the main source for the damage of both men and women from generation to generation by giving a clear picture of her female main character as a strong woman who has courage to fight for her freedom of speaking and gaining independence by breaking the patriarchal system.

However, the existence of the other female character that has contradictory perspectives on patriarchy, to some extent, discourages Freeman's own attempts to promote the feminist agenda. Furthermore, the existence of her ‘other’ female character becomes a negative symbol that women still have to fight harder in diminishing injustice in the future, which is as the result of the patriarchy, since Freeman's female character has fallen into a conventional stereotyping of women in the patriarchal society. Freeman's portrayal of Nanny (as a woman in her young age who is about to get married) and her naive way of thinking makes her can be seen as one of a blur image of women in the future, that women still become the victim of patriarchy.

As for suggestion, regarding with the findings of the analysis of "The revolt of 'Mother' ", the readers of literature, especially the students who are majoring in English Language and Literature, have to be aware and do not easily be trapped to the stereotype that are given to a certain author since it will definitely impoverish their own experience of reading the literary text.

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