The Deconstruction of Gender Dichotomy: A Feminist Approach
to The Revolt of “Mother”

Yi ZENG

School of Foreign Languages, Huazhong Agricultural University, Wuhan, Hubei, China
416782017@qq.com

Keywords: Freeman, The Revolt of “Mother”, Gender Dichotomy, Androgyny.

Abstract. The Revolt of “Mother” is one of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman’s most popular short stories which presents us with a new woman—the rebellious mother. With the analysis of the gender dichotomy, this thesis probes into the reasons for the changes in the gender relationship in the story, and also proposes a possible way to the equality and harmony between sexes— androgyny.

Introduction

Freeman's short story The Revolt of “Mother” which introduces to us a wife, Sarah, who prevails over the greed and stubbornness of her husband Adoniram in acquiring a decent home for her family, has reached such fame that it is reported that Theodore Roosevelt, who at the time was the governor of New York, recommended that mothers read it “for its strong moral lesson” (Rena Korb, 1998). Rena Korb pointed out that The Revolt of “Mother” succeeded so well because of Freeman's ability to show such real truths about the lives of women of her time. But it also succeeds narratively because Freeman never sacrifices the structural features of a good short story. She effectively uses symbolism in Adoniram's promise of a new house, which dates back 40 years—the length of time in the Bible is consistently related to periods of tribulation and sacrifice, followed by deliverance. Interestingly, many early critics and readers found The Revolt of “Mother” a comic folk tale, particularly because of its magnification of Sarah’s revolt, the portrait Freeman draws of the provincialism of the village, and the husband’s sudden and unexpected reversal at the end of the story. But many later critics, particularly women, claim that these earlier and primarily masculine readers wanted to label the story as "comic fantasy" in order to deny a frightening picture—that of a woman who defies gender roles. Indeed, the wife's revolt against the will of her husband and the will of her entire town and region touches upon very serious issues of female identity and the relationship between the genders. What’s the traditional relationship between genders? What’s the way out for a woman? This article probes into the deconstruction of this gender dichotomy with the analysis of the traditional relationship between the genders in The Revolt of “Mother” from the feminist approach, hoping to perfect the gender roles of both male and female.

Dichotomy: The Traditional Relationship between Genders

When human society transformed from matrilineal to patrilineal, the struggle for wealth appeared, which resulted in the enhancement of male status. The biological inferiority of women then becomes the perfect excuse for the suggestion that they should be limited to domestic service only. Consequently, the labor division of “outdoor-oriented man and domestic-oriented woman” came into being. In the story it is clear that Adoniram and Sarah closely adhere to their gender roles: the husband has complete charge of the farm and any business dealings, while the wife’s domain is the home and “she was a masterly keeper of her box of house” (Freeman,1890: 555). Such a division also finds full express in the duties of the next generation. Sammy, their son, often helps the father with those tough works such as unload the wood. As a male he has the right to go to school and receive education. On the contrary, Nanny, her sister, could only stay at home and do some washing, cleaning and sewing. Adoniram only tells Sammy the purpose of that new structure and Sammy...
also keeps it a secret for three months without telling his mother and sister. Both the father and the son don’t think it’s a woman’s business.

Social division further strengthens the gender attributes which are based on the biological differences. Therefore, men, the breadwinners of the families, become stronger, more and more aggressive, ambitious, competitive, fearless, independent, intelligent and so on. Women are the opposite of what it means to be male: they are weaker, more and more passive, not ambitious, cooperative, emotional, dependent, gentle and etc. At the beginning of this story, Freeman presents us with such a typical female image in the patriarchal society: “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” (Freeman, 1890: 553). And the daughter Nanny with “a pretty girl’s face, pink and delicate as a flower” (Freeman, 1890: 554) further displays the female temperaments vividly and incisively—speaks in “sweet, slow voice”, “turned quietly”, “wiped the plates slowly and dreamily” (Freeman, 1890: 554), and “sewed industriously” (Freeman, 1890: 555). On the contrary, the father’s rude in action: “He hurried the horse into the farm wagon, and clattered out of the yard, jouncing as sturdily on his seat as a boy” (Freeman, 1890: 555). And Sammy also shows the nature of a young boy: he is reluctant to stay at home to help his father and always wants to do out playing with his peers.

**Conflict: The Consequence of Dichotomy**

Naturally, the dichotomy in attributes will lead to the difference in the mode of thinking between male and female. Adoniram thinks macroscopically and what he cares most is his business which can bring him the absolute authority over the whole family and the admiration of the villagers. So he builds that barn instead of the house he has promised the family decades ago. Since Adoniram spends most of his time on the farm and in the barns, in his eyes, house is only a habitat — any construction with wife and children could be his home no matter it is incommodious or spacious, ancient or newly-built. While Sarah, a caring and considerate mother, always thinks of the daily life of the family: food, clothes and health. Therefore, her primary reason for usurping Adoniram's barn is the concern for her daughter's health. And because of the narrowness of the house, “Nanny she can’t live with us after she’s married. She’ll have to go somewhere else to live away from us. . . . She wa’n’t ever strong... an she ain’t fit to keep house an’ do everything herself. She’ll be all worn out inside of a year” (Freeman, 1890: 556). And after spending the morning watching Nanny, “pale and thin with her steady sewing” (Freeman, 1890: 558). Sarah makes up her mind decisively. She not only notices Nanny’s lament on the fact that her impending wedding will take place in their ill-decorated "box of a house." But also she herself experiences the inconvenience of working in the small, ill-lighted pantry. “Here,” said she, “is all the buttery I've got — every place I've got for my dishes, to set away my victuals in, an' to keep my milk-pans in. Father, I've been takin' care of the milk of six cows in this place, an' now you're goin' to build a new barn, an' keep more cows, an' give me more to do in it” (Freeman, 1890: 556). Due to difference in their focus of attention and the divergence in their mode of thinking, the husband and wife hold the opposite views on the matter of a new house.

The discrepancies in domain, attributes and thoughts lead to an unbridgeable gap between the two genders. So they are noncommunicative. And in the patriarchal society, males are in the dominant positions. Females have to depend on their husbands for living and are diminished to “Second Sex”. They have neither individualities nor “discourse rights”. They should obey their husbands absolutely. Under such oppression women only have two choices—keeping silence or rising up.

Outwardly, the Penns family appears happy: successful husband, laborious wife and lovely children. Inwardly, Sarah’s depression grows with each passing day. As Freeman states out in the story: “However deep a resentment she (Sarah) might be forced to hold against her husband, she would never fail in sedulous attention to his wants” (Freeman, 1890: 555). She has long accustomed
to obeying her husband and accepting the capricious nature of men. For forty years Adoniram has promised to build Sarah a new house with no fulfillment. Sarah never complains. When the husband builds a new, spacious barn on the very spot where he had for decades promised to build her a new house, her patience worn out.

Sarah takes pains to persuade Adoniram to change his mind, while the husband steadfastly holds on to silence, a tactic he has been using for their entire marriage life. For his speech, which is "almost inarticulate as a growl," had become for Sarah "her most native tongue" (Freeman, 1890: 553). When she speaks with Adoniram about building the family a house, Adoniram "shut[ting] his mouth tight" (Freeman, 1890: 555). Since communication is useless, one day in July, Sarah takes an action which shocks not only her family members, but also the neighbors, and the village minister.

Androgyny: The Subversion of Dichotomy

The story The Revolt of "Mother" ends satisfactorily: Mother and children live in the new house they have long desired; father realizes his wrongness, instead of blaming his wife, he plans to do some improvement to make the new house more comfortable. Such a happy ending owes a lot to the androgyny manifested by mother, father and their son Sammy. It is Virginia Woolf who first puts forward the idea of androgyny in literature. In her famous work A room of one's own she argues: "it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or a woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly" (Woolf, 1929: 26). What Woolf emphasizes is the harmony between two genders. In her opinion, the distinction between sexes is as important as the fusion of sexes. Based on the thought of equality between the two genders, Woolf ponders over the mechanism of gender difference and the uniqueness of female’s existence in the patriarchal culture. Furthermore, androgyny has been assumed new meanings by feminists, such as relieving oppression, releasing the negative and oppressed parts and free development of human beings and eliminating unequal relationships.

Although the mother Sarah is a traditional female in the patriarchal society, there are some male traits in her character. As Freeman foreshadows at the beginning of the story: “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” (Freeman, 1890: 553). When Sarah suspects the purpose of that new structure and fails to find it out from her husband, she turns to her son. She looks at Sammy in such a "sternly" way that the boy finally tells the truth. Her irritation vents in the following series of rude actions: "shoved" her daughter aside, "plunged her hands vigorously into the water" and "scrubbed a dish fiercely" (Freeman, 1890: 554). What’s more, her face "had that expression of meek vigor which might have characterized one of the New Testament saints" (Freeman, 1890: 555). In order to defeat the opponent psychologically, Sarah bears an unconquerable air: “… 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” (Freeman, 1890: 555). During the course of her persuasion, Sarah also shows her strong logical mind which is often regarded as males attribute. She starts with Adoniram’s promise forty year’s ago, and then the shabby decorations inside the house. To satisfy man’s vanity, she compliments his success in business. By reminding Adoniram that this is the house where they get married, she implies that the next generation should live better—Nanny’s wedding shouldn’t be held here. In terms of the new barn, Sarah has her own reason: “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” (Freeman, 1890: 556). However, all these doesn’t move Adoniram, he keeps reticent stubbornly.

Sarah shows the same stubbornness on this matter. Such words occurs to her after Adoniram's departure: "'Unsolicited opportunities are the guide-posts of the Lord to the new roads of life.'" To Sarah, the opportunity "looks like providence" (Freeman, 1890: 558). She forthwith gives directions to the help: move all of the household belongings to the barn. The event is a grandly liberating and heroic one, even if it does seem destined to produce an unhappy outcome. When the village minister comes to reason with her, she is shelling peas "as if they were bullets," and when she looks at him
there is in her eyes "the spirit that her meek front had covered for a lifetime" (Freeman, 1890: 559). After rounds of cross swords, her masculine vigor finally repels the minister.

Androgyny also finds traits in their son Sammy’s character. His daily behavior sometimes shows the female tenderness: “…stood before the kitchen glass combing his hair. He combed slowly and painstakingly, arranging his brown hair in a smooth hillock over his forehead” (Freeman, 1890: 554). At first he is the adherent of the father and keeps the purpose of that new structure as a secret to his mother and sister. Later when the mother takes the advantage of Father’s absence and decides to move the whole family to that new barn, he changes his position and follows the mother’s direction obediently. With Sammy as the main labor force, the remove finishes quickly and successfully. From him what we could see is the feminine flexibility instead of the masculine obstinateness.

What will Adoniram do when he returns? We know only the most negative things about his character: he has seemed violent; he has acted in the most egotistical and pig-headed ways; he has been curt with Mother beyond the point of simple rudeness; and he expects no one to cross him, least of all Mother. We are free to imagine only dire consequences. However, things turn out to be the opposite. Mother’s revolt shocks him, moves him and awakens his feminine consciousness—he weeps. As Freeman presents at the end of the story: “Adoniram was like a fortress whose walls had no active resistance, and went down the instant the right besieging tools were used” (Freeman, 1890: 561).

Conclusion

With thousands of years’ history, the mode of traditional gender roles have been deep-rooted in people’s minds. They not only obey such prescriptions but also use it as criterion to assess the opposite sex. Therefore, the elimination of gender dichotomy is by no means an easy task. In The Revolt of Mother Freeman presents with us the binary opposition of the two genders in New England at the end of 19th century and further suggests a possible solution to such opposition—androgyny. Elain Showalter, one of the forerunners of feminist movement, is skeptical of the feasibility of androgyny: “The concept of true androgyny— full balance and command of an emotional range that includes male and female elements— is attractive, although I suspect that like all Utopia ideals androgyny lakes zest and energy” (Elain Showalter, 2004, 263). However, Freeman gives us more confidence in the realization of androgyny through the successful revolt of “Mother”.

The traditional molding of gender roles puts male in the dominant position and female is regarded as inferior. So androgyny is also adopted by some feminist as a way of women to rescue themselves from the patriarchal oppression. To be more exact, there should be no oppression between genders. With the subversion of gender dichotomy and patriarchal oppression, a new type of gender relationship which endows everyone with equality, freedom and happiness can be expected soon.

References


