

THE IMPACTS OF THE CHANGING TYPES OF BONDING ON THE LIFE OF THE TWO WOMEN IN G.D. JOHNSON'S SHORT STORY ENTITLED FREE

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to discuss the unique relationship between two women living in the same roof for 25 years which takes an unexpected turn after the breadwinner that unites them uncompromisingly passes away. The focus is on the impacts of the changing types of bonding on the life of the two women in G.D. Johnson's short story entitled *Free*. To support the discussion, several concepts are borrowed, such as the concepts of female domesticity and patriarchy. Since the center of analysis is on the women, the feminist criticism is used. This criticism is supported by contextual method of literary analysis which combines the extrinsic elements with the intrinsic ones especially character, conflict, and setting. The result shows that the death of the patriarchal figure breaks the imposing bonding in the life of the two women. After a moment of internal conflict experienced by each woman, both can put aside their uncomfortable past to create a mutual bonding for the rest of their life.

Key words: female domesticity, patriarchy, contextual method

Introduction

The short story entitled *Free* is written by Georgia Douglas Johnson (1880–1966). G.D. Johnson is an African-American female poet and a short-story writer. The short story tells about a complicated relationship between two women who lived in the same roof for 25 years united by Dr. Paul Ryan. The first woman was Martha Ryan, the wife. Martha and Ryan had married for a long time with no child. One day Dr. Ryan brought a much younger woman in the household and positioned her as his new nurse. The second woman's arrival caused opposition from the wife and a long-lasting rumor in Nashville's society. However, the death of Dr. Ryan brought an unexpected turn on the relationship of the two women who had grown old. Based on the summary, it is worth to discuss the faceted relationship among the three people in one household. Thus, the focus is on the impacts of the changing types

of bonding reflected in G.D. Johnson's short story entitled *Free*.

Previous Study

Since the short story entitled *Free* written by Georgia Douglas Johnson is not a prominent work and often not mentioned in Johnson's works in general, there is no article written about this short story.

Theory and Method

Some concepts are needed to support the analysis on the impacts of the changing types of bonding on the life of the two women in G.D. Johnson's short story entitled *Free*. The first concept needs to refresh is about female life in a patriarchal society as described by Murray. According to Murray, the females, due to financial dependence, become domesticized. This situation at the same time reflects the social and moral status

of the male breadwinner in the middle class society (2005: 69).

Closely related to the concept of female domesticity is the concept of patriarchy. Murray states that patriarchy is “the economic, political, sexual and ideological domination of women by men” (1995: 26). Gilligan and Richards add another characteristic of patriarchy, that is, “patriarchy rests on a suppression of voice” (2009: 198). The suppressed voice here refers to the independence, chance, and opinion of the females. This patriarchal bonding is inevitable because it “does appear throughout recorded Western history” (Doyle, 1999: 45).

The analysis on this paper is done using feminist criticism in which it “reads writing and examines its ideology and culture with a woman-centred perspective” (Humm, 1995: 51). Thus the focus is on the female living in a patriarchal domain described in G.D. Johnson’s *Free*. In analyzing the chosen topic, contextual analysis is applied. Contextual analysis is a literary analysis which combines theories from outside the field of literature with its intrinsic elements (Behrendt, 2008).

Discussion

The story starts soon after the funeral of Dr. Paul Ryan on September. The deceased was a person with “portly, beaming, and genial personality” (Johnson, 1993: 55) who was a prominent figure in the society of Nashville.

The Imposing Bonding and its Impact on the Life of the Two Women

The most imposing bonding in the life of the two women is represented by Dr. Paul Ryan. As the breadwinner, Dr. Paul Ryan is a decision maker in her marriage with Martha Ryan: “Always he had made the decision for her” (Johnson, 1993: 55). Another of his dominant action is reflected in his uncompromisingly bringing another woman,

a much younger Rose Delaney, to live with them. The wife, Martha Ryan, having a long and untroubled marriage with Dr. Ryan, unsuccessfully tries to oppose his idea: “Even when she had tried once to put her foot down on his bringing this young woman Rose Delaney to live right in the house with them” (Johnson, 1993: 55). The impact of the imposed decision is in the form of a long but silent conflict between the two women, fully realized by Martha Ryan, the wife: “twenty-five years ago ... twenty-five long years” (Johnson, 1993: 56). Thus, it can be said that in the marriage, Martha Ryan as the wife has no voice at all.

Everything depends on Dr. Ryan’s words. When he says that Rose Delaney is his new nurse, everybody including his own wife has to accept that. Martha Ryan as a woman and wife cannot believe it at all, however she cannot do anything about it: “nurse forsooth! And what could she do about it? Nothing, she was old and the girl was young!” (Johnson, 1993: 56). One point that reflects Martha’s weakness, in Martha’s own opinion, is the factor of age. Old age is a weakness while young age is a strength. Being old means losing power while being young means gaining power. This happens because the two women is under a patriarchal situation led by an imposing patriarchal figure of Dr. Ryan.

Another imposing bonding in the life of the two women is the Nashville’s society where the household of Dr. Ryan is present. The Nashville’s society does not buy Dr. Ryan’s statement that the young woman now living in his house is his new nurse: “But the whole town knew the truth ... you can’t throw dust in people’s eyes ...” (Johnson, 1993: 55). A young woman brought by the head of the family into his household is commonly not considered as an innocent nurse. In other words, the society considers that the young Rose Delaney is more likely a mistress of Dr. Ryan. This can be seen in the narrator’s words concerning the two women

in the funeral of Dr. Ryan: “the wife and the mistress” (Johnson, 1993: 55). It indicates that whatever effort done by Dr. Ryan to give positive label to the younger woman is futile in the eyes of the society. However, the Nashville’s society tolerates Dr. Ryan’s action since he is a prominent figure in the society as reflected in his funeral: “Nashville had not seen such a long procession of carriages as had curled through her narrow street at this noon hour in many a year. Dr. Ryan had been very popular” (Johnson, 1993: 55). Thus, the Nashville society, representing the wider patriarchal domain, corners and labels the two women while leaving them alone with their long-lasting conflict.

The house of Dr. Ryan is another imposing bonding that influences the life of Martha and Rose. Both Martha and Rose depend on Dr. Ryan. They live in the same house because of Dr. Ryan. Although unwillingly, Martha has no other place to live. For Rose, the new comer, Dr. Ryan is her “protector” (Johnson, 1993: 56) and the house is her “refuge” (Johnson, 1993: 57). In other words, both women depends financially on Dr. Ryan. Living together, the house becomes the patriarchal shelter which on one side is protecting but on the other side is binding, caging, and silencing the existence of the two women. Both are under Dr. Ryan’s commands and rules.

Still another imposing bonding in the life of the two women is Dr. Ryan’s lawyer who will read Dr. Ryan’s will. The lawyer has the binding power because the two women are still tied in the house while waiting for the reading of the content of the will: “to hear his last commands!” (Johnson, 1993: 56). Lawyer Green who comes to the house is described as follows: “The tall solemn faced lawyer dropped awkwardly into a chair. He had a difficult duty to perform” (Johnson, 1993: 55). Reading a will to the rest of the family after the funeral is basically not a comfortable task. The task of Lawyer Green

is much more uncomfortable because he faces two women in an unusual bond for 25 years as reflected in his gesture: “I ask you two ladies to hear the will at once because—because ...” He cleared his throat in embarrassment, the finished, “I thought it best for you both to have an understanding” (Johnson, 1993: 57). The awkward silence radiating from the presence of the two women makes the lawyer feel embarrassed. The lawyer is morally burdened by the unique relationship of the two women producing a rumor for 25 years.

The will written by Dr. Ryan is also an imposing bonding. The content is as unusual as the relationship of the two women: “... The house and all my remaining property I bequeath and devise to my wife Martha Ryan, and my adopted daughter, Rose Delaney, equally share and share alike—” (Johnson, 1993: 58). Surprisingly, Dr. Ryan mentions Rose Delaney as his “adopted daughter” in his will while to the public she is introduced as his new nurse. This can be seen as the effort of Dr. Ryan to raise the status of the younger woman. As an adopted daughter she is given the same right and share as the wife. Dr. Ryan’s “last commands” are too startling even to the lawyer as indicated by his words “I’m sorry” (Johnson, 1993: 58). The lawyer’s sidedness with the wife is obviously shown in his words to Rose, the younger woman: “Either of you can sell your share of the house to the other,” the lawyer added. “You’d be willing to sell wouldn’t you, Miss Delaney?” (Johnson, 1993: 58). He indirectly advises Rose to leave the house by selling her part to Martha. He does not grasp Dr. Ryan’s intention to keep uniting the two women in the house by giving each a half share of the house.

Thus, there are several binding ties that impose their power to keep the two women in the same house forever. The binding ties do not give a chance for the two women to exist in another way except as

already constructed for them. Their roles, their paths of life, and their future are already settled by the patriarchal figure. The two women are supposed to just follow the plan without any question or resistance. However, the carefully entwined binding ties take an unexpected ending as will be discussed soon.

The Mutual Bonding and its Impact on the Life of the Two Women

As briefly mentioned previously, Martha Ryan the wife has to accept the presence of Rose Delaney who is brought by the husband in their household: “He’d stood between them and taken her part! Protected her against his own wife. Men were queer. Yet he had been good to her. She’d had nothing, nothing of which to complain but this, this one thing” (Johnson, 1993: 56). Martha is trapped in-between her dominant but kind husband and the new young girl protected by her husband. Martha feels hurt and her right is violated but she has no means to make a fuss of the presence of the third party since she is a dependent wife. Martha has nurtured her silent rage for 25 years and it silently explodes after the funeral as can be seen in Martha’s vengeful words:

“Out of one corner of her eye she could see Rose’s head bowed beside her. She was weeping, and well she might, for now, her protector was gone and she herself was boss. At last, boss in her own house, and out she’d go! Her friends had taunted her long enough, she’d show them how she’d handle the situation. Martha tightened her lips in determination. Tears, tears, let her cry, cry her eyes out” (Johnson, 1993: 56).

Martha feels so powerful in front of Rose after the imposing head of the family passes away. She feels that she now can give orders. Nobody blocks her intention to take revenge. The 25 years of being silenced is over. The long waiting will end soon: “Martha sighed, free, free from her at last” (Johnson, 1993:

56). However, several things strangely work to the strained relationship of Martha and Rose.

The first form of the freeing bonds that unconsciously and slowly eases the strained relationship of Martha and Rose is Rose’s attitude long before and after the reading of the will. Rose is described as having a serving attitude: “She liked to serve” (Johnson, 1993: 56). Her servitude is also clearly seen after the funeral. She willingly offers to make a cup of tea for Martha who looks so tense (Johnson, 1993: 56). Rose also has a surrendering attitude. She fully realizes that now her presence in the house is in Martha’s hands. She also realizes that Martha silently dislikes her for such a long time. She has predicted that she will be dismissed from the house as soon as the reading of the will. Rose has mentally said goodbye to the house as shown in her silent words: “The day was over and now she must go—go away from this refuge that she had learned to love, this home, hers no longer” (Johnson, 1993: 57). Her certainty that she is soon leaving without knowing where to go is reflected in her attitude while waiting for the reading of the will: “Rose looked like a lonely traveler who sits in the station without a time table waiting for the next train with no fixed destination—just going!” (Johnson, 1993: 57).

Rose’s yielding and serving attitude is not escaped from Martha’s critical eyes: “in fact, she has always deferred to her, served her well, had been kind and considered, nursing her” (Johnson, 1993: 57). Martha cannot deny that Rose has treated her well so far. Martha is hesitated about her previous strong determination to drive Rose out of the house as soon as the reading of the will ends. Martha’s hesitation is heightened by her new startling finding about Rose. Martha just realizes that Rose is not “a lovely young brown-eyed girl” (Johnson, 1993: 57) anymore. Rose at present is different from Rose 25 years ago: “Another thought awoke

like a thunder-clap in her mind! A new thought, so strangely new that she felt stunned ... this woman who moved so slowly before her was not a young woman—she was old! old!! Rose too was old. The years had passed and even Rose had lost her youth” (Johnson, 1993: 57). The young Rose that poses as a threat for her position as the wife of Dr. Ryan is now not a threat anymore. Both of them are now old. There is no more conflict of power triggered by age. The young versus old conflict has been over.

The realization that both are now old produces a new meaning to Martha: “There was something sweet and comforting in the thought” (Johnson, 1993: 57). Martha feels relieved, however her little comfort is shaken by the instruction in the will to divide equally Dr. Ryan’s property for Martha and Rose (Johnson, 1993: 58). It relieves the raging silence in Martha’s heart. Lawyer Green’s awkward comment also reminds Martha about what the society thinks about her relationship with Rose: “... The will is a little peculiar, but—ah—ah—the situation is a bit unusual” (Johnson, 1993: 58). Martha’s emotions are in conflict. Rose’s timid response to ease the blow of the will adds to Martha’s conflicting emotions: “Oh certainly yes—anything Mrs. Ryan suggests will be all right with me. I’ll cause no trouble at all. Now if you will excuse me I’ll get a few things together and be leaving” (Johnson, 1993: 58). Even though the will protects her, Rose fully realizes that society and especially Martha cannot accept her, now her protector has passed away. Rose understands Martha’s feeling, intention, and determination: “Rose knew that she was waiting for her to go—had waited for twenty five years, waited for this moment for nearly a life-time!” (Johnson, 1993: 58). Even though she has no place to go and she does not want to leave the house, she feels she does not have any choice except leaving the house.

Martha keeps silent before and after the reading of the will. She is sorting her conflicting feelings. She still keeps silent when Rose, haltingly, stumblingly, while carrying her valise, is walking to the door and brokenly says good bye to her: “Well, well, I’ll ... be ... go i n g ...” (Johnson, 1993: 58). For Martha, it seems like a liberating moment, liberating her from the woman she does not like for so long. However she does not feel relieved or triumphant: “How still the house was. Still and empty. It would be more still and empty ... there would be no one to do little things for her ... nurse her ... comfort her ... decide for her ... no one to lean upon” (Johnson, 1993: 59). Instead of feeling powerful, victorious, and relieved, Martha feels alone, lonely, and helpless. She cannot live by herself. She needs somebody to accompany her, to be there for her. She just realizes that she is not an independent person. She needs a friend to help her. If Rose leaves her and the house, she has nobody.

Old age and the realization that Rose is also old has turned the feeling of rivalry into the feeling of needing. In her old age, Martha needs someone that can become her friend and help. A friend that knows her. A friend that serves her. A friend that she is familiar to. Rose is a perfect choice, but Rose is leaving the house: “With a start she awoke the moment ... Rose was going, her hand was turning the knob ... Martha watched with growing panic ...” (Johnson, 1993: 59). Martha has to decide quickly or she will lose Rose forever. In this critical moment something happens that saves both of them. Rose who deeply inside does not want to leave the house takes a last look at the house that she has lived for 25 years. Her action defreezes the frozen Martha into unexpected action: “Rose paused a moment on the threshold, she looked back! and then Mrs. Ryan flung open her arms and cried brokenly, “Rose!”” (Johnson, 1993: 59). They need each other. The 25 years together, although

unwillingly united, has grown the sense of familiarity. Each knows her role and right. Rose is always serving and yielding even though now she has the right to the house. She respects Mrs. Ryan by leaving the house, leaving her right. However, it feels heavy for her to leave the house. Martha, on the other side, has come to a decision. She does not want revenge anymore, she wants to live the rest of her life comfortably with someone who knows how to behave to her. She needs Rose while Rose needs the warmth of the house and the regularity of life. In other words, there is a mutual need between the two women.

Martha's feeling of rivalry, her raging silence, and her intention to take revenge vanishes with the passing of time. Being old emerges the sense of needing the other, to keep the familiar life, and to live peacefully. Hard feeling nurtured so long unconsciously has changed into a shocking understanding that she basically needs the other party used to be considered as her rival. Martha offers a new start to Rose. Both can build their own life based on mutual bonding in which they support and help each other once the dominant patriarchal figure has left them. In other words, the death of Dr. Ryan has freed Martha and Rose from the imposing situation binding them so far in a silent conflict. The will of Dr. Ryan stating that each woman has the right of one half of the house does not create hard feeling because of Rose's yielding attitude. The house, once Dr. Ryan was still alive feels like a cage silencing the women, now it becomes a liberating nest for the two women to live equally in mutual understanding. By lowering the ego and pushing aside hurt feeling on the side of Martha and keeping the humble attitude and unconsciously showing deep loss in leaving the house on the side of Rose, both of them finally build a mutual bonding for the rest of their life.

Conclusions

The short story entitled *Free* written by Georgia Douglas Johnson which tells about the complicated relationship of one man and two women living in the same house is rich in meaning. From the feminist perspective, it is proven once again, that patriarchy in whatever form and disguise always has the power to divide women, to subtly set women against each other, and to cripple their very existences. The disappearance of the patriarchal proponent sets the women free, grows their awareness of mutual need, and develops the women's ability to lead their lives as they wish. The silenced women finally find their voice. Finally they can construct their own life after years of clipped life.

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