

Sounds of Silence: M(other) Systems of
Signification in Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's
The Revolt of Mother and
Laila Al-Uthman's Home Leaving

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Abstract

The paper analyzes Freeman's "The Revolt of 'Mother'" and Al-Uthman's "Home Leaving" by using a feminist comparative approach. It argues that the two stories constitute radical critiques of patriarchal systems of signification which render women as silent. The two stories depict two mothers who use their cultural assumptions of themselves as non-speaking subjects, to disrupt their cultures' dominant discourses by re-inscribing, renaming, and reclaiming what has been linguistically prescribed as the silent other. Their silence becomes a means of communication, a spoken language that subverts the binary system of speech/silence but also includes the dominant other in a discourse of interconnectedness and inclusiveness.

M(Other) as "other" appropriates the language of the one or dominant symbolic order so as to gain access to textuality.

(Adriana Ménez Rodenas 29)¹

It is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence.

(Hélène Cixous 351)

Perhaps more expressive than the two quotes by Rodenas and Cixous with which to start my study is the reference to a painting by the French artist Odilon Redon (1840-1916). This painting comprises a portrait of a still, haunting face of a woman in a womb-like Cameo, further enclosed by a red and green oval mist, and probably holding two fingers on her lips. This painting, significantly enough, is titled Silence.

Odilon's work visually constructs and externalizes a representation of a male dominant logic for which the "abstract identification of woman = Silence" (Kaplan 79). This silence forms the essence of her femininity. Her muted speech projects a "material image" (Kaplan 79) of the verbal imprisonment of all women by a patriarchal symbolic order. Accordingly, silence has been designated as a feminist issue, one not confined to any historical moment or geographical space, but "a form of imposed repression" (Hassan 13) enforcing a symbolic order in which the "appropriate condition for women" (Stout vii) is silence. Entrapped and wrapped in this womb-like sphere, Odilon's woman becomes a symbol of all women, regardless of their class or race or nationality, who are treated as marginal by the fact that they are excluded from a discourse that is patriarchal in intent and meaning.

The condition and experience of being females in male-dominated cultures prove to be more important in defining the works of the two women writers in this study than the specifics of differences in place and time. One can say that Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (1852-1930), the American post-civil war writer in new England, and Laila Al-Uthman, the contemporary Kuwaiti fiction writer in post-oil period of economic affluence, belong neither to a western nor to an eastern culture but rather to what Linda Kerber advocates as "Women's culture" (21. qtd. Pryse 5).

In their fictions, Freeman and Al-Uthman show awareness to the constraining and constricting and ultimately negative effects of systems of signification which render our world in terms of opposing binaries: dominant/subordinate, active/passive, mind/body, human/sub-human, rational/irrational. Their works constitute a radical critique of patriarchal systems and their stereotypical images of women, one of which is feminine

silence. Freeman's "The Revolt of 'Mother'" and Al-Uthman's "Home Leaving" (الرحيل) depict mothers who use their cultural assumptions of themselves as m(others), and non-speaking subjects to disrupt their cultures' dominant systems of signification. They manage to do so by reinscribing, renaming, and reclaiming what has already been linguistically prescribed as the silent other. Their silence becomes a means of communication, a spoken language that subverts the binary system of speech/silence and, thus, speaks a new way of being in communication with difference.

"The Revolt of 'Mother'" celebrates the female, the oral, and the creative powers of Sarah Penn, referred to in the story as "Mother," who refuses to remain the silent other. Sarah Penn claims the power of speech, not through submitting to the dominant symbolic system of her husband, Adoniram the "Father," but rather through shaking its foundation and changing its meaning and signs. Mother is able to force Father to listen to her voice by speaking not against, but "outside" Father's symbolic structure, by establishing "a discourse the status of which would no longer be defined by the fallacy of masculine meaning." Mother, in other words, meets the challenge of language and succeeds to "re-invent' language, to re-learn how to speak" (Felman 20).

What Sarah Penn wants for her family is a comfortable home. Her well-off husband, however, insists of building more barns and buying more cattle on the very ground set aside for the new house promised Sarah at the time of marriage forty years ago. When she learns of his plans of a new barn, Mother tries desperately to get him to understand the injustice done to her self and to their children. "You're lodgin' your dumb beasts better than you are your own flesh an' blood," she says. "I want to know if you think it's right" (RM 152). In response to Father's complete indifference, mother moves home into the new barn during Father's absence. When he returns, Sarah tells him: "we've come here to live, an' we're goin' to live here. We've got jest as good a right here as new horses an' cows" (RM 157).

To Janice Daniel, Sarah Penn "merely locates home from one enclosure to another" (69). She actively determines and maintains her choice of space only "to continue comfortably in her domestic role" (71) as mother. Elaine Orr, on the other hand, reads Mother's act of revolt as "a textually negotiated female voice," a text that is required "to unsettle established pattern of relationship – in their case, to transform a static marriage contract into a process of active negotiation" (56). To Martha Cutter, Sarah Penn struggles "to define a linguistic frontier which has excluded her as a speaking subject," by engendering "a new linguistic

frontier which merges the conflicting systems of father's and Mother's frontiers" (280). My argument, however, suggests that Mother struggles to disentangle her voice, deemed silent, from the voices of others – Father's and the patriarchal system it represents – through structuring a language system which speaks her autonomy but also includes others in what Carol Gilligan would call "a web of interconnectedness."² Mother's structuring process starts in a willful acceptance of enforced silence, moves to a tactful appropriation of masculine discourse, and terminates in a (non) verbal act of revolt which constitutes an open discourse of interconnectedness and inclusiveness.

Trinh T. Minh-ha in *Woman, Native, Other* writes that "language is one of the most complex forms of subjugation," and also "the locus of power and unconscious servility" (52). The truth of this statement is evident in the opening dialogue between Mother and Father. Mother asks a question, repeats it three times before she gets an explanation. She wants to know "what them men diggin' over there in the field?" (RM 147). To remind her that barn building is no business of hers, Father speaks symbolically by "harnessing the great bay mare," hustling "the collar on her neck with a jerk," and slapping "the saddle upon the mare's bade" (RM 147). His intentional (non) spoken act, and his following speech described by the narrator "as inarticulate as a growl" (RM 148), speak Father's linguistic dominance over Mother which, interestingly enough, is both understood and willfully accepted by Mother. She persistently repeats her question for the second time only to be reminded by Father "to go into the house ...an' 'tend to your own affairs" (RM 148). She, at last, non-violently forces Father to speak and then peacefully leaves the barn to mind her own business as ordered.

Accepting her domestic role at this stage of the narrative, mother appears to understand what Father is unable to read: no matter what she has to say on the subject, Adoniram will not see and hear what she sees and says. She accepts silence by consent, by the wish not to hurt. Her-self chosen obedience is indeed in itself a silent and sound voice speaking her autonomy.

In the second dialogue, however, Mother again persistently calls father three times before he responds. Her strategy this time is to plead "her little case like a Webster" (RM 152), "to talk real and plain" (RM 151) like a man. She realizes that accepting her culturally ascribed role as an obedient and silent m(other) will not help her in her argument. Erroneously, however, she comes to believe that is she adopts her husband's logical and plain discourse, she will be empowered to force Father to listen and to respond.

Unfortunately, Mother's "eloquent" speech is mocked by Father's "obstinate silence" (RM 152). Adoniram has nothing to say except that he has nothing to affirm, "I ain't got nothin' to say" (RM 151). As Martha Cutter states, "Sarah does not enunciate, or initiate a challenge to Father's structuring of the universe" (285). "Her access into patriarchal discourse" is, in other words, "a fall in to powerlessness, defeatism, and a loss of the imaginary" (Cutter 285).

By Appropriating male models of discourse, Mother indeed remains silent and unheard. Her verbal act to me, however, speaks of a loss of responsiveness to family needs and a response to the demands of the self in separation from others. Her present system of signification is undeniably identical to Father's laddered system. It is a system of exclusion rather than one of inclusion. It is in this sense that Mother's speech enunciates "powerlessness" and "defeatism."

In the third dialogue, Mother finally speaks and success in obliging Father to listen to her case and to accept her act of self-assertion. Moving home to the newly built barn momentarily appears to have disrupted power relations in her family nexus. It articulates, however, an ethic of responsibility that stems from an awareness to self in connection with others. This daring act of revolt certainly speaks Mother's attentiveness to what would work best for all members of her family. It is a discourse, moreover, that allows her "to inscribe," rename and, therefore, expand the meaning of the barn, "a male-oriented text" (Orr 58-59) to her use and to the needs of all the members of her family, including Father. With such a discourse of interconnectedness, Mother is no more stranded between two worlds of relationships: self/other, self/self, nor is she forced to give up the affirmation of the self for the demands of the others. She learns how to articulate the former without negating the latter. Her act of assertion, therefore, is not an act of aggression but rather of communication. She articulates for herself a life of integrity centered on activities of motherhood and care.

In Laila Al-Uthman's "Home Leaving," Um Hejran is another heroine determined to express herself and maintain her integrity within the constricting patriarchal institution of marriage. Like Mother, Um Hejran's primary interests are centered around home and family. Unlike Sarah, however, she is an unmothered mother, for she loses her only child in a tragic accident. Sarah takes upon herself the responsibility of moving her home from one location to another; Um Hejran, on the other hand, leaves this responsibility to the husband. For once again, the male character in "Home Leaving" occupies greater linguistic space while the female voice,

inspite of its obstinate presence, is radically muted. At first reading, the story appears to be an inversion of Freeman's. The difference is only apparent, and the story indeed proves to be more complex than its surface meaning. Um Hejran abides and obeys the law of the husband and, thus, her act of submission can be read as silence. The narrative meaning, however, is embedded with symbolism speaking and voicing Um Hejran's plea for the lives of all oppressed women like her who are persistently excluded from any fruitful engagement in discourse. Sarah Penn performs a (non) verbal act of revolt that speaks; Um Hejran articulates through silence her plight for all silenced women who struggle for self-expression and self-expansion in a world where the word is masculine.

Structurally, the story is built around two dialogues between husband and wife and a closing third one which includes their neighbors. The opening scene introduces the husband's plans to leave home and fetch a living in another country for financial reasons. The wife, meanwhile, is packing and preparing her family for home leaving. The dialogue that follows is initiated not by the wife as in Freeman's story but rather by the husband. He wants to know if his wife has finished packing. Um Hejran is unable to decide what to take and what to leave. She voices her priorities which are doggedly objected to by the husband.

In the second scene, Abu Hejran again commences the conversation. This time he wants to know why Um Hejran is unable to sleep. it is this very idea of home leaving and the little precious things she values that worries her and prevents her from sleep. She verbalizes a suggestion to stay among family and friends during his absence (HL 52) [أقول لنفسي ماذا لو سافرت..]

Again her proposal is discussed and refused. It is at [أنت وبقيت أنا هنا بانتظارك] this moment, however, that the husband plainly and bluntly states his priorities, intentionally withheld from the wife in the first dialogue: Moosa is to stay in the house during their absence. Vigorously, Um Hejran expresses how she feels about a stranger and a male to occupy her space and invade her privacy.

To explain the logic of his proposition and to urge his wife's consent, Abu Hejran appropriates his wife's system of signification and the transcendental meanings attached to the signifier "home." He assures her that his concern about the security of "the house" and "the garden" (not "our house" and "our garden" nor "my house" and "my garden") is no less genuine than hers. The Arabic text (HL 55) indeed translates the husband's discrete and subtle manipulation of his wife's discourse more than the English summary translation:

- وبيتنا؟
- سينتظر .
- وهل تضمن أن يبقى في مأمن من اللصوص وقد كثروا في المدينة؟
- آه! لقد ذكرتني بأمر لم أحدثك عنه بعد .
- تعتدل في جلستها، في صوتها رنة فضول:
- أمر! أي أمر؟
- يحك رأسه ثم يمسخ عليه:
- في الحقيقة يا أم هجران فإنني أفضل أن تبقى للبيت حركته الدائمة، ثم أنني أخشى على شجيرة الورد أن تذبل وكذلك شجة الحناء . . والياسمين . . لذا فقد كلفت «موسى» أن يبقى في البيت يحرسه ويرعاه . . . وشهقت . . .

When the subordinate m(other) appropriates Father's system of signification in Freeman's story, she is rendered verbless and powerless. When the dominant Father, in this case Abu Hejran, adopts a female discourse, he stays in power. His power is derived from both his position as the dominant other who has the final say in managing family affairs, and from his silent (non-spoken) indifference to his wife's interests, similar in a sense to Father's "obstinate silence" in Freeman's story. His stated interests in his wife's feminine world are, however, verbally articulated but are not genuinely shared. Abu Hejran's system, in other words, is one of exclusion rather than inclusion, a reflection of male domination, which the wife must accept. In this sense, his moral failing, like that of Adoniram's, resides in his failure to expand relationships. His discourse, therefore, is indeed a single-gendered system where only the male speaks, where the opposing binary of speaking male/silent female is reduced to sameness: male/male, as Irigaray writes:

This domination of the philosophical logos stems in large from its power to reduce all others to the economy of the same... from its power to eradicate the difference between the sexes in systems that are self-representative of a masculine object. (One 74)

Within this dominant system of discourse, the woman is always the silenced other, "off-stages, off-side, beyond representation, beyond self-hood" (Irigaray, *Speculum* 22).

The husband's discourse, however, is critiqued by the human and transcendental significance attached to Um Hejran's catalogue of the little, precious objects she wants to take on her trip. Her list includes utensils she has inherited from her mother: old copper cooking pans, an old container



used by the mother to wash father's clothes and now by daughter to wash husband's garments, and a collection of old silver cutlery (HL 49). This list includes as well their woolen bed cover, an old carpet, one of her son's toys, some of her husband's old books and, significantly enough, her father's rifle.

Um Hejran's system of signification adequately reveals a system of boundness and not boundariedness. It is a discourse which attaches value to self-in-relation to another; it is one of inclusion trying to force itself into a symbolic, dominant system that works every possible means to keep the woman silent. Um Hejran does not perform an act of self-expression comparable to Mother's in Freeman's story. Like most of Al-Uthman's heroines, she is a powerful and fitting example of the stultifying repression and oppression imposed upon a female character.³ Her strategic choice to remain obedient, that is silent, is in itself a historical, muted cry, comparable to that in Odilon's Silence, speaking her oppression and that practiced against all women.

The historicity of her utterance is certainly evident in her potent attachment to old objects inherited from her parents, in her fidelity to objects owned by her own family (father and son), and in her loyalty to her marriage (woolen bed cover and carpet). What Um Hejran inherits is the conservative essentialist ideology of womanliness imposed by patriarchy. She, doubtlessly, articulates her culture's constructions of her as the ideal daughter, the submissive wife, the selfless mother. References to the father's rifle in this context, therefore, represent all the masculine (non) discourses that express categories of dominance and hierarchy imposed by the power of language. This hierarchical system, however, is bequeathed to the son, symbolized in the story by Moosa, the young chap, penetrating the privacy of Um Hejran's private rooms in a metaphoric act of rape. Of all the objects in her catalogue, Um Hejran cogently manages to take her father's rifle and the key to her home, an act which manifests Um Hejran's awareness and knowledge of this historical discourse and its oppressive ideology. This understanding, however, empowers her to endure.

Different as they are in their discourses, Sarah and Um Hejran indeed vocalize women's essential aspiration for self-expression and self-expansion through systems of signification which sustain relationships and interconnectedness. In both stories, dialogues that begin in patriarchal contexts end in discourses that are structured to include the self and the others. Freeman's story, however, "elicit(s) the idea of compromise" (Orr 60) more than Al-Uthman's does. In her (non) verbal act of revolt, Mother

creates a system which forces Father to see and say that barn is like home and not like it, that home is both barn and home. For Um Hejran, however, imagining a world beyond binary opposition of speaking male/silent female, a world "where the code of sexual remarks would no longer be discriminating" (Derrida 76, qtd. Cutter 291) is possible only in private, that is in silence.

NOTES:

1. Rodenas's article, "Tradition and Women's Writing: toward a Poetics of Difference," has greatly clarified my thinking on the subject of language and gender and, surely, helped me in my reading of Freeman's and Al-Uthman's stories.
2. My Reading of the two stories has been influenced by what Carol Gilligan has to write about Psychological theory and woman's development in her book, In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1982).
3. Criticism on Laila Al-Uthman's fiction is indeed sparse. The most relevant to my study were the following references in arabic:

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—. *This Sex which is One*. Trans. Catherine Potter and Carolyn Burke. Ithaca, N.Y. Cornell UP, 1985. Parenthetically quoted as *One*.

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