

Silent Persuasion and Empowerment of Republican Motherhood in Freeman's *The Revolt of 'Mother'*

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Abstract

Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's *The Revolt of 'Mother'* presents a compelling portrayal of Republican Motherhood through the character of Sarah Penn, whose quiet resistance within the domestic sphere powerfully challenges patriarchal authority and unjust social norms. Drawing upon the notion of revolutionary spirit within Republican Motherhood, this paper explores how Sarah Penn, the female protagonist in Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's *"The Revolt of 'Mother'"*, uses the silent persuasion of Republican motherhood to legitimize female rebellion, reveal her political agency, and redefine traditional female roles. Referring to resistance, this paper examines how this resistance comes to Sarah Penn, what leads her to become a revolting mother, and how she gains a new insight to fight for her rights. In doing so, this paper, scrutinizing the representation of rhetoric of justice, right, and democracy intermingled within the text, provides a new insight to look at the female's position in family and society who can persistently contribute to social change.

Keywords: Republican motherhood, domestic resistance, silent persuasion, empowerment

Introduction

Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's short story *The Revolt of Mother* explores how a woman's silent resistance within the domestic sphere becomes a persuasive expression of Republican Motherhood. Freeman illustrates a subtle yet powerful conformation of patriarchal authority through the character Sarah Penn with her transition from long-submissive wife to morally assertive figure—mostly notable when she relocates her family into the new barn without her husband's consent. With this act, she implies rhetorical action to exemplify the political ideals of Republican Motherhood, a concept that emerged after the American Revolution of the eighteenth century, which took women as moral guides responsible for shaping the values of future citizens. Despite the interruptions and limitations, these empowered women subtly guided the families by shaping the moral values and responsibilities, and influencing the male members to ensure moral reformation and fair practices. This subtle but powerful influence of mothers through domestic

education and moral guidance can be defined as the silent persuasion of the Republican Mother. This article argues that in Freeman's *The Revolt of Mother*, Sarah Penn embodies the empowered Republican Mother whose silent persuasion functions as a rhetorical strategy to resist patriarchal dominance and promote justice within the domestic realm.

Literature Review

Many scholars have addressed Sarah Penn of the Freeman's *The Revolt of Mother* as a strong, proactive, and transformative figure, while few others have critiqued how her final act helped to subvert the existing gender structure. For instance, *The Revolt of Mother* by Freeman is a serious critique of patriarchal structures where Sarah Penn's act of moving into the barn symbolizes a powerful appropriation and transformation of male-dominated space, reflecting a woman's assertion of authority within inherited social and discursive frameworks (Church, 1990). Similarly, Cutter (1991) highlighted Sarah as a robust heroine who overcame the subordinate status in the patriarchal society, and Tritt (2004) stated that Freeman's portrayal of Sarah as a brave, proactive figure, who initiates significant changes in the family, undermines gender stereotypes, paralleling her bold act with the biblical Sarah's assertiveness. Using strong fairy-tale themes and tropes, Freeman's work not only challenges the traditional gender boundaries but also highlights the transformative power of feminine authority (James, 2006). Further, Toler (2007) depicted Sarah as an unconventional woman who has abandoned the prescribed role of a traditional woman, and with her action, Sarah demanded the redefinition of the female's role within the household. According to Garvey (2009), the story offers a key perspective on the role of rural motherhood, which emphasizes the tension between traditional domestic roles and the financial pressure of farm life. In addition, Denmak (2020) studied the story as the dialectical revolt of the mother. He argues that the protagonist of Freeman's story gains empowerment by redefining and claiming new space for herself. All these critical research have focused more on the character's transformation from the passive to proactive agency. Despite these studies, there is still a lack of scholarship on how Freeman's protagonist is inspired and motivated for her silent rebellion action, and why she chose a silent struggle for dignity and justice within the family to eliminate the broader tension between gender roles and moral responsibility within family life. Therefore, this paper aims to address the gap of how the resistance comes to Sarah Penn, and how she uses the silent persuasion of Republican motherhood to legitimize female rebellion within the domestic sphere.

Theoretical Framework

This paper draws on the notion of 'Republican motherhood', a belief that mothers are in charge of instilling republican values in their offspring. In general, Kerber (1976) examined the women of the American Republic—the republican mothers—and their intended roles during the American Revolution period. She means Republican philosophy apparently integrated mothers' political and domestic behavior and reluctantly established their position in politics. Claiming how the ideology influences the women's political socialization process, Kerber takes the Republican Mother as a tactic to combine domesticity with politics (p. 203). Instead of just conducting domestic responsibilities, these mothers set off to pass the values of morality and civic duty to both their children and spouses. The mother served a political role by raising patriotic children and governing the family to be a virtuous American citizen. According to Kerber, these women's commitment to instructing civic virtues to their sons made them criticize and even correct their husbands for their transgression from it. Their place in the home and the political sphere got a new shape, which measured their domestic duties as important tools of politicization and socialization (Bell, 2005). Rendall (1985) also affirmed the notion of Republican Motherhood as a way to tie public and

private responsibilities of women. Further, Zaggari (1992) claimed that Republican motherhood crafted an innovative political role for women while preserving the conventional gender stereotypes. Through such actions, women empowered themselves with an independent and initiative role.

Along with their involvement in the domestic sphere, these mothers tremendously place the spotlight on the political purpose. Kritzer (1996), in addition, pointed out how the notion that women should demonstrate, teach, and protect the values of the republic within the family gave a political meaning to their traditional family roles. She means that republican motherhood negotiated the dominant definition of American women, even though it excluded women from overt political participation. Moreover, to notify women's status as political subjects, Landes (1984) argued that as a result of the increased politicization of women, the Feminist Movement emerged in Western Europe and North America during the nineteenth century. Although females were confined to their domestic sphere, carrying out different roles, the same roles finally propelled them to the forefront of a new nation (Thorsen, 2020). In this way, leaning on the political roles of the Republican Motherhood, women also began to apprehend how they were enslaved by the patriarchy. As a result, they demanded their rights, the right to proper, fair practices in the family, and loyalty between husband and wife. They resisted all apparent hurdles to lay the foundation for the virtuous citizen. Republican mothers' resistance, here, means the act of withstanding against injustice that even opposes the unbalanced power hierarchies to impart civil virtue and liberty in action.

With Republican Motherhood, both men and women ventured into the possibilities of social change; nevertheless, women's groups worked out to ensure natural rights for women, both personally and politically. It also maintained the role of women in the private sphere and gave them more rights to education so that they could develop their nerves and intelligence. Republican motherhood, which modified the female domain in both the domestic and private spheres, was very crucial for revolutionary invention (Kerber, 1976). After the American Revolution, when their husbands were at the battlefield, many women had to maintain their households alone. This isolation out of sheer necessity somehow made them feel a sense of being independent. As a result, a new class of outspoken, independent, and powerful women, who imparted the concept of right, justice, and liberty to their children, emerged. These mothers, who were ignited with revolutionary spirit, vigorously started to resist silently against bias and injustice, demanding their rights to maintain the civic virtues of their husbands and sons. In this way, mothers, as a part of republicanism, exercised political liberty with sovereignty in instilling values and developing a liberal relationship to children. The initial notion of resistance against powerful authority in an American family emerged with the concept of Republican Motherhood of the eighteenth century.

Sarah Penn as a Republican Mother

In the beginning, Sarah, accompanied by her daughter Nanny Penn, confines to her domestic realm. Engaged with domestic affairs such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for her children. Like her, Nanny also spends much time in the domestic chores known as the females' sphere of Republican Motherhood, especially in sewing and embroidery. Sarah initially hesitates to intrude on Adoniram's decisive act of constructing a new barn. For this reason, women who are under the control of men are defenseless since their duties are allocated inside the house. However, like father, when her son deliberately holds the matter of construction clandestine for three months, she acknowledges the same fatherly authoritative figure in her son. In this particular moment, she wants to execute the ideal of Republican Motherhood. This ideal emphasizes a political role that

women can fulfill at home. The role is to inculcate her husband and son—the present and future republican citizen—the need for civic virtues. At the same time, she realizes a need to demonstrate an instilled revolutionary spirit to exercise justice, equality, and liberty. Instead of loud confrontation, she chooses silent, persuasive action to protect the family's virtue and dignity and to persuade the way to protect the public.

Resistance, as a tool to fight against the oppressor, leads to an action against conflicting power hierarchies. It assists women to overcome subordination, fight for justice, voice for equality, and obtain their rights. Weitz (2001) defined resistance as actions that discard subordination by contesting subordination-supporting ideology. When men respect their own contentment and do the things guided by their narcissistic yearning, it is undue subjugation for women. As a result, resistance takes place to get rid of such subordination.

As a male representative of patriarchal society, Adoniram Penn confines himself to his own merriment, submits himself to doing the things of his personal interest, and desires to limit family authority within himself. Willfully exercising patriarchy, “a social system that is male-identified, male-controlled, male-centered will inevitably value masculinity and masculine traits over femininity and feminine traits” (Becker, 1999, p. 24), Adoniram somehow controls Sarah Penn. As such, with a patriarchal ideology, he frequently reminds Sarah of her duty to stay in the house and attend her work. Following the unjust social system exclusively, the father, to some extent, limits the female members' legal rights and keeps them subservient. Female members, too, have accepted this subordinated role in the family. As a Republican mother, she wants civic virtues to be followed even in domestic matter. This is why she tolerates the ongoing stuff. Rajan (2000) divulged that women's resistance is an accurate way to reflect the reality of their circumstances under men's oppression, which opens up more opportunities for women's efforts. In the case of Sarah, while upholding the ideas of republicanism and working on the civil rights, she notices how the patriarchy had enslaved her. Thus, she starts to combat patriarchy so that she can exercise her authority and rights.

Like domination, communication breakdown, knockback in dialogue, and confidentiality in actions are also some elements against democratic practices that promote unfair social system, and enhance women's dependency. Scanlon (1972), highlighting the necessity of access to means of expression, states, violations of free speech are examples of distributive unfairness. When Sarah Penn inquires her husband, the unwarranted authority of the family, about his purpose of building a new barn, he refuses to respond to her meaningful dialogue repeatedly. Adoniram's this unsolicited reticence exhibits his alacrity to uphold his preeminence over females. That is why he clutches their democratic freedom, exercises unjust practices, and withholds their longings and requirements. Except to his son, Adoniram scarcely discloses his strange motifs to the female members of the family. During the dinner, in addition, he usually stays taciturn. Breaking off the communication flow, he not only adheres to the traditional sexual hierarchy, but also controls his wife's right to know about familial matters, and her involvement in the decision-making process. More importantly, the family conversation has an immense power to settle different issues and conflicts in a democratic society. Sarah, however, is deprived of access to resources and the decision-making process in the family. As an aftermaths of long, unjust practices, finally she apprehends her inferior position and limited self-esteem in her family. And thus, she repels her dictatorial husband for democratic freedom, liberty, and, of course, for her right to the property utility silently.

After Adoniram's personal autonomy awakens the insights of Republican Motherhood within the family, Sarah becomes aware of how patriarchy confines and accommodates her. Obviously, these patriarchal values restrict women's mobility and liberty, devalue their capabilities, and deny their right to property through diverse exploitative mechanisms. The knowledge, particularly the acumen of female characters, implants the revolutionary spirit, empowering them to see things differently. Farr (2010) pointed out that American revolution enhanced rationalism, competence, and independence in women's action along with enlightenment ideals, which later led some of them to participate in politics alongside men. Spawning an unquenchable enthusiasm for living a comfy life, Sarah also persuasively instigates complaining to complain her husband about the lack of basic requirements of the house and their miserable condition. Her first complaint nudges him to reflect on his unjust behavior and negligence towards familial matters. Her strong voice, distinct articulation, and logical statement, warmed by sentiment, vividly resembles the revolutionary spirit of Republican Mothers who often resist authoritative family figures for political liberty.

Democratic practices, in addition, ensure equal roles for the citizens, guarantee their rights, and promote the representation of women embracing the principle of equal liberty. To address distributive justice, Rawls (1999) averred that justice makes compelling arguments for equal liberty as a just treatment. In a likely manner, the republican mother of the family, Sarah, also seeks justice. To get rid of the domestic violence and give a proper shape to her motherly and wifely duties, she exercises her freedom. Her demand for justice, the preliminary phase of revolt, is articulated through her daring act to inquire about her husband. With a complete preparedness of resistance, she further says, "I ain't never complained, an' I ain't going to complain now but I'm going to talk plain" (Freeman, 2006, p. 726). Unlike her husband, Sarah seldom thinks of oppressing her husband and holding all power in her hand. Instead, she strives for equality and justice. For this reason, she even substitutes her identity as a docile wife with a proficient, self-asserting life partner who has equal status in the family. Demonstrating herself as an equal authoritative figure in the family, she stands like a queen, a royal authority. She, in addition, not only exercises democratic freedom of equal participation in familial matters, but she also judiciously obliges her husband to think about his irrational acts.

Resistance is also a result of the self-transformation based on willpowergrab equal opportunity and freedom of choice. It upholds the balance between oppressors and the oppressed so that justice can be preserved. Shapiro (2001) stated that the idea of justice in the family is based on the general rule, where, in order to delegitimize themselves, the dominated attempt to politicize, while the dominators attempt to depoliticize. The moment Adoniram voraciously politicizes his power, holding up the family authority, the female members of the family are fighting for justice, particularly for the equal rights, spotting his exploitation. Apart from their involvement in domestic work such as cooking, cleaning, scrubbing, embroidering, stitching, and so on, Sarah probes her husband, makes him mindful of their worsening condition, and reports about the monetary matter. She further compels him to think on his doings—whether it is right or not, "I want to know if you think you're doing right an' according to what you profess" (Freeman, 2006, p. 727). Nonetheless, her husband, who longs to fulfill only his wishes, stands dumbfounded. He prefers to buy a horse for his comfort, but he denies building a house for his family. Because of his self-guided act, the female family members feel deprived of what they want; they are compelled to live with injustice. Inequalities that do not benefit everyone are injustice (Rawls, 1999). Therefore, the mother determines to show up her striking decisive act as the aftermaths of her long subordination in the family for the intended justice. To defy injustice, Sarah withstands her subservient role in the family, opposing her husband's ideology and practices.

The evolving self-assertion finally stimulates the mother to shift her family to a new barn in the absence of her husband. Adoniram was not only frightened after observing the daring and strange act of his wife as it is described, “his old bristling face was pale and frightened”, but he also felt powerlessness, “His arms seemed to lack the power. His wife helped him” (Freeman, 2006, p.733). His physical feebleness and inability to defend wife’s revolt made him cry. The tyrannical authority, who has exercised power in the family for decades, finally realizes his exploitation. After all, he seems willing to address the demands of his family, especially of his wife, giving her justice and democratic freedom, “I’ll – put up the- partitions, an’-everything you- want, mother” (p. 733). The mother’s insurrection in a familial act, in the end, endows her to get what she wants in the family.

To lead the inspiring counter-revolutionary act, Sarah, the representative figure of Republican Motherhood, ardently appropriates the rhetoric of America’s Founding Fathers on democracy, equality, and justice, which contributed a lot during the American Revolution.

Kann (1999) specified that these founders were committed to dismantling traditional gender bias and promoting a revolutionary discourse for women, both of which were eventually employed to enhance women's rights and political participation. In the rebellious conversation, Sarah frequently adopts the language of Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and John Adams to talk about equality, equal liberty, justice, democratic freedom, right, and her quest for happiness. The resemblance of the rhetoric is evident in Sarah’s speech; seeking justice she blames her husband, “You’re lodgin’ your dumb beasts than you are your own flesh an’ blood. I want to know if you think it’s right” (Freeman, 2006, p.727). The rhetoric of the American founding fathers made her much aware of her rights, equality, freedom, and equal liberty, with which she resists with unjust authority of the family, as she says, “I have thought it all over an’ over, an’ I believe I’m doing what’s right” (p.731). Her self-governance is reflected in, “I’ve got my own mind, an’ nobody but the Lord is goin’ to dictate to me unless I’ve a mind to have him” (p. 732). Despite the men of the village rebuking Sarah as “insane” and “lawless” woman with “rebellious spirit” for her audacious act of shifting the family to a new barn, she clamps her head high with much pride and dignity. Moreover, she retorts to the minister of the Church, Mr. Hersey, with gratification, “I think it’s right as much as I think it was right for our forefathers to come over from the old country because they didn’t have what belonged to them” (p. 732). Thus, these counter-revolutionary languages for resistance dominate all her views and talks.

Sarah Penn, as a Republican Mother’s figure resists against unjust practices for the betterment of her children and family. This revolt of the mother even leads to a transfer of power from the male authority to the female authority. For forty years, her family has been accommodated in the congested house; however, being aware of the unjust social practices, she finally acts out what she realizes as the right thing to take place. Her politically revolutionary rebellion spirit is yet socially unacceptable. Her morally grounded silent rhetoric becomes a powerful political tool to achieve the change within and beyond the domesticity.

Conclusion

With the evolving cognizance and the strategic use of silent persuasion, Sarah acts out against the restricted rules and tries to encumber the male’s position in the family, fighting for her rights. Her quiet determination and moral authority can be seen as an extension of silent persuasion through which she challenges the boundaries of gender norms and maintains the ideals of republican virtue, order, and responsibility. Being inspired by the practices of Republican Motherhood as a form of moral and rhetorical power, she, in addition, empowers herself with a true political agency and the

revolutionary spirit to challenge the entrenched social hierarchies. She is an audacious figure of the Republican Mother, who, appropriating the rhetoric of the founding fathers on justice, right, and democracy, challenges the hierarchical order of patriarchy for justice, equality, and mutual respect in the family. Her discreet and determined act thus serves as both a rhetorical intervention and a political assertion, suggesting that domesticity can act as a subtle but powerful political agency for transformative acts of resistance. The gradual evolvment of self-consciousness, confidence, and knowledge in Sarah enables her to voice for rights, to teach civic morality to family members, to resist against unjust practices, and to seek equality in the family. This budding conscience makes her more reflective on her confiscated life, and boosts her self-assurance.

On the one hand, this resistance opens an avenue for social change, alerting all men of the village to their unjust practices in the family, while it reassures the downtrodden women to fight for their rights on the other. As a symbol of resistance against patriarchal value, Sarah is made a virtuous signifier in history. The powerful reverberation of her resistance lasts for decades.

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