



The Resistance of the Invisible Mute: Gender Oppression in Franz Kafka's "A Little Woman"



LAU Chi Sum Garfield¹

International Review of Literary Studies

Vol. 2, No. 1; June 2020, pp. 11-21

Published by: MARS Research Forum

Abstract

In the works of Franz Kafka (1883-1924), it is certain that the notion of women is never as impressive as the monstrosity of his gigantic bug or the mystery of his artist who fasts endlessly.² Most of notable works written by Kafka seemingly center on male protagonists with a certain degree of uncanniness. As a scholar specialized in women's studies, Evelyn Torton Beck highlights the minimal presence of women in Kafka's works.

This essay aims to analyze the invisibility and silence of the female protagonist in "A Little Woman" (1923) in relation to the status of women in Kafka's modernist world. In this story, the existence of the invisible and voiceless woman conflicts between the audible male narrator. The tension between them demonstrates gendered bias. The depiction of the little woman is made solely under a biased male perspective, which demonstrates how women are oppressed by the opposite sex in the patriarchal context.

Key words: Franz Kafka, misogynist, oppression, visibility, audibility, feminist criticism

I. Introduction:

In Franz Kafka's short story "A Little Woman", the little woman is an absent character although her vague physical appearance is visibly revealed to the reader. In describing her physical appearance, the male narrator has paid little attention to her unique features, but rather, focused on some stereotypical qualities shared by women under traditional male gaze. As a result, the little woman is not being perceived as an individual, but rather, a monolithic representation of women who are forever muted by males under the unjust social system that enforces gender oppression.

¹ Assistant Professor, The Open University of Hong Kong. Email: cslau@ouhk.edu.hk

² Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" (1915) and "A Hunger Artist" (1924).

I. The Oppression faced by Woman

Physically, the little woman is portrayed as fragile and powerless. I relate this portrayal with how women are restricted by both biological and social forms of constraints. The story begins with a very general depiction about her that “[s]he is a little woman; naturally quite slim”. (Kafka 234) Other than highlighting the physical built of the little woman, her littleness and slimness are also associated with fragility in terms of her physical strength. The word “naturally” is a suggestion that her slimness is an inborn quality. The depiction is an indication that physical restriction limits women’s ability in many different ways. For instance, it is mentioned in the later part of the story that “women faint easily” and “the world has no time to notice all their doings”. (Kafka 241) Phrases like these clearly reflect that the society depicted maintains a traditional mindset of valuing physical prowess, a stereotypical masculine trait.

While physical fragility is one of the reasons that result in the little woman’s insignificant role in the world, the male narrator points out how the tension in their relationship could be the cause that makes the little woman always physically unwell:

Every now and then, and more frequently of late, information is brought to me that she has risen of a morning pale, unslept, oppressed by headache and almost unable to work; her family worried about her, they wonder what can have caused her condition, and they have not yet found the answer. I am the only one who knows that it is her settled and daily renewed vexation with me. (Kafka 236)

Though it is apparent that the vexed relationship between the narrator and the little woman drives her into illness, the actual conflict remains ambiguous. That the little woman has to work carries the symbolic meaning of how she strives hard in resisting patriarchal domestication of women in this conventional setting by making herself financially independent. In inflicting pain upon her, the male narrator is hence a symbolic representation of the oppressive patriarchy. According to Sandra Gilbert (1936-) and Susan Gubar (1944-), male writers and their works play the role of sustaining patriarchy. They regard the author in Western literary civilization as “the spiritual type of a patriarch”. (Gilbert and Gubar, 7) The male narrator serves as the writer’s tool to impose patriarchal ideology upon the reader. For instance, despite the male narrator is being troubled by gender tensions, he has not mentioned if he shows symptoms of sickness. Rather, he highlights how women are physically disadvantaged, an evidence that their image of feebleness is rooted in the minds of men.

The little woman is oppressed by various social doctrines imposed upon her gender. In condemning established patriarchal values for hindering the progress of feminist movements, Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) observes in *The Second Sex* (1949) that “[w]hen one fails to adhere to an accepted code, one becomes an insurgent”. (De Beauvoir 692) The male narrator’s depiction of the little woman reveals his disapproval towards her uncompromising apparel:

[s]he is tightly laced as well; she is always in the same dress when I see her, it is made of grayish-yellow stuff something the color of wood and is trimmed discreetly with tassels or button-like hangings of the same color; she never wears a hat ... (Kafka 234)

Other than wearing a tightly laced corset, the little woman fails to fulfill the male narrator’s expectation that she should have different outfits. Her choice of dimmed and gloomy colors is a hint of her silent resistance against stereotyped feminine color tone. Besides, she has also rejected the convention of wearing hats in emphasizing her bourgeoisie status.

Being determined in rejecting gendered norms, the little woman is passively treated as an object being criticized by the male gaze. The male narrator’s biased gaze is a representation of the corrosive nature of patriarchal culture that has influenced men and women silently and continuously. Contemporary feminist Gayle Rubin (1949-) has argued that “the world historical defeat of women occurred with the origin of culture, and is a prerequisite of culture”. (Rubin 176) The biased social shaping of women has become a rooted cultural norm. Glover and Kaplan suggest how the different sets of cultural values imposed upon men and women divide them socially:

[S]ex too is filtered through the culturally dominant codes that regulate the behavior acceptable in men and women. But these codes police not only “the social relations of sexuality”; they also determine the social division between the sexes, the basis upon which men and women are placed into “mutually exclusive categories”. (Glover and Kaplan XXIV)

Certain social norms serve to separate the two genders. A female is viewed as a woman because it is assumed that she should possess certain characteristics of being a woman in that socio-cultural context. De Beauvoir initiates that “the concept of femininity is artificially shaped by custom and fashion, it is imposed upon each woman from without”. (De Beauvoir 692) This idea is verified by the detailed depiction of the little woman from the male narrator’s view. In condemning the objectification of women through fashion and apparel, De Beauvoir further mentions how a woman “knows that when she is looked at she is not considered apart from her appearance: she is judged, respected, desired, by and through her toilette”. (De Beauvoir 693) As the descriptions of the little woman first begin with her physical appearance and then moves on to her temperament, it is obvious

that fashion and apparel are instruments that degrade women into objects of patriarchal desires. Despite the little woman's awareness towards the social shaping of gender, her "tightly laced" feature reveals how she is also unaware of her inability in getting rid of various patriarchal limitations. Her "quick and light" movements show she is used to those culturally implanted constraints. In highlighting her swift movements, the male narrator seems to be aware of the constraints. However, later development of the story proves that he is reluctant to make any changes.

Echoing Glover and Kaplan's idea on how men and women are "mutually exclusive categories", the male narrator highlights certain qualities of the little woman so as to point out gender difference. For example, the narrator hints that the little woman possesses no ability of empirical judgment:

I have often wondered why I am such an offense to her; it may be that everything about me outrages her sense of beauty, her feeling for justice, her habits, her traditions, her hopes, there are such completely incompatible natures, but why does that upset her so much?
(Kafka 235)

Since he cannot comprehend how he can be the source that irritates her, he turns to believe that the "incompatible natures" of the two genders is the sole explanation. As I allegorize the little woman as feminist ideology that resists against the male narrator's misogynist beliefs, I regard established patriarchal norms that subordinate women's rights as the source that contradicts with her "sense", "feeling", "habits", "traditions" and "hopes". Under patriarchal code, these aspects are merely perceptions that have nothing to do with empirical judgment. In fact, women are stereotypically associated as being emotionally centered. The story provides little information on what has happened between the narrator and the little woman. Besides, there is no way to know whether his comments are based on stereotypical perception or empirical analysis.

The incomprehensibility of the little woman from the narrator's perspective is somehow imagined as symptoms of hysteria. It sounds peculiar that the narrator and the little woman are only connected by vexation. The narrator mentions that they are like strangers to each other and the problem can be solved if the little woman can regard him as "an utter stranger". (Kafka 235) The paradoxical aspect of their relationship is intensified with the use of oxymoron when he states that the vexation in her is both "settled and daily renewed". (Kafka 236) This dilemmatic vexation illustrates that she is emotionally ambivalent. She is easily irritated by the narrator and this symptom suggests that she is a patient suffering from hysteria.

Gendered attributes have been accused of causing the non-understandable vexation between the narrator and the little woman. However, stereotypical gendered features are often developed and shaped by the society:

Of course she understands it, but being a fighter by nature she forgets it in the lust of battle, and my unfortunate disposition, which I cannot help since it is mine by nature, conditions me to whisper gentle admonitions to anyone who flies into a violent passion. In this way, naturally, we shall never come to terms. (Kafka 239)

The narrator holds the opinion that he and the little woman can never compromise because of their natural divergences. That the narrator regards the little woman as a fighter in nature can be viewed as a response towards feminist movement and the battle between the two sexes. The narrator claims that he holds a gentleman attitude in situations of disapproval, which forms a sharp contrast with the violent rage of the little woman. He believes that his reaction is also a gendered attribute. This metaphorical representation of the battle between the two sexes is indeed stereotypical. As we begin to realize that the ultimate goal of the feminists is to achieve equality while this aim is still far away under biased judgement, her rage becomes reasonable.

II. The Significant Other

The little woman is troublesome from the narrator's perspective. Still, he has repeatedly stressed that she does not possess any power to inflict harm upon him. In other words, she is just a "nonsignificant Other". The narrator believes that the little woman is trying to arouse a rancor against him among the public. However, he is confident that she will not succeed:

Well if that is what her hopes are really set on, she is deluding herself. Public opinion will not take over her role: public opinion would never find me so infinitely objectionable, even under its most powerful magnifying glass. (Kafka 237)

He believes that her wicked wishes can never come true because the public will not agree with her view. There are two reasons to explain his belief. First, what is known as the public is in fact a group of people whose voice can represent the community. The crucial point lies on the identity of this group of people. There is no information regarding the historical background or actual milieu that the story takes place. Thus, there is no apparent clue regarding the actual social context. However, from the confident attitude of the narrator, it is assumed that the public is a group of people who possess similar beliefs as he does. This group of people is probably males who have adopted a gendered perspective. This perspective is metaphorically presented by the magnifying glass. No matter how powerful this magnifying glass is, not a flaw can be found from the male narrator. This is because the glass represents the misogynist perspective of men. It is only through the perspective of woman that

the shortcomings of men can be seen. This is just like the male narrator has discovered many problems from the little woman. The second point that makes the narrator confident towards public judgment upon him is related to his social reputation. He stated that “I am not unknown to the public, that I have lived for long in the full light of publicity, trustingly and trustworthily”. (Kafka 242) Although the narrator has not stated and explained his actual identity, it is conceivable that he possesses both fame and public recognition. This explains for his confidence in gaining trust from the public in the conflict with the little woman. Meanwhile, the little woman has a very trivial role in the society. Her voice is limited in arousing any social concerns. It is precisely this difference in terms of their social status that makes her a “nonsignificant Other”.

The narrator has mentioned repeatedly that the affair with the little woman is trivial in his life. The declaration is actually an indication of the irritations caused by the little woman. This reflects that though women are considered by men as nonsignificant, they are still perceived as troublesome disturbances to men. The narrator is trying his best from being affected by the disturbances brought by the little woman:

I must stay quietly where I am and not let it affect my behavior as far as can be seen, and that includes mentioning it to no one, but not at all because it is a kind of dangerous mystery, merely because it is a trivial, purely personal matter and as such to be taken lightly, and to be kept on that level. (Kafka 240)

It is obvious he is trying to prevent the little woman from affecting him. He dares not to let other people know that he could easily be affected by a woman of no significance. He is watchful towards his behavior as his unusual action can easily be observed by other people. Despite the unavoidable effect upon him, he insists that it is a trivial affair that one should not care too much about it. It seems that he is comforting himself by stating this. As the whole story is in fact a depiction of this “trivial” affair between the narrator and the little woman, it is obvious that she irritates him quite a lot. The story has proved that his attempt to deny the power of the little woman fails. Besides, the stereotypical image of women as the “nonsignificant Other” is simply a false projection.

III. Social Indifference

Social constraints upon gender expectations have been implanted into the minds of men and women. Being unaware, women do not actually sense that they are in fact victims of various doctrines. Elaine Showalter (1941-) observes the portrayals of harsh treatment of female characters by the males during the “feminist” phase (1880-1920). (Bressler 148) Despite of various feminist movements, Kafka’s story shows that women remain social victims when the world is cold towards these

movements. Though we know very little about the actual social context being depicted in the story, it is for sure that the society is either indifferent or incapable to offer any help in ending the sufferings faced by women. As mentioned by the narrator, the family members of the little woman are “worried about her” (Kafka 236). However, they are incapable in helping her. They simply “wonder what can have caused her condition, and they have not yet found the answer”. (Kafka 236) They do not know the reason that causes her sufferings and sickness.

The narrator represents people who are aware of the sufferings of women but is unwilling to provide any assistance. The narrator could well observe the crisis faced by the little woman. In saying “why am I tormenting the poor little woman with my incorrigibility”, it is apparent that he shows sympathy towards her. (Kafka 237) He is somehow blaming himself for bringing the unnecessary torments to her. He finally admits his responsibility for causing her sufferings. It is ironic that he sees his reluctance in being open to correction as the source of the troubles. This demonstrates that he is not only aware of her crisis. He realizes that his incorrigibility is precisely the source of her torture. However, he is unwilling to offer help through changing his attitude. In this sense, he is indifferent to her torments. It is a dilemma that he is both indifferent and sympathetic towards the little woman. This paradoxical attitude turns the little woman into a victim.

In the story, the public represents the passive observants of various feminist movements. Despite of knowing the need to liberate women, they fail to alter their mindsets and eventually more women fall into the category of victims:

[W]omen faint easily, the world has no time to notice all their doings. And what has really happened in all these years? Nothing except that such occasions have repeated themselves, sometimes more and sometimes less violently, and that their sum total has increased accordingly. (Kafka 241)

Here “the world” is apparently a world that cannot accommodate women’s opinion. This world is too busy in paying attention to some other more important things but not trivial women. There are two possible meanings for “such occasions”. The first one is the tragedy of the little woman. Similar cases take place repeatedly, as the case of the little woman is not a single case. The little woman is only one of the many women who suffer in this world. This is because nobody takes the initiative to stop it from happening again. The second meaning of “such occasions” could be used to refer to feminist movements. As the world remains cold to the liberation of women, movements that fight for women’s rights will continue. These movements can be in the form of the battle between the two sexes, just like the one being depicted in the story between the narrator and the little woman. This can also be

confirmed by how the narrator sees the little woman as a natural fighter. (Kafka 239) This image resembles with the insurgent type of women who strike for independence and liberation. They will go on for their battle in achieving equality between the two sexes until they succeed.

IV. Women in Society

Kafka was a modernist writer who excelled in employing the technique of alienation and surrealism. In his works, the existence of uncanniness and unreal elements could often be reflections of social problems. Critics such as Maggie O'Neill suggested that "truths regarding reality can be found in the gaps and contradictions in the text". (O'Neill 25) *A Little Woman* is a story that illustrates this point of view. The story itself is full of gaps for readers to fill in. It can be interpreted as an allegorical work that portrays the difficulties of women in the society.

Women are considered as subordinates under patriarchy. Their insignificance can be shown by the fact that the little woman has no name. She is merely known as "she" or "a little woman". Though it could be argued that not a single character in the story has been given a name, not even the narrator himself. However, the other characters, like the family members of the little woman or the close friend of the narrator, play minor roles in the story. No matter how trivial the little woman is, she plays a major part in the story. It is strange that the narrator does not address the little woman with any proper name. Her name remains a mystery to readers. Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) has made a suggestion in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) that no matter what a woman is called, she remains unimportant:

Here then was I (call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please – it is not a matter of any importance) sitting on the banks of a river a week or two ago in fine October weather, lost in thought. (Woolf 22)

As a result of the subordinate position of women in the society, their names carry no significance. The cultural norm of attaching a woman's name to her husband's is another example to illustrate how women are not treated as independent individuals. Even for the case of remarkable women who advocated feminist movements, such as Virginia Woolf and Doris Lessing (1919-2013), their names are attached to their husbands'. Consequently, their maiden names, Virginia Stephen Doris May Tayler, remain unknown to many people who have read their works.

In Kafka's story, although the little woman is the focaliser, her voice has never been heard. All the depictions and opinions about her are presented from the perspective of the male narrator. From his perspective, readers have a sense that the little woman is the antagonist while the narrator is the protagonist. There is no point in arguing whether the comments made by the narrator are true

or not. But that the little woman is unvoiced reveals the muting of women under patriarchy. There is also a tendency in Kafka's works that not a single female character speaks from their own perspective. (Beck 40) The muted females represent the fact that they are silenced by the society. As gender oppression prevails, women are not allowed to express their own desires. As suggested in *A Room of One's Own*, masculine values determines what is right from wrong:

It is obvious that the values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the other sex; naturally, this is so. Yet it is the masculine values that prevail. (Woolf 75)

When masculine values become the dominant scale of judgment, feminist normality no longer exists. As a result, standards or beliefs about women depend upon patriarchal perceptions. The narrator's comment on the dress code of the little woman is an example that demonstrates this notion. Men hold absolute power in defining women which is in fact a form of gender oppression.

V. Conclusion: Feminist Writing and Feminist Reading

The expansion of feminism from a mere political approach to a literary and academic discipline is an important step in the liberation of women. Ray Chow explained the political intention of feminism:

Feminism ... has from the outset defined itself by an explicit political project, one in which the causes of women's social oppression and subordination can be carefully probed and hence, ideally, eradicated. (Chow 97)

Feminism aims to arouse attention on the unfair treatment to women and finally to eliminate the treatment itself. Literature can be powerful in helping to achieve the goal. For instance, the real condition that women face can be reflected in literature. It is through this reflection that readers can be alert of the problem. It is possible to associate "A Little Woman" with the society that Kafka lived in, which is the Jewish society in Prague. Traditional Jewish society is characterized by its patriarchal nature in which the status of women is inferior to men. There are also rules and regulations governing the behavior of women. No matter "A Little Woman" is a story that depicts women in the Jewish world or not, it is doubtlessly an allegory that shows the problems faced by women under conventional patriarchy.

Instead of criticizing Kafka for oppressing his female character, he should be praised for his effort in arousing concern towards women's role in the modern world. Kafka's story reflects some progress made in feminist movements. Though the exact identity of the little woman is unknown, it is certain that she is a member of the working force. This evidence can be seen from the depiction

that the vexation makes her almost “unable to work”. (Kafka 236) Her status as a working woman demonstrates that she has the potential to be economically independent from men. This is an important step towards the achievement of the liberty of women. She does not need to rely on marriage to secure her in the economic sense. Besides, from her rebellious character of arousing public hatred towards the male narrator, it reveals that she is highly aware of the need to fight for women’s rights.

The battle between the two sexes began since the days of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) in the late eighteenth century. It seems that this long battle shows no sign of ending. Women have gained more rights in the contemporary world but the ultimate goal of the feminists, which is to achieve sexual equality, is still far away. Kafka’s story suggests that the radical attitude of the little woman and the male’s intention to avoid the issue make the problem an unsolvable one:

Her objection to me, as I am not aware, is a fundamental one; nothing can remove it, not even the removal of myself. (Kafka 239)

a very good friend of mine ... underestimated it, for he advised me seriously to go away for a short time. (Kafka 240)

The little woman is depicted as having a stubborn and uncompromising character. This radical attitude can be associated with the image of feminists. Meanwhile, the friend of the narrator represents males who prevent themselves from hearing the voice of the females. These would not contribute to the end of the battle. It is believed that both the females and the males should pay efforts in achieving a state of equilibrium.

Bibliography:

Beck, Evelyn Torton. “Gender, Judaism, and Power: A Jewish Feminist Approach to Kafka”. *Approaches to Teaching Kafka’s Short Fiction*. Ed. Richard T. Gray. New York, NY: MLA, 1995. 35-42.

Bressler, Charles E. *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*. New York: Prentice Hall. 142-160.

Chow, Ray. “Sexuality”. *A Concise Companion to Feminist Theory*. Ed. Mary Eagleton. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003. 93-110

De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Trans. H.M. Parshley. Middlesex: Penguin, 1972.

- Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1984.
- Glover, David & Kaplan, Cora. *Genders*. London: Routledge, 2000.
- Kafka, Franz. "A Little Woman". *The metamorphosis, in the penal colony, and other stories*. Trans. Willa & Edwin Muir. New York: Schocken, 1995. 234-243.
- O'Neill, Maggie. "Adorno and Women: Negative Dialects, Kulturkritik and Unintentional Truth". *Adorno, Culture and Feminism*. Ed. Maggie O'Neill. Trowbridge: Cromwell, 1999. 21-40.
- Rubin, Gayle. "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex". *Toward an Anthology of Women*. Ed. Rayna R. Reiter. NY: Monthly Review Press, 1975.
- Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own and Other Essays*. London: Folio Society, 2000.