

Subverting The Patriarch Through Silence: A Feminist Resistance in *Mrs. Noah's Pocket*

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Abstract. In the canon story of Noah, Mrs. Noah, one among the few being saved from the flood, is barely mentioned. She is not even given a name indicating that she is unimportant. The lack of information about her creates a curiosity about this character. A picture book called *Mrs. Noah's Pockets* (2017) is one of the few books for children that addresses this issue. What makes this book stand out is its attempt to shift away from the biblical canon. The initiative to build the ark does not come from God, but from Mr. Noah himself. Again, different from the previous picture books which portrays Mrs. Noah as white, *Mrs. Noah's Pockets* portrays her as a black woman. Another interesting trait is the intense presence of silence as there is no communication nor interaction between Mr. and Mrs. Noah. In tracing research on Noah's story, we found that the research can be classified into three topics: the flood story, sex roles and heteronormativity, and female violence. Our research will contribute in the discussion about how silence subverts the dominant masculinity. We aim to show how silence operates in the text as the feminine strategy to resist the domination. In order to explain about the functions and meanings of silence, we applied Glen's (2002) *Silence: A Rhetorical Art for Resisting Discipline(s)*.^[1] The research found that although silence and silencing are practiced by masculine domination to oppress the feminine, silence is also used by the feminine to subvert masculine domination.

Keywords: *Feminist Resistance, Masculine Domination, Silence, Subversion*

1. Introduction

The story of Noah's rescue mission has always been an interest and a source of inspiration in literature and film. In the history of Western children's literature, Noah's story has been retold and adapted in a variety of writings and perspectives. As an epic, Noah's story leaves gaps of untold mysteries, among other is the mystery of Noah's wife. In the Bible, Noah's wife is barely mentioned although she is Noah's closest companion in facing the wildest tempest ever imagined. In English and American literature, the absence of Noah's wife in the Bible canon story set off a variety of narratives in the attempt of exploring this mysterious character. An English opera by Benjamin Britten, *Noah's Flood (Noye's Fludde)* produced in 1958 and reproduced ever since portrays her as a gossip who refused to enter the ark out of

her strong camaraderie. She has to be taken by force by her son to leave her friends behind. Michèle Robert's *Book of Mrs. Noah* (1988) makes an attempt to reconstruct the flood and the ark from the perspective of a marginalized woman, while the latest novel on Noah's wife (T.K. Thorne, 2009) uses her as the narrator and the protagonist who suffers from Aspergers syndrome, a less severe type of autism.

Similar attempts have been made in children's literature. Stories of Noah's wife have also appeared in picture books. *Noah's Wife* by Figley and Riggio (1978) portrays Noah's wife as a supportive wife who willingly stand for the oddity of her husband. *Mrs. Noah's Patchwork Quilt* (Bolton, 1995) shows her efforts in overcoming boredom of being confined in the ark by sewing a travel journal in the form of a patchwork quilt. Meanwhile, in *Noah's Wife: The Story of Naamah* (Sasso and Anderson, 1996) and *Mrs. Noah's Vegetable Ark* (2010) Mrs. Noah is represented as the guardian of the plants who restores the environment by collecting the seeds. In contrast with *Noah's Wife: The Story of Naamah* in which the initiative to take seeds to the ark comes from God, in *Mrs. Noah's Vegetable Ark* the initiative comes from Mrs. Noah out of her concern of the plants in her garden. Her clever devices manage to save the animals and her family from starvation as her garden becomes the source of food supply during the flood. Similar to the latest picturebook, *Mrs. Noah's Pockets* which is written by Jackie Morris and illustrated by James Mayhew does not comply with the Biblical canon story and its religious values. In this story, God is never mentioned since the initiative to build the ark does not come from Him, but from Mr. Noah himself. He also has designed the rescue of some animals and the demise of creatures he believes to be "troublesome." Another interesting traits of this book is the depiction of Mrs. Noah as a black woman in its visual which makes the conflict even more complex as it implies the issue of double marginality.

In an interview during Edinburgh Bookfest 2018, Morris claimed that the idea of writing *Mrs. Noah's Pocket* was triggered by the performance of the opera *Noah's Flood* in which James Mayhew, the illustrator, was involved in the production. Morris admitted that she was concern by the depiction of Mrs. Noah in the opera and was inspired to write a different story about her. The story is not really meant for children only because it displays adult women experience although it is taking the form of a picture book. Thus, the book becomes one of those that can relate to both children and adult readers.

Research on the retelling of Noah's narratives in children's book are conducted by [2], [3], [4], and [5]. Both [2] and [3] made a survey on a large collection of children's Bible story books. [2] traces the changing ideas of American church about the purpose of religious education of children through the stories of Noah and Jonah. His findings show that the "retellings often change Hebrew Bible stories in ways that rob them of the very features that make them helpful resources for religious education." Similar to [2], [3] investigated the verbal and visual narratives used to retell Noah's story to come to the conclusion that "the canonical text is virtually eliminated, and only appears through the cracks." [4] questions whether the retelling of the flood "need ... to include the destruction and to what extent, what God's role in it is, why humans deserve to be destroyed, and to what degree human (and animal) suffering is presented." Different from the others, [5] examined 47 children's picture books based on biblical story and found the recurring frame used for the story, that is the trope of "two by two." The repeated trope emphasizing on mated pair, a male and a female, both for human and animals, serves to reproduce the two gender categories and heternormativity in the reader's subconsciousness. Research on Mrs. Noah is found in [6] and [7]. [6] addressed violence against Mrs. Noah in Chester Play, the British renowned play, Noah and the Great Flood. In this play, Mrs. Noah was beaten and forced to embark the ark because she refused to leave her friends behind, which in [6]'s view represent "a culture of sexual difference—a

culture in which women's dissenting voices are created in order to be suppressed, and moreover suppressed with physical force." By integrating biblical interpretation and feminist perspective in rereading Noah's Ark narrative, [7] argued that the silences about Mrs. Noah and the other women in the story "speaks of limitation and loss." For her, studying the patriarchal text will help women to re-imagine and reclaim "what has been denied" (the unicorns, griffins, and the weird and wonderful that have been submerged). Related to [7]'s contention, this research examined how the pervasive silence found in *Mrs. Noah's Pockets* is used by the patriarch to dominate and by women to subvert the domination. To discuss the function of silence in the text and how it operates, the research used [1]'s theory of "silence as a rhetorical art for resisting discipline."

2. Research Method

Once we start reading *Mrs. Noah's Pockets*, we will feel the intense presence of silence. From communication study, [8] defines silence as a concept when "something is not communicated from a sender to a receiver." From feminist perspective, silence "can be a specifically feminist rhetorical art, often one of resistance." [1] However, silence in the study of masculinity, is also a strategy "to display and/or create power." [9] Thus, silence, surpassing gender divide, is a powerful means either to dominate or to subvert the domination. By using this theoretical framework, this study explored how *Mrs. Noah's Pockets* makes use of silence to show power contestations between the two characters and how silence is used by the silenced female character to subvert masculine domination.

3. Results And Discussion

3.1 The Dominating Silence of The Patriarch

The silence in *Mrs. Noah's Pockets* is a result of the absence of communication between the husband and the wife. Even further, the silence connotes clandestine schemes. From the very beginning, Mr. Noah does not intend to involve his wife in his decision to build an ark and "to tidy up the world" by saving animals that he thinks worth saving and leaving behind troublesome creatures to be drowned in the flood. In the verbal narrative, he keeps his project to himself, although in the visual, he is shown to build the ark with his three sons. The marginalization of Mrs. Noah from the rescue mission is increasingly clear when Mr. Noah claims the ark as his ("How lovely," thought Mr. Noah. "Mrs. Noah is making curtains for the windows of *my ark*") Not only that he makes a claim of his ownership over the ark, he also has an ignorant assumption that his wife would willingly support his project despite her being left out in the dark.

Apparently, Mr. Noah conceals his ark project and his plan to eliminate the troublesome creatures from his wife because he knows that Mrs. Noah cares for them. This information is implicitly revealed in the verbal narrative in the middle of the story, although the illustration has already given the clue to the readers early on that what Mr. Noah meant as troublesome creatures are actually mythical beings, such as unicorns, griffins, centaurs, dragons, mermaids, phoenix, and other fantastic, wondrous creatures which are most likely to be believed as part of the imaginary/irrational world. Therefore, Mr. Noah's preference to fill the world with

“real” , “proper” animals and his desire to clean the new world from the fantastic, “fictional” beings carries with it an implication that his hidden agenda is reforming his wife from believing in myth and its irrationality. By taking this decision, Noah does not only play god by judging his wife’s belief, but also represses his wife’s freedom from choosing what to believe in and deprives her from the rights to express herself. Mr. Noah’s insistence to remain silent to his wife signifies that in his view, his wife’s opinion deems to be unimportant.

Mr. Noah’s condescending view is reflected by his curt remarks when Mrs. Noah is telling stories about mythical beings to the children (probably their grandchildren). This scene is portrayed on a double spread page on which Mr. Noah is placed on the far left side of the page quite the opposite of Mrs. Noah who is on the far right side of the page. In between are the six children with two different skin colors. Mr. Noah is sleeping while Mrs. Noah, who is slightly higher in position, is interacting with the children. The verbal narrative tells us that in the middle of the story, Mr. Noah, would wake and interrupt occasionally, saying, “Bah, unicorns, troublesome creatures!” This is the first time the verbal narrative reveals what creatures are troublesome in Mr. Noah’s point of view. This is also the first time Mr. Noah openly expresses his feeling and opinion to his wife, even if he does that indirectly. Although the comment does not stop Mrs. Noah from telling the fantastic story to the children, his interruptions is his way to claim dominance since interruption can be a strategy for “claiming dominance (as one is preventing another party from speaking when they want to)” [9] What’s more, the remark shows how Mr. Noah’s defines her. From the visual narrative, we are given the clue that Mr. Noah is a man of reason as shown in his well thought out blue print of the ark and list of animals to save and to leave behind. This is in contrast with Mrs. Noah who believes in myth and talks to the unicorns and other creatures. By defining the creatures dear to his wife as troublesome, Mr. Noah indirectly also defines her believe in them as troublesome, and therefore needs to be stopped by eliminating the embodiment of the myth.

Despite the fact that he does not include his wife in his project, Mr. Noah as mentioned before makes an assumption that his wife will obligingly support him and his project, so that when he sees his wife sewing a very long fabric, he thought to himself that his wife is sewing curtains for his ark. His confidence that his wife submits to him and serves his needs without being asked or talked to implicates the normalization of silence and domination. In his view, it is normal for his wife to be submissive and obliging as it is normal for him to make all the important decision by himself for he has superior knowledge which entails the authority to make judgment. Mr. Noah’s secretive plan to rearrange the world is a strategy not only to cover up his “vicious” plan to eliminate his wife’s beloved creatures, but also to maintain his domination as the patriarch in the family. By depriving Mrs. Noah room for questioning and opposing his decision, he wants to assert that his decision is final and could not be contested.

Visually, Mr. and Mrs. Noah are more often portrayed on two separate pages and when they are placed on one double-spread page, both are facing the opposite directions or are on opposite poles.

This positioning displays their having different ideas, beliefs, and perspectives. This is even enhanced by the presence of intense silence emanating from the lack of interaction and communication. When the verbal tells about the indirect interaction, the visual shows Mr. Noah’s closed eyes (as he is sleeping) while Mrs. Noah’s eyes are on the children. So, even though they are placed on the same page, they are deliberately shown having no eye contact.

By choosing Mrs. Noah as a black woman, Mayhew emphasizes the powerful domination experienced by Mrs. Noah. Thus, visually she is not only oppressed in terms of her gender, but also of her race, though it is not expressed in the verbal narrative. Stereotypically, blacks are often associated with irrationality and with magical beliefs. Stereotypically, black women are

most often stereotyped as the irrational beings, usually in the image of “the Conjure woman...a witch doctor with traditional knowledge of ...black magic and supernatural powers...” [10] Thus, by portraying Mrs. Noah as a black woman, Mayhew wants to emphasize the double marginality she has to endure, as a woman and a black character.

3.2 Subverting the Patriarch through Silence

Silence in *Mrs. Noah's Pockets* is also implemented by Mrs. Noah. However, the silence of Mrs. Noah is different from the dominating silence of her husband. She is the one being silenced by Mr. Noah as she is not given the chance to voice her opinion. Although being suppressed by her husband, Mrs. Noah's silence is not the silence of the subservient and powerless wife. There is an indication of tactical and calculated resistance toward the domination of the patriarch. By referring to Glenn, “silences need not be read as simple passivity. They take many forms and serve many functions...”, “silence can be a plan / rigorously executed. ... Do not confuse it /with any kind of absence,” [1] this section will examine how Mrs. Noah uses silence to resist her husband's domination.

Visually, Mrs. Noah is depicted to be more subversive in comparison with the verbal narrative. Verbally, the story opens with a statement that “it rained” followed with the description of the unusual torrent and Mr. Noah's initiative to rearrange the new world by eliminating the troublesome creatures. In the visual, the first character to appear on the page is Mrs. Noah. Represented as a dark skin woman wearing a scarlet long dress, Mrs. Noah is standing on a hill holding an umbrella observing the rising water under the lashing rain with her house standing on a different hill at the background. Thus, the first time we are introduced to her, she is presented not as a timid, nor a weak woman because she has the courage to venture alone in the cold wet weather when she could have stayed inside her warm dry house (as indicated by the smoke coming out of the chimney)

Another visual shows Mrs. Noah's resistance that does not appear on the verbal narrative, that is when she finds out about her husband's plan to build an ark and to eliminate the troublesome creatures. The verbal narrative states that “All the time Mrs. Noah watched Mr. Noah. She saw the plans. She watched as he worked. She saw the lists. She smiled.” The verbal narrative portrays her as passive and submissive with the use of the verbs “watched” and “saw” that are related to an act of observation. Yet, when she has seen all she needs to see, she just smiled. Smiling in this context is an ambiguous act as it seems to be submissive. In contrast with the verbal narrative, the picture shows her resistance because she is not depicted smiling, but stealthily sneaking out to meet the unicorn that is waiting outside her house, while Mr. Noah is inside studying the blue prints of his ark. Thus, although the visual complements the verbal narrative [11], the smile as indicated in the verbal narrative is given a stronger interpretation by the visual as it entails covert resistance [13].

The way the visual is emphasizing Mrs. Noah's subversion of the patriarch is indicated with the changing position of the characters. At the beginning when Mr. Noah dominates the story with his plan and what he does, the visual applies an over the shoulder shot in which Mr. Noah's head is used to frame the image shown in the background. By using this typical shot, the readers are placed behind the character and see things from his perspective. To emphasize his domination over the story, the visual uses this kind of framing on two scenes. One is when the readers are shown the blue print of the ark, and when Mr. Noah wants to check whether the flood has subsided. The visuals show that Mr. Noah is the one having the knowledge to handle the situation. He is the head of the family and the one that makes all important decisions. At the end of the story, though, the visual uses the same type of shot but replaces the patriarch with Mrs. Noah when she is setting the troublesome creatures free in the wood

unknown to Mr. Noah. She is portrayed differently from her previous depiction. This is the first time in the visual narrative that she is portrayed having her hair loose and smiling happily. The fact that she has been carrying her dear friends, the troublesome creatures, in the pockets of her long trailing coat also suggests another way of subversion that is by turning her body into an ark.

4. Conclusion

As opposed to voice that is often thought of as the equation of agency, silence is often misunderstood as limitation and loss, passivity and subordination; however, contemporary feminist and gender theories challenged the binary paradigm by problematizing the ambiguity of both voice and silence.[1], [12]. Despite the fact that *Mrs. Noah's Pockets* seems to emphasize the power of patriarchy, the book offers a different turn from the canon by revealing the "real" story behind the silent and seemingly unimportant figure of Mrs. Noah. Silence in this book does not mean limitation and loss nor passivity and subservience because it can be operated as a strategy to dominate and silence the other. On the other hand, intentional silence is likewise a powerful means of resistance and contestation over the imposed silence. It can be used strategically to reverse the condition and to "reclaim what has been denied" and subvert the domination of the patriarch.

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