

FEMININITY AND SACRIFICING MOTHERHOOD IN THE OLGA MASTERS' SHORT STORIES: "THE SNAKE AND BAD TOM" AND "A SOFT AND SIMPLE WOMAN"

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the femininity through the images of good mother. The female protagonist of two stories: "The Snake And Bad Tom" and "A Soft And Simple Woman" is taken for the study. The first section of the study will demonstrate the femininity through the silence of a sacrificing mother. The second section will explore the rebellious action as a devoted mother for her children's sake. The final section of the study will review the main points drawn from the analysis of how Masters' depicts her female characters femininity through their motherhood.

This paper also considers Masters' attitude towards domestic violence and the roles of the mother as peacekeepers in family conflicts. Throughout both stories, Masters' attempts to comfort the children by providing them food while the mother sacrificing their own happiness or hiding their silent suffering for the sake of family harmony. The chosen methodology has been a close textual analysis of Olga Masters' representation of 1930s Australian femininity from select pieces of her writing, exploring femininity and sacrifice of motherhood.

Key words: Femininity, Motherhood, Sacrifice, The snake and bad tom, A soft and simple woman

Introduction

This paper investigates the femininity through the images of good mother. The female protagonist of two stories: "The Snake and Bad Tom" and "A Soft and Simple Woman" is taken for the study. It explores Master's attitudes towards the relationship between femininity and the devotion or sacrifices of mothers. The first section of the study will demonstrate the femininity through the silence of a sacrificing mother. The

second section will explore the rebellious action as a devoted mother for her children's sake. The final section of the study will review the main points drawn from the analysis of how Masters' depicts her female characters femininity through their motherhood.

The silent mother in “The Snake and Bad Tom”

According to Sharon Hays, the essential tenet to which must adhere if she is to be as a ‘good’ mother is childcare (54). She must be self-sacrificing, nurturing, selfless, emotional, compassionate, as well as giving efficient attention to everyday tasks. One of the mother who bears the above mothering attributes is the mother in “The Snake and Bad Tom”, in the face of her husband's rages, she silently endures suffering for the sake of her children. She becomes a mediator in the family conflicts and a protector of her children's welfare. All these are fully demonstrated in the first section.

“The Snake and Bad Tom” opens with the picture of a mother and five children sitting at the dining table and waiting anxiously for their father to come home from work “*one spring Saturday of 1930*”. Right from the beginning of the story, family tensions can be felt. Instead of commenting on the food or wishing her children a good appetite, the mother warns them of their behaviour which may arouse their father's irritation: “*Now everyone behave when Father comes,*” *Mother said*'.

This family is not prosperous: they are just above the level of poverty. The father has to work hard on other family's farms, work that does not bring in much money to support his big family. He is presented as a brutal domestic tyrant, though there is also some sympathy in Masters' account of the difficulties he faces. The whole family, particularly the children, become “totally dependent on the state of their father's temper to determine whether they will eat, talk, relax, or be beaten” as Pam Gilbert has commented on the story (172). The mother is deeply conscious of her children's suffering. During dinner, she tries to draw discussion towards the food and urges them to finish their meals so that there may be no outbursts of rage from their father. It is the mother who ensures that Tom - a slow and ‘different’ boy – does not get a beating from his father. She keeps asking people to eat up and hopes “*to pull Father's eyes away from Tom*”.

The great proportion of the story centers on depicting Tom's reluctant and protesting behavior and his father's anger towards him. Tom is a thorn in his father's side and any of his movements can awaken the father's temper. The story reaches its climax when the father "*seized Tom by his old cambric shirt*" and then "*swung the strap around the table*", hitting Tom with a stinging force. In this horrible situation the mother tries to calm down the father, while from the bottom of her heart she wishes Tom would away run as fast as he can. She tries to intimate this to Tom, without saying so out loud, which would confound the purpose of soothing the father.

"The Snake and Bad Tom" is a sad story about the cruelties perpetrated within a rural family life where the children suffer a lot and the mother seems to bear all the stress of such a life for her children's sake so that they are not cruelly treated or beaten by their father. The story ends with the image of Tom flying through the green corn paddock and a shining happiness in his mother's eyes, which may indicate some positive changes for the family in the future. Escape is identified as a kind of rebellion when Tom runs out the door, free from his father's whip, and the mother's protest can be seen through the twitching of her mouth and a new light in her usually dull eyes.

Though the mother is not the focus of the story, she is visible, important and totally on the side of her children. Like many of Masters' female characters, the mother in "The Snake and Bad Tom" is trapped in her marriage, her poverty and insecurity, and her husband's rages. Masters suggests the mother's femininity through her silent suffering and sacrifice.

The next section investigates what is going on in this family through extracts taken from the story "The Snake and Bad Tom". It shows how the mother is represented in transitivity roles as a silent, submissive but caring and sacrificing mother. The mother's effort to maintain family harmony can also be seen when she says "*Now everyone behave when Father comes*". Behaving in ways that she thinks will not upset their father could also include asking the children to be quiet and not to disturb their father. This example demonstrates that the mother does not dare to openly show her protest against the father's rages, or provide any instant protection for her children; rather she focuses on trying to get the children to be good so that the abuse does not happen so often. This shows her responsibility to shield her children from daily confrontations with her husband, their father.

It is the common idea that a 'good' mother always puts her children first, regardless of the circumstances. This implies that women ought to prioritise their children's needs over their own needs: a good mother does not care about herself, her thoughts are for her children. The reflection of this idea is visible in the detail of "*Mother's plate with so little of her food eaten*". In such circumstances, the mother is often depicted by Masters to as juggling her children's needs and behaviors with her husband's demands. She feels so stressed and concerned with calming the family tension; either by pleasing the father or keeping the children under control that the mother has no time to eat.

Masters' description of the father's situation below shows that the father is cruel partly because he is unable to cope anymore with the pressures of poverty and a heavy load of farm work. He is presented as a horrible bully, but Masters provides us with some explanations for his violence: *The young whelp! The dingo! Neglecting food slaved for under the shot gun and orders barked out by old Jack Reilly on whose farm Father did labouring work because.....(13)*

The father dreams of a better life that he believes he deserves: he should be able to go to the races with money in his pocket. He is soon brought back to the miserable reality of his life: the burdens of five children and farm labor have turned him into a bad-tempered man. The example above shows that father feels miserable that he no longer has the freedom to follow his hobbies, like going to the races. His anger at the children is probably rooted in the hardships of his life. While creating a scenario that problematizes the controlling and silencing presence of the male figure, Masters simultaneously draws readers' attention to the way poverty puts pressure on people and controls them. The father has become the victim of these pressures of life squeezes.

In my opinion, Masters may be suggesting that the mother's silent suffering contains the acceptance of a patriarchal rule, reflected in the fear of the mother herself and children. The acceptance contains the unspeakable messages that she may think it is safer not to reveal her feelings and opinions through words. Also as a mother of a big family and someone who lived through the Depression, Masters would not criticize but sympathize with the mother for her negative submission and passive protection of her children – the mother is a victim of poverty, a patriarchal society, and the harshness of Australian rural life. The story is really a chilling tale of the abuse of a child by an ugly-tempered father while the rest of the family, terrified

into complicity, are as much his victims as poor Tom.

Throughout the story, though Masters does not spend much time writing about the mother or depicting her protests against the father, one can still feel her sympathy for the mother through the language she uses: the mother is restricted to all the feminine roles. Although she is domesticated, she is still unappreciated and bullied by her husband. She faces a dilemma. As a mother, she really wants to protect her children and provide them with a pleasant family life. As a wife, she does not want to confront her husband. However, we have reason to expect some changes in her reaction towards the father's rages: the twitching of her mouth and a new light in her usually dull eyes bring hope of a better life for the children as indicated in "*Mother had a vision of Tom flying through the green corn. She blinked the dullness from her eyes. One corner of her mouth twitched*". Masters' description of the mother twitching her mouth and Tom running away from the father's whip is seen as a kind of self-protection and rebellion against domestic abuse.

A courageous mother in "A Soft and Simple Woman":

As mentioned before, images of caring mothers are very common in Masters' writing. They are depicted as being available to give children care, consideration and protection. In the previous section, we saw "The Snake and Bad Tom" as the story of a mother's sacrifice and endurance for the sake of her children. In the following sections, we find another example of a mother as a dedicated care-taker. Similar to the mother in "The Snake and Bad Tom", Mrs Laycock in Masters' "A Soft and Simple Woman", first of all sets a good example of a child-focused mother; she is there to put her children to bed and to comfort them, to protect them from their father's rages, and even to fulfil their dreams. The question is whether she, like the mother in "The Snake and Bad Tom", accepts the father's rages and suffers silently or whether she will fight to claim a better life for herself and her children.

As a man, he is supposed to work hard outside in the fields, attending to cattle and harvesting crops. His mother, Mrs Laycock, loves him and the other children very much: she cares for them and she comforts them every night, but she is depicted as "*too soft and simple to stand up to [her husband]*". In contrast to his wife, Mr Laycock (Albie) appears as a rude and cruel man who "*hardly ever spoke civilly*". His behaviour to his family is very violent. He treats his children as animals and the house shudders with his moods and tempers (Gilbert 181).

But as a popular saying has it, ‘even a worm will turn’; one day Mrs Laycock dramatically changes herself and does what she can to protect her children against the father with the hope of bringing them a better future. The incident comes about when Albie whips his eldest son and refuses to pay for his studies, and his wife, despite her reputation as “a soft and simple woman”, takes down the shotgun and confronts him with an uncompromising demand: money for his son’s studies or a shot through his head. The responsibility of caring for her family helps the mother remain strong and determined not to be defeated during these difficult times. She proves to be a caring and responsible mother.

In an article in the *Canberra Times*, Marian Eldridge concludes that “A Soft and Simple Woman” is a tense, dramatic story in which a gentle woman finally brings herself to stand up to a sadist.

The next sections will provide evidence for an interpretation of Mrs Laycock as a caring mother and in the end a woman of action who fights against her husband’s abuses. The analysis concentrates on three extracts from the story “A Soft and Simple Woman”, focusing on the main character Mrs Laycock. It will demonstrate Masters’ employment of the mental and relational processes “*know*” and “*be around*” respectively show Mrs Laycock asserting her confidence and control over guns and horses which are often associated with the male sphere. She also accuses Albie of whipping Dick and describes his brutality as similar to the behaviour of an “*animal*”.

Through these examples, Masters suggest the inner realities that influence how women in general and Mrs Laycock in particular cope with the domestic violence they experience. On one hand, Mrs Laycock’s internal resources reflect a powerful self that is capable of fighting and rescuing herself and her children. On the other hand, her inner resources also denote a powerless self, influenced by internalized social norms that require her to be a good wife and mother by maintaining the family harmony. However, we can see Masters’ positive view in the internal versus external battle of Mrs Laycock when the powerful self and mother inside Mrs Laycock jointly lead her to carry out the actions which demonstrate her assertiveness over her daily life. This shows sympathy and support from Masters towards her female protagonists who are experiencing family violence, gender discrimination, and patriarchal oppression.

Conclusion

From Masters in “The Snake and Bad Tom” and “A Simple and Soft Woman”, we can see the qualities of femininity represented by Masters through her two fictional mothers: a silent mother and a rebellious one respectively. The similarity between these two mothers is that both of them are linguistically depicted as caring and sacrificing mothers. They are shown to be the habitually submissive party to their male counterparts. The women in both stories come from country towns where poverty puts many pressures on people’s life. Their primary responsibility lies with the care and nurturing of a big family of up to five children. In contrast to these considerate mothers, the fathers in these stories are characterized by Masters as very abusive. They abuse the children physically and emotionally. It is the mothers who calm them down and keep the children away from their rages. They give their children a lot of love and always attempt to create a comfortable family atmosphere.

The mothers prove to be their children’s protectors from the fathers who are the perpetrators of violence. However the ways they protect their children from a father’s aggression vary. The mother in “The Snake and Bad Tom” resorts to long-standing endurance and suffering for the comfort of the children, while the mother in “A Soft and Simple Woman” takes a more proactive step to gain the upper hand over the father and better the treatment of her children.

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