



Uluslararası Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi

The Journal of International Social Research

Cilt: 9 Sayı: 44 Volume: 9 Issue: 44

Haziran 2016 June 2016

www.sosyalarastirmalar.com Issn: 1307-9581

**WOMAN AS A SUBJECT AND/OR AN OBJECT IN *THE GRACE OF MARY TRAVERSE*
BY TIMBERLAKE WERTENBAKER**

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Abstract

The Grace of Mary Traverse, a play written by Timberlake Wertenbaker, presents a multi-dimensional portrayal of the role of women by focusing on social, political, psychological, and also physical aspects. The imposed inferiority upon women compared to the supposed superiority of men in a patriarchal society is challenged by the female characters in the play. However, the main character, Mary is taken in her own quest. While trying to break her chains and learn the life and search for knowledge, she has fallen to the trap of mimicking the patriarchal attitude rather than subverting them and creating her own way. Thus, this article will analyse to what extent the main character of the play succeeded in the discovery of the world, knowledge, her identity, and herself while struggling to see beyond the glass only through which she was allowed to see the world for years. Moreover, the pursuit of finding her identity as a subject will be questioned as an act of turning the other people into objects.

Keywords: Timberlake Wertenbaker, Gender Roles, Role of Woman, Identity, Submission, Subversion.

1. Introduction

The Grace of Mary Traverse written by Timberlake Wertenbaker premiered at the Royal Court Theatre in London in 1985, and this play "traces one young woman's attempt to perfect, then escape and replace, the particular kind of subjectivity society prescribes for her" (Dahl, 2010: 150). The struggle of the woman while passing through all these steps is a kind of both submission to and subversion of the roles allocated to the women in society. The play takes place in eighteenth century England; however, the point to be emphasised is that the historical period is not used as the actual setting but it is used for metaphorical purposes as stated as "a valid metaphor" by the author herself in the "Author's Note" (1996: 66). However, this metaphorical usage of the time as two hundred years backwards covers both fictive and real aspects since it is a representative of the eighteenth century values and the events. As Wertenbaker herself stated "plays should be accurate, whatever their subject. Then the imagination can be let free, but only after a solid knowledge of the world, the people, the age, whatever is the world of the play" (qtd. in Kirkpatrick, 1998: 554). As the historical perspective is not the issue to be dealt with in this paper, another important one which is the gender issue will be analysed and emphasised in order to reveal the stand of Timberlake Wertenbaker and to recognise the parallelism between the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries in one of which the play sets and in the other the writer lives.

Although the play is not "a historical play" as Wertenbaker states (1996: 66), it does not totally isolate itself from the eighteenth century concepts like the place of woman who is responsible for the family, husband, and children at home. Schnorrenberg explains the state of women in the eighteenth century, as follows:

The view of the holders of power was that woman's only proper role was that of dutiful adjunct to man, whether daughter, wife, mother or sister. She had no place outside the family and its home. [...] It was the female's duty to provide safe haven in which children could be nurtured in innocence and morality and where husbands would find refuge from the masculine wars of business, politics, philosophy and theology. (qtd. in Philpott, 1992: 48)

However, these duties and feminine roles attributed to the eighteenth century woman are challenged and subverted by Mary Traverse who attempts to change the prescribed role or subjectivity for her in the play, at least tried to challenge. Dahl defines this process of Mary as an attempt "to break the mirror that has defined her identity and come to know herself and the forces that operate on her" (1993: 151). This metaphorical mirror that reflects the attributed roles is the barrier that Mary should overcome and go through.

2. The Role of Woman in Domestic Field

Mary Traverse is the daughter of an eighteenth century upper-class merchant Giles Traverse and she has a life 'appropriate' for the girls as stated above. The turning point of the life of Mary starts with her action or reaction by leaving her home, in other words, leaving the domestic arena of the women and entering the social - political - and masculine outside world. The condition of woman from the aspect of her

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role in domestic and social spheres is the major concern of the play. The depiction of the stage in the opening scene of the play both summarises and also clearly demonstrates the allocated gender roles in this upper-class family, as follows: "Mary Traverse sits elegantly, facing an empty chair" with the companionship of her father "behind and away from her" (1996: 67). This scene can be considered as the portrayal of the atmosphere in the house and the father-daughter relationship which reveals the private education of the girl at home instead of a social education.

Mary's father is a kind of representative figure of the general manner of men to women in the eighteenth century because the most significant beauty of a woman is "the retiring delicacy, which avoids the public eye" (Hill, 1987: 19), and the women are like decorative figures to be proud of when they are presented to the 'public eye' as Giles states: "You are my brightest adornment, my dear. I want to be proud of my daughter" (I, I, 70). Moreover, the dialogue between Giles and Mary presents the expectations of the father and also his dominant influence on the daughter. It is apparently stated that a woman should be equipped by the features of being passive ("There is no need to see a play to talk about it. I'll bring you the playbill" by Giles to Mary I, I, 70), modest ("A compliment must be received in silence" by Giles to Mary I, I, 70), negligent to any serious subject like politics ("[...] a woman talking about reason is like a merchant talking about the nobility" by Giles to Mary I, I, 69), weak ("It shakes your frame with terror and you begin to faint" by Giles to Mary I, I, 68), and also encouraging of the power of male ("To be agreeable, a young woman must make the other person say interesting things" by Giles to Mary I, I, 68). Beside all these, another appealing statement by the oppressive father to the daughter is to become submissive, but subversive daughter is represented when Mary looks out of the window pane which is like a barrier between her and the real world, and Giles criticises her "Why gape out of the window when I've given you so much to see?" (I, I, 69). This one scene dialogue between Mary and Giles is a plain and simple but effective representation of the eighteenth century woman-man roles.

To clarify the point, the world shown by men, the things taught by men, and the ideas imposed by men upon women should be sufficient and satisfactory for women. The women should not have any opportunity to gain their own perspectives through their own experience since the primary and also the sole source of knowledge should be that of the men. Kate Millett, the feminist critic, argues that the biological differences between these two sexes are not the basis of gender difference, but rather the cultural differences which leads to the presupposition of "birthright priority" for the male sex (1970: 33). This allegedly superior position of men brings the main problem of "interior colonization" of women, which shapes the roles of both sexes in the society (Millett, 1970: 33). More significantly, the imposition of these roles originates in childhood and family, and following this, they are strengthened by "education, literature and religion" which generate "self-hatred, self rejection, and an acceptance of inferiority" by some women (Bryson, 1992: 185). In this play, Wertebaker both illustrates this internalization and also the challenging attitude of the main character against this. The so-called ideal woman (perfect, passive, silent, submissive, feminine beauty) is replaced by an exaggerated imitation of men (gambler, seducer, macho, and interested in politics). Bommer explains this transformation of Mary as she "is mercilessly jerked from a cloistered girlhood - where she is taught only to please - and thrown into careers as a gamester, whore, and political firebrand" (1991).

3. 'Interpellation' Process

Moreover, the social, familial, and political attributions on woman in this play can also be analysed from the aspect of Althusser's ideas on the "ideological state apparatuses" because all these impositions of the proper roles for the individuals can be regarded as the methods applied by the society, the family, or the ideologies behind the social system (as also Dahl studies on this issue in her article "Constructing the Subject: Timberlake Wertebaker's *The Grace of Mary Traverse*"). The ISAs (ideological state apparatuses) are different from the Repressive State Apparatuses (i.e. the institutions of government, police, army, courts, prisons; shortly the superior power of the state) since some of these can be counted as the churches, schools, cultural works (novels, sports, etc), media, and some others (Althusser, 2006: 90-2). In *The Grace of Mary Traverse*, family is one of the most prominent apparatus that can be used as a way for role attributions and also for internalising the proper roles determined by others. To illustrate, right in the beginning of the play, while Mary is rehearsing her speech, self-censorship or self-restrictive attitude is reflected through her questioning the speech as she says "No, that's a direct question" or "No, that's too enthusiastic" (I, I, 67). Even the self cannot have the freedom to form her ideas regardless of social concerns. Following the self-control of Mary and her being formed by Giles, her father's statements, another remarkable point emerges in the dialogue between two women, Mrs Temptwell and Mary in the second scene of Act 1. In this example, the governess figure is used as a factor to impose the pre-formed appropriate behaviour for woman. The walking rehearsals of Mary are criticised by both of these women as a woman should be "like air. Weightless. Still. Invisible" (I, II, 71). Her struggle to walk accurately is because of her struggle to gain

“grace: the elegant, decorous nullity of an ‘agreeable’ woman” (Cousin, 1996: 160). Moreover, the explanation how she has learnt to behave and walk since the early ages of her childhood is appealing since the process includes different stages, such as “the dolls who gave [her the] first lesson” because “No well-made doll, silk-limbed, satin-clothed, leaves an imprint” or the teachers who taught her to “become like air” and to “drop a fan and wait” (I, II, 71). Following the dolls and the teachers comes her governess who gives Mary’s mother as an ideal example for an ideal woman because she can “[go] in and out of rooms with no one knowing she’d been there. She was so quiet, your mother, it took the master a week to notice she was dead” (I, II, 73). The influence of the dolls on a child, that of the teachers on a growing teenager, that of the governess on a young lady, and also that of the mother as a role model, and of the father as a role imposer are the shaping forces of the society which are emphasised in this play. These shaping forces can be called the ISAs as emphasised above since they bring the “interpellation” process of the concepts and also the roles in Althusserian terms (2006: 108).

Actually, there are also some other forces, which can be regarded as another ISA, and these are the conduct books which were popular until the end of the eighteenth century. In one of these, *The Character and Conduct of the Female Sex and the Advantages to be Derived by Young Men from the Society of Virtuous Women* published in 1776, Fordyce explains the features of an ideal lady:

Ah, my female friends, did you in particular, did you but know, how deeply the male heart is enchanted with those women, whose conversation presents the picture of simplicity and grace, of ease and politeness, in a group, the spirit of whose conversation is a compound of sprightliness, sense and modesty; who seldom dispute, and never wrangle; who listen with attention to the opinion of others, and deliver their own with diffidence, more desirous of receiving than of giving conviction, more ambitious to please than to conquer! Such, believe me, are sure of conquering in the noblest sense. (qtd. in Byrne, 2004: 23-4)

As seen in the quotation above, the passivity, modesty, dependence, submission, and also devotion and self-denial for the sake of others are the necessary properties of a woman in the eighteenth century. Also, in this play, Sophie is preferable as a submissive female to the rebellious Mary as Giles states “I want a woman, not a personality” (III, I, 115). This preference of Sophie to Mary is also owing to the vulnerability of Sophie because Mary “has excised female vulnerability from her persona” by adopting more masculinised features, and therefore, she “no longer appeals to the more predatory instincts of men” (Wyllie, 2009: 42). The formation of the individual by some external factors, or by the ‘ideological state apparatuses’ in Althusserian terms, results in the “interpellation” of the individual “as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e. in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection” (Althusser, 2006: 108). However, as Dahl points out, Mary changes this “interpellation” process and also her being the “subject” since she resists her subjection and she thinks and refuses to internalise the accepted roles for her (1993: 153-4).

4. Looking through the Cage or Leaving it Behind

Another issue which is crucial for women from the aspect of gender was education because it was a controversial issue and there were opposite ideas on this like the ones who thought that the women who were working cannot be perfect mothers to care their children, or the ones who thought that education would be like a barrier in front of the domestic attributes of women and would turn women into “pedantic learned female monsters” that attract men and distract them from their political concern (Cohen, 1996: 64). For this reason, education was not used as an intellectual or occupational improvement for women but rather for the merits of cooking, sewing, embroidery, dancing, drawing, and singing in parallel to the classes they belong to. Considering this perspective towards education in the eighteenth century, it would be appropriate to exemplify this with Wertebaker’s depiction of Mary as a woman trying to become a lady figure by walking on the carpet without leaving any trace, being educated to become a proper listener for a talking male, and becoming a lady who can drop her fan as it should be. The problematic issue of education for women and also their being educated in and limited only to the private sphere is given, whereas male is in the public sphere like in the coffee house scene where Wertebaker puts the dominant figures of the period all together such as Mr. Fielding, Mr. Goldsmith, Mr. Garrick, Mr. Sheridan, Mr. Hoggarth, Mr. Hume, and Mr. Boswell. Men are the ones who deal with politics, the serious issues related to the society, the ones who have clubs where women are not accepted while women are always at home alone or in company with their governesses.

However, as mentioned above, the turning point or the traverse of Mary comes with her leaving the house as the representative of the feminine and domestic roles and her entrance to the social and political outside world. Through the whole play, Mary traverses from the traditional eighteenth century woman to a man and then again to a traditional woman, from upper class to lower class, and from prosperity to poverty. Tancock states this is a “decision to abandon her bourgeois cage and venture in the world on the other side

of her window pane" (2002: n.p.). This is clarified in a very striking way in a dialogue between Mrs Temptwell and Mary when they are talking about how outside is different from the perceived outside by Mary. Mary tells that she sees "nothing of interest" on the streets when she passes in her carriage, and Mrs Temptwell answers "That's because the streets have to be emptied to make way for your carriage. It's different on foot. Very different" (I, II, 74). Mrs Temptwell's answer demonstrates the social hierarchy both in terms of class and gender by making Mary travel in a carriage as she belongs to an upper class than the ones walking on the street and as she cannot walk or experience the world outside on her own but kept in a carriage, again behind a windowpane. Later, Mary challenges these both as Wertebaker makes her character question with curiosity and her "hunger for knowledge and experience forces her to confront restrictive institutional structures of family, class, and gender" (Carlson, 2000: 142). In her earlier analysis, Carlson explains the quest of Mary as follows: "In *Mary Traverse*, Wertebaker takes the Faustian journey and converts it from an isolating, individual nightmare into a string of bizarre episodes that the main character, Mary, shares with her maid Sophie and her Mephistophelian guide, Mrs Temptwell" (1991: 201). Nonetheless, the heroic attempt of Mary and her Faustian curiosity for knowledge by means of experience is difficult to be articulated as a successful endeavour since she loses her fortune in the card game as she tries to discover the social world of male, and she becomes a prostitute as she wants to discover the sexual world.

In this play, Wertebaker deliberately places a woman in the male dominated environment of the 18th century instead of the 20th century and creates a kind of distancing effect for the audience. This helps her to criticise or talk about the political concerns of the contemporary world by making the audience estranged from their own time but focusing on the similar events. Wertebaker also supports those contemporary linkages by making a parallelism between her main character and the prime minister of the years she wrote the play, Margaret Thatcher. In an interview made with Wertebaker, she explains the situation of the female when they gain power by giving the case of Mary since "she becomes quite a monster. But I don't think we know whether women are basically more peace-loving than men because women have never had the power" (qtd. in Bigrigg, 2004: 158). Moreover, the governor or the authority figure cannot make a difference as long as the governed part or the society is "an essentially male country" (qtd. in Bigrigg, 2004: 158). Neither Mary as a fictional character, nor Margaret Thatcher as a real and influential figure is interested in women's role in the society, or neither of them has tried to enhance the conditions. On the contrary, they just watched women's being humiliated and raped (metaphorically in Thatcher's case). Both acted in a selfish manner since they both are individualistic. While Mary tries to oppose and react against the male suppression on women and the men's objectifying women, she herself becomes the one who objectifies the other women around, especially Sophie. Although Sophie substitutes herself in the rape scene to save Mary, Mary just watches the scene and she says she "couldn't stop looking. It's not like the books" (I, III, 80). She looks at the situation as if she were learning, as if she were observing; however, the scene was full of violence, inhuman behaviour, and also cruelty. Even in the last scene of Act Two, Mary tortures an Old Woman who asks for help and begs for something. Mary tells that she will give "something priceless" which is knowledge and she "takes the whip and beats her" by saying "There is no kindness. The world is a dry place" (II, IV, 110). In a patriarchal society where women are seen inferior and beaten, raped, even not accepted to the coffee houses where politics is discussed, Mary turns to have such a harsh attitude towards women when she experiences knowledge and power. Similarly, Margaret Thatcher was also known for her neglect of woman rights or any kind of enhance in the life conditions or working conditions of women.

The similarity between the two epochs (the 18th and 20th centuries), in other words between Mary and Margaret Thatcher, from the woman aspect and their problems can be emphasised to understand this play clearly. To illustrate, the Church of England, as an institution, did not accept any female priest until the end of 1992, and it "remained a predominantly male institution well into the 1980s" (Bigrigg, 2004: 167). Not only in religious but also in social arena experienced women some trouble in terms of sexuality. Cambridge University has done a research and the results of this research revealed that "one in five of 1500 women interviewed had been victims of rape or attempted rape" and "only one in 50 dared to report it to police" (Bigrigg, 2004: 167). However, the punishment process seems also problematic because only few of these rapists reported to the police have been found guilty, and the penalty given is limited to petty sentences around two years. This concern of rape in the society is also emphasised by Wertebaker in her play through Sophie, and also as Mary and Mrs Temptwell only watches the rape scene without trying to stop it, this ignorant attitude of the society and also the authorities towards crimes and also towards the sexual oppression on women is presented in *The Grace of Mary Traverse*. Beside the religious and sexual oppressions, it can be stated that political suppression still continued in the 1980s since women cannot participate in politics actively although the government party was led by a woman prime minister, and also the number of female members at the parliament was decreasing instead of increasing (Bigrigg, 2004: 167-9).

5. Conclusion

To conclude, although there seems a woman who tries to overcome the obstacles in front of her and to become a part of the social life by sharing it with men, the style of Wertebaker is not a kind of propaganda to impose any idea but it is a kind of encouraging attitude to push the spectator consider the cases on the scene and the cases in the real life. Chaillet expresses how the playwright thinks on theatre as follows;

[theatre] can make people change, just a little, by forcing them to question something, or by intriguing them, or by giving them an image that remains with them. And that little change can lead to bigger ones. (1988: 554)

Moreover, the idea here is not a collective attitude or solidarity among people to achieve a social liberation as seen in the socialist plays in the post-war British tradition, but Wertebaker's interest is "in investigating possible routes through which individual men and women might become agents of social and political action" (Dahl, 1993: 149). Moreover, the final scene of the play is open to discussion because of its being unclear whether Wertebaker supports the feminist approach of the saviour of woman and the rights of woman as a part of the future generation or she still explains the objectified woman by the male world. When Giles calls Mary, the answer she gives is "there she is," and this answer can be interpreted as an approach towards the existence of a woman as an identity because she exists and she has a place there; on the other hand, the choice of the subject as the third person instead of the first person (i.e. "there I am") can be interpreted as the non-existence of a woman identity as a subject in the society. Therefore, it can be problematic to reach a clear-cut result about the aim of Wertebaker. However, still it can be said that the playwright challenges the concepts of feminine and masculine roles in familial, social, and political arenas, and she focuses on the individual achievement or failure, depending on the individual choice.

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