

DISMANTLING SOCIAL NORMS AS PORTRAYED IN JAMES PURDY'S *DON'T CALL ME BY MY RIGHT NAME*

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ABSTRACT

Social norm is created to control society and to make sure thatn it runs well parallel to morality and social system. Thus, the social norms are kept existing because they are considered good and they are, the, are treated as guidances for people's lives.

Anyway, in the process of humans' development, certain social norms may no longer be considered applicable since they do not fit certain people's thought/s. Responding to this situation, people express their unsatisfaction with the existed norm through various media. One of the media is literary work. Related to that, this writing analyzes how a literary work, James Purdy's *Don't Call Me By My Right Name* dismantles social norms in American society.

Keywords: Dismantle, social norms, *Don't Call Me By My Right Name*

INTRODUCTION

Dismantling a stable meaning is common in recent analysis. It is done to question the universal meaning because people think the meaning is no longer appropriate, besides, the universal meaning is not the only meaning someone should signify something.

Dismantling a universal meaning is an interesting and challenging analysis because it does not signify something conventionally instead it signifies from different perspective, so it does not signify with stiff and standardize signification.

One of the ways to dismantle a text is by analyzing it deconstructively. Deconstructive analysis dismantles the standar signification because it doesn't believe in one, single signification. In this case, what to be dismantled is social norms reflected in James Purdy's short story, entitled *Don't Call Me By My Right Name*.

Don't Call Me By My Right Name attacks and satires the American society with its norms which is considered inappropriate any more. Since the society has applied the norms for centuries, so, the norms has rooted in the society's life, thus, it needs serious effort to transform it.

One of the ways to transform a society is by using literary work. A literary work is written to express an artist's feeling and thought and in the same time, it is also used to

change the society's perception. It is not only written for fun and entertainment but also used as medium to make people aware of certain belief and thought in which in some cases, may no longer fit the development and to ask people to renew and transform them.

Parallel to that idea, this writing analyzes the literary text, *Don't Call Me By My Right Name* by focusing its analysis on how the text dismantles the society. Since it dismantles the universal meaning, so, it is done deconstructively.

DECONSTRUCTION

Deconstructive reading assumes that culture is a text. In this case, all cultural products are treated as texts. The texts cover all things and all cultural performances. That's why all things can be read as texts. it is made possible because

Deconstructors assume that culture is a text. The boundaries of literary texts expanded to include all manner of culture and performances and artefacts, from television and film to textbook and science. Cultural deconstruction is possible only if we make the assumption that the diverse cultural products can be "read"....¹

Deconstructive reading focuses its attention on marginal parts (marginalia) which is considered trivial but is able to dismantle and question the whole texts. Besides, deconstructive approach is used to seek *aporia* (inconsistence, incoherence, ambiguity and contradiction) in a text. *Aporia* shows that a text which is considered well-structured and well-built, in fact contains elements which eat away itself.

Deconstructive reading tries to prove that a text which is seen structured and arranged based on coherence and consistence, in fact is built on contradiction, incoherence, and inconsistence. The existence of the followers of this approach highlight problems in a text (doesn't aim to signify or solve the problem) by subversing the stability of a text. Deconstruction doesn't work based on doubtful random but with careful teasing on the process of signification in a text.

Deconstruction emphasizes on the deconstructive reading in a reading method which expresses the failure of a text in presenting the weakness of a text itself as a whole. By so, a text can be teased by the inconsistence, incoherence and contradiction in a text.²

¹ Ben Agger, *Cultural Studies as Critical Theory*, (London: 1992) hal 98

² Madan Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism* (Herfoshier: 1988) hal 37

This reading method tries to uncover the relationship between what is said with what is unsaid/repressed/implicit because what is unsaid/repressed has deeper meaning than what is said.

Deconstructive reading offers 3 processes of deconstruction:

1. Verbal phase : in this phase what is done is *close reading* like what is done in conventional form and in the same time seeking the paradox and contradiction.
2. Textual phase : in this phase it seeks the shifting or breaking in continuity in a text. This shifting shows the instability of a text. The shifting varies such as the shifts in focus, shifts in time, or tone, or point of view or attitude or pace, or vocabulary.”³
3. Linguistic phase : in this phase it questions the ability of language as medium of communication. This phase involves things such as saying something which is not said, then saying it. In other word, languages adds or takes out or presents something inaccurately.

DON'T CALL ME BY MY RIGHT NAME

This text talks about a woman. Lois Klein, who decides that although she likes her husband Frank, to whom she has been married for six months, she does not care for his last name. she hates her husband's name. Her maiden name, Lois McBane, by which she was known both professionally and socially, provided her with a sense of identity that she feels she has lost through her marriage. She can not say what makes her feel exactly unhappy with the name, but clearly it involves the fact that because she is a large, middle-aged woman, the name “Klein,” German for “small,” is inappropriate for her appearance. The discontent has been developing since the day she married her husband. She has to keep her discontent for six months and after six months of the marriage, she comes suddenly to the surface one Halloween while she and her husband are attending “one of those fake long parties where nobody actually knows anybody,” at which all the guests except for Lois are men.

Several men, overhearing Lois's insistence that she cannot go on being Mrs. Klein, laugh at her. Having had too much to drink, she tells them that they would not like being “Mrs. Klein”

³ Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. (Manchester: 1995) hal 75

either, a remark they find even more hilarious. When one man comments that Lois does not look much like Mrs. Klein, an obvious reference to her size, she demands to know why not. He inquires if she has not looked in the mirror. His remark is, to her, like “the last of many possible truths she could hear about herself,” and she grows more dismayed and confused.

As Lois becomes more insistent that Frank allow her to change her name, he grows progressively more annoyed, and once again refuses to change “*ourname*.” When Lois insists that she does not understand what he means by “*ourname*,” he takes the drink from her hand and strikes her twice across the face. It leads to their argument. The couple argues and argues and Frank hits her several times. It makes her bleeding on her mouth. Frank asks her to go home but she refuses unless Frank agrees to change his name. Frank loses his temper and leaves her. She runs after him. Outside of the house they argue again and Frank hits her again. She can not tolerate anymore. she feels very sick on her head, she hits Frank with her purse and rudely asks him to call a cab.

DISCUSSION

1. NAME

For Europeans or American names do make a difference. In their society, when a woman marries to a man, the woman will use the husband’s name. This is the norm in American society and these people apply this concept in their lives. In *Don’t Call Me By My Right Name*, Lois McBane marries to Frank Klein, so she has to use her husband’s name, she is Mrs. Klein. But she refuses to use her husband’s name, she doesn’t want to be recognized as Mrs. Klein, “Lois Klein, she often thought as she lay next to her husband in bed.” (Purdy, : 445).

Lois McBane understands that name is associated with someone’s identity. She doesn’t want to use her husband’s name because she doesn’t want to be identified as Mrs. Klein, she doesn’t want to be associated with someone other than herself. When people like or dislike her, it should be because of what she is not because she is related to someone else. That’s how she signifies her identity. For that reason she refuses to be addressed as Mrs. Klein because she thinks that does not suit her character, “It is not the name of a woman like myself, it does not reflect my character.” (Purdy, : 445).

Feeling uncomfortable with this issue, Lois McBane gets upset with the norm and it leads her to behave strangely by asking her husband to change his name. At the beginning she asks her husband politely, “One evening at a party when there had been more drinking for

her than usual, she said offhand to him in the midst of some revelry: “ I would like you to change your name.”but when she thinks her husband does not show serious response, she asks him more aggressively, “ Frank,” she said, “ You must change your name, do you hear, I can not go on being Mrs. Klein.” (Purdy, : 445). She realizes that this is serious issue because it implicitly attacks the social norm. Thus, she has to face people in her society who have applied this norm for centuries. She has no idea how those people will react towards her idea. That’s why she needs bravery to talk about it and she makes herself half drunk in order to be brave enough to face any possible reaction. She also realizes that what she does is dealing with social transformation, so she has to think about it seriously, that’s why she needs time to think about it and she takes six months to decide what to do, besides, since it deals with identity, she talks about it in a party instead of in the house because she wants people to get her point.

Eventhough she asks her husband to change his name, but basically she doesn’t really mean to change his name. It is proved when one of the guests in the party asks her what name she wants her husband to have she can not answer,

“If he changed his name,” another of the men said, “ what name would you have him change it to?”

Frank put his hand on her glass, as though to tell her that they must go home, but she seized the glass with his hand on it and drank quickly out of it.

“ I hadn’t thought what name I did want,” she said, puzzled. (Purdy, : 445-446).

So, it is not the name that she wants to change but the norm in the society that she wants to transform. For that reason she keeps asking her husband to change his name (refers to changing the norm) eventhough she is laughed at by the guests in the party, “ several people heard what it was she said, and they laughed loudly so that Lois and Frank would hear them appreciating the remark.”(Purdy, : 446).

Dealing with idea which opposes the idea of the mainstream, Lois is not only laughed at but also hit by her husband several times. At first, her husband tries to be patient. Frank Klein thinks his wife talks nonsense like that because she is drunk, so, he persuades her to leave the party. But Lois Mcbane does not want to go home with her husband because Frank Klein changes his name. It makes him impatient and hits her several times. This incident makes them become the center of attention. People in the party look at them and when they find out what has happened, they make fun of them and it makes Frank Klein ashamed and he leaves the party.

When the people make fun of them, Lois tells them that she and her husband are in disagreement because her husband does not understand what she means, “ My husband can’t

see my point of view, ‘ she explained. “ And that is why he can’t understand why his name doesn’t fit me...” (Purdy, : 449). It shows that Frank Klein does not understand that name means a lot for his wife. When Lois McBane realizes that her idea of changing Frank’s name brings hurt to her husband, she suggests they both change their names, “We will both change our names, if you like,” she said. It indicates that Lois McBane insists to have her own identity.

From her action, Lois McBane is dismantling the norm in American society in which a woman who marries a man should use her husband’s name. She is questioning why it is so. Why can’t man and woman use her and her own name? Why should a woman be associated with man? Doesn’t it bother if a woman marries more than once, she has to change her identity for more than once? Or in other case, if a woman is respected or liked, she is respected and liked because she is the wife of someone, not because what she really is. In this case she has no her own self.

2. HUMAN RIGHT

Americans, through various media, promote themselves as people who adore human rights. They show to the whole world that they are the people who respect and appreciate other people. Anyway, in this text, there are some events which show the husband, Frank Klein, hits his wife many times.

Firstly, Frank Klein hits his wife when he tries to take the drink from his wife’s hand, “ He took her drink out of her hand and when she coaxed and whined he struck her not too gently over the mouth.” (Purdy, : 448). When he does this, it leads them to argue and when Lois asks his action he hits her again and it makes her mouth bleeds.

“What was the meaning of that?” She wanted to know.

“ Are you coming home, Mrs. Klein?” he said and he hits her again. Her lip was cut against her teeth so that you could see it beginning to bleed.

“ Frank, you’re abusing me, “ she said, white and wide-eyed now, and as though tasting the blood slightly with the gin and soda mix.

“ Mrs. Klein,” he said idiotically. (Purdy, : 448)

This incident leads them to have more argument and quarrel. In the quarrel, Frank hits her again and again.

“ I’m not going home as Mrs. Klein, “ she said.

He hit her again.

“ Frank, you have no right to hit me just because I hate your name.”

“ If you hate my name what do you feel then for me? Are you going to act like my wife or not?”

“ I don’t want to have babies, Frank, I will not go through that at my age. Categorically not.”

He hit her again so that she fell on the floor, but this did not seem to surprise either of them because they both continued the conversation. (Purdy, : 448)

After hitting her many times, Frank leaves the party and Lois runs after him. And they continue their argument. Suddenly Frank hits her again, and this time, it makes Lois feel sick,

“Will you change your name? She said.

We will live together the way we have been,” he said not looking at her.

“We can’t be married, Frank, with that name between us.” Suddenly he hit her and knocked her down to the pavement. She lay there for a minute before anything was said.

“Are you conscious?” he said crouching down beside her. “Tell me if you are suffering.” He wanted to know.

“You have hurt something in my head, I think,” she said, getting up slightly on one elbow. (Purdy, : 448)

Being hit again and again until she gets hurt makes Lois upset, she can not tolerate anymore. Finally, when she feels so much pain, she angrily hits and rudely tells Frank to find her a taxi, “Immediately then she struck Frank with the purse and he fell back in surprise against the wall building. “Call me a cab, you cheap son of a bitch,” she said. “Can’t you see I’m bleeding?” (Purdy, : 451)

The text shows Frank Klein as the husband who hits Lois McBane, his wife, several times. Frank Klein hits his wife in a party in front of many guests. No one tries to help her and stops Frank Klein. If Americans promote themselves to be the fighters of human rights who respect and appreciate people, they should not let someone be hurt in front of their eyes, like what Frank Klein does to Lois McBane. They should stop Frank Klein from the violence. But they only see and watch the incident without doing anything to help. They may think this is a personal affair because it is the problem of a husband and wife, but the incident occurs in public. At least they can advise the husband not to solve the problem with violence.

Another point to show their disrespect to others is proved when some men or some guests make fun and ridicule Lois McBane because she tells her husband to change his name. If they show their respect, they shouldn’t make fun and ridicule her no matter how weird her idea is.

Thus, this text dismantles two important elements in American society in which in their social norm, a wife should use a husband’s name. And the other one is an idea which believes that Americans adore human rights and treat people well. These two points are dismantled by this text which proves that using a husband’s name is not responded positively anymore, this text represents the people who are questioning this norm. Besides, this text portrays American people who are indifferent with other people’s problem because they

think it is not good to mind other people's problem, moreover if it is personal problem. With this perception, they betray their have attached themselves with as people who adore human right.

CONCLUSION

Dismantling a text deconstructively is unmasking what is not said from what is said, unmasking what is seen on the surface. On the surface, from social perspective, when a wife uses her husband's name, it shows an appreciation because a man gives his name to his wife. But behind it, it makes the wife loses her identity because she will always be associated with the husband. It refers to domination and oppression. That's what the main character does in this text in which the wife can't accept the domination and she feels oppressed with the norm and she insists to change the husband's name which means to change the norm with all the consequence she has to face. Other element that this text dismantles is an idea that Americans are people who revere human right, on the other side, the text presents the people who show their disrespect and indifference to others.

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