

The Sprouting Consciousness of the Psychologically Oppressed Wife in “The Steel Brassiere” by Iris Sheila G. Crisostomo

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Abstract. The purpose of this paper is to analyze Crisostomo’s short story entitled “The Steel Brassiere” to find out how the personal consciousness of the female protagonist emerges, the trigger of the emergence, and the psychological oppressions that she experiences as a domestic wife of a patriarchal husband. The concepts used to support the analysis are three modes of being of existentialism, existential psychology, patriarchy, husband, the personal is political, bras as cultural myth and in the perspective of feminism, and types of verbal abuse. The analysis applies the feminist literary criticism, considering that the focus of analysis is a woman, and the contextual method of literary research which combines intrinsic and extrinsic elements. The analysis is done in a qualitative way supported by library research with its close reading strategy. The result shows that once the obedient wife who keeps her psychological distress by herself is triggered by the steel bra which gives the hint of the image of a strong independent female, her personal consciousness emerges inextinguishable. She is ready to change into a woman who is prepared to refuse the husband’s abrupt order that she is not willing to do and is calmly waiting for the consequences.

Keywords: personal consciousness, psychological oppressions, existential psychology, feminist literary criticism, contextual method.

1 Introduction

“The Steel Brassiere” [1] is a short story written by Iris Sheila G. Crisostomo, a Filipino author (born 1953). It was about a wife who lived a domestic life with two children and an established husband. She lost her close female friend, her neighbor, and got a steel brassier from the ruins of the house. Several events in her domestic life made her rethink about her life and reacted to it in her own way. Based on the brief summary of the short story, it is challenging to find out how her consciousness grows, what the main trigger is, and how she responds to what happens to her personal life since the emergence of the female’s consciousness entrapped in invisible patriarchal snare always produces vibrating energy. The proposed problems do not overlap with

other published articles concerning the short story since there are no articles written about the short story entitled “The Steel Brassiere” yet.

To unravel the proposed problems and to support the academic analysis, several concepts and methods are applied. The first is the concept of existentialism. Sartre divides existence into three modes of being. The first is the existence without consciousness or “being-in-itself”, the second mode of being is personal existence with consciousness which is still kept in the mind only or “being-for-itself”, while the last is social existence in which the consciousness is put forward and results in conflict over the position of subject, or it is called “being-for-other” (Sartre, 1992: 800).[2]

The second concept, relating existentialism and psychology, is existential psychology. According to Leontiev, existential psychology views that human being is “a self-determined being” who has “the courage to take responsibility to act without being sure” (2004: 104-105) [3]. Existential psychology also considers that people “have free will and are participants rather than observers in their own lives” (Existential Psychology. History of the Movement, n.d.: par. 1) [4].

The third concept reviewed is about patriarchy and husband. According to Murray “an understanding of patriarchy as involving the economic, political and ideological domination of women by men, which may include but is by no means limited to sexual domination and paternal power” (1995: 8) [5]. In other words, patriarchy covers many facets revolving around the basic idea of male domination over females. One shard of patriarchy is called private patriarchy in which “a man in his position as husband or father who is the direct oppressor and beneficiary, individually and directly, of the subordination of women” (Walby, 1990: 178) [6]. In domestic life, a husband, as a domestic ruler, may gain benefits from his wife. Mainardi quoted John Stuart Mill in his *On the Subjection of Women* who said that basically women accept the power of the husbands but cannot tolerate the tyranny as the abusive practice of that power (1970) [7].

The other concepts are concerning the personal life of the women. According to Kelly “the personal experiences of women are rooted in their political situation and gender inequality” (n.d.: par. 1) [8]. Kelly considers that what are experienced by the women in their daily life is not separated from the basic inequality based on their politicized gender. Another thing close to women’s life is bra. Bra has a preserved cultural myth in which “The brassiere has oppressed, controlled and sexualized the female body in order to submit to male dominated cultures” (Garcia, 2016: par. 1) [9]. However, from the feminist perspective who reevaluates the myth, it is viewed that “bras are not just pieces of fabric but a symbol of feminine spirit, strength and uplift” (Tara, n.d.) [10].

Elaine Johannes who examined the verbal abuse, mentioned that there are several types of verbal abuse, such as “Name-calling, Condescension, Criticism, Degradation, Manipulation, Blame, Accusations, Withholding or isolation, Gaslighting, Circular arguments, Threats, Trivializing” (quoted by Bosch, n.d.) [11]. Some of these forms of verbal abuse are experienced by the female protagonist in Crisostomo’s “The Steel Brassiere”.

The method used in this analysis is first feminist literary criticism in which the analysis is focused on the female protagonist and the researcher “reads writing and examines its ideology and culture with a woman-centred perspective” (Humm, 1995: 51) [12]. Using this perspective, the analysis will be concentrated on what happens to the female protagonist including the main

trigger of her personal consciousness and her responses to her existential experience. The second method used is the contextual method in which it is “simply an analysis of a text ... that helps us to assess that text within the context of its historical and cultural setting, but also in terms of its textuality – or the qualities that characterize the text as a text” (Behrendt, 2018) [13]. Thus, contextual analysis is basically a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic elements. The intrinsic elements used are character, conflict, and setting while the extrinsic elements are the borrowed concepts briefly explained above; namely, the three modes of being of existentialism, existential psychology, patriarchy, husband, the personal is political, bras as cultural myth and in the perspective of feminism, and types of verbal abuse. The analysis is in the form of qualitative one with the help of the library research and its close reading. The concepts and methods support the aim of the analysis, that is, to discuss the sprouting consciousness of the psychologically oppressed wife in “The Steel Brassiere” by Iris Sheila G. Crisostomo.

2 Results and Discussion

Referring to the topic of discussing the sprouting consciousness of the psychologically oppressed wife, the focus of analysis of this paper is on the female protagonist known as the “I”. She has no name except that she is the wife of an established man named Lindoln and has two little children, a boy named Jonathan and a girl named Gina. Apart from that, she has no identity of her own. She is just a wife and a mother. She has no existence of her own. From this situation, the no-name female protagonist finally has the courage to dodge the subtle but oppressive patriarchal snare from her husband.

2.1 “I” as an Obedient Wife

“I”, the female protagonist, is described as an obedient wife. She functions as a domestic wife that serves the husband, takes care of the children, and handles the household. Her domestic role as a wife is clearly indicated in her action of waiting her husband shaving and helping him with the towel (Crisostomo, 2000: par. 8). This action also indicates the hierarchical position between them with the husband as the dominant one.

The dominant position of her husband is supported by the financial power and the patriarchal ideology. The husband is the sole bread winner in the family. He is quite capable of it and provides a good life for the family, as indicated by the following quotation: “Lindoln was a good provider, the sales manager of a pharmaceutical company that paid well. He gave me a big house with a lush garden, a dutiful maid and an excellent cook. There was nothing more to ask but I felt I really had nothing” (Crisostomo, 2000: par. 14). As a financial provider for the family, he is an excellent example, but his action gradually makes his wife feel that she is not part of the owner of all these.

Lindoln always has a way to show that he is the bread winner and “I” is dependent on him for that matter. He does not say it, but his action is louder than his words as implied in the following event: “AFTER breakfast, I asked him for money because I would be taking little Gina and Jonathan to the park that afternoon. He took out P500 then changed his mind and gave me P300 instead. I whispered “Thank you” loud enough for him to hear but my hand was crushing the

bills inside my pocket (Crisostomo, 2000: par. 2). By reducing the sum of money being given to "I" in front of "I", the husband clearly indicates that he is the one who is in charge of the financial matter. The reaction of "I", the female protagonist as well as the wife of Lindoln, impliedly indicates her suppressed and helpless anger. She acknowledges her husband's power on money but is powerlessly offended by his action.

Lindoln's patriarchal ideology is obvious in his class debate that makes "I" fall for him at that time: "A man needs a woman to take care of his needs and the woman needs a man to support her" (Crisostomo, 2000: par. 13). "I" is late to realize that the charmingly masculine statement is patriarchal in nature, positioning a woman as an independent person who serves a man in compensation for being supported in her life. As a true patriarchal figure, Lindoln practices his ideology in his household. His strong hold on patriarchal ideology is also manifested in his seemingly protective caring words "Stay home. It's best for you and our children," he told me after I gave birth to Jonathan. He thought he was relieving me of the trouble of working outside the home but he was really closing a door and locking me in (Crisostomo, 2000: par. 15). As an obedient wife, "I" has no choice except to accept her husband's words although she also realizes that she is trapped more in the domestic life. She cannot complain too much because her husband provides the family more than enough.

Apart from those above, Lindoln also uses verbal abuse to "I", his wife. "I" is at that time feels sad, after losing her close friend who is also her neighbor, now her late friend's house is going to be demolished. "I", the female protagonist, goes to the house to get some little things as a remembrance of her late friend. Knowing her action, instead of showing a little sympathy, her husband's reaction is "I thought I saw a smirk on his face when he remarked, "It's about time they do something about that house. It's rotting, anyway"" (Crisostomo, 2000: par. 10). His words can be categorized as a verbal abuse in the form of "trivializing" or belittling another's feeling, in this case the feeling of "I" towards her late friend's house. Besides, his expression also shows his mocking and ridiculing his wife's present feeling.

Another verbal abuse is done by Lindoln towards "I". It happens after "I" in a moment of impulse, lets the children play in the rain with her after going to the park resulting in the children's catching cold. Lindoln harshly scolds "I", his wife in so many words basically indicating that "I" is not capable to be a good mother: "'Haven't you any sense at all?" he asked, slamming the closet door with a loud thud. "No mother in her right mind would permit her children to play in the rain. And what's worse, they did not even ask to do it. You actually invited them to play. So what do you call that?" (Crisostomo, 2000: par. 25). It is undeniable that "I" as a mother has made a mistake, but Lindoln's words are patronizing and chastising as if he speaks to his subordinate, not his wife as his partner in life. It can be classified as a verbal abuse in the form of "criticism" with the purpose of destroying his wife's self-esteem as a capable mother. What is more, he sleeps soundly after hurting his wife's feeling.

The above discussion clearly indicates the imbalance relation between husband and wife in which the husband exploits his power to position his wife under his control. The financial power and the verbal abuse are his weapons directed towards his obedient wife. Having no power to encounter the arrogance of the patriarchal husband, the obedient wife has to keep all those lowering attitudes by herself.

2.2 The Growing Personal Consciousness of “I”

Even though “I” is an obedience wife of Lindoln, it does not mean that her personal consciousness does not grow with the passing of time and the many things that happens in her relationship with Lindoln. However, there is one thing that triggers the sprouting consciousness of “I”. It is in the form of a pair of steel bra that she finds among the old little things of her late female friend: “cold and hard metal. A steel bra ... Two cones of stainless steel with straps made of hammered wire” (Crisostomo, 2000: pars: 4-5). The pair of steel bra is an enigmatic thing that makes “I” feel curious.

The curiosity concerning the steel bra drives “I” to try wearing it. Because it is a strange thing, “I” does not want anybody knows her wearing it, so “I” tries to wear it in her locked bedroom (Crisostomo, 2000: par.5). Unexpectedly, when the cold steel bra is attached to her bare breast, “I” feels that “The bra properly belonged to an ancient warrior-princess yet I felt I was too weak to fight my own battles” (Crisostomo, 2000: par. 7). The steel bra is a symbol of female power that protects the vulnerable body parts. The cold steel bra triggers “I” to imagine a strong woman who bravely faces the struggle ahead. However, at the same time the steel bra reminds her of her own condition as a woman who is dependent on her husband who is a typical patriarchal figure.

“I” begins to be critical about her own situation. She begins to realize her weak response in facing her husband’s attitude to her. It can be seen when her husband looks down at her concern with the coming demolition of her late friend’s house. The reaction of “I” towards her husband’s belittling attitude and words is as follows: “I wanted to walk out of the room in protest but didn’t. I was too kind--too foolishly kind” (Crisostomo, 2000: par. 10). She does not do anything and she evaluates that her action is stupid one. In this case, the “I” is in the second mode of being, the “being-for-itself”, in which she has formed her personal and critical opinion but she still has no bravery to express it.

The cold iron of the swing when “I” play with her children reminds her of the coldness of the steel bra, while the swaying of the swing produces a new feeling: “The wind was brushing against my face with every swing and I felt like a warrior riding with the wind, charging towards the enemy” (Crisostomo, 2000: par. 20). The image of a fighter emerges again, giving a realization to “I” that her life is a fight that she has to face. However, “I” does not seem to be ready for her fight as indicated by “Then I felt a drop of liquid on my cheek. Was it a tear? Was I crying?”(Crisostomo, 2000: par. 20). It also indicates her deep feeling that her life is not as comfortable as it seems, that she deeply buries her sorrow because she has no way to express it moreover to fight it. Here the psychologically oppressed wife begins to sense her powerless situation.

In an impulsive moment due to the glimpse of consciousness, “I” does something that is not deeply thought. She enjoys the drips of rain and lets the children get wet before they can reach the car: “I knew it was foolish to play in the rain but I felt no remorse” (Crisostomo, 2000: par. 23). “I” savors a moment of freedom to do what she likes with the children out of her husband’s control. Here, “I” applies her personal consciousness to her children, to do something not recommended in the daily routine of healthy life. However, this impulsive action does not go

without any consequence, "I" is chastised harshly by her very strict husband when the children get sick, as has been discussed previously.

As "I" now has gained her own personal consciousness, her husband's harsh scolding produces different effect on her. If previously she will feel psychologically burdened by her husband's rough words leading to her unable to sleep, now she is free from that burden:

Then I went to the balcony for some air. I wanted to cry. I wanted to scream. I wanted to laugh if it would help. For the first time, I felt nothing. Lindoln's words which used to bother me into sleepless nights didn't mean anything anymore. I looked up the sky but saw no stars. I felt no fear. I felt I could do anything and still remain unfeeling (Crisostomo, 2000: par. 27).

"I" is free from all the burdensome feeling so far weighing her psyche. She feels empty of all forms of heavy feeling. She is not afraid anymore. She is ready to face a new step of life. Her present condition reflects Leontiev's opinion in the theoretical discussion that as a human being she finally can decide her own life although she is still not too sure what to do next.

2.3 The Resistance of "I"

"I" is now different. She always remembers the steel bra. The coldness of the steel bra makes her feel comfortable and confident of herself. The feeling emerges when she drinks a glass of cold water on a hot afternoon: "The feel of the steel brassiere was as comforting and reassuring as the ice water running down my throat" (Crisostomo, 2000: par. 36).

The comfortable feeling of the self-confident "I" is disturbed by a sudden phone from her husband. Without any bother to ask about the condition of "I" and the children as a nice lip-service, Lindoln, the patriarchal husband, directly puts forward the purpose of his phoning her: "Hey, Pareng Jimmy will be coming over for dinner tonight. Can you prepare his favorite rellelong bangu?" (Crisostomo, 2000: par. 38). The phone, the order, the tone of the order, and the ignorance to others except for his own purpose are all implied in Lindoln's two sentences. He does not care whether "I", his wife, is willing to do his instruction, whether she has all the ingredients ready, or whether she has time to cook it. His only purpose is that "I" as his wife should follow his order in whatever condition, because he is the master in the house that must be heard and obeyed, willingly or unwillingly.

However, Lindoln does not ever realize that "I", his wife who is always obedient, silent, and kept her hurtful feeling by herself is now different. "I" has changed into a different person who has her own personal consciousness and now she is ready to apply it whenever she feels forced to do something.

"What?" I asked, still holding the cold glass in hand.

"I said Pareng Jimmy will come for dinner tonight..."

"Call again. The line is bad. I can't quite hear you." I put the phone down and leisurely walked to the bedroom.

And the phone rang again and again and again (Crisostomo, 2000: pars. 59-41).

For the first time it is described that "I" is brave enough to deny her husband's order. Even though she does not directly refuses the order, it is implied that she will not do it. Her calmness in refusing the master's order indicates her growing consciousness that she can do that. "I", the

wife, keeps enjoying the nice day, slightly bothered by the phone that keeps ringing and ringing, indicating the stubbornness and increasing aggravation of Lindoln, the patriarchal husband who is always obeyed so far.

The wife's growing courage to defy the undeniable order from the patriarchal husband is triggered by the memory of the sensation of wearing the steel bra. The sneaking power and liberating coolness of the steel bra unconsciously influence the obedient wife. This is in line with Tara's opinion in the theoretical discussion that bras bring about the boosting female spirit for the users.

3 Conclusion

Human being is a developing creature as represented by "I", the no-name female protagonist of Crisostomo's short story entitled "The Iron Brassiere". Once, she is an obedient wife who always keeps her psychological oppression by herself considering that she, as a domestic wife, is dependent totally on her patriarchal husband. However, the finding and wearing, although only once, the iron bra from the old things of her late close female friend, triggers her insight of what she can do for herself. The emergence of her personal consciousness drives her to test it by making a personal choice involving her children, resulting in their catching cold and her being scolded by her husband. However, this faulty testing choice makes her know that she is strong enough to face her husband strong chastise. As can be predicted, she tries again to apply her personal consciousness not to do something if she does not like it even though it is a direct order from her patriarchal husband. Although her resistance seems to be passive and indirect, it is a fully aware choice of hers, and she is ready to face the consequences. It can be said that the no-name female protagonist finally has the courage to enter the Sartrean mode of being called "being-for-other" in which she, in a feminine subversive way, defies the husband's patriarchal order.

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