

Discernments of Frustration, Alienation, and Isolation in Raymond

Carver's "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?"

J. Prithamshopana

Ph. D Research Scholar

Department of English

Annamalai University

prithamshopana9@gmail.com

Mobile No. 6374472465

Dr. P. Dinakaran

Research Supervisor

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Annamalai University

dinuarchanaa@yahoo.co.in

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to illustrate the nature of repression, alienation, frustration, and isolation in Raymond Carver's short-story - "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" It seeks to demonstrate how this short-story exemplifies material possession, complacency, and story-telling as repressive strategies adopted by the characters to conceal or suppress their anxieties. In this short-story Carver underlines the role of narration in reconstruction of self and concealment of hidden anxieties. He also reinforces the healing power it has in its connection to the other. Being so, it presents the brighter side of the postmodern culture. Repression in this story is wilfully and willingly embraced by the characters as a means to deny or suppress latent anxieties on both private and public domains.

Keywords: Repression, Culture, Anxiety, Alienation, Frustration, Isolation

Discernments of Frustration, Alienation, and Isolation in Raymond Carver's "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?"

Raymond Carver, a minimalist postmodern short story writer, is famous for his famous saying about Reagan's America. As a critic of American consumerist society, Carver explores the dark side of life through short-stories. The bulk of short stories crafted by Carver reveal a rejection of the self-reflexive mode of writing advocated by contemporary

postmodern experimentalists such as John Barth, Donald Barthelme, and William Gass. Carver never favours the preference of textuality over reality and in his writing workshops and numerous essays accentuated the roles of traditional plot, character, and dialogue. His short stories are mainly first-person narratives about hardship, stress, and sense of alienation which are indispensable elements of the life of the working class. They commonly resist any sort of encapsulation into a plot summary, dialogues are sparse, and traditional characterization can be formed only partially. Labels such as minimalism and realism which are attached to his style hint to the influence of Hemingway and Chekhov.

The first of Carver's major short-story collection, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976), appears to be sequential in nature. In *The Stories of Raymond Carver: A Critical Study*, Kirk Nessel observes: "One of the more striking things about Carver's first volume of stories is that as a collection it is hardly uniform in subject or voice" (9). Nessel specifies that Carver's obsession with "love and its absence" in his first short-story collection can be positioned in a broader framework:

For Carver's lovers, the politics of sex ultimately reflect a kind of larger politics, more tenuous and more ominous still: the politics of fortune and fate which, forever unseen and unheard, dictate the bleak circumstances of their lives, provoking the bafflement and dismay that is for them a daily fact of existence. Evoked by the politics of Carver's uniquely hardscrabble domesticity, the marriages of *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* are scaled-down models representing larger, more terrifying politics, or antipolitics - models reflecting, in human form, the arbitrariness and caprice and chaos of the world in which those marriages are rooted. (11)

Chaos, Arbitrariness, and caprice are the core of the world of Carver in immense part because most of its dwellers are totally suffered by poverty and the insecurity which is its

natural consequence. For the characters of *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, insecurity and poverty lead to sense of devastating alienation, frustration, and desolation. In turn, these help to impair the probability of satisfactory relationships, specifically between the sexes. The senses of isolation and alienation damage and disrupt human bonds by creating communication futile or difficult at best.

The volume's second preoccupation is the failure of individuals to interact with those who surround them, specifically their partners. The lack of communication can only bolster the hopelessness which mostly suffuses Carver's world and the relationships between its characters and, in fact, it does so in most of the stories in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* The volume's relationships are typically marked by a deafening silence, often broken only by a variety of misguided outbursts, neuroses, and perversions.

The last of the six stories of the collection which constitute the volume's narrative deep structure, "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" is also the collection's final short-story. The situation it presents - a couple in crisis - is familiar. How it principally differs from all the stories thus far examined is in the degree to which the reader is made aware of the background to the story's events. We are introduced to Ralph Wyman, the central character, and read of his progression through young adulthood as a university student and, after graduation, a school teacher. Two moments during this period seem particularly significant. One is Ralph's feeling, after taking courses in philosophy and literature that he is on the brink of some kind of huge discovery about himself. But, we are told, it never comes. He does find inspiration under the tutelage of a literature professor, Dr. Maxwell, and then meets the woman he eventually marries, Marian Ross. The second moment comes the night before the couple's wedding, when both he and Marian "pledge to preserve forever the excitement and the mystery of marriage." (229)

Ralph Wyman tried to figure out what to do with his life. But after attending Philosophy and Literature classes, he knew that he wanted to become a teacher. There, he met Marian who he married after college. They had two children, Dorothea and Robert, but Ralph believed that his wife had sex with another man. When he faced her, she admitted that she did so four years ago. Furious, he went from bar to bar. In the first bar, the barman recognized him and he bought a drink, so he decided to go to another bar where nobody knew him. In the bathroom, he started questioning who he was and what he believed in while looking in the mirror. He remembered his father's words that life was a serious matter, and he realized that was true.

In that bar, he decided to join a poker game, and he was lucky at the beginning, but in the end he had only two dollars left in his wallet. This situation was similar to his relationship with Marin, since at first, he felt lucky to have a beautiful woman, but then he knew that things would never be the same, because she had cheated on him. Ralph decided to buy some cigarettes in a liquor store, but then a man stole his wallet. After that he went home and found his wife and children asleep. He faced a situation of loss of identity and started asking question about who he was and what he should do. His children heard him and run to greet him, but when he heard Marian waking up, he locked himself in the bathroom. Marian told him to open the door, but he just told her to go away. In the bathroom, he looked again in the mirror and started making faces as he was uncomfortable with whom he was. Then he took a shower and got into bed. Marian sat on the bed and touched him. Finally, she moved towards him and he turned to meet her. In the end, he realized that he could not refuse his wife.

That is what all the stories in this first collection are all about. After reading and analyzing them, the situations that they described seemed familiar to us for we have been talking about Raymond's life and career which were not glamorous at all. As a result, the stories are just reflecting his real feelings in that stage of his life. When Carver's life changed,

his stories changed, too; nevertheless, in that first stage of his career we talked about above, every aspect of his life was really problematic because of his drinking and other problems. Thus, as could be seen, the first stories he wrote were hopeless and the characters lived in a world of despair.

In order to understand Carver's reasons to write about these topics, it was important to investigate his life and career, first, because knowing what his life was like would make it easier to get the real idea he tried to communicate through his writing. For example, the main characters of the stories are not important people, but common people living common lives and trying, but sometimes failing, to do what they want to. Also, Carver's favorite activities, hunting and fishing, were present in many of the stories. Drinking, a fact that marked his life forever, was also a common habit in many of his characters. Moreover, smoking and even consuming drugs were other bad habits some characters had, so Carver and his characters shared these qualities in his early years as writer. Besides, loss, death, bankruptcy, betrayal, fights, fear, regret, identity, and lots of other problems are faced by these people who get involved in every situation. Situations Carver himself went through in his lifetime.

Carver's fiction was developed by his own mind, but the places and situations it talked about were taken from real life. Once in a while, the name of cities and towns were mentioned in the stories. Those places were also familiar to us, and Carver mentioned them because he lived in many of those cities and was acquainted enough to describe lots of their characteristics and how life was over there. So this important fact that we have noticed in the stories we just reviewed gives the stories a realistic setting. For example, in the stories cities like Sacramento, Yakima, and San Francisco appear, of course, there are lots of other among the ones we mentioned. That was the way he let us know what life in those cities were like and what people living there had to go through. Though the stories are similar to the lives of thousands of people of America, none of them is really represented in the plot of the stories.

Therefore, he used a lot of imagination in every story, and it was easy to understand why his work has caught the attention of many people.

In keeping with the volume's "thematic core," marital bliss does not last. The story differs, however, in that we are witness to the moment at which a critical gulf between the couple opens. One afternoon during their honeymoon in Mexico, Ralph observes, from a distance, Marian leaning over a balustrade, sexually alluring and almost exotic. He experiences "an intensely dramatic moment into Which Marian could be fitted but he could not" (229). Marian's intense sexuality scares and isolates Ralph, and, furthermore, suggests the rupture to come.

Ralph's insecurities about his position within the sexual world of his wife are confirmed on the fateful evening which is the story's focus. During a quiet moment after their children are put to bed, Marian confesses to a sexual liaison with a male friend, an event which, to some degree, Ralph has always known about and feared. He becomes enraged: "Christ" The word leaped out of him. "But you've always been that way, Marian!" (235). In *Understanding Raymond Carver*, Arthur Saltzman puts it: "Before him once again is that strange, disconcerting woman whom he had watched on the balcony" (70). Ralph's perceived isolation seems complete to him as he connects this moment with the earlier one in Mexico.

The night of drunken excess which follows resurrects a way of life which was usual for Ralph during the period in which he felt on the brink of some kind of huge discovery about himself. After it is over, he returns home, seemingly farther away than ever to such a revelation. In "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?":

Ralph heard the children stirring. He sat up tried to smile as they came into the kitchen.

'Daddy, Daddy,' they said, running to him with their little bodies.

'Tell us a story, Daddy,' his son said, getting into his lap.

‘He can’t tell us a story,’ his daughter said. ‘It’s too early for a story. Isn’t it, Daddy?’

‘What’s on your face, Daddy?’ his son said, pointing.

‘Let me see’ his daughter said. ‘Let me see, Daddy.’

‘Poor Daddy,’ his son said.

‘What did you do to your face, Daddy?’ his daughter said.

‘It’s nothing’ Ralph said. ‘It’s all right, sweetheart. Now you get down now, Robert, I hear your mother.’ (249)

Ralph’s face has been bruised after an attack by a hoodlum, but his child’s question, suggests the degree to which he has been displaced from his former self by the night’s events. Juxtaposing the short-story’s conclusion against those of the five stories discussed above reveals a significant variation- indeed an inversion of the recurring end-pattern present in the “inner core” short-story. Ralph gets into bed with Marian, only she is not asleep. They make love, and in so doing seem to bridge the gap that the previous night has torn open. The effect of this re-connection on Ralph concludes the volume: “...he turned to her. He turned and turned in what might have been a stupendous sleep, and he was still turning, marveling at the impossible changes he felt moving over him” (251). Commenting on this last sentence, Nesset notes that

through verbal repetition - especially of the gerund - Carver suggests the kinds of possibility residing in the ‘impossible,’ emphasizing that the road to recovery is part of the journey, too. He also suggests, ironically, that the remedy for such disease lies in its cause. For Ralph and Marian, sex will now restore, at least in part, what sex has earlier undertaken to destroy. (25)

Ralph does not know where his “turning” will take him. As his daughter points out, it is, for the moment, “too early for a story.” We clearly sense, however, that he, and Marian, is not at

the end of a road, but at a new beginning.

As majority of Carver's short-stories we have looked at end with couples in "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" more alienated from each other than ever, and sometimes clearly on the brink of disaster. Sexual politics, often working in tandem with a larger politics of fate, combined with an inability or unwillingness to communicate, lead to displacement from the partner and family, as well as displacement from the former self. "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" ends on a note that suggests a terrible storm has been weathered, and that life, although difficult and confusing in its newness, can now continue. This short-story's seemingly positive end cannot possibly negate all that has come before in the volume, however, but it does make it more difficult to pin down the collection's overall worldview.

References

Caner, Raymond. "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*

New York: Vintage, 1992. Print.

Neset, Kirk. *The Stories of Raymond Carver: A Critical Study*. Athens: Ohio UP, 1995.

Print.

Powell, Jon. "The Stories of Raymond Carver: The Menace of Perpetual Uncertainty."

Studies in Short Fiction 31 (1994): 647-56.

Saltzman, Arthur M. *Understanding Raymond Carver*. Columbia: U of South Carolina P,

1988. Print.