

## THE HOUSEWIFE'S RESISTANCE AS PORTRAYED IN SOMERSET MAUGHAM'S SHORT STORY ENTITLED *THE COLONEL'S LADY*

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### Abstract

The focus of this paper is to analyze the domination and resistance in the domestic area as portrayed in Maugham's *The Colonel's Lady*. The special aims are to analyze the factors that trigger the wife's resistance, the kind of resistance carried out by the wife, and the impacts of the wife's resistance on the husband. The analysis is supported by the concept of power by Foucault, the concepts of resistance and how to face domination by Vinthagen and Johanson, Husu, Butler et al., Cohen and Taylor, and Woolf. The qualitative method is used in the contextual analysis focusing on the character, conflict, and setting. The result shows that the wife subtly resists the constricting patriarchal atmosphere in the household by constructing a private area in which she actualizes herself in the world of poetry. Her great success enables her to enter a new and different zone where she is the star. This makes the husband feel uncomfortable and even insulted but he cannot do anything because his wife still shows her respect to him and she does nothing unlawful against him.

**Keywords:** resistance, power, patriarchal atmosphere

### Introduction

Maugham's short story entitled *The Colonel's Lady* describes a typical husband-wife relationship in which the dominant husband is an ex-colonel and the submissive wife is a pure housewife. The wife, in her own subtle way, tries to resist the suffocating domination by constructing her own world in which she secretly writes and publishes a collection of poems under a pen name. When the wife's literary work unexpectedly gets famous and so does she, the husband feels irritated and tries to look his wife and her literary work down, while the wife keeps respecting her husband.

This short story revolves around the topic of domination and resistance in the domestic area. Domination always has a close relationship of power. Foucault gives an enlightening definition of power as follows: "Power is exercised from innumerable points ... Power comes from below ... Power relations are both intentional and nonsubjective" (1978, p. 94). It means that the sources and the practices of power are not singular, they are from many

directions and spread into many directions. Everyone can practice power or becomes the target of power without exception. Foucault also stresses that "Where there is power, there is resistance" (1978, p. 95). Power is not without a match. There is always resistance, in whatever forms and levels, when power is exercised.

In relation to resistance, Vinthagen and Johanson propose the idea of 'everyday resistance', a term that they borrow from Scott (1985). According to them, "everyday resistance is about how people act in their everyday lives in ways that might undermine power. Everyday resistance is not easily recognized ..... typically hidden or disguised, individual ... Everyday resistance is quiet, dispersed, disguised or otherwise seemingly invisible" (2013, p. 2, 4). Thus, everyday resistance is a non-confrontational resistance and almost impossible to perceive because the resisting person does not show any signs of disobedience. This kind of resistance which operates on daily basis tends to weaken the foundation that supports the domination insidiously.

Meanwhile, Husu mentions about a symbolic struggle, which is “more than a clash of world views and definitions. In order for it to be effective, it must not challenge the dominant ideas” (2013, p. 23). Husu’s idea is almost the same as the idea of Vinthagen and Johanson about everyday resistance. It is a kind of resistance without direct confrontation. She also proposes that the person who struggles against any form of domination should construct “a positive sense of self” (2013, p. 62) to encounter the negative or underestimating label or given identity.

Feminists view that the problem of domination and resistance is triggered by the males “denial of their own vulnerability” that lead them to “project, displace, and localize it elsewhere” (Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay, 2016, p. 4). In domestic household it is usually projected to the females by constructing a dependent, vulnerable, ineffective, emotional, or skill-less females.

Cohen and Taylor propose a “free area”, whether in the form of hobbies, sports, or artistic works to escape from the dominating atmosphere. However they also warn that the created free area might experience “mockery” and considered worthless by the dominating figures (2002, p. 117). In other words, the dominating figure does not appreciate the specific zone and its products constructed by the dominated party to exist as him/herself.

In relation to the “free area” proposed by Cohen and Taylor, Woolf, from feminist perspective, proposes what she calls “a room of one’s own”. It is a kind of personal space for women to be able to actualize herself. She states that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (1977, p. 7). Suggesting that the private space suitable for women to actualize herself is in the literary area, she reminds that it needs certain supports to be able to exist and survive: financial support and spatial support. According to Woolf: “Women have served all these centuries as looking-glass possessing the magic and

delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size” (1977, p. 41). Thus, it is time for women to stop to be a looking-glass, it is time to actualize themselves.

The short story entitled *The Colonel’s Lady* written by Somerset Maugham is a good example of the problem of domination and resistance in the domestic area. Analyzing the factors that trigger the wife’s resistance, the kind of resistance carried out by the wife and the impacts on the husband will enrich the knowledge on the female creative resistance and the male selfishness.

### Methodology

The data and the supporting concepts are taken using library research while the qualitative method is used to analyze the data. The method of literary research is contextual method which combined the analysis of intrinsic aspects and extrinsic aspects. The intrinsic aspects focus on character, conflict, and setting while the extrinsic aspects utilize the concepts of power and resistance. Since the focus of analysis is on the female character, the frame of analysis used in this paper is a feminist literary criticism (Humm, 1995, p. 51).

### Findings and Discussion

The everyday resistance applied by the wife to subvert her husband patriarchal domination is very effective. The wife, patiently and gradually without using confrontational way, constructs a free area for herself in the form of joining the literary writing world. Too proud of himself and always underestimating his wife’s appearance and talent, the ex-colonel husband cannot accept the fame bestowed to her wife by the literary world. Impossible to be angry to his wife since she is doing nothing wrong or illegal makes his wounded ego helpless.

George Peregrine, the husband, is an ex colonel who lives as a landowner having many tenants in the outskirts of Sheffield. As an ex-military man, a conventional husband,

and a landowner, George Peregrine's patriarchal domination to his surrounding is inevitable. He gives advices to these tenants, takes prominent positions in the community institutions, a true fellow in the political party, and even builds a local hospital plus paying the nurses on condition that the locals elect the candidate of his political party (1985, p. 231).

In the house, George Peregrine always places himself as the number one person even in trivial matter such as reading newspaper: "George Peregrine finished his *Times* and being a considerate fellow rang the bell and told the butler to take the paper to Evie" (1985, p. 232). Evie is his wife. Even though there are only the two of them in the house, they eat in a long table far from each other: "they sat at opposite ends of it" (1985, p. 230). It indicates that the husband-wife relationship is not close and warm.

George Peregrine the ex-colonel views his wife, Evie, based on her role as a house manager who can strengthen his good image: "... she managed the house uncommonly well and was a good hostess. The village people adored her" (1985, p. 231). As they grow old, they are getting far apart. They are like two strangers living in the same house: not disturbing each other but also not intimate. The patriarchal husband feels that his wife has no objections to his personal way of life that he now chooses:

They had nothing much in common ... she'd never bothered him. There'd been no scenes. They had no quarrels. She seemed to take it for granted that he should go his own way (1985, p. 232).

The intimate husband and wife relationships has ended. George Peregrine is disappointed because they have no child and Evie always appears so simple with no make-up: "'Evie had been a sad disappointment to him ... she was faded now ... the sort of woman you simply didn't notice" (1985, pp. 231-232). Sexually not aroused by his wife anymore, the ex-colonel has a mistress in London that he visits regularly:

She was blonde and luscious and he only had to wire ahead of time and they'd dine, do a show and spend the night together. Well, a man, a healthy normal man had to have some fun in his life (1985, p. 232).

This indicates that George Peregrine is an egoistic patriarchal who does not consider the feelings of his wife.

Facing such an inconsiderate, dominating, patriarchal husband, and living in a suffocating household atmosphere, Evie, on the sly, creates a "free area" for herself. She constructs "a room of one's own" for herself. Secretively she composes personal poems in which the collection is personally funded to be published. Having money of her own from her parents (1985, p. 231) she does not need to use her husband money. She also carefully uses her maiden name, E.K. Hamilton as an abbreviation of Evie Katherine Hamilton (1985, p. 231). This is a form of her non-confrontational resistance because she does not want to have any link with her husband's name in her own world. On the other side, her husband feels happy because his 'great' name is not related to something that he underestimates: "He was glad she had used her maiden name on the title page ... he was proud of his own unusual name" (1985, p. 232).

George Peregrine definitely looks down Evie's collection of poems. His underestimation is camouflaged with a joking advice: "'Not much money in poetry, my dear," he said in his good-natured, hearty way" (1985, p. 232). However, his advice shows that he is a money-oriented person, unlike his wife who tries to find personal satisfaction while developing herself. Realizing his words do not affect Evie's silent satisfaction, he gives an underestimating comment: "I read your book, Evie," he said as they sat down to lunch. "Jolly good ....'" (1985, p. 232). He acts as an evaluator of his wife's literary work although actually he does not read it thoroughly. Poetry is not his taste, his books are all about practical things (1985, p. 231).

He is so sure that nobody will buy or read her wife's collection of poems: "he didn't suppose anyone would ever hear about the book" (1985, p. 232).

Evie's does not show that she is offended or intimidated by her husband's remarks or opinion. Now she has produced something of her own in her own world without any connection to her husband who feels that he is great and admired. She feels satisfied in her own way. The fact that her collection of poems is highly appreciated by readers and critics is beyond her expectation and of course beyond her husband's prediction. He knows Evie's popular work not from Evie of course, but from his mistress, Daphne, when he visits her in London (1985, p. 233).

Without a word from Evie's lips the ex-colonel Peregrine begins to feel uncomfortable. His irked feeling grows fast when he knows that Evie declines an invitation from a prominent citizen that he wants to get noticed without consulting him. However, Evie's expression makes him realized that it is only Evie that is invited. To cover his wounded ego, he expresses a criticizing remark: "I call it damned rude of them to ask you without asking me" (1985, p. 235). He does not want to acknowledge that Evie refuses the invitation to respect him.

Because Evie does not want to make her husband feel disrespected and abandoned, she always invites her husband to go with her to the invitation. The ex-colonel Peregrine's consent to accompany his wife to the invitation is triggered by his curiosity to see his wife's new friends and the poem lovers, not by his kindness to escort his wife. The ex-colonel Peregrine is surprised by his wife's new circle because it is beyond his underestimating prediction: "George Peregrine was dazed by the cocktail party ... He was introduced to everybody as Colonel Peregrine, E.K. Hamilton's husband, you know" (1985, p. 235). What makes the proud ex-colonel feel chagrined is that in the

party he is not the respected focus, he is just "E.K. Hamilton's husband".

In his wife's world, his wife is the star. A star that accepts her being a star calmly and humbly. Instead of being happy and proud for her, the proud and self-centered husband feels marginalized and humiliated. His uncomfortable feeling grows worse and worse when he perceives that the ladies in the room giggles when he is near them (1985, pp. 235-236). What can be concluded from this event is that Evie shows, not challenges, her husband that she has a personal world in which she is successful without his support. It is the sweet fruit of Evie's subtle resistance.

Curious about the big success and fame possessed by Evie due to her collection of poems, he wants to read it seriously to find out the secret. Since he has lost the book personally given by Evie, he forces himself to go to the bookstore in London secretly. What he sees surprises him so much. He is face to face with the big posters of Evie's work but he cannot find Evie's book. His surprise grows bigger when the shop attendant tells her that all the books are sold out and that the fifth edition has just come. It indicates the undeniable success of Evie's collection of poems that he strongly underestimates. The shop attendance's comment: "It's the story they like. Sexy, you know, but tragic" (1985, p. 236) triggers further his curiosity.

Locking himself up in his study room so that nobody, especially his wife, knows that he reads the collection of poem, he starts reading curiously and seriously. What he finds out in his reading makes him feel restless and slighted. Evie's poem describes an intimate relationship between a married woman, who is not young anymore, with a young man who adores and desires her. The passionate relationship must end abruptly and painfully due to the premature death of the young lover leaving the devastatingly sad woman alone while pretending that nothing happens in front of the husband (1985, pp. 237-238).



As a practical and ex-military man who knows nothing about imaginative works and world, he directly concludes that the married woman who is not young anymore but has a passionate love affair must be his wife, Evie: “there was no doubt about it; it was her own story she had told, and it was plain as anything could be that she had had a lover and her lover had died” (1985, p. 238). His self-conclusion elicits many self-reactions. He is angry not because he presumes that Evie is cheating on their marriage, but because he becomes a laughing object behind his back. He is not angry but is wondering who wants to have an affair, even a passionate one, with his wife whom he considers unattractive (1985, p. 238). These self-reactions are very condescending and egoistic. The proud husband concerns only with his image while sneering at his wife.

Returning to the topic of Evie’s subtle resistance to her smug husband, it can be said that without any overt action bragging about her success, her husband has felt resisted and slighted although he tries to suppress the feeling. Through her literary work Evie not only has a personal world but also gets personal fame. In the meantime, she gives a lesson to her husband that she is a ‘somebody’, not a ‘nobody’ as what her husband considers her so far. It can be called as an “everyday resistance” without overt struggle ignoring the “mockery” directed to her by her husband in his effort to hide his own vulnerability.

In his silent rage and humiliation, the ex-colonel husband wants to hire a detective to find out the deceased young lover. He consults his friend who is a lawyer (1985: 239). As a sensible man and a little bit enjoy the personal hurt felt by the proud husband, the lawyer prevents the intention: “if you do she’ll leave you. D’you want her to do that?” (1985: 239). The lawyer knows well that the self-centered husband, even though he tries to conceal it, depends on his wife to support his good image as the pillar of the society.

When the lawyer alludes to the husband’s years of infidelity, the husband’s

answer is egoistic and self-justifying: “I don’t deny that I’ve had a bit of fun now and then. A man wants it. Women are different” (1985, p. 239). Feeling that he is always right, the proudly humiliating husband cannot comprehend that his wife has sexual attraction to another man, let alone a young one: “... there’s one thing I shall never understand till my dying day. What in the name of heaven did the fellow ever see in her?” (1985, p. 241). However, behind this condescending denial there is a vulnerable ego. The wounded ego is camouflaged with humiliating remark and scornful attitude directed to Evie. Her silence, her still respecting the smug husband, her satisfaction, her personal life and world are all the forms of her subtle resistance done every day to face the arrogant, dominating, egoistic, patriarchal husband and the constricting patriarchal atmosphere in the house.

### Conclusions

Somerset Maugham’s short story entitled *The Colonel’s Lady* superficially portrays a common relationship between a dominating patriarchal husband and a silently obedient wife. What is interesting is the silent resistance effectively carried out by the wife. Actualizing herself in poetry writing, she constructs a personal space for herself without involving her husband in it. The positive thinking about herself even though in a constricting patriarchal household atmosphere makes the wife not only becomes a star but also able to respond to her sudden literary fame properly and humbly. Her humbleness in her fame painfully erodes the husband’s vulnerable ego camouflaged in mocking remarks, humiliating attitude, and condescending opinion about her. Thus, the wife is a real lady who elegantly and artistically outperforms her ex-colonel husband who is arrogant and self-centered.

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