Impact Of Ethical Principles and Manifestations of Resistance: A Feminist and Post-Structuralist Examination of Patriarchal Authority, Suppression, And Moral Responsibility in Women's Discourse and Comparable Phenomena

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***Abstract*—This paper presents a feminist and post-structuralist comparative examination of Sarah Polley's film Women Talking (2022) and Claire Keegan's novella Small Things Like These (2021), investigating how both works engage with patriarchal authority, religious ideology, and systemic gendered violence. Utilizing theoretical frameworks from Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Nancy Fraser, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the research analyzes the deployment of language, silence, and space as mechanisms that either sustain or challenge prevailing power structures. Whereas Women Talking articulates a collective feminist intervention addressing sexual abuse within a Mennonite community, Small Things Like These portrays individual moral opposition to the Catholic Church's institutional complicity in abuse during 1980s Ireland. By employing five analytical dimensions—faith, accountability, silence, agency, and conscience—the study illustrates how both texts interrogate religious patriarchy and propose alternative frameworks for ethical resistance. In conclusion, this research emphasizes the political importance of narrative voice and examines the ethical dimensions of bearing witness to and resisting gendered violence within repressive institutional contexts.**

***Index Terms*—Patriarchal power, ethical resistance, feminist analysis, moral agency.**

I. INTRODUCTION

This research conducts a thorough feminist analysis. A post-structuralist interpretation of Women by Sarah Polley. Claire Keegan's novella Small Things Like These (2021) and Talking (2022) are two separates but closely connected stories that confront patriarchal religious organizations and the institutionalized gender-based violence they support. Despite using different approaches, both pieces deeply address themes of silence, language, power, and resistance.

The story revolves around a series of conversations between the women, who get together in a hayloft to talk about how they might react to the abuse—whether to fight, leave, or stay. Toews is able to highlight the complexity of each character's individual and group decisions by delving deeply into their internal conflicts and diverse points of view thanks to this format. Because August Epp is both an insider and an outsider in the community, using him as the narrator adds another level of perspective. The conflict between authority and agency, as well as between voice and silence, is highlighted by this narrative technique and outsider within the community. This narrative technique underscores the tension between silence and voice, authority and agency.

Both texts highlight the intricate relationships between faith, gender, and power and how this influence both individual and group acts of resistance, despite variations in form and narrative voice. The foundational theories of Judith Butler, whose concept of gender performativity clarifies how identities are socially constructed and maintained through repeated behaviors; Michel Foucault, whose insights into power relations and discourse reveal how institutions regulate bodies and speech; Nancy Fraser, whose

concept of subaltern counter publics highlights the emergence of oppositional discourses within marginalized communities; and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, whose framework of ethical witnessing emphasizes the responsibilities involved in representing and responding to silenced voices. These theoretical foundations direct the investigation of how language, silence, and spatial dynamics in

Faith and religious ideology, forgiveness and responsibility, silence and complicity, freedom and agency, moral conscience and resistance, language and discourse, authoritarian structures, and intersectional oppression are some of the ematic axes. By using these perspectives, the study shows how the stories present complex criticisms of patriarchal authority and investigate different moral approaches to systemic violence. The analysis emphasizes the strategic use of language and silence in both texts, showing that, depending on the situation, silence can serve as a site of complicity or a mode of resistance, while speech can be a form of empowerment. The study adds to current feminist discussions regarding the politics of voice and silence within oppressive structures, particularly those influenced by religious authority, by contrasting these two narratives. This study uses a feminist and post-structuralist theoretical framework to examine the intersections of power, gender, silence, and ethical agency in women.

II. CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION

This investigation utilizes a feminist and post-structuralist theoretical approach to analyze the convergence of authority, gender, suppression, and moral agency in Women The analysis of Women Talking and Small Things Like These is grounded in the insights of Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Nancy Fraser, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, whose work collectively provides a conceptual vocabulary for understanding resistance within systems of domination. Butler's (1990, 1997) theory of gender performativity is foundational to this inquiry. In Women Talking, the women's identities are shaped and ultimately transformed through communal dialogue, which disrupts fixed gender roles by enacting new forms of feminist agency. Similarly, in Small Things Like These, Bill Furlong's ethical awakening challenges traditional masculinity through his embrace of care, empathy, and moral deliberation. Butler's concept of subjection further demonstrates how individuals are constituted by power while retaining the capacity to resist it, revealing the complex and often ambiguous nature of agency under constraint.

Foucault's (1979, 1980) concepts of discourse and disciplinary power illuminate how religious and institutional authorities construct moral "truths" and regulate subjectivity. In *Women Talking*, illiteracy and the manipulation of scripture serve as tools of domination, while in *Small Things Like These*, the Catholic Church enforces silence through moral rhetoric. Yet, as Foucault argues, where there is power, there is also resistance. Both narratives depict subtle acts that challenge dominant discourses, whether through collective deliberation or individual refusal.

Fraser's (1990, 2008) theory of subaltern counterpublics is instrumental in framing the women's gathering in *Women Talking* as a site of discursive autonomy. Their dialogue challenges the exclusionary public sphere and asserts the political legitimacy of marginalized voices. Fraser's emphasis on recognition and participatory parity also informs the reading of Bill Furlong's resistance, which, although solitary, asserts ethical subjectivity within a society that marginalizes dissent. Spivak's (1988) critique of representation and her theory of ethical witnessing provide an essential ethical lens. She warns against "speaking for" the subaltern and instead advocates listening and responsibility. In *Women Talking*, the characters do not merely speak; they speak into a space historically defined by silence, risking fragmentation and incompleteness in the process. In *Small Things Like These*, Bill does not articulate the girls' suffering; instead, he witnesses and acts, embodying a form of solidarity that refuses appropriation. Together, these frameworks enable a layered, nontotalizing reading of both texts. Rather than imposing a singular narrative of victimhood or agency, this theoretical foundation reveals the unstable and negotiated nature of ethical life under patriarchal authority. It affirms that silence, speech, and subjectivity are not fixed but are continually formed and reformed through language, power, and resistance. Grounded in these conceptual foundations, the study proceeds to outline the interpretive methodology through which both texts are read, privileging depth, context, and ethical

complexity over reductive interpretations Generalization.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in feminist literary criticism and post-structuralist discourse analysis. Rather than seeking generalizability, it prioritizes depth of interpretation by examining how *Women Talking* (2022) and *Small Things Like These* (2021) construct, complicate, and resist patriarchal ideologies and religious authority through narrative strategies, silence, spatiality, and ethical tension. Close reading serves as the primary method, supported by theoretical frameworks developed by Butler (1990, 1997), Foucault (1979, 1980), Fraser (1990, 2008), and Spivak (1988). These frameworks provide tools for analyzing how power operates not only through content but also through form—through what is said, what is withheld, and how narrative voice, structure, and space interact to produce meaning. The texts were selected deliberately: both engage directly with gendered violence within religious systems, yet they employ contrasting scales and narrative modes, with one being collective and dialogic and the other solitary and introspective. This contrast enables a comparative framework that highlights both communal and individual forms of resistance.

Thematic analysis was guided by repeated readings and the emergence of several key themes: religious ideology; accountability and forgiveness; silence and complicity; freedom and agency; moral conscience and resistance; language and discourse; and intersectional oppression. These themes correspond to the theoretical framework and organize the analytical chapters.The methodology also attends to the ethics of interpretation. Drawing on Spivak's (1988) warnings about epistemic violence, the study avoids speaking for or over subaltern subjects. Instead, it emphasizes listening to narrative silences, structural absences, and moments of rupture. Butler's (2004) understanding of vulnerability as a condition of ethical life further informs the study's treatment of subjectivity and resistance as relational rather than heroic. Ultimately, this methodology approaches the texts not as mere reflections of historical reality but as cultural artifacts that challenge dominant ideologies and invite ethical engagement. Through theoretically grounded interpretation, the study examines how narrative art can intervene in systems of oppression and imagine new forms of agency. With this framework established, the analysis turns to the texts themselves, exploring how the selected themes develop across both narratives and what they reveal about power, agency, and resistance.

IV. ANALYSIS

This provides a comparative analysis of *Women Talking* and *Small Things Like These* across seven thematic axes, examining how both texts expose, complicate, and resist patriarchal power through narrative structure, ethical tension, and feminist critique.

Faith and religious beliefs

Faith and religious ideology are central frameworks through which patriarchal authority is both justified and challenged in *Women Talking* and *Small Things Like These*. Each narrative presents a distinct engagement with institutional belief systems, showing how faith can operate both as a tool of oppression and as a catalyst for ethical resistance. In *Women Talking*, the Mennonite. The community's rigid theological structure reinforces male dominance by using religious doctrine to silence dissent and perpetuate systemic gender-based violence. Figures such as Pastor Aaron frequently invoke scriptural authority to portray submission and endurance as spiritual virtues, thereby entrenching abuse under the guise of divine will (Polley, 2022). This reflects Foucault's (1979) analysis of discourse as a mechanism of power that determines what can be said and believed. However, the women's discussions in the hayloft mark a radical shift: they engage with scripture not as passive recipients but as active interpreters. Their theological inquiry recasts sacred texts as sites of feminist agency, echoing Butler's (1990) argument that performative rearticulation can disrupt normative structures of identity and power.

A clear expression of this theological resistance appears in Greta's assertion: "Leaving is how faith is demonstrated. Leaving happens because faith is stronger than the rules, bigger than life itself" (Polley, 2022). Her words overturn the traditional logic of obedience, redefining departure as an act of fidelity not to dogma but to a higher spiritual truth. This moment reflects the women's refusal to accept a form

of faith that demands silence and suffering, instead recasting belief as a mandate for resistance.

The women's collective deliberation situates feminist discourse within religious practice, framing their potential departure as both a spiritual and political act. By redefining spiritual devotion as principled resistance rather than passive obedience, the narrative shows how ethical consciousness can transform faith into a means of liberation. In contrast, *Small Things Like These* presents a quieter, more internal confrontation with religious authority. Bill Furlong's moral awakening unfolds amid the Catholic Church's pervasive control over Irish society in the 1980s. His discovery of the imprisoned girl in the Magdalene laundry does not lead to overt rebellion but instead prompts a deeply personal ethical reckoning (Keegan, 2021: 86). Foucault's (1980) concept of micro-resistance applies here: Bill's decision to intervene creates an individual fissure within a broader system of disciplinary power.

Bill's reflection "Was it possible… and yet calls yourself a Christian?" (Keegan, 2021: 106) reveals his growing disillusionment with performative faith devoid of moral action. Like the women in *Women Talking*, he recognizes that genuine belief is inseparable from ethical responsibility, presenting conscience as a measure of spiritual integrity.

Both texts show that religious belief, although often weaponized by patriarchal structures, can also inspire subversive reinterpretations and ethical resistance. The women's creation of a discursive counterspace exemplifies Fraser's (1990) concept of subaltern counterpublics, while Bill's ethical solitude evokes Spivak's (1988) notion of ethical witnessing and embodies a form of solidarity that requires neither visibility nor vocalization. Significantly, the interplay between speech and silence within religious frameworks underscores how the characters experience faith as a contested, lived reality. Through scriptural reinterpretation and embodied action, both works demonstrate that resisting patriarchal theology is possible, urgent, and deeply rooted in moral conscience. This ethical rearticulation of faith leads naturally to the next axis of analysis: the tension between forgiveness and accountability and the ways both texts negotiate the moral consequences of harm.

V. FORGIVENESS ALONGSIDE ACCOUNTABILITY

The theme of forgiveness and accountability presents a central moral and philosophical dilemma in both *Women Talking* and *Small Things Like These*, particularly within religious systems that often prioritize forgiveness over justice. These narratives examine the complexities of responding ethically to institutional abuse while challenging the religious imperative to forgive as a means of preserving patriarchal order. In *Women Talking*, the women's debate over how to respond to the repeated sexual violence in their Mennonite community centers on competing ideas of forgiveness and justice. Characters such as Ona question whether forgiveness can be meaningful without truth or change, expressing an ethical refusal to reconcile without acknowledgment of the harm inflicted (Polley, 2022).

Her stance echoes Butler's (2004) argument that reconciliation, when performatively detached from justice, risks perpetuating the very structures it claims to heal. Ona's reflections reveal the limitations of theological forgiveness when it functions as a means of moral erasure rather than restoration.

In contrast, Salome demands retribution, highlighting another facet of feminist resistance. Her refusal to absolve the perpetrators reinforces Fraser's (2008) argument that recognition alone is inadequate without structural redress. The narrative does not resolve the tension between these positions; instead, it presents them as part of an ongoing ethical struggle over how to respond to trauma within a closely regulated spiritual and social order.

In *Small Things Like These*, forgiveness emerges through quiet acts of conscience rather than collective deliberation. Bill Furlong's moral awakening is internal and solitary, shaped by small but significant moments—particularly his encounter with the girl trapped in the Magdalene laundry (Keegan, 2021: 86). By refusing to ignore her suffering, he assumes personal accountability and resists the broader community's acceptance of clerical abuse. Foucault's (1979) analysis of power as productive and diffuse is reflected in Bill's minor yet consequential choices, which challenge the hegemonic silence surrounding Church authority.

Unlike the visible resistance depicted in *Women Talking*, Bill's ethics are grounded in what Spivak

(1988) calls "ethical witnessing": attending to silenced suffering without appropriating it. His intervention challenges structural complicity by emphasizing that accountability can be enacted through presence and refusal rather than overt confrontation. Both texts critique the way religious ideology often demands forgiveness as a moral imperative while simultaneously erasing the conditions necessary for justice.

Fraser's (2008) concept of participatory parity frames the women's deliberations as a pursuit not merely of emotional closure but of transformative justice. Similarly, Bill's actions demonstrate that even solitary moral agency can constitute resistance when situated within broader structures of complicity. Ultimately, both *Women Talking* and *Small

VI. THE SILENCE OF COMPLICITY

Silence acts as a paradoxical force in Women Talking and Small Things Like These, enabling oppression and complicity, while, at times, allowing for resistance and ethical reflection. Both stories illustrate that silence is not merely a lack of speech; it has complex links with gender, power, and trauma. In Women Talking, silence is initially enforced by religious and patriarchal authority, serving to conceal abuse and uphold male dominance. The Mennonite elders' refusal to acknowledge sexual assaults, along with spiritual coercion and institutional illiteracy, fosters an environment where silence is both imposed and internalized (Polley, 2022). According to Foucault's (1979) theory of disciplinary power, control is maintained not just through force but by creating subjects who lack voice and agency. Thus, silence becomes a product of trauma and a social construct created by power.

Within the hayloft, a symbolic location for the women's discussions, this imposed silence starts to fracture. The space serves as a subaltern counterpublic according to Fraser (1990), functioning as a discursive platform where marginalized voices express opposing viewpoints. In this setting, speaking out becomes a radical act. Specifically, Ona's voice represents a break in the enforced silence, encapsulating Spivak's (1988) concept of ethical witnessing, where shared experiences necessitate a moral reaction. Her bravery in confronting violence and her refusal to accept easy reassurances convert silence into a battlefield. However, the narrative does not depict all silence as mere compliance. Butler (2004) argues that silence can also be a deliberate mode of resistance, particularly when speech is constrained by oppressive standards. For characters like Mariche, moments of silence may reflect struggles and intentional agency rather than passivity. The text recognizes that while breaking silence involves risks, silence itself may also serve as a form of survival rather than mere submission.

Foucault's (1980) observation about the circulation of power throughout every layer of society illustrates that even small gestures can significantly disrupt systems of domination. Bill's method of resistance is not marked by overt public protests but rather by adhering to Spivak's (1988) principles of listening and acting without taking ownership. His silence emerges as a form of quiet and responsible defiance. Within both works, silence is interwoven into a complex web of power dynamics, trauma, and ethical uncertainties. It may convey either repression or resilience, complicity or moral awareness, based on the context. The narratives resist simplistic interpretations, avoiding the valorization of speech for its own merit as well as the outright condemnation of silence. Instead, both are presented as morally significant actions influenced by the abilities and limitations of those involved. Therefore, Women Talking and Small Things Like These unveil that the politics surrounding silence remain fluid, contingent on who remains silent, their reasons, and the circumstances surrounding it. Silence transcends mere absence of agency, functioning as a space where power, ethics, and resistance are perpetually negotiated. After analyzing silence as a tool of complicity, the discussion shifts to the issue of agency, focusing on how characters assert their voices and autonomy within oppressive systems.

VII. AUTONOMY AND LIBERTY

In Women Talking and Small Things Like These, freedom and agency are influenced by ingrained patriarchal, religious, and social barriers rather than being absolute or unchecked. Both stories examine how individuals, whether acting together or individually, navigate their moral stances within structures that restrict their freedom. The women's meetings in the hayloft of Women Talking illustrate a notable example of collective agency. Their decision

to communicate, cast votes, and plan an escape represents a reclaiming of their agency in a system that has silenced them (Polley, 2022). The idea of performativity by Butler (1990) is especially pertinent here; the women's discussions not only reflect agency but help to create it, practicing different identities through speech acts that challenge traditional gender expectations.

The hayloft serves as a secluded space, distanced from male authority, that symbolizes a transitional area for ethical rethinking. Fraser's (1990) concept of subaltern counterpublics elucidates the political potential of this space, as it enables marginalized voices to develop collective forms of resistance. Characters such as Mariche and Salome illustrate the inherent tensions in this journey, as they contend with fear, anger, and the yearning for self-determination, highlighting how agency can be both complex and precarious.

Foucault (1979) points out that power is not just repressive but also generative, creating avenues for resistance while simultaneously enforcing boundaries. The women's agency arises not despite the system but through their involvement with its shortcomings and contradictions. Their collective trauma and reflection underpin their refusal to conform, rendering their resistance deeply impactful both emotionally and politically.

In contrast, Small Things Like These presents a more personalized and reflective view of agency. Bill Furlong's journey is quiet and marked by significant yet small choices. Living in a community shaped by Church authority, his moral awakening does not lead to public protest but a solitary act of defiance: assisting a girl imprisoned in the Magdalene laundry (Keegan, 2021: 86). This subtle but transformative action exemplifies what Spivak (1988) calls ethical responsibility, as it represents acting without spectacle, driven by a moral compass rather than institutional approval. Although Bill's sense of agency does not emerge through open dialogue like the women's in Women Talking, it holds substantial importance. His choice disrupts the norm of silent complicity and promotes an alternative masculinity founded on empathy and justice. Butler's (2004) notion of relational agency is applicable here: Bill's identity transforms not through grand rebellion but by recognizing vulnerability and responding ethically.

VIII. MORAL AWARENESS AND OBJECTION

Moral conscience serves as a vital point of resistance in both Women Talking and Small Things Like These, influencing how characters confront ethical challenges amid patriarchal and religious frameworks. Instead of depicting resistance as a grand break from the norm, both narratives imply that it often starts with personal introspection, a subtle realization of injustice, and the bravery to act, even when restricted. In Women Talking, Ona embodies this moral awareness through her reflective and empathetic voice, which grounds the group's discussions. Speaking not only as a survivor but also as a thinker, she challenges the theological and moral grounds for forgiveness and submission (Polley, 2022). Her clear moral vision resonates with Butler's (2004) concept of "precarious life," where vulnerability serves as a basis for ethical responsibility. Ona's resistance is deeply rooted in her commitment to justice, accountability, and collective change, as her dual role as listener and questioner allows her to serve as both a witness and a moral guide.

1. In Women Talking, moral conscience is not monolithic. Characters like Salome, Mariche, and Greta showcase various expressions of ethical conflict, anger, fear, and resignation, illustrating the emotional demands of making ethical choices. Fraser's (2008) observations on participatory justice cast their discussions as a battle against both external oppression and the pursuit of inner clarity and communal acknowledgment. The group's decision to depart, although complicated, reveals a collective conscience developed through shared trauma processing. Religious language is prominent; the women do not entirely abandon faith but instead reinterpret scripture to highlight its misapplications and envision it as a path to liberation. This discursive approach reflects Foucault's (1980) assertion that power and knowledge coalesce; while institutions manipulate discourse for control, individuals can reclaim it to resist. Therefore, moral conscience becomes intertwined with faith, serving as a venue for transformative engagement. In Small Things Like These, moral conscience is apparent in Bill Furlong's inner world. His contemplation of Church abuses, recollections of a vulnerable childhood, and compassion for the imprisoned girl culminate in an ethical crisis (Keegan, 2021: 86). Bill's quiet intervention represents a significant act of resistance. The concept of ethical

witnessing proposed by Spivak (1988) is crucial here: he does not speak on behalf of the victims but rather listens, acknowledges, and takes action without seeking approval. Bill's internal struggle, "Was there any point in being alive without helping one another?" (Keegan, 2021: 108), signifies a shift from passive acknowledgement to active moral engagement, resonating with Butler's (2004) idea of vulnerability as the foundation of ethical living. His moral position arises not through direct confrontation but via a subtle refusal to accept injustice as normal, opposing dominant masculinity and institutional power (Butler, 1997). Both texts resist portraying resistance as binary or absolute. Instead, resistance is profoundly human, emergent, layered, and influenced by lived experiences.

IX. CONCLUSION

This research illustrates how Women Talking and Small Things Like These provide powerful feminist and poststructural critiques of patriarchal and religious organizations, shedding light on the interconnected aspects of power, silence, language, and moral conscience. Through a multi-theoretical framework informed by Butler (1990, 1997, 2004), Foucault (1979, 1980), Fraser (1990, 2008), and Spivak (1988), the analysis reveals how both works challenge normative ideologies and question simplistic binaries concerning agency, speech, and resistance. Both stories present faith and religious ideology as pivotal structures that uphold patriarchal power while demonstrating how discourse can be reclaimed as a platform for feminist resistance. Women Talking reflects collective deliberation in the face of theological oppression, whereas Small Things Like These showcases how an individual's conscience can break institutional silence. The struggle between forgiveness and accountability reveals the intricate nature of resistance, highlighting the significance of recognition, responsibility, and structural reform (Fraser, 2008; Butler, 2004). Silence is shown to be multifaceted, serving either as protection or complicity, depending on the context (Foucault, 1979; Spivak, 1988). Language is portrayed as anything but neutral, becoming a battleground for ideological conflicts, while spatial arrangements like hayloft, laundry, and home reflect and shape ethical possibilities. An intersectional analysis emphasizes that oppression is seldom singular. By exploring gender, class, faith, and silence, the texts support Crenshaw's (1991) claim that feminist critique must involve intersecting identities. Resistance is dynamic, evolving through lived experiences, emotional nuances, and social limitations. In conclusion, Women Talking and Small Things Like These illustrate the power of literature and film to confront hegemonic systems and reimagine ethical agency. They urge attention to silences, challenge complicity, and recognize that resistance is nuanced, relational, and ethically intricate. Through distinct yet resonating portrayals of feminist awareness, both works enrich discussions on voice, witnessing, and the radical possibilities found within ethical responses.

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