Communal Voice and Female Speaking Subjectivity in Jeanette Winterson’s *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal*

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Jeanette Winterson (1959 – ) is an innovative fiction writer in contemporary English literature. Her works have elicited considerable critical attention for its focus on gender issues and experimental employment of narrative techniques. Apart from her most widely-known debut memoir *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985), she continues to experiment on biographical writing in her latest memoir *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal* (2011). In this book she writes about women’s life experiences, exploring and experimenting with innovative narrative modes to represent different female subjects. This memoir, negotiating with the predicament and the regain of the female protagonist’s subjectivity, deserves a close examination, especially with reference to the relationship between narrative strategies and female subjectivity.

The analytical paradigm of feminist narratology is conducive to the study of issues such as female subjectivity in a narratological mode of research so as to discover the relation between narrative effect and the explored issue. Adopting the related theories of feminist narratology and feminist criticism, this paper attempts to reveal the contribution of communal voice to the construction of the heroine’s speaking subjectivity in the selected memoir.
I. Predicament of the Heroine’s Speaking Subjectivity

Narrative voice has been a crucial term of feminist narratology, as it “has become a trope of identity and power” for “the collectively and personally silenced”. Among the various types of narrative voice, the communal one that “articulate either a collective voice or a collective of voices that share narrative authority” deserves exceptional attention in that it facilitates the achievement of the heroine's speaking subjectivity.

To become a speaking subject, the heroine goes through an incremental process from unrequitedness to resistance and finally to freely expressing herself. The predicament of having her voice heard and respected stems from, firstly, the foster mother’s discouragement at home. And to support the argument, it would be better to start with the critique of the foster mother’s self-identification with Virgin Mary, since it explains the mother’s repression of the daughter’s voice. In the novel, the heroine retells the mother’s story of trying every means to resist sexual intercourse with the father. The mother’s detestation of sexual intercourse results from her traumatic experiences. Her own mother was deeply afflicted by the husband’s womanizing and had died lonely. She feels indignant at her father and agonized over her miserable mother, but is also aware of the power asymmetry in a marital relation institutionalized by patriarchy. Seeking a way to avoid falling into the same trap as her mother did, she attempted to reject a heterosexual marriage. However, the social institution at that time declined her attempt, for a woman had to depend on her husband for financial support in that she was not allowed to enter into the workplace. In fact, the mother’s indifference to her husband and daughter prove that she rejects the identity of a housewife and child-bearer, a woman’s traditional role regulated by patriarchy. It is asceticism purported by the Church that facilitates her evasion of these matrimonial duties. The Church thus becomes her shelter, but also another snare that traps her into patriarchal assimilation.

The mother's internalization of patriarchal expectation can be explained by her conscious identification with the image of Virgin Mary. Julia Kristeva in “Stabat Mater” argues that the sublimated Virgin Mary is the result of a patriarchal conspiracy that associates dignity and divinity with virginity but actually prohibits women from jouissance. Therefore, the foster mother’s identification with Virgin Mary in essence deprives her of subjectivity because she is confined by patriarchal expectation and is reduced to an object of male gaze.
Adhering to the religious doctrine, the mother enjoys both the isolation from sexual desires and the power to isolate the daughter from those desires she believes inappropriate. She never provides the daughter with knowledges of sex. The daughter is expected to be the mother’s “another self”, or better still is a reproduction of Virgin Mary. When she discovers the daughter’s secret collection of fictions, she sets them on fire just because she considers them phonographic. And her prohibition of the daughter’s “inappropriate” desires extends to the determination of the daughter’s desire to read and write, with the six religious books in the house as the only exception. What’s more, as the heroine complains, “Mrs Winterson never respected my privacy. She ransacked my possessions, read my diaries, my notebooks, my stories, my letters” \[4\], the mother enjoys suppressing the daughter’s desire, which endows her with a sense of fulfillment in fostering the daughter as her “another self”.

The responsibility for the daughter’s suppressed voice is attributable to the mother’s problematic over-identification with her. The mother’s intervention of the daughter’s privacy represses the daughter’s voice expressing her desire, and consequently leads to the daughter’s subjectivity and self-worth yet to be accomplished. A notable example is the heroine’s voice ignored by the foster mother when she confesses her homosexual affection to the same-sex:

I have no idea how to begin so I open my mouth and I say, “I think I am always going to love women in the way that I do ...”

At that instant her varicose vein in the top of her leg bursts. [...] “I’m sorry. I didn’t want to upset you [...]” Then her leg erupts again.

By now she is lying backwards in the chair with her leg up on the half—polished coal scuttle. She is looking at the ceiling. She doesn’t say anything.

“Mum ... are you all right?”

“We’ve just had that ceiling decorated.” \[5\]

The heroine begins her speech with the pronoun “I”, which is supposed to entail strong self-consciousness. However, the indecisiveness in her voice tells her lack of confidence in herself and her decision to be heard and approved. The way she pleads for the mother’s permission implies that she is heavily dependent on the mother. In this sense, it can be inferred that she is far from autonomous and independent to make her own decision and act on her own. More importantly, the “I” she used is not a communal “I” that entails a communal voice for the marginal community of the female homosexuals. The way she confesses her homosexuality
apologetically suggests that she feels guilty of disappointing the mother. Her attitude presupposes her awareness that homosexuality is "abnormal" and disappointing and that it is not "right" to upset patriarchal expectation. Hence, her voice has not inscribed in itself a sense of communal consciousness and a demand for recognition and identity.

The mother's response, at the same time, indicates the predicament of the heroine's speaking subjectivity. Though the daughter speaks more, it is the mother who renders her voice unrequited. Not only does the mother give irrelevant answers, she also keeps a distance from the daughter. For the pronoun "we" the mother used represents the communal voice of her community, of which the Church is the symbol, thus excluding the daughter who rebels against the phallocentric doctrine and placing her in the position of "the other". In so doing, the mother ruptures her relationship with the daughter and the daughter's voice is lonely and unsupported.

The foster mother succeeds in defusing the awakening of the heroine's speaking subjectivity by subtly suppressing her voice at home, simultaneously there is a rebuke of her voice in the Church as well. The church, in this context, is the location dominated by the phallocentric and heterosexual regime and organized to cover up patriarchal oppression despite its alleged normality and rationality. One important similarity between the heroine's unrequited voice at home and in the Church is that it is the foster mother who brings the daughter to these two sites to bear such predicament. To safeguard the Church's order which is virtually patriarchal, the mother plays as its advocate to accuse and abuse those women who dare to rebel against the established patriarchal norms. Thus, when she discovers the daughter's homosexual relationship, without the slightest hesitation she brings the daughter to the Church to be blamed by the voice of authority. The example is as follows:

I noticed everyone was looking at me. We sang, we prayed, and then the pastor said that two of the flock were guilty of abominable sin. [...]  
As soon as he began I knew what was going to happen. Helen burst into tears and ran out of the church. I was told to go with the pastor.  
[...] I didn't even know I had a demon whereas Helen spotted hers at once and said yes yes yes. I hated her for that. Was love worth so little that it could be given up so easily?[
As is mentioned earlier, the Church serves as a cultural symbol of patriarchy to safeguard the legitimacy of heterosexuality and its convention is to throttle other
different voices, such as those from the homosexual community. Therefore, when the heroine poses a challenge to the phallocentric authority by committing what the Church purports is “abominable sin”, her voice is rebuked. And it is precisely the lack of communal consciousness in her voice that accounts for unrequited desire for recognition.

At first glance, the pronoun “I” and “we” seem to contain a communal consciousness. Nevertheless, what is incorporated in the heroine’s voice here is indeed a misidentification with the community which refuses to include her as a member. In the first paragraph, the heroine says “We sang, we prayed”. She regards herself as a member of the Church, but soon realizes her misidentification with a wrong community when the pastor declares the Church’s antagonistic stand. It is significant to notice that she “was told to go with the pastor”. The Church’s accusation of their “sin” goes without a chance for them to question, explain or defend. It aims to reassure that women without the patriarchal approval are not allowed to organize themselves into a unity which would pose a threat to the patriarchal status quo. Therefore, it extinguishes any female voice which will possibly create a communal consciousness and help women to find each other. What’s more, when talking about Helen, the heroine does not say “we” because Helen’s submission makes her fail to feel a sense of solidarity with Helen as an oppressed group standing face to face with the adverse unity. The heroine and Helen’s voices here represent separate and different communities. While the heroine hopes that Helen will stand by her side, Helen shows no concern for allying with her. Helen’s admission of having “abnormal” relationship with the heroine contains the most heartbreaking message: her ready detachment from the heroine. Given that the communal consciousness in the heroine’s voice is already tenuous, Helen’s betrayal makes her situation worse off.

Failing to speak in a communal voice, the heroine is disqualified with the power to rebel against the suppressing power which is much stronger. That is to say, without a supportive power to depend on, the heroine’s single resistance is futile. As long as she could not gain strength from the ally of women which confirms her, her speaking subjectivity will still be in the grip of the phallocentric and be imprisoned in the snare of silence.

To summarize the discussion of this section, both sites, i. e. home and the Church, create an environment where the heroine is accused, abused and abandoned. And the heroine, in neither site, is able to take up a communal voice.
which would satisfy her desire to break the phallocentric codes that negate her voice and benefit her speaking subjectivity, not to mention sustaining such a voice. Nevertheless, the predicament of her speaking subjectivity on the other hand intensifies her desire to regain her voice and acquire recognition.

II. Regain and Recognition of the Heroine’s Speaking Subjectivity

The awakening of the heroine’s voice as a communal one is stimulated by the torture of patriarchal power around her. After the event of exorcism conducted by the Church members in their house, she is clear about her tough condition. She realizes that to liberate herself from the patriarchal prison, she has to regain and launch a forceful and independent voice first in the single battlefield in the house so as to join the oppressed community. Therefore, the heroine is filled with an urge to speak by and for herself, which signifies the awakening of her strong self-consciousness and paves the way for her to be empowered as a communal voice later. The communal consciousness in her voice is gradually gathering, which can be perceived, for example, in her dialogue with her uncle who threatens to drive her out the house:

“I said to Connie don’t go adopting. You don’t know what you get.”

“Drop dead.”

“You what?”

“Drop dead.”

Slam. Straight across the face. Janey was really crying now. I had a split lip.

Uncle Alec was flushed, furious. [7]

Uncle Alec is another symbolic figure of patriarchy who supports the foster mother to subjugate the heroine with violence. In the house, the heroine is under the foster mother’s strict surveillance. Even if the mother has to leave the house, she asks Uncle Alec to keep a watch on the daughter in case the daughter escapes to meet her homosexual lover. Although Uncle Alec does not get along well with the foster mother, as the heroine discovers that “[t]here was nothing between them but loathing”, [8] they ally with each other in front of the heroine and share an accordant attitude towards her. The mother’s invitation of Uncle Alec, whose masculine presence is to warn and abuse the daughter, in turn testifies her identity as a patriarchal accomplice assisting to persecute the disobedient daughter.

Despite the terrific threatening of Uncle Alec, the heroine’s self-consciousness to
regain her voice is awakened here. Hence the determination to affirm her presence, her desire to extend her own space and her goal to acquire subjectivity. And this determination takes shape in the form of irreducible oral defiance. Given that Uncle Alec is an incarnation of hegemonic masculinity, the first type of masculinities proposed by Raewyn Connell that “guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” [9], the recipient of the imperative sentence speaking in a tough-tone with commanding connotation, i.e. “Drop dead”, should not be limited to Uncle Alec only, but should extend to direct towards the oppressing community to which the uncle belongs. Allegedly the heroine is speaking on behalf of the community of oppressed women. In this case it is plausible that the heroine’s voice here contains a communal consciousness.

Authorized as a communal voice, the daughter becomes exceptionally confident when speaking to the mother, especially in the following dialogue in which she ignores the mother’s declaration of repudiating her daughterhood and insists on her homosexuality despite having to leave home:

“You’re no daughter of mine.”

It hardly mattered. It was too late for lines like that now. I had a language of my own and it wasn’t hers. [...]

“Mum... I love Janey.”

“[...]. I’m going to tell her mother.”

“Her mother knows. She’s not like you.”

Mrs Winterson was quiet for a long time and then she started to cry.

I heard her behind me. I turned.

“Jeanette, will you tell me why?” [10]

Compared with the past condition that she had been unable to speak in a communal voice, the heroine is not only able to ignore the mother’s threat, but also able to say “I” here with a strong collective consciousness of the oppressed female community she belongs to. Her relationship with the foster mother has gone through subversive transformation. In contrast with her diminished presence in the past as the mother’s shadow with a lost subjectivity, the daughter now frees herself from the fetters of the mother’s oppressing voice and enjoys her own right to speak by and for herself. And it should be emphasized that she is speaking in a position which she is deeply aware of. That is, a position in which she will be conceded as an autonomous self whose speaking subjectivity is respected and recognized. Her insistence on
homosexual love is articulated in a confident tone, not inscribing in it a sense of indecisiveness or fear. Thus, in spite of the mother's threat of breaking their mother-daughter relationship, she does not hesitate to cut herself off from her sixteen years of family life. For she is ready to listen to her own voice and seek a broader space where her voice could be heard and her value as an autonomous subject could be recognized. With the regain of her voice, she finds her self which is once silenced, swallowed and stifled in the house.

The mother's anxious babble here, under the vibration of the daughter's vigoroso voice, suggests that her once powerful voice is waning. Her voice is first unrequited, then interrupted and finally transformed into the weaker one. When the daughter tells that her homosexual lover's mother speaks no opposing word to their relationship, the mother for the first time perceives a loss of communal solidarity. Her silence and cry symbolize her mourning for her lost authority. Her last words, saying "Jeanette, will you tell me why", embody a tone of imploration and signify the subversion of their relationship. What's more, it is the first time for the mother to call the daughter by her name, which implies that the daughter's identity as an independent individual is finally recognized. At this point there could be little threat from the foster mother to prevent the daughter from developing her speaking subjectivity.

While the daughter regains her voice through negotiating an overturned relationship with the foster mother, the recognition of her voice is facilitated through her identification with the birth mother whose voice implies self-consciousness and self-reliance.

I am very pleased to see her. "I thought I'd get the washing done before you got here," is her very first line.

It is just what I would say myself. [11]

"I like men myself, but I don't rely on them. [...] I don't rely on anybody, me."

Yes, we are alike. The optimism, the self-reliance. [...] I look at her and it seems to be an inheritance. [12]

What is embodied in the birth mother's voice carries a strong sense of self-consciousness and self-reliance with the pervasive "I". The image of the birth mother is a courageous one whose subjectivity will help the daughter to attain and maintain her own independent subjectivity. Courageous mothering is advocated by the American female poet Adrienne Rich, who calls for a courageous mothering of the
daughter whose subjectivity will be successfully constructed when the mother is represented as a woman of confidence, self-reliance and self-consciousness. A courageous mother also provides the daughter with sufficient space to speak. Hearing the voice of the mother who represents a community of intelligent and independent women, the daughter finally discovers that it is with this voice of the birth mother that their voices will mutually authorize or empower each other. The similarity she claims to share with the birth mother, which she humbly attributes to a biological inheritance, is a formal pronouncement of the daughter's identification with the courageous mother.

The birth mother, whose voice is in a long absence, is for the first time allowed to make a strong sound. The frequency with which the birth mother says “I” here reveals her subjectivity and strength invested by a strong community. Simultaneously, the heroine begins to pick up a collective voice with a plural “we” that designates a positive identification with the birth mother. Separated for a long time, they are now brought together and it is time to say “we”. For their voices overlap and echo each other just as the daughter claims firmly that they share a lot in common. The communal “Is” and “we” collaborate to produce a communal consciousness between these two women.

The heroine's identification with a courageous mother explicated above offers the possibility of the attainment of her speaking subjectivity, and it is the mother's voice reiterating her daughterhood that further recognizes her speaking subjectivity:

“I ordered your book from the library” said Ann, “before you sent me anything, and I said to the librarian, ‘This is my daughter.’ ‘What?’ she said. ‘It’s for your daughter?’ ‘No! Jeanette Winterson is my daughter.’ I felt so proud.”

For a long time the heroine failed to affirm her daughterhood and a sense of worth from the foster mother, with whom she misidentified and by whom her voice and thus subjectivity were almost annihilated. The only and last time the foster mother referred the heroine as her daughter is when the heroine left home after the mother declared to her “You’re no daughter of mine”. Although the heroine’s voice is no longer suppressed by the foster mother, she still demands recognition from her relationships with the others. And the birth mother responds to her demand for identity recognition with an affirmative gesture. The reiteration of the heroine's daughterhood made by the birth mother to the librarian reassures the heroine's
identity. It is a communal voice reaffirming the daughter’s membership in the community to which the two women belong. Different from her foster family, the birth family creates a reciprocal and harmonious community of able, caring and independent women. This is a community of mutual understanding, in which women do not live for men or defined by men and the heroine is able to attain membership without patriarchal approval. Not only the birth mother, but also Aunt Linda and Gary welcome and embrace her into the family, as Aunt Linda says, “Everybody wants to meet you.” [16]

What is emphasized in this description of the harmonious reunion of two separate females is the solidarity of a female community in which women sustain and support each other’s subjectivity, and struggle as a unity for more freedom and rights to realize their values.

**Conclusion**

The analysis in this paper goes through a process from a denouncement of the phallocentric voices conspiring to deprive the heroine of her voice, to a positive affirmation of the heroine’s desire to speak in a position respected and recognized; the construction of the heroine’s speaking subjectivity henceforth possible. The heroine’s voice is first regained by dislocating herself from the misidentification with the foster mother, and then recognized by identifying with the courageous birth mother; and it is precisely the narrative strategy of communal voice that functions to facilitate the awakening and accomplishment of her speaking subjectivity. That is to say, the technical strategy of communal voice is amenable to constitute the heroine’s speaking subjectivity. And it has been elaborated in this essay that communal voice can readily be used to explore intersubjective mother-daughter relationship in the selected text in which a female communal consciousness is created through the harmonious collaboration of the mother and the daughter’s voices. A reciprocal intersubjective mother-daughter relationship thereby takes shape in the vibration of such a communal voice. It is a relationship that enhances female affiliation which protects female subjectivity from patriarchal suppression.

**Notes:**

[1] Susan S. Lanser. *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice*. Ithaca; Cornell University Press, 1992, p. 3.

[2] Ibid., p. 21.
[3] Julia Kristeva. “Stabat Mater”, Tales of Love, trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1987, pp. 235 -237.

[4] Jeanette Winterson. Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal. New York: Grove Press, 2011, pp. 59 -60.

[5] Ibid., p. 215.

[6] Ibid., p. 80.

[7] Ibid., p. 110.

[8] Ibid., pp. 109 -110.

[9] Raewyn Connell. Masculinities. 2nd ed. Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2005, p. 77.

[10] Jeanette Winterson. Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal. New York: Grove Press, 2011, pp. 112 -113.

[11] Ibid., p. 213.

[12] Ibid., pp. 216 -217.

[13] Adrienne Rich. Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution. London: Virago, 1977, pp. 246 -247.

[14] Jeanette Winterson. Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal. New York: Grove Press, 2011, p. 224.

[15] Ibid., p. 112.

[16] Ibid., p. 218.

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