



Silenced Voices and the Violence of Patriarchy: A Feminist Analysis of Timberlake Wertenbaker's *The Love of the Nightingale*

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المخلص

تستخدم هذه الورقة البحثية إطاراً تحليلياً نسوياً لدراسة مسرحية *The Love of the Nightingale* لتيمبرليك ويرتنبيكر من خلال عدستي الأصوات المُهمشة والعنف الأبوي. ومن خلال تحليل التمثيل الرمزي لشخصية فيلوميلا، توضح الدراسة كيف تُبرز المسرحية القمع التاريخي والمنهجي لوكالة المرأة، مبيّنةً نتائج السيطرة الأبوية على أنها عنف جسدي وعاطفي في آن واحد. وبالاعتماد على مناهج الأدب النسوي، توظف الورقة مفاهيم أساسية مثل "النظام الأبوي" – المفهوم على أنه النظام الاجتماعي الشامل الذي يُهمّش النساء – و"الأصوات المُهمشة" – أي تغييب السرد النسائي بشكل مقصود لدعم هياكل السلطة القمعية. كما تُبرز التحليل الاستراتيجي الذي تنتهجه ويرتنبيكر لاستعادة سلطة السرد، مظهرةً عملية تحوّل يصبح فيها فعل السرد ذاته شكلاً من أشكال المقاومة والتمكين. وتُظهر الورقة أن مسرحية *The Love of the Nightingale* تقدّم نقداً للأعراف الأبوية وتعيد تصور العلاقة بين الصوت، والسلطة، والنوع الاجتماعي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: النظام الأبوي، الأصوات المُهمشة، التحليل النسوي، استعادة السرد، المقاومة الأدبية.

Abstract:

This research paper employs a feminist analytical framework to examine Timberlake Wertenbaker's *The Love of the Nightingale* through the lenses of silenced voices and patriarchal violence. By examining the symbolic representation of Philomela, the study explains how the play foregrounds the historical and systemic suppression of female agency, depicting the consequences of patriarchal control as both physical and emotional violence. Utilizing feminist literary methodologies, the paper utilizes key concepts such as "patriarchy" – understood as the pervasive societal system that marginalizes women – and "silenced voices" – the deliberate negation of female narratives designed to uphold oppressive power structures. The analysis further highlights Wertenbaker's strategic reclamation of narrative authority, illustrating a

transformative process in which the act of storytelling emerges as an act of resistance and empowerment. This paper illustrates that *The Love of the Nightingale* offers a critique of patriarchal norms to reconceptualize the intersections between voice, power, and gender.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Silenced Voices, Feminist Analysis, Narrative Reclamation, Literary Resistance.

“In patriarchal culture, a woman is defined and delimited by her difference from masculinity.” (Gilbert and Gubar). Hence, many classical works from the ancient Greeks to modern-day literature have been about men and their daily quests and struggles, while women are on the margin of these narratives. Some male authors even neglect women completely, making them a silent participant in the plot, if the woman is given a chance to participate in the plot at all. Therefore, female authors have wanted to take popular classical works and rewrite them to give the females in these male-dominant narratives a voice and a story. Feminist theory and gender studies provide a vital lens for interrogating literature that has traditionally been embedded in patriarchal discourses.

At the core of feminist thought is the recognition that gender is a social construct—a notion that challenges the idea of fixed, natural differences between men and women. Consequently, the rewriting of myths and classical works has emerged as to defy the social constructs of gender and gender roles. Many examples of rewritten myths exist in the literature of female authors who sought to give the women in popular narratives and myths a voice and a story. Thus, the retelling of myths examines how they are reinterpreted from a different perspective or through the eyes of a different character than in the original. In doing so, female authors have resorted to deconstructing the original narrative to accommodate the new perspective they wish to introduce. “Contemporary feminism has employed deconstructive strategies in order to destabilize a binary model inscribed in the masculine/feminine dyad. Feminist authors deconstruct the original myth and the original narrative to create a space that could accommodate their new perspective and input. Feminists have provocatively elaborated new frameworks in which to locate the gendered and sexual subject” (Phoca 46).

Feminism is, in simple words, the belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities in all aspects of life, including education, work, and personal freedom (Adichie 20). Hence, feminism and gender studies are closely linked. Gender refers to the roles, behaviors, and expectations that society assigns to people based on their perceived sex (Butler 23). Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*

argues that gender is performative; that is, it is produced and reproduced through repeated actions and cultural rituals (Butler 25). In this sense, gender is less about an intrinsic identity and more about a set of behaviors dictated by societal norms. In other words, gender roles vary and differ across cultures and time periods. Hence, it is not a fixed mold. Therefore, gender and gender roles can be changed and altered based on the needs of a society (Butler 25). Butler's gender performativity revolutionized feminist thought.

Many feminist theories have also explored how gender has been used to justify discrimination and maintain power imbalances between men and women (Hooks). Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* provides another critical foundation for understanding gender dynamics in literature. De Beauvoir famously stated, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (de Beauvoir 15), highlighting how femininity is constructed through socialization rather than biology. This notion of "othering" is central to feminist readings of myth: women have historically been relegated to secondary roles, defined primarily by their relationships to men. In classical mythology, female characters are often cast as either passive victims or monstrous aberrations, their stories dictated by male narratives.

Early feminist critics, including Mary Wollstonecraft and Virginia Woolf, pointed out the ways in which literature has historically reflected and reinforced male-dominated worldviews. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf famously argued that women's voices had been systematically erased from literary history, writing that "for most of history, Anonymous was a woman" (Woolf 51). This recognition of the erasure of female authorship is particularly relevant to Timberlake Wertenbaker's play *The Love of a Nightingale*, which rewrites an ancient myth that originally silenced its female protagonist.

Building on de Beauvoir's critique of gender as a social construct, Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970) further exposes how patriarchal ideology shapes literature and culture. Millett argues that male-authored texts often reinforce male dominance by depicting women as passive, dependent, or victims of male power (Millett 26). Butler's work also informs a broader deconstruction of mythic structures. In classical mythology, gender roles are often rigidly defined, with male characters embodying active, heroic qualities while female characters serve as passive figures or instruments for male narratives. Therefore, female authors make it a point to shift the narrative of the original myths when they rewrite them. For instance, Timberlake Wertenbaker's *The Love of the Nightingale* is a retelling of Philomele's myth. The original myth depicts Philomele's silence as an act of male dominance. However, in her *The Love of the Nightingale*, Wertenbaker challenges and actively resists such a depiction. She instead crafts a narrative that makes Philomele's

transformation not only an act of male control but a reassertion of female subjectivity. Wertenbaker also uses the original myth as a vehicle for female resistance and transformation.

The Love of the Nightingale can be seen as an enactment of *écriture féminine*, as it disrupts conventional mythic structures and instead offers a narrative centered on female solidarity, resistance, and transformation. In the original myth, Philomele's enforced silence represents the ultimate patriarchal control over women's bodies and voices. Wertenbaker, however, disrupts this narrative, allowing Philomele not only to speak but to challenge and transform her oppression. The play, in this sense, is a feminist act of revisionist mythology—one that seeks to rewrite history in favor of the silenced. This research paper, henceforth, examines how the interplay among feminism, gender, myth, and literature enables women to reclaim narratives that historically marginalized and silenced them.

Timberlake Wertenbaker's *The Love of the Nightingale* offers a searing contemporary engagement with the classical myth of Philomele. It transforms the myth into a potent critique of patriarchal power structures and their devastating impact on female agency and voice. The play also reveals how societal norms, male authority, and the suppression of female sexuality contributes and leads to the silencing and brutalization of women. *The Love of the Nightingale* is a powerful commentary on the enduring nature of gendered violence and the struggle for female expression within oppressive systems.

Butler's theory of gender performativity is particularly relevant to *The Love of the Nightingale*, as Wertenbaker exposes the constructed nature of gender roles in both myth and contemporary society. Wertenbaker reflects this idea through characters like Philomele and Procne, who challenge traditional expectations of female passivity. Philomele's intellectual curiosity and resistance to silence, along with Procne's eventual rejection of her role as a dutiful wife, disrupt the notion that women's subordination is natural or inevitable. Their acts of defiance—through speech, resistance, and performance—demonstrate how gender norms can be subverted. By rewriting the Procne–Philomele myth, Wertenbaker dismantles binary oppositions such as male/female and silence/speech, suggesting that women can reshape their destinies through alternative forms of expression. This aligns with Butler's claim that acts of resistance can reveal the performative and unstable nature of gender norms (Butler 33). The play's very structure reinforces this point: it opens with a conversation between the Male Chorus and two soldiers, immediately establishing a world governed by male authority, violence, and exclusion. This absence of female voices in the opening moments highlights the patriarchal setting against which the women's resistance will unfold.

The two soldiers at the beginning of the play start insulting each other and calling each other names. The verbal exchange between the two soldiers starts with silly names like: "You cat's whisker." (Wertenbaker 291). However, this exchange of insults quickly escalates, and the two soldiers start actually cursing each other, as in "You son of a bitch," "You son of a bleeding whore," and then the other soldier quickly runs out of curse words to use, so he says: "You son of a woman" (291). This seemingly simple exchange shows how men see women and how women are treated and looked at in the world of the play. Cursing someone is meant to be insulting and the one who curses another tries to use the most hurtful insults he/she could think of. The exchange of "You son of a woman" indicates that women are, at least in this world, something shameful and something to be insulted by. This sentence also suggests that the word woman is synonymous with "whore" and "bitch", which inherently means that women are reduced to whores and bitches. Hence, men get to use them the way they see fit, since a "whore" gets paid to carry out a man's desire and his sexual fantasies. This also suggests that men get the right to control those rouge females who are out to destroy society with their "heinous" acts.

On the other hand, Wertenbaker uses the female chorus to counter the male chorus. However, the female chorus, at the beginning of the play, was just like the male chorus defending the patriarchal world they live in. Wertenbaker utilizes the chorus in a way that amplifies the feminist critique. The chorus, composed of women, initially embodies societal expectations and the internalization of patriarchal norms. They express concern for reputation and adherence to traditional roles. However, as the play progresses and they witness the injustice inflicted upon Philomele, their voices begin to shift. They become a collective voice of outrage and solidarity, demonstrating the potential for female community to challenge patriarchal structures. The chorus eventually challenges traditional expectations of female passivity by asserting their agency, deconstructing the notion that women's silence and subordination are natural or inevitable. This aligns with feminist theories that emphasize the importance of female bonding and collective action in resisting oppression (Bunch 124). The chorus's transformation reflects a growing awareness of their own subjugation and a nascent understanding of the need for collective resistance. As Helene Cixous argues, patriarchal societies often operate through a "logic of mastery," where male power is asserted through the subjugation of the feminine (88). *The Love of the Nightingale* vividly portrays and deconstructs this logic in action.

The play explores the complexities of female relationships within a patriarchal framework, which is done through the female chorus, Niobe, and Procne. In contrast to the female chorus who eventually challenges male dominance and

defends women and gives them a voice, there is another example of females who are the voice of the patriarchy: Niobe. She is a servant who is given the task of taking care of Philomele and answering Philomele's demands. Niobe presents in the play the patriarchal voice that helps further subjugating women. Niobe at first did not question any of Tereus' strange demands when he wanted Philomele to stay with him late at night. However, she did not want to leave Philomele alone with Tereus because a young girl and a man cannot be left alone, which is another stark example of the patriarchy speaking and its influence on women. Niobe's role as the advocate for the patriarchy was evident when Tereus raped Philomele. Niobe blamed Philomele for saying "No" and she blamed her for having a voice and for refusing the demands and wants of a king, of a man. "She should have consented. Easier that way. Now it will be all pain." (Wertenbaker 330). She later on wanted Philomele to be an object for Tereus to use as he likes because it was better for Philomele to just accept whatever Tereus was willing to give her to avoid being dumped at the end because "They don't like [women] much afterwards, you know" (334). She is, here, referring to the relationship between a man and a woman after having sexual intercourse. This strongly suggests that a woman is only for a man to use as an object of desire and as a sex slave who only gets to "smile" or to "[g]et some coins if [she] can" (334).

"Niobe: Be careful. Worse things can happen. Keep low. Believe me. I know. Keep silent.

Philomele: Never.

Niobe: Here's the King. Hold back your tongue, Philomele." (334)

This exchange between Niobe and Philomele highlights the importance of silencing women in a patriarchal society that does not understand or listen to any voice other than the voice of the macho male, the one who is in power or has power. Since Philomele did not want to keep silent about her rape, the play introduces to audience the scene where her tongue is being cut. The physical act of cutting Philomele's tongue represents the literal silencing of a woman who has been violated, highlighting the patriarchal fear of female testimony and the lengths to which men will go to suppress female narratives of abuse. As Elaine Showalter argues in *A Literature of Their Own*, women's experiences have historically been marginalized and excluded from dominant discourses (12). Hence, Philomele's rape experience has been silenced and marginalized to serve the male dominated world. Philomele's physical silencing becomes a potent metaphor for the societal silencing of women's voices, particularly when they speak of male violence. Her inability to articulate her trauma forces her to find alternative modes of expression, such as weaving, underscoring the resilience of the female spirit in the face of oppression, even as it highlights the brutality that necessitates such resilience. This

act of forced muteness resonates with Judith Herman's analysis of trauma, which notes the ways in which traumatic experiences can shatter the victim's ability to articulate their story (1). This act also reinforces male dominance by depicting women as victims of male power (Millet 26).

The Female Chorus's questioning at the end of the play serves as a poignant reflection on the consequences of silencing and its connection to wider patterns of systemic oppression. Their final lines do not offer closure but instead open up a space for interrogation, compelling the audience to consider the implications of Philomele's story beyond the immediate narrative. The Chorus asks not only why Philomele was silenced, but also who benefits from such silencing and what other voices have been muted in similar ways. These questions shift the focus from the individual tragedy of Philomele to a broader critique of how power operates by erasing dissent, especially among marginalized groups. The Chorus, composed of women who observe but rarely intervene, suddenly breaks its passive role, voicing a collective awareness of how the mechanisms that destroyed Philomele are mirrored in the treatment of women, minorities, and the socially disempowered across time and place.

By linking Philomele's suffering to the experiences of all silenced groups, the Chorus universalizes her narrative, transforming it into a political statement about oppression. Their questioning emphasizes that silencing is never neutral—it is an intentional act that maintains dominance and erases alternative narratives. In this way, Wertenbaker uses the Chorus to draw attention to the structural nature of injustice, suggesting that the violence inflicted upon Philomele is not an isolated event but part of a continuum of suppression enacted against those who challenge normative power. The Chorus's voice at the end thus becomes a moment of awakening, both for themselves and for the audience, as they gesture toward the necessity of remembering, listening to, and amplifying voices that have been historically erased. Their questions linger, unresolved, asking the audience to confront their own complicity in systems that silence—and to imagine what justice might look like if those voices were truly heard.

Tereus embodies the unchecked power afforded to men in a patriarchal society. His desire for Philomele is presented not as a transgression to be questioned, but as an entitlement. This entitlement culminates in the violent rape of Philomele, an act that serves as the central trauma of the play and a stark illustration of Susan Brownmiller's assertion in *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* that rape is "nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear" (15). Tereus's act is not merely one of sexual assault; it is an assertion of dominance, a silencing of female desire and autonomy.

As Laura Mulvey's work on the male gaze suggests, in patriarchal cultures, women are often positioned as objects of male desire and control (833). Tereus's actions exemplify this objectification taken to its most brutal extreme.

Procne's initial complicity, born out of fear and a desire to maintain her position within the male-dominated court, reflects the ways in which women can be positioned against each other by patriarchal structures. Her eventual rage and act of revenge, the murder of her son Itys, can be interpreted as a radical, albeit horrific, act of agency in response to the systemic violence she and her sister have endured. This act, while disturbing, can be seen as a desperate attempt to reclaim power and disrupt the patriarchal order that has caused them so much pain. As Adrienne Rich argues in *Of Woman Born*, motherhood itself can be a site of both power and oppression for women (247), and Procne's actions grapple with this complex dynamic. The shared trauma and eventual alliance between Procne and Philomele highlight the potential for female solidarity to emerge from shared experiences of oppression, echoing Bell Hooks's emphasis on the importance of sisterhood in feminist struggle (43).

By centering Philomele's experience and giving voice to the trauma often marginalized in traditional tellings of the myth, Wertenbaker engages in a form of feminist revisionism. She reclaims the narrative from a male-centric perspective and foregrounds the suffering and agency of the female characters. This act of Philomele resorting to other creative ways to tell her story aims to recover and reinterpret women's stories and experiences from a female perspective (Gilbert and Gubar 85). Wertenbaker's play can be seen as an act of "speaking the unspeakable," giving voice to the silenced narratives of women throughout history.

The play implicitly critiques the binary opposition of male/active and female/passive, revealing the damaging consequences of such rigid and essentialist gender constructs. Wertenbaker presents a world where individuals are forced into narrow roles, and deviation from these roles is met with violence or repression. As Judith Butler argues, gender is not an innate truth but a set of repeated actions and behaviors dictated by cultural norms (23). In *The Love of the Nightingale*, Wertenbaker's characters are shown to be trapped within these enforced performances, navigating identities that have been prescribed to them by a patriarchal order. The violence inflicted upon Philomele can be read as a brutal enforcement of these norms—a punishment for stepping outside the expected boundaries of femininity.

From her first appearance, Philomele is portrayed as curious, outspoken, and openly fascinated by sexuality. Rather than embodying the quiet modesty traditionally associated with femininity, she is inquisitive and unashamed of her

desires. Her sexual curiosity, framed in the play as excessive or inappropriate, positions her as a threat to the patriarchal status quo. In this context, Tereus's assault becomes more than a personal act of violence; it is a systemic attempt to silence a woman who dares to exist beyond the confines of socially sanctioned womanhood. Furthermore, as Raewyn Connell argues in *Masculinities*, dominant forms of masculinity are often sustained through the subordination of women and the policing of gender boundaries (77). Tereus embodies this hegemonic masculinity, which is defined not just by power, but by its dependence on the control and suppression of the feminine. His violence is not simply an individual crime—it is an extreme but revealing manifestation of patriarchal masculinity at work, illustrating how gender hierarchies are maintained through domination and fear.

Philomele's play-acting during the Bacchic festival marks a powerful moment of revolt in *The Love of the Nightingale*, transforming performance into a mode of resistance. Stripped of her tongue and silenced by violence, Philomele turns to theatrical reenactment as a way to reclaim her voice and expose the truth of what happened to her. The Bacchic festival, rooted in Dionysian tradition, temporarily suspends societal norms and allows for inversion and subversion. It is within this liminal space that Philomele seizes the opportunity to act out her trauma, using the stage not for entertainment, but for confrontation. Her performance transcends the boundaries of language, demonstrating that even in silence, the body can testify, accuse, and resist. In this moment, theatre becomes not only a medium of storytelling but also an instrument of justice.

By dramatizing the violence she endured, Philomele subverts the passive role that has been forced upon her and forces the audience—especially Procne—to witness the reality of patriarchal brutality. This act of embodied storytelling is radical in its refusal to be silenced. Philomele's choice to communicate through performance rather than remain in voiceless suffering challenges the structures that attempted to erase her. It is a reclaiming of agency through artistic means, and in doing so, she rejects the victimhood assigned to her. The Bacchic festival's association with divine madness and feminine liberation adds another layer of significance to her act, as it aligns her revolt with a sacred tradition of ecstatic defiance. Her theatrical rebellion becomes a ritual of truth-telling, reclaiming both narrative and identity in the face of systemic silencing.

Moreover, the act of play-acting within a festival context underscores Wertenbaker's broader commentary on the function of theatre as a site of resistance. By embedding a play within the play, Wertenbaker draws attention to the transformative potential of performance itself. Philomele's reenactment

unsettles the male-dominated order not through direct confrontation, but through art that refuses to conceal violence or conform to imposed scripts. It is a moment in which the personal becomes political, and performance becomes protest. The temporary freedom of the Bacchic festival allows Philomele to step outside the confines of gendered expectations and to use the tools of theatre—gesture, movement, spectacle—as weapons against the silence imposed upon her. In doing so, she not only communicates her own pain but also exposes the fragility of the patriarchal structures that sought to suppress her.

The transformation of Philomele into a nightingale at the play's conclusion can be interpreted in multiple ways. On the one hand, it can be seen as a tragic end, a final silencing where her voice is reduced to a bird's song, a beautiful but ultimately powerless expression of her trauma. This underscores the enduring power of patriarchal forces to suppress female voices, even in metaphorical terms. On the other hand, the nightingale's song can be seen as a symbol of resilience, a testament to the enduring power of female experience to find expression, even in the face of extreme violence. The song, though non-verbal, becomes a potent reminder of the injustice that was committed, a haunting melody that refuses to be forgotten. This suggests that even when direct articulation is impossible, the body and artistic expression can bear witness to suffering (Caruth 4). The nightingale's song, in this sense, becomes a form of protest, an enduring testament to the violence Philomele endured.

In conclusion, Timberlake Wertenbaker's *The Love of the Nightingale* offers a powerful and nuanced critique of patriarchal power and its devastating consequences for women. Through a feminist lens, enriched by insights from gender studies, the play exposes the violence inherent in male dominance, the suppression of female voices and agency, and the complexities of female relationships within oppressive structures. By reimagining the myth of Philomele, Wertenbaker not only highlights the historical roots of gendered violence but also underscores its enduring relevance. The play is revealed as a transformative text—one that deconstructs patriarchal narratives, redefines the symbolism of transformation, and highlights the intersections of oppression that continue to shape the female experience. The play serves as a stark reminder of the importance of challenging patriarchal norms and creating spaces for female voices to be heard, resisting the silencing that Philomele so tragically endures. Wertenbaker's work stands as a significant contribution to feminist drama, prompting audiences to confront the ongoing struggle for gender equality and the urgent need to address the systemic violence that continues to silence women. *The Love of the Nightingale*

demonstrates that myth, when reinterpreted through the critical insights of feminist theory, can serve as a dynamic and enduring tool for social transformation.

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