

Women Talking: A Discourse on Violence, Trauma and Survival

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Women Talking (novel by Miriam Toews in 2018; film by Sarah Polley in 2022), is a fictional account of eight Mennonite women in Bolivia, gathering in the wake of the men's arrests to decide a course of action for their life. The plot begins with the rapists having been carted off to jail and the women of an isolated religious community wrestling with the decision to do nothing, stay and fight, or to leave. This article is a feminist reading of the novel and the movie, as appropriately titled, women talking about their lives, prospects of their future, the trauma they were put through, the complexities of—and choices between—faith, love, safety, democracy, and forgiveness. The role of religious pacifism, hegemonic masculinity and rape culture propagated by society are studied in relation to the lives of these Mennonite women.

Keywords: Faith; Hegemonic Masculinity; Rape; Salvation; Trauma

Introduction

The opening scene of *Women Talking* depicts a young woman sleeping in bed by herself. Her hips and upper inner thighs are marked with obvious bruises and wounds—injuries sustained from rape. Focus shifts to eight women who are left alone for two days to decide how they will proceed as the majority of the colony's men depart to supervise the bail. To decide whether to stay and fight, stay and do nothing, or leave, they convene a referendum. The vote is tied between staying and fighting, and leaving.

Salome, just back from a trip to gather antibiotics for her little daughter Miep, who was assaulted, remains adamant about staying and fighting, an opinion shared by Mejal. Ona, who was raped and became pregnant, advises that they remain, and after winning the fight, create a new set of rules for the colony that would give the women equality. Greta's daughter Mariche, Autje's mother, is of the opinion that forgiveness is the only practical solution. That evening, Mariche's violent husband Klaas would come back to pick up more bail money. The meeting is back in session. Ona and Mejal decide to go. Salome is adamant about continuing the struggle and bitterly admits that she would sooner kill the guys than put her daughter in danger. But after being reminded of the tenets of their faith by both Ona's and her mother, Agata, she changes her mind. Mariche is the lone member who is not convinced.

August has recorded their reasons for departing: to protect their children, to maintain their religious convictions, and to exercise their right to freedom of thought. They choose to attempt enlisting boys who are fifteen years of age or less, but they will not coerce any boy who is older than twelve. They hide their departure intentions from Klaas and get ready to go at daylight. As an "artifact" commemorating the women's stay in the colony, August, at Ona's request, posts the paperwork outlining the advantages and disadvantages of leaving and staying. In addition, he offers Ona a map that the women might use and confesses his love for her.

Melvin informs Salome that her teenage son Aaron has run away and hidden before they can depart. Although he is located, there is not enough time to persuade him to depart. Aaron is made to leave with them after Salome tranquilizes him in violation of their departure protocol. Only August is privy to this information, and he accepts it without question. He begs her to watch over Ona and says he plans to commit suicide as soon as the women leave. Scarface and August observe the women as they leave, while Helena and Anna go with the others.

This is the premise for the novel-turned-film *Women Talking* (book by Miriam Toews in 2018; film by Sarah Polley in 2022). *Women Talking*, is a fictional account of eight women gathering

in the wake of the men's arrests to decide a course of action. Miriam Toews who was born in Manitoba the place of this crime scene, describes her book as an "imagined response" (O'Keeffe, 2015, para. 9) to the actual crimes perpetrated against Mennonite women in Bolivia. Manitoba Colony is an ultraconservative Mennonite community in the Santa Cruz Department or eastern lowlands of Bolivia. In a note at the start of *Women Talking*, Toews describes the novel as "a reaction through fiction" to the true-life events that took place between 2005 and 2009 in the Manitoba Colony. Toews, who left her hometown at 18 and is no longer a practicing Mennonite said that she was "horrificed but not surprised" by the crimes in Bolivia. Too often, the forces of patriarchy and fundamentalism within such insular communities like the Mennonites continue to silence women and girls, and expose them to dangers beyond imagining. Toews' own knowledge of those events came through her personal connection to the community itself. Gladly both the novel and the film have been conceived as powerful tools in the form of fiction for readers/audience to grapple with the most existential questions. "I've always been trying to challenge the patriarchy, specifically of my Mennonite community, but I'm concerned with the suppression of girls and women especially, and any place in the world that falls under fundamentalist, authoritarian thinking," says Toews. "I think in my work, and in my life, I've always been attempting to, as they used to say, stick it to the man" (Onstad, 2018).

The plot begins with the rapists having been carted off to jail and the women of an "isolated religious community grappling with reconciling their reality with their faith" and wrestling with the decision to do nothing, stay and fight, or to leave. The entire novel and film are, as appropriately titled, women talking about their lives, prospects of their future, the trauma they were put through, the complexities of—and choices between—faith, love, safety, democracy, and forgiveness:

First, the rapes happened to real people, in a real country. For a while, the residents of Manitoba Colony thought demons were raping the town's women. There was no other explanation. No way of explaining how a woman could wake up with blood and

semen stains smeared across her sheets and no memory of the previous night. No way of explaining how another went to sleep clothed, only to wake up naked and covered by dirty fingerprints all over her body. The victims' plea for help to the council of church ministers, the group of men who govern the 2,500-member colony, were fruitless—even as the tales multiplied. Throughout the community, people were waking to the same telltale morning signs....Then, one night in June 2009, two men were caught trying to enter a neighbor's home. The two ratted out a few friends, and, falling like a house of cards, a group of nine Manitoba men, ages 19 to 43, eventually confessed that they had been raping Colony families since 2005. They were accused of raping more than 100 women over the course of several years. (Rudovsky, 2013, para.5)

In August 2011, eight men were convicted in a Bolivian court of serially raping, over a period of years, more than 130 women and girls in the religious Manitoba colony to which they all belonged (an estimated 150 additional possible victims refused to come forward). The rapists along with the girls and women they violated, from 8 to 60 years in age, were adherents to a pacifist Anabaptist Christian sect known as Old Colony Mennonites. Closely related to the Amish, they similarly drove buggies, forwent electricity, and forced their women into antique dresses. The women were illiterate and spoke only low German (*Plautdietsch*). The 2011 trial of the rapists, which was covered by TIME magazine, surfaced the horrific details: the men had turned a cow anaesthetic into a spray that sedated humans. For years, they sprayed it into bedroom windows at night, before climbing through to rape the women. In the morning, the survivors had no memories of what had occurred to them. The colony's men, insisted that the rapes were figments of the women's 'wild female imagination,' or, perhaps, the work of demons or god's punishment. But over the course of the investigation in Manitoba, it was discovered that the crimes were far from over. Even though the initial perpetrators were sentenced to jail, the rapes by drugging continued to happen as reported by TIME journalists Jean Rudovsky and Noah Rudovsky in January 2013 for their follow-

up article and documentary made over the course of a nine-month investigation, including an 11-day stay in Manitoba.

The women of Manitoba Colony, what do they do after they learn the truth of these violations, this attack on body and faith? Miriam Toews, raised a Mennonite in Manitoba, moulds her novel on this premise, in which the colony's women themselves, through their own agency, come to terms with what has happened to them and what they should do about it. In the book and movie version, they meet secretly in a hayloft, perched on milk buckets, and talk – and talk, and talk. In a place where, as one of them puts it, “women live out their days as mute, submissive, and obedient servants. Animals”, simply gathering without permission is an act of subversion. Engaging in a two-day long Socratic dialogue on forgiveness, innocence and love is flat-out transgressive, and a dream project of what actually should have been their response, exploring what it might feel like to have power over their own future and fate.

When the elderly Earnest enters and asks jokingly if the women are plotting to burn down his barn, Agata says, “No, Ernie. There's no plot, we're only women talking.” It's a brilliant meta-line that functions as a pre-emptive strike against critics. And the “only” is sharply ironic: in this place – as has often been the case throughout history – women talking is not a small thing, but is in itself action and hence plot. One day, Toews suggests, these women — and all the women of the world — will ‘talk’ and take control (Onstad, 2018). This optimism comes from Ona, the book's axis, a woman with a poet-philosopher's mind, who does most of the talking.

Feminist Discourses

The discourse in *Women Talking* evolves into a moving reflection on the complexity of life choices to be made. They discuss how they will heal, protect their children, educate their sons, keep their faith, and forgive. The dialogues in *Women Talking* depict women making strong political statements. The movie is in fact a “powerful act of nonviolent protest”(Debruge, 2022, para. 1). There are bursts of salty wit and cathartic laughter in the series of conversations. A card at the beginning of the film reads: “What follows is an act of female imagination.” The rapes were blamed on “wild female

imagination,” the phrase “wild female imagination” is deployed to erase the rapes and to dismiss the female experience as “hysteria”. “Wild is a word used to discount and discredit what women do and say,” Toews says (qtd. in Onstad, 2018), but Polley spins that bit of gaslighting into the picture of a world where women’s voices are heard, free from the spectre of patriarchy. The discourse in *Women Talking* evolves into a moving reflection on how women’s voices and experiences ought to be centered and is a potent instrument that helps people address their deepest existential concerns. The women mostly argue over what to do— do nothing, stay and fight or leave. Their lack of literacy and comprehension of the wider world severely restricts their choices since they genuinely have no idea where they are in it. None of them can read a map, leading to a radical idea: “Perhaps the women can create their own map as they go.” Questions like Ona Friesen’s “Surely there must be something to live for in this life and not only the next?” and, again, Ona’s “Is forgiveness that’s forced upon us true forgiveness?” and her proposal to write a manifesto detailing their hopes for a self-sufficient women’s community are compelling and especially interesting given the eschatological fervour of the Anabaptist faith and the rigidly enforced subservience within the Mennonite community women.

Literary and Cinematic Techniques Employed

As Toews, Polley, and the characters make clear, ‘women talking’ are also ‘women thinking’. The movie supplies more visual particulars than the book: its washed-out palette is especially evocative, reflecting both the harsh climate and a culture where change is discouraged and power is unquestioned. The enraged young mother Salome, and Salome’s more contemplative sister Ona, lead the cast, but every character plays a pivotal role. In both versions, the conversation among the women is sometimes oddly formal, even stagey but appropriately so, for these characters are to some extent performing, taking the trouble to ensure that their deliberations are flawless. The women know that church authorities expect them to forgive their assailants, and will condemn them as heretics if they refuse to do so. The colony’s bishop, Peters, has told them that if they refuse to forgive their offenders, they will be denied entry into heaven.

Yet they take their faith, and themselves, seriously enough to examine the assumptions beneath this ultimatum and conclude that evil, in any guise, deserves no deference (Nijhuis, 2023). The stakes are high, and they must come to a decision quickly. The colony men, who are away to post bail for the rapists, will soon be returning. Over the course of two days, in the privacy of a hayloft, the women have a series of fierce, philosophical debates.

The experience of reading the novel is debilitating. But unlike Toews, who unswervingly denies the reader any reprieve from the crushing discursive force of her story, Polley strings up various sources of relief and diversion to keep her audience engaged, like an appropriately mournful background score, a saturated colour tone and varied visual strategies .

The film's commitment to naturalistic lighting is appreciable. David Leitner rightly comments on the cinematographic technique used in the movie:

Throughout *Women Talking*, the level of colour saturation is dialled way down — an aesthetic choice doubtlessly conceived as an analogue to the film's wrenching themes of brutal patriarchy and mass rape... Scenes in the hayloft were shot on a set, with a blue screen behind what would be the large opening under the barn's gable, called a hay door. The hay door, open in every scene, served as a window to the world outside the barn, framing distant crop fields, a flat horizon, and the position of the sun in the sky. The hayloft's loose build, constructed of rough wooden slats, creates large vertical cracks through which shards of daylight enter from all sides. This forms a pervasive interior gloom, regardless of time of day. The colour palette in the movie is, by turns, muted, muddy, pallid, bleached. In a word, desaturated. (Leitner, 2022)

The situation of the protagonists in *Women Talking* is grim. Should nothing be done, more abuse will follow immediately. Their lives are ruled by ignorance and lack of experience in the outside world. They can only cook, clean and bear children. For them disobeying means excommunication or being shunned from people they have lived with since birth. Their life would still remain dull and

colourless unless there is a reform in it. The colourless palette used in the shots align metaphorically with the bleak themes of oppression, despair and hopelessness.

After a long afternoon of debate and discussion, the women have reconvened to make a fateful decision. One of the women remark that if God is omnipotent, why hasn't he protected the woman and children? I will become a murderer if I stay, says another. Leaving is how we demonstrate our faith, says a third. In this scene, in which the women are approaching a fateful decision, the colour grading is seen restored to an almost normal level. Shadows are lifted in order to give this interior night scene a softer contrast. This has worked well to depict the ray of hope that the women now look forward to.

The #MennoniteMeToo

The book drops into the cultural conversation around sexual assault like an exclamation mark: “#MennoniteMeToo”. The women in the movie are clearly part of a conservative religious order, but the location of the colony is ambiguous. In the era of the #MeToo movement, Sara Polley has given the movie a broader resonance. Polley said she took it out of a specific place and time so as not to give viewers permission to say that the story's central issues are ones that concern only hyper-isolated communities (qtd. in Rudovsky, 2023). The story which is told in the realm of a fable has reached a wider audience since it rests on the foundation of truth and is important that it is recognized and shared.

Like so many other women, the women of Manitoba count on their male peers' belief that because they are women, they will not strike back. Toews calls to mind a long line of underestimated icons, down history to the present day, who took control of their lives and their communities too, all the while relying on men's blindness to their power.

Trauma and Healing

It is hard enough to reconstruct the details of a direct act of violence when it is visited upon you in a conscious state — the physical pain, the shock of violation, the incredulity that your invisible yet sanctified bubble of invulnerability could burst so easily.

It takes days, weeks, and months to heal the literal wounds, and then there are the emotional and psychological ones. Especially in the case of rape, the assailant is overwhelmingly someone the victim knows. This agonizing journey from safety to terror was even worse for the real-life women of the Manitoba colony. (Coleman, 2022, para. 11)

Their attackers were their most immediate kin by virtue of everyone in the colony sharing some basic blood relation. The women had no third party — no social workers to consult or impartial witnesses to help process their raw script of trauma. Even if they found a sympathetic outsider, they wouldn't be able to speak to them without a male interpreter. The women of the Manitoba colony were taught only Plautdietsch, a dialect of Low German shaped by Dutch that has been the native tongue of the Mennonite diaspora for hundreds of years. The rapists also always struck at night, only after sedating the women into the deepest state of unconsciousness. On a basic cognitive level, the helplessness of the inability to process a series of traumatic events that one had no memory of is horrifying. In her reporting, Friedman-Rudovsky notes that colony leadership had an answer to that question: There's no need to! She writes, "some of Manitoba Colony's male leaders have suggested that because the women were sedated during the rapes, they have no psychological wounds" (Rudovsky, 2013, para. 14). TIME reports prove that, there was no healing process for the Manitoba women. Women had been refused counselling because, the reasoning went, they were passed out when the events occurred. The warning to the survivors was to forgive the rapists or face eternal damnation. Other victims that the journalists of TIME interviewed—said that they would also have liked to speak with a therapist about their experiences. But they were told that there were no Low German-speaking sexual trauma recovery specialists in Bolivia. None of the women knew that progressive organizations in the US and Canada had promised to send counsellors who spoke Low German to Manitoba. The truth was that it was the men in the colony who had rejected these offers. They saw the offer for psychological support from afar as yet another thinly veiled attempt to encourage the abandonment of their old ways.

According to court records from Bolivia, each of the young girls who were raped displayed symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder and was advised to seek long-term counselling. Many young girls may not even have had the opportunity to speak with anyone because, in the Old Colonies, rapes bring shame upon the victim; survivors are stained, and it is generally felt that it is better to remain silent.

The book and the movie depict scenes, where the women wash one another's feet in a ritual cleansing/healing before the debate commences. The decision to start with this healing gesture rather than depicting the rapes was a brilliant way adopted by Sarah Polley to portray a metaphorical therapy for the trauma they had undergone.

Religion as the only Path to Salvation

Manitoba Colony, which was formed in 1991 emerged as the ultimate safe haven for Old Colony true believers. Other colonies in Bolivia had loosened their codes, but Manitobans fervently rejected any affinity to development as cardinal sin. Men were forbidden from growing facial hair and don modern costumes. Girls and women had to wear identically tied intricate braids, and similar dresses with a preordained design.

Mennonites are known for rejecting modernity and technology, and Manitoba Colony, like many Mennonite settlements with extreme conservatism, is an attempt on the part of the whole group to withdraw as much as possible from the world of non-believers. Every victim who was interviewed stated that they thought about being raped virtually every day and that they coped with this by relying on their faith. The ministers in the community were brainwashing the people into believing that, "God chooses His people with tests of fire," "In order to go to heaven you must forgive those who have wronged you" and that "if she didn't forgive, then God wouldn't forgive her" (Pressly, 2019). It is not shocking that even though eight of the men convicted of rape remained in prison in Bolivia, community leaders of Manitoba had lobbied for their release in the name of forgiveness even while reports of more recent assaults within the community were made during that time.

In this context, it is not surprising that Scarface Janz makes the statement that her vote is “to do nothing”, “so that we will be allowed to enter the gates of heaven”(Toews , 2018, 38). The small cadre of church leaders had become the sole interpreters of the Bible in Old Colonies, and because the Bible was seen as the law, leaders used this control over the scripture to instil order and obedience in the women.

The women in the book and movie, in times of a deadlock found solace in singing hymns of God thus depicting an escape to religion. For Manitoba residents, these were not arbitrary rules: They formed the only path to salvation and colonists obeyed it because they believed their souls depended on it.

Hegemonic Masculinity

R.W. Connell in the article about “the male role,” sharply criticises cultural role norms as the source of oppressive behaviour by men.

Hegemonic masculinity was understood as the pattern of practice that allowed men’s dominance over women to continue and ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men. Hegemony did not mean violence, although it could be supported by force. Hegemonic masculinity can become a scientific-sounding synonym for a type of rigid, domineering, sexist, “macho” man. Because the concept of hegemonic masculinity is based on practice that permits men’s collective dominance over women to continue, it is not surprising that in some contexts, hegemonic masculinity actually does refer to men’s engaging in toxic practices including physical violence that stabilize gender dominance. (Connell, 2005, p. 831)

Any breach of this was unacceptable in a male-dominated society. In *Women Talking*, August’s mother was the only one who questioned the gender disparity and encouraged others to question things too. Still, she was excommunicated and had to leave the colony with her little son. This social embodiment of masculine identity and behaviour emerges in many contexts. In youth, skilled bodily activity becomes a prime indicator of masculinity with prestige conferred on boys with heterosexual partners and sexual learning imagined as

exploration and conquest. The male leadership of Manitoba's refusal to provide counselling to the women likely had these underlying reasons, like the community's staunch belief that a woman's role was to obey and submit to the men's command. Mennonite girls were schooled a year less than boys because females supposedly had no need to learn math or bookkeeping, which is taught during the extra boys-only term. Women could neither be ministers nor vote to elect them. They also couldn't legally represent themselves, as the rape case made painfully apparent. Even the plaintiffs in the trial were five men, a selected group of victims' husbands or fathers, rather than the women themselves.

The Rape Culture

Examining rape not as a matter of sexuality, but rather as an expression of control, the hostile masculinity pathway is related to an insecure sense of masculinity, hostility, distrust, and a desire to dominate women (Buss). Attitudes supporting a rape culture begins shockingly early in society. A recent survey of 8th and 9th graders reveals the early establishment of gender stereotypes in the context of rape where over 7% said it is acceptable for a boy to force a girl to have sex if she got the boy sexually excited" (McMahon, 2000). In a survey of middle school and high school students, female adolescents overwhelmingly reported being forced into sexual situations against their will, and male adolescents reported being socially pressured into sexual situations (ibid). Theorists have posited rape as a crime of property, in which sex is a commodity which is stolen from a woman by a rapist. Baker clearly describes such a theory in 'Once a Rapist? Motivational Evidence and Relevancy in Rape Law.' Youth, particularly young men, are bombarded by a culture that sexualizes commodities and commodifies women's sexuality. This cultural endorsement of sex as a commodified good lead to an increased desire for, and sense of entitlement to, sex.

This is where August's conversation with Salome about teenage boys' behaviour, growth and psychological patterns becomes significant: August is asked to stay back by Ona and Salome, to teach the boys properly to prevent any further violence and to give them purpose and a good perspective about gender, to create a private

realm in which masculine identity may be formed and performed, especially by isolating and examining positive examples of male protagonists like August who do not conform to masculine stereotypes.

Conclusion

It is a subtle departure from Miriam Toews' 2018 book that makes the movie by Polley more expressionistic and roots it in universality. Bohner and Schwarz note that a greater belief in gender inequality is associated with a higher frequency of rape, at both the individual and the societal level.... By having to worry about and guard against being raped, coupled with culturally supported myths about rape, women are restricted in their behaviour and intimidated into feeling less good about themselves and less trusting of others (qtd. in Buss, 2010, 193). Toews and Polley present with a twist, a feminist perspective about the impact of the threat of rape on women's self-esteem, trust in others, and perception of personal control. The hayloft in Manitoba witnesses the birth of a new nation- a nation where women are encouraged to think, equality cannot be taken for granted and faith still matters. The declaration of independence is not confined to the barn, it is designed to get the readers'/audience's blood boiling and it has to spread like wildfire, instilling hope, as Toews/Polley gives these women a rare opportunity to reinvent their world.

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