

Conflict between Self-discovery and Salvation in Mary Rowlandson's *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God*

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Abstract—This paper aims to explore, in social-cultural and textual contexts, how Rowlandson's self- discovery did not always conform to the Protestant- Calvinist framework. Rowlandson's sinful experience, characterized by extraordinary individuation, ministerial involvements in her narration and her anxiety after release from captivity can best explain the conflict between her self- discovery and salvation.

Index Terms—Rowlandson, self- discovery, salvation

I. INTRODUCTION

Author of the first and most famous Indian captivity narrative in Anglo- American letters, Mary Rowlandson (1682) said in her spiritual autobiography, titled *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God*, "It's good for me that I have been afflicted" (p. 358). Faced with the chaos of the attack and the trials of an experience in captivity, she turned to Puritan theology to make sense of it all. What is appealing to many scholars is that feminine issues are covered in this narrative and a popular conclusion has been drawn that affliction, along with salvation, enables Rowlandson to achieve a form of female self- discovery. This paper aims to explore, in social-cultural and textual contexts, how Rowlandson's self- discovery did not always conform to the Protestant- Calvinist framework.

Salvation was the central part of puritan civilization. Rowlandson was struggling for it, through an interaction with Indians in the wilderness where she suffered and survived. Affliction led Rowlandson to realize how careless she had been of God's holy time; however, it also forced Rowlandson to risk becoming sinful by taking on barbaric behaviors like Indians. Due to her special family background and experience, Rowlandson's female piety, in a form of extraordinary individuation, interfered with social- level religious mission. Her narrative of her strength and willpower to survive the captivity failed to serve public religious knowledge, and therefore, her experience of pain was limited to individualization. What was particularly noticeable was the sense of guilt after her release from captivity, which proved that Rowlandson swerved away from the puritan doctrine. The need for salvation in the real sense just began when she came back to normal life. She realized that with her family being left behind in the wilderness, even though unintentionally, her survival was not in accordance with the traditional solidarity of English institutional puritan life. In addition, as far as the text is concerned, readers can see scriptures were inserted and interrupted the story, which demonstrated that, to some degree, her story of female self- discovery and biblical salvation were not harmonious. No doubt, the captivity narrative was originally a story of religious salvation, in which Rowlandson was imposed on with affliction. However, close readers will notice her self- discovery was achieved when Rowlandson survived all the hardships and realized her great potential of being a woman. Ironically, instead of paralleling, these two dimensions often conflicted with each other, sometimes with self- discovery betraying theological salvation.

II. ROWLANDSON AS A SINNER

Rowlandson's wilderness journey allowed her to negotiate cultural restrictions on women's freedom and identity. She "lived in prosperity, having the comforts of this world" (Jehlen, 1997, p. 352). She possessed ability to control things — until her captivity. Suddenly she was taken away as an Indian captive, totally out of the contexts of her faith. Like the puritan emigrants, she was removed from all that was familiar and forced to redefine herself in the absence of everything that had at one time comprised her life. The story was told by two voices, termed by Kathryn Derounian (1987) as "empirical narration" and "rhetorical narration" (p. 82). Derounian argued that the narrative's duality arose not merely from this contrast between participant and observer, but additionally from a clash of codes between Rowlandson's psychological and religious interpretations of her experience (p. 83). It was, in some sense, an

implication that Rowlandson's experience was more than a pursuit of both puritan self-revelation. Taking into her gender into consideration, we can easily recognize that the captive story was also about a self-discovery of female strength and persistence. This interpretation was closely related to her unique identity. Rowlandson's value was contingent on the patriarchy she was involved in. Her husband was Lancaster's minister and her father was the wealthiest man in that region. She lived in comfort and luxury, with an easy access to material wealth and spiritual guidance. This background made it more amazing that a woman who seldom experienced difficulties could live all through unimaginable harshness. In captivity, she broke with the familiar. Her use of "remove" for each encampment created the impression of distance without the need for explicit details. The word "remove" further created the sensation of the captivity as an all-encompassing experience — a complete expulsion from the ordinary. As Rowlandson journeyed with her captors away from Lancaster, she entered deeper into the forested recesses of "this lively resemblance of hell" (p. 33-34). The wilderness served as both a literal and figurative hell: it held both the opportunity for redemption and the possibility of destruction. The unprecedented challenge, a matter of "to-be-or-not-to-be", intensified and gave prominence to her strength of surviving the wilderness and her belief in God's guide for salvation. "As members of tightly knit communities, seventeenth century Puritans understood that the journey to salvation is made alone with God as their guide. Rowlandson's reliance on God dramatized this dependence" (Dietrich, 1960, p. 10).

Mary Rowlandson relied on her faith in the providence of God to sustain herself during her period of captivity. Not surprisingly, then, she, in her painfully literal combat with the wilderness during her nearly three-month forced trek through the New England bush, turned most often to this first book of the New England Puritans to relieve her anguish. Approximately one-third of the Biblical references that pervaded Rowlandson's narrative of her captivity among Wampanoag Indians came, from the Psalms. In the Psalms, Rowlandson found a context for her misery, spiritual assurance, and emotional release. To her, God was omnipotent and always there with her.

The first week of my being among them, I hardly ate any thing; the second week, I found my stomach very faint for want of something; and yet it was very hard to get down their filthy trash; but the third week, though I could think how formerly my stomach would turn against this or that, and I could starve and die before I could eat such thing, yet they were sweet and savory to my taste (p. 358).

Rowlandson contributed all this justification to God's providence, "for to the hungry soul, every bitter thing is sweet" (p. 359). Rowlandson in her narrative managed to find an outlet for her own frustration by taking her anger public and communicating it through the language of Puritan bible. Rowlandson found in the psalms a reserve of hope as well as an arsenal of curses against her enemies. Both sources of emotional sustenance proved essential to her spiritual survival in the wilderness, where the captive must marshal all her personal resources, her faith and her rage, in order to keep sane and sacred her own identity.

At the same time, she explores the frontiers of woman's sphere and woman's societal definition, and thus explores her self-definition by confronting her readers with her transformation from a confined, dependent woman to a woman for whom "self-reliance is axiomatic" (Dietrich, 1960, p. 2).

Her fortitude in the wilderness as a female textually parallels to God's salvation shone upon her, but they do conflict with each other sometimes on the interpretational level. Before her captivity, Rowlandson acknowledges, she had been lax about her spiritual development. In the third remove, for example, she admits, "I then remember how careless I had been of God's holy time, how many Sabbaths I had lost and misspent and how evilly I had walked in God's sight, which lay so close unto my spirit that it was easy for me to see how righteous it was with God to cut the thread of my life and cast me out of His presence forever" (p. 354). Obviously, salvation is beginning to emerge for Rowlandson through afflictive redemption.

But this salvation is achieved in a materially filthy and secularly skeptical wild world through constant interactions with Indians, which is a backslide from spiritually purified and theologically sublime function of Puritan religion. Salvation can be defined as being saved from something, such as suffering or the punishment of sin. On the contrary, in the narrative, Rowlandson survived, as a physically weak woman, mainly through a process being Indianized. Indians, to Puritans, are "Heathen" (p. 351), "Barbarous Creatures, (p. 352)" "hellhounds" (354), and "Pagans" (p. 355) as Rowlandson describes in the introductory passages. Indian is regarded as the agent of the devil in opposition to the Puritan as the "saint" chosen by God, and the Indian as the Canaanite to be cast out of the Promised Land to make way for the new Israelites of Puritan typology. But she let herself conform herself to Indian social codes. She showed great willpower and necessary skills in her daily struggle to survive, to borrow a term from Dietrich, "aggressiveness of business". What impresses readers most is that she changed so much beyond recognition even to herself.

For though I had formerly used tobacco, yet I had left it ever since I was first taken. It seems to be a bait, the devil ways to make men lose their precious time: I remember with shame, how formerly, when I had taken two or three pipes, I was presently ready for another, such a bewitching thing it is (p. 361).

What used to be witching tobacco now has become a bewitching fascination. Another example:

As we went along, they killed a deer, with a young one in her, they gave me a piece of fawn, and it was so young and tender, that one might eat the bones as well as the flesh, and yet I thought it very good. (p. 358)

Being very hungry I had quickly eaten up mine, but the child could not bit it, it was so tough and sinewy, but lay sucking, gnawing, chewing and slobbering of it in the mouth and hand, then I took it of the child, and ate it myself, and savory it was to my taste. (p. 370)

In the travel text we glimpse an alternative identity, that of Mary. Both Mary and the Indians behave at times like predatory animals. The condition of starvation that Mary shares with her captors effects an equivalence between them, with the necessary changes in her dietary habits representing a total reorganization of customary values. The above scenes happened shortly after Rowlandson lost her daughter. As a reader, I can not endure her merciless eating up a deer with a baby inside and of robbing a child of his food. On the ethical level, her desire for survival is disrupting the puritan morality of generosity and kindness. And the more deeply she journeyed into the wilderness and the more immediate and real her grief and her need to survive became, the more inadequate exemplification became as a source of comfort. And the more alienated she felt from her own society, the greater her subconscious identification with her Indian captors. So identify with captor splits her sense of self from Puritan identity formation and allows her to begin constructing an occluded identity.

After a restless and hungry night there, we had a wearisome time of it the next day. (p. 359)

My heart skipped within me, thinking they had been Englishmen at the first sight of them, for they were dressed in English apparel, with hats, white neckclothes, and sashes about their waists, and ribbons upon their shoulders (p. 369).

In seventeenth-century New England, Native Americans were seen as God's instruments to scourge the colony for its sins; accordingly, Rowlandson's account should stress and already stressed the Indians' paganism and diabolism (Stodola, 1993). But she identified herself with the Indian captors by using a pronoun "we" and by taking them for Englishmen. It is going too far to say that Rowlandson was assimilating herself into Indians' community, but it is without any doubt that her identity was shifting constantly. Rowlandson, dazed and disoriented, struggles to cope with an unstable Indian world that nearly engulfs her in terror and madness. Therefore, on both conscious and subconscious level, shifting identities, especially taking on an Indian identity will facilitate her survival and self-realization in a harsh life. From this perspective, we can say that Rowlandson is a smart woman, but it is sure that her belief in piety is not advancing. To some extent, striving to sustain herself under the stress of Indian capture catalyzes a kind of renegade identity formation.

Some may argue that all the above-mentioned behaviors are not religious sins in the real sense, but instinctual responses in captivity. Then another problem appears.

III. EXTRAORDINARY INDIVIDUATION

As a Puritan writer, Rowlandson possessed the added responsibility of turning personal experience into public ideology. This barbarism is unable to serve the theological functions, for it is an extreme case of a humiliated and submissive woman with a marginal gender status. As Bryce Traister (1999) put in *Mary Rowlandson and the Invention of the Secular extraordinary*, "individuation follows from traumatized consciousness. Her text, therefore, only partially assumes the communal hermeneutic of pious exemplarity. In the grip of a persistently individuated trauma, she dissents, however inadvertently, from the directives of pious imitability" (p. 2).

Rowlandson wrote and published her captive story when the children of the original emigrants began to fall away from the original purpose. "The years from 1660 to 1690 encompass a period called New England's Great Declension. It was a time when the children of the original emigrants began to fall away from the original purpose. This second generation of emigrants was still hard-working and ambitious, but now their ambitions were becoming increasingly secular. Preoccupied with worldliness and money making, they were beginning to turn away from the church" (Dietrich, 1960, p. 9). At sunrise on February 10, 1676, "Indians with great number" (p. 374) attacked the tiny Lancaster. The residents were quite likely roused from their sleep. Indirectly, they exemplify the failure of the second generation to uphold the design of their ancestors. Illustrating the entire Puritan body grown lax, the slumbering residents of Lancaster rested content behind their protective garrisons on their cultivated lands--- that is, until that attack. So as a typological narrative, *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God* can be regarded as an inspiring story to help members of a threatened and internally fractured religious culture to strengthen their belief in God's omnipotence, the necessity of faith in affliction and the need for constant penitence. But to what extent does Rowlandson's private contemplation fulfill these purposes?

Firstly, Rowlandson is a woman. The Puritans believed that women were subordinate to men. The subordinate role of women was widely acknowledged and women were viewed as the "weaker sex." Secondly, she is a wife of a church pastor and a daughter of a rich businessman. She witnessed more violence and hardship than she experienced, because Indians knew her values and were relatively kind to her. Thirdly, she was imprisoned into slavery and stayed with Indians for twenty eight weeks, which is a sort of physical and psycho spiritual affliction in a very extreme case. All these contribute to her specific female exemplarity. It's hard for the abstraction in her case to generalize into a representation of her society. One function of Rowlandson's narration is to satisfy readers' curiosity about her personal experience of female suffering. "The scandal of this text is not so much its persistent mourning of personal and material loss, but it's more extraordinary proposition that, in or around 1680, there is female self whose losses are worth mourning at all" (Traister, 1999, p. 11).

O the wonderful power of God that I have seen, and the experience that I have had: I have been in the midst of those roaring lions, and savage bears, that feared neither God, nor man, nor the devil, by night and day, alone and in company: sleeping all sorts together, and yet not one of them ever offered me the least abuse of unchastity to me, in word or action. Though some are ready to say, I speak it for my own credit; but I speak it in the presence of God, and to his glory (p.

356).

It can be read that Rowlandson contributes her own credit as well as God's glory to her survival and return to the community. As we know in Puritan period, because the duty of early childcare fell almost exclusively on women, a woman's salvation necessarily depended upon the observable goodness of her child. But Rowlandson was separated from her children, forever from her youngest daughter, who was buried in the "newly-digged ground in the wilderness." She met a strong female rival, Weetamoo, who was "a severe and proud dame, bestowing every day in dressing herself neat as much as any of the gentry of the land: powdering her hair, and painting her face, going with necklaces, with jewels in her ears, and bracelets upon her hands: when she had dressed herself, her work was to make girdles of wampum and beads" (p. 371). All this psychological and spiritual torture inflicted upon Rowlandson presented a big challenge to her high status she was used to in her world before captive and, therefore, the most important and most difficult thing for Rowlandson is to overcome the mourning all that she had lost. The female self commemorated in 1682 would become the voice of a post-Puritan Protestant femininity (Traister, 1999). This point can be powerfully supported when Rowlandson described Thomas Read, a male captive, who was scared to "cry bitterly, supposing they would quickly kill him" (p. 365). Compared to the weak masculinity, Rowlandson's strong femininity by no means can be understated.

Possibly feminine issues are not what Rowlandson was groping for in her captive narrative, but the text itself as well as her background and experience offer the possibility of open interpretations of both female self- realization and puritan revelation. Especially to modern readers, this story is more like a secular account of suffering and religious beliefs seem to have retreated into the realm of private opinion.

In addition to elaborating on mourning problematical because it is personal and marginalizes the religion, the text reveals a potentially contradictory relation between experience and interpretation that deepens the conflict between personal grief and doctrinal explanation.

IV. MINISTERIAL INVOLVEMENT

For educating the new puritans, the narrative was employed for theological purpose. It is a popular viewpoint that Rowlandson's husband or her senior spiritual advisor Mather have read her manuscript and given her suggestions for improvement. According to Kathryn Stodola, the first parallel concerns the racist tags given to Native Americans in Rowlandson's text, which are at odds with the more realistic and tolerant view the captive has of her individual captors elsewhere in the narrative: for example, "hell- hounds", "barbarous creatures", "crew of pagans", and "the heathen". Indeed, this terminology is very close to the gags used in "the preface to the Reader" which, as already noted, was probably written by Increase Mather.

A second narrative insertion that may indicate the ministerial involvement occurs in the twelve removes where a lot of quotations of providences interfere with the story at a crucial moment. This list includes five points which superficially show the Indians were able to escape from Englishmen's hunting and offered it a religious justification; typological interpretations of these points, however, shows that they are merely tests for the faithful. It is also weird, Stodola said, that the providence is listed in a way similar to that used by Puritan ministers in the explication, use, and application sections of their sermons. The Rowlandson text says the Indians agreed to let the captive return; then it reads, "But before I go any further, I would take leave to mention a few remarkable passages of Providence; which I took special notice of in my afflicted time"(p. 376). This intrusion of three pages of God's providence is too abrupt to be located in a story of female personal memories. Theological purpose is fulfilled in a way by conflicting with a secular plot of a woman.

Throughout, Rowlandson's narrative contains references revealing its author's depression and emotional bleakness, but frequently Rowlandson masks these signs with outward spiritual interpretations. When she looked back, she claimed "I have seen the extreme vanity of this world. One hour I have been in health and wealth, wanting nothing, but the next hour in sickness and wounds and death, having nothing but sorrow and affliction" (p. 378).

Suppose the scripture were not inserted by Mr. Mather. Rowlandson did it by herself, there still exists a problem. When women utilized scriptural allusions in their writings, they in general deliberately tried to reflect the authorized male commentary tradition. If the use of biblical allusions potentially occasioned a submerged anxiety in women because such scriptural citation was circumscribed by male authority, writing itself was often another source of uneasiness (Scheick, 1998).

In either case, the narrative of a female's self- discovery and the scripture insertion are not harmonious, which can be recognized by readers. Scripture, the medium for salvation, is men's interpretation about God's doctrine and practice. So in some sense, the gender conflict is extended to the conflict between self- revelation and salvation for Rowlandson. As a result, although she alluded to the Bible in an orthodox manner to analogize her situation, "her complicated use of Scripture reveals both a fear and anger at a punishing God that must be transformed into an anger at herself, which nonetheless resurfaces as a paradoxically self- abnegating accusation to him". "The more mechanically Rowlandson acknowledges her submission in orthodox terms, the more she complicates the range of explanation offered to her by such orthodox"; "as hard as she might try to conceal it in her narrative, the text reveals the impasse imposed upon the imagination by her own interrogation of the old models for establishing her sense of value" (Scheick, 1998, p. 92-93).

V. ANXIETY AFTER RELEASE FROM CAPTIVITY

The conflict between Rowlandson's self-discovery and salvation is also reflected in the anxiety after release from captivity. People sift through memory in which self-discovery can be realized. When recalling the past painful captive memory, she found "the many remarkable happenings of her captivity must have seemed almost like the jumbled details of a bad dream" (Leach, 1961, p. 353), including the initial attack, the death of Sarah, the mental and physical abuse, and the continual attempt to stave off starvation. She overcame all these hardship and difficulties and survived. As a woman, she displayed her unique persistence and realized her great potential strength she never realized before, but it is noticeable that she had to pay for all her physical survival and spiritual elevation.

Rowlandson is always haunted by a sense of guilt, obsessed to what Freud (1989) terms as melancholia. The intense guilt and unsolved grief at having survived when other people did not. During Rowlandson's captivity, her own instincts for self-survival prevent her from feeling too much guilt, but after her release, she repeatedly admits her guilt at still being alive when so many are dead: "Yet I was not without sorrow to think how many were looking and longing and my own children amongst the rest to enjoy that deliverance that I had now received, and I did not know whether ever I should see them again" (p. 379). Although she initially feels relieved to be ransomed, she cannot stop thinking about her two captive children and her dead daughter: "That which was dead lay heavier upon my spirit than those which were alive and amongst the heathen, thinking how it suffered with its wounds and I was no way able to relieve it, and how it was buried by the heathen in the wilderness from among all Christians" (p. 381). Now she thought she was sinful to leave behind her family and was suffering from more afflictions, spiritual afflictions.

What becomes worse is that she could not feel God's guidance as she used to in the captivity. Her sins can not find a way to let out. "I can remember the time, when I used to sleep quietly without workings in my thoughts, whole nights together, but now it is other ways with me. When all are fast about me, and no eye open, but His who ever waketh, my thoughts are upon things past, upon the awful dispensation of the Lord toward us" (p. 381). It strikes readers as that she maintains her own female identity and elevates it with a never yielding spirit but breaks family bond, though against her will, is illustrative of her intensified concern about her sins.

VI. CONCLUSION

Rowlandson in *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God* tells a secular account of female suffering and a puritan contemplation. The clash between ideology and individualism exemplified by the captivity's traditional elements set off the writer's sufferings. A similar tension between spirituality and secularism is fundamental to Puritan literature, and the orthodox position always prevails (Derounian, 1987). Rowlandson's narrative records the confusion, frustration, and despondency that colonial women-- silenced by the total assent that Puritanism demanded from its adherents--- were unable to express overtly. She takes good advantage of this pattern to serve her own purposes of presenting her self as a true female figure in a puritan social cultural context.

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