

# Old Women and ‘Empty Nest Syndrome’—An Analysis of Mary Gavell’s *The Swing* from the Perspective of Feminism

Wenju Han

Shanghai International Studies University, School of English Studies, Shanghai, China

**Abstract**—Mary Gavell’s *The swing* is about an aging mother who suffers from ‘empty nest syndrome’. This paper analyzes the novel from the perspective of feminism, argues that the direct causes of her ‘empty nest syndrome’ are her estranged relationship with her husband, son and friends. And the underlying cause of her ‘empty nest syndrome’ is that she is oppressed in the patriarchal society which restricts her to the role of mother and wife. In the patriarchal society, women rely too much on the relationship with their husband and son for their happiness, and thus lose their real ‘self’, and become invisible. In order to cure the ‘empty nest syndrome’, old women should pull themselves out of the sole role of mother and wife in the family, build their own ‘selves’ and set up connections with friends outside the family.

**Index Terms**—Mary Gavell, *The swing*, empty nest syndrome, feminism

## I. INTRODUCTION

*The swing* is written by Mary Gavell (1919-1967), who had never published a single piece of literary writing when she died of lung cancer at the age of 47. Her short story *The Rotifer* was published as a tribute in *Psychiatry* (a magazine for which she had worked since 1955) as its managing editor. Quickly, the story made its way into *The Best American Short Stories* (1968), and was chosen for *The Best American Short Stories of the Century* (1999) by John Updike, a very famous writer, who called it a ‘gem’. More stories were discovered in her drawer later and were compiled into a collection *I Can’t Tell a Lie Exactly*, published in 2001. The stories, ‘The Swing’ included, reveal the writer to be a very sharp and sensitive observer of human behaviors, and some critics believe that she deserves a place among the best writers of her time and of our time.

*The Swing* is included in *Short Stories in English A Reading Course* by Yu Jianhua. It has received some critical comments from scholars both at abroad and at home. ZENG Rujun and ZHANG Huaihai explored the novel in light of space theories, ‘argued that the novel creatively uses literary characterization of space, puts an entire story in a dynamic combination of material space and spiritual space, forms the intense tension between the space and time, and at the same time gives space rich social, cultural and ethical connotation, making her novel full of artistic charm and deep insight’ (Zeng, Zhang, 2012, p.138). Zhu (2011) studied the ‘dream’ in *The Swing* with Freud’s psychiatric analytic approach. Li (2014) analyzed the magical realism in *The Swing*. Zhang (2014) argued that ‘the historical fact that the son had left his mother was concealed by the mother, and with the impetus of her love for her son and the fabricated memory, the mother dreamed into the past and uncovered the concealed history’ (p.99). As far as the author of this paper knows, no one has analyzed the ‘empty nest syndrome’ suffered by the old women from the perspective of feminism, so this paper has such an attempt to *The Swing*.

The definition of ‘empty nest syndrome’:

First introduced in 1914 by writer Dorothy Canfield, the concept of ‘empty nest syndrome’ was clinically identified and popularized in the 1970s as a group of symptoms including depression, loneliness, and low self-esteem, found among mothers whose last child had recently moved out of the family home. A great deal of sociological research since then has sought to find out how the ‘empty nest’ relates to mothers’ (and to a lesser extent fathers’) well-being, and how other circumstances such as being employed outside the home may influence the experience. (Harkness, 2008, p.318)

After her only son had moved out of the family home, the aging mother in *The Swing* began to suffer from ‘empty nest syndrome’. She was troubled by feelings of depression, loneliness and low self-esteem.

The reason underlying the old woman’s suffering from ‘empty nest syndrome’ is that she is oppressed in the patriarchal society. The patriarchal society makes women be limited to the role of mother and wife, so women are restricted to family and have less social connections with others outside the family. They rely too much on the relationship with their husband and son for their happiness, and thus lose their real self, and become invisible. If they can’t enjoy harmonious relationship with their husband and son, or they fail to achieve understanding from a few friends, they tend to suffer from ‘empty nest syndrome’. In *The Swing*, the old woman has no name, which shows her invisibility in the patriarchal society. In her middle years, she spent all her life in performing well the role of mother and wife and lost her real self. In her old days, she had an estranged relationship with her husband, her son and her female

friends in reality, which lead her to suffer from 'empty nest syndrome'. So she tried to regain intimacy with her son in dreams. After several happy reunions with her seven-year-old boy, she gradually accepted the fact that her son had left her and pulled herself out of the role of mother, then regained her real self, and reconciled with her husband in the end.

## II. THE DIRECT REASONS FOR HER 'EMPTY NEST SYNDROME'

### A. *The Estranged Relationship with Her Husband*

The relationship between the aging woman and her husband is cold. They have no intimacy. And their communication is blocked. The wife wants and tries to build a harmonious relationship with her husband, but her husband 'Julius was drawing in upon himself, becoming every day more small and chill and dim' (Gavell, 2010, p.53).

She is eager for her husband's companionship and intimacy. She cares for her husband and desires his return of love. She hopes that they can 'sit together in the evenings, companionably watching television, or reading, or chatting' (Gavell, 2010, p.56). And she knits an afghan for her husband to warm his knees. 'But he sat less and less with her in the evenings; he went to bed very early nowadays, and he had taken to wearing the afghan daytimes around his shoulders like a shawl. She was sorry immediately for her irritation, and she tried to be very thoughtful of him the rest of the day. But he didn't seem to notice; he noticed so little now' (Gavell, 2010, p.56).

She devoted all his love to her husband, but her husband's reaction disappointed her, and her efforts to build a good relationship with her husband were in vain. Her focus was on her husband, but her husband paid little attention to her.

And in her old age, her role in the relationship with her husband changed somehow. In her middle age, her husband took the dominant role in life, but in her old age, her husband began to rely on her and she gradually took the upper hand. In the past, Julius insisted on driving himself, but nowadays he let her do it without a word. On their way to see their son, she drove the car. But they didn't talk with each other mostly. When they talked, it was her husband's complaint. No matter which road she took, her husband found a reason to complain. 'Julius said querulously, "I could have told you you'd get into a lot of traffic this way and you'd do better to go by the river road, but I knew you wouldn't listen," but she was so happy that she forbore to mention that whenever she took the river road he remarked how much longer it was, and only answered, "I expect you're quite right, Julius. We'll come back that way"' (Gavell, 2010, p.54).

They can't communicate with each other smoothly. Their dialogue begins with her husband's reproach and ends with her concession, so she always suppresses herself in exchange for the superficial harmony. But in fact, tensions simmer below the surface. The estranged relationship with her husband strengthens her feeling of loneliness.

### B. *The Alienated Relationship with Her Son in Reality*

In addition to her estranged and cold relationship with her husband, she has an alienated relationship with her son in reality, which is another cause to her 'empty nest syndrome'. Her son James 'lived in a suburb on the opposite side of the city—just the right distance away, far enough so that aging parents could not meddle and embarrass and interfere, but near enough so that she could see him fairly often. She loved him with all her heart' (Gavell, 2010, p.54). 'He was the light and the warmth of her life' (Gavell, 2010, p.54). They had family reunions at the weekends. She looked forward to seeing her son and having deep and close ties with him, however, the result is disappointing to her. At the family reunion, their conversation is limited to the outside matters, and James is reluctant to share his inside feelings with her. 'She was a little depressed, as she often was when she returned from James's house' (Gavell, 2010, p.55). She loves her son with all her heart, so she wishes that when she asks him how he is he wouldn't tell her something about his work, but his inner feelings.

The family members treat each other with due respect, but they lack intimacy and mutual understanding. They kiss each other as guests, and her son is considerate towards his parents. 'He had slipped a footstool under her feet and had seated his father away from drafts' (Gavell, 2010, p.55). But they have no communication of the inner feelings.

The mother wants to delve into the son's innermost feelings, but he has grown up and left her farther and farther away that she can't grasp and share his thoughts. What the mother wonders is 'what did he feel, what did he love and hate, and what upset him or made him happy, and what did he look forward to?' (Gavell, 2010, p.55). But she knew it was impossible. 'I can't expect him to tell me his secret thoughts. People can't, once they're grown, to their parents. But the terrible fear rose in her that there were his secret thoughts, and that was all there was' (Gavell, 2010, p.55). Her attempt to get intimacy and comfort from her son in reality fails, which partly leads to her 'empty nest syndrome'.

### C. *The Blocked Relationship with Her Friends*

With the failure of communication and being understood at home, she decides to turn to her friends for communication. She was eager to pour out her innermost feelings of depression to her friends for comfort, but her friend Jessie Carling was self-centered, indifferent to her needs. And all she cares about is herself and such trivial matters as clothes matching. 'Jessie spent the entire lunch discussing her digestion and the problem of making the plaids match across the front in a housecoat she was making for herself' (Gavell, 2010, p.56).

Jessie pays no attention to her inner feelings. And her attempt to communicate with Jessie fails. Then, she turns to another friend Joyce Simmons. To her disappointment, 'Joyce told her in minute detail about her son, dwelling, in full circumstantial detail, on the virtues of him, his wife, and his children. She held her tongue, though it was hard. My

trouble, she thought wryly, is that I think my son is so really superior that a kind of noblesse oblige forces me not to mention it' (Gavell, 2010, p.56). So her attempt to give vent to her innermost depression fails again.

Her friends' indifference to her innermost feelings makes the old woman even lonelier.

The estranged relationship with her husband, son and friends are the direct causes to her 'empty nest syndrome', but the underlying cause is her oppression in the patriarchal society.

### III. THE UNDERLYING CAUSE TO HER 'EMPTY NEST SYNDROME'

The underlying cause to her 'empty nest syndrome' is her oppression in the patriarchal society which limits women to the role of mother and wife, resulting in their invisibility and loss of real 'selves'. According to four well-known feminist writers: Jean Baker Miller, Adrienne Rich, Dorothy Dinnerstein, and Nancy Chodorow, 'the institution of motherhood is the root cause of the oppression of women and the sexual malaise experienced by men and women' (cited from Kahn, 2004, p.826). The motherhood excludes women's 'self'. The children are all what they live for. After their children move out of the family home, and they cease to play the role of mother, they will lose the aim of life and be likely to suffer from 'empty nest syndrome'.

The old woman in *The Swing* is denied of her 'self'. She is always reproached by her husband, and negated by her son—the symbol of the patriarchal authority. The patriarchal society only acknowledges women's value as mother and wife and denies other pursuing of value. In *The Swing*, without the role of mother and wife to play, the old woman tries to regain her 'self' by doing what she likes, but she is negated by her son. When she tells her son and daughter-in-law, in a burst of confidence, that she has the ancient piano tuned and practices an hour a day, reads books on China, and plans to dig phlox all up and try iris, they feel puzzled, and they find no point in her efforts.

The old woman in *The Swing* is invisible. 'She hasn't got a name, this old woman is called "she", which seems to imply that it's unnecessary for her to have her own name, or that she represents the fate of all women as "the other", and her life is a life of mother and wife' (Zhu, 2011, p.186). On the contrary, the male characters have their names; her husband's name is Julius—which reminds us of Julius Caesar the roman dictator of the 1st century BC. And her son's name is James, which reminds us of the English kings named James. The use of the names of the great men symbolizes the strong power of man over woman.

In the patriarchal society, women are limited to the role of mother and wife, so that they lose their 'selves'. In her middle years, she lives for the role of wife and mother. Her husband Julius's health is not so good, so she has to help her husband with all the office work, and does all the housework, such as mowing the lawn, helping her son to learn to ride his bike and hit the ball. She has to look after her son and mother her sister after their parents died. Therefore, the role of mother and wife over occupies her head, and her 'self' is 'pushed right out of her head' (Gavell, 2010, p.53). At last she loses her real 'self'. She is traumatized and in desperate need for love and care in her heart because she gives too much without taking anything.

However, as she grows old, her son 'James was grown and gone, and Julius was drawing in upon himself, becoming every day more small and chill and dim' (Gavell, 2010, p.53), the influence of her husband and son upon her has weakened, the role of mother stops, she begins to suffer from 'empty nest syndrome', and she has to adapt to the new situation and start to regain her real 'self'. Dream symbolizes the self, so the fact that she begins to dream again as she grows old symbolizes her journey to regain her real 'self'.

### IV. THE CURE OF HER 'EMPTY NEST SYNDROME'

#### A. *The Intimacy with Her Son in Dreams*

She is oppressed in reality by the patriarchal society, and she can't find any comfort from her husband, son or friends in reality, which makes her feel helpless, so she turns to dreams for her outlet of feelings. The swing, which symbolizes the happy memory of the past, whose creak brings her about the cozy memory and intimacy she shared with her son in the past. She meets her son James who is a little boy and they talk with each other intimately. 'She ran to him and stopped the swing—he had slowed down when he saw her — and knelt on the mossy ground and put her arms around him and he put his arms around her and squeezed tight' (Gavell, 2010, p.56). They hug each other and have intimate body contact which she can't get in reality. She expresses her strong longing to the fullest extent, and their meeting is full of tender feelings as in her son's childhood. "'I'm so glad to see you!" she cried. "It's been such a long time since I've seen you!" "I'm glad to see you too," he cried, grinning, and kissed her teasingly behind the ear, for he knew it gave her goose bumps. "You know," he said, "I like this airplane, and sometimes I go r-r-r-r- and that's the engine"' (Gavell, 2010, p.57). Instead of kissing her on the cheek in reality, her son kisses her behind the ear and tells her what he likes and dislikes.

She regains her role as a mother in their conversation, and she enjoys real communication of feelings with her son. 'She felt as if the wheels of her mind, rusty from disuse, were beginning to turn again, as if she had not engaged in a real conversation, or thought about anything real, in so long that she was like a swimmer out of practice' (Gavell, 2010, p.58). The boy relies on her mother and asks her a lot of naïve questions to which she answers happily.

The boy comes every night or two and she anticipates in bed happily for their meeting. She dresses properly for it to perform the role of mother well. They sit beside the swing and talk about some childish matters: 'they talked about the

stars and where the Big Dipper was, and about what you do about a boy who is sort of mean to you at school all the time, not just now and then, the way most children are to each other, only they don't especially mean it, and about what you should say in Sunday school when they say the world was made in six days but your mother has explained it differently, and about why the days get shorter in winter and longer in summer' (Gavell, 2010, p.58). They enjoy the happy moment of talking and communicating.

With the merry times of sharing tender feelings with the boy, she frees herself from the frustration in communication with her husband, friends and son in reality. She becomes cheerful.

she sang around the house until even Julius noticed it, and said, disapprovingly, "You seem to be awfully frisky lately." And when Anne phoned apologetically to say that they would have to call off Sunday dinner because James had to attend a committee meeting, she was not only perfectly understanding — as she always tried to be in such instances — but she put down the phone with an utterly light heart, and took up her song where she had left it off. (Gavell, 2010, p.58)

'Then one night, after they had talked for an hour, Jamie said, "I have to go now, and I don't think I can come again, Mommy." "Okay," she said' (Gavell, 2010, p.58). With calmness, she finally accepted the fact that her son had grown up and left her. She began to face the reality that as they go to school, college, work and get married, children are on the way in leaving their parents. Facing the new reality is the first step to cure the 'empty nest syndrome'.

#### B. *The Reconciliation with Her Husband in the End*

At the end of the story, her husband Julius changed his attitude of indifference and disdain to his wife and began to understand her and share her innermost feelings.

After the boy left, she wept for a long time on the swing till she was disrupted by her husband's sound. As Hélène Cixous put it, the patriarchal authority considers the femininity in contrast to masculinity as negative (Bowers, 2004, p.66). Women's feelings are prescribed as unreasonable. Scared of being blamed by her husband as unreasonable, she tried to hide her feelings from him. 'She hastily tried to rearrange her attitude, to somehow make it look as if she was doing something quite reasonable, sitting there on the ground with her head pillowed on the swing in the middle of the night' (Gavell, 2010, p.59), with the thought that her husband would 'think she was quite out of her mind and talk very sharply to her' (Gavell, 2010, p.59). To her great surprise, 'his cracked old voice spoke mildly. "He went off and left his jacket," he said. She looked, and there was the little red jacket hanging on the nail' (Gavell, 2010, p.59). Her husband's understanding of her feelings and his own expression of emotions put them in an equal position, and united them together. As humans, men and women have emotions alike. But the patriarchal society appreciates reason and depreciates emotion, which constrain people's expression of emotions, especially men. Men are prescribed to hold their feelings back by the patriarchal society, which does harm to men themselves. Men and women shouldn't be put in opposite, or superior (men) and inferior (women) positions, but in equal positions. To form a harmonious relationship between men and women, mutual confession of feelings, worries and weaknesses based on equality is needed. The antagonistic or superior relations would make men and women ashamed of confiding emotions and thus estranged.

In the end of the story, they reunited to face the situation together. They accepted the fact that their son had left them, and all he had left them was happy memories, they should cherish the memories and keep them in mind and continue their life; they shouldn't always live in the past, otherwise, their life would be a tragedy.

### V. CONCLUSION

*The Swing* depicts an aging mother who suffers from 'empty nest syndrome'. The direct causes to her 'empty nest syndrome' are the estranged relationship with her husband, the alienated relationship with her son in reality and the blocked relationship with her friends. But the underlying cause of her 'empty nest syndrome' is that she is oppressed in the patriarchal society which restricts her to the role of mother and wife. In the patriarchal society, women rely too much on the relationship with their husband and son for their happiness, and thus lose their real 'self', and become invisible.

In order to cure the 'empty nest syndrome', the old women can recall the happy memories, but they should accept the fact that their children are bound to leave them when they have grown up and the closeness and intimacy they share with their mother or father in their childhood will never come back. If the parents can't accept it and desire for the childhood intimacy, their life would be a tragedy. Therefore, the old women should let go of the child, build an equal relationship with their husband and face the future together with mutual understanding and encouragement. They shouldn't be limited to the role of mother and wife, but they should build their own 'selves' and harmonious relationship with people outside the family.

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**Wenju Han** was born in Lanzhou, China, in 1986. In 2009, Wenju Han obtained her master's degree in the field of English Language and Literature in Northwest Normal University in Lanzhou, China.

At present, she is a PhD candidate majored in English Language and Literature in Shanghai International Studies University in Shanghai, China.

In the past, she was a lecturer in Foreign Languages Department, Gansu Normal University for Nationalities, China. She has conducted one research project funded by Gansu province in China: An Investigation of the Present Situation of the Boarding Schools in the Rural Minority Areas and Corresponding Countermeasures—Taking Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Region as an Example. She has published ten articles, such as The Art of Parody in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (Taiyuan: Journal of Taiyuan Urban

Vocational College, 2009), An Analysis of Robert Frost's *Two Witches* from the Feminist Approach (Mianyang: Journal of Mianyang Normal University, 2009), The Effectiveness of Grammar-translation Method in the Teaching of British and American Literature (Lanzhou: Journal of Gansu Normal Colleges, 2011). Her major field of study mainly involves English language and literature and education.