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The Divine Women in *Women Talking*: Restorative Imagination for a Divine Becoming

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Abstract

This paper will examine how Miriam Toews' 2018 novel, *Women Talking* builds on its initialthemes of women's subjugation to men, their systematic oppression through religion, and their inability to reclaim their lives, to ultimately evolve into an account of women's emancipation and divine becoming through the exercise of their restorative imagination. The novel spans two days during which eight women from the ultra-religious and patriarchal Mennonite community of Molotschna in Bolivia engage in several discussions pertaining to different aspects of their lives. These conversations very casually unfold the horror of unimaginable cruelty in the name of religion and unforgiving patriarchy as practiced within their closed community. Keeping this bleak setting in the background, Women Talking is also a tale of these women's divine becoming, as propounded by Luce Irigaray in her essay, "Divine Women." The resilience showed on part of these broken and abused women and the unprecedented bold decision to which they collectively arrive towards the end of the novel, is a demonstration of the courage and restorative imagination that they unknowingly harbored within themselves, the exercise of which results ultimately in their divine becoming.

Keywords: Divine Becoming, Luce Irigaray, Mennonite, Patriarchy, Restorative Imagination, Women's Emancipation.

Miriam Toews's 2018 novel, *Women Talking* quite literally features what the title suggests, "women talking" (Toews 179). It is the record of a two-day secret conversation among eight women from three generations, and occasionally of a male note-taker August Epp, who is also the narrator of the novel. They all belong to the remote, ultra-religious Mennonite colonyof Molotschna. Their conversation very casually unfolds the horror of unimaginable cruelty and and unforgiving patriarchy as practiced in their closed community. Keeping this bleak setting in the background, *Women Talking* is also a tale of these women's "divine becoming" as propounded by Luce Irigaray in her essay, "Divine Women." Over the course of their secret

two-day congregation on a hayloft, these women come together for the first time to talk about how they really have been living, identify true evil, and recover their power to imagine an alternate life for themselves. This paper will examine how Toews' novel builds on its initial themes of women's subjugation to men, their systematic oppression through religion, and their inability to reclaim their lives, to ultimately evolve into an account of women's emancipation and divine becoming through the exercise of their restorative imagination.

Women Talking is based on a true event that took place in a similar Mennonite community in Bolivia between 2005 and 2009. Within these four years, more than a hundred and thirty women and girls, ages ranging from six to sixty-five, had been knocked unconscious by an animal anesthetic spray and raped in their own houses. Waking up from their daze; disoriented, bloody, and bruised from the attack, these women had no recollection of whathad happened the night before. When these events were reported to the male members of their community - their fathers, husbands, and brothers - they, instead of investigating the assaults, accused these women. They insisted that these women were punished by the devil for their sins and that the attackers were demons or ghosts instead of men from their community. They even blamed the women for trying to cover up their own illicit affairs and adultery. It was also suggested that nothing had happened, that these stories were actually the products of their "wild female imagination" (Prologue). But later it was found out that what the women were saying was true and the "ghosts" and "demons" were in fact, eight men, among whom were also the close relatives of these women. Subsequently, the perpetrators were arrested, convicted, and sentenced to twenty-five years in prison except for one who got twelve years for supplying the drug. According to the *Times*, it was "one of the ugliest sex scandals in the history of the Mennonites" (Friedman-Rudovsky). Toews' novel is what she describes as "a reaction through fiction to these true-life events," and indeed an act of "female imagination" (Prologue). In *Women Talking*, Toews takes up the story where the community's action ends in real life, that is after the accused have been arrested by the police. In the novel, the men of the colony, headed by their bishop Peters, arrange to bail out the accused men who were handed over to the police to save them from possible attacks ofthe violated women. To collect the bail money in town, they leave the colony for two days. Their plan was to bring the perpetrators back to the colony before their trial, then "the women of Molotschna will be given the opportunity to forgive these men, thus guaranteeing everyone's place in heaven" (Toews 5). Peters further declares, if the women decide not to forgive these men, then they'll have to "leave the colony for the outside world, of which they know nothing" (Toews 5). The novel narrates the events of

these two crucial days within which the women must talk and decide what to do. At the start of their discussion, only three options emerge in front of them:

1. Do nothing,
2. Stay and fight, or
3. Leave

The women of the colony were asked to choose from these three. After the voting, it was up to the women who chose the last two options to come up with their next course of action. Should they stay and fight so that they are allowed to enter heaven, because they believed, to gain access to heaven, they have to stay within their community, or leave their colony to save themselves and their children from future attacks on this very earth. During their two-day secret meeting, these women talk about forgiveness, faith, and salvation. They talk about love, innocence, and patriarchy. Together they dream of creating a new map for themselves. They talk about matters they have never dared to discuss openly because even having such a meeting without permission from the males in the colony, let alone talking against their authority over them, is an act of transgression, an act of revolution that supposedly might even jeopardize these women's places in eternal heaven. They talk about the mysterious river, an anecdote supplied by August, that flows deep beneath the calm and serene surface ofthe Black Sea. A river that is believed to sustain life in the inhospitable part of the sea just as these women themselves sustain their individuality, their dreams, and hopes for a better future within the toxic patriarchal community of Molotschna. In August's words, "life and the preservation of life is a possibility even when circumstances appeared to be hopeless" (Toews 35). As the women continue talking, the plot unfolds, and the horror slowly sinks in. Through Toews' beautiful and often humorous prose, the readers are made to actually feel theunbearable burden of male domination that weighs down the spirit of these women of an ultra-conservative Mennonite community to which Toews herself had belonged once. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Toews says, "I felt an obligation, a need, to write about these women. I am related to them. I could easily have been one of them" (Onstad). The severity of the oppressive patriarchy practiced in Molotschna finds expression through Salome's speech:

> We're not members! We are the *women* of Molotschna. The entire colony of Molotschna is built on the foundation of patriarchy when the women live out their days as mute, submissive and obedient servants. Animals. Fourteen-year-old boys are expected to give us orders, to determine our fates, to vote on our excommunications, to speak at the burials of our own babies while we remain silent, to interpret the Bible for us, to lead us in worship, to punish us! We are not *members*, Mariche, we are commodities. (Toews 120-121)

The horror further unfolds when she continues:

> When our men have used us up so that we look sixty when we're thirty and our wombs have literally dropped out of our bodies onto our spotless kitchen floors, finished, they turn to our daughters. And if they could sell us all at auction afterwards, they would. (Toews 121)

Her words shed light on only part of the manifold evil that they have been enduring throughout their lives. Her agonies mirror the agonies of all women under strict authoritarian patriarchy, exercised anywhere in the world, which has the potential to become the breeding ground of such atrocities. During her talk with *The Guardian* Toews continues on the same note saying,

> 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. 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. (Onstand)

Woman Talking is the result of this concern, her response to the authoritarian and oftentimes cruel form of patriarchy practiced anywhere in the world including the real Mennonite community of Bolivia as well as in the fictional one of Molotschna.

The women in Bolivia in reality did nothing to protect themselves from these attacks, and similar incidents of violation continued well into 2013. But in her novel, Toews gives these women a voice. She imagines the conversation and reasoning among the representatives of two groups of women in her novel, three generations from each of the Friesen and Loewen families. But the characters of Greta, Agatha, Mariche, Mejal, Ona, Salome, Autje, and Neitjetragically keep on talking, reaching nowhere. Their limited knowledge of the world outside oftheir little rural Mennonite colony, and lack of education leave them with very few options to live by. Either they have to forgive and forget all they had to endure or stay and try to reverse the system - which is next to impossible, or they can leave their colony for the world they have no idea about whatsoever. Briefly, another option is placed by Ona, why not ask the men to leave instead? But the absurdity of the option and the impossibility of its implementation immediately rule it out. At the end of the first day, they finally reach to a collective decision. They decide to reclaim control over their own lives as well as their children for whose wellbeing they are responsible to God. As Mariche puts it, "We want our children to be safe. We want to be steadfast in our faith. We want to think" (Toews 153). The desire to think for themselves, which slowly starts taking root in their hearts because of this conversation, and

their gradually activated ability to imagine that there might be somealternative to the miserable life at Molotschna, marks the turning point of their discussion at the end of the first day. They begin questioning the male projection of God and religion. The outrageous demand of bishop Peters and the elders of the community proved too much for them to entertain. Even when it was proved beyond any doubt that the unbridled licentiousness of some of their men have devastated their minds and bodies, they were required to forgive them and forget in order to ensure their place in heaven. The cruelty inherent in such demand from the men whom they feared and, in some cases, even loved was unsupportable. Ona brings up another instance to highlight the lack of care for women's well- being when the victims of these violent attacks were even denied counseling. She says,

> If it has been decided by the elders and the bishop of Molotschna that we women don't require counseling following these attacks because we weren't conscious when they happened, then what are we obliged, or even able, to forgive? Something that didn't happen? Something that we are unable to understand? And what does that mean more broadly? If we don't know "the world," we won't be corrupted by it? If we don'tknow that we are imprisoned then we are free? (Toews 39)

This callousness of the men headed by Peters, even after when the allegedly diabolical attacks had unquestionably taken humane form after the capture of one of the perpetrators, turns into the testimony of the gullibility expected of the women, the proof of the helpless submission required from them to whatever worthless explanation is provided by their men. Their will to change this condition had never before been this strong because now, for the first time in their lives, they feel the urgency to claim control over not only their corporeal body but also their thinking mind. Luce Irigaray in her essay, "Divine Women" writes, "Are we able to go on living if we have no will? This seems impossible. We have to will. It is necessary, not for our morality, but for our life. It is the condition of our becoming. In orderto will, we have to have a goal. The goal that is most valuable is to go on becoming, infinitely" (Irigaray 61). These women of Molotschna come to realize the need for action or willingness to change before they can even start the conversation on how to bring about the necessary changes. This becoming is towards "entering further into womanhood, not moving backward" (Irigaray 60). This becoming is towards the actualization of their divine self. Irigaray further elaborates on the process in her essay,

> Every man …. and every woman who is not fated to remain a slave to the logic of the essence of man, must imagine a God, an objective-subjective place or path whereby the self could be coalesced in space and time: unity of instinct, heart, and knowledge, unity of nature and spirit, condition for abode and for saintliness. God alone can save us, keep us safe. The feeling or experience of a positive, objective, glorious existence, the feeling

> of subjectivity, is essential for us. Just like a God who helps us and leadsus in the path of becoming, who keeps track of our limits and our infinite possibilities - as women - who inspires our projects. (Irigaray 67)

These women, through their dialogue on self-love, religion, faith, loyalty, and justice start to ultimately form a divine figure that is infinitely generative, a God who is unlike what their male members projected to be. They begin to see right through the fallacy of God's image generated by bishop Peters and colony elders. At the same time, they come to realize the corruptibility of absolute power. Ona rationally puts this fact as,

> Peters said these men are evil, the perpetrators, come up but that's not true. It's the quest for power, on the part of Peters and the elders and on the part of the founders of Molotschna, that is responsible for these attacks, because in their quest for power, they needed to have those they'd have power *over,* and those people are us. And they have taught this lesson of power to the boys and men of Molotschna, and the boys and men of Molotschna have been excellent student. In that regard. (Toews 123)

To rid themselves of the trauma of sustained damage, they decide to leave and also contemplated the possibility of forgiving their men. But this act of forgiving was not to be carried out at the cost of their own sanctity and sanity, rather they want to forgive to remain a good Mennonite, for their own salvation. Greta defines leaving not as an act of cowardice either, she says,

> Leaving will give us the more far-seeing perspective we need to forgive, which is to love properly, and to keep the peace, according to our faith. Therefore, our leaving wouldn't be an act of cowardice, abandonment, disobedience or rebellion. It wouldn't be because we were excommunicated or exiled. It would be a Supreme act of faith. And a faith in God's abiding goodness. (Toews 110)

Given their absolute ignorance of the real world outside their small community, and also their inability to communicate in their state language, the way these women were imagining to obtain their emancipation, dreaming of drawing their map as they progress, might appear implausible and their imagination wild, as bishop Peters had declared previously. But this exact wild female imagination is necessary to be able to disregard what is codified and is not serving any real purpose for these women.

While reading *Woman Talking,* the feelings that most frequently take hold of a reader are of suffocation and shock. Suffocation from the unimaginably exploitive form of patriarchy in the name of religion endured by the females (often males) of the novel and shock from the sudden revelation of cruelty and sexual violence. Toews spares her readers from the graphic details of these assaults but they somehow manage to make their point and leave deep scars on the reader's consciousness. The knowledge that the novel is based on a true incident that

took place not so long ago, unsettles the reader even more. But Toews does not waste many words in describing these events or the trauma that they have caused. Instead, she focuses on how these women must survive and carve out a life worth living. Accordingly, her characters on the hayloft above the ground, symbolically suspended between heaven and earth, permit themselves to breathe freely and harmoniously, sing to relieve themselves of the plague of negative emotions, share their dreams, and permit themselves to dream of a better future. Toews, the novelist, appears to be projecting here again Irigaray's idea of divine becoming as the philosopher had written, "Once we have left the waters of the womb, we have to construct a space for ourselves in the air for the rest of our time on earth - air in which we can breathe and sing freely, in which we can perform and move at will" (Irigaray 66). In this airy space on the hayloft, that allowed these women limited freedom from the life they had known so far, they were aware that they were rejecting the notion of God served by men so that they could rid themselves of their obligation to be submissive to them. But they were unaware of their attainment of divinity in that process, which is essential to be free as avowed by Irigaray. Regarding this achievement of freedom, she writes,

> Divinity is what we need to become free, autonomous, sovereign. No human subjectivity, no human society has ever been established without the help of the divine. There comes a time for destruction. But, before destruction is possible, God or the gods must exist. If woman have no God, they are unable either to communicate or commune with one another. They need, we need, an infinite if they are to share a little. (Irigaray 62)

Irigaray continues,

> The only diabolical thing about women is their lack of a God and the fact that, deprived of God, they are forced to comply with models that do not match them, that exile, double, mask them, cut them off from themselves and from one another, stripping away their ability to move forward into love, art, thought, towards their ideal and divine fulfillment. (Irigaray 64)

That's why they had to destroy the image of God that did not serve them anymore to create another one that matches their needs and that allows their own divine becoming.

In her book, *Mennonite Women: A Story of God's Faithfulness 1683-1983,* Elaine Sommers Rich talks about two streams of thoughts that traditionally emerged about Mennonite women's position in their community and roles in religious affairs. Those are,

> Stream One: Women are human beings, copartners with men, in need of redemption. As Christians, women have the obligation to follow the Lord Jesus, to testify to the power of the risen Lord, to take the gospel of the ends of the earth . . . "teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you."
> Stream Two: Woman have a limited role. They should be primarily in the home. Both at home and in the church, they should be subordinate to men. Paul teachers that they

should be silent in the church. (Rich 232)

The men at Molotschna were reducing their women even lower under stream two by demanding their women's subordination and submission to be at the level of animals. But these women at their meeting wanted to rise to stream one, claimed the status of equal responsibility religiously, and above all, humanely. They decide to leave their community, their men, and all they have known till then for the unknown because if they don't, they'll turn to violence, which is the opposite of pacifism, one of the central tenets of their Mennonite faith. In Salome's words, "We know that we are bruised and infected and pregnant and terrified and insane and some of us are dead. We know that we must protect our children. We know that if these attacks continue our faith will be threatened because we will become angry, murderous, and unforgiving. Regardless of who is guilty of them" (Toews 119). To avoid violence, to remain good Mennonites, and to conjure up a life away from violence, a life that is based on pacifism, mutual love, and respect, the eight talking women decide to leave everything behind for a new beginning in a new world. The presence of this boldness in imagining a path away from such violence, and the courage to draw their own map as they progress through the unknown, ascribe these women with a divine status as well. Even though they are headed towards an unknown future of potential danger and suffering, the readers remain convinced that they will ultimately survive because of their resiliency and power to imagine alternate modes of existence.

Although the mysterious river metaphor is used sparingly in *Women Talking*, the concept flows into the whole narrative of the novel. The strength demonstrated by the abused women of the community and the unprecedented bold decision to which they collectively arrive towards the end reminds the readers frequently of the life-affirming secret river beneath the smooth surface of the Black Sea. Just as the river's very existence was not yet proved by scientists, so also were the readers unsure of these women's capabilities at the beginning. But as the readers reach the end of the novel, it is proven beyond any doubt that just like the Black Sea's smooth water surface, the untroubled exterior of the ultra-religious Mennonite community of Molotschna harbored unknowingly the restorative imagination and courage of their divine women.

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