

The Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Power in *Rebecca*

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Abstract: *Rebecca* is the most famous work of British female writer Daphne du Maurier. Many scholars have analyzed the mysterious protagonist Rebecca under Foucault's theory of discourse and power. They claim that as an absent character, Rebecca's story can only be told by others and prefer to read her as an absent victim in the story. However, this paper argues that Rebecca is no longer a victim; instead, she is portrayed as the winner in the story through building her own power and discourse. Similarly, while the anonymous female narrator is usually regarded as an obedient and childish wife, analyzing the story with Foucault's theory reveals that she also builds her own power and discourse to some extent.

Keywords: Rebecca; Discourse and Power; Deconstruction.

1. Introduction

Rebecca tells a story among Maxim, his ex-wife, and "me". Maxim's ex-wife Rebecca has died since the beginning of the story, but her shadow is everywhere. She is like an invisible wall between "I" and Maxim. "I" always doubts if Maxim loves me. Maybe he still loves Rebecca. However, all "my" worries disappear when Maxim tells "me" that it is he who kills Rebecca.

Present domestic studies tend to regard Rebecca as a victim who cannot speak for herself and whose power is deprived. Han Wenjuan and Wang Wenyan (2020) analyzed Rebecca from the perspective of Foucault's theory of power and discourse, and called Rebecca "the silent figure". All of them believe that Rebecca lost her right to speak for herself, so she has no power at all. However, they only mentioned the absence of Rebecca without noticing how successfully her power runs before and even after her death. Besides, many scholars prefer to make a comparison between Rebecca and "I". Liu Xiangli (2015), Li Yajie (2011), Liu Shanshan (2015), and Isabella Silbo (2018) Rebecca is like the devil while "I" is more like an "angle in the house". This implies scholars tend to read "me" as a traditional obedient wife who has no power in the family. Actually, "I" master the secret (knowledge) of Maximism, so "I" have "my" power in this relationship. It seems that "I" just haven't recognized "I" have established the power already. It is inappropriate to say that Rebecca lost the game of power. In contrast, Although Rebecca dies, she wins the game. It is important to reveal how they deconstruct the power of Maxim and build their own power, which can help readers to understand the story better.

2. Power and Discourse

Great changes happened in literary theories in the late 20th century. One of these changes is the transformation of discourse. Many scholars studied the theory of discourse, and Michel Foucault is one of the greatest contributors to the theory of discourse.

2.1. The Development of the Discourse Theory

[1] Bakhtin Michael is largely regarded as the pioneer of discourse theory. He may be the first one to refuse Saussure's

View on Language. He believes that all speech acts should be understood in a specific social context. The second one who contributed a lot to this theory is Tzvetan Todorov. It is Tzvetan Todorov [2] who puts forward the term "discourse". For him, the society we are in always decides our discourse. Besides, he also mentions that literature belongs to both formality and society, which means literature does have a very close relationship with society. Both Bakhtin and Todorov emphasize the social influences on discourse. After the two scholars, Michel Foucault studies discourse systematically. He explores how society, history, economy, culture, and other factors affect discourse. Besides, being influenced by Nietzsche, he introduces Nietzsche's concept of power. Then the theory of power and discourse comes into being.

2.2. Relationship among Power, Discourse, and Knowledge

According to Foucault [4], power existed in discourse. Both meaning and power are in discourse, while there is an order between them, namely, power comes first then the meaning. One of the basic points summarized by Yao [1] is that power is everywhere, they are not the kind of power we refer to in our daily life which only hold by some official organizations or stuffs. In At the same time, power and knowledge can be connected within discourse. As for the concept of knowledge, it can be understood further by the example of Bentham's Panopticon, a kind of prison, which has the shape of a circle. In the center of the circle, stands a tower, once the prison guards stand in it, he can see everything. Then what he [4] sees can be called knowledge which can help the prison guards establish their power. Besides, the prisoners know that they are watched but they are not sure when they are watched by the guards, so they will behave carefully in case of being punished.

Therefore, knowledge can make power establish, then power executes through discourse.

3. The Deconstruction of the Power

In the story of *Rebecca*, the main character Rebecca dies at the beginning of the story. Generally, she is read as a tragic female figure who loses her life in that patriarchal world,

while the narrator "I" is read as a typical Victorian female who is obedient and submissive. However, analyzing the text through Foucault's theory of power and discourse, there can be another interpretation of the story: they are trying their best to deconstruct Maxim's power.

3.1. A Deal with the Devil

The male main character Maxim describes her as a vicious woman. Many scholars also compare Rebecca to the devil. But it is Maxim who makes a deal with Rebecca voluntarily. Once the deal is made, Maxim's power is gradually deconstructed.

Rebecca knows clearly that Maxim loves Manderley more than anything else. She knows clearly that Maxim cares about the fame of the family very much, so he will never declare a divorce. Besides, Rebecca makes almost everyone like her. She knows the secrets (knowledge) of Maxim. She knows what he cares about and what he wants. Since Maxim's power is deconstructed by Rebecca, she can do what she wants and Maxim is unable to bother her. She isn't afraid of Maxim at all. When Maxim threatens Rebecca to expose her indecent behavior, she doesn't care at all, for she has disciplined servants in the house and believed they will certainly speak for her. Therefore, as it mentioned before, knowledge can help establish power. Rebecca has deconstructed Maxim's power in the house, and build her power and discourse.

After Rebecca's death, her power still exists in Manderley. It can still be seen everywhere. Because she disciplined servants strictly when she was alive. She decides when to eat, where to put vases, when to hold parties, and who will be invited to the house etc. Every servant does all these things as she required. In his book *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault mentions that if one wants to discipline others, one important point is that he needs to make a strict schedule for them to follow and asks them to repeat to do everything in the schedule. [5] She is like the prison guard stands in the tower. Just as Foucault points out that once the prisoners in the prison are disciplined, they will follow the rules, even though the guard isn't in the tower. Therefore, Though Rebecca dies, her servants still do all the things Rebecca required. This is why the narrator always feels Rebecca is still in the house, for her servants can help her to monitor the narrator and all the things in the house. Besides, although Maxim tells the narrator that Rebecca is a devil who behaves indecently, there are no evidences that can verify his words. He tells the narrator that Rebecca even teases servants and Betrice's husband. The narrator never hears about the so-called truth from servants' or Betrice's husband's mouths. Even though she is a bad woman, no one chooses to reveal her, which shows that Rebecca may have already known their secrets or disciplined them successfully. Of course, there may be another possibility that Maxim is lying to the narrator.

Rebecca masters the knowledge of Maxim, so she deconstructs the power of Maxim, which allows her to be herself. Although Maxim kills her and may think only killing can bring his power back, he is wrong. Rebecca deconstructs his power when she is alive, but even she dies, her power still runs in Manderley through the servants in the house.

3.2. The Deconstruction of the Power from the Second Wife

The second wife of Maxim is the narrator of the story. In the first two-thirds of the story, she appears as an obedient figure who cares too much about her husband and hides her

moods. In those parts, she has no power in their relationship and even no power in front of servants. Maxim always calls her "child", which makes her even less confident about herself. When Maxim confesses to her that he kills Rebecca and her death isn't an accident at all, she constructs her power. She feels that she grows up suddenly. She is no longer a child who only relays on Maxim, now she is a mature woman. Her feeling of this kind of sudden growth is partly caused by knowing Maxim never loves Rebecca at all, but it is mainly caused by the knowledge (secrets) she masters from Maxim.

Like Rebecca, she also knows the secret of Maxim. Moreover, this secret is even more fatal for Maxim than the secrets Rebecca knows. She can even reveal Maxim if she wants. Therefore, she starts to build her power in Manderley. The following three examples can testify this point: (1) When Maxim confesses his crime to her, she felt she can help him, and she does comfort Maxim and gives him some advice. (2) After confession Maxim asks her again and again to be sure if she will still love him. (3) After Maxim's confession, she starts to ask servants to serve her, and even starts to order Mrs. Danver to change the meal which used to be loved by Rebecca. She doesn't face servants timidly like she used to. She starts to behave like a real hostess in the house, for example, she starts to refuse to answer Mrs. Danver's questions, for she realizes that servants never have the right to question the host or hostess in the house. Besides, her language becomes simpler than before. She uses only several words to answer the sergeant when he is flattering her. Just as mentioned before, knowledge helps to establish power, and then power runs through discourse [1]. The narrator's changes in her behaviors and language can testify her building of power.

3.3. The Deconstruction from Mrs. Danver

[6] Mrs. Danver is the head of the servants in Manderley. She loves Rebecca so much so that many scholars even believe there is a kind of love which abnormal between the hostess and the servant. She knows Rebecca a lot. Rebecca is willing to tell her all her indecent behaviors and feelings to men who admire her. She says men are only games for Rebecca. She never loves anyone, but herself. Therefore, Mrs. Danver knows Rebecca treats all the men like toys, and she despises both Jack (Rebecca's cousin who loves her) and Maxim. Besides, she knows everything in the house and takes care of the whole house. She has both the knowledge of the house and the secret that Rebecca never loves Maxim. Thus, she can help to deconstruct the power of Maxim.

[7] It also reflects servants' deconstruction of power of hosts. The relationship between hosts and servants becomes tense in Maurier's time, which is known as the Servant Problem. Servants in her period were not the ones in the previous time. Women can earn more in factories and offices, so they are less likely to choose to be servants, which lead to the scarcity of servants for both middle-class families and up-class families. Therefore, some of them did not treat hosts or hostesses like they were supposed to be, for they have been powerful figures. This is why Mrs. Danver's power is much stronger than the narrator's and makes the narrator afraid of her.

Mrs. Danver masters the knowledge of the house and the secret of Rebecca. She knows that Rebecca doesn't love any men who appear in her life. Therefore, she can deconstruct the power of both Maxim and the anonymous narrator "I".

3.4. Maurier's Wish to Deconstruction of Power in Patriarchal Society

The story is set in the interwar period [8] which is a very special period. During the first world war, men all went to the front and left home to women. Therefore, many women had chances to have jobs in society. They can earn money by themselves without relying on their husbands. Since their husbands were not home, they could decide everything in their homes. Therefore, they established domestic authority. However, when men came back from the front, they want to be the center and the authority again in the house. Therefore, women need to go back to their traditional position which means they need to be a wife and mother in the house instead of the one who go out of house to earn butter and bread. Many women struggle in this situation. In this kind of setting, Rebecca can stand for those women who struggle in this game of power, and according to much previous research, she also stands for Maurier.

Besides living in this women-unfriendly society, Maurier had to face the pressure from her father and dissatisfaction with her husband. Maurier's father tries to monitor all her behaviors, which makes her want to escape from her father. Some scholars believe the depiction of Maxim has some relationship with Maurier's father. Although Maurier cannot escape from the patriarchal society, she can make the wish come true in literature. [7] In real life, when Maurier grew up, she chose to get married to escape from her father. And she had to take care of three children and face her husband who was a "coward hero" coming back from the front. However, Rebecca is in a different situation. In her childhood her father doesn't bother her too much, she can ride horses and even fights with her cousin. After marriage, she doesn't have children, and she can also control her husband. In the story, Rebecca does what Maurier couldn't do and owns the life that Maurier doesn't have. Maurier shows her wish to escape from the patriarchal society in this story.

4. Conclusion

Maurier, Rebecca, and the anonymous narrator all live in a patriarchal society, but all of them try to deconstruct the patriarchal power. In the story of Rebecca, Rebecca, Mrs. Danver, and the female narrator all deconstruct the power of the male character Maxim by knowing the knowledge (secrets) of Maxim.

Rebecca knows Maxim doesn't love her but his fame, manor, and himself. Then she tells Maxim that she could help

him to win great fame and take good care of Manderley, in exchange, she can do whatever she wants. Maxim is afraid of divorcing Rebecca for his fame and his family's fame. Thus, she deconstructs the power of Maxim and builds her one. The obedient narrator who always relays on her husband has also built her power in the late part plots in of the story. After knowing that it is Maxim who kills Rebecca, she suddenly "grows up". It doesn't mean she really grows up suddenly, she "grows up" for her knowledge (secret) of Maxim. Like Rebecca, the narrator knows what she knows is fatal to Maxim. If she reveals that Maxim kills Rebecca, Maxim will lose everything. From this aspect, the narrator can build her power. And Mrs. Danver also tries to deconstruct the power of Maxim. She is a follower of Rebecca, and she supports Rebecca unconditionally. She helps to take care of the whole Manderley, she knows every little thing in the house, while Maxim doesn't care about those things. Therefore, his power in the house is deconstructed by Mrs. Danver. The last one who tries to deconstruct the power of men is Maurier. Although she doesn't make it come true in her real life, she creates Rebecca to help her make it come true.

Writers can usually realize the dark side of the world. They know how unfair the world is. They may be unable to change the situation, but they can make literature do it for them.

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