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A Language of Their Own: Deconstructing Patriarchal Language and Religious Oppression in Miriam Toews' *Women Talking*

Kendilerine Ait Bir Dil: Miriam Toews'ın *Women Talking* Romanında Ataerkil Dil ve Dinsel Baskının Yıkımı

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ABSTRACT
This essay explores the depiction of linguistic and religious oppression of women in Miriam Toews' *Women Talking*, while focusing on their efforts to deconstruct patriarchal structures and reclaim agency. Set within a patriarchal Mennonite community, the novel illustrates the lives of women and their endeavors to find a solution to the systemic sexual violence perpetrated by men within the community. This essay argues that the women's journey toward self-discovery and liberation hinges on their ability to deconstruct patriarchal language and reconstruct a new, emancipatory form of expression. Since language is central to the novel, the analysis of the women's dialogues and interpretive acts brings their journey of challenging oppressive structures into sharper focus. In this context, Kristeva's theory of symbolic and semiotic modalities, which transcend phallogocentrism, and Derrida's theory of deconstruction, which challenges fixed meanings and centralized authority in language offer significant insight into how these women navigate the journey of deconstructing oppressive language and religion while attempting to reconstruct new ones. Building on these theoretical perspectives, the essay situates the novel within discussions of feminism, religious hegemony, and gender-based violence, exploring how language and religion, as tools of patriarchal oppression, intersect to shape the women's experiences. Finally, it demonstrates how *Women Talking* challenges and redefines narratives of power and agency in contemporary literature.

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- ... It has to do with the Biblical exhortation that women obey and submit to their husbands. How, if we are to remain good wives, can we leave our men? Is it not disobedient to do so?
- We can't read, so how are we to know what is in the Bible?
- We have been told what is in the Bible.
- Yes, by Peters and the elders and by our husbands.
- Right, and by our sons.
- And what is the common denominator linking Peters and the elders and our sons and husbands? ... They are all men!

Introduction

Since the 1960s, Mennonite literature has become an influential part of Canadian writing. Writers like Rudy Wiebe, Sarah Klassen, and Patrick Friesen are well-known both within and beyond Mennonite communities. Among these authors, Canadian secular Mennonite writer Miriam Toews has recently gained significant attention by readers interested in the genre. The success of her

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novel *Women Talking* (2018) among both religious and secular readership lies in its powerful portrayal of the struggle to create a genuinely feminist community. Toews' fiction frequently confronts themes of religious hypocrisy and patriarchal control—elements she perceives as part of her cultural heritage. The novel is primarily concerned with issues of language, religion, and subjectivity, and as the title of the novel suggests, Toews emphasizes the role of language in women's journey toward self-discovery.

Numerous scholars have explored Mennonite literature, with a particular focus on Miriam Toews' works. Grace Kehler, for example, concentrates on Mennonite theologies of pacifism and Toews' critique of the church and its failure to authentically represent the pacifist ideals within the community. Kehler (2020) provides an insightful analysis of *Women Talking*, viewing Toews's novel as a "feminist theological parable of women" through the lens of Luce Irigaray's philosophy on "becoming divine women." She suggests that the women of Molotschna "restore a feminist peace theology from below, translating it into a renewed, liberatory community" (pp. 409-10). Victoria Glista (2023) also offers a thoughtful reading of the novel, focusing on the transformation of women, which she describes as reliant on "gestures, postures, and reorientations." Drawing from feminist political and critical theories on the gestural and postural life of nonviolence, especially in Judith Butler's slant on "aggressive nonviolence," Glista brings embodiment — particularly "bodily comportment" — into the foreground, highlighting its vitality within the novel (p. 97).

While this essay considers women's religious enlightenment, it significantly diverges from the previous works by intertwining language and religion, focusing on the role of patriarchal language in shaping women's identity and religious beliefs. The emphasis will be on women's efforts to deconstruct this language and reconstruct their own, fostering a vision of a new religion that promises a non-hierarchical, egalitarian colony.

The novel begins with the revelation that all women in the novel are illiterate and thus dependent on a male minute-taker for their secret meetings. Soon, the male narrator and minute-taker reveals the main reason for the hastily organized meeting, that "since 2005, nearly every girl and woman has been raped" and experienced strange, violent nightly attacks while they were put into the state of unconsciousness (p. 4). Although the sexual violence faced by these women in religious community is deeply concerning, the deliberate illiteracy imposed upon Mennonite women is noticeable in the first place, which renders them reliant on men for reading, writing, and interpreting scriptures. Yet, these resourceful women's ongoing dialogue culminates in a decision that challenges the status quo. They reject the notion that a language shaped by men serves their needs, realizing instead the necessity of creating their own manifesto in a language free from patriarchal influence. At this point, readers grasp the metaphorical depiction of illiteracy: As long as women rely on male language and their interpretation of the sacred texts, they are illiterate and thus their conception of the world is constrained and controlled. This leads them to deconstructing man-made phallogocentric language (used by Derrida for language that prioritizes men and their values) and generating a language of their own, a language that doesn't reinforce male dominance and gender inequality.

While the exact nature of this language — whether it aligns with Virginia Woolf's concept of a "man-womanly" androgynous language or Julia Kristeva's notion of a womanly semiotic language—is not explicitly stated, what remains certain is that the symbolic language constructed by men, and the subsequent patriarchal interpretations of sacred texts, are wielded as tools of oppression to subjugate and control women.

In this essay, we will focus on the intersection of language and religion within *Women Talking* and explore how religious patriarchal norms are imposed upon women to perpetuate a submissive

feminine identity, reinforcing the dominance and control of oppressive men over the bodies and souls of women. In choosing the title "A Language of Their Own," we aim to underscore the profound exploration of gender and identity articulated by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and Elaine Showalter in *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), as both works illuminate how women have historically crafted distinct literary languages and spaces to articulate their unique experiences and perspectives. In this regard, we will refer to Derrida's theory of deconstruction and Kristeva's concepts of symbolic and semiotic language to illuminate the ways the Toews' female characters confront and transcend their linguistic confinement. Derrida's deconstruction reveals how the women challenge the binary oppositions inherent in phallogocentric language, subverting the rigid structures that perpetuate patriarchal control. Meanwhile, Kristeva's distinction between symbolic and semiotic language underscores the contrast between paternal, rule-bound discourse and maternal, fluid expression. Symbolic language represents the rigid, rational framework imposed by patriarchal systems, while semiotic language offers a more rebellious and flexible means of communication. By utilizing these theories, we will explore how the women in *Women Talking* navigate and disrupt these linguistic boundaries, seeking to escape from a restrictive patriarchal language and establish new forms of expression. We will also consider how through their acts of interpretation — of biblical texts, stories, and so on — they deconstruct male-dominated interpretations of the Bible and work toward reconstructing a religion grounded in their own agency and understanding.

Language and Deconstruction: Derrida and Kristeva's Theories

In examining the evolution of language form from past to present, we encounter a profound shift in philosophical perspectives on meaning and presence. Historically, Western philosophy had focused on the metaphysics of presence, where binary oppositions — such as presence/absence and truth/error — were crucial in establishing definitive meaning and truth. However, the 20th century introduced a radical rethinking of these notions through the work of French philosopher Jacques Derrida. The term "deconstruction" was first introduced by Derrida in the late 1960s as a reaction to structuralist views regarding text and its meaning. The term was also used to criticize the basic metaphysical assumptions of traditional western philosophy. In his *Of Grammatology* (1967), Derrida challenges both Western thought and structuralism by questioning the concept of a fixed center of meaning, which he refers to as "logocentrism". This critique basically aims to lay bare the reliance on an assumed central truth or origin in texts and philosophical systems, suggesting instead that meaning is fluid and constructed through language. In his *Dissemination*, Derrida provides a deconstructive reading of Plato and attempts to subvert the idea that the structure of a text is fixed, originated from the fixed center. As he argues:

> There is nothing but text, there is nothing but extratext, in sum an 'unceasing preface' that undoes the philosophical representation of the text, the received opposition between the text and what exceeds it. The space of dissemination does not merely place the plural in effervescence, it shakes up an endless contradiction, marked out by the undecidable syntax of 'more'. (1972, p. 43)

In his essay "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (1966) Derrida offers a critique of structuralist thought and Western metaphysics. The essay begins with Michel de Montaigne's quote: "We need to interpret interpretations more than to interpret things" (p. 247). This sets the stage for Derrida's exploration of how interpretations and meaning are not fixed but are constantly shifting within the structures of thought and language. Focusing on duality and paradox within traditional thought regarding "center" of a structure, he sees that the center is both within the structure (as its organizing principle that provides stability) and outside it (as transcendent, such as God, truth or reason, and not subject to the structure's rules). This paradox leads Derrida to the provocative assertion: "The center is not the center" (p. 248). By this, he means

that the center is not a fixed, stable entity but rather a placeholder that shifts over time and across contexts. Since language itself is a structure, it follows that it has no fixed center and no definitive meaning. This is the negation of logocentrism inherent in western philosophy. The idea extends to foundational religious texts like bible and their interpretations, suggesting that they too lack a singular, ultimate meaning. This in fact opens up space for multiple interpretations of holy texts.

This approach of reading a text while emphasizing on the absence of a central meaning is further emphasized by dismantling the hierarchical binary opposition of classical idealism that helps provide the final meaning of a text. His deconstruction challenges these binary oppositions, labeling them as "violent hierarchies" (1981, p. 41). He challenges speech/writing binary and puts into question the western thought of privileging speech over writing (phonocentrism), arguing instead that this hierarchy is flawed because both speech and writing are forms of signification that rely on "différance," where meaning is not fixed but constantly deferred and shaped by their differences (1972, pp. 5-6, 25). This critique extends to Western thought's broader dichotomies, such as good vs. evil, being vs. nothingness, presence vs. absence, and man vs. woman, all of which are structured within the logocentric system. Derrida also observes that sexual difference sets the foundation of this hierarchy, which he names phallogocentrism (p. 49). By deconstructing the speech/writing binary, denouncing phallogocentrism and other oppositions, Derrida reveals that both sides of these pairs share inherent instabilities, that the reversal of binary hierarchies are possible, ultimately indicating that words and texts do not possess a single, central meaning. As he states: "language bears within itself the necessity of its own critique" (1966, p. 253).

Influenced by Derrida, the Bulgarian-French philosopher Julia Kristeva talks about limitations of language, of meaning and philosophy. Kristeva explores the binary pair of the semiotic and symbolic modalities, which she famously details in *Revolution in Poetic Language*. She describes two systems within language: one that is closed and rational (the symbolic), and another that is open, irrational and disruptive (the semiotic). Drawing on Lacan's concept of the three orders — imaginary, symbolic, and real — Kristeva identifies the semiotic as an irrational aspect of language associated with the pre-Oedipal phase, occurring before the mirror stage and entry into the symbolic order. She defines semiotic as "rhythmic, unfettered, irreducible to its intelligible verbal translation; it is musical, anterior to judgement, but restrained by a single guarantee, syntax" (1984, p. 29). In this phase, language manifests as rhythmic, pre-Oedipal babbling of children. Kristeva labels this realm the "semiotic chora," where the child exists in a maternal, undifferentiated dyad with the mother. However, once the child enters the symbolic order — the realm of the father's law and structured language — the rational, rule-based system of language comes into effect. This symbolic phase imposes repression and censorship, requiring the child to sever ties with the mother and regard her as an object of abjection (1984, p. 31).

Kristeva focuses on poetic language and the way it transcends and disrupts conventional grammatical and syntactic structures. She notes that poetic language often violates the strict rules of language through rhythmic and phonetic elements, which introduce a semiotic layer that breaks away from clear, structured meanings. This semiotic layer — the aspects of language tied to rhythm, tone, and form — is distinct from the "symbolic," or the structured language that adheres to syntax and grammar. As she states:

> In any poetic language, not only do the rhythmic constraints, for example, go so far as to violate certain grammatical rules of a national language . . . but in recent texts, these semiotic constraints (rhythm, vocalic timbres in Symbolist work, but also graphic disposition on the page) are accompanied by nonrecoverable syntactic elisions; it is impossible to reconstitute the particular elided syntactic category (object or verb), which makes the meaning of the utterance decidable. (1984, p. 134)

It is this quality of elision, or omission that removes the possibility of fixed meanings in any poetic language, making the interpretation of the text fluid, ambiguous, and open to individual perception. Essentially, Kristeva suggests that poetry engages the semiotic as it disregards the strictures of symbolic language. It is this "undecidability" within the semiotic/poetic language that make it disruptive.

Despite being labeled as feminine, the semiotic realm is not limited by gender; Both men and women can intermittently access it as a form of resistance to the symbolic order. This resistance is often evident in poetic language, where traditional language rules and syntax are subverted, creating an expressive, liberated space outside the constraints of conventional speech. Critics such as De Nooy highlight the ways in which Kristeva's theory is absorbed into Derrida's deconstruction. She states that what Kristeva terms as the symbolic and the semiotic are in fact "a pair of terms among others, subordinated to the movement of 'difference', the symbolic merely a deferred moment of the semiotic" (1998, p. 15). By referring to masculine/feminine and self/other opposition, both Derrida and Kristeva attempt to rewrite the traditional perception of woman as the Other. Kristeva's use of *le feminine* as what resides within every speaking subject, even though ungraspable to some, disrupts the masculine/feminine binary. She sees the feminine as remnants of the maternal body before the stage of self/other separation, and before entering to the realm of language. As the child learns language and tries to establish a distinct self, the mother-child fusion is severed, and the mother becomes the Other or abjected. *Le feminine* and the maternal body cannot embody the sign system of language and thus remains as an unsymbolized remainder within the subject which is accessible only in specific moments. What Kristeva aims to show here is that the masculine/feminine binary oppositions are sexual identities constructed within the language system and shaped by the constraints of society on the one hand, and the *jouissance* of the mother-child fusion on the other. Within the language system and shaped by the symbolic/semiotic, man and woman are other to themselves (De Nooy, 1998, p. 118). But according to the theory of deconstruction, the subversion of this system is possible.

Deconstructing Patriarchal language in *Women Talking*

Language plays a significant role in restricting and subjugating women in the novel. As the novel opens, the male minute taker August Epp, whose name is derived from a tree called "women's tongue" (p. 3) explains how he gets the role of becoming a group of Molotschnan women's tongue by writing what they discuss secretly in a loft. His name symbolizes his role as the articulate voice of women who are unable to speak for themselves. August Epp delineates the linguistic constraints imposed upon women, revealing the isolation within the confines of their community. According to August, the only language these women know is Plaudietsch, the "unwritten medieval language" spoken exclusively by a small number of Mennonites (p. 8). Ona Friesen, a woman who is primarily preoccupied with how language restricts her and women in general, articulates her thoughts by saying "we are women without a voice… we are women out of time and place, without even the language of the country we reside in" (p. 56). The women in *Women Talking* are isolated within their colony, denied access to external information, while men, fluent in English and Spanish, control all connections to the outside world. This linguistic confinement reinforces gender inequality, as men monopolize knowledge and religious interpretation, limiting women's independence and perpetuating their dependency on male authority. The patriarchal system benefits from this control, using religious doctrine to enforce submission and silence dissent. Without exposure to alternative ideologies, women internalize the patriarchal norms, which stifle their autonomy and reinforce their subjugation.

The language used by these women is man-made, and as Dale Spender has argued in her book *Man-made Language*, both syntax and semantics are created to serve patriarchy in the best way possible. Spender considers language more than a neutral Saussurian sign system with signifier

and signified, not "a vehicle that carries the ideas" but "a shaper of ideas" (p.139), the ideas that are biased in favour of men and therefore obviously sexist. Miriam Toews' women who are inexorably the users of this language have no way of escaping oppression as long as they use the same language. By using man-made language, they internalize the sexual hierarchy and get ignorant to the violence and oppression being imposed on them. An example of this could be Agata's reference to the word "pacifism" as one of the central tenets of Monnonite faith (p. 103). The ideological power of the word is so strong on women they couldn't stay and fight to defend their rights.

To overcome the oppressive effects of man-made language, Mennonite women have to deconstruct patriarchal language and then reconstruct a new one. Firstly, they try to get over the binary opposition within language which has fixed categories and hierarchies, and thus in Derrida's manner they attempted to deconstruct the language. Agata's fervent appeal to "put aside the animal/non-animal and forgiveness/non-forgiveness and inspirational/ non-inspirational… debates to concentrate on the matter at hand" (p. 38) can be seen as a huge step taken to subvert the inherent goals of the man-made language. To ignore binary opposition within the language indicates the overturn of western patriarchal philosophies with inherent hierarchies within them.

One significant binary opposition that the women deconstruct in *Women Talking* is that of violence and nonviolence, which becomes most evident in Salome Friesen's expression of anger after learning that her three-year-old daughter has been repeatedly attacked by the rapists. When Salome attempts to kill the attackers with a scythe, she is condemned by the Mennonite community (p. 44). Here, the patriarchal religious structure uses "pacifism" and "forgiveness" as tools of control, requiring that the rapists "be forgiven by the victims and in return have the victims forgiven by God" (p. 45). This notion of pacifism aligns with submission, pushing women to embody a passive, compliant nonviolence that upholds male authority, and compelling Salome and the other victims to stifle anger or resistance in favor of silence. Although they appear to accept and internalize the doctrines of the patriarchal Mennonite faith, but as the women begin to question and reshape their beliefs, they experience a profound shift in how they understand nonviolence. As Glista argues, their journey "revivifies nonviolence as agonistic and egalitarian," (p. 95) transforming it into an empowering, assertive stance. By engaging in gestures, postures, and new forms of community interaction, they develop what Glista calls "aggressive nonviolence," which rejects passivity and redefines nonviolence as an active, revolutionary force. This new approach disrupts the binary opposition of violence/nonviolence and reveals the limitations of a simplistic framework that associates nonviolence with submission and compliance. By reinterpreting nonviolence as a liberating and empowering force, they deconstruct its traditional meaning, unveiling its latent potential for resistance rather than repression. Obviously, we see Derrida's theory at play here.

In addition, while the women in the novel are illiterate and rely on speech for their discussions, they insist on the act of writing by August Epp as a way to document their experiences and decisions. This challenges phonocentrism by recognizing writing not as a secondary or inferior mode of expression but as a necessary complement to speech. In the context of Western philosophy, speech is often seen as more authentic because it is immediate and tied to presence. Writing, by contrast, is viewed as derivative and distant. Derrida critiques this privileging of speech over writing, arguing that both are interdependent, and writing plays an essential role in constructing meaning. The women's insistence on detailed writing in *Women Talking* can thus be seen as a deconstruction of this traditional hierarchy.

On the other hand, Toews highlights the inherent limitations of the language itself. When the women gather to discuss the nightly assaults, they turn to spoken language—the symbolic, as Kristeva terms it—to make sense of what has happened to them and to plan their next steps. Yet,

this language quickly reveals its limitations. As they speak, one warns another against using an "incorrect word" (p.182), and sometimes these exchanges escalate into arguments over language. The tension even strains mother-daughter bonds, as with Agata and Ona. When Agata uses the phrase "run away," Ona snaps, "We're not running away, we're not rats fleeing a burning barn, we've made a decision to leave" (p.182). Though upset by the phrasing, Ona knows, as do they all, that the words themselves fall short of what they truly mean. She soon regrets her reaction, thus apologizing and promising to "stay quiet," and realizes that their love and shared understanding transcend these verbal missteps. When they finally decide to act, rather than talk, they understand the shortcoming of symbolic language. Ona deeply grasps this when she "takes back her words, to take them back inside her body" (p.101).

In this way, the women begin to recognize that the symbolic language of rules and definitions will not hold them together, nor will it sustain their trust. Instead, they find unity through their unspoken bond. Heart to heart, hand in hand, they bridge the gaps that words cannot fill. "Agata takes Ona's hand who takes Salome's hand who takes Majal's hand who takes Neitje's hand" (p. 165), they all take each other's hands — all join hands, and in a powerful gesture of solidarity, they reach for August as well. When August drops his pen — a symbol of the symbolic, of words, definitions, written language — he joins them in the "semiotic," a pre-verbal realm of shared feeling and understanding and start singing a hymn. Here, beyond symbolic language and by libidinal energies they find a deeper connection that empowers them as they take their first steps toward freedom together.

It is remarkable how August, as a man, succeeds in forming such a deep bond with the women. Critics such as Kehler see August as the one "stranded between masculinity and femininity as well as between tradition and change" (p.422). August Epp is the only man in the colony who understands women, participates in their "collective singing" (p.29) and interpretation of dreams, stories and poems. At times, he finds himself reciting silently the same poem with women, as for example when he and Ona quote Virgil together (p. 79). Through his involvement in singing and poetry recitation—both rhythmic forms that transcend ordinary speech—he aligns himself with the women's semiotic language. He is a man who oscillates between Kristeva's symbolic and semiotic and establishes a deep connection with women within rhythmic semiotic realm. As Kristeva's semiotic is not gender specific and not necessarily limited to women, the presence of August Epp within semiotic realm seems ordinary.

Glista argues that it is feminism that holds the "capacity to move those bodies, to spur them into action and coalition". For her, the women's feminist "movement" is both a literal and symbolic force — an organized struggle for change and a physical commitment to nonviolent transformation (2023, p. 99). Drawing on Kristeva's symbolic/semiotic modalities, we argue that this movement is not driven by symbolic language, with its rule-bound limited structures, but by the subversive force of semiotic — a rebellious, pre-verbal force that defies the restrictions imposed by patriarchal society. This semiotic language pushes them forward to break through boundaries and move them toward liberation.

Throughout discussion these women notice the ambiguity and confusion within the symbolic language, made by semantically related words such as "fleeing" and "leaving" (p. 40-41). They understand that these related words, used interchangeably can cause confusion and varied interpretations, because a word that is perceived as positive in one context, can be perceived as negative in another. These connotations in fact arise from cultural, historical, and contextual factors, as well as the specific usage of the words over time. This type of language is thus complex, and the potential for misinterpretation or misunderstanding exists, especially when dealing with subtle differences in meaning or connotation. Toews' women question the reliability of this language by discussing its deficiencies. Moreover, the author skillfully directs the reader's focus

towards the limitations of language, illustrating how certain phrases defy translation into other languages: "Agata has enough breath now to speak. Yoma leid exhai, she says. (This is untranslatable)" (p. 183).

The portrayal of female characters as ostensibly illiterate while endowing them with a profound understanding of language challenges traditional notions of literacy and education. The writer vividly depicts these women as possessing an intrinsic, if unconventional, grasp of linguistic concepts, effectively positioning them as sophisticated analysts of language. This subversion is particularly evident when an elderly female character discusses binary opposition—a concept typically associated with formal linguistic theory — and suggests that women should transcend such rigid dichotomies. Although she is described as illiterate in the conventional sense, her insightful commentary on binary structures aligns closely with Derrida's deconstructive approach, revealing an unexpected depth of understanding. This juxtaposition not only undermines the simplistic binary of literate/illiterate but also highlights how the meaning of illiteracy is more phenomenological than pure. Derrida's theory suggests that such meanings are embedded within the system of signification itself, rather than existing as pure, unmediated entities (1981, pp. 31-32). Thus, the novel's depiction of these women as both "illiterate" and linguistically adept serves to challenge and destabilize traditional categories of literacy. Moreover, the portrayal of these women as well-versed in the works of renowned poets like Virgil and Samuel Taylor Coleridge — whom they refer to as "a metaphysical dreamer, in pain" (p. 77) demonstrate that their so-called illiteracy is not a straightforward lack of knowledge but rather a complex, nuanced engagement with language. In Kristeva's framework, the term "dreamer" aligns closely with the semiotic realm, which encompasses pre-verbal, unconscious drives and connections often expressed through dreams, rhythms, and symbols. In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva talks about "the vital role played by Freudian processes of displacement and condensation in the organization of the semiotic" (p. 29), the processes that are mostly seen in dreams. So for both poets and the women in *Women Talking*, "dreamer" represents an entry point into the semiotic — a space where language is fluid and meanings are intuitive rather than strictly defined. Poets, like Coleridge, are "dreamers" because they navigate between the symbolic structures of language and the boundless imagery of the unconscious, often accessing truths that lie beyond direct expression. Similarly, the women, as "dreamers," use dreams to access a shared, intuitive understanding that transcends formal language.

As the women talk, they begin sharing their dreams — terrifying visions that, at first, seem like isolated nightmares. But over time, they come to realize "they were collectively dreaming one dream, and that it wasn't a dream at all" (p. 15). One by one, they take turns recounting what they've dreamt, joining in a collective effort to interpret these dreams. As mentioned above, much of their communication in this space aligns with Kristeva's concept of the semiotic, as the language of dreams and the semiotic both reside in the unconscious, beyond structured meaning. Ona acknowledges this bond, saying, "All we women have are our dreams – so of course we are dreamers" (p. 56). It is through these shared dreams, through the rhythms and symbols of their unconscious minds, that they reach their ultimate decision. Here, beyond the limitations of spoken language, they find a profound unity that drives them toward action and transformation.

An illustration of the women's preference for the semiotic over the symbolic is seen in Nettie who, as a protest to the violation enforced on her, retreats to a silent mode. The way she communicates with other women without a need of man-made language is outstanding and greatly noticeable: "she apologizes for letting Miep out of her sight, for allowing Miep to run away to her mother, although she says all this *without using words*" (p. 64, my emphasis). Choosing silence over speech, she is not the borrower of a man-made language (echoing Dale Spender's perspective); Rather, she uses what Kristeva calls "pre-Oedipal semiotic" (1984, pp. 22-27), where the Law of the Father is

not there to oppress and tyrannize her. Kristeva's semiotic language is associated with the maternal, and is characterized by its fluidity and openness, operating outside rigid constraints and embracing a more flexible, often irrational approach. That is why Toews emphasizes that Nettie only communicates with children (p. 64). By dedicating herself solely to engaging with the children of the colony, she chooses a path of semiotic expression. Obviously, by embracing this pre-Oedipal form of expression, women can subvert the conventional structures of patriarchal discourse and pave the way for more dynamic and egalitarian forms of communication. No doubt, Toews women never struggle to comprehend this language, the maternally connected language that can also connect and unite all women. Even the young teenagers practice "using body language" and communicate with each other without using words (p. 39). Moreover, the younger generation's rebellion against patriarchal norms is marked not by patriarchal symbolic language but by subtle, defiant actions that challenge established codes. For example, they resist societal expectations for women to cover their bodies modestly: they roll their socks "into little doughnuts that encircle their ankles" (p. 19) and shed their kerchiefs in the presence of August, though tradition dictates they wear them around men (pp. 39, 69). By breaking dress code expectations in small but deliberate ways, these young women reject the authority of patriarchal rules not through speech, but through action. Glista's observation resonates particularly well here, as she points out: "An attention to bodily comportment draws our gaze beyond the dominance of language and toward movement, toward what is often resistant to definition or clarity, but nevertheless generates new formations of gender and social relations" (p. 107). While this paper's focus is not primarily on bodily movement, it's clear that these women recognize the limitations of using patriarchal language as a means of rebellion.

Finally, these women begin to deconstruct the patriarchal language that confines their identities and actions to male-imposed definitions:

> Can we agree that we will not feel guilt ... about disobeying our husbands by leaving Molotschna because we are not entirely convinced that we are being disobedient? Or that such a thing as disobedience even exists?
> Oh, it exists, says Mariche.
> Yes, says Salome, as a word, as a concept, and as an action. But it isn't correct word to define our leaving Molotschna.
> It might be *one* word, says Mariche, to define our leaving.
> True, says Salome, one word out of many. But it's a word that the men of Molotschna would use, not God. (pp. 158-159)

Agata's question here introduces the possibility of reinterpreting "disobedience" as a socially constructed label rather than a universal truth. Mariche and Salome's responses reveal the limitations of this term and emphasize that it belongs to the male symbolic order. Salome distinguishes the symbolic language of the men from a potentially more meaningful, spiritual understanding. This assertion underscores their desire to break free from the restrictive language imposed by men and suggests a search for expressions more aligned with their lived experiences and values. By re-examining terms such as "disobedience," the women initiate a process of deconstruction, seeking a language that reflects their autonomy and resists patriarchal definitions

After a two-day meeting, the women in the novel have finally reached a point of heightened consciousness. They envision creating a society and language of their own, free from sexism, sexual oppression, and all forms of hierarchy and tyranny. It's important to note that they do not view men as adversaries. Instead, they invite men to join their community if they align with their principles and their manifesto, demonstrating their commitment to an egalitarian society rather than engaging in a battle of the sexes. Perhaps they embody and embrace the internalized tenet of "pacifism" in its most profound sense.

Deconstructing Patriarchal Religion in *Women Talking*

Just as Toews' women strive to deconstruct patriarchal language and challenge phallogocentrism, the same applies to religion. Religious doctrines, often derived from sacred texts, are traditionally grounded in fixed, authoritative interpretations. However, Derrida's concept of deconstruction reveals that these texts, including the Bible, are open to multiple interpretations and lack a singular, central truth. Toews examines how traditional, male-centric interpretations have influenced the understanding of biblical texts, often resulting in readings that favor men and marginalize women, contributing to their oppression. In this section, we will examine how women deconstruct religion by rejecting patriarchal interpretations and offering new, inclusive readings.

Many feminist works critically examine male interpretations of the Bible and investigate how gender influences biblical exegesis. These studies often seek to challenge and reframe traditional, male-dominated readings, addressing the gender biases inherent in interpreting biblical texts. One significant example is *The Woman's Bible* by Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1993), which is considered as the original feminist critique of the Bible. The book explores how male interpretations are sometimes internalized by women as "the word of God," thereby hindering their emancipation. In the book's introduction, Stanton highlights how priests and legislators frequently cite scripture to reinforce notions of female inferiority, subservience, and dependence. She counters these views by reinterpreting biblical texts from a feminist perspective, emphasizing principles of liberty, justice, and equality for all individuals (pp. 7-13). In a similar vein, Fulkerson (1998) examines how sexist interpretations affect the understanding of biblical texts and church practices, urging a feminist reassessment of traditional readings. Fulkerson highlights how the meaning of biblical texts is influenced by the gender biases and cultural norms of the communities interpreting them. She calls on the church to address these biases and adopt more equitable practices to ensure that biblical interpretations support gender justice and inclusivity.

Miriam Toews' novel vividly reflects these feminist perspectives on religion, incorporating and exploring themes that challenge traditional gender roles and religious norms. The society of *Women Talking* operates within a religious framework, where religion serves as a repository of rules and principles that are articulated in holy scriptures. Obviously, religious norms within these sacred texts are prescribed by means of language. However, widespread illiteracy among women prevents them from accessing these holy texts directly. Instead, men assume the authority to read, interpret, and communicate the scriptures, shaping the women's understanding and reinforcing patriarchal control. Yet, it is the self-educated, intellectually curious women—and as we discussed above, those who are passionately engaged with language, words and definitions, and poetry—who dare to challenge this dynamic.

In an interview with Ben MacPhee-Sigurdson (2018), Toews criticizes "the idea of fundamentalism, of scripture being used to oppress girls and women," seeking to inspire Mennonite women to actively engage in transformative change, and to present a call for reparative action. Scholars like Karen Armstrong (2001) discuss how fundamentalists in different religions rely on scripture as an unchanging authority. This definition of fundamentalism as strict adherence to sacred texts, particularly through a fixed literal interpretation is in stark contrast with Derrida's theory of deconstruction. Derrida argues that texts, including religious ones, are always open to reinterpretation and that meaning is constantly deferred through "différance" — a process where words and concepts gain meaning through their differences from other words and concepts, never arriving at a final or stable interpretation. The way Mennonite women in the novel seek to redefine key tenets of their religion — "pacifism, love, and forgiveness" (p. 111) — and challenge fundamentalism by embracing a broader hermeneutic and reinterpretation of sacred texts, aligns with Derrida's deconstruction of logocentrism. As Agata Friesen asserts, "We will find a road and we will travel" (p. 113), which is a promising act of transformation.

Toews' portrayal of the women gathering in the symbolically liminal space of the hayloft, "between earth and sky" (p. 166), is a powerful metaphor for their journey towards deconstructing and reconstructing language and religion. This liminal space, existing between the material world and the spiritual realm, reflects the women's position at the threshold of transformation. By questioning the traditional religious interpretations handed down to them by men and confronting their own experiences of oppression, they begin to deconstruct the patriarchal structures that have shaped their understanding of religion and language. For example, influenced by male reading of the bible regarding "forgiveness", they first advocate forgiving men, believing that by doing so, they will earn God's forgiveness and gain entrance to the gates of heaven (p. 24). It's evident that this ideology is imposed on women by men, and like what Stanton stated above, women accept them passively as words of God. While women are made to see forgiveness as ethical principle and an act of mercy, Peters and the male figures use women's passive forgiveness as a tool for disempowerment of victims and impunity from any punishment for their wrongdoing. Soon, they become aware of having male interpretation of the bible which harms them in various ways. Ona' statement that "our inability to read or write puts us at a great disadvantage in any negotiation over the interpretation of the Bible" (p. 158) can serve as motivation and encouragement for women to create their own language and religion. In this regard, the new language means new interpretation of the Bible, and the new interpretation means new tenets and doctrines, and thus the new religion. The great success of women towards the end of the novel is when, for the first time, they interpret "the word of God for themselves" (p. 159) where their leaving Molotschna and its brutal men is not considered "disobedience" and sin but rather interpreted as a time for love and peace (p. 159).

Throughout this spiritual journey, the women understand that religion which proclaims the message of justice is used to promote injustice; they see themselves as victims of religious exploitation and false teachings, which results in apostasy and deconstructing religion: "[Greta] makes a radical statement. She says that she is no longer a Mennonite" (p. 62). Also, as mentioned in the above section, the younger generation deconstruct dress code in this religious society, and by not wearing their kerchiefs and socks properly (pp. 19, 39, 69), they challenge the oppressive ideologies that seek to control and dictate their appearance. This act of rebellion not only asserts their autonomy and individuality but also highlights the need for greater freedom of expression and equality within these religious societies.

Therefore, as these women take a journey to create their own language, so is true about religion. Throughout discussions, Ona states: "A new religion, extrapolated from the old but focused on love, will be created by the women of Molotschna" (p. 56). The motif of "map" in *Women Talking* could be interpreted in relation to these women's spiritual journey. Women in the novel keep referring to the fact that they don't have a map, thus not knowing where they are in the world and where to go (p. 62). Symbolically, the idea of characters creating their own map can suggest their desire for autonomy and self-determination in navigating their lives: "'Perhaps the women can create their own map as they go.' 'Now that's a unique idea.'" (p. 84). They decide to take ownership of their path; a path which is not dictated by oppressive men, but a unique, personalized one. In this regard, Kehler suggests that the women in *Women Talking* are developing a belief in faith that diverges from the rigid, patriarchal religion of their colony, stating that the women's faith is grounded in movement, exploration, and relation, contrasting sharply with the colony's static and oppressive emphasis on purity and rigid dogma (p. 418). In their quest for meaning, purpose and enlightenment, they challenge the centrality of established structures that resonates with Derrida's deconstruction.

The women who engage in reinterpretation of the Bible also practice the art of interpretation more broadly throughout the novel. Beyond sacred texts, they interpret stories, paintings, and their own

lived experiences. These interpretive practices may ultimately empower them to approach the Bible with greater confidence and insight, enabling them to challenge patriarchal readings and uncover new possibilities within its teachings. Toews highlights the richness of multiple interpretations by crafting key moments in the novel that celebrate diverse perspectives. In a contemplative moment, August Epp asks Ona about the butterfly named Comma (pp. 101-102). Ona offers a poetic interpretation, likening its perpetual motion to a comma's function in punctuation—a pause amidst movement. Though aware of the literal reason for the name, the comma-shaped marking on its wings, August refrains from correcting her, valuing her perspective and the richness of multiple interpretations. Notably, Ona's interpretation focuses on the butterfly's behavior rather than its appearance, challenging patriarchal norms that prioritize superficial beauty over substance. Her view celebrates movement and agency, offering a refreshing departure from societal expectations of passivity.

The second instance involves August and Ona's discussion of Michelangelo's two paintings, The Creation of Adam and Eve (pp. 97-98). Here, August presents diverse interpretations, while pondering and questioning to grasp the true intention behind the artwork's creation. Particularly striking is his feminist analysis of *The Creation of Eve*, which stands out for its thoughtful consideration: "In the painting, Eve is beseeching God, begging, imploring… perhaps reasoning, as though she has it within her power to restore Christianity to its original grandeur" (p. 98). Through his alternative interpretation of the painting, August dismantles the phallogocentric reading of the artwork, which indicates that Eve was created from the rib of Adam, demonstrating how she is perceived as an appendage, relegated to a secondary position behind the original ideal, which is typically embodied by a man. August takes our attention to the way God himself has come down to earth just for the creation of Eve and to talk to her directly (p. 98), emphasizing on the way God gives value to this female creature. This is contrasted with the *Creation of Adam* in which God has a noticeable distance from the male creature, Adam. By deconstructing phallogocentric texts and artworks, Miriam Toews' characters present a different interpretation that transcends patriarchal ideologies, offering a fresh perspective that advocates for a more equitable existence for women. This alternative viewpoint extends beyond the confines of traditional norms, embracing diverse languages, religions, and non-patriarchal interpretations. By envisioning new possibilities for women's lives, rooted in enlightenment and empowerment, they challenge existing power structures and pave the way for a more liberated and just society.

Conclusion

Miriam Toews' novel *Women Talking* serves as a powerful exploration of linguistic confinement and religious oppression and the journey toward freedom and self-determination for women within a patriarchal Mennonite community. Through an analysis of the characters' dialogues and perspectives, this essay has highlighted how patriarchal structures and religious doctrines are used to control women, while showcasing their acts of resistance and agency. Central to this resistance is the women's deconstruction of male-dominated language and interpretations of religion. We attempted to show how, based on Kristeva's symbolic and semiotic modalities, the women recognized the deficiencies within the patriarchal symbolic system. By tapping into semiotic language — rooted in rhythm, fluidity, and the maternal — they were able to challenge and deconstruct phallogocentrism. Toews' portrayal of the limitations of language — seen in the women's debates over the use of incorrect words, August's struggle to translate certain sentences, and their turn to unity and togetherness through singing hymns, reciting poetry, or engaging in acts rather than speech — aligns closely with Kristeva's theory of semiotic and symbolic modalities. By associating the rhythmic and subversive qualities of the semiotic with rebellion, Kristeva's framework helps illuminate how the women in the novel challenge the rigid, patriarchal symbolic order. Moreover, the women's collective efforts to discuss and interpret each other's

dreams echoes Kristeva's semiotic, as both the language of dreams and the semiotic reside in the unconscious, beyond structured meaning. To further deconstruct male-dominated language, women overcame the binary oppositions such as obedience/disobedience and violence/nonviolence, rejecting rigid hierarchies in favor of fluid interpretations. This parallels with Derrida's critique of binary opposition which is central to western philosophy. Furthermore, Toews brilliantly challenges traditional notions of literacy and education by portraying ostensibly illiterate women as possessing a profound and nuanced understanding of language. Through their discussions of binary oppositions, references to poets like Virgil and Coleridge, and their sophisticated engagement with linguistic concepts, the women subvert the simplistic literate/illiterate binary and reveal how literacy is more phenomenological than rigidly defined, resonating with Derrida's deconstructive approach to meaning and signification. In addition, Toews's depiction of the interplay between speech and writing mirrors Derrida's critique of rigid binaries as well. While the women rely on verbal dialogue for immediacy and collective engagement, they recognize the significance of writing in asserting their autonomy and preserving their legacy. Therefore, they insist on the male minute-taker's detailed writing of their verbal discussions. This dual emphasis destabilizes phonocentrism and reflects Derrida's argument that both speech and writing are interdependent and equally capable of generating meaning. Besides, using Derrida's critique of logocentrism, which posits that there is no fixed center or final meaning in a text, the essay attempted to show how the women embraced the multiplicity of meanings and reinterpreted biblical texts and patriarchal doctrines on their own terms. By practicing and embracing multiple interpretations, the women of Molotschna challenge the authority of oppressive religious system and reclaim the act of interpretation as a tool for empowerment. The passive forgiveness of women as an ethical principle in male-centric biblical interpretation is shown to be exploited by men to maintain power. Therefore, through her portrayal of women challenging male-centric interpretations of sacred texts and the key tenets of Mennonite religion such as pacifism, Toews aligns with Derrida's critique of logocentrism by exposing how religious doctrines, traditionally rooted in fixed, authoritative meanings, are instead open to fluid, shifting interpretations. As women embark on a journey to create a language and religion rooted in their own agency, they move beyond the confines of male-dominated traditions. Their efforts inspire readers to imagine possibilities for liberation, equality, and a more inclusive society. Through their courage and determination, they offer a vision of transformation and justice grounded in shared humanity.

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