
Patriarchal Oppression and a New Feminist Order as a Solution In Sarah Daniels's *Ripen Our Darkness*

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Abstract

In her first play, *Ripen Our Darkness*, Sarah Daniels reflects her hatred for the oppression of patriarchy on women by manifesting the devastating consequences of this oppression. She lets the readers see the relentless operation of patriarchal oppression exhibiting the mundane lives of a group of women who are surrounded by stereotypically patriarchal men. In the play, there are four couples: Mary and David, Rene and Alf, Daphne and Roger, Anna and Julie. The common point of the relationships between these four couples is that they are all manipulated by patriarchy. In addition, it is evinced in the play that patriarchy's power on women is based upon three principle institutions: marriage, church and psychiatry.

As well as demonstrating the devastating outcomes of patriarchal oppression, Daniels underlines the importance of solidarity among women as a cure to this oppression. However, she also problematizes it as an ultimate cure to patriarchal oppression by drawing attention to the inherent problems within female solidarity in a patriarchal society. Thus, this study aims to focus upon the ineffectiveness of female solidarity as a radical solution to patriarchy's oppression on women, instead, laying stress on the validity of a new feminist order that embraces both women and men, which can be created through mutual will.

Keywords: Sarah Daniels, *Ripen Our Darkness*, patriarchy, oppression, female solidarity.

Sarah Daniels'in *Ripen Our Darkness* Oyununda Ataerkil Baskı ve Çözüm Yolu Olarak Yeni Bir Feminist Düzen

Öz

Sarah Danielsilk oyunu *Ripen Our Darkness*'ta, kadınlar üzerindeki ataerkil baskının yıkıcı sonuçlarını açıkça ortaya koyarak bu baskıdan duyduğu nefreti yansıtmak-

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tadır. Yazar, oyununda etrafları tipik ataerkil erkeklerce çevrili kadınların sıradan yaşamlarını sergileyerek okuyuculara ataerkil baskının acımasız işleyişini görebilme imkânı sunmaktadır. Oyunda dört çift bulunmaktadır: Mary ve David, Rene ve Alf, Daphne ve Roger, Anna ve Julie. Bu dört çift arasındaki ilişkilerin ortak özelliği ise ataerki tarafından yönlendiriliyor olmasıdır. Ayrıca, oyunda ataerkinin kadınlar üzerindeki gücünün üç temel kuruma dayandığı açıkça ortaya konmaktadır: evlilik, kilise ve psikiyatri.

Daniels ataerkil baskının yıkıcı sonuçlarını göstermenin yanı sıra, bu baskıya bir çare olarak kadınlar arası dayanışmanın önemini altını çizmektedir. Bunun yanı sıra yazar, ataerkil bir toplumda kadınlar arası dayanışmanın özünden kaynaklanabilecek problemlere dikkati çekerek ataerkiye karşı nihai bir çözüm yolu olarak kadın dayanışmasını sorunsallaştırmaktadır. Bu sebeple, bu çalışma ataerkinin kadınlar üzerindeki baskısına karşı köklü bir çözüm yolu olarak kadın dayanışmasının etkisizliğini vurgularken, hem kadınları hem erkekleri kucaklayan ve ancak iki tarafın karşılıklı isteği ve çabası ile oluşturulabilecek yeni bir feminist düzenin geçerliliğini vurgulamayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Sarah Daniels, *Ripen Our Darkness*, ataerki, baskı, kadın dayanışması.

Introduction

In spite of the fact that Sarah Daniels refuses to be labeled as a radical feminist playwright, even as a feminist one as she stresses in her introduction to *Plays: I* that: “I didn’t set out to be a ‘Feminist Playwright.’ I didn’t set out to be a playwright at all” (1991:ix), *Ripen Our Darkness* (1981) is one of her plays which is “representative of Daniels’s feminist vision with [its] comedy and [its] radical separatist politics” (Carlson, 1989:1). In *Ripen Our Darkness*, her first play, Daniels portrays a view of “the wholesale condemnation of the patriarchy” (Carlson, 1989:2) by focusing on the troublesome life of women of different ages, social status and educational backgrounds, and designates the destroying consequences of patriarchal oppression on the lives of these women living in England in the early 1980s.

The chief character in *Ripen Our Darkness* is Mary, the wife of the churchwarden David and the mother of three teenage sons along with a lesbian daughter, “who is having an identity crisis over her roles as [a] wife and mother” (Carlson, 1989:1). Rene, married to often drunk and oppressive Alf, is another woman whose life is limited to domestic sphere as a wife and mother. Both Mary and Rene have young daughters who are also exploited within the patriarchal society for the fact that they do not conform to the established norms that patriarchy, represented either by their fathers or male partners, expect from them.

The fact that both generations are oppressed and dehumanized within the patriarchal society points out that the power of patriarchy to control women's life does not lose its effect depending on time, age, social and marital status or education. For instance, Daphne's being an educated woman with a university degree, cannot not prevent her from being humiliated by her husband Roger: "Believe it or not, women have minds of their own. Ha ha! You know sometimes I forget that Daphne has a degree" (Daniels, 1991:27). Tara is the wife of the psychiatrist Marshall Hutchinson who claims to be able to treat women with mental disorder, while it is revealed within the course of the play that his medical education has, indeed, added to him nothing in terms of understanding women and their problems within the patriarchal world. Like patronizing David and abusive Alf, thence, Marshall is a member of the patriarchal system due to his sexist attitude to women.

As a solution to the distress of women in a patriarchal society, Daniels offers solidarity in order to overthrow patriarchy. Meanwhile, she also also problematizes the idea of female solidarity as an antidote to patriarchy insinuating that solidarity among women cannot solve women's problems on its own since not all women are willing to fight against patriarchy. Given this situation, women must also be supported by men so as to defeat patriarchy, which seems impossible in the play. Making the readers realize the impossibility of such a revolutionary act, Daniels draws them into a utopic world, members of which are only women. In this way, Daniels makes clear that it does not seem to be possible for women to live as they are under current social order. Accordingly, the aim of this study is to underline the ineffectiveness of female solidarity as a radical solution to the long-lasting patriarchal oppression while, instead, emphasizing the effectiveness of a new feminist order which is not based on the superiority of the female sex, as it is mostly thought to be, but on the harmony of all humans, male and female, both with each other and with the world they are living in.

Female Solidarity Versus Patriarchal Oppression in *Ripen Our Darkness*

Ripen Our Darkness opens with a scene in the kitchen of the Johnson family "ironically describe[d] as 'Mary's kitchen', ironically because the space is clearly not owned by Mary-she is relegated to the status of servant within this site which is invaded by her husband and her sons who behave like a colonial force come to brutalise an unknown country" (Griffin, 2000:197). The first scene of the play provides the readers with detailed clues as to the nature of the marriage of Mary and David. It is a Sunday morning and Mary is busy with preparing the breakfast. David cannot find where his clothes and

things are and oftentimes asks Mary where they are. Although he never gives Mary a hand with the housework, he wants everything to be ready just on time. "David's reliance on Mary to know where everything is in fact resembles that of a child: he is the archetypal image of the man as the additional child in the (petit) bourgeois household who is unable, because unwilling, to take on any responsibilities for what are defined as domestic chores" (Griffin, 2000:197). Mary's three sons are irresponsible and good-for-nothing boys like their father. It is possible to infer that it is not easy to change men's attitude in a patriarchal society, as implied by David: "Boys will be boys, and they're not going to get any better if you persistently nag them, now are they?" (Daniels, 1991:6). As it is clear in David's words, Mary's struggle to change her sons' behaviour seems to be in vain.

On the same day, David invites Roger, the vicar, and his wife Daphne to lunch without asking Mary first, and they play monopoly in scene four. The scene of the game of monopoly reveals David's humiliating attitude to Mary as he frequently looks down on her near the guests. As Mary's mind is busy with the housework, she cannot concentrate on the game and David calls her "silly" (Daniels, 1991:24) blaming her for having "no business sense" (Daniels, 1991:24). When Mary advises to "[play] to the nearest ten pounds" (Daniels, 1991:25), David makes fun of her advice: "Playing to the nearest ten pounds! Have you ever heard the like, Roger? Sacrilege. I ask you. Pure sacrilege. Well, Roger, you have my sympathy if Daphne plays to the nearest ten pounds with the housekeeping. Ha ha" (Daniels, 1991: 25).

During the visit of Roger and Daphne, David implies that Mary is psychologically disordered and she needs treatment. He also expects to be approved by Roger and Daphne for his decision regarding Mary's psychological situation. Upon Roger's advice, David sends Mary to a Mother's Union, a religious retreat where the wives of the church workers come together. Mary joins the union, but escapes to see her daughter Anna, which she believes she needs more than the religious retreat. In scene eleven, Mary is introduced to the psychiatrist Marshall Hutchinson, a seemingly educated member of the patriarchy who is willing to label women as hysteric. Hutchinson is prejudiced against women and he believes that the underlying reason for women's "insanity" is sex-related. Hutchinson advises David that Mary should be sent to a Mental Health Section to be treated, which David accepts readily. David's decision to send Mary to a Mental Health Service is like a final blow for Mary. She grasps that she can no longer bear her burdensome life and commits suicide "turn[ing] on the gas and put[ting] her head in the oven" (Daniels, 1991: 64). Ironically, the kitchen, her living space, becomes her death place while her final sentence in

the letter to David enables the reader to see the depth of her despair: “Dear David, your dinner and my head are in the oven” (Daniels, 1991:64).

The second scene of the play takes place in Rene’s kitchen with “Alf[...] drunk [...], Susan sit[ting] silently at the table[...] [and] Rene buzz[ing] around frantically, dusting and polishing the tatty furniture” (Daniels, 1991:12). In this scene, the readers are introduced to the miserable life of the housewife Rene and her daughter Susan. Alf is bullying his wife and daughter yet, apart from David, he not only exerts psychological but also physical and verbal violence on them. Susan has an illegitimate baby born heavily disabled and just died. Therefore, Alf regards Susan as a shame to his family and thanks God for the baby died: “Bleedin’ slut. Cow. Little filthy fucker. See, yer know what this bleedin’ is, eh? Retribution from God. All-bleedin’ mighty. Mighty wrath of God lands you with a shitty, vegetating baby. Thank fuck Christ it’s dead” (Daniels, 1991:12). Rene tries to act as an intermediary between her husband and daughter : ”I know your father’s not exactly gracious...downright hostile...but it’s not his fault...He’s done his best by you he has” (Daniels, 1991:15). Rene does not have any strength to help herself out because she is the direct target of Alf’s assaults, still, she hopes a better future for her daughter: ”There’s nothing to keep you here now, love. You go” (Daniels, 1991:16). However, Susan says that she cannot leave her mother behind with her father, through which Rene feels the support of her daughter:“What would I have done if you’d been a boy?” (Daniels, 1991:16). Although Susan refuses to leave the home unless her mother goes with her, this does not provide them with any chance for a better life.

The marriage of Daphne and Roger at first seems to be unproblematic. However, in the thirteenth scene, it comes out that Daphne has been crushed under patriarchy’s oppression. Roger comments on the death of Mary as “[a]ll part of God’s rich plan” (Daniels, 1991:69). Roger’s and David’s indifference to Mary’s death brings about a burst of anger in Daphne. Mary’s suicide causes a realization in Daphne, still, her reaction to the patriarchal oppression remains at a much simplistic level compared to that of Mary’s-to “sabotage tonight’s salad-rinse the lettuce in Dettol” (Daniels, 1991: 70). While, through suicide, Mary releases herself “from her domestic bondage [...] and grow[s] into fearless self-fulfillment” (Dymkowski, 1996:65), Daphne’s reaction is an outburst of personal anger towards patriarchy’s hypocrisy.

Tara is the wife of the psychiatrist Marshall Hutchinson. Her situation is different from that of other women in the play for she does not complain of her life despite the fact that her husband is an obsessive, sex-

driven tyrant. All that Tara cares about is her comfort and privileges that her husband's social status provides her with:

Between you and I, Marsh has begged me to divorce him.
Why should I? I don't want to live in some pokey little flat
where some social worker might try and certify me for
being batty. No thanks. I like being posh. Don't listen to
this live without men rot. The way forward is to use them
and have some fun (Daniels, 1991:37).

Tara adopts the existing system as it is and tries to make the most of it using her sexual attractiveness as a woman. "In this regard, the liberal feminist voice can be claimed to operate in Tara's attitude because she prefers to survive using her potential and her own methods within the existing patriarchal system rather than trying to overthrow the patriarchal system" (Dere, 2009: 88). This case enunciates that not all women volunteer to take on responsibilities in a fight against patriarchy.

Scene three takes place in Anna and Julie's kitchen. "Anna is knitting. Julie is watching television" (Daniels, 199:17). The kitchen imagery, with which the first three scenes of the play opens, is functional within the course of the play as it reflects the nature of the relationships between the couples of the play:

The kitchens are associated with the senior female character of the family, with the exception of Anna and Julie's kitchen which belongs to both women jointly. Furthermore, whereas Mary and Rene have orare completing domestic tasks, Anna and Julie are depicted engaging in activities usually associated with relaxation and leisure, such as watching television and knitting. This is reflected in the level of agency each of these four characters has within the play more widely. The lesbian couple, Anna and Julie, have identities outside the home either as a teacher, in the case of Anna, or as a student of the Open University. In this way, Daniels sets up a contrast between the agency and equality of her lesbian characters in contrast to their heterosexual elders and the more conventional families (Bartleet, 2010:146).

Whereas it can be observed that Daniels presents Anna's and Julie's relationship as an alternative forthe problematic heteresexual marriages, "[they] are neither idealized nor romanticized. The couple has various disagreements in the course of the play, ranging from serious arguments about practical matters (Anna objects to Julie's desire to offer her half-sister

Susan a home) to more light-hearted exchanges about sexual politics” (Dymkowski, 1996:66).

In the analyses of various relationships above it is possible to realize the oppression of three institutions which operate as the base of patriarchy. In *Ripen Our Darkness*, “we see a woman’s body and work controlled (or dictated) by marriage, her mind or mental ‘health’ by psychiatry, and her spirituality and morality by the Church. These three institutions (along with the areas of life they seek to control) become the main thematic pillars of the play” (Bakker, 1996:13-14). In the play, the oppression of the church is epitomized in Roger, the vicar and David, the church warden “both of whom preach moral rectitude more in their homes than in the Church” (Bakker, 1996:14). The oppression of psychiatry on women is represented by the psychiatrist Marshall Hutchinson who is eager to explain women’s untraditional ways of behaviour, which are in fact reflections of their struggle to get rid of the boundaries of patriarchy, as mental illness. As for the institution of marriage, Daniels presents the above-mentioned models which are characterized by the domination of the more powerful over the weak, except for the relationship of Anna and Julie-as it is based on the personal freedom and equality of the sides.

Regarding the oppressive institutions of patriarchy, Daniels offers female solidarity as a solution, however, she is far from idealizing or presenting it as a radical solution since she problematizes it indicating that not all women are willing to take sides against patriarchy. As a result, representations of female solidarity in the play are replete with problems:

In *Ripen Our Darkness* Mary is presented as mostly without female support. Although she discusses her situation with her lesbian daughter Anna, she has no sense of the possibility of change except by chancing-i.e.-killing-herself. Anna is unable to help her mother. In contrast, the all-female, lesbian household of Anna and her lover Julie, is based on mutual support and understanding-even though the women have differences of opinion. Whereas the class differences between Anna and Julie do not constitute an unresolvable problem for their relationship, the tensions between mother and daughter arising from their different life-styles prevent Anna from helping her mother effectively (Griffin, 2000:198).

As it is emphasized, although Mary tries to understand and shows respect to her daughter’s personal choice, they cannot help each other to escape patriarchy’s oppression as long as David regards Anna as “a

disgrace” (Daniels, 199:11) and places herin “the sordid part of [the] family” (Daniels, 1991:11). Like Mary, Rene tries to establish a closer bond with her daughter Susan, yet she is too powerless even to save herself. Daphne sincerely tries to help Mary in order to find out the reason for her troubles but she, herself, is a victim of patriarchy’s domination although she does not seem to be much aware of it. As it is obvious in the play, the biggest challenge before the fight against patriarchy is men with stereotypically patriarchal attitudes:

[T]he solidarity between Mary and Anna, and Rene and Susan is not a major factor in their survival or success. It undoubtedly brings some relief [...], but Anna’s support cannot prevent Mary’s suicide. Similarly, the relief of Rene and Susan is not a result of solidarity between them but a result of the oppressive Alf’s death. [...] [I]t can be concluded from the play that the solidarity between mothers and daughters cannot be an effective means to solve women’s problems when they are surrounded by men, whose attitudes to women are stereotypically male attitudes, that is, who regard women as inferior, passive beings. Actually, solidarity between them cannot be regarded as a collective struggle since they cooperate merely to solve their personal problems rather than take a collective action against patriarchy (Dere, 2009:90).

Sarah Daniels’ All-Female Utopia

In scene thirteen of *Ripen Our Darkness* Mary is in a hospital room, “in bed, semi-conscious” (Daniels, 1991:65) with Old Woman, Young Woman and Tall Woman. In this scene, Daniels subverts the authority of religion and the Christian doctrine. Carina Bartleet states that:

The female Holy Trinity that appears near the end of the play is a clear example of the kind of carnivalesque turnabout that is really a travesty. Thus, *Ripen Our Darkness* uncrowns the male Holy Trinity and crowns a female version in its place. By exposing gender as the organizing factor, the power of the play’s intertextual practice to subvert the authority of the male monopoly over the hierarchical structure of the Church is realized (2002:195).

Mary's knowledge regarding religion is shattered first when the Old Woman presents herself as "the deity" (Daniels, 1991:66). She becomes unsettled on hearing that God does not exist at all:

Mary (shouts): Christ alive. I'm dead!

Young Woman (smiles): No need to call up false images.

Mary: But I mean, I never got the feeling that God approved of me.

Old Woman (shrugs): That's just as well. He doesn't exist. (Daniels, 1991: 66)

The Old Woman, of the female Holy Trinity, tells Mary that she is in paradise. The scene portrays a feminist utopia since all women here are free of the restricting boundaries and distressing oppression of patriarchy, where they "simply know no fear" (Daniels, 1991:68), but love and care for each other. The hospital is a feminist paradise where women are rewarded for "[their] life was at most monotonous, and at worst unbearably painful" (Daniels, 1991:67). In this paradise, women do not have to do anything they do not want. Moreover, they are free to go back to earth, "that war-ridden shit heap" (Daniels, 1991:67).

Though Mary says: "I'm home" (Daniels, 1991: 68) in this paradise, she wishes to return to the earth to stand by her daughter "[a]t least until she is happily married" (Daniels, 1991:67). At the end of the thirteenth scene, Mary is in her kitchen. It is only Daphne who understands that Mary killed herself. David comments that: "Mary was always very careless about leaving the oven door open. It is my opinion that she tripped up and fell asleep before she had time to get up" (Daniels, 1991:69). According to Roger, Mary's death is "[a]ll part of God's rich plan" (Daniels, 1991:69). The last scene of the play takes place in Mary's kitchen where David and Roger are playing monopoly. This time, David advises Roger to play to the nearest ten pounds. Mary speaks, yet nobody hears her.

Conclusion

In the play it can be observed that women's attempts to live as they wish standing by each other against patriarchy do not provide radical solutions most of the time. There are women, like Tara, who have already become a part of the patriarchal system and patriarchy is a long-standing institution which is not easy to overthrow. In the hospital scene, Daniels presents an all-female utopia as the ideal place for women's happiness, which they are denied in the patriarchal world. Presently, however, she underlines the

impossibility of such a heaven for women. Mary returns to earth to be with her daughter and realizes that her husband still thinks of her death as an accident. It can be concluded that it is hinted in the play that neither radical feminism nor female solidarity can be the path to a gender-free, egalitarian society. As Halsaa puts forward:

Since many women are anti-feminists, a feminist utopia hardly stands a chance without political alliances between women and men, and between the radical women's movement and other alternative movements. This should not be impossible, since feminism is comprehending more than 'just' the special interests of women (1988:328).

So, it is possible to contend that the need for a new feminist order is foregrounded in the play, with an emphasis on the solidarity of both women and men. As hinted in the play, it may be possible for the paradise, including both women and men, to come true in a world which is:

the opposite of the existing patriarchal world [...]. It is a world in which we can live, love and die as whole beings, not fragmented like we do today: a world in which the antagonism, if not the differences and conflicts, between men and women, between children and adults, between body and spirit, between production and reproduction, family and work, between love and labour, and between human being and nature are abolished (Halsaa, 1998:327-328).

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