

DECONSTRUCTING THE STEREOTYPES OF WOMEN THROUGH A FEMALE VOICE IN *BURIAL RITES* (2013) BY HANNAH KENT

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ABSTRACT

*Patriarchal society regulates how women should behave and act. If a woman obeys the social rules, she will be labeled as a good woman. On the other hand, if a woman does not follow the social values, she will be immediately categorized as an evil woman and given negative stereotypes. This binary opposition between a good woman and a bad woman is often criticized by the feminists because they think this categorization burdens women. This issue is also highlighted by Hannah Kent in her novel *Burial Rites* (2013). This novel is set in a rural society in Iceland in the 19th century with its patriarchal values, focusing on a woman named Agnes that will soon be executed. This theme interested the researcher to study *Burial Rites* more deeply using feminist perspective. Characters, setting and point of view are the intrinsic elements discussed in this research. The result of the analysis shows that through these three elements, *Burial Rites* describes society's stereotypes about 'evil women' and there is an effort from the author to deconstruct the stereotype through a female voice.*

Keywords: feminism, gender issues, gender stereotypes, patriarchy

ABSTRAK

*Masyarakat patriarkal mengatur bagaimana kaum perempuan seharusnya bertingkah laku dan bertindak. Apabila perempuan menjalani peraturan sosial itu, ia akan diberi label sebagai perempuan baik. Di sisi lain, jika seorang perempuan tidak menuruti nilai-nilai sosial, ia akan langsung dicap sebagai perempuan tidak baik dan diberikan stereotip-stereotip negatif. Oposisi biner perempuan baik dan tidak baik inilah yang kerap kali dikritik oleh kaum feminis karena menurut mereka pembagian ini membebani kaum perempuan. Isu ini juga mendapat perhatian oleh Hannah Kent dalam novel *Burial Rites* (2013). Novel ini berlatar masyarakat pedesaan Islandia pada abad ke-19 dengan pemikirannya yang masih patriarkal, berfokus pada seorang perempuan bernama Agnes yang akan menjalani hukuman mati karena dituduh sebagai pembunuh. Hal ini menarik perhatian peneliti untuk menelaah *Burial Rites* secara lebih dalam dengan pendekatan feminis. Karakter, latar, dan sudut pandang adalah elemen sastra yang dibahas dalam penelitian ini. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa melalui ketiga elemen sastra tersebut, *Burial Rites* menggambarkan stereotip-stereotip masyarakat tentang perempuan tidak baik dan terdapat usaha dari pengarang untuk mendekonstruksi stereotip tersebut melalui suara perempuan.*

Kata kunci: feminisme, isu gender, patriarki, stereotip gender

INTRODUCTION

Between 1820 and 1860, *The Cult of True Womanhood* arose, and it was especially applied during the Victorian era in British society. Welter in Brannon (2015) stated that *The Cult of True Womanhood* is a set of characters of true womanhood. It contains four virtues that define what a true woman is according to the society at that time. The virtues are purity, piety, submissiveness and domesticity. Society expected that women should hold this belief and behave following the rules, or else their life as women would be meaningless. Another consequence if they did not obey *The Cult of True Womanhood* is they would be labeled as 'bad women'. This particular condition shows how gender stereotypes hold a powerful and influential position in a society.

Gender stereotypes are beliefs about the psychological traits and characteristics of men or women (Brannon, 2015). These traits define true manhood and womanhood and make a clear distinction between the two. Gender stereotyping is not only about the categorization of characteristics based on gender, but it could have a serious impact. It can influence the way a person judges him/herself and others. Gender stereotyping also has a significant role in society's perspective in determining moral and social values, and even law. This issue becomes the focus in Hannah Kent's highly acclaimed debut novel, *Burial Rites*.

Burial Rites was inspired by a true story, which was twisted and added with various speculations so it became more like a myth. When visiting Iceland for her study, Kent encountered a story about the last execution in Illugastadir in 1829. Two people were beheaded for a murder they committed. What interested Kent is the tales surrounding one of the two murderers, Agnes Magnúsdóttir. Compared to the other convict Fridrik Sigurdsson, Agnes was more notorious because of the fact that she was a woman committing a crime. Agnes was seen as the representation of women who did not obey the moral and social values. Consequently, she was labeled as a bad woman—in some stories, Agnes was even described as a witch. There were many stories circulating about the figure of Agnes, mostly were fictions instead of facts. After doing a research on Agnes and gathering documents about the murder and the execution, Kent then wrote a novel that focuses on Agnes' life entitled *Burial Rites*. Using multiple narrators, *Burial Rites* gives Agnes a voice so that she can narrate the events from her own perspective.

The novel *Burial Rites* was used as the primary data of this research. It was chosen because the novel tells a story of an oppressed woman through a unique narrative. It combines letters and documents from the events and, as explained previously, uses multiple narrators to give various perspectives about the murder and the execution. This research was conducted to see how gender stereotypes are influential in society and how this novel tries to deconstruct them. Characters, point of view, and settings were the elements of the story analyzed in this research.

Gender is a cultural construction, which means that it is constructed by people and can vary from one culture to another. Meanwhile, Brannon (2015:184) states that gender stereotypes are "the beliefs about

the characteristics associated with, and the activities appropriate to, men or women." Gender stereotypes have four aspects, namely physical characteristics, traits, behaviours and occupations. Steele in Brannon (2015) reports how stereotyping can be threatening because it can manipulate people's self-concept and how they judge other people.

In Victorian era, gender stereotyping appeared in a form of belief called *The Cult of True Womanhood*, emphasized in books and mass media. This belief states that there are four aspects to build a true womanhood: purity, piety, submissiveness and domesticity. Purity means women should be seen uninterested in sex. They should be sexually passive and show no seduction to men. The second is piety, that positions women as pious and religious. On the other hand, men were seen not as naturally religious as women Brannon (2015). Next is submissiveness, which signifies that women should be obedient and dependent (on men). The last aspect is domesticity that places women at home, while public sphere belongs to men.

The Cult of True Womanhood tried to define the true meaning of womanhood. Women who have the aforementioned four aspects will be categorized as the 'authentic' women. On the other hand, those who fail to have these four aspects will not be seen as true women. The impact of this is that they will be socially and morally judged by the society. The concept of gender stereotyping (in particular, *The Cult of True Womanhood*) was applied in this research to show how the society in Illugastadir judges Agnes and labels her as a 'bad woman' based on the gender stereotypes that they firmly hold.

Many researchers have discussed the issues of gender stereotypes in literary works. The first related research is Paynter (2011) who updated the previous studies on gender stereotypes and female representation in children's literature. She concluded that there is an improvement of stereotypes and underrepresentation over the last decades. The next research is Haleem (2014) who published a paper that discusses gender stereotyping in Qaisra Shehraz's novel *The Holy Woman*. The paper reveals that there is gender stereotyping in *The Holy Woman*, but then it is challenged and resulted in the emancipation of the female characters.

Moreover, there are many reviews and articles on *Burial Rites* for example Etherington (2013) and a review by Moss (2013). Nevertheless, this research has not found any academical paper/research on the novel. Thus, this paper could contribute a new perspective in reading the novel, particularly through feminist' point of view. Different from the previous researches mentioned, this paper focuses on the issue of gender stereotypes and the deconstruction of them through a female voice.

METHODS

The primary data were collected from the novel *Burial Rites* written by Kent (2013). To analyze and interpret the data taken from a literary work, the researcher took qualitative method that lies on library research. The library research was conducted, either in libraries (Binus University libraries and Depdiknas library) or on the

Internet. In order to keep the analysis on academic path, books, and academic journals related to feminism issues were used as references.

Moving on to the next step, the intrinsic elements of characters, point of views and settings were analyzed based on the feminism theories, particularly the theory of gender stereotypes. Firstly, the setting of the novel was discussed to see how the society, the time and the place construct and influence the gender stereotypes. Next, the paper discusses how the society sees Agnes. The last part of the discussion is dedicated to Agnes and her own narration, particularly how through her own voice she tries to resist the gender stereotypes labeled on her. After the data were analyzed and interpreted, a conclusion was taken and the result of the analysis was written down.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Setting in *Burial Rites*

The novel *Burial Rites* was inspired by a real event that happened in northern Iceland in 1829. To emphasize this fact, Kent uses public notice, letters and other archival materials from that year that she managed to gather after doing a constant research. For example, in chapter one she puts a public notice about the auction of Natan Ketilsson's belongings (Natan was one of the murder victims) and two official letters from Björn Blöndal, the District Commissioner. Kent even inserts the map that shows where Agnes stayed and the murder took place. The uses of these documents helps readers to go back to the past, and they are continually reminded that the tragic murder and the execution did happen.

Iceland is described by Kent as a somber, lonely and nightmare-ish place, building a haunting atmosphere for the novel. For example, when Agnes is taken from Stóra Borg to Kornsó, she describes what she sees, "We are passing through the strange hills at the mouth of the valley and I hear the caw of ravens," (Kent, 2013:37). She uses the word strange to illustrate the eerie scenery that she sees. Also, the fact that she hears ravens creates a solemn atmosphere.

There are two significant places in *Burial Rites*: Illugastadir and Kornsó. Natan's house is located in Illugastadir, a quiet area near the sea, and this is where the murder happened. Agnes says Illugastadir is almost on the edge of the world (Kent, 2013). She also describes it as a beautiful but also a remote place:

"... It's a long line of rocky ground, with one or two smooth fields where winter fodder is grown, and the rest is wild grass, growing around the stones. The shore is of pebbles, and huge tangles of seaweed float in the bay and look like the hair of the drowned. Driftwood appears overnight like magic, and eider ducks nest upon nearby banks of rocks near seal colonies. On a clear day it's beautiful, and others it's as miserable as grave-digging in the rain. Sea fog plagues the place, and the nearest farm is Stapar, which is fair distance away." (Kent, 2013:227)

Agnes uses two similes (like the hair of the drowned and as miserable as grave-digging in the rain) that show beneath its beautiful scenery, Illugastadir has a disturbing ambiance. Meanwhile, Kornsó is a farm that belongs to Jón Jónsson. In this farm he lives with his wife Margrét and two daughters, Steina and Lauga. When Agnes stays in Kornsó, it is almost winter: "The weather is bad, there is ice in the rain, and the wind is like a wolf nipping at your heels, reminding you that winter is coming," (Kent, 2013:202). Winter is always associated with loneliness and death, and the bad weather here serves as a prophecy of what is waiting for Agnes, which is the execution.

Not only giving details about the time and the place, Kent also gives an illustration about how the way the society lived at that time. For example, the readers can see the social hierarchy as shown by Natan as a master of the house. Actually, instead of treating Agnes as a lover, Natan considers Agnes more as a maid. Everytime they argue, Natan always reminds Agnes that she is just a maid, "Remember your place, Agnes!" (Kent, 2013:263). Rósa (Natan's ex-lover) even calls Agnes and Sigga (another maid works for Natan) as Natan's whores because she knows how Natan treats them. This condition shows how the maids are treated by their master. Not only taking care of the house and the farm, they have to satisfy the master's sexual need as well.

In *Burial Rites*, the setting does not only function as the where and when the events happen, but it also has a significant role in creating the mood of the story. The bleak and cold weather seems to predict Agnes' fate at the end of the novel. Kent also inserts letters and archives about the murder, the trial and the beheading execution to accurately construct the Icelandic society and their law system in the early 19th century.

Agnes through Society's Perspective

In this section, the researcher will provide proofs from the novel that present how the society sees the figure of Agnes. In general, it can be concluded that they see Agnes as a rebellious woman because she does not obey the social and moral values. Society in this novel is represented by the District Commissioner Björn Blöndal, the Assistant Reverend Thorvador (Tóti) Jónsson, the Jónsson family and their neighbours. There are two kinds of point of view in *Burial Rites*, first person and third person. Kent uses first person narration for Agnes, while the third person narration focuses on Tóti and Margrét, two characters that are in touch with Agnes closely before her execution. The society members' perspective on Agnes will be explained one by one, and later it can be seen how they apply negative gender stereotypes on Agnes.

The first character that is analyzed is Tóti, the Assistant Reverend that is assigned to accompany and give Agnes a religious guidance before her execution. Kent creates Tóti as a soft-hearted and innocent character. This is shown by other characters' opinion about him. When Tóti tells the District Commissioner's servant that he will serve as Agnes' spiritual advisor, the servant cannot hold his laughter and says the District Commissioner have picked a mouse to tame a cat (Kent, 2013:10). He uses this metaphor to illustrate that in front of Agnes the murderer, Tóti is only like a mouse, small and weak.

Tóti does not only have the role as Agnes' spiritual advisor, but he also serves as the first listener to Agnes' story. Impressed by his kindness since he once helped her to cross the river, Agnes now relies on Tóti to believe in her version of the story. Because Tóti is such an attentive listener, Agnes confides in him even more. She tells him about her bitter childhood, when her mother died and she had to be separated from her siblings.

In the beginning, Tóti is afraid of Agnes. He confesses his feeling when he prays: "I confess to fear, I do not know what to say to her. I do not feel at ease, Lord. Please guard my heart against the ... the horror this woman inspires in me," (Kent, 2013:50). He even once wants to run away from his responsibility to provide Agnes with spiritual comfort: "He wanted to turn away, flee at the sight of her. Like a coward," (Kent, 2013:49). It can be interpreted that Tóti's fear is caused by this label of Agnes as a murderer or a female monster, which is understandable since he does not know who Agnes really is.

However, later after Tóti hears Agnes' side of the story, the distance between them is gradually lessened. Furthermore, Tóti starts to see her not as a criminal but as a human being; to be precise, a woman who is oppressed and harshly misunderstood by the society because she is not like other women. Even though the District Commissioner almost fires him because he thinks it is useless to bring Agnes back to Christian values, Tóti insists he stay with Agnes. He accompanies Agnes to her execution site, giving her support to the very end, "I won't let go of you. God is all around us, Agnes. I won't ever let go," (Kent, 2013:328).

Another character that puts sympathy on Agnes is Margrét, the owner of the farm. She is one character that develops a dynamic relationship with Agnes. At first, she does not agree if Agnes lives in her house, "I do not like to share my home with the Devil's children," (Kent, 2013:30). As a strong believer, Margrét in the beginning bluntly labels Agnes as a sinner. She also keeps questioning how a woman could kill men, "What sort of woman kills men?" (Kent, 2013:51). If we look at the categories of *The True Cult of Womanhood*, Margrét seems to confirm that Agnes does not obey the value of piety by believing that she is a cold-blooded murder.

Margrét even does not see Agnes as a human being at first. It feels strange for her to call Agnes by her name: It seems wrong to call her by a Christian name, Margrét thought. What would they call her in Stóra Borg, she wondered. Prisoner? Accused? Condemned? (Kent, 2013:51). She is really shocked when she saw Agnes for the first time since the prisoner is very dirty, beaten and does not look like a human: The woman's body was a terrain of abuse (Kent, 2013:54).

However, after listening to Agnes' story first-handedly, Margrét slowly changes her opinion and starts to pity Agnes. As a woman, she can understand that Agnes is actually a victim of a patriarchal society that favours obedient and innocent women. As told by Agnes, Margrét finally sees her in a more positive way: "You are not a monster," she says. Her face is flushed and she bites her lip, she bites down. Her fingers, entwined with my own, are hot and greasy (Kent, 2013:323). This is the part when Agnes finished telling her story and she is going to be

taken to execution site. Agnes, who got labeled by the society as a female monster, in the end receives sympathy from Margrét.

Assistant Reverend Tóti and Margrét are shown as characters who hold onto strong Christian values, although they have different ways in applying them. In the beginning, each of them sees Agnes with negative stereotypes. Tóti sees Agnes as a lost child that needs to be saved, while Margrét says that she is the Devil's child. However, after interacting with Agnes and listening to her stories, there is a change in their opinion on Agnes. Finally, they see as Agnes as a human being, a woman.

On the other hand, there are other characters who keep stereotyping Agnes as a wicked woman who does not deserve pity and compassion, such as the District Commissioner Björn Blöndal and Margrét's neighbour, Róslin. They also judge Agnes as a rebelling woman, or in other words a woman that does not meet the categories of *The Cult of True Womanhood*.

District Commissioner Björn Blöndal is the character who holds the highest power in *Burial Rites*. Determining Agnes' fate, he makes the decision that she and Fridrik will receive death sentence in a form of beheading. According to him, the death sentence is the best decision, "It is a victory of justice, as I am sure you will agree," (Kent, 2013:16). It can be said that Blöndal symbolizes the law of the father in this novel because he is the male figure that holds the highest authority in the society.

Even though Tóti asks him to reconsider his decision, Blöndal sticks to his belief that executing Agnes will be a good example for the society. He also clearly holds negative stereotypes on Agnes. First, he sees Agnes as an impious woman: "I'm not surprised. She struck me as especially godless during the trial," (Kent, 2013:165). It is a proof to him that Agnes disobeys one character of a true womanhood because she is seen as not religious.

Furthermore, he judges Agnes as a seductive and emotional woman who planned a vengeance, "... As far as I can see, Agnes was under the impression that she had successfully seduced him. But Sigga testified that Natan preferred her ... attentions," (Kent, 2013:170). He later describes Agnes as an immoral woman: "You will not find proof of innocence in Agnes' stories of her life, Reverend. She is a woman loose with her emotions, and looser with her morals," (Kent, 2013:170). In another expression, Blöndal tries to say that Agnes does not fulfill the category of true womanhood since she is not pure, aggressive, and ungodly. Consequently, she earns the death penalty. Blöndal is categorized as a static character because until the end of the story, he does not undergo any change.

Róslin is also a character who represents society's negative perspective about Agnes. She is Margrét's neighbour who loves to gossip and deals with other people's business. When she knows that Agnes will stay with the Jónsson, she expresses that she is sorry for it. When Margrét asks what she is sorry for, she answers, "Why, for having a murderess under your family's roof! For being forced to look at her hideous face every day! For the fear it must inspire in you, for your own good self and your husband and poor daughters!" (Kent, 2013:66). She then later defends Natan and Pétur, the other victims,

by calling them as good people, while Margrét actually knows that Natan and Pétur are not that innocent.

Another scene shows how Róslin stereotypes Agnes as a wicked woman just because she has more knowledge. When Agnes tells Róslin that her baby will be a girl, Róslin is horrified: “Witch!” Róslin cries. “Tell her to stop looking at me.” She storms out of the room (Kent, 2013:180). She thinks Agnes performs a black magic while actually Agnes is just applying the knowledge about pregnancy that she acquired from a mid-wife.

Through those characters’ perspective, Kent seems to emphasize the fact that Agnes is seen differently from other women. This difference is not favoured by the society, and it even causes them to judge Agnes as a wicked woman. On the other hand, Sigga is the character that exemplifies the kind of woman preferred by the patriarchal society: young, beautiful, sweet and innocent. This next conversation between Tóti and the man who takes Agnes to Kornsa demonstrates how the society sees Agnes and Sigga in two different ways:

“A lot of people Vatnsnes way hope Sigga will receive a pardon from the King. Too young and too sweet to die.” The man pulled a face. “Not like this one. She has a right temper when she fancies.”

“Is she waiting an appeal?”

The man laughed.” I don’t like her chances. Blöndal’s behind the youngest. They say she reminds him of his wife. This one ... Well, Blöndal wants to set an example.” (Kent, 2013:41)

The quotation clearly describes that since Sigga is young and sweet, the District Commissioner helps her to get forgiveness from the King. Meanwhile, Agnes receives death sentence as an example for the society. Moreover, the conversation also shows that the society thinks Agnes, who is not as sweet as Sigga, does not deserve an apology. Undoubtedly, there is a binary opposition between Sigga (the good woman) and Agnes (the wicked woman). Agnes who does not meet the categories of true femininity such as gentle, shy and childlike (as listed by Moi, 1999:193) is not seen as a true woman. Thus, she does not deserve an apology from the King.

This part has discussed how the members of society perceive Agnes. Assistant Reverend Tóti and Margrét are characters who change their opinion toward Agnes. They used to apply negative stereotypes on Agnes and see her as a wicked woman, but then after knowing her better, they show mercifulness. In contrast, District Commissioner Björn Blöndal and Róslin represent members of society who label Agnes as a female monster. Blöndal who holds the highest power in the district does not even want to know the story from Agnes’ perspective. The next part studies the characterization of Agnes further, focusing on the first person narration.

Agnes through Her Own Voice

In Iceland, Agnes Magnúsdóttir has become a myth. Negative stereotypes have been cruelly labeled on her, constructing her as a femme-fatale or even a ‘witch’ figure. As explained by Kent in her notes, Agnes “was

almost always presented as a gross caricature – a ‘wicked woman’ plotting vengeance” (Kent, 2013:343). Here in *Burial Rites*, the author makes an effort to show that Agnes is a misunderstood figure. Therefore, she re-interprets the character of Agnes and gives her a first-person narration by using the pronoun ‘I’. This technique is proven to be effective since the readers can directly understand Agnes’ own experience and emotions.

Burial Rites starts with a prologue from Agnes, summarizing her fate and giving readers hints about what has happened before: They said I must die. They said that I stole the breath from men, and now they must steal mine. (Kent, 2003 : 1). Agnes’ prologue indicates that she is going to be executed. It also states what the reason is: it is because she has killed men. One thing that can be underlined here is the clause ‘they said’. ‘They’ here refers to the authority, and the word ‘said’ signifies how they have control over Agnes’ fate.

As a narrator, Agnes is very conscious about her fate. She also understands what the people think about him, particularly the negative stereotypes they have on her. This next quotation shows the labels the society puts on Agnes:

“They will see the whore, the madwoman, the murderess, the female dripping blood into the grass and laughing with her mouth choked with dirt. They will say ‘Agnes’ and see the spider, the witch caught in the webbing of her own fateful weaving.” (Kent, 2013:29)

The labels ‘whore’, ‘madwoman’, ‘hags’, and ‘witch’ have long been used to refer to woman who disobey social and moral values (Daly in Tong, 2006). The words suggest women who do not belong to the categories of *The Cult of True Womanhood* because they are not pure and rebellious. These names are the social punishment from the society for what Agnes has done, and they will be forever stuck in her image. Furthermore, Agnes also realizes that the society no longer sees her as a person:

“At first I did not know why these people stood about, men and women alike, each still and staring at me in silence. Then I understood that it was not me they stared at. I understood that these people did not see *me*. I was two dead men. I was a burning farm. I was a knife. I was blood.” (Kent, 2013:35)

The italic ‘me’ highlights how Agnes’ self is no longer important for the society. The murder that they think Agnes has committed has turned her into a pathetic monster in their eyes.

Through Blöndal’s character, Kent wants to show that society and even the law can be really biased toward women who are different from their expectation. The patriarchal society with *The Cult of True Womanhood* expects women to be pure, religious, obedient and domestic. However, Agnes is different. She is critical and also too smart for the society. She is aware that her cleverness as a woman is not approved by people around her: “I’ll tell you something, Reverend Tóti. All my life people have thought I was too clever. Too clever by half

they'd say. And you know what, Reverend? That's exactly why they don't pity me," (Kent, 2013:131). She later compares between herself and Sigga: "... But Sigga is dumb and pretty and young, and that is why they don't want to see her die," (Kent, 2013:132). As previously explained, there seems to be a binary opposition in the way people judge Agnes and Sigga. With her intelligence and courage, Agnes is not the type of woman that the society prefers. Meanwhile, Sigga is the kind of woman they like. The law even gives a second chance to Sigga, but not to Agnes.

Burial Rites is Kent's re-interpretation about the murder and the last execution in Iceland. If the stories spreading in Icelandic society almost always illustrate Agnes as a witch or a femme fatale figure, this novel tries to present the other side of this woman, particularly through a first person narration. Agnes' stories and experiences show the readers that she is actually also a victim of values that put such moral burdens on women's shoulder. *Burial Rites* is another effort to emphasize that female voice is important in deconstruct the negative gender stereotypes over women: "It's not fair. People claim to know you through the things you've done, and not by sitting down and listening to you speak for yourself ... how other people think of you determines who you are," (Kent, 2013:108). That quotation shows Agnes' awareness about the importance of female voice and perspective in patriarchal societies.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of *Burial Rites* has shown how patriarchal society negatively depicts Agnes Magnúsdóttir, a woman who does not obey the moral and social values. They see her as a wicked and (to quote Blöndal) morally loose woman; thus, she deserves a punishment from the society. This death sentence seems to implicate that as a woman, you need to be obedient and sweet or else you will accept negative consequences. However, through Agnes' first person narration, this novel also aims to show the other side of this wicked woman, giving her a voice to retell the story from her perspective. Negative stereotypes that have been labeled on her are questioned and in the end, deconstructed. Through *Burial Rites*, Kent nurturs the idea that to understand a woman, you need to listen to her version of the story. Female voice needs to find its place in patriarchal society.

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