

# **Of Demons, Adders and Drugs: Discourse as Instrument of Female Agency in**

## **Miriam Toews's *Women Talking* and Catriona Ward's *Little Eve***

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### **Introduction**

If readers limited themselves to the blurbs, they would probably think that Miriam Toews's *Women Talking* and Catriona Ward's *Little Eve* have little in common. The former is set in contemporary South America, while the latter is set in Scotland between 1917 and 1946. The two stories, in other words, seem initially to follow different patterns of rebellion to patriarchal oppression. Both books can be disturbing due to graphic descriptions of violence on women and children, but it is this violence that determines a revolutionary change in the beliefs and self-consciousness of the victims. Both books, in fact, present women discussing faith, family, and freedom while coping with the trauma of abuse and sexual assault. I contend that in these novels it is the power of words that allows women, the victims, to find the courage to challenge patriarchal authority, redefine their role in the world, and forge a new, independent life for themselves.

### ***Women Talking***

Published in 2018, *Women Talking* was a finalist for the Canadian Governor General's Award and the Trillium Book Award, and was longlisted for the International Dublin Literary Award. In 2022 it was adapted by director Sarah Polley into a powerful movie, starring actors of the caliber of Claire Foy, Rooney Mara, Frances McDormand and Ben Whishaw.

Toews opens the novel with a matter-of-fact author's note, providing background information on the horrific real-life events that inspired her to write as a woman and as an ex-Mennonite. Between 2005 and 2009, she explains, eight men in a remote Bolivian Mennonite colony called Manitoba raped many of the girls and women in their community, after rendering

them unconscious during the night with a cattle anesthetic. The victims woke up feeling drowsy and in pain, their bodies bruised and bleeding, but they were not believed until the culprits were finally apprehended. In 2011, the rapists were convicted and received lengthy prison sentences, but similar sexual attacks still continue to plague isolated colonies. Writing *Women Talking* was, for Miriam Toews, “both a reaction through fiction to these true-life events, and an act of female imagination.”<sup>1</sup>

The novel, set in the fictional Mennonite colony of Molotschna, opens after the discovery of the rapes and after Bishop Peters, the colony’s supreme authority, has decided to have the attackers arrested and taken to the city for their own safety. The women are left alone for two days, because the remaining men also go to the city to post bail for the rapists. On their return, the elders decree, the women must forgive the criminals in order to guarantee everybody’s place in Heaven. In an absurd twist of justice, “if the women don’t forgive the men, says Peters, the women will have to leave the colony for the outside world, of which they know nothing” (WT 5).<sup>2</sup>

Molotschna is a heavily oppressive, patriarchal society and it is tacitly assumed that the women, although viciously attacked in their own beds for years, will just obey in silence. However, that is not what is happening and the women are instead organizing their response to the violence, a response that takes the form of three options: stay in the colony and do nothing; stay in the colony and fight for change; or leave the colony. The vote is basically a deadlock between the second and the third option, so the choice is entrusted to two families, the Friesens and the Loewens; they have to debate the advantages and disadvantages of each option, decide which one to adopt and finally choose how best to implement it. Each family brings a mother, two adult daughters and a teenage daughter or niece to the secret meetings taking place before the men return.

Because colony women are denied education, one of them, Ona Friesen, invites the local school teacher, August Epp, to take minutes for posterity and to translate into English

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<sup>1</sup> Author’s Note to the Novel, no page number given.

<sup>2</sup> From now on, *WT* is the abbreviation for *Women Talking*.

what is said in Plautdietsch, the only language the women speak.<sup>3</sup> Mocked by the colony for his inability to farm, August is a kind and compassionate man, whose presence does not simply serve a practical purpose: in a reversal of patriarchal order, philosophical and moral discourse is now reserved to women and it is a man who has to write down their ideas, concerns and decisions. August as a narrator plays a role similar to Nelly Dean's in *Wuthering Heights*, as he is well aware: "My name is August Epp— irrelevant for all purposes, other than that I've been appointed the minute-taker for the women's meetings because the women are illiterate and unable to do it themselves" (1).

Out of shame, the women didn't immediately denounce the attacks; however, when finding themselves pregnant and their children with venereal disease, they informed Bishop Peters, who immediately blamed them. First he declared that they were being assaulted by Satan's demons or ghosts and that God was punishing them for their sins; then he dismissed their stories as fantastic lies: "Then Peters told Mina she was making the attack up. He repeated the words "wild female imagination," with forceful punctuation after each of the words to create three short sentences" (57-8). Peters is a powerful representative of the patriarchal system that enslaves the women of the colony: not only is he well aware that the attackers are neither demons nor imaginary, but it is later revealed that the drug used by the rapists has always been kept in his own dairy barn and that he has prohibited medical treatment for the victims for fear of gossiping.

The debate begins with considerations on the women's status inside the community, when Greta Loewen, one of the two matriarchs, acknowledges that "we have been treated worse than animals, and . . . in fact Molotschna animals are safer than Molotschna women, and

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<sup>3</sup> Plautdietsch or Mennonite Low German is a Low Prussian dialect of East Low German with Dutch influence that developed in the 16th and 17th centuries in the Vistula delta area of Royal Prussia. The word *Plautdietsch* translates to "flat (or low) German" (referring to the plains of northern Germany or the simplicity of the language). It was a Low German dialect like others until it was taken by Mennonite settlers to the southwest of the Russian Empire starting in 1789. From there it evolved and subsequent waves of migration brought it to North America, starting in 1873. In Latin America the first settlement occurred in Argentina in 1877 coming from Russia. Plautdietsch is spoken by about 400,000 Russian Mennonites, most notably in Mexico, Peru, Bolivia, Paraguay, Belize, Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay, along with the United States and Canada (Wikipedia).

better cared for” (39-40). This situation did not start with the rapes, of course, but now perhaps for the first time the women express their frustration and anger without any reserve:

The entire colony of Molotschna is built on the foundation of patriarchy . . . where the women live out their days as mute, submissive and obedient servants . . . . We are not *members* . . . we are commodities . . . . When our men have used us up so that we look sixty when we’re thirty . . . they turn to our daughters. And if they could sell us all at auction afterwards they would. (120-1)

Male violence and exploitation are an integral and morally justified part of Molotschna’s life: throughout the novel we find several references to domestic abuse and cruelty also against children and animals (the tenets of the Mennonite faith do not apply to men, apparently). However, now the women refuse to accept male superiority as a divine decree and start questioning all their assumptions, becoming in the process architects of their own ethics, their own theology and—above all—their own destiny.<sup>4</sup>

Forgiveness is required from the women, so that both they and the “unwelcome visitors” (49)—as the rapists are euphemistically called by the elders—are guaranteed a place in heaven, but the problem is how to reconcile the Mennonite faith with the monstrous reality of Molotschna. Agreeing that their first duty is to protect their souls and their children, the women also acknowledge that “The only forgiveness we can offer if we stay would be coerced and not genuine” (111), because of the murderous rage they would feel towards their attackers. There is only one solution and Agata Friesen, the other matriarch, sees it clearly:

By staying in Molotschna . . . we women would be betraying the central tenet of the Mennonite faith, which is pacifism, because . . . we would knowingly be placing ourselves in a direct collision course with violence, perpetrated by us or against us . . . we would be bad Mennonites. We would be sinners, according to our faith, and we would be denied entry to heaven. (103-4)

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<sup>4</sup> As Gerda Lerner points out, “Whatever route women took to self-authorization and whether they were religiously inspired or not, they were confronted by the core texts of the Bible, which were used for centuries by patriarchal authorities to define the proper roles for women in society and to justify the subordination of women: Genesis, the Fall and St. Paul” (*The Creation of Feminist Consciousness* 138).

Distance alone will enable the women to acquire a new perspective and to feel again forgiveness, compassion, and love, basic tenets of their faith: “Therefore, our leaving wouldn’t be an act of cowardice, abandonment, disobedience or rebellion . . . It would be a supreme act of faith. And of faith in God’s abiding goodness” (110).

Ona Friesen, the most philosophically inclined of the group, points out that “when we have liberated ourselves, we will have to ask ourselves who we are” (28) and proposes the creation of a new colony, based on gender equality and love: “Men and women will make all decisions for the colony collectively. Women will be allowed to think. Girls will be taught to read and write . . . . A new religion, extrapolated from the old but focused on love, will be created by the women of Molotschna” (56).

Mejal Loewen poses the question of the Biblical command that women submit to their husbands, wondering whether leaving the men would be an act of disobedience. But Salome Friesen points out that they do not actually *know* what is written in the Bible, being unable to read it and having to rely on what the elders and their husbands choose to tell them: “The issue . . . is the male interpretation of the Bible and how that is ‘handed down’ to us” (158). Like several feminist Bible critics before them, the women of Molotschna must engage in the theological reinterpretation of biblical core texts, that sit “like huge boulders across the paths women had to travel in order to define themselves as equals of men” (Lerner 138).

After two days of debating, the decision is reached to leave the colony with the children and the disabled. Naturally, the women have several practical concerns:

We girls and women are considering leaving the colony, but has it been determined among us what we will do, how we will live, how we will support ourselves, when and if we leave? We’re unable to read, we’re unable to write, we’re unable to speak the language of our country, we have only domestic skills that may or may not be required of us elsewhere in the world and—speaking of the world—we have no world map. (*WT* 80)

Through discourse, however, they have acquired a level of assertiveness and determination that overcomes even their fear and pain at leaving behind the only world they have ever

known: “We’re embarking on a journey. We’re initiating a change that we have interpreted, over the last two days, as being God’s will and a testament to our faith . . . We must believe in it” (164).

Although leaving the church very young, Miriam Toews was raised a Mennonite and her sympathy and respect for these women transpire throughout the novel. Above all, she emphasizes their strength and courage to do what they feel is right in the face of unspeakable patriarchal violence: “‘Let’s talk about our sadness after we have nailed down our plan,’ suggests Agata. The women’s expressions are stern, grim, desolate and tight, but they nod in agreement” (172).

### ***Little Eve***

The rural landscape of a Mennonite colony could not be more different from the rugged coast of the Scottish Highlands, where Catriona Ward’s novel is set. Winner of the 2018 Shirley Jackson Award and the 2019 British Fantasy Award for best Horror Novel, *Little Eve* also offers insights into the inner workings of a cult and into the crimes perpetrated in an isolated patriarchal community.

On the remote Scottish Isle of Altnaharra, the only dwelling is a dilapidated castle, where a mysterious man tyrannizes over his makeshift family consisting of two runaway young women and four children (supposedly foundlings), among them Evelyne (“little Eve”), the main character, and Dinah, her adoptive sister and best friend. The children call the man “Uncle” and their life on the island is harsh indeed: Uncle subjects them to several forms of physical abuse, from hunger and cold to exhausting manual labor and even, it is later revealed, imprisonment and rape. He has also brainwashed everyone into believing in a deity of his invention, the Adder, a supposedly omnipotent sea serpent who will rise one day to destroy the so-called impure world outside the island and create a new one. Uncle claims to possess the Adder’s power (which grants him several privileges, like abundant food and no hard work), but his promise to pass it along to a worthy heir in the future naturally sets all the members of the family in competition with each other for his approval. The details of this snake-cult are

disturbing to say the least, including not only blood sacrifice and being bitten by an actual reptile, but also ingesting a supposedly magical, vision-inducing honey, taken exclusively from Uncle's fingers.

The novel opens in 1921 with the grim discovery on the island of the mutilated bodies of its inhabitants, arranged in a circle and each missing the right eye. There is only one survivor, Dinah, who accuses her supposed sister Eve of the massacre in an attempt to gain the Adder's power. The story is narrated in first person by Dinah and Eve, whose voices alternate to cover the events of about thirty years and to reveal, in a crescendo of tension, the girls' gradual realization of the abuse they suffer at the hand of a manipulative sexual predator.

It might appear that *Little Eve* has little in common with *Women Talking*, but a careful reading reveals, on the contrary, several similarities. First of all, both stories are set in an isolated and remote location, where women have very little—if any—contact with the external world. The children of Altnaharra go briefly to school so as not to attract unwelcome attention and, later, Eve pretends to be a psychic for the gullible customers she finds at the market in a nearby town. Nobody from the neighboring community, however, sets foot on the island, and that allows Uncle to act without fear of being discovered. His control is absolute and the most common punishment for any perceived fault is “wane”: days of imprisonment in a dark cellar without food or water and with lips sealed by tar. Once they reach puberty, the girls are also expected to do their so-called duty to the Adder, that is submitting to sexual congress with Uncle, in order to bring new adepts into the world. Faith and religious indoctrination are prominent in both stories: the women have no direct knowledge of what they are supposed to believe, but must obey the dictates of the patriarchal authority, who keeps them in ignorance and exploits them mercilessly.

The meaning of family is also a common theme in the two novels: just like the Mennonite women, the girls on the island feel they belong to the abusive environment where they grew up and realize how difficult it would be for them to live in the outside world. However, there comes a time when the conflict between the desire to belong and the realization of having been violated becomes too strong and action is required. In *Women Talking*, the debate after the rapes leads to the women's decision to leave; in *Little Eve*,

repeated conversations with a caring stranger will finally guide Eve to self-awareness and freedom.

After a local murder, Chief Inspector Black comes to investigate and discovers that Uncle is actually John Bearings, an ex-soldier notorious for his pedophilic tendencies. He is very vocal about what he sees: “You have filled all these children with nonsense and fear. Your cruelty to their minds is as great as that to their bodies” (*LE* 87).<sup>5</sup> Unable to legally take the children away, however, Black talks repeatedly with Eve, trying to make her see the abuse and the manipulation of which she and her makeshift family are victims: “He keeps you starved, half-dead with exhaustion, always vying for his attention. That place is the very edge of the world, Evelyn, and you have been taken to the edge of what a person can stand, or be” (93).

Behind the Inspector’s sincere desire to help Eve there are deep personal reasons, because he too was victim of abuse and Eve reminds him of his little sister, whom he was unable to protect from his alcoholic father: “This man burnt his son’s skin with matches, broke his bones, cut him with a knife. He did other things, worse things, to the boy’s sister . . . Brother and sister were best friends. But the sister couldn’t stand what was being done to her, so in the end she ate rat poison” (95).

Having been brainwashed since birth, it is extremely difficult for Eve to realize that she can leave the island, that her life must not necessarily include fear and punishment, that freedom from Uncle’s control is possible and indeed necessary. The act of speaking is not only cathartic for Black, forever haunted by his personal loss, but also empowering for Eve, who for the first time hears the words “You can choose another way” (96) and “Only you can free yourself” (127) and who, again for the first time, is forced to accept the possibility of a reality different from the one imposed by Uncle’s gaslighting. For example, Eve desperately wants to be the next Adder and believes she possesses the “benison”—the gift of vision—but Black offers her a different explanation of her supposed second sight: “You can read people—the tiny ticks and tells. That, and a wee, mental sleight of hand. I can see that it would be possible for you to believe in your own magic. A harmless fiction, some would say. But your uncle has set

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<sup>5</sup> From now on, *LE* is the abbreviation for *Little Eve*.



himself up in place of the law and that will not stand” (148). Black is a kind but relentless interlocutor, and his words help Eve acquire a gradual awareness of her own feelings:

“What you are saying doesn’t make sense,” I say. “*Why* would I invent the eye?”

“To satisfy the great need that lies at the heart of us all.”

“Which is?”

“To be loved. To belong.”

“That’s too easy,” I say. “It’s not worthy of you.”

“Nevertheless, it is the truth.” (149)

Although it takes years for the policeman to convince Eve that he truly has her best interest at heart, “the result of the give-and-take of face-to-face conversation with another, which allows one to ‘hear oneself think’” (Shlain 315) is that Eve eventually starts doubting what she has been taught her whole life. The full realization of the extent of Uncle’s manipulation takes place when Black confirms her suspicion that the so-called magic honey produced on the island—and that she has been fed for years—is drugged. Identifying the flowers where Altnaharra bees feed as *Rhododendron Ponticum*,<sup>6</sup> the Inspector explains that they produce a hallucinogen called Grayanotoxin,<sup>7</sup> passed from the nectar into the honey and able, in the right quantity, to incapacitate a human being: “‘Just enough to keep you under the influence,’ he says. ‘Not enough to incapacitate you— that he reserves for special days. It is clever. It is a form of assault to drug someone. He could be charged for that’” (174). Not surprisingly, it is later revealed that Uncle has repeatedly raped the girls after supposedly rewarding them with honey.

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<sup>6</sup> *Rhododendron ponticum* subsp. *baeticum* is one of the most extensively cultivated rhododendrons in western Europe. It is used as an ornamental plant in its own right, and more frequently as a rootstock onto which other more attractive rhododendrons are grafted. Honey produced with pollen from the flowers of this plant can be quite poisonous, causing severe hypotension and bradycardia in humans if consumed in sufficient quantities, due to toxic diterpenes, called grayanotoxins (Wikipedia).

<sup>7</sup> Grayanotoxins are a group of closely related neurotoxins named after *Leucothoe grayana*, a plant native to Japan originally named for 19th century American botanist Asa Gray. Grayanotoxins are produced by *Rhododendron* species and other plants in the family Ericaceae. Honey made from the nectar and so containing pollen of these plants also contains grayanotoxins and is commonly referred to as mad honey. Consumption of the plant or any of its secondary products, including mad honey, can cause a rare poisonous reaction called grayanotoxin poisoning, mad honey disease, honey intoxication, or rhododendron poisoning (Wikipedia).

Naturally, Eve's first reactions are confusion and dismay: "I am cold. I have gone to Uncle's arms for comfort all my life. Where will I go now? . . . Who will I be?" (174-5). Her words remind us of Ona Friesen: "When we have liberated ourselves, we will have to ask ourselves who we are" (WT 28). Her words are also reminiscent of the identity construction issues with which survivors of cult abuse have to deal: "Probably the most important issue that a cult survivor may face when leaving a cult is the definition of his or her identity in the outer world . . . within the cult, members introject the group's values and assume a completely introjected personality, the cult pseudo personality. Regaining a genuine identity is a challenge for the cult survivor" (Scotellaro 8).

Challenges for Eve begin very soon, when she realizes that Uncle, perhaps aware that his control over his victims is diminishing, plans to murder his whole motley family under the pretense of the Adder's imminent coming. She alerts her beloved sister Dinah: "I touch her hand lightly, just once. I do not think he intends us to live . . . I can no longer see. The eye is gone. It dropped away with my belief. I have begun to see other things, however" (LE 207).

Her conversations with Inspector Black have guided Eve in a journey of self-discovery and she starts remembering the sexual abuse: "I think of what Nora told me. Of what Uncle did to me . . . something stirs in the depths. Half-memories, vague images made of fire and eyes and hands. It happened, I think" (227). And now she knows the answer to her question about who she will be; she will be a survivor: "All I know is that I must not die at Uncle's hands. Anything but that" (216). In the end, the patriarch's power over Eve is vanquished and she finally sees him for the ignoble creature that he has always been, a sadistic pedophile that she will not recognize as family any longer: "My gaze rests for a moment on John Bearing's corpse. He was quite a short man. I had never noticed" (235).

*Little Eve* is a masterful Gothic tale and, after several shocking plot twists, we discover that Eve is not responsible for the mass murder that opens the novel. Paying a high price to leave the island, she assumes Dinah's identity to find freedom, if not happiness, away from Altnaharra: "I lie down in the place made ready for me. I become a spar in the five-pointed star of the dead. I take up a stone and make ready to drive it into the place where my eye once was. I prepare to survive" (236).

## Conclusion

Survival is, I contend, the most important thread connecting the two stories: survival to “rapism as the paradigm of all oppression” (Daly 117) and to the degradation operated by a patriarchal system that has “enslaved women’s minds, deprived them of education and finally robbed them of the knowledge of their own equal humanity” (Lerner 162). *Women Talking* and *Little Eve* are novels with a cause and “it happens to be the cause of our time— how to survive the dying patriarchy and replace it with a culture in which the Feminine is more prominent without becoming the shadow of the repressing thing it shall replace” (McDowell 140).

We might be tempted to ask with T.S. Eliot’s *Gerontion* “After such knowledge, what forgiveness?” (33), but we must hope that survivors like Eve and Ona Friesen will not only find forgiveness in their heart (for their own peace), but will also become strong and independent human beings as an answer to the crucial question “Who will I be?” (*LE* 175). Speech is what in the end allows victims to forge their own path to freedom and safety. Maria Tatar reminds us that “language, speech and plots were among the few instruments of challenge and change available to women in times past” (102) and, we must add, in times present: the #MeToo movement has revealed all too painfully how deeply invested our culture is in silencing women and preventing them from speaking out in public spaces. *Women Talking* and *Little Eve* are therefore two especially relevant novels: not only do they allow us to hear the stories of the victims in their own voices, but they also give us hope, showing how words can become a powerful instrument of female agency and assertiveness in the face of unspeakable—but still all too common and unchecked—patriarchal violence.

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