

# “Come Inside My Silence and Know Me”: The Emotional Disintegration of the Deaf Female Character in Mark Medoff’s Children of a Lesser God

Asmaa Mehdi Saleh<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Chemistry, College of Science for Women, University of Baghdad, Baghdad, Iraq

## ABSTRACT

Deafness has been considered an exceptional condition and people who have this individuality are recognized all over the world as weak, fragile, deformed, and in great need for help from other “fit” people. The problem of integrating deaf people in their societies has been risen since the 19th century. There appeared two camps; one which advocated for teaching the deaf individuals the skills that enable them to blend in the world of “hearing people” while the other camp, the manualists, called for teaching and learning sign language as a means of communication. Amid all the conflicts between those two camps appeared literary works that dealt with this issue. In *Children of a Lesser God* which was written 1980 by the American playwright Mark Medoff, there is a manifestation of this conflict presented by the dramatist through the characters of his play and through a love relationship between a hearing man and a deaf woman. The play depicts the suffering of a deaf woman in a hearing society and the abuse she gets from people who are unable to appreciate her uniqueness as a human being. She faces a hostile attitude starting from her parents, society, and eventually from the man she love. The current work aims at exploring the leading female character in the play and how her deafness has added to the restrictions she experiences as a woman.

**KEY WORDS:** Acceptance, Exploitation, Feminism, Human Rights, Mark Medoff.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In literature, disabled people have been introduced in different shapes and for different purposes, but most of the time, they are presented to highlight the completeness of the hero or the heroine in the literary works. Deafness has been treated as a curse or a defect in minor characters thereby putting them in an inferior position next to the “normal” ones. Selfishness tend to be the main impulse of such idea, as long as it is not a common problem for people, there is no need to pay attention to their needs. Longmore astutely states that

such representations: “tell us that the problem is not as painful or as overwhelming as we fear, that it is manageable, or that it is not really our problem at all, but someone else's” (Longmore, 1986, 66). People often misjudge disabled people and view their disability as a stigma. People often misjudge disabled people and view their disability as a stigma. According to Banik, people “regard disability with a guilty complex and conceal it as a shame, thereby preventing outsiders of having any interaction with them. This gradually engenders a perception of fear and suspicion which is used by literature to portray them as evil and malicious characters” (Banik, 2016, 200). In modern literature and with the advent of human rights, there begin new trends in literature which introduce disability as a main idea that emphasizes the identity and struggle of disabled people in a society that neglect them and impose certain standards on them. Deaf people have suffered from discrimination because of their deafness. It is obvious that the hearing people are the ones who decide what the deaf need, should do, and how to assimilate them in

Koya University Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences (KUJHSS).

Volume 3, Issue 1, 2020.

Received 14 Sep 2019; Accepted 01 Feb 2020,

Regular research paper: Published 24 June 2020

Corresponding author’s e-mail: [asmaams\\_chem@cs.w.uobaghdad.edu.iq](mailto:asmaams_chem@cs.w.uobaghdad.edu.iq)

Copyright ©2020 **Asmaa M. Saleh**, this is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.



the society, without even asking them about their opinion. Deaf people face barriers around them that exclude them from the society they live in. They are being dealt with as an inferior section or a second rate people. Alan Gartner has compared this discrimination to racism and gender bias by saying "Just as whites have imposed their images upon blacks, and men upon women, people without disabilities have imposed their image upon people who are disabled. These images have told us not only what is beautiful-and right; they have also warned us that the image of disability is ugly-and evil" (Gartner, 1984, 31).

As women undergo difficulties in many places in this world, deaf women are suffering double burdens as they lack the language of the majority of the living people. As they lack the means of communication, they fall pray for so many people who exploit them. They cannot express themselves in the same way as the hearing women, thus they are being taken advantage of because they are unable to voice out the injustice they face on daily bases. In theatre, there are very few representations of deaf women, one of which is Mark Medoff's *Children of a Lesser God* in which he introduces a love relationship between a deaf woman and a teacher in a deaf school. The play follows the deaf-mute girl, Sarah Norman, who works as a janitor at a school for the deaf. She falls in love with James Leeds, a new teacher at the same school. James tries to teach Sarah how to speak but she tries to show him her world of silence which is beyond the realization of hearing people.

The play has a historical importance as it introduces a leading role for a deaf performer in a play designed for hearing audience. The play deals with problems like communication, emotional manipulation, psychological anxiety, and difficulty of accepting the other. Medoff earned a Tony Award for this play in 1980 and an adaption form the play was released as a movie in 1986 starred by Marlee Matlin who earned an Academy Award for her performance as Sarah, the deaf woman who suffers to prove her identity in a society that needs her to change just to fit in it.

## 2. A BATTLE BETWEEN SILENCE AND SOUND

The play depicts James, a teacher at a State School for the Deaf who falls in love with a young woman who has been diagnosed as deaf since her birth. Sarah was a student at the school but now works as a maid, she prefers to clean bathrooms in silence rather than learning to speak. James tries to find a compromise between his world of sounds, and hers of silence, between sign and spoken language, between muteness and speech. Their love relationship and marriage are put on stake because it is not easy for her to cope with the needs of her husband for her to speak and her feelings of being distinguished and different from other people. She

feels lost and shattered between the camp that demands her to learn the skills to mix with the world of hearing people and the group of the deaf who want her to be a part of their campaign against the school they are part of.

The title of the play is an extract from Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, the lines foreshadow the theme of the play:

*For why is all around us here  
As if some lesser god had made the world,  
But had not force to shape it as he would?*

(Tennyson, 1983, 92)

The playwright thinks that people misunderstand the title to give the suggestion that deaf people are God's imperfect creations who are unable to be a part of the society. The fact is that the title refers to the tendency of some people like the protagonist of the play who tries to change other people to be like himself. Like "self-proclaimed demigods, they lift up and celebrate conformity and, consequently, subordinate values associated with differentness" (Medoff, and Zachary, 2004, 14). There is indirect reference to the protagonist who acts like a god and wants to impose his image on other people especially his wife.

In this play, there is an emphasis that women can use sign language and communicate with world better than men who are able to speak. The leading female character is presented as a deaf woman who has relationship with a man who tries to control how she communicates and wants to dominate her orally as well as emotionally. There is a strong suggestion that a deaf female who lives in a male-dominated society suffers from the lack of a means of communication. She is an outcast from the world for she belongs to the world of silence. Consequently, she falls a prey for all kinds of maltreatment and neglect. According to some feminist psychoanalytic scholars, the patriarchal society marginalizes not just deaf or mute women but it oppresses all women by language. This idea agrees with Jacques Lacan who asserts that language is a male-dominated system (Lacan, 1977, 67). So it is hard for a woman to express herself through speech in a masculine system because she will be discouraged by the male members of her family and other males surrounding her because "social entry into patriarchal culture is made in language, through speech" (Caplan, 2005 56). Hence, women tend to be voiceless in the male-dominated societies. Their voice is repressed by the social norms and the masculine power over them. Deaf women have double burden; they suffer from muteness in addition to the oppression they share with the hearing ones.

Hence, even if a male tolerates using another language as a mean of communication, still he does this with his own terms. James claims that he wants to

communicate with his wife using sign language but now and then tries to convince her to speak and learn the vocal skills of hearing people. Thus, James in *Children of a Lesser God* attempts to communicate with the mute Sarah through alternative forms of expression, but he tries to impose language on a female that prefers to live in her private world. Sarah cannot bear to live in a hypocrite world that pretends to include her but simultaneously, tries to create another version of her to be added to the majority of population.

In Act I James states that "in the beginning. In the beginning there was silence and out of that silence there could come the only one thing: Speech. That's right. Human speech. So, *speak!*" (Medoff, 198, 1). Here, there is a direct allusion to *The Book of Genesis*. From the first moment, it is obvious that silence and speech are not put together as parallel concepts but as two opposites, James considers silence as evil or bad and speech is good. This concept is well established in the literature because deformity, including deafness, has been depicted as evil sign for the bearer of it. Bowe asserts that "Our memories of these and other characters often become indelible, impervious to any experiences we may have with disabled individuals in real life. Somewhere in the back of our minds we associate disabilities with sin, evil, and danger" (Bowe, 1978, 109). Thus deaf people are dealt with as incomplete and in need to be learning the skills of speech in order not to communicate their wishes but to fit with the majority of the people they live with. Even so, hearing people are reluctant to learn the sign language in order to communicate with deaf people. Society privileges audism and speech at the expense of sign language (Levitt, 2013, 78).

Sarah appears very rebellious because she refuses to learn lip reading and speaking skills since she does not consider her deafness as a stigma and she does not need the spoken language to express herself. She accepts herself and content of her world. As Christine Keating asserts: "Like silence, voice can also be enforced." (25), thus she refuses to speak and her rejection of articulation is her weapon of resistance. For her, silence rather than spoken language is the alternative tool of defiance "as a means of protest and a tool of alliance work" (Levitt, 2013, 68).

Mrs. Norman, Sarah's mother, has abandoned her deaf daughter after the father deserted the house not long after Sarah was sent to the State School of the Deaf. For eight years the daughter and her mother never met. The mother lost her daughter because of the misunderstanding between the two and lack of communication between herself as a hearing mother and a deaf daughter. Mrs. Norman appears from the beginning of the play as a bitter woman. The defeat she has experienced in trying to parent a deaf child turned her to a frustrated woman. When James tries to unite the

daughter and her mother, Mrs. Norman seems disinterested in what he says to her about Sarah and the potential abilities she has. The mother suspects James's attempts as another required step in some training program for new teachers at the school. She reunites with her daughter after James arranges a meeting for the two. She attends her daughter's marriage and she acts like the final shelter for Sarah when she leaves James at Act III. Left by her parents to be educated in the deaf school, Sarah learned at very early age how to create her own world of silence. She has lived in the school and later worked in it as a maid. She wants to prove to herself and the world that she is able to undermine patriarchy through resisting the male-oriented spoken language that supports this world. Her resistance is shaken when James Leeds appears in her world, and with him come the doubts that are reinforced by her need for him and her feelings towards a man who appears to be different from other males in Sarah's life.

Due to the general view for disable people as incomplete, they represent a source for exploitation. Disable people are maltreated and abused. People like Sarah "have their bodily integrity violated without their consent, and the widespread denial of rights to people who are Deaf" (Levitt, 2013, 70). Sarah has suffered from violation and exploitation in her teenage years. She tells James about her experience with hearing boys: "Hearing boys. They could never be bothered learning my language. No— that was too difficult. I was always expected to learn to speak. Well, I don't speak! I don't do things I can't do well. The boys who did try to communicate with me got about as far as: How are you, I am fine" (Medoff, 1980, 29). As an outsider, she feels that people around her are insensitive about her and do not make any effort to connect with her world or respect her singularity. On the contrary, she has been abused, oppressed sexually, and her deafness has been a point that enabled the boys take advantage of. She says

*At first I let them have me because they would. Sex was something I could do as well as a hearing girls. Better! It got to be what when I went home, the boys would be lined up on a waiting list my sister kept for me. Most of them didn't even take me for a Coke first. No introductions. No conversations. We just went to a dark place and [screwed]. But I liked that communication. I loved it. It made me feel a lot better than this bullshit talk you make. (Medoff, 1980, 30)*

It is very clear that boys look at Sarah as a sexual outlet rather than a human who has feelings that should be respected. In such attitude they reflect the view of their society towards women in general and disabled ones in particular. Even so, Sarah considers her physical abuse better than the psychological pressure James practices on her in addition the play can be viewed as a conflict between classes and genders. James belongs to

the well-educated class while Sarah is from a working one.

In James and Sarah's case, it is not James' belief that silence is a defect that urges him to make Sarah speak. He wants her to be part of his world of sound, he tries to rescue her, as he thinks, from the world of muteness which is evil and malevolent. On the contrary, Sarah prefers to live and work in the soundless world. She tells James that she does so because she can be alone and comfortable, for her "silence is a technique, a cloak, at times a space of invisibility and solidarity" (Levitt, 2013, 71). Therefore, silence is the shield she puts on to be hidden and not to be seen by the others. It seems that her experience with the hearing people makes her abandon their company and be with herself. The barriers the society constructs between disabled people and the other members creates this state of isolation. Longmore claims that if the disabled people are "socially isolated, it is not because the disability inevitably has cut them off from the community or because society has rejected them. Refusing to accept themselves with their handicaps, they have chosen isolation" (Longmore, 1986, 71). But the case here is that Sarah has been rejected by her parents and her mates at school, thus her isolation is the outcome of people's superiority towards deaf people.

For Sarah, silence is a relief from the speaking people who use to misjudge and intrude upon her privacy. But James never comprehends this need that is why he translates her words aloud in his masculinized oral language trying to impose his dominance over her sign language. In one of the confrontations between them, James tells Sarah that his mother told him that he was God:

*Sarah: So your mother told you you were God.*

*James: So my mother told me I was God. Yes, that's correct.*

*Sarah: And that's why you want to make me over in your image. (Medoff, 1980, 19)*

James acts like self-proclaimed demigod. He lifts up and celebrates conformity and subordinates values related with differentness. He is not able to leave the traditional values that he believes in to meet his wife in the middle of the way. His comfort zone is essential so that he wants Sarah to leave hers just to be with him. Such tendency includes all the main characters like James who implores Sarah to practice speaking although she can never fulfill. Similarly, Orin, her deaf friend, fights along with deaf students to support the deaf culture allegiance against hearing culture lifestyle. Lidia, another deaf friend, also has this tendency because she tries hard to change herself to be like James's image just to impress him. Even Mrs. Norman who does not sympathize with her daughter's frantic attempts to search for her identity wants another version of Sarah, the one

that can cope with the social demands. This is also obvious in Mr. Franklin, the headmaster, who neglects so the extraordinary aptitudes of his deaf students (Medoff, and Zachary, 2004, 16). Sarah considers James' ideas to change her as an act of selfishness. In doing so, Sarah emphasizes her individuality over the codes of masculine society and shows that all deaf people experience the same injustice she undergoes. After the confrontation of the deaf people with the authorities, they demand that Sarah stand with them as a deaf member of their community. Sarah feels divided between her husband and her deaf comrades who think that her hesitation is an act of treason to their cause and their struggle against the hearing people.

Sarah is aware of her situation and tries her best to adapt to her new experience of living with a hearing man as a wife. Sarah appreciates the sign language; she engages her entire being when she expresses ideas that words cannot convey. She expresses to James the waves of the ocean, the beats of music when she dances with him. It is an assertion that sign language for her is the natural form of communication rather than the skills James wants to force her to learn. The problem is with James who is unable to realize how it is hard for her to do so and how intelligent she appears in explaining some ideas that he himself is incapable to explain. He stands helpless when she asks him to describe Bach's music. He is unable to use his body to convey meaning as she does. Instead of stating his helplessness, he attacks her language stating its incompetence as a means of communication. James struggles painfully to "explain to Sarah the nature of music and his affection for it. She knows this phenomenon only as soundless vibrations with none of the infinite modulations which arouse serenity and wonder in James. This excruciating scene focuses all preceding perceptual and relational difficulties, the ultimate separateness of their respective worlds, and foreshadows the end" (Medoff and Zachary, 2004, 17).

There is a form of duality in which the male protagonist lives in. Although he begins to declare that he accepts Sarah the way she is, but step by step he begins to urge her to speak his language.

*Sarah: Let me a person.*

*James: I don't want you to be a person?*

*Sarah: You want me to be a deaf person so you can change me into a hearing person. (Medoff, 1980, 71)*

The climax happens when James pins his wife's arms to her sides and forces her to speak, her cry for freedom makes it clear that it is difficult for them to occupy the same space and live in the same world (Medoff, and Zachary, 2004, 17). She tells him that he denies her existence on purpose. Her feeling of disintegration makes her confront James that he negates her right of

being different. She states "As if there were no I. As if there were no one in here who *could* understand. Until you let me an individual, and *I*, just as you are, you will never truly be able to come inside my silence and know me. And until you can do that, I will never let myself know you. Until that time, we cannot be joined. We cannot share a relationship" (Medoff, 1980, 84). The feeling of pity creates this gap between them, but "you are pitying me" (Medoff, 1980, 84). This feeling of pity is against her sense of strength and individuality. This feeling creates a state of insecurity in their relationship. In spite of her muteness, Sarah succeeds in breaking the double bound she suffers from as a deaf person and as a female. She seeks to break the bondage of silence and of masculine dominance over her life and over the language she prefers to use as a means of communication. It is very clear that "while silence has been a tool of marginalization and exclusion, certain forms of silence can be important and sometimes indispensable for social change. Silence can be used to reject, to witness against, and to temper modes of domination so that we can not only articulate but also forge new truths about ourselves and our relations" (Keating, 2013, 32).

The play ends optimistically with James and Sarah facing each other from a distance. Sarah signs for the word "join" as she and James promise to help each other to develop as sensitive, confident individuals capable of understanding, accepting, and appreciating the differences in human (Medoff, and Zachary, 2004, 17). There is a very vital point that needs our attention which is the problem of communication rather than that of sound and hearing, we might hear other's suffering but we give the deaf ear for them. So the play gives a message "not for those who cannot hear sounds, but for those who cannot hear the chords of communication between people, and in this we are all hard of hearing, as well as partially blind, numb of touch, with fast-food taste buds and stuffy noses" (Quoted in Medoff, and Zachary, 2004, 16-17).

There is a clear message the play wants to send to people to accept the other regardless of their differences. The sign Sarah makes at the end to the play suggests her wish that she can join not only with her husband but with a society that does not seem to accept or respect her. The optimistic end advocates for toleration, acceptance and sympathy in this chaotic world.

### 3. REFERENCES

- Banik, Somdev, 2016. "Representation of Disabled Characters in Literature" in International Journal of Language, Literature and Translation Studies, Vol. 3. Issue.2. pp.198-202
- Bowe, Frank, 1978. *Handicapping America: Barriers to Disabled People*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Caplan, Cora, 2005. "Language and Gender in Cameron D. edit, *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader*. London, Routledge. pp.54-65
- Gartner, Alan, 1984. "Images of the Disabled: Disabling Images." *The Disability Rag*. New York: Praeger. pp. 31-46.
- Keating, Christine (Cricket), 2013 "Resistant Silences" in Sheena Malhotra & Mimeo Carillor Rowe. *Silence, Feminism, Power: Reflections at the Edges of Sound*. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, GB. pp.30-34
- Lacan, Jacques, 1977. *Ecrits: A Selection*. Translated by Alan Sheridan, New York: Norton.
- Levitt, Rachel, 2013. "Silence Speaks Volumes: Counter-Hegemonic Silences, Deafness, and Alliance Work." in Sheena Malhotra & Mimeo Carillor Rowe. *Silence, Feminism, Power: Reflections at the Edges of Sound*. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, GB. pp.76-81
- Longmore, P., 1985, 'A Note on Language and the Social Identity of Disabled People' in *American Behavioural Science*, Vol. 28, No. 3: pp.419-423
- Malhotra, Sheena and Aimee Carrillo Rowe. editors. *Silence, Feminism, Power: Reflections at the Edges of Sound*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Medoff, Mark, 1980. *Children of a Lesser God*, James T. White & Company Clifton, New Jersey.
- Medoff, Mark Howard, and Samuel J. Zachary, 2004. *The Dramaturgy of Mark Medoff: Five Plays Dealing with Deafness and Social Issues*. Lewiston, N.Y.: Mellen. Page, N. 1985. *Tennyson: Interviews and Recollections*. London, Macmillan.