

A Conflict between Manliness and Motherliness: A Study on Robert Frost's "Home Burial"

W.M.S. Dananjaya

Lecturer (Probationary) in English, Department of Languages and Communication Studies, Trincomalee Campus of Eastern University, Sri Lanka.

DOI: 10.29322/IJSRP.10.07.2020.p10367
<http://dx.doi.org/10.29322/IJSRP.10.07.2020.p10367>

I. INTRODUCTION

Creating new knowledge from renowned pieces of literature has always been challenging since they are researched with various individual perspectives by every passing second. Given the consideration of Robert Frost's Home Burial, it is not an exaggeration to mention that it has also no exception with regards to the above claim. But still, it is quite clear that the poem could sail more longer as it has not been much viewed from the viewpoint that this paper addresses; a conflict between manliness and motherliness. These two have been a topic of academic debate in the history of literary studies in which each was separately taken into consideration within one piece of literature. For instance, this can be minutely examined in the poem of "Refugee Mother and Child" by Chinua Achebe for which motherliness has been the base. Home Burial is promising and appealing as both manliness and motherliness meet on one platform in which two seems to be contradictorily fighting each other.

II. MOTHERLINESS IN HOME BURIAL

Unbearable life long pain of a mother at her child's death has been depicted all over the poem through a careful choice of words that indeed serves the poet's intention. Evidence could be observed to point out that the poet has thought of the deepness of motherliness in creating the diction.

Blind creature; and awhile he didn't see.

Above is one of the finest examples to witness how appropriately Frost has used the diction to convey the theme of motherliness. The sixteenth line of the poem starts with an unexpected application of a couple of words especially in a context where the relationship between husband and wife is emphasized. No husband in the universe would have ever thought that he would be called as 'Blind creature' by her wife. No wife in the universe would have ever meant to call her husband as 'Blind creature'. It is the mother's love that desperately made this woman to speak her husband in a such way since she is almost collapsed (into dust) as the death of her child. After a full comprehensive reading of the poem, one could sense that this mother is on a wrong judgment in which her husband doesn't feel the pain of the loss of their child rather he is back to normalcy. The word 'creature' suggests more of the meaning of insane or animal. For her, the husband is animal as he has not noticed the burial through the window frame until the moment she shows it to him. She considers it as complete

blindness which is not accepted by any means as a mother. Her point of view, in this case, is that if she has been seeing it throughout why he has not been able to do so all these days. Therefore it is evident that motherliness comes above all here even above fatherliness by bringing out the term 'Blind creature.' As a punishment for not noticing the burial of their beloved child, she being annoyed uses the above term. The harshness of the term symbolizes how much she loves her lost child and it is up to the readers to understand that she doesn't have any other sort of anger with her husband. The same concept elaborated in this paragraph can be evident in the following lines of the poem as well.

> *Can't a man speak of his own child he's lost?
Not you! Oh, where's my hat? Oh, I don't need it!*
> *You can't because you don't know how to speak.*

*If you had any feelings, you that dug
With your own hand—how could you?—his little grave;
I saw you from that very window there,
Making the gravel leap and leap in air,
Leap up, like that, like that, and land so lightly
And roll back down the mound beside the hole.
I thought, Who is that man? I didn't know you*

III. OPERATION OF MANLINESS AND FAMILY LIFE IN HOME BURIAL

The world is a beautiful place because of its inequality. Even though there is a universal notion that many things are equal, the survival of the world and its splendor is driven by inequality. This inequality can be found out everywhere. Since the concept of inequality is everywhere, there have been long rivalries among human beings to defeat one another on many occasions. In the human case, the major physical and biological inequality is sex. From their birth itself, they have the deference of man and woman, and gender-wise it is considered as male and female. Under this fundamental division, interpreting the lifestyle of human beings is a complex task. The difference between man and woman appears in human society by various kinds of forms. Among those, boy and girl, boyfriend and girlfriend, brother and sister, mother and father are some major forms of the inequality of man and woman. The relationship between husband and wife takes a prominent place in society among these human relationships. It is very important to understand how the factor of man and woman is being operated by the characters of husband and wife under the context of the home.

Robert Frost, one of the great American poets, has considered this human obligation in his poem "Home Burial". Even though they are human beings, biologically and psychologically they have the deference of man and woman and when it comes to the topic of home, they are husband and wife. Two different human beings have got together under one home. Then the rivalry creates ceaselessly. Most probably this is a psychological one and sometimes it may be physical. When husband psychologically outmaneuvers wife, she doesn't bear it and when wife psychologically outmaneuvers husband, he doesn't tolerate it. So, the rivalry happens between husband and wife. Robert Frost has realized this reality and readers are given a psychological analysis for that by the poem of Home Burial. Not only he has enjoyed the poem but also he has drawn a superb picture of how the husband and wife relationship should be maintained in the context of the home. The poet expects a home to be a place where mutual understanding is shared by the husband and wife by the name of emotional bounds. Mutual understanding of husband and wife is all about an emotional understanding because human beings are the beings who are having emotions and feelings rather than any other animal in the universe. Understanding the emotions and feelings of these two is the best pathway to better marriage life.

Henceforth, Robert Frost's Home Burial is a business of human emotions and it is maintained in the home. Frost touches the core sense of the poem very beautifully by its title itself. Home and Burial are two contrast words and they have extremely two different meanings. Though they have two separate meanings, the poet has put them together and then he has tried to generate new meaning for those two words by summarizing the full poem into two words. The word home is totally different from the word house. It's because a house is a structure of materials like bricks, sand, cement, etc. It is just a building. Once it is filled with emotions it will become a home. Hence in the case of a home, we might definitely have emotions and feelings. That is why people feel free when they are in their homes. Once people lost their emotions in the home it will automatically be a house. Therefore home is nothing but emotions and it is a happy place. Burial is the place where people are buried after they died. So, the meaning of this word is sad or unhappy. But the topic of the poem is Home Burial. According to the meaning analysis, it would be a place like a house where the emotions have been lost. That is why the poet has given the name for it as a home burial. So, even if it is a home it is a burial. So home must be a place with full of emotions. The poet begins the poem as following,

He saw her from the bottom of the stairs

Frost makes the foundation for his intention with a very beautiful image and first of all, HE and SHE or husband and wife appears in the first line of the poem. When the reader reads this *from the bottom of the stairs* a kind of visualization is created in his mind; a very lavish people, comfortable lives, and a high-class family. Because of word stairs, people tend to think like that. Here the poet says that the husband is at the bottom of the stairs and wife is on the top of the stairs. Physically they are not at the same level. The wife is in an upper position and the husband is in a lower position. Even though Frost has created a physical visualization for this incident it implies a hidden meaning which has a value of thousand words. He expresses the psychological side of this

incident and says that even though husband and wife are human beings, they have the inequality of man and woman. So, the way of thinking of husband and wife is different. That is normal and natural. That is the nature of the world. So, mentally or psychologically they have a difference. This difference has been drafted by the phrase *from the bottom of the stairs*. In this house, there is a gap between husband and wife. It is a problem of emotions. In the case of the house, this gap must be maintained at a lower level because it leads to a better home and a better family life. Though there are always gaps between husband and wife they must negotiate all those things by having talking or discussions. Otherwise definitely home is a house and husband and wife lead to two sides. This conflict has been replicated by this poem.

Negotiation is essential at home. It is because the ego of human beings is different from one another. Once somebody's ego is in the up, the ego of the other one must be in a lower position. They must be able to negotiate with a particular position. This is the psychological side of the relationship between husband and wife.

*Looking back over her shoulder at some fear.
She took a doubtful step and then undid it*

She is about to put the first step to get down to the stairs. But she looks back with fear. Here, fear is the first emotion. When one has a fear behind him or her, he or she used to go forward or run. But she again looks back towards the fear and even she undid the step which she put. That is also with a doubtful observation. Behind all these scenes her husband is in front of her. So he may be the worst fearful thing to her. But in the home, this should not happen. Husband and wife should not live in fear of each other in a happy relief home. If it is a home emotional bondage should be shared depend on respect and in the heartiest way. It shouldn't maintain with fear. If the wife respects the husband as the fear that is not a home. In the home always emotional bondage is appreciated in the first place.

He spoke

*Advancing toward her: "What is it you see?"
From up there always? -- for I want to know."*

She turned and sank upon her skirts at that,

*"I will find out now—you must tell me,
dear."*

The concept of male dominance has spread all over human society. It is an ongoing problem in the home also. Man is the power of the home in many countries of the world and everything is under his observation and ruling. He tries to spread his dominance on his wife in the relationship between husband and wife also. Sometimes this scatters their marriage life. The poet above uses the phrases *Advancing toward her: "What is it you see?" From up there always? -- for I want to know* and *"I will find out how—you must tell me, dear."* to implies the male dominance inside the home. He has broken the rule of punctuation marks in *From up there always? -- for I want to know* to emphasize the more attention and power on male dominancy. So, the husband must be able to double think about the male dominance in an ideal home and still he shouldn't be able to think about his own wife as his servant. He must respect her for the sake of an emotional bond. If it is so, that home will be home forever. And of course, once the husband asks something from wife, the wife would be able to give

feedback for that. At least a simple gesture is enough since it is an emotional bond. But this wife does,
She turned and sank upon her skirts at that,

She doesn't care about her husband. If things continue like this, this home will be a hell. The wife also must have a willingness to negotiate. At least listening to her husband is enough. In this stanza, considering the ego of the husband is very important. This kind of ego flexibility is needed for our typical home also. Continuously his wife doesn't care about him and he doesn't get angry and his ego is getting lower and lower. It is well expressed in these lines.

"What is it you see?"

From up there always? -- for I want to know"
(two harsh questions)

"What is it you see?" (One question)

"I will find out now—you must tell me, dear."
(Even though the question is hard, dear is used at the end)

It is clearly observed that his harshness is getting lower and lower. The first one is a couple of tough questions for the wife. Then the second one is another question. But that is not a harder one rather than the earlier one. Then, in the end, he has used dear. Still, emotional bondage between this husband and wife is alive. The husband is ready to negotiate step by step. But the wife doesn't.

refused him any help,

So, the home which is in Frost's mind is a paradise of ego flexibility. Once the husband gets angry wife should tolerate and once the wife gets angry husband should be able to tolerate it. If both are against them at the same time it will not be a home furthermore. The flexibility is very much needed for a happy home. When the emotions are not balanced inside the home it will become a house.

"You don't, she challenged. "Tell me what it is."

Earlier he was kept on asking questions from her but she doesn't give any answer. But when she asks a question, he replies for it. Even she challenged him. How bad she is? This wife doesn't try to balance her emotions with her husband. Then only the question is solved. The emotional bond of the home is linked together. Here, it is reversed. That is what it was given the name of Home Burial. By the poem Home Burial, Robert Frost expresses the most essential element of a marriage life or a happy home as follows.

So small the window frames the whole of it.

Not so much larger than a bedroom, is it?

Not only in a happy home but also this is the philosophy of life. The nature of the human being is, interpreting the things and events by having only one direction. Life is seen by the people through only one frame. This one angle or direction is equal to a window frame. But the poet says that that is not everything. People might be in trouble when they see all their life through a single-window frame. So, their vision should be broadened. In a happy home also wife must not think about his husbands in negative ways by depending on one or two incidents. That may not be everything (*the window frames the whole of it*). In this poem also such a wrong understanding is seen.

I saw you from that very window there,

She suspects his husband on her own child's burial. Behind this suspicion, she doesn't have clear evidence that he buried the child's body. Based on very few minor chances she thinks like that. The husband and wife must think about them with a wide vision. When there are problems and doubts between husband and wife, the best thing is to solve the problems by compromising. Ego flexibility is much needed for compromising.

"There is something I should like to ask you, dear."

"You don't know how to ask it."

"Help me, then."

The husband is always ready to compromise in this home. Ego flexibility is they're always in his side and from the wife's side, it doesn't exist. In a happy and peaceful home, this mustn't be maintained and once one is ready to compromise at least others must listen to the other. But this wife is not like that. That also happens because of an emotional problem where he is suspected to her own child burial. The husband and wife relationship must be followed by a win-win situation. It is something like a bargaining process. Both of them must be equal in some point and there they might have the compromising. When the compromising is done it is a happy and peaceful home.

A man must partly give up being a man

With womenfolk.

Here again, the poet has shown that when the husband deals with his wife he must be a soft-hearted person with a lack of male dominance.

Two that don't love can't live together without them.

But two that do can't live together with them."

If the husband and wife love each other, their home will be heaven. If it is not they are unable to live together. Love to one another is the basic building block of a happy home. As a fundamental fact, it is very important to mention that the male dominance of the husband will destroy the happiness of family life.

You won't go now. You are crying. Close the door.

I will follow and Notes, K. (1970, January 01). Refugee Mother and Child { Chinua Achebe }. Retrieved July 06, 2020, from <http://kjtenglishnotes.blogspot.com/2014/05/refugee-mother-and-child-chinua-achebe.html>bring you back by force. I will! --"

Therefore, this is the problem between husband and wife. The husband always comes first before his wife and he wants control always her life. That is also being done by force. The wife doesn't tolerate this tendency and it will create more and more quarrels between them. For a happy home, quarrels are not positive.

REFERENCES

- [1] Frost, R. (n.d.). Home Burial by Robert Frost. Retrieved July 06, 2020, from <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/53086/home-burial>
- [2] Mcleod, S. (n.d.). Attachment Theory. Retrieved July 06, 2020, from <https://www.simplypsychology.org/attachment.html>
- [3] Webb, A. (2020, June 05). The subtle interplay of attunement. Retrieved July 06, 2020, from <https://www.mother.ly/child/what-to-know-attachment-theory/the-subtle-interplay-of-attunement>
- [4] Notes, K. (1970, January 01). Refugee Mother and Child { Chinua Achebe }. Retrieved July 06, 2020, from <http://kjtenglishnotes.blogspot.com/2014/05/refugee-mother-and-child-chinua-achebe.html>

- [5] Shmoop Editorial Team. (2008, November 11). Home Burial Lines 21-31. Retrieved July 06, 2020, from <https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/poetry/home-burial/summary/lines-21-31>
- [6] Home Burial. (n.d.). Retrieved July 07, 2020, from <https://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/poem/home-burial>

AUTHORS

First Author – W.M.S. Dananjaya, Lecturer (Probationary) in English, Department of Languages and Communication Studies, Trincomalee Campus of Eastern University, Sri Lanka.