

Study on Medical Colonization in "People Like That Are the Only People Here: Canonical Babbling in Peed Onk"*

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Abstract—"People Like That Are the Only People Here: Canonical Babbling in Peed Onk" is written by American writer Lorrie Moore. It tells a mother's experience in hospital after her son's diagnosis with Wilms' tumor. Arthur W Frank presents the concept of "medical colonization" and proposes that in the narrative of medical colonization, patients would question their place in the medical colonization and find their identities. In "People Like That Are the Only People Here: Canonical Babbling in Peed Onk", Mother constructs the counter story to counter the narrative of medical colonization and further to undermine the diagnostic identity in the ideological work of medicine and thus establish mother's new identity.

Keywords—counter-narrative of medical colonization; counter medical discourse; counter-culture of medical colonization; identity repair

I. INTRODUCTION

"People Like That Are the Only People Here : Canonical Babbling in Peed Onk" (1997) is one of best short stories American novelist Lorrie Moore has ever written. It was published on *the New Yorker* in 1997 and won O Henry Award for best short stories in 1998. Moore's writing style is humorous and satirical and "for over twenty-five years, Moore has been the master of the American literature as a whole"^[1] and has been called "America's first lady of darkness and mirth"^[2]. She has won many prizes as PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, the Orange Prize for Fiction, Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award and a finalist for The Story Prize. She is among the best short story writers as Ann Beattie, Raymond Carver, Barry Hannah, Bobbie Ann Mason and Alice Munro^[3]. In 1990-2000, Moore is the top three writers whose short stories are collected in *The Best American Short Stories*, *PEN / O. Henry Collection* and *Pushcart Prizes for Fiction*. Moore is also a new feminist and Elaine Showalter sees Moore as "part of a female-led renaissance of the American short story"^[4]. "People Like That Are the Only

People Here: Canonical Babbling in Peed Onk" tells a mother's journey from the time of her son's diagnosis with Wilms' tumor, through his hospital course, to his post-operative discharge home. The story records the mother's experience in a humorous but heartbroken way and reveals the secret life of the patients and working staff in hospital.

Arthur W Frank proposes the concept of medical colonization in his works *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*. He believes that "colonization was central to the achievement of modernist medicine"^[5]. Modern medicine colonizes the patient's body the same as the colonizers who colonize the land politically and economically. Dan Gottlieb points out that "we stop being people and start being patients.... Our identity as people and the world we once knew both are relinquished .we become their patients and we live in their hospital"^{[5][10]}. Once people become a patient, he becomes the colonized and the identity is changed. Hilde Lindemann Nelson believes that "A person's identity is damaged when a powerful social group views the members of her own, less powerful group as unworthy of full moral respect, and in consequence unjustly prevents her from occupying valuable social roles or entering into desirable relationships that are themselves constitutive of identity"^[6]. In the narrative of medical colonization, patients don't get enough moral respects and their identity is damaged. In this situation, the patients would quest their position in the medical narrative and reclaim their identity. Nelson calls this narrative of resistance counterstories which "are tools designed to repair the damage inflicted on identities by abusive power systems"^[7] 178. "People Like That Are the Only People Here" is such a counterstory which resist the narrative of medical colonization and repair the patient's identity.

II. COUNTERING DISCOURSE OF MEDICAL COLONIZATION

Colonization is a discourse[8], knowledge system and a power system. Anyone who dominates the discourse could wield the hegemony[9]. Colonizers carry out their hegemonic power by dominating the discourse of the colonized. Similar to the economic and political colonization, there exists the hegemonic discourse between the hospital and the patients. in *Profession of Medicine: A Study of the Sociology of Applied*

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Knowledge, Eliot Freidson points out that the authority of modern medicine is based on the professional knowledge and humanity[10]. After the professional training, the doctors have a good master of medical knowledge, but the patients know nothing about medicine. The knowledge gap between the doctor and patient creates the inequality between them. The doctors rely heavily on the professional terminology to maintain such unbalanced doctor-patient relationships[11]. In this way, doctors could get their authority and realize the medical colonization. In this medical colonization, patients are deprived of identity and subjectivity. In 1980s, American fictions are characterized as highly linguistic reflexivity and words construct colorful reality[12]. The most distinguish feature of Moore's fictions are "resilient humor, which regularly asserts itself in the most odd irregular places in her stories"[3] 31. And Moore is good at wordplays which show the reader both embarrassed and comic despair[13]. Anne Hawkins categorizes illness narrative as four kinds: didactic narrative, angry narrative, alternative narrative and ecopathography narrative[14]. However, Hawkins ignores another important illness narrative: ironic illness narrative, by which Moore constructs a counterstory to resist medical hegemony in "People Like That Are the Only People Here: Canonical Babbling in Peed Onk".

At the beginning of the story, mother finds a blood clot in the Baby's diaper. She doesn't believe it and tries to construct a story about the blood: "Perhaps it belong to someone else. Perhaps it is something menstrual belonging to the mother..." [15]212. Mother doesn't believe that the son suffers a disease, so from the beginning, the story is a counterstory. Mother phones the clinic at the children's hospital saying "Blood in the diaper" and on the other end says "Come in now." (213) Moore describes such an answer as "pleasingly instant service": "Just say blood...look what you get!" (213). Moore describes going to hospital as going to supermarket in an ironic tone, which becomes the foreground narrative of mother's disbelief in hospital.

The surgeon tells Mother that Baby suffers from Wilms' tumor. Mother asks "is that apostrophe s or s apostrophe?" (216). As a writer and teacher, Mother tries to use grammar principle to detect the strange medical words so as to counter the medical discourse. When the surgeon suggests a radical nephrectomy, Mother could not accept the truth and says "Baby and Chemo. They should never even appear in the same sentence together, let alone the same life" (216). Mother would rather believe the power of language than accept surgeon's suggestion. In this way, Mother wants to resist surgeon's authority of knowledge. The surgeon comforts mother: "the Baby won't suffer as much as you", "you will get through it" and "you just put your head down and go" (217-218). These clichés are protested by Mother: "who can contradict? ...who in his Slavic Betty Boop voice can say only mama, dada, chese, ice, outside... This will not suffice to express his mortal suffering. Who can say what babies do with their agony and shock? Baby talk: isn't it a stitch?" (218). Baby's talk is his first attempt to speak language and it is an imitation and meaningless. By using Baby's language to respond the surgeon's indifference, Mother indicates that the surgeon's words are mimic, absurd and nonsense. Peed Onk in the title is

an abbreviation which means medical knowledge and expertise for doctors, but for Mother means incomplete dialogue and meaningless. That Mother relates medical terminology to baby talk satirizes the authority of medical knowledge and undermines medical hegemony. Mother wants to protect Baby from hurting by countering medical discourse[16].

When the surgeon says Vincristine would be a little light chemo for curing, Mother deliberately questions the surgeon: "Wine of Christ?" Vincristine is the name for a medicine, but the spelling of this word doesn't illustrate the structure of this medicine and its effect for disease. On the contrary, it seems to be the wine for Christ. For an artist and a writer, Mother equals these medical words with those in art field. Therefore, all the words are undetermined and no fixed meanings. Doctors keep distance with patients by the way of discourse medical colonization, and express the symptoms of diseases in an incomprehensible language so that doctors could control the patients[17]. In this way, doctors could take control of the discourse between patients and them. In this story, Mother questions such a discourse by wordplay aiming at violating the absolute medical authority. Mother proves that the discourse is a deceptive communication and it couldn't ease the pain of patients[18]. Later Mother finds that the doctor turns the suction so high that the tube sucks blood out of his stomach. This event increases the distrust of mother for doctors. It is the medical students who come to deal with this problem. Mother is tired of those medical students and calls them as "Dr. Kiss Me Kate". Mother satirizes these doctors in the way of comedy, which not only creates the effect of dark comedy but also expresses Mother's helplessness. Dark comedy cripples the authority of medical colonization.

Mother is reluctant to write down the baby's suffering, because she says "I am writing a novel. This is not a novel." (222). But later Mother records everything. Tom Radekin notes that this short story could be read in both ways -- fiction and autobiography[16] 9, which could show both the true experience autobiography brings and the fictional world the fiction gets at the same time. In this way, the unspeakable trauma of Mother is written into the story, recording the complex feelings in hospital and at meantime the imagination functions in the story, creating an imaginary world. This method makes Mother have a lived experience in hospital and at the same time keep a cool distance from the medical discourse. Between fiction and autobiography, there exists a tension, which could protect Mother and child from the harsh reality and exposes the absurdity and hypocrisy of medical discourse by the way of literary language and writing techniques. Moore represents the life in hospital and debunks the discourse of medical colonization.

III. COUNTERING THE CULTURE OF MEDICAL COLONIZATION

According to Michael Foucault, since clinic was born in 1800, the paradigm of medical diagnosis is changed. Doctors rely on the medical instrument to diagnose the diseases and replaces the traditional way which communicates with patients face to face. With medical devices, doctors only focus on the diseases themselves and ignore the subjectivity of patients. Sometimes doctors could diagnose patients by medical devices

without the presence of patients. Colonizing is to deprive people's rights of saying. Thus the wide application of medical devices in diagnosis deprives patients' rights of saying. In this case, doctors are alienated from patients and doctors could finish diagnosis without oral report of patients. The subject of the patient is no longer important and doctors have absolute authority over patients. Until now, modern medicine could not work without medical devices. In "People Like That Are the Only People Here", Mother resists the medical devices and protests the authority in hospital. Before the operation on Baby, the hospital shows a video about anesthesia to Mother, "the mother holds the baby and fumes are gently waved under the baby's nose until he falls asleep." but the fact is "he turns the gas on and quickly clamps the plastic mouthpiece over the baby's cheeks and lips. The Baby is startled. The Baby starts to scream and reddens behind the plastic, an odd kidnapping kind of sleep." (233–234) Mother thinks it is quite different from the video and it is brutal and unforgivable. Mother shows her anger and distrust to hospital. In Peed Onk, a four-year-old boy named Ned holds a deflated rubber ball with the intriguing, curling hose. It is drawing fluid from Neddy's liver. That the children play with this ball seems to look down upon the modern science. Mother says to the machine and patient's room "half gratitude, half fuck". Mother wants to escape such hospital cultures as the colonized want escape from the colonization.

In the Peed Onk of "People Like That Are the Only People Here", all the doctors are male. They represent the patriarchal culture in medical colonization. They keep the order in hospital [18] 11. For example, the oncologist tells Mother, "of all the cancers he could get, this is probably the best"; when the operation works longer than expectation and Mother is anxious, the doctor says: "everything is ok"; After operation, the doctor makes a mistake, and the doctor comforts Mother: "Everything is normal here. Death is normal. Pain is normal. Nothing is abnormal. So there is nothing to get excited about." (239). By professional knowledge, the doctors keep the hospital in order and correction. However, this peaceful order is at the expenses of patients' ignorance about medicine and their blind obedience. Patients survive by their courage and high mood.

Contrary to the orderly colonization in hospital is the marginal culture represented by the crazy friends of Mother. All her friends are female, "the two on Prozac, the one obsessed with the word penis in the word happiness, the one who recently had her hair foiled green" (243). "They never offer impromptu spiritual lectures about death.... They take no hardy or elegant stance loosely choreographed from some broad perspective. They are the only people who not only will laugh at her stupid jokes but offer up stupid ones of their own. Unlike the people who are more her husband's friends and who seem just to deepen their sorrowful gazes, nodding their heads with Sympathy" (243). Mother believes that they are true friends. They help Mother keep contact with outside and offer her alternative perspective to examine the patriarchal culture in hospital. Foucault says "craziness is a new order", "an absurd social upheaval and a rational fluid" [20]. The crazy friends represent such new order. They are against "the rational power" in modern society and they could get truth in craziness. One of

mother's friends Green Hair asks: "Everyone's so friendly here. Is there someone in this place who isn't doing all this airy, scripted optimism. Are people like that the here?" (234) Her words put the so called "correct and orderly" rational power" into question. Her question deconstructs the culture hegemony in hospital.

For a long time, everybody in Peed Onk follows the routine in hospital: washing hands with soap, putting paper slippers on the shoes, wearing sweatpants to cope with the emergency of baby. Parents talk about the diseases and offer comfort to each other. Everything looks odd in the world of Mother, but in the world of Peed Onk, all are normal and necessary. All the routine activities are the results of medical colonization which infuses the colonized value into patients. The patients have to accept it passively. Mother finds that all the routines are empty and they intensify the blind optimism and could offer any consolation. In the end, Mother chooses to escape in order not to be assimilated in medical colonization. Mother chooses to participate an experiment for Wilm's Cancer. It means that Baby doesn't need chemotherapy and would keep thick hair. This choice makes the surgeon nervous, but Mother is hopeful. She wants to escape with Baby. Their escape is a refusal and protest to the culture of medical colonization.

IV. IDENTITY REPAIR AND CONSTRUCTION

Frank argues that children's illness narrated by parents is the subgenre of life writing. When the life of parents are shaped by children's illness and parents find the life value in it, the life writing bears the tension of narration [7] 182-184. Parents are inseparable to such illness narrative. They suffer the pain and experience the ill with children. In "People Like That Are the Only People Here", Mother and Baby get the significance of life by going through the illness.

Howard Waitzkin believes that medicine is an ideology which forms patients identity and forces patients to accept and assimilate such identity [22]. When patients accept the relationship with doctors, the inequality between doctors and patients exist. When the tension between patients and doctors become broken, countertextual reality is produced. "People Like That Are the Only People Here" is such a countertextual reality, by which Moore undermines the identity formed by medical ideology and constructs a new identity which makes her son get rebirth.

Moore tells the story as a witness. Telling the story is the process of finding the new identity. Arthur Frank calls this query as quest narrative [14]. In the process of questing, people could get what they want. Mother compares her experience in hospital as a traveling, going through the three stages: departure, initiation, return described by Frank [5] 117-119. In the last stage, Mother gains the new identity: she departs from medical colonization in hospital, but she still carry the mark of diseases. The person who is labeled by diseases lives across the two worlds. They experience two different cultures. Mother's experience in hospital connects her past identity and new identity and thus forms a hybrid identity. When Mother leaves the hospital, she cries. "Rope! Bring on the rope" (249), indicating Mother refuses to make choice between the common life and life in hospital [16] 10. Rope brings Mother to the

"third space", where different cultural facts melt and produce new culture, belonging to neither of the common life nor life in hospital. The mother's identities of past and now are negotiating and transforming and becoming a new meaning.

V. CONCLUSION

Frank points out that clinical medicine reduces the diversity of suffering into a unifying general view and this clinical reduction creates a benevolent form of colonialism[5]11. The patients in medical colonization protest such colonialism and are eager to tell their individual story to the public so as to gain new identities. Mother's experience in "People Like That Are the Only People Here" may be not universal and Mother's witness does not provide a better example for others to follow, but Mother constructs a counterstory by language and culture to voice her protest. As the title of this short story suggests, story like that is the only story here. This story of illness paves a new way for countering medical colonization and constructing new identities.

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