

# Crumbling Gingerbread Lovers: Reading the Female Aphasia in Hans Christian Andersen's "Under the Willow-Tree"

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**Abstract:** "Aphasia" is originally defined as the loss of ability to articulate words or comprehend language, but after its introduction into literary criticism, it is usually correlated to women's impediment to speech due to social deprival. In his "Under the Willow-Tree", Hans Christian Andersen depicts the heroine Joanna as a "female aphasia". This paper aims to explore and examine the reason why and how Joanna becomes a "female aphasia" in the story like other female characters in literary works written by male authors. Through reading the text, this paper finds that Joanna is "lost" in the story because the story is narrated from the perspective of the hero Knud. There are several ways to deprive a woman's power of speech. Firstly, the patriarchal consciousness of speech impedes women to articulate their ideas. Secondly, in a patriarchal society, the use of language inevitably takes on a masculine consciousness and speech becomes dominated by men, thus women are depicted as objects. Thirdly, women are repelled by the formal register of speech, and they can only be active in informal domains. Therefore, women have been deprived of the ability to speak. The story of the gingerbread lovers implies the fact that Joanna is "female aphasia", and it is the intertext of the tragedy of the two protagonists. Only by reading the two stories jointly can one manages to discover the origin of female aphasia.

**Keywords:** "Under the Willow-Tree", Female Aphasia, Linguistic Masculinity, Linguistic Women's Alienation, Formal Domain Exclusion

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## 1. Introduction

After early romantic and optimistic fantasy faded, Hans Christian Andersen (1805-1875) wrote a large number of stories about teenagers and childhood friends, such as "Under the Willow-Tree", "A Story from the Sand-Hills", "Ib and Little Christina", "The Caretaker's Son", "The Old Bachelor's Nightcap" and "Stories Told by Old Joanna", all of which contain descriptions of innocent childhood relationships. Apart from "The Caretaker's Son", these stories or "new fairy tales" mostly end in tragedy: the hero falls in love with his childhood friend but is rejected, suffers from the pain of love, leaves his home, wanders, and dies tragically. Compared to other stories about childhood friends, "Under the Willow-Tree" is relatively well-known among Chinese readers, but little research has been done on it: a search of the Chinese Internet reveals only two papers on this

short story examine the roots of the hero Knud's tragic love and his journey to pursue his dreams respectively. According to Mr. Ye Junjian who once translated Andersen's fairytales into Chinese, this work is "more or less autobiographical, like 'The Ugly Duckling'" [1]. Because of the autobiographical nature of the story, it principally shows the experiences and the journey of Knud, while the heroine Joanna is "lost" in the plot.

Aphasia is originally a medical term that refers to the impairment or loss of speech caused by an injury to the left side of the brain. Michel Foucault (1926-1984) can be considered the first to explore it on a social level. He combines discourse with power. According to Foucault, discourse is a concept closer to the concept of discipline than language [2]. In 1995, Chinese scholar Hu Quansheng introduced aphasia into literary criticism mainly to describe the state of "women whose speech is impaired or lost due to

psychological damage". Female aphasia has at least two sides of meaning: Firstly, the existing language is a male language that oppresses women; secondly, women are either silent or parroting the male language. According to Hu, this oppression of women in the language is manifested firstly in the sexism of language in everyday life, in dictionaries and textbooks, then secondly in the exclusion of women from the formal domain and finally in the alienation of women in the existing language. Therefore, the alienation of women from the current language is more evident in the text and implicitly reveals the fact that women are excluded from the formal language domain.

There are not many pieces of research on female aphasia in literary works abroad, and we can find only one paper through google academic research, titled "Foucault's Discourse and Theory of Power That Explores the Root Cause of Female Aphasia: Interpretation of 'The Portrait of a Lady'", in which the author Sun Wenqian explores the roots of the aphasia of the two female characters Isabel and Madame Merle under the perspective of Foucault's discourse theory, holding that Foucault believes that discourse and power complete each other, and discourse is determined by power [3], so the two female characters lose their voice because they lack authority in a society dominated by the male power.

However, research on this topic in China is currently flourishing, and there have been more than 140 papers retrieved on CNKI by 2022, involving over 110 journal papers and 29 pieces of master's thesis. Many essays intend to correlate female aphasia with women as "the other" and their awakening of female consciousness. Therefore, these papers usually present a dynamic process of women's losing and regaining voices. For example, in her "From 'Aphasia' to 'Voicing': the Transition of Discourse Power in How I Learned to Drive", Shen Shujun argues that the heroine Li'l Bat has been robbed of domestic power of discourse in a patriarchal society, but she ends up with controlling the power by learning to refuse the male authority, "which also reflects modern women's aspiration of improving social status through getting rid of patriarchal oppression" [4]. In other words, female aphasia is associated with patriarchy, the aphasia of the heroine Joanna in this story is among them.

## 2. The Tragedy of the Gingerbread Lovers: The Patriarchal Consciousness of Language

"Under the Willow-Tree" is a tragic story of unrequited love: Knud lives in the small Danish town of Kjøge in his childhood, playing with his childhood friend Joanna under the "Papa Willow" and "Mama Elderberry" trees at the door. When they grow up, Joanna moves to Copenhagen with her father and takes a place in the theatre with her beautiful voice, while Knud stays in their hometown to learn shoemaking as what Andersen's father did, imagining that one day he will become

a decent craftsman and marry Joanna. Joanna, however, rejects Knud's confession and says, "I will always be a good sister to you". Knud leaves Denmark for the Southern European countries and tries to find a place where there is no trace of Joanna or his childhood, but "elder-mother and willow-father", as they call in their childhood, are everywhere, and Knud has to wander around until he is exhausted. Until, exhaustedly, he leans back against a willow tree and has a sweet but fatal dream: Joanna accepts his love and marries him, and he freezes to death in this dream.

The story begins with Andersen arranging for a gingerbread seller to stay with Knud's father and telling Knud and Joanna the story of a pair of gingerbread lovers: There are two gingerbread cakes on the counter, one in the shape of a man wearing a hat, the other of a maiden. According to the seller, "on the left, just where the heart is, the gingerbread man had an almond stuck in to represent it, but the maiden was honey cake all over" [5]. They fall in love with each other but remain silent due to their shyness. In the end, the maiden is split in two because she has lost her moisture. This little story influenced Knud for the rest of his life: it prompts him to confess his love to Joanna, and he often compares himself and Joanna to the gingerbread lovers. The lovers also appear at Knud's dream wedding as witnesses to his love and express their gratitude to him: "for you have loosened out tongues; we have learnt from you that thoughts should be spoken freely, or nothing will come for them..." [5].

The story of the gingerbread lovers is another form of the tragedy of Knud's love, and although they love each other, unlike Knud's bitter and unrequited love for Joanna, both end up in the same place overall: their love fails, one of the two dies, and it is only through Knud's dream that the wish for a marriage can be fulfilled. On the surface, the tragedy of the gingerbread lovers' love is the result of their shyness and silence, and their end inspires Knud to confess his love to Joanna, yet a closer reading of the story suggests that female aphasia is the underlying cause of the gingerbread lovers' tragedy.

"He is a man, he ought to speak the first word." [5] This is the first internal monologue of the gingerbread girl, and her final thought, after days of silence and before she shatters, is "It is enough for me that I have been able to live on the same counter with him" [5]. This is a tacit acknowledgement that women have placed themselves in a position of silence: "The prevailing language, being controlled by men, is inevitably full of masculine consciousness, which women are bound to reveal or even spread, consciously or unconsciously, in the process of speaking." [6] It is the result of "women's acceptance and internalization of the male value system" [7]. Meanwhile, society at that time demanded that women remain silent about their desire for love, so the gingerbread girl would have waited in silence for the man's confession.

The gingerbread man's imagination is also full of male domination - "but his thoughts were far more ambitious, as thoughts of a man often are. He dreamed that he was a real street boy, that he possessed four real pennies, and that he had bought the gingerbread lady, and ate her up" [5], in other

words, the man imagines that he is not equal in the way he expresses his love, that he is a flesh-and-blood street kid and that she is just a piece of gingerbread, and that her fate awaits her only to be "eaten up". In fact, the girl's fate is equally tragic in the end: the man never shows his love, and the girl's mind "became even more tender and womanly" [5], thinking that "it is enough for me that I have been able to live on the same counter with him", and then "suddenly, 'crack', and she broke in two" [5]. To which the man responds, "If she had only known of my love, she would have kept together a little longer." [5] This indirectly shows that women, because of their lack of voice and the fact that even their survival depends on the words of men, the social mores of the time, as well as the education the girl has received, require her to voluntarily give up her voice and acquiesce to the thought that a man "ought to speak the first word" [5], and when she is unable to do so, she can only hope for the man's confession. It can be argued that the tragedy of the gingerbread lovers is rooted in the masculine consciousness of language and the alienation of women by existing language and that the fantasy of the gingerbread man suggests that a girl is merely an object of scrutiny for herself, in the same way that Joanna's position in Knud's mind is.

### 3. The Angel Under Scrutiny: Women as Objects

Hu indicates that one of the manifestations of male linguistic oppression of women is the alienation of women from the prevailing language. When language is seen as a tool for expressing the subjective world and reflecting the objective world, it can be divided into "male language" and "female language". In a patriarchal society, the use of language inevitably takes on a masculine consciousness and speech becomes dominated by men. The difference between the male and the female language is thus created: "In the male language, men are heroes, the subjects of love, hate, desire, striving and struggle. But in the language depicting women, women are objects, whether as demonesses or angels, objects that men loathe or use to satisfy their desires." [6] It is hard to read "Under the Willow-Tree" without feeling sympathy for the hero Knud, and some readers even accuse Joanna of despising the poor and currying favour with the rich. However, a rereading of the text reveals that it is in fact a "misread love story" [8]. It is even more pitiable when Joanna is been loved unrequitedly by Knud. As a matter of fact, Joanna, who is as beautiful and gentle as an angel in Knud's eyes, is also an object to satisfy his desires instead of a living person.

Obviously, despite Andersen's third-person narrative perspective, the plot always revolves around Knud's experiences, so the story is told from Knud's point of view, where Knud is the Self of the narrative and Joanna exists as the Other, subject to Knud's gaze. Therefore, the Joanna that is presented in the story has always been subjected to Knud's scrutiny.

Indeed, Knud's view of Joanna is constantly tinged with

compulsion: ".....and the nearer the time came for his apprenticeship to end, the clearer did it appear to him that he loved Joanna and that she must be his wife" [5]; "...she exclaimed; and the words loosened Knud's tongue, and he told her how truly he had loved her, and that he must be his wife" [5]. The two "musts" reflect Knud's compulsion to love Joanna; when Knud is invited to the theatre to see a performance by Joanna who has made her named in Copenhagen with her beautiful voice and who is married to a stranger in the opera, Knud's instinctive reaction is "but that was all in the play, and only a pretence" [5]. Thus, in both thought and action, Knud is ordering Joanna to accept his love. Before being rejected, under Knud's gaze, Joanna has been his destined wife. Apart from the polite words of rejection that follow Knud's confession, Joanna does not have the opportunity to express her actual feeling.

In his *The Order of Things*, Foucault emphasizes that discourse is a window, through which a person watches or gazes at an object, and it is the foundation of discipline [9]. When Knud is rejected by Joanna and begins a life of indolence, Joanna remains as the object under his gaze: "The old childish story of the two cakes had a deep meaning for him. He understood now why the gingerbread man had a bitter almond on his left side; he was the feeling of bitterness, and Joanna, so mild and friendly, was represented by the gingerbread maiden." [5] The story of the gingerbread lovers heard in his childhood has influenced Knud for the rest of his life, and Knud often compares himself and Joanna to them. However, under Knud's gaze, it seems that only he has an "almond" or heart, and Joanna has not. It implies that Knud does not really understand or respect Joanna. When Knud is unsure of Joanna's true attitude towards himself, he forces Joanna to "become his dear wife", and when his love is rejected, he subjectively assumes that Joanna does not have a heart like his own. Although Knud's lifelong infatuation is touching, his lack of understanding and esteem for Joanna prompts his failure. Andersen also fails to give Joanna a voice, and instead, he describes her as an object of Knud, as a "sanctified disembodied speaker" [10], or even an objectified disembodied speaker – this is reflected in both Knud's comparison to a gingerbread girl without a heart, and in the nickname of the historical prototype of Joanna, Jenny Lynde, "the Swedish nightingale".

### 4. The Nightingale in the Cage: Exclusion from Formal Discourse

Women's linguistic oppression is also manifested in the exclusion of women's speech from formal domains. Foucault argues that "discourses are knowledges; knowledges are collected into disciplines, and the disciplines...are those of human sciences" [2]. That is to say, the situation of being disciplined by men prohibits women from the knowledge and the formal discourse. In language activities, women are most active in informal domains, such as gossip, chatting, private letters, diaries, autobiographies, and even novels. However, it

is difficult to hear women's voices in formal discourses such as poetry and political speeches. Women are bound by social taboos and customs in authoritative discourses and are forced to remain silent, as is the case with Joanna in "Under the Willow-Tree".

With her "sweet voice", Joanna becomes an accomplished opera singer and through this achieves a rise in social class – from the poor girl in the opening scene to her eventual engagement to a gentleman – but as an opera singer, Joanna has always struggled to find a place in the formal discourse as an opera singer. Even though opera was an art form that combined poetry, music and drama and was favoured by the courtly aristocracy. During its development, both composers and performers focused more on the technique and melody of the opera's singing than on the plot when composing and performing operas, and in order to appeal to the interests of the audience and the habits of the singers, they often added to the arias. In acquiring these external skills, the opera gradually lost the emotion that was also a part of the composition. As the dominance of the virtuoso singers increased, less and less thought was given to dramatic content, and the plots of...opera scripts were often reduced to contentless love affairs and mythological themes." [11] As a result, opera has often been considered a curiosity for more than 400 years since its inception [12].

In addition, the opera's composers, mostly men, still use male language in the creative process, and in a sense, when women sing opera songs, they are still parroting male language. In other words, Joanna in "Under the Willow-Tree" is not only excluded from the formal domain but also the informal sphere, because she is still able to express what men want her to express, rather than what women themselves think. This was also the common fate of women before the mid-nineteenth century. Thus, although Joanna seems to have achieved a social position towards the end of the story through her talent and marriage, she still has difficulty entering the formal sphere, and even the news of her engagement reaches Knud's ears through people's rumours. Joanna herself remains in a state of aphasia – a seeming replay of the gingerbread lovers who emphasize that a woman has no right to open her mouth in romance. So, in addition to the exclusion from the formal domain, Joanna is also alienated by the prevailing language, and her status and fate are not fundamentally different from that of the gingerbread lady.

## 5. Conclusion

It is generally accepted that the root of the tragedy of love in "Under the Willow-Tree" is the disparity in social status between the two protagonists, Knud and Joanna, who have been the object of sympathy from readers for over a hundred years since the story was published. Yet Andersen euphemistically conveys through the gingerbread lovers' vignette that Joanna, as a woman, is alienated from the prevailing language, excluded from the formal domain of

discourse, and even under Knud's gaze. Most of the time, she is the lost voice of the fairy tale, the real victim, and more deserving of sympathy than Knud. The story of the gingerbread lovers is the intertext of the tragedy of the two protagonists. Exploring the roots of the love tragedy, therefore, requires a close reading between Knud and Joanna and the gingerbread lovers in combination, rather than viewing the two stories in isolation. The tragic ending of Knud proves that women's voiceless status in society is also detrimental to men themselves, so the only way to avoid tragedy is to give women the same voice as men, encourage them to express themselves, and free them from being voiceless.

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