

# The Silent and The Silenced - on Jane' Campion's Movie *the Piano*

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**Abstract.** This paper engages itself in analyzing two different silences in *The Piano* - one of Ada's and the other of the Maoris' and proposes that it is the colonial patriarchal logic that results in such silences of both. But these two kinds of silence are different in essence: one resisting the oppression with subjectivity, whereas the other being deliberately neglected. The comparison illustrates that the silence with subjectivity is more subversive than the one without and the silent is more powerful than the silenced. The real equality in eco-feminist terms of "women-other human Others-nature interconnections" can hardly be achieved and there is indeed implicit gradation among these "others".

**Keywords:** Jane Campion, *The Piano*, Silence, Feminism, Colonialism, Eco-feminism.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Jane Campion and Her *The Piano*

As a Zelanian-directed, Australian-produced, French-financed and Hollywood- starred film, *The Piano*(1993) is truly an exemplar of successful international coproduction. It is both a commercial and critical success with three awards won at the 66th Academy Awards and forty more other awards in hand. It tells the story of how a mute woman, Ada along with her young daughter, and her precious piano was sent to 1850s New Zealand for an arranged marriage to a wealthy landowner and how she fell in love with a local worker on the plantation later. *The Piano* made its director, Jane Campion "an internationally renowned auteur and a 'household name' " (Jolly, 2009, 100) while also placed her at the center of debates concerning the feminist as well as colonial narrative involved in this film. Academic and critical attitudes towards *The Piano* are quite polarized: while supported by many feminists of its "revisioning of gender and sexuality", it is also resented by some of its "racism and misogyny" (100).

### 1.2. The Silent and The Silenced

Silence be an utter loss of voice, but sometimes it can also speak. An important element that makes a difference here is autonomy, or more precisely, the subjectivity, since autonomy and choice pertain only to those whose subjectivity remains. Starting from this assumption, two silences could be identified in *The Piano* driven by different forces. When audiences are emotionally touched by Ada's powerful silence in *The Piano*, they would usually neglect a group of indigenous people there, serving as the overall background, occasionally as a silenced stimulus for narrative, and foregrounding all the important and potent white protagonists. This paper is aware of the neglect and engages itself in analyzing the two different silences in *The Piano* - one of Ada's and the other of the Maoris' and then a colonial patriarchal logic that results in silences of both will be exposed. In the end, a comparison will be made to illustrate that the silence with subjectivity is more subversive than the one without and the silent Ada is more powerful than the silenced Maoris.

## 2. Ada's Silence

"The voice you hear is not my speaking voice, but my mind's voice". The opening sequences of *The Piano* situate us as Ada (acted by Holly Hunter), peeping through gaps of her hands, moving with the panning camera to see how the world looks like in her eyes. In a Scottish girlish voice-over, Ada tells that "I haven't spoken since I was six years old. No one knows why. Not even me". No explanation of her silence is offered and her father calls her muteness a "dark talent". It is also by her father that she has been arranged to

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marry a man she had not even met- Stewart (Sam Neil). The father's decision is the law and she speaks of the arrangement in such a detached way as if she is not the one to marry a stranger, or maybe she is just used to obeying such violent orders and decisions from her father, and from the patriarchy alike. Her muteness is "a sign of anger at the world" she lives in as well as a "refusal to speak in midst of patriarchal inanities" (Jolly 101).

Soon the voice-over continues and connects her to the piano, "the strange thing is I don't think myself silent. That is because of my piano". The camera then focuses on her as the center of the frame with a medium close-up of her back image. A black Victorian costume, a black piano, together with a dark room shot in low-key light, all the mise-en-scene together has successfully produced a sense of repression; but the moment her fingers touches upon the piano, the music that carries a most strong power of her free will immediately clears up all the darkness and oppression around her. From this scene, we can assume that though her silence stands for her opposition to the pervasive patriarchal oppression, her music is somehow a mediator to release all these anger and a way to spare her a space for a true and independent self.

From the very beginning, such a contrast between silence and voice (the music) has been presented to foreshadow a potential force underlying Ada's silence. Sherry Ortner (1974) has exposed in *Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?* that the "universality of female subordination" can be detected from the level of symbolic devices (69) and the patriarchy justifies their "value-hierarchical thinking", "value dualism", and "logic of domination" (Warren, 1990, 128) mainly through language. Such control via language is so much systematically patterned that women are usually stifled to articulate anything. Ada's early silence is no exception, but her later muteness is a chosen one. Actually, her silence is a revolt from the symbolic level by breaking the Symbolic order of the patriarchy and abandoning their language to preserve her subjectivity through her own language- the piano. That explains why we have seen her struggling to touch the keys through the crate when she is rudely deposited on the beach; her playing music on a carved kitchen table deprived of her piano; and we have also seen how she has managed to bargain with Baines (Harvey Keitel) when he has offered indecent exchanges for piano lessons. All in all, what she has done is trying to maintain the precious subjectivity which differentiates her silence. She is silent, but through her piano, she is talking about everything. In a patriarchal society where her desires, emotions and will are too easily abused and violated, her piano, i.e her subjectivity becomes the last resort to empower her with the ability to subvert the oppression through not words, but an independent subjectivity.

A preserved subjectivity and an active silence allows her to choose her own way to resist the patriarchal system. In this film, Ada's silent but powerful female gaze as well as her free expression of sexuality is also destructive forces to oppression. Laura Mulvey (1975) has elaborated in her famous *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* how "in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" and argues that spectator pleasures derived from woman's "to-be-looked-at-ness" and man's "scopophilic instinct" must be destructed by disturbing the male gaze and enjoyment as well as by changing the "active controller of the look". In *The Piano*, two typical female gazes of Ada can be found as an overthrowing power. One is Baines' confession scene and the other Ada's caressing scene. At first, Baines only listens and watches Ada rather than learn to play himself in the piano lessons. In this beginning phase, Ada is situated as the object of Baine's gaze and his pleasure arises from his erotic imagination upon Ada. Later Baines put forward lustful offers and Ada reluctantly agrees. However, in that process Ada herself is also sexually awakened by Baines' kissing and touching and she gradually gets a grip on her relationships with Baines and becomes the "active controller of the look". There is one scene when Baines is tortured by his lovesickness and confesses his true feelings: Ada is shot in a medium close-up standing in the center of the frame under bright light, looking silently but firmly at Baines who is shot from a relatively high angle sitting in the left conner of the dark cabin powerlessly and fragilely. The female gazing scene freezes and contrast the power relationship in which Ada is becoming stronger than the one who used to put her under his gaze. She is silent, but her gaze is speaking.

Later, her husband who has witnessed her intercourse with Baines locks her up, but her desire for bodily contact have driven her to reach for and caress him. The camera moves with Ada's hand, taking off Stewart's bedclothes and touching him. Ada's devoted gaze on his body is captured by the camera, and the next cut meets the conventional eye-line match (typically employed in Hollywood male gaze scene) by showing

close-ups of Stewart's chest. Here woman becomes the active looker whereas man the passive object. Her obsession with the body can be seen as an open transgressions of the "restrained, mute, and hypocritical sexuality" (Foucault, 1990, 3) in Victorian age. She chooses to return to the period "when bodies 'made a display of themselves' " (3) and reject the established patriarchal rule that "flesh [is] the root of evil" (19). She listens to her "stirring desires" (20) and release the pressure imposed on sexuality. Ada is silent, but under the silence lies her persistent power to overthrow the patriarchal discourses and she is also a forceful spectator whose "female gaze signifies a break from the Law of the Father" (Bihlmeyer,2005, 69).

### 3. The Māori Silence

Compared with Ada's silence, the Māori Silence seems more implicit and hardly observable. Despite of the great number of Māori cast in *The Piano*, most Māori men appear as an "undifferentiated ensemble" (Jolly,2009,105), carriers of goods, navigators whose body carries the burden of the story. They are the speaking mass and the virtually silenced group. In this part I choose several speaking scenes of Māoris to analyze their silenced situation.

In the beginning of the film, after Ada has been placed on the beach, Stewart walks with his Māori crew to get Ada, Flora as well as all their luggages home. I choose the sequence where they marched on the beach as a team. It is a tracking shot with the camera moving horizontally with the "marching" of the group in which Stewart walks uprightly ahead. In this long shot, human figures are captured in silhouettes against the dark rolling sea and black clouds, walking to the rhythm of comic music score. The 22 seconds sequence continually foregrounds the Māoris' talking voices and presented them in an unbearably noisy way. The comic score and the weird silhouette movements altogether brings the Māoris out in a caricature-like way. Especially when they have reached Ada and her daughter, the European luggages have aroused great curiosity of the Māoris and elicit them to discuss in an even louder way while examining the large trunks joyfully. All that are transported from the continental land can make them excited, ignorantly excited. It is not surprising at all that the only human voices in this 22-second scene understood by no one, and their happiness, excitedness or even their puzzlement felt by no one. The ones who keep talking all the way have communicated nothing whereas the one who is not speaking at all, Stewart, has successfully conveyed the message that he is the leader, the knowledgeable and the wise one among the group. The sequence ends up with a close-up of the face of a young Māori who has rudely pulled his head into the ladies' tent without any manner; but in sharp contrast, our Stewart address Ada in a quite cultivated and polite way. The minute the Master opens his mouth, all the previously foregrounded voices of the Māori are immediately silenced into the background. All the noisy talks and conversations between the Māori only render them to be more silent. The more they talk, the more they are considered primitive, ignorant and backward and the less people will listen to them. This scene is only a epitome of their silence, the noisy silence, the ignored speaking.

The Māori silenced condition can be basically accounted for by a lack of listener which is the most essential factor in bestowing the speaker a potential force to transform. Listeners mean recognition and respect, and listener's guarantees power and subjectivity. With no listeners, one is defied any possibility to communicate and is deprived of all subjectivity to articulate himself. Later, in the negotiation scene, the conversation between Stewart and the Māori renders the silence more obvious. Māoris make very clear that they cannot trade their land since the graves of their ancestors are all over the land. Every time they have made their refusal, Stewart would offer another round of exchange and ignores all their furious claims and gestures. Without any due respect and understanding, Stewart is at last enraged by the Māori stubborn refusal and the negotiation breaks up. Regardless of all the talks, Stewart deems the natives to be out of reason to keep their lands since they "don't do anything with it", "they don't cultivate it"; "they don't burn it back". But whose land is it at all? Who can decide the use, thus the meaning of the land? He even continues, "I mean how do they even know it's theirs?" The cause of the conflict may be that the whites behave to their capitalist ethics whereas the native adopt another set of land ethics. They worship their ancestors and cherish their land rather than profit. Both sets of ethics deserve to be respected in equal terms, but with an euro-centric arrogance and a logic of domination of the native, no whites would like to listen to the Māori. Can the subaltern speak? Yes, but only speak in silence.

## 4. Why Compare the Silent and the Silenced?

The juxtaposition of Ada's silence and the Māori silence is not at random, but very reasonable in eco-feminist terms. For eco-feminists, all the social and environmental crisis are the outcome of " 'masculine' values and behaviors" (Salleh,2001,109) that distinguish men as representatives of " 'humanity and culture' ", whereas "women, indigenes, children...are part of 'nature'"(109). Since both the female and the native are reckoned as closer to nature, thus more backward and fragile, a connection between them can be naturally drawn in a wholistic view. That is why Karen J. Warren has named in her monographical book, *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters*, the "connections between the unjustified domination of women, people of color, children, and the poor and the unjustified domination of nature" (1) as "women-other human Others-nature interconnections" (2). Ada as a female oppressed by the patriarchy and the Māori as a group silenced by the colonialists, the interconnection between them is self-evident. But to admit the same subordinative condition of women and other human Others is only a start, for eco-feminists, the oppression imposed on them can be explained further in the same "logic of domination" (Warren,1990,129) and the same "oppressive conceptual frameworks" (131). The patriarchal, imperial, racist, classist and other ideologies alike all seem to have derived their power from such an oppressive conceptual framework where value hierarchy and value dualism facilitate a logic of domination. In this sense, the oppression imposed on Ada and the Māori are intrinsically the same.

It is also very provoking when eco-feminists have declared the feminist ethic to be a "contextualist one" (139) which prefers a collage or mosaic instead of only "one picture based on a unity of voices" (139). It is an ethic claims to be characterized by its "inclusiveness" (140) to be against any sexist, racist, classist, naturist idea and "any 'ism' which presupposes or advances a logic of domination" (139).The eco-feminist pluralistic view is enlightening but much too idealistic. As discussed before, Ada's silence and her power to subvert the Father's Law contrasts the Maoris' powerlessness. We may begin to think that the director Jane Campion may be a feminist inside, but she is obviously not an eco-feminist believer due to the Māoris' lack of agency and subjectivity, due to their speaking silence represented in this movie. It is also from this comparison between the silent and the silenced in *The Piano*, we may question the eco-feminists as well. Is there such a thing as complete equality or is there still further latent gradation in their pluralistic "inclusiveness" of different groups? Maybe in a long run, only a "destabilization of euro-centric capitalist patriarchalism"(Salleh 110) can open up a discursive space for different voices to be heard.

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