Crying "Change" in a Permanent World: Contemporary Mormon Women on Motherhood

Linda P. Wilcox

Though leadership of a living prophet offers possibilities for both ongoing and dramatic change, Mormon society values permanence, order, and stability in this life and the next. "We do not need innovation," a member of the First Presidency said at a recent general conference (*Salt Lake Tribune*, 3 April 1983).

Women in the Mormon Church are encouraged toward traditional roles and attitudes that discourage personal, familial, and societal change. The ideal female role is that of a non-wage-earning wife and mother in a nuclear family where the husband is the provider and the woman's energies are directed toward her family, the Church, and perhaps community service. Exchanging or sharing sex roles — or any other blurring of traditional distinctions between the sexes — is frowned upon. A fear is often expressed that declassification would produce chaos and confusion, upsetting the orderly pattern and structure of the family and society.

Mormonism divides duties between "priesthood" for men and "motherhood" for women. Although men of all races were granted the priesthood in 1978 and there are voices saying, "First blacks, next women," Church leaders have not allowed that possibility in public statements. Priesthood authority not only governs all administrative and decision-making affairs in the Mormon Church but officiates at all crucial life-cycle experiences such as birth (blessing and naming of babies), baptism, ordination to priesthood offices, callings to other positions, marriage, and death. Some Mormon women are feeling anger

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LINDA P. WILCOX, the mother of three daughters, is a history graduate from Stanford with a master's in education from Stanford and another in history from the University of Utah. Currently an administrative assistant in local government, she has published on Brigham Young, Utah agricultural history, and has two essays on Mormon concepts of motherhood and the belief in Mother in Heaven forthcoming in a new book.

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at not being able to function actively in such experiences, as expressed in the poem by Lisa Bolin Hawkins:

LET MY SISTERS DO FOR ME

If we must preserve our differences,
Then let my sisters do for me.
Let my sister tear my last resistance
From my mother's womb, let her
Cradle me and give me my name,
Let her baptize me and call me forth
To receive the Spirit, let her
Teach me of the world, let her
Ordain me to womanhood, let her
(She does wash, anoint and clothe)
Be my god beyond the veil, let her
Heal my sickness, hold my baby, be my friend.
Let her dig my grave, let her robe me,
Let her bless my empty bones.
If you will not have me for your sister,
Then let my sisters do for me.
And let me greet my Mother on the far shore.
(In Sillitoe 1980, 57)

But while radical changes in the position of women in the Mormon Church are not likely, change in general is inevitable — changes in society arising from the women's movement, politics, education, the economy; changes in family structure and dynamics; and changes within individual women. This paper will examine change and confrontation as expressed by women in recent Mormon literature. It will focus on motherhood as a crucial life-cycle experience, considered the equivalent of the priesthood which men hold, and elevated in Mormonism as woman's highest role. It also appears to be the only life-cycle event that, while theoretically optional, is not theologically optional for faithful Mormon women. Birth and death, puberty and aging (if one lives long enough) are the only universals. Marriage, divorce, and widowhood are not experienced by all women. But motherhood in some form is unavoidable.

A painting displayed in the Jordan River Temple in Salt Lake shows "An Eternal Mother" — a serene white-haired woman in a long white dress sitting motionless. From a surrounding mist emerge children, both living and unborn. Mormon theology posits a Heavenly Mother as well as a Father. All human beings are her spirit daughters and sons, having been born and having lived with her and the Father in a pre-existence before earth life. Her children will not only return to the presence of their heavenly parents after death but may also become godlike and produce billions of spirit children with which to people their own created worlds. Family ties on this earth will continue in the hereafter so that one is always a mother to one's children and a daughter to one's

earthly mother. Mothers will have the opportunity in the next life to raise children who die at an early age on earth. Women who never produce children on earth will be able to "adopt" children to raise in heaven and, if worthy, to bear spirit children of their own. Implicit in the theology is the idea that women contract in the pre-existence to provide bodies for the waiting spirits — which partially explains the Mormon Church's opposition to birth control and abortion.

Motherhood is thus not an elective choice but a duty and a mission — the main reason for a woman's existence. Those who are unable to bear children on earth, either for physiological reasons or because they are unable to marry, will have the opportunity (duty) in the hereafter. Motherhood is continuous and never-ending. No one in Mormon literature as yet discusses childlessness as a legitimate permanent choice. It is always viewed as a misfortune, deprivation, or even tragedy.

An experience as central to a Mormon woman's identity as motherhood gets much attention in the fiction, poetry, and personal essays they write. Most of the literature emphasizes the positive aspects of the role, the joy of nurturing and physical closeness, the pleasure of watching growth and learning. One of the more straightforward and refreshing essays, written by Jaroldeen Asplund Edwards about fourteen years ago, expresses a thorough delight in the joys of motherhood: "The glories of a new baby are beyond description. Hardly mortal! I revel in this tactile, subtle, exquisite and complex experience. One unexpected bonus of motherhood is the visual beauty. I am enchanted by the sights of my children, the tones of skin, the clear eyes, the grace, the curve of hand and cheek — to see them racing across the back lawn in a certain slant of light" (1971, 11). Though undoubtedly sincere, most such descriptions of the mothering experience tend toward overgeneralization, sentimentality, and romantic idealization.

But there is another side to the experience of being a mother. One woman wrote with surprise that "nothing had prepared me for the darker side of motherhood, the one that saps the mental, emotional and physical energy of a woman" (Pederson 1982, 193). The "darker side" of motherhood was not much in evidence in Mormon literature fourteen years ago. But many Mormon women are now experiencing some of the feminist "clicks" of the early '70s — a time lag of a decade or more.

One fear is that becoming a mother can mean a loss of control over one's life. Myrna Marler writes that when she married and became pregnant, "glimmerings of apprehension warned me then that my life had swung out of control, that the course I had set for myself was irreversible. I wanted the baby — of course I did — but now the choice was gone" (Marler 1982, 70). When her baby was six months old and her husband suggested they have another one, she agreed — not knowing how difficult her older child would become as a toddler nor what a demanding temperament her second child would have. "Besides," she says, "I wanted to show the Lord that I was willing to give and to give unstintingly. That sacrifice, I reasoned, would be in lieu of other adversities I hoped not to experience, a sacrifice certain to purify me for the

Celestial Kingdom. In a way I suppose I was bargaining with God: 'I'll have many children, just as I'm supposed to, if You'll keep death and disaster away' (Marler 1982, 73).

Being a mother also can create doublebinds and feelings of being cheated and trapped. "I realized," Jerrie Hurd writes, "that I had half believed my success (in the professional world) could only be bought by failure in the home, and since I was unwilling to fail at home, I hadn't expected to succeed. And at the same time, I felt cheated, trapped and unfulfilled by my nurturing role because I knew I was capable of more" (Hurd 1982, 141). Sonia Johnson has pointed out that the Mormon Church both promotes and rewards infantilism in women. Having a baby and being a mother is often an easy excuse not to complete one's education or develop talents and abilities in a sphere beyond the home. The theory many women believed was,

> If they never proved to themselves that they were capable, talented people, then they would have less frustration performing in roles that required them to be, in many important ways, both incapable and untalented. If these women never raised their expectations of life, never expected to have the excitement and feel the power of developing and using their minds and skills, then they would never feel thwarted or miserable. Only, it didn't turn out that way for most of them. (1981, 42).

Mormon women writers are expressing their fear that motherhood may be infantilizing to a woman and keep her immature. Myrna Marler tells how, as a young girl, she watched on a city bus

> . . . while a man talked endlessly to a little girl about her new dress, her new purse, and how her daddy was going to take her to the park. The mother beside her beamed as each lisping syllable dropped from her prodigy's mouth. Is this motherhood then, I asked myself, long days spent in the company of immature minds? At that moment I was aware of fear, fear that a good Mormon girl isn't supposed to have, a fear so alarming that I shoved it to the back of my mind and didn't examine it again until it was too late. (Marler 1982, 70)

In a short story by Marla Zollinger Russell, Taira notices one effect of her constant association with her one-year-old daughter April. "Since April had begun to say 'bye-bye,' 'momma,' and 'daddy,' Taira had lost some of her own vocabulary by prompting her daughter, in simple words, over the months to speak. Recently, as Jim and she left for a few groceries during April's nap, she said, 'Bye-bye house, see you,' and waved. Jim looked at her with his eyebrows in a question, and she pretended it was a joke, and felt very strange" (1981, 55).

Linda Sillitoe has noted that the frequent theme of creation in recent Mormon women's poetry more often expresses the idea of the child forming or at least fulfilling the mother, rather than the mother creating the child. Sillitoe believes that this reflects the reality of the authors' lives. "The child makes the woman a mother. Since motherhood is the most valued status women attain in our society, the child who achieves that for the mother is intrinsically powerful and valuable. The woman's worth is drawn from the child and is dependent on the child's future. No wonder there is such adulation of already endearing, eternal children. Again and again I read words to the effect, 'You, child give life to me' " (1980, 52).

What do Mormon women find frustrating and unfulfilling about their experience as mothers? Some of them are beginning to tell us clearly and specifically. One admits that she never dreamed her sweet baby would in time be able to infuriate her to the point of physical violence. Her children, as they grew, became — as she calls them — "brats":

> They whined, declared my dinners were yucky, and refused to take baths. Where I had envisioned a gathering around the piano in the evenings, they fought at the dinner table and threw themselves down hypnotized in front of the television set. They teased each other, poked each other, hit each other, twisted each other's ears, tattled on each other, and when in public, acted as if they had never even met. . . . My children are not achievers in school; they fight and hit each other and the neighbors, turn family outings into free-for-alls, don't take care of their possessions. . . . And so I walk around from church meeting to church meeting oppressed first by guilt and inadequacy, finally by resentment. (Marler 1982, 83–85)

A mother's strong feelings of responsibility and guilt regarding her children is a frequent theme in contemporary literature by Mormon women. Mothers feel more responsible than do fathers for the children — and they resent their husbands' relative nonparticipation while flogging themselves because of their children's failings or problems. The "Prodigal's Mother" in Elouise Bell's poem of that title takes all the responsibility for her son's waywardness upon herself but never loses hope. She works with a frenzy to keep her mind busy and asks her dearest friend the familiar question: Where did I fail?

> Sariah, oldest friend, no mock honey ever oozed from
> your lips,
> So tell me: where was I amiss?
> If only someone would tell me!
> This endless chasing after "maybe's"
> Like some dull ox chained to his round —
> I fear I will end by wandering the hills,
> A madwoman in shreds and shards!
> Maybe I didn't teach him well enough
> In earliest days, when he tugged about my skirts
> (Always crying for dates and figs, he was.)
> But goodness knows, I did my best!
> . . . .
> Tell me Sariah, I implore you!
> What did I *do*? What did I *not*? (1979, 522–24)

Several thousand years later a Mormon mother worrying about the "family presentation" her family is readying for a church meeting feels the same sense of responsibility and sadness:

> As our preparation for the program progressed, [her daughter wrote], my mother's anxieties increased. We still had only sixteen minutes worth of material, and she felt humiliated that the entire family wasn't participating. My brothers' indifference and my sister's vacillation toward the Church were all the more painful by the realization

that, for all intents and purposes, it would be broadcast publicly. Two days in a row she dissolved into tears saying, "I'm a failure as a mother. Where did I go wrong?" All I could reply was, "You didn't. They did." (Saderup 1980, 114)

In a short story, "Prayer for Tommy: A Chant of Imperfect Love," Myrna Marler shows us the pressures on Sharon, the mother of Tommy — a "different" child, and subject to violent rages. Somehow her efforts to teach him just didn't "take" as they did with her other children. She wonders, "Was she a neglectful mother? Was the one soap opera she allowed herself every day a sin? It came on just before the kids got home from school so every day they found her sitting there watching the tube. Was that the sin that had done it?" (1981, 33) The neighbors dislike Tommy, her friends at Church tell her to "love him more," but Sharon continues to feel inadequate. Once after Tommy has confronted the family in an angry rage, Sharon feels overwhelmed by all of the demands on her. "Tommy was locked tight in his room, and her husband was leaving for a meeting, and her responsibilities continued, the dishes still not done, the laundry to fold and her Mutual books lying open on the desk, and Ronnie, the youngest of her six children, tugged at her pant leg." She feels anger at her husband when he gives what she considers cheap advice from a comfortable distance:

"You worry too much," Gene had told her.

"Well, somebody has to," she had snapped. "It's not you who has to go to teacher conference, apologize to the neighbors, or put up with his mouth."

"Sharon, that's not fair."

"Why isn't it fair?" she had demanded, knowing as she said the words she was attacking the whole structure of their Mormon lives — and maybe in that sense it wasn't fair. (1981, 32, 35)

Sharon is experiencing internal changes and wants some changes in her relationship with her husband and son. But she draws back when she realizes that adequate changes in her settled Mormon family pattern cannot be achieved without radically undercutting the entire structure. In the end she hopes that telling Tommy she loves him even when he is misbehaving might change him — if she never gives up. But the responsibility for dealing with the situation remains hers and remains within the set structure of her home and surroundings. No change in family roles, no change in society (church, school, neighbors) is available or viable to her.

Nor was any possibility of change available to the woman who wrote a letter describing the destructive effect which her compliant support of her husband in his church callings — instead of insistence that he help her with family responsibilities — had had on her own health and her relationship with her husband. Pregnant with her fifth child, she broke into tears when the apostle who called her husband to a high church position asked how she felt about it. She was assured that all would be well, for they were doing the Lord's work, but she realized then and later that it meant the loss of her husband, emotionally and spiritually.

Now as I look back, I should have said in that interview, "I think you are making a mistake in asking my husband to take this calling. He has a more important calling —

> his children and his wife." I should have told my husband, "Look, I can't support you in this. I need you, the children need you. I can't raise five children all by myself. It is physically impossible." But I didn't say any of these things. I just sat there blubbering. I could see how much it meant to my husband to receive this call. He loved the recognition, the adulation of the people, the feeling that he was loved and needed by God to do His work here. I couldn't fight that. And I thought it was wrong for me to have such thoughts and so I tried to do what was "right" and accept the calling.
>
> Now, years later, it isn't any easier to talk to my husband about my feelings toward church authorities and even the church itself. Our children are all married, my husband now holds an even higher church position. And I, though not a typical Mormon matron — fat and harried looking — am not-quite-thin, and have chronic back trouble. We (the Mormon wives, whose children are raised) are all suffering physical problems. We are battling boredom, fatigue, and depression, and trying to figure out why we are so unhappy. (In Johnson 1981, 383–84)

These women, and many others, are confronting their realization that change is needed, but they either do not see a workable way to make the changes — or they see it too late. Rubina Rivers Forester's poem, "Mother Doesn't Feel Well," not only captures the sense of isolation and sole responsibility which Tommy's mother experienced but confronts the depressing truth that "nobody really cares":

Lord, my head aches,
Throbs press to the
pit of my stomach
drum, drumming
a melody of pain
And nobody cares.

Children gather
in the kitchen —
they mess, break, dirty,
and touch, touch, touch.

Lord, my head swirls,
Dizziness jellifies
my legs, arms, will.
And nobody cares.

Phone rings —
husband is safe
at work.

Lord, I feel nausea.
Waves suffocate me.
They will not spill out.
And nobody cares.

Children play outside.
They cry, fight, whine,
keeping me awake
with complaints.

I need sleep, Lord.
I cry like a baby
because I hurt,
I really hurt.
And nobody really cares.
(1982, 14)

One of the most common themes in the writing of Mormon women in the past few years is depression. The fiction contest sponsored by *Sunstone* a few years ago brought floods of stories dealing with the topic. This outpouring has possibly been influenced by a powerful TV documentary aired in Salt Lake in 1979 which brought vividly to the public consciousness an awareness that even "good" Mormon women who were keeping all the commandments and doing all they should were vulnerable to depression and were, in fact, experiencing it in what appeared to be near-epidemic proportions. While depression affects both single and married women, both mothers and non-mothers, a significant number of Mormon women wrote about depression related to their role as wife and mother.

The protagonist of Marla Zollinger Russell's "What Wondering Brings" is Taira, a young mother of one-year-old April. Taira is experiencing many symptoms of depression — fatigue, listlessness, not feeling connected to her surroundings, lack of self-discipline, and a tendency to overeat. She gobbles pie early in the morning and is too tired to pick up her daughter's messes during the day or do the dishes after dinner. She envisions her daughter choking on the leaves of a dying plant — leaves which she has not remembered to pick off. Taira does not understand "how she ever got to be twenty-three years old, married, and now a mother; it seemed to have happened while she was looking the other way." Once, seeing her own features in April's face, she "spontaneously wanted to throw April away, to get into the crib herself and begin over again" (1981, 55).

Kathy, in "Separate Prayers," becomes depressed even before becoming a mother, as her husband prods her about the issue of children and even uses it to wound her:

"Why don't you want children, Kathy?"
"I do want children. I just don't want them right now."
"Why?"
"I don't know why. Leave me alone."
"You and your father — you're so much alike."
"What do you mean by that?"
"I mean that neither of you has a gift for intimacy."
(Edwards-Cannon 1981, 35)

The depressed mothers in Linda Sillitoe's story "Demons" are seen through the eyes of Paul, a young Church leader assigned to visit them and help them. He sees women either deserted or patronized by husbands who do not help care for their numerous small children. Paul ascribes the women's condition to the presence of "evil spirits" — as evidenced by the "dark evil feelings" of

one woman who "seemed angry, even at us." Paul believes that "maybe if these girls would get out and run every day it would be good for them." He thinks of his own wife who jogs with him each morning, who still looks trim, and who manages her own three closely-spaced children beautifully. Yet Paul feels a fear that the demons may invade even his home, that the "disease" may be contagious: "He somehow felt that he brought defeat home with him, that even in his own shining house a rustle would follow him. Or sometimes from the corner of his eye, he would catch a furtive motion. He would have to be on guard, armored against the shadows" (1981, 43).

As Mormon women confront their feelings of frustration, guilt, and resentment as well as the possibility of external changes, the solutions in the literature are almost invariably worked out within a Mormon framework. Most of the women handle their situations with some combination of hope, acceptance, rationalization, and a basic reconciliation to the way things are. Tommy's mother Sharon decides not to risk toppling the traditional Mormon structure on which her relationship to her husband is built but to continue trying, by herself, to help her son. The mother with the bratty children says it's all worthwhile when a son hands her a valentine to comfort her when she cries or when another thanks her for a cut-up orange (Marler 1980, 76). A woman who with the help of her family begins juggling a professional life and outside interests with her motherly duties deals with her discomfort about feeling "selfish" by finally saying, "It isn't selfish. Think about it. Anyone who develops his or her talents will not only have a better self but better skills to share" (Hurd, 1982, 146).

These women cope within the stability of the Mormon framework of roles and attitudes, somehow finding ways to make everything fit into the mold. The women who don't — who experience depression or alienation — have until recently usually not written about it (unless they had overcome the problems by faith or perseverance) or they have in some ways ceased to be "Mormon" as their life styles and attitudes diverge from the accepted Mormon pattern. Sonia Johnson was a thoroughly Mormon woman who, when confronted with personal changes, broke the Mormon mold rather than accept its prescriptions. Her autobiography is the most graphic, weighty literary example of change and confrontation in the life of a Mormon woman to appear in the literature. A young TV cameraman said to her in surprise, shortly after her excommunication, "But you're just a mom!" She was indeed. Although intelligent, talented, and well-educated, Sonia focused her life on her role as wife, mother, and homemaker before her feminist awakening. She describes motherhood for her in the same straightforward way she records all her life-cycle experiences — puberty, marriage, divorce:

> As I slogged about in a fog of fatigue and postpartum depression, I found myself wondering why I had to bear this burden so alone. . . .
>
> In those first few months of motherhood, before I succeeded in stifling such "unnatural' thoughts, I wondered guiltily whether it was possible that I'd been deceived about motherhood's being the totally fulfilling activity the church and society assured me it was. It didn't take long to learn that this was indeed a myth for a good many women, if not for most.

> That didn't mean I didn't love my baby and find aspects of being a mother delightful. Though I chafed at the fulltimeness of it and at Rick's nonparticipation, I found Eric endlessly entrancing. (1981, 44)

Some years later in Palo Alto, with her husband spending most of his time working on computer programs, Sonia found herself "stuck at home with three small children and only the church for an outlet." She awoke one morning with stiff burning hands and painful joints. The diagnosis was acute rheumatoid arthritis, and the prognosis was poor. Sonia writes,

> I believe that all the frustrations and inchoate longings and boredom of that time, and the guilt at not being perfectly happy doing what the men of the church taught should make a woman perfectly happy — being a full-time wife and mother — all this negative energy turned inward, combined into a potent weapon, and attacked me. . . .
>
> It took me years to figure out that I may very well have given myself arthritis to punish myself for not being happy doing God's will. That I'd turned my body into a battlefield for my emotions. (1981, 48–51)

While her holistic understanding of the connection between mind and body came later, Sonia's only wish and prayer at the time was to be able to have the use of her hands long enough to raise her children.

Sonia's disappointment and resentment at her husband's lack of involvement and even avoidance of parenting responsibilities led her to question, in a way that Tommy's mother Sharon backed away from, the traditional assumptions behind the structure of the Mormon family:

> Though I had been left the usual childhood and family residue, too, as we all have, the difference between us was that I knew I was responsible for those kids. The church and society had told me so often enough. I knew I couldn't fail, because if I did, no one would come in and pick up the pieces. He knew he could fail, because I'd be there, finally responsible, to take care of things. The patriarchal notion of the mother's doing the nurturing and the father's making the rules kept him an adolescent parent. . . .
>
> Before we can solve the ills of society, we must reorganize parenting. Let the patriarchs of the New Right, who are so concerned about the "family," start taking their share of the responsibility as parents, in keeping the family emotionally secure and united and educating other men to do the same instead of blaming women, who are seldom in positions to make policies that would lift pressures from families. (1981, 209)

Sonia recognized that personal change on the part of mothers alone will not solve the problems inherent in motherhood as Mormon (and Western) culture has institutionalized it. Changes in family patterns of parenting are imperative and certainly helpful. But she went further and pointed out the necessity of societal change on a sweeping scale as well:

> Men own and rule the world. They are the heads of government, the presidents of corporations, the presidents of universities. They are the ones who could, if they cared about families, reorganize society so families could flourish. If they really want someone home when children come home from school, for instance, or someone to take decent care of the little ones during the day, they have the power to institute scheduling flexible enough that at least one parent can be on hand, or see to it that there is good child care available.
>
> To insist that *women* — the powerless, the economically dispossessed of the world — bear total responsibility for child care, and therefore are to blame if families

> are in trouble, is cruel nonsense. How would men like to be faced with the dilemma of full-time work and full-time parenting and *full blame when things go wrong*? I lay the blame for the disintegration of family life squarely at the feet of *men*. They are the only ones who can do anything about it on any scale that would be helpful to families, *and they are not doing it*. (1981, 209–10)

These ideas are not particularly new, but to Mormon society they were radical and potentially revolutionary. Eventually Sonia's questioning of the Mormon church pattern extended to the familiar "motherhood-priesthood" division and even beyond. In noting the fear and avoidance her male leaders exhibited about anything concerning the doctrine of a Mother in Heaven and their slowness and reluctance to let women pray in meetings, she writes,

> If I was excommunicated for not respecting the priesthood enough (meaning the men), then why shouldn't bishops be excommunicated for not respecting "the motherhood" enough (meaning the women)? After all, the Mormons make much of motherhood. Motherhood is supposed to make up for not having anything else. . . .
>
> A question I often wanted to ask the leaders of the Mormon church but never got the chance is, "If motherhood is really so revered and so wonderful and is truly the equivalent of priesthood — why can men who not only do *not* hold the priesthood but are not even *members of the church* stand in the circle when their children or grandchildren or other relatives are blessed, whereas the mother, though she may have been a devout and worthy member of the church all her life, cannot?" This speaks eloquently of the divinity of maleness in and of itself, which is the basis of patriarchy. Priesthood is merely a smoke screen to hide this fact. (1981, 248)

Sonia Johnson, though now outside of the Mormon Church, went unwillingly at the time and still claims that it made her much of what she is. While Mormon women are beginning to write about motherhood with more realism, directness, and honesty, few of them move beyond a tentative examination of the "darker" side to question their society's structure, attitudes, and practices concerning motherhood. Most seem to feel that any problems women experience in their feelings or roles as mothers arise mainly from their own inadequacies and shortcomings, or they only hint at inadequacies elsewhere in the system. Sonia Johnson's careful detailing of her own radical internal changes shows us that there is still much change that is needed — within marital relationships, Church prescriptions, and societal structure — to support individual women's personal changes. Her book is valuable to Mormon literature for revealing the processes that shaped one devout Mormon woman, the agony of personal change, and the dissonance and upheaval that resulted when she made internal change jarringly visible in a conservative society that values permanence, order, harmony, and obedience.

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