

FEMALE EXPRIENCES IN DIFFERENT CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS: GYNOCRITICISM ON SHORT STORIES OF FIVE CONTINENTS

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Abstrak

Dalam artikel ini penulis ingin menghadirkan pengalaman perempuan dari berbagai macam latar belakang yaitu Cina, Amerika, Australia, Eropa, dan Afrika lewat lima cerpen berbeda. Penulis juga melihat budaya patriarki yang melatarbelakangi tulisan-tulisan tersebut. Dalam penelitian ini, penulis menggunakan teori gynocriticism dari Elaine Showalter yang menggagas pentingnya membahas karya perempuan sudut pandang perempuan. Dari penelitian ini penulis menyimpulkan bahwa para penulis perempuan tersebut mencoba memaparkan ide mereka bahwa menjadi perempuan itu sulit, baik sebagai seorang wanita muda, maupun paruh baya. Terbukti dengan tidak pahamnya para tokoh lakilaki dalam cerpen tersebut terhadap pikiran dan keinginan kaum wanita. Selanjutnya, penulis menyimpulkan bahwa lingkungan patriakilah yang menyebabkan kaum wanita dianggap tidak penting untuk dipahami dan didengarkan.

Kata Kunci: cerita pendek, karya perempuan, sastra dunia, kritik sastra feminis

ABSTRACT

In this article the author wants to show the experiences of women from various backgrounds , namely China , America , Australia , Europe , and Africa through five different stories. The author also looks at the culture of patriarchy underlying these writings. In this study, the author uses the theory of gynocriticism of Elaine Showalter , who suggested the importance of discussing the works of women from female perspectives. From this study, the authors concluded that women writers are trying to present that being a woman was difficult , both as a young woman, as well as middle-aged . Proven by the failure of male figures in the short stories to understand the thoughts and desires of women Furthermore, the author concludes that patriarchal environments create obstacles for women to be heard or understood.

Keywords : short stories , works of women, world literature, feminist criticism

A. Introduction

The character's experience in a literary work is probably related to the real social condition or culture of author because literary work is an author's creation and imagination. It is similar to women experiences in literary work. Some issues presented in a literary work—

women can hardly get education as much as men, women cannot get an access to employment, women are treated as secondary to men—are seemingly the portrait of the real condition because patriarchal culture still existed strongly in societies. It dominates all aspect of woman's life.

In relation to the development of women's writing, Elaine Showalter said that in the early 20th century, women's writings attempted to point out the female reality within female perspective, known as "gynocritics" (*Reader Guide*, 220). It proves that women place themselves at the center as the important point. They female writers show their experiences according to female perspective without being effected by male authors.

What the writer tries to point out in this research is about female experiences based on different backgrounds within female perspective. The writer assumes that women have different experiences and peculiarities in treating their life. Finally, the writer collects several canonic short stories which are published in early 20th century from female authors who come from different backgrounds and understand their cultural background. Those short stories bring strong issues which can represent female experiences in different cultural backgrounds: Asian, African, American, Australian, and Europe. The writer wants to present the reality of female experiences and hopefully it can be a representation of female reality in the world by using the short stories of Willa Seibert Cather, Virginia Woolf, Sui Sin far, Zora Neale Hurston, and Katherine Mansfield.

B. Background of the Research

The writer finds that the patriarchal culture exists quite strong in some female experiences because the societies still lived under patriarchal thought. On the other hand, the writer uncovers the reality of female perspectives, women's characters and other necessities more than male's perspective about women. Their way of reacting or responding to those situations must be considered and taken as solutions revealed by female authors.

Mabel Wearing's experiences in "The New Dress" (Virginia Woolf) describes that fashion should be important consideration because it makes some impacts on their confidence. The society appreciates the women's identity based on their clothes at the time. Laura's experience in "The Garden Party" (Katherine Mansfield) shows that her adolescence issued to show the morality and maturity between contradictive societies while the adult ignore it. Author shows that women are not always the follower but they can be pioneers. As a result, she

uncovered the contradictive life of Australian, the slavery life which is denied by the elite class-society. Delia's experience in "Sweat" (Zora Neale Hurston) describes her suffer as a wife in unhappy marriage and racial problem in her society. Meanwhile she proves that women can live independently in an unhappy marriage by ignoring the unkind husband, even revenging for the sake of bad treatment to get her own happiness. "Mrs. Spring Fragrance" (Sui Sin Far) is a short story which describes misunderstandings about Chinese female's life because of their men and society in which the arranged engagement and underestimation have been regarded as the important thing. In this case, Mrs. Spring Fragrance who lives in freedom tries to realize her surroundings to go out of traditional value and fight for freedom and happiness. Georgiana in "A Wagner Matinee" (Willa Cather) explains that woman's life is her own choices. The author reveals the authority and responsibility of women.

In order to this research, the writer applies gynocriticism that is proposed by Elaine Showalter. She is the one of founders of feminist literary criticism in United State Academia. She has divided three major phases of development of women's writing and developed the concept of gynocriticism. Selden notes in *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory (1993)* that Elaine Showalter has classified woman's writing into three phases of development and the third period is the time of developing of gynocriticism. (220)

Elaine Showalter in her *A Literature of Their Own* in 1977 coined the term gynocriticism to describe literary criticism based in feminine perspective. "It purposefully and collectively concerns itself with the articulation of women's experience and which guides itself by its own impulses to autonomous self-expression."(4) It means that gynocriticism attempts to understand women's writing as a fundamental part of female's reality and wanted to establish a literary tradition of women without being influenced by incorporating male authors.

Furthermore, Showalter notes Gerda Lerner's explanation that "history must include an account of the female experience over the time and should include the development of feminist consciousness as an essential aspect of women's past" (198). Model of the cultural situation of women is crucial to understand both how they are perceived by the dominant group and how they perceive themselves and others.

In addition, the writer takes the primary data from these five short stories by analyzing the main female characters and their circumstances and the secondary data are taken from the

educational journal in internet, essays, and some books that are related to the patriarchal cultural background of each background.

C. Review of Related Literature

BC. Jan Benes conducted a research *Discourse on Sexuality in the Works of Zora Neale Hurston* in 2011. It is explained that Hurston's work provides a channel for promoting the cause of black women's empowerment and resistance to decades of male dominance. Hurston transforms the stereotypes of oversexed women into empowering tales of complex female characters whose claiming of their bodies and free expression of desires brings about their liberation in from patriarchy system.

Lucille Cooper conducted a research about feminist exploration of Katherine Mansfield's short story which contains "The garden Party" which entitles *Is There a Woman in a Text? A Feminist Exploration of Katherine Mansfield's Search for Authentic Selves in A Selection of Short Stories* in 2008. This short story shares a common central image of death, but the emphasis is on the ethical aspect that expresses against a society that allows privilege to be indifferent to the misery of others, and ignores recognition of it which is observed by the main character, Laura (65).

Jenifer A. Howell wrote *American Dream; Fact or Fiction?* in 2001. It is purposed to help her students about American dreams. She used a short story of Willa Cather "A Wagner Matinee" which is believed can give a value and picture of American dreams. Such as, Georgiana as the main character educates the white woman who gives up a potentially fulfilling career as a pianist to marry.

Harriett Feenstra posted *Circling the Self; the Short Story Innovations of Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf* in *Leading Undergraduate Work in English Studies Volume 2* (2009-2010). She find that Woolf and Mansfield's use of the short story form to reflect the nature of fragmented self-identity is further extended by their shared underlying argument that it is necessary to impose boundaries upon personal expression and identity (64).

The writer found that "Mrs. Spring Fragrance" as an object of dissertation, *Sexual Politics in the Work of Chinese American Women Writers* by Jianhui Wang in 2007. It is demonstrated how Chinese American women writers reconstructs Chinese American women's

self-consciousness through their demand for freedom from the sexual oppressions of patriarchy of both American and Chinese cultures.

D. Female Experiences in Different Cultural Backgrounds: Gynocriticism on Short Stories of Five Continents

Chinese Female Experiences as Reflected in Mrs. Spring Fragrance

Chinese women seem to have difficulties in setting their freedom due to the Chinese patriarchal culture. They cannot choose to marry the man they love because the culture says that the father will arrange the marriage. As seen on the Laura's experience who has arranged marriage since she was fifteen years old. Even, Sheng in *Chinese Families: Asia and The South Pacific (2004)* said that:

Chinese ideology and ethics were built on patriarchy and man's domination and on the oppression and subordination of woman, characterized by the rules of "three obedience and four virtues" (obedience to father before marriage, to husband after marriage, and to son after husband's death; morality, proper speech, modest manner, and diligent work) (G. Liu & Zhao, 1994). (106)

Chinese women cannot live without financial determination, because there is a social stratum in their social system. Women who come from low class are placed unimportant in the society rather than the rich. Even, if they have marriage partner who come from higher class. Sheng also stated that:

Traditionally, a marriage in China was based solely on the command of parents and the good offices of a matchmaker which emphasizes matching socioeconomic statuses between the two families. Thus, marriage is actually an issue of connecting the political, social, and economic resources between the two families, rather than a result of love. (102)

Moreover, they cannot have freedom in expressing their feeling, even if they can do it, and the men do not seem to understand it, such as Mrs. Spring Fragrance's experiences.

In other hand, the female author proposes a solution, maintaining good sisterhood is the only thing these women can do, in order to be able cope with those problems. The sisterhood is reflected by the Mrs. Spring fragrance's actions. She motivates Chinese woman whose marriage is arranged by her father to never give up. She keep making friendship with Chinese woman who

has insufficient finance and ignoring the society's rejection, and she keep expressing her feeling although the men do not seem to understand it.

African Female Experiences as Reflected in Delia

African women seem to have difficulties in setting their freedom due to the Colonizer patriarchal culture in African. They have gender and racial oppression. They cannot get good and appropriate treatments from their husband because the culture says that a husband can do physical torture toward a wife, even they tend to be a chattel in marriage life. Moreover, they cannot have an important position in their society. The society does not seem to help her when facing problem.

Those are seen on Delia's experiences "Ah been married to you fur fifteen years, and Ah been takin' in washin' for fifteen years. Sweat, sweat, sweat! Work and sweat, cry, and sweat, pray and sweat!" (2). Moreover, According to Elizabeth Petersen, MSW in *Coloured Women's Experiences of Domestic Violence in Post-Apartheid South Africa (2010)*, she notes that "Research estimates that one in four women finds herself in an abusive relationship (Jewkes& Abrahams, 2002) and that every six hours a woman is killed by her intimate partner (Matthews, 2004)." (1).

On the other hand, the female author proposes a solution, keeping powerful strength and exploiting a chance for things these women can do, in order to survive in their life. This solution is reflected by the Delia's actions. She tries to solve all the things that hurt her to keep being calm, strong, and independent. However, when she has found a chance, she uses it to end her misery experience, such as, allowing her husband killed by a snake without doing anything.

Australian Female Experiences as Reflected in Laurie

Australian Young white women seem to have difficulties in showing their morality due to racial issues with contrasted condition in Australian. It is seen on Laura's experiences in this short story "Garden Party". But Jose was still more amazed. "Stop the garden party? My dear Laura, don't be so absurd, of course we can't do anything of the kind. Nobody expects us to. Don't be so extravagant." "But we can't possibly have a garden party with a man dead just outside the front gate", said Laura (68). They cannot express it because they are the young who

have no authority in making decision and they are the white who are forbidden to contact with the slave. Even, they have to follow adult's rules and keep being witness of adult's bad attitude.

In this case, the writer interprets that Laura's family is representation of colonizer family which have more authority and rich, while, Scoot's family is representation of lower class or the original Australian. Since colonizer has come to Australia, the comer or Western dominated Australia and just gives little place for the Aborigines. According to Jana Saglova in *The Australian Aboriginal People the Past and Present: Thinking White?* (2009), she notes:

British colonization began in Australia in 1788 (Hann: 2007). Moreover, because of different culture, colonizer thought that aborigine was savage rather than human beings (Webby: 1989).

On the other hand, the female author proposes a solution, keeping strong morality. It is a solution they can do, in order to be able cope with those problems. It is reflected by the Laura's character who asks older members to stop garden party. Meanwhile, she has no authority to do it and has been forbidden to contact the slave. She keeps caring about the death in Scoot family and visiting them to apologize for the party.

European Female Experiences as Reflected in Mrs. Mabel

European low class women seem to have difficulties in following high class women's dressing rule when they joined same condition (party). They are forced to set all the things that look charming at their self, even they are not comfortable. It is seen on Mabel character who was invited to come to Dalloways's party. "What she had thought that evening when, sitting over the teacups, Mrs. Dalloway's invitation came, was that, of course, she could not be fashionable. It was absurd to pretend it even—fashion meant cut, meant style, meant thirty guineas at least—but why not be original? Why not be herself, anyhow?" (51).

Indirectly, high class women also seem to have difficulties in showing their freedom in dressing because it has been controlled by the society. They cannot get precious identity when they wear old fashion dress. They are forced by their high class position and their obsession to be the most charming among other women. In addition, it will be worse when there is a man cannot seem to understand those female problems. It is proved by Anon in "On the Revolutions of the French Fashion, with some Advice to the Ladies Respecting Certain Parts of Dress" (1789) states that:

When by some lucky chance, a woman has attained almost to perfection in the art of dressing; that is to say, in the art of knowing what best becomes her, she ought to be very nice in her choice of new fashions. In an age so frivolous as the present, the loss of a lover may be the consequence of even such a trifling circumstance as that of the hat being wrong placed, or turned too much to the right or the left. When a passion is founded only upon trifles, ought we to be surprised that a trifle should destroy it? (365)

It means that though women are supposed to have freedom, but there are still dominations in clothing awareness. It is not acceptable if women wear incorrect choice in clothing.

On the other hand, the female author proposes a solution, leaving dressing rule. It is a solution they can do, in order to be able cope with those problems. Leaving fashion rule, they can get their freedom in dressing. They can get freedom in showing their image without being oppressed by social control.

American Female Experiences as Reflected by Georgiana

The writer sees the American women have better life than other women in different backgrounds. They have freedom in choosing their life. According to Stephanie Coontz in *Marriage: A History (2005)*, notes that "By the end of the 1700s personal choice of partners had replaced arranged marriage as a social ideal and individuals were encouraged to marry for love"(145-46). In fact, in the 18th century love became the most important reason for marrying (146). However, they seem hard to apologize themselves when they make wrong decisions and set their freedom due to respecting the responsibility of choice.

American women seem hard to give second chance to themselves to continue their life in freedom. It is seen on Georgiana:

"She seldom talked to me about music, and I understood why. She was a pious woman; she had the consolation of religion and, to her at least, her martyrdom was not wholly sordid. Once...I had found among her music book, she come up to me and, putting her hands over my eyes, gently drew my head back upon her shoulder, saying tremulously," Don't love it so well, Clark, or it may be taken from you".(30)

In other hand, the female author proposes a solution, to be more tolerant is the only thing these women can do, in order to be able cope with those problems.

E. Conclusions

In relation to the force of patriarchal culture, female experiences are different in each background. It depends on how open the society to accept gender equality. Moreover, the writer assumes that female authors want to prove that it is not easy to be a woman whether they are a girl, a woman, or a wife because their husband, family, or societies also seem to have difficulties in understanding them. It is seen through inappropriate treatments of society's rule and man's respond toward female experiences in selected short stories. The writer concludes that patriarchal culture is the reason that causes the phenomena and it makes female's life become something unimportant and not appreciated by society. On the other hand, the female authors also give some solutions to cope with those problems by maintaining the good sisterhood, powerful strength, keep being morality, leaving fashion rule, and be more tolerant.

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