

A FEMINIST ANALYSIS ON WOMEN'S STRUGGLES IN BREAKING GENDER INEQUALITY AS SEEN IN NEVIL SHUTE'S *A TOWN LIKE ALICE*

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Abstract

This research is aimed (1) to describe the kinds of gender inequality which are experienced by women, and (2) to explain the struggles of the women in breaking gender inequality in Nevil Shute's *A Town Like Alice*. A qualitative content analysis method was used to conduct the research. The data of the research were the phrases, clauses, and sentences related to the kinds of gender inequality experienced by women, and the struggles of the women in breaking gender inequality in the novel. To ensure the data trustworthiness, peer debriefing was applied in this research. The trustworthiness of the data was gained through conducting peer debriefing that was applied through the researcher's supervisor as the expert along with two students majoring English Literature Study Program. The first result of this research shows that there are four kinds of gender inequality practice experienced by women found in the novel. The practices of gender inequality analyzed in the novel are marginalization, subordination, stereotype, and violence which are experienced by women in the novel. The second result is the struggles done by women in breaking gender inequality, namely by expressing opinion, boosting self-esteem, establishing sisterhood, refusing to get married, and having a career in public sphere.

Keywords: gender inequality, feminism, feminist literary criticism, women, struggle.

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, discrimination has become a never ending issue that happen in society. According to Oxford Electronic Dictionary, discrimination can be defined as "the practice of treating somebody or a particular group in society less fairly than others". Essentially, human beings in this world come from different culture, language, religion and so on. However, people's perception towards those differences goes excessive since people start to think they are not equal with one another and there exists superior and inferior group in society. Basically, the strongest influential factor that shapes this

issue comes from the different perception each person has, as someone often thinks that he or she is the most precise and the finest in every aspect of life. As the result, people discriminate and even oppress one another only because they have different perception.

Discrimination can vary in types such as in social status, ethnicity, gender and many more. Discrimination in social status occurs when someone who belongs to the higher class status treats the lower unfairly and even unpleasantly for the sake of their own prosperity. Then, discrimination in ethnicity is often related to different race, religion, language or

nationality which makes ones feel worthy than the others. Subsequently, there are many cases regarding discrimination over gender which spreads not only in the high class society but even in the lower ones. In most societies, men are considered more superior in all aspect than women. Men are associated as physically strong, rational and independent gender. Meanwhile, women are seen as useless and futile gender which depicts weak physical look, irrational mind, and emotionality. This construction of gender differences then formulates discrimination towards women.

Gender differences occur primarily because society embraces the system which honors men over women called patriarchy. In a patriarchal society, that men born as a leader and women are demanded only to follow men or stay behind them have become society's construction since a long time ago. Basically, patriarchal system believes that men hold the highest position of power and further leads to gender inequality that not only discriminates but also oppresses and exploits women who are allegedly inferior. Walby (1990) claims that men's superiority over women is practiced in six different areas such as in paid work, in the state, in culture, in household production, in sexuality, and in violence. To conclude, men are taking advantage of women's

position in society whose abilities are constrained and even denied.

However, as time goes by, gender differences have been assumed in excessive understanding. It happens because people believe that women are not necessary to do activities that men do just because women are stereotyped to have weaker physical body than men. Moreover, people in patriarchal society views women's job is only to stay at home taking care of the family while their husband is out for work. Women are not allowed to make a decision since men are believed to possess high-intelligence and the one who take the responsibility of the household. Furthermore, when it comes to inheritance sharing, women are often given less than men. Fakhri (2013) adds that in most ethnic groups in Indonesia, women do not have rights to receive inheritance at all. Encyclopedia Britannica (2008) adds that in English and America, a woman's legal existence as an individual is suspended once she is married, which is written in Coverture law. Coverture law views husband and wife as a single entity since the wife has to take her husband's name. Therefore, it means that in a matter of property, whether it is in form of inheritance of estate or money will belong to the husband as the head of the household.

Furthermore, according to Scott and Cheatham (2010), in India and South Asia, having sons is more preferable instead of daughters as girls are considered as a financial burden since they bring small income contributions for the family. Some of mothers in India even killed their newborn daughters. They believed that by killing their newborn daughter, they would bear a baby son on the next pregnancy. They also thought that sending their daughter to death is better than seeing them live in the society that worships son more than daughter. This was occurred because girls who happened to grow up tended to die young as they would be given less medical care or would not get hospitalized at all when they were sick. Most of people in India would prioritize treating sons instead of daughters. This led to a sex-selective abortion program that enables women to learn the sex of a fetus in order to abort their upcoming baby daughter. The program was applied in South Korea where 30 percent of pregnancies noticed as female fetuses were aborted while on the contrary, male fetuses got to breathe normally after birth.

Another example related to the practice of gender inequality is in China, where based on China's 2000 census, the ratio of newborn girls to boys was 100:119 (Scott, Sampson, and Cheatham, 2010). Mustafa (2010) adds that in China, women were

seen as a meaningless creature as the words used for women are mostly "sell" and "buy". If a mother gave birth to a girl, the husband would tell the wife to "exchange" their daughter with money to the upper class to be a slave. Women were sold as prostitutes and told to sing or dance. Once, the prostitution in Song Dynasty increased as the economic problems aroused. Women were not merely used as a preference for prostitution but they were promoted like a thing and barely considered as human at all.

All the examples mentioned above are the portrayal of patriarchal society that is going excessive. Being alive is a nightmare to women and girls as many cases about humiliation and even violence always happen to women. Nonetheless, in this modern era, women are trying to erase the stereotype of woman as a weak and irrational creature. Women are trying to acquire the equality of gender and starting to fight for their human rights to live as a worthy and independent creature without the oppression from either men or society.

Responding to this great issue, some women activists made a movement against gender inequality acts towards women that is called Feminism. The movement tries to eliminate the practice of patriarchy which disadvantages women for the sake of men's prosperity. The

movement is not about insisting women to be the ruler of society by changing the society into matriarchy. However, it is about the equality and justice for women who are seen as second level after men in both public and private sphere. Feminists demand the rights of women as human beings just like men such as given chance to vote, to work, and to get education fairly. In 1920, feminism reached its first goal when women's suffrage was finally granted in the United States based on the 19th Amendment to the United States Constitution (Horton and Simmons, 2006: 73). The struggles of the feminists in the past ought to be appreciated as they made the path for women nowadays to get the right to vote. However, even though feminists have struggled in the past, feminists still have a lot to achieve regarding women whose rights are still denied by society. As time goes by, feminism led to the emergence of the criticism against this great issue of gender inequality in form of literary work. Many writers pour their opinion toward the practice of patriarchy into literature such as prose, poem, and drama. Thus, this resulted in the emergence of feminist criticism which is considered as the right device to discuss the practice of gender inequality that is spreading in the society.

A Town like Alice by Nevil Shute which is published in 1950 is one of many

literary works that concern on women issue in society. The novel tells a story of a British woman named Jean Paget as the main female character who lives in patriarchal society together with other women who struggle in breaking the practice of gender inequality that disadvantages women. Women in the novel struggle to get free from patriarchal society that dignifies men as the highest holder of authority in society. Considering the objectives of this research are (1) to describe the kinds of gender inequality experienced by women, and (2) to explain the struggles of the women in breaking gender inequality Nevil Shute's *A Town Like Alice*, the researcher used feminist literary criticism and liberal second-wave feminist perspective.

Feminist literary criticism is defined as a type of literary criticism developed in 1960s which appeared as a respond towards feminism. The word "criticism" relates to the idea of critique. Thus, feminist literary criticism focuses primarily on the critique of portrayal of women particularly in any kind of literature, such as prose, drama, or poetry. Barry (2002) adds that feminist literary criticism highlights on uncovering literary work containing the practice of patriarchal system which continually constructs gender inequality which puts women on disadvantages. Furthermore, other than as

a respond towards feminism, Plain and Sellers (2007: 2) define that feminist literary criticism is the peak period of “women’s writing, of women writing about women writing, and of women – and men – writing about women’s minds, bodies, art and ideas.” Different from liberal first-wave feminism which succeeds in gaining political right such as receiving voting right for women, liberal second wave feminism focuses on gaining legal equality for women in economic and social fields such as receiving the same opportunity to get a fair work paid as men, to get educated, and to elude from domestic exploitation and violence. Hence, in the second wave, liberal feminists try to accomplish bigger scope of women’s right. Second wave liberal feminism aims at empowering women to make use their capacity to challenge patriarchy. According to Gamble (2006: 239), Betty Friedan is claimed to be the leading figure of liberal feminism in the second wave in which she pours her findings about the unsatisfying life of married women in her book entitled *The Feminine Mystique* published in 1963. Second wave liberal feminism is the suitable theory for this research considering women in Shute’s *A Town Like Alice* are struggling in breaking gender inequality in order to get their

rights back and to explore their capacity in both public and private sphere as men.

THE RESEARCH METHODS

As for this research, the researcher used qualitative content analysis research design that provided textual descriptions of the phenomena observed in the research considering this research focuses on the interpretation of the text instead of calculations or measurements. According to Vanderstoep and Johnston (2009: 165), qualitative research starts with the process of defining, describing, and then making sense of what is observed. Therefore, the researcher started with reading the theory related to the research and then analyzing it to collect the needed information. Subsequently, the research applied the theory onto the object of the research to be discussed in the research findings.

The data of the research were some significant expressions whether it is phrase, clause, or sentences taken from Nevil Shute’s *A Town Like Alice* that represent gender inequality experienced by women. There were two kinds of research instruments used in this research. The first research instrument was the primary instrument. The primary instrument in analyzing the data was the researcher herself. As what Lincoln and Guba advice, human is the best instrument in conducting a qualitative research (in Vanderstoep and

Johnston, 2009: 188). Therefore, the researcher was ought to be involved in every process when conducting this research; as the designer, the data collector, the data analyst, the interpreter, and the data reporter of the research finding.

In this research, there were two steps of collecting the data conducted by the researcher. The first step was reading and re-reading the data source, Nevil Shute's *A Town Like Alice*, in order to find evidences that can lead the analysis to answer the objectives of the research. Therefore, the novel was read thoroughly and carefully to avoid any misinterpretation. The researcher also read the secondary data such as any books related to the issues of gender inequality in a patriarchal society to deepen the researcher's understanding of the topic analyzed in this research.

THE RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data related to the kinds of gender inequality experienced by women, their struggles in breaking gender inequality Nevil Shute's *A Town Like Alice*.

Kinds of Gender Inequality Experienced by Women in Nevil Shute's *A Town Like Alice*

The practices of gender inequality which are experienced by women are clearly depicted in Nevil Shute's *A Town Like Alice*. The main character, Jean Paget, along with other women in the story undergoes unequal treatments as the result of patriarchal society. The researcher found four out of five types of gender inequality as stated by Mansour Fakhri (2013) which are marginalization, subordination, stereotyping, and violence. The practices of gender inequality which are experienced by women are clearly depicted in Nevil Shute's *A Town Like Alice*. The main character, Jean Paget, along with other women in the story undergoes unequal treatments as the result of patriarchal society. The researcher found four out of five types of gender inequality as stated by Mansour Fakhri (2013) which are marginalization, subordination, stereotyping, and violence.

The first datum below shows that women prisoners experience marginalization. Women prisoners are not considered valuable at all that they are put on road to march by the Japanese. In the novel, women prisoners are promised to get a comfortable camp to live in Singapore by a Japanese Captain named Captain Yoniata. Captain Yoniata also says that the women prisoners will be happy once they arrive at the camp. However, firstly they have to go to Kuala

Lumpur for forty seven miles by walking.

The datum is presented below.

From Panong to Kuala Lumpur is forty-seven miles; it took a minute for his meaning to sink in. Then Mrs Horsefall said, "How are we to travel to Kuala Lumpur? Will there be a truck?"

He said, "**Very sorry, no truck. You walk, easy journeys, not more than you can go each day.** Japanese soldier help you." (Shute, 1950: 49)

Based on the datum above, Captain Yoniata puts women prisoners on road in order to make them stay away from his sight. It takes forty-seven miles yet the captain does not bother to help them by providing any transportation. Women prisoners are merely told to walk. The worst is they are not given food unless they arrive at Ayer Penchis. They are not even allowed to get a temporary shelter until they arrive at the destination. The Captain does not even feel sorry towards women prisoners because basically he never needs them. He thinks that women prisoners will not bring any advantage for the Japanese, unlike men who can be asked to do some works.

As for subordination, women have to go through some unfair treatments such as given less authority, given limited medical attention and food, and treated as men's property. In the datum below, women in Kuala Telang have less authority regarding their right as villagers.

There was a long clamour of discussion. Some of the women were doubtful if the men would ever allow such a thing, and some were doubtful whether it was not impious to wish to alter the arrangements that had satisfied their mothers and their grandmothers before them. (Shute, 1950: 120)

In the datum above, it is stated that the main female character, Jean, wants to pay back the kindness of Malay women who have helped her together with other women prisoners in the war back then. Jean plans to build a well for women in Kuala Telang as a thankful sign and also to help them relieve their burden as a villager. However, Malay women are wondering if the men will allow the construction of a well in the village. They think that they have to ask for men's agreement whether or not Jean can build a well there even though the well itself is for the village's goodness. As Fakhri (2013: 16) states that in a household, a wife should always obey what her husband says. Therefore, it shows the position of women in Kuala Telang which is still being subordinated by men since they cannot make their own decision.

Other than marginalization and subordination, women are also stereotyped by society. They are merely stereotyped with inferior traits. In the datum below, it is narrated that a young girl aged twenty one will not fit to manage a bunch of

money. Different from the agreement with Donald, Jean's brother, who would inherit once he reaches his legal age or in other words becomes an adult, Uncle Douglas wants Jean to receive his inheritance only when she is forty. He discriminates Jean because she is a woman. The datum is presented below.

He shook his head. "I think that would be most imprudent, Mr Strachan, if I may say so. **No lassie would be fit to administer her own estate when she was twenty-one. A lassie of that age is at the mercy of her sex, Mr Strachan, at the mercy of her sex. I would want the trust to continue for much longer than that. Till she was forty, at the very least.**" (Shute, 1950: 8-9)

Furthermore, in the novel, women also experience violence whether it is physically or psychologically.

His eyes hardened; he motioned to the sentries, who gripped her by each arm. Then he hit her four stinging blows upon the face with the flat of his hand. "Very bad thoughts," he said, and turned upon his heel, and left them. No more was said about beds. (Shute, 1951: 46)

According to the datum above, a woman prisoner gets hit by the Captain four times on her face with the palm of his hand instead of receiving what she needs. The Captain hits her as he thinks that she asks too much for a prisoner of war. He wants the women prisoners to sleep on the floor just like Japanese women. However, since they are English, they are not

accustomed to sleep on the floor, so they expect a good treatment from the Japanese considering the women prisoners carry their children along in the camp. The captain does not give any good treatment towards women prisoners yet he prefers to hit them every time they disobey his command. Finally, those four types of gender inequality are found to be experienced by women.

Women's Struggles in Breaking Gender Inequality in Nevil Shute's

A Town Like Alice

In Nevil Shute's *A Town Like Alice*, women struggle through expressing opinion, boosting self-esteem, establishing sisterhood, refusing to get married, and having career in public sphere in order to eliminate the practices of gender inequality. The first struggle which is done by women is shown below.

A stern-faced woman, Mrs Horsefall, asked to see the officer; **when Captain Yoniata came she protested at the conditions and asked for beds and nets.**

"But we're English," she said indignantly. "We don't sleep on the floor like animals!" (Shute, 1950: 46)

Based on the datum above, a woman named Mrs. Horsefall tries to protest Captain Yoniata who treats women prisoners unfairly. When the women prisoners first captured by the Japanese,

they are put in a camp. However, when the night comes, women prisoners are told to sleep on the floor. Captain Yoniata insists that women prisoners should sleep on the floor just like Japanese women. However, Mrs. Horsefall thinks that it is inappropriate to sleep on the floor because it makes them feel like animals. Therefore, she asks for beds and nets as she wants to be treated humanly even though she is a prisoner of war. The datum signifies that Mrs. Horsefall represents the other women prisoners to voice their mind demanding to be treated humanly and to get a comfortable stay in the camp.

Then, women also boost their self-esteem in order to move beyond their cage to fight against gender inequality. Jean as the main female character is married to Joe Harman, a cattle station owner. She thinks that she should not solely become a housewife who stays at home doing housework and serving for her husband. She ensures herself that she wants to be a high-quality wife who stands evenly with her husband. Moreover, she has fifty-three thousand pounds on her hands. The datum below signifies how Jean has high confidence and self-realization which helps her boosting her self-esteem. She recognizes her capability as a woman, as a human being, that anybody can be what they want to be. She wants to develop not only as a woman, but as a full human

being in order to explore her capability. The datum is presented below.

She learned a lot that evening. She learned a little of the fortitude that a wife on a cattle station must develop, even, she thought a little grimly, a wife with fifty-three thousand pounds. (Shute, 1950: 270)

Besides, women in the novel establish sisterhood that is believed to achieve their goal as they think they have the same goal that is to eliminate the oppression of women.

“That there should be a well in this place, so that you should not have to fetch fresh water from the spring morning and evening, but you could walk out of your houses only fifty paces at the most and there would be a well of fresh water with a bucket that you could go to and draw water at any time of the day whenever you had the need of cool, fresh water.” (Shute, 1950: 119)

According to the datum above, Jean plans to pay back the kindness of women in Kuala Telang who have helped her during her times as a prisoner of war. It is narrated that Jean wants to build a well in Kuala Telang considering Malay women have to fetch water from the spring which is too far from their house. Jean herself has experienced living as a villager woman and the struggle walking back and forth from the house to the spring carrying water. Therefore, other than paying back their kindness, she wants to relieve the

women's burden as they have to fetch water from a very far place which has dangerous path.

Furthermore, the main female character named Jean refuses to get married as she thinks that she still has a lot to pursue. In Singapore, Jean meets Bill Holland, Eileen's husband who happens to be a prisoner with her. Eileen and her daughter have died of fatigue from the march and it is Jean's duty to tell her husband. As Jean is telling Bill the situation in Malaysia back then, Bill thinks that Jean seems fitting to be the figure of mom for his child. By seeing Bill's intention, it shows that men see women as a gender which is destined to possess motherhood since they are claimed as the best at nurturing. Therefore, Jean refuses to get married because she still has dreams to achieve as individual. It is stated in the datum: **"It seemed to me that she had shown great strength of character in refusing an offer of marriage at that time."** (Shute, 1950: 111).

Lastly, women are having career in public sphere whether by working or providing job opportunities for fellow women which indicate that they manage to break the practices of gender inequality.

He said slowly, **"I think it must be—everything comes back to that, when you look at it. It's not only the workshop, you see. She's got two girls employed in the ice-**

cream parlour, and one lubra. Two in the beauty parlour, three in the dress shop, two in the fruit shop, three in the cinema. She employs quite a lot of people." (Shute, 1950: 306)

It is clearly seen in the datum above that Joe Harman as Jean's husband shows his respect towards her who has succeeded in establishing public facilities in Willstown. It is stated that beside a shoes workshop, Jean also has an ice-cream parlor, beauty parlor, dress shop, fruit shop, and cinema. She also never forgets to employ women. Back then, Joe Harman thinks that she is only talking non sense, yet she can truly make it comes true at the end. Jean's accomplishment proves that the statement of "women have very little influence" is wrong. Jean's efforts of establishing job opportunities and making women enter the workforce are believed to bring beneficial for society. It is supported by Rivers and Barnett (in Williams, 1998: 21) who state that "dual income couples provide financial security and stable home environment for their children." Therefore, it can be concluded that a woman can bring great transformation for society when she is permitted to explore and develop her capacity.

CONCLUSION

The existence of patriarchal society in the novel leads to the practice of gender

inequality which disadvantages women as patriarchy honors men more than women. In *A Town Like Alice*, women are found to experience four types of gender inequality which are: marginalization, subordination, stereotype and violence.

Firstly, as for marginalization, women are marginalized as prisoners of war, marginalized from getting public, and marginalized from getting a job. Secondly, women also experience subordination. They are given less authority, given limited medical attention and food, and treated as men's property. Thirdly, women are stereotyped to possess inferior traits. Lastly, violence is the fourth practice of gender inequality experienced by women which is found in the novel. Women are violated whether physically or psychologically.

Responding to the practices of gender inequality which spread widely in the novel, women struggle to end the practice by expressing opinion, boosting self-esteem, establishing sisterhood, refusing to get married, and having career in the public sphere. In conclusion, the existence of patriarchal society which creates gender inequality does not stop women from exploring and developing their capacity as human beings. Women in the novel prove the readers that if ones want to move beyond their cage, there must be a way to achieve it. Therefore,

Nevil Shute as the writer of the novel shows the reader that the constructions of gender should not be considered as a barrier but are signs that women are respectable, dignified and stronger than people can ever think.

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