

## FRENCH WOMEN DISCRIMINATION AND THEIR RESPONSES DURING THE WORLD WAR II IN HANNAH'S *THE NIGHTINGALE*

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### Abstract

This study aims to identify the kinds of French women discrimination, and the way they respond to discrimination in Hannah's *The Nightingale*. The researcher uses feminist literary criticism. It belongs to a qualitative research employing content analysis method. There were five steps of data analysis; reading and re-reading the data, re-arranging the data, interrelating the data, interpreting the data, and making the interpretation into storyline. The researcher finds four results. The first one is related to gender discrimination which are (1) marginalization: marginalization in private life, and society; (2) subordination: alienation, and restriction; (3) stereotype: weakness, foolishness, and harmless; and (4) violence: psychological, physical, and sexual violence. The second result is related to women's responses towards discrimination which are (1) struggling: showing their resistance and taking collective actions; and (2) accepting: having no resistance and least engaging in collective action. The third finding is the unexpected agenda in the novel that emphasizes men as heroes in the war.

**Keywords:** French women discrimination, women's responses, feminist literary criticism, *The Nightingale*

### INTRODUCTION

Gender discrimination is an unfavorable treatment based on sexual characteristics. It causes the elimination of individual's right and opportunity (Reeves and Baden, 2000: 2). In fact, gender discrimination usually disadvantages women because they are inferior in society. Virginia Woolf states that it is a result of the imbalance power between men and women (in Dobie, 2012: 114). Apparently, discrimination towards women has happened since a long time ago.

Discrimination itself is a term referring to unflattering behavior or treatment based on their origin. Meanwhile, Blackstone (2003:335) assumes "gender is constructed in individual, interactional, and structural ways to create environmental constraints and

opportunities that usually benefit men more than women". In other words, gender discrimination can also be assumed as unfavorable treatment based on their individual characteristics which are systematically constructed that usually disadvantage women.

The cause of gender discrimination is because of the men domination in society which is so commonly called as patriarchy. As it is strongly believed by the society, patriarchy becomes the source that cause inequality between men and women.

Fakih (2012:12-13) argues that there are five kinds of gender discrimination. He mentions marginalization, subordination, stereotyping, violence, and workload as forms of gender discrimination. Those kinds of discrimination are suffered by women

over centuries. Apparently, discrimination towards women has happened since a long time ago.

Women living in France during World War II also faced discrimination. They experienced violence and body exploitation during the war. Furthermore, because of the unstable condition, women should choose between the two options; whether to collaborate with the enemy to survive, or to resist against the enemy to liberate (Gougeon, 2017: 5-8).

Additionally, discriminated women react differently to the gender discrimination. Some researchers argue that people who experience discrimination may be associated with the feeling of anxiety, depression, and hopelessness. Furthermore, on their research journal, Gill and Matheson (2015) state that there are two dominant emotions as the results of being discriminated. There are anger and sadness. Those two emotions cause different responses.

The different responses are also caused by several influencing factors, including the educational background, the society they live in, their personality, and even their own perception of discrimination itself. Those influencing factors affect women's consciousness whether to struggle abolishing the discrimination, or to fight off surviving in the discrimination.

Women discrimination and their responses are widely depicted in literary works, one of the examples is *The*

*Nightingale* by Kristin Hannah. It portrays women discrimination and their responses during the World War II.

This research focuses on the analysis of French women discrimination and their responses to discrimination during the World War II in Hannah's *The Nightingale*. The research examines kinds of discrimination that female characters suffer and female characters' responses to discrimination since the subject matters are inseparable.

## **THE RESEARCH METHODS**

The type of this research was a qualitative research. It is a textual analysis research producing narrative description providing in depth understanding of the phenomena under study (Vanderstoep & Johnson, 2009:8). The novel entitled *The Nightingale* by Kristin Hannah was used as the main source. To support the research focus, this research uses feminist literary criticism.

The data was collected by doing a comprehensive reading to the main source, labeling the data, categorizing and classifying the data. In analyzing the data, there were at least five ways that was applied. There are reading and re-reading the data to meet the real relevancy of the data, re-arranging the data into manageable order, interrelating the final form of the data to make sure that the data were ready to be interpreted, and finally interpreting the data.

A qualitative research can also be considered subjective since it relies on the researcher interpretation. To avoid the doubtful feeling to the quality of the findings, therefore, the researcher should establish trustworthiness.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **A. Kinds of Discrimination**

There are four kinds of discrimination that the female characters suffer. There are marginalization, subordination, stereotype, and violence.

#### **Marginalization**

Marginalization towards women is hardly recognizable because it happens within the legal topics. Marginalization also provokes women to believe in its idea. So that, women see it as something right. In fact, it is the act of eliminating them, both in public and private sphere.

The female characters are marginalized in their private lives under the disguise of marriage. In their marriage lives, women are often marginalized because they are assumed to be incapable to think independently (Johannasdottir, 2009: 3).

“Use it wisely, Vianne. Along with your teaching salary, it should last you a good long time.” She felt a flutter of panic. **She knew too little about their finances. Antoine handled them.**” (Hannah, 2015:20).

Vianne are seen to be incompetent to manage the convoluted matters in the family, especially the family finance, because her

husband does not involve her in it. It is shown when Vianne knows a little about her family finance condition.

Meanwhile, the marginalization in the society is the act of excluding women in any sphere of public life. Fakhri (1: 15) believes that it happens because of the governmental system and cultural beliefs.

**“You are terminated, Madame.”** Her heart seemed to stop. “E-excuse me?” “I speak of your employment as a teacher. You are terminated. **Go home, Madame, and do not return. These students do not need an example such as you.**” (Hannah, 2015: 215)

Vianne is excluded from the society. She experiences the termination because she tries to defend her Jewish friend. It causes her losing her social status as a teacher affecting her losing the teaching salary too.

#### **Subordination**

Subordination is the situation when women have no power towards everything. During the war in France, women were alienated to the remote area, for they were expected as useless in the war. Meanwhile, the detention nuance caused by the wartime rules made everyone’s movements being watched. It causes women facing a severe difficulty in mobility.

During the war, women were sent away to the remote places since women were considered no use in war. As Sultana states, subordination causes by the patriarchal which is believed in the society

(Sultana, 2010:1). Isabelle faces alienation to the remote place because of her Papa.

**“I am not going, Papa. I have told you this.”** ... “They will take you as far as Tours. From there, I leave it to your ingenuity to get to your sister’s house. Lord knows you have always been adept at running away.” **“So you throw me out. Again.”** (Hannah, 2015: 39).

Her Papa assumes that the reason of alienating her is for the sake of her safety. Apparently, that is also a symbol of women’s powerlessness because they do not deserve to live in the city. It also means that Isabelle cannot join the war since she is not in Paris which war take place.

Women subordination can also be defined when women have less power than men (Hornby, 2003:1296). The female characters are found to be restricted to access their needs.

**“The rules: All radios are to be turned in to us at the town hall, immediately, as are all guns, explosives, and ammunition. All operational vehicles will be impounded. All windows will be equipped with material for blackout, and you shall use it. A nine P.M. curfew is instantly in effect. No lights shall be on after dusk.”** (Hannah, 2015: 91-92).

Because of the curfew and the seized vehicles, women’s mobility are limited. The rules cause women having no privacy because of the sheer blackout that must only be used. Moreover, women are restricted in gaining extra information making them isolated from the outside world. The control

of the food production also impacts to the hardship that women must bear.

### Stereotype

Stereotyping causes gender bias in society. People range what belongs to women and what belongs to men. What belongs to women is called femininity, and masculinity is what belongs to men. Meanwhile, women stereotyping is depicted in *The Nightingale*. Based on the research, the female characters are stereotyped as weak, foolish, and harmless.

Besides the intelligence and agility, the physical strength of French is needed to defeat the Nazi which the characterization is portrayed in the male characters. In contrast, the female characters are considered having the opposite characterization, which is weak.

“Does that scare you?”

“No. It’s just ... unexpected.”

**“You should be scared,”** he said, pushing the stringy hairs out of his eyes. **“Anyway, you are safe enough with me...”**. (Hannah, 2015: 49).

Here, Isabelle is seen as fragile and weak even though she has shown her strength. As Chinchilla states that the most general stereotype is that women are weak, and adds that those perception may “stem from women’s greater desire to build a consensus” (in Goudreau, 2011).

Women in general around the world are also seen to be not successful in education, and people assumes that foolishness is the cause of it. In the novel,

people also assume that women do not need high education since they merely end up in the kitchen and chores. That is why almost all of the female characters are considered as foolish.

“You read too much,” Christophe said, chewing on a stalk of hay. **“What is that, a romantic novel?”** (Hannah, 2015: 32)

Christophe seems not happy with Isabelle’s hobby by saying that she reads too much. He then spontaneously states that the book must be a romantic one. It is because women are attached to such light theme. He also assumes that women never read the books with other subject matters as books are for the smart ones.

Moreover, the colonial government in the novel often publishes special rules to prevent a rebellion, but the rules only focus on men rather than women. They concern only for the men because men are assumed to be physically strong and able to fight than women. Men are also assumed for being more rebellious than women.

“All males who ... be shot on the spot. **Women who render the same help will be sent to concentration camps in Germany.**” (Hannah, 2015: 245)

The colonial government is more concerned to men rather than women. It mostly states ‘**males**’ on the rules rather than ‘**female**’. The differences in the penalties between men and women are also obvious.

## **Violence**

Violence is one of discriminations that the female characters suffer from. It happens because women are put in a lower status in the society. It is the most obvious discrimination since people can see some of it directly. It harms the women not only psychologically but also physically. Violence lingers bad memory to the women. It leaves scars if it is physical violence. When it comes to psychological violence, it leaves trauma. Also, when the women suffer from sexual violence, it leaves both physical and psychological trauma.

Psychological violence against women can hardly be seen. It is hidden in women’s thought and inner-self which forms unhealthy psychology of the women.

“When he spotted her, **she saw the irritation that transformed his features,** reshaped his expression into one of grim determination.” (Hannah, 2010: 32).

It happens to Vianne and Isabelle whose fathers are violating them psychologically in the form of bad treatment. It explicitly states that her father is annoyed at Isabelle, his own daughter. It hurts Isabelle to be disapproved by her own father.

Meanwhile, in physical violence, women suffer from fierce treatments. Some Nazi soldiers become fiercer when America joins the war. This high tension also make Nazi soldiers lost their temper. To release the tension, they wreak their anger on women

who are powerless.

**“Von Richter took her by the arm- a painful, punishing grip- and led her into the stone courtyard outside her classroom.”** (Hannah, 2010: 427).

Von Richter’s bad treatment to Vianne is considered physical violence because he makes Vianne suffer as cause of his physical contact. By holding Vianne mercilessly, Von Richter assumes her belongs to have lower status than him.

Sexual assault means that any unwanted sexual contact against somebody’s will (Gluck, 2016). Women who lived during conflict era were experienced sexual violence.

“When the bodice gaped open, he slid his hand inside, sliding it over her breast, twisting her nipple hard enough **that she cried out in pain.** “Anything?” he asked... **He hit her again.** Still she stayed where she was, her eyes closed tightly. ... **She gritted her teeth as he yanked down his pants and shoved her legs farther apart and violated both her body and her soul.** She did not make a single sound. Nor did she look away.” (Hannah, 2015: 447-448)

The paragraph presents that Vianne shows no resistance, so that Von Richter assumes her as vulnerable. When Von Richter suspects Vianne of knowing a Jewish guy, Vianne refuses to admit that. Then, Von Richter uses the situation to rape Vianne. He makes an excuse as a part of negotiation so Von Richter will not do any harm to her and

her children.

## **B. Women’s Responses to Discrimination**

Women have faced discrimination since ages. Along with it, women have different responses to overcome the discrimination. The responses are the cause of women’s emotion as the result of being discriminated. In Kristin Hannah’s *The Nightingale*, the female characters show the different responses.

### **Struggling**

Women’s struggles to discrimination are in accordance with the idea of feminism. It is very important for women to wake their consciousness before challenging patriarchy (Hooks, 2000:7). In the novel, the idea of feminism urges Vianne and Isabelle to have feminist’s consciousness. It becomes the influencing factors that triggers the female characters to struggle.

The first influencing factor is the willingness to learn. This trait is attained from attending higher education which also belongs to feminist’s consciousness. The willingness to learn is not merely represented by having a comprehensive knowledge and insight. It is also from how women can solve the problem.

The second influencing factor is having bold personality. The bold personality women are usually courageous and confident. Women with bold personality usually stand up in their group. Their opinions are mostly

echoed in the group.

The third influencing factor found in the novel is optimism. Being optimist is not really different from being bold. There is courage and confidence in the two personalities. However, the optimism stress more on the forward-looking trait and how they focus on possibility instead of problems.

Besides the three influencing factors that cause the trigger of the struggles, there is one influencing factor found in the novel which contributes to the success of the female characters' struggle. It is the male characters' role. This factor is unexpectedly found behind every women's struggle in the novel which promotes female as the hero in the war.

As women's struggles are associated with the idea of feminism, the influencing factors above are in accordance with feminist's consciousness. Feminist's consciousness can be described as women's recognition that they belong to subordinated group and that it is wrong to be subordinated (Lerner, 1993: 274). In the novel, those influencing factors trigger the rise of women's struggle. There are at least two forms of women's struggles found in the novel. The female character's struggles by showing their resistance and taking collective action.

One of the ways to struggle found in the novel which is done by the French women is showing their resistance. Women with power are likely to direct their anger to

the discriminator.

**“No,” she said. The single word galvanized her. Had she ever said it to him before? She said it again for good measure. “No.” “Pardon?” “I said no, Papa. I will not bend to your will this time. I will not leave. This is my home. My home.”** (Hannah, 2015: 190)

It describes how Isabelle shows her resistance to her father's will. Her father does not want Isabelle to stay in Paris with him. He wants Isabelle to go back to Carriveau with Vianne.

Giora (1997:76) states that the powerful women tend to direct their anger against their oppressor. In the novel, Isabelle is often mentioned as a rebellious young girl who tend to direct their anger to the situations which oppose her.

Another way to struggle done by the female characters is taking collective action. Mackie states that discriminated women who are angry tend to express their emotion in a form of confrontational action (in Gill and Matheson, 2015).

**“Isabelle was to meet the others who shared her passion for a free France, and she was nervous as she walked among the sallow-faced Parisians and well-fed Germans”** (Hannah, 2015: 204).

She is 'nervous' to meet the others which means how excited Isabelle is to join the group. She works with communists and some Jews to fight the Nazi. She keeps her strength by joining the rebellious action.

## Accepting

As it is the opposite action of the struggle, acceptance also contrasts to the feminist consciousness. In feminism, there is a false consciousness which makes women having no resistance when becoming an object of patriarchy. It also leads them to believe in powerlessness. There are two factors cause women to accept the discrimination.

The first factor found in the novel is that women have traumatic experience. In the novel, Vianne and Isabelle are psychologically abused by their father since young age. It leaves scars on their hearts.

Unlike Isabelle who confronts her father to stop being abusive, Vianne tends to avoid the conflict by accepting it. She suppresses the traumatic experiences which cause her to lose the courage to fight against it.

Another influencing factor caused women to fight off the discrimination is a pessimism. Pessimism triggers the negative thought that cause women to easily give up. A pessimist also tends to be indecisive. Vianne's traumatic experience causes her to be a pessimist. Since her mother's death in her young age, she is forced to choose her own future by herself.

Those influencing factors trigger the rise of women to accept the discrimination. There are at least two ways of acceptance that the female characters have done. There are

having no resistance and least engaging in collective action.

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The first way of accepting the discrimination is by having no resistance. Women who are discriminated are mentally exhausted. Some of them give up to fight against it because they believe that discrimination is legitimate. Some of them repress their anger which then turns into sadness.

Sad women are mostly being quiet and being submissive. Since women who are sad neglect the feminist consciousness, it leads women assuming that discrimination is unchangeable (Gill and Matheson, 2015: 150). Thus, women are expressing more sadness which leads to have no resistance in discrimination.

“And do you think they would not

come looking for a captain who had orders to billet here? Mon Dieu, Isabelle.” **She took a deep breath to calm her racing nerves.** “I know there are problems between us, Isabelle. I know I treated you badly as a child—I was too young and scared to help you—and Papa treated you worse. But this is not about us now, and you can't be the girl who acts impetuously anymore. **It is about my daughter now. Your niece. We must protect her.**” (Hannah, 2015: 102)

Vianne tells Isabelle not to fight the Nazi. She mentions the consequence of not following Nazi's order. Vianne seems scared of consequence so she tries to wreck Isabelle's impetuosity. It is because Vianne thinks Isabelle's impetuosity may trigger the anger of the Nazi. She also mentions that they should keep their head down because of Sophie. She is being submissive to protect Sophie from danger that may come from the Nazi.

The second way to accept the discrimination is by least engaging in collective action. Facing discrimination can cause emotional distress and anxiety. Sweetman (2013:219) states that “feminists emphasize the importance of building feminist's consciousness through women's group”. Because of the emotional distress and anxiety, women tend to constrain their behaviors. It causes women to set the limitation themselves to engage to collective action which cause the feminist consciousness blurred.

“Still, sometimes without Isabelle,

**the house was too quiet, and in the silence, Vianne found herself thinking too loudly.** Like now. She'd been awake for hours, just staring at her own bedroom ceiling, waiting for the dawn." (Hannah, 2015: 199)

The quotation above shows that Vianne is deeply drown in her loneliness. It depicts the depression of being alone and oppressed. By choosing to not engage in any collective action, Vianne keeps considering herself as powerless. She may resist struggling and fighting against the discrimination.

## CONCLUSIONS

After analyzing Hannah's *The Nightingale* based on the feminist perspective, it comes up with the conclusion. The first one is that women's discrimination during the wartime exists in the novel. There are four kinds of discrimination experienced by French women. Those are marginalization, subordination, stereotype and violence.

The second one is that the female characters respond to discrimination differently. There are two kinds of women's responses found in the novel which are struggling and accepting. The struggle is in the form of showing the resistance and taking collective action. Meanwhile, related to the acceptance, the female characters are having no resistance and less engaging in collective action.

The last but not least, unexpectedly,

related to the influencing factor of women's struggle found in the novel, the female characters are unable to gain any success in their struggle without any men's role. The female characters' are found to be unable finishing the struggle because of their limitation. The rest of the struggles are done by the male characters. It is also clinched that the novel has a hidden agenda. By exposing the female characters' flaws and weaknesses, it accentuates the male characters as the hero in the war. It opposes feminist perspectives which is applied to this research.

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