

An Analysis of the Main Female Character's Efforts in John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath

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Abstract

This research aims (1) to identify the main female character's problems in her family related to gender roles; (2) to analyze her struggles in gaining equal roles in her family, and (3) to reveal the significant meanings behind her struggles. This research was a descriptive-qualitative study. The subject of this research was Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath. The primary data of this research were expressions in words, phrases, clauses, sentences, and paragraph related to gender discrimination and stereotypes in the novel. The supporting data were obtained from some sources, such as books, articles, and journals, related to gender discrimination, women's stereotypes, and feminism. In collecting data, read-write technique was used. The data analysis was conducted using feminism approach. Trustworthiness was used to achieve dependability, conformability, transferability, and credibility. The results of this research show three important points. First, there are two gender problems experienced by Ma Joad: gender discrimination and stereotypes. Related to gender discrimination, there are three forms of gender discrimination: being prohibited to help her husband in leading family, being prohibited to share her opinion in family discussion, and being prohibited to take men's duties. There are also two forms of women's stereotypes; women are emotional and women are fearful. Second, there are five efforts done by the main character to face gender discrimination and stereotypes; taking an opportunity from Pa's inability to lead the family, re-considering her husband's decisions, actively participating in public sphere, having logical reasons in her orders and decisions, and having bravery to challenge men. Third, the significant meanings being her efforts are that women can participate in public sector which proves that women can take men's roles, and women cannot be regarded as subordinate to men.

Keywords : feminism, gender discrimination, women's efforts, *The Grapes of Wrath*.

INTRODUCTION

Every human being basically has the equal roles in the society. Women and men have a right to participate in public and private life without any restrictions or prohibitions. However, in many societies, men are regarded more superior than women. It means men have a right to control women. As a result, women cannot control their life, and they have to accept all men's orders without any right to reject the orders. From this phenomenon, it can be inferred that society has constructed women into the subordinate with men.

This phenomenon can be seen in the United States. In America, a declaration on gender equality has been recorded in the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration of Independence declared in 1776 is a source of

human rights protection. It states that all men are created equal by God to be given a right to life, liberty and the freedom to pursue happiness. This principle means that Americans have a great respect for all the rights possessed by every human being. In other words, every man and woman has the equal roles and freedom in the society. However, in social practice, the social system in American does not match with the contents of the Declaration of Independence, especially in giving freedom for women to participate in the society.

For years after the declaration, American women become the second class of civilization, while men become first class of civilization. This stratification happens because American society holds the patriarchal system as their system in the society. The patriarchal system is a social

system in which men have a role to organize all the social elements, including controlling women. Women have to follow all the rules or orders given by men, so that the freedom of women to gain equal role is difficult to be achieved. As an effect, women cannot access the whole social elements.

One of many factors in which women are regarded as the second class of civilization is the family. Family is a social institution in which every person learns about their values in the society, including learning about the roles of women and men. In the family, parents direct the individual who born as men to behave as leaders in family or social life. For women, parents lead them for being independent on men and do their roles as domestic care-takers. Because the differentiation on role teaching occurs in the beginning of recognizing the social values, each individual undergoes his or her roles without questioning the social orders. According to Chavret (1982:5), "the causes of distinction in the behavior of women are a proof that the society through family sees women as sexual beings rather than as human beings." Moreover, there is also a society's assumption that "women are considered not to have parallels with men, but women are considered as a creature that relies on men and has a lower position than men" (McDowell and Pringle, 1992).

A gender inequality between men and women becomes a problem that leads to the unfair treatment and opportunity for women in the society. A social condition in which men have a right to control women and have more access in public sector creates the gender

jealousy for women. Women think that their roles, which are only dealing with a child and a household, are constructed by the patriarchal values in which men have an important role. This jealousy creates awareness in women, so that there is women's movement to gain equal roles in the society. This movement is the only way to restore the essence of gender equality in social life.

In Literature, women's spirit to gain equal roles gets many responses from literary authors. Many authors response it by creating literary works that tell about women's experiences, such as being tortured and restricted by men in patriarchal system. Many authors dare to write about the women's condition and their struggles to face the unfair treatment because they are aware for the equality between men and women. John Steinbeck is one of authors who dare to tell about women. He writes stories about the portrayal of women in the patriarchal system and women's efforts to participate in public sector. Among many his novels, *The Grapes of Wrath* is a unique novel to be analyzed related to women's movement. It is unique because it was written by a man who illustrates the changing role of women. Moreover, in 1939, patriarchal system is still practiced in his society.

The Grapes of Wrath also depicts Ma's efforts to gain equal roles in her family. There is an interesting aspect in Ma's efforts. She, who lives in a small town and has limited education, is brave to fight against values in her society. In 1930s, her efforts to gain equal roles are not commonly done by Oklahomans women, so that it is an extraordinary women's movement. For

years, the struggle toward equal roles only happens in the big towns in the United States, such as New York or California, and the struggle is also conducted by educated women. Through her efforts, she is able to participate in leading family to continue the family's life and to face the new environment.

Referring to the research background, the research objectives are to identify the main female character's problems in her family related to gender roles, to analyze the efforts of the main character in gaining equal roles in her family, and to reveal the significant meanings behind her efforts.

RESEARCH METHOD

Type of Research

This research is qualitative in type. According Vanderstoep and Johnston (2009:7-8) qualitative research is a research that produces narrative or textual descriptions of the phenomenon under study, so the researcher provides a richer and more in depth understanding of the population.

Data and Source of Data

The object in this research is a novel entitled *The Grapes of Wrath*. The novel deals with women's discriminations and stereotypes in the social life. All the words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs related to the discriminations and stereotypes are the research data.

The sources of data were divided the two parts; primary sources and supporting sources. The main source is Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* which was consisted of 30 chapters and

published in 1939 by The Viking Press with 313 pages.

Research Instrument

According to Vanderstoep and Johnston (2009: 222), "research instrument is an assistance tool for researcher to obtain the information and to compile and analyze the information into a cohesive report." In this research, the instrument used the researcher himself. According to Lincoln and Guba (in Vanderstoep and Johnston, 2009:188), "the best instrument for qualitative naturalistic inquiry is the human." Since this research used human instrument, the researcher collected, interpreted, and analyzed the data to gain the deep analysis.

Technique of Data Collection

The technique of data collection in this research was note taking. In this research, there were several steps to collect the data in *The Grapes of Wrath*. First, comprehensive reading is the important technique for collecting the data. Second, writing all the data. The data which related to Ma Joad were written in a notebook to make easy in sorting the data later. Third, reading the theories that had been written in chapter two. Fourth, the researcher created a table. Creating the table has function to classify the data.

Data Analysis Technique

According to Given (2008:185) there are six steps used in analyzing the data: organizing and preparing the data, reading through all the data, categorizing the data, giving the description, interrelating description and interpreting the meaning of description.

Data Trustworthiness

According to Given (2008:895), “there are four criteria used to achieve the trustworthiness of the data; dependability, conformability, transferability, and credibility.” However, this research just uses transferability and credibility to achieve the trustworthiness. The researcher and the readers are important elements. The researcher presented and analyzed the findings, while the readers assess whether the analyzing had a relation to the research focuses. The researcher gave background information relating to the topic of analysis in chapter two for providing the readers about the context of the research. According to Given (2008:896) states that triangulation technique is the use of different sources of information to confirm and to improve the clarity or precision of research findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data findings of this research are the kinds of problems the female main character faces related to women’s role, Ma’s efforts to gain equality in terms of taking roles in social life, and the significant meanings behind her struggle to gain equality. In term of gender problems, there are two problems which are gender discrimination, and women’s stereotypes. There are three forms of gender discrimination face by the main female character. First, Ma is being prohibited to help her husband leading family. An example of this discrimination can be seen below.

The family became a unit. Pa squatted down on the ground, and Uncle John

beside him. Pa was the head of the family now. Pa said, “John, what should we do?” “we have to prepare all the stuff for movin’ to west,” said Ma. “Be a good girl, Ma. Don’t make us more complicated. Let we do what we must do” Pa said to Ma. (Steinbeck,1939:93)

The Joads’ men are in discussion and Ma who is prohibited to help her husband shows that there is a distinction on their roles. This implies that men have more dominant role than women, so that it does not give women an opportunity to participate in leading the family.

Second, Ma is being prohibited to share her opinions in family discussion. An example of this discrimination can be seen below.

Then Pa, speaking to no one, but to the group, made his report. “Got skinned on the stuff we sold. The fella knowed we couldn’t wait. Got egihteen dollars only” Ma stirred restively. “the stuff is mor’ than eighteen dollars. We need muc’ money, the way you sell them is underprize, thin’ fourty dollar the stuff”, said Ma. Pa said angrily, “can you close you mouth, an’ respect to husband?” (Steinbeck,1939:67)

This shows that Ma is prohibited to express her opinion toward the price. All the stuff that the Joads have just gets in eighteen dollars. Eighteen dollar is not enough for eight people in the family to move to California. For that reason, Ma argues the stuffs are worth for forty dollars. However, Pa orders to his wife to close her mouth. This implies that Ma has no opportunity to share her opinion, but Pa can decide whatever he wants.

Third, Ma is being prohibited to take men duties. The example can be seen as follows.

“ I can set up the camp for Mr, Wilson,” said Ma.

Pa said, “ Ma, like a good girl go lay down with Granma. She needs somebody now. She’s knowin’, now.”

Ma got to her feet and walked to the mattress and lay beside the old woman, and the murmur of their soft voices drifted to the fire. Ma and Granma whispered together on the mattress. (Steinbeck, 1939:96)

In this situation, it shows that Pa prohibits Ma to do what men’s roles. In their society, setting up the camp is considered as the men’s roles. It means that Ma is prohibited to set the camp because it is not included to her role, as domestic care-taker. Instead, Pa argues that she should take care of the grandmother. This situation implies that Pa wants to maintain the patriarchal values in the family.

Moreover, there are two stereotypes face by Ma Joad. First, women are emotional. This can be seen below.

Al explained, “ I don’t know what made her go out. I give her plenty of soil.” Al knew the blame was on him. He felt his failure.

Ma said, “ It ain’t your fault. You done ever’thing right. We don’ stop for hours.

“Ma, listen to me. It is Al’s fault. How can ya talk like that? Always use ya heart !” said Pa. (Steinbeck, 1939:111)

Ma tells to his son that it is not his mistake. She argues that the long journey is the main cause of broken car. However, Pa tells her that it is Al’s mistake because Pa gives him a responsibility to take care of the car. Pa assumes that his wife does not use her logical thinking to see the fact.

Second, women are fearful. This can be seen as follows.

“ Pa,” she said. “ I got to ask.”

“ Scared again?” Pa asked. “ Why, you can’t get throught nine month without sorrow.”

“ But will it – hurt the baby?”

Pa said, “They used to be sayin’, ‘ A chile born outa sorrow’ll be happy chile’. Isn’t that so, Mis’ Wilson ?”

“ I heard it like that,” said Sairy. “ An’ I heard the other: ‘Born outa too much joy’ll be doleful boy.” (Steinbeck, 1939:95)

In this situation, it shows the effect of being stereotyped. Rose of Sharon asks to her father about her pain during the pregnancy because she thinks that he knows everything. As a man, he does not know anything about the pregnancy. Because she asks him, Pa argues that his daughter is too worried about her pregnancy which is normal. As a result, the stereotype of women as being fearful is attached to her.

To fight with gender problems, there are five efforts, which are done by Ma Joad. First is that taking an opportunity from Pa’s inability to lead the family. The example of her efforts can be seen below.

Casey said, “ well, yeah – maybe.” He appealed to them all suddently, to Ma and Grampa and Tom. “ I got to get goin’ west. I got to go. I wonder if I kin’ go along with you folks.” And then he stood, embarrassed by his own speech.

Ma looked to Pa to speak, because he was a man, but Pa did not speak. She let him have the chance that was his right. And she said, “why, we’d be proud to have you.’ Course I can’t say right now; I says all ‘ll talk tonight and figger when we gonna start. I guess maybe we better not say till all the men come. John an’ Noah an’ Tom an’ Grandpa an’ Al an’ Connie, they’re gonna figger soon’s they get back. But if they’s room I’m pretty sure we’ll be proud to have ya.” (Steinbeck,1939:62)

She respects Pa as the leader who has the right to answer Casey. However, her husband is not able to do so because he does not know how to meet his demand. Hence, Ma takes his role to answer it. Her respond to wait for other men and to consider the remaining place on the Joads' car signifies that she can handle a problem in their family. In the other words, she breaks the social values that women are prohibited to be leaders because of their sex. It also proves that the society has a wrong assumption toward women for underestimating them.

The second effort is that re-considering her husband's decisions. This effort can be seen as follows.

Pa said, "well, if that's the way we go. We should go quickly to California. he's gonna go, we better get a-stop later'. We can maybe go in a hundred miles 'fore we stop."

Ma stepped in front of him."I ain't a-gonna go."

Ma's face softened, but her eyes were still fierce. "You done this 'thout thinkin' much," Ma said. "What we got lef' in the worl'? nothin' but us. Nothin' but the folks. We come out an' Grampa he need a rest for takin' breath. An' now, right off, you wanna kill the folks—" (Steinbeck,1939:113)

Based on patriarchal values, Pa is the only one who has a right to make a decision. However, Ma believes that Pa makes the decision without trying to understand grandpa's condition. He just thinks his ambition to arrive in California soon. Because of the inappropriate decision, Ma explains to her husband related to the Joads condition. First, she explains that grandpa is sick. If they continue their journey, Granpa's

condition will be worse. Second, she argues that the family is the most precious treasure that they have right now. For those reasons, she decides to reject his decision, and she decides to rest in the shade. Her explanations to her husband imply that she has a responsibility to make a decision and a right to reject her husband's decisions.

The third effort is actively participating in public sphere. This effort can be seen below.

"Pa, I want to join the comittee, like Ma does."

"No, Rose. Better you for carin' you brother and sister, and you baby" said Pa " I get to work in the nursery," Rose of Sharon said. " They tol' me. I can find out all how to do for babies an' helpin' women there, then I'll know." (Steinbeck,1939:218)

Pa's rejection to Rose's request, who wants to participate in the nursery, implies that he still holds patriarchal principle which prohibits women to participate public sector. However, she ignores his mind because she wants to involve in the nursery and help pregnant women. In this case, she works outside the domestic roles. For her, participating in public life can prove her that she cannot be assumed as being independent to her father, so that she can take care of her baby by herself.

The fourth effort is that having logical reasons in her orders and decisions. An example of this effort can be seen below.

Pa broke in,"But s'pose there just ain't room and food?" He had twisted his neck to look up at her, and he was ashamed. Her tone had made him ashamed."S'pose we jus' can't all get in the truck?"

"There ain't room now," said Ma. "There ain't room for more'n six, an' twelve is goin' sure. One more ain't gonna hurt; an' a man, strong an' healthy, ain't never

no burden.” She stopped, and Pa turned back, and his spirit was raw from the whipping. (Steinbeck,1939:68)

Pa’s reason shows that he cannot think rationally to decide the family’s decision. This happens because he is panic with his current situation for being unemployed. Ma knows that he is in pressure, so that she argues that Casey is not a problem to the family because he is strong and healthy. Her reason implies that she can think more rationally than her husband and can handle herself in their difficult situation. This proves that Ma is rational although the stereotype about women in her society is that she is emotional.

The last effort is that having bravery to challenge men. This effort can be seen as follows.

Where’d you come from?”
“Right near Sallisaw, Oklahoma.”
“well, you can’t stay here.”
Ma’s face blackened with anger. She got slowly to her feet. She stopped to the utensil box and picked out the iron skillet.”Mister,” she said. “You got a tin button an’ a gun. Where I come from, you keep your voice down.” He loosened the gun in the holster.”Go ahead,” said Ma. “Scar in’ women. I’m thankful the men folks ain’t here. In my country you watch your tounge.”
The men took two steps backward.”Well, you ain’t in your country now. You’re in California, an’ we don’t want you goddamn Okies settlin’ down.” (Steinbeck,1939:144)

From the situation above, Ma shows that she does not fear to the policemen. She believes that if the Joads’ men are in the tent, they will fight with the policemen. Then, it creates a danger for the family who cannot rest in the area and they cannot find job in California. Thus, Ma who is

brave to fight with the policemen protects the family.

From her efforts to fight with gender problems, the significant meanings are women cannot be regarded as subordinate to men, and women can participate in public sector to prove that they can also take men’s roles.

CONCLUSIONS

After analyzing Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* from feminist perspective, some conclusions can be drawn.

1. A patriarchal system in Oklahoma depicted in *The Grapes of Wrath* causes gender problems. There are two gender problems experienced by Ma Joad as main female character in the novel. Those are gender discrimination and stereotypes. Related to gender discrimination, there are three forms of gender discrimination; being prohibited to help her husband in leading family, being prohibited to share her opinion in family discussion, and being prohibited to take men’s duties. Meanwhile, there are two forms of women’s stereotypes; women are emotional and women are fearful.
2. In facing discrimination and stereotypes which cause unequal roles between men and women in her society, Ma shows her efforts to fight against them. The efforts are taking an opportunity from Pa’s inability to lead the family, re-considering her husband’s decisions, actively participating in public sphere, having

logical reasons in her orders and decisions, and having bravery to challenge men. There are some factors which influence Ma's efforts to gain an opportunity to participate in the family and public sector. They are responsibility and consciousness. Responsibility means that Ma shows that she has a responsibility to save her family from the crisis. Consciousness means that she is aware that she also has equal roles in the society and the family. Her efforts and the factors show that women cannot be regarded as the subordinate to men because of their sex.

3. There are two significant meanings in Ma's experiences to face patriarchal system. First, women can participate in public sector which proves that women can take men's roles. Second, women cannot be regarded as subordinate to men.

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