

**GENDER NARRATIVES IN
ANTHONY DOERR'S *ALL THE LIGHT WE CANNOT SEE*:
WOMEN IN AN AMERICAN WAR LITERATURE**

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Abstract

This research is aimed to prove and explain how (1) female subordination and (2) male domination in Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* are narrated by identifying the novel's gender narratives. The theory of poststructuralist narratology and feminist criticism on gender and war are employed to analyze the problem.

It is a qualitative research. It employed textual analysis which focused on the narrative of the text. The main source of data was Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See*. The data were in the forms of words, phrases, clauses, sentences, and paragraphs depicting or implying gender narratives. The researcher used five steps in analyzing the data. The data were gathered from reading and re-reading the text, identifying those which embody gender narratives, categorizing them based on the research's objectives, comparing them to the analytical constructs, and lastly interpreting them by using feminist narratology. The researcher used triangulation and peer debriefing to obtain trustworthiness.

The results show that female subordination and male domination are found in the narratives of gender. Females are narrated as figures embodying vulnerability, fear, irrationality, emotional instability and submissive characteristic. Meanwhile, males are narrated as figures embodying power, bravery, rationality, intellectuality and heroic behavior. Those qualities embody the polarized gender narratives of men and women that endorse a patriarchal order and hierarchy. Females are seen as inferiors from the beginning of their gender creation. The construction of this dualistic gender shows the binary thought of patriarchal society. These findings conclude that gender subordination is embedded in the novel.

Key word: narratives, poststructuralist narratology, gender, feminism, war, American literature

INTRODUCTION

Conflict in the name of sexual identity is one of many conflicts defining the history of human. The world consists of two sexes. Yet, the relationship among them is not always smooth. Each of them prejudices each other. This makes a society can have so many judgments or stories regarding them because a society is a collection of people. However, the dominant actors always have more power to define the stories.

Females are commonly subordinated in these stories because of the power gap. Females are bounded in the story of “women”. This story is the construction of their gender. The notion of “women”, then, is culturally constructed. Meanwhile, gender is actually dynamic since it differs from culture to culture. . Inferring to Teresa de Lauretis’ definition of gender, gender refers to the social construction of what male and female are (Lieske in Wallace, 2009:252). However, the rigid construction of females as “women” in the society has resulted

in the creation of roles of the sexes. This creation of roles is the initiation of patriarchal embodiment which then constructs the ideology of patriarchy.

Patriarchy is closely related to male domination and female subordination. These domination and subordination can be found in many forms. The continuous narrations from generation to generation which submit to the traditionalist convention of patriarchal ideology have cultured the norms. Females are likely to be sealed into these norms. Their spirit of independency is killed by the notion of preservation of values. Lerner (1987:6) argues that if patriarchy is a system caused by historical process, then it can be changed by historical process too.

The problem is actually about narratives. The male centered narrative or androcentrism as a result of patriarchy is the culprit of domination and subordination. Counterbalancing the established narratives with the ones that portray females fairly is certainly needed. Simone de Beauvoir’s call that says

“One is not born, but rather becomes a woman”, summarized by Postal in Wallace (2009: 57) as the liberation of women from any determinant on what defines women in society is necessary to educate a society on issues regarding females’ independency.

Literature can act as a curative text to the problem of patriarchy. However, war literature is susceptible to this problem. It is caused by the fact that war literature exploits war in making its story. War is a significant constructor of patriarchy. Thus, the story in war literature is prone to embody patriarchy as well. The creation of gender in war literature can be so patriarchal in nature.

Anthony Doerr’s *All the Light We Cannot See* is an example of war literature that is going to be analyzed in this research. It is an American literary artwork about World War II. War is always associated to male field. Thus, females are commonly leaved from the discourse. In this research, the gender narratives in the mentioned novel are scrutinized in demands of equal gender narratives.

These narrations of females in war are important to challenge the historical process of generalization and stereotyping. The narrations of female subordination and male domination are managed to be proved and explained under this research. The theory of poststructuralist narratology and feminist criticism on gender and war are employed for those purposes.

FEMINIST CRITICISM ON GENDER AND WAR

Feminism arises as dissatisfaction to patriarchal culture and acts as a reminder to people regarding the problem of patriarchy. It is done in order to improve the condition of women so that they can get what they deserve. In the narrative discourse, feminist narratology works for this problem. It tries to criticize the available narrations of females or women as well as generates fair narratives about them.

1. Gender

The current gender establishment is in the culture of patriarchal tradition. Gender is

perceived as socially constructed by society. Yet, this definition is actually problematic since it does not give space to individual autonomy.

It is true that the social embodiment of women has endorsed cultural attachment to females. However, it does not mean this construction should be taken for granted. This perspective of cultural attachment will only dismiss individual creation. This idea is in line with a notion that states gender is actually performed (Butler, 1990: 34). If one perceives gender as having performative qualities, then, they will not be bounded by the continual dictation of patriarchal values.

This idea is important because, according to the researcher, the problem is there is no exact and same point of departure in thinking to signify in mind and direct every individual's mind when somebody refers to what gender is. This makes one will always assume when they address gender. This idea also can be used to any notion which is doomed as socially constructed. This assumption made by the people is the

seed of generalization and stereotyping of gender in society. Moreover, people are always habituated with patriarchal tradition. Therefore, their perspectives of gender are more likely to be patriarchal too.

Aside from that explanation, gender is also narrated. It is proved by the creation of those generalizations or stereotypes regarding gender. Thus, to cut the vicious cycle of the problem means to cut the misleading narratives. This researched is aimed to do so.

2. War

War is still assumed as the field of males. In fact, it is not. War is sadly rarely addressed in feminism. This gesture, then, perpetuates the polarization and gendering of war. The consequence is fatal.

The traditional paradigm often posts war as merely a physical war. Yet, this narrow definition affects a lot in the creation of gender in society. The females' gender is, then, attached to its biological deterministic justification. Power gap between males and females are

created because of this assumption. Male domination and female subordination cannot be evaded.

The binary opposition of males and females which reflects the superiority and inferiority of them continues into the creation of binary gender. The consequences are misleading. Women are perceived as creatures embodying peace and tenderness. Meanwhile, men are perceived as creatures embodying conflict and violence. This is caused by defining war simplistically. There are almost no or few heroines in society because of this.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research is qualitative. Logical approach was used as guidance in conducting the research. This was based on Goertz and Mahoney's definition on qualitative research as being determined by logic (2012: 2). Textual analysis was specifically employed under this research. According to Vanderstoep and Johnston (2009: 210), textual analysis is an analysis which identifies and interprets signs. He also regards narrative analysis as a

branch of method in this textual mode of study. Vanderstoep and Johnston (2009: 213) explain that narrative analysis focuses the analysis on how a story is told and how it functions as a constructive material to society.

The data were taken from Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See*. The novel was published in 2014 by Fouth Estate. It has 178 chapters and 544 pages. The type of data acquired was in the form of words, phrases, clauses, sentences, as well as paragraphs which embody the story. The data were only those which depicting or implying gender narratives.

To obtain the data for this research, there were at least four fundamental steps. Those steps were reading, taking notes, categorizing, and interpreting the data. The research instrument of this research was the researcher himself.

Narrative analysis was used to analyze the data from this research. Literature is closely connected with narratology. Herman and Vervaeck (2005: 109) assert that the methodology of postmodern

narrative analysis is dependent on the researcher's thoughts in criticizing the text. This was caused by the fact that the study of postmodern or poststructuralist narrative is no longer centralized to the study of structure. It tends to emphasize the contextual study of text which relates to many theoretical narrative discourses. Thus, the data analysis on this research started from the researcher's point of view on feminist narratology. Feminism was used as the central point of guidance in analyzing the text or the data.

There were at least five steps in analyzing the data under this research. The steps are as follow;

1. The first was reading the novel of Doerr, *All the Light We Cannot See*, as part of collecting the data.
2. The second was identifying which text (words, phrases, clauses, sentences, and paragraphs) belongs to the narratives of gender in the novel.
3. The third was categorizing those identified data into thematic based in accordance with the objectives of this research.

4. The fourth was examining those categorized data by comparing them to major theoretical narratives of feminism.

5. The fifth was interpreting those comparisons by relating them to feminist narratology on how women should be represented.

In this research, the researcher employed analytical constructs in order to examine the collected data logically. The researcher also used Creswell's theory of *peer debriefing* and triangulation to check the validity.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter consists of three main parts. The two parts are the answers of the questions in this research regarding the gender narratives in Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See*. The last part is the synthesized framework of binary gender construction attained from the findings. The first part of this chapter discusses how females in Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* are being subordinated through the construction of their gender. The second part of this chapter discusses

how contrastively the engulfing domination of males is narrated also through the construction of their gender. Meanwhile, the last part shows the map of the gender narratives found in the novel and how they create the phenomena of binary gender in society. Gender narratives are key elements to the establishment of a patriarchal society. Female subordination and male domination are usually practiced as the manifestation of gender hierarchy.

1. The Narrations of Female Subordination

a. Vulnerability

Anthony Doerr in his *All the Light We Cannot See* portrays a number of narrations which depicts the fragility of women. These narrations were found sporadically. An example of the narrations is this phrase below.

He pulls off her stockings to inspect her heels. **In his hands, her feet are as light as birds.** (Doerr, 2014: 88)

That statement above shows how fragile a female body is by comparing the feet of a girl with the lightness of birds. Birds are generally creatures with very light body and

thin feet. On the above statements, Marie Laure's father is depicted as carrying her when they search for protection during the invasion. Her father treats her very gently. He sees her as a merely fragile child who knows nothing. Yet, her head is full of questions regarding the chaotic world they are in. He, then, inspects his daughter's feet if it gets hurt.

b. Fear

Females are subordinated in the narration of fear. An example below shows the excessive fear of Frau Elena in welcoming the arrival of a corporal in their house. Meanwhile, Werner is depicted as a calm individual in responding to the call.

Frau Elena folds her hands over her apron, and Werner can see she has done so to keep them from shaking. "Werner," she calls in a slow, dreamlike voice, without taking her eyes from the corporal. "This man says he has a wireless in need of—" (Doerr, 2014: 80)

c. Irrationality and Emotional Instability

This narration below shows Marie Laure's attachment to her father as well as her persistent irrationality.

A woman prays in a Norman accent; someone shares pâté; everything smells of rain. No Stukas swoop over them, machine guns blazing. No one in the truck has even seen a German. For half the morning, **Marie-Laure tries to convince herself that the previous days have been some elaborate test concocted by her father, that the truck is moving not away from Paris but toward it, that tonight they'll return home.** (Doerr, 2014: 117)

d. Submission

This passage below narrates the submission of Marie-Laure's reasoning to his father.

In her head, her father reasons: *The gate closed before the door, not after. Which means, whoever it is, he closed the gate first, then pulled the door shut. He's inside.* All the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. *Etienne knows he would have triggered the bell, Marie. Etienne would be calling for you already.* Boots in the foyer. Fragments of dishes crunching underfoot. *It is not Etienne.* The distress is so acute, it is almost unbearable. She tries to settle her mind, tries to focus on an image of a candle flame burning at the center of her rib cage, a snail drawn up into the coils of its shell, but her heart bangs in her chest and pulses of fear cycle up her spine, and she is suddenly uncertain whether a sighted person in the foyer can look up the curves of the stairwell and see all the way to the third floor. She remembers her great-

uncle said that they would need to watch out for looters, and the air stirs with phantom blurs and rustles, and Marie-Laure imagines charging past the bathroom into the cobwebbed sewing room here on the third floor and hurling herself out the window. Boots in the hall. The slide of a dish across the floor as it is kicked. A fireman, a neighbor, some German soldier hunting food? *A rescuer would be calling for survivors, ma chérie. You have to move.* (Doerr, 2014: 303)

The passage shows the subordination of Marie-Laure's capability to think and reason. The narration of her father's thoughts and voices dismisses Marie-Laure's self reasoning. Marie-Laure is narrated as a girl who is unable to think by herself. She is very reliant to the thoughts of her father.

2. The Narrations of Male Domination

a. Power

This passage below is an example of narrations of power owned by the German's soldiers in the novel.

The Germans, a gardener claims, have sixty thousand troop gliders; **they can march for days without eating; they impregnate every schoolgirl they meet.** A woman behind the ticket counter says **the**

Germans carry fog pills and wear rocket belts; their uniforms, she whispers, are made of a special cloth stronger than steel. (Doerr, 2014: 59)

The passage tells how powerful German soldiers are. They are depicted as having capacity to march for days even without eating. This narration shows all of those three qualities mentioned previously namely strength, toughness and durability exist in males.

b. Bravery

This narration below is an example of bravery embedded in the male figures. It is the narration of Werner and other soldiers during the time of which they are having a frontal attack in the war.

Werner can hear the Austrians two floorsup scrambling, reloading, and the receding screams of both shells as they hurtle above the ocean, already two or three miles away. One of the soldiers, he realizes, is singing. Or maybe it is more than one. Maybe they are all singing. Eight Luftwaffe men, none of whom will survive the hour, singing a love song to their queen. (Doerr, 2014: 8)

This paragraph shows the bravery of Werner and the Austrians in facing the allies. Both of them are depicted as having bravery to fight their enemy. They are also depicted as having no fear to die.

c. Rationality and Intellectuality

The most crystal clear narration of male's rationality and intellectuality is from Werner. This paragraph below may give an initial example of his intellectuality even as a kid.

Werner is **eight years old** and ferreting about in the refuse behind a storage shed **when he discovers what looks like a large spool of thread. It consists of a wire-wrapped cylinder sandwiched between two discs of pinewood. Three frayed electrical leads sprout from the top. One has a small earphone dangling from its end.** Jutta, six years old, with a round face and a mashed cumulus of white hair, crouches beside her brother. "What is that?" "**I think,**" Werner says, feeling as though some cupboard in the sky has just opened, "**we just found a radio.**" (Doerr, 2014: 32)

It is told above that Werner is still eight years old. However, he is narrated as observant and clever in analyzing electronic components. He is narrated as successfully identifying the components that belong to the

internal organs of a radio. Meanwhile, Jutta as somebody two years younger than him has no idea about what they have found out. Both of them do not have a long gap in age. Yet, the brilliance of Werner is obvious in the passage. His brilliance is narrated continuously later on in the story.

d. Heroism

The narrations on the following paragraphs are the example of how male heroism is so strong in embodying the story of the novel. An example of the narrations can be seen below.

The morning fog is so dense that he cannot see the roofline. He entertains pipe dreams: the Frenchman will invite him in. They'll drink coffee, **discuss his long-ago broadcasts.** Maybe they'll investigate some important empirical problem that has been troubling him for years. **Maybe he'll show Werner the transmitter.** Laughable. **If Werner rings the bell, the old man will assume he's being arrested as a terrorist.** That he might be shot where he stands. The antenna on the chimney in itself is cause for execution. **Werner could bang on the door, march the old man away. He would be a hero.** (Doerr, 2014: 411)

The paragraph tells Werner's imagination after he has found out the location of the assumed terrorist radio. This job to locate the radio is the mission of Werner and his team. By revealing the transmitter or radio, he will be praised for completing his mission successfully. However, Werner does not reveal the location of the radio. He prefers to keep silent and save the information for himself.

3. The Framework of Binary Gender Construction Attained from the Gender Narratives in Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See*

The framework shows that females are narrated as figures embodying vulnerability, fear, irrationality, emotional instability and submissive characteristic. Meanwhile, males are narrated as figures embodying power, bravery, rationality, intellectuality and heroic behavior.

It was found out that the constructed gender exist in the text is in binary. Those narratives regarding males and females above were found as the components which construct

the binary gender. The discovery of this binary gender is the proof of a patriarchal gender's manifestation in society. It reflects patriarchy because the male's gender is superior compared to the female's gender. The superiority is indicated through the construction of superior qualities that constitute the male's gender.

Doerr narrates this construction consciously or unconsciously through his characters. The embodiment of the characters' gender reflects the common or established presumption or stereotype of binary gender in society. This idea is shown through the narration of his characters in the context and setting of war. War shapes how people behave and response to it. Goldstein (2005: 403) extends that war impacts on people's everyday life, not to mention gender, in significant ways. It means the construction of gender is affected by the initiation of war. The conceptual meaning of war constructs the people's thought. Thus, the meaning of war is needed to be addressed. The concluding remark from this research is, then, the embodiment of binary

gender in Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* is a result of a patriarchal society which is influenced by the conventional values about war.

CONCLUSION

The researcher found that the constructed gender in Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* is patriarchal based. This is proved by the narratives of gender embedded in it. Through those gender narratives, female's and male's gender are constructed. Females are found to be subordinated through the construction of binary gender in the novel. Meanwhile, males are found to be top rated through it. This dualism of gender reflects the construction of opposite of qualities between those males and females in the novel.

The narratives of the gender can be identified from how characters are built. These characters embody domination and subordination to female viewed from feminist narratology. The narrations of female subordination are depicted by the creation of female figures as figures which embody vulnerability, fear,

irrationality and emotional instability as well as submissive behavior. On the contrary, the narrations of male domination are depicted by the creation of male figures as figures which embody power, bravery, rationality and intellectuality as well as heroic behavior.

These attached qualities are the pattern which constructs the notion of men and women in Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See*. This pattern may also possibly be found in society. Men and women are not biological distinguishers rather both of them are the cultural constructs of gender. This creation of binary gender which is attached or inseparable to the sexes is the source of patriarchal embodiment in society. It continually becomes the modes to sustain patriarchal values and ideology in society.

Those phenomena above are started from narratives. Thus, they can also be changed through narratives. It is important to present the counter narratives in order to prevent those narratives to become myths in society. This research has uncovered the polarized gender

narratives that endorse a patriarchal order and hierarchy by revealing the process and creation of gender subordination. The construction of this dualistic gender reflects the binary thought of patriarchal society. Furthermore, this research may also give a new reading on gender. Without the approach developed under this research that focuses on gender narratives, this conclusion would possibly never be gained.

Contextually, this research also shows that a modern American war literature is unexceptionally also prone to patriarchal ideology. This research has uncovered an example of how American war literature is still in question regarding its power to bring social changes. Literature of war should essentially have a tangible effect to the problem of wars which are still happening today. However, the researcher also does not deny that it is possible that the story is intended to be this way to probably test the sensitivity of the readers about feminism and its progress. Gender subordination was found to be a crucial problem under this research. Feminism and war will be likely to be still a domain which is lucrative for research purposes.

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