

Feminism thoughts in 20th and 21st century literary works: A comparative study

¹Fransiska Marsela Hambur*

¹Nurhayati

*¹Linguistics of Postgraduate Program, Universitas Diponegoro,
Semarang, Indonesia*

***Corresponding Author**

Email: fransiskamarsela@gmail.com

Abstract

One of most arguable and observable social phenomena is gender inequality which is based on feminism thoughts. Considering how literature may portray human's life along with its values, this study is purposed to elaborate and compare how feminism thoughts and gender inequality take place in various literary works. Based on the importance of feminism thoughts and gender inequality in cross cultural literature, then there is a necessity to conduct a comparative literature study which focused on feminism thoughts. This study took four kinds of literary works, namely drama, prose (short-story), movie, and poetry. Feminism approach as sociological approach was applied in this study altogether with comparative criticism and content analysis method. This study discussed how feminism thoughts got more supports and encouragement as the century progressed. By comparing literary works from 20th and 21st century, several important findings can be drawn, namely (a) feminism thoughts are getting stronger along with the progression of century, (b) feminism thoughts always oppose gender inequality as both are always found as binary oppositions in literary work, (c) both feminism and gender-inequality live through human's values and repetitive actions, (d) personal and familial values are crucial in order to develop feminism thoughts and gender-inequality in an individual, and (e) the change of values, especially social and cultural values can bring changes in both feminism and gender inequality phenomena.

Keywords: *feminism; literature; comparative literature; gender inequality; comparative study*

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INTRODUCTION

Human life is full of ideas, values, and experiences which mostly will influence human's life mentally and physically. Sometimes, people need to reflect their experience and one of the reflections of life is literature. Literature is a kind of knowledge about human life that shows human existence. Through literary works, human life is easy to describe although it is difficult to define (Taum, 1997).

Taum's statement (1997) is in agreement with Wellek and Warren (1977) who state that literature represents and portrays variation of many life's aspects. Their theory supports literature as mirrors and human life expressions. In a nutshell, this theory states that literature is born from real events of society. In literature, the author presents ideas to the reader by certain form of work.

As stated by Taum (1997) and Wellek and Warren (1977), the ideas in literature present real human life. It must be noted that human's life holds values and belief. This is also in alignment with fact that values and beliefs are instilled in us by culture and play a significant role in our lives. The aforementioned values function as guidance in life to justify and execute actions (Knafo and Schwartz, 2003).

There must be an implication that literature may portray human's life altogether with its real values. Values are shaped by thoughts of human's communities in certain place and period of time. Therefore, literary works can be used as a tool for studying social-phenomena, social-values, and even the thoughts of humans at certain period of time or era.

One of most arguable and observable social-phenomena is gender inequality which is based on feminism thoughts. Considering how literature may portray human's life along with its values, this study is purposed to elaborate and compare how feminism thoughts and gender inequality take place in various literary works, such as in prose, poetry, drama, and movie.

Gender inequality has been a part of culture for hundreds of years, as most of times it produces oppressions toward women. Gender inequality is a social phenomenon which consisted of the idea that men are superior and women are inferior. This idea is a part of the hegemonic construct which is often called 'gender-paradigm'. Several communities in the world even intentionally create inequality for men and women. Through these intentional or accidental force, gender inequality is gradually acknowledged as one of important social phenomena.

Hollander (2002) states that gender is a social construction, not something related to biological differences nor biological distinction. Most scholars agree that gender is socially constructed. Gender is a social institution, and thus it is something that members of a society create, maintain and impose. In other words, people have agreed that there is a rule that dictates how people see others. By stating "others", Hollander refers to those ones belong to the subdominant group that never dictate what the majority of the population should do and should be like.

When gender inequality, as Hollander (2002) states, is recognized by the subdominant group, then the feminism thoughts come to a light. Eagleton (1983) states that Feminism always relates to other issues. It is not a certain 'social-movement' for some political projects, rather it is seen as dimension which informed and asked every aspects of personal, social and political life. The message of the women's movement, as interpreted by some of those outside it, is not just that women should have equality of power and status with men; it is an inquiry toward power and status. This means that even though it is not stated directly that the world will be a better place with more feminism thoughts; without the 'feminization' of human history, the world will harshly live. According to Mackinnon (1982), feminism is socially constructed

universal as activity yet historically specific. Feminism is a comprised union between problems and mind. In response to the existence of feminism thoughts, Stanton argued in Bressler (2003) that "because man and woman are the complement of one another, we need woman's thought in national affairs to make a safe and stable government" (Bressler, 2003).

In post-modern feminism, there is an interesting argument that support gender as social construction as proposed by Hollander (2002). It is stated by Judith Butler (1999). Her theory urges us to consider identity as a signifying practice: gender is something we and, like all signifying practices, is dependent on repetition and acts which make the subject culturally intelligible. The result is that not only are categories of identity such as femininity recognized as varied and contested (rather than fixed), but a subversion of identity also becomes possible. Butler has explained that she intends more limited popular notion of performativity which makes plain that gender is constructed, or 'contoured', through 'repetition and recitation', is the subversive 're-signification' of normative identities (Butler, 1999).

Considering the arguments and theories proposed previously, then there is a necessity to conduct comparative study about feminism thoughts and gender inequality phenomena. Both feminism and gender inequality can be seen as social phenomena, therefore both of them can be found in some literary works. This study is purposed to compare the characteristics of feminism thoughts and gender-inequality in 20th and 21st century literary works, because both centuries are known as the peak of change and the start of globalization altogether. The globalization may influence all social phenomena, including feminism thoughts. Therefore, the study is purposed to uncover the feminism thoughts in various literary works from 20th and 21st century.

METHOD

This study took four kinds of literary works, namely drama, prose (short-story), movie, and poetry. All the taken literary works come from different authors. There are four literary works, namely:

- a) *The Conduct of Life* (drama) by Maria Irene Fornes (1985),
- b) *Interpreter of Maladies* (short story) by Jhumpa Lahiri (1999),
- c) *How to be Single directed* (movie) by Christian Ditter (2016),
- d) Instagram poetries written by Rupi Kaur (2018-2019).

This study applies feminism as an approach. Feminism thoughts and gender inequality are applied as approaches along with comparative criticism as a method. Comparative criticism is an approach which transcends national, geographical, lingual boundaries and considers literature as a global phenomenon of which human nature is the same in all cultures (Justi, 2002).

Comparative criticism is crucial since it shows cultural values and latest values in each literary work on first contact with global literature to help improving human consciousness or ethnic orientation. The important things in comparative literature is the recognition on the unity of human thought. This unity of thought can be realized in one part of the world. The thoughts represented by a scientist, scholar or a writer are the same one appears in another way in another part of the world (Akbari, 2007).

Along with comparative criticism, the second method in this study is inferential method which is known in qualitative analysis as content analysis. According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), content analysis is a widely used qualitative research technique. Conventional content analysis, coding categories are derived directly from the text data. With a directed approach, analysis starts with a theory (feminism) as guidance for finding's interpretation.

Selected text from the scripts of literary works were taken. The selection was conducted based on two major parameters, namely feminism and gender-inequality. Data collection was conducted based on non-participant observation technique. In this technique, researchers take a more distant role in non-participant approaches and do not interact with the research objects. In this study, the research objects are the selected text which represent feminism thoughts and gender-inequality. The selected text was gathered, closely read, and then analysed based on feminism approach following the comparative criticism method.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on feminism theory, gender inequality may cause woman-oppression. Katz et al (2005) argues that inequality is an idea with multiple dimensions. It has relation with sex, race, ethnicity, and age. Therefore, woman oppression always comes along with gender-inequality and feminism thoughts. These three social phenomena may interweave and they need require examination from different vantage points. This study presents the comparative criticism for the aforementioned phenomena, in order to present detailed elaboration and analysis of feminism thoughts, gender inequality, and woman oppression in 20th and 21st century literary works.

Feminism Thoughts of Appreciation in “The Conduct of Life” (Fornes, 1985)

Fornes (1985) presents *The Conduct of Life* as a portrait of marriage life which is shaped by domestic violence, woman oppression, and gender inequality. Married characters in *The Conduct of Life* (1985) depict feminism thoughts, gender inequalities, and woman oppression. The drama's theme rotates in abusive behaviors conducted by the husband, named Orlando. In the play, Orlando is a lieutenant with a tendency to do physical and sexual abuses. The victims who experience his savage behaviors are his wife, Leticia, and the young girl he abducts, named Nena.

The play shows how Leticia as a wife seeks for more appreciation from his husband. Despite receiving much abuse from Orlando, her husband, Leticia still wants to extend her education so that she will win more appreciation. She talks about her husband's oppressive treatments altogether with her wishes to be appreciated in the Scene 2, “He is deaf. He is an animal. Nothing touches him except sensuality. I can't change him. I want to study. I want to be knowledgeable. I am tired being ignored. I would have to study a great deal in university. I would like to be a woman who speaks in groups and have others listen”

Leticia's opinions and wishes are examples of feminism thoughts of 20th century. In 20th century, feminism ideas have been known well. The knowledge

of inequality between both genders, pushes women to be more knowledgeable, so that their existence will not be ignored by community. Leticia, as the main character, is the prominent example of woman which is influenced by feminism ideas.

Despite the familiarity of feminism ideas in 20th century, the culture of gender-inequality also has prominently influenced Leticia, as she also stated, "No, there is nothing I can do. I can't do anything". This shows how woman feels inferior and helpless in marriage. Marriage is shaped based on sexuality of both genders. As stated by Morgan (1975), gender, as socially constructed, embodies sexuality, not the reverse. Women and men are divided by gender, made into the sexes as we know them, by the social requirements of heterosexuality, which institutionalizes male sexual dominance and female sexual submission, and thus sexuality is the shaper of gender-inequality (Morgan, 1975) and control it's the issue revolving in feminism thoughts.

Feminism Thoughts of Social Interaction in "Interpreter of Maladies" (Lahiri, 1999)

Different authors have different values. Both feminism and gender inequality take place in various literary works through different ways. In Lahiri's short story *Interpreter of Maladies*, the theme of the story rotates in indirect domestic oppression experienced by the housewife, as main female character. Mrs. Das - the main female character - does not have any trouble to express her needs toward her husband, her children, and even to a stranger, such as Mr. Kapasi who works for her family as tour guide. Nevertheless, Mrs. Das also got indirect oppression from both of her husband and her family. Her statements about marriage hold some implications that she has been living in an ignorant environment, which is ignorant enough of her needs of social interaction.

In Mrs. Das's discussion with her tour guide, she tells him her life story. She told Mr. Kapasi how she gets married. She said, "We married when we were in college. Our parents were best friends lived in the same town. I think it was all more or less a setup" (Lahiri, 1999, p. 26). From her complain, there is an implication that it is not her choice to get married at a young age. After her marriage, she gets obliged by all her tasks as a wife, but her husband does not even notice that she is oppressed by family's decision and her role as a housewife.

The indirect oppression experienced by main female character in this story is caused by ignorant husband and family's decision. Thus, it can be classified as familial or domestic oppression. As previously stated by Katz (2005) that inequality has multiple dimensions. Inequality and its effect, namely oppression, can happen everywhere in any occasion.

Furthermore, Mrs. Das tells about her oppressive life in the narration. She states that after marrying so young she was overwhelmed by having child so quickly and nursing, while her husband was at work. Her husband never looked cross or harried or plump as she had become after the first baby, while she is always tired and left at home all day with the baby (Lahiri, 1999 p.26)

From the narration, it is evident that Mrs. Das needs more social interaction despite her living a very limited domestic life. Her loneliness and social isolation are stated by the narration, "As a result of spending all her

time in college with Raj, she did not make many close friends. There was no one to confide in about him at the end of a difficult day, or to share a passing thought or a worry. She declined invitations from her one or two college girlfriends, to have lunch or shop. Eventually the friends stopped calling her, so that she was left at home all day with the baby” (Lahiri, 1999, p. 26).

Lahiri (1999) portrays a female character with various limitations. These kinds of limited situations have been imposed toward woman, so it is argued (Qasim et al, 2015) that the most terrible thing is when women receive the oppression as her nature. The statement means that the most terrible thing is when a woman finally gets used to oppressions which places her as inferior, up to the point that she can no longer think about taking any new opportunities based on her own wishes and abilities.

This short story shows that family’s point of view about gender inequality is very crucial to shape woman as an individual. Woman’s family and her close circle may become a prominent influence during the life of woman. Family’s values can push woman into more oppressive relationship, or it can bring woman to the ideas and understandings of feminism thoughts and equality.

Feminism Thoughts of Personal Development in “How to Be Single” (Ditter, 2016)

As stated at the previous section, Literature is one of ways to portray various aspects of human and society. This argument is supported by Qasim et. all (2005) which stated that literature can function as reflection of something which happens in society in certain age or period of time. Since literature can be a reflection of society, therefore feminism and gender inequality can be observed in how female characters in literature are depicted. In this sense, how society treats women and how women bring themselves as individual are crucial in analysing feminism thoughts and gender inequalities.

The movie *How to Be Single* (2016) has several female characters. All of female characters are single, including the main female character, named Alice. This movie depicts how the female characters live her singularity life despite being lonely, confused, and sometimes, sad. Alice, as the main character, at first, had a boyfriend, but later she decides to be a single to get more space for her personal development. She said to her boyfriend, “I said I’m gonna do things all the time, and I never, ever do them. Like, I’m gonna learn to cook, or take a self-defence class or I’m gonna hike the Grand Canyon, and I never, ever do it. I need to know who I am alone. We need to know what it’s like to be single, at least once”.

From Alice’s statement at the previous paragraph, it is evident that Alice, as a woman also wants to know who she is truly. She wishes to find herself by releasing herself for a moment from any relationship. A modern woman has the legal rights to choose life for herself without being dictated by husband or family. Thus, Alice also wants to be free herself from any relationship for a while only to find herself through single life. This means that she wants to be seen as individual with her own thoughts, wishes, and life style. This kind of freedom might be impossible from women at older times who bounded by family’s will and marriage. In modern times, it is evident that woman sees themselves as a free individual which cannot be bound by any familial or relationship roles, as long as she is single.

Despite being lonely and confused in her single period, at the end of the story, Alice regards her experience of being single as a significant point in her life. How Alice regards her single experience is expressed by the narrator at the closing scene of the movie, “But, how good at being alone do we really want to be? Isn't there a danger that you'll get so good at being single, so set in your ways that you'll miss out on the chance to be with somebody great? Some people take baby steps to settle down. Some people refuse to settle at all. And sometimes, just because it is over, does not mean the love ends. The thing about being single is, you should cherish it. Because, in a week, or a lifetime, of being alone, you may only get one moment. One moment, when you're not tied up in a relationship with anyone. A parent, a pet, a sibling, a friend. One moment, when you stand on your own. Really, truly single. And then, it's gone.”

Thus, as main character, Alice's purpose is to become an example of single woman who is successful at finding her own identity. Through many processes and many social interactions, Alice recognizes that she actually is able to do many things by herself. As a main character, she still regards relationship, especially with her best friend. Alice's purpose is to show us the example of independent woman who takes her own decision and action without being annoyed by her single status. It is evident that in this movie woman's independence to choose marriage or singularity, is the most prominent feminism thoughts which radically oppose the ideas of patriarchy hegemonic construct.

Based on the analysis, there is an implication that the purpose of main character, Alice, is to portray variations of problems and resolutions in single woman's life. The purpose of main female character in the movie is in line with Butler's post modernism feminism theory (1999) that gender is formed by repetitive actions and that there are variations in femininity. Butler (1999) states that gender is a matter of repetition of actions, thus femininity and masculinity can be varied and contested at the same time.

How single women behave in this movie reflects the development of feminism in accordance with Butler's statement (1999) in an exact way. In this movie, all of the major female characters are single women who has professional job and their femininity are different from each other, yet all of them still treat their personal development as a very important thing that must be accomplished more than their relationship. This proves much that gender is indeed a social construction which is based on exposure of certain repetitive actions. The repetitive actions can be exposed in any forms, such as professional jobs, sexual relationship, online dating, and etc. Those repetitive actions shape individual belief, furthermore a society paradigm, concerning how women should live their lives as an individual without any intervention from patriarchal oppressive ideas.

Feminism Thoughts of Woman's Personal and Social Capability in Rupi Kaur's Instagram Poetries (2018-2019)

Rupi Kaur is an Indian-born Canadian poet, writer, illustrator, and performer (Fischer, 2017). Kaur shared her writing anonymously. In 2013, she began sharing her work under her own name on Tumblr. Kaur's first book, a collection titled *Milk and Honey* was published on November 4, 2014 (Wilson,

2017). Her inspiration for the book's name came from a past poem which included a line about women surviving terrible times. She describes the change in the women as, "smooth as milk and as thick as honey." A collection of poetry, prose, and hand-drawn illustrations, the book is divided into four chapters, and each chapter depicts a different theme. Her book sales of milk and honey surpassed the 2.5 million copy mark (Roy, 2018). The book was on The New York Times Best Seller list for over 77 weeks (Mzezewa, 2018). Her book titled *Milk and Honey* has since been translated into 25 languages.

Due to recent popularity of Kaur's poetries in Instagram accounts, two of her poetries concerning woman, were taken from Instagram accounts. The first one's title is *Legacy*, while the second's is a *short tour and farewell*. Both poetries were published in Instagram, therefore the screenshots of the poetries were enclosed at the following images.

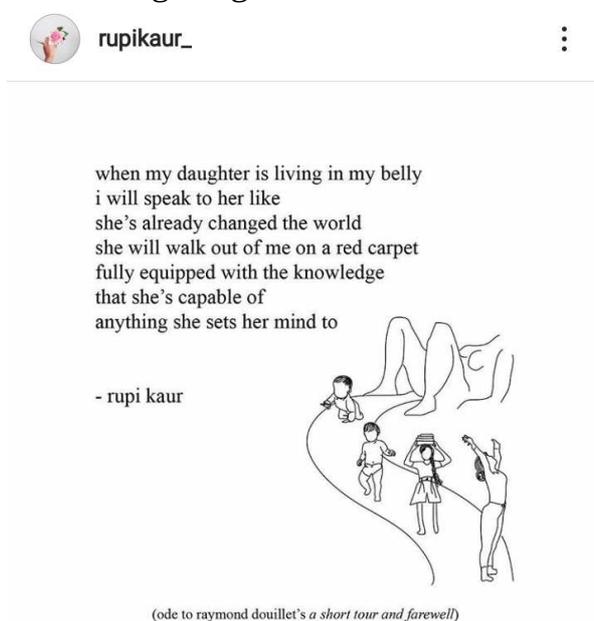


Figure 1. Screenshot of Kaur's poetry: *Short and Farewell*

Short and Farewell contains a heavy dose of feminism thoughts, even though it is a short poetry. Based on its lyrics and visual aspects, this poetry tells of what mother, as a woman, feels about her daughter, as a woman's candidate and how a mother instils her feminism thoughts in her daughter. At the first line, it is stated, "When my daughter is living in my belly", this one line conveys how an adult woman views a young woman, and furthermore how a mother views her daughter. Therefore, it is a relationship between woman and woman, not between woman and man.

Despite of being lack of man participant, this poetry still conveys a lot of ideas concerning feminism thoughts. The third, sixth, and seventh line of the poetry state, "She's already changed the world ... that she's capable of ... anything she sets her mind too". These lines are in agreement with Butler's post modernism theory (1999) that gender are social construction and gender is shaped based on certain repetitive actions, not by biological distinction. This poetry is a good example to prove that gender-inequality is not something

related to physical constitution, rather it relates to the mind. As stated in this poetry, that woman also has the ability to do many things as long as she sets her mind to do them. Through the recitations of the capability of woman, in this poetry, a mother armed her daughter with feminism thoughts, in order to instil personal and familial values concerning equality between both genders. Therefore, this poetry contains the feminism thoughts concerning woman's personal capability which is based on equality between both genders.

Another poetry from Kaur also depicts feminism thought. The title is *Legacy*. It was also published in Instagram. The screenshots of the poetry is enclosed as follows.

i stand
on the sacrifices
of a million women before me
thinking
what can i do
to make this mountain taller
so the women after me
can see farther

legacy - rupi kaur



Figure 2. Screenshot of Kaur's poetry: *Legacy*

Legacy is also short poetry with no regular rhymes. Even though it only has eight lines, it also depicts a lot of woman's struggle concerning equality and aspiration. There is a participant 'i' mentioned on the first line with a small letter as a stylistic device. In this poetry, participant 'i' is written by the small letter in order to depict how small a woman compare with many women which had been struggling before her, as stated on the second and third line "on the sacrifices ... of a million women before me". How small a woman compared with all the struggles which previous women had experienced, is also depicted by the visual image: a single black woman stands on the white mountains facing the white sun. This may symbolize the importance of individuality due to colour's contrast between black individual and white environment.

The woman, as the speaker of poetry, asks herself at the fifth until eight line, "what can I do to make this mountain taller so the woman after me can see farther". It is notable that the mountains are built on the sacrifices of many women before her, therefore as an individual, and as a woman, the woman in this poetry also wishes to sacrifice herself in order to support women in society. This is the feminism thoughts that this poetry tries to

convey. This thought conveyed by Kaur in this poetry, is also in line with Butler's theory (1999) which emphasizes gender is shaped through repetitive actions and recitations of certain belief concerning equality or inequality between both genders. Therefore, this poetry conveys the social capability of woman to support other women, even the future women, by repetitive struggles and sacrifices.

CONCLUSION

Feminism, woman-oppression, and gender-inequality are multidimensional social phenomena which sprawl through personal, familial, and social, and cultural values. In this study, all the literary works shows that feminism thoughts, gender-inequality, and woman-oppression are interwoven each other. Based on previous discussion, there are several implications that (a)feminism thoughts have been getting stronger along with the progression of century, (b) feminism thoughts always oppose gender inequality as both are binary oppositions in literary work, (c) both feminism and gender-inequality live through values, (d)personal and familial values are crucial in order to develop feminism thoughts and gender-inequality, and (e) the change of values, especially social and cultural values can bring changes in both feminism and gender inequality phenomena. As stated by Banarjee (2005), Socialization is a huge factor in the establishment of gender role identity or the scope to which people feel that they show characteristics relate with traditional gender stereotypes (Bem, 1993). Finally, through this research, it is prominently evident that literary works as society's portrait can indeed depict all the aforementioned points, including human's values and actions which shape and are shaped by both feminism thoughts and gender-inequality.

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