

The depiction of liberal feminism through the main character in the novel *Yellow Wife* by Sadeqa Johnson

Riska Efanda¹, Mardliya Pratiwi Zamruddin²

^{1,2}English Literature Department, Faculty of Cultural Studies

Mulawarman University

Email: rska.efanda14@gmail.com

ABSTRAK

Dalam penelitian ini, peneliti menganalisis tokoh utama perempuan yang bernama Pheby. Ada dua tujuan dalam penelitian ini yaitu mengidentifikasi bentuk-bentuk feminisme liberal melalui karakter Pheby dan menganalisis momen sejarah yang memengaruhi karakter utama perempuan dalam novel. Peneliti melakukan penelitian ini menggunakan teori feminisme liberal oleh Rosemarie Tong dan perspektif sosiologi oleh Laurenson dan Swingewood. Hasil penelitian ini, ditemukan tiga aspek feminisme liberal berdasarkan teori Tong berupa equal education, equal liberty, dan equal right. Momen sejarah yang terjadi dalam novel sudah tergambar pada liberal feminism itu sendiri seperti tergambar pada karakter utama perempuan

Kata kunci: Karakter, Feminisme liberal, Momen Sejarah

ABSTRACT

In this research, the researcher analyzed the main female character named Pheby. There are two aims in this research, they are to identify the forms of liberal feminism through Pheby's character and to analyse the historical moments that influence the female main character in the novel. The researcher conducted this research using the theory of liberal feminism by Rosemarie Tong, and the Sociological Perspective by Laurenson and Swingewood. The results of this research found three aspects of liberal feminism based on Tong's theory in the form of equal education, equal liberty, and equal rights. The historical moments that occur in the novel are reflected in liberal feminism as portrayed by the main female character.

Keywords: Character, Liberal Feminism, Historical Moments

A. INTRODUCTION

Feminism exists to oppose the inequality faced by women in every way, whether in class, race, social, economic, or political. Women also have the right to make their own choices and lives. As Margaret Sanger stated in *Woman and the New Race*, "The women with small families, however, are free to make their choice of those social pleasures which are the right of every human being and necessary to each one's full development (29)".

Women in America in the 19th century had few rights and opportunities. Liberal feminism has a type that emphasizes the need for equal opportunities for women in all fields and sees differences between men and women as socio-economic and cultural constructions (Barker 281). Also in *Feminist Thought*, Tong states that liberals prioritize "rights" over "goods". In other

words, people can make their own choices, because it is the right of every individual, as long as we do not harm others (11). This literary criticism is used for analysing the object of this study.

The object of this research is a novel with the title *Yellow Wife*. The novel tells about the life of a woman named Pheby Delores Brown who tried to survive and struggle in the cruelty and harshness of the social life she was living in. She was instead trapped in a notorious slave sale called the creepy prison (lots of violence), in Richmond, Virginia.

The researcher is interested in analysing Pheby's character as the main female character, based on the experiences she goes through in the story. This topic is also interesting because the story is inspired by the life experiences of a woman in America. In the story, women are treated unfairly, forced, and not allowed to receive education, such as reading and writing.

In this research, the focus is on liberal feminism based on Rosemarie Tong's theory, which divides several aspects of liberal feminism such as equal education, equal liberty, the suffrage, and equal right. In order to understand the social circumstances surrounding the main character to see the historical moments, the researcher used Diana Laurenson and Alan Swingewood's sociological perspective. With those, the analysis is carried out to find and describe the form of struggle for freedom and survival through the experiences of the main female character in the novel.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Literature

Through literature, a history, culture, or tradition of a society from a particular region can also be portrayed. As Taylor says in his book that a work of literature can provide a depiction or detail of life in society that may or may not be reflected by the author based on a particular time and place (1). Another definition also mentioned that literature imitates most of life which is social reality (Wellek and Warren 89). As said earlier, literary works can reflect a social life.

2. Novel

A novel is realistic if it depicts all kinds of human experiences, not just one literary perspective. The realism of the novel is not in the type of life it portrays, but in the way it is presented (Watt 6). As the object of this research, the novel to be analyse is a historical fiction novel entitled *Yellow Wife*. The novel is set in the 1850s with the main character is a woman.

3. Elements of Fiction

a. Character

Gill stated that a person in a literary work is called a character (127). What is meant here is not only objects in the form of people (humans), but also animals or figures that are animate and also involved in conflicts in the story.

b. Characterization

Characterization can be seen in how characters act, speak, and interact with their environment in a story. In other words, characterization is the portrayal of a character, that is, how the character is constructed (Gill 127). Kenan mentions two types of characterizations,

namely direct characterization and indirect characterization. First is direct characterization, which can be seen through naming with adjectives, parts of speech, or kinds of nouns that are displayed directly for readers to immediately understand without reading the whole story (59). The second is indirect characterization which is built through action, speech, external appearance, and environment (61-66).

c. Setting

It is mentioned in the book *Mastering English Literature* that the term setting is interpreted more broadly not only as the place and time when characters appear, but also as the atmosphere, mood, habits, beliefs, and social context of characters such as their friends, family, and class (Gill 148).

4. Feminist Theory

As stated in the book *Introducing Women's Studies* that in general, the term 'feminist theory' refers to a body of knowledge that provides critical explanations for women's subordination. And further explained, "Feminist theory offers some kind of analysis and explanation of how and why women have less power than men, and how this imbalance could be challenged and transformed (Richardson and Robinson 50)".

5. Liberal Feminism

Tong in her book *Feminist Thought* states that liberals prioritise rights over good (11). There are four aspects of liberal feminism described in the book *Feminist Thought*, namely equal education, equal liberty, the suffrage, and equal rights.

a. Equal Education

In *Feminist Thought*, it is mentioned that Wollstonecraft claimed that a truly educated woman would be a major contributor to the well-being of society. She encouraged women to get an education, so that they could be moral, independent, and strong in mind and body (qtd. in Tong 14-15).

b. Equal Liberty

Other figures also mentioned in *Feminist Thought* include John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor who were emphasised the importance of rationality for women. They also emphasised that women should enjoy the same rights to education, partnership, and opportunity as men enjoy in social life (Tong 17).

c. The Suffrage

In this case, the opportunity to express themselves and participate in voting, not only in politics itself but can also change systems, structures, and attitudes that contribute to the oppression of others or themselves (Tong 21).

d. Equal Right

In the 20th century the liberal feminist movement fought for women's civil rights, which was also known at the time to be associated with black civil rights. Feminist activists themselves

fought for women to be fully emancipated in terms of economic opportunities, sexual and civil liberties (Tong 23).

6. Sociological Perspective

Sociology is basically a study to learn and understand how people work in society, both in social institutions and social processes, which is also in this case, literature is related to the human social world (Laurenson and Swingewood 11-12).

In the book *Sociology of Literature*, There are three perspective to characterising the sociology of literature, namely literary work as a mirror of the age, literary work relate with the social situation of the author, and literary work as specific historical moments.

a. Literary Work as Mirror of the Age

It can reflect directly from various aspects or social structures, such as in family relationships, class conflicts, and population structure (Laurenson and Swingewood 13).

b. Literary Work Relate with the Social Situation of the Author

The literary works produced have an influence that can describe the phenomena that occur in the community. In this case concentrates on the social context or on the literary text and its social meaning in the production of the literary work itself (Laurenson and Swingewood 20).

c. Literary Work as Specific Historical Moments

In this case, it can be seen through the characters and situations that influence the story in the creation of a literary work. As Swingewood notes, writers with great texts are interesting because the artist has the ability to describe the entirety of the human experience, which in turn implies into human social conditions (22). It is the human experience or story in the literary work itself that represents history, which can be accepted in society.

C. METHOD

This research used qualitative research methods. According to Tracy, the qualitative method is a general phrase that refers to the collection, analysis, and interpretation of interviews, participant observations, and document data to understand and describe meanings, relationships, and patterns (36). In addition, the researcher also used feminist approach to see how the author portrays the main character's struggle to gain the freedom she dreams on. As it is known that feminist criticism is a part of feminist studies. It has aims that focus on patriarchy, societal rules, and culture by men, whereas feminist literary criticism advocates for equal rights for all human beings in all areas of life, such as political, social, economic, personal, and other (Bressler 144).

The researcher analyzed the data by using data analysis techniques consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing by Miles and Huberman (10-11). The first step is data reduction. During this step, the researcher focused and selected the data on each narrative or dialogue between the main characters and other characters that shows a picture of liberal feminism in the novel *Yellow Wife*. The second step is data display. The researcher organises the reduced data into a more focused analysis and includes aspects of liberal feminism based on the

theory of liberal feminism from Rosemarie Tong's book, which can be equal education, the suffrage, equal liberty and others. The third step is to draw conclusions from the data that has been reduced and displayed. The researcher drew conclusions and obtained the correct data results in answering research questions after identifying all the data that has been obtained through the depiction of the main character based on the theory of liberal feminism.

D. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Findings

The researcher presents the aspects of liberal feminism on the female characters in the novel based on the theory of liberal feminism by Rosemarie Tong and presents the historical moments with a sociological perspective by Diana Laurenson and Alan Swingewood.

a. Equal Education

Data (1)

This became our weekly routine. The kids would be tutored by Miss Grace and July would stay in the room to supervise while I took Joan with me to the shed. **I instructed July to listen to the lessons but to keep her face blank and feign disinterest.** Any questions after the lesson, I would answer for her. She was a quick study and learned how to spell all the girls' names and read a few simple sentences in only a few weeks. (Johnson 162)

Pheby took action by letting July stay around her child, besides that July could also listen to the education provided by the tutor who also taught Pheby's daughters. Through her actions when she instructed July to listen to the lessons, she bravely provides educational opportunities that the young girl should also be able to receive, even though the environment and her husband are strongly against it.

Many women in the 19th century were denied educational opportunities such as reading. The moment that was influenced by stereotypes against women who were considered weak and innocent creatures at the time. Reading was considered dangerous in that period, especially for women.

Data (2)

Pheby: You are only a slave in name. Never in your mind. Remember all that I have taught you. Try to be useful in the big house and keep your education hidden. (Johnson 219)

Women who are able to get an education have the opportunity to develop their human potential and contribute to the well-being of society. That is what Pheby did, she gave the right to education to July who was part of the society itself. It shows Pheby's empathy for the young girl, as she realizes the importance of education for women to become strong and independent.

It reminds of the social conditions in the 1800s around the 19th century. *Yellow Wife* is set in the 1850s, during which time slavery was rife in the American south. At that time, enslaved women were not entitled to their life choices and it was considered against the law if they got an education.

b. Equal Liberty

Data (3)

When I caught myself in the mirror, my first thought was that Mama would have been pleased at how I had made the best out of my situation. When I was growing up, she constantly reminded me to never be a slave in my mind. Tonight's gathering served as my opportunity to honor her wishes. (Johnson 132)

Pheby's character is portrayed in the narrative when she thinks she can make the best of her situation, despite the tough environment she faces such as being trapped in her husband's power. However, she does not let this limit her. With her smart and confident character, she can deal with any situation and show her talent in front of everyone including her husband.

Data (4)

All eyes were on me as I sauntered toward the piano. The instant my fingers grazed the keys, I felt at ease. **The moment rivaled old times on the plantation, with me entertaining important guests and being admired for my talent.** The violinist accompanied me perfectly, and we each paused to give the other a chance at a solo. Then we ended with one last piece and moved through the notes in concert. Everyone applauded. (Johnson 134)

Because of her confident character, Pheby has the courage to take a step and prove that women can also be valued and appreciated for their talents in public. This relates to the liberal feminism aspect of freedom in public spaces and collaborating with other musicians.

Based on historical moments, before the civil war in America, most American women were trapped by law and society to be subservient to men and had no rights of their own. This is also influenced by traditional gender norms in the moments that occur in the novel.

c. Equal Right

Data (5)

Some of the woman tied red scarves on their heads. I combed my hair simply because it felt good to groom myself, and then twisted it away from my face. My dress contained stains from my journey, and my shoes were, mucked in waste, but I did not plan to doll myself up to please anyone. (Johnson 72)

Pheby's actions are an attitude that she is entitled to herself and has her own identity. She only cleans herself to feel more comfortable and does not beautify herself to please any of the men there. She is showing other women that they are also entitled to themselves because it is their right.

Data (6)

The Presenter: Disrobe in order that we might see how formed and sound you are.

The Presenter: Disrobe now.

Pheby: I will not. (Johnson 74)

With strong confidence and courage she did not let herself be oppressed by the men. Pheby confidently stood up and refused the presenter's orders. Certainly not only that, they continued

to force this on Pheby. With her strength and resilience she continued to fight and survive so that she would not be oppressed by the situation that forced her.

Data (7)

Nothing else scared me. **I would not take off my dress in front of these men. I would not follow Matilda into that back room. I would not sink further into degradation than I already had.** (Johnson 74-75)

Pheby repeatedly said "would not" in front of everyone. As a woman, she did not want to be oppressed by either the men or the environment she faced at the time. She did not want to be like other women who would just surrender to what they were told. Through Pheby's speech and action when she loudly refuses the orders that undermine women's dignity, it shows that she is a resilient and strong person.

The oppression experienced by women during slavery shows that women were more probably to experience excessive physical violence. They were victims of abuse ranging from harassment by overseers, sailors on slave ships, and slave owners themselves. However, despite the oppression that many women experienced, they also showed resistance in various ways.

Data (8)

Abbie: How come you never call him Marse?

Pheby: I Left my master back on plantation.

Abbie: **I ain't never met no woman like you. You don't act like the rest of us** (Johnson 104)

Through Pheby's ingenuity and persistence, however, she was different from the other women in that place. Most of them were simply submitted and bound by their masters. Pheby did not even call Lapier master. Pheby felt that she should not give up and just crumble. In her new place she struggles and survives to escape oppression and be able to protect the people she cares about. It was because of this that Abbie felt that she had never met a strong and brave woman like Pheby who did not act like them.

Although Pheby had a difficult situation, at least she could enjoy the rights that should have been hers, such as education and other personal rights that could not be enjoyed by most women at that time.

Data (9)

Mama^cplan had not gotten me my papers, but at least offered me some advantages: Miss Sally's education, never whipped, never worked the fields, always had full belly and slept in a warm bed. (Johnson 106)

With unusual access and affection in her new place, she persistently and wisely makes the most of her position. She did everything she could to ensure that her daughters also got their rights, whether in access to education, housing and more. This describes Pheby's character as a compassionate woman who loves her children.

Data (10)

We both knew that women were only there to serve drinks and entertain with their bodies. I had no practice with the former and no intention of doing the latter. (Johnson 125)

Pheby would certainly not come to entertain the men there with her body, because women are not just entertainment or mere objects for men. She will do everything possible to survive the social environment and traditional gender norms that can oppress her. Therefore, she will attend the meeting as a woman who deserves to be recognised. She performs to show her talent in playing the piano.

Data (11)

I had sewn together a pretty blouse for July out of the extra material from the shed, and she looked lovely in lavender. She was old enough now for a corset and hoopskirt but I did not want men getting ideas about her, especially now that she had received her first blood, so I dressed her down like she was still a child. (Johnson 121)

Pheby always showed concern for July. Even when she wanted to take July out, she didn't want her to look too flashy. She didn't want any man to behave inappropriately towards her. Beautiful girls will only make them more vulnerable to the desires of the masher men who are around them.

Data (12)

Pheby: July, you have to tie up your hair.

July: Forgive me, ma'am. It just takes so much time.

Pheby: Better that you are overheated than draw unwanted attention from the men at the tavern. Beauty is a curse for a slave girl. (Johnson 193)

Pheby did not want this to happen to July. She tried to protect July from conditions that could trigger her at that time. Especially with the conditions and situation at that time, July was a slave in that place. Slaves certainly do not have no choice over their lives, especially a female slave. As explained earlier, they are more vulnerable to sexual abuse. They have no control over either their reproductive life or their personal life. The abuse experienced by women at that time was not only physical domination but also a means to assert dominance and control to degrade women.

2. Discussion

The researcher focused on the main female character named Pheby. The description of liberal feminism by Pheby's character is observed through actions, dialogues with other characters, speech, and the environment that the character lives in.

Related to liberal feminism research, the researcher using liberal feminism theory based on Tong's book and found three aspects of liberal feminism in the form of equal education, equal liberty, and equal rights. Furthermore, by using the sociological perspective by Laurensen and Swingewood to see the conditions experienced by women in the novel that effected Pheby doing her action. Out of the three perspectives, the researcher focuses on the third perspective literary work as specific historical moments. The condition of women in this novel is the life of women

in the pre-war period around the 1800's. Pheby tried to protect the young girl from the cruelty and abuse that women were more likely to be subject to at that time.

D. CONCLUSION

The researcher can conclude that the three aspects that form the theoretical basis of this research are found in the novel. The three aspects of liberal feminism are equal education, equal liberty, and equal rights. Pheby realises to think wiser as a woman and be brave in all situations. She also struggles and does things to fight and survive. She struggles as a woman in educating girls and to use their intelligence and be able to survive in every journey of life. With Pheby's persistence and struggle, in the end she and her daughter were able to live freely according to their own desires. There are three historical moments in the novel that related to liberal feminism itself that is stereotypes of women, traditional gender norms, and women during slavery.

Future researchers can use other forms of objects besides novels, such as short stories, films, and other literary works that can be used as objects in analysing using liberal feminism theory. The results of the research in the form of experiences and conditions experienced by women are expected to provide awareness and insight into the women's oppression that is sometimes still often found today in new and dangerous ways.

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