

## FEMINISTIC THOUGHTS IN THE 20<sup>TH</sup> AND 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY LITERARY WORKS OF AMERICAN FEMALE WRITERS

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**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 of American women from the end of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. This study took two literary works, namely science-fiction, prose (short-story). 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 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, several important findings can be drawn, namely feminism thoughts are getting stronger along with the progression of years, both feminism and gender-inequality live through human's values and repetitive actions, personal and family values are crucial in order to develop feminism thoughts and gender-inequality in an individual, and 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*

### **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.

In post-modern feminism, there is an interesting argument that support gender as social construction as proposed by Hollander (2002). It is stated by Octavia 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.

### **Main part**

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 to her 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 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.

### **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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