

GENDER INEQUALITY IN ELIZABETH RUDNICK'S NOVEL *MULAN*

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Abstract

This study is aimed at analyzing gender inequality in Elizabeth Rudnick's Novel *Mulan*. This study is focused on the phenomena of gender inequality in the novel, and the gender inequality seen through socio-cultural context. *Mulan* tells about of a young Chinese woman, a female warrior from the period of the Northern and Southern Chinese dynasties. She disguises herself as a man to fight. She replaces her father in a war. As the first child, *Mulan* is burdened with the tasks of bringing honor to her family; while, at that time, the kingdom does not allow a woman to join the war. Such part of the story in the novel portrays gender inequality. In the study, the descriptive qualitative method is applied. The result of this research shows that the phenomena of gender inequality cover gender violence against women presented in the novel. Besides, the gender inequality can be seen through socio-cultural context in the novel. It can be concluded that gender difference between women and men can be found in the novel. It occurs in social and cultural context in the novel.

Keywords: *gender difference; gender inequality; power oppression; violence*

1. Introduction

Gender equality is one of the important aspects in society for both women and men. Discrimination or woman inequality in terms of gender in various regions has various characteristics and levels. One of which is that women have limited opportunities related to programs and activities in the community. Every man and woman want to have freedom to do something without any gender inequality, for example; working, being a leader, and having higher education. According to Wilson (1975), the differences between women and men are the result of socio-cultural construction resulting in different roles and tasks. These differences make women always be left behind and neglected their roles and contributions in family life, society, nation, and state. Social construction places women and men in a different class. Men are identified with the bourgeois class, and women as the proletariat.

There is a difference or inequality between rights of women and men. The factors hinder the realization of equality are the delay in development of science in the society or people's attitudes in that place. The people still glorify the traditions of the past. Wadud's work is actually anxiety intellectual writer on gender inequality in society. One of the causes of gender inequality in social life is the ideology of the interpretation of the Qur'an doctrine which she considered as patriarchal bias (Wadud,

2006: 16). In order to obtain a relative interpretation objectively, a commentator must return to the basic principles in the Qur'an as her paradigm framework. That is why Wadud requires an title to understand the word view.

Related to the novel, *Mulan* is a historical fiction novel released in February 2020. The novel was written by Elizabeth Rudnick. The novel tells the story of a young Chinese female warrior from the period of the Northern and Southern dynasties (420-589 AD). She disguised herself as a man to fight in her father's place. As a child, *Mulan* was burdened with the tasks of bringing honor to her family; while, at that time, the kingdom did not allow a women to join the war. But, in *Mulan*'s family, there was no male member except her own father. His father's old condition made *Mulan* run away from home with her father's equipment and armor. She went away without thinking about what other soldier could do to her if she disguised as a man. She later joined other soldiers for pre-war training. It can be seen that gender inequality is used in the Chinese government in that century. A woman could only stay at home and could not participate in military activities. In fact, in the novel, *Mulan* can survive on the battlefield. She saves her soldier friends who should even be smarter and stronger than she is. *Mulan* in the novel is an independent woman. She does not depend on anybody who has conflict with other women in society. She also destroys stereotypes about women in society.

It is essential to analyze gender inequality in the novel *Mulan* because this topic could inspire person, and as a prospective literary scholar, *Mulan*'s heart is drawn to the era of gender equality and women's rights in the past, today, or in the future. It is argued that women can get the same rights as men can. This is the background why this topic is selected to analyze in this study.

2. Literature Review

Sociology of Literature

Sociology of literature is a literary theory that analyzes a literary work based on in social relations. The goals of sociology are the same as the other social sciences, but people view social events in their own way. According to Damono (1979: 1), in literary studies discourse, sociology of literature is often defined as an approach in literary studies that understands and evaluates literary works by considering social (social) aspects. Sociology of literature is research that focuses on the object of human study by environment. Wellek and Warren (in Suaka, 2014: 34) say that in general literary studies, sociology is divided into three, namely: sociology of writers, sociology of literary works, and sociology of reader. While, Wolf quoted by Faruk (2013: 77) gives the definition that sociology of literature is a formless, poorly defined, scientific discipline. consists of empirical studies, and various experiments on somewhat more general theories that each only has something in common in terms of dealing with literary relations with the community.

Endraswara (2011: 77) states that the sociology of literature is a branch of literary research that is reflective. According to Ratna (2013: 3), the purpose of sociology is to increase understanding of literature in relation to society, explaining that fiction does not contradict reality. Literary works are clearly constructed imaginatively, but the imaginative framework cannot be understood outside of its empirical framework. Literary works are not merely individual phenomena but also social phenomena. According to American literary critics, Wellek and Warren, the sociology of literature can be classified into three problems, as quoted from the book *Sociology of Literature, A Brief Introduction*. First, the sociology of the author which questions

social status, social ideology, and other matters concerning the author as a producer of literature. Second, the sociology of literature is concerned with the literary work itself so that the subject of the study is what is implied and what is its purpose in literary works. Third, sociology of literature is concerned with the reader and the social influence of literary works.

Gender Inequality

Gender inequality assumes that men and women are not equal and that gender has an impact on a person's life experience. Discrimination based on gender still occurs in all aspects of life, all over the world. Gender inequality is a form of treatment difference based on reason gender, such as roles, exclusion or favoritism that results in there is a violation of the recognition of human rights, equal rights between men and women, as well as basic rights in the social, political, economic, cultural and other fields (Pujar, 2016). The following are some of the causes of gender inequality according to Syam (2003) based on a sociological view which states that first, a woman is only placed at home. So, this fact does not support women to need higher education. Second, there is a psychological view of the position of women as wives who accompany their husbands without the need for more education. This is supported by the ancient view that marrying young is more honorable than being a spinster. The third cultural views of society that adhere to the notion that women are not human figures who need more education. In fact, women are seen as complementary to men.

Amnesty (2021) says that, during the French revolution, the declaration of the rights of man and of the citizen, one of the pioneering rules of civil rights, ratified in 1789, referred to human rights as the rights of all men, not human rights. This statement indirectly does not recognize women as human beings with human rights. Before the 18th century, women were still not considered as rational human beings with common sense who were entitled to have equal rights with men. As a result, women do not have the right to vote and be elected in politics. According to Wollstonecraft (1792), women are not inferior human beings. The achievement gap between women and men is not caused by the lack of women's abilities, but the lack of opportunity and access due to the stigma that limits women's freedom to choose and develop their quality of life. An example of gender equality for women is that women get space for politics, have the same property rights as men, and get the highest formal education opportunities. And for the example of gender inequality against women that often occur today is a physical and non-physical violence perpetrated by husbands against their wives in the household and gender inequality in novel *Mulan* which depicts that woman should only be at home and not freely do things outside the habits of women in that century. One example of the phenomenon of gender inequality described by Fakih (1997) is violence, physical or non-physical attack by one of the gender, family, society, and the State against other genders. All human beings, regardless of gender, have the right to develop their personal abilities, pursue careers and make choices without being limited by rigid stereotypes about gender roles. Gender equality is one of human rights as human beings. The right to live well, free from fear and free to make life choices are not intended for men, and women also have the same rights in essence.

One example of gender inequality is violence. Understanding gender violence requires an understanding of the context of gender identity, as well as a situational analysis of the impact that occurs on gender in a social context. A broader understanding of violence does not only discuss violence on a physical level but also in

a cultural context so that violence can mean more than persecution. Gender itself is a socio-culturally constructed hierarchical classification system where there is a polarization between genders that is more dominant than other genders (Fu, 2015). This causes a fundamental problem. Gender as a binary and hierarchical model that constructs society in asymmetric power relations. The polarization of masculine and feminine gender leads to power oppression such as sexism, patriarchy, misogyny, transmisogyny, heteronormativity, and homophobia are the forerunners of gender inequality itself (Fu, 2015). Gender violence then develops into violations and threats as a consequence of racism, class discrimination, and poverty in the gender dimension. Another important dimension that is closely related is structural violence which is essentially normalized violence. In the international political dimension, gender violence is a matter of concern. Now many international organizations, both government and non-governmental affiliated are trying to combat gender violence, especially against women.

The effect of gender inequality is also detrimental to the economic growth of a country or region. Gender inequality in education will result in low human capital productivity so that economic growth is also low. Klasen's and Lamanna's research (2009) shows gender inequality effects in direct and indirect education negative effect on economy growth.

3. Research Method

According to Creswell (2009: 3), research design is a set of plans and the procedures for research to detailed method of data collection and analysis. This study was conducted by descriptive qualitative design. Namawi (1993: 63) describes qualitative method as a procedure of problem solving by describing the subject of the study based on the visible facts. Then, Bogdan and Biklen (2012) state that qualitative is descriptive, where data are in the form of words or picture rather than numbers. Therefore, the research design adopted in this study is descriptive qualitative because the analysis and the findings are accomplished in a descriptive form. In this research, the phenomena of gender inequality was described qualitatively by giving the description of the data in the discussion. The data include the quotations in the novel in which the phenomena of gender inequality are presented. The phenomena of the gender inequality include the power oppression to women, and gender inequality seen through social context in the novel.

4. Discussion

4.1 The Phenomena of Gender Inequality in the Novel

Differences in roles and functions between men and women are known as gender differences that occur in society. One example of the phenomena of gender inequality is gender subordination, defined as the subordination (secondary) of gender to both men and women. However, many cases generally occur by women so that the subordination of women is subordinate (secondary) to women. It means that the roles, functions and positions of women are under men generally. According to Syam (2003), there is a psychological view of the position of women as wives who accompany their husbands without the need for more education. This is supported by the ancient view that marrying in young age is more honorable than being a spinster.

In the Chinese Empire, *Hua Mulan* is a vibrant, active, adventurous young woman who lives in a small village. Her parents hope that one day she will marry a good

husband. As a young woman, *Mulan* is forced to meet an old woman to show off her elegance as a future wife. Mulan is flustered and tries to pour tea in front of the old lady, but a spider causes panic and destroys the event. The old woman immediately gets angry and calls it a disgrace to the family. In the north, an imperial outpost is attacked by Rouran warriors, under the leadership of Bori Khan. They are assisted by the witch Xianniang who uses her magic to pretend to be a living soldier and report the attack to the Chinese Emperor. Later, she issued a conscription decree ordering each family to contribute one male to fight the Khan's army. Imperial soldiers arrive at Mulan's village to ask for recruits and her old and frail father Hua Zhou is forced to promise to serve as he has no sons. Realizing that her father has no chance of survival, Mulan flees with armor, horse, and sword to join in his stead. When she run away from home to join the war, she pretending to be a man because at that time the kingdom did not allowed a women to join the war or participate in military activities, but as the first child she burdened with the tasks of bringing honor to her family. The way of a woman in that century brought honor to her family is only by getting married not by participating in male activities. Because of her father conditions she did not want her father to struggle when joining the war, because of that she pretending to be a man when she was running away from home for the sake of her father and thinking by bringing honor to her family in her own way.

Mulan experiences a very struggle and hard time. She always sacrifices for the happiness of her family by acting as a woman in general, like staying at home, cooking, sewing and cleaning. It makes her sacrifice herself. She likes freedom and activities that are generally done by men. Even though her father gives her the freedom to do what she likes since she is young, the environment around her demands that she has to behave like the other girls. Because of that, her mother always tells and reminds her that she is a daughter not a son, and a daughter brings honor through marriage. The phenomena of gender (woman) inequality that occurs in the novel *Mulan* can be seen from the quotation below.

“The least *Mulan* could do was offers a sacrifice to her own family. If that meant following her sister’s lead and being her mother’s shadow, she would do it. She would do what her father asked of her. She would make her family proud, and she would bring honor to them no matter what kinds of sacrifices she had to make.” (Rudnick’s, 2020: 23-24)

The data above shows that *Mulan* is willing to sacrifice anything that will be a source of pride and happiness for her father, mother and younger sibling. She feels guilty when she tries to chase a chicken and it causes an incident where a phoenix statue is broken. Apart from embarrassing her family, a woman should not chase a chicken in public. She also accidentally falls right on the phoenix statue's wings. Even so, *Mulan* still tries to become the woman as her family hopes for. She tries to further reduce her curiosity and adventurous spirit even though it hurts her. It can be seen from the quotation below.

“*Mulan* tried, and tried, and tried to be the honorable daughter who would make her family proud. She dutifully sat by her mother’s side and practiced weaving. She let the occasional chicken wander away even though her feet itched to give chase. When the boys of the village gathered in the courtyard to play, she did her best not to kick

the wayward ball that stopped in her path. But despite her best intentions, it was hard to always be good.” (Rudnick 2020: 25-26)

The data above shows that *Mulan* sacrifices her true self. This is referred to as a phenomena of gender (woman) inequality where *Mulan* feels inner pressure because a woman at that time has to marry at a young age. She is only being allowed to stay at home. She cannot do activity freely even though she wants to choose to live freely and do what she loves without any coercion from her environment. *Mulan* also made a promise to her father Hua Zhou. She promises to bring honor as they ask her even though *Mulan* thinks she has another opinion in her mind. She is held back by her parents' wishes because of the manners of the environment she lives in at that time. *Mulan* thinks that she could bring honor to her family with the other way but not marriage. At the same time, she also does not want to disappoint her mother and father with her own opinion which can be seen from the quotation below.

“Mulan knew it would not bring the honor her family wanted, and she would never admit it out loud, but she did not want to get married. She could stay and help her parents instead, she reasoned. Perhaps make them proud on her in other ways. She looked at her father with a sad look at her mother's decision to marry her off, but her father said "it has been decided, if this is the best for the honor of our family". Mulan had made vow to her father that she would bring honor to her family. Even if it meant sacrificing her own happiness. She nodded and said “it is best, I will bring honor to us all”. Mulan was silent lost in her own thoughts. In one moment, her life and her fate had been decided. She had never felt more miserable.” (Rudnick's 2020: 28-30)

The above quotation shows that *Mulan* cannot be honest about her own desires because of the limitations of a woman in behaving in her environment. They are raised only to bring honor to their families by marrying men chosen by their parents and elders there. Matchmaker in the village where she and her family live, has prepared a husband for her; therefore, *Mulan* takes this opportunity with a heavy heart to make her family happy with this honor even though she feels sad and does not want to do it.

4.2 Power Oppression to Women

Power is the ability of an individual or a group of people to dominate other individuals or groups based on authority, charisma or physical strength. Bori khan, makes a large group (bandits) to fight against the emperor of China at that time. He has his men to go traveling here and there. At that time, he thinks that his dark business is not safe and would be exposed because of the emperor rules that make the people very lazy. There have been no conflicts or wars lately. That makes Bori khan remembers the time when his father creates a group called *The Rourans*. It is a group filled with bandits that causes chaos in the kingdom. People get scared when they hear the name the *Rourans*. When their name is called, everyone will shut down. The time comes for the emperor to defeat and fight with the leader of *The Rourans* at that time. None other than Bori khan's father finally makes the people of the kingdom not afraid anymore. The Emperor thinks since then, everything is safe until finally Bori khan returns to take revenge on death of his father. Like the quotation below.

“The famed Shadow Warriors had caused trading posts like this one to shut down. And then the emperor had defeated the Rouran leader, and for years, there had been no sign of the fearsome Shadow Warriors. The empire had gone back to believing it was safe. But Bori khan was about to show them, how wrong they were to believe The Rourans had been destroyed. His father had taught him all he knew before the emperor had killed him. And now Bori khan had revitalized the Rourans. It was time, he thought as his eyes flicked to the open gate of the trading post, for them to begin their revenge.”
(Rudnick 2020: 31-32)

It can be seen above that the power oppression occurs at that time. *The Rourans* and his new leader Bori khan, have prepared themselves to take revenge. It is for their revenge of the emperor for killing the leader and his father as well. On their way, they are from one village to another to tear down China's empire one by one. The *Rourans* begin to prepare themselves. He wants to see the fear in the eyes of the royal guards. It can be seen in the following quotation.

“He wanted to see fear in the eyes of the guards when they noticed him and his men. The sound carried across the steppe and the guard spotted Bori khan and his warriors. A smile of satisfaction spread over the Rouran leader's face as he saw panic fill the guard's eyes. As the guard began a fruitless attempt to warn the other soldiers and close the marketplace gates, Bori khan dropped his arm. In an instant, the Shadow Warriors raced across the desert. Their horses' hooves pounded on the sand, creating a huge cloud of dust behind them. The giant beasts ate up the distance and soon were upon the trading post. Up on the wall, guards began to let loose arrows. But their aim was off, their hands shaky. The arrows flew wide and short and the Shadow Warriors galloped closer. “take out the leader!” Bori khan heard one of the guards shout. Lifting his eyes, he saw another guard take aim. Bori khan didn't hesitate.” (Rudnick 2020: 32-33)

It can be seen above that the group of the *Rourans* has started to visit the royal village one by one. They come to a marketplace guarded by the royal guards, and make a scene there. The *Rourans* really enjoy the panic in the eyes of the guards, and then they start to approach slowly and to cause chaos in the marketplace.

4.3 Gender Inequality Seen through Socio-Cultural Context in the Novel

Gender Inequality seen through Socio-Cultural Context means to describe the phenomenon of gender inequality that occurs in the social sphere (Yimer, 2016). Women or men are different from functions. As the same as men, women also deserve to have dreams and aspirations. *Mulan* just wants to be honest with what she does to herself and others. When she is honest about her identity as a woman on the battlefield, *Mulan* is not given the trust and opportunity to be someone who can prove that she can also help and fight together to save her empire, family and pride. A woman by nature at that time has to follow the orders or wishes of her family and husband. Even though she lies and changes her identity as a man, she commits it all for her father. She replaces her father who is sick. She worries about her father's current condition.

She is sure her father would not be able to return home safely from the battlefield. The phenomenon of gender inequality (women) seen from social culture can be seen from the following quotation.

"I am Hua Mulan," she said, her voice strong, steady, and feminine. Commander Tung's expression had grown icy. "you're the imposter," he hissed his voice heavy with disappointment. "you have betrayed your regiment". Mulan hung her head in shame. Commander Tung went on. "you have brought disgrace to Hua family." His word cut Mulan like a sword through her heart. Her head flew up. There was nothing worse he could say. "Commander..." she begged. The commander didn't let her finish. "Your deceit is my shame", he went on. "When we return to the capital, I will yield my command." What punishment assigned to this imposter?" he asked. Commander Tung didn't hesitate. "Expulsion." (Rudnick's 2020: 220-222)

It can be seen above that the social culture of the Chinese empire of that century, regarding the limitations of doing something, especially women, *Mulan* finally realizes that what she has been doing all this time based on lies. It will not be a blessing for her. It is no matter how good her intentions are. After her little conversation with the witch Xianniang, she realizes how important her honesty is as her father Zhou says in the following quotation below.

"Failure is not fatal, Mulan. This is the lesson of the phoenix. What matters is that each day you rise up and continue. The phoenix will watch over you. That's her job. Your job is to bring honor to your family." (Rudnick's 2020: 23)

It can be seen above that Zhou, the father of *Mulan*, always reminds her about the phoenix that always sees her and protects her wherever she is. He says that the phoenix is half male and half female. She is both beautiful and strong. Because of that, Mulan gets up and realizes that honesty is very important, and finally she chooses to be honest with everyone on the battlefield. She risks all the lies. She will bring her family's honor based on honesty. But still beside being disappointed, commander Tung also knows the rules that a woman or girl should just stay at home to wait for being married instead of the other way around, being curious and reckless. However, at the same time it is unfair for *Mulan* who always feels isolated as a woman who always loves to be active outside the house. Also. She has an adventurous spirit. Behind it all, apart from *Mulan* having a free and adventurous nature, this case does not make her an excuse to be free from marriage. She does all this truthfully for her father because she loves him very much.

5. Conclusion

After analyzing the gender (women) inequality in the novel *Mulan*, the conclusion can be presented. To begin with, the phenomena of gender inequality can be found in the novel. Women and men are treated differently. As it is described in the novel that Mulan, the protagonist cannot do what she wants freely. Even though her father gives her the freedom to do what she liked since she is young, the environment around her demands that she has to behave like the other girls. It is far different from what boys do as they like. Next, the phenomena of the gender difference cover two

occurrences in the novel: first, violence against women; second, power oppression to women. In the novel, there is violence in limiting activities and emotions against the character Mulan herself, Mulan forces herself to follow the habits of the environment around her. Besides, the rule powered by the kingdom limit the women's participation in the war. The emperor brings about fear to women to fight the system and the cultural power. It is described how gender Inequality is seen through socio-cultural context. The phenomenon of gender inequality occurs in the social sphere. Women or men are differently treated. Women activities are limited by the cultural doctrine. Women are forbidden to do activities like men do. If women break the cultural law, they will get costumery punishment by the society.

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