

**BEING POWERLESS: WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE UNDER CHINESE  
PATRIARCHAL CULTURE AS SEEN IN NOVEL SNOW FLOWER AND  
THE SECRET FAN BY LISA SEE**

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**DESY DALFIA**

**06985002**

**ENGLISH DEPARTMENT  
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES – ANDALAS UNIVERSITY  
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## ABSTRAK

Skripsi ini membahas karya Lisa See yang berjudul Snow Flower and the Secret Fan. Dalam novel ini penulis menganalisis mengenai diskriminasi gender terhadap kaum perempuan dan ketidakberdayaan perempuan dalam menentang sistem patriarki tersebut. Penulis juga memberikan gambaran tradisi Cina terhadap perempuan yang merupakan suatu bentuk praktek patriarki yang merugikan kaum perempuan.

Dalam menganalisis novel ini, penulis menggunakan kritik sastra feminis yaitu teori yang dipelopori oleh Elaine Showalter, *Gynocriticism*. Dengan pendekatan yang digunakan dapat diperlihatkan bagaimana perempuan menulis tentang pengalaman perempuan (*woman's experience*) dalam sebuah karya sastra yang terdapat budaya patriarki. Dalam penelitian ini penulis menggunakan metode ekspresif yang berfokus pada sudut pandang pengarang.

Berdasarkan hasil yang didapat dari analisis terhadap karya ini dan didukung dengan sumber-sumber yang ada maka penulis menyimpulkan bahwa adanya ketidakberdayaan kaum perempuan untuk menentang ide-ide patriarki yang ada dalam budaya patriarki. Hal ini tergambar melalui tokoh-tokoh utama, Lily and Snow Flower, dan dengan tokoh-tokoh perempuan lainnya.

Kata Kunci: Gender discrimination, Gynocriticism, Powerlessness,

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 The Background of the Research

Feminism is related to movements which aimed to establish and defend equal political, economic, and social rights and opportunities for women. Guerin et al mention that feminism in its diversity concerns with the marginalization of all women: that is, with their being relegated to a secondary position (1999:196).

Feminist literature, as the name suggests, is based on the principles of feminism, and refers to any literary work that centers around the struggle of a woman for equality, and to be accepted as a human being, before being cast into a gender stereotype (Lalwani, 2010). Feminist literary criticism aims to analyze the literary works by using women perspective toward development of women's life especially for image of women that illustrated in the literary work.

Lisa See is a Chinese American writer and novelist who has written historical fictions. The Chinese side of her family has had a great impact on her life and work. Most of See's books such as Snow Flower and the Secret Fan (2005) and Peony in Love (2009) are in the best seller list. Lisa See's Snow Flower and the Secret Fan and Peony in Love have attracted many readers to the genre with her exquisitely detail insights into women in seventeenth- and nineteenth-century China (Saricks 2009: 305).

Lisa See is a historical fiction writer who focuses on the roles of women especially in her popular book Snow Flower and the Secret Fan. She was honored

as National Woman of the Year by the Organization of Chinese American Women in 2001 and was the recipient of the Chinese American Museum's History Makers Award in Fall 2003.

Snow Flower and the Secret Fan was published by Random House in 2005. This novel tells the story of 19<sup>th</sup> century Chinese culture, especially about the life of the women which is presented through the depiction the tradition of footbinding (*Footbinding*, was a custom practiced on young girls and women for approximately one thousand years in China, beginning in the 10th century and ending in the first half of 20th century), *Nu Shu* writing as women's secrets that should not be known by men (*Nu Shu*, is a syllabic script, a simplification of Chinese characters that was used exclusively among women in Jiangyong County in Hunan province of southern China), marriage ceremony until the wedding, as well as the daily lives of Chinese women in their life from childhood to elderly age.

Feminist literature will often reflect the cultural assumptions and attitudes of its period, and that of course includes attitudes towards women: their status, their roles and their expectation. Feminism concerns with the wide issues of gender in social and cultural contents. There are many works that deal with many topics of women, such as women's history, women labor, women psychology, lesbian, etc ("Feminist" par 7).

In the novel Snow Flower And The Secret Fan, See describes Chinese women's life in the 19<sup>th</sup> century through the life of two main characters Lily and Snow Flower. The lifelong story, intimate friends called *laotong* of Lily and Snow

Flower (*Laotong*, means "old same" or kindred spirits. In old China, young women would be matched together and form *laotong* relationships. These are lifelong intimate friendships that offer emotional support throughout all of life's ups and downs.), about their imprisonment by rigid codes of conduct for women and their betrayal by pride and love.

The writer sees many aspects that can be analyzed in this novel based on feminist criticism. Starting from the position of women in Chinese culture which is underestimated by men. Women are only required to give birth to boys, to do the housework and to serve the husband's family after marriage. It also tells about the suffering of women to get a better life. This novel also tells about the footbinding custom in order to get the ideal size and form of foot for women at that time. With the ideal form and size of foot, a woman can marry a man from upper class family. Next, *Nu Shu* writing is the form of rebellion of women. With this *Nu shu* writing the woman can express what they feel to the other women.

From the description above, the writer analyzes the novel using feminist approach because this novel contains many issues about women. In this research the writer intends to conduct a research entitled: "Being Powerless: Women's Experience under Chinese Patriarchal Culture as Seen in Novel Snow Flower And The Secret Fan By Lisa See".

## **1.2 The Identification of the Problem**

Lily and her friend Snow Flower are a *laotong* pair who are related to each other more closely than husband and wife. A *laotong* relationship is made by

choice for the purpose of emotional companionship and eternal fidelity. A marriage is not made by choice and has only one purpose that is to have sons. The two girls experience the painful process of foot binding at the same time, and write letters to one another on fans with *Nu Shu*, a secret phonetic form of women's writing. In addition to the language itself, the young women learn *Nu Shu* songs and stories.

From the summary above, the writer focuses on analyzing the gender discrimination and Chinese women's Powerlessness against Chinese's patriarchal ideas as reflected in the novel Snow Flower and the Secret Fan by Lisa See.

### **1.3 The Scope of the Research**

In analyzing the novel Snow Flower And The Secret Fan, the writer makes some points to limit the research, they are:

1. Gender discrimination Experienced by women in Chinese Patriarchal culture
2. Chinese women's Powerlessness under the patriarchal culture as reflected in the novel.

### **1.4 The Objective of the Reseachr**

The objective of the research is to show the gender discrimination toward women in Chinese traditional roles and feminist issues occur in the novel. The writer also wants to show Chinese women's Powerlessness under the patriarchal culture as reflected in the novel Snow Flower And The Secret Fan by Lisa See.

## 1.5 The Review of the Previous Studies

In conducting the research the writer uses the novel entitled Snow Flower And the Secret Fan written by Lisa See as the primary data. The writer also needs supporting data to analyze the novel. The writer provides some previous researches related to the research.

In her article entitled The role of Nu Shu in Snow Flower and the Secret Fan, by Lisa See Richardson describes about the role of Nu Shu in Chinese women's life. Nu Shu has important role in daily life of Chinese women. Many messages pass between them as they continue to learn *Nu Shu*. When they are together, they spend hours practicing the characters, tracing the strokes with their fingers on each other's palms. They listen to stories and sing songs. It is a tool to communicate each other and also through the *Nu Shu* itself the women recorded their life story. The joys of women are few, and their sorrows many in the folds of their secret fan. This article is useful for the writer because in this article the author provides the information about the role of *Nu Shu* in Chinese Women's life (2010).

Sara Peyton also describes the cruelty of the footbinding custom in the novel that gives pain to the women in order to get the ideal size of foot. This article is useful for the writer because in this article the writer can see the impact of the footbinding custom toward the Chinese women in the nineteen century era. (Bound by Oppression and A Secret Tongue, 2005)

Faiqah Mahmudah has written an undergraduate thesis entitled Women's Strategies to Fight against Patriarchal System: A Feminist Analysis toward Pearl S. Buck's Imperial Women. In this research, she discusses about image of woman in the novel with attention to cultural aspect. She concludes that the position of woman in the novel belongs to feminist movement although they are not against the patriarchal system. The women set the strategy for entry into the patriarchal system that aims to equalize women to men. This thesis is useful for the writer to see how the patriarchal system treats women (2010).

### **1.6 Theoretical Framework**

In this research, the writer analyses the suffering because of gender discrimination and the form of rebellion of women in Chinese traditional role in the novel Snow Flower and the Secret Fan by Lisa See by using feminist approach. The writer uses expressive approach as the method to analyze the novel itself. Expressive criticism treats a literary work primarily in relation to its author (Abrams 1999: 51). It means that the writer focuses on the author's point of view and based the analysis on her knowledge and her experience.

Feminism is a theory that proposes men and women should be equal politically, economically and socially. The theory says that there are fundamental personalities differences between men and women, and that woman's differences



are special and should be celebrated. This theory of feminism supports the notion that there are biological differences between men and women.

Feminism is both an intellectual commitment and a political movement that seeks justice for women and the end of sexism in all forms. However, there are many different kinds of feminism. Feminists disagree with what sexism contains, and what exactly ought to be done about it; they disagree about what it means to be a woman or a man and what social and political implications gender has or should have. Nonetheless, motivated by the quest for social justice, feminist inquiry provides a wide range of perspectives on social, cultural, and political phenomena. Important topics for feminist theory and politics include: the body, class and work, disability, the family, globalization, human rights, popular culture, race and racism, reproduction, science, the self, sex work, and sexuality (“Topics” par 1).

The writer wants to present the movement of feminism in literature, especially that is contained in the novel Snow Flower and the Secret Fan by Lisa See. The writer wants to show how the author pours her thoughts about Chinese women who live under the patriarchal society system. This is about the male role is more dominant and take the women as objects. So that the writer applies the feminist literary criticism proposed by Elaine Showalter which focuses on woman as writer or as we called Gynocritics.

According to Barry in Beginning theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural theory: 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, Showalter divides the three phases of women’s writing

tradition. The first is feminine phase (1840-1880), women wrote in an effort to equal the intellectual achievements of the male culture and internalized its assumption about female nature. The second is feminist phase (1880-1920) a condition of female writing is radical and often separatist positions are maintained. And the last is female phase (1920-present), which looked particularly at female writing and experience (2002: 123). From three phases above, the writer sees Snow Flower and the Secret Fan deal with third phase of Showalter division that is female phase because Lisa See tells women experience under the patriarchal system and the unfair treatment toward women in the society.

Bressler mentions that “Showalter’s term gynocriticism has now become synonymous with the study of women as writers and provides critics with four models concerning the nature of women’s writing that help answer some of the chief concerns of feminist criticism: the biological, linguistics, psychoanalytic and cultural” (1999 : 185). This research is belong to the cultural aspects of Gynocriticism because the cultural model investigates how the society in which female authors work and function shape women’s goals, responses, and points of view. The cultural aspect in this novel deals with the gender discrimination in the society.

This novel is created by the author based on her research about the Chinese tradition and then she pours into her work. The story of the novel has been filtered through her heart, her knowledge, her experience, and her research. In this research the writer analyzes the suffering that is caused by the gender

discrimination in the society toward the female characters in the novel itself. Novel Snow Flower and the Secret Fan describes how the patriarchal system in the Chinese culture at 19<sup>th</sup> century works and how the patriarchal system gives many disadvantages to the women.

In Tyson, Patriarchy in thus, by definition, sexist, which means it promoted the belief that women are innately inferior to men (2006: 85). This patriarchal system makes the image of women weak from man's perspective. As mention in Tyson "...in patriarchy, everything that concerns men usually implies something (usually negative) about women" (2006: 88). Patriarchal system curbs a woman with the rules that make a woman can not become equal with men.

Gender, on sexual discrimination may be characterized as the unequal treatment of a person based solely on that person's sex. Women are not entitled to the same rights and privileges as men. Women are not allowed to vote and usually required to surrender control of their property to their husband upon marriage. Moreover, their educational and occupational opportunities severely limited. It commonly believed that a woman's place just at home, raising children and tending to domestic affairs.

### **1.7 The Method of the Study**

In conducting the research the writer follows three steps. They are collecting data, analyzing data and presenting the result of analysis.

### **1.7.1 Collecting Data**

There are two kinds of data in this research, namely primary and secondary data. The primary data is the novel Snow Flower and the Secret Fan as the object of research and secondary data is the information taken from books, study guide, and sites related to this research. The data has been collected by using library research method.

### **1.7.2 Analyzing the Data**

In analyzing the data, the writer starts from analyzing the primary data, then the writer analyzing each part of the novel which supports the analysis by using book, the theory and the application of literary criticism especially deals with feminist approach which support the analysis.

### **1.7.3 Presenting the Result of Analysis**

The result of this analysis is presented descriptively based on feminist theory. The writer explains about the suffering and rebellion of women in Chinese traditional role as reflected in the novel.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **CONCLUSION**

After analyzing Lisa See's Snow Flower and the Secret Fan the writer can conclude several points of the author's ideas related to the feminism especially about Gynocriticism by Elaine Showalter. Gynocriticism attempts to understand women's writing as a basic part of female reality.

According to Elaine Showalter, Gynocritic deals with woman's experience. In See's novel, the writer finds See's ideas about powerlessness of women under the patriarchal system in China. In the previous chapter the writer provides the review about women's life in the remote area of 19<sup>th</sup> century China. Women are required to obey the men who have more power and to be discriminated by having no chance to get formal education to the women. Then the women have responsibility to bear a boy where son is more valuable and expected to get a better life for women. Furthermore the women have to pass the painful tradition of footbinding to get the perfect form and size of lily feet with the length of seven centimeters only. Footbinding in China in the past is believed as standard of beauty and could make a woman be marriageable to the men from upper class. These are the portrait of women's life under the patriarchal system that reflected in the novel.

From the feminist perspective, See reveals her ideas through the female characters in her novel. Based on research and her experience living in Chinatown within Chinese tradition she creates her own ideology about women's

powerlessness based on women experience in china. In her novel, she describes capability of women to create their own writing called *Nu Shu* which is the medium for sharing and as proof of women creativity. Then See shows her disagreement about the patriarchal ideas that a daughter is the worthless thing by the willingness of Lily to have a daughter. The last thing See shows is her rejection of footbinding by postpones binding her daughter's feet. See argues that the concept of beauty accepted in society should not be through a painful process. The beauty could not be determined by the culture especially in patriarchy because culture itself is made by the men to weaken the women.

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