



FEMININITY ASPECT AS REFLECTED IN LISA SEE'S SNOW FLOWER AND THE SECRET FAN

Yunie Amalia Rakhmyta

STAIN Gajah Putih Takengon, Aceh Tengah, Aceh

Email: amalia.nirfan@gmail.com

Abstract. The purpose of this study is to describe forms oppression faced by Chinese women in the nineteenth century as reflected in the novel "Snow Flower and the Secret Fan" written by Lisa See, then to find out the way of the Chinese women to minimize their secluded life. This study is carried out with descriptive research which is collected with documentary technique and used a documentary sheet as the instrument. The finding indicates about the idea of femininity aspect that describes in the oppression faced by Chinese women. This oppression derives into three forms of oppression; emotional oppression, physical oppression, and sexual oppression. The Chinese women try to obey the particular custom judge by the culture to construct the femininity aspect, but secretly they try to find a way to minimize their secluded life through Nu Shu (secret writing) and having a baby boy. It is hoped that the result of this study will be useful to anyone who wants to study women life situation in a certain communities.

Kata kunci: Femininity, novel, oppression.

Introduction

In the 18th century the general term of Novel was originally written in verse. Then known as prose, then became the regular medium with the introduction of paper. Prose provides the ideal matter for silent and intimate reading; it could be translated without greater stylistic losses. Paper could be easier spent on coincidental wordings of long prose histories. Verse romances become part of the epic tradition; prose romances developed an internal debate over their proper design and their special history. A search for precursors ensued with the effect that the modern generic term known as "novel".

There are various subgenres of the novel. The novel is like a mirror that reflects all the lives aspects of people in certain places. Since it is expanded, those literary works mostly written by men, even for several centuries almost no women was admitted as a writer. Women right was limited by men dominancy. Of course it raised question among the literary observer. Men perception's become a measurement for quality of literary works. Ironically, most of those writers took women as their character. For those reason, raised movements in literary critics. The movement was known as feminimism. In 19th century, it was in the USA that feminism developed most, becoming a model for women's movements in othe countries. Certainly in the 19th century in Britain and the United States, this term was a matter for much public discussion and debate.

This study is not to survey the history of feminism as a set of ideas or as a series of political movement, but rather is to sketch one of the central uses of the term that are most relevant to those interested in literary works especially in contemporary novel written by Woman called femininity.

The novel *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* written by Lisa See is one of literary works that gives an important value for human life especially woman. This novel achieved as New York Best Seller Version 2005. Belong to the femininity aspect, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* takes us into 19th century in China, where the girls had their feet bound. Feet binding mean that women feet have to be crushed to the size of lily flowers, this is a ritual of beauty that started at age six and took two full years to complete. When foot binding onward, girls and women lived secluded in a second-story chamber of their household. This is basically planted at the very heart of Confucian society.

Nineteenth century China was a culture in which education and scholarship was limited to the male elite. Women secluded from age 7 until death. Married out into the husband's family. Unless they had sons, women were isolated from anyone who cared about them personally. What they said and how they communicated was rigidly formalized, learning the calligraphy of men was prohibited, so they developed a secret writing called *nu shu*. Lisa See briefly describes how woman actually formed by the cultural tradition.

In line with previous description, it will be interesting to analyze this novel because the quality of Lisa See's novel is inclined to illustrate the life of women in the past especially in China. The way they live, what they rights, how they struggle for better life. The study is focused the analysis of femininity aspect in Lisa See *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*. In relation to the background, formulate the problem of study as follows: (1) what are the forms of oppression faced by Chinese women in the novel?, and (2) how do the women minimize their secluded life?

Review Of Related Literature

1. Novel

Burries (1997) stated that novel which emerged in Spain during the seventeenth century and in England during the eighteenth century is "an invented prose narrative of considerable length and a certain complexity deals imaginatively with human experience usually through a connected sequence of events involving a group of person in specific setting". Thus, as a literary work, novel usually portrays the characters and presents and organized series of event and settings.

2. Femininity

Women are sometimes forced to go to extremes to meet such exacting cultural dictates of what is considered attractive. For example is foot binding, which occurred for several centuries in China. Foot binding produce unnaturally small and deformed feet, where toes often rotted due to lack of circulation. More example is corsets, in the early 20th century in Europe, women were corsets that restricted their movement and caused a variety of health problems including shortness of breath. Webster (1996: 708) define femininity refers to qualities and behaviours judged by a particular culture to be ideally associated with or especially appropriate to women and girls.

Femininity is often considered to be negative due to its contradiction of traditional rules. However, this varies by location and culture and certain traits and behaviors. In China until the last century, some mothers broke their daughter's feet to give them tiny, unnatural feet for the reason of femininity.

3. Oppression

The method that constructed by society through woman in order to to form the femininity aspect raised oppression. Marilyn Frye stated that “oppression is a strong word. It repels an attracts. It is dangerous and dangerously fashionable and endangered. It is much misused and sometimes not innocently”. Recently, this is being a based reason to thefeminist todefense feminism.

Loraine Code divided oppression into three:

- a) Emotional oppression, is the persistent emotional maltreatment such as development.
- b) Physical oppression, is the violence that includes hitting, shaking, throwing, poisoning, burning, sclading, drowning, suffocating orotherwise causing physical harm.
- c) Sexual oppression, involves forcing or enticing the victim to take part in sexual activity, including prostitution. The activities may include physical contact including penetrative or nonpenetrative. It also may includes non contacts activities, such as involving someone in looking at, or in the production of, pornographic material or watching sexual activities, or encouraging them to behave in sexually inapropriate ways.

The oppression faced by Chinese women mostly derived from man and someties from the elder woman in their own family. In also divided into two levels, the oppression that occurred since kid until marriage age and oppression that occurred after married.

4. Chinese Woman in Nineteenth century

Traditionally, male babies were valued muchmore than female offspring. Girls were looked as a liability and in times of economic hardship often were sold into lives of servitude or prostitution. Confucian values place women as strictly subordinate to men, and this was reflected in traditional society. Woman had no rights and were treated as possessions, first of their father’s, second of their husband’s, and later for her son. The practice of foot binding was symbolic of the strictures women faced in all aspects of life. This practice was not outlawed until 1901. The procedure was inflicted mainly on upper-class and middle-class women.

Research Methodology

This study is a descriptive research on a literature of “Lisa See’s Snow Flower and the Secret Fan”. It describes the social life of women in nineteenth century of China. This study intends to analyze the femininity aspect reflected in it. The technique for collecting data is conducted to get information which is neede to support the goals of research. The data of this study is collected by using documentary technique. In which, the instrument for collectingdata is documentary sheet. For the main data, Lisa See’s novel Snow Flower and the Secret Fan is used primarily.

In this study, the data is analyzed by description technique as following steps:

- a) Identifying data that includes the forms of oppression and the way to minimize their secluded life.

- b) Reducing data which has been identified proper to the forms of oppression and the way the minimize it.
- c) Classifying the data in line with the forms of oppression and the way to minimize their secluded life.
- d) Analyzing and interpreting the data which has been classified.
- e) Concluding the data.

In this study the forms of treatment received by Chinese women in order to construct femininity aspect was come in the forms of oppression called the footbinding process. But it was not only oppression received by the women in order to construct their qualities and behaviors, there was much oppression and unfairness for the women. It is also includes the way to minimize their secluded life. The study deals with the idea of femininity in Lisa See's novel *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* or more especially the objectives are what the forms of oppression faced by Chinese women in the novel, and how do the women minimize their secluded life.

Findings and Discussion

1. Forms of Oppression Faced by Chinese Women in The Novel.

Belows are several description found in the novel. There are three types of oppression faced by the Chinese women. Emotional oppression, physical oppression, and sexual oppression.

a. Emotional Oppression

Lily is the main character of this story. She was a Chinese woman who was born on the third year of Emperor Danguang's in 1823. Puwei is her home village. She lived in an era within man fully lead the system of life. This story was present since Lily as little girl. In her childhood, she never positioned as the true child within this family, because the only true child is her big brother as a male.

I have spent my life in upstairs women's room. Yes, I have gone to the temple, traveled back to my natal home, even visited with Snow Flower, but I know little about the outer realm.
(SEE, 2005:4)

I have lost five children and my husband has blamed me each time. He always takes his frustration and stuffs it in his fists. When those weapons need to find their release, they find me, I used to think he was angry that I'd been pregnant with girls. But now, with my son...
(SEE, 2005:210)

Many of those babies die through babies are die through miscarriages, at childbirth, or from illness. Girls was susceptible to weakness from poor food and neglect, they never outgrow their vulnerability. Women are told to love their in-laws, but they enter those families as strangers, as the lowest person in the household, just one step on the ladder above a servant.

b. Physical Oppression

A woman hoped to have five children who reach adulthood. For that to happen, those women must get pregnant every one or two years. Many of those babies die through miscarriages, at childbirth or from illness. Girl either die young from footbinding as Lily's young sister died, in giving birth, or from too much work with too little nourishment. They believe baby boys, so precious, can die just as

easily. It means a mother could be crueler to her daughter than her son as represent in:

I handed the sticks to Mama, hoping for her praise. After all, it's not so easy for a little girl to hug a bucket of water or carry firewood. But mama didn't say anything. (SEE, 2005:12)

Mama asked aunt to go downstairs for tea, as soon as aunt was gone, my mother crossed the room, leaned her cane against the table where I sat, grabbed my arm, and sank her nails into my flesh. (SEE, 2005:136)

Another basic treatment for the little girl is footbinding. In China, there was a tradition for a little girl to bind their foot in order to get small lily flower size about 7 cm lengths. The goal was to achieve a pair of perfectly bound feet with seven distinct attributes: they should be small, narrow, straight, pointed, and arched, yet still fragrant and soft in texture. Of these requirements, length is most important, seven centimeters, the ideal is about the length of thumb. A perfect foot should be shaped like the bud of a lotus. It should be full and round at the heel, come to a point at the front, with all weight borne by the big toe alone. This means that the toes and arch of the foot must be broken and bent under to meet the heel. Finally, the cleft formed by the forefoot and heel should be deep enough to hide a large cash piece.

The first time Lily's mother pushed her to begin the binding, she tried with a rough way, but her mother tried to push her. "*Mama's dragging me down the alley*". *Mama scolded me loudly. "You're a worthless nothing. You're an embarrassment to our ancestor"*. (SEE, 2005:27).

No one can imagine how the pain feels like did, it hurt and it can not describe by words. Many girls also died in this process because they could not hold on the pain or because the infection and over bleeding. As seen in this description:

"I heard something crack". One of my toes had broken. I thought the sound was something internal to my own body; but it was so sharp that everyone in the women's chamber heard it. My mother said: "Move! Progress is finally being made!". Walking my whole body trembled. By nightfall the eight toes that needed to be broken had broken, but I was still made to walk. I felt my broken toes under the weight of every step I took, for they were loose in my shoes. (SEE, 2005:30).

In China, since a kid women usually treated as the last. It was not a strange condition when a daughter had to be patience waited for her turn to eat, although if there was enough food to eat, her brother must be a priority. So the girls had not strong enough to defense for the disease because they did not get enough healthy supply for their body.

3. Sexual Oppression

Women hope to have five children who reach adulthood. For that to happen, so they must get pregnant every one or two years. Son gives a woman identity, as well as dignity, protection and economic value. Sons are a woman's crowning glory. The women's feet were so forbidden to be showed in public area because their feet also regard as a symbol of women's sexual part. Only women and their husband actually could see it. As Lily state: "... *And we overcome our*

embarrassment about other body functions, learning to do our business behind a tree or in the common latrine, once it was dug". (SEE, 2005:197). The quotations show us that the author of the novel wants to remind that women and men are treated differently in 19th century of China. The author wants to describe eliminate an unequal treatment of women especially come from the culture.

2. The Way to Minimize Women's Secluded Life

The central issues of this novel are basically about women and their life in 19th century of China. Here are women who move into loveless arranged marriages. They are confined to the upstairs chambers with their mother-in-law and sister in-law. They are basically a servants. The women are living in cultural isolation, and no one expected them to have an intellectual thought, to be creative, to show any kind of emotions. There two ways for Chinese women to minimize their secluded life; through *nu shu* and having a son.

a. *Nu Shu*

Nu shu is a special written language used and understood only by women in the past China. This mysterious language has been handed down, from mother to daughter, for generation to generation. They wrote their female script on fans, paper, handkerchiefs or embroidered the characters on cloth. Through *nu shu*, the women were able to fly out of those windows and go to another village where they would find somebody who would listen to them. *Nu shu* is part of tradition of complaint, but also way for those women to write about what was going on in their lives, as Lily state:

My only rebellion came in the form of nu shu, our women's secret writing. My first break with tradition came when Snow Flower—my laotong, my "old same, my secret—writing partner—sent me the fan that sits here on my table, and then again after I met her.

(SEE, 2005:4)

In the novel, the author explained that *nu shu* is connected to their binding.

With her bold act, I realized the true purpose of our secret writing. It was not to compose girlish notes to each other or even to introduce us to the women in our husband's families. Our nu shu was a means for our bound feet to carry us to each other, for our thoughts to fly across the fields as Snow Flower had written.

(SEE, 2005:169).

Nu shu was a delicate, graceful script handed down from grandmother to granddaughter, from elderly aunt to adolescent niece, from girlfriend to girlfriend, and never ever shared with the men and boys. Actually based on data of historical museum in Beijing, men's writing has more than 50000 characters. Women's writing has perhaps 600 characters, which used phonetically.

b. Having a son

The other way is by having a son. As quote from the novel:

Sons were the foundation of a woman's self. A son gave women her identity, as well as dignity protection, and economic value. They created the link between his father and his ancestors. Shows in the statements in the novel: "Uncle Lu was the

ultimate master, but I secured my place by being the first daughter –in-law and then by giving my husband his first son.

(SEE, 2005:151).

For those reason a woman also told the young women who have married or will be married that they should be hurry to have a baby boy.

Confucian values placed women as strictly subordinate to men and this was reflected in traditional society. Women had no rights and were treated as possessions, first of their father's and later of their husband's. The practice of footbinding was symbolic of the strictures women faced in all aspects of life. From the age of seven, girls had their feet wrapped tightly, stunting their growth and virtually crippling them in the name of beauty.

Footbinding might have started as a fashion among women from a few elite families, but once it became widespread during the twelfth century, it became part of training which prepared girls for their roles as married women in traditional patriarchal family. These reason support the construction of femininity which refer to the beauty and refers to qualities and behaviors of Chinese women. It was formed to be ideally associated to women and girls. In fact, this oppression or unfair treatment toward women becomes an ordinary act in human social life or common in human culture from the past until now.

Oppression could be derived in form of emotional oppression, physical oppression, or sexual oppression. In the case of footbinding and other oppression faced by Chinese women, it could be viewed as the method that constructed by society through woman in order to form the femininity aspect. Therefore oppression especially footbinding, examined the different ways in which femininity was constituted as a "problem" in feminism growth.

Conclusion

Afer analyzing the statement that describe women oppression and also the way they minimize their secluded life based on novel "Snow Flower and the Secret Fan" written by Lisa See, it can be conclude that the life of women in 19th century of China was so hard. Footbinding began as a luxury among the rich. It made the women more dependant on others and less useful around the house.

These three types of oppression occurred in Chinese women's life; emotional oppression such as being ignored, physical oppression hitting, and sexual oppression. The only way to minimize their secluded life were wrote on *nu shu* and having sons.

To fully understand a paractice such as foot binding, people have to practice cultural relativism. That is in most case better to suspend own personal judgment and attempt to understand this custom in China's own cultural term.

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