

OPPRESSION TOWARD WOMEN REFLECTED IN FEMALE CHARACTERS IN DRAMA *THE CONDUCT OF LIFE* (1985) BY MARIA IRENE FORNES AS A FEMINISM STUDY

Nurul Aminah¹ Yulistiyanti²
Universitas Stikubank

nurulpm124@gmail.com¹ yulistiyanti@edu.unisbank.ac.id²

Abstract

The study reveals woman oppression in *The Conduct of Life* by Maria Irene Fornes. The purpose of this paper is to describe feminist character of Maria Irene Fornes's *The Conduct of Life* by analyzing the female character. This study applied qualitative study and applied feminist theory of Kate Millet (1969) in her book entitled *Sexual Politics*. The data were collected by reading the text of drama comprehensively and taking some notes on important words, sentences, and narration that relate to the topic. After analyzing the data, it can be concluded that the female character in Maria Irene Fornes *The Conduct of Life* accepted oppression because of the low level of law that imposed in the 19th century, disregarding of society that is known as patriarchy. The oppression that the female characters get is verbal oppression and physical abuse (sexual abuse).

Keywords: *Sexual Politics, Kate Millet, the Conduct of Life, Maria Irene Fornes, Woman Oppression*

1. INTRODUCTION

Oppression toward women is an action performed by a person or group of people by oppressing or committing a violent act. Oppression toward women is the oppression that occurs in women who are oppressed by men. Women oppression can happen anywhere. For example, women oppression can occur within the family, school, work, and others. The oppression can take the form of physical, verbal, and mind.

Some opinions state that rape is caused by the women. According to men, woman is a weak person and one who can arouse a man's lust. The dominance of a patriarchal culture that places women as subordinate to men is a major factor in rape. In the patriarchal culture the status of women is considered lower because the role of domestic space is not rewarded at all (materially). As a woman must also be able to accept the stigma that they are the weak and obedient while men

are strong, powerful, and tough, this mindset makes women think right that women do not have the strength to fight men. In general, a man also has a higher authority than a woman.

The topic of oppression toward women can be found in literary works. One of literary works that presents the oppression is a drama entitled "*The Conduct of Life*". *The Conduct of Life* was written in 1985 by Maria Irene Fornes. It is one of Maria Irene Fornes's most critically acclaimed plays. This work brings together issues of politics, gender, and sexuality to show how forms of national and domestic violence often exist in direct relationship to one another. *The Conduct of Life* tells about a young, beautiful, innocent, hopeless and weak girl. It seems that she has all categories to become victim of sexual desire of man domination which defines woman as the object of men. The oppression gained by a young girl or underage girl is sex abuse or sexual harassment. She was raped by a man that she did not know who he is. Then *The Conduct of Life* also tells about a married woman. She married with a man ten years his elder. She never gets attention of her husband and he always ignores her. It seems that she feels oppressed and in her marriage she feels hurt.

This thesis explains oppression toward women that occurs in female characters in the drama *The Conduct of Life* (1985). Based on the explanation from the background, there are some problems of study here as follows:

1. What kind of oppression do the female characters in drama *The Conduct of Life* receive?
2. Why do the female characters get oppression?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Previous Studies

The first previous study is from in Diamantino J. N. Hanjan Soares. *Machismo as seen through Maria Irene Fornes 'titled The Conduct of Life*. In his research or in Diamantino's study, he discusses the machismo point of view from the drama by Maria Irene Fornes *The Conduct of Life*. In his study he tells about Machismo. It is a gender issue that exists in Latin countries, because it is part of their patriarchal culture where men are expected to be more oppressive, violent and superior to women. In his study, he found that the male characters in the drama *The Conduct of Life* are depicted differently from one another. Orlando is described as a hard, intolerant, aggressive and selfish Latin who embraces machismo as his way of life. However, Alejo is described as a weak person who has lost the passion of life. He seems like a person who looks down on machismo.

Then the second previous study by Oktavionita Putri from Andalas University about *Daniel Defoe's Patriarchal Perspectives as Reflected in Moll Flanders; A Sexual Politics Approach*. This research is telling about Daniel

Dafoe's perspective through his novel story that makes a negative character on woman. The author chose Moll Flanders as the object of research because Dafoe wrote this story based on his personal experience while he was in prison. Her study uses a feminist approach that is sexual politics proposed by Kate Millet. It states that there is a political content in this work on representing female figures in their works to form public opinion. The results of this analysis show that first, Defoe uses two patriarchal terms, named "gentlewoman" and "market". It is to build a negative image of women through the main character Moll. Second, Daniel Defoe as a male writer cannot escape from a patriarchal mindset that tends to condescend women.

Oppression toward Women

According to Gil (1994:233) oppression is an unfair action or cruel that is used to control another person or group. It refers to relations of domination and exploitation - economic, social and psychological - between individuals; between social groups and classes within and beyond societies; and, globally, between entire societies. Injustice refers to discriminatory, dehumanizing, and development-inhibiting conditions of living (e.g., unemployment, poverty, homeless, and lack of health care), imposed by oppressors upon dominated and exploited individuals, social groups, classes and peoples.

Kate Millet's Sexual Politics

In this article, the researcher used the feminism theory by Kate Millet. She is an American feminist writer. She has written a book about feminism entitled *Sexual Politics*. The politics he refers to in this book is not conventional political understanding in the narrow sense as we know it, with regard to the position of government, parties and state meetings. The politics he refers to in this book is not conventional political understanding in the narrow sense as we know it, with regard to the position of government, parties, and state meetings. The politics referred to in this book is something related to the power structure in which one group is controlled by another, where gender or sex is a category as status as an implication of politics, which of course, in the end, cannot be separated from what we know as politics term patriarchal system. Kate Millet's understanding of politics has been developed into a theory of sexual politics which has become a grand theory of radical feminism and has taken women's emancipation to a meaning that goes beyond the equality. In her book, Millett tries to explain what is meant by sexual politics or patriarchy through 8 paradigms, those are ideologically, biologically, sociologically, class system, economy and education, force, anthropology and psychology.

3. METHOD

This article uses qualitative approach. The qualitative approach is research method involves data collection of personal experiences, story about life, interviews, observations, interactions and visual texts which are significant to

people's life. The data are generally non-numerical. The data collected by reading the text of the drama, took some notes on important words, sentences, and narration that relate to the topic. This article applies feminism theory by Kate Millet.

4. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

4.1 The Actions of Oppression toward Women Reflected in Maria Irene Fornes' *The Conducts of Life*

The researcher here will discuss the actions of oppression that happen on female characters in drama *The Conduct of Life* (1985). The actions of oppressions happen to Mrs. Leticia and Nena in *The Conduct of Life* drama. As we discussed in the previous sub-chapter, the women who lives in patriarchal society will get some oppressions by the men. In *The Conduct of Life*, the oppression is experienced by Mrs. Leticia and Nena are not only referred to physical violence but they also get verbally oppressions.

4.1.1 Mrs. Leticia gets Verbal Oppression

In here the researcher will discuss about the oppression that Mrs. Leticia get. She got verbal abuse from her husband named Orlando. Here show that Orlando that Leticia's husband limits and forbids her to do everything she wants. He wanted her to be what he told her to. It can be proved by the citations which said

“... you don't think that is madness? She's mad. Tell her that-she'll think that it's you who's mad. (To Leticia) Hunting is a sport! A skill! Don't talk about something you know nothing about...” Orlando (Fornes, 1985: Scene 2).

The citation above tells that Orlando wants her wife to join him and his friend to go hunting but Leticia refuses him. She does not want to kill animal because they should live freely in the forest. Here Orlando verbally cursed her on purpose without thinking what she feels. It can be one of the actions of oppression because actually Orlando forced her to go hunting with him whom she does not like. Based on Kate Millet's theory about Force and Sociological, it is closely related to this quote. Because Orlando wanted his wife to obey all his words and will. So that Leticia is seen as a good and obedient wife. Even if Orlando hurt Leticia with cursed words or violence, it is perfectly normal things to do because the wife did not obey her husband.

4.1.2 Nena gets Physical Violence (Sexual Abuse)

In this drama, oppression does not only happen to Leticia, but also to Nena, an orphan who was found by Orlando on the side of the road. Orlando treated Nena the same as he treated his wife Leticia. Yet the oppression that happens to

Nena is on action. It seems when Nena is being harassed by Orlando in his basement without Leticia's knowledge. This happened because Orlando has his own sex fantasy to Nena, which he thinks could satisfy his personal desires. This is shown in the following narration.

“Orlando enters the warehouse holding Nena close to him. She wears a gray over-large uniform. She is barefoot. She resist him. She is tearful and frightened. She pulls away and runs the right wall. He follows her.” Narrator (Fornes, 1985: Scene 3)

In this narration, we know that Orlando was harassing Nena by touching her body. This is not appropriate in today's society, though we still often find it. Moreover, Nena is still a student and she is underage. As a victim, Nena could only surrender because she could not fight Orlando. From various aspects, Nena will not be able to escape from Orlando. She looks like a sex slave that Orlando is hiding. Orlando does not care about Nena's opposition is trying to put up with because he is definitely the one who was stronger and dominated her.

4.2 The Cause of Oppression in Maria Irene Fornes' *The Conducts of Life*

In this discussion, the researcher has analyzed the causes of oppression in the 19th century that occurred in *The Conducts of Life* drama.

4.2.1 Patriarchal Society

In the drama, it is explained that oppression occurs because of the lack of equality between men and women. The first factor, men are the most dominant. They also assume that women are weak and their position is also considered inferior. It can be seen in the citation below:

“... I told her that she is not my heir. That's what I said. I told her that she is not in my will, and she will not receive penny of money if I die.” Orlando (Fornes, 1985: Scene 2)

From the citation above it explains that Orlando is trying to offend Leticia's opinion. It also reflects that Orlando wants her to know her position as wife. He pushes her by telling that she would not get anything from him, if he dies. It shows that Orlando has a powerful control over his wealth. It shows that he is more dominant than Leticia. That is why he just wants her to obey everything under Orlando's control as householder.

Then, the second factor is the tradition or culture that prevails in the 19th century. This kind of society is known as patriarchal society. In the drama, the character who adopted patriarchal society and committed the oppression is Orlando. The traditions or cultures that time are made by the dominant society, which they want women to be under men's control. The biggest authority is held by the men. It makes the men perception different, because they are dominant. So, the women will never achieve their own dream, passion or even desire.

“I asked you to come. Because I want something from you. I want you to educate me. I want to study. I want to study so I am not an ignorant person. I want to go to the university. I want to be knowledgeable. I am tired of being ignored. I want to study political science.” Leticia (Fornes, 1985: Scene 2).

In the citation above we can consider that Leticia as a woman and human being has a desire to get higher education. It seems easy to be done, but at that time women are not allowed to have higher education or even job than men. Leticia’s passion and desire could not be achieved easily. The society will assume her as disobedient wife. So that she tells about it to Alejo who will understand her better than Orlando. We know that Leticia really wants to study about political science. She feels that education is very important for her. For her, this is a huge inequality happens that time. She will only be a wife who should always obey and keep under the husband.

The cause of oppression is due to the wrong mindset of a patriarchal society. This result, lead the gender inequality significantly. As seen in the previous sub-chapter, Orlando’s treatment of Leticia and Nena is normal in the society. In this case, Kate Millet has explained her theory of sexual politics, 1970. She said that feminist were still so intent on a reasonable civil rights argument that it seemed almost “Shrill” to look very far into domestic violence and rape. Only later did we become aware that there was a normative element in patriarchal violence, still later we begin to understand the debt of worldwide poverty among women, even the widespread malnourishment of female children (Millet, 1970).

5. CONCLUSION

After the researcher analyzing the findings and discussion in the chapter 4 based on *The Conduct of Life Drama (1985)* as the data. The researcher concluded that oppressions happened to the female characters in *The Conduct of Life* named, Leticia and Nena. Both are struggling to against the man that oppressed them, he is Orlando.

Actually Leticia is a woman who really cares about her surroundings, from the poor people to her country condition. Yet because of her husband, Orlando, she cannot do whatever she wants and has to live under her husband’s control. Leticia’s biggest expectation is to continue her education in political science, because she wants to be able to speak in a group and her opinion is noticed by others while Nena is an innocent teenager who is kidnapped by Orlando to be able to satisfy his sexual desires. Even from an underprivileged family, Nena only wants to be able to help her grandfather who cannot do anything without her. Nena is truly a devoted child. There are many factors that make the oppression in *The Conduct of Life* happens. The first factor is the low level of law that imposed in the 19th century. Basically, in the 19th century, the government did not care about the occurrence of the women oppression. Men are still free to do whatever

they want, and women have to obey them. Therefore, domestic violence, kidnapping, raping and cheating were common at that time.

The second factor is the society that leads woman being oppressed. The society was known as patriarchal society. The impact of the patriarchal society on women is immense and lasting. This is what makes Kate Millet one of the feminists to create a theory to identify the impact of a group or politics on oppression experienced by women in several paradigms. Based on Kate Millet's Sexual Politics theory, she divides into ideologically, biologically, sociologically, class system, economy and education, force, anthropology and psychology.

However, the factors above are shown by Maria Irene Fornes in her Drama. She describes it by the actions that Orlando commits to Leticia and Nena. From the findings and discussion, the action of oppression that Orlando shows toward Leticia is verbally oppression. He always says rude words on her wife. Then he often does some sexual abuse on Nena. Both of Leticia and Nena should be living under Orlando's control and will. The cause of Oppression here happens because Orlando wants to fulfill his sex desire and fantasy, moreover he wants to have everything around him, such as wealth, high position, and have others to honor him. Therefore, in the last scene of the drama Orlando gets killed by Leticia because she feels enough under Orlando's pressure and control.

6. SUGGESTION

From the conclusion above, this study relates to woman oppression which the theory is based on feminism. This study is interesting, because it reflects the reality of life. Through this final project, the researcher wants to give suggestions to:

1. The fellow students.

For students, learning English literature is an interesting thing, because they have to understand each literature arts or works well. They can also get many values and solve the problem themselves. In literary works like drama usually relate to the real life. Moreover the theory of literature experts is unlimited to observe such as Sexual Politics by Kate Millet that tells about how a group or politics is taking control of women in equality. In addition, the researcher hopes the fellow students can give more better explanations and elaborations for broader study in the future research.

2. The Society

Through this final project, the researcher hopes that the society will understand the history of oppression in the 19th century. However, as Indonesian we should remember one of the founding mothers of

feminism, our hero R.A Kartini. Her dedications in the war era gave all the woman educations. It has great impacts for all women in Indonesia till now, because we can have a better education and the same right as men.

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