

BOOK REVIEW OF STEPFORD WIVES

WRITTEN BY IRA LEVIN

Adelia Wulandari

ABSTRACT

Novel adalah salah satu bentuk refleksi atau pencerminan dari kebudayaan manusia dalam pergaulan sosial masyarakat. Novel identik dengan sebuah karya sastra yang berbentuk prosa, cukup panjang, dan cerita serta tokoh-tokoh di dalamnya mayoritas adalah fiktif atau tidak nyata. Sebuah novel yang telah beredar di pasaran dan dibaca oleh masyarakat pasti akan mendapatkan penilaian dari anggota masyarakat tersebut. Novel yang penulis ulas pada final project ini berjudul *The Stepford Wives* karangan penulis novel dari Amerika Serikat, Ira Levin. Ira Levin telah menulis tujuh novel dan salah satunya adalah novel *The Stepford Wives*. Novel ini berkisah tentang perjuangan seorang wanita bernama Joanna Eberhart yang berusaha mengubah pola pikir istri-istri Stepford ke pola pikir yang lebih modern dan lebih luas dengan membentuk suatu organisasi perempuan. Pada *book review* ini, penulis membahas mengenai alur, cerita dan keberhasilan serta bahasa dari novel. Melalui *book review* novel *The Stepford Wives*, penulis berharap agar novel ini dapat dibaca oleh banyak pembaca dan para pembaca merasa tertarik dengan novel ini. Simpulannya, dengan alur yang mudah dipahami dan cerita yang menarik untuk dibaca.

1. INTRODUCTION

Introduction consists of background of the writing, purposes of the writing, and short biography of Ira Levin and his books.

1.1 Background of the writing

In 1960, the world of American women was limited in almost every respect, from family life to the workplace. American women who worked in 1960 were largely limited to jobs as teacher, nurse, or secretary. Women were generally unwelcome in professional fields (<http://www.workforce.com/articles/the-women-s-movement-in-the-70s-today-you-ve-come-a-long-way-but> accessed on 15 November 2013). Friedan's book, *The Feminine Mystique* captured and discusses the lives of several housewives from around the United States in the 1950s and early 1960s who felt trapped and unfulfilled (*The Feminine Mystique*, 1963: I). Afterwards, her work is such an impact that sparked the "Second-wave" of the American feminist movement. Ira Levin's novel, *The Stepford Wives* is a social satire which is a little bit spooky, a little bit horror, but then was made in the midst of the Second Wave of feminism. *The Stepford Wives* is a novel that provides the reader about young, thin, white, upper-middleclass New York housewife and liberated woman. She reluctantly moves to the upper class suburbs, Stepford, with her lawyer husband and two daughters. In Stepford, Joanna wrestles with conflicts over her roles as wife, mother and a freelance photographer. Joanna becomes alarmed by the fanaticism of wives in Stepford that attend to household chores and give themselves up to their husbands' every

will. Through this novel Ira Levin can clearly give us the picture about what men really want during the second wave. In the novel, Stepford husbands do not allow empowerment and liberation of women. Men ridicule women who attempt to achieve liberation and break free from patriarchal power.

1.2 Purpose of the writing

First of all, the purpose of the writing is to give a summary of the novel. The writer hopes the summary will give a portrait to the reader about the story. The second purpose of the writing is to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the novel.

1.3 A review of the author and his books

Ira Levin was born in New York City on August 27, 1929. Initially a television writer, he became a best-selling author with his first novel, 1953's *A Kiss Before Dying*. More thrilling works followed, including 1968's *Rosemary's Baby*, 1972's *The Stepford Wives* and 1976's *The Boys from Brazil* which those later turned into feature films. Ira Levin decided on a career of a writer at the age of 15. Educated at the elite Horace Mann School, he went on to two years at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa, before transferring to New York University, where he majored in philosophy and English. (<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0505615/bio> accessed on 9 February 2014). Mr. Levin also wrote

Deathtrap, the longest-running thriller in Broadway history and it became his own greatest theatrical triumph. Levin successfully combines humor and clever plot twisted in this tale about a washed-up writer who plans to kill another. Ira Levin was two-time winner of the Mystery Writers of America's Edgar Allan Poe Award (<http://www.iralevin.org/about.htm> accessed on 9 February 2014). *The Stepford Wives* was published in 1972, almost a decade after *The Feminine Mystique* that sparked the "Second-wave" of the American feminist movement (Bralesfod, 2006:12). *The Stepford Wive novel* concerns men who discover the ultimate method of controlling women. The men create robot duplicates of their wives, which have no will and become men's sexual and domestic slaves.

2. SUMMARY OF THE NOVEL

The Stepford Wives novel describes the condition and effects of the Second

wave of the American's movement in 1960s-1970s. *The Stepford Wives* (1972) presents a young, middle-class woman named Joanna Eberhart who moves with her family to Stepford, Connecticut. Although Joanna is a housewife, she enjoys photography as a hobby and seeks to turn it into a career. When she arrives in the new neighborhood, Joanna talks to the Welcome Wagon lady. Specifically, she is briefing the Welcome Wagon lady, because she wants her to write up in the local paper to help her meet open minded women.

In *Stepford*, Joanna's husband, Walter, is a member of Men's Association. Joanna talks to Men's Association when her husband brings the Committee to their house. Joanna tells about her idea to Dale "Diz" Coba, the president of the Men's Association, and other members, Claude Anselm, Herb Sundersen, Frank Roddenberry, to make Parent and Teenager Forums in one school auditorium. The forums will make Stepford's people out and talk and listen to each other. Unfortunately, the Forums are attended by just a few people; there are only nine women and about a dozen men.

Joanna finds best friends who have similar ideas, Bobbie Markowe and Charmaine Wimperis. Joanna tells Bobby and Charmaine about her idea to set up a Women's Association. This group is meant to discuss women's roles in the household and the desire for other paths in life, including a career. But they are almost totally unsuccessful. Things become worse when Bobbie and Charmaine are back from a holiday with their husbands, Bobbie and Charmaine change to become a submissive wife.

In here, Joanna learns that strange things only begin to happen in Stepford

after Betty Friedan came to speak to the Women's Club half a dozen years earlier, following the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* (Levin, 1972:39). In a little while, she learns everything when she seeks advice from her chemist ex boyfriend. At last, she knows that Men's Association is behind a plot of somehow changing the women. With the help of bachelor Dale "Diz" Coba, a former creator of animated figures for Disneyland, the men are murdering their wives and substitute their body with indistinguishable robots.

The marriage gets into a serious matter when Joanna and Walter argue about their missing children. In an attempt to find her children Joanna hypothesizes that Bobbie may care for her children. Intuitively, Joanna stabs Bobbie with a kitchen knife because she wants to prove her humanity because she is still mystified by Bobbie's behavior, but Bobbie does not bleed or suffer. Instead she goes into an odd mechanical behavior, thus Joanna feels that Bobbie is a robot. She thinks she may be the next victim, so she sneaks into the mansion which houses the Men's Association to find her children. On there, she finds the mastermind of the whole operation, Dale "Diz" Coba. In the last chapter it is narrated that Joanna makes a hard effort to rescue her children and flee but unfortunately she is ultimately caught, killed, and replaced. The story ends with a conversation of Joanna and Ruthanne at the supermarket. Ruthanne asks Joanna about what she has been doing and Joanna looks marvelous with perfect performance.

3. REVIEW OF THE NOVEL

After reading *The Stepford Wives*, the writer realizes there are some points

of strengths and weaknesses that exist in this novel. So, in this occasion, the writer will describe about the strengths and weaknesses of the novel.

3.1 The Strengths of the novel

The first strength of this novel is the plot. The plot of this novel is chronological from the beginning to the end of story, and the writing style of this novel is narrative which is easy to understand by the reader. The chronological plot consists of introduction, rising action, climax and falling action (Abrams, 1981: 138). The introduction starts when Joanna arrives in Stepford and is greeted by Welcome Wagon Lady then Joanna lists her interest for the local paper. Then Joanna finds the Stepford wives are obsessed with finding the most effective household products for their home (Levin, 1972:60) and fill their days with domestic chores. Rising action begins when she knows her friend, Bobbie Markowe and Charmaine to become a submissive wife and only interested in doing chores. The climax is reached its peak when Joanna has to fight against the oppression in Stepford alone. Men's Association tries to convince Joanna that they do not replace their wives to become a robot. Joanna does not believe that and wants to run away from Stepford (Levin, 1972:118-120). Men's Association tells that she can prove it with Bobbie. Then at last, the falling action comes after Joanna talks to Bobbie and she stabs Bobbie, but Bobbie does not bleed at all. Walter, Joanna's husband instead of saving Joanna, reports her to Dale Gribble, it can be seen from the quotation: "*He was dialing the phone. Calling Dale Gribble to tell him she was there. Proceed with plans. All systems go*". (Levin, 1972:112).

From his report it can be seen that Walter is in agreement with Association to replace his wife to become a perfect wife. Finally she is not interested in photography anymore. Like other Stepford women, she loves doing housework every day. They have no opinions, are grateful to be wives, and do everything their husband wants (Levin, 1972:126-128).

The second strength of the novel is that the Author narrates the story inspired by the reality which happens in that time. Levin wrote *The Stepford Wives* to give a portrayal about social problems that happen because of the impact of the publication of the *Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan. Because of Friedan's writing, the second wave of feminism happened, women in America form the Women Movement to conquer the patriarchal power. In the novel, Levin illustrates that Betty Friedan came to Stepford and spoke to the Women's Club half a dozen years earlier. It is found when Joanna reads an article in a yellowed copy of the Stepford Chronicle about the speech. The following is the conversation between Joanna and her husband about Betty Friedan's speech:

"For God's sake," she said. "What is it?" ask Walter. "There was-a women's club here," she said. "Betty Friedan spoke to them. And Kit Sundersen was the president. Dale Coba's wife and Frank Roddenberry's wife were officers.".. "Are you kidding?" he said. She looked at the paper, and read: "'Betty Friedan, the author of *The Feminine Mystique*, addressed members of the Stepford Women's Club Tuesday evening in the Fairview Lane home of Mrs. Herbert Sundersen, the club's president. "Over fifty women applauded Mrs. Friedan as she cited the inequities and frustrations besetting the modern day housewife" (Levin, 1972:39)

The fact is Friedan's visit in Stepford, does not bring much major rebellion. Ira Levin wants to satirize Betty Friedan's writing that Stepford women are still being perfect wives for their husband. It can be seen from the quotation below in

the conversation between Bobbie and Joanna:

“It can't be a coincidence that Stepford women are all the way they are. And some of the ones we spoke to must have belonged to that club. A few years ago they were applauding Betty Friedan, so what's so surprising about that? He allows them to be real women, lipstick and dreams, interaction. and look at them now. They've changed too. There's something. It makes women interested in housekeeping and nothing else”. (Levin, 1972:60)

The quotation shows that Betty Friedan allows Stepford women to become open minded and pursue their dreams. Yet the men of Stepford, assume that if the women want to be open minded it is a crime punishable by death. As a result, they make Men's Association and plot to kill their wives and replace their flesh and blood, active wives with robots. That is what the Stepford wives look like, actresses in commercials: pretty actresses, big in the breasts but small in the talent, playing suburban housewives, unconvincingly, and too nice to be real. (Levin, 1972:45)

The third strength is the failure of activist women's right, Joanna in her struggles to conquer the patriarchal society. This shows that the satire towards Betty Friedan's writing has successfully made the novel popular and become international bestseller and was filmed twice in 2004 and 2007 (<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0505615/bio> accessed on 9 February 2014). In the novel women's liberation is considered a threat for the men so it must be stopped from existence, women are reduced to objects. Their husbands destroy and recreate their bodies. The women of Stepford are seen as perfect housewives who never have a stray of hair out of place and are always submitting to their husbands. (Levin, 1972:125)

3.2 The Weaknesses of the novel

Besides the strengths, the writer also found some weaknesses from this novel. First, though *The Stepford Wives* novel tells us about how to make women become submissive wives by changing them into a robot, Levin does not give an illustration about the processes of how Stepford wives become robots. The novel just shows about how the Men Association's building looks like. It is a big building on the hill (Levin, 1972:12) and no one is allowed to go there except the members of Men Association. The novel also tells the story about the smell of medicine and chemicals around the Men's association building (Levin, 1972:96) and about the people who have an important role of the changing of Stepford wives (Levin, 1972: 62). The writer thinks that the novel's lack of explanation of the process of changing the women into robots is one major weakness of the book. Second, the novel was written in unclear words. It can be seen from the following quotation:

"Hi, Joanna," Carol said in her nasal New Englandy voice. "No, you didn't scay-er me. It's a nice night, isn't it?" (Levin, 1972:8)

"Good night," Joanna said, and watched Carol go-profile of too-big bosom-into her kitchen and close the door. (Levin, 1972:10)

From the quotation, it can be seen that the words "scay-er" and "go-profile" are not clear for the readers who do not know the meaning of those words. Thus, it gives misunderstanding between the readers and the novel.

4. CONCLUSION

After presenting the result of the study in the previous chapter, the conclusion

is taken in this part. The novel written by Ira Levin presents the story with interesting plot and style. Ira Levin as an author of this novel successfully expresses his aspiration. This novel is inspired by true event that happened in that era. Levin tries to satirize Second Wave Feminism which happened in United States as if not all men agree with Women Liberation. Levin gives some portrayal that patriarchal power will not die though second wave feminism happens. Basically, Stepford men do not want women to dominate their life and forget what they are supposed to do in a family. *The Stepford Wives* is one of the greatest Levin's works ever and already filmed twice, in 1974 and 2004.

On the contrary, though this novel tells us about how to change women to become submissive wives, the processes of Men Association change the Stepford wives to be robots are not narrated at all. Besides, some unclear words make the readers difficult to understand.

Finally, we can conclude that *The Stepford Wives* tells us to change a culture that has been run for many generations requires a long process that cannot happen instantly and take efforts and patience. In this case, *The Stepford Wives* novel has successfully makes a breakthrough about people's perspectives on feminisms.

5. REFERENCES

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