

## **Structural Oppression of Women in *Surat Dari Tini Chen: Siapa Aku:* A Feminist Literary Criticism**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Women in a patriarchal system have a close relationship with domestic roles. This study aims to describe the construction of women's roles faced by a woman before becoming a prisoner in a short story entitled *Surat dari Tini Chen: Siapa Aku* written by Tini (pseudonym), a former convict. This research is descriptive qualitative in nature and has qualitative data taken through library techniques. The approach used in this study is structural story analysis and feminist literary criticism with an intersectionalism approach to explaining social phenomena that become the factor of oppression. The results show that three factors (i.e., education, power relations, and psychology) support the formation of structural oppression on Tini. The economic condition is the estuary that underlies the emergence of the factors. Tini is faced with a construction that requires women to get security through a husband, though it has to go through early marriage. This construction then ensnared Tini so that she could receive domestic violence and a prison sentence of 6 years and 3 months for her husband's work.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In society, the role of women tends to be marginalized when the system implemented by society has the quality of patriarchy. Beauvoir (1949) explained that in history, women tend to be in the "other" position or, in Spivak's word, subordinated. The "Other" or subordinated refers to a group of people who are alienated and controlled by their surroundings (Guo, 2018). This claim is proven when we look at how society narrates or places women unequally against men either in mass media or law. Culturally, this inequality manifests itself in the form of stigma. Because of the existing stigma, a woman will feel guilty when her public demands are not met, such as in terms of taking care of the household to educating her children (Srimulyani, 2016).

Whether it is directly or indirectly, the distribution of roles between men and women becomes constructed as a default base that still acts conservatively and subjectively. For example, in Indonesian culture, there exists a concept that places women with domestic works like dressing up, giving birth and cooking (3M; *Macak, Manak, Masak*) whereas men with the obligation of working and finding income. This distribution of roles will be one of the sources of problems where each gender is placed with a specialized role while nullified for the others. In the democratic system, this becomes problematic because it has the potential to take away the right of individual freedom to do something. This is where the so-called gender inequality emerges.

In a broader perspective, gender inequality occurs in various lines and is interrelated with one another. However, if a common thread is drawn, women will still be a gender whose position is lower than men, with the argument that physically women have a weaker body performance. According to Dagon (as cited in Ratna, 2004) this argument is not supported by scientific research which shows a correlation between biological conditions and behavioral differences. This means that a person's physical condition does not have an impact on the decisions taken or the behavior performed because these two things are closely related to the culture of a society.

In the world of literacy, works that touch the problem of women are commonly found, and so are women writers. In Indonesia, there are many women writers such as Djenar Maesa Ayu, Oka Rusmini, N.H. Dini, Ayu Utami, Dewi Lestari, Helvy Tiana Rosa, Leila S. Chudori, Intan Paramaditha, Okky Madasari and many others. From the West, Simone de Beauvoir became a pioneer of women writers who succeeded in forming a theoretical foundation related to women's literature, especially feminist literary criticism. Some literary works from female writers from the West (e.g., Kate Millett, Elaine Showalter, and Gilbert and Gubar) often touch on many feministic problems through their own distinctive writing style. However, it needs to be questioned whether all of the literary works successfully well-represent women from the perspective of gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnic and others. From here comes a study in the world of literacy called Feminist Literary Criticism.

Feminist Literary Criticism is a critical work, in which the reading and writing process in ideology and culture points towards women. This criticism supports the idea of gender equality. In feminist literary criticism, literary works are viewed from the perspective of women to challenge the thinking, tradition, culture, and ideology of patriarchy.

“...to recognize that women writers and critics are also positioned in ideology, to understand feminist literary histories and theories as complicitous, and to question what may be passing for "universal" women's values and experience.” (Lanser, 1991)

Feminist Literary Criticism does not mean criticism on women or criticism formed by women but rather criticism of literary works by using women's subjectivity to create, read and study literary works. This idea exists due to the findings of stereotypes against women that are presented in literature works without looking at the rights of those women. Because of this negligence, many literary works are classified as sexist and gender-biased. Criticism in feminist literary criticism means looking at literature with a specific awareness that two genders have a lot to do with culture, literature, and life (Salsabila, 2018). One of the purposes of feminist literary criticism is to give women space to voice their feelings out so that their voices will not be subjected to sexist

stereotypes. Another term that is used to refer to feminist literary criticism is Reading as a Woman. Lisa Tuttle stated that the end goal of feminist literary criticism is; (1) to develop and uncover a female tradition of writing; (2) to analyze women writers and their works from the perspective of women; (3) to rediscover old texts; (4) to interpret the symbolism of women's writing so that it will not be lost or ignored by the male point of view; (5) to resist sexism in literature and to increase awareness of the sexual politics of language and style.

“...the final goal of feminist criticism is “to develop and uncover a female tradition of writing,” “to analyze women writers and their writings from a female perspective”, “to rediscover old texts”, “to interpret the symbolism of women's writing so that it will not be lost or ignored by the male point of view” “to resist sexism in literature and to increase awareness of the sexual politics of language and style”. (Tuttle, 1986)

In its application, the theory of feminist literary criticism takes a wide scope. When the practice boosts the subjectivity of women, the analysis must be supported by other disciplines. This is because the experience of each woman is unique, and thus the approach taken must be adapted, such as the discipline of psychology to explain the psychic background of women, the discipline of economics to explain the salary produced by women, the discipline of sociology to understand their position in society and many others. Many of the approaches that exist in the theory of feminist literary criticism are feminist-socialist/Marxism, feminist-psychoanalysis, feminist-sociologist, and feminist-anthropologist.

The short story *Surat dari Tini Chen: Siapa Aku* is one of the many short stories publicized in the portal *Jurnal Perempuan*. This short story was written by Tini, an alias of a convict. This writing was one of the many works from women convicts who took the writing class. The writing class was a program organized by Jurnal Perempuan, Lembaga Bantuan Hukum (LBH) Masyarakat, Magdalene.co and Konde.co. The writing class was held at Lembaga Permasalahatan (Lapas), was named #SURATPROJECT #SuaraPerempuanDariBalikSekat, and was organized with the intent to give room to women convicts to express themselves through written works. The written works publicized in the *Jurnal Perempuan* portal show how the women convicts tell their stories from their childhood to their prisoner life. As the writing class progressed, the convicts were given some topics to write about, including their personal life, mothers, experiences in prison, and other topics that made them happy.

In Indonesia, there was some research within the framework of feminism, such as that conducted by Lisnawati et al., (2016). The study describes how women prisoners were treated in prison, including discussions on the fulfillment of women's rights in detention, conditions (treatment) of women in prison, and the public's view of women with ex-convict status. The research has similarities in the scope of the discussion, which is about female prisoners. However, this current study uses a different point of view that is in the field of law and sociology.

Another study was conducted by Sumarauw (2013), discussing the lives of female prisoners in prison, using an anthropological perspective. Sumarauw's research discusses the rights that women inmates must have in prison and society's view of women with ex-convict status. The conclusion drawn by Sumarauw on the background of women in committing crimes is based on the ignorance of the offenders and also the lack of socialization from the state apparatus regarding

legal articles to the public. The correlation between Sumarauw's research and this research is that there are similarities in examining matters relating to female prisoners, especially regarding the background of the occurrence of criminal acts by women. However, Sumarauw's research does not dissect in a systematic and focused manner so that the results of the analysis related to the background of the occurrence of criminal acts by women are not comprehensive. However, the process and results of the analysis can be different due to different geographical and cultural differences. Another interesting study was conducted by Munandar (2006). The study used a criminological perspective with a feminist approach in understanding the factors that led to female prisoners using drugs. The correlation between Munandari's research and this current research is that there is a similarity in the scope of the discussion, which is about female prisoners and the factors that cause criminal acts by female prisoners.

## **METHODS**

This research applies the descriptive qualitative method. The descriptive understanding of this research leans towards the data and the analytic result that is presented through narration (Rahardi, 2009). The qualitative data and the analytic result were explained and presented descriptively. The data were in the form of sentences in the story that indicate structural oppression. The source of data came from short stories publicized on a site titled *Jurnal Perempuan* ([jurnalperempuan.org](http://jurnalperempuan.org)).

The steps taken for the analysis were identifying the topic, choosing the data based on analysis of the structure of the short story, and contextualizing the data from the text with a social phenomenon that becomes the factor of gender inequality by applying the intersectionality approach.

Intersectionality or intersectionalism is the approach of using many multidisciplinary views. In general, intersectionality is the study in the realm of feministic sociology that is used to dissect deeper into gender inequality that exists in society. The term intersectionality was first used by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989 in her article titled *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics*. In her article, Crenshaw used the term intersectionality to elaborate on the oppression experienced by black women. Crenshaw places women who received discrimination from every angle such as the ones in an intersection. A woman will find discrimination in one direction and flow in the other (Mustaqim, 2018). As in the case of black women, the oppressions experienced can come from multiple sources starting from race, class, physique, gender, religion, caste, and other sources.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Structural Oppression towards women**

In the short story, one of the characters is Tini who told her story in the first-person perspective. Tini was born in Singkawang in 1992, graduated from junior high school (SMP) at age 15, and went straight to Malaysia to work. Not long after, she went back to Singkawang. Tini was the younger of two siblings and had always been spoiled by her mother who at that time worked in Taiwan. Tini lived with her father, where she was rarely taken care of and in the end, found

happiness from her male friends. At age 17, Tini found a man 27 years older than her. This man proposed to Tini and she agreed. In the middle of 2009, Tini's husband got into an accident and couldn't work anymore that affected their income. At that time, Tini finally found out that her husband was a drug dealer. Because of this, Tini was disappointed in her husband, but as time passes, Tini had to accept the reality and took her husband's drug dealing business even though she did not know anything about the business. Not long after Tini replaced her husband, Tini's house was raided and she was taken to the police. Tini admitted that she was a drug dealer but was not a drug user. Because of this, Tini was sentenced to prison for 6 years and 3 months.

In the story text below, through some perspectives, the root source of gender equality can be identified.

*"Lulus dari SMP, aku berumur 15 tahun. Aku mulai bekerja mulai dari Singkawang ke Malaysia, hingga kembali lagi kerja di Singkawang. Pergaulanku semakin luas."*

"Graduating from middle school, I was 15 years old. I started working from Singkawang to Malaysia, until I returned to work in Singkawang. My social circle is getting wider."

*First*, from the perspective of economy and education, Tini was a woman from Singkawang who was born in a poor family. It can be seen from her decision to work overseas after graduating from junior high school. Her mother also worked overseas in Taiwan where many female labor workers worked as house workers. The statement indicates that the economic factor becomes the main factor that influenced Tini's decision. Daly (1992:12-15) even concludes that the biggest factor that causes a woman to be sent to prison is the economy.

"Meanwhile, young women drop out of high school because of pregnancy, boredom or disinterest in school, or both. Their paid employment record is negligible because they lack the interest to work in low-paid or unskilled jobs. ... A woman may continue lawbreaking as a result of relationships with men who may also be involved in crime. Women are on a revolving criminal justice door, moving between incarceration and time on the streets. ... Is there something more than economical survival which propels or maintains women in a criminalizes status?" (Daly, 1992)

As a woman from the lower class, Tini was faced with few options: finishing her school, working, or marrying for money. There would have been more options if Tini had come from a middle-class family or had gained access to further formal education. Formal education was very important for Tini as it was one of the main requirements to find proper work in the industry or agency sector with minimum regional wage and suitable work hours. However, it did not happen to Tini so that she chose to work at age 15, leaving the options that she thinks unrealistic to choose.

*"Mendengar aku menikah, semua teman-temanku tidak terima. Bagi mereka, laki-laki yang kupilih lebih pantas menjadi papaku daripada suamiku. Sampai-sampai mereka berpikir bahwa aku menikah hanya karena uang"*

"Hearing that I got married, all my friends didn't accept it. For them, the man I chose was more worthy of being my papa than my husband. To the point that they think that I married only for money."

After Tini married, she faced another difficult problem when her husband got into an accident and was unable to work for his family. Tini was forced to find a formal job. However, due to her lower educational background, it became hard for her to find a formal job. After Tini knew her husband's real occupation, with a heavy heart, Tini continued his business as a drug dealer without knowing the risks that lay ahead.

*Tapi rasa takut itu aku buang jauh-jauh. Aku perlu uang untuk keluargaku, anak-anakku, pengobatan suamiku, dan untuk makan sehari-hari. Aku harus pikirkan semua karena untuk sementara waktu suamiku benar-benar tidak bisa berbuat apa-apa. Mau tidak mau, suka tidak suka, aku harus terjun ke dunia narkotika, menggantikan suamiku.*

But I threw that fear away. I need money for my family, my children, my husband's treatment, and for my daily meals. I had to think things through because for a while my husband really couldn't do anything. Like it or not, I had to dive into the world of narcotics, replacing my husband.

*Second*, from the perspective of the power distribution, Tini as a susceptible woman was exploited in the domestic realm. From her earlier years until she grew up, Tini had experienced violence from her own father. From this, it can be seen that Tini as a daughter lost power to her father. Daly (1992) relates the domestic violence experienced by a woman in her childhood with the crimes she committed in adulthood. When a woman experiences violence in her childhood, she will tend to try to get out of her home. When the tendency is actualized, the girl will be forced to live independently, including financially. In the case of women with poor economic status, many factors (e.g., Educational background, working skills) make them unable to work and earn a living. As a result, they tend to choose an affordable way to get money by selling their own body or doing other criminal things such as stealing.

“Whether they were pushed out or ran away from abusive homes, or became part of deviant milieux, young women begin to engage in petty hustle or prostitution. ... The leading feminist scenario is better than previous ideas about women's lawbreaking for three reasons. First, the gendered and sexed contexts that bring adolescents to the street are brought into focus. For young women, this means running away from abusive or overly strict parents.” (Daly, 1992)

Biologically, Tini, who was in the transition zone from a child to a female teenager, lost her power to her father. Since young, Tini looked at her father as someone to obey, someone she had to bow and respect because he was older than her. The concept is sufficient to judge that there was an unequal power relationship between Tini and her father. The unequal power relationship caused Tini to be controlled or treated like an object belonging to her father. This condition occurred because Tini's father saw her as a girl with subordinate qualities instead of as a subject with consciousness. A man will easily control a woman when he is aware of the power he has (Handayani, 2018). Though in the Eastern culture the “respecting and bowing to your parent” concept does not mean showing weakness over others, the concept, however, was abused by Tini's father to exploit her when she was young.

*“Waktu itu aku berumur 17 tahun. Aku menikah dengan seorang laki-laki yang umurnya 27 tahun lebih tua dariku. Mendengar aku menikah, semua teman-temanku tidak terima. Bagi mereka, laki-laki yang kupilih lebih pantas menjadi papaku daripada suamiku.*

*Sampai-sampai mereka berpikir bahwa aku menikah hanya karena uang. Lucunya, ada pacarku yang aku putusin. Namun, ia menolak hingga nekat berlutut di depanku, di tepi jalan, agar aku tidak meninggalkannya. Tapi aku tidak ada pilihan. Aku sudah lelah hidup bersama papa yang penuh kekerasan. Saat itu aku berpikir, hanya dengan menikah aku bisa lepas. Jadi, aku ambil keputusan untuk menikah dini.”*

“At that time I was 17 years old. I married a man who is 27 years older than me. Hearing I got married, all my friends did not accept it. For them, the man I chose was more worthy of being my papa than my husband. To the point that they thought that I married only for money. The funny thing is, I had a boyfriend that I broke up with. However, he refused (to break up), and desperately knelt in front of me on the side of the road, so that I did not leave him. But I had no choice. I was tired of living with an abusive dad. At that time I thought, only by getting married could I escape. So, I made the decision to get married early.”

The bad treatment Tini received affected the decisions she made throughout her life. One of them was deciding to marry at the age of 17 with a man 27 years older. This decision was based on her disappointment over her father's attitude and behavior towards her when she was young. Therefore, Tini was trying to find freedom in a matrimonial relationship.

*“Awalnya aku berpikir dengan aku menikah hidupku akan jauh lebih baik dan akan selalu dihiasi dengan kebahagiaan. Ternyata tidak. Dia sama saja dengan papaku. Dia tidak sebaik yang aku kenal. Mungkin inilah kesalahan terbesarku. Belum genap satu bulan kenal dia, aku sudah memutuskan untuk menikah dengannya. Sekarang, menyesal pun sudah percuma, sudah terlambat. Yang bisa aku lakukan hanya menjalaninya.”*

“Initially I thought that with me getting married my life would be much better and would always be filled with happiness. Apparently not. He's just like my dad. He's not as good as I know him. It was probably my biggest mistake. Less than a month of knowing him, I'd decided to marry him. Now, even regret is useless, it's too late. All I can do is live it.”

The decision was soon regretted because Tini found that she was unable to find freedom but got the same oppression from her husband, instead. In Munawara's (2015) research, it was found that women experience a double burden in the realm of work. The double burden requires women to do two jobs simultaneously, namely domestic and public works. Besides, women are still attached to the family, including their husbands and parents. All of these give a negative impact on women both psychologically and physically. One of the impacts is that women receive physical violence or domestic violence. In this situation, Tini felt as if she didn't have any escape route from the oppressions she got in the domestic realm. Tini's option to find freedom turned into the same oppression from a different person with the same power to Tini. Tini's husband placed Tini in a domestic position as he knew that Tini was a junior high school graduate and was unable to work and find income. The domestic works refer to housework, including preparing food (cooking), washing, keeping the house clean, etc. (Rorintulus, 2018). Because the source of income came from her husband, Tini was conditioned to bow down towards her husband. This makes Tini *the other person* even in her own home.

*Third*, from Freud's psychoanalysis perspective, Tini was in the Phallic and Latent stages, that were not fulfilled by her parents. Because of the absence of the father and mother figures in her

life, she failed to project a father figure that shows affection, empathy, and sympathy towards her. Consequently, Tini was searching for a father figure in other people and “found” it in her husband who was 27 years older than her.

Another thing that was found in the psychoanalysis viewpoint was that Tini vented her dissatisfaction subconsciously towards compulsive things such as free sex. It was taken because Tini was stuck in the incompleteness of one of the four phases of Oral, Anal, Phallic, and Latent.

*“Aku hanya tinggal bersama papa yang tidak terlalu peduli denganku. Kondisi ini membuatku mencari kebahagiaan lain di luar sana. Aku mendapatkannya dari teman-temanku yang rata-rata adalah laki-laki. Beruntungnya pergaulanku tidak ke narkoba dan minuman keras, melainkan seks bebas.”*

“I just lived with papa who didn’t really care about me. This condition made me look for other happiness out there. I got it from my friends who were mostly boys. Luckily my association was not into drugs and alcohol, but free sex.”

## CONCLUSION

In the world of patriarchy, women have always been the second gender even though the facts show that women are in equal positions as men. In the short story *Surat dari Tini Chen: Siapa Aku*, it can be found that Tini has experienced oppression in many ways and ended in economic problems. From her childhood until she was married, Tini had faced people who had higher authority than her (i.e., her father and her husband). As a result, Tini unconsciously placed herself in the domestic position and had always received oppression from the two people mentioned. From the psychoanalytic perspective, Tini was trying to find a father figure from other people since her childhood development stage was unfinished. To this point, Tini had got oppression both in the domestic realm and in prison because the demand she had to fulfill was not supported by the infrastructure and superstructure around her.

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