



ELITE Conference

English Language and Letters Department

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

MAULANA MALIK IBRAHIM STATE ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY OF MALANG

Certificate of Attendance

Number: Un.03.3/HM.00.5/591/2013

This certifies that

Indah Damayanti, M.R.S

attended the ELITE International Conference

"The Multifaceted Dimensions of Linguistics and Literature"

November 26 – 27, 2013

as
a Presenter



Dean,

Dr. H. Istiadah, M.A.

NIP 19670313 199203 2 002



Feminine Identities in John Steinbeck's Short Stories

Indah Damayanti

English Study Program, FKIP Bengkulu University

indah_078@yahoo.co.id

“The Chrysanthemums,” “The White Quail,” and “The Harness” are three of Steinbeck's short stories collected in *The Long Valley*. These stories share common themes and character's type such as Elisa Allen, Mary Teller, and Emma. Those women are outwardly depicted as dependant women but inwardly independent to their own visions of their lives. The purpose of this paper is to analyze those female identities, to elucidate how they are similar and different in those three short stories. The method used was descriptive method. The result shows that Elisa, Mary, and Emma are accepting their roles as housewives in a vain, sterile way. The three females make their husband sexual desires quite unsatisfied. We can also say that the three females are very different in ways they pursue their own ideals. Elisa is portrayed as the least independent one as she fails to realize and accomplish her natural, feminine desires. Thus, Mary is portrayed as the stronger female; she is able to manipulate her husband and her garden to be kept and corrected according to her own narcissistic, feminine identity. Finally, Emma appears to be the strongest, the most independent among the three.

Key words: identity, female, feminine, sterile

Introduction

The Long Valley, a collection of short stories John Steinbeck published in 1938, serves as a significant introduction to the whole Steinbeck's works. It is comprised of eleven unrelated short stories and “The Red Pony” series. The stories are set in Steinbeck's birthplace, the rolling Salinas Valley in California, a land of farms, ranches, sunny hills, distant mountains, and they tell us about ways of inhabitants' lives

The eleven stories do not constitute a unified work and were actually written and published in various magazines and newspapers at different times before they were finally collected into one volume. Nonetheless, the stories share common themes and characters' type such as Elisa Allen, one of Steinbeck's most memorable female character who finds her “niche”

at her garden and grows the biggest chrysanthemums in the valley; Mary Teller, a pretty young woman who gives a lonely life to her husband; Emma, the skinny little old woman who has strong determination to live. Those women are outwardly depicted as dependent women but inwardly independent to their own vision of their lives.

Woman's movement in literary works in the 1960s and early 1970 was dealing with women's experience under patriarchal society. The circumstances around them had been ruled and controlled by men. The tradition of masculine-dominated society had been silenced the voices of women and have treated them peripherally (Rivkin and Ryan, 1998). In the mid 1980s some essential works of Hellen Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray inspired some feminist scholars. They are considered to be the mothers of poststructuralist feminist theory. By their contribution in literary works, the study of women was rendered turning into subject of interpretation.

Those female characters are portrayed in the marital relationship which renders them to be dependent on their husbands. They seemingly depicted as stereotype feminine features. However from the closely reading, we can see their identities from other point of view. The purpose of this paper is to analyze those female identities portrayed and focused in "The Chrysanthemums," "The White Quail," and "The Harness. At the end this of paper will be elucidated how the females are similar and different in these three short stories. In order to reveal the female identities, the study will focus not only on the female characters but also the male characters as well, analyzing the relationship between the couples. The descriptive method was used to explain the feminine identities of the female protagonists.

Content

1. Elisa in "The Chrysanthemums"

"The Chrysanthemums" was first published in *Harpers*, October 1937, and then was included in John Steinbeck's 1938 short story collection, *The Long Valley*. In several significant ways this story can be said to underline an "unhappy marriage", and is typical of Steinbeck's fiction. The story's setting is placed in Salinas Valley of California, like the other stories in *The Long Valley*.

The Chrysanthemums,” discussing about the conflict Elisa Allen (the female protagonist) faces to enhance her role as a woman in a modern society, “men’s world,” and about her attempt to gain social approval for her feminine traits. Elisa spends most of her time within her fenced garden. For Elisa her garden is the place to which she devotes herself. She is very passionately working in the garden and seems to find her “true” self or identity when she is alone in her garden. When Henry Allen, her husband, approaches the garden, he leans over the wire fence instead of crossing it. At this point the fence becomes a physical border between them; a sign of separateness between Henry’s masculine, capitalistic cattle farm world and Elisa’s feminine, aesthetic garden world. She is a female to be excluded from the ranch business or from the men’s world.

Elisa seems to be interested in getting involved in business affairs and stepping out into the outer or men’s world, and getting through the physical border which exists between feminine and masculine world. When Henry jokingly urges her to “work out in the orchard and raise some apples,” Elisa responds as saying “Maybe I could do it, too. I’ve a gift with things, all right.” (*The Long Valley*:2-3) But Henry does not follow up on his suggestion, rather switches the conversation back to the flower instead. Whether wishing into the men’s business outer world or not, Elisa clearly feels separated from Henry’s business world and somehow is interested in involving in men’s matters.

Elisa as a typical and efficient house-wife dramatizes how a woman and her femininity can be limited and undervalued in a masculine world. Elisa is trapped between society’s definition of the masculinity and the femininity and is thus struggling against the limitation on the female. The story reveals fundamental differences between the way women see themselves and the way they are viewed by men (Mitchell, 1987:91-101).

Some critics express sympathy for Elisa, and see the source of her frustration as related to sex and gender, and to the limitations in her marriage life. As McMahan (1968:453) suggests, “In order to understand Elisa’s emotions, we first should look closely at the relationship between her and her husband”. In the beginning of the story, we see Elisa works at her garden, cutting away old chrysanthemum stems. Henry is speaking with two other men in business suit; “The three of them stood by the tractor shed, each man with one foot on the side of the little Fordson. They smoked cigarettes and studied the machine as they talked.” (*The Long Valley*:1) Elisa is watching them from her garden while doing her works with chrysanthemum stems. After Henry finishes his

man's business, a sale of thirty steer, he approaches the garden. He leans over the garden's fence. He suggests an evening in town with dinner and movie and compliments Elisa on her flower as she produces the most impressive chrysanthemums around. At the same time, Elisa praises for his business, "'Good,' she said, 'Good for you.'" (*The Long Valley*:2) But there is no intimacy in their talk; the two are serious and formal to each other. There is a sense of awkwardness, no passion between the two.

Another explanation about the relationship between the two, we look at Elisa's gesture; in confronting Henry she seems to be rigid, straighten, stiffen, and tighten. These words elucidate Elisa's feeling about Henry. Every time Henry approaches her, she turns to be "cold." When Henry comes near to the garden and compliments her, "Elisa straightened her back and pulled on the gardening gloves again." And before leaving for dinner Henry approaches her while shoving his tie, "Elisa stiffen and her face grew tight." (*The Long Valley*:11-12). There is evidence that this couple has something wrong with their marriage. Indeed, they have separate rooms as Renner (1985:305) describes, "She has her own room and presumably sleeps apart from her husband. This woman repulses the amorous advances of her husband. Elisa, as we shall see, characteristically stiffen and turns cold as the approach of Henry, even as they prepare for a romantic evening in town."

Her brief encounter with the tinker arouses Elisa's passion for beauty, for he can reach her aesthetic feeling. The tinker describes chrysanthemums by their beauty, not by its size. His aesthetic appreciation brings out a response in Elisa that her husband is unable to evoke. Her eyes shine; She shakes out her hair, runs excitedly and talks rapidly; Her breast swells passionately, her voice grows husky, and she talks about her own passion in her own words that Henry would never understand.

Henry's inability to understand Elisa's feminine identity leaves her vulnerable in her encounter with the tinker, which renews Elisa's feeling of femininity and sexuality. The tinker discovers what the flowers mean to Elisa, and realizes that he can use her passion for flower to earn some job. Through flattery he manages to get some money and is given some shoots from her treasure plants and even her advices about the care of them. It is as if, through getting the chrysanthemum shoots, the tinker has awaken something in Elisa. Though he pretends to be able to appreciate the beauty of her flowers, for selfish and money motives, Elisa responds gratefully to him, perhaps even suggesting some unfaithfulness to her husband.

Chrysanthemum is very important to Elisa. The flower is a symbol of her femininity, her inner self. Giving the flower's sprout to the tinker parallels to giving her hope to be brought and expanded in the outer world. So, at the end of the story, when she sees a dark speck on the road that is her discarded flowers, she is truly desolated. Tinker's discarding seemingly ends her hope for understanding, for recognition, and for gender fulfillment as a female. At the end Elisa fails to escape from her sterile and unproductive way of life, which renders her "crying weakly like an old woman."

2. Mary in "The White Quail"

In "The White Quail." Mary Teller, the female protagonist of the story, is a beautiful young woman who exerts her beauty to get what she has been longing for a long time in her life, "a garden" of her own. Mary's garden has "existed" in her mind long before it is actually planted. Her vision of the garden even deeply influences her choice of husband. For five years she has been looking for an ideal husband who will be matched to her scrupulously planned garden. She filters many men who propose her according to the garden's criteria. Finally, she consents to marry Harry Teller only after he seems to be fit to such a garden. Her garden should be realized not by his own values but by his economic power, his money.

According to Mitchell (1987:93)), Mary Teller is "a virtual caricature of the selfish, castrating female who inspires animosity. Yet she is one of the most ruthless and egotistical of all Steinbeck's feminine characters, although outwardly she conforms to the stereotype of feminine weakness." In the first part of the story, Steinbeck shows us how Mary is the controller of the story. He mentions Mary's name, followed by her husband's twice to let the readers know how Mary's vision manage the story. However, Harry is economically a controller in their marriage. Teller is a name for opulent, well-financed family among society. He is a successful businessman and owns nearly every automobile in town. He makes Mary have the garden by his economic or his money power. All things he has done are from his intense love for Mary. On the contrary, Mary considers marriage as a supporting tool for her garden to be existed rather than as a loving matter.

For Mary, the garden is an essence of herself, her beauty, her femininity and her sexuality. The garden should be beautifully and carefully tended, surrounded by cinerarias which are so heavily loaded with flowers that the stems are bent over. To add more beauty to the garden

there is a line of fuchsias which stand like “little symbolic trees.” There is a beautiful shallow pool for birds. The most important feature in the garden, the white quail to come to the pool, symbolizes the strangeness and the freakishness of Mary. She sees the quail as a “beautiful center” of herself, a crowning perfection of her garden. The rigidly controlled garden tells to us about Mary’s self-centered selfishness.

To know more about how Mary defines her sexual identity, we can see her attempt spending nights separately from her husband. Mary spends at night in her own bedroom and lets Harry find it locked. Mary’s locked-door is a “signal” that she does not want to invite her husband get into her private space. Harry can never complain about their marital life for his inner feelings and sexual desires are completely controlled by his wife. In their relationship Mary seems to be more powerful and controlling but legally and economically the power is in him. Apparently Mary dominates the marriage and she takes in a controller part.

We have already told that the text mentions Mary’s name followed by her husband’s family name twice to show that economically and legally, she should be under the power of Harry; the word “teller” means a manipulator of the money. For their romance, Harry can kiss his wife only when the kiss has some connection with the garden. Mary once describes the garden before they get married, and she lets Harry kiss her. Then, when the garden is finished, Mary lets him kiss her again. After the completion of the garden, Steinbeck does not show Harry kisses her anymore. In the whole course of the story, Mary lets him kiss her only four times. Mitchell (1987:95) describes:

Harry is as much an outsider in her world as the animals and the hill. To her sex is not a sharing of physical and emotional energy, but rather a price she must pay for the garden. Four times, in describing Mary’s response to Harry’s advances, Steinbeck writes that “she let him.” The phrase is used three times describing their courtship, and only once following the wedding, after which the locked door is mentioned on two occasions. Furthermore it is significant that “the lot was bought and the house was built, and they were married,” in that order. Afterward, Harry is not invited into the garden except on those occasions when he is to protect it from harm.

The word “let” is a key word for their marital relationship and the power balance in it. Mary seems not to have any sexual desire for her spouse. Consequently, a kiss is not a representation of mutual feelings for her in a sense that she lets him kiss her, rather than she

engages upon this romantic occasion. The word, “let” gives us an insight about the essence and meaning of their marriage, and elucidates their mutual feelings.

According to Timmerman (1990:178) *The White Quail* moves in two synchronously paced directions: Mary Teller’s obsession with her garden, with its lush foliage, is paralleled by the sexual aridity of the marriage. From the start her marriage to Harry is subordinated to her garden. When Henry proposes, she consults to herself: “Would the garden like such a man?” For the garden was herself, and after all she had to marry someone she liked.” (*The Long Valley*:22). It is important that at this stage the garden is only an idea. Her marriage to Harry is simply a mean of making the concept a reality.

In “*The White Quail*” Steinbeck attacks the idealization of love, woman, and marriage that has troubled Anglo-American culture since Victorian times (Rugoff, 1971). As Mary does not have any care of Harry’s pain that she has caused, his involvement with her garden helplessly ends with his rebellion. He kills the white quail his wife is so enamored of, and then, after killing it, turns to feel very guilty and lonely. At the end of the story he says, “What a skunk I am. What a dirty skunk, to kill a thing she loved so much.” (*The Long Valley*: 27) He knows that killing of the quail is a complete mistake as a husband, but Mary’s rigidity, her constructed physical border i.e the garden, is much worse than his killing. It is Mary’s blind selfishness that brings the conflict between the couple to a deadly intensity.

Harry is ranked as a stranger for Mary’s aesthetic identity even though he loves her intensely. He always results in spoiling his wife’s wishes and yields to her demands while sacrificing his own. Mary spends at night in her own bedroom and lets Harry find it locked. Harry never complains about their marital life and Mary’s extraordinary self until Mary forces him to poison the cat which Mary considers is stalking the white quail, her very essence. Harry admits he is terribly lonely, isolated from Mary’s exclusiveness and narcissism. At the end, he rebels by shooting the white quail instead of the cat to show his own inner feelings as a husband.

3. Emma in “The Harness”

“*The Harness*” focus on Emma’s identity as a wife and a woman from the gender point of view. How Emma is portrayed as a woman behind the town’s respect for her husband and his leading spirit. The male protagonist of the story, Peter Randall, is depicted as one of the most

admirable men in the Salinas Valley. He is a man who is very wise in his business and very reliable in his judgments. His strong, reliable personality is reflected in his upright and unbending physical posture. It is Emma who makes him wear a web harness to keep this good posture even in his fifties.

Peter is a successful farmer who runs his farm without any fail under Emma's directions. He yields to all of Emma's wishes, except for his dissipation trip to San Francisco for bars and whores. Emma seems to consider this annual trip as a business one. Though Emma says nothing about his trips to Peter but she knows well about the reality of the trip and his transgressions, which makes her illness gets worse. Seemingly, her most powerful aspect is her getting worse which results from the trip and makes her husband feel guilty. He feels bad when she is worsening her sickness, and he does what she wants him to do. When he does what Emma wants, he has a deeply restraint and repressed feelings. Therefore he must go to town and release his desires for pleasure and sexual activities. However, he seems not to be happy with this temporary escapes. When he returns to the ranch, he surely can feel a guilty feeling inside him that that we know from his another fixing in the home; "The furniture and woodwork were freshly varnished once a year. Repairs were usually made after Peter came home from his yearly business trip." (*The Long Valley*:79) As a kind of penance he always makes home repairs after each trip. Those lines above tell us that the furniture and woodworks are annually varnished. Peter "bends" to Emma's feelings and desires the more when he feels guilty and shame. Finally he is caught in a tight-knit, vicious circle of his conditions, and his guilt makes him unable to escape from Emma even after Emma's death.

During Emma's lifetime he has been wishing to see his forty acres of fertile land covered by the color and the scent of sweet peas. Since the sweet peas are considered as a very risky crop, Emma never allows him to plant them. However, Peter hungers for the smell and the color of them which represent his hidden rebellious feelings to Emma's domination over him. He wants to change his farmland by sowing sweet peas after her death. Forty acres of color and fragrance is a representation of his attempt to resettle his life after Emma's death and brings his own likings setting to the ranch, in which Emma has been rigidly controlling Peter and his aesthetic values for many years.

The night when Emma dies Peter vows not to wear the web harness anymore. He tells to his nearest neighbor that he will lead his life on the contrary to Emma's wishes till then. It seems

that he always, even after Emma's death, flees to the city for brief sensual satisfaction. Furthermore, he keeps at home the strictness and wisdom Emma forces him to follow during her lifetime. He might be wearing the harness even after her death since he is being "controlled" by Emma's spirit. In other words, he cannot be relieved nor escaped from Emma's controlling identity over him.

Conclusion

Analyzing thus the female characters in some stories in *The Long Valley*, we can find some similarities and differences among them. Elisa, Mary, and Emma are accepting their roles as housewives in a vain, sterile way. The three females make their husband sexual desires quite unsatisfied. Doing these, the female characters maybe show us how their attempts could be against the cultural oppression of modern, capitalistic, and masculine society. It can be said that they try to reveal their own identities as an individual woman who has her own values and wants her life in her own willing way. The three texts' portrayals of female characters evoke us to image the feelings of women in the 1930s. The actions and feelings in the stories are surely good examples for us to see the external and internal conflicts felt and shown by any "modern" woman at those time.

We can also say that the three females are very different in ways they pursue their own ideals. Elisa is portrayed as the least independent one as she fails to realize and accomplish her natural, feminine desires, which in the end makes her cry weakly like an old woman. She eventually comes to know that her hope, which is tenderly put into the pot of chrysanthemum shoots, is miserably discarded by the tinker. Mary is portrayed as a stronger female; she is able to manipulate her husband and her garden to be kept and corrected according to her own narcissistic, feminine identity. However, we should not fail to see that both her desires and her garden are conditioned by her husband's economic power, his money. Harry's shooting the white quail can be regarded as an attempt to exert his economic, masculine power over their marital relationship and as a kind of his revenge at which he immediately shows his remorse. Finally, Emma appears to be the strongest, the most independent among the three. Although she is portrayed as a little skinny old woman who lies sick most of her lifetime, she can direct Peter not only to wear the harness but also to keep both the house and the farm as she wants them to be. Peter accepts and

yields to her directions, even after her death. Peter is portrayed as a “weaker” being, who cannot escape from her wishes and desires, and from her long domination. Emma, in this sense, is very powerful and “masculine” from a modern gender point of view. Her identity, seemingly very fragile, is far from feminine in its reality.

References

- Ditsky, John. “A Kind of Play: Dramatic Elements in Steinbeck’s ‘The Chrysanthemums.’” *Wascana Review*. 21.1 (1986) 62-72.
- McMahan, Elizabeth E. “‘The Chrysanthemums’: Study of A Woman’s Sexuality.” *Modern Fiction Studies*. 14.4 (1968) 453-458.
- Renner, Stanley. “The Real Woman Inside the Fence in ‘The Chrysanthemums.’” *Modern Fiction Studies*. 31.2 (1985) 305-316.
- Rivkin, Julie and Michael Ryan, eds. *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1998.
- Rugoff, Milton. *Prudery and Passion: A Study of Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Putnam, 1971.
- Schultz, Jeffrey, and Luchen Li. *A Critical Companion to John Steinbeck: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work*. New York: Facts on File, 2005.
- Steinbeck, John. *The Long Valley*. London: Penguin Books, 1995.
- Timmerman, John H. *The Dramatic Landscape of Steinbeck’s Short Stories*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990.

Curriculum Vitae

Indah Damayanti, A lecturer at English Education Study Program, Language and Art Education, FKIP, Bengkulu University. I was born on Jakarta, August 29, 1978. I graduated from Padang State University for undergraduate program and for graduate program graduated from Gifu University, Japan.