

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

The first biology dichotomous division of this mankind is the prototypes of males and females. This biological categorization is based primarily on reproductive potential (Eckert and Ginet 2013). As society attempts to match up ways of behaving with biological sex assignment, gender and sex come together to create gender binary. This gender binary carries biological differences into practices and beliefs that are completely irrelevant because it exaggerates the differences (Sunderland 2004, 17). There are no biological reasons why women are not allowed to become a leader because men should be. Women are described as emotional, innocent, and fragile; meanwhile, men are rational, strong, and reliable. Unfortunately, the differences also lead into unfair judgment from the society towards men and women (Ellemers 2017, 279). Society disregards the presence of women while men are valued as the superior ones. Men are given bigger opportunities and privileges than women. These are resulted from a culture called patriarchy.

Walby (1990, 20) defines patriarchy as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, exploit, and oppress women. She also captures two quite different forms of patriarchy: the public one which permits women from

gaining access to the public, but uses segregated strategies to subordinate women within all spheres of social action; the private one is shaped from women exclusion from the public and confinement to the private world of the family house-hold. Family, the smallest unit of society that is expected to protect each member from all the prejudice, is one of the places ruled by the patriarchal system. In patriarchy, the belief of women's subordination shapes an oppressive culture. The root of the word "oppression" is the element "press". Something pressed, in this case, is something caught between or among forces that is related to each other that jointly they restrict, restrain, or prevent the thing's mobility or motion (Frye 1983, 2). In an oppressive system, one would be the oppressor, and the other would automatically be the oppressed.

In a family, oppression comes from a father to his daughters or from a husband toward his wife. The oppression of women and unequal relationships between men and women in the house-hold in fact caused by cultural construction rather than resulted from biological differences (Cerrato and Cifre 2018, 8). The son sees his father works and enjoys his hobby at home. The daughter sees her mother takes care of the house chores and obeys the father's rules. The children would learn and henceforward they repeat this cycle. Men as the oppressor restrict women's freedom, both freedom of expression and movement. For example, daughters are told that it is their responsibility to dress properly in order to avoid sexual harassment. This practice could be considered as an unequal treatment because it implies that it is

solely women's responsibility to avoid sexual assault. This kind of practice reflects how patriarchy gives privilege to men and place women as the oppressed.

Giving women freedom, equal opportunity, and control of their selves is one of the aims of the feminist movement. This goal could be achieved by challenging the beliefs and norms in a patriarchal society. Started in the 19th century, women sought equal rights especially the right to vote. In the twentieth century, the movement became larger and extended its concerns. The second-wave feminism embraced many areas of women's issues including work, politics, sexuality, and family. Within this second-wave feminism, radical feminism was arising. Radical feminist believes that women's oppression is the most widespread and deepest form of oppression, and thus it attempts to examine the different ways through which men attempt to control women's bodies and enslave female sexuality to serve their own desires (Mahmoud 2012, 12). This feminist perspective sees society as a patriarchal system that supports men domination and women oppression. Hence, this movement seeks to obliterate male privilege by challenging social norms.

Considering the fact that patriarchy does exist at present, it is important to call attention to how patriarchy is presented in literary works. Frye (1983, 49), on her theory of oppression states that what represented and symbolized in literary work is the reflection of the society. She argues that the works in literature might reflect the nature of the society in real life. By isolating a certain unit and refers it to the principle of nature, we will be able to see the symbolization of nature in literary

works (Frye 1983, 67). Therefore, literature can become a tool for studying the thoughts of human, social values, and social systems at a certain period time.

Thus far, several studies have examined the patriarchy and women oppression in literary works from feminist perspectives. A study on Alice Walker's major novels reports that the female characters in the novels have undergone various sufferings and dealing with suppression and disloyalty of males (Suresh and Anuradha 2018). Janoory and Hammood (2019) share similar findings in their discussion of the novel *The Tent*, in which the female characters suffer silent oppression and are subjected to discrimination and marginalization. Both studies discuss women oppression using feminist theories and the results of these studies agree that the source of the oppression against these female characters is male domination in a patriarchal culture.

Meanwhile, some other studies agree that there is another source of women oppression. A study of female oppression in the novels *Ice Candy Man* and *Holy Woman* focuses on how the religion and culture of Muslim and Indian society make women marginalized and oppressed (Akhtar, Andleeb and Awan 2015). Religion and culture indirectly force women to dress and behave in certain way. However this custom is used by men to limit women's activities and freedom. This study shows how the tradition of its society places women inferior to men, rather than focusing on how male oppresses women. Discussing women oppression and relation with the society, a study has been conducted on women oppression of the Afro-Arab community in Egypt (Ideris 2018). In his study, Ideris criticizes women for

oppressing their fellow women and agrees that men are the main source of women oppression, but it could not be denied that in some cultures fellow women are also the source of oppression against women. These studies suggest that besides men, there are other sources of oppression, namely: culture and tradition.

This study analyzes patriarchal oppression against women in a novel entitled *For Today I Am a Boy*. It is a masterpiece and the debut novel of Kim Fu, a Canadian-born writer, living in Seattle. Fu's delicate, honest, and poetic prose successfully captures the tragic, violent struggle of first-generation immigrant's experience to change standards of traditional norms. This is a young adult novel published in 2014. Young adult literature is a blend of enduring adolescence and constant change and is defined as a literature that provides a unique adolescent point of view and reflects the concerns, interests, and challenges of contemporary young adults (Aronson 2001). This novel received several awards and critical praise. The book was one of the finalists for the *PEN/Hemingway Award*. It also won the *Edmund White Award* for debut fiction. This novel was also one of the *Book Review Editors' Choice of New York Times* and a long listed for *Canada Reads*. The story of this novel is also praised for its depth of character development for supporting characters.

In the novel, the issue of women oppression and patriarchal society could be seen clearly. The novel tells a story of a Chinese immigrant family living in Canada consisting of a father, mother, three daughters, and a son. The story actually focuses

on the journey of the only son in finding his gender identity. However, the focus of this study would be directed into the oppression experienced by the mother and three daughters of the family. The mother is presented as a voiceless woman, a wife of a very patriarchal husband. The three daughters, Adele, Helen, and Bonnie also receive a lot of oppressions. The oppression comes mainly from their fathers and their closest persons who are expected to give them protection and comfort.

As the narrative follows the life of Huang family living in Ontario in the 1980s until the early of twenty-first century, it is important to call attention to the condition of women especially female immigrants in Canada at that period of time. During the second -wave of feminism in Canada, in the period of 1960s until the 1980s, there were women movements supporting the use of birth control and an end of violence against women (Strong 2016). In the 21st century, women in Canada are still experiencing oppression. *Canadian Women Foundation* states that Canadian women and girls live with a heightened risk of violence – often at the hands of someone they know (2016).

It has been mentioned that *For Today I Am a Boy* is a young adult novel. This genre allows young people to experience and gain knowledge about the complexities of life. A number of researches have discussed young adult literature. In his study, Leire Martin Anton (2018) discusses how the female characters in young adult literature are presented as a problem solver and a powerful woman. He argues that readers who are young adults would prefer strong female characters. A study using

some well-known young adult novels like *The Princess Diary* and *Speak* states that young adult novels tend to have the strongest, most role-model worthy characters. Although several studies have identified the portrayal of women in young adult literature, remarkably little research has addressed the specific issue of patriarchal oppression against women in a private sphere presented in young adult literature.

This study complements previous studies that explore the patriarchal oppression experienced by female characters in contemporary young adult novel. Most studies of women oppression have only investigated the oppression presented in literary works. However, this study aims to contribute to this area of research by exploring the issue of patriarchal oppression within the private sphere including family and closest people. This study applies feminist criticism of Sylvia Walby's *Theorizing Patriarchy*. Walby (1990, 220) argues that there are six main patriarchal structures that can adequately grasp the varied forms of women's oppression in the period and place under its consideration. It emphasizes on how the mother is oppressed by her own husband and the three daughters suffering from patriarchal oppression from their father. The discussion continues on the story of the mother after the death of her husband and the daughters who are still experiencing oppression after leaving their home.

This study also aims to reveal the self-determination of each character in order to examine how the female characters fight the patriarchal oppression. Radical feminism offers an accurate analysis of women who are angry with men that oppress

them and offers a means of women rage so they can properly direct to those who oppress them that is based on self-determination (Madsen 2000, 24). In addition, this study also considers the cultural influence, setting of place and time, and its condition of society at that time with the patriarchal oppression and how the female characters fight the oppression.

Since there is the trend of strong female characters in contemporary young adult literature, many studies claim that our society has achieved its gender equality. However, the resurgence of women movements in the 2010s is a proof that women are still struggling to achieve their freedom. This study decides to discuss the issue of women oppression in order to support the women movements that have been emerging in the last decade. The discussion of women issue especially women's oppression is one of some efforts to awaken people's awareness of women's struggle.

1.2 Statements of the Problems

After reading the novel and determining the issue, there are two major questions to be examined in this study, namely:

1. How is patriarchal oppression portrayed through the female characters of Huang family in a young adult novel entitled *For Today I Am a Boy*?
2. How do these women fight against the patriarchal oppression from their family and society as depicted in the novel?

1.3 Objectives of the Study

In order to answer the statements of the problem, the following are the objectives of the study:

1. To identify the patriarchal oppression portrayed through the women of Huang family in a young adult novel entitled *For Today I Am a Boy*
2. To examine how these women fight against the oppression from their family and patriarchal society in the novel.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study aims to give a contribution to the discussion of the novel *For Today I Am a Boy*. Telling a story of a transgender person and the family, the existence of supporting female characters seem to be neglected by many researchers. Focusing on the struggle of the female characters, this study shows that the women issue in the novel is worthy of attention. This study also intends to express appreciation to the presence of women in the story. Applying feminist criticism, a literary criticism that few researchers use in discussing the novel, this study is expected to shed new light on the discussion of the novel *For Today I Am a Boy*.

Discussing women oppression in young adult literature, this study attempts to deliver additional research about women issues especially in contemporary young adult literature. As the #MeToo movement emerges, women are presented in an empowered manner. This discussion of oppressed female characters in young adult

literature is needed to educate young women about the problem that women are facing nowadays.

In addition, this study also purposes to give a contribution to the development of literary studies especially, at the English Department of Universitas Airlangga. As collecting the secondary data for this study, the writer realizes that most of the objects of the studies are literary works considered as the most popular of a particular time, place, or genre. This study attempts to prove that there are many newer or less unknown literary works that are worth to be examined.

1.5 Definition of Key Terms

- Radical Feminism : A move to reduce and eliminate gender inequality, or alternatively limited to the goal of improving the position of women while still embracing gender difference, or more ambitiously as having the aim of transforming gender relations and existing gender standards (Walby 2001, 20)
- Women Oppression : A harm, through which groups of persons are systematically and unfairly or unjustly constrained, burdened or reduced by any of several forces (Cudd 2006).
- Patriarchy : Men's pervasive oppression and exploitation of women, which can be found wherever women and

men are in contact with each other, in private as well as in public (Lorber 1997, 16).

Private Patriarchy : Private patriarchy is a form of patriarchy which is based on upon house-hold production with a patriarch controlling women individually and directly in the relatively private sphere of the home (Walby 1990, 178)

Self-determination : Sources of motivation such as a need to gain knowledge or independence, which is known as intrinsic motivation (Madsen 2000, 35)