

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Narratives of women who do not have children, such as “childless,” “unchilded,” “non-mother,” “not a mother,” and “child-free,” are intended to be derogatory to women’s social value due to their lack of biological children (Tanaka and Johnson 2016, 3). The myth that motherhood is “women’s inevitable destiny” continues to stigmatize their non-normative lives (Letherby 2002, 10). Childless women are frequently stereotyped as either hopeless or inconsiderate, regardless of whether they are childless voluntarily or involuntarily (2002, 11). Voluntary childless women are those who do not have the intention of having children despite being fertile and surgically sterile for contraceptive purposes. On the other hand, involuntary childless women are those who have a fertility impairment and are informed that they are sterile for non-contraceptive reasons, such as the difficulty of conceiving or delivering a baby, the inability of a partner to father, or a woman advised by her doctor not to become pregnant due to a medical danger (Frejka 2017, 162). For involuntary childless women, they find it necessary to endure the agony of childlessness through social isolation in order to protect themselves. Women who are childless involuntarily often have difficulty expressing their sorrow and prefer to grieve alone because they believe no one can truly understand their desperation and misery (Obiyo 2016, 11).

Childless women in the United States have received significant interest within the professional literature in recent decades, and it is also frequently discussed in newspapers, radio, and television talk shows (Frejka 2017, 159). According to the National Survey of Family Growth data, approximately 10.9% of all women in the United States have fertility impairment at some point in their lives (Sternke and Abrahamson 2015, 2). Moreover, McQuillan et al. (2012), as cited in Koba (2016, 6), stated that among wealthy, industrialized nations, the United States continues to be one of the most pronatalist countries. In the pronatalism value system, motherhood is both a personal experience and a societal institution, which makes it the major aim of a woman's life (McCutcheon 2020, 2). Although the United States is considered the most developed country, the majority of its citizens aspire to have biological children one day (Williamson 2019, 3). The social and psychological value of parenthood is deeply instilled in the dominant Western value system in the United States (Koba 2016, 6), which results in women being expected to be warm, sensitive, gentle, soft-spoken, caring, compassionate, and motherly, making them better suited to a life spent caring for children (Williamson 2019, 24).

Parenthood, particularly for women, has become a master status where it overshadows other qualities and pervades the execution of a wide range of social roles (Sternke and Abrahamson 2015, 3). While gender roles in the United States have evolved since the mid-twentieth century, with more women entering the workforce and more men engaging in childcare, the expectations placed on women to become mothers and be the primary caregiver do not appear to have

decreased (Williamson 2019, 24). Not meeting maternal expectations frequently causes women to feel deeply distressed and unfulfilled as women. Involuntarily childless women with fertility impairment have therefore been regarded as a severe disturbance, which is viewed as a failure to live up to normative ideals of what it means to be a woman in American society (Sternke and Abrahamson 2015, 3). Given the persistent emphasis on biological motherhood in American culture, many studies show that when women do not become pregnant and give birth to children, they feel alienated and are perceived as deviant or abnormal (2015, 4).

Attitudes toward childlessness in the United States thus might not be changing as quickly or favourably as in other Western countries. According to Koropecjy-cox et al. (2015), research on university students in the United States revealed that the majority desired to have children and saw parenthood as extremely important in their future lives. When compared to those who did not have children, parents were perceived as warmer, kinder, more caring, and more nurturing. Women without children were perceived as less warm, self-centred, and emotionally troubled (Koropecjy-cox et al. 2015, 18). American society is regarded as a pronatalist because parenthood is essential for adult roles as it is the primary foundation for achieving full social participation, particularly for women (Gimenez 2019, 160). Deviations from established role expectations, such as childlessness, would be punished with a range of socioeconomic and psychological penalties.

Therefore, motherhood becomes one of the primary sources of women's oppression when viewed as a given parameter of a woman's normal adult role. The idea that all women should and want to be mothers has always been used to keep women in a subordinate position while perceiving the social significance of their role. Childless women will experience feelings of guilt, self-esteem loss, role failure, family abandonment, and social isolation (Nahar and Richters 2011). Moreover, childless women are left feeling incomplete, inadequate, unworthy, and undesirable (Obiyo 2016, 10). Childlessness can also lead to marital disruption, such as when a husband abandons his wife, leaving her mentally and physically helpless. Moreover, husbands often do not trust their childless wives when they work outside the house because they believe that men can approach a childless woman more easily than a child-bearing woman. Thus, childless women are frequently denied the opportunity to work outside the house and earn money (Nahar and Richters 2011, 332).

Besides happening in reality, women's subordination also occurs in mass media production. Images and representations dominate cultures and societies, and mass media such as newspapers, television, and films construct and represent images of the world (Purvis 2006). For instance, women continue to be underrepresented in the recent Hollywood films. Compared to male characters that are often identified with a work-related role, female characters are twice as likely to be identified with a life-related role (Murphy 2015). Women are frequently portrayed as being bound to gender stereotypes and traditional views of women regarding their familial roles and feminine traits. Studies have shown

that women are still overwhelmingly valued in films based on their identity as lovers, wives, or mothers (2015, 8). Montgomery (1984), as cited in Murphy (2015, 9), stated that in commercial films, female characters are typically centred on themes of self-sacrifice, being subordinated in relationships with men or children, or identifying female audiences with weak or powerless female characters who rely on male protagonists. Therefore, films aimed at a female audience frequently fall short in depictions of women's empowerment to which real audience members can relate.

The subordination of childless married women has been depicted in films such as *The Girl on the Train* (2016) and *The Light Between Oceans* (2016). In the film *The Girl on the Train* (2016), Rachel, the main female character, is an alcoholic divorcee who rides the train every day, passing by her old house where she used to live with her ex-husband, which is now occupied by him, his new wife, and their infant daughter. The couple discovered that Rachel was unable to have a baby during their marriage, and it saddened both of them that the male partner began to familiarize her with alcohol to ease her emotional pain. Because the male partner did not see a continuation of his bloodline with Rachel in the future, he began to physically and emotionally abuse her. Furthermore, Rachel's male partner cheated on her with another woman, and he divorced her and kicked her out of the house they purchased together. Rachel allegedly used violence to cope with her guilt and pay for her 'mistake' because she couldn't satisfy her husband and couldn't be a 'good wife' for him. Accepting the violence and then

moving out of the house they bought together was a way Rachel used to cope with her guilt and pay for her ‘mistake’.

In the film *The Light Between Oceans* (2016), the main female character, Isabel, is a wife who is depressed after three miscarriages in a row. One day, she and her husband come across a baby who has been washed away by the sea. Despite her husband’s objections, she decides to adopt the baby privately and names her Lucy. This event was eventually revealed over time. Grace, the child, is then returned to her biological mother, Hannah. Isabel blames her husband for this and falls back into depression. As depicted in the film, Isabel becomes obsessed with having a baby. Isabel’s profound desire for a child is still entwined with the patriarchal system that implicitly surrounds her. Her husband told her that she could become a mother, which has such a powerful meaning that men, as the embodiment of the patriarchal system, admit that motherhood is supposed to be possessed and resided in the presence of women. Isabel’s strong feelings toward a baby are shaped by her surroundings, which are implicitly institutionalized by patriarchy. Isabel suffers greatly as a result of the patriarchy’s intervention. Similarly, the writer would also address the issue of childless married women’s subordination, which had been depicted in *The Girl on the Train* (2016) and *The Light Between Oceans* (2016), in the film entitled *Pieces of a Woman* (2020). The film *Pieces of a Woman* (2020) differs from the previous films as it includes several attempts by the main female character to resist her subordination.

The film *Pieces of a Woman* (2020) is chosen as the object in this study in order to reveal the portrayal of subordination toward childless married women. The film *Pieces of a Woman* is a drama film directed by Kornél Mundruczó, which originated from a screenplay by Kata Wéber. The film *Pieces of a Woman* (2020) tells about Martha Weiss and Sean Carson, a married couple who are about to become parents. The couple has agreed to have their baby delivered at home with the assistance of a midwife called Eva. Once Martha gives birth to her daughter, Eva realizes that the baby is turning blue. Eva tries to resuscitate the baby, but she fails in cardiac arrest and dies. Following that, the film begins to present a variety of situations in which Martha is oppressed due to her child's death, making her a subordinated childless married woman. While Martha is still depressed over her child's death, Sean begins an affair with her cousin, leaving her neglected and abandoned. Furthermore, Martha discovered that her own mother, Elizabeth, was ashamed of what had happened to her. Elizabeth blames Martha for her decision to give birth at home and convinces Martha to attend the trial of Eva that accused of malpractice and caused her child's death. Elizabeth believes that taking this action will relieve Martha from her stigma due to her childlessness. However, Martha says that she does not blame Eva and it is not her fault that caused her child's death. The situation changes at the end of the film when the relationship between Martha and her mother becomes better as she finally respects Martha's decision and no longer cares about the stigma attached to Martha. In addition, Martha decided to cremate her child's body and scatter the ashes in the river. The final scene of the film portrays a little girl who is climbing

an apple tree, followed by Martha helping her go down, and the two enter a house together.

The writer chose *Pieces of a Woman* (2020) as the object of the study because there are still limited films that portray women's subordination that include the appearance of childless married women. The main female character, Martha Weiss, is depicted as a married woman who faces subordination due to her childlessness, which resulted from her child's death and her decision to give birth at home. Although her decision has already gotten consent from her husband, the film demonstrates that Martha is more to be blamed for her child's death than her husband. The film portrays her difficulty in experiencing the oppression that she gets, not only from her husband but also from society. Furthermore, Martha is portrayed as attempting to resist her subordination to obtain as no longer be viewed as a failure. However, the ending of the film shows how Martha eventually managed to have children and was free of the negative stigma of being childless. Therefore, it may imply that the film has a double meaning. On the one hand, Martha rises to oppose her subordination. On the other hand, Martha also demonstrates that becoming a mother brings fulfillment to women. Regarding the implied double meaning of the film, the writer is interested in analysing whether the resistance that appears in this film is to empower the subordinated women. Since the representation of images and culture in mass media such as films has a significant influence on the dominant ideology in society, an analysis of how women are portrayed in films can reveal what ideology is being instilled in order to construct and define gender roles.

The writer is interested in analysing the representation of subordination toward childless married women in the film, as this issue has become important in today's reality, where the ideal notion of married women is for them to produce children in order to be the most important and valuable members of society. The writer is also interested in analysing how the resistance of subordination towards a childless married woman occurs in the film. In this study, the resistance of subordination towards a childless married woman in *Pieces of a Woman* (2020) is represented by the main female character, Martha Weiss, who is a brave and confident figure. These two representations of Martha Weiss appear in chronological order within the film.

There are previous studies that have discussed the representation of women's subordination within marriage in media texts. However, there are still limited studies that have discussed the subordination of childless married women represented in films. The first study is *The Portrayal of Women Subordination and Intimate Partner Violence in The Girl on The Train (2016) Movie* conducted by Ekie Silvy Nadia which discussed the portrayal of women's subordination and the representation of Battered Woman Syndrome experienced by a female character in the film (Nadia 2018). The second study conducted by Yuanita Albhar entitled *The Motherhood Instinct of Isabel Sherbourne in M. L. Stedman's The Light Between Oceans: A Feminist Criticism* examined the issue of the notion of motherhood in the novel (Albhar 2017). The third study conducted by Christina Archetti entitled *No Life Without Family: Film Representations of Involuntary Childlessness, Silence and Exclusion* examines the dark side of the

“family imperative” by focusing on film representations of involuntary childlessness (Archetti 2019).

This study examines not only how women’s subordination is portrayed in the media, but the subordination aimed at married women who are childless involuntarily, in which they are childless by circumstance rather than choice. The purpose of this study is to analyze the issue of subordination of childless married women and its resistance in the film *Pieces of a Woman* (2020). The subordination that occurs in the main female character is analyzed using the theory of Woman as *Other* by Simone de Beauvoir. According to Beauvoir (1989), women as *Other* means that women are regarded as secondary and insignificant because their presence does not contribute much, and they are frequently positioned as inferiors and viewed as dependent creatures. The object is analyzed using the qualitative method and the narrative and non-narrative analysis in order to examine the issue in the film and support the writer’s discussions.

1.2 Statement of the Problems

Based on the background of the study above, the writer would like to state the statement of the problems as follows:

- How is Martha Weiss subordinated for being a childless married woman in *Pieces of a Woman* (2020)?
- How does Martha Weiss resist her subordination as a childless married woman in *Pieces of a Woman* (2020)?

1.3 Objectives of the Study

Based on the statement of the problems above, the objectives that are proposed to be achieved for this study are:

- To discover how Martha Weiss is subordinated for being a childless married woman in *Pieces of a Woman* (2020).
- To discover how Martha Weiss resists the subordination she faces for being a childless married woman in *Pieces of a Woman* (2020).

1.4 Significant of the Study

The significance of this study is to provide knowledge about the subordination of childless married women and its resistance found in *Pieces of a Woman* (2020). The subordination of childless married women was chosen from among the many issues of women's subordination in the media because it is still rarely used to reveal female representation in the media. This study is expected to provide a better understanding of the theory that the writer uses, which is Simone de Beauvoir's theory of Woman as *Other*. The writer hopes that this study will contribute to the field of cultural studies by providing insight into the representation of subordination toward childless married women and its resistance in the media, particularly film. Furthermore, the writer also hopes that this study will be useful to students in the English Department at Universitas Airlangga who are interested in conducting similar studies.

1.5 Definition of Key Terms

Involuntarily Childless : The individuals who are childless by circumstance rather than choice, such as the death of a partner, being ill during one's fertile years, or being unable to afford assisted reproduction (Kreyenfeld and Konietzka 2016).

Patriarchy : A system in which men's dominance, oppression, and exploitation of women are reflected in social structures and practices (Walby 1991).

Resistance : An individual's inherent ability to reject, deny, or otherwise oppose harmful influences in the form of a psychological defence mechanism ("Resistance Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster" 2022).

Women Subordination : The social condition in which women are forced to remain under the control of men in order to preserve men's dominance (Sultana 2012).