WOMEN’S INFERIORITY IN HAITI AS SEEN IN EDWIDGE DANTICAT’S

BREATHE EYES MEMORY

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to discuss women’s inferiority in Haiti pictured in Breath Eyes Memory by Edwidge Danticat, a Haitian- American author. In attaining the purpose, the writer applies feminist literary approach by Kate Millett which emphasizes on the issues of sexism in educational, economical, and social aspect. In addition, the writer applies qualitative and descriptive methods to analyze and understand the content in the novel. From the analysis, the writer found that there are different treatments between men and women in education, economy and social aspect in Haitian society where women are still more disadvantaged. Men also insist women to be submissive by men’s rule that applied in Haitian society and make women feeling oppressed. These circumstances make men living in superior and women living in inferior. Living in inferior condition becomes conflict for them and the result they resist toward their inferiority.

Keywords: patriarchal culture, inferiority, oppression, resistance

Introduction

The phenomenon about women inferiority occurred not only in America, but also throughout the world including in Caribbean officially known as Republic of Haiti. In Haiti women are living in inferior condition. The discrimination against women is being a structural feature in Haitian society and culture that has subsisted throughout its history, both in times of peace and unrest. The inequality right between men and women has been a longstanding problem in Haiti where men are more dominated in all aspects.

An interesting novel Breath Eyes Memory by Edwidge Danticat is a novel describing about women inferiority in Haitian society. Breath Eyes Memory, first was published in 1994 and chosen as an Oprah Book Club in 1998. Edwidge Danticat is Haitian-American author, educator and lecturer. She was born in Port-au-Prince 19 January 1969, Haiti.
**Methodology**

In analyzing this research the writer uses feminist literary approach. According to Lois Tyson in *Critical Theory Today* explained “Feminist literary approach is the way in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforce or undermine the economic, political, social and psychological oppression of women”(83). To support this analysis the writer uses theory by Kate Millett one of the famous feminist writers who gives many critics of the issues of sexism in education, economy, politic and social in literary works.

In this research the writer also uses two methods that are qualitative and descriptive methods to analyze women’s inferiority in Haiti. According to Cresswell (1994) “a qualitative study is defined as an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting.

Descriptive method according to Nyoman Kuta Rata (53)”descriptive method is an analyzing through describing facts and then followed by analysis.

**Result and Discussion**

**The Aspects in which Women Inferiority Occur in Haiti**

Millet’s feminist concept about women inferiority in *Sexual Politics* explained that “in patriarchy women are lower in status, position and quality than men such as aggression, intelligence, force, wealthy and efficacy in the male and passivity, ignorance, docility, poverty, virtue, and ineffectuality in the female. The evidence of women’s inferior status and oppression that exists in all aspects of life and literature abundantly clears”(47). The statement proves, in life we can see how patriarchy is placing women in inferior position in all aspects. Literary works also have important role to show it to reader because it is reflecting about the real women condition in certain places and societies portrayed by authors through their works.

*Breath Eyes Memory* by Edwidge Danticat describes about women inferiority in Haiti in some aspects such as educational, economical and social aspect. Inequality between men and women rights in Haiti is represented in the novel. The women’s limitations and domination of men in all aspects in Haitian society is being hindrance for them to escape from their inferiority. The different rights between men and women make Haitian women stands under men. Haitian woman has no access to education and they do not participate fully to run important roles in economy. Many of Haitian women living
in poverty that makes them shoulder the burden of tilling land, grinding grain. Haitian men insist woman to take care of domestic affair such as cooking, washing, cleaning and sewing. In society, men also make rules that be submissive by women. This is not easy burden but Haitian women still face greater problems. The lack of social protections makes women vulnerable to be sexual victim such as rape and harassment.

**Educational Aspect**

Education is very important to support our lives and basic of all aspects. *Breath Eyes Memory* describes women inferiority in educational aspect caused by gender inequality in Haitian society and women are still more often disadvantaged. In the novel pictured the different qualities of education between female characters (Sophie, Atie and Martine) and male characters (Chabin, Donald and Joseph). The lack of opportunity for Haitian women to get education makes them illiterate. This condition makes them often get fooled and underestimated by men. Haitian women’s intelligence is considered low than men by Haitian society. Patriarchal culture is so dominant to control women in society such as what women should to do and don’t need to do. The women’s limitations in Haiti deter women to reach something precious in their lives like high education. The obstacles for women in reaching their dreams are roles of women in society and different treatment between men and women for education.

The woman inferiority in educational aspect can be seen through relationship between characters, Tante Atie and Albino.

The albino wrote us a receipt with the numbers and the amount Tante Atie had given him. Tante Atie raised her receipt towards the sun to see it better. "There, he wrote your name," I said pointing to the letters, "and there, he wrote the number thirtyone." She ran her fingers over the numbers as though they were quilted on the paper. "Would it not be wonderful to read?" I said for what must have been the hundredth time. "I tell you, my time is passed. School is not for people my age.(2)

From quotation above we know that Atie is illiterate. Atie cannot read the receipt written by her friend Albino. It shows the education quality of Atie is lower than Albino. In Haitian society, the quality of women in education is always under men. This circumstance caused by the different treatment between men and women to get opportunities for education where men are more advantaged.

In Haiti different treatment between men and women in education happens in Haitian society.
The older boys huddled in small groups near the school yard fence as they chatted over their books. The girls formed circles around their grandmothers' feet, learning to sew. (4)

From the data clearly explains that boys get enough education in Haiti by studying in the school and get some books to improve their knowledge. While the girls learn to sew with their grandmother. It means, in patriarchal culture women are prepared to be able to take care of household chores like sewing, cooking, and so on since they were little kid. Beside that patriarchy also assumes women cannot do like men do in example learn at school because their abilities are not compatible to accept what they had learned. According to Flaxner in *Century of Struggle the women’s Rights Movement* it was almost universally believed that women’s brain was smaller in capacity and therefore inferior in quality to that of a man”(23). Based on the statement explains women have low intelligence than men, as the result women are considered unable to study science, economy, politic and other subjects at school. Therefore, men think the ideal women's position is placing them at home to take care of domestic affairs.

Haitian women also often underestimated by men because they have low education like conversation between Sophie and Joseph.

What are you going to study in college?” he asked. "I think I am going to be a doctor."You think?” (33)

Following the conversation we can look Joseph underestimates. He knows that extremely rare for Haitian women to become a doctor. If they do, they must from upper class and get education outside of Haiti because education in Haiti it is not programmed for women. In *Sexual Politics* Kate Millett says “patriarchy enforces a temperamental imbalance of personality traits between the sexes, its educational institutions, segregated or co-educational, accept a cultural programming toward the generally operative division between "masculine" and "feminine" subject matter, assigning the humanities and certain social sciences (at least in their lower or marginal branches) to the female and science and technology, the professions, business and engineering to the male”(42). Thus, the different education programs in Haiti between man and woman that being obstacle for women to reach their dreams in their live like Sophie dream to become doctor because of she has no enough education to make her dreams to be happen.

The roles of women in Haitian society are being obstacle for women to get
education. Kavita Krishnan in *Patriarchal Ideology and Political Culture* (2011) says that “in a deep rooted patriarchal culture that permeates society, a good woman is one who conforms to the role of wife and mother. A patriarchal culture venerates the image of woman as a mother”(7). So, in country practices patriarchal culture women are destined since they were born to be mother for their children and wife for their husband.

Besides that, In Haiti, there are so many storytelling that forbid women to get education. It can be seen from source in http://www.haitinet.gender-in-haiti “are you remember, when sitting there braiding your daughter’s hair that she looks a lot like you at her age and like your mother and your grandmother before her. She is going to school. Always use your 10 fingers your mother told you when your father took you out of school. What is the use of school to a girl who cooks and cleans? a kitchen scholar”.

It shows the reason why Haitian tradition deters women to get education because they do not want women run away from their status and role as mother and wife. In patriarchal culture women can be said success if they able to be good mother for their children and good wife for their husband not expected to become career woman or educated woman. Even Haitian women are able to get their bachelor in college but if they back in Haitian society it is useless because they have to back to their destiny as mother or wife and Haitian men mock them as a kitchen bachelor.

**Economical Aspect**

Millett states in *Sexual Politics* that” In patriarchy the male's superior economic position and female's inferior one have also grave implications”(54). It shows in patriarchy men’s status is higher than women in economical aspect. The discrimination on women’s right for economy is happened in patriarchal country like Haiti. Women are oppressed by patriarchy system that placing women in inferior class in economy.

The lack of education for Haitian women affect to their economy in society because they have no knowledge and skill. It is being a hindrance for Haitian women to find good job to improve their economy. There are no chances for Haitian women to run important roles in economy because all are dominated by men that make Haitian women keep living in poverty.

We are a family with dirt under our fingernails. Do you know what that means?” She did not wait for me to answer. "That means we've worked the land. We're not educated.(10)

From the quotation above Atie tells to Sophie that her family is experiencing economical hardship that makes them to work in their land like Grandme as rice
pounder and tilling their land. On quotation Atie also says” We’re not educated”(10). It means, there is no opportunity to get education for them that are being one of factors why they keep living in poverty because they have no skills or knowledge to get good jobs to increase their economy. It is also reason why in Haitian society all important roles in economy are dominated by men because they are educated.

As laborer in plantation is one of women’s jobs in Haiti. Working in plantation is felt so heavy for women because the circumstance of plantation is very hard. Although women get low salary from their job as laborer in plantation but they have no choice.

Tante Atie would talk about the sugar cane fields, where she and my mother practically lived when they were children. They saw people die there from sunstroke every day.(1)

From quotation above Atie tells that working in cane field is so heavy for her. Atie also describes the circumstance of cane field where many of people cannot survive by sunstroke. She has to work to help her mother to get money to fulfill daily needs. Atie also says” Food, it was so rare when we were growing up. We could not waste it “(82). It means, although they have work as laborer in cane field but they still have no money to buy food. It proves the salary for women as laborer in plantation is very low.

Social Aspect


In patriarchy men are powerful than women. Because of that stereotype women are considered have no power to fight back to men and they always accept oppression, act despising and harassment. Men also make rules and give limits that must to be obeyed by women. In society, Men insist to Haitian women are virgins. They make tradition to keep women’s Virginity but the tradition has oppresses women’s mental.

In social interaction women are vulnerable be victim sexual violence such as harassment by men. It happens to female character Martine can be seen from quotation.

Did Atie tell you how you were born?”The details are too much" she said. "But it happened like this. A man grabbed me from the side of the road, pulled me into a cane field, and put you in my body. I was still a young girl then, just barely older than you.(29)

The quotation shows Martine was raped by men at the age sixteen. It is mean in social women treated so badly by men. Women are often being sexual weak object
for men. It is relating to Kate millet in Sexual Politics said that “Patriarchal force also relies on a form of violence particularly sexual in character and realized most completely in the act of rape. The figures of rapes reported represent only a fraction of those which occur "as the "shame" of the event is sufficient to deter women from the notion of civil prosecution under the public circumstances of a trial”(44). It means, in patriarchal country like Haiti sexual violence is often occur in society and the victim is definitely women. In the case women do not want to report what happened to them because sexual violence like raping is something shame for women where women have to lose their virginity. In Haitian society virginity is the most valuable thing in women. Women will be excommunicated by men and society if they lose it. It is the reason why women cover it and decided to do not report. So, this condition is advantage for rapists (men) because they can avoid from punishment.

In Haiti, Men have power to control everything in Haitian society. They make rules that must be obeyed by Haitian women.

Haitian men, they insist that their women are virgins and have their ten fingers. According to Tante Atie, each finger had a purpose. It was the way she had been taught to prepare herself to become a woman.(70)

The quotation shows Haitian men insist for women are virgins before they married with a Haitian man. It explains, women have no control even to their body. Actually the virginity is woman’s right to keep it or not. It means, women still denied to their sexual freedom and biological control by men in Haitian society.

Women are forbidden to do activities that can damage their virginity. I learned very early in life that virgins always took small steps when they walked. They never did acrobatic splits, never rode horses or bicycles. They always covered themselves well and, even if their lives depended on it, never parted with their panties. (72)

The quotation explains that women do not feel free to do something in their lives. Haitian men’s rule applied in Haitian society that insists to women to keep their virginity make women burdened. They cannot enjoy fun things as done by men such as ride bicycle or horse, acrobatic and other things that believed can damage women’s virginity.

Men’s rule that insist women are virgins make parents try to keep the pureness of their daughter until she married with a man. The parent’s way to keep the pureness of their daughter by
checking their virginity every night and it is called testing tradition. Testing tradition is a Haitian tradition to make sure their daughters still virgin or not by checking directly in private parts of women.

"When I was a girl, my mother used to test us to see if we were virgins. She would put her finger in our very private parts and see if it would go inside. Your Tante Atie hated it. She used to scream like a pig in a slaughterhouse. The way my mother was raised, a mother is supposed to do that to her daughter until the daughter is married. It is her responsibility to keep her pure."

The data shows how Grandme does testing tradition to her daughter Atie. Atie looks does not like the test because she is feeling depressed and embarrassed as long the test is going on. It means, Haitian men’s rule that insist women are virgins making them oppressed mentally. They are forced to obey the rule without any resistances because women have no power to oppose the rules made by men.

The Resistances of Haitian Women Toward Their Inferiority.

As stated in previous chapter about women’s inferiority in Haiti in educational, economical and social aspects. In this chapter the writer wills discusses how Haitian women resist toward their inferiority. In line what are said by Kate Millett in Sexual Politics explains “female was inherently inferior in mental ability, and was still willing to attribute a certain amount of female resistance to her situation, however emphasized as "conflict" to social and educational factors cultural rather than inherent biological or psychological elements.”(198) it means, although men are considered more strong in mentally and biologically than women but women resistances are basically connected to their conflicts in their lives because of oppressed by men and culture.

Improve Education

In Haitian history women do not benefit from an equal access of education. Education is an issue complicated by cultural boundaries, poverty and inequality. Haitian women rights for education are very limited and related to gender discrimination. This circumstance makes many of Haitian women are uneducated and hard to get their dreams. It is also being factor Haitian women’s position seen inferiority by Haitian men in educational aspect. Breath Eyes Memory is pictured the women characters resist their inferiority through improve their education. Women’s dreams are being the main reason why the characters need to get their education because women want get something precious in their lives like
career and education.” You should have seen us when we were young. We always dreamt of becoming important women. We were going to be the first women doctors from my mother's village. We would not stop at being doctors either. We were going to be engineers too. Imagine our surprise when we found out we had limits.(20)

From quotation shows that Martine and her sister have dreams to become doctor and engineer. They want to become first women doctor and engineer in her village. It explains, they want to break men domination in those professions. In Haitian society only men are more assumed able to hold those professions because of men have high intelligence than women. Because of this stereotype, women are considered unable to study science at school is being one of factor the discrimination gender in educational aspect in Haiti. On quotation also shows that Martine find out her limit. The limit intended by Martine is; she has no education to become doctor because of the different treatment between men and women in educational aspect in Haitian society that makes hard for her to reach her passion.

Although Martine cannot get her dream, she puts her dream to her daughter Sophie." There are a lot of opportunities in your life" he said. "You should reconsider, unless of course this is the passion of your life."She is too young now to know," my mother said. "You are going to be a doctor," she told me. “(47)

From quotation above show Martine wants her daughter to be a doctor like her passion when she was young. Martine realizes that her daughter needs to get high education to achieve her goal. It is reason why she tells to Sophie to get her education in New York. She knows education in Haiti education is still an issue complicated by cultural boundaries and inequality for women.

**Improve Standard of Living**

Millett states in *Sexual Politics* that” The male's superior economic position, the female's inferior one have also grave implications” there are no opportunities for women to run important roles in economy in patriarchy give impact to their economy. As mentioned in previous chapter that Martine’s family is getting economical hardship that insists them to work in their land as worker in cane field and rice pounder. Martine is realizing that those jobs not escape them from poverty. Martine wants to find good job in Haiti to get much money but it is difficult because all dominated by men. Therefore, Martine decides to migrate to America and hopes to find better job there.
In America she works in nursing home and collects money to send to her family in Haiti.” My mother had sent money for the reconstruction of her old home. The house stood out from all the others in Dame Marie. It was a flat red brick house with wide windows and a shingled roof.”(11)

From quotation above explains that Martine starts to build her economy and family by send her money to reconstruction house in Haiti. Martine is very care to her family and shares half of her salary for cost of living her family in Haiti. She also responsible to Sophie’s future and planed to give high education for her daughter. Martine realizes that the cost of education for her daughter is very expensive

Ignore Social

In patriarchal culture women’s biological is lower than men. The women’s stereotypes such as powerless and depend on men. Because of those stereotypes women are obliged to stay at home to be in domestic circumstance. Women also are destined to be a mother for their children. As Friedan says in Feminist Mystique that “women’s primary responsibility for child care and household maintenance.” It means, women considered as a rebel if they run away from their responsibility to be a mother. Women are must to take care their children by their self but it is not shown from the character Martine.

Sophie, it is not mine. It is your mother's. We must send it to your mother.” I only knew my mother from the picture on the night table by Tante Atie's pillow.”(3)

The quotation above tells, on mother’s day Sophie gives a card to Tante Atie to celebrate it but Atie refuses the card from Sophie because it is must to give to her mother (Martine). Sophie looks confused because she never meets her mother since she was born. Sophie only recognizes her mother from photo shown by Atie. Martine migrates to America and leaves Sophie to Atie when Sophie still infant. Martine goes to America to find good job to improve her economy. Although Martine’s act only purposed to her family but it is cannot acceptable by Haitian society. As long twelve years Martine puts her responsibility as a mother to her sister Atie. Therefore, Martine’s act is considered contradict with social values in Haitian society. It can be observed from conversation between Atie and her neighbor “A child belongs with her mother, and a mother with her child”(7). So in Haitian society, a woman must taking care her child by her self. Women are judged a rebel if they escape from their responbility.
Conclusion

In the novel *Breath Eyes Memory* can be seen clearly that women in Haiti are in inferior position in all aspects. It is influenced of patriarchal culture that practiced in Haitian society to differentiate rights between men and women where men are more advantaged in educational, economical and social aspect. While women are must struggle to get their rights and escape from their inferiority.

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