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THE DEPICTION OF WOMAN'S ROLES IN SHAKESPEARE'S *OTHELLO*

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Abstract

William Shakespeare's *Othello* is a drama that tells about the woman's femininity power in her role. Here, Desdemona as the central female character becomes the main focus in this research. This study aims to reveal woman's roles depicted by Shakespeare in *Othello* and describe the factors affecting them. This study used the literary criticism with the theory of cultural feminism. This research is a type of descriptive qualitative research. From this research, two findings can be stated as the answer of the problems of the study. The first is, the roles of woman in Shakespeare's play *Othello* are woman as a wife, woman as caretaker, and woman as peacemaker. From those roles, the researcher finds that the factors that affect woman's roles in the drama are relationship and personal factors.

Keywords: role, femininity, cultural feminism

INTRODUCTION

Literature is not only a composition which entertain the readers, but also a reflection of human real life. It expresses the social condition of human and describes about culture in the past and so on. It has three genres, poetry, prose, and drama. Drama is created to give many concepts for representing certain social condition, human's experience, and some realities of life, not only about imagination that released from problem of life that is played on the stages. It is a proof that literary work is not born from inanity, but it is the reflection of the phenomenon had happened or will happen in another time. That is why studying literature is always related to other studies, such sociology, psychology, structuralism, history, and other philosophy.

Feminism is one of those studies that also used as one of literary theories and criticisms. Feminism started from the assumption of gender differences which causes an inequality for women. It has been revealed that feminism is a struggle of women to have equal rights with men (Junaidi, 2018). Man's role becomes the authority and woman's role always becomes the second sex and be subordinated. Besides, this also brings the assumption that men are always associated to reasonable, objectively, logic and so on, while women are linked to the body, matter, emotion, absence logic, unreasonable and the like. This statement causes women are considered as the second and inferior creature. Meanwhile, a group of people calling their selves as radical cultural feminist stated that women are treated not to be the second creature but to accompany men to face the world. Cultural feminism focuses on the positive aspects of it is seen of being female character or feminine personality (Bingham, Jackson, Gamblin, & Jones, 2009). Cultural feminism on women's innate differences from men, including their "natural" kindness, tendencies to nurture, pacifism, relationship focus, and concern for others (Alief & Farijanti, 2015).

One of the playwright who present this issue in his work is William Shakespeare through his drama *Othello*. In this drama, Shakespeare portrays society in many ways that is different from his own. He explores these differences in politically creative way (Oza, 2019). It was written in the period of the peak of Shakespeare's fame (Abuzahra & Salahat, 2018). This is not an easy drama to understand at first time reading because the story consists of many phenomena of human life such as human's struggle to get the high position in a government, fighting to get a love, and so on. However, obviously all the problems in the drama relates to woman existence and roles.

In line with this, there are critics who believe that this play is about Renaissance stereotypes of woman. (Naranjo, 2010) believed that Shakespeare's *Othello* can be categorized as a work of feminist literature because of its exploration of men and women in the play. The work revealed the oppressiveness that women have to cope with in their daily life. She stated that the two main female characters in *Othello*, Desdemona and Emilia, prove to be sufficient but their favor and strengths are terminated by patriarchal authority. Similarly, (Masule, 2014) believed that Shakespeare explores the women characters negatively. He portrays female characters as sex goddesses who would compel men to kill their women out of love. In contrast, (Amri & Maylani, 2020) pointed

out that women in *Othello* could have strong domination toward men in regard to race relation. Under certain circumstances, women were not always inferior and men were not always superior on women. The race and class indicated to have significant role in determining the role of each man and woman in society.

In sociology, role concerns the tendency of human behaviors to form characteristic patterns that may be predicted (Encyclopedia of Sociology, 1992). Alongside with (Amri & Maylani, 2020), the role is also influenced by the structure of social life and individual occupy social position. In sum, woman's role is a set of connected behavior, right, and obligation that are conceptualized by society.

25 Talking about woman's role, cultural feminism has different view from other feminist scholars. This school tend to value the qualities identified in women and men are products of culture and nature (Lewis, 2019). It argues that traditional male behaviors, including aggressiveness, competitiveness, and domination, are dangerous to society. Instead, female's nature, emphasizing caring, cooperation, and egalitarianism, is good in decision-making processes in society and in particular field (Lewis, 2019). Hence, these behaviors are equally needed to make a better world. Cultural feminism is a variety of feminism which emphasizes the essential differences between men and women biologically and naturally (Bingham, Jackson, Gamblin, & Jones, 2009).

In *Othello* play, Desdemona is the woman character whose life becomes the focus of this research. Desdemona is the daughter of the Venetian senator, Brabantio, who is socially well-trained. She is also described as a lady who has a noble character and beauty. In Venice sixteenth century, women's tenderness and beauty become the reason why they are assumed as weak and discriminated. However, Desdemona uses those things as a power to fight the culture which influences her role as a daughter and a wife. In a war situation, Desdemona acts the important role as a person that is very influential for *Othello*'s success or shellacking. Hence, Desdemona's role as a wife is not only to be sex preserver, but she has her own role as a person who has the real power to determine everything, including *Othello*'s life, with her natural potential as a woman.

In this case, the researcher analyzed the woman's roles found in Shakespeare's *Othello* as contemplation for people who are interested in studying woman. Besides, by this study, the researcher also delivered information to people about the variation of feminism critics, one of them is cultural feminism. The objective of this research is exploring the woman's roles in Shakespeare's *Othello* and the factors affecting them.

METHOD

This study is qualitative research. (Creswell, 2018) states that qualitative research is a research method used in conditions of natural objects that emphasize more on meaning and data quality for strengthening meaning as a conclusion. The analysis used is descriptive analysis which reveal woman's roles and describe the factors affecting them.

8 On the other hand, this study also uses literary criticism. Literary criticism is a study of literary works purposed to understand and to value the works of literature. As (Sheet, 2020) stated that literary criticism is a term for writing that studies, evaluates, discusses, and interpret of literary work. Researching a literary criticism requires finding information on specific theory. The researcher used feminist literary criticism to explore feminist idea in the literary work, William Shakespeare's *Othello*. (Endraswara, 2008) stated that feminist literary criticism is the literary approach that is based on the understanding of the woman's positions and roles in literary work.

In collecting the data, the steps were started by reading and understanding Shakespeare's *Othello* to find the general data related to female character's life in the form of dialogue. After that, the researcher chose the data which only deals with the problems of the study, woman's roles and the factors affecting them. The last was identifying the data and finding the only appropriate data to answer the problem of the study.

The data then analyzed by categorizing them into the forms of woman's roles. Furthermore, the researcher then looked for the relation of the cultural feminism criteria with the data that are assumed as the result of the woman's roles. The next step was applying the concept of cultural feminism about women in the play. Finally, the last step is making conclusion based on the whole analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Woman's Roles

This study explored the woman's roles in William Shakespeare's *Othello* by using cultural feminist perspective. This play told that Venetian women's tenderness and body became the reasons why they were assumed as weak and discriminated. However, Desdemona, one of the female characters in *Othello*, used those things as her power to fight the culture which influences her role as a daughter and a wife. As it has been explained that cultural

feminism sees women's powerful from their femininity, the women's roles in this drama is depicted as a wife, lover, and friend.

Woman as wife

In this drama, Desdemona is described as a person who is faithful to her husband. She recognizes it as her obligation in playing her role as a wife of Venice general military. Declaring an obedient and a loyal person means continuing to obey her husband's order from the early happy phase of their relationship through to any obstacles come to their life. This drama describes how Desdemona shows her loyalty for her husband to Venetian people when they disagree with her love to Othello. Desdemona is a daughter of the Venetian senator who is socially well trained. Many Venetians want to marry her, but she only chooses Othello to be her husband, a Moor –a black African- who becomes the general military of Venice. She is brave to fight everything which prevents her choice although he is her father (Act 1 scene 3: 180-192). This scene shows that Desdemona will do everything to prove her love and loyalty to her husband. She considers a loyalty to a husband is measurer of her role as a wife in bringing happiness for her household.

Another case is when Othello is assigned to fight the Turk for Cyprus. At that time, Othello craves fit disposition for Desdemona, because he will leave Desdemona for a month. Fortunately, Desdemona tends to follow him to fight the Turk, she subjugates her soul and fortunes for Othello's life and happiness. As her saying to the Duke of Venice

7
DESDEMONA: That I did love the Moor to live with him,
My downright violence and storm of fortunes
May trumpet to the world: my heart's subdued
Even to the very quality of my lord:
I saw Othello's visage in his mind,
And to his honour and his valiant parts
9 I my soul and fortunes consecrate.
So that, dear lords, if I be left behind,
A moth of peace, and he go to the war,
The rites for which I love him are bereft me,
And I a heavy interim shall support
By his dear absence. Let me go with him. (Act 1 scene 3: 244-275)

Desdemona gives up her life to Othello as a husband whom she loves. Starting from the sixth line, it tells that when Desdemona hears Othello will be assigned to go fight the Turk for a month, she feels that she may lose Othello and difficult in leading her life, Desdemona states she gives her life for Othello's courtesy and valiant. Then, she begs to the Duke for allowing her to follow and live with Othello. It is the proof that in being a wife, she has to be ready to subjugate her life and loyal for her lovely husband in every condition.

Fortunately, Desdemona's role as a wife brings victory for the battle. Many Venetians believe that her existence is very influential for Othello's life. It is shown that Cassio, Othello's lieutenant, calls her as "*She that I spake of, our great captain's captain,*" (Act 3 scene 3: 76). It means that Desdemona is the great motivator for Othello's spirit and energy until he is able to bring a victory for Cyprus. This is Desdemona's peculiarity and importance for Othello's fight against on the Turk. Hence, it cannot be denied that she is the source of Othello's power as his recognition to her "*O my fair warrior!*" (Act 2 scene 1: 175). In Britannica dictionary, the word "warrior" means a person who fight in battles and is known for having courage and skill. Fair Warrior means a wise or beautiful person who accompanies the lord in warfare. As it has been told above that Desdemona is a wife who is ready to accompany her husband in every condition. Thus, in this drama, Desdemona is considered as Othello's loyal warrior who is able to comfort his soul with her wise and brilliant idea.

In war situation, Desdemona played the important role in Othello's life. She was able to determine Othello's success and shellacking. Hence, Desdemona's role as a wife was not only to be sex preserver, but also a person who had the real power to determine everything with her natural potential as a woman.

Generally, the power of woman's femininity has been found in many literary works which describes politics, family, and authority. It means that woman's role also can influence political situation. In this drama, there was one example that described Desdemona's role as the general military's wife which was used for political activity. She was in Iago's planning to remove Othello's position as the general military of Venice. Desdemona was the beloved wife of the general military of Venice, Othello. Hence, Iago exploited her position to do his planning in usurping Othello by calumniating her to have a date with his lovely lieutenant, Cassio. Iago expressed his planning in his statement below:

4
After some time, to abuse Othello's ear
That he is too familiar with his wife.
He hath a person and a smooth dispose
To be suspected, framed to make women false.
The Moor is of a free and open nature,

That thinks men honest that but seem to be so,
And will as tenderly be led by the nose
As asses are.
(Act 1 scene 3: 361-383).

This provocation makes Othello doubts to Desdemona's loyalty and assumes that she has betrayed their marriage. He calls Desdemona as a Venetian whore who is brave marrying and deceiving the general military of Venice. However, Desdemona is consistent to her principle to her husband for being a loyal person. Her recognition as being a loyal wife is stated in this drama at scene 4 act 3. She states her subservience to Othello when he is uncertain about Desdemona's loyalty. This idea is described in the following dialogue.

OTHELLO: Why, what art thou?
DESDEMONA: Your wife, my lord; your true
And loyal wife.
OTHELLO: Come, swear it, damn thyself
Lest, being like one of heaven...
Swear thou art honest (Act 4 scene 3).

It shows that Desdemona still on her principle that she is Othello's loyal wife. Although Othello's word is full of fury when he talks to her, she replies him softly, showing that she is an obedient wife. Desdemona wants to prove that she is truly his obedient wife. Recognizing as an obedient wife means that she will be continuing to obey Othello's orders from the early happy phase of their relationship through to the later stages of his jealous ravings. Her recognition as an obedient and loyal wife also makes Othello doubts about his decision to kill her. Moreover, he regrets about himself who is very tender hearted to any kind of problem in social life. This phenomenon means that Desdemona describes how the woman's loyalty cannot be shakable, and it is her power in playing her role in social life. Desdemona's power of femininity appears from showing the strength of woman's principle to be a loyal person to her husband. In the concept of traditional woman, being a submissive means that the woman respects other people. Moreover, feeling of respect is much needed to avoid the controversy among people. Additionally, being a loyal and obedient wife do not make a woman is assumed as the second creature, but it makes the husband will be depended to his wife because she is able to be expected and relied.

Woman as a Caretaker

The second woman's role as depicted in this drama is being a lover. A lover can be meant a person who has a feeling of care to others and ready emphasize their necessity than her need. Caretaking is more of what society demands of women rather than something women created. Care is the key concept from the feminine perspective. In this drama, the researcher finds some Desdemona's behaviors which show a characteristic of care. One of them is she takes care of Emilia when she is despised by her husband. Iago states about Emilia's way in kissing him. It is by putting her tongue into Iago's mouth, but actually when they just married Emilia is not brave to do this. This expression is the bad thing that Desdemona has ever heard. However, Emilia does not say anything to against him and takes the grave accusation. This phenomenon makes Desdemona is angry of Iago's way of treating his wife and then calls him as *true slanderer* (Act 2 scene 1). The word shows Desdemona's angry to Iago and care about Emilia as a person who is always discriminated by her husband. Then, she comforts Emilia by saying ". . . Do not learn/of him, Emilia, though he be thy husband. . ." (Act 2 scene 1). Desdemona's act is matched to woman culturally about care, that a care woman always searches for some solutions whereby no one gets hurt. Hence, she will not be silent when she knows her friend or family has a problem, but being a responsible person to make they are happy.

Desdemona also shows her natural characteristic as a caregiver in treating her husband's illness. As it has been described in the drama she is ready to serve her husband every time, moreover when he is sick.

DESDEMONA: How now, my dear Othello!
Your dinner, and the generous islanders
By you invited, do attend your presence.
OTHELLO: I am to blame.
DESDEMONA: Why do you speak so faintly?
Are you not well?
OTHELLO: I have a pain upon my forehead here.
DESDEMONA: 'Faith, that's with watching; 'twill away again;
Let me but bind it hard, within this hour
It will be well.
OTHELLO: Your napkin is too little:
She puts the handkerchief from him; and it drops
Let it alone. Come, I'll go in with you.
DESDEMONA: I am very sorry that you are not well (Shakespeare, act 3, scene 3: 299-305).

Here, Desdemona's natural characteristic appears to care of her husband. She is able to understand her husband's illness immediately when his speaking is so softly. Othello complains to Desdemona that he has a pain upon his forehead or headache. Instead, she feels that she is at fault when her husband is sick. She thinks

that she cannot care of her husband. Desdemona wipes his forehead by a handkerchief and persuades him that the illness will be better in one hour. It is the proof that a woman truly has a feeling of protection, love, attention and worry about her family. It is certain for woman that she will not let her family in a chaos.

In this drama, Othello also states that her care and love are the reason of his love “²⁶ Upon this hint I spake: She loved me for the dangers I had pass'd, And I loved her that she did pity them.” (Act 1 scene 3: 130-173). This is the form of her femininity power. By applying this power, woman's feeling of care is able to shift the general's principle that is rude and stiff because he has often been in warfare. It also proves that being a master need not to be a masculine because unconsciously woman's femininity has made her being the master of world. Woman's femininity is also able to twist a certain position. The meaning is generally woman is assumed as the second creature, but she can hold men's authority in every shape. It is because man has given up his domestic and external affairs to woman who is considered as the most understood person.

Woman as a Peacemaker

In this drama, Desdemona is also depicted as a peacemaker. She tries to reconcile the problem between Othello and Cassio. As a wife, she feels that she should keep her husband's relationship with his friend in harmony. It also aims at keeping her husband's reputation as a general military of Venice. She receives Cassio's beseeching because she feels that he is the true loyal friend for her husband, he is also a person who had been living with Othello for long time, so, he had understood Othello's character. Hence, she swears to return Cassio's reputation and solve his conflict. This information is stated in the following quotation.

DESDEMONA: ... Do not doubt, Cassio,
But I will have my lord and you again
As friendly as you were (Shakespeare, Act 3 scene 3:5-7).

Desdemona explains clearly that making a peace does not suddenly happen and come from God. Yet, it needs some steps and approaches. Desdemona gives some examples to her husband about the steps by saying “Tis as I should entreat you (Othello) wear your gloves.²⁷ feed on nourishing dishes or keep you warm, / or sue to you to do a peculiar profit. / To your own person” (Act 3 scene 3). It means that reconciling or solving the problem needs us to do something, but not to wait it comes. Hence, Although Othello refuses Desdemona's suggestion with any kind of ways; she still tries to make her husband and his lieutenant at peace. It happens because her willing to make peace appears from her own thought.

The Factors Affect Woman's Roles

Talking about women's role in social life, it is certain that there are several factors which influence it. (Hren, S.F., 2012) stated that the factors affecting woman's roles include environment, relationship, and personal factor. Here, the researcher analyzed the factors of each Desdemona's roles.

Being a Wife

In being an influential wife for Othello, Desdemona has a characteristic of loyalty. She considers this loyalty as her obligation in playing her role as a wife. The development of person's morality in loyalty is influenced by parental education. As it is added by (Hren, S.F., 2012) that loyalty is something that must be ⁶stilled in a child by the parents, not something that the child comes by naturally. However, this depends largely upon the child's habit pattern that it brought with it into this life. It is, however, still the duty of the parents to mold the child into a better pattern while the child is still impressionable.

In this drama, Desdemona's role as being a loyal wife is affected by her personal factor. She stated that she would never do abuse the ¹husband to Emilia even he is a monster.

DESDEMONA: ...--tell me, Emilia,--
That there be women do abuse their husbands
In such gross kind?
EMILIA: There be some such, no question.
DESDEMONA: Wouldst thou do such a deed for all the world?
EMILIA: Why, would not you?
DESDEMONA: No, by this heavenly light! (act 4 scene 3: 162-166).

Emilia views it must be thousands wives do it, but it is because of their husband's act hurts them. Then she asks Desdemona whether she will do it or not if her husband hurts her. Desdemona answers honestly and distinctly that she will not do it even though she must be murdered. In general, a loyal wife will always protect her husband from any kind of bad assessment. This information strengthens the idea that Desdemona's loyalty is

caused by relationship and personal factor. Thus, it can be concluded that the factor affecting her role to become an influential wife for her husband's life is because of her characteristic which is caused by her personal and family education.

Being a Caretaker

In cultural feminism, woman has a feeling of care because herself says that she is responsible for solving everyone's problem. She feels a responsibility to give others what each of them needed or wanted. Accordingly, it happens to Desdemona when she tries to help Cassio. Desdemona's recognition "I will do all my abilities in thy behalf" (Act 3, scene 3: 1) is a proof that her feeling of care is motivated by her own natural inclination to care and feeling of responsibility to give Cassio what he needs or wants. She really search solution for Cassio, as she says "Do not doubt, Cassio, / But I will have my lord and you again / As friendly as you were" (Act 3, scene 3: 4). She promises to Cassio to solve his problem and return his reputation and position as the general's lieutenant. Woman believes that doing her willing without care about others is egoistic. Gilligan in (Tannen, 2012) states that the process of self-sacrifice is part of the development woman's vision in achieving a peace in the world.

Being a Peacemaker

Gilligan says women picture themselves as part of a closely knit network of intimates; they are in the center of a web of connectedness. Hence, women have a principle to prevent any kind of conflict. Their aim is to keep the harmony relation in social life. However, in creating a harmony atmosphere, the women should have certain characteristic such intelligence, fair, and wisdom because those characters are influential factor in reconciling people in conflict.

In this drama, Desdemona is considered as a woman whose noble character that is admired by Venetian people. As it is described in the drama that one of the male characters recognizes her natural characteristics are educated, clever, full of ideas, and wise in facing the conflict. Those things are the background which motivates her to do the roles of being a peacemaker.

CASSIO: She's a most exquisite lady.
IAGO: And, I'll warrant her, fun of game.
CASSIO: Indeed, she's a most fresh and delicate creature.
IAGO: What an eye she has! Methinks it sounds a parley to provocation.
CASSIO: An inviting eye; and yet methinks right modest.
IAGO: And when she speaks, is it not an alarum to love?
CASSIO: She is indeed perfection (Shakespeare, act 2, scene 3:16-22).

In his statement, Cassio explains that Desdemona is a most exquisite lady, a most fresh, delicate creature that has right modest, and perfect. His statement means that she is beautiful, polite, and perfect woman. Besides, Iago states that she has fun of game, eyes full of provocation, and always speaks of love. Thus, according to their thought, Desdemona is a beautiful and delicate creature who has right modest and full of joy. The natural characteristics of Desdemona are the background of being a peacemaker. It is certain that a peacemaker should be wise and fair because she needs them in solving the problem which is being faced by the members of family. As a result, the factor which affects her role of being a peacemaker is because of her natural noble characteristic. This factor is included to the personality factor which is based on one's self-motivation and inner beauty. The means of inner beauty is person's intelligence that appears from inside her mind or soul. Thus, Desdemona's personality also affects her role in being a peacemaker.

CONCLUSION

This study focuses on woman's roles in William Shakespeare's *Othello* by using feminist literary criticism, especially cultural feminism. This study is not only urgent to be done but also beneficial for women's understandings about fighting the right equality and being the master of the world. In this drama, the researcher finds that Shakespeare depicted woman's roles into as a wife, woman as a caretaker, and woman as a peacemaker. Desdemona is described as a wife who is loyal and respect person to her husband in any condition. Besides, her role as a lover means that she is responsible for giving others what each of them needed or wanted, especially when they are in problem. Shakespeare also depicted Desdemona holds the important role in reconciling the conflict between her husband and Cassio. Furthermore, the factor which influences Desdemona's role as a wife who is loyal and respect her husband is relationship and personal factor. Her role as a caretaker is affected by her self-motivation and her experience about care from her childhood. Desdemona's role as a peacemaker for every conflict in the drama is affected by personal factor.

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