

THE MALE FEMINISM OF KRISHNA IN CHITRA LEKHA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS*

*Male
feminism,
Krishna,
Equality*

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Nikodemus Yudho Sulisty

English Education, Sekolah Tunas Bangsa Secondary School

nikodemusoul@gmail.com

***Abstract** - Men can also be a feminist. They can respond to the oppression and discrimination toward women and struggle to change the situation to promote gender equality. This movement is called male feminism which can be also depicted in a literary work. This research seeks to find male feminism of Krishna in the novel *The Palace of Illusion* written by Chitra Lekha Banerjee using feminist approach while the method used in this research is library research. Krishna is a very famous character in Indian epic story of Mahabharata and holy figure in Hinduism. The result shows that Krishna is found as a male feminist who supports the equality among men and women through the main character of Panchaali as reflected by his actions and thoughts.*

Keywords: *male feminism, Krishna, equality*

INTRODUCTION

It seems barely easy to consider that men are able to recognise the feminism, in the sense that men understand what women have felt and experienced during their lives, especially their experience of oppression from men-created society and world. Therefore, it is not easy to define what male feminism is due to the seemingly impossible way to relate men and feminism. However, the definition is equally difficult for a woman since a woman cannot be automatically called as feminist due to her natural condition since feminism is a social-political reality, a struggle and a commitment (Jardine & Smith, 2003, p. 1). That is why a feminist is achieved.

Today's society expects and demands more on the gender equality. This equality somehow considered as the basis of modern world without prejudice and discrimination. Therefore, to help creating this kind of society, the feminists cannot work alone, especially in the world which is considered men-created. There must be some supports and agreement from the men themselves in realising that equality is a must to help

SPECTRAL
Jurnal Ilmiah STBA
Vol.7 No.1
Januari 2021
ISSN 0216-3381

creating better life. This research tries to make people realise that the feminist movement does not belong to women only and that men are somehow involved in the movement itself.

It is true, that there have been many reports and records during the history of male's voices and actions to support women's freedom and equality. As stated by Soobug (2017, p. 1), some men found it important to support feminism movements, even though others formed men's rights movements as a response. There are factors the men's involvement in feminist movement such as questioning their privilege as men in personal and public spheres and participating in collective mobilisation alongside women. There is also a research on pro-feminist men who were interviewed on their personal experiences involving gender issues during unstructured interviews which illustrates the complex developmental process of personal change and social transformation experienced by these men (Cornish, 1999).

However, in most cases men are always in the position of male beings who bring domination which the women have been trying to challenge. Women in this case are the subjects, and the opposite, the men are the objects of the analysis. The men are objects to be changed and transformed. Therefore, referring to the recorded researches on men's involvement in supporting feminist movements, it means men can do something about the gender equality. Men can do actions to respond and change this situation for the sake of feminism. The fact is that men still hold the major positions of power where lead many cases of men's violence against women and girls in many different countries where they are still seen as second-class citizens (Gaag, 2014, pp. 1-2).

When the feminism movement came into existence, there have been changes in women's lives and rights. There are also consequences in the lives of men where people are starting to question men's traditional model of being strong, brave and as the provider of the household. Many men, husbands for instance, started to believe that they become violent like their fathers when they force their wives to do what they were told. The men in this case experienced power over women, but they also smelled something wrong – it did not make them happy. Therefore, they should react to this condition. Furthermore, similar to Jardin & Smith, Ikard (2007, p. 15) explains that the feminist should also reject the notion that men are automatically sexists, violent to women and oppressing because

of their biological maleness. This point of view shows the exact point of what the society has created with the women's stereotypes – which the feminists intend to reject.

The notion of male feminist has attracted many writers, feminists and thinkers to be the topic to debate. However, the writer could not find a single research which focuses on male feminism even though some articles and writings on the Internet, especially on news-based and feminist-based websites, clearly point out that male feminist is an issue. Pittman (2016) in her article explains that there is such a thing called male feminist. McGorry gets the praise for being a feminist and he is a straight white man. Therefore, it concludes that a 'normal' man can be a feminist. McGorry says that it is easy for a man to become a feminist since he did not experience death threats like what women have when they speak out against sexism.

Based on this uniqueness and rarity, the writer is interested in making this topic into a discussion in the research. Literary works often stand in the front of the movement and argument how women are oppressed by male power. In the opposite, the literary work also provides many insights about the men's involvement in the women's movement of feminism. The writer observed that the famous Hindu character, Krishna, has a strong sense of feminism in the novel entitled *The Palace of Illusions* written by Chitra Lekha Banerjee Divakaruni (2008), in the case that he has a lot of respect toward woman – especially the main character, Panchaali or Draupadi – and shows new interpretation toward women's roles in the male-created society in India. It is likely that the depiction of Krishna may result in debate of other feminists, since Krishna may be portrayed as the one of the peaks of patriarchal symbol due to his status as a king, a god – an avatar, a husband of many wives, and the leader of the world – which he happens to be a man. Therefore, this research seeks to find the male feminism of Krishna where he supports the equality among men and women through the main character of Panchaali.

Divakaruni can be considered as an Indian-American feminist writer where most, if not all, of her works tell about Indian women's experience in accordance to the cultural background. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Krishna is depicted as a man of trust and honour. Panchaali favours and even worships Krishna as her important figure. Furthermore, it is known that in Indian mythology of Mahabharata epic story, somehow Panchaali or Daupadi is a character of a feminist discussion source who is noted for her

status as a polyandry practitioner. As a polyandrous women, Panchaali is still considered as a victim of men's power, since she is not different to a housekeeper or prostitute shared by two or more men (Cutas & Chan, 2012). However, Krishna therefore puts different way of thinking in seeing Panchaali's part in life as a woman. Krishna does not underestimate or differentiate her to male figures in Mahabharata story.

Speaking of feminism, without a doubt, there is no generalisation on the definition of feminist literary theory. It is agreeable that feminism examines the ways in which literature reinforces and undermines economic, political, social and psychological oppression on women (Tyson, 2006, p. 83). The variation of feminism reflects the different ways women understand and pursue their interests, especially political. It is also because there are considerable gaps in the women's standard of living in different countries (Ferree, 2012, p. 14), although the main focus of feminism or feminism criticism is to struggle toward discrimination and equal rights of men and women since the subordinate status of women is defined irrationally by the society (Malpas & Wake, 2006, p. 100).

Using the feminist point of view, it is clearly acceptable that a male can be a feminist. Looking at the case of racism toward black people communities in America, Sexton (2018, pp. 3-5) explains that both men and women of black descendant in America have experienced oppression, threat and violence – including sexual violence, without differentiating the genders. Black masculinity is somehow struggles for the rise of black feminism as well. Black men are fighting for a racial justice for all black people lives. Black feminist in another side also struggles for liberation of black people including their consciousness toward black men and boys. In some more acceptable arguments, it can be said that black men experience worse treatment from the American society filled with white people. They are stereotyped as criminals or 'bad men'. The black feminists cannot oppose the violence toward women while ignoring other violence toward black men, such as police brutality and white supremacy threat, oppression and violence (Sexton, 2018, p. 79).

The ancient beliefs and mythology of the world, it is believed that in the beginning there was no such sex division. The beginning of the world, the supreme being – or God for some – created the human in His own image or at least served non-gender

role and function such as in Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism (Kiberd, 2000, p. 2). Therefore, even reflecting to some of the religious concepts, feminism should search for the equality of humans without discriminating one gender and out of gender bias.

METHODS

Research Design

Any research needs methodology, in literature as well. However, research in literature is different than the researches in natural and social sciences. The research in literature depends more on the literary scripts or texts than field surveys or experiments (Deshpande, 2018, p. 7). It is no wonder that library is the main source of data collection in literature. The writer took notes on the Krishna's acts and dialogues – also in Panchaali's points of view – which resembled Krishna's male feminism. The writer then analysed the evidence to explore the male feminism in Krishna by also reflecting to the feminism theoretical books.

Data Collection

In this research, the writer uses library research where the data consist of primary and secondary data (Deshpande, 2018, p. 94). The primary data was the novel *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Lekha Banerjee Divakaruni (2008) which had first-hand and authentic value. The writer collected the dialogues, thoughts and actions written in the novel to be analysed. While the secondary sources were feminism and literary theoretical books and research journals.

Data analysis

The writer analysed the evidence to explore the male feminism in the character of Krishna by reflecting to the feminism theoretical books to show that his actions and thoughts resemble feminism and also to show his support toward feminism itself. Krishna's dialogues, actions and thoughts written in the novel were analysed and interpreted based on the aim to answer the research question.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Panchaali or her other name, Draudapi, is the main character in the novel. However, it is known that Krishna is another favourable characters since Panchaali herself talks a lot about him. In Mahabharata epic story, Krishna is the incarnation of the god Vishnu in Hinduism. He is also regarded as dear friend of Panchaali. The very initial evidence shows the Krishna's close relationship with Panchaali and the first exposure of Krishna as being a feminist is Panchaali's depiction:

Perhaps the reason Krishna and I got along so well was that we were both severely dark-skinned. In a society that looked down its patrician nose on anything except milk-and-almond hues, this was considered most unfortunate, especially for a girl (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 8).

Panchaali clearly describes how the colour of the skin becomes the source for differentiation and discrimination. As a male feminist, Krishna encourages Panchaali to be herself and be confident, "A problem becomes a problem only if you believe it to be so. And often others see you as you see yourself," (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 9) Krishna says to Panchaali. Many times Krishna shows his support toward Panchaali for not letting herself to be underestimated by others:

Later I asked Krishna, "What Sikhandi said about his past life, was it really true?"

Krishna shrugged. "He believes it to be so. Isn't that what truth is? The force of a person's believing seeps into those around him— into the very earth and air and water—until there's nothing else." (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 49)

Krishna always presents the answers for all Panchaali's questions and doubts.

Yet whenever I had a serious question, something I couldn't ask Dhri, who was too straightforward for the knotted ways of the world, it seemed that Krishna was always there to provide an answer. And that too is a puzzle: why did my father allow him to visit me freely when he had kept me segregated from other men and women? (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 11)

From the statements above, Krishna seems to be able to see something special about Panchaali as a woman, just like a man that can also be special. Krishna does not discriminate or treat Panchaali differently, even though Panchaali experienced the same condition and status as other women in her era. She is not allowed to freely meet not only

men, but also women. She has limited access to her own social life and can only live based on what has been prepared or planned by her father. However, Krishna does not put this as a problem. He talks to Panchaali and treats her normally.

There is also some obvious and clear proof of Krishna's male feminism when he makes Panchaali in an equal position and status to him, "He called me by a special name, the female form of his own: Krishnaa. It had two meanings: *the dark one*, or *the one whose attraction can't be resisted*." (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 12). Again, Krishna feels that Panchaali only differs to him in type of sex, instead of gender. Sex is a natural attribute or a biological difference among humans and even animals, while gender refers to a system of social meaning ascribed to physical difference.

Krishna addresses Panchaali with a female version of his own name, Krishnaa. This female version does not refer to the female as a gender, since it is explained that gender and gender roles create and justify women's meaning in the society. Krishna explains that the name Krishna and Krishnaa have the same exact meaning. It means that there is an equal meaning of both names where the difference is only that Krishna is sexually a man and Krishnaa is sexually a woman. Even further Krishna regards Krishnaa, Panchaali, as intellectually his match, 'He lifted his shoulders and spread his hands. "There's no fooling you, Krishnaa! In you, I've met my match!"' (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 50)

Krishna does not stop only ensuring Panchaali that she is equal to him and other people, including other men. Krishna insists that Panchaali must follow the kingdom's activity that can be done only with the man. The royal family activity such as studying

about the kingdom's politics and laws are followed only by male royal family member such as Panchaali's brother, Dhristayumna.

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At first, no matter how much I begged, King Drupad had balked at the thought of me studying with my brother. A girl being taught what a boy was supposed to learn? Such a thing had never been heard of in the royal family of Panchaal! Only when Krishna insisted that the prophecy at my birth required me to get an education beyond what women were usually given, and that it was the king's duty to provide this to me, did he agree with reluctance. (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 23)

Education is important for everybody, Krishna cannot agree more on that. Royal family members are already special compared to ordinary people, however, Panchaali does not have this privilege. When a prince can study, a princess must take care of herself and wait for a prince from other kingdoms to propose and it is not fair according to Krishna. To support his argument and support toward Panchaali's education, Krishna uses the argument on prophecy. The prophecy is somehow symbolizing the women's role in the society, the path that they have the right to walk on, equal to men. By believing prophecy, Panchaali's life can be considered safe. Krishna struggles to help Panchaali gets her position in the society. Prophecy in many cultures is regarded as something which is respected and taken seriously. The prophecy justifies the struggle and support toward equality between men and women that must be respected and taken seriously.

Krishna rejects the notion that women are underestimated and considered inferior to higher power; such as gods, kings and men,

Once I complained to Krishna, "Why don't the gods appear to me? Is it because I'm a woman?"

"You have the drollest notions!" Krishna laughed. "Why do you think that should matter to the gods, who are beyond gender?" (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 222).

Krishna shows of him believing in the equality between men and women. The higher beings like gods are genderless, which is one characteristics of being powerful. Therefore, genderless means power.

Discussion

From the very beginning, the novel shows many different questions on gender and race differentiation and discrimination. Panchaali is known for having a dark complexion which is known for the object of violence since the era of slavery and colonialism, such cases that can be found in America (Nel, 2017, p. 17; Sexton, 2018, p. 81). Black people are considered by the white people as the colonialists at the time of colonialism as lazy, unintelligent, immoral, ignorant and criminal (Mesiter, 2017, p. 15).

Krishna shows of him believing in the equality between men and women. The higher beings like gods are genderless, which is one characteristics of being powerful. The gender difference therefore creates gender roles; social practices associated with masculinity and *feminity* (Code, 2002, p. 197). Therefore, genderless means power. As stated by the feminist that the purpose of feminism is to achieve social and political equivalence which is genderless as stated by Kiberd (2000, p. 2). His divine characteristic does not make him into a superior male character, but instead supports the feminism perspective of equality. Regarding power, everyone can hold and be worthy of it, no matter the gender is. In fact, power has nothing to do with gender. The most powerful creatures, which are the gods, are beyond gender. Their powers are nothing like in the world, therefore, the power in the world held by the patriarchy is basically man-made, i.e. men-made.

Krishna's feminism lies in his way seeing people. He is a king, a great leader and an avatar – basically a god, therefore it is not uncommon for him and many people with his position to marry more than one wife. However, it is not because he underestimate or intend to use his power to control women. It is simply because he is a powerful leader. In this case, it can be understood that Krishna supports Panchaali in equal to his own position and status. Later on, Panchaali is destined to marry five husbands of Pandava brothers. Even she is a princess of a great king, Drupad, her status as a woman is still valued traditionally, which is male-centred society and norms. Krishna came to lift

Panchaali as special person as she is. Panchaali should be considered as great as other leaders, princes and royal family members who are allowed normally to marry more than one person, as he is.

Panchaali surely feels like what the feminists concern about. As a polyandrous women, Panchaali is still considered as a victim of men's power, since she is not different to a housekeeper or prostitute shared by two or more men (Cutas & Chan, 2012). Panchaali is having a doubt for being a special woman, she is still imprisoned by men's rules. She is afraid of being inferior and subordinate.

For this thought, Krishna cannot disagree with her. However, he says, "As for being pawns," Krishna was saying, "aren't we all pawns in the hands of Time, the greatest player of them all?" (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 58). Krishna refuses to consider Panchaali as a pawn for the greatness of the kingdom of Panchaal since she is prepared for contest. Human cannot avoid problems and life's obstacles. Sometimes they just have to face it and go on with their life. What happens with Panchaali happens to everyone. It is not because Panchaali is a woman and being a pawn is her consequence for this. Krishna says that people are the pawns of the greater power, it is Time. Therefore, it is a consequence of Panchaali as a special person, a princess, just like him or other men and women who have the similar social status. Time does not differentiate men and women. As the result, Panchaali should also be accepting of her condition, not as a woman, but a human being.

Krishna sees feminism as acceptable and normal way. People are different, but should not be differentiated, especially in genders. No matter the gender is, as long as she or he has the special position in the society, he or she has and must do what they are responsible for. They can also demand for their rights, again, no matter the gender is. It can be inferred from this analysis that Krishna is a male feminist who brings the spirit of equality between genders, struggles for women's rights by breaking the rules the society has created.

CONCLUSION

Krishna represents a male feminist. Although is it often debated whether Krishna represents the pathriachal society in the Hindu mythology, in the novel *The*

Palace of Illusion, he stands as a supporter for equality between men and women. He explains that even gods are genderless, therefore there is no concept of inferiority based on gender differentiation. In the end, feminism is not about gender, as it is suggested by its movement and philosophy, but giving meaning to the equality and putting women in their rights and responsibility. Male feminism is another philosophical insight on how to justify this idea, that gender is merely created by the society.

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