

GENDER INJUSTICE TOWARDS THE MAIN CHARACTER IN THE NOVEL A SPARK OF LIGHT BY JODI PICOULT

Sulistya Afriliani^{*)}, Agnes Setyowati^{*)}, Ni Made Widisanti¹⁾

^{*)}Universitas Pakuan, Bogor, Indonesia

Email correspondence: sulistyaafriyani@gmail.com

Article history: accepted: June 01, 2023 revised: June 25, 2023 approved: September 11, 2023

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes gender injustice experienced by the female main character by applying qualitative descriptive analysis as the method in this research. The main data source used in this research is the novel *A Spark of Light* by Jodi Picoult. The research finding posits that the main character experiences gender injustice in the form of violence and stereotypes because of her decision to commit abortion. Another finding also indicates that abortion is still socially and culturally perceived as a negative action that should not be done by a woman.

Keywords: women, gender, gender injustice, abortion, stereotype

INTRODUCTION

In *Second Sex* (1989), Simone de Beauvoir argues that women are considered as another figure “The Other” meaning that women are defined and distinguished by male references and not men by female references. Women are not born as women, but become women. In this concept, she views women as a second class subordinated to men where women are considered to have no rights over themselves, over their bodies and minds.

Gender is a trait that is used as the basis for identifying differences between men and women in terms of social and cultural conditions, values and behavior, mentality and emotions as well as other non-biological factors. In terminology, gender is usually defined as cultural expectations of men and women. Gender is seen as a cultural concept that is used to differentiate roles, behaviors, mentality and emotional characteristics between men and women that develop in society (Alfian, 2016).

Young, Fort & Danner, in the *Journal of International Sociology* (1994, p.55) says that “Gender inequality is defined as the departure from parity in the representation of women and men in key dimensions of social life”.

Fakih, (2012) explains the grouping of injustice caused by gender as follows: marginalization, subordination, stereotypes, violence, and workload.

Marginalization of women does not only occur in the workplace, but also occurs in the household, society or culture and even the country, marginalization of women has occurred since at home in the form of discrimination for male and female family members.

Subordination to women due to the notion that women are irrational or emotional so that women cannot appear to lead, results in attitudes that place women in an unimportant position. Subordination due to gender occurs in all kinds of different forms from place to place and from time to time.

Stereotypes are labeling or marking of a particular group. Stereotypes are a form of injustice. One type of stereotype is that which originates from a gender perspective. For example, tagging starts with the assumption that women dress up in order to attract the attention of the opposite sex, so every case of violence or sexual harassment is always associated with this stereotype.

Violence is an attack on the physical and mental integrity of a person. This violence is referred to as gender-related violence, which is basically caused by power. Various kinds and forms of crimes that can be categorized as gender violence, both committed at the household level to the state level, even religious interpretations. Basically, gender violence is caused by the power inequality that exists in society.

Among poor families, this very heavy burden must be borne by the women themselves. Moreover, if the woman has to work, then she carried a double workload.

Studies on gender inequality refer to studies of feminism and patriarchy. Feminism was born because of the inequality that thrives in a society that ignores women's rights. Feminism is a theory about equality between men and women in the political, economic and social fields or organized activities that fight for women's rights and interests (Goefe in Astuti, 2015, p.4).

Feminist studies on the concept of the body and abortion emerged in the second wave of the feminist movement which is often associated with

radical voices about women's empowerment and different rights, so it is also called part of the concept of radical feminism. This concept is basically a demand for women's freedom of expression and emphasizes that women's bodies are their own right. From here emerged policies such as abortion rights, divorce rights, anti-sexual discrimination rights, job protection, and protection rights from domestic violence (Deyis, 2021, p.5).

Counter-feminism appears along with the existence of patriarchy in society in general. Patriarchate is a system of male authority that oppresses women through social institutions. In addition, the patriarchy is a system of authority that places both inside and outside the home. Even patriarchy can be stated as a form of male control over women's reproduction (Humm in Astuti, 2015, p. 4-5).

Based on the observation of the novel *A Spark of Light* by Jodi Picoult, the problem identified in the novel is the pros and cons of the main character's action to have an abortion that causes gender inequality to occur as the main issue in the story. This research will be focusing mainly on the main character by analyzing the intrinsic and extrinsic elements. The formulation of the problem in this research are; the form of gender injustice experienced by the main character, the factors that cause gender injustice and how the main character tries to overcome the gender injustice. The aim of this research is to show that the treatment received by the main character as the

perpetrator of an abortion is included into gender injustice because such action is still viewed negatively by society.

I. RESEARCH METHOD

This research is a qualitative research with a descriptive design, in which the researcher tries to understand the meaning of events and their relation to individuals or groups in certain situations. Ratna (2010) argues that the presentation and interpretation of the qualitative method is in a descriptive form.

II. DISCUSSION AND FINDING

The story is told in third-person narration and the name of the main character is Joy Perry who lives in Mississippi, America. The background of the story is around 2009-2017 with the theme of abortion. Abortion comes from the Latin word *abortio*, which means expulsion of conception (fetus, fetal membranes, and placenta) from the uterus prematurely at 24 weeks where the fetus cannot live outside the womb (Kusmaryanto, 2005).

Joy Perry is the main female character in the novel *A Spark of Light*. Etymologically, the word 'perempuan' which means women, in the Indonesian language, comes from the word *mpu* and thus the word 'perempuan' is a form of domestication (because *mpu* means one who makes, produces [children] (Junus, 1983, p.22). Therefore, it can be said that issues regarding women and their relationship to abortion are

presented in this novel through the study of Joy Perry as the main female character of the story.

Mississippi becomes the dominant setting in this story. Mississippi is a state of the United States located in the south. Mississippi was ranked as the most conservative state in 2018. Social conservatives in the United States generally take a fundamentalist stance, especially Christian fundamentalists whereby social conservatives encourage a focus on Christian traditions as a guiding force for the State in social issues (Marietta, 2012). Several states in America that are dominated by conservative groups have long fought to ban abortion (cxomedia.id).

Joy gets a negative stereotype from a protester she does not know when she is about to enter the clinic where she will have an abortion procedure. *"This morning, when she had walked past the protesters, one of the women yelled that Joy was selfish."* (Picoult, 2018, p.77). The negative stereotype that Joy received when she was about to abort her fetus was a form of gender injustice in the form of negative stereotypes from society which stated that she was a selfish woman because she tried to abort her womb for her own sake. Stereotypes are labeling or marking a particular group. Stereotypes are a form of injustice. One type of stereotype is that which originates from a gender perspective (Fakih, 2012).

Joy felt scared and threatened when a shooting occurred at the clinic where she had the abortion procedure. Joy knows that the shooting was carried out by a pro-life figure so she is worried

that she will become a victim of the shooting because she had just had an abortion procedure. *"If anyone else were going to be a casualty of a pro-life shooter, he'd pick the woman who'd just had an abortion. Was this the karmic price she had to pay? A life for a life?"* (Picoult, 2018, p.203).

The shooting incident was carried out by a figure named George who was a religious figure. He carried out such incident at the clinic to oppose abortion because his religion prohibited it. This attack is a form of gender-based violence. Violence is an attack on the physical and mental integrity of a person. This violence is referred to as gender-related violence, which is basically caused by power. Various types and forms of crimes that can be categorized as gender violence, both committed at the household level to the state level, even religious interpretations. Basically, gender violence is caused by the power inequality that exists in society (Fakih, 2012).

"She felt volcanic anger—for having been born to a parent who couldn't or wouldn't take care of her. For being judged by a stranger who acted holier than thou. How dare she think Joy was selfish, when in fact, she was being selfless." (Picoult, 2018, p.165).

The main character as an abortionist experiences gender injustice in the form of negative stereotypes which state that she is a selfish person because she had an abortion. This negative labeling was raised by an anti-abortion figure she had just met in the clinic, after previously she had also received the same

treatment from a protester who was outside the clinic. Stereotype is the giving of certain traits to someone based on a subjective category just because he or she comes from another group. Stereotypes are based on the interpretations that we produce on the basis of perspectives and cultural backgrounds (Rosyidah & Nurwati, 2019).

There is a negative stigma formed by men regarding women who have abortions which the novel wants to show to be a concern for its readers. Which is expected to open the mind of the reader on the issue. This stigma was formed because men want to continue to have control over women, especially they want to have women's reproductive rights. *"There was, of course, the history, too. Women had been property. Their chastity had always belonged to a man, until abortion and contraception put control of women's sexuality in the women's hands. If women could have sex without the fear of unwanted pregnancy, then suddenly the man's role had shrunk to a level somewhere between unnecessary and vestigial. So instead, men vilified women who had abortions. They created the stigma: good women want to be mothers, bad women don't."* (Picoult, 2018, p.236-237).

The stigma formed because of men's desire to continue to have control over women's reproduction is a form of patriarchal action. Patriarchy is a system of authority that places both inside and outside the home. Even patriarchy can

be stated as a form of male control over women's reproduction. (Humm in Astuti, 2015, p.5).

Feminism studies regarding the main female character in this novel can be concluded in terms of the efforts made by the main character who courageously maintains her rights over her own body amidst patriarchal domination and also negative stereotypes which state that she is a selfish woman and a bad mother. for killing her own baby. In the understanding of feminism, women have control over their bodies to continue or terminate pregnancy for any reason. This understanding emphasizes it's concern for the future of children who are unwanted if they are still born which often leads to child violence. (Raquel Lopez in Safira and Novianto, 2020, p.87).

III. CONCLUSION

The research results obtained are that the main female character in Jodi Picoult's novel *A Spark of Light* experiences various forms of gender injustice as a result of her actions as an abortionist. The forms of gender injustice experienced by the main character in Jodi Picoult's novel *A Spark of Light* are as follows:

First, forms of gender injustice in the form of gender and violence that take away women's rights over their own bodies because of religious interpretations. This happened when there were several anti-abortion figures who opposed her actions to abort her own fetus. This opposition was also made on the grounds that Joy's actions were

an act that was prohibited by religion and her actions were also considered an act of killing her own baby.

Violence is an attack on the physical and mental integrity of a person. This violence is referred to as gender-related violence, which is basically caused by power. Various types and forms of crimes that can be categorized as gender violence, both committed at the household level to the state level, even religious interpretations. Basically, gender violence is caused by the power inequality that exists in society (Fakih, 2012).

Second, the form of gender injustice is in the form of gender and stereotypes due to the negative labeling received by the main character. The negative label she received stated that she was a selfish woman and also a bad mother because she was considered to have killed her fetus only for her own sake. The label she got was because she had performed an abortion on her fetus.

Stereotypes are labeling or marking of a particular group. Stereotypes are a form of injustice. One type of stereotype is that which originates from a gender perspective (Fakih, 2012).

The causative factors of gender inequality experienced by the main character in Jodi Picoult's novel *A Spark of Light* are the first, the religious factor embraced by anti-abortion figures who oppose their actions to have abortions. The second is the norm factor in the community which gives her negative stereotypes in the form of labeling

stating that she is a bad mother because she killed her own baby.

The effort made by the main female character in Jodi Picoult's novel *A Spark of Light* in dealing with the gender injustice she experienced was by making verbal resistance efforts by expressing her reasons to defend herself when she was insulted by saying that she was a selfish woman. and also a bad mother. Apart from that, with other efforts in the form of action where Joy continued to carry out abortions amidst the conflicts going on around her.

From some of the research results above, it can be concluded that the character Joy Perry as an abortionist that experiences gender injustice in the form of violence and stereotypes. The causal factors for the occurrence of gender inequality are religious factors and norms in society. Apart from that, Joy's efforts in dealing with the gender injustice she experienced were by taking action and verbal resistance.

REFERENCES

- [1.] Alfian, R. (2016). *Pengantar Gender dan Feminisme*. Yogyakarta: Garudhawaca.
- [2.] Astuti, Dian W.S., Christianto Syam, A. Totok Priyadi. (2015). Kajian Feminisme Dalam Novel Karya Ayu Utami. *Jurnal Pendidikan dan Pembelajaran Khatulistiwa*, 4, 1-13.
- [3.] Beauvoir, Simone de. (1989). *The Second Sex ; Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier*. New York: Vintage Books, a Random House, Inc.
- [4.] Deyis, Muhammad Rayhan S. (2021). *Polemik Kebijakan Aborsi Berdasarkan Perspektif Feminisme: Studi Komparatif Greenland dan Indonesia*. ResearchGate.
- [5.] Fakih, Mansour. (2012). *Analisis Gender dan Transformasi Sosial*. Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar.
- [6.] <https://cxomedia.id/general-knowledge/20220628151057-55-175390/roe-v-wade-apa-yang-terjadi-dengan-hak-aborsi-di-as>. Accessed on Desember 20th, 2022.
- [7.] Junus, Umar. (1983). *Dari Peristiwa ke Imajinasi: Wajah Sastra dan Budaya Indonesia*. Jakarta: PT Gramedia.
- [8.] Kusmaryanto, C. B. (2005). *Tolak Aborsi*. Yogyakarta: Kanisius.
- [9.] Marietta, Morgan. (2007). *A Citizen's Guide to American Ideology: Conservatism and Liberalism in Contemporary Politics*. New York: Routledge.
- [10.] Picoult, Jodi. (2018). *A Spark of Light*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- [11.] Ratna, Nyoman Kutha. (2010). *Teori, Metode dan Teknik Penelitian Sastra*. Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar.
- [12.] Rosyidah, Feryna Nur & Nunung Nurwati. (2019). Gender Stereotype: Konstruksi Realitas Dalam Media Sosial Instagram. *Social Work Jurnal*, 9, 10-19.
- [13.] Savira & Novianto. (2020). Kritik Teori Hukum Feminis Terhadap Kebijakan Aborsi Pada Korban Pemerkosaan di Indonesia. *Jurnal Universitas Sebelas Maret: Recidive*, 9, 2.
- [14.] Young, Gay., Lucia Fort., & Danner, Mona. (1994). Moving From 'The Status of Women' to 'Gender Inequality': Conceptualisation, Social Indicators and an Empirical Application. *Journal International Sociology*, 9, 55. Washington DC: Sage Publications.