Proposing Asian and African Motherhood through Literature: A Comparative Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Motherhood is seen as one of the essential aspects in a human's life. Although several values concerning motherhood is cross-cultural, its representation varied from time to time upon locations and cultures. Deriving from this line of thought, this paper compares the differing portrayal of motherhood from Asian and African literature. Undertaking the library studies, this article illustrates the depictions of motherhood and seeks to underline the reasoning why it is manifested through the selected literary works. The novels employed as the objects of study are The Joys of Motherhood by Buchi Emecheta and Ibuk by Iwan Setyawan. The finding extrapolates a global conception towards motherhood and how it is presented. It is concluded that the depiction of motherhood in the novels is employed to maintain a social construction that privilege patriarchy. The African motherhood may be different than what they call Asian motherhood. Yet mothers, no matter where they are will always focus on their children's well-doing.

Keywords: Asian literature, African literature, motherhood

INTRODUCTION

In a small village of Umu-Iso in Nigeria, Nnu-Ego, the daughter of Nwokocha Agbadi and Ona believes that she cannot bear any children from Amatokwu, her first husband because of her ill-fated mother. Ona, her mother passed away during her childbearing leaving Nnu-Ego as an orphan. The people in the village put a label on Nnu-Ego as an infertile woman and oppress her. They say that a virtuous woman should be able to bear children. Nnu-Ego will also have to deal with an abusive husband who keeps blaming her for her infertility. Her husband later divorces her and returns her to Agbadi's house.

It does not take long for Agbadi to find Nnu-Ego another husband. Nnaife, the new husband is a laundryman for a white man whom Nnu-Ego does not love at all. Yet she promises herself that she would try to love him if she can bear his children. She lives with Nnaife in Lagos, the capital city where Nnaife keeps changing jobs. Nnu-Ego later does give a birth to a baby boy who dies later. She is devastated and decided to end her life by jumping into the river when a villager saves and comforts her. Given the new life, Nnu-Ego is able to bear nine surviving children.

The story then tells that Nnaife will have to join the army in the wartime. Therefore, Nnu-Ego will have to look after the children on her own even she barely manages to feed them.

Nnaife's brother later dies and Nnaife inherits his four wives and moves the youngest one into the house. Nnu-Ego will have to compete with the new mistress that the husband brings home. While Nnaife returns to the army duty, the mistress also leaves to become a prostitute while Nnu-Ego continues devoting her life and to become the provider for her children. She saves the money and spends it tightly in order to send their children particularly the first son to school. Her only dream is for the son to help and support the rest of the family like she does. Nnu-Ego's first and second child, two sons are able to migrate to the U.S and Canada where they make their own fortune there. Her third child, a girl runs off with the buther's son. While Nnaife chases them, he injures a man and is thrown into a prison. Nnu-Ego's fourh child's husband, a lawyer pleads for his case and offers him to take care of the fifth child.

The novel concludes with Nnu-Ego's returns to her village. People who firstly think that Nnu-Ego bears an ill-fate start reconsiders her as a great woman. They believe that Nnu-Ego will begin to feel the joys of motherhood. Yet instead of enjoying her success as a mother, Nnu-Ego passed away in the middle of her way to the village. Her children later come and spend huge amount of money for her funeral.

Meanwhile, in Malang, a small region in East Java, a young girl named Tinah will have to drop her school out and help her mother selling goods in the market. When she reaches puberty, her mother forces her to marry her suitor. The suitor is Abdul Hasyim or Sim, a local playboy and an *angkot* – a minibus driver. They are married and later become parents of five children namely Isa, Nani, Bayek, Rini and Mira.

Raising five children on a daily-basis salary is not easy. Moreover, Tinah only works as a housewife. This family will have to stay from one family house to another one until they are able to establish their own house. Tinah as a housewife will have to spends everything that she owns in order to make sure that her children can get better education. In addition, the living cost is increasing following the increased responsibilities as the children get older. Tinah will often have to borrow some money from Mang Udin, a creditor who later takes all the utensils they have in the kitchen in returns. Despite of the difficult life, Tinah and Sim are proud of their children particularly their only son Bayek who is able to get a better job and a scholarship to study in the U.S. As a mother, Tina has never given up nor complains about the family condition instead feels obliged to make her children happy.

Both stories are the synopsis of two novels which differs culturally and regionally, yet share similarities concerning their representation of motherhood. The first one is from *The Joy of Motherhood* written by a Nigerian writer, Buchi Emecheta which was was firstly published in London in 1979. The novel was well-received and Buchi Emecheta's reputation was growing for raising the voices of African women and their issues among other prominent African writers like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Ama Ata Aidoo (Busby, 2017).

Continuing the discussions, the second synopsis is from the novel *Ibuk* written by Iwan Setyawan. The novel was firstly published in June 2012 by Gramedia Pustaka Utama. The novel is a semi-autobiography of Iwan Setyawan himself. Through her journey, Setyawan wants to encourage his readers to pursue their dreams. His previous novel entitled *9 Summers 10 Autumns* tells a similar story and was adapted into a movie. The movie won some awards and enable Setyawan to leave a good remark in the Indonesian literature (Yustiningsih, 2013).

From the aforementioned synopses, a recurring theme is that motherhood carries different definitions and weights in the varying cultures. The majority of society sees motherhood as a denominator to define a woman: as a wife and as a mother. Positioning female position in Indonesian contexts, a woman is positioned as a companion for others such as for the husband, as a mother for the children, the manager of the family as what the society, *adat*, and religious beliefs tell them so (Suryakusuma, 2011; Margaretha, 2019). Therefore, motherhood has a strong bound to the cultural arena and religious corridors.

The most possible explanation related to the cultural bound is that motherhood is often regarded with the social perceptions of what it takes to be a mother and how to do so.

Meanwhile, motherhood is explained in relation to a belief that one practices in a daily life. Several notions like *kodrat* – destiny or nature is brought in the religious corridors to strengthen the beliefs that a woman's obligation is to bear children. As a result, a woman often thinks that bearing children is important and is something inseparable from a human life because she wants to fill the community and religious obligations. It also means that motherhood which is configured in the social and religious discourses carries ideologies, meaning and social connections towards women in society. The notion of motherhood itself is likely understood as a woman's experience which is constructed, controlled, and implemented by the culture, religion, and social agencies (Rich, 1976; Malone, 2013).

As pointed earlier, many African and Asian societies often believe that a woman will achieve her full womanhood when she is able to bear her own children (Kanu, 2012). Motherhood is seen as a primary role for women in most Indonesian societies which is maintained through economic, social, political and most importantly the religious discourses that intersect to each other in Indonesia (Bennett, 2007; Bennett, 2012; Setronaluri & Silalahi, 2018). In the African context, women in Africa are culturally mothers and childbearing and nurturing are traditionally endorsed to them (Walker, 1984). With the importance of being a mother, the childless women will likely be left grieving and suffering from that social stigma. The society consider that they are socially failure and personally and individually incomplete (Goffman, 1963; Hollos & Larsen, 2008).

> "Not having children results in a sense of role failure with social and emotional consequences for both men and women. This can often result in social stigmatisation of the couple particularly of the women concerned. Within the household, childlessness may also mean physical and psychological abuse for women." (Van der Geest & Papreen et al, 2013, p.33)

As aforementioned, the social experience of motherhood and the criteria of what makes a good mother varies depending upon cultures and locations. What makes a good mother also changes with time and contexts. It means that the class, race sexuality and economic status have formed certain criteria in defining good mothers. The good mother is expected to be heterosexual, married, monogamous, economically not self-sufficient even most of them depend on her husband's income, unemployed because she needs to focus on their children and family (Arendell, 2000). In the contrary, the portrayal of good mother has been changing recently. In the new contemporary period, motherhood is defined as a new woman who contributes physically and financially without neglecting the needs of the children and the family (Byrne, 2006). However, mothers repeatedly sharing similar focuses: the importance of sacrifice, care-given, protection, and self-reliance (Rinaldi, 2017; Gunlock, 2017). On a particular note in this article, a notable aspect concerning these novels is how the main character possesses several traits of motherhood aforementioned. By studying the representation of motherhood in the novels, this article illustrates how motherhood is depicted through literature in the two selected novels. The depiction later is used to unveil the purpose of maintaining motherhood.

METHOD

The emphasis of this article is to explore the concept of Asian and African motherhood depicted in the literary works and relating the discussion within the socio-cultural contexts of its country of production. To analyse the portrayal of motherhood, this article follows the descriptive-qualitative approach and focuses more on the interpretation. Meanwhile, the approach used in this study is an objective approach. The object is analysed through a process of repeated readings. The library study is taken to classify the data. The data of the article is gathered through the analysis of words and sentences in the novel.

The object are two novels *The Joys of Motherhood* by a Nigerian writer Buchi Emecheta and *Ibuk* written by Iwan Setyawan, an Indonesian writer. The novels are selected because they clearly portray the Asian and African motherhood. The female characters in both novels will have to undergo several hardships in life before achieving their goals as a mother.

The story of both novels is captivating, portraying the real condition of certain ethnicity including poverty. The female characters are similar: marriage at the young age, living in poverty, going through difficult life while raising big number of children in a country dominated with patriarchal system. Those points are some of the reasons why these novels are worth-analysed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section concerns with analysing the concept of motherhood in both novels *The Joys of Motherhood* and *Ibuk.* It should be highlighted that these novels share similar portrayal of mothers, in which Nnu-Ego and Ibuk are depicted as a lower-class citizen. Nnu-Ego will have to become a breadwinner and sell the cartons of cigarettes that she gets from the sailors in black market in order to support the family while her husband is jobless (Emecheta, 1979, p. 88). Meanwhile Ibuk who is only a housewife will have to be very cautious with their family expense.

> "…Ini dua telur ceplok untuk kita bertujuh…Ibuk mencoba mengerjakan semua urusan rumah dan sekolah sendiri…hem Bapak sudah penuh tambalan. Demikian juga celana seragam Bayek. Tidak ada pergi ke tukang jahit. Tidak ada pergi ke salon. Ibuk harus pintar-pintar menyiasati uang yang ada."
>
> […these are two eggs, sunny side-up for seven of us…Ibuk tries to do the homework and (her children) school expenses on her own… Bapak's shirt is full of patches…so is Bayek's uniform. There is no seamstress. There is no beauty parlour. Ibuk will have to be very smart in managing the money that they have] (Setyawan, 2012, p. 40, 98)

One can see that Ibuk or Nnu-Ego do not only sacrifice themselves either by being the breadwinner of the family or by managing the family's money. They share the same purpose in doing so which is to take a good care of their children. Both mothers also prefer to sacrifice themselves for the sake of their children. Nnu-Ego for instance, prefers to work as a seller close to the railway station in order to help the family financially and to send Oshia, the direct heir of the family to the best school in town. Meanwhile, Ibuk put some efforts to send her children to school. She believes that the children cannot follow her step who cannot even graduate from the elementary school (Setyawan, 2012, p. 66). She would rather eat the rest of *empal* – slices of beef left in their frying pan and let her children having the big slices for themselves.

> "Bayek langsung mengambil yang paling besar…Rini, ia makan separuh. Ibuk sendiri cukup makan dengan remah-remah yang tersisa dari penggorengan. Matanya bersinar-sinar melihat kedua anaknya makan dengan lahap."
>
> [Bayek takes the big portion…Rini, she eats half of it. Ibuk eats with the crumbs left from their frying pan. Her eyes sparkle looking at their children eating hungrily]. (Setyawan, 2012, p. 47)

Another recurring theme in the novels is that both mothers are always portrayed as a supporter for the family and a protector for the children. When Nnaife is unemployed and refuses to look for a new job, Nnu- Ego hates her husband but still stands for the family. She tries to manage the left of her family money.

> "Nnu Ego, the daughter of Agbadi, don't be greedy. Manage with Nnaife's income and look after your child. That is your duty. Be satisfied with his earnings. Let him do this duty." (Emecheta, 1979, p. 81)

Nnu-Ego works even harder to afford her children's school fees. Meanwhile, Ibuk will make sure that the children will never lack of things. She would even borrow some money from mang Udin, the creditor to fulfil her children's need and school fees.

> "Uang SPP. "Oh, besok tanggal 10 ya? Besok ya, Yek. Besok. Pasti *ono* kok!"
>
> [School fees. "Oh, tomorrow is 10, isn't it? Wait for tomorrow (to pay your school fee), Yek. Tomorrow. We will have the money tomorrow!] (Setyawan, 2012, p. 60)

As described in the aforementioned discussions, both mothers Nnu-Ego and Ibuk are portrayed as with the importance of sacrifice, care-given, protection, and self-reliance. Those points are used for their children's well-being. Both Nnu Ego and Ibuk do not want their children to undergo what they have been through.

> "Cintanya melahirkan tekad untuk kehidupan yang lebih baik, untuk anak-anaknya. Agar anak-anaknya tidak melalui jalan hidup yang sama dengan jalan hidup yang sama dengan jalan hidup yang telah ia lalui dahulu."
>
> [Her love has caused a will to have a better life for her children. She does not want her children to undergo the same life she once has been through]. (Setyawan, 2012, p. 230

The subsequent excerpt confirms Rinaldi's and Gunlock's opinion related to the characteristics of good mothers. However, there is one thing that should be highlighted in the analysis of both novels: Nnu-Ego and Ibuk are mothers with big number of children yet their female heirs are not treated in the same way as their male heir particularly when it comes to the privilege of studying at school.

In Iwan Setyawan's *Ibuk,* Isa is the first child and is portrayed as a gifted daughter. She is smart but she is only able to study until they graduate the senior high school. The reason is cliché which is the family lack of money. Isa prefers to work in order to support Bayek and Nani's fees at the university. In the contrary, when Bayek finishes his high school and is accepted at one of reputable universitas, the parents sell their *angkot* in order to help Bayek.

> "Yek, kita jual angkot kita…, kita jual angkot kita untuk kuliah ke Bogor."
>
> [Yek, we are selling our *angkot…,* we sell our *angkot* for your fees at the university in Bogor]. (Setyawan, 2012, p. 133)

Selling *angkot* is one of the things that the family do for Bayek. Ibuk has devoted her energy, time, wealth and passion to her children particularly for Bayek, the only male heir of the family. When Nani and other children cannot wear their shoes, Ibuk borrowed some money from Mang Udin to buy a new pair of shoes for Nani and Bayek. This rises a question: why Bayek, among any other children like Mira and Isa?

In almost similar circumstances, Nnu Ego in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* also places Oshia in her top priority. Oshia goes to the best school as the first male heir while Adim, the second male heir does not have the same privilege as his elder brother.

> "But, Mother, why? Don't I deserve help too? Is it my fault that I am a second son? Everything in this house is Oshia's. He must have the best of everything. You answer to his every whim, Mother. Sometimes I think we the rest of your children do not exist for you at all." (Emecheta, 1979, p. 190).

> "…your brother is the direct heir, the first son of your father. He needs to be specially treated…." (Emecheta, 1979, p. 191)

In both examples in *The Joys of Motherhood* and *Ibuk*, one can see that there is a favouritism for a male heir particularly the first male-born son. It seems that in African societies there is an obligatory for a woman to bear a male child (Makinde, 2004). Emecheta herself believes that a woman will earn more respect if she is able to bear children particularly male children (Emecheta, 2011). She, in addition says that male children are very important. According to her, many African women will like to bear male heirs who will stay in the family and look after their mother when she gets older (Emecheta, 2011, p. 556). This idea is similar to Indonesian idea that male heirs are important.

Based on those aforementioned explanations, the favouritism of first male descendant shows that under the image of self-sacrificing, caring, and protective image of motherhood, there is a perpetuation of patriarchal ideologies. Both of Nnu-Ego and Ibuk also have shown certain action to legitimise the patriarchal system in the culture they are living in through their symbolic statuses as a mother. Motherhood is use to hide the patriarchal values. In addition, the only portrayal of success in both novels lie in the male heirs either Bayek and Oshia who later migrate to the US and Adim who migrates to Canada. It even gives more confirmation that in both novels *The Joys of Motherhood* and *Ibuk*, the values and characteristics of motherhood is used to perpetuate the patriarchal system both authors reside in.

CONCLUSION

The study concurs that the novel *The Joys of Motherhood* and *Ibuk* written by Buchi Emecheta and Iwan Setyawan enriches world literature particularly through elaboration of African and Asian literature and offers new perspectives to be analysed to the scholars. Both novels articulate a vivid portrayal about being a mother and the concepts of motherhood which become an interesting subject to be analysed under the framework of gender studies. The narration about motherhood either explicitly or implicitly shown to strengthen the female characters of the novels.

Regarding with the discussion of motherhood, two characters in the novels are both mothers. They are portrayed in the frame of perfect mothers. Their defining traits are self-sacrificing, protective, supportive, and caring to their family and their children. They will do the best they can do for the sake of their children.

Viewed in a negative spectrum, these portrayals of the perfect mothers come with their flaws. Both Nnu-Ego and Ibuk as a mother tend to pay more attention to their male heirs. This favouritism leads their conception of motherhood into a perpetuation of patriarchal ideologies. They still place men as the superior ones; therefore, they neglect their female heirs. Hence, it can be concluded that the representation of motherhood in the selected novels works to maintain patriarchy.

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