THE FEMALE’S MASCULINITIES AGAINST SIAMESE PATRIARCHAL SYSTEMS IN ELIZABETH HAND’S ANNA AND THE KING

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Abstract

By not giving voice and value to women’s opinions, responses and writings, men have therefore suppressed the female, define what it means to be feminine, and therefore devoiced, devalued, and trivialized what it means to be a woman. As femininity is mostly related to women for women are labeled as extensions of men, mirrors of men, devices for showing men off, and also devices for helping men get what they want, women’s position is inferior to men. This study discusses the female’s masculinities through the portrayal and life experiences of the main female characteristics, Anna Leonowens, as her protests against the Siamese patriarchal systems that abundant her life as a career woman and also the oppressed lives of Siamese women in Elizabeth Hand’s novel Anna and the King. Feminism and Deconstructions approaches will be applied to analyze Leonowens’ actions and reactions regarding to what Siamese patriarchal systems claim to be parts of masculine traits. Leonowens’ nationality, cultural and educational backgrounds as well as positions play significant roles in the novel. By opposing Leonowens’ ways of thinking to the King who represents the patriarchal system of Siam, Hand gives a new identity to women in struggling for gender equality in Siam.

Keywords: masculinity, femininity, patriarchy, feminism, deconstructions

Introduction

The social system of the patriarchal society is a system which enables men to dominate women in all social relations. The system is known in feminist discourse as ‘patriarchy’ - refers to the possession of phallus, which entails the possession of power. It is believed that in the patriarchal order of knowledge perpetuate in the patriarchal society, the kind of looking which results in ‘knowing’ is likely to be exploitative. Men see knowledge, in other words, as something to be mastered, in the way that women are to be mastered. (Ruthven,1984). Furthermore, it is mentioned that feminist criticism is moral because it sees that the one of the central problems of Western literature is that in much of women are not human beings, seat of consciousness. They are objects, who are used to facilitate, explain away, or redeem the project of men.

Beauvoir in The Second Sex (1949) establishes with great clarity the fundamental questions of modern feminism. When a woman tries to define herself, she starts by saying ‘I am a woman’. No man would do so. This fact reveals the basic asymmetry between the term ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’. Man defines the human, not woman. Women have been made inferiors and the oppression has been compounded by men’s beliefs that women are inferiors by nature. Woman is riveted into a lopsided relationship with man, he is the One, she is the Other. In line with Beauvoir, Madsen L. Deborah (2000) states that specific cultural values
are tied to male interests such as the oppositions between rational (male) and emotional (female), and between nature (female) and civilization (male), women are defined as rendered invisible and silent, if they do not fit the patriarchal scheme. Outside the dominant definitions of male-dominated culture women exist only as insane, inarticulate, or irrelevant. In the matter of discourse, additionally, women have been fundamentally oppressed by a male-dominated language. A sociologist Robin Lakoff believes that women’s language actually is inferior, since it contains patterns of ‘weakness’ and ‘uncertainty’, focuses on the ‘trivial’, the frivolous, the unserious, and stresses personal emotion responses. Whatever encourages or initiates a free-play of meanings and prevents ‘closure’ is regarded as ‘female’. Male utterance, she argues, is ‘stronger’ and should be adopted by women if they wish to achieve social equality with men (Selden, 1986). The binary opposition of masculine and feminine traits are then concluded as follows:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Masculine Traits</th>
<th>Feminine Traits</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Vocal in speech</td>
<td>1. Silence</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Consistent in one meaning</td>
<td>2. Going off into plurality of meaning</td>
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<td>4. Relevant</td>
<td>4. Irrelevant</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Objective</td>
<td>5. Subjective</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Rational</td>
<td>6. Irrational</td>
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<td>7. Focus on general matters</td>
<td>7. Focus on trivial matters</td>
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However, the feminist critics have employed wit to ‘deconstruct’ male-dominated ways of seeing. To deconstruct a discourse is to show how it undermines the philosophy it asserts, or the hierarchical opposition on which it relies. (Culler, 1983). Beauvoir concludes that women will achieve liberation only through their agency or positive actions in society.

“Anna and the King” is one of novel written by Elizabeth Hand which is enriched by cultural elements. It talks about a widow from England who was invited by King Rama IV in Thailand to tutor his children, wives and concubines the English language and to introduce them to the Great Britain customs. It explores much the way Leonowens gradually adapts to living in Siam and how her ways of thought and principles give big influences for those around her. On the other way around, the novel also shows Leonowens’ struggles to get through her life with her Siamese companions and lifestyle that gradually re-shape her personality, enabling her to come to grips with her husband’s death. Leonowens pursued her principles regarding to human rights and equalities as shown in many events of the story among them are her risky actions against unfair treatments to women. She felt outraged when she saw the beautiful young Burmese slave-girl Tuptim presented to the king as a gift from the subjugated king of Burma and her struggle to winning a case of a slave who tried to buy her own freedom. Leonowens’ concern and actions to defend women’s rights of equality deconstruct the patriarchal ideas that put women in a subordinate position to men.
Discussion

Silence is identical to femininity, as femininity to women. However, Leonowens seemed to be different. As an educated woman who knew much about how things supposedly went on, Leonowens always questioned something inappropriate. She could not remain silent when something went wrong, especially if she knew that she could do something about it.

Leonowens was being very vocal to the Prime Minister of Siam to demand her rights. The Prime Minister of Siam was the representative of the King himself who held the power towards a decision. As a woman yet a foreigner, Leonowens supposed to put high respect to him, at least, that was how the rule worked in Siam, where men had an absolute power toward women. Less awareness of Siamese culture is another factor for Leonowens’ concern was to get her rights of maintaining her privacy of her personal life and fulfillment of King’s promise of a house of her own. Leonowens persisted on her real goals showed her consistency and her demand of having the promising house outside the palace revealed the fact that Leonowens focused on general issues for a house is one of human basic needs and she was aware of it. Being a lady did not position Leonowens to accept any condition dictated to her. On the other hand, she set her own bargaining power which shows her power as a woman. Her protest was fruitful. She got what she wanted. Even in patriarchal society, where most power are owned by men, women carried masculine traits can excel.

―Behind them, tucked into a groove of rhododendrons, was a beautiful two-story house, in the Siamese style but built of faded rose-colored brick. Servants scurried in and out of its doors, already unpacking baskets full of Anna’s things.‖

―Your Majesty,‖ she said, her eyes brimming. ―I believe you’ve finally rendered me speechless.‖

―I trust you’ll find ample spaces for engaging in English traditions,‖ said King Mongkut. ―Even for growing of roses.‖ (p.114)

Leonowens’ authority in speech did not only appear once. She spoke for the La Ore-Jao Manga’s slave who had difficulty to buy her freedom. Leonowens could not ignore her conscience toward the injustice happened in front of her. She could not keep silent for she knew that what had happened against the law. It was irrational and unfair for Anna that a slave, who deserved freedom for she had purchased it, was tortured and sentenced guilty. She tried very hard to release the slave, though she had to lose her wedding ring—the most precious thing that bound her feeling to her late husband. At the end, she succeeded. The slave was finally released. The issue of slavery in Siam witnesses a fact that the ones carry out patriarchal values are not always men. La Ore-Jao Manga is an influential lady who adopted patriarchal values for she supported unfair treatment to women as commodities or objects. On the other hand, Leonowens again carried masculine traits of being logical and rational to detect and solve a problem.

Leonowens’ vocal action seemed unstoppable. Tuptim, one of the King’s concubines, was accused of a traitorous act against the King, which was then sentenced guilty and got a
death penalty. Leonowens’ thought that the accusation was too far and the punishment was unfair since what Tuptim did was just to love someone and devote her life for that person. What she did to defend a woman who was considered guilty for having an affair stole the public attention for then her action was rejected by the Siamese. It actually a narrow-minded thought when what she did was called irrational for what she objected was actually the death sentence since she was aware that to live was everyone’s right. A person with logical and objective ways of thinking will be able to view a problem not simply using emotion but ratio. And Leonowens had proven it.

The second example of Leonowens’ objectivity could be seen from the way she ‘woke’ the King after a great loss of Fa Ying’s death. Leonowens understood the loss felt by the King since she had experienced the same feeling for losing her husband. However, she thought that the way the King isolated himself from his family (other Royal children) was not good. As a King, he should not lose in his personal matter. That was why Anna tried to cheer him up. Leonowens’ decision to remind the King was quite rational. The King could not mourn too long since he had other responsibilities to do. His other Royal children and the nation needed him. Leonowens was able to rank the orders of importance. With her masculine traits inside her, she was able to wake King’s awareness of his duty of a King that he was not only a father of a dead daughter but a father for the whole nation. Her willingness to continue her life after her husband’s death showed the power of her ratio against her emotion.

How Leonowens carried the masculine traits was again seen in the way she tried to stand for the King and the Royal family against the humiliation toward Siam and the attack of General Alak’s troops. Naturally, as an English woman, she could ignore when another English man tries to underestimate Siam. However as an educated woman, she was able to use her logic to differentiate the truth. She could not support what British had done to Siam. She questioned the diplomat about the attacks on Siam whether British was behind those attacks. She thought that that British had been unfair to attack Siam after the peace agreement offered by the King. She was very objective and brave to state that right is right, apart from any circumstances which might confuse it.

“You raised a glass to him, you commended him for his vision, but all the while you are waiting to take his country away from him.” (p. 226)

Leonowens was being very brave to determine what was right for her. She risked her life and took her responsibility of a teacher to her students that she decided to stand by their sides even in a very hard situation. She could not leave her ‘family’ faced a problem themselves. Leonowens did not give up easily for something she can struggle. She created her own destiny and would not let the destiny govern her life.

Leonowens’ courage was not only supported by her passion without any logical reasons. Her logical ways created a sudden to precise strategy to win the battle. When everyone saw no hope of winning the battle, she came out with an idea to use blow the English bugles and to set the fireworks to bluff the enemy as if the back-up troops of England had arrived to have their backs. Without sufficient knowledge, she would not come to the
idea of using bugles and fireworks. Her knowledge worked together with her rationale was able to equip her to perform a precise action to handle a problem.

Anna’s logical action was also clearly shown in the last night she spent with the King before her leaving to England. She admitted her feeling toward the King and regretted why there was no solution for her love story with the King. However, she endured her own feeling and accepted the fact. She knew that in Siam everything had its own time and at that moment, it was impossible and still unacceptable for an English woman to marry a King.

Conclusion

Howe (1975) stated that traditionally, a man’s life in his work; a woman ‘s life is her man and that a woman’s life might have connections with her work is a revolutionary idea in that it might—indeed must—lead her to examine and question her place as woman in the social order. In this case, it can be said that masculinity does not always belong to man and femininity to woman for both man and woman must have these two characters in their selves. The degree of masculinity and femininity in one’s self will later influence how he or she thinks, acts, and reacts toward certain circumstances.

In the novel titled Anna and the King, Anna Leonowens was described as an educated woman who devoted much of her time to books and issues that made as if she knew more about the world than anyone. Her knowledge brought her rational and logical ways of thinking. Leonowens’ independent self-confident strong-willed characteristics break the doctrine of the patriarchal values that put women position lower than men. Her job as a teacher signals her position under what might be determined by patriarchal awareness that women find job opportunities primarily in the caring professions - like teaching and nursing - and the clerical posts that require the same kinds of organizational skills that a woman needs to run a household (Madsen Deborah L, 2000). Still, her ways of thinking, facing problems, finding and determining solutions reflect how Leonowens as a female character portrayed masculine traits against the strong values of masculinities in a patriarchal society of Siam.

References


