

Woman's Struggle Against Gender Inequality in 'Hamnet' by Maggie O'Farrell

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the struggle carried out by the main woman character to fight gender inequality in the novel Hamnet (2020) by Maggie O' Farrell. The writer chose this topic because until now, women still get a lot of violence both verbal and nonverbal, even not only happened to adult women, but also happened to underage children. The writer analyzes the problems of gender inequality faced by the main woman character in the novel Hamnet by Maggie O' Farrell. Furthermore, the writer analyzed the struggles she makes, and also the results of her struggles. This study used Simone de Beauvoir's feminist literary approach. This study used a descriptive qualitative method. Data collected in the form of sentences, actions and narratives closely with the factors that caused the main woman character against gender inequality. Furthermore, the received data is classified by categorizing the data according to their various subjects, analyzed using relevant topics, and analyzed depending on the writer's understanding. In this study, the writer discovered that the main woman character in Maggie O' Farrell's novel Hamnet faced: subordination, stereotypes, and violence. Second, the writer identified the struggles faced by the main woman characters: become intellectuals, freedom to be herself, freedom to actualize themselves.

Keyword: *feminism, gender inequality, hamnet, woman's struggle.*

A. Introduction

Gender inequality is a form of differentiated treatment based on gender reasons. Gender inequality can be experienced by both man and woman. However, currently woman experiences more injustice than man. Therefore, there are restrictions on the role

of woman, and also gender inequality has been a persistent issue in society for centuries. According to Beauvoir (2010), gender inequality due to gender discrimination can manifest in various forms, such as subordination, stereotypes and violence. Women, in particular, have faced various forms of subordination, stereotypes, and violence for merely being born woman. Despite the progress made towards gender equality in various societies, women's struggle against gender inequality continues.

The issue of women being the second sex occasionally creates a type of gender inequality. The gender inequality faced by women is an interesting issue to explore because women are treated differently than men. Inequality can show itself in a variety of ways, ranging from uneven social standing and work possibilities to limited access to education or political power. Gender inequality is built and perceived differently by women in a variety of ways.

Subordination related to marital traditions is one form of gender inequality that women frequently face. Until recently, the father, as the family's leader was responsible for a woman's marriage preparation. Even if the bride does not know the prospective groom, the father chooses him for her. This marriage may also involve an element of pressure for the benefit of financial or political interests.

The tradition of family-initiated planned marriages undoubtedly has a foundation and purpose. Women still do not hold the same position as males. Even some people have the belief that women are subhuman and hold a position that is inferior to that of males. This viewpoint is unmistakably impacted by women's restrictions on their ability to make decisions owing to ignorance and undereducation. Therefore, it appears that families with daughters use this circumstance to pair them with men who are regarded as mature and established.

Additionally, the involvement of matchmakers frequently results in an unhappy union where women are treated as inferior. Who a lady marries is decided by the matchmaker. Women must get married according to tradition. Siti Nurbaya is a well-known tale concerning the custom of arranged marriage in West Sumatera, Indonesia. (Santosa, 2021).

Based on the above phenomenon, the writer applies the theory of women's existence proposed by Beauvoir (2010) Simone de Beauvoir's feminist approach is an important lens to analyzes. In her book, *The Second Sex* (2010), Beauvoir argues that women are oppressed by men in society, and that gender roles are social constructs that have been imposed on them. She argues that women have been treated as "the other" in society, and that this has resulted in their subordination. This approach is very much in line with the struggles of the main character in this novel.

The writer tries to analyzed issues in *Hamnet* by Maggie O'Farrell (2020). The book is famous all over the world. *Hamnet* has been selected as Women's Prize for Fiction 2020, National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction 2021, This novel deals with the issue of women's struggle, which is important to analyzed as an example and learning material for all of us how a woman's struggle

against gender inequality, can also motivate women to always fight and can be a reminder for men not to harass or make women the object of their crimes. The writer chose this novel because it contains elements of feminism and women's struggles. Another reason is because this novel has never been studied before.

This novel is interesting to analyzed because no writer has analyzed this novel before. Another reason is because the appearance of the characters and the storyline in this novel are very interesting. Given that feminism theory is a theory that departs from gender inequality. Women are often treated unequally with men. They are considered as someone who has less power than men, demeaned in several aspects: politics, economics, education, domestic, and others. From this condition, women have shown their existence. They struggle to show that they cannot be seen as someone else, which means they have less power than men.

B. Method

According to Creswell (2014) research methodology gives a specific direction for the researchers in the process of inquiry in quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. This study will be conducted in a qualitative method.

According to Litosseliti (2010) Qualitative study is concerned with structures and patterns and how something is. Therefore, it can be concluded that a qualitative method is a study approach based on searching for data related to social aspects in humans, such as human feelings and situations that produce data to be analyzed. In addition, the writer will examine the data using a text analysis approach. Following the collection of data, the next stage is to assess it using theories related to the study's topic.

C. Findings and Discussion

In this chapter, there are two parts that are analyzed. The first part of the Gender Inequality Issue in the novel *Hamnet*. The second is the struggle of the main character against inequality in the novel *Hamnet* (2020).

1. Gender Inequality Issue

Gender inequality refers to the notion or scenario in which men and women are not treated equally. People are treated unfairly or have negative impressions of others because of their gender, in whole or in part. (Okpara, 2011).

1.1 Subordination

Beauvoir (2010) finds it unjust and immoral to use sexual difference as an argument for women's subordination. She insists that women and men must both have the capacity to assume their existence as immanence and transcendence, and therefore must treat each other as equal.

The phrase "women subordination" refers to women's subordinate status, lack of access to resources and decision-making, and the patriarchal dominance that most countries subject women to. The dominance of men over women is one example of subordination. The texts that support this claim are as follows:

"Hamnet fastens his arms around his mother's waist; he wishes to communicate to her the urgency, the necessity of ending this conversation, of getting away from this person. She doesn't move but brings a hand down to his wrist, as if to say, I acknowledge you, I am here.

'Madam,' the physician says, and again his beak swings towards them, 'you may trust that I know much more about these matters than you do. A dried toad, applied to the abdomen for several days, has proven to have great efficacy in cases such as these. If your daughter is suffering from the pestilence, I regret to say that there is very little that may—'" (Farrell, 2020, p. 91)

In the quote above explains the form of subordination to Agnes. Agnes is subjected to a form of subordination by the male physician who treats her son. The quote, "*you may trust that I know much more about these matters than you do,*" demonstrates a patriarchal arrogance and a lack of respect for Agnes as a woman with decision-making power.

The physician's statement implies that Agnes is incapable of making her own decisions about her son's health and well-being. This is a common form of subordination experienced by women throughout history - their opinions and thoughts are dismissed or ignored, and they are seen as inferior to men. This type of patriarchal arrogance is still prevalent in contemporary society, particularly in male-dominated professions such as medicine and politics.

Furthermore, the physician's behavior reinforces the idea that women are not trusted to make their own decisions. This is particularly concerning in the context of healthcare, where women's experiences and knowledge of their own bodies are often disregarded or dismissed. This lack of trust can have serious consequences, particularly in cases where women are seeking reproductive healthcare or treatment for conditions that are specific to their gender.

1.2. Stereotype

A stereotype is a collection of assumptions, either positive or negative, that a person has about the traits of a certain group of people. Society has numerous presumptions about women, such as the idea that they are submissive, weak, and irrational. Since a woman is already married, it is assumed that she has a responsibility to maintain the home's cleanliness, cook, take care of the kids, and take care of her husband (Beauvoir, 2010) believed that women should be free to reject male stereotypes of feminine beauty. In doing so, there would be greater equality between men and women.

"Agnes's head is pressed against the smooth flank of the cow as she milks. Joan hears the psht-psht-u-psht of milk jetting into the pail. At the sound of Joan's cry, the cow shifts and Agnes lifts her cheek and turns to look at her stepmother, a wary expression on her face. Here it comes now, she seems to be thinking. Joan grabs her by the arm, yanks her off the milking stool, and pushes her up against the stall partition. Too late, she sees her son James standing

in the next stall: he must have been helping Agnes with the milking. Joan has to fumble through the girl's kirtle, the fastenings of her gown, and the girl is struggling, pushing her fingers away, trying to break free, but Joan gets her hand through, just for a moment, and feels what? A swelling, hard in texture, and hot. A quickening mound, risen like a loaf. 'Whore,' Joan spits, as Agnes pushes her away. 'Slut.' (Farrell, 2020, p. 52)

The quotation above shows the form of stereotypes that Agnes received. Agnes is portrayed as a victim of harmful stereotypes. She is labeled as a slut by her stepmother, despite being pregnant with a child. This form of stereotyping not only affects Agnes' reputation but also her mental health and well-being.

Agnes' portrayal shows the extent to which people can be judged and labeled based

on their circumstances. Her pregnancy is seen as evidence of her promiscuity, without any consideration for the circumstances that led to it. This form of stereotyping is not only hurtful but also inaccurate. It assumes that all women who become pregnant outside of marriage are promiscuous and therefore deserve to be labeled as slut.

Furthermore, this stereotype has harmful effects on Agnes' mental health. She becomes isolated and depressed, unable to defend herself against the accusations made against her. The negative labels she receives from her stepmother and others in her community have a profound impact on her self-esteem and sense of self-worth. She is unable to escape the stigma attached to her and is therefore trapped in a cycle of shame and guilt. This highlights the fact that stereotypes not only affect how others perceive us but also how we perceive ourselves.

1.3 Violence

Physical violence is not the only kind of violence against women. It is far more comprehensive and includes emotional, psychological, and sexual abuse. In this novel, sexual harassment is the first issue that women encounter. Women are viewed as human beings who have a responsibility to fulfill the needs of males, according to feminism, which is a topic that is often discussed. Beauvoir (2010) insists that we must affirm ambiguity and freedom against structural conditions of oppression, and act politically to minimize violence and its tragic effects.

"Agnes is up, off, away, scrambling to her feet, gathering her skirts. Joan gets up unsteadily and goes after her. They are in the farmyard when Joan catches up with her. She grabs her by the wrist, swings her round, lands a slap on the girl's face." (Farrell, 2020, p. 53)

The quote above shows the violence Agnes received. Agnes faced a great deal of violence in her life, both physical and emotional. The quote above highlights the emotional violence she experienced, but it is important to also acknowledge the physical violence she endured.

Agnes' stepmother, Joan, inflicted physical violence on her in the form of a slap during an argument. This type of violence is not only painful, but it is also a violation of a person's boundaries and can be traumatizing. Agnes' reaction of shouting that Joan was not her mother demonstrates her resistance to being mistreated.

2. The Struggle Against Inequality

According to Beauvoir (2010) Women's struggle is an effort against the oppression of men as individual who have power. Beauvoir raises awareness among women about the need of being able to live freely and select their own path without support or guidance from others via feminist existentialism. Beauvoir, in other words, encourages women to be themselves. Women must be allowed to express themselves in all ways since they have the same rights as men and exist as humans. Furthermore, Beauvoir classified women's life into three categories: Intellectual, freedom to be herself, and freedom to actualize themselves.

2.1 Intellectual

An individual said to have intellectual abilities are those who have high intelligence. According to Beauvoir (2010) being an intellectual woman, someone who is intellectual is someone who uses intellect to solve an issue, there are several things that can be taken from the strengths or habits that arise in their environment, namely the way women can be intellectual. As in the quotation from novel *Hamnet*:

“Agnes comes through the front door. She places upon the table the following items: two bundles of rosemary, her leather bag, the jar of honey, a hunk of beeswax, wrapped in a leaf, her straw hat, a tied posy of comfrey, which she intends to pluck and dry, then steep in warmed oil. She walks through the room, straightening the chair by the hearth, moving a cap of Susanna’s from the table to a hook behind the door. She opens the window to the street, in case any customers come for her.” (Farrell, 2020, p. 64)

The quote shows the intelligence of Agnes. Agnes' intelligence shines through in her ability to cultivate and harvest her own herbs, flowers, rosemary, and honey, which she then uses to create medicinal products. This level of skill and knowledge indicates a depth of understanding and a dedication to her craft that is truly impressive.

In addition to her proficiency in herbal medicine, Agnes' ability to multitask and manage her time effectively is a clear indication of her high intellect. At a time when women were expected to focus solely on domestic duties, Agnes was able to balance her household responsibilities with the demands of running a business. This level of organization and efficiency is characteristic of a systematic mindset, where an individual is able to manage multiple tasks and responsibilities simultaneously.

2.2 Freedom to be herself

Women who are able to make decisions based on their desire to be herself and their belief in what they do without needing to be someone else are said to "be themselves." According to Beauvoir (2010) “[a woman is] like all humans, an autonomous freedom, [but] she discovers and chooses herself in a world where men force her to assume herself as Other.”

“Agnes seems to split in two. Part of her gasps at the sight of the buboes. The other part hears the gasp, observes it, notes it: a gasp, very well. Tears spring into the eyes of the first Agnes, and her heart gives a great thud in her chest, an animal hurling itself against its

cage of bones. The other Agnes is ticking off the signs: buboes, fever, deep sleep. The first Agnes is kissing her daughter, on the forehead, on the cheeks, at the place where hair meets skin on her temple; the other is thinking, a poultice of crumbed bread and roasted onion and boiled milk and mutton fat, a cordial of hips and powdered rue, borage and woodbine.” (Farrell, 2020, p. 75)

The quote above explains Agnes to be herself, being a mother, who Agnes' daughter fell ill with the bubonic plague, forcing Agnes to put her career on hold and devote all her time and energy to caring for her child. As a mother, Agnes experienced anxiety and worry for her daughter's health, which intensified as the plague spread throughout the city. She could not leave her daughter, even though she missed the intellectual stimulation of her work. Agnes' struggle reflects the dilemma faced by many working mothers who must balance the demands of their careers with their parental responsibilities.

Meanwhile, Agnes' husband is absent for most of the novel, working out of town and only sending money and occasional visits. This leaves her in a difficult financial situation, struggling to make ends meet and also care for her sick child. The added pressure of financial stress only adds to the sense of overwhelm she feels, as she is forced to prioritize her daughter's immediate needs over her own professional aspirations.

Despite these challenges, Agnes remained committed to her daughter and her work. She refused to give up on her career ambitions, even when it meant sacrificing her personal life. Her dedication to her work is admirable, but it also comes at a cost. She was unable to fully enjoy time with her daughter, as she was always preoccupied with the demands of her job. At the same time, she struggled to meet the demands of her job, as she was always worried about her daughter's health.

2.3 Freedom to actualizes herself

Women's self-actualization is an independent activity they do based on the actual experiences they have had to achieve self-freedom. Women who are conscious of their independence will be able to fully actualize who they are. Women who are aware of their freedom will be able to actualize themselves to the fullest. Women can be intellectual, and they don't even have to worry about their biological limitations. Women refuse to be used as object even women are also able to tempt men. (Beauvoir, 2010)

Women who are aware of their existence will be able to actualize the freedom that exists within themselves to the maximum extent possible. The following is an excerpt from Agnes's resistance, in which she bravely refuses in front of her family that her future is determined by herself.

Agnes takes the risk of establishing herself as a being who deserves to be recognized for her existence in a way that does not limit her desires. The declaration made against her was courageous. In the quote below, she defies the patriarchal construct that oppresses women by denying them the right to express themselves freely. This can be seen from the quote below:

“Agnes will marry a farmer, by and by – someone with prospects, someone to provide for her. She’s been brought up for that life. Her father left her a dowry in his will – I’m sure you know that, don’t you? She’ll not marry a feckless, tradeless boy like you.

And she had turned away, as if that had been an end to it. But I don't want to marry a farmer, Agnes had cried. Joan had laughed again. Is that so? You want to marry him? Yes, she said. I do. Very much. And Joan had laughed again, shaking her head. But we are handfasted, the tutor said. I asked her and she answered and so we are bound. No, you are not, said Joan. Not unless I say so." (Farrell, 2020, p. 49)

In the quote above, Agnes' decision to marry the Latin teacher of her dreams despite her father's opposition is a form of woman empowerment and intellectualism that defies the patriarchal norms of her time by insisting on marrying the man of her choice.

Agnes' decision to marry for love was a radical departure from the norms of her time. In the Victorian era, women were expected to marry for social status and financial security, not for love. Marriage was seen as a transactional relationship, where women were expected to provide domestic services and bear children, while men were the breadwinners of the family. However, Agnes refused to submit to these norms and insisted on marrying the man she loved.

This decision shows that Agnes is an empowered woman who is not afraid to assert her will. She values her own desires and beliefs over the expectations of her family and society. Agnes' decision challenges traditional gender roles that place women in a passive and submissive role in society. By choosing to marry for love, Agnes shows that women can make their own decisions and have control over their own lives, even in a patriarchal society.

Agnes' decision also shows that she is an intellectual woman who can consider her options. She is aware of the risks and challenges of marrying a Latin teacher who is not from a wealthy background. Agnes understood that marrying for love could mean sacrificing social status and financial security. However, she was willing to take the risk because she believed that her relationship with the Latin teacher was worth it.

Agnes' decision to marry an intellectual man also shows that she values knowledge and education. She hoped that by marrying the Latin teacher, she herself would become an intellectual, and her children would inherit her love of learning. This decision challenges traditional gender roles that limit women's access to education and knowledge. Agnes showed that women can be intellectuals and pursue their own interests, even in a society that does not provide such opportunities.

D. Conclusion

In this chapter, the writer presents some conclusions and suggestions. After analyzing the novel *Hamnet* by Maggie O'Farrell (2020), the writer draws some conclusions and suggestions as follows. After analyzing the data on the novel "Hamnet" by Maggie O'Farrell, the writer concludes that there are three problems of gender inequality faced by Agnes Hathaway, namely subordination, stereotyping, and violence. In the case of subordination experienced by Agnes who is subordinated by the Physician, Bartholomew and his family. In the case of stereotyping experienced by Agnes, she is stereotyped as positive as an independent woman who can make potions, as well as

negative stereotypes as a slut and a witch. In the case of violence experienced by Agnes, she was abused by her stepmother, her in-laws and her family. These problems caused Agnes to struggle to fix the problems and fight for gender equality. The writer found three types of struggles that Agnes carried out, namely the struggle to be an intellectual, the struggle to be oneself and the struggle for freedom to self-actualize. In the struggle to become an intellectual, Agnes, who has the ability to concoct potions, when she received subordinate treatment from a healer because Agnes was a woman, Agnes used her intellect to debate the healer's statement. In the struggle to be herself, Agnes struggles as a mother, when her child is affected by an epidemic and at that time her husband is away from home, Agnes plays her role as a mother and father for her child, Agnes also opens a shop in her house. In the struggle for freedom to self-actualize, Agnes opposed the arranged marriage with a farmer that her father had prepared, Agnes also had the option of marrying a Latin tutor. Agnes' decision to marry for love was a radical departure from the norms of her time. In the Victorian era, women were expected to marry for social status and financial security, not for love. Marriage was seen as a transactional relationship, where women were expected to provide domestic services and bear children, while men were the breadwinners of the family. However, Agnes refused to submit to these norms and insisted on marrying the man she loved. This study focuses on the main character's struggle against gender inequality, in the novel *Hamnet* (2020) by Maggie O'Farrell. This study has limitations because it only reveals three forms of gender inequality experienced by the main character. For future writers who are interested in the same topic, it is highly recommended to look further into how feminism, especially the main character's struggle, is represented in Maggie O'Farrell's *Hamnet*. Future writers are strongly advised to reveal how women can struggle from the problem of gender inequality and remember the importance of human rights. In addition, future writers also need to have a better understanding of feminist issues to present a better study and provide more information in the future.

The writer hopes that this analysis will contribute academically to the depth of literary thoughts. Regardless of how little the essence offered, it might be utilized as a reference for students, particularly literature students, to undertake more study on this work.

The writer also hopes that future academics who wish to feminism because Farrell's novel *Hamnet* would employ theories other than feminism, because there are many topics that may be studied in this work.

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