



Gender Inequality in the Novel *the Dressmaker* by Rosalie Ham

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Abstract

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The study aims at describing gender inequality in the Novel *The Dressmaker* By Rosalie Ham". The object is a novel entitled *The Dressmaker* by Rosalie Ham. The purpose of this study is to analyze the gender inequality that exists in the novel and how gender inequality affects the main characters and the people around her. This study uses a qualitative method in which all the data that has been collected is presented in the form of descriptive analysis. This study is guided by the theory of Lorber (2010) in her book Gender Inequality: Feminist Theories and Politics. There are two results of this research namely, the first is about gender inequality experienced by the main characters in the novel and the second is about how the main characters deal with it. The gender inequality reflected in the novel *The Dressmaker* are in the form of sexual violence, misogyny, and men dominance. This research also found some ways that were done by the protagonist to deal with gender inequality such as avoidance, self-defense, self-hatred, and self-proving. © 2025 Universitas Pamulang

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INTRODUCTION

Rosalie Ham's *The Dressmaker* (2000) is a compelling narrative set in a small, conservative Australian town during the 1950s. At its core, the novel explores issues of gender, social exclusion, and the struggle for justice through the life of Myrtle "Tilly" Dunnage. As a female protagonist returning to her hometown after years of exile, Tilly becomes the focal point through which the novel unravels layers of gender inequality, social

prejudice, and revenge. This study investigates how gender inequality is reflected in *The Dressmaker* and how it influences both the protagonist and her surrounding environment.

Gender inequality in *The Dressmaker* is portrayed through the rigid expectations imposed upon women by the patriarchal community of Dungatar. Women are judged based on appearances, domestic skills, and compliance with social norms rather than intellect or agency. Tilly's mother, Molly Dunnage, is ostracized and labeled insane for bearing a child out of wedlock, illustrating how women's sexual autonomy is harshly policed (Ham, 2000). Similarly, Tilly herself is scapegoated for a childhood accident and is subjected to lifelong exile and ridicule. These narratives reflect how societal structures punish women who deviate from normative gender roles, aligning with Beauvoir's assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" through societal impositions (Beauvoir, 1949).

Tilly's return to Dungatar becomes a subversive act. She embodies resistance against gendered oppression by using her skills as a dressmaker to gain social and economic power. Her transformation from victim to agent disrupts the gendered hierarchy of the town. As she designs glamorous dresses for the very women who once shunned her, Tilly exposes the hypocrisy of Dungatar's social order. Her success challenges the male-dominated economy and cultural authority, especially as she remains unmarried and independent—two traits often stigmatized in mid-century rural settings (Ham, 2000).

Moreover, Ham constructs a web of female characters to explore different responses to gender inequality. Characters like Gertrude Pratt and Una Pleasance are shown to internalize patriarchal values, often turning against other women to gain favor or status. In contrast, characters like Sergeant Farrat, who defies masculine norms through cross-dressing, reveal the novel's broader critique of gender binaries and heteronormativity. Ham uses satire to expose how both men and women are trapped by the town's repressive gender expectations, demonstrating the social cost of gender inequality for all individuals.

The protagonist's journey thus represents not only a personal struggle for justice but also a broader challenge to systemic gender bias. Tilly's act of burning down the town at the novel's end can be interpreted as a symbolic erasure of an unjust social system, one built on misogyny, lies, and exclusion. It signifies a form of radical justice, where the destruction of the old order becomes the prerequisite for new possibilities (Ham, 2000).

In conclusion, *The Dressmaker* is a powerful literary work that exposes and critiques gender inequality through a combination of satire, tragedy, and female empowerment. Ham's novel invites readers to reflect on the deeply embedded structures of gender discrimination and the ways in which literature can serve as a tool for resistance and social critique.

METHODS

1. Approach of The Study

A qualitative approach used in this research to support data-collecting and analyzing the object analysis. The writer arranged the data in the form of descriptive essays without numerical data. The research is based on a textual phenomenon that reflects real-life situations. According to Ary et al. (2014, p.36), "Qualitative data generally take the form of words (descriptions, observations, impressions, recordings, and the like)". The collected data is taken from the novel *The Dressmaker* by Rosalie Ham as proof to explain the issue

represented in the novel. Therefore, a qualitative approach is appropriate to be applied in this research.

2. Data Source

The data were taken from a novel entitled *The Dressmaker* (2000) by Rosalie Ham. The writer collects and analyzes the data in order to identify gender inequality in the story.

3. Data Collection

There were a few steps done to collect the data. The first step read the novel *The Dressmaker* by Rosalie Ham. The second identified the gender inequality issues contained in the novel. The next step wrote a list of the gender inequality issues found in the novel. The last step, classified the selected data and develop the data based on the supporting theories of gender inequality issues.

4. Data Analysis

The data that is collected and classified in this research are the issues raised in the novel *The Dressmaker* by Rosalie Ham. The data are classified according to the gender inequality which reflected in the novel. The issues of gender inequality were analyzed using the theory of Judith Lorber in her books *Gender Inequality: Feminist Theories and Politics*, Fourth Edition (2010).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Gender Inequality in the Novel *The Dressmaker* by Rosalie Ham

The Dressmaker by Rosalie Ham consists of thirty-three chapters that have a female character named Myrtle Dunnage. The novel tells how she was treated in her social life and dealt with it, fighting for justice, revenge, and bringing change to women. She experienced gender inequality issues that are reflected in the form of sexual violence, misogyny, and men's dominance. This study also finds that gender inequality is not only experienced by the main character of the novel but is also experienced by some female characters in the novel. How gender inequality is reflected in the novel *The Dressmaker* by Rosalie Ham in different forms is analyzed by examining the text and the dialogue in the novel *The Dressmaker* by Rosalie Ham.

Sexual Violence

The Dressmaker by Rosalie Ham not only tells the story of Myrtle life but also tells how women are treated inappropriately by men such as being harassed and receiving violence. Lorber (2010) reveals that gender inequality occurs because of the inequality of treatment between women and men. Sexual violence is well-known as one of the forms of gender inequality and women are usually found as the victims of sexual violence.

1. Myrtle

Myrtle Dunnage or Tilly is the main character of the novel. She is the daughter of a single mother named Molly Dunnage. She comes from a family with a lower social status. She often gets unfair treatment and becomes a victim of bullying by school students. She was also sexually abused from an early age by a student named Stewart Pettyman, a boy who has higher social status than her. This is shown in the text:

He grabbed her around the neck, dragged her down beside the library, held her by the throat against the wall, and rubbed her fanny hard under her panties. Myrtle couldn't breathe and vomit rose. (Ham, 2000, p.96)

2. Marrigold

Marrigold is the wife of Evan Pettyman, and the mother of Stewart Pettyman. Her husband was the Dungatar's town councilor. She was depressed because of her son's death and her condition got worse because her husband lied about their son's death. What he did to make his wife feel better and to cover up misunderstandings about the cause of her son's death involving Myrtle Dunnage. To overcome her mental health condition, her husband makes her consume some medicine to help her fall asleep and serves as a sedative, but the worse is he uses his wife's weakness to satisfy his sexual desires. This is shown in the text:

Evan poured a little more tonic and gave it to her. When she slept Evan undressed, then leaned over her, licking his lips and rubbing his hands together. He pulled back the bedclothes and removed Marigold's nightie. She was limp but he positioned her as he wanted her, legs splayed, arms over her head, then he knelt between her thighs. (Ham, 2000, p.50.)

3. Gertrude

Gertrude is the daughter of the owner of the convenience store in Dungatar. Her family has a middle-class social status, so she decided to marry William Beumanot to increase her family's social status. She did everything she could to raise her social status by changing her dress style with the help of Myrtle Dunnage, marrying William who had a higher social status than her, and holding a social club in Dungatar. While trying to get close to William, Gertrude was sexually harassed by Him. This is shown in the dialogues and the text:

'It's time to go in.'

'Yes!' said William and reached for his fly.

'NO!' said Gertrude and pushed at his shoulders. She struggled, feeling about in the dark with William still oozing all over her, sucking at her neck. She crawled out from under him and was gone. (Ham, 2000, p.86)

4. Una

Una Pleasance or Una is a cousin of Elsbeth Beaumont. She is a dressmaker who has poor fashion sense. Una is also involved in an affair with Evan Pettyman. While living in Dungatar, she lived with Evan and Marrigold Pettyman. Una's arrival was greeted quite impolitely because of Evan's inappropriate treatment. This is shown in the dialogues and text:

'We're just giving Una a guided tour of her new home –'

'You must allow me!' said Evan, rubbing his hands and licking his lips, his warm breath visible in the winter air. 'I can drive Miss Pleasance in the comfort of the shire car, after all – she is my guest.' (Ham, 2000, p.157)

Misogyny

Apart from sexual violence, gender inequality can take the form of misogyny. Misogyny is behavior that dislikes or hates women. Misogyny can be in the form of hate speech against women, sexual discrimination, insults, and violence against women. There are misogyny treatments is found in the novel *The Dressmaker* by Rosalie Ham, especially misogyny treatment aimed at the main characters Myrtle and her mother, Molly.

1. Myrtle

Due to the sexual violence Myrtle experienced and the death of Stewart Pettyman, she had to be separated from his mother to serve a period of imprisonment. Without valid evidence, Myrtle is accused of being a murderer by the Dungatar people. She gets a lot of hate, and she is labeled as a murderer. After growing up and returning to Dungatar, people still hate her and call her a murderer and she gets a new label as a witch because of the death of Teddy McSwiney, Myrtle's lover. This is shown in the text, "*Beula stamped her feet. '... AND, that daughter of Mad Molly's is back – the murderer!'*" (Ham, 2000, p.40).

2. Molly

Molly is Myrtle's mother. Before moving to Dungatar, she worked in Paris and she has a lover named Ormond. Molly thought their relationship would run smoothly because of the presence of their child, but their relationship was broken because of the child's death and she is blamed for the death of their baby. After the incident, Molly decides to live in Dungatar. Her economic condition was poor, she is forced to hook up with Evan Pettyman and own Myrtle. For the second time she had to lose her child, Molly had to part with Myrtle and she was forced to isolate herself in her small cottage because of the case of Stewart's death. Molly also received misogynist treatment from the Dungatar community, she was called as a *Mad Molly*. This is shown in the text and the dialogue, '*Who lives at Mad Molly's now?*' said William. '*Mad Molly,*' said Elsbeth, '*unless she's dead.*' (Ham, 2000, p.22)

Men's Dominance

Gender inequality cannot be separated from the existence of man dominance because of the different treatment of men and women. Women are the side that always gets unfair treatment. Women are always depicted as weak figures, always using feelings and sensitivity in solving problems, and always being the object of men's dominance, which is a judgment that prevents women from getting equal treatment. There are several issues of man dominance found in the novel *The Dressmaker* by Rosalie Ham. The gender inequality in the form of men's dominance is analyzed by examining the narrative and the dialog towards the female characters.

1. Molly

Molly has a hard time because of losing Ormond, her boyfriend, and also her son, Pablo. She lived alone and to fulfill her life she had a backstreet relationship with Evan Pettyman and gave birth to Myrtle. Because of the death of Stewart, the son of Evan and Marrigold, Molly was forced to lose her daughter Myrtle. This is shown in the text and the dialogue:

Molly shivered, 'I wouldn't give my baby away so I had to leave my home and my parents. He came after me and used me. I had no money, no job, and an illegitimate child to support. He kept us ...' Molly sighed. 'Then when he couldn't have his son anymore, I couldn't have you.' (Ham, 2000, p.178)

2. Marrigold

Marrigold is the daughter of the shire president. In the novel, she is described as innocent and also has mental issues caused by the death of her son, Stewart. She is also obsessed with cleanliness. Her shy and innocent figure is used as an object for Evan

Pettyman which shows the existence of men's dominance over Marrigold. This is shown in the text and the text and the dialogue:

Marigold had been just a shy, innocent little thing when Evan came to Dungatar. Her father was the shire president then, and when he died he left her a lot of money, so Evan swept her off her feet. (Ham, 2000, p.49)

3. Dungatar's Women

The existence of men's dominance makes women not get equal job opportunities with men. It is also found in the novel *The Dressmaker* by Rosalie Ham, that Dungatar women generally become housewives, sex workers or prostitutes, farmers, convenience store owners, and ranchers. Meanwhile, men have better job opportunities and can choose the jobs they like according to their potential. This is shown in the text:

'... take for example the Pratt women: they know nuts and bolts and powders that are lethal to maggots in fly struck merinos, also stock feed and the treatment for chicken lice, haberdashery, fruit preservatives and female intimate apparel. Most employable.' (Ham, 2000, p.17)

The Protagonist Deals with Gender Inequality

The study found gender inequality that is experienced by the protagonist and the other female characters due to men's dominance, women as subordinates of men, and also due to social judgment. This study also found out how the protagonist dealt with gender inequality. The analysis of how the protagonist dealt with gender inequality is explained below,

Avoidance

To deal with sexual violence, Myrtle Dunnage as the victim of the sexual violence of Stewart Pattyman, chooses to avoid the problem. She was too afraid to fight him back and she runs to avoid him. This is shown in the phrase, "*After school she ran as fast as she could but they caught up with her.*" (Ham, 2000, p.48). The quotation shows how the protagonist deal with gender inequality reflected in the form of sexual violence. Myrtle as the protagonist chooses to avoid the problem, the worst is she chooses to die and not fight back against Stewart to deal with what she has experienced. That shown in, *Myrtle sucked in her tummy and closed her eyes – he could just kill her. She decided to die* (Ham, 2000, p.97). As an illegitimate daughter from a lower social status family, Myrtle is afraid to fight back against Stewart who has higher social status whose father was the Dungatar's town councilor. He has the power to do what he wants and silence Myrtle as the victim which clearly shows the inequality to her as a woman.

Self-Defense

Myrtle decided to protect herself by dodging Stewart's attack when she got abused by him. It is caused Stewart's head hitting the wall and dying. What she has done is disadvantage her even though that was a form of self defense. It is shown by how Dungatar people treat her after the tragedy happened, "*Beula stamped her feet. ... AND, that daughter of Mad Molly's is back – the murderer!*" (Ham 2000, p.40). The quotation shows how the main character is treated and gets blamed for Stewart's death. Myrtle is called the murderer even though what she did was to protect herself without any intention to kill Stewart. She was not got the chance to explain what really happened and was punished at an early age.

Self-Hatred

Myrtle as the protagonist is also a victim of misogyny. To deal with it she was forced

to isolate herself and her mother in their cottage because people blamed Myrtle for the death of Teddy McSwiney, they labeled Myrtle as a "witch", "cursed", and "murderer" labels. They also committed acts of discrimination by throwing hill rocks and throwing rubbish at Myrtle's cottage. This is shown in the text, "*Mother and daughter stayed behind their locked door cuddling their desolation and sorrow, moving about very little.*" (Ham, 2000, p.155)

Self-Proving

The existence of Men's dominance makes women get different job opportunities that are not equal, the categorization of the most employable jobs for Dungatar women also limits them from getting equal jobs with men. After getting out of jail, Myrtle learned how to make the dress. With her abilities as The Dressmaker, Myrtle proves that Dungatar women can get better jobs. She also has a role in Dungatar Women's Fashion.

CONCLUSION

After analyzing gender inequality in the novel *The Dressmaker* by Rosalie Ham, there are several forms of gender inequality found. There is gender inequality in the form of sexual violence, misogyny, men's dominance, and gender roles. The first is sexual violence, which is experienced by several female characters in the form of coercion to have sex, attempted rape, and the male gaze. Sexual violence is motivated by the victim's lower social status and the use of power abuse against women. The second is misogyny, which is also experienced by female characters. Misogyny is hate treatment that is done verbally and visually. Misogyny suspects do this because of an excessive sense of hatred towards women. The third is men's dominance, female characters are treated as objects for men because of male dominance who uses their power to treat women as their subordinates. In addition, female characters do not get equal job opportunities with male characters because of the understanding that farmers, ranchers, and shopkeepers are the most employable jobs.

The study also found how the protagonist deals with gender inequality. The first is avoidance which the protagonist was avoid the problem. She is unable to fight or defend herself due to the use of power abuse, abuse of social status, and social judgments, and it also left traumatic effects that imprint on her that make her silent and cannot speak up for her right. The second is a self-defense which the protagonist decided to protect herself from the sexual abusers. The third is self-hatred which the protagonist is forced to isolate herself and blame herself for what happened in the past. The last is self-proving which the protagonist uses her abilities as the dressmaker and proves that Dungatar women have the potential to get better jobs.

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