

**Women's Representation and Resistance as Depicted in Josephine Chia's *Frog under a Coconut Shell* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*:
A Comparative Study**

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
<p>Article History</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Article Received 6th March 2021 • Article Accepted 19th April 2021 <p>Keywords</p> <p>Women's representation, women's resistance, comparative literature, liberal feminism</p>	<p>This study is aimed to analyze the comparison between women's representation and resistance in Josephine Chia's novel <i>Frog under a Coconut Shell</i> from Singapore and <i>The God of Small Things</i> by Arundhati Roy from India. By using a comparative literature approach, the research focuses on the differences and similarities in women's representation and resistance to get gender equality in Singaporean and Indian society. Chia's novel tells the story of Soon Neo and her daughter, Josephine, who struggles to get their rights as women in the midst of patriarchal <i>Peranakan</i> culture in Singapore, and Roy's novel tells the story of Ammu and her twins children, Rahel and Estha, who fight against the social rules in India that are discriminative against women and the Untouchable people (<i>Paravan</i>). The research employed a descriptive qualitative analysis method and the theory of liberal feminism. There are similarities in the representation of women who are considered as second class and become the objects both sexually and economically; and restrained by their patriarchal society and culture. The difference of both novels is in the caste system which regulates women's freedom only reflected in <i>The God of Small Things</i>. From the perspective of liberal feminism, the female characters in both novels show resistance in making decision, education, society, and economy. However, resisting inequality in economy is only reflected in <i>Frog under a Coconut Shell</i> while resisting inequality in society is only reflected in <i>The God of Small Things</i>. The direct resistance is demonstrated in verbal and non-verbal ways.</p>

Women's Representation and Resistance as Depicted in Josephine Chia's Frog under a Coconut Shell and Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things: A Comparative Study

I. INTRODUCTION

Literary work is often considered as a representation of human life. One topic that is immortalized in many literary works is about women's issues and gender equality. Two literary works that represent about gender issues are Josephine Chia's *Frog under a Coconut Shell* from Singapore and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* from India.

Women in *Frog under a Coconut Shell* are discriminated by the people and their culture as the second class, submissive to their husbands and/or fathers, ineligible to obtain education, and not allowed to read books[1]. Likewise, women in *The God of Small Things* are also imprisoned by their culture and religion. This novel takes the story of marginalized people including women. Arundhati Roy shows us that religion, ideology, and even socio-culture in India, especially Kerala, at that time were unable to realize human equality, between the rich and the poor and between men and women[2].

The first novel *Frog under a Coconut Shell* is a literal translation of a Malay idiom "*Katak di Bawah Tempurung*" which refers to someone whose life like a frog under a coconut shell, believing that the shell is its entire world. This novel is written by Josephine Chia, a *Peranakan* (mixed-blood) who is very proud of her cultural heritage. Chia was born and raised in Kampong Potong Pasir in the 1950s. Josephine is a fairly productive writer. Besides writing novels she also wrote short stories and won several awards for it. One of them is The Ian St. Award James Award. Some of her works have also been published in the form of anthologies. Chia is also active as a member of the UK Society of Authors and Member of the Council of the Society of Women and Journalist. She also actively gives regular lectures on *Peranakan* Culture in England.

The second novel *The God of Small Things* was published for the first time in England by Flamingo 1997. This is the first novel of Arundhati Roy, a young woman writer from India. Roy was born in 1961 as the daughter of a divorced widow, Mary Roy, from Syrian Christian family in Kerala. Until the age of ten, Roy had never received an elementary school

education because her mother decided to educate her at home. She took a study at the Delhi School of Architecture, but she ended up being a screenwriter and novelist[2]. This novel won Britain Book Prize the Booker Mc Connell in 1997, and it made her to be the first Indian woman who got the prestigious prize. Her novel becomes very controversial and is criticized and praised by various people. In India, this novel was opposed by various parties, accused of being a book that spread anti-communism and was regarded as a book that damaged the moral of young people[2].

These two novels, generally, have a storyline that is almost the same, that is the struggle of a woman who is also a mother in fighting for what is their right as a woman and also the rights of their daughters. Both come from different countries with different culture, this study aims at analyzing how the two cultures and countries can show similarities and differences in the women's representation and resistance as depicted in these novels. The issue of women is never out of date since the problems of gender equality still occur today, and women still get discrimination from both their own society and culture.

The reasons of comparing the two novels are because, in general, both novels have a similar storyline, that is the struggle of a woman who is also a mother in fighting for what is their right as a woman and also the rights of their daughters. Both novels come from different countries with different culture, so it is interesting to find how the different culture can also show the similarities in terms of women's representation and resistance in Singapore and India as the background of the stories. Comparing the issues of image and resistance of women in the two novels are investigated through the approach of comparative literature and liberal feminism perspective.

II. METHODOLOGY

The method of this research is descriptive qualitative analysis which means "a study that intends to understand the phenomenon of what is experienced by research subjects such as behavior, perception, motivation, action, etc." [3]. The data is

collected through reading and identifying the data on the representation and resistance of the female characters in the two novels, classifying the women's representation and resistance in these two novels, describing and comparing the data from Chia's *Frog under a Coconut Shell* and Roy's *The God of Small Things* to find the similarities and differences. The writers applied a comparative literature method and liberal feminism theory in approaching the novels.

Liberal feminism sees women and man as human nature that has the same reason which makes them different to animals, so they are able to take a decision for their life[4]. Jaggar[5] in *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* defined that liberal feminism is a theory and work that focuses more on issues like equality in the workplace, in education, and in political rights. Furthermore, Wendell[6] argues that liberal feminism commitments to end sex prejudice and discrimination against women. Furthermore, comparative literature as the tool to analyze the similarities and differences of woman's representation and resistance in these two novels is defined as "a study of relationship between two or more literatures"[7][10].

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the writers elaborate the findings of the research from Josephine Chia's *Frog under a Coconut Shell* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* with the comparative literature analysis and liberal feminism theory.

1. Women's Representation

a. *Frog under a Coconut Shell*

In this novel, women are represented as the second class in *Peranakan's* family. The girls did not get any formal education but was only educated at home[8]. Moreover, women were treated as an object. First, they became an "object" for men sexually. Men are considered to make money, so taking care of the household and serving their husband are considered as an absolute or natural destiny of women[8]. In addition, women also become an object in a marriage. When Josephine was old enough, her father, Ah Tetia already planned to marry her off so he could get money through the dowry. Since Josephine had been in a formal education, her father used it as a chance to make her marry a rich man[8].

The author also shows some rules for women in the *Peranakan* family in this novel. The sentence: "Never look directly at man, always lower your eyes" [8] can be interpreted that woman cannot resist or even rebel to their husband; otherwise, a wife must always subject to her husband. In addition, the sentence: "Only express opinions which he expresses" [8] shows discrimination towards women, in which they are not given the right to speak about their opinion or thoughts. Women were bred to prepare themselves for an obvious ending, which is marriage. The cooking skill was considered as something very important for women. Someday her father said after tasting Soon Neo's cooking, "She'll make some man a good wife"[8]. This answer shows how cooking skills become one of the standards for a 'good wife' or 'good woman'.

b. *The God of Small Things*

In this novel, women also became the second class in the society. For instance, Ammu and her brother, Chacko, were treated differently by their parents because of their gender[9]. Roy also wrote: "Chacko said, "What's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine"[9]. This dialogs show the dominance of men over women. As a son, Chacko has a higher position than Ammu and considered himself as the owner of all things that Ammu had. Even though women already got an access in education, they were still excluded from higher education such as college or university. Conversely, education about domestic job is still considered more important and even it seems to be as women's obligation[9]. This shows the gender inequality against women, which can create subordination for women. In addition, women seem to be an object of men sexually. For instance, the reason of Ammu to leave her first husband, besides of his attitude and drunken habits, it was also because he tried to use Ammu for saving his job[9].

The differences in *The God of Small Things* compared to *Frog under a Coconut Shell* is the present of caste system that also regulates woman. Caste discrimination is the most complex human rights issue faced in India. In this novel, the laws of India's caste system are represented by the character of Velutha, an untouchable or *Paravan*. Velutha is a *Paravan* who works at Ammu's family company,

Paradise Pickles. Meanwhile, Ammu is a woman from a middle class family and a Christian caste. In Indian society, someone from the Christian caste should not make relationship with *Paravan*. Nonetheless, in this novel, after her divorce and return to Ayemenem, Ammu met Velutha and was into the relationship with him. Roy said that the community regulates women, to whom they should marry and who is worthy of love and how much[9].

Besides, in this novel, Roy describes the rules for Indian women through the impact of their transgression. Ammu breaks the rules that women must be subject to their father if they are not married yet, and they should not be married except to someone who has been chosen by the family. However, Ammu married someone she loved, and as a result her parents refused to attend her wedding, probably because they did not give their blessing to Ammu.

In addition, women were expected to stay at home. However, in this novel, Roy describes the fact that Kerala society has been aware about women's ability. She brings up the character of Ammu's mother as a business woman. Nevertheless, even though she had been successful, her husband saw it negatively. In this quotation, Roy describes the response of Ammu's father when her mother gets succeed in business: "In the evenings, when he knew visitors were expected, he would sit on the verandah and sew buttons that weren't missing onto his shirts, to create the impression that Mamachi neglected him. To some small degree, he did succeed in further corroding Ayemenem's view of working wives" [9].

2. Women's Resistance

a. *Frog under a Coconut Shell*

In this novel, the author outlines the development of Soon Neo and Josephine's way of thinking as the main characters who finally reached their self-awareness that women should not be treated discriminatively, should have the same rights so that they can be treated equally with men if they are given the same opportunities in education and economy.

First, Soon Neo resists the rules for women that have to stay at home by putting her daughter into a formal school. She wanted her daughter to be

educated at school, so she could work and is not dependent on men. In addition, Josephine resists the rule that, even they are wrong and behaving badly, as a wife, she must subject to her husband. In her marriage, Josephine was not passive when she received the discriminatory treatment and restraints by her husband. Back then, her mother, Soon Neo, persisted in a marriage that was filled with violence because economically women were still dependent on men. Moreover, when she re-married to her new husband, instead of being a housewife, she worked with him running a business. In this case, she resisted the rule for women who have to be at home and only run the household.

The second thing that the female characters resist in *Frog under a Coconut Shell* novel is the inequality of making decision. In this novel, Chia portrays Soon Neo and Josephine as intelligent women who are aware of their abilities as individuals in the society. Living without a father led Soon Neo to be the backbone of her family. Therefore, when she got married, she made the requirement for the man who wanted to marry her[8]. Instead of simply accepting the marriage proposal, she tried to negotiate about the marriage when her husband's family came to ask her. Even though she is a woman from a poor family and lived without her father, she was brave to negotiate the marriage proposal[8]. Likewise, her daughter, Josephine, also resisted the inequality of making decision, especially about marriage. Josephine had planned to run away to avoid the forced marriage that his father was going to do[8]. Even she had a thought to commit suicide[8]. These show that Josephine's resistance on the accepted social norm in her society that only her father who has the full right to determine to whom she would marry. Josephine showed that she did not want to do something only because it was an order from her father.

Furthermore, Soon Neo shows her resistance of the inequality in economy through her reason of putting her daughter in a formal school[8]. Soon Neo realizes that a woman can determine her own life if she is economically independent. However, to be economically independent, a woman must get the same education as a man does. Then, when Josephine runs a business with her second husband, she

considered herself as a partner for her husband and not an employee. Therefore, Josephine wants an equal position in the economy[8].

Soon Neo and Josephine also show their resistance to the inequality in education. The author depicts Soon Neo and Josephine's belief that education is one way to free them from the men's domination in the society[8]. Soon Neo resists the rules of women who must always be subordinate to men. In this phase, she believes that education can make women to stand equally as men. Women can also make their own living if they get the same opportunity as men do. Moreover, some of Soon Neo's dialogues show her rejection of the exclusion of women from education that is considered reasonable in her culture. Soon Neo considers that not having education is the beginning of the oppression that she gets as a woman[8].

b. *The God of Small Things*

In Indian society, a good woman is the one who obeys her husband. If she is not married, she must obey her father. The first resistance that is found in this novel is resisting the rules for women. In this novel, Arundhati Roy portrays the figures of Ammu and Rahel as individuals who often do the opposite to the social norms. Both Ammu and Rahel show their resistance to the rules by doing transgression[9].

Rahel is a child who always does what she wants even though it violates the rules of women who must always be submissive and obedient. When she was in a girls' high school, Rachel often breaks the law which ended up with the situation when she is expelled from school[9]. Since she always does what she wants and violates the rules, she is considered to be ignorant on how to be a girl[9]. Moreover, Ammu rebels against the social norm that constitutes the Syrian Christian community in Kerala. In her first marriage, she marries a man from another religion. The second and the most significant act, which is the climax of this novel, is when she becomes sexually involved with the untouchable, the lower-class, Velutha.

Ammu's relationship with Velutha can be seen as a sign of her resistance towards the inequality in her society that is not just faced by women but also by men from the lower class. Ammu and the

untouchable, Velutha dare to break the laws of the caste system by having the love affairs. When Velutha was arrested for vilification of kidnapping Ammu's and Chacko's children, she visits the police office and argues against the detention of this lower class, denying how typical qualities Indian woman is supposed to act[9]. In addition, Ammu is also dared to fight the social injustice caused by Indian inferiority towards the British[9].

Ammu is also determined to show that she does not need anyone, especially in educating her own child. Roy described Ammu's opposition to the social outlook of the community who looked down on her as a divorced woman and a widow. She asserts to her two children that they did not need father as what people thought[9].

Another form of resistance by women is on the inequality in making decision. Ammu and Rahel choose to resist the condition that they have no right to make decision, and that their lives as women have already been controlled by men. They both choose the ways how they are going to lead their lives. First, both Ammu and Rahel are married to the man of their choice. Both of them decided to get married of their own choice, even though no family attended their wedding. In addition, they also decided to divorce by their own decision[9]. Ammu also resists the social presumption that every child needs a father to take care of them[9].

The next form of resistance of Ammu is on the inequality of education. Since her father did not let her take an education in college simply because he thought that it was "an unnecessary expense for a girl" [9], Ammu has decided to run away from her house. In contrast, her brother went to college in Oxford, London. Therefore, Mamachi considered her son as a cleverest man in India. Ammu directly resists this assumption by asking, "According to whom? ..., On *what* basis?" [9]. Then Ammu gives a statement to Mamachi: "Going to Oxford didn't necessarily make a person clever" [9]. This quotation can be a perfect instance of women's resistance for the inequality in education. Chacko always debates with Ammu because he thought that women did not know anything about education, and they have

irrational thinking, but Ammu tried to rebel this by mocking Chacko.

2. Form of Resistance (Verbal and Non-verbal)

The form of resistance to get the equality in their respective society by Soon Neo and Josephine in Singapore or Ammu and Rahel in India comes in a direct way. In the novel *Frog under a Coconut Shell*, both Soon Neo and Josephine show a direct resistance, mostly in nonverbal ways.

When her husband refused to pay for her daughter's school, Soon Neo looks for the money by herself. Soon Neo resists the inequality in education by putting her daughter at school. Besides, Josephine resists the rules of women that have to subject to their husband by leaving him and get divorced[8]. In addition, Soon Neo's verbal resistance is shown when she talks to the headmaster about how important education is for women, so they have the capability to be independent and not always dependent on men. In other words, there is no need to suffer or "eat blood" in the language that Josephine uses[8].

Likewise, in the novel *The God of Small Things*, Ammu and Rahel show a direct resistance, either through verbal or nonverbal ways. Ammu's verbal resistance is shown when she answers to Mamachi's statement about Chacko being the cleverest man in India because he had studied at Oxford University [9]. In addition, Ammu and Rahel show more resistance in action (nonverbal). As explained earlier, both Ammu and Rahel do a transgression to resist the women rules. They choose the man they love to marry with even though their family did not bless them and attend their marriage. Unfortunately, Ammu and Rahel experienced divorce from their first marriage, which make them get more oppression by the family and community. Moreover, Ammu's resistance to the caste system that creates an inequality between lower class and middle class is also seen in her action. Ammu had an affair with the lower class, Velutha.

IV. CONCLUSION

Both Josephine Chia and Arundhati Roy show a thorough understanding of women issues and gender equality in their writings. The two authors also experienced the same situation of life wherein their

mothers become a victim of abusive husband and patriarchy family. Soon Neo and Ammu's characterization in the novels were inspired from the authors' mothers. The stories of the novels are also based on the authors' life experience.

Frog under a Coconut Shell and *The God of Small Things* have some similarities. First, the main problems are about women's oppression and their struggle to get their right in their society. Women are considered as the second class and object both sexually and economically (to get the dowry). They were expected to stay at home and being an obedient wife and daughter; not free to do what they want, cannot take any decision for their life without men's permission, and must be subject to men. Second, both of the characters in these novels show the characteristics of liberal feminism struggle. Both Soon Neo and Ammu realize the importance of education for women so they can become equal with men. The resistance from the main female characters focus on resisting the unjust rules in their society, getting their right in education, and taking decision for their life. Third, the female characters in both novels perform the direct resistance in verbal and nonverbal ways to get the equality and justice in their society. Their resistance and act are typical of liberal feminism in which women resist for their right to be equal with men.

Beside the similarities, the two novels also have differences. First, in the *Frog under a Coconut Shell* novel, there is no caste system like that in *The God of Small Things*. The caste system forbids women from the high caste to have a formal relationship with men from the lower caste. Second, women in *The God of Small Things* get oppression from the other women, while in *Frog under a Coconut Shell* the oppression only comes from men to women. Moreover, the oppression of women in *Frog under a Coconut Shell* comes from the culture of the society, while women in *The God of Small Things* get oppression both from the culture and religion that exist in the society. Third, women's discrimination in *The God of Small Things* is caused by the culture and religious rules in society, while in *Frog under a Coconut Shell* it is only caused by the culture in society. Fourth, women in *The God of Small Things* have more education because they are allowed to go to high school. In contrast, women in

Frog under a Coconut Shell do not get a formal education as reflected in the character of Soon Neo. Therefore, to get the education, they have to face more oppression.

There are also some differences of women's resistance in both novels. The resistance of inequality in economy is only reflected in *Frog under a Coconut Shell*, while the resistance towards the inequality that is caused by caste system is only reflected in *The God of Small Things* in which Ammu does the transgression by having a love affair with the lower class, Velutha. Besides, women in *Frog under a Coconut Shell* were still influenced by their culture of submission to their parents and husbands, so they do not show the verbal defense directly to them. Meanwhile, Ammu in *The God of Small Things* dares to go against the words of her mother and brother directly.

It can be concluded that, there are some similarities and differences of how women are represented and how they resist the oppression in the two novels that also reflect the image of the real condition of women around 1950s and 1960s in Singapore and in India. The similarities that occur in both novels because both Singapore and India belong to patriarchal societies. Therefore, this research shows that even though the novels were written in different backgrounds of place and society, the two literary works show a silver line that is experienced by many women in the world, most particularly to those who lived with the patriarchal system in the society.

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