

Feminist Criticism: A traceable premise in Welsh and Malaysian Short Stories

Nor Hashimah Isa
Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Malaysia

Abstract

This is a comparative study of short stories from Wales and Malaysia, countries which are in many ways as culturally distant as they are geographically remote. Several corridors might lead to a fruitful comparative study. Both countries have more than one official language and have a history of cultural tensions arising from different legacies of colonialism including prominent discourses of authenticity and rootedness positioned against imported cultures. The National language of Wales and Malaysia is Welsh and Malay respectively. But, the two short stories, one from each country that will be discussed are written in the English language. How women's loyalties may be divided between religious or national affiliations and feminist aspirations are also interesting to compare. This research acknowledges key differences in how women writers from Wales and Malaysia negotiate feminist aims in often conflicting cultural, national and religious contexts. Stories from post-war Welsh and Malaysian women writers are compared. Interesting findings include different ways of resolving conflicts in a patriarchal society where Welsh women are more vocal and ensure that their voices are heard in one way or another. The Malaysian women on the other hand are voiceless and relentlessly suffer in silence. The Welsh woman as depicted in the story is deprived of help in her dreaded daily chores and all she could do is shout and scold her husband to no avail.

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Stories from post war Welsh and Malaysian women writers are compared. Interesting findings include different ways of resolving conflicts in a patriarchal society where the Welsh women are more vocal and ensure that their voices are heard in one way or another. The Malaysian women on the other hand are voiceless and relentlessly suffer in silence. This paper highlights stories by Welsh and Malaysian writers to identify the writers' ways of recognizing women and their experiences in combating issues in a patriarchal society. When Welsh story is compared with Malaysian story there are prominent ways the women characters used in confronting issues with male characters who are defiantly very patriarchal. Similarities and differences are revealed.

The stories compared are *Davis* (1967) by Sian Evans and *The Journey* (1967) by Shirley Lim. Both Welsh and Malaysian stories are written in English. *Davis* is about a husband named Fred Davis, who is rather lazy in terms of doing work in the farm and other chores at home. He feels that his wife nags him a lot, 'Nagging night and day; it ain't my fault, damn you' (p.181). His wife Mary is very upset with his laziness and complains to him, telling him of his duties and that she has no vegetables to cook. They rely on their small patch of land and a few animals for consumption and to survive. Davis realises he has to do this and repair that but he deliberately does not do them as required of him, much to his wife's anger and frustration. She yells at him saying he is such a lazy pig and how she wished she did not marry him. In their bed at night he tries to rekindle the passion with her but to no avail. He promises her he will do the chores in the morning. But when morning comes Davis continues sleeping as his wife carries on with his difficult chores in the farm and the house.

The Journey by Shirley Lim was written in 1967, ten years after the country achieved its independence from the British. This story is about a Chinese young girl who is born into poverty with a pregnant mother, a gambler father and many siblings. Her father is a Mahjong player, a form of Chinese gambling. Her mother is a housewife and she has many children. The girl who is not named in this story is the eldest. Her mother asks her to go to a place to get some herbs for her. She has to board a bus and the journey is rather long. She follows her mother's specific directions on how to get to the place and what to do when she gets to the specific house. Although she is rather scared she willingly goes on this journey for the love of her mother. She knows this journey is vital for her mother. She reaches the house and takes the package from a man and pays him. She then boards the bus again to go home. Her mom boils the herbs and drinks the brew. The young girl is unaware that the herbal preparation is to help abort her mother's fetus. That night she is awakened by a loud groan of her mother in excruciating pain. She dashes to the bathroom and sees her mother lying on the floor in a pool of fresh blood, 'Dark messes were splattered on the floor, her mother's clothes were blood-red with a flow from some secret wound, while the woman herself squatted, eyes contracted, body rigid and contorted' (p.17). The girl feels repulsive of blood but in the pale light she helps her mother, giving her warm sweet milk from the baby's flask. As her mother lay asleep, the girl cleans the bathroom floor, scrubbing and pouring water.

The story ends with the young girl pouring cold water, shuddering and crying as she cleans her mother's blood on the floor. She is too young to understand that the herbs she took earlier are actually for abortion. Her mother does not want any more children as the youngest one is still a baby. She is

weak and has many children. She has no choice but to take matters into her own hands and drink the herbs. She suffers in silence because her husband only cares for his gambling. The mother endures deprivation of love and care by her dominant husband as she tries to tend to her many children and her daily duties.

It is evident that the female characters in both stories yearn for their male partners' attention, love and care. It is apparent a female yearning for something that is lost from a male significant other or husband is portrayed in *Davis* and *The Journey*. The female characters in *Davis* and *The Journey* appear to want their partners to listen to them and to share their sorrows but to no gain. The object of much yearning for attention and care in all stories is unquestionably desire for a man's love and care. With his love comes his affection and undivided attention. A feminist writing would still agree that men and women need one another biologically and emotionally. One completes the other and therefore if one is not getting enough attention from the other the person will definitely feel it and is affected miserably. In these stories the women negotiate feminist aims such as to just ignore the abuse, continue with their chores, move on with their lives or find other means to handle their problems. In so doing they may endanger their lives such as in the case of the pregnant mother in *The Journey*.

Felman states that just as man considers himself superior to nature, so he considers himself superior to woman (p.321). This is irrefutably true as men have the last say in many cultural settings. The parallel between the stories is Welsh and Malaysian women are subjected to suppression and alienation by their husbands in patriarchal dominated societies regardless of cultural and geographical setting. It is evident that in these stories, the women are treated as mere objects by the men. They are silenced by the patriarchal dominated men. Sands & Nuccio (2008) say feminist writings across disciplines have illuminated an understanding of the status of women in a patriarchal society, sexist biases in social and behavioral theories, and the feminization of poverty. The difference is whether the Welsh and Malaysian women find ways to liberate themselves from their stifling environment. If they did then what are the ways they attempt to resist the men's domination?

In the stories, the writers show us the female characters are stifled and alienated by the males' demonstration of a very patriarchal dominance. The males are the husbands and the breadwinners for the family and the wives are just the female caretakers. They are not treated as wives, showered with love but merely the persons who take care of their food and needs and who work for them. Tolan F. explains how De Beauvoir, a French philosopher and novelist constructed an epic account of gender throughout history, examining biological, psychological, historical, and cultural explanation for the reduction of women to a second and lesser sex (p.320). Felman, S (1993). in her article 'Women and Madness. The Critical Phallacy (p.133 -153) quotes a book that derives and disputes a 'female psychology' conditioned by an oppressive and patriarchal male culture. (p.134)

The Welsh woman has a voice and demonstrates some form of resistance. She releases her bitterness and sadness by calling her husband lazy pig and saying she wishes she did not marry him. She has courage to resist suppression and alienation because Welsh women have a different value orientation and culture than the Malaysian women. The Welsh women had some education and some

went to college. In Wales the women had free education which even started as early as the eighteenth century. There was the women's movement that started in France which was responsible for many women movements in Europe. Welsh women in early twentieth-century took part in protests and many were put in jail. Hence, the psyche of the Welsh woman writer is portrayed in the story. There is some distinct difference between the stories in terms of the timeline. In Malaysia not many women are educated in early post independence or post Second World War. The only education they probably would have received is lower primary. They received little or no education during pre independence which affects their lives during post independence. What they had was just little education from Primary vernacular schools in their villages and they did not continue to English Secondary schools. The Welsh women on the hand had education from biblical teachings in churches to secondary schools. Some Welsh women had the opportunity to study in universities in Wales and England.

The similarity in the stories is that the women are all 'abused' and harassed by their husbands. Here, abused is not physically abuse but abuse in terms of not helping out with chores that are theirs and giving a deaf ear to their female partners. The women are wives and in *the journey*, she is a mother of many children. Yet, both are not given the respect they deserve. In *Davis*, Karen is constantly doing her husband's chores because he is too lazy to do them. Isn't it the duty of the male in a family to put food on the table for his wife and children? In *Davis*, there are no children, yet, it is such an ordeal for Davis the husband to do his daily chores. He is too indolent because he knows if he does not execute the cumbersome chores the wife Karen will do them instead.

Another similarity is the women abide to all foes and fancies of the husbands as obedient wives. Karen in *Davis* still prepares her husband's supper although she yells and screams at him for being so lazy. Apparently, the female character in *The Journey* by Shirley Lim cannot discuss this issue of not wanting anymore children with her dominating gambling husband. Being a woman and a wife she has no choice but to drink the preparation of herbs to abort the fetus. This is the tragic fate of being a woman in a patriarchal society. In *The journey*, the Chinese wife who is the mother of many children takes care of her family and endures her fate in silent. She is voiceless even to the extent of drinking herbs preparation to abort her fetus illegally. She has had enough of successive pregnancies. Hence, she takes care of it in her own dangerous way. On the contrary, Karen in *Davis* finds her voice by scolding and yelling at her lazy husband but in *The journey* the Chinese wife is voiceless. Perhaps it is due to her Chinese or Asian culture. In the early days, the superiority of the Chinese father is carried to such an absurd length like sons cannot sit at the same table with their fathers if there are any guests present. Eastern values such as that of the Chinese and Malay stress respect to elders, especially the father. Nor Hashimah Isa (2007) states the Chinese or Malay father is superior because he is the man of the house and responsible for everyone and everything under his roof. His accountability is huge. Hence, he must ensure that the children obey and respect him and this is to discipline the children. The father knows that children, being merely children, would definitely behave unbecomingly especially in the presence of guests. Be it to discipline the children or to uphold their superiority, Chinese fathers and parents work to earn filial respect from their children. This respect for fathers and the elders is still a strong value that is inherited for years.

The Welsh and Malaysian women had very difficult and demanding domestic chores as wives and mothers in a very patriarchal community. The Welsh and Malaysian men as males in a very patriarchal society may have disregarded or suppressed their wives' feelings or their attempts to be heard. More often than not the women were thrown into obscurity. They existed only to prepare food, scrub soiled clothes, and wash dirty dishes. Not to mention other tasks prioritized to the family like giving birth and taking care of the children and husbands. Beddoe, D (2000) says the Welsh women had to scrub their husbands' backs that were dirty with black coal daily. Mothers were too busy doing other chores like cooking and feeding husbands who had to go back to work in the quarries.

In conclusion, regardless of any geographical or cultural location women writers bring forth the suppression and annihilation experienced by fellow women via their literary works. Depictions of women's loyalties that may be divided between religious or national affiliations and feminist aspirations in combating patriarchal society are made known through their creative works. Welsh and Malaysian women endure deprivation of love and care by their husbands and partner but they differ by having a voice. This is due to their cultural and religious value orientations that allow them to find their or prevent them from doing so.

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