

RADICAL FEMINIST THEORY ON ROALD DAHL'S
"LAMB TO THE SLAUGHTER"

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ABSTRACT

The portrayal of women in English literature has always been controversial in the same vein as Roald Dahl's reputation as a writer. Criticisms accumulated against "*Lamb to the Slaughter*" are primarily to condemn his approach in portraying characters which are argued to be falsely interpreting and demoralizing women. The purposes of this study are to discuss the portrayal of women and the forms of oppressions faced by Mary Maloney in "*Lamb to the Slaughter*". Drawing from radical feminist theory, I argue that the representation of women in literature has a direct association with women's power, equality and rights in society. Consequently, I conducted a textual analysis to disintegrate different components in the story that extensively relied on interpretations of the textual evidences. The portrayals of Mary in the story denoted and proved the presence of oppression against women. I conclude that oppression occurs accordingly due to women's lack of power, equality and rights in society- which is in line with radical feminism's perspective on women's oppression being the most fundamental form of oppression arising from patriarchy. It appears that Dahl's modification of the story's paradigm is to address social inequality issues and to ridicule society's paradigm of the "ideal woman".

Keywords: feminism, radical feminism, patriarchy, oppression, power, equality, right

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In today's modern age where feminism is still apparent across different cultures and societies around the world, it is evident that a majority of the countries still fail to attain social equality among gender populations. Particularly among certain cultures or religions, women are still being objectified and oppressed. Where women's social position and equality in a particular society is neglected, they will continuously succumb to subordination in society. Through English literature, the differences between depictions of women and men are clear-cut. Women will always reflect an image of being weak, defenceless and inferior to men while men will always be the superior gender. "*Lamb to the Slaughter*" by Roald Dahl will be the topic of the study. This paper will discuss 1) the portrayal of women in "*Lamb to the Slaughter*" 2) the forms of oppressions faced by Mary Maloney in "*Lamb to the Slaughter*". Chapter 1 will cover the background of the study, statement of problem, research objectives, research questions, significance, definition of terms and scope & limitation of the study.

Research Background

English literature has witnessed women's passage of advancement through ages. The issue of how women are treated as inferior beings and always the target of being exploited in literary works have always been a significant matter that repeatedly appeared in many academic writings (e.g., Barry, 1995; Lippa, 2002), especially after the post-World War II period. Many past literatures ranging from short stories, poems and novels subjectively portrayed women in a domestic setting as the submissive and inferior gender when compared to men (Meyerowitz, 1994). The portrayals of women in literary works are biased and unrealistic; not to mention that in the past, the amount of female writers was very limited to the point where the majority who could write were strictly only the males. Female writers in the past such as the Brontë

sisters had to resort to using male pseudonyms to conceal their gender identities simply because society at the time did not consider their style and method of writing “feminine” enough. Had they chosen to publish their works using their original names instead of the adoption of male aliases, they would have been liable to prejudice from society (Armitage, 2018). Unlike the males, females never receive access to equal opportunities in education. It was only after the occurrence of the women’s movement during the 20th century that women began to emerge to the forefront across different societal arenas, such as gaining access to education and employment, and earning the right to vote (Copenhaver, 2002).

It is revealed through the progress of civilization of the human race in its entirety that women have always been in a struggle of trying to obtain social equality and rights equivalent to men (Ahlawat, 2018). However, this struggle has been proven to be onerous as women are continuously being held back by the patriarchy societies that they live in. The traditional societies with patriarchal social structures typically embrace a stereotypical ideology in which women are regarded as inferior to men. As previously mentioned in the introduction, women were very much viewed as mere objects to men and they were always the victim of oppression.

In the 1950s, traditional social norms had begun to come under the pressure that would later on lead to a revolution in the 1960s, known as the “women’s movement”. In the United States (US), women began to demand equal rights (Chisamya, Dejaeghere, Kendall & Khan, 2012) in political and economic realms while attaining sexual “liberation”. Feminist theory, which emerged from feminist and women’s movement, aims to comprehend the nature of gender inequality by closely examining women’s social roles. According to Merriam-Webster, the term ‘Feminism’ refers to the thesis of the political, economic and social equality between men and women (Feminism, n.d.). This period was the rise of challenging the portrayal of female characters among literary works by many feminist scholars. Feminism in Britain,

however only concerned mainly with the representation of women in literature because it was depicted as a sort of “socialization” (Barry, 1995).

The short story “*Lamb to the Slaughter*” that will be analysed in this paper using the radical feminist theory, was written by Roald Dahl in 1953. Dahl (1916-1990) was a distinguished writer in Britain in the twentieth century being known for his rather distinctive writing style which frequently incorporated a dark sense of humour and a sadistic nature in his writings. He often used methods such as to ridicule certain characters or by giving his characters a rather bad ending that he thought they deserved in his writings to convey his criticisms towards society. His works had always received a great deal of criticisms considering that they never fail to stir up mixed reactions from readers and critics. Through his writings, Dahl attempted to address certain social issues such as violence, racial issues, sexism, and the unequal opportunities between men and women in real life while trying to convey certain messages to his readers. Take for example one of his books, “*Matilda*” which places a considerably heavy emphasis on gender equality (Holly, 2017). The portrayals of the female characters contradict and break free of the conservative gender stereotypes and biases that have been attached to females in a male dominated society.

“*Lamb to the Slaughter*”, described as having the perfect composition of mystery, sadness and humour, details the main female character- Mary Maloney’s efforts in an attempt to deflect suspicion from herself in relation to her husband- Patrick Maloney’s murder. In the story, Mary’s attempt in concealing her motives and emotions while pretending to be the victim of the murder, is ironic in that the expression “lamb to the slaughter” is normally used in describing an innocent person being led into danger. When first encountering Mary, readers will think that Mary will be the lamb, considering that she is a woman pregnant with her husband’s child. However, as the story progresses, it turns out that Patrick is the real lamb being led to slaughter by his wife. After using the frozen leg of a lamb as a murder weapon,

Mary ultimately uses the lamb as a meal she prepares for Patrick's police colleagues, which they ironically destroyed whatever evidence there is to the murder weapon that is right under their noses.

"Personally, I think the weapon is somewhere near the house." "It's probably right under our noses. What do you think, Jack?" And in the other room, Mary Maloney began to laugh (Dahl, 1953).

Through the short story, it is revealed that the gender stereotypes that were deeply instilled in the society are considerably firm. In the context that Dahl set his story in, readers will find that Mary Maloney lived within a patriarchal social structure that restricted women's freedom and disparaged their worth. Women were belittled and considered as being powerless as a lamb. Dahl wonderfully addressed this particular social issue while integrating his usual dark sense of humour and irony within his story.

Lastly, this paper will attempt to identify the depiction of women portrayed in one of Roald Dahl's most famous short stories- "*Lamb to the Slaughter*" using the radical feminist theory.

Statement of Problem

Feminism in literature primarily responds to the interpretation of women presented in writings. Females depicted in literature are supposed to fulfil certain social roles such as a caring mother, obedient wife or a diligent homemaker. Worse, some are even represented as merely an object that can be suppressed through silence or a tool for giving birth. "*Lamb to the Slaughter*" implies the presence of gender inequality issues and false female interpretation in the story that can be reflected upon the male-dominated cultures of society during the past.

Many past researchers sought to establish a connection between their research to social transformation and social change in support of the minority oppressed groups (women in this

case) within a society. Feminist values in research can be interpreted as the main goal being “to reveal lived realities of power inequalities and difference, and provide evidence that can be deployed in working towards addressing these engrained inequalities.” (Jenkins, Narayanaswamy & Sweetman, 2019). The present study seeks to 1) Challenge the traditional unrealistic portrayal of female characters within the history of English Literature 2) Empower women by confronting the long-established conservative gender norms and stereotypes attached to women as presented in English literature.

This study will address the issue of how women were being portrayed in English literature, in this case, Mary Maloney in “*Lamb to the Slaughter*”. The portrayal of women as well as the forms of oppressions faced by Mary Maloney in “*Lamb to the Slaughter*” will also be put into discussion in an attempt to answer the research questions posed by the researcher.

Research Objectives

1. To discuss the portrayal of women in “*Lamb to the Slaughter*”.
2. To discuss the forms of oppressions faced by Mary Maloney in “*Lamb to the Slaughter*”.

Research Questions

1. How are women portrayed in “*Lamb to the Slaughter*”?
2. What are the forms of oppressions faced by Mary Maloney in “*Lamb to the Slaughter*”?

Research Significance

The contribution of women to the English literature culture should not be underestimated and overlooked. The four most distinctive female writers who made a connection between feminism and literary works are Charlotte Brontë, Thomas Hardy, Virginia Woolf and Jeanette Winterson (Halířová, 2016). These authors, albeit using different

approaches, addressed the issue of the unrealistic female interpretation in English Literature. Some even challenged the traditional gender norms and presented their characters in a way that opposed the gender norms and stereotypes in society.

Past researchers/ authors such as (Chen, 2010), (Halířová, 2016) and (Shukla, 2016) had previously looked into the issue of the portrayal of female characters in literature. What these researches have in common is that the portrayals of women in literatures are biased and ambivalent. Such heavily one-sided portrayals can be depicted as a mirror, reflecting the society and context in when the writers lived, where women held little to no hierarchy social power.

This study postulates that women are being depicted with a stereotype as being the repressive and constrictive gender in "*Lamb to the Slaughter*". By using the radical feminist theory to analyze the different affairs throughout the story, it can be concluded that issues regarding gender often combine to create a reality of utmost disadvantage for certain minority groups where in this case, women. "*Lamb to the Slaughter*" is written in a manner that greatly deteriorates the values of women.

Awareness towards the biased depiction of women portrayed within English literature is a significant issue that should not be overlooked. Readers should be aware of the unrealistic portrayal of female characters in many of the previously published English Literature works and recognize that such representation is immensely absurd. This awareness could also indirectly affect the socio-cultural and political status of women living amongst different cultures and societies, hence directly or indirectly influencing their daily lives.

For the researcher, this study will help them uncover areas and fresh knowledge in the literature field that is open to be explored.

Definition of Terms

Feminist movement- a movement with the aim to secure legal, economic and social equality rights for women. The roots of this movement originated from the 19th century women's movement which shared and sought some similar motives in securing property rights and suffrage for women (Gassman, 2006).

Gender equality- a concept that holds that males and females alike acquire equal conditions, treatments and opportunities in realizing their freedom in developing personal abilities. Humans in general should be able to make choices without the limitations set by the stereotypes and prejudices about gender roles (UNICEF, 2017).

Oppression- the inequitable or cruel implementation of authority or power, especially by the imposition of burdens; a sense of heaviness or obstruction in the body or mind (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In this paper, it refers to the prolonged unjust treatment that men exercise towards women.

Patriarchy- a social system in which males hold power over females in terms of leadership roles, privilege, access to resources and moral authority (UNICEF, 2017). From the aspects of feminists, it is conceptualized as an unjust social system that subordinates, discriminates and is oppressive to women (Facio, 2013).

Radical feminism- a concept which believes that women's oppression is the most universal yet deepest form of oppression exacted by men towards women. This theory examines the different ways in which men attempt to oppress women in terms of enslaving female sexuality and the female bodies to serve their own desires (Aboudaif, 2012).

Scope and Limitation of the Research

The scope for this study includes discussing Roald Dahl's short story- "*Lamb to the Slaughter*", a story that reflects aspects of human cruelty, violence and gender inequality. The study will cover the use of the radical feminist theory, discussing how women are being

portrayed as the inferior gender compared to men within the story and in literary works in general.

The limitation of applying the radical feminist theory upon this study is analyzing the story only through a single perspective while filtering out any possible ideas that might be present at the same time. The story itself can be analyzed from multiple other perspectives and theories such as the Marxist theory and Freudian theory, not to mention the many other theories within the Feminist theory itself such as the Liberal Feminist theory, Socialist Feminist theory and so on. By analyzing the story from another perspective, the researcher might be able to discover some other details or possibilities that they fail to ascertain.

Conclusion

The components in Chapter 1 discuss the general background of the study. The radical feminist theory will be used to analyse "*Lamb to the Slaughter*" in terms of looking into how Mary Maloney is being portrayed in the story. Chapter 2 will discuss the theoretical framework used in this study.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Feminism in literature answers to the portrayal of women in literary works. Where past researchers such as (Chen, 2010), (Halířová, 2016) and (Shukla, 2016) had previously attempted to link their research to social transformation and social change to investigate such biased portrayal, the common ground reached is that social criticism can be an influencing factor. The portrayal of a certain character within a story could be a mirror acting as a reflecting image to what the author had experienced within a society. As stated by Hambur & Nurhayati (2019), literary works can be utilised as an instrument to examine social-phenomena and social values. The one most notable social-phenomena that can be reflected through literary works is gender inequality (Hambur & Nurhayati, 2019). Chapter 2 will look into the aspects related to feminism in terms of reviewing the past published literatures related to “*Lamb to the Slaughter*” while in the process, discuss the portrayal of women in literature and feminist literary criticism. A discussion about Roald Dahl’s literature will also be included under this chapter to provide comprehensibility on the writer’s writing style and also the criticisms towards his written works.

Review of Related Literature

“No one is more arrogant toward women, more aggressive or scornful, than the man who is anxious about his virility” (Beauvoir, 1953).

Literature is capable of recreating and redefining the role of women (Gassman, 2006). Hambur & Nurhayati (2019) in a statement, theoreticized that literature is a close characterization of society that portrays variations of life aspects. Literature arises from the social events of a society while the author merely introduces ideas to the readers through a certain form of work. The portrayal of Mary Maloney in “*Lamb to the Slaughter*” as the housekeeper expected to carry out traditional female roles can be potentially analysed as being

a reflection of women's social status as during the context of the story. Such interpretation of women has been argued as oppressing and undermining the value of women.

Nadeau (2015) in a research analysing "*Lamb to the Slaughter*" using Feminist and Moral Criticism, came to the conclusion that "*Lamb to the Slaughter*" is a story that undermines the value of women in a way that female portrayal in this story is heavily biased and bound to traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Traits such as passiveness, submissiveness and emotional are some of the gender cultural constructs of females while males are assigned the traits of being active, dominating and rational. "Sit down," he said. "Just for a minute, sit down." (Dahl, 1953). The story is written in a manner that the males exert their power and dominance over the females.

Henfridsson (2008), in researching Roald Dahl's adult fiction using thematic analysis, also acknowledged that "*Lamb to the Slaughter*" is portrayed in a rather negative way towards females. The female character is depicted in a harsher manner compared to the male, where the researcher classified the story as concerning the matter of a woman seeking revenge on a man. The story "*Lamb to the Slaughter*" can be categorized under the subtopic "female vengeance" under the three subtopics of "Relationships between Men and Women", as proposed by Henfridsson (2008). "*Lamb to the Slaughter*" shares some similarities with another one of Dahl's short story- "*The Way up to Heaven*", from the collection *Kiss Kiss* in a way that both stories can be labelled as belonging to the female vengeance theme. Both stories portrayed women as the person seeking vengeance over the men, where ultimately the final outcome of the victim is death.

Henfridsson concluded from the analysis that Dahl, in his writings, tends to balance the macabre elements with his sense of humour. The chief character is somehow always depicted in an absurd manner, with the macabre fate that often follows, implying the cynical intention

that Dahl tries to insert in his writings. The implicit macabre method in writing is the technique that is most adopted by Dahl in his various writings in presenting an additional ironic element. “*Lamb to the Slaughter*” is an example of a story that uses this specific technique.

Simms (2014), in an analysis of “*Lamb to the Slaughter*” using New Historic criticism, aimed to identify a feminist discourse through the characterization of Mary Maloney. Findings from the analysis found that Roald Dahl and his work “*Lamb to the Slaughter*” appear neither to be a misogynist nor a feminist. It was justified that Mary Maloney is portrayed as having the mental strength to overcome a victim mentality while playing a reversal of the typical gender roles in the process of murdering her husband. In “*Lamb to the Slaughter*”, he found his typical dark humour in the irony (Simms, 2014).

It was suggested that Dahl’s writing style in “*Lamb to the Slaughter*” could be due to his life experiences caused by his mother, sisters and wife that he developed a ruthless personality in both his writings and real life. The portrayals of women across several of Dahl’s writings exude many negative female traits, which suggest that women had a strong influence throughout his life. The portrayal of the female characters in his writings could be his real life experiences in having previously met someone with such traits or personalities.

As further clarifications, Simms (2014) mentioned the traditional roles of women in marriage. “The 19th amendment had only been rectified for 33 years when Dahl wrote *Lamb to the Slaughter*, and women still found their place and purpose in the home, and society still considered it the norm for a woman to be a willing slave to her husband.” (Simms, 2014). Marilyn French (1985) summarizes the era of the early 1950’s (the context of “*Lamb to the Slaughter*”) by the word “domesticity”. The purpose of a woman is to serve as a homemaker decorating her home, waiting for her husband to return after a day-long labour work.

According to Simms (2014), the roles of women in marriage has shifted in the twenty-first century. Women no longer view domestic life as their only purpose in life. In fact, women are expected to share the responsibilities equally as men in terms of supporting the family and raising children. The main reason as to why Simms (2014) did not consider “*Lamb to the Slaughter*” a feminist or misogynist text was because feminists do not condone murder. It was speculated by Simms (2014) that what feminists considered “feminist element” in “*Lamb to the Slaughter*” was merely Dahl using his typical dark humour to portray his story.

Subsequently, Tanusy (2018) in a research employed Barthes’ five systems of codes under the area of structural semiotics to investigate how Dahl portrays women in “*Lamb to the Slaughter*”. A comparison between the portrayal of men and women characteristics in the story was made and analyzed. The findings of this research, along with the units of meaning in the story point towards female empowerment instead of oppression.

According to Tanusy (2018), the one element that has never ceased to surface in literary works is gender role and representation. Based on the findings, it was discovered that despite Mary being portrayed to fit the traditional gender role at the beginning of the story, Dahl reversed the role later on as the story progressed, portraying women to be more independent and resourceful in times of trouble. On the other hand, it was the male character- Patrick that was portrayed negatively as under the dominance and manipulation of Mary, implying that men are in fact the weaker sex in this story.

The readers are given a false sense of security following the structure of the story, as it can be seen through the emphasis made by Dahl on the contrast between the male and female characteristics (Tanusy, 2018). The women of the house managing all house chores while the man of the house working for a living are the most distinctive stereotypes portrayed at the beginning of the story. Additionally, the male pronoun “he” when used by the police officer in

referring to the murder subject also indicates that they do not think of women as being capable in conducting a murder. Readers will be exposed to thinking that this is yet another typical story that stereotypes and portrays men as the dominant member within a household but in fact, it is the exact opposite (Tanusy, 2018). The swerve of gender stereotypes pointed towards one dominant trait: female empowerment (Tanusy, 2018).

In another research conducted by Yusoff & Nine (2013) using three theories of literary criticisms namely- Psychoanalytic criticism, Feminist criticism and New criticism, the researcher argued that "*Lamb to the Slaughter*" empowers women through the use of Dahl's common black humour writing style. The sense of irony that a pregnant doting wife of a policeman waiting for her husband to return home being the same woman who used a frozen leg of a lamb to murder her husband then proceeds to let his friends consume the murder weapon indicates and highlights the wit and wisdom of a woman who is willing to do things out of necessity for her child (Yusoff & Nine, 2013).

Followed by the study conducted by Þórðardóttir (2019) in analysing three of Dal's story individually from a feminist perspective, the researcher concluded that Dahl's stories such as "*Matilda*", "*The Witches*" and "*Big Friendly Giant*" encourage female empowerment. According to the researcher, Dahl's books can be regarded as creating a feminist influence on young readers, as they contain strong female characters possessing distinctive traits. "This is evident when looking at Dahl's work through the lens of feminist criticism." (Þórðardóttir, 2019). It was noted in the conclusion of the study that the expectations that society has on women are often superficial. Gender stereotypes on the other hand, are merely a product of society which should not become the norm that serves to define young girls or women.

It would be interesting to take into consideration that female empowerment is not a foreign concept across Dahl's writings. Despite the possibility that "*Lamb to the Slaughter*"

can be potentially analysed through a feminist perspective, the study in Þórðardóttir (2019) exclusively only looked into three of Dahl's stories.

To summarise, researchers such as Nadeau (2015) and Henfridsson (2008) are in agreement that the portrayal of the female character in "*Lamb to the Slaughter*" is indeed biased and stereotyping against women. Women are portrayed negatively as the subordinate gender and weaker sex compared to men. Simms (2014) on the other hand, came to the conclusion that "*Lamb to the Slaughter*", along with Roald Dahl himself, are not feminist nor misogynist. Contrarily, researchers such as Tanusy (2018) and Yusoff & Nine (2013) acknowledge and consider "*Lamb to the Slaughter*" a story that empowers the value of women. Lastly as noted by Þórðardóttir (2019), multiple of Dahl's writings such as "*Matilda*", "*The Witches*" and "*Big Friendly Giant*" promotes female empowerment- which leads to the deduction that it is possible to analyse "*Lamb to the Slaughter*" from a feminist perspective.

Lamb to the Slaughter: Background of Roald Dahl

Roald Dahl's writing career began in 1942. However, it was during 1961 that there occurred a burst of literary energy in his writing career, with "*James and the Giant Peach*" successfully being published in the US subsequently followed by his best known work- "*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*". This decade can be considered his prime where many other classics such as "*Danny the Champion of the World*", "*My Uncle Oswald*" and "*The Enormous Crocodile*" surfaced in the literature field. Including collections and books published after his death, he has published a total of 49 books, not to mention his enormous success on television screenplays and plays made from adaptations of his books and novels (Dahl, n.d.)

Described as being a master of story construction, Dahl's distinguished writing style is one reason that led him to fame. His cynical, ironic and dark humour approach that he always

incorporates within his stories and books including children's stories are visible to readers. This unique method of his that is used to describe characters aids in attaching an unusual twist to his stories.

Even though such elements in his writings have been prospected quite often, there were in fact only few researches that have been conducted on exploring the sociological aspect of feminist. Oftentimes, society is condemned by the use of dystopias or the unusual varying characterization approaches in writing (Peery, 2017).

Nevertheless as much as children and adults loved his works, for the same reason under his extraordinary writing style, his works have also been attached to a great deal of criticism. Many of his published works have always been controversial due to the nature of the themes and elements portrayed within the writings.

Criticisms against Roald Dahl's writings

Most of the criticisms against Dahl mainly derived from his portrayal of the unsavoury themes and elements in his writings. Some of the most common themes and elements reviewed by critics such as Gregory (2017) and Þórðardóttir (2019) are racism, language abuse, violence, misogyny and lastly, feminism. It should however, be noted that such criticisms against him may not always be well-founded. External factors such as personal biases and lack of understanding can affect how a piece of literacy work is perceived.

"Charlie and the Chocolate Factory" along with *"James and the Giant Peach"*, as according to critics, displayed elements of sadism, abuse and racism. Inappropriate themes such as language abuse, humiliation, and stereotypes are evident in these two stories. In *"James and the Giant Peach"*, despite the attempt by Dahl in portraying an accepting view of the world through the book, the depictions of characters found in the novel itself are ironic in a sense that the amount of intrinsic and subtle racism that can be identified is appalling. As stated by Kanoria (2018), children's minds are especially vulnerable to influence; the author should be

aware of what is written and try to instil positive values in a piece of writing for the sake of shaping and constructing their fragile minds in the best way possible.

Subsequently, “*The Witches*” displayed elements of violence and potential misogyny. The allusions in the portrayal of women in this story are heavily stereotyping and sexist. Dialogues from the book such as: “All witches are women” (Dahl, 1983) promote gender inequality and stereotypes against women. The unrealistic expectations that are bound on women are reinforced when the depiction towards women is limited to having no choice and freedom in one’s life. Contrarily, “*Matilda*” is one of Dahl’s stories where a heavy emphasis on gender equality is placed in the story. This story can be considered a feminist text as it contains elements of female empowerment. This story creates a strong feminist influence on readers as the portrayal of women in this story are all powerful in their own ways (Þórðardóttir, 2019). It promotes the notion that women can do anything they want regardless of gender.

Criticisms on Roald Dahl’s “*The Witches*” and “*Matilda*” will be used as references on analysing the female depiction in “*Lamb to the Slaughter*”, considering that these two stories present similar themes and elements such as misogyny, violence and feminism as compared to “*Lamb to the Slaughter*”.

Feminist Criticism

According to Green & Kahn (2020), feminist literary criticism is a branch of integrative exploration which holds gender as a principal organizing category experience. This exploration postulates two related hypotheses about gender. The first holds that the inequality of the sexes is a product of cultural construct while the second hypothesized that the universally accepted male perspective has subjugated fields of knowledge, hence shaping their paradigms and methods on society.

The oppression of women is a concrete reality. It is contemplated as the product of social construct originating in material conditions and at the same time, also a psychological phenomenon in which it is referred to as a function of the way in which women and men discern one another and themselves (Green & Khan, 2020). In the research conducted by Green & Khan (2020), it was concluded that gender is socially constructed in patriarchy societies to serve the interests of male supremacy.

Feminist criticism recognizes that stereotypes and cultural assumptions can be reflected and shaped through literature. It falls under one of the many approaches of analysing literary works under literary theories. Feminist critics examine the cultural and economic disabilities within a patriarchal society hindering women from progressing and realizing their own possibilities (Appleman, 2007). Feminist criticism also concerns with the continual marginalization of women in terms of the exclusion of women writers in the literature field (Tyson, 2006).

Feminist criticism is associated with the three waves of feminism, with each wave playing a considerably significant role (Yang, 2019). As stated by Appleman (2007), the several assumptions and concepts held widely by feminist critics are as follows:

1. The society that we live in is prevalently patriarchal.
2. “Gender” is merely a product of cultural construct as a result of patriarchal bias within a society.
3. Patriarchal ideology hinders the progress that women could have made in literature.

Similar to feminism, this theory analyses and considers the relationships between males and females and their respective roles within society. The treatments that each gender receive are often unequal and reflect a patriarchal ideology where the females experience

oppression. “*Lamb to the Slaughter*” can be classified under the second wave of feminism (early 1960’s- late 1970’s).

According to Yang (2019), the second wave of feminism mainly emphasizes on three major aspects: 1) Recognition of female writers’ works. 2) Examination of the treatment of women in literature. 3) Understanding female writers’ contributions in the context of female empowerment and criticizing the ways women have been treated. Critics in this time period evaluate and compare the difference between the portrayal of male and female characters then proceed to inspect how writers discriminate against and marginalize female characters (Yang, 2019). In this case of this study, the researcher will look into how Roald Dahl portrayed Mary Maloney in “*Lamb to the Slaughter*”.

The three major aspects of the second wave of feminism create a connection between the story and the radical feminist theory. The second wave of feminism, along with the Radical feminism both seek to critique the patriarchal and male dominated cultural practices throughout society through exposing and tackling issues such as the marginalization and discrimination faced by women.

Radical feminists claim that the concept of gender is grounded in the attempt of male having control over female sexuality (Green & Khan, 2020). According to Vukočić (2017), radical feminism which falls under one of the branches of the vast feminist theory, was founded on the attitude that a society is based on the patriarchal grounds leading women to experience marginalization and discrimination. In Aboudaif’s (2012) study aiming to present feminism as a critical literary approach and elaborates through the works of some feminist writers, the researcher came to the conclusion that women’s oppression is the basis of radical feminism. In researching the impact of radical feminism on Alice Walker’s fiction, it was found that all the female protagonists are oppressed victims who fell prey to the domination of men. Researchers

such as Kumar, Banerjee & Bhattacharjee (n.d.), Allen (2016) and Vukoičić (2017) are in agreement that the patriarchal social structure is the source of issue in radical feminism that leads women to experiencing oppression in society.

The second wave of feminism and the radical feminist theory which both share the similarity on examining the discrimination and marginalization faced by women in literary works, will hence be used to analyse the portrayal of Mary Maloney in "*Lamb to the Slaughter*" with the intention of discussing how she is being portrayed and the forms of oppressions experienced by her.

Conclusion

Chapter 2 provides an overview on the literature review of "*Lamb to the Slaughter*", background of Roald Dahl and also Feminism literary criticism related to the present study in discussing the portrayal of female characters in literature. "*Lamb to the Slaughter*" will be analysed under the radical feminist theory under the second wave of feminism where the portrayal of Mary Maloney will be compared to Patrick Maloney to differentiate the portrayal between female and male characters by Dahl. The researcher has also introduced subtopics under the radical feminist theory such as oppression, marginalization and discrimination. Chapter 3 will discuss the conceptual framework for this study.

CHAPTER III

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

As demonstrated in the literature review section of this study, there are many ways of exploring and analysing literary works from a feminist perspective. This study will use the concept of the second wave of feminism, along with the radical feminist theory to answer the research questions posed. The objectives for this study are to discuss: the portrayal of women in “*Lamb to the Slaughter*” and the forms of oppressions faced by Mary Maloney in “*Lamb to the Slaughter*”. The two research questions will seek to direct the researcher in achieving the objectives of this study.

History of Feminism

According to Gassman (2006), since the nineteenth to the twentieth century, feminists have aimed to terminate the historic misconception as perceived by them that women are inferior to men. Despite the fact that not all feminists pursue identical goals, the one common goal is to achieve equality for all women (Gassman, 2006). Feminism is divided into three distinctive waves. Each wave of feminism has their own corresponding defining characteristics that signifies the effort in achieving different goals for women.

The first wave of feminist movement primarily emphasized on women achieving official authority to vote (Halířová, 2016). The first wave is considered an important historical moment of the motion of women progressing through time. During this period, women were considered to be physically and emotionally inferior to men. Women at the time were treated similarly to servants with barely any rights or possession. Marriage was merely viewed as enslavement to men. They were not exposed to opportunities in education at school and could only work in manual jobs. Interpretation of women in literary works is biased and unrealistic.

Hence, the first wave of the movement mainly focused on how authors view and portray women in their works (Yang, 2019).

The second wave of feminism is referred to as the “new social movement” dedicated for women to gain sexual “liberation”. This wave focused more on gaining social equality for women and end all sorts of discrimination towards women (Halířová, 2016). N.O.W. (National Organization for Women) was formed for feminists in 1966. Nevertheless, the society was still patriarchal and women were still treated as inferior even though they had legal rights. Portrayal of women in literature during this wave was regrettably still biased. Yang (2019) proposed that the feminist criticism during this wave looks into three major aspects: 1) Recognition of female writers’ works. 2) Examination of the treatment of women in literature. 3) Understanding female writers’ contributions in the context of female empowerment and criticizing the ways women have been treated.

The third wave of feminism was a continuation and comeback to the failures from the previous wave. From the early 1990s to the present, these decades have deepened the equality of women where they are now open to a variety of opportunities. Even though the portrayal of women in literature has improved, conservative societies such as India still portray women as living under patriarchal norms where they constantly crave liberation for the purpose of discovering their identity as women (Vyomakesisri, 2017).

Radical feminism

The focus of radical feminism arose from the public retaliation of the 1960’s focus on liberal and Marxist feminism. Mainstream women’s rights groups such as the National Organization for Women believed that gender equality could only be attained through the reform of the existing social system; whilst radical feminists held that the existing issue was not to reform the system but to uproot the patriarchal power structures (Kumar, Banerjee&

Bhattacharjee, n.d.). Substantially, the concept of patriarchy in society is widely held and accepted as the root of structure in radical feminism that leads women to being oppressed due to their sex. Contrarily to other strands of feminism such as liberal feminism that sought to address gender inequality issues through the reform of the existing socio-political system, radical feminism holds that the radical restructuring of society is imperative so as to eradicate male supremacy and challenge social norms existing.

As Bryson (1992) postulated, the theory of radical feminism contains some clear-cut theoretical approaches that provide a unifying framework which diverged from ideas that initially emerged from other theories of feminism such as liberal and Marxist feminism.

The earliest radical feminism held that feminism experienced by women was grounded securely in their own life experiences and perceptions where there wasn't a need for women to compromise with the existing political perspectives and agendas that hugely disadvantaged them. As the theory progressed, the oppression of women became a fundamental element that was notably considered a universal form of domination of men on women. Women began to attempt in comprehending and ending this flawed element present in society, as they realized that the true issue here, is after all 'patriarchy'.

As a result, having realized that women have opposing interests to those of men, they established groups with mutual interests as a means for them to struggle together in the process of achieving liberation. Finally, the theory insists that male power in a patriarchal society is not only confined to the public sphere but that it also extends into the private sphere, as in the private lives of women.

The three elements concerning radical feminism. The researcher deduced that radical feminism arose mainly from the factors of power, equality and rights. These elements

will be presented in the conceptual framework section following the subsection of methodology, aiming to interpret the roles of women in literary works.

Power. The most evident difference between radical feminism and the other varieties of feminism lies in the scale to which the biased social system based on the power struggle between the two genders is contemplated as the root of inequality and oppression (Vukoičić, 2017). In a patriarchal society where men generally hold more power than women, women will then be automatically considered the subordinate category of sex exposed to the exploitation of men. Power can be considered the root of the problem for the unequal distribution of power in a society with a patriarchal power structure in a way that this element in radical feminism has a direct connection with the equality and rights of women.

According to Allen (2016), radical feminists perceive and interpret power as the dyadic relations of dominance and subordination between men and women. Power is asserted as domination. Feminists have used a variety of terms such as “oppression”, “patriarchy” and “objectification” in attempt to define this kind of relation between the two genders.

“If gender difference is itself a function of domination, then the implication is that men are powerful and women are powerless by definition” (Allen, 2016).

The continual oppression faced by women leads to the constant marginalization and suppression of rights of women in a society. This dyadic relations of dominance and subordination between men and women is the outcome of the lack of power from women (Allen, 2016).

Equality. Similar to the other branches of feminist theories that have made significant contributions in improving women’s social status, radical feminism shares the perspective of feminism that has insights into the issues of gender inequality present in a society.

As claimed by Lorber (1997), the reason for the establishment of the different branches of feminism is caused by the pervasive nature of gender inequality. While feminists have generated more compounded views about gender, sex and sexuality, the focal point is the emphasis that gender inequality is not considered an individual issue but an issue that has been deeply entrenched in the structure of societies long since. When gender inequality is embedded in various societal organizations of marriages, families, economy, religions, politics and other cultural productions including the language that are spoken on a daily basis, making men and women equal does not appear to be an individual solution to the issue.

In relation to the unjust distribution of power in a society between the two sexes, equality will never be achieved assuming that the two sexes are constantly striving for power in a fight for dominance. The gender inequality existing in a patriarchal society is hard to eliminate simply because of its root in seeing women as the inferior sex who hold lesser power compared to men.

Rights. Some of the most commonly examined perspectives underlying radical feminism thoughts are androgyny, the sex/ gender system, sexuality, pornography, lesbianism and reproduction (Kumar, Banerjee & Bhattacharjee, n.d.). The common ground between these perspectives is the patriarchal control that men have over women in terms of the use of power to dominate and oppress women within a patriarchal society structure. The powerless position that women are forced into leads to the deprivation of rights of women.

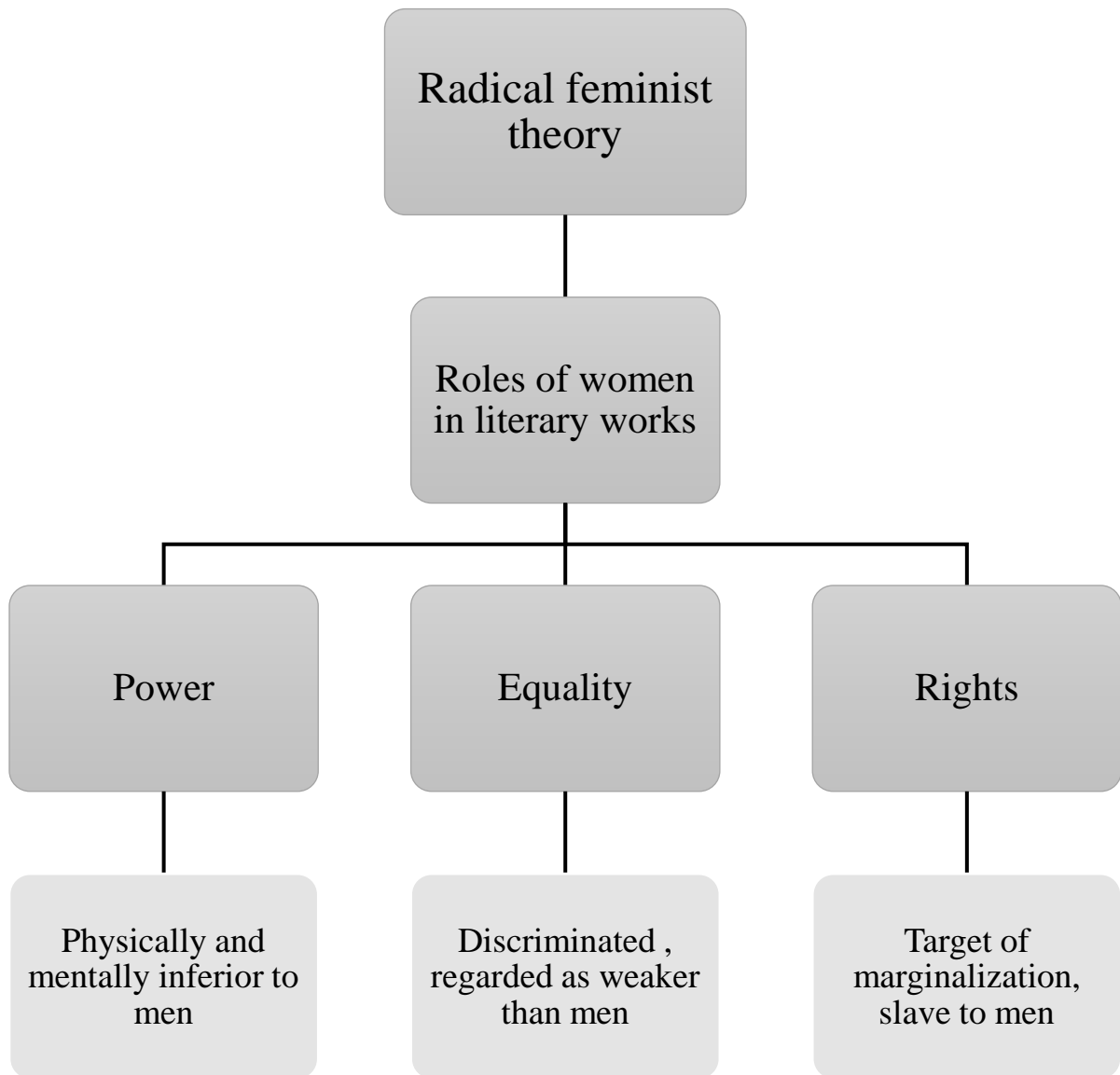
To reinforce the postulation of Bryson (1992) that male power in a patriarchal society is not only restricted to the public sphere but that it also expands into the private sphere, Doude & Tapp (2014) suggested an identical theory explaining the forms of oppression faced by women in the private sphere in a patriarchal society.

The different forms of oppression faced by women as exerted by men, within the private and political spheres are evident in patriarchal societies (Doude & Tapp, 2014). The private sphere for women that focuses on child rearing, marriage, and the managing of the household are some of the most common patriarchal ideals that are rejected by radical feminism. The private sphere of patriarchy is always associated with women being harmed in the political sphere through rape, domestic violence and prostitution. The threat/ exert of violence and rape, as radical feminism proposes, is the method that patriarchy men control women (Lorber (1997).

Methodology

The researcher will do a textual analysis on “*Lamb to the Slaughter*”. Textual analysis is a methodology that revolves around understanding language and symbols existing in a piece of analysed text for the aim of gaining information regarding how readers make sense of life experiences (Allen, 2017). As proposed by Frey, Botan, & Kreps (1999), the four major approaches to textual analysis are: rhetorical criticism, content analysis, interaction analysis and performance studies. This study will only exclusively use the qualitative content analysis approach to organize and elicit meaning from textual evidence extracted to draw practical conclusions from it.

By combining the two strands- second wave of feminism and radical feminism into a textual analysis of the portrayal of Mary Maloney in “*Lamb to the Slaughter*”, the researcher’s goal is to identify and discuss the forms of oppressions that are evidently portrayed by Roald Dahl in the story.



CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

To further reinforce the claim by Hambur & Nurhayati (2019) on literature being a representation of society which characterizes variations of life aspects, the researcher will conduct an analysis from the vantage point of analysing the portrayal of women in "*Lamb to the Slaughter*" so as to achieve a conclusion on the theory of the relationship between literature depictions and social issues that subsist in society. Research questions drawn afore will aid the researcher in narrowing the scope of analysis of the story. The two topics under this chapter are 1. The portrayal of women in "*Lamb to the Slaughter*" and 2. The forms of oppressions faced by Mary Maloney in "*Lamb to the Slaughter*". Subtopics branched out from the topics will only serve the function of clarifications. The analysis on the portrayal of women in the story will be separated into three individual parts (subtopics), as the portrayal varies and differs in each part of the story as the plot progresses; whereas for the forms of oppressions, the two forms will be ideological and interpersonal.

The analysis and discussion will be entirely based on the characteristics of the subjects of the story as portrayed by Roald Dahl and predominantly revolve around the concept of the second wave of feminism and radical feminist theory in a critical discourse analysis perspective.

The Portrayal of Women in "Lamb to the Slaughter"

The first part of the portrayal of women in "Lamb to the Slaughter"

This part stretches from the commencement of the story up until where Mary proceeds to make supper once Patrick breaks the silence announcing that he is planning to leave her. The onset of the story begins with a narrative exposition painting a background on the Maloney household with Mary portrayed as a diligent homemaker. As depicted in the story, the role of Mary in the household is to manage all the household chores ranging from cooking, grocery

shopping and homemaking. Through the roles assigned to her by Dahl, qualities such as understanding, loving and doting are apparent in the portrayal of this character at the brief surface of the story. Dahl's deliberate outline of Mary's character in a predictable manner ineluctably emerges as an effort to materialize her character as the ideal woman and wife in a patriarchal society.

The room was warm and clean, the curtains drawn, the two table lamps alight-hers and the one by the empty chair opposite. On the sideboard behind her, two tall glasses, soda water, whiskey. Fresh ice cubes in the Thermos bucket. Mary Maloney was waiting for her husband to come in from work. (Dahl, 1953, p. 1)

This commencing paragraph which acts as the opening of the story has already suggested the presence of gender stereotypes, with the woman of the story being portrayed as the homemaker keeping the house homey and welcoming for her husband to return to after a day of work. The analysis of this part reveals that Mary, along with her husband Patrick, are portrayed in a way to conform to the conventional gender roles in the context of the story, which is during the 1950s. Mary's every action and decision revolves around pleasing her husband while Patrick is illustrated as the breadwinner and head of family.

The actions and reactions of the characters have a connection with the alleged system of gender role in society during the context of story. Considering that the story was published in a period of time where gender stereotypes and discriminations were still entrenched in society, the portrayal of Mary by Dahl fits into the stereotyping gender role system yet at the same time, reiterated the existence of a biased social system containing elements of patriarchy during the context of the story. The portrayal of Mary as a pregnant housewife who is only capable of working internally at home affirmed the powerful stereotypes exerted on women by society. The portrayal of Mary in this part is in congruence with Henfridsson's (2008) assertion

where female characters in Dahl's writings were often portrayed in a harsher manner compared to the male. She is portrayed as being inferior and submissive to her husband with her missions in life aiming to please and tend to her husband's needs.

Ruling out Dahl's inclination of frequently utilising the implicit macabre approach to portray female characters in a harsher demeanour, his portrayal of the two main characters in the story could be accounted for his indefinite attempt to make use of literature to express life aspects and social issues that followed around during the context of the story. Indisputably through the substantial difference between the portrayals of the female and male character, it can be safely deduced that the circumstances thus described in the story exhaustively aimed at uncovering the gender inequality issues that prevailed in society when Dahl wrote and published his contentious story.

She laid aside her sewing, stood up, and went forward to kiss him as he came in. (Dahl, 1953, p. 1)

She took his coat and hung it in the closet. Then she walked over and made the drinks, a strongish one for him, a weak one for herself; (Dahl, 1953, p. 1)

"Sit down," he said. "Just for a minute, sit down."

It wasn't till then that she began to get frightened.

"Go on," he said. "Sit down."

She lowered herself back slowly into the chair, watching him all the time with those large, bewildered eyes. (Dahl, 1953, p. 2)

The multiple paragraphs and lines extracted from the story clearly paint a picture of Mary's focus in her life: which is solely on meeting the needs of her husband. Such prejudiced

portrayal of a female character in literature implies that a woman's life purpose is limited only to provide service while accommodating to her husband's needs (Brannon, 2017). The traditional and conservative stereotypes further extend to showing a woman being powerless in a situation despite feeling uncomfortable, as seen when she obeys her husband even while feeling nervous. The notion of Mary being powerless in such an arduous situation is a symbolism which figuratively compares to a lamb, as per the title of the story suggests.

Taking into account the title of the story itself, satirically the portrayal of Mary corresponds and compares precisely to that of a lamb. Her powerlessness, as a result of society's endorsement of societal issues concerning gender inequality, discrimination, along with stereotypes obtruded upon women, lead readers at first glance to presume that Mary is in fact the "lamb" of the story that eventually will be "slaughtered". Evidently based on the narration, under the gruelling circumstances of Mary's live and position in the household and society, readers are coaxed into being under the impression that her narrated conditions of living are simply not advantageous enough for her to have the potential to act in her own capacity upon what is presumably, her fate. Inferring from her inability to grapple with the stranded living conditions that are mechanically allocated to women in society, readers are prone to assume that the pressure of society will ultimately "slaughter" her.

For her, this was always a blissful time of day. She knew he didn't want to speak much until the first drink was finished, and she, on her side, was content to sit quietly, enjoying his company after the long hours alone in the house. She loved to luxuriate in the presence of this man, and to feel-almost as a sunbather feels the sun-that warm male glow that came out of him to her when they were alone together. She loved him for the way he

sat loosely in a chair, for the way he came in a door, or moved slowly across the room with long strides. She loved the intent, far look in his eyes when they rested in her, the funny shape of the mouth, and especially the way he remained silent about his tiredness, sitting still with himself until the whiskey had taken some of it away. (Dahl, 1953, p. 1)

The above extracted paragraph diving into the rising action of the story preceding Patrick telling Mary that he is leaving her, is an exemplary interpretation of how Dahl intends to portray Mary at the beginning of the story: a foolish woman who is so blindly consumed by love. As mentioned, some of the characteristics of her that can be identified include understanding and loving, as seen from sentences such as “She loved to luxuriate in the presence of this man, and to feel- almost as a sunbather feels the sun-that warm male glow that came out of him to her when they were alone together.” (Dahl, 1953, p. 1).

In this paragraph, Dahl puts an emphasis on how women lived and acted in traditional households. It is also implied through the portrayal on how she fixates her gaze while staring lovingly at him, being mesmerized in the existence of him that Mary is consumed by her love for her husband. Even when Patrick breaks the silence announcing to her that he is intending to leave her, her initial reaction for what she hears is to proceed to preparing supper, pretending as though nothing happened by launching herself into a denial phase. Her unrequited love for him, in the eyes of readers, may seem imprudent and impetuous, as though she had been living in denial all these times giving it her all in their marriage.

In relation to the context of the story, it may well be argued that marriage is a big part of a woman’s life. For a woman to commit herself to a marriage with a man, henceforth bounding her remaining life to him by completely entailing herself into an all-inclusive part of her husband’s life is unquestionably a critical decision to make- especially when an official

marriage or even engagement means that a woman's life is thereby restricted by the constraint of her husband/fiancé. To look at things from another perspective, marriage is in reality merely the starting point of a woman's subordination by her husband. Upon scrutiny, the preliminary narration of the story itself has already hinted at and disclosed Mary's state of confinement in her marriage.

The very much conspicuous sign transpiring Mary's state of confinement and subordination in her marriage is the fact that she is limited to just being a housewife, indicatively a Maloney housewife. As discussed afore, the portrayal may be interpreted as the author's intention to characterize her in this particular way to fit society's expectation. Another feasible possibility that can be deduced from such portrayal is that owing to her marriage, she opted to relinquish her original position in her previous placement to fully commit herself to managing her family. Be it the former or the latter, the fact that she is depicted a housewife initially as the story unfolds is an obvious sign of one of the effects that her marriage brought upon on her life. Moreover, the fact that she changed her last name to being "Maloney" could be interpreted as the inception of her loss of identity, therefore leads to the development of her character in her marriage as a typically submissive and obedient housewife that is easily dismissible and discardable by her husband.

The second part of the portrayal of women in "Lamb to the Slaughter".

The second part consists of the climax of story where behavioural changes in which Dahl portrays the characters are characterized. The climax of the story is the unforeseen change in portrayal in Mary where she swung the leg of lamb into the skull of her husband, consequently murdering him in the process. At this point of the story, Dahl's delineation of Mary's character exhibits a stark disparity as compared to the first part of the portrayal. The

change in Mary's characterisation from being a submissive and obedient wife to a gallant woman suggests that she is thenceforth not anymore depicted as powerless and fragile.

At that point, Mary Maloney simply walked up behind him and without any pause she swung the big frozen leg of lamb high in the air and brought it down as hard as she could on the back of his head. (Dahl, 1953, p. 2)

This paragraph depicts the major yet abrupt shift in portrayal in the character. Word phrases such as "simply" and "without any pause" reveal that her action in conducting the murder shows no hesitation whatsoever. Findings from the research conducted by Jaber (2016) similarly, affirms that this specific section of the story is deemed the decisive critical point which depicts the shift in the portrayal of Mary's character. With the classification of Dahl's themes under mostly being affiliated with the element of "turning of the table", it is not out of the ordinary for the presence of an unanticipated and abrupt shift in portrayal of his characters (Makman, 1977). The process of alternating the depiction by creating unforeseen changes in the portrayals of characters is recognised as the macabre method in Dahl's writings. Conforming to Henfridsson's research, Dahl's themes and writings often utilised the implicit macabre method to achieve the effect of attaching an additional ironic element (Henfridsson, 2008).

The brusque shift in characterization of the characters does not merely serve the function of a major turning point of the story but in actuality aims to demonstrate Mary's intrinsic power, which can be argued as showing her true colours. In a direct contrast to the first part of the portrayal where she was assumed to be the powerless lamb that was impotent to the point where she was incapable of defiantly uttering an answer back to her husband in fear of enraging him, her portrayal in the second part has proven to overwrite her initial portrayal. The emphasis of her action is driven by her decision to finally take matters into her

own hands. The outburst can be decrypted as the effect of the long-term culminated patience and rage that she has had to put up with his unbearable domination over what is presumably, years of their marriage.

Despite appearing to be rather reckless by bringing the frozen leg of lamb directly onto the skull of her husband's head, her abruptness as seen when she shows no sign of hesitation in bringing about change in her own life for the sake of her future demonstrates that she is willing to take over the reins especially when the future of her baby is jeopardized. Albeit as the story further advances it is revealed that she did not actually consider the consequences that might be imposed on her or her unborn baby, her qualities displayed during the murder such as decisiveness and courageous dispense assurance to readers that she had been furtively concealing her true colours to conform to society's expectations and norms- in other terms trying to be the perfect woman that society idealized.

She stepped back a pace, waiting, and the funny thing was that he remained standing there for at least four or five seconds, gently swaying. Then he crashed to the carpet. (Dahl, 1953, p. 2).

This paragraph following the action of Mary swinging the leg of frozen lamb acts to explain a specific sequence of action: Mary stepping back waiting for her husband to lose consciousness and collapse to the ground. From this action, it is perceivable that Dahl is trying to portray the stereotypical role of men in customary households as the superior gender, which ironically is being reversed with women in this story. Mary's action of murdering, together with how she proceeds to react, distinctly depict her shift in portrayal as the one holding superior power over her husband.

By the same token, this section of the precipitous portrayal ensuing her incipient portrayal is not only an indication to the cessation of her portrayal as the "ideal woman" but

also fulfils the function of depicting Patrick in a manner that literally puts him in a position beneath her, as shown from the course of action following the murder where she stepped back and waited for him to collapse after a few solid seconds. Judging from how Dahl paradoxically addresses the shift in portrayal of his characters, Patrick's action of collapsing momentarily after the firm swing is intended to reinforce the stereotypical gender role of men being stronger than women. Lamentably, the reinforcement is merely designed to serve the purpose of underscoring the ironic overturn of the plot that reveals the reversal of the gender roles by portraying an unforeseeable situation where tables are ultimately turned on Patrick.

For the most part, the shift in portrayal firmly established that Mary is in fact not the lamb being led to slaughter. In reality, it appears that Patrick, being oblivious to the circumstance that he is being positioned, materializes as the real lamb as the story progresses into the climax. The notion of the man of the house going from the dominant role of a successful man to the role of a victim ironically in the hands of his submissive wife reveals that Patrick's ignorance and heedlessness to his wife's capability is in fact the symbolism that constitutes the actual lamb that is unknowingly being led to slaughter.

The third part of the portrayal of women in "Lamb to the Slaughter"

This part of the story comprises the aftereffects of the slaughter as Mary's attributes further on materialise and drift away from her primary depiction in the first part of the story. The falling action embodying Mary's attempt in concealing the murder extends to the resolution of the story whereby the unvarnished and abhorrent truth of the sexist gender norms that repress women is ultimately exposed. Discernible from textual evidences assembled, the further escalation of her character development since the previous part is to acquire an intensifying impact in the interest of evoking a clearer distinction towards Mary's character.

All right, she told herself. So I've killed him. (Dahl, 1953, p. 3)

It was extraordinary, now, how clear her mind became all of a sudden. She began thinking very fast. As the wife of a detective, she knew quite well what the penalty would be. That was fine. It made no difference to her. In fact, it would be a relief. On the other hand, what about the child? What were the laws about murderers with unborn children? Did they kill then both-mother and child? Or did they wait until the tenth month? What did they do? Mary Maloney didn't know. And she certainly wasn't prepared to take a chance. (Dahl, 1953, p. 3)

Contrary to how a great deal of researchers generally classify women with the tendency to endure pressure and distress by openly expressing their emotions (Emslie & Hunt, 2008), Dahl's portrayal in this part once again opposes and disregards such stereotypical gender norms. In Brannon's (2017) research on the psychological perspectives on both genders, it is suggested that men are more resilient and rational in coping with a problem while women generally tend to get overly emotional. Conflicting to Brannon's research, Dahls' portrayal of Mary in this part does not fit the criterion as assigned to women in his proposed assertion.

With phrases such as "all right" and "so" show extra evidence in backing up the claim for the substantial shift in the portrayal of Mary's character. These phrases show that she is clearly not expressing a single sign of remorse or terror, after having murdered her husband using a leg of frozen lamb. The succeeding paragraph mainly sustains and adds on to her alteration in portrayal by manifesting attributes that were initially absent in her character. The last sentence from the paragraph particularly demonstrates her capability of being logical and resourceful in times of crisis; her state of emotional detachment during uncertainty times remarkably discloses her unclouded judgement and mental state amidst disarrays.

“Jack,” she said, the next time Sergeant Noonan went by. “Would you mind giving me a drink?”

“Sure I’ll give you a drink. You mean this whiskey?”

“Yes please. But just a small one. It might make me feel better.”

He handed her the glass.

“Why don’t you have one yourself,” she said. “You must be awfully tired.

Please do. You’ve been very good to me.”

“Well,” he answered. “It’s not strictly allowed, but I might take just a drop to keep me going.” (Dahl, 1953, p. 5)

Towards the resolution of the story, by closely examining Mary’s speech style and patterns of behaviour, symbolically it shows that she has opted to cease conforming to the expectations and portrayal of a customary compliant woman. This definitive portrayal of Mary is thoroughly opposed to the introductory portrayal in the first part of the story and analysis. Despite utilising a polite speech style which incorporates the frequent use of polite requests in her speeches such as “would you mind”, “why don’t you” and “please” (Blum-Kulka, 2003), the illocutionary force as according to speech act theory (Searle, 1969) is unmistakably Mary dishing out orders to Jack.

As a matter of fact, this portrayal suggests indications of overwriting Mary’s position as a woman in the household: She is no longer a woman who seeks to serve other people. Contradicting to how she is portrayed in the first part of the story, she now holds the position of someone who possesses power over the others, going so far as to ordering subtly and indirectly the men around her to follow through her directives in the form of suggestions, as

assessed from the phrase “why don’t you”. By evaluating the interpersonal relationship between Mary and the officers, it seems that they constantly treat her with condescension; being the ones who attempt to soothe and satisfy her. The palpable contrast between the portrayal of Mary’s character in the first and third part leads readers to conspicuously perceive that the woman of the story is no longer submissive and compliant to the whims of men, as she has managed to escape the predetermined role that society has assigned her.

The forms of oppressions faced by Mary Maloney in “Lamb to the Slaughter”

Ideological oppression

Oppression that occurs at an ideological level customarily entails a system of beliefs or ideas (Chang, 2019). Fundamentally, an oppressed system with its core idea that a group is superior to another believes that said group has the right to exert control over the inferior group (Chinook Fund, n.d.). In a radical feminist perspective, this idea can be elaborated and extended in further ways. In a patriarchal society in which the story took place, presumed to be an era following the socially stagnant post-war United States during the early years of 1950’s, men and women conformed strictly to gender roles and society’s expectations (“Women in the 1950s”, n.d.). Women in particular were continuously being held back by the hierarchical and patriarchal social structures which typically embraced a stereotypical ideology against them (Bahlieda, 2015).

The dominant group in a patriarchal society being men, adjure the idea that they are far more dominant, deserving or simply stronger than its competing group- the women. As such, the opposite qualities are generally characterized to the females, whereas they are commonly termed incompetent, weak, inferior and so on. This ideology can be associated with the story through the portrayal of the characters by Dahl. The cultural and linguistic elements that differentiate the female from the male are apparent in "Lamb to the Slaughter". In terms of a

social hierarchy ranking between the two genders in the story, women are ranked lower than men. This is very much evident through the portrayal of Mary in the story, especially in the first part of the story.

Mary Maloney was waiting for her husband to come in from work. (Dahl, 1953, p. 1)

For her, this was always a blissful time of day. (Dahl, 1953, p. 1)

The most patent depiction of ideological oppression discernible from the story is the substantial distinction in the portrayal of the male and female characters. With the portrayal of Patrick as a police officer possessing authority and power in society while Mary works as an insignificant homemaker tending to their home, this depiction is plain in sight to readers of the social status of Mary. According to social stratification theory, particularly in gender, social status and power (Oyekola & Eytayo, 2020), Mary is located in a social hierarchical order that is very much lower than that of Patrick's, as such she has little to no power in the household and society alike.

It may well be argued that her initial portrayal of being assigned a trivial role in society is owing to her gender and destined social position. With the gradual indoctrination of society's patriarchal ideologies, she is ultimately brainwashed into recurrently acting in line with these implausible expectations, as evidenced when she feels content with the daily routines that she has established for herself as a homemaker, spending each day anticipating her husband's return from work. Despite the discrepancy between their social status and power, Patrick's presence assures and completes her in that she is dependent on him economically and emotionally, as seen when she considers the return of her husband a "blissful time" of her day. Nevertheless, the depiction of the family structure of the Maloney household, along with the unbalanced roles assigned to each of the character correspond to the features of an oppressed

system, in which Patrick holds more power and continuously attempts to control every aspect of Mary's life.

Patrick's power in terms of within the household or society both surpass Mary's, which justify the initial portrayal of her insignificant characterizations in the first part of the story. Her lack of power which causes her inability to act upon the unfortunate state of affairs revolving around her character is the indication of the commencement of her oppressive marriage. Her acquiescent behaviour which aims to please her husband indirectly connotes her consent and endorsement to his atrocious manner and behaviour attributed to how he treats her. From a feminist perspective, the prolonged period of Mary's silence and conformity towards her husband's treatment induce the sense of authorization that he has gained over her life, thereby motivating him to be of the assumption that he is indeed deserving of her.

“Darling, shall I get your slippers?” (Dahl, 1953, p. 1)

“I think it's a shame,” she said, “that when a policeman gets to be as senior as you, they keep him walking about on his feet all day long.” (Dahl, 1953, p. 1)

“Darling,” she said. “Would you like me to get you some cheese? I haven't made any supper because it's Thursday.” (Dahl, 1953, p. 1)

One noticeable feature across most of Mary's speeches involve mentioning her husband, in a way that the conversations she makes with him usually end up being about him and his needs. As seen from the examples of lines extracted from the story, her utterances tend to favour the use of words such as “you” and “yours”. This feature of her speeches indicate that she considers her husband her everything to the extent that she is likely to put her husband before herself. Her docile behaviour and actions in the beginning of the story are socially acceptable, as she is the willing and obedient housewife as all women in a patriarchal society are expected to behave. Nevertheless, it can also be interpreted as she has no choice in the matter since she

is inevitably born a woman. Owing to the fact of her gender, along with the western family structure that desires to place women in a position of subordination, the outcome results them to be economically dependent solely on men (Bressler, 2011). It is only natural for her to behave in a consistently mindful yet fastidious manner when she possesses little to no power in a household with a family structure which favours only the male.

Reasoning from this exact fact of her portrayal as a woman who performs daily tasks of serving her husband, one can also examine the issue from another standpoint- slavery of women in the United States. From the circumstances thus delineated, Mary's living condition can be linked in a direct comparison to the enslavement of women during the 17th and 18th century in America, where women were forced into slavery and exploited to work as indentured servants. Notwithstanding the fact that the enslavement of women eventually came to an end and abolishment, in actuality the living conditions of women across the continent following the termination still compare to that of the period of enslaving women as servants, which is comparable to Mary's servile role in the Maloney household.

Interpersonal oppression

According to Chinook Fund (n.d.), in relation to the ideology embraced by ideological oppression in which the idea of the dominant group has the right to exert control over the submissive group, interpersonal oppression postulates that this ideology gets structured into social institutions across time. Interpersonal oppression holds that sexual abuse, harassment, violence directed at women and the belittling or ignoring of women's thoughts are part of what the dominant group does to the oppressed group (Chinook Fund, n.d.). By way of explanation, it involves the interactions between individuals where members of the dominant group use oppressive behaviours in attempt to control the oppressive group.

Aforementioned, Mary's obsession towards Patrick has been transparent since the beginning of the story as she has assumed a completely servile role to him. It appears that her entire existence is to provide service and love for her husband. In all likelihood, she has lost her own identity apart from that role assumed by Patrick to her. From a feminist perspective, Mary is caged and oppressed by her husband, though she does not realise or recognise it as a cage that confines her identity. The cage is arguably a symbolism of her oppressive marriage and the roles that society has assigned her.

“So there it is,” he added. “And I know it’s kind of a bad time to be telling you, but there simply wasn’t any other way. Of course I’ll give you money and see you’re looked after. But there needn’t really be any fuss. I hope not anyway. It wouldn’t be very good for my job.” (Dahl, 1953, p. 2)

The first discernible oppressive behaviour in their marriage is psychological/emotional abuse. According to Smith & Segal (2014), abuse in the form of inflicting an emotional or psychological trauma often stems from the imbalance of power in abusive relationships. The most critical strike of abusive behaviour among Mary and Patrick's marriage is when Patrick chooses to abandon his wife when she is pregnant, willing to trade his career over his family. The power imbalance in the relationship is palpable to the point where Patrick is not discussing, but rather announcing to Mary his withdrawal from the marriage and ways to compensate her, hoping that it will not bring about any impact on his job.

Patrick's fashion of reasoning to see fit to his own gains is merely a product of the aforementioned power imbalance in their marriage. Mary's suppression along an extended period of time led him to be of the assumption that she condoned his behaviour. Her flawless façade not only effectively masked her concealed power to put up a deceiving outward appearance as a powerless lamb, but also directed Patrick to surmise and overlook the actual

power variance between the two. Adding up the two factors brings forth the impression that Patrick assumes to be tolerable for justifying his decision of deliberately abandoning her and their baby without discussing the matter beforehand with his lawful wife.

“I’ll get it!” she cried, jumping up. “Sit down,” he said. (Dahl, 1953, p. 1)

“Darling, shall I get your slippers?” “No.” (Dahl, 1953, p. 1)

“Darling,” she said. “Would you like me to get you some cheese? I haven’t made any supper because it’s Thursday.” “No,” he said (Dahl, 1953, p. 1)

According to research conducted by Nader (1986), the ideology of motherhood in the United States in fact segregates women and compromises their positions in the family and society. Sign of dismissiveness through Patrick’s actions and behaviour further on validates Mary’s powerlessness in the household. Patrick is portrayed to fit the image of the expected gender role where he is the head of the family, leaving Mary no authority in the household. In the form of active dismissiveness, he constantly dismisses her thoughts or suggestions by rejecting them all. The power imbalance can be seen through Mary’s inability to refute or contradict what her husband says. To a certain extent, this can be attributed to the nature of a western family structure which subordinates women (Bressler, 2011).

He didn’t answer, so she bent her head again and went on with her sewing; but each time he lifted the drink to his lips, she heard the ice cubes clinking against the side of the glass. (Dahl, 1953, p. 1)

Her eyes waited on him for an answer, a smile, a little nod, but he made no sign. (Dahl, 1953, p. 2)

Dismissiveness in the form of passive ignoring can also be identified through Patrick’s silence over Mary’s questions and statements. In the story whereas Mary is portrayed to be the

ideal wife who eagerly anticipates and tends her husband's needs, her efforts are unappreciated. As seen when every time she says something anticipating his response, what she receives are only vague non-answers or effortless dismissals from her husband.

In the forms of active and passive dismissiveness, what can be perceived is the proven confinements as a result of Mary's marriage as according to the western family structure which positions women ranks below men. With an oppressed system which actively encourages men to be of the belief that the inferior gender is women, to the point where it is perfectly appropriate to belittle, ignore and dismiss a woman's thoughts, her rights are vastly compromised and diminished. Presuming that Mary's marriage is the mere beginning that unconsciously placed her within the confines of the imaginary cage established by her husband, the continuous dismissal strengthened and incarcerated her within the cage of her oppressive marriage, in the process provoking the loss of her identity, power and rights as a woman.

In fifteen minutes he was back with a page of notes, and there was more whispering, and through her sobbing she heard a few of the whispered phrases-"...acted quite normal...very cheerful...wanted to give him a good supper... peas...cheesecake...impossible that she..." (Dahl, 1953, p. 4)

The murderer may have taken it with him, but on the other hand he may have thrown it away or hidden it somewhere on the premises. (Dahl, 1953, p. 5)

"It's the old story," he said. "Get the weapon, and you've got the man." (Dahl, 1953, p. 5)

Moreover, the oppression experienced by Mary in the story can be partly attributed to society's prejudiced attitude towards women. The lines extracted clearly demonstrate society's discriminating and stereotyping attitude towards women- where women are belittled and underestimated. The popular belief of belittling the capability of women is the product of a

patriarchy social system which holds that men are generally more capable than women. The widely-held belief across a society that openly promotes gender inequality naturally gives rise to a by-product of gender stratification. The treatment distinction between the two genders mostly arises from distinctions regarding wealth, power and privilege- with the course of event described in the story illustrating the officers' treatment towards Mary being a good case in point; as seen when the officers dismiss her as a potential murderer given that she is a woman and also the wife to the victim. This is a perfect example of how she receives a different treatment by exploiting her gender, pregnancy, along with her ostensible powerlessness to divert suspicion from herself.

One distinctive feature noticed from the utterances of phrases produced by the officers is the unconscious use of male pronouns "he" and "him", along with the word "man" to address the murderer. It appears that the police officers automatically assume that the murderer is a male, even after assessing the situation. This demonstrates that with patriarchy ideologies and beliefs deeply ingrained in every aspect of the culture, even reputed officials representing the authority of power in society are unconsciously biased as a result from their beliefs, hence clouding their judgements in carrying out their duties. In fact, Mary's oppression does not only stem from her husband and marriage but also from society's expected gender roles and discriminations that vastly deteriorate a woman's value.

Conclusion

By the end of the analysis, the researcher concludes and assents to the assertion by Hambur & Nurhayati (2019), in which the most prominent social phenomena which can be reflected upon on society are gender inequality and gender stereotypes. These unaddressed social phenomena subsequently lead to the inaccurate portrayal of women in literature and also the oppression faced by women over the prolonged span of time in which women struggle to

break free of the consequently imposed stereotypes and discriminations. In essence, Mary's portrayal in the story is largely affected by the oppressive social system which is patriarchal in nature, privileging only the men in society. Her portrayal at the beginning of the story corresponds to that of the actual living conditions of women in the 1950s- where women were supposed to tend to managing house chores and assume a servile role to their husbands. Nevertheless, the story took an unexpected turn in altering her portrayal, hence creating a primary perspective that is completely out of the blue. The successful exit of her preestablished role assigned by society expresses the role reversal of a woman who is willing to take control over her destiny to strive for a better tomorrow- in the process of doing so, she reclaimed her power, equality and rights that she lost in her oppressive marriage.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

“Lamb to the Slaughter” is a controversial story that is exceptionally well-written in its own way- thanks to the undiminishing talent by the late Roald Dahl. From the beginning of the story towards the end, Dahl’s intention to accentuate the contrast between his major male and female characters’ portrayal is apparent to readers. One can argue that the depiction of the stereotypical household initially as the story unfolds is exclusively just a technique to highlight the contrast. By starting off presenting the man of the house as the superior gender exerting control and dominance over the woman of the house- in the end he reverses the portrayal to fabricate an ironic tale manipulated by the woman of the story. This depiction can be categorised under his usual implicit macabre method of writing while also fit under his special genres of female vengeance and dark humour.

The structure of the story especially emits an intentional false sense of security. Like aforementioned, a brief glance at the title of the story makes readers assume that the story is yet another conventional tale that illustrates men as the principal participant in the family. Accounting for his tendency to relate his writings to real life events primarily surrounding his life experiences, as supported by findings from researchers such as Simms (2014) and Þórðardóttir (2019), the researcher concludes that *“Lamb to the Slaughter”* is indeed a story that serves a greater hidden purpose than only as an ironic tale for entertainment purposes.

Seemingly at the surface of the story, Dahl keeps an emphasis on the portrayal of how men treat women as inferior, only to be revealed in the end he breaches through the exemplar and reverses the portrayal. Relating to radical feminism which holds that women’s oppression is the most universal yet deepest form of oppression exacted by men towards women, the two forms of oppression- interpersonal and ideological oppression experienced by Mary can be

summarized owing to Mary's lack of power and rights in an oppressive patriarchal society. Additionally, society's biased perception held widely against women, believing that women are incapable and incompetent- is the root of social inequality issues. The researcher infers that social inequality issues result in women's lack of power and rights, which eventually leads them to being the victims of oppression.

Upon close inspection from evidences gathered from textual analysis, the researcher firmly believes that "*Lamb to the Slaughter*" is a story written by Dahl to address social issues, particularly social inequality. It is believed that the ultimate alteration of the story's paradigm is the product of Dahl's ingenious method of ridiculing the society's paradigm of the "ideal woman". The organization of the story evidently reveals that the sequence is intended to serve the function of inserting an ironic spin to the story- which the researcher infers that it is a technique deliberately used to deride the sexist and male-privileged society in the 19th century.

Lastly, the researcher intends to make clarification that this research only focuses on exploring the story from certain aspects- namely radical feminist theory and textual analysis. Owing to this factor, the conclusion made by the researcher on the overall meaning of the story may not only be about addressing social inequality issues. To further validate the accuracy of the conclusion made, another theory or approach should be piloted in order to attain a more general/fulfilling outcome of findings. Furthermore, the researcher personally did not take into consideration Dahl's perception and ideology regarding gender inequality and gender roles alike. This is to say that the conclusion is made entirely based on only the evidences gathered from the analysis. This factor is urged to be taken into consideration by any future researchers as it may or may not give rise to or point towards an entirely differing inference of the analysis.

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