

**Being Cunningham's Women: The Portrayal of Women in Michael
Cunningham's *The Hours***

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ABSTRACT

This present study entitled *Being Cunningham's Women: The Portrayal of Women in Michael Cunningham's The Hours* is aimed to unearth the way in which Michael Cunningham, as a male author, portrays women in the novel *The Hours*. This study employs qualitative descriptive method coupled with textual analysis approach. It can be seen from the portrayal of women as the ones who are unconfident and exhausted in domestic sphere yet powerful enough to make their own decision to liberate themselves from the exhaustion caused by their life. In other words, Cunningham subverts Gubar's (1980, cited in Lange, 2008) notion that male authors perceive women as "blank page." With the benefit of stream of consciousness method, Cunningham has successfully portrayed women's experience and their situation accurately while, at the same time, diffusing liberal feminism value in his work.

Keywords: *Feminism, Liberal Feminism, Portrayal, Stream of Consciousness*

INTRODUCTION

Most portrayal of life from female point of view in literature is written by women authors (Lange, 2008, p. 1). However, male authors too have written fictions about women and some of them 'have attempted to see life from a woman's perspective' (ibid.). Feminism has been suspicious towards fictions written by male authors as they provide feminine idealization that, 'through the centuries, have served as propaganda to keep women in their place' (Williamson, 2001, p. 2). In her extended essay, Virginia Woolf argues that female characters featured in early literary works such as Sophocles', Shakespeare's, Tolstoy's, Flaubert's 'have burnt like beacons...lacking in personality and character' (Woolf, 1929), giving an impression that male authors have never been portraying female accurately and attempt to either make themselves feeling superior or make women 'completely insignificant' (ibid.).

Some research regarding the way male authors portray women in their work of fiction have been

conducted by Roger (1996), Miner (1997), and Ruunaniemi (2001). Roger (1996) conducted an analysis of how women are portrayed in Ian McEwan's fictions. From her study, it is concluded that, in some of McEwan's fictions, women are portrayed in a way that 'encapsulates the idea of Simone de Beauvoir, that the construction of woman as incidental to man and only reference to man can be accepted by woman' (Roger, 1996, p. 11). It is due to the fact that during his adolescence, he had a little knowledge of girls since he was sent to all-boys boarding school. This research is similar to that of Ruunaniemi (2001) which is concerned with the portrayal of women in F. Scott Fitzgerald's fictions throughout his literary career. The study shows that the portrayal of women in F. Scott Fitzgerald fictions changes throughout time. In his early fictions, Fitzgerald portrays women as the ones who aspire to acquire personal liberation and want to be free, while in his later works Fitzgerald portrays 'women who actively work to reach that goal' (Ruunaniemi, 2001, p.

116). However, his later works shows some sensitiveness in the condition of women while portraying the yearning for independent in some aspects such as financial, education, and occupation field.

Miner (1997) has also conducted an analysis of how Andre Dubus wrote about women in his short stories. Miner discussed about women's voice and women's experience represented in the three works of Dubus – *Anna*, *Leslie in California*, and *Rose* – that focus intently on female characters. The study shows that in Dubus' stories the female characters are in an attempt to establish 'herself as herself' (ibid., p. 20), meaning that each of these women is portrayed as autonomous individual who seeks her identity through the events she experiences.

One of works written by contemporary male author that focuses on the life of women and women's experience is *The Hours*. Published in 1998, *The Hours* is a Pulitzer Prize winning novel that tells about three different women from different historical periods

whose stories are intertwined in the end of the novel. Written by a male American novelist, Michael Cunningham, each of the stories tells 'the experience of a particular woman during the course of one day' (Nogueira, 2009, p. 32). *The Hours* is opened with a prologue which later is followed by three narrative threads. They are Mrs. Woolf's section where ('fictional but entirely plausible' (Wood, 1998)) Virginia Woolf writes her *Mrs. Dalloway* while longing for London life in the end of World War I Richmond; Mrs. Brown section where a housewife Laura Brown prepares a party for her husband's birthday in 1950s America; and Mrs. Dalloway section where Clarissa Vaughan, nicknamed Mrs. Dalloway, an editor living in the end of 20th century New York is preparing a party for her AIDS-stricken friend. These women have a similarity: they are experiencing an existential anguish that makes them rethink and reconsider the choices they had made in their life. In the end of the novel, the readers are made known that those women are connected in a way

they are writer, reader, and character of the novel *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Cunningham uses stream of consciousness narrative method in *The Hours*. Stream of consciousness method refers to the presentation of characters thoughts as they continue to act in the fiction. This method gives the reader insight of what is going on in characters' mind and what emotional process they feel (Humphrey, 1954; Barnes, n.d.; Lethbridge & Mildorf, 2004). The method is commonly used by modernist novelist such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, and Dorothy Richardson. To a great extent, *The Hours* is actually based on Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, and said as Cunningham's act of homage to the later novel (Schiff, 2004, p. 365).

Unlike the previous studies that have been mentioned above, this study takes one work written by a male author as the object of the study while using the framework theory of liberal Feminism as a guidance to achieve the goal of this study.

The reason why liberal feminism is chosen as the guidance of this study is because it mainly focuses on gender equality in society. Its root can be traced back to a publication written by Mary Wollstonecraft in 1792. In her work, she noted that biological differences between women and men should not be used as 'the basis for differential rights and roles' (Sample, 2006, p. 334). She also asserted that access to education is necessary for women in order to enhance their rationality so that they can be more productive as fully responsible moral agents (ibid.).

Echoing Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill and his later wife, Harriet Taylor (Mill), also gave contributions in the study of liberal feminism. Even though their approach to liberal feminism is slightly different, they basically focus on equality between husband and wife in domestic sphere.

In terms of women's condition in domestic sphere, Betty Friedan also plays an important role in the study of liberal feminism. Her contribution in feminist literature has made her elected as the first

president of the National Organization of Women (NOW) in the United States. She believed that even though sexual equality and women's rights have been acknowledged, women still suffered from 'the problem that has no name' which refers to the sense of dissatisfaction experienced by most suburban housewives in 20th century America (Freidan, 1963; Tong, 2006, p. 28). In her later book, *The Second Stage*, she urged both sexes to 'work toward an androgynous future in which all human beings manifest both traditionally masculine and traditionally feminine traits' (Tong, 2006, p. 32). This notion is supported by psychologist point of view assuming that androgynous person who possesses both good masculine and feminine traits are believed to be more effective and functioning as a human being (Bem, 1989).

Based on these figures' thoughts, in short, liberal feminism seeks to emphasize equal right and liberation for both women and men regardless their sexual differences. This form of feminism also underlines that educated women are

'assumed to be the final judge of their own interest' (Sample, 2006, p. 333) and promotes the liberty for both sexes to decide their sexual orientation and partners (ibid. p. 334).

METHODOLOGY

This study tries to reveal the depiction of women in Cunningham's *The Hours*. To meet the aim of the study, the data in the form of text are collected. Therefore, it makes this study qualitative in nature. Then, the technique of textual analysis is adopted to complement the methodology. It includes textual evidences that are gathered through multiple close-readings. Secondary sources such as previous research regarding women's portrayal in fictions, journals, and books related to the subject being investigated are also taken into account. Moreover, theoretical framework of liberal feminism is used as guidance to achieve the goal of the study. They are all analyzed in order to answer the research question.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

WOMEN'S PORTRAYAL IN *THE HOURS*

Based on the finding of textual evidences in the novel, the study revealed that women are portrayed in the level of main female characters' attitude in domestic sphere, main female characters' traits, and main female characters' decision/action towards self-liberation by the author in the novel *The Hours*.

In regards to main female characters' attitude in domestic sphere, Virginia, Laura and Clarissa are identified as the ones who are unconfident in performing domestic tasks and the ones who feel that they are not their true self. It can be seen from the way the author presents the emotional process and thoughts of the characters through the use of indirect interior monologue. The author, as the heterodiegetic narrator, guides the reader through the flow of characters' consciousness with his commentary and description of the events. However, he remains close to the characters' subjective perception. For example, when Laura Brown is descending the stairs on her way to

the kitchen, she stops only to feel that she has no idea how to act in front of her husband and son (*The Hours*, p. 43).

Still within domestic sphere, Cunningham also portrays women as the ones who are not being their true self. This can be seen from main female characters' thoughts about themselves around their domestic domain. For example, when Clarissa is left alone in her apartment, she feels that her life she has built with Sally, her partner, is not satisfying because it makes her feel like she is not herself (*The Hours*, p. 92). This also happens to both Virginia and Laura. From the description in the novel, Laura is described as the 'bookworm, the foreign-looking one with the dark, close-set eyes and the Roman noses, who had never been sought after or cherished; who had always been left alone, to read' (*The Hours*, p. 40). The reason why Laura married Dan is because it is her duty, since Dan (an ex-soldier) has fought for the country in the World War II and saved the world. However, it is actually not what she really wants. This feeling is shared by Virginia

when she feels that Richmond makes her not her true self. It is because living in Richmond is not something she wants. She wants to live in London but her illness causes her to move to quieter environment. All of female characters' feeling about themselves is presented by the author in a great detail through the use of indirect interior monologue.

In terms of traits possessed by women characters, Cunningham portrays them as the ones who possess good feminine traits such as nurturing, gentle, and tactful; as well as good masculine traits such as ambitious, firm, and independent. Virginia, Laura, and Clarissa have both good feminine side and good masculine side. Their good feminine traits can be seen from the way they treat others. For example, as a mother, Laura makes sure that she is gentle with her son; as a good friend, Clarissa tends Richard through his illness and brings flowers to cheer him, which shows her as a nurturing person; as a housewife, Virginia is tactful in terms of taking care of others' feeling.

Meanwhile, the characters' masculine traits can be seen from the way they decide on something. Virginia is described as firm and ambitious for her work as a writer; Clarissa and Laura are able to make their own conscious decision without others' interference or influence. Thus, these good masculine and feminine traits complement each other, indicating that Cunningham supports Friedan notion about androgynous individuals. While Fitzgerald and McEwan are rather hostile and misogynistic in treating their female characters in their early fiction, Cunningham constructs his characters according to the value of liberal feminism claiming that individuals, be it women or men, should 'work toward an androgynous future in which all human beings manifest both traditionally masculine and traditionally feminine traits' (Tong, 2006, p. 32).

Moreover, the notion of androgyny does not only apply to female characters. Cunningham also constructs his male characters in *The Hours* as androgynous, having and showing certain good feminine traits.

Dan Brown, Richard 'Richie' Brown, Leonard Woolf and Louis Walter are male characters who show some traits that are associated with female such as nurturing, sensitive and emotional. Dan Brown, Laura's husband, shows nurturing trait when he is with his son in the kitchen, serving breakfast and 'ministering to Richie' (*The Hours*, p. 38). Leonard Woolf is also portrayed as "the husband who has nurtured her (Virginia) through her worst periods." Louis Walter, Clarissa's friend, exhibits emotional characteristic as he weeps during the conversation with Clarissa about the person he is in love with. He does so because he is suddenly taken by the 'spasms of emotion' (*The Hours*, p. 134). While, Richard "Richie" Brown shows his sensitive aspects and his appreciation of details in the novel he wrote.

Other level of women's portrayal in the novel is main female characters' decision/action towards self-liberation. Self-liberation is essential in liberal feminism as it is a symbol of the acknowledgement of one's individual choice and equal

respect of personhood (Schwartzman, 2006). Cunningham acknowledges this notion by portraying his characters as the ones who work towards their self-liberation. They want to escape their exhaustion and dissatisfaction by acting on something they are willing to do so they can be happy, if not free. This is in line with the notion of liberal feminism stated by Mill (1869) which calls to all individuals, regardless their sex, to pursue their own desire so that one's happiness can be maximally attained (Mill, 1869, cited in Tong, 2009). Virginia, Laura and Clarissa strive for their happiness by doing something about it. It's a walk to a train station for Virginia; a trip to local hotel for Laura; and a decision to live freely without Richard (her former lover) for Clarissa. Unlike most canonical male authors who portray women as merely sexual object (LeBihan, 1999), Cunningham shows his ability to comprehend that women are not merely sexual entities, but rather as persons who have their own autonomy.

In general, Cunningham has portrayed unconfident and exhausted women in domestic sphere yet they are powerful enough to make their own decision to liberate themselves from the exhaustion caused by their life. Women are constantly portrayed as the ones who are having what Friedan calls as “problem with no name”; when women feel the sense of dissatisfaction among the comfortable life they have built (Friedan, 1963). This can be seen in their attitude within the domestic sphere where they feel unconfident and being not their true self. This portrayal is more apparent in Mrs. Brown section where Cunningham successfully illustrates the feminine mystique discussed by Friedan. However, Cunningham does not tell about a woman who falls to the trap of suburban comfort or the traditional belief that women should glory in their femininity. Rather he vividly pictures the unidentified problem experienced by suburban women in 1950s America like that discussed by Friedan in her *The Feminine Mystique*. In order the reader to feel the sympathy for

Laura, the author mostly uses indirect interior monologue, showing Laura's emotional process and thoughts towards the given events as she feels unconfident doing certain things related to domestic tasks such as being a housewife and a mother.

Cunningham's ways of portraying women in *The Hours* is different from those of most canonical male authors who make women insignificant in their fictions (Woolf, 1929). In contrary to those canonical male authors, Cunningham makes his female characters significant through his commitment to “woman's autonomy and a recognition of her individual and independent importance” (Claridge & Langland, 1990, p. 3). While women are mostly stereotypically portrayed as sex objects in fictions by most canonical male authors, Cunningham portrays women as autonomous individuals who have control over their decision.

Some theorists like Gardiner (1980) claims that the lives experienced by men and women are different in “profound and regular ways” so that it affects the depiction

of gender in their writing (Gardiner, 1980 cited in Lange, 2008). On the other hand, Gubar (1980) claims that men perceive women as “blank page” and that in literary works male authors create something outside themselves (Gubar, 1980, cited in Lange, 2008). However, those claims do not apply to Cunningham in his *The Hours*. Neither does Cunningham try to define what it is like to be a woman nor does he treat women as “blank page.” Rather, he bases his writing on real women’s experience as depicted in Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* and his interpretation of the lives of Virginia Woolf and on the character Clarissa Dalloway in Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Finally, the ability of Cunningham in portraying women has everything to do with his employment of stream of consciousness method. Cunningham portrays women’s exhaustion and dissatisfaction with complexity and in such great details. The stream of consciousness method, especially the indirect interior monologue technique allows Cunningham to remain in the three female

characters’ perspective, presenting to the reader the insight into the main female characters’ mind. This narrative detail that Cunningham employs seems to give the reader who stumbles upon his writing an assumption that the author of the story is female. Cunningham remains subjective in terms of the female characters’ perception of given events. Humphrey (1954) argues that the authors using stream of consciousness method in their fictions are ‘trying to depict life accurately’ and ‘the life they were concerned with was the individual’s psychic life’ (Humphrey, 1954 p. 9). Therefore, with the benefit of stream of consciousness method, Cunningham has successfully portrayed women’s experience and their situation accurately while, at the same time, diffusing liberal feminism value in his work.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, this study has answered the research question pondered in the previous section. It is discovered that Cunningham shows the issues discussed in liberal feminism by

portraying women in the level of attitudes within domestic sphere, traits, and the act/decision towards self-liberation.

Cunningham

illustrates how women can be unconfident in doing domestic tasks and how they are being not their true self within the domestic sphere they inhabit. By this portrayal, he illustrates how domestic sphere can be very exhausting and agitating for women. This illustration conforms Betty Friedan's view on women who are having 'the problem with no name'.

Cunningham supports liberal feminist belief that human being should work towards androgynous future by portraying women in *The Hours* as androgynous persons who possess good feminine and masculine traits. The good feminine traits that women in *The Hours* possess are nurturing, gentle, and tactful. At the same times, the women in the novel also possess good masculine traits such as ambitious, firm, and independent.

Besides being androgynous, women in the novel are portrayed as

the ones who are capable of acting or making decision towards their own self-liberation. This includes acting out of their will and finding an escape to gain freedom from the exhaustion they feel in the domestic domain they inhabit. This is in line with liberal feminism value where individuals, be it men or women, must pursue their own desire so that one's happiness can be maximally attained (Mill, 1869, cited in Tong, 2009).

Lastly, it can be said that these portrayals of women in the novel are different from that of most feminist critics claim. The author shows women's dissatisfaction and exhaustion with complexity and in great details. Liberal feminism values are found within the novel. As the result, with the benefit of stream of consciousness method, the author has successfully written women's experience and their situation without being hostile and misogynistic.

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