

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Social life is arranged with the hierarchical binary categories of man/woman, masculine/feminine, male/female, and other gender-based categories where gender inequality might exist because women are constructed as inferior to men (Nash, 2020, p.43). Even though gender is arguably just cultural assumptions and practices (Barker and Jane, 2016), feminine attributes are still seen to be less valuable than those masculine attributes (Nash, 2020, p.43), and women are subordinate compared to men. A system of beliefs which exist in political, social, and economic systems that structured gender inequality between men and women is called patriarchy where it privileges men by perpetuating traditional gender roles (Nash, 2020, p.43).

Traditional gender roles may be defined as certain roles, responsibilities, and interests of men and women based on cultural expectations and social norms (Burt, 1980; Parent & Moradi, 2009, 2010, cited from Johnson and Johnson, 2017, p.3). Traditional gender roles

construct men as superior, dominant, strong, and aggressive whilst women are seen to be inferior, submissive, fragile, and passive (p.3&4). Although labeled as “traditional”, these cultural and social norms still applied up to this day. As a result, traditional gender roles could endorse and perpetuate gender inequality and women’s oppression since it controls women’s role and limit their opportunity in many life aspects such as education, relationship, career, and so on.

The data from UNICEF (2019) showed that the literacy rate among youth people at the age 15-24 and adults in over two decades has increased from 81% to 92%. However, the data from UNICEF (2020) found that in recent years, men are still more literate than women since women cover up to 56% total of the illiterate youth population worldwide. The data furthermore showed that the number might be caused by the lack of access and opportunity for women to attend school. Although the number had decreased from 2000 to 2018 (girls went from 57 million to 32 million and boys went from 42 million to 27 million), 55% out of 59 million out-of-school children in 2018 were girls. The variety of obstacles that children had to face often in forms of poverty, geographic remoteness, lack of school infrastructures, poor-quality education, and of course, gender inequality (UNICEF, 2020) where girls have less opportunity to afford proper education than boys. Even with those who can afford it, another problem such as the inability to join the professional workspace might occur.

According to Catalyst (2021), of all participants in the global labor force, women only represent 38.8% of it, and the existence of gender gap is the result of the structural barriers and cultural restrictions which prevent women from join the labor force and instead spend more time doing unpaid work and house chores. Catalyst compared that only 1.5% of men work full-time in doing unpaid work whereas women are up to 21.7%. Thus, women's places are somehow still limited in the domestic sphere. Even if women are finally able to join the professional workspace, they still have to deal with their daily struggle between advancing their careers and fulfill the needs of the family (Bierema, 2016, p.120). These might be caused by the cultural and social construction where it is believed that the domestic stuff is only the responsibility of the "mother", and thus, it preserves the never-ending gender inequality.

Gender inequality will oppress women since it might cost women their freedom, and in many cases, it makes them have to give up on their dreams due to their inability to make choices in their life. As a result, women might also lose their sense of self-identity. The concept of self-identity by Anthony Giddens from his book *Modernity and Self Identity* (1991) is used to help the writer describe the idea about identity. For Giddens, identity is a variable that depends on the particular time where someone is living (Golubović, 2011, cited in Mushtaq Ahmed and Basir, 2019, p.282). Thus, self-identity is formed by one's ability to hold on to his/her self-narration (Giddens, 1991, cited in

Barker and Jane, 2016, p.261). Instead of being a passive entity whose meaning is determined for them, the self could perform based on its intentions and affect the social structures (Tashma Baum, 2014, p.409-405). In a world where the meaning of her life is often determined by others as a result of gender's oppression, a woman might lose her ability to hold on to her self-narration. Thus, she might be could not determine her own identity.

Fortunately, many women are aware of the oppression they have to face and try to seek equality, and thus, feminism is born. Although there are many different approaches, perspectives, frameworks, and standpoints of feminism, the main purpose is to fight patriarchy and undo women's oppression (Tong and Botts, 2017). Feminism can be called as a plural field of theory and politics which asserts the cultural construct of gender differences in the interpretation of literary work (Mehrpuoyan and Banehmir, 2014, p.200; Barker and Jane, 2016, p.343). Therefore, problems about gender inequality and women's oppression along with the solution to eliminate those problems can be seen depicted in many pieces of literature.

As one form of literary work with the main issue about gender inequality, this study will use a novel entitled *Well-Behaved Indian Women* by Saumya Dave as its corpus. The novel tells a story about Nandini and Simran, a mother and daughter, who have to deal with gender inequality which exists in their life and try to fight for their own life choices. Although they live in the current American society, the traditional standards about well-behaved

Indian women are still embedded in their family and often in contrast with what they try to achieve. Their customs make it always easier for the men in the family, and as a woman, they often see themselves lack of power and have no equal opportunity especially in terms of their career, education, relationship, and they need to fill the high expectation of the predefined gender roles that are imposed to them by the society. The novel tries to show how Nandini and Simran's journey in facing and overcoming gender inequality. The writer chose this novel because the novel was published recently, so its depiction of gender inequality might be more relevant to the recent time.

For that reason, this study will conduct research to see the portrayal of gender inequality in the novel and how the characters try to overcome it, so they do not lose their sense of identity. This study will use the theory of existentialist feminism by Simone de Beauvoir. Beauvoir published her book, *The Second Sex*, which later will be an important theoretical text for 20th-century feminism (Tong and Botts, 2018) in 1949. The book contains her famous quote that "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman." She argued that while man is the self, a woman is the other, and in this otherness from men, women are oppressed (Beauvoir, in Tong and Botts, 2018). Thus, instead of being the object whose meaning is determined for her, a woman must move beyond the definitions, labels, and essences that limit her existence to fully be whomever she wants to be (Beauvoir, in Tong and Botts,

2018). By following her own choice, a woman might be able to determine her own identity. The writer chose this theory because it explains the importance of women's free will and the correlation between women's otherness and their ability to determine their self-identity.

Some previous studies have been done using the same approaches and similar issues with this study. In 2020, Małgorzata Durygin in the research entitled "Simone de Beauvoir and a period of transition" used Beauvoir's approach to analyze the inequality women had to face in a transition time as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. This study found that during the pandemic, women had to suffer and were more prone to experience gender discrimination in the public and domestic sphere. Victoria Walker (2012) in the study "Ornithology and Ontology: The Existential Birdcall in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Anna Kavan's *Who Are You?*" used Beauvoir's approach to analyze the existence of birdcall as a symbolization of the absence of female characters' identity after marriage. The study showed that the portrayal of birdcall is a reflection of the characters who lose their identities. Marwan Harb Alqaryouti and Hanita Hanim Ismail (2019) in their study "Women as the 'Other' in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*" used Beauvoir's theory to analyze the role of the self and the other. The study found that the role of the self and the other in the main characters of the novel were shifted, so the woman in the novel was not following the idea of woman as the

other since she could follow her desire and did what she wanted while the man was portrayed as the weaker side.

Meanwhile, in 2019, Younus Ahmed Mushtaq Ahmed and Norasikin Basir used Giddens' concept of self-identity in their study entitled "Transition in Self-Identity: A Sociological Narrative of Tamil Muslims in Malaysia" to analyze the transformation of Tamil Muslims in Malaysia's identity. The study found that the ethnicity with which the Tamil Muslims associate themselves changed according to their age. Brita Ytre-Arne (2012) used Giddens' theory of reflexive self in the study entitled "POSITIONING THE SELF Identity and women's magazine reading" to see how the readers of women's magazines interpret the magazine and its correlation to identity construction. The study found that women's magazines might be not crucial in building the readers' identity construction, but identity construction was important in interpreting the magazine since a different person could interpret the same thing differently.

From the previous studies above, none of the studies used Beauvoir's approach to analyze the portrayal of gender inequality from its cause until the process to overcome the inequality which will be analyzed in this study. Also, none of the previous studies above used Giddens' concept of self-identity to analyze gender inequality. This study will analyze the *Well-Behaved Indian Women* novel to see the cause of gender inequality, its embodiment, how the

characters try to overcome it, and its relations with self-identity by using Beauvoir's existentialist feminism and Giddens's self-identity.

1.2 Research Questions

The research questions of this study are:

1. How is gender inequality portrayed in Saumya Dave's *Well-Behaved Indian Women*?
2. How does gender inequality affect the characters' self-identity?

1.3 Purpose of the Study

Based on the research questions above, this study aims to:

1. Explain how gender inequality is portrayed in *Well-Behaved Indian Women*.
2. Describe how gender inequality affects the character's self-identity.

1.4 Scope of the Study

This study focuses on the narrations that portray the existence of gender inequality and self-identity of the two main female characters in the novel *Well-Behaved Indian Women* by Saumya Dave. This study will use Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism and Giddens' self-identity to see gender inequality experienced by Nandini and Simran.

1.5 Significance of the Study

The result of this study is expected to give a better understanding about Beauvoir's existentialist feminism and Giddens' self-identity. It is also expected that this study could become a reference for future researchers who want to conduct a similar topic about gender inequality or self-identity, or for future researchers who want to use the same approaches with this study.

