

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Gender inequality is a multifaceted global challenge deeply entrenched in centuries of societal, cultural, and historical norms (Cermakova & Mahlberg, 2021). While strides have been made towards gender equality, discriminatory practices and injustices against women continue to permeate various aspects of life. These include disparities in social settings, employment, education, family life, economic, and political spheres. Language, as Formanowicz & Hansen (2022) contend, plays a significant role in perpetuating gender inequality by encoding and transmitting discriminatory biases. Societal stereotypes, which limit the roles and capabilities of both men and women, further underpin gender inequality (Gangal et al., 2024).

Gender inequality is also linked to the normalization of patriarchal culture (Lestariyana et al., 2020). A patriarchal system that places men as the center of power still dominates society. This causes women to often experience subordination and be considered powerless. This gender inequality has a wide-ranging impact, not only on women but also on society as a whole. Gender inequality limits women's potential to contribute fully to societal development. This can trigger social conflict and instability in society. Therefore, it is important to have balanced gender representation in society across various media. Williams (2022) mentions that one medium that can depict representations and critiques of gender inequality are through literature.

Literature serves as a lens through which we can understand gender structures. Literature itself is a reflection of society, often mirroring and reinforcing prevailing norms and social structures, including gender structures (Williams, 2022). Through characters, language, plot, and themes, literature shapes our perceptions of what it means to be a man or a woman. Literature can uncover hidden gender structures, both in terms of stereotypes and gender

hierarchies (Dahllof, 2024). Literature often exposes gender stereotypes that already exist in society. For example, women are often portrayed as weak, emotional, and dependent on men, while men are depicted as strong, rational, and dominant. Additionally, literature can reveal how power is unequally distributed between men and women. For instance, in many folktales, men often serve as heroes who rescue women, demonstrating the passive position of women and their need for help.

Moreover, literary works can be used to identify critiques of gender structures and understand the transformation of these structures (Langah & Umrani, 2022). Literature can serve as a medium for voicing experiences and perspectives. Feminist literature, for example, often criticizes existing gender structures and offers alternative viewpoints. Some literary works seek to deconstruct existing gender stereotypes (Mandolini, 2021). For instance, by creating strong, independent, and intelligent female characters, or by depicting men who have emotional and vulnerable sides. Literature can also show how gender representations change along with social and cultural changes. For example, a comparison between 19th-century literature and contemporary literature will show how the role of women in society has undergone a transformation.

Therefore, the study of gender representation in literature, including gender inequality and gender role, is an invaluable tool for understanding how literary texts shape our perceptions of gender, reinforce or challenge existing gender structures, and drive social change. Through literary analysis, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of gender issues and how we can contribute to creating a more just and equitable society.

One literary work that can be used to examine gender representation is Liane Moriarty's novel, *Big Little Lies*. *Big Little Lies* is a novel that successfully stirs the reader's emotions with its suspenseful plot and complex characters. *Big Little Lies* has received widespread attention and acclaim, not only as a bestselling novel but also as the basis for a successful HBO

television adaptation (Moriarty, 2014; HBO, 2017; The New York Times, 2014). The novel explores gender inequality hidden behind a veneer of affluence. On the surface, the lives of the mothers in *Big Little Lies* appear perfect: luxurious homes, intelligent children, and successful husbands. However, beneath this flawless facade lie complex problems, particularly those related to gender. Beneath the intriguing tale of mothers in a small town, the novel also highlights relevant social issues, particularly gender inequality, women's roles, and power dynamics in interpersonal relationships. The novel had been reviewed by New York Time Book Review and received positive comments. Many reviews of the novel praise Moriarty's ability to balance humor, domestic drama, and dark themes like bullying and gender inequalities. Critics often highlight how she explores the hidden struggles of women behind seemingly perfect suburban lives (The New York Times, 2014; HBO, 2017). The female characters in the novel portray various roles often expected of women: the perfect mother, the devoted wife, and the good friend. Yet, behind these roles, they also struggle with societal pressures, unrealistic expectations, and domestic violence.

The relationships between the women in this novel are incredibly complex and dynamic. They compete, envy, and gossip, but at the same time, they also support each other. This dynamic reflects how women often find themselves trapped in conflicted relationships and how they must struggle to gain power and autonomy. The novel doesn't shy away from addressing the issue of violence against women, both physical and psychological. This violence often hides behind seemingly harmonious relationships and is difficult to detect. *Big Little Lies* is a relevant and thought-provoking work of literature. Through an engaging story and complex characters, the novel successfully voices important issues about gender inequality, the role of women, and domestic violence. The novel invites readers to be more aware of the social realities often hidden beneath everyday life. *Big Little Lies* is not just a piece of entertainment but also a literary work that encourages readers to reflect on the gender inequality that still

exists in society. This novel demonstrates that violence against women can happen anywhere, even in seemingly perfect environments. Additionally, the novel highlights the importance of female solidarity in facing various challenges.

Regarding the issue in the novel, there have been several previous studies analyzing the representation of gender in this novel. The first study was conducted by Angelina & Arianto (2022), which discussed family gender roles in the novel *Big Little Lies*. Their research used Eagly's social role theory with a feminist approach. The data collection and analysis method used was documentation and content analysis. The results of their research show that there are two types of gender roles in the family, namely breadwinner and homemaker. This result is in line with what is expected of the roles of women and men in general in society. In addition, the findings in this study also show that there are several male and female characters who can exchange roles. Thus, the researchers conclude that the characters in this novel do not project strictly typical gender roles because husbands and wives in this novel are allowed to exchange roles.

The next research is a study by Kadir et al. (2022) which conducts a comparative analysis on gender issues in two novels, one of which is the novel *Big Little Lies*. This research was conducted to find the differences in types of women's language, the impact of social norms, and the domestic lives of the characters. This research uses a qualitative method by applying Lakoff's theory. This research applies a feminist approach to find liberal feminism as an impact of social norms. The results of the study show that there are 5 types of women's language used in the novel *Big Little Lies*. These languages indicate that women's married life is very complex and their freedom of speech is always related to social norms and the rules that apply in society.

Further research, namely a study by Khalid & Ahmad (2024) explored how women defy social stereotypes in the novel *Big Little Lies*. This research employed Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) as its theoretical framework. The results indicate that the novel

portrays women as complex and strong individuals, capable of balancing various roles in life. They are not limited to the roles of mothers or wives but are also actively involved in careers and face life's challenges courageously. Through their stories, the novel critiques societal views that often underestimate women's abilities. Furthermore, the novel highlights the importance of solidarity among women in the face of injustice and discrimination. According to this research, "Big Little Lies" is not only entertaining but also serves as a reflection and a transformer of societal views on gender, class, and the role of women in society.

Based on previous studies, the focus of each study varies, such as the role of gender in the household, women's language, and how women challenge traditional stereotypes. These studies also use different methods and theories. While other approaches such as **feminist literary criticism** or **sociological analysis** could certainly provide valuable insights into gender representation in *Big Little Lies*, this study will use **Critical Discourse Analysis**. CDA offers the most comprehensive and detailed lens through which to investigate how gender inequality and gender roles is constructed, represented, and challenged in the text (Rubhani et al., 2024). CDA's focus on the relationship between language, power, and ideology makes it uniquely equipped to analyze the ways in which gender inequalities and power dynamics are both subtly reinforced and contested in the novel, providing a critical reading of how gender operates within the discourse of everyday life. Thus, in this study, the researcher will examine gender representation using Fairclough's (2015) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to gain a broader and deeper understanding. Because this novel depicts gender issues in a fictional context that is relevant to contemporary social issues, further review of this novel using the CDA lens is needed. By implementing CDA, this study will critically explore gender inequalities and gender roles.

However, this research is limited to the textual dimension of Fairclough's three-dimensional model. At the textual level, the analysis focuses on linguistic features such as

vocabulary choices, transitivity, modality, and clause structures to examine how gender roles and gender inequality are represented in the novel. Through this textual analysis, the study investigates how language constructs particular representations of women and men, especially in relation to domestic roles, power relations, and social expectations.

To deepen the linguistic dimension of this analysis, Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is integrated, with particular attention to the textual metafunction. This metafunction examines how information is organized and structured within a text—specifically through devices such as theme and rheme, cohesion, and information flow. When applied in conjunction with CDA, the textual metafunction allows the researcher to critically examine how certain gendered meanings are foregrounded, backgrounded, or naturalized through language choices. According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), the textual metafunction concerns how language organizes information within a clause and across a text so that it becomes coherent and meaningful in context. It focuses on the arrangement of Theme and Rheme, cohesion, and information flow. For instance, by analyzing which characters or ideas are consistently placed in thematic positions, the study can reveal how the narrative privileges or marginalizes particular gender roles and ideologies. Additionally, patterns of cohesion and reference may indicate how characters are grouped, aligned, or distanced in terms of gendered identity.

Thus, the integration of CDA and Halliday's SFL textual meta function provides both a critical and linguistic framework for uncovering how gender operates within the discourse of the novel. This combined approach enables a broader and deeper understanding of the narrative's engagement with contemporary gender issues, particularly those related to power dynamics, social structures, and identity in domestic and public spheres.

1.2 Research Questions

1. How is gender inequality is portrayed in the novel *Big Little Lies*?

2. How are the gender roles in society portrayed in the novel *Big Little Lies*?

1.3 Purpose of the Study

1. To analyze how gender (inequality) is represented in the novel.
2. To describe how gender roles (and positions of women) in society are portrayed in the novel *Big Little Lies*

1.4 Scope of the Study

This study will delve into the portrayal of gender in Liane Moriarty's novel, *Big Little Lies*. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a framework, the research will examine how gender representations are depicted through the narrative, dialogue, and character interactions.

Research Limitations:

1. The focus of analysis will be confined to the 2014 edition of *Big Little Lies*. All interpretations will be drawn solely from the novel's content.
2. The study will primarily concentrate on gender roles and stereotypes within the textual narrative. This includes the examination of main characters like Madeline, Celeste, Jane, and others, and the social and cultural forces influencing their gender identities.
3. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) will be employed to uncover how language constructs and reflects power dynamics, dominance, and gender inequality within the text. The analysis will identify language patterns related to gender and explore how these discourses contribute to shaping social and cultural norms.
4. The analysis will be limited to the textual narrative and dialogue within the novel itself, excluding any broader social or cultural context beyond the text.

By examining these aspects, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of gender representation in contemporary literature and how gender discourses can illuminate broader societal dynamics.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This research is expected to enrich the ongoing discussion about gender's role in modern literature. By analyzing literary works, this research aims to shed light on how literature can portray, challenge, and uphold societal gender norms.

