

Gender Inequality in Japanese Fairy Tales with Female Main Character

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Abstract. Gender at root is a system of inequality that is founded on cultural beliefs about status differences between men and women. Women usually became the one who are disadvantaged in a relatively similar-situated men. This paper discusses the gender inequality upon women that can be found in Japanese fairy tales that have female main character entitled *Kaguyahime* and *Tsuru no Ongaeshi*. Fairy tales chosen as the object of this study because as a traditional story that is told from generation to generation, fairy tales are able to absorb aspects of life found in the supporting community groups, both in the form of social problems, ethics, and others. The results of feminist literary criticism on the object of this study are that both of the fairy tales has four forms of the gender inequality acts toward women, which are marginalization, subordination, stereotyping, and gender-related violence; and none of them has the double workload form. This could be due to the fact that when this fairy tale made, there were none of any women's activities are performed in the public sphere, as well as being a housewife in their domestic sphere.

Keywords: gender inequality; Japanese; fairy tales; feminist literary criticism

1 Introduction

Anthony Giddens and William Sewell have stated that all sorts of social structures have an inherent dual nature. On the one hand, it consists of the implicit rules or cultural schemas by which people set the structure. On the other hand, material distributions of behaviors, resources, and power that result by which of the observable [1]. For example is the structure of typical classroom. It consists of the cultural concepts or rules that followed by students and teachers to shape their behavior toward one another. On the other hand, the observable distributions between students and teachers of behaviors, power, and resources that emerge from their actions.

According to Giddens and Sewell, there are rules for structure that based on widely shared contemporary beliefs about gender. Our current views of who men and women and why they are unequal are the results of those rules which are for establishing social relations in a manner that has arranged between men and women. We all know how to act like a woman or a man precisely, because we all know our culture's taken for granted beliefs—its

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stereotypes—about who men and women are and how they behave. But by acting on these beliefs, then we all end up materially demonstrating the differences and inequality between men and women that these stereotypes suggest [1]. These stereotypes describe the traits or attributes that people associate with the typical man or woman. In that sense, they are “descriptive” in nature, providing a template of what people take to be the way men and women behave in common. But as the rules of gender, gender stereotypes have a “prescriptive” quality as well, which include standards of behavior from which deviations will be punished.

Gender at root is a system of inequality that is founded on cultural beliefs about status differences between men and women. Yet, to persist over time, the widely shared cultural beliefs that confer greater status on one category of people, which is men, than on another, which is women, must be supported by significant differences between those people. And usually, those significant differences are in the form of material resources and power.

Although we speak about gender inequality, women usually became the one who are disadvantaged in a relatively similar-situated men. Nemoto stated that gender inequality in Japan “continues to be seen as legitimate.” The way Japanese culture forms families are continually legitimizing gender inequality. Japanese women in a moderately high level status has now trapped in a way from which there is not yet any easy escape for those who might wish to do so [2]. While Japanese women rank among the highest in the world in personal autonomy, financial security, physical safety, education, health care, low infant mortality, and high life expectancy, they remain ranked near the very bottom of the world’s wealthy nations, which is 104th in 2014, in gender equality measured as participation, especially at higher levels, in political, economic, and public life broadly. This rank is according to the UN’s Gender Inequality Index, Social Watch’s Gender Equity Index, and the World Economic Forum’s Gender Gap Index [2].

In Japan, man is placed above woman, just as the head above the body. This status asymmetry involving female inferiority, subordination, and vulnerability ties in with legal patricentricity in property ownership, household headship, and succession. Japanese Confucianism assimilated the Chinese idioms of such gender hierarchy as “the seven rationales for divorcing the wife” and woman’s “three obedience” (first to her father, then to her husband when married, and last to her son when widowed) [3]. These were understood symbolically to impress male superiority and dominance upon women. The *ryousai kenbo* (meaning “good wife, wise mother”) role of Japanese women seems to be came from the perspective of the present age Confucianism, with its focus on division of labor as the proper relationship between husband and wife.

This paper discusses the gender inequality upon women that can be found in Japanese fairy tales that have female main character entitled *Kaguyahime*, or in English often translated as *The Tale of Bamboo Cutter*, and *Tsuru no Ongaeshi*, or in English usually translated as *The Crane’s Return*. I chose fairy tales as the object of this study because people will never be separated from storytelling activities as part of a community group in daily lives, whether it is real or fictional stories. And as a traditional story that is told from generation to generation, fairy tales are able to absorb aspects of life found in the supporting community groups, both in the form of social problems, ethics, and others [4].

Fairy tales often adapted in other form of literary works, for example is in *shōjo manga*. *Shōjo manga* is a *manga* or Japanese style comic book that aimed at young teen females target-demographic readership, which covers many subjects in a variety of narrative styles, from historical drama to science fiction, often with a focus on romantic relationships or emotions. For example, a *manga* series entitled *Kaguyahime* which based on *Kaguyahime* fairy tale. By including female characters in a variety of different relationships, *Kaguyahime* comic book takes issues of interpersonal dynamics to a new level, problematizing the concept of “boy” in boy-boy relations and demonstrating that, in the *manga* context, this type of

relationship does not have to be premised on biological sex. The series has integrated this type of relationship with a host of others, thereby minimizing its isolation as special/Other/abnormal and bringing other relationships to the same level, where neither sex nor gender is of particular consequence. *Kaguyahime* comic book also reveals some of the problems with generalizing issues of the gender representation [5]. Meanwhile, although have the same title, this paper focused on the gender inequalities upon women found in *Kaguyahime* and *Tsuru no Ongaeshi* fairy tales, not the comic book version.

2 Method

This research design uses qualitative methods. Data collected in the form of events that related to gender inequalities in the research corpus, which are two Japanese fairy tales entitled *Kaguyahime* [6] and *Tsuru no Ongaeshi* [7]. Data collection using observation and record technique, while the data analysis uses feminist literary criticism design with the following steps: (1) close-reading the fairy tales; (2) collecting data that related to the representation of gender inequalities upon women; and (3) analyzing collected data with the concept of gender inequality and feminist literary criticism.

The aim of feminist literary criticism is to analyze gender relations, the relationship between women and men socially constructed, which among others describes the situation when women are in male domination [8]. Through feminist literary criticism, it will be described the oppression of women contained in literary works. The writing of literary history before the emergence of feminist literary criticism was constructed by male fiction. Therefore, feminist literary critics reconstruct and re-read these works with a focus on women [9].

3 Results and Discussion

The concept of gender inequality used in this study is based on Mansour Fakih's concept concerning gender inequality in his book. Fakih stated that gender inequality is manifested in five forms of interrelated social injustice which are marginalization, subordination, stereotyping, gender-related violence, and double workload [10].

3.1 Marginalization

The first form of gender inequality act toward women can be found in both fairy tales. In *Kaguyahime*, we can see that the old bamboo cutter and his wife nicely play the dichotomy in role spheres, which is "breadwinner : housewife". The old bamboo cutter's wife spent her time to cooked, cleaned their house, and did the laundry. From here, we can be sure that women's foremost role should be that of the "good wife, wise mother". If a woman participates in the male sphere, she is obliged to do so only as a surrogate for her husband, son, or other male kin, or invisibly from the backstage [3].

In *Tsuru no Ongaeshi*, we have been told that the crane as female main character in this fairy tale returned the favor that she received from an old man who set her free from hunter's trap in the wood. She returned the favor by giving the old man beautiful and luxurious fabrics woven from her own feathers, for days. The old man had no idea that those fabrics he received from a beautiful young woman are actually woven from a crane's feathers that he once saved, and the beautiful young woman is actually the incarnation of the crane. And yet, the young

lady nor the crane didn't receive her share when the old man sold the fabrics and received a lot of money. She just flew away when the old man caught her in her crane form.

3.2 Subordination

The subordination of women can be found in both fairy tales. Either in *Kaguyahime* or *Tsuru no Ongaeshi*, the old woman character only described as the old man's wife. Both of them have no important role in the story. In the whole story, those old women just cooking and cleaning. They don't even engage any conversation; they just responding or replying when their husbands talked to them. As I have mentioned in previous section, men is placed above women in Japan. This has led women to felt and eventually accepted the female inferiority, subordination, and vulnerability.

The unimportant role of female character in the fairy tales not only shown in additional character, but also in main character. In *Tsuru no Ongaeshi*, the crane fully aware that if she continued to weave fabrics for the old man from her own feathers will cause her a weaken and damaged body, yet she still doing it. She done this for the old man because that is what a Japanese constructed to do; to return the *on* she received. *On* is a Japanese term used to refer to psychological and social debt imposed on someone for the acceptance of kindness he/she received from others. *On* payments have clear categories based on different rules such as, *on*-time payments of unlimited amounts and times, *on*-payment in quantitative terms or amounts, and *on* to be paid on special occasions [11]. Based on the *on* payments rules, we can say that the crane has paid her *on* to the old man in unlimited amounts and times, because she gave the beautiful and luxurious fabrics for days, not just a one-item or one-time returned favor.

3.3 Stereotyping

Stereotyping is obviously always causing harm and injustice feelings; and gender is one source of stereotyping. Commonly held cultural beliefs about gender are indeed stereotypes, but there are more than just stereotypes or stereotyping; as we all understand that people used to think of widely shared cultural beliefs about men and women as simply stereotypes. For instance, it reflected in the popular phrase that "men are from Mars and women are from Venus".

Stereotyping in both fairy tales can be found in the old men's wives who only have domestic sphere in their whole life, while their husbands can freely go anywhere they wanted or needed. The domestic sphere here confirms Sherry B. Ortner's statement that women's primary place remains at the domestic sphere [12].

Another form of stereotyping that can be seen in both fairy tales are the one that I have mentioned in my previous paper. In *Kaguyahime*, the emperor (man) who tried to protect Princess Kaguya was described as a strong and protective person, while she was described as a weak one who need to be protected. She also portrayed as an obedience daughter who didn't protest nor said anything, when her foster father accepted men who came flocked to their house to marry her [4]. And likewise, the old man in *Tsuru no Ongaeshi* saved the crane from some hunter's trap, who later transformed herself into a beautiful young woman to return the old man favor.

3.4 Gender-Related Violence

Gender-related violence is not always physically, but also verbally and mentally. Let alone raping, even catcalling or dirty jokes is included in the violence. We can see the gender-

related violence in *Kaguyahime* fairy tale in stereotyping section. Princess Kaguya's foster father seemed to "softly" forced an arranged married to her with some rich nobleman she never knew. I used the word "softly" because her father at least gave her a chance to choose one over five nobleman who came to propose her.

In *Tsuru no Ongaeshi*, the old man peeked in the young woman's room who stayed in his house for several days, just like the men did to Princess Kaguya who was asked to stay in her room by her foster father. For some people, this kind of act perhaps do not count as gender-related violence form, but it is. In his book, Fakih clearly mentioned the types and their form of gender-related violence. They are (a) rape, including marital rape; (b) domestic violence and child abuse; (c) genital mutilation; (d) prostitution; (e) pornography; (f) enforced sterilization; (g) molestation; and (h) sexual and emotional harassment, including unwanted attention from men [10].

3.5 Double Workload

Working women usually have the burden of double workload, publicly and domestically, while men don't have it. It doesn't matter if the working woman is the main supporter of the family; she still has to do the domestic work by herself. And this is the reality that women from all over the world have to face. But this last form of gender inequalities act toward women was not found neither in *Kaguyahime* nor *Tsuru no Ongaeshi* fairy tales. This could be due to the fact that when this fairy tale made, there were none of any women's activities are performed in the public sphere, as well as being a housewife in their domestic sphere.

4 Conclusions

As an example of Japanese fairy tales, *Kaguyahime* and *Tsuru no Ongaeshi* reflect that the gender inequality toward women have lived in Japan from a long time ago. This isn't surprising, regarding that Japan is a patriarchal nation. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that patriarchal and gender hegemony still live in Japanese society through the gender inequality acts toward women that has been told from generation to generation in their fairy tales. And until now, Japanese gender relations remain deeply patriarchal and unequal.

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