

Language Context and Feminism Representation in Phillis Wheatley's Poetry: A Study of 'On Being Brought From Africa to America'

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ABSTRACT

Poetry is not only a form of creative writing. This literary works also can be used as an act to share an idea and come as an act of formation into the society. In this case, Phillis Wheatley as an African-American woman wrote "On Being Brought from Africa to America" come as an agent of change of inequality in a part of racial issue. The poetry itself talking about her thoughts about religious aspect and also in her society which is segregation between White and Black People. The research came up to analyze its language context from its poetry and find out a feminism representation through a literary works perspective. In this study, qualitative descriptive approach was utilized to analyze the poetry. Furthermore, there are some aspects that can be concluded in this research after it is conducted. First in language context, it is found that the poetry "On Being Brought from Africa to America" affected based on external influence and religious imagery. Second in feminism aspect, this poetry represented women which Phillis Wheatley pass the three phases of tradition writing in a form by woman which lead creativity became an act of expression in social issue.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the society, between man and woman have a segregation that it is occurs in people's activity. Most of that happen in the people perspective about one gender. In this part, people think that man can be the only agent of change or dominant in every role. For example, that we can see in a job opportunity, social movements, or even in the social class for some particular culture in several traditions. In this part, man has more spotlight and have a higher status rather than a woman.

Along with that, the perspective gender is the basic understanding to find out a clear idea of this segregation. An idea about gender itself can be refers to the social, cultural, psychological constructs that are imposed upon these biological differences (Holmes and Meyerhoff, 2003). This idea can reflect that a gender itself can be known by a wider perspective based on specific aspect among society. Not only seeing from a biological aspect, a gender also represents in people's daily life.

Sometimes, this idea about gender also can bring a stereotype that can be a root of people's main set. Any differences in gender in the adjectives used by men and women to describe themselves and others (Ember and Ember, 2004). Ember stated that this adjective can be seen in two areas, which are an adjective may be ascribed differentially and an adjective that may be endorsed differentially by men and women themselves. So based on this part, the stereotype about gender itself can be occur from each individual by naturally.

Furthermore, the stereotype of gender is begun to change from time to time. Women especially try to bring fairness in daily aspect which have a hope that they can stand equal with a man. In the eighteen centuries, the movement of equality among fairness in gender move rapidly around the world. This is also

become as a basic background to the bigger act of feminism until the present day. The movement itself can be varying, but one of the popular acts for women to express in equality is using a literature.

As in studies perspective, a literature can bring an open-minded world and a new perspective about one particular idea which is come as a complex point of view among societies. In detail, literature also can provide an objective base for knowledge and understanding for broader aspects such as cultural, religious world, or philosophic (Lismayanti and Aryensi, 2020). Literature also can be known for several works such as song, short story, drama, and also poetry. But for the eighteen century, and poem or poetry become popular that is used for people to express their thoughts.

The question, why poetry is popular among any other literature? It is because this kind of works can be written, read, or even listened by all kinds and conditions of people (Arp and Johnson, 2012). Not only can be understandable for every people, poetry itself also sometimes can be used for social function in the society. This social function can be involved in every aspect such are political, religious, social, and any other things that related for people (Mumin and Sudrajat, 2021).

Based on that perspective about poem or poetry, one of the African-American women that use this kind of literature to talk about social function is Phillis Wheatley. She was born in West Africa and later on she spent her whole life in the United States. Work as a slave in Boston, she has been purchased by Wheatley family on there. By Wheatley family, she has been taught by this family to write and also to read. Time by time, Phillis Wheatley has her talent. And one of her talents is to write the poetry. After see her talent, Wheatley family is encouraged them to write poetry, and the result is Phillis Wheatley Peters can make several famous poetries that can it is important for the American Literature itself in the period of American Revolution.

Since she has the first African-American female poet, her works by her poetry bring several changes in the Unites States itself, especially about the views and for the ideas about the African-American people that can bring something crucial and, on that time, woman is not have an equality with man, so at that time, there is a gap for the gender itself for American's society. Even white people or black people itself, the gap of that gender is significantly seeing in several aspects of life such as in the society, jobs, education, and so on.

Phillis Wheatley or sometimes known as Phillis Wheatley Peters has written several works about poetry in her life. From all her works, one works that is popular among society is titled "On Being Brought from Africa to America". This poetry appeared in 1773 on volume *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious, and Moral*. Some people thought that poetry "On Being Brought from Africa to America" is Wheatley's works to express her thanks for having brought to America and rose as a Christian from Wheatley family.

Besides her expression of thankfuly, this poetry at that time also occurs as a protest sign perspective about slavery in the Unites States. The meaning also has a related between the religion itself, especially from the Christian aspects and with the black people that even black people can be saved by Christian religion, not only for the white people itself.

Related about the background above, the researcher intends to find out the language context that is used in this poetry which can bring a meaningful or not. And also, the researcher also wants to know if the poetry "On Being Brought from Africa to America" can represent feminism perspective or not.

In a literary works, poetry is one kind of a works that is popular until nowadays. Why is it still popular in our world? Simply, because it is memorable for all the readers. Sometimes, poetry also can bring a value of people's live and also its wisdom in the humanity. The other thing that poetry is memorable because it is immediate through its sounds a rhythm which can speak to people directly and forcefully (Gill, 2006). According to the *Perine's Lietarute: Structure, Sound & Sense* by Greg Johnson and Thomas R. ARP, poetry can be defined as a kind of language that says more and says it more intensely than does ordinary language (Johnson & Thomas, 2016). From that statement, we can see that poetry is a kind of language which means using an extraordinary language and also different language than a daily language itself that we use it every day.

The basic definition of poetry is also aligning from the other perspective. Poem or poetry itself also can be referred as a kind of language that says more and more intensely that what people did in everyday activities with the language itself (Siswantoro in Siregar, 2022). Language that is using in the works of poetry has to be something deep in each word since the context of this kind of literature need to be meaningful. It is also aligned with us as human that we need an inspiration and also able to give an inspiration to the others. This also would lead that the poetry itself is essentially and exclusively the product of such inspiration, fervor, mania, or frenzy, such as a long poem of epic dimensions (Singh, 1964). In some cases, readers of poetry have to find an encouragement in what poets think (Gill, 2006).

Since poetry can bring as an inspirational subject for other people, the works of making poetry need to be in a part of creative process. Poetry also can be known that kind of a literature that need to be an

integrated process between several things such as creation, mimetic, and also the imagination in a creative process on people's mind (Faizin and Nuryatin, 2017).

As we can know, to make poetry need a deep reflection based on specific context and finding the best words that we can apply in those works, so it has to be impactful to the people who read it. It is also included that most of the poetry works are include a metaphoric that can relate to other perspectives. The metaphor also can be known as figurative language that compares an empirical object that has value in people's society (Diplan, 2024).

In a concept of poetry, there are about four things that can be as an inspiration to make an English poetry (Gill, 2006) which is first, the language of external influence. Inspiration can be from anywhere, especially something that can happen beyond us. That thing can be known as a pressure that compels. Since of that, the works of poetry can be open to influence other people even in the part of language that is subjective. Second, religious imagery that can refer to the imagery of an inspiration is drawn from a Bible. In this part, the creators of poetry can have an inspiration from the God's creation. Third, the language of breathing which can be known that for the creators of poetry, inspiration about life and breath are the main aspects that to make a poetry. The link between creation and breathing can be seen as an expression. And fourth, the language of the Muse since for some of the poetry writers, some of them think that several poetry works inspirations are too elevated. So, because of that, they have a prompting to write a works of poetry.

Based on the several theories above about poetry, we can see that all the works about that literature product can come from the several aspects in what the authors had. The inspiration for poetry can be anywhere and anything that is closely related to the author's life. So, it means that the author itself can expand his or her creativity based on the specific event and express it with a meaningful language for a deeply understanding for what they feel at the moment.

In the society, especially around 18th and 19th century, there are some issues that are spread among the people which bring the impact for its daily activities. For example, like in United States of America and in the European continent, several issues occur in this era. Issues like racism, slavery, and also the equality of gender are the things that closely exist among people.

But from all the issues, one issue that is having a spotlight on that era is feminism in a part of gender equality. Gender equality at that time is not balance just like in the present day. Most of the workers and positions in the society are held by man from time to time. While man do work and any other activities, woman mostly just focus in the house and taking care of daily needs such as cooking, take care their kids, and so on.

Because of that, the movements of feminism try to rise up since woman find equality to become equal with man in the society. In this part, women must take themselves a life-plan, and educate themselves to be more than housewives that they already knew before in a society (Wolfreys, 2002). So, what is feminism if we can see from the context itself? Feminism can be known as an act of woman that demand fully equal between woman and man which is mix from any doctrine of equal rights (Hidayati, 2018). On the other perspective, feminism also can be seen as femininity emerges out of a masculine period which is mandatory for both genders (Gamble, 2001). This emerging act happen because in the gender's position status, woman itself not clearly enough among the society. To make this status clear, feminist, a woman activist who concerns about gender equality believe that change is not only come just through a negotiation. In this part, it should be forced to make something happen (Gamble, 2001). In additional, the meaning of feminism itself can be seeing despite of social difference in a part of gender, woman also can express their opinion about particular idea to people (Kinasih, 2021).

The ideas of feminism itself change not only as an ideology, but also become a changing system in social aspects. In this part, the feminism located in relation to several aspects on people's life such are changing value of systems, shifting any balances of power, and also as the struggles of oppositional groups (Felski, 1989).

As a part of change in feminism, literature works become popular by woman to express what their thoughts and also about what are they felt about. Phillis Wheatley as an example of African-American writers in this part approach directly to the specific condition aligns with her life. According to Lodge and Wood (2000), black woman as a writer's manifest common approaches to the act of creating any literatures as a direct result of specific cases such as social, political, and also economical experience that they want to share.

For example, as what Phillis Wheatley works in produces poetry, she come the inspiration about her life experiences and also with her social status at that time. In an African-American literature on specific, the literary works itself was born in a slave narrative and hence on the public voice (Lanser, 1992).

Showalter in Widyaningrum, *et al.* (2021) stated that there are three phases of a tradition of writing a literature by woman. The three phases are first which female writers often imitate and live with the aesthetics standards of man. This is also can be referred from a dominant tradition. Second, woman writer that becomes

radical, which means that she feels entitled to express her soul in many ways. If she can express herself, then she can raise up any diverse themes even the complex one. In this phase, it can be known as a protest against standard and values. And third, women will do a writing which follows previous pattern and it will be combines with the current condition. Sometimes it is also can be known as a self-discovery or search of an identity for woman.

In the literature perspective, this world can be filled with anyone without thinking about someone's background. People can do make a literary works based on their creativity and also their perspectives with one particular idea. It is not limited for people to make a literary works, especially in poetry. This is also can be known that literature itself become the arena of power struggles in its relation to any social categories such as gender, class, age, ethnicity, and many more (Mulyani, 2022). At this point, feminism as a part of action by woman to express themselves by using a literary works. This will also come as an act of power for each woman to stand up with their existences along with man.

Furthermore, there are three previous studies that can be related to this research to fulfill the research gap. First as in study conducted by Permatasari (2016), it is focused on discrimination toward black women which appears in Maya Angelou's poetry which is using descriptive qualitative method for the object of poem. This research analyzes every datum using content analysis and found three results which are first is discrimination toward black women are related to the bad story of black people, second is the feminism perspective by the poet is the image of Maya Angelou's bad life experiences, and third is image of black woman in Maya Angelou's poems shows the discrimination toward woman in her era. Second as in a research conducted by Pasaribu et al. (2024) which is focused on determine language features in William Shakespeare's selected poems. Using descriptive qualitative method for analyzing Shakespeare's selected poems, the theory that are used such as phonological level, lexical level, and semantical level. For the result, it is stated that the poems itself tells a story about a person who feels hopeless about life and has a strength to live. Furthermore, the third previous studies are made by Tamrin (2016). In this research, it is aimed to reveal feminism idea in Adrienne Rich's selected poems. It is using a feminist theory as the main theory and for the methods using descriptive qualitative with bibliographical which is applied. The result of this work shows that women in Adrienne Rich poems try to their best to fight for their right oppose the culture and patriarchal society tat that time in 20th century.

2. METHODS

In this research, the method that is used is a qualitative descriptive, and there is no counting at the data analysis itself. The qualitative descriptive is used because it is described to describe the language that has a meaningful meaning and also to find out an agent of change in feminism perspective based on the poetry by Phillis Wheatley. A descriptive method can be known used to describe a specific events or problems as they naturally occurred (Donald in Sulaiman, 2017).

While qualitative, it also can be seeing that this method will focus about interpretation based on the subject itself. Mostly, in this type of research focus on understanding the particular distinctive (Halim, 2020). This will along with the basic concept idea about qualitative research. In basic, this type of research not uses any complicated calculations or formula to analyzing any data (Stardy, 2024). It is can be known that qualitative refers about several aspects such as meaning, concepts, definitions, characteristics, or even symbols (Berg, 2001). The qualitative method inversely proportional with a quantitative method since in quantitative, the method focused on counting and measures data in research field activity.

From a significance standpoint, it is importance lies in educating the reader about poetry that has deeper significance and relates to feminism in relation to Phillis Wheatley's works, which we can learn more about once they are examined using the selected theories. The researcher's concentration on Phillis Wheatley's poetry titled "On Being Brought from Africa to America" is also related to the research's scope and limitations.

Furthermore, this research is used an observation of the poetry to get the data and after that, the researcher will analyze the data with the theories itself. For the data steps, the researcher has two steps to get the data. First is finding the poetry and second is analyze the data by using the theories that has been stated in the part of discussion.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The poetry "On Being Brought from Africa to America" by Phillis Wheatley was published in London. This poetry along with her thirty-nine poetries that is published as a book collection of poems with a title

Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral in 1773. Because of her works, this makes her as the first published book by African-American.

Furthermore, the poetry "On Being Brought from Africa to America" that is written by Phillis Wheatley can be seen below.

On Being Brought from Africa to America

By Phillis Wheatley

*'Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
"Their colour is a diabolic die."
Remember, Christians, Negro's, black as Cain,
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.*

Data 1. Poetry "On Being Brought from Africa to America" by Phillis Wheatley. (Source: Lehman, 2006).

A. Analysis about the Language in Poetry

Based on the poetry above, the first thing that we can know about the language itself. As we see, the language that is used in this poetry has a deep meaning for its readers. Based on (Johnson & Thomas, 2016), we can see that this poetry "On Being Brought from Africa to America" by Phillis Wheatley using an extraordinary language and also have an aesthetics itself on its words. Words like *'twas*, *diabolic*, and *sable*, are rarely to use to speak at the daily live or conversations itself. Those words have aesthetics to represent the poetry more meaningful to get the effect for the reader.

The other perspective about language that is also represent in this poetry about its inspiration. Gill (2006) mentioned there are at least four aspects for a poetry writer to make this kind of literary works. Furthermore, in poetry "On Being Brought from Africa to America" itself, it can see two aspects as an inspiration for Wheatley to produce this poetry.

First is the aspect of language in external influence that can be analyzed to the poetry. In the first line, there is a word *'Pagan land'* which can be seeing as an African land that her as a personification language in her works. Phillis herself was born in African continental, which at time Christianity is not really common religion just as in Europe or America. Later, we can know that Phillis Wheatley was purchased by John Wheatley and his wife who gave her American name. John Wheatley and his wife also teach her about Christian religious which he later converts to the Christianity faith. This is also including the word *'mercy'* in the first line which has a context about her brought from Africa mainland to the America. She was believed that America can change her life since at that time the United States of America itself become a land of opportunity for everyone around the world. And she wrote *'mercy'* as a part of gratitude for a new life.

The other aspect of language in a part of external influence can be referred to the fifth line which is *"Some view our sable race with scornful eye"* that can be contradicted with the eighth line in *"and join th' angelic train"*. In this part, we can see the contradiction of the context between African people and White people. The context of *"sable race with scornful eye"* may refer that White People look down on African people or African descent. Not only that, it is also refer that African people is still on the darkness life. This was contradictory with the words *"and join th' angelic train"* that refer to the heaven. The words *"join th' angelic train"* which also occur as White people as a savior to bring African people to America.

A second aspect is about religious imagery that can reflect in her works. There are several lines in this poetry that give an influence on religious imagery. For example, in the third lines *'That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too'*, this represents a Christian faith among society. For Christianity believer, God is a savior for humankind. By believe in God, Christianity believes that God can save humanity from sins and also from the fall to the hell. In the context, Phillis Wheatley wrote this line also can be related about her world in Africa before she was moved to America. Since Christianity is associated as a savior, Phillis Wheatley brings Christianity context become a symbol of freedom from her darkness world in Africa. Other example in the part of external influence is on the line *'Once I redemption neither sought nor knew'*. The word *'redemption'* in here is still related with the Christianity. In a Christianity theory, the word redemption is related with a sacrifice of Jesus in the cross as the savior for human from everlasting life in hell because of sin. Context of *'redemption'* also come from Phillis Wheatley's mind that White people come to become as a hero to bring any changes for African descendant since this word is align with the context of words *"that there's a Saviour too:"*.

The next example regarding religious imagery and also can be combining with an external influence aspect is can be known on the seventh line. In this line, the text “*Remember, Christians, Negro's, black asCain,*” is mixed between the religious perspective and with an external influence that happening in Wheatley’s condition. The text itself talking about a relation between Christianity and African-American, which come as a correlation from Phillis Wheatley perception on her works. In the context of religion, Cain itself according to Bible is the person who killed his brother named Abel and later Cain was punished by God. But in the end, God offered a mercy to Cain. During the Wheatley’s era, many Christianity belief that Cain is represented with a dark skin. In seventh line text, “*black asCain*” comes to represent African-American since its context at the society. Moreover, this line also referred African-American people who gave a mercy from a sinful land and has an opportunity to civilized land in United States of America by White people. The word “*Negro's*”, “*black as Cain*”, and also “*Christians*” by Wheatley can be as a correlation idea that religion can be universal and the faith of Christianity can save anyone without see any races.

B. Analysis of Feminism in Literature

In the context of feminism perspective in literature, the poetry of “On Being Brought from Africa to America” by Phillis Wheatley represent herself as a woman to speak up about current condition that is occur on her era. This poetry itself occurs near during the American Revolutionary War or sometimes it is also known as American independence war against Great Britain. In this era, the segregation racial between White people with other races especially with Black people is clearly occurring enough at the society. At that time, most of African people who brought to the America were tied related with slavery and also Phillis Wheatley felt the same way about what she had. In this era, most African descendant in America must obey their masters and also not have any optional in jobs or other status that they can choose.

Furthermore, we can see that Phillis Wheatley express her feeling and also her idea through the poetry that she made. By using the Felski’s(1989) theory, we can see that woman can be the agent of change itself. In this context, Wheatley came with the idea of revolutionary since at that time the America want to become an independence country from Great Britain and with a new national identity which led freedom from everyone. With “On Being Brought from Africa to America”, Phillis Wheatley had a chance to give an opportunity for every African people to feel and have same independence just like White people, especially in a part of slavery.

As a progression act of woman in a feminism based on literature perspective, Wheatley already passed the three phases of a tradition of writing a literature by woman just like Showalter elaborate. The three phases can be seen below:

- First phase: It is related with John Wheatley and also his wife who taught Phillis Wheatley about Christianity faith, English language, literature, and so on. Based on Showalter in this first phase, it is started for woman to imitate a dominant tradition on her society. So, before Wheatley wrote poetry, she had to learn some knowledge from Wheatley’s family and know the current situation that happens in her social culture before make a future progression as an act.

- Second phase: In this phase, Phillis Wheatley can express herself and rise up with a specific condition based on what she already learnt before. She did a protest about racial issue that is occurring in her society which African people suffer on slavery in United States of America. At this point, she wants to a change in a society with knowledge that she earned before. She uses poetry to express what she taught and use it as a tool to change values of life in her society.

- Third phase: In the third phase, Phillis Wheatley using a pattern that combines the current condition while she wrote poetry “On Being Brought from Africa to America”. In here, she represents herself as a woman and also as an African descendant in the place that her people have discrimination in every part on society. Wheatley using a pattern as a Christian faith that she already learnt from John Wheatley and his wife who taught Phillis Wheatley in several knowledge. This pattern is used by her to speak up about a current condition about racism that Black people got in society. She also wants woman and even man from African descendant to rise up against racism and slavery.

Furthermore, Phillis Wheatley uses poetry of “On Being Brought from Africa to America” as a part of action for woman to express her creativity which is related with a specific condition. In here, Phillis Wheatley as a woman is stand up against a discrimination of African-American people who suffer with slavery in America. Her poetry also has any relation with several issues in the society such as gender, ethnicity, and also about religion.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion based on the researcher analyze Phillis Wheatley's poetry works, it can be known that "On Being Brought from Africa to America" have two aspects of the language context. The aspects are affected based on external influence and religious imagery.

In a context of external influence, we can sum up that Phillis Wheatley influenced by the condition on her society. She makes this poetry because she wants to share idea about equality in racial aspect. Since she came to United States of America as a slave just like any other African-American people, she also wants her people to be have a same status just like White people and live without any racial discrimination. That idea by Wheatley itself occurred because on that time, the United States of America is on war with Great Britain to gain independence. It is occurred during this era that everybody who lived in America will have their freedom and will be lived well in a single nation named USA.

In the part of religious imagery, this poetry by Phillis Wheatley is much influenced with a Christianity aspect. Since herself was learnt by John Wheatley and his wife who taught Phillis Wheatley about Christianity faith besides other knowledge that they gave to her. The poetry "On Being Brought from Africa to America" that Phillis Wheatley made was had an inspirational by Bible context which can be related to the society that happen on that time in the United States of America.

Furthermore, this poetry also represents a feminism aspect that can bring woman as a part of agent of change. In here, Phillis Wheatley as a women came herself to change people's perspective in a part of equality in gender and racial which is related with Rita Felski's theory about feminism. She also uses a literary works which is poetry as a progression of act on feminism aspect. If we can see from poetry "On Being Brought from Africa to America", came up after she pass the three phases of tradition of writing in a form by woman which led a creativity became an act of expression for criticism a social issue that can bring movement for a better change in people.

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