

AMBIVALENT SEXISM IN SUCHEN CHRISTINE LIM'S RICE BOWL AND SHIRLEY GEOK-LIN LIM'S MR TANG'S GIRLS

ZAMILA ABDUL RANI

Selangor International Islamic University College

zamila@kuis.edu.my

ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to investigate the concept of ambivalent sexism by highlighting different subcategories of sexism through the male characters' behaviour and their influence towards the female characters in two selected texts. The first one is Suchen Christine Lim's novel entitled *Rice Bowl* and the second text is *Mr Tang's Girls* a short story by Shirley Geok-Lin Lim. It also aims to analyse the nature of gender inequality and its consequences as portrayed by male and female characters in both texts. Ambivalent sexism is a theoretical concept developed by Peter Glick and Susan Fiske; both are Professor of Psychology at Lawrence University and Princeton University respectively. Ambivalent Sexism aims to study and understand the nature of sexism and under this concept; sexism is divided into two categories; hostile sexism and benevolent sexism. Both sexism reinforce traditional gender roles and preserve patriarchal social structures. Hostile sexism is an antagonist attitude toward women, in the form of domination, degradation and hostility while benevolent sexism is a chivalrous attitude toward women that feels favourable but is actually sexist because it casts women as weak creatures in need of men's protection. In *Mr. Tang's Girls*, Ah Kong being the only male and authoritative figure in his household is not holding back in asserting his dominance. Ah Kong also portrays certain behaviours which related with "dominative paternalism and heterosexual hostility". According to Glick and Fiske, dominative paternalism suggests that men should control women while heterosexual hostility views women as sexual objects and fears the power that women can gain through sexual attraction. Benevolent sexism is best portrayed through Hans Kuhn in Suchen Christine Lim's *Rice Bowl*. Hans is stereotyping Chinese women as exotic, submissive, vulnerable and docile thus they are more appealing to him and need to be protected. Benevolent sexism may seem harmless, noble or even "romantic" but its effects can be devastating because it is an ideology that supports gender inequality and in some ways benevolent sexism can be even more insidious.

Keywords: ambivalent sexism, gender inequality, sexism

Introduction: Feminism, Feminist Theory and Sexism

Feminism is a form of collective movements that aim to define, establish and defend the equal political, economic and social rights as well as equal opportunities for women. The major concern of these collective movements is in dealing specifically with the problem women face in overcoming social barriers. Apart from this issue, feminism is also concerned in liberation of both men and women from traditional cultural roles (Kolmar and Bartowski, 2005). Feminist

theory is developed from these feminist movements and it aims to understand the nature of gender inequality. It examines women's social roles and lived experience.

The history of feminism is divided into three phases which are known as waves. The first waves mainly focussing on women's suffrage movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries where the main concern is with women's right to vote. The second wave refers to a period of feminist activity in the early 1960s until the late 1980s. This period focuses on the liberation of women and their fight to gain legal and social equality. The third wave represents the continuation and the reaction on the failure of the second-wave feminist movements (Kolmar and Bartowski, 2005).

The theory that is being highlighted for this paper is feminist theory. As stated earlier, feminist theory is the extension of feminism. It is designed to understand the nature of gender inequality by examining women's social roles and feminist politics in a variety of fields, such as sociology, communication, economics, literary criticism and philosophy. Feminist theory is not only focusing on social relations but also focuses on analysing gender inequality and the promotion of women's rights, interests and issues (Kolmar and Bartowski, 2005).

Gender inequality refers to the obvious or hidden disparity between individuals due to gender. According to Hurst, gender is constructed in two ways. The first is through social interactions and the second is through chromosomes, brain structure and hormonal differences (Hurst, 2007).

In his book entitled *Social Inequality*, Hurst describes one of the main reasons behind gender inequality is sexism. Sexism is a term coined in the mid-20th century. Hurst defines sexism as "the belief or attitude that one sex is inherently superior to, more competent than or more valuable than the other" (Hurst, 2007). Hurst elaborates that sexism usually involves hatred and prejudice toward the other sex. It also refers to the application of stereotypes of masculinity in relation to men. It is also known as male chauvinism.

Peter Glick, Professor of Psychology at Lawrence University in Appleton explains further on the issue of sexism in his works. He and Susan Fiske, a Professor of Psychology at Princeton University developed a theoretical concept called ambivalent sexism to study and understand the nature of sexism. According to them ambivalent sexism has two subcategories: hostile sexism and benevolent sexism.

Ambivalent Sexism: Hostile and Benevolent

Glick and Fiske clarify that ambivalent sexism highlights on the reconceptualization of the traditional view of sexism by including benevolent and hostile feelings toward women. Benevolent and hostile sexism both reinforce traditional gender roles and preserve patriarchal social structures. They share the common assumption that women are the weaker sex; however the two forms of sexism differ in their expression. Benevolent sexism is defined as subjectively positive attitudes and protection, idealization and affection towards women in traditional roles, while hostile sexism is defined as their negative equivalents of domination, degradation and hostility (Glick and Fiske, 2001). Hostile sexism is common as it is a familiar form of traditional sexism such as offensive jokes, discrimination and harassment. In contrast, benevolent sexism takes on a more subtle form such as finishing a team work assignment alone based on the implicit assumption that a woman is not capable of completing the task by herself. Even though he may not be conscious of this subtle and perhaps unintended message, his actions suggest that she is inferior. In previous time only hostile sexism was considered relevant, however recently a

strong stream of research has been conducted to show the damaging effects of benevolent sexism toward the individual as well as the community (Glick and Fiske, 2001).

Benevolent Sexism in *Rice Bowl*

Rice Bowl, a novel by Suchen Christine Lim is a story of religious aspirant Marie-Therese Wang and her idealistic students. The novel, set in 1970s Singapore, explores the students' involvement in politics and the nature of idealism in a complex local environment. Marie leads her students for change in Singapore by setting up a student-worker alliance where the university students are trying to educate the workers in the factories and encourage them to demand for their rights. In the middle of the conflicts and between the issues of religious affiliation, intellectual idealism and political conviction, Marie finds herself increasingly drawn to Hans Kuhn, an American Christian missionary with liberal view. Simultaneously, Paul Tan, Marie's first love who is portraying the soulless pragmatism in the novel is attempting to stop her from getting involved further in political movement.

Two male characters in *Rice Bowl*; Hans Kuhn and Paul Tan are selected as the best examples in portraying ambivalent sexism, in the form of benevolent sexism. In order to highlight and clarify on the concept of benevolent sexism, the first focus will be on Paul Tan. He used to be involved romantically with Marie the protagonist of the novel. He received his degree abroad and became a government scholar but later on, he held a position as the Superintendent of Police. He is portrayed as the embodiment of unattractive and soulless pragmatism embraced by the Singaporean elite thus his worldview most of the time contradicts Marie's. Paul in some extent portrays the characteristics of a sexist. After learning Marie's plan to take the oath to become a nun Paul dismisses and undermines her decision by stating that Marie "would never make it" (Lim, p.19). Apart from that, Paul's disapproval of Marie's involvement in the issues of religious affiliation, intellectual idealism and political conviction is causing self-doubt and makes Marie's feels inferior. Instead of explaining the conflicts to Marie, to make her understand his view, Paul ends up scoffing at her enthusiasm.

'He was disgusted with the whole thing. Power was what was at stake, and of course Marie did not realize it.'

(Lim, 1984, p.140)

This remark highlights Paul's view of Marie that she is beyond naïve to make a decision or take a stand. The argument on the reason for Paul Tan is included under the portrayal of benevolent sexism is he believes his action and words are meant to protect Marie from her ingenuous perspective and ideology. However by giving such remarks to Marie he in reality is pushing her away. Studies have been conducted on the consequences of benevolent sexism toward women's cognitive performance. It is proven that a person's confidence and performance can be hindered when dealing with benevolent sexist (Masser and Abraham, 2004). As a result Marie is pushing

herself to the limit as a form of retaliation towards Paul's attitude by focusing on to prove his belief and idea are wrong.

Another male character that represents benevolent sexism in this novel is Hans Kuhn an American Christian missionary with liberal view. By belonging to the same church with Marie, he forms friendship with her and her students. He has the habit of stereotyping women especially Asian and enjoys being in the company of eastern women where he perceives them as exotic as well as docile. He believes that the submissiveness in women makes them more appealing and intriguing. Such stereotype is a form of benevolent sexism. While attending a party, Hans is captivated with Ser Mei, one of Marie's students. The first sentence he uses to describe Ser Mei is:

'Her fashionable attire and quite deportment fitted into his conception of the modern Oriental Chinese girl.' (p.66).

This statement illustrates the element of benevolent sexism through idealizing of women in traditional roles and in this case an Oriental Chinese girl. Hans also relishes the close proximity of dancing with Ser Mei by stating he enjoys "the fragrance of her Chinese hair". Chinese in this novel is the connotation of eastern culture where women are bound with cultural and social constrain as well as traditional roles. He emphasizes the stereotyping of Asian women where they are submissive and easily be "tamed".

During a discussion between Hans, Marie and her students on the issue of prostitution in Saigon, Ser Mei is extremely upset after Hans and other male characters Rev James and Dr Jones, friends of Hans make some insensitive remarks. Rev James insists that women who selling sexual favours are committing an act of self-sacrifice in order to support their family. However Hans asserts that the "prostitutes are from well-to-do families, who succumbed to the materialistic culture of Saigon" (p.85). When Hans realizes Ser Mei's discomfort he assumes that she is a sensitive girl who reacting to the tragedy of the Vietnamese peasants.

"A noble feeling, and bending down he put an arm around Ser Mei's shoulders to show his sympathy and approval....Another overly sensitive Chinese girl". (p.86)

The issue of prostitution exceptionally upset Ser Mei because her mother is selling sexual favours in order to pay for her father large debt. Instead, Hans is taking of her concern lightly by assuming her distress is due to her sensitive female nature on others' misfortune. Hans' treatment on women is an exact representative of benevolent sexism where it is defined as subjectively positive attitudes and protection, idealization and affection towards women in traditional roles. Benevolent sexism is as destructive as hostile sexism because it diminishing the individual self-esteem and personality. After Hans' shows of "sympathy and approval" Ser Mei becomes more distraught.

"Ser Mei wiped away the last traces of her tears. No one, no one, she felt, would understand her... She wished she had been abandoned at the convent instead of suffering this canker in her life." (p.88)

Due to his stereotyping women as submissive and sensitive, Hans condenses the grievous circumstances of Ser Mei's death. She is sold to one of her mother's clients and the man died of heart failure while in the middle of raping her. Hysterical and traumatized, Ser Mei leaves the

house and runs into moving traffic. During Ser Mei funeral, while her friends and Marie are left devastated with her death, Hans expresses his fascination on Chinese women in general.

“Hans felt Ser Mei must be the truly genuine Chinese girl whose filial duty was yet undiluted by exposure to the values of the West.” (p.102).

Due to his view on the docility of Chinese women, Hans concludes that Ser Mei’s death is a form of sacrifice by selling herself to earn money for her family and later commit suicide to uphold her purity. He does not perceive the dreadful circumstances of her death. Marie in another hand, as Ser Mei’s teacher is exceedingly overwhelmed with regret and sadness because she is unaware of Ser Mei’s situations that eventually lead to her death. Hans perceives beauty in Marie’s grief and this strengthening the idea of him romanticizing the dreadful incident.

“Hans stole a glance at her. She looked so beautifully vulnerable when she was upset on someone’s behalf, her lips quivering as she sought to control her feeling.” (p.107)

The idea of a woman being vulnerable is appealing to Hans. When Marie is doubtful of his affection towards her, he states that Marie is “so frustratingly naïve! Yet so like a woman” (p.185). Hans reflects benevolent sexism by assuming that women are submissive and vulnerable thus they become more alluring to him. Through this notion he is creating his own romanticized conclusion without knowing the factual circumstances.

Hostile Sexism in *Mr. Tang’s Girls*

Shirley Geok-Lin Lim’s *Mr. Tang’s Girls* is a short story of a man names Ah Kong who is married to his second wife and has four daughters. Ah Kong’s attitude and his treatment towards the women in his household are the best example of a man portraying hostile sexism. Glick and Friske (2001) explain that the most likely reason for a man to be a hostile sexist is related with the notion of trying to maintain the domineering role. Being the only male and authoritative figure in the household, Ah Kong is not holding back in asserting his dominance. He emphasises his power in the household by controlling his daughters’ activities.

“On Saturdays, the girls stayed home. No school activity, no friend, no party, no shopping trip took them out of the house. Their suppressed giggles, lazy talk, muted movements and uncertain sighs constituted his sense of home. And every Saturday, the four girls played their part: they became daughters whose voices were to be heard like cheerful music in the background, but never loudly or intrusively.” (p.87)

The above excerpt portrays the domineering aspect of Ah Kong in maintaining his family. To Ah Kong the daughters have their roles to fulfil by being docile and quiet. They must obey his rules and act only the way he requires them to be. In other words the daughters are seen as ornaments or dolls to be put on display to reflect his authority and success as the head of the family.

Ah Kong also portrays certain behaviours which related with “dominative paternalism and heterosexual hostility”. Dominative paternalism suggests that men should control women while heterosexual hostility views women as sexual objects and fears the power that women can

gain through sexual attraction (Glick and Friske, 2001). The first aspect of affirming control is done through his wife, where she obeys every instruction and demand given by Ah Kong in order to avoid his temper. Submissive women, physically and emotionally is the ideal women to Ah Kong.

“He could meet her submissive form like a bull sinking into a mudbank, groaning with pleasure”. (p.93)

“No his wife was always submissive, a good woman who could never suggest an immodest actions.” (p.98)

Ah Kong’s views women as sexual objects and fears the power that women can gain through sexual attraction can be perceived through his midnight inspection of his daughters’ rooms. This nightly inspection brings a sense of euphoria and “masculine vitality” (p.92). According to him, his daughters’ “silent form would fill him with pleasure, that they should belong to him, depend on his homecoming, and fall asleep in his presence, innocent and pure” (p91). Thus when Ah Kong notices his daughters’ transition from children to teenagers, he feels threaten by their physical and sexual maturity. He feels disgusted when he enters Kim Mee’s room, his 15-year old daughter because “...her haunches curved and enveloped the pillow like a woman with her lover. He hated the sight..” (p.91). The smell of hairspray and perfume as well as the sight of his daughters’ clothes make him derives into conclusion that “all his good little girls turning to bitches and licking themselves” (p96).

The biggest threat perceives by Ah Kong is Kim Li, his 17-year old daughter. Being the eldest, Kim Li challenges Ah Kong’s authority in all possible way. During dinner when Ah Kong refuses to buy the girls new clothes, Kim Li makes a remark that all the daughters are becoming women and is met with Ah Kong’s hostility by calling Kim Li “a half-naked slut”(p.89). After this incident Kim Li displays antagonistic contempt towards Ah Kong, the embodiment of dominative paternalism. Ah Kong is terrified of his daughters’ sexual awakening and becoming women as stated by Kim Li. Consequently, Kim Li’s words and actions are perceived as sexual enticement to seduce and arouse him like a prostitute or a female dog. On one incident Ah Kong believes Kim Li is seducing him while he observes Kim Li clipping her toenail.

“Her silent contortions, exaggerated by the shorts she was wearing, bemused him...Was she already a woman as she claimed last evening? Ah Kong felt a curious pity for her mixed with anger. She moved her skinny legs...she was trying to aroused him”. (p.95)

To gain his dominance again, Ah Kong sets up an arranged marriage for Kim Li. However instead of being seen as the domineering authoritative figure, Ah Kong is illustrated as being paranoid and is being ridicule by Kim Li herself.

“It was good she was marrying soon, for her stance, her glances, her whole appearance indicated a lewd desire. He turned his eyes away for her and stayed in his room all night.” (pp.98-99)

The act of staying in his room without the nightly bedroom inspection depicts his fear and misplacing dominance towards his daughters particularly Kim Li. Instead of being docile after

she learned of her arranged marriage, Kim Li provokes Ah Kong by wearing make-up and insisting to meet her future husband. These actions inflame his fear of losing control over her due to her awakening sexual identity. Ah Kong's hatred and dread of losing his dominance over his daughter are verified by the derogatory images he uses in describing Kim Li.

The Influence of Sexism towards the Female Characters

In *Rice Bowl* the reaction towards sexism is different for diverse characters. In Marie's condition when she is being criticized and undermined by Paul, the motivation to demonstrate him wrong increases. Marie wants to show that her dream and idea are not naïve as Paul claimed them to be.

As the result of Paul's treatment towards Marie, she struggles to gain others' trust and support so they can join her in making some changes in the country.

Hans is stereotyping Chinese women as submissive and vulnerable. He is perfectly fit in the category of "intimate heterosexuality" (Glick and Fiske, 2001). In this category men romanticize women as sexual objects and views romantic intimacy as necessary to complete a man. However, Mary shows determination in keeping her vow to the church and is not easily swayed by Hans's affection toward her.

As for Ser Mei she is being romanticized by Hans as an overly sensitive Chinese girl and a noble daughter who fulfils her filial duty. He does not see her beyond that label. There are other reasons for Ser Mei becomes upset during the discussions on prostitution. By giving a decorative image on her behaviour is equal to diminishing her as an individual and the burden she has to carry.

Based on studies conducted, researchers discover that women's cognitive performance is affected as the consequence of benevolent sexism. Because of its sweet façade and implicit (implied) versus explicit (clear) attributions, benevolent sexism may hinder a person's confidence and performance (Hurst, 2007).

In the short story *Mr. Tang's Girls*, the women are being dominated by Ah Kong. The wife is the figure of submissive female and placates her husband every time he loses his temper. With this portrayal of subservient woman he expects the entire household to behave like her. However the domineering attitude is finally challenged by Kim Li. By being a hostile sexist Ah Kong elicits Kim Li's anger and frustration. Studies are conducted on hostile sexism and its effect of the victims. According to Chasteen hostile sexism leads to evocation of anger, frustration and low self-esteem (2001). Kim Li displays her rebellious attitude deliberately as a form of mocking Ah Kong. After learning about her arranged marriage with Chan Kow, Kim Li derides the arrangement by insisting to meet him. As the story progresses, Ah Kong's hatred towards her increases and Kim Li keeps on challenging him.

Conclusion

The three male characters that are being highlighted in this paper demonstrate sexism. Even though they express different subdivisions of sexism, their attitude and remarks influence the female characters around them. By exhibiting benevolent sexism Paul Tan and Hans Kuhn might not be conscious of this subtle and unconscious message; however they can hinder a person's confidence and performance with their behaviour. The best examples for their treatments of women can be perceived through Marie and Ser Mei. Ah Kong represents hostile

sexism where he asserts his domination through hostility and degradation. His actions and words show his desire to control his household and fear of losing that control. The ending of the story might be expected by some readers for Kim Li's anger, frustration and aggressiveness are initiated out of Ah Kong's hostility.

Benevolent sexism is delivered differently than hostile sexism. While hostile sexism is widely known and familiar through domination, degradation and hostility, benevolent sexism is most of the time delivers unconsciously or in a subtle manner. However both categories bring negative and destructive effects as both undermine a person's value, self-esteem and creating a long lasting blemish to their mental, physical and emotional development.

REFERENCE

- Chasteen, A. L. *Constructing Rape: Feminism, Change and Women's Understandings of Sexual Assault*. (2001). Chappel Hill,NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Comber, L. (ed). (1991). *Prizewinning Asian Fiction*. Singapore: Times Book International.
- Cotter, D, and Hermsen, J. (2000). *Social Forces: The Glass Ceiling Effect*. Chappel Hill,NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Glick, P, and Fiske, S. (2001). *The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory*. New York: Oxford University Press,
- Hurst, C. (2007). *Social Inequality*. Boston: Pearson Education Inc.
- Kolmar, W, and Bartowski, F. (ed). (2005). *The Changing Woman. Feminist Theory: A Reader. 2nd Ed*. New York: McGraw-Hill,. Print.
- Lim, S.C. (1984). *Rice Bowl*. Singapore: Times Book International.
- Masser, M, and Abrams, D. (2004). *Sex Roles*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Unger, R, and Crawford, M. (1992). *Women and Gender: A Feminist Psychology*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Webster, R. (1996). *Studying Literary Theory An Introduction.2nd Ed*. New York: Arnold.
- Wood, J. *Gendered Lives*. (2005). 6th Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.