

**Poetry, Gender and Teaching:
Building Students' Character through Multicultural Literature**

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A. Introduction

*My husband gives me an A
for last night's supper,
an incomplete for my ironing,
a B plus in bed.
My son says I am average,
an average mother, but if
I put my mind to it
I could improve.
My daughter believes
in Pass/Fail and tells me
I pass. Wait 'til they learn
I'm dropping out.*

When I give the poem entitled “Marks” by Linda Pastan above to my students, some of them laugh, some smile, some do not care. Unfortunately, most students who are female do not recognize the dangerous issue represented by the poem: the unequal gender role in a family. They don't have gender awareness. They do not concern on that inequality. They do not have ‘character.’

That poem by Linda Pastan represents clearly and obviously what happens in our daily life. Contemporary people especially feminists say that liberal feminism which concern on the equality does not answer women's problem, but the idea on what liberal feminist has been fighting against still happens today – check the recent advertisement, VCD bonus for milk for toddlers, etc. Mother does domestic job and father does public job. Ironically, this material has been served for our children in their very early life.

This is a kind of poems that are useful for building students' character since poetry is the most effective and economical literary genre. Giving the students gender awareness is helpful for them to live in reality thought not directly because literature is not practical but is valuable to build their sensitivity to understand others. A friend of mine with her English Literature background working in Batan (National Atomic Energy Agency) finds it valuable knowing the characters in novels she read in her study to cope with her colleagues in her institution.

Truly, literature especially poetry is basic for human being. Students find it beyond their grasp because of their lack of teacher's supervision. Pick a poem and find what it is about: it is not far from our life like love, death, being left by someone we love, admiration, childhood, nature, and many other basic ideas for human life. Unfortunately, most students think that poetry is beyond their comprehension. This is the result of the failure of teaching literature which focuses on the intrinsic values so it does not touch the students' life and just make literature and poetry more inferior. Here, in this paper, I would like to introduce the possible rationales to touch the students' life – to make them more involved to poetry – by using gender based approach in teaching poetry so that they are more sensitive towards their surroundings: to make them students with character.

B. A brief account on theories of teaching literature

Books on teaching literature are various and subjective, for instance it must be specific for particular audience and of particular genre or topic. However, at smallest amount we have to take a look at theories of teaching literature in general. *Teaching Literature to Adolescents* by Richard Beach et al. (2011) provide four theoretical perspectives in teaching literature. They are transmission theory, student-centered theory, socio-cultural learning theory and practice oriented theory.

Transmission theory is a frame of learning in terms of acquiring facts and knowledge about literature – the characteristics of the short story of Romantic poetry – or critical concepts used to analyze literary text – the difference between metaphor and simile. The primary focus in terms of teaching is how to best impart knowledge to students assumed to be empty vessels. Freire (in Beach, et al., 2011) calls this a banking of education. You give test to determine if they can replicate what you taught them.

The second is the student-centered theory. It argues that students should be able to make their own choices for what and how they would learn. If they have choices, they are more motivated to want to learn. For example, if they could chose whatever text they wanted to study, they would then be more engaged with those texts than having to study assigned text.

The third is the socio-cultural learning theory. This theoretical approach posits that learning is primarily social. It argues that we learn to acquire uses certain practices and tools that serve certain purposes in social group of communities. Through participation in these groups or communities, people this theory emphasizes the importance of creating a social community that supports learning literature. As a literature teacher, you are socializing students into what could be called a literary community of practice reflected in the practices of a highly engaged book club. In this community of practice, students assume the identities of careful readers who acquire various practice involved in interpreting and producing literature.

The last one is practice oriented theory. This helps students improve in their use of practices you model or scaffold the uses of those practices by demonstrating you use of practice to achieve certain purposes. You then do a hand over, letting the students engage in the practice themselves with your assistance, employing an “I do, you watch; you try, I watch” sequence.

Based on those four approaches which one do you prefer to use. In fact many other writers on teaching literature have different perspectives like for example Showalter (2003), Flohr (2010), Agathocleous and Dean (2003), Campbell (2007), and Parkinson and Thomas (2000). It depends on what we emphasize to teach the students: whether we use literature to teach English language or, for example, we focus specifically on the genre like poetry or biography. However, Budi Dharma (2007) says that teaching literature is always subordinated by teaching language since the objectives of teaching language touches the cognitive side rather than affective side like in teaching literature. At this point, we need to redefine our teaching method, like the one using gender approach.

C. The need of teaching transformation

“It’s time to start learning about things they told you didn’t need to know . . . , *starting to learn about her instead of learning about him.* It’s what makes education education,” says a student as quoted by Tetreault in “Classrooms for Diversity: Rethinking Curriculum and Pedagogy” (in Banks and Banks, 2005). This statement comprises an important idea: we have to rethink and redefine our traditional way(s) of teaching. The current challenges to classroom teaching are not only incorporate multiple perspectives into the curriculum but also to engage in pedagogical practices that bring in the voices of students as a source for leaning rather than managing or controlling them.

Tetreault provides the so-called feminist phase theory (Tetreault in Banks and Banks, 2007:164-183). This model consists of five common phases of thinking about women. First, male-defined curriculum rests on the assumption that the male experience is universal, that is representative of humanity, and that it constitutes a basis for generalizing about all human beings. Second, contribution curriculum is the early efforts to reclaim women’s rightful place in the curriculum. It searches for missing women within a male framework. Although there was the recognition that women were missing, men continued to serve as the norm, the universal human being. Third, bifocal curriculum is the one in which feminist scholars have made an important shift from a perspective that views men as the norm to one that opens up the possibility of seeing the world through women’s eyes. Fourth, women’s curriculum focuses on the idea that women’s activities, not men’s, are the measure of significance. What was formerly devalued, the content of women’s everyday lives,

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assumes new values such as female rituals, housework, childbearing, child reading, female sexuality, etc. The last one, gender-balanced curriculum continues many of the inquiries begun in the women's curriculum phase, but it articulates questions about how women and men relate to and complement one another.

The above phases emerge due to feminist scholarship or women's scholarship. This helps us to understand that all knowledge, and therefore all classroom knowledge, is a social construction. For Tetreault, and I totally agree, the term *pedagogy* applies not just to teaching techniques but also to the whole classroom production of knowledge; it encompasses the full range of relationship among course materials, teachers and students. This idea is best exemplified by Tetreault when a Japanese American student feels the same experience when reading Dickinson's poem on silences and invisibilities. An interesting example is also shown in the male student's reaction to the female student's question about how a particular poem relates to her as a female.

D. Gender and teaching poetry

There are many fields of study in the twenty-first century classroom as indicated by Agathocleous and Dean (2003); among other things are autobiography, Victorian, literary realism, and lyrical poetry. Also there is always 'teacher's creativity' to approach the classroom so that the class can touch today's issues as proposed by Agathocleous and Dean (2003) in their second part of the book.

Gender, contemporarily used along with race and class, has been applied to investigate further women's problems in feminist perspective in various disciplines including sociology (Few, 2007; Harnois, 2010), women's studies (Davis, 2006; Adomako, et.al., 2008), politics (Nath, 2009; Peace and Rees, 2008), psychology (White, 2006), education (Singh, 1995), and even archaeology (Geller, 2009). It also works for literary studies (Knupfer, 2009; Brah, 2006).

Gender role in many fields and life has been the most dynamic motivating factor especially for the feminist movement that it becomes the most far-reaching criticism in the last twentieth century. Gender has also become the biggest problem in our daily life, thus adequate understanding on this idea is very useful to live in real life. This is supported by Blackburn's account in *Women and the State in Modern Indonesia* as follows, “

Women are at the centre of the hostilities, that break out over issues like abortion, dress, sex education, intermarriage with non-Muslims, *kodrat*, lesbianism and marital rape (Blackburn, 2004)

What makes me concerned is on women's ignorance on this issue as shown by my students. Therefore, I tend to use gender issue to make them more sensitive to their surrounding along with the affective mission of teaching literature. Many sources can be used as the main source of our material in teaching poetry but we have to be selective, of course. One of the rationales is gender.

Take for example *An Introduction to Poetry* by Dana Gioia and X. J. Kennedy. Compared to the other books on the introduction to the study of poetry this is the most complete with its various writers with varied cultural background. In addition, they also provide the context and also simple approaches. However, what is more important to me is their care on the theoretical approaches that can be applied to analyze the poems, one of which is feminist criticism.

Seen carefully the previously mentioned book is helpful in providing poem written by women with their feminist concern. By providing them to the students, as a teacher I can relate the text to the students' reality. We have to remember that text is nothing without being read, isn't it? If poetry can not contribute anything to their life, like the other disciplines would give; poetry and literature in general will still be subordinated. In this way, then, it will not be even contributive to the character education. We have to deconstruct this assumption and prove that "poetry can change."

E. Teaching poetry and character building

Bohlin in *Teaching Character Education through Literature: Awakening the moral imagination in secondary classrooms* (2005:27) claims that she does not seek to prove a direct correlation between reading particular books and changes in character, but it does seek to give students "some practice at being brave." This shows the importance of moral imagination in reading literature. This is parallel with my idea of "experience" in reading literature especially poetry.

I always ask the students to compare poetry and other kinds of text with the same topic or subject to know what poetry is. And the result shows that *they are more involved to poetry than other text: this is experience*. Exploration of this part make poetry is earthy not as complicated as it was thought. While narrative literature has enormous potential to help readers see the moral life more fully, it can also help them see things differently. Literature provides a rich context within which students can reflect and then mentally rehearse how they might act in similar circumstances. (Bohlin, 2005:31).

In the seminar on multiculturalism conducted in Yogyakarta State University (2009) I emphasize on the use of multicultural literature that can also extend students' knowledge about parallel cultures by exposing them to the differences and similarities

between their culture and that of other groups. These observations support the notion that incorporating multicultural literature into the curriculum can expand students' awareness and decrease negative stereotyping of individuals from other cultures. This point is labeled as promoting understanding among cultures. In short, literature can present students with clear contrasts in perspectives and can help them understand their own cultural heritages and those of others - within and outside the classroom.

In terms of gender, multiculturalism may support women, by providing more effective integration of minority groups into the mainstream society Shachar (in Reitz, et.al., 2009). According to Wormser et al. (2000; 339-341) teaching poetry focuses not only on the *feeling* for process--how poems are made--but on the process of feeling--how readers respond. As the British educator, David Holbrook, observes, "Poetry is not 'writing about,' but exploring experience metaphorically." Metaphor typifies the inner/outer dynamic of the poetry experience. The facilitator recognizes this. On one hand, the teacher recognizes the validity of emotional responses to poetry and does not seek to short-circuit them. On the other hand, the teacher recognizes that responses that do not have demonstrable points to make are doomed to the futility of "I don't know why I like it, but I do." It is incumbent upon the teacher to demonstrate "the moves" so that the student can articulate responses.

Teaching the art of poetry in the classroom is a sort of rhetoric. The teacher provides models for students to examine, analyze, imitate, and emulate. Rhetoric is not some foggy, ancient, dead term. Rather, it presents a structured means to understand poetry as a living art. Rhetoric prizes practice and the "poetry-based classroom" is the place for students to practice the art of language. To use poetry in this way is to stress to students the idea that aesthetic experience is based upon their ordinary, everyday life but in a heightened way through the art of language. To use poetry in this manner is the first step in helping all students acquire real skills in the art of language. There is nothing like it (Wormser, et al., 2000:347).

Therefore, relevant to the ideas promote by Wormser et al. (2000), the importance of teaching poetry is by making the students involved to the poems being discussed by sharing more on the students' experience rather than the poets' for example by giving privilege to their personal response to the text. One of the possible ways to do this is by the use of gender approach to poetry analysis.

F. Gender and Character Education

As previously mentioned, studies on gender has become the key point to further study on women, who are still under problematic situation due to gender awareness in our education. By promoting gender-balanced approach in our ways of teaching, in this case poetry teaching, we are actually promoting character education. It has become the "hottest" issue in our education although it has been discussed widely in Britain and the US as mentioned by Thomas Lickona. However, our great

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education thinker Ki Hadjar Dewantara has been always concerned on this. He says that education is an effort to advance the development of character (*budi pekerti*), intellect and physic. And these there are inseparable (Nuh, 2010).

Contemporarily, Indonesian education scholars have been intensively discussing this issue. And talking about character education is always full of debates and arguments caused by different school and ideology (Damon, 2002). However, in this case I would simplify this definition by the following tentative as proposed by Lockwood (in Nucci, 2008). Character education is a school-based activity that seeks to systematically shape the behavior of students. She details three central propositions: first, that the goals of moral education can be pursued, not simply left to an uncontrolled hidden curriculum and that these goals should have a fair degree of public support and consensus; second, that behavioral goals are part of character education; third, that antisocial behavior on the part of children is a result of an absence of values (Nucci, et al., 2008)

Gender as indicated earlier has become the “hottest” issue in today’s life. And students must be aware on that as a part of social problem, even family problem since according to Suyanto (2010), character is a way of thinking and acting that become the qualities of an individual to live and work together in family, social and national life. And individual with character is the one who can make decision and is ready to be responsible with that. In addition, there are nine universal virtues that must be taught in the holistic method o education using knowing the good, feeling the good and acting the good. They are religious, independent and responsible, honest, respectful, generous and helpful, self confident and hardworking, just, humble, tolerant.

Truly, gender awareness belongs to, at least, one of them. As shown in the opening poem of this article, there are lessons on building students’ character: being respectful to mother or women in general in family life, and also equal share of responsibility in family life between male and female members of the family. This is what makes teaching poetry interesting for the students since it gives them something beneficial in their own life.

G. Conclusion

As a poetry teacher I try to make poetry be beneficial to the students’ life since there is a degrading character in our children. Ignorance as shown by students and other teenagers in our environment as the effect of the development of technology like cell phones is the proof – and this is dangerous to be ignored.

Poetry can be the most effective way, although I know that it does not give must effect but I do not believe on the idea proposed by Freud, Marx and Sartre who say that no matter how an individual strive, nothing significant will change. I know it changes at least one student.

Gender is the closest problem of the students' family life and it can be the way to make literature especially poetry earthy and reachable so that poetry teaching can play roles in developing students' character which is very significant for their life in this multicultural society.

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