



An Open Learning through Feminist Writing for Self-Discovery and Intellectual Development

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Abstract

This paper aims to demonstrate the impact of feminist writing as a new paradigm for education in the 21st Century to provoke awareness of gender inequity issues and to maintain justice and healthy living in society. It discusses the two selected works by prominent feminist authors: Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* to reflect different nature of gender problems, and equity issues by providing an overview of feminist movements in the west, inclusive of leading feminist pioneers and their works that impact the works of feminist authors. The investigation of the two novels was based on the conflicts derived from gender stereotypes, illiteracy, mainstream stream male-dominant values, racism and cross-cultural conflicts derived from social prejudices against women that resulted in their oppression, suffering and poverty. Both works provide solutions to empower women through sisterhood, and the bond of illiterate mothers, who become witty through experiences and their blunt daughters, formal and informal education that empower women to be economically, and personally independent. The conclusion confirms that feminist writing and great classics are best learning resources for young learners to make them insightful of the social problems and conflicts, and their roles to enhance a healthy society.

Keywords: 21st century education, feminist writing, cross-cultural conflicts, empower women, independent

Introduction

The best way to educate learners in the 21st Century is to engage them with meaningful learning contexts. In this aspect literary study has proved to be challenging to enhance learners' problem-solving and thinking skills. Despite development in science and technology that makes life better for many people around the world today, there are still a large number of people, especially women in every country who are still considered the under privileged due to social injustice, illiteracy, poverty, and exploitation created by mainstream stereotypes and cultural identities that oppress women in both developed and under developed countries. Since knowledge is available through many channels, such as social media, books, magazines, and the Internet, teachers should encourage their students to read extensively on their own to develop their intellectual growth, and live a meaningful life. Teachers themselves should be the role models to read both intensively and extensively to pursue their academic excellence. Alvin Toffler's famous statement: "The illiterate of the 21st Century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.", Covey (2005, p. 400) maintains that "One needs to be proactive and continuously improve



himself all the time to maintain intellectual growth, physical well-being, and emotional and spiritual balance for a meaningful life". This paper intends to empower women through feminist writing. It is believed that if women are well-educated they can lead meaningful lives.

The paper begins with discussion of the positive impacts of extensive reading to enhance critical reading skills, then extends to the main stream stereotypes and gender issues inclusive of reflection of social stereotypes against women in the great classics from the past up to the 19th century, and finally analyzes in detail the two selected novels. The reader will understand why it is important to educate women through reading feminist literature. The conclusion restates the importance of feminist writing for self-discovery and intellectual development. It should be used not only to improve students' English proficiency, but also to make them gain an insight into cross-cultural, and gender issues to maintain peace and healthy living in the world.

Srisermbhok (2009, p. 133) also maintains, "extensive reading has positive impacts on young learners on their overall language improvement. Most of the participants in her research agreed that apart from the four language skills, they had also enlarged their vocabulary and improved their grammar. Moreover, they had developed their critical thinking skills." Additionally one important way to empower young learners, especially women is to motivate them to read critically. Consequently, it is meaningful to familiarize learners with a new paradigm for an opening learning with an emphasis on analytical reading skills, as well as acquaint them with global issues to prepare them to become global citizens.

Srisermbhok (2003) reflects her self-discovery through reading feminist writing as follows:

My fascination with feminism began many years ago when, as the first grantee of the Thai University Administrators Shadowing Program at the University of Sydney, I was introduced to Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1988), and Jung Chang's *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* (1986). I was moved and overwhelmed by the power of these two novels. Although the focuses of the texts were different in nature, they shared, to a certain extent, the themes of identity and self-discovery interconnected with issues of gender, family, history, culture and social prejudices. (p.1)

Consequently, she has integrated feminist writing in teaching her students to inspire them to learn independently and empower themselves with knowledge. This paper aims to elaborate the impact of feminist writing on learners' intellectual development by first providing some related background that underpins mainstream prejudices that oppress women with reference to analyses a few representative great classics from the past up to the 19th century selections for illustration. Then examines two contemporary prominent feminist novels: Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989). The main reasons I selected these two novels were because they were popular and made into films viewed by millions of people all over the world. My analysis of the two novels will focus on the theme of sisterhood and the bond of daughter-mother relationship. The final part is a conclusion that literary imagination can be used as a new paradigm for English teaching and learning.



Main stream stereotypes and gender issues

Bennett (1987) describes how patriarchal values can oppress women:

Norms of female and male behavior in the medieval countryside drew heavily upon the private subordination of wives to their husband as popularized by such saying as, "Let not the hen crow before the rooster". Femaleness was defined by the submissiveness of wives who were expected to defer to their husbands in both private and public. Maleness was defined by the authority of husbands who, as householders, controlled not only most domestic affairs, but also most community matters. (p.6)

The norms of female inferiority cited above can still be seen in many countries in Asia, the Middle-east, including Africa, and even in Europe and America. Our culture and tradition has distinctly divided masculine and feminine roles. Myths and archetypes consolidate our perceptions that men embody positive elements of self, but women are defined through the negativity, and less valued descriptions of 'Other'. In other words, men are portrayed as superior or dominant, whereas women are portrayed as inferior and controlled. These stereotypes are practiced worldwide. But in Europe, and North America there have been some political and intellectual movements for equal rights and other major concerns from the late 17th century.

Rendall (1984) points out that:

The intellectual climate of Western Europe came to be dominated by the mood of optimism about the potential of individual human reason and about the possibility of understanding the natural environment of humanity: this mood of optimism came to be known as the Enlightenment It is often assumed that concern about the right of women springs from the 18th Century Enlightenment, from the assertion of individual natural rights in a period of revolutionary political thinking. (p.7)

From the above, it is apparent that awareness of gender equity issues has been raised among the intellectual since the 18th Century. Consequently, one begins to wonder, why at this 21st Century, this awareness has not yet made much impact on mainstream female condition, despite many advancements in terms of education, living condition, and technological progress.

Reflection of stereotypes against women in the great classics

A conventional classic heroine is also intentionally illustrated in Samuel Richardson's sentimental 18th Century novel entitled *Clarrisa*. In this novel, Richardson sets up a situation which powerfully dramatizes the oppression of women. Clarrisa, the protagonist, is portrayed as a virtuous, intelligent, and idealistic heroine who is doomed to fail. After she has been raped by Loveless, the man she does not love, she is compelled to commit suicide. Through Clarrisa's confidential letters to her best friend, Anna Howe, we can understand the enormous social impact on her sensitivity and her sensibilities offended by masculine dominance and arrogance. Clarisa's downfall is not the loss of her chastity, but her refusal to submit to male superiority.

This stereotypical concept can also be found in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, of which Tess, the protagonist, is abused by her parents. Due to poverty,

they drove her to claim kinship with the wealthy Urbervilles. Tess is portrayed as innocent, submissive, and sacrificial. Her life is later torn to pieces by two selfish men. One seduces and dominates her with his wealth, whereas the other, her conventional husband, deserts her after he finds that she had lost her chastity before their marriage. Hardy apparently underpins social prejudice and men's blind cruelty embedded in masculine pride. Gorsky (1992) argues that Tess certainly presents a double standard about sex, but her men also suffer. "Tess loses her child, her lover, and ultimately her life; her seducer dies as well" (pp.69-70).

Gilbert (2000) maintains that the sexual ideology of the 19th Century era was in many ways particularly oppressive, confining women, not just to corsets, but to the 'Private House' with all its deprivations and discontents, but on the other hand, its aesthetic and political imperatives were especially inspiring engendering not just a range of revolutionary movement but some of the richest productions of the female imagination.

In the academia, some leading figures whose writing has had great impact on the feminist movement, or feminism, were John Stuart Mill, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Kate Millet, to name just a few. Jaggar (1983) described the 19th Century woman movement in the United States as an advancement of the women position. In other words, the term "feminism" is commonly used to refer to those who seek to end women's subordination, and the idea of sisterhood has become increasingly important. Among many issues the feminist movement strives to achieve are equal rights to vote and employment opportunities, while putting education as their top priority. Yet, despite the struggle of the women liberation movement, Millet (1970) pointed out that most education for women in the 19th century was just to make them better housewives and mothers. It can then be concluded that the illusion about the feminine mystique was the major cause of women frustration, which makes their lives empty, and they had no identity, but once they were able to see through the delusions of the feminine mystique, it was easier to find the solution.

To encourage women to fight for freedom, Friedan (1963) summed up in her book entitled *The Feminine Mystique*:

Who knows what women can be when they are finally free to become themselves? Who knows what women's intelligence will contribute when it can be nourished without denying love? Who knows the possibilities of love when men and women share not only the fulfillment of their biological role, but the responsibilities and passions of the work that creates the human future and the full human knowledge of who they are? It has barely begun, the search of women for themselves. But the time is at hand when the voices of the feminine mystique can no longer drown out the inner voice that is driving women on to become complete. (p. 364)

From the above citation, it is hopeful that to solve the problem of inequality, there must be not only equal education and work opportunities, but also some other changes in our culture and society as well, and women themselves must be inspired by their inner selves to end their subordination, and be reinforced by society outside in many political aspects.

Millet (1970) provides the definition of sexual politics as follows:

The term "politics" shall refer to power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another. By way of parenthesis one might add that an ideal politics might simply be conceived of as the arrangement of human life on agreeable and rational principles from whence the entire notion of power over others should be banished, one must



confess that this is not what constitutes the political as we know it ,and it is to this that we must address ourselves. (pp. 23-24)

The above clearly explains Millet's notion that sex is a status category with political implications. While liberal feminists put more emphasis on liberal values of individual dignity, equality, autonomy, and self-fulfillment. As a radical feminist, Millet strongly insists that sex is political, primarily because the male-female relationship is the paradigm for all power relationships. In sum ,radical feminists try to eliminate any theories of patriarchy that oppress women such as sex, gender, woman's biology, feminist sexuality, pornography, psychology, and lesbianism as paradigms for female controlled female sexuality.

Morrison (1990) pinpoints male authors' patriarchal mindsets apparently consolidate cultural identity and racial prejudices. Therefore, she provokes readers' awareness to read critically:

American literature has been clearly the preserve of white male views, genius, and removed from the overwhelming presence of black people in the United States....The contemplation of this black presence is central to any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imagination. (p.5)

Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* is not alone to openly criticize characteristics of mainstream American male authors' mindsets against blacks, and subordination of women. Other marginal African American and Chinese American feminist authors also voice out their deep empathy to female oppression, pain and suffering with solution for self-discovery for their protagonists to strive for achievement and live with dignity in the world.

The Bond of Sisterhood

The bond of sisterhood not only provides moral strength and productivity for females' struggle for achievement in literary imagination, but in real life moral support among women has proved to be constructive for female writers as in the case of Kate Chopin, whose feminist novel *The Awakening* (1899), not only reflects her struggles for freedom and independence, but a group of her female friends also provide her moral support for her professional success as reflected in Toth (1998):

Kate Chopin's Private Papers round out our portrait of the artist as a young and middle-aged woman who was, indeed, a woman for all seasons. She was a pioneer in her own time, in her portrayal of women's desires for independence and control of their own sexuality. ...Chopin also belonged to women's groups. She joined the St .Louis Children of Mary Sodality, and was a charter Member of the prestigious Wednesday Club founded by the biographer, poet ,and social reformer Charlotte Stearns Eliot(now best known as the mother of T.S Eliot).Chopin left the Wednesday Club when it became more structured, but the club remained loyal to her. In late1989, after *The Awakening* had been condemned by most male reviewers, the Wednesday Club invited Chopin to give a reading and over 300 women turned out to applaud and praise her. (p.131)

The citation above shows that a feminist author like Kate Chopin is a genius who is proactive and leads a meaningful life with freedom and integrity. And through her tie



with a group of women, she got strong support for her daring novel that was condemned by male authors, but her novel was later claimed to be the most acclaimed feminist novel.

The Bond of Sisterhood in *The Color Purple*

At the outset of the novel, Walker illustrates Celie's loneliness and oppression. She has to remain silent and keep her pain to herself. She does not even know what makes her life suffer. The only person whom she trusts is God, who knows everything about her bitterness. Through her conversation with God, we come to understand her life and how she is exploited by her father and husband. Walker powerfully makes use of Celie's monologue with God as a significant master narrative technique:

Dear God,
I am fourteen years old. I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me. (Walker, 1982, p.11)

This is rather moving and as the story develops we come to understand that Celie was raped by her own father and had born him two children. And after that she was forced to marry a man she did not love and became his free slave. We also learn that Celie's mother was also suffering from her husband's selfishness:

Dear God,
My mama dead. She die screaming and cussing. She scream at me. She cuss at me. I'm big. I can't move fast enough... When I start to hurt and then my stomach start moving and that little baby come out my pussy chewing on it fist you could have knock me over with a feather. (Walker, 1982, p. 12)

Celie did not know that she was pregnant, and her mother was angry at her. Both the mother and the daughter were frustrated. After Celie's mother died, she was still raped by her father and got the second child. Both her children were taken away, and later Celie was separated from her witty sister, Nettie, to be a wife of Mr. Albert, whose wife left him with nasty children. Then she was told by her neighbors that as a wife her duty was to keep the house clean, cook for the whole family, and obey her husband. While her sister was sensible and smart, Celie was submissive until she met Shug, her husband's mistress who was independent, unconventional, and demanding. It was Shug who taught Celie to enjoy sex and they developed intimate friendship as lesbians. When Albert talked to Shug about his authority as a husband, Shug contradicted him.

Mr. _____-didn't want me to come. Wives don't go places like that he say. Yeah, but Celie going, say Shug, while I press her hair. Spose I git stick while I'm singing, she say. Spose my dress come undone? She wearing a skintight red dress look like the straps made out of two pieces of thread.

Mr. _____mutter, putting _____ on his clothes. My wife can't do this. My wife can't do that.. No wife of mines...He goes on and on. Shug Avery finally say, Good thing I ain't your damn wife. (Walker, 1982, p.74)

Nettie, Celie's sister also taught her to read and write. Through their correspondences, Celie had broadened her knowledge about Africa. The story has a happy ending. Celie became independent after separating from her cruel husband and



was reunited with her children who were both adopted by a kind hearted missionary couple. Celie settled down, and became wealthy and lived happily having a little business in sewing.

Walker's *The Color Purple* provides a simple story with a powerful narrative approach to reflect how women and girls are usually abused in the under privileged black community. However, with education even it is informally done and strong support from Shug and Nettie, Celie has become independent and discovered her identity as a strong woman who is brave enough to express her idea openly. As mentioned earlier, the bond of sisterhood can provide moral strength for women to strive for independence personally and economically.

Kaplan and Anderson (1991) in response to Virginia Woolf's 'A Room of One's Own' remarks that:

As for a woman to be independent economically only in 1882 were women in England allowed to own property in their own right. In attaining a voice in the government of England, certainly connected achieving economic independence, women over the age of thirty gained the vote in 1918, while total suffrage was achieved only in 1928, the year of Woolf's lectures. Certainly these facts must have resonated in the lecture hall. As Woolf exhorted the students of Girton and Newnham to correct the omission of women from the learned histories. (p. 444)

The above reveals that Virginia Woolf is a leading figure in women liberation movement, and her notion about the necessity for women to have privacy and freedom as men to write and express themselves is considered farsighted. Women must be equally treated and have access to good education as men. In this regard, Walker has achieved her goal in empowering illiterate women through informal education and creating a bond with other women to become strong and economically independent.

Bond of Mother and Daughters

Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) became an immediate success as her first novel. In a nutshell, the story portrays the struggles of the four pairs of Chinese mothers and their American born Chinese daughters, whose conflicts are derived from growing up in different cultures and each culture has an impact on their relationship. The novel begins with a symbolic aspect of the memo of an old woman and a swan's feather as she has travelled a long journey from Shanghai, which represents an old world to America, representing a new modern world. As the story develops we see the hope and expectations of the mothers whose strong desire is to escape oppression and hardships set against women in China. The swan symbolizes arrogance and snobbery. But in a new country, the old lady is just an immigrant. The novel consists of four pairs of mother/daughters, representing four corners of a table: Suyuan Woo/Jing-mei, "June" Woo, An-mei Hsu/Rose Hsu Jordan, Lido Jung/Waverly Jong, and Ying-ying St. Clair/Lena St. Clair. Jing-mei is the central character. From Jing-mei's point of view, her mother, Suyuan Woo, who initiated a Joy Luck Club, is quite sensitive to the tragedies of their Chinese friends at home. As the story develops we come to understand the oppression of Chinese women whose roles in the house are just free slaves to their husbands, who are their masters, and always find faults even in small matters:



When I arrive at the Hsus' house, where the joy Luck Club is meeting tonight, the first person I see is my father. "There she is! Never on time!" he announces. And it's true. Everybody's already here, seven family friends in their sixties and seventies. I'm shaking, trying to hold something inside. The last time I saw them, at funeral, I had broken down and cried big gulping. They must wonder now how someone like me can take my mother's place. (Tan, 1989, p.14)

The above citation portrays the father figure as cold and full of criticism, and is inhumane.

Chinese mother is also portrayed as authoritative figure toward her daughter as can be seen below:

When we were children, Auntie An-mei didn't let us touch any of her new furniture except through the clear plastic coverings. On Joy Luck Club, my parents brought me to the Hsus. Since I was the guest, I had to take care of all the younger children, so many children it seemed as if there were always one baby who was crying from having bumped its head on a table leg. "You are responsible," said my mother, which meant I was in trouble if anything was spilled, burnt, lost, broken, or dirty. I was responsible, no matter who did it. (Tan, 1989, p.16)

From the above, it is frustrating to be a daughter, and the Chinese parents always like to take control of their children. Even among close friends, Chinese mothers are competitive and try to hide their jealousy from one another. They like to show off their off-springs' achievement:

Auntie Lin and my mother were both best friends and enemies who spent a lifetime comparing their children. I was one month older than Waverly Jong, Auntie Lin's prized daughter. From the time we were babies, our mothers compared the creases in our belly buttons, how shapely our earlobes were, how fast we healed when we scraped our knees, how thick and dark our hair, how many shoes we wore out in one year, and later, how smart Waverly was at chess, how many trophies she had won last month, how many newspapers had printed her name, on many cities she had visited. (Tan, 1989, p.277)

The above clearly illustrate how boastful the Chinese mother was to compensate for her own inferiority.

Chinese are superstitious and the matchmakers play a great role in match making and predict if the marriage is going to be successful or not. Daughters have to get married to leave the family when they are old enough as seen below:

I saw the matchmaker place the lighted red candle in a gold holder and then hand it to a nervous-looking servant. This servant was supposed to watch the candle during the banquet and all night to make sure neither end went out. In the morning the match maker was supposed to show the result, a little piece of black ash, and then declare, "This candle burned continuously at both ends without going out. This is a marriage that can never be broken." (Tan, 1989, p.54)

The above shows how superstitious Chinese people are and may seem funny or create a culture shock to American people that whether a married couple will be happy or not depends on the burning of the candle stick. This is Tan's artistic wit to amuse her audience as well as to tell the truth about her parents' ancient culture.

Ying-Ying St. Clair's reflection of her youth and the worries about her daughter's unhappy marriage illustrates the bond of mother and daughter and the mother's desire for her daughter's successful and happy life:



For all these years I kept my mouth closed so selfish desires would not fall out. And because I remained quiet for so long now my daughter does not hear me. She sits by her fancy swimming pool and hears only her Sony Walkman, her cordless phone ,her big, important husband asking her why they have charcoal and no lighter fluid...But now I remember the wish, and I can recall the details of that entire day, as I clearly see my daughter and the foolishness of her life...But now I am old, moving every year closer to the end of my life, I also feel closer to the beginning, and I remember everything that happened that day because it has happened many times in my life. The same innocence, trust, and restlessness, the wonder, fear ,and loneliness. How I lost myself. (Tan, 1989, pp.64, 83)

The above clearly reveals the sorrow of the mother seeing her daughter's failure in her marriage, and felt bitter. It was like a repetition of her own failed marriage. The only way to console her loneliness and eliminate her frustration was to have a self-reflection of her youth, which makes her realize that her wish alone could not make things happen. Daughters should communicate openly with their mothers for advice, but in *Ying-Ying St. Clair* there is a communication gap widened by age and experiences. This plain truth explains why women prefer to remain quiet. Therefore the solution is to communicate openly and to respect one another's feeling, and learn from failures.

Racism and Cross-Cultural Issues

The Joy Luck Club also portrays the impact of racism and cross-cultural issues on interpersonal relationship as reflected in Rose Hsu Jordan, and Ted, an American medical student, whom Rose met at the University of California, Berkeley. Hsu Jordan thinks she is American, and takes for granted that everyone will accept her like any American, but her mother has warned her about the different cultures, but Rose does not care about her mother's comment:

My mother must have noticed these same differences after Ted picked me up one evening at my parents' house. When I returned home ,my mother was still up, watching television.“He is American,” warned my mother, as if I had been too blind to notice. “A waigoren.”“I'm American too,” I said “And it's not as if I'm going to marry him or something.”

But she now realizes what her mother had noticed after she had met Ted's mother :

Mrs. Jordan also had a few words to say. Ted had casually invited me to a family picnic, the annual clan reunion held by the polo fields Golden Gate Park....Ted introduced me to all his relatives as his girlfriend, which, until then, I didn't know I was....I am so glad to meet you finally, Mrs. Jordan said. “I think it's nice that you and Ted are having such a lot of fun together. So I hope you won't misunderstand what I have to say.”...She assures me she had nothing whatever against minorities; she and her husband, who owned a chain of office-supply stores, personally knew many fine people who were oriental, Spanish, and even black. But Ted was going to be in one of those professions where he would be judged by a different standard ,by patients and other doctors who might not be as understanding as the Jordans were. (Tan, 1989, p.124)

Tan effectively employed a dramatic irony to present the conflicts caused by cultural identity and generation gap. In this way the readers learn to understand more than the characters involved and are more sympathetic with them and their situation. Although both mothers are concerned about their children's happiness, and have tried to



interfere in their lives, they should have realized that their children are grown up and well educated, and have the right to make their own decision in their personal lives. At the same time Tan also makes use of what is called a master narrative technique to reflect the existence of racism in American society.

The Joy Luck Club realistically demonstrates ungrounded worries of the Chinese mothers towards their daughters' lives in a multicultural American society, which reflect a strong bond with their daughters. Their judgments were based on their instinct and past experiences. Finally June made a decision to travel to China to visit her half-sisters and convey to them how their mother spent her life in America. June's journey to her motherland symbolizes a compromise between the two cultures and has resolved the generation gaps among family members. In the end, the daughters come to realize their mothers' concern and the bond between them. As they became more mature through life experience and have learned to appreciate both cultures, they can find solutions to their problems. In America, they have opportunities to learn to advance themselves, and become independent women who treasure their roots and appreciate their freedom in a new culture.

In conclusion, approaches to feminist writing as reflected in the two novels discussed earlier not only enhance learners' effective communication, and conceptual thinking skills, but also make them aware of social problems that create conflicts and injustice in the world. Since the 21st century education emphasizes multi-literacy for English education, the teacher's role is to coach their students to become competent and effective in their communication. It is, therefore; practical for teachers to encourage their students to read both intensively and extensively to come really well-educated. Students are free to choose any novel they want to read. The teacher's role is to motivate them to read feminist literature to provoke their concern about gender inequity issues. Literary studies, including feminist writing are recommended as good learning resources to educate young and adult learners to be mindful of the well-beings of others for a healthy society.

About the Author

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