

The Alienating Job of the Female Protagonist in Hsi Hsi's Short Story Entitled *A Woman Like Me*

Ratna Asmarani
{ratna_asmarani@yahoo.com}

Faculty of Humanities, Diponegoro University, Semarang 50275 Indonesia

Abstract. The aim of this paper is to analyze the peculiar job of the female character in the short story entitled *A Woman Like Me* written by Hsi Hsi, a Taiwanese female writer. The focus of the analysis is on the social and psychological life of the female character that is deeply alienated by her unusual job. Contextual method of analysis is used to analyze the data from the feminist literary perspective. This method is a combination of intrinsic elements, focusing on the character, conflict, and setting, and extrinsic elements using the concepts of alienation and semiotics done from the female perspective. The result shows that due to her unique job, the female character is alienated from her friends and her love-life. Her unusual job also affects her perspective in seeing her surroundings.

Keywords: alienation, semiotics, social and psychological life, contextual method

1 Introduction

Some jobs are socially acceptable such as prestigious jobs in admirable surroundings, however some are socially needed but not publicly and proudly acknowledged. The later usually relates to situations that refer to sadness and death, such as jobs relating to preparing the dead bodies before burial or cremation. This paper aims to analyze the influence of a particular job, a make-up artist for the dead bodies for their last public appearance, to the social life of the artist in relation to gender. The focus of analysis is a short story entitled *A Woman Like Me* (1982) written by Hsi Hsi, the pen name used by the female Chinese writer, ChangYan. Hsi Hsi (Chang Yan) who has published most of her literary works in Taiwan, is famous in Taiwan's literary life [1].

2 Methods

To support the analysis, there are certain theories and methods used. The theories used are basically concerning the concept of alienation and the concept of semiotics. According to Geyer, alienation has a strong relationship between the person with his/her surrounding [2]. Here Geyer refers to social alienation experienced by an individual with his/her social surrounding. Schacht calls it "social isolation" referring to the loss of warm relationship between the individual with his/her cultural values [3]. The deviant feeling that arises might be due to the individual's particular job that he/she totally commits himself/herself to. Jaeggi calls this total commitment

as “appropriating a role” in the form of professional commitment covering personal involvement and identification with the job. The individual and the job become inseparable [4].

The concept of semiotics used here is especially concerning cultural semiotics which basically focuses on the symbolic interaction in the cultural communication [5]. The basic idea is that every human interaction however simple contains symbolic meaning as stated by Merrell [6]. The world is rich in symbolic representations that need to be interpreted by the individual. Referring to Peircean Sign, Danesi says that according to Peirce, a “representamen” is the sign while “the object” is the referred concept, and “the interpretant” is the meaning of the sign [7], while Deledale says that representamen is “The sign, the concrete subject of the representation” [8]. Thus, in the social interaction, it is important to interpret the representamen to find out the symbolic meaning.

The combination of methods is used to support the analysis. First, data from the short story and the supporting theories are gathered through library research method with its close reading technique. Then, the literary analysis is supported by the contextual method which is a combination of intrinsic analysis and extrinsic analysis [9]. The intrinsic analysis focusses on the character, conflict, and setting while the extrinsic analysis is supported by the concepts on social alienation and cultural semiotics. This literary analysis is also done from the feminist literary criticism [10] paying attention on the different influence of job on different gender. At last the analysis is presented in a descriptive-qualitative method. These combined methods will be sufficient to help analyze the topic concerning “The Alienating Job of the Female Protagonist in Hsi Hsi’s Short Story Entitled *A Woman Like Me*”.

3 Results and Discussions

The focus of analysis is on the alienating effect of the particular job on the female character. The alienating effect is traced through the female character’s physical condition, social life, gender, and love life by paying attention to the representamen.

3.1 The Female Character’s Job and Its Alienating Effect on her Physical Condition

The female character, a no-name character, works as make-up artist to prepare the dead persons for their last public appearance. Her aunt, Yi-fen, is a professional make-up artist for the dead and she makes the no-name female character as her apprentice for two basic reasons: because she is not a timid person [1: 142] and because this rare job will secure her financial needs [1: 138]. Committed to her job with the dead like her aunt Yi-fen, gradually her job affects her physical condition. Working in a closed room most of the time makes her skin getting paler and paler [1: 136]. The special chemical used to work with the dead also gradually permeates her body that cannot be washed with soap so that the faint smell of formaldehyde comes out of her body [1: 137]. Nobody to talk to while working to prepare the good appearance of the dead make the no-name female character gradually less and less communicative [1: 138], while the silent working situation without no living things rushing her to finish her work in a short time makes the no-name female character slower and slower in her silent movement [1: 138]. All these gradual influences on the physical condition of the no-name female character causes no problem when she works with the dead bodies, however these physical changes more or less influence her love life if not her social life.

3.2 The Female Character's Job and Its Alienating Effect on her Social Life

Beautifying the dead to make them appear peaceful before funeral affects the social life of the no-name female character. Actually the profession of the no-name female character belongs to the domain of "beautician or make-up artist", however this representamen refers to the different object of representation in the form of place of work and clients. If the beautician or make-up artist works in a beauty parlor, then the clients are living people, usually females, who want to look beautiful especially for special occasions such as parties, weddings, or celebrations. If the beautician or make-up artist works in a morgue, then the clients are dead people whose families want them to look peaceful and serene in their final sleep for the parting with the living families before funeral. The first implies an interpretation that the job is glamorously cheerful, positively anticipated, and openly carried out for happy events while the latter can be interpreted as a publicly isolated job without a tint of happiness and communication. The first is a job that people are happily associated while the latter is a needed job but not much publicly talked about.

In relation to the no-name female character whose job belong to the second category, although she faces no problem in doing the work *per se*, she has to face different situation when she interacts socially. Her friends' comment "What a horrible job!" [1: 143] is a typical comment that she has to face followed by an avoidance reaction. Her friends feel afraid to be close to her, to touch and be touched by the hands used to touch the dead bodies, to look at and be looked by the eyes that used to look at dead bodies [1: 143]. The no-name female character becomes the representamen, the dead bodies is the object of representation, and the interpretation is that she is the death and the darkness itself that is normal to be afraid of and avoided.

The no-name female character also feels isolated from the family of the dead whose only concern is with the peaceful appearance of the deceased for the parting moment with the family and close relatives: "my efforts will surely go unnoticed by the family of the deceased" [1: 140]. The deceased's family sometimes just pays for the serene make-up and respectable appearance of the deceased, they often do not want to bother themselves to meet personally the beautician that handle the deceased. Thus, the no-name female character does not socialize with the living family of the dead. However, the no-name female character is not isolated from her job. She is close to the object of her job. She touches them, constructs their facial appearance, dresses them tidily and elegantly before presenting them to the closed public. All of these are done silently. Moreover, even though she is a skillful make-up artist, there is no chance for her to exhibit her skillfulness to the public, because it is "a lonely profession" [1: 140]. Thus, even though she is not isolated from the result of her job, she is isolated from the public's appreciation of her skill as a beautician just because her clients are dead bodies that cannot be displayed to the public in general.

3.3 The Female Character's Job and Its Alienating Effect on her Love Life

The no-name female character finally has a boy friend named Hsia. At first she feels hesitated to have a relationship with a man due to her special job. She does not want to experience the same fate as her aunt Yi-fen's. According to the story that she hears, her aunt once had a serious lover who swore that he was ready to face everything together due to his unconditional love [1: 141] because he only knew that Yi-fen was a professional beautician. Yi-fen herself never specified her real job to him haunting by the doubt that he would change. Yi-fen's doubt was

proven. When she showed him the place where she worked with the awaiting clients, his reaction was so dramatic and left a traumatic memory for Yi-fen: “He let out a loud yell, turned on his heel and ran ... Aunt Yi-fen never saw him again” [1: 142].

Even though the traumatic experience of her aunt is also haunting the no-name female character, she cannot resist the temptation of love. During her close relationship with Hsia, she is always in a state of internal conflict: “A woman like me is actually unsuitable for any man’s love” [1: 135]. However, her feeling of love overcomes her doubts. As a trusting person with limited experience of her own, the no-name female character lets her relationship with Hsia getting closer and closer. As her aunt Yi-fen, she only states her profession in a very general term “I’m a cosmetician” [1: 136], fully aware of the consequences. The comment from the misleading Hsia “But your face is so natural” [1: 136] which is actually a compliment is interpreted differently by the no-name female character that makes her feel so sad. Due to her job, the natural face refers to the state of the face of the dead before being skillfully applied with cosmetics. Thus, Hsia’s compliment misleadingly reminds the no-name female character about her clients in her particular, lonely job that she still keeps as a secret from Hsia.

Because the no-name female character also works on Sunday morning while Hsia is free with nothing to do, he urges her to take him to her work place to see, based on his assumption, “the brides-to-be” that need her skillfulness to make them more beautiful [1: 136]. Seeing no other reason to refuse his request, and using his request as a testing case, she finally agrees to let him go with her to her place of work. They make an appointment to meet in a coffee shop near her work place to walk together from there. However, he brings something that makes the no-name female character jumps into wrong interpretation that justifies her previous bad feeling. Smiling happily while approaching her, Hsia brings “a large bouquet of flowers” [1: 146]. This representamen refers to the idea of the blooming love from the general perspective of the person who is in love like Hsia, however this representamen is interpreted differently by the no-name female character due to her particular job: “in our profession flowers symbolize eternal parting” [1: 146]. The deceased, after being skillfully prepared for the last meeting with the family and friends, holds a flower bouquet to his/her final resting place. So, the same representamen has different interpretation depending on the perspective or context. The no-name female character sadly assumes that Hsia wants to break their relationship and his saying good-bye is represented by a beautiful flower bouquet.

3.4 The Female Character’s Job and Its Alienating Effect on Certain Gender

Besides the no-name female character and her aunt Yi-fen, the father of the no-name female character is also a beautician for the dead. However, both parents of the no-name female character died in an accident leaving the very young no-name female character and her younger brother in the hand of the aunt, Yi-fen. If Yi-fen and the no-name female character have no lasting relationship with their boyfriends due to their unusual job, the case is different with the father of the no-name female character. He has a wife who is not afraid of his job as a cosmetician of the dead [1: 145]. The no-name female character tries to think logically this different situation and concludes that: “Men everywhere like women who are gentle, warm, and sweet, and elegant. But my job is cold and ghostly dark, and I’m sure that my entire body has long been tainted by that sort of shadowy cast. Why would a man who exists in a world of brightness want to be friendly with a woman surrounded by darkness?” [1: 145]. Thus the same representamen, the cosmetician/beautician/make-up artist is interpreted differently based on gender. If the clients are living people and the work place is a beauty parlor, the profession is

good in social and love life for both kinds of gender, however if the clients are dead bodies, it is good in social and love life only for the male gender since the bravery to handle the dead is suitable for the males but not appropriate for the females like the no-name female character and her aunt, Yi-fen. Thus, the profession as a cosmetician for the dead is impliedly gendered.

4 Conclusions

The short story entitled *A Woman Like Me* written by Hsi Hsi presents an unusual profession, needed but not much talked about; namely, the profession as a cosmetician/beautician/make-up artist for the dead. Hsi Hsi plainly describes the complexities of this profession especially its effects on the concerned professional doer, especially on the no-name female character. The profession unavoidably has certain alienating effects that gradually change the life of the no-name female character. Her smell, her gait, her desire to talk change due to her frequent closeness with the dead in preparing for their last public appearance before burial. Other ensuing alienating effects concerned with her social life and love life. She loses her friends who are terrified by her job, and her boyfriend whom she interprets as symbolically saying goodbye by giving her a beautiful flower bouquet. However, considering the gender issue, it can be concluded that the profession as a cosmetician for the dead is not gender-neutral. It is more suitable for the males, like her father who is narrated having a wife who is not afraid of his profession. Thus the alienating effects are only headed to the female and not male cosmetician for the deceased.

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