

The Female Character Struggle to Obtain Equality in *Beauty and the Beast*

Rahmawati Muafiah¹, Suci Suryani²

English Study Program, University Of Trunojoyo Madura^{1,2}

e-mail address: suci.suryani@trunojoyo.ac.id

DOI : 10.21107/prosodi.v18i1.24196

Received 01 December 2023; Received in revised form 01 December 2023;

Accepted 01 December 2023; Published 01 April 2024.

ABSTRACT

In the patriarchy system, women have restriction in delivering thoughts and action, accessing education, and obtaining rights. However, they struggle hard to attain equality in those aspects in their life. Hence, the study aims to find out the restriction experienced by women character named Belle and how she fight against the restriction to obtain her freedom and independence as women. While the original "*Beauty and the Beast*" story has roots in classic fairy tales, modern adaptations, such as the one by Elizabeth Rudnick, transform it into a contemporary literary work. This book, applying the theory of Liberal Feminism, can be seen as a form of challenge or movement within the postmodern era. Using the theory of liberal feminism espoused by Rosemarie Tong (1980) those two issues will be analyzed through reading book entitle "*Beauty and the Beast*" by Elizabeth Rudnick's (2017). The library use in this study is to help the writer to analyze the data regarding to the issues in the novel.

Keywords: *Beauty and the Beast, Female character, Liberal feminism, Novel, Rosemarie.*

INTRODUCTION

In society, the role of each individual is needed to form a stable structure in order to regulate the existing power in society itself. In this case, society in general often assumes that the role of men is better in doing something that improves life and also occupies the most dominant and essential position in society. This is where the term patriarchy comes from. Meanwhile, women are treated unfairly and in the eyes of society are considered not very valuable unless they are married. They are not given freedom of opinion, politics, education, and so on. Women tend to be very limited in expressing their freedom. In cases like this, societies that do not prioritize equality tend to be less cohesive. In addition, such societies tend to have anti-social attitudes and high levels of violence. That is why the term feminism appeared. Feminism emerges in an effort to fight gender stereotypes and build equal opportunities for women to have opinions, work, education, and politics, and be equal to men. This is why gender equality is very important in society so that women are not always looked down upon and can prove their worth.

This analysis focuses on Elizabeth Rudnick's literary work, "*Beauty and the Beast*," examining instances where the central female character faces unjust treatment within her surroundings, reflecting an evident power disparity between men and women. The narrative highlights the resistance encountered by the female character when engaging in activities that express her individuality and self-defense, actions traditionally deemed suitable only for men by the community. Despite societal expectations dictating that women should depend on men and derive their value primarily from marriage, the main character consistently defies these norms by pursuing her own desires and asserting her freedom. A significant aspect of this analysis delves into the character named Belle and her struggle against the restrictions imposed on her, showcasing her determination to attain freedom and independence as a woman. The choice of "*Beauty and the Beast*" as the subject for analysis enables an exploration of how the main female character navigates societal norms, expressing her opinions and striving for autonomy, while also highlighting the impact of her environment on her quest for freedom and independence.

To analyze the restriction experienced by a woman character named Belle and how she fights against the restriction to obtain her freedom and independence as a woman, the theory of Liberal Feminism is used. This theory ensures that women and men are created equal and have the same rights in delivering thoughts and action, accessing education, and obtaining rights. In the realm of liberal feminist thought, the principle of equal thought and action champions women's workplace rights, emphasizing their return post-childbirth without loss of seniority and advocating for paid maternity leave. Simultaneously, it calls for tax law revisions, community-based child care, and the eradication of sex-based discrimination in education. This aligns with the vision of a just and compassionate society. Equal education in liberal feminism underscores the need for women's education equal to men, devoid of sex-based discrimination. It seeks to grant women identical educational opportunities, fostering their intellectual and moral development. This resonates with liberal feminism's emphasis on individual autonomy and equal opportunities.

In terms of equal rights, liberal feminism demands the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment, equal employment opportunities, and reproductive rights. It also calls for equitable treatment in poverty, job training, housing, and family allowances. These demands reflect the commitment to parity in women's rights and opportunities in employment, reproductive rights, and social welfare. The use of this theory aims to

clarify the feminist movement carried out by the female lead in the literary work "*Beauty and The Beast*".

RESEARCH METHOD

In the process of conducting this research, the data acquisition and analysis focused on a meticulous examination of Elizabeth Rudnick's (2017) novel "*Beauty and the Beast*." Through a comprehensive reading of the narrative, specific attention was given to identifying key themes and instances that illuminated the issues related to women's restrictions, their persistent pursuit of equality, and the central character Belle's transformative journey toward freedom and independence. Detailed notes were taken to document relevant passages, dialogues, and character interactions that exemplified these themes, serving as the primary data source for subsequent analysis.

Additionally, a parallel exploration involved delving into the library to unearth scholarly articles, critical analyses, and theoretical frameworks related to feminist theories and particularly, liberal feminism. These external sources provided valuable context and theoretical perspectives to enrich the analytical process. The subsequent phase of the research involved a rigorous literary analysis. Applying the theoretical framework of Liberal Feminism, as articulated by Rosemarie Tong (1980), the collected data from the novel was scrutinized to uncover instances where the protagonist, Belle, confronted and challenged gender norms, fought against societal restrictions, and navigated the path toward personal independence.

The synthesis of findings culminated in a narrative that elucidates the nuanced depiction of women's struggles and triumphs in the novel. The analysis delves into Belle's character, examining her responses to societal challenges and the broader implications of her journey within the context of gender roles and feminist discourse. This research thus seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the issues at hand, offering insights into the intricate dynamics of gender representation and feminist narratives within the literary realm.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This part discusses problem formulation analysis. It is divided into two parts to clarify the results of the analysis. The first part discusses how is the restriction experienced by a woman character (BELLE). The second part is how she fights against the restriction to obtain her freedom and independence as a woman.

The restriction experienced by a woman character named Belle

In Belle's experiences, restrictions manifest through her daily actions, offering several pieces of evidence for analysis. First, Belle stands out as the sole woman in her village who passionately enjoys reading books, frequently visiting the small library. Her love for reading has earned her the affectionate nickname 'bookworm' from the local librarian. Despite the prevailing belief that only men can pursue education in her environment, Belle tenaciously continues to pursue her passion for reading books.

- Pere Robert** : Well! If it isn't the only bookworm in town. So where did you run off to this week?
- Belle** : Two cities in Northern Italy. You should have seen it. The castle. The art. There was even a masquerade ball.
- Belle (CONT'D)** : Have you got any new place to go?
- Pere Robert** : I'm afraid not. But you may reread any of the old ones that you'd like.
- Belle** : Thank you, Pere Robert. Your Library almost makes our small corner of the world feel big.

Dialogue Data 1.0

In this dialogue excerpt (Data 1.0), it is evident that even after finishing one book, Belle consistently returns to borrow another for further reading. This pattern illustrates Belle's unwavering commitment to her intellectual pursuits, portraying her as a woman with ambitious dreams and a perpetual thirst for knowledge. However, her enthusiastic attitude becomes a point of contention in a society where such behaviors are not readily accepted, often leading to disapproval and frustration from others. In this strictly patriarchal environment, Belle's unique position as the only woman seeking education renders her actions unconventional, perceived by the community as contrary to societal norms. Consequently, her simple act of reading a book is met with condemnation, positioning her as an outsider and sometimes even deemed a 'strange' woman.

Gasping, Belle reached out and grabbed one of the beautiful clay pots just before it fell. Then, satisfied nothing else would fall, she gave the mule the apple and turned to leave.

- Jean The Old Potter** : Where are you off to?
- Belle** : To return this book to Pere Robert, It's about two lovers in fair Verona -
- Jean The Old Potter** : Are either of them potters?
- Belle** : No
- Jean The Old Potter** : Sound Boring

Belle sighed. She wasn't surprised by Jean's reaction. It was the same reaction she got anytime she mentioned books. Or art. Or travel. Or Paris. Anything other than talk of the village or the villagers was met with indifference - or, worse, disdain.

Dialogue Data 1.0

Belle's situation in the provided data aligns with Tong's (1980) discussion on equal education. Belle's passion for books, art, and broader intellectual pursuits sets her apart from the villagers, including Jean's The Old Potter, who shows disdain for topics outside the village's conventional interests. This reflects the societal attitude that Wollstonecraft criticizes—where women like Belle, who seek intellectual and cultural enrichment, face indifference or disdain. Wollstonecraft advocates for equal education to empower women like Belle, allowing them to develop their rational and moral capacities and be recognized as full human beings. Belle's struggle for acceptance and understanding in the village echoes the broader theme of the need for educational parity.

In another part (Data 1.1), Belle faces mistreatment from her neighbors after teaching a young girl to read. Returning home, she encounters Gaston, a man who attempts to persuade her to conform to societal expectations by discouraging her from engaging in unconventional activities and urging her to marry him instead.

[Belle's Cottage]

Gaston : I was pretty great back there,
wasn't I?
Belle : That was twelve years ago, Gaston,
Gaston : Sad, I know,
Belle, I'm sure you think I have
it all. But there *is* something
I'm missing.
Belle : I can't imagine..
A wife,
Gaston : You're not really living until you
see yourself reflected in someone
else's eyes.
Belle : And you can see yourself in mine?
Gaston : We're both Fighters,
Belle : All I wanted was to teach a child
to read.
Gaston : The only children you should
concern yourself with are...your
own.
Belle : I'm not ready to have children.

Dialogue Data 1.1

Belle : Look, we could never make each
other happy. No one can change
that much.
Gaston : Belle, do you know what happens to
spinsters in our village after
their father die?
Gaston : They beg for change in the street.
(CONT'D) This is our world, Belle. For
simple folk like us, it doesn't
get any better.
Belle : I might be a farm girl, but I'm
not simple. I'm sorry, but I will
never marry you, Gaston.

Dialogue Data 1.2

In the (Data 1.2), it is evident that the society depicted places value on women primarily through the lens of marriage. This cultural perspective contributes to the subjugation of women, reinforcing the belief that a woman's worth is closely tied to her role in childbirth. This situation is largely responsible for the hardships that women go through as well as the prevention of women breaking out of their domestic gender obligations (Confidence Gbolo Sanka, Samuelis Gracious Ablah, Peter Arthur. 2021, p. 233). This sensitivity in Belle's environmental reactions becomes evident when she demonstrates a divergence in her actions to indulge in activities she enjoys.

Despite Gaston's attempts to sway her, Belle consistently articulates her thoughts with clarity and firmness. She adamantly rejects his proposal, choosing to remain unbound by marriage. In this instance, Belle's stance resonates with the tenets of liberal feminism, showcasing her capacity to express and uphold equality in action while making autonomous choices.

How she fights against the restriction to obtain her freedom and independence as a woman

Society plays a crucial role in perpetuating patriarchy, influencing individuals' actions and instigating irrational behavior when confronted with those who deviate from the norm. Take Belle, for instance—a smart and beautiful woman who prioritizes her happiness and freedom. However, to attain these, she must contend with the adverse treatment meted out by her community.

Absorbed in thoughts of what new bookish delights might be awaiting her at Pere Robert's, Belle didn't even notice the attention she was getting. Nor did she pay any mind to the barely concealed comments her presence sparked. She had heard them all before. It was not the first time she had passed by the school and heard the young boys call her strange. The washerwomen, their hands pruned and covered in suds, also loved to whisper among themselves whenever they saw Belle. "Funny girl," they would say. "Doesn't fit in" was another favorite. To the gossipy women, this was the worst offense of all. It never occurred to them that Belle chose not to be part of the crowd.

Data 1.3

In the scenario presented in (Data 1.3), the residents of Belle's village view her as an unconventional woman. They label her as peculiar, deeming her actions, such as avidly reading books and pursuing her interests despite societal norms, as aberrant. Belle stands out as markedly different from the other women in her community because she chooses to act independently, particularly by indulging in her love for reading. This divergence is rooted in the historical perspective that viewed women acquiring knowledge as undesirable, reserving the right to proper education exclusively for men.

Another noteworthy incident occurs when Belle takes on the role of an educator, teaching a young girl to read in defiance of societal norms that question women's right to education. Despite the disapproving glares directed her way, Belle persists in calmly

imparting knowledge to the little girl. Regrettably, this act of empowerment is met with unpleasant treatment from others.

Washer girl : T...th...the blue bi-ir-ird flies...
Belle : ...Over the dark wood.
Nasty Headmaster : What on earth are you doing?
 Girls don't read

Dialogue Data 1.4

In the presented data (Data 1.4), villagers express disapproval when Belle takes on the role of an educator once again, teaching another girl to read. Their reaction is marked by outrage at Belle's audacious behavior. Despite the unfavorable response, Belle remains undeterred, persisting in her efforts to educate the young girl. This incident underscores the deeply ingrained gender biases in Belle's village, where education and transformative actions are normalized for men, and any such endeavors by women are met with societal shame and condemnation. The negative response not only reflects the villagers' displeasure with women challenging traditional roles but also perpetuates harmful stereotypes, suggesting that women's intellectual capacities are somehow limited. Access to education, leadership and any other areas that are considered to be public or belong to men is pivotal in women's development. In traditional gender roles, women are prohibited to be in the public sphere because women are believed as incapable of performing the roles (Diksita Galuh Nirwinastu, 2021, P. 460)

[EXT. Village of Villeneuve - Square - Night]

Belle : Open this door! He's hurt!
Monsieur D'Arque : I'm afraid we can't do that miss.
 But we'll take very good care of him.
Belle : My father not crazy! Gaston... tell him!
Gaston : Belle, you know how loyal I am to your family, but your father has been making some unbelievable claims.
Jean : It's true, Belle. He's been raving about a beast in a castle.
Belle : But I have just come from the castle, there is a beast!
Gaston : We all admire your devotion to your father, but you'd say anything to free him. Your word is hardly proof.
Belle : You want proof? SHOW ME THE BEAST!

(In the mirror, the beast sits slumped against a turret wall. The villagers gasp. Gaston's face registers shock.)

There is your PROOF!

Dialogue Data 1.5

In (Data 1.5), the Beast releases Belle to aid her father, who has been wrongfully detained by villagers who deemed him mentally ill for claiming the existence of beasts in the palace. Undeterred by the discrimination faced by both herself and her father, Belle fearlessly steps forward to substantiate her father's claims and defend the truth. In this moment, she boldly asserts her rights and advocates for justice in the face of adversity.

In this pivotal scene from "*Beauty and the Beast*," Belle passionately confronts the villagers, including Gaston and Jean, about her father's plight. Despite her urgent plea for them to believe her father's extraordinary claims regarding the Beast, the villagers exhibit skepticism, doubting his sanity. This moment mirrors the discussion in Tong's (1980) statement on liberal feminist thought, emphasizing the challenges faced when individuals assert unconventional views that challenge societal norms. Belle's struggle to gain recognition and acceptance for her father's claims parallels the broader feminist struggle for acknowledgment and understanding. The demand for proof, embodied in Belle's emphatic "SHOW ME THE BEAST!" mirrors the ongoing challenge within liberal feminism to provide tangible evidence and justification for advocating changes in societal structures. The scene encapsulates the tension between unconventional perspectives and societal skepticism, drawing a compelling parallel to the complexities explored in Tong's analysis of liberal thought.

CONCLUSION

The main female character, Belle, exhibits remarkable courage in expressing her opinions and exercising her freedom to pursue her interests, undeterred by the negative responses from her surroundings. Despite facing pressure from the community, Belle steadfastly unveils truths she holds dear. Her character serves as a tangible representation of the struggle to assert women's rights and freedoms, challenging societal norms that position women as inferior to men. Belle navigates a patriarchal environment, defying its constraints to enjoy her preferred activities, pursue education through extensive reading, and attain independence without reliance on men.

REFERENCES

- Tong, R. (2009). *Feminist thought: A more comprehensive introduction* (3rd ed.). Westview Press.
- Rudnick, E. (2017). *Beauty and the beast*. Disney Press.
- Ruruk, H. L.L., & Rosiandani, L.P.N. (2015). The Resistance of Women towards Sexual Terrorism in Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues*. *Journal of Language and Literature*, 15(1), 46-56.
- Sampe, M. D. (2022). Rejection against the Patriarchal Society in Stephen Chbosky and Evan Spiliotopoulos's *Beauty and The Beast*. *Journal of Language and Literature*, 22(1), 115-124.
- Banks, M. (2021). 'De Beaumont's *Beauty and the Beast*: A feminist analysis', *Literator* 42(1), a1713. <https://doi.org/10.4102/lit.v42i1.1713>
- Oktarini, R. (2021). Belle Character and Feminism in "*Beauty and the Beast* 2017". *International Conference on the Teaching of English and Literature*, 341-347
- Kinanti, L. W., Siagiyanto, B. E., Qomar, A. H. (2022). Analysis Of Main Character In *Beauty And The Beast* Movie By John Alvin. *Journal of English Education and Entrepreneurship (JEEP)*, 2(1), 55-78.

- Murtadho, A.M. and Maharani, V.R (2022). Analysis of Belle's Character in Beauty and the Beast Movie (2017) Directed by Bill Condon. *Journal of English Language and Literature*, 7(2), 185-194.
- Nirwinastu, D. G. (2021). Oppression towards Women as Depicted in Marge Piercy's Selected Poems. *Journal of Language and Literature*, 21(2), 453 – 463.
- Sanka, C. G., Ablah, S. G., Arthur, P. (2021). Deconstructing Feminist Positions in Unigwe's "Possessing The Secret Of Joy" And Aidoo's "The Girl Who Can". *Journal of Language and Literature*, 21(2), 228-241.
- Mulyani, S. (2022). Revisiting Feminist Strategies in Poetry: Gender, Genre, and Power Relation. *Journal of Language and Literature*, 22(1), 208-219.