

DEPRIVATION OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS PORTRAYED IN SALLY NICHOL'S *THINGS A BRIGHT GIRL CAN DO*: A LIBERAL FEMINISM STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The discriminatory treatment of women is a result of societal perceptions regarding gender and sexuality, which often portray women as weak creatures. This form of deprivation of rights against women, as depicted in the novel *Things A Bright Girl Can Do*, stems from the belief that women are inherently limited in various aspects compared to men. This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach, utilizing primary data extracted from the novel *Things A Bright Girl Can Do*, and secondary data derived from relevant books and journal articles. The research methodology involved reading, recording, and analyzing the collected data. To examine the various forms of rights deprivation experienced by women, the researchers employed the theory of Liberal Feminism proposed by Mary Wollstonecraft. The findings of this study revealed (1) the existence of rights deprivation against women in the domains of education, economics, and freedom of expression, and (2) the efforts made by women to advocate for gender equality.

I. Introduction

Human rights are an essential part of every individual's existence, and they should be granted to all human beings from the moment they are born until their last breath. These rights are not dependent on any external factors but are inherently possessed by humans due to their intrinsic worth and dignity as members of the human race (Smith et

al., 2008). Likewise, there are no exemptions regarding women's rights, who should be granted equal status as men. Women are divine beings who can be perceived as beings of magnificence. They hold a significant position in society due to their ability to conceive and give birth. Consequently, women are regarded as honorable creatures. Nevertheless, the prevalent issue of gender discrimination persists in societies where patriarchal ideologies are deeply ingrained. Women are consistently perceived as inferior to men, both in terms of physical strength and capabilities. Numerous women have initiated a struggle for their rights in response to this oppression and discrimination.

Gender equality refers to equal rights and justice for women, ensuring that they are treated fairly and without discrimination. Unfortunately, there are numerous misunderstandings surrounding this concept, with some individuals mistakenly perceiving it as an endeavor by women to overpower men (Subhan, 2015). As in research by Purwarno, Sylvia Madatillah, and Andang Suhedi (2021) entitled "Liberal Feminism in Ika Natassa's Novel *Critical Eleven*" the focus is on equality in the workplace and education. The character Tanya Baskoro emphasizes the importance of gender equality. The author highlights that women's inclusion is crucial in various domains, as shown through Tanya's impressive education and ability to compete with men. Another research by Putri Amalia Zahra, Tri Murniat, and Ririn Kurnia Trisnawati (2000) "Liberal Feminism in Nawal El Saadawi's *Memoirs of A Woman Doctor*" explores liberal feminism and patriarchy. They found that the unnamed protagonist overcomes societal barriers to becoming a doctor and achieving equality with men. The author also gains economic parity, freedom of choice, and civil liberties, proving that women can occupy the same positions as men. Next is the research entitled "Characterization of Enola Holmes in the Case of the Missing Marquess: A Study of Liberal Feminism" Halimatus Sakinah and Ari Setyorini (2022) explore how Enola defied societal norms in the nineteenth century. Enola's masculine appearance and critical thinking challenged gender roles that undermined women's intelligence. Despite facing opposition, her independent and courageous personality drove her to prove her intellectual prowess.

According to various studies mentioned above, it is evident that real-life issues are frequently depicted in literary works. Many literary pieces address feminist concerns that are prevalent in society. These authors strive to amplify the voices of women through their writings. Several examples of literary works that tackle the issue of feminism can be found. *Things A Bright Girl Can Do* (2017) by Sally Nichols is a novel set in the early 19th century, which portrays the suppression of women's rights and their subjugation to the desires and circumstances imposed upon them by others. The character of Evelyn undergoes deprivation in the realm of education, as she is denied the opportunity to study at Oxford due to the prevailing belief that women only require basic education for household duties. Additionally, Nell's character experiences economic deprivation, receiving lower wages compared to male workers in her capacity as a female laborer. Lastly, the

Suffragettes face a deprivation of freedom of expression as they strive to advocate for their rights.

Therefore, researchers focus on the deprivation experienced by the female characters in this novel and how their struggle to uphold gender equality. The researcher uses the main liberal feminist theory put forward by Mary Wollstonecraft. Liberal feminism is a theory of gender equality that strengthens the integration of women into larger roles in society, demanding justice and equal rights, wages, social status, and respect for women in social relations (Priyadharshini et al., 2021),

The researcher hopes that this research will open the minds of the wider public that gender equality must be upheld, instilling the idea that women are capable of having the same abilities and insights as men. Not to replace men's positions, but to make women independent individuals who can do what they want as long as they do not neglect their duties as mothers and wives in a household. It is also hoped that this research can become a reference for future research.

II. Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative approach as its objective is to examine the manifestation of women's rights deprivation and gender inequality through the portrayal of characters in the novel *Things A Bright Girl Can Do*. The primary data source for this study is the novel itself, authored by Sally Nicholls in 2017, which spans 432 pages in its printed version. In addition to the primary data, this research incorporates secondary data derived from previous studies, as well as supplementary data from various sources including websites, journal articles, and books.

The researcher undertook several steps of data collection procedures. Initially, the researcher engaged in a thorough reading of the novel, comprehending its essence and substance. Subsequently, the researcher identified and highlighted passages within the text that pertained to various manifestations of women's rights deprivation, gender inequality, and the endeavors of female characters to uphold gender parity. These aspects were directly linked to the theoretical framework employed in this study, specifically the concept of Liberal Feminism, which was originally coined by Mary Wollstonecraft.

After collecting data, the researcher uses a liberal feminist theory to analyze and establish correlations among women's experiences in the novel. This analysis includes aspects such as the deprivation of rights of women in the workplace, freedom of expression, and education. The researcher investigates challenges faced by women in upholding and maintaining gender equality.

III. Results and Discussion

A. Forms of Deprivation of Rights to Women

Sally Nichols' novel, *Things A Bright Girl Can Do*, set in the early 1900s, exposes the unequal treatment of women during that time. It highlights the belief that women were limited. Inspired by Mary Wollstonecraft's Liberal Feminism Theory, the novel emphasizes the importance of equality in education, economics, and self-expression. Through various examples of rights deprivation, the author portrays the struggles women faced in their fight for gender equality, including limited education, unequal job opportunities, and suppression of freedom of expression.

1. Deprivation of Women's Rights in Education Fields

Mary Wollstonecraft argues that to challenge the stereotype of women as emotional, they must receive an education equal to men. This education should cover not only domestic skills like music and art, but also humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences (Tong, 2009). In this novel, a character named Evelyn undergoes the deprivation of educational rights. Evelyn, a seventeen-year-old girl, is the second child among four siblings. Her older brother, Christopher, is nineteen years old and was fortunate enough to be sent to Oxford due to their family's upper-class background. Similarly, Evelyn aspires for an education that is on par with her brother's.

"A university education, from Evelyn's mother's perspective, 'was simply an expensive way of unfitting one's daughter for matrimony.'" (Nichols, 2017:18).

The quotes provided above discuss Evelyn's attempt to communicate with her mother regarding her interest in taking the entrance exam for Oxford. Evelyn believes that it would be easier for her to discuss this matter with her mother first and gain her support before approaching her father. Her desire to go to Oxford grew after receiving advice from Miss Dempsey, a classics teacher at her school. This advice filled her with enthusiasm and made her believe in her capabilities. Evelyn longs to study subjects beyond the classical lessons taught to girls at her school. She feels that the education provided at her school only scratches the surface of worldly knowledge and fails to empower women to achieve true equality with men. Evelyn's beliefs align with the principles of liberal feminism, which emphasize the importance of women possessing both intellectual and physical strength (Wollstonecraft, 1792).

However, when Evelyn shared her aspirations with her mother, she received a response that did not meet her expectations. The researcher observes how Evelyn's mother's perception reflects the prevailing views of women entering university during that time. Evelyn's mother still holds the belief that sending girls to university is an expensive endeavor that renders them unsuitable for marriage. She believes that Evelyn does not need higher education and that finding a suitable husband, taking care of a household, and starting a family should be her primary goals. This belief is reinforced by the fact that Evelyn had been engaged to her childhood friend Teddy a year prior. Teddy and Evelyn's father had studied at the same school, and their families were close, which is how Evelyn became acquainted with Teddy. However, Teddy himself supports Evelyn's ambitions as he possesses a more progressive mindset.

2. Deprivation of Women's Rights in Economic Fields

Women face significant challenges in the economic domain, grappling with a range of issues. In line with the principles of feminism, it is crucial to ensure gender equality by providing women with equal opportunities, particularly in the field of economics (Tong, 2009). In this novel, lower-class women face economic hardship. Nell, the central character, stands out with her narrative of a challenging workplace and limited job opportunities. Hailing from London's destitute East End, Nell embodies the struggles of poverty. Sharing a cramped house with fourteen family members, she had to quit school and work to support her family. She also actively participated in the women's suffrage movement

“she'd gone round every shop in Poplar and no one had wanted to hire a girl, even a girl in breeches, so she'd settled for a job in a jam factory instead.” (Nichols, 2017:45)

“ In the jam factory, a woman's wage was less than a man's, whether you were paid by the hour or by the number of boxes you filled. It was the same everywhere.”(Nichols, 2017:47)

The quotes show Nell's experience of gender-based injustice in job opportunities and workplace treatment. Despite being a tomboy and excelling in activities typically associated with boys, Nell faced difficulties pursuing a career as a delivery boy due to the belief that women were weaker. She eventually finds a job at a jam factory, highlighting the limited options for women at the time.

Nell's frustration has been growing due to the low wages she receives. This feeling of annoyance has persisted for a considerable amount of time, as the wage gap between genders continues to exist. Nell is uncertain about the origins of this rule, but she finds this injustice particularly burdensome for individuals like herself who are struggling to support their families. Workers' wages mustn't be differentiated based on gender, as this goes against the principles of liberal feminism. According to (Tong, 2009), liberal feminism advocates for women to have equal opportunities to work alongside men and share in the profits, risks, and rewards of productive industries. Women should have the freedom to collaborate with men and be given the same opportunities in the economic sphere, rather than being segregated and considered inferior to men. This highlights the importance of equal opportunities in employment, where individuals should be remunerated equally regardless of their gender.

3. Deprivation of The Right to Freedom of Expression

In this research object, advocates of women's suffrage undertake diverse actions to safeguard their rights and articulate their desires for the fulfillment of women's rights. However, they face criticism from society, who dismiss their efforts as inconsequential and foolish.

"The chestnut-seller pulled an awful face. 'Go on!' He yelled at the woman on the orange crate. 'If you were my wife, I'd take a stick to you!' ..." (Nichols, 2017:15)

"...He picked up a handful of chestnuts, cooling on the side of his brazier, and flung them at the Suffragette's eyes. She ducked again, but did not step down from the crate." (Nichols, 2017:15)

The quotes show women's dedication to advocating for their rights during that time, despite opposition due to the prevailing mindset that women should only focus on household affairs. Evelyn witnessed the Suffragettes' passionate speeches and admired them, but those around her had a different view. The Suffragettes aimed to gather support for Votes for Women, recognizing the injustices faced by women in all areas of life. They believed that fighting for suffrage was a crucial step in advancing women's rights.

Contrarily, some individuals saw women only as homemakers, exemplifying the narrow-mindedness of the era. The aforementioned phenomenon is relevant to the concept of freedom of expression within liberal feminism, in 1848, three hundred women and men convened in Seneca Falls, New York, and drafted the Declaration of Sentiments and Twelve Resolutions. The Twelve Resolutions emphasized women's freedom to express themselves publicly (Tong, 2009). The novel's portrayal of women's experiences shows the constraints they faced, even in expressing their desires, due to opposing beliefs.

In addition to their verbal resistance, individuals in the vicinity of the suffragettes frequently resorted to physical aggression by hurling objects at them. For instance, a chestnut vendor once threw chestnuts at one of the suffragette activists who was passionately delivering a speech.

B. How Women Uphold Gender Equality

The researcher examines the challenges faced by women after discrimination, particularly in terms of their rights. Sally Nichols' novel, *Things A Bright Girl Can Do*, addresses these issues and highlights real-life experiences, specifically those of the women's movement. The Suffragettes, depicted in the novel, actively advocate for women's suffrage using various strategies like campaigns, demonstrations, and civil resistance to achieve gender equality. They believed that equality with men required fighting for equal rights in all areas, especially in politics. By carefully selecting leaders, they aimed to have representatives who would champion their cause and fulfill women's aspirations, aligning with the principles of liberal feminism.

1. Campaign (Give A Speech)

A significant aspect to consider is the empowerment of women in fighting for their rights. An essential step in the pursuit of equality, as advocated by liberal feminism, is for women to engage in campaigning and public speaking. This can take place at women's gatherings arranged by the Suffragettes or in front of larger audiences. The main goal of these efforts is to increase awareness and inspire individuals to empathize with and actively back the cause of women's rights.

"The woman on the orange crate was lecturing her audience on the iniquity of British divorce laws. Evelyn took her copy of Votes for Women and scowled at the front page."(Nichols, 2017:14)

The aforementioned quotations elucidate the initial backdrop of the novel, wherein the character, Evelyn, strolls and encounters the Suffragettes delivering a speech on the roadside. Notably, one of the orators stands atop an orange crate while addressing the audience. The speakers expound upon numerous aspects, including the advantages women would reap if granted the right to vote and other rightful entitlements. They earnestly deliver their speeches, aspiring for passersby to lend an ear to their cause. It would be even more advantageous if individuals also procured a copy of *Votes for Women*.

"Mrs Leighton waited, holding the silence. Then she began to speak".(Nichols, 2017:104)

One of the speeches delivered by Mrs. Leighton, a prominent women's suffrage activist, captivated Evelyn's attention. Mrs. Leighton eloquently shared her journey of joining the Suffragettes, leaving a lasting impression on the audience. The aforementioned quote by Mrs. Leighton's words during her opening speech resonated not only with the suffragettes but also with the numerous guests in attendance. This gathering aimed to inspire individuals through the exchange of ideas, with the hope that they would be moved to support women's rights and lend their voices to the cause. Adhering to the principles of liberal feminism, such endeavors seek to foster understanding and persuade society about the imperative nature of gender equality, while simultaneously challenging the patriarchal system without undermining the value of men. Utilizing publicity as a tool, individuals can amplify their voices and garner recognition from the wider public (Dietz, 1991).

2. Demonstration

In the novel *Things A Bright Girl Can Do*, efforts to uphold gender equality for women are further emphasized through the demonstrations. According to (Iye et al., 2020), demonstrations involve actively taking a stand in a public setting to express dissatisfaction with policies implemented by those in authority, especially when these policies do not benefit the general population or specific groups. Unlike mere speeches, demonstrations directly confront those in power who can covertly, and they are typically carried out by larger groups of people. The female characters in this novel demonstrate their commitment to tangible action by organizing and participating in demonstrations against the king and his government during that time.

"They would march from Grosvenor Square to the Wellington Arch on Constitution Hill, break through the police cordon, and hand their petition to the king himself as he rode past." (Nichols, 2017:79)

The aforementioned quotation pertains to the emergence of demonstrations and the factors that contribute to their occurrence. Initially, Evelyn refrained from joining the suffragettes, but she developed a keen interest and curiosity in participating in the forthcoming demonstration organized by the suffragettes. She chose to keep her intentions clandestine from her parents but confided in her fiancé Teddy, as well as her two younger siblings, Kezia and Hety.

The reasons the suffragettes staged this demonstration were because, during that time, women's complaints were not being heard by members of parliament as they were considered unimportant and had no impact on the government. Therefore, the suffragettes aimed to directly convey their grievances to the king. The groups participating in this activity came from various regions and different backgrounds, all with the common goal of advocating for women's rights and demanding voting rights for women.

Suffragettes from different regions gathered and marched together from Grosvenor Square to Wellington Arch on Constitution Hill. Evelyn joined the Hampstead Suffragette, May, along with her mother, as well as the Quaker suffragette group, which was known for its anti-violence stance. Nell supported the East London Suffragette Federation, which primarily consisted of workers. Once the masses had gathered.

3. Civil resistance

The novel, *Things A Bright Girl Can Do*, is a purposeful undertaking to direct the government's focus towards women's concerns. This act of rebellion was solely carried out as a form of protest, as the government had neglected to establish lasting measures to advance gender equality despite the unwavering efforts of women. In the context of this literary piece, civil resistance manifests itself through a hunger strike, serving as a potent instrument to communicate the pressing nature and importance of women's fight. Hunger strikes symbolize a form of activism that remains closely linked to demonstrations, wherein incarcerated women utilize this approach to protect their dignity.

Evelyn's determination only grew stronger. She secretly joined the Suffragettes and actively participated in demonstrations, leading to her arrest and imprisonment. She felt anxious as she engaged in these activities without her parents' knowledge and skipped school. Eventually, Evelyn and the other arrested Suffragettes were taken to the police station and later transferred to a prison hospital. Anticipating hunger strikes, the police placed them in hospitals with iron beds.

“Tea. Steak. Fruit. Jellies. Brand’s Essence. A large earthenware jug of water. This food, Evelyn soon realized, was to be left permanently in the cell.” (Nichols, 2017:137)

Evelyn embarked on a hunger strike, initially unaffected by the food before her. Her primary concern was her impending fate, as her two-week prison sentence meant she would not be able to return home. The next day, hunger and a lack of focus began to plague her, followed by excruciating pain throughout her body. Eventually, she could bear it no longer and had to be released from prison, with her sentence suspended. However, Evelyn was still required to serve the remaining days of her prison term. It was during this time that she reunited with her family, who remained silent and took care of her. They did not attempt to secure her freedom, as Evelyn's actions were seen as a significant problem and considered taboo.

As Evelyn recovered, her father granted her permission to study at Oxford, recognizing her dedication to taking the entrance exam. Unfortunately, another calamity arose in the form of the war between England and Germany. This conflict created a crisis and further hindered women's efforts to achieve gender equality. The actions of Evelyn and other incarcerated Suffragettes were in line with the goals of liberal feminism, aiming to bring about a transformative change that would empower women to make choices independently, free from external influences or coercion.

IV. Conclusions

In this study, the researcher successfully identified multiple instances of women's rights being violated and explored how women strive to achieve and maintain gender equality. The research focused on the novel *Things A Bright Girl Can Do* by Sally Nichols, which is set in the early nineteenth century, and utilized the liberal feminism theory during the analysis process.

Within the novel, the deprivation of rights takes on various forms, including limitations in education, economic discrimination, and restrictions on freedom of expression. One character, Evelyn, experiences the deprivation of educational rights as she is denied the opportunity to study at Oxford due to societal beliefs that women do not need higher education and should solely focus on domestic responsibilities. Additionally, Nell, a worker in a jam factory, faces significant economic injustice. The factory perpetuates a discriminatory system that pays female workers lower wages compared to their male counterparts. Furthermore, the novel highlights the denial of freedom of expression, particularly through the experiences of the Suffragettes. These women face opposition and ridicule as they strive to voice their goals of elevating women's status in society. They encounter public disapproval and even physical violence, such as objects being thrown at them while delivering speeches on the roadside.

However, the women depicted in the novel do not passively accept the denial of their rights. Instead, they actively resist and challenge the oppressive system. The Suffragettes, in particular, employ various strategies to fight for gender equality and secure women's voting rights. These include carrying out campaigns, demonstrations, and civil resistance.

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