

“The Gilded Cage”: Oppression Experienced by Upper-Class Women in

Novel *The Widows of Malabar Hill* (2018) by Sujata Massey

THESIS

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OF MALABAR HILL (2018) BY SUJATA MASSEY

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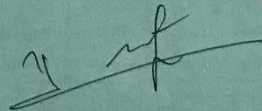


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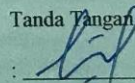
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The writer has done her best in writing this thesis. However, the writer realizes that this paper actually has not been perfect yet, there are many mistakes in it. In the end, the writer just hopes that the paper will be guidance for some literary study.

Padang, November 2023

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ABSTRACT

ANASTASYA, CITRA. (2023). **“THE GILDED CAGE”: OPPRESSION EXPERIENCED BY UPPER-CLASS WOMEN IN THE WIDOWS OF MALABAR HILL (2018) BY SUJATA MASSEY.** Padang: English Department, Faculty of Language and Arts, Universitas Negeri Padang.

This analysis explores the issue of oppression towards women as a result of patriarchal practices, traditional traditions, gender roles, and social expectations in the novel *The Widows of Malabar Hill* (2018) by Sujata Massey. This is qualitative research that relies on text and applies feminist literary criticism to analyze the issue in the novel. This analysis uses oppression theory by several theorist including Frye, Cudd, Young, and Panades and Chris Drew to find out the forms of oppression experienced by the upper-class women in the novel. This research found that upper-class women experienced several forms of oppression which are gender-based discrimination, gender-based marginalization, powerlessness, restricted access to formal education, restriction on property sales rights, being forbidden to work in public, limitation in freedom of mobility, cultural and religious practices, gender-based violence, and lack of legal rights. On the surface, they appear to live a comfortable and luxurious life, yet their freedom and potential are confined or limited as they live in “the gilded cage.” Despite the oppression imposed upon them, these upper-class women display a remarkable degree of agency. By applying the agency theory of several theorists such as Meyers, Barker, Abrams, Isaac, Kabeer, Burke, and Sen, this study finds that women show their agency in several forms including exercising autonomy, challenging gender norms and expectations, resistance to oppression, legal advocacy, awareness of the oppression, deception, and positive respond on religious understanding.

Keywords: oppression towards women, upper-class women, gender oppression, patriarchy, women’s agency

ABSTRAK

ANASTASYA, CITRA. (2023). "THE GILDED CAGE": OPPRESSION EXPERIENCED BY UPPER-CLASS WOMEN IN THE WIDOWS OF MALABAR HILL (2018) BY SUJATA MASSEY. Padang: English Department, Faculty of Language and Arts, Universitas Negeri Padang.

Analisis ini mengeksplorasi isu penindasan terhadap perempuan sebagai akibat dari praktik patriarki, tradisi, peran gender, dan ekspektasi sosial dalam novel *The Widows of Malabar Hill* (2018) karya Sujata Massey. Penelitian ini merupakan penelitian kualitatif yang mengandalkan teks dan menggunakan kritik sastra feminis untuk menganalisis isu dalam novel tersebut. Analisis ini menggunakan teori penindasan dari beberapa ahli teori seperti Frye, Cudd, Young, dan Panades serta Chris Drew untuk mengetahui bentuk-bentuk penindasan yang dialami oleh perempuan kelas atas dalam novel tersebut. Penelitian ini menemukan bahwa perempuan kelas atas mengalami beberapa bentuk penindasan yaitu diskriminasi berbasis gender, marginalisasi berbasis gender, ketidakberdayaan, pembatasan akses terhadap pendidikan formal, pembatasan hak jual beli properti, dilarang bekerja di tempat umum, pembatasan kebebasan mobilitas, praktik budaya dan agama, kekerasan berbasis gender, serta keterbatasan hak hukum. Di permukaan, mereka tampak hidup dalam kehidupan yang nyaman dan mewah, namun kebebasan dan potensi mereka terkungkung atau terbatas seakan mereka hidup di dalam "sangkar berlapis emas". Terlepas dari penindasan yang menimpa mereka, para perempuan kelas atas ini menunjukkan tingkat agensi yang luar biasa. Dengan menggunakan teori agensi dari beberapa ahli teori seperti Meyers, Barker, Abrams, Isaac, Kabeer, Burke, dan Sen, penelitian ini menemukan bahwa perempuan menunjukkan agensi mereka dalam beberapa bentuk, yaitu menjalankan otonomi, menantang norma dan ekspektasi gender, perlawanan terhadap penindasan, advokasi hukum, kesadaran akan penindasan, penipuan, dan respon positif terhadap pemahaman agama.

Kata Kunci: Penindasan Terhadap Perempuan, Perempuan kelas atas, Penindasan Gender, Patriarki, Agensi Perempuan

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of The Research

In many countries, some women are denied fundamental human rights and face various forms of oppression. Oppression of women is a common societal problem throughout many nations. Among the many causal factors, a sociocultural component of patriarchal ideology plays a major role in limiting and controlling women's thoughts, movements, and lives. (Johnson & Johnson, 2001, pp. 1051–1052).

According to S. Sawant (2016, p. 21), in a male-centric society, women have been assigned a secondary and inferior role in their family and society and faced injustice, restraint, oppression, subordination, and exploitation. Despite their education, women have been treated with disdain and reduced to the position of a toy and a machine; a lifeless item designed to satisfy men's sexual needs. Several cultures and religions justify the oppression of women by granting the man sexual power, which men must then strictly control in order to protect their purity and dominance (Napikoski, 2020).

Therefore, oppression is not solely intentional, but also the product of a complicated system that includes multiple factors such as institutional authority, social norms, stereotypes, legislation, or societal practices among others. It has numerous faces and presents itself in various ways, including politically, socially,

economically, and culturally. Gender and class oppression are two of many forms of system oppression. (Panades & Chris Drew, 2023).

According to Ingrey (Ingrey, 2016, pp. 1–3), gender oppression is the act of limiting or prohibiting a person's freedom, dignity, or subjectivity based on their gender expression, identity, and/or role. She states that liberal and second-wave feminists view gender oppression as sexism and inequality between men and women; they oppose a patriarchal system that denies women's autonomy. In short, gender oppression is privileging men over women. Thus, women's oppression is a form of gender oppression.

Furthermore, Marxist feminists state that women's oppression is intrinsically related to social class. According to Duignan (2023) social class is a social group consisting of persons of the same social and economic status. Sociologists distinguish class into three categories including upper class, middle class, and working (low) class. The upper class tends to possess greater wealth and authority than the middle and low classes. It leads to a socially organized oppression based on class or prejudice and discrimination based on social class which is known as class oppression (Pincus & Sokoloff, 2014, pp. 9–15).

Based on the definition above, people from the upper class seem not to have experienced oppression. They may face discrimination and oppression due to other factors including gender, race, and religion (Mezzadri, 2015). However, it is crucial to acknowledge that it appears in different forms of oppression faced by

the lower class. They may be subjected to societal pressures or expectations, discrimination based on gender or ethnicity, or systemic disparities (Pearl, 2020).

One of many literature works that reflect women's oppression is *The Widows of Malabar Hill* by Sujata Massey. It is a historical fiction novel set in Bombay, India, in the early 20th century. The story follows the life of Perveen Mistry, a young and intelligent Parsi woman who became the first female solicitor in India. The novel offers a portrayal of the oppressions that upper-class women like Perveen face during this period. Furthermore, as Perveen navigates her legal career, she encounters a case involving the widows who are oppressed by tender and religion. Despite the oppression imposed upon them, these upper-class women display a remarkable degree of agency.

The women in the novel live in "the gilded cage." The phrase "gilded cage" expresses the paradox of comfort and constraint that characterizes the lives of these women. While they may have some financial comfort and security, they remain confined by society and cultural norms that limit their independence and agency. On the surface, they appear to live a comfortable and luxurious life, yet their freedom and potential are confined or limited.

Numerous researchers have examined Sujata Massey's works and two of them discuss *The Widows of Malabar Hill* novel. The first study is *Emulating feminist legacy in the select work of Sujata Massey: A Murder on Malabar Hill and The Satapur Moonstone* by Mol et al (2022) which claims that Massey's work succeeds in transporting the reader into the historical period that she is describing, which is the 1920s, to the reader in 2018. Another study conducted by Vijay &

Tripathi (2022) entitled *Appropriating a Hostile Genre: Feminist Concerns in Contemporary Indian Women's Crime Fiction* investigates how women writers have reworked the conventional image of the detective, which is a male domain and use it to break the gender discrimination in crime fiction works.

Unlike the two previous studies, this research focuses on the issue of oppression experienced by upper-class women and their agency. By applying feminist literary critique, the oppressions and agency can be unveiled properly. The women are from the upper class, yet they still experienced oppression because of patriarchal practices, traditional traditions, gender roles, and social expectations.

1.2 Focus of The Problem

The researcher focuses on analyzing and understanding the portrayal of oppression experienced by upper-class women in *The Widows of Malabar Hill* through feminist literary critique. This research explores and captures the form of oppression towards women due to patriarchal practices, traditional traditions, gender roles, and social expectations. The study also captures the agency shown by the female characters to challenge the oppression and carry out their life choices.

1.3 Research Question

This research has two questions. There are:

1. What are the forms of oppression experienced by the upper-class women in the novel?

2. How do the female characters show their agency?

1.4 Purpose of The Research

According to the research questions above, the purposes of this research are:

1. To capture the forms of oppression experienced by the upper-class women in *The Widows of Malabar Hill*,
2. To present the female character's agency in challenging the oppression and carrying out their life choices.