



ITALIAN WOMEN'S RESISTANCE TO OPPRESSION IN THE NOVEL *MY BRILLIANT FRIEND* BY ELENA FERRANTE (2011)

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Abstract

This research discusses resistance to oppression carried out by female characters in the novel *My Brilliant Friend* (2011) by Elena Ferrante. This research focuses on the types of oppression and resistance that female characters accept and carry out to face male domination. This research uses feminist literary theory with the support of two other theories, namely oppression theory and resistance theory to analyze the novel. The method used in this research is descriptive qualitative. Results of this research divided into 2. First, 3 types of oppression such as marginalization, exploitation, and violence. Second, 2 types of resistance such as open resistance and hidden resistance. The two things above are represented by several characters. First, Lila's father who represents marginalization, physical violence and psychological violence. Second, Rino, Lila's brother, represents marginalization and physical violence. Third, Enzo represents physical violence. Fourth, gino represents sexual violence. Fifth, Donato Sarratore, who represents sexual violence and psychological violence. Sixth, the stranger represents marginalization, exploitation and sexual violence. Seventh, Lila which represents open resistance and hidden resistance. Eighth, Lenu represents open resistance and hidden resistance.

Key words: Resistance, Oppression, Patriarchy, Violence

A. INTRODUCTION

In 1950, the nations of Europe were still struggling to overcome the devastation wrought by World War II, which had ended 5 years earlier. During the Second World War II, many countries in Europe have been quite badly affected. Italy was one of the European countries affected by the Second World War, especially the condition of women. In Italy, women's lives in particular were changing; as the 1950s progressed, more and more of them were choosing to migrate to the city or Near by town in search of greater independence and autonomy. In rural Italy their lives were usually more

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restricted than those of men and they had limited possibilities in education, work or even in how to spend their free time. Many had to stay at home while their brothers socialized in the evenings and had little freedom in choosing whom to date or marry (Niamh, 2012: 2).

Niamh (2012: 2) continued that perhaps it was no wonder then that by the late 1950s and 1960s it was perceived that young women were choosing ‘not to marry peasants’ (as one journalist complained) and to move to the city instead. Bold new fashions, whether bright red lipstick in the 1950s or mini-skirts in the 1960s were just outwards manifestations of the ways in which women’s lives were changing in attitude, lifestyle and opportunity. It was those growing up and coming of age in these years who would have experienced those changes whether big or small most strongly – they were the ones who had to decide whether to leave home in search of work or a different lifestyle, or to stay on the land. Or even whether to wear lipstick, when in the early 1950s it was forbidden by the church and might have scandalized their family.

On the other hand, Italian women bear quite a heavy burden, they have to work as full-time housewives, and only focus on taking care of their children, husband and home. According to Morris (2007: 305) perhaps even more important were the subtle changes taking place in family relationships. Not always obvious, because of the lack of legislative change, but highly significant, was the changing role of women in Italian society. Despite the aspirations of the immediate post-war period, the vast majority continued to fulfil the traditional role of wife and mother, subordinate to their husbands. Those who combined that role with a job outside the home, whether through choice or not, endured the pressures of ‘double working’. Whilst there were new areas of work that had opened up for them, overall the number of women employed outside the home dropped during this period and there was an ever greater emphasis on the role of full-time housewife. Nevertheless, there are many signs that, during the post-war period, attitudes were shifting considerably and there was a growing demand, particularly amongst women, for greater freedoms and genuine equality. The gender gap in Italy is very visible compared to other countries in the European Union, one example is the field of labor, Carta (2023: 8) explains that Italy has one of the lowest female labor force participation rates in the EU and the lowest employment rate. This made me interested in researching a novel by Elena Ferrante entitled *My Brilliant Friend* (2011), which reveals the struggle of two women, namely Elena and Lila, in 1950 in the village of Naples, Italy. The two main female characters fight back against the oppression they receive, from childhood to adulthood, I have read the novel and find how they struggle when other women just accept their fate.

Elena Ferrante in her novel entitled novel *My Brilliant Friend* which was published in 2011, is a novel explores the complex dynamics between Elena and Lila, two intelligent and ambitious girls, as they navigate the challenges of growing up in a post-war, male-dominated society. The narrative spans several decades, chronicling their evolving friendship,

personal struggles and aspirations. Elena, the narrator, excels academically, while Lila demonstrates a remarkable intellect and creativity. Despite their divergent paths, their destinies remain intertwined.

When the novel *My Brilliant Friend* was published in 2011, this novel became a boom and sold thousands of books in every country in the world, so it was immediately adapted into a film in 2018, because the story really inspired women about how difficult it was for Elena and Lila to survive. Realizing Lenu and Lila dream in the midst of the patriarchal system and conditions after the second world war, because it was in great demand.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

This research was conducted as a literary research type, and used qualitative descriptive methods. According to (Mulyana, 2008) describes qualitative research as research that uses scientific methods to reveal a phenomenon in a way describe data and facts through words comprehensive towards the research subject. In this case, research data is collected directly from research subjects by carrying out analysis using close reading techniques and then drawing conclusions from the analysis results obtained. A qualitative descriptive method was used with the aim of further explaining the types of oppression and resistance carried out by women in Italy. Data analysis in this research uses feminist theory with two other theories such as oppression theory by Young and resistance theory by Scott with data collection using reading techniques in the novel *My Brilliant Friend* (2011) by Elena Ferrante as the main research subject. This research was conducted by paying attention to the types of resistance and oppression of Italian women who live in a patriarchal environment.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Research Finding

1.1. Kinds of Oppression Experienced by Women in Italy

1.1.1 Marginalization

Marginalization is a form of thinking that aims to limit someone from showing their capacity in society, as happened to Lila, her father did not want her to go to school even though she was very smart, this happened because of the patriarchal system which places women only as “others”. , which is cited by the following quote:

“If you pay me I’ll take care of sending her to school,” Rino said.

“School? Why, did I go to school?”

“No.”

“Did you go to school?”

“No.”

“Then why should your sister, who is a girl, go to school?”. (p.48)

From this quote, it can be revealed that how Lila was marginalized in education by her father, this was due to patriarchal domination which

oppressed women, because women were considered weak creatures and even seen as “the other”, whose lives are closely linked to their oppressors, namely men. The statement of the patriarchal system can be seen in the quote above “Then why do your female siblings have to go to school?” This passage emphasizes how patriarchy looks down on women, as Lila’s father said to Rino, her brother, why Lila, who is only a woman, has to go to school, because in the patriarchal system women only have traditional jobs, namely taking care of the household, so education will not change, anything in her family and life. The comparison made by Lila’s father when talking to Rino about having to go to school makes it clear that the patriarchy indeed views women as “the other”.

Furthermore, in the social sector women usually do not get the right to vote, are not cared for or ignored, are always the second choice in society, one example of social marginalization of women shown in the novel is indifference or being ignored as in the following quote:

"Then we began to get tired, to get thirsty and hungry. We hadn't thought of that. Lila slowed down, I slowed down, too. Two or three times I caught her looking at me, as if she had done something mean to me and was sorry. What was happening? I realized that she kept turning around and I started turning around, too. Her hand began to sweat. The tunnel, which was the boundary of the neighborhood, had been out of sight for a long time. By now the road we had just traveled was unfamiliar to us, like the one that stretched ahead. People appeared completely indifferent to our fate." (p.55)

From this quote, it can be revealed that even though the women were in a bad condition or in distress, no one cared, like Lenu and Lila, feelings of hunger, thirst and tiredness emerged from them after walking far from their comfortable environment. However, along the way, no one cared about them. This shows that women are always excluded in society and marginalized, Lenu and Lila’s desire to get out of their environment is also due to the isolation they receive from their environment, so they are curious about the conditions of the outside world. The last quote “People appear completely indifferent to our fate” states that women are not noticed by society, both in their environment and outside their environment, women are still not considered and cared for.

So, marginalizations prevent women from showing their capacities, thereby preventing them from progressing and remaining in one place. Marginalization in the education sector is the first marginalization that must be opposed, because only by having education can women know that they are being intimidated, dominated, thus giving rise to thoughts and courage to fight against the limitations that make it difficult for her to show her capacity both in the family and in society.

1.1.2 Exploitation

Young (2014: 50) said that exploitation is taking advantage of women both emotionally and physically. Exploitation can be material and sexual. This is revealed in the novel in the quote below:

“One day as I came out of school, Gino, the pharmacist’s son, followed me along the street and said that his classmates claimed that my breasts weren’t real, I stuffed them with cotton batting. He laughed as he spoke. He said that he thought they were real, he had bet twenty lire on it. Finally he said that, if he won, he would keep ten lire for himself and would give me ten, but I had to prove that I didn’t use padding. That request frightened me.” (p.72)

Women are always involved in sexual violence and are only seen as sexy objects. It is not uncommon for men to exploit women for their own gain with things that are sexy. They openly abuse women for their own pleasure and personal gain. As happened with Lenu, Gino and his male friends made Lenu a bet as a sexual object. This shows that women’s self-esteem is seen as very low. Not only that, this also shows how much higher the value of money and power is than women’s self-esteem, Lenu shows how weak and dominant men are, so that Gino can manipulate her physical attributes with money. Women are not only exploited emotionally but also physically, namely using women’s labor to work but being paid low wages. This often happens because of domination or a patriarchal system that prioritizes and raises men’s wages over women’s. This is shown in the novel. In the following quote:

● *“When the two young men began to talk about some problems with the convertible, a conversation in which Antonio had a lot to say, I took the little girls away so that they wouldn’t bother them. Lila joined me.*

“How much does the stationer pay you?” she asked.

I told her.

“Not much.”

“My mother thinks she pays me too much.”

“You should assert yourself, Lenù.” (p.248)

This shows that women’s work is always valued as low by society, especially men, which makes women unable to advance to create job opportunities. Are paid as little as possible and do not deserve to be paid

more, and Lenu's attitude of not making a big deal about it explains that women who have been exploited in society do not demand many things, such as salary from their work. The most common exploitation in Italy based on this novel is the exploitation of women's bodies, which are used as betting or gambling, even women's bodies are only considered as sexual objects to simply satisfy lust.

1.1.3 Violence

According Young (2014: 61) Violence is an act committed against other people, and it can cause physical suffering. Violence against women encompasses any gender-based act that causes or is likely to cause physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering. This includes threats, coercion, and arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether in public or private settings. For example include domestic abuse, sexual assault, human trafficking, forced marriage, and emotional or psychological abuse. Such violence arises from systemic gender inequalities and seeks to maintain male dominance and control, perpetuating the oppression and marginalization of women in society. Violence always happens to people who have no power, and this often happens to women in particular. In this novel, Italian women experiences physical, psychological and sexual violence.

1.1.3.1 Physical Violence

Physical violence is an easily recognizable act that inflicts physical suffering on someone. It includes causing bodily harm, ranging from minor to severe injuries, and encompasses physical assaults that result in harm to the victim, like the quote below :

“But Rino wouldn't give in, and in the following days he continued to attack his sister with words and fists. Every time Lila and I met I saw a new bruise.” (p.172)

This quote describes Lila's condition which is full of abuse from the environment and family, the narrator even uses the word “new” to show Lila's physical condition which is always violent and full of wounds or bruises. This can show that every day she always gets physical violence. This is supported by the following quote:

“Suddenly the shouting stopped and a few seconds later my friend flew out the window, passed over me head, and landed on the asphalt behind me. I was stunned.” (p.60)

This quote reveals that patriarchal domination is cruelly hurt, they consider women to be nothing more than a pile of goods, education or whatever is meaningless, because the norm of life for a

woman is only as a housewife, so education or something like that is just a waste of money and wasting time. Like Lila's character who was thrown out of the window by her father, her father really shows what it means to be a woman, especially if she is still a child, only the burden adds to her distress. This violence resulted in Lila bleeding and breaking the bones in her hands. The phrase that Lila said after receiving physical violence was "I haven't hurt myself" shows that the violence she received was not because of anything she did wrong but because she was a woman, still small, and wanted to continue going to school or receive an education. Which is limited by the patriarchal system in its environment.

1.1.3.2 Sexual Violence

Sexual violence involves acts of aggression by men against women, typically driven by sexual desire and including behaviors like sexual harassment, sexual assault, and rape. Like the quote below:

"We also saw a fat man in an undershirt who emerged from a tumbledown house, opened his pants, and showed us his penis." (p. 54)

This quote shows that wherever women are, they always experience sexual thoughts, as happened to Lila and Lenu, when they wanted to try to get out of their environment to see the sea, but on their journey they experienced understanding from the surrounding community. This shows that conveying to women knows no age. This sexual harassment can damage a woman's mental state, and it is not uncommon for them to commit suicide because of it, because they are pressured by stress and depression.

1.1.3.3 Psychological Violence

Psychological violence involves non-verbal actions that threaten, ignore, or terrorize someone to cause hurt, sadness, or stress. This is demonstrated by the novel in the following quote:

"completely the opposite of my mother, who, at home, so often rebuked me, sometimes abusively, that I wanted to hide in a dark corner and hope that she wouldn't find me." (p.24)

Based on this quote, Lenu experienced psychological pressure from her mother who always rebuked Lenu and was sometimes abusive. Every day she always imagines how and where to hide when her mother scolds her. It could be said that the

violence perpetrated by her mother was too much, causing so much trauma for Lenu, that she said “she wouldn’t find me”, of course this means how cruel her mother was, and the violence that Lenu often received from her. Lenu is worried about her life because her mother could torture or kill her so she wants to hide and hopes that her mother does not find her. Turning to Lila, Lila also experienced some psychological violence from her family, namely her own father. As happens in the novel in the following quote:

“I was the guardian, I kept it at home among the schoolbooks, because Lila didn’t feel she could keep it in her house. Her father, lately, would get angry if she merely took it out to read.” (p.48)

The quote above shows that Lila is worried and afraid if her father brings her and is caught studying, this is because of the violence her father did when she was little, when she wanted to go to school her father threw her out of the window and every time she saw Lenu, her face and hands always covered in bruises, this explains how bullying and violence from her father became a threat that made her afraid of being discovered by her father if she studied. This happened because of the power and dominance of the patriarchy in her environment, so that all Lila did was obey and obey what her father said, even though she still studied in secret.

The most common form of violence against Italian women is physical violence which often threatens women’s lives. Women are only seen as worthless so men are not afraid to hurt them. The large number of cases of violence shows that violence is the most pressing issue of oppression and is often experienced by women. This could reflect the high level of physical and mental danger that women face in certain situations.

1.2 Italian Women Resist The Oppression

According to Scott (1985: 29) Resistance involves actions taken by individuals facing inequality, patriarchal domination, and oppression to fight and oppose the dominant social forces in society. Resistance is an act of resistance to decisions made by groups or individuals who have the power to achieve justice and obtain their due rights. This happens more often to women. So, they fight either directly or indirectly to get their rights. This is in accordance with feminist theory which embodies women’s struggle for gender equality and getting the same rights as men in education, work, social society, politics and so on.

1.2.1 Open Resistance

In Italy, women continue to face male oppression and must struggle to achieve equality. They resist this oppression through various means, such as literary works and demonstrations, to combat all forms of injustice. Many women fight back against the everyday societal oppression they experience. Resistance serves as a tool for individuals to defend their rights. As one of the main characters, Lila boldly confronts all forms of oppression. She willingly fights for equal rights and against the oppression of women. Despite being a child, she does not fear the challenges she faces. This is evident in the data provided below:

“He threw small, sharp-edged rocks with great accuracy, and Lila waited for his throws to demonstrate how she evaded them, making him still angrier, and responded with throws that were just as dangerous. Once we hit him in the right calf, and I say we because I had handed Lila a flat stone with jagged edges.”
(p.14)

This quote shows Lila’s courage in facing Enzo and his friends, who intended to hurt her by throwing stones at her. Lila was even able to nimbly avoid the stones thrown by Enzo, which shows and proves that women are not weak, Lila even returned Enzo’s throw and injured him. Lila shows that women also have energy, strength, and can do what men do and can even surpass them. Courage or power is something that women really need and must have, so that they are not easily oppressed by men, because patriarchy always oppresses women who are helpless and do not have the courage to fight back.

Lila not only defended herself against the violence committed by Enzo, but she also wanted to convey to Lenu that we must not allow ourselves to be oppressed, we have the same rights as those that we should have, so don’t be afraid to take our own rights, Lila taught Lenu a lesson that we don’t always have to be dominated by men, we have to move, fight and defend anything that limits our rights and freedoms. This is in accordance with Scott’s statement that open resistance can be carried out individually or in groups for the purpose of removing the dominance and oppression of those in power. In line with the principles of feminist theory which states that women must fight for gender equality which is illustrated by Lila’s counter-resistance to Enzo.

1.2.2 Hidden Resistance

Lila and Lenu carried out hidden resistance to overcome oppression that they could not fight directly. Like the resistance that Lila carried out by continuing to study, even though her father had forbidden it. This is mentioned in the novel in the quote below:

“The library was a great resource for her. As we talked, she showed me proudly all the cards she had, four: one her own, one in Rino’s name, one for her father, and one for her mother. With each she borrowed a book, so she could get four at once. She devoured them, and the following Sunday she brought them back and took four more.” (p.84)

This quote shows Lila’s hard determination and how smart she is, so that she does not run out of ways to always learn, her struggle to change her life, fight for equality, and of course to fight oppression and obstacles from male domination in the environment. She maximizes all available opportunities, such as studying at the neighborhood library and using library cards consisting of Lila’s entire family, so she can get as many book as there are cards.

Based on the explanation, both forms of resistance are present in Lila and Lenu’s everyday lives. It is clear that Lila engages in closed resistance to escape oppression and seek equality for herself and her friend, Lenu. She uses hidden resistance to access education freely, strive for gender equality, and more. Women need to combat all forms of oppression, and Lila’s closed resistance represents her efforts to liberate herself from various types of oppression. Overall, the oppression experienced by Italian women occurs because of the patriarchal system which places men in the highest positions of power both in society and in the family, so that women often become marginalized, become victims of violence and are always taken advantage of by men. However, Italian women are not only silent and resigned, they also fight against male authority to gain their rights in society and in the family, both openly and secretly.

2. Discussion

Analysis of Italian women’s resistance to oppression in *My Brilliant Friend* was carried out using feminist literary theory with the support of Young and Scott’s theory of oppression and resistance. It focuses on the types of oppression Italian women experienced and the resistance they put up to overcome this. This theory explains the injustice, inequality and marginalization experienced by women in literary texts, and how these things reflect and strengthen patriarchal structures in society.

The resistance carried out by Lila and Lenu reveals that the patriarchal system places women as weak and worthless creatures, so that women often experience oppression in society and in the family. According to Young (2014: 40) Oppression is the exercise of tyranny by a group of rulers who dominate or are in power. In this case, the environment where Lila and Lenu live adheres to a patriarchal system which makes men dominant over women, so they often experience oppression. This combination of patriarchal systems and environmental influences creates a cycle of gender inequality that is difficult to break, as change usually requires significant efforts in changing existing social norms and power structures. This is in accordance with what Lila and Lenu said and experienced when they wanted to get their rights in society and their families were always blocked by a combination of the patriarchal system and environmental influences. So they have to fight hard to fight or break this inequality as best they can.

The resistance carried out by Lila and Lenu was due to oppression from men which made them traumatized, injured, and unable to highlight their abilities in various aspects such as education, work, household and society. According to Scott (1989: 29) Resistance involves actions taken by individuals facing inequality, patriarchal domination, and oppression to fight and oppose the dominant social forces in society. The form of resistance proposed by Scott is depicted in the lessons carried out secretly by Lila and carries a sharp weapon every time he leaves his house. Likewise, Lenu continues to be active in studying and follows Lila's style to protect herself when oppressed by men. The most prominent thing and a reflection of the theory stated by feminists is Lila and Lenu's struggle against the oppression they receive.

Overall, this analysis highlights how *My Brilliant Friend* not only depicts women's lives in a patriarchal environment, but also raises the theme of resistance to oppression which was an important part of the experience of Italian women at that time. The resistance carried out by Lila and Lenu is a symbol of the strength of women in fighting injustice and their efforts to get the rights and freedoms they deserve.

D. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Oppression against women is an action that harms women by limiting women's freedom and capacity, not only that, it can also physically injure and attack women mentally, often leaving them traumatized and stressed. It was revealed that this preference for women occurs because of the patriarchal system which places men as the highest power holders in society and the family. This research uses feminist literary theory and is supported by two other theories, namely Young's theory of choice and Scott's theory of resistance. Feminist theory focuses on women's struggle to obtain equal justice with men. Then Young's theory explains the types of resistance and Scott's theory explains the types of resistance to taking. By using these theories, this research

focuses on examining the types experienced by Lila and Lenu in demanding their rights in *My Brilliant Friend* (2011) by Elena Ferrante, as well as the efforts made to fight this chin.

This research was conducted to explain that thinking about women never really ends, both decades ago and today. It is hoped that this research will increase the reader's insight and can also be useful as a reference for further research on the same problem.

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