

Social discrimination



1. 0 Introduction

“ Power is everywhere and comes from everywhere so in this sense is neither an agency nor a structure.” (Foucault, 1998: 63)

Social and gendered subaltern voice due to the misuse of power has been waged largely and long embedded over cultural practices, historical accounts and literary texts of both Asian and Western. Social discrimination advocates such ideology that the rich, is by nature superior and the poor inferior. The rich are the one who rule while the others are being ruled. This distorts the relations between the rich and poor. In that bygone era, the rich are endowed with power for every aspect and they manipulate their power to control their opposites to satisfy their desire, greediness and life.

Additionally, ideology of social discrimination isolation also plays a crucial role in dealing with gender problem. Due to the wealthy and higher status issue, sexual abuse indirectly comes along whereby young women from low social levels are persecuted by rich and powerful men. According to Bertens, “ ideology distorts reality in one way or another and falsely presents as natural and harmonious what is artificial and contradictory.... If we succumb to ideology we live in an illusory world, in what in Marxism has often described as a state of false consciousness”. Since these assumptions have been a traditional standard of ideology for centuries, the rich and the poor conform to the cultural ideas that the poor will be discriminated and isolated as what has been established for them by the society itself.

The Bondmaid is a Novel written in 1988 by Catherine Lim which tells of a tragic love story. Although it is fictitious, it evocatively captures the ethos of

a wealthy and powerful Chinese household and the shocking physical and sexual brutality towards the bondmaids and prostitutes in that bygone era. It is actually a reflection of the attitudes and social values of the Singapore traditional Chinese life in the 1950's. As in the story, Ah Bor, a seventeen year old young lady, is sold as a slave to the wealthy house of the Grandmother, and being so she is owned both in body and soul by her (the Grandmother).

All the bondmaids in that house are treated harshly. They receive milder form of every day punishment, such as the “ pinching, slapping and caning”. Besides physical violence, sexual assaults and rapes also happened and this leads to the death of Ah Bor. She is raped by the Half-Uncle and dies after the abortion. Later, she returns to haunt him in the form of a ghost. His greediness of asking a lucky winning number from her (the ghost) leads him to his death. After knowing the summary of this story, I will discuss in details the literary elements such as plot, characters, setting, theme and moral values in the following essay. A literary theory in relation to the story will also be touched on.

2. 0 Literary Elements * Plot * Exposition At the beginning of the story, the character of the Grandmother is introduced. She has a business in bridal furnishings whereby she sells and rents “ satin bed sheets embroidered with flowers”, “ satin pillows”, “ bolster”, “ tasseled bed curtains” and “ beaded slippers” for the bride and groom. As it is a successful business, she needs many workers who are skillful in sewing and stitching to work for her. Additionally, she is sick with cancer which has been tormenting her for ten years.

She wants to earn as much money as she could during the remaining part of her life. Those are the real purposes of her buying and owning bondmaids. However, she threatens the bondmaids harshly. Due to her own greediness for earning more money, she wants the bondmaids to work hard like labours or else they would be punished in different forms like pinching, slapping, canning, hitting, smacking their mouths, stray out of the house and so on. Even names without any dignity and grandeur such as “ pig”, “ smell”, “ bun” and “ female” are given.

* Rising Action The conflict begins to develop when a rebellious bondmaid successfully escapes from the house and the emergence of the character named Half Uncle. Majorities are sulking at Grandmother’s terribly cruel treatment but no one dares to revolt her till one of the bondmaids named Ah Pow finally is brave enough to go against her.

She runs out of the house after she snatches the stick broom from Grandmother’s hands. Later, the unsteady broom hit onto Grandmother’s face and Grandmother cries out precipitously in pain. Since after that incident, people have never see the girl again. One week after that, the household finds out that the entire front portion of the house is spattered with smelly human faeces. Due to those incidents, Grandmother becomes stricter and dictates with an iron fists towards the rest of the bondmaids. When she is away to town for business, her half sister will be called up to supervise those bondmaids.

At the same time, the characters of the Half Uncle, the husband of the half sister and Ah Bor are brought into the story. The cunning Half Uncle who is

two-faced and lecherous. When grandmother and his wife are around, he scolds and even slaps or knocks his knuckles on their heads. However, he would take advantages by attempting to touch or fondle the bondmaids when they are not around. The childlike Ah Bor who is already seventeen years old with “ woman’s fullness of beauty’ becomes the victim of Half Uncle.

* Climax The story reaches the climax when Ah Bor passes away. She is sexually abused by the satyr like Half-Uncle. Grandmother and the aunt (half sister) notice that she is expecting when she begins to vomit and wants to eat sour things. Their anger of her pregnancy has led them to the intensifying of violation towards An Bor. Instead of taking care of her, they begin to ask questions, abuse and slap her. In the fourth month of expecting, she is taken by trishaw to a small Malay kampong to abort the foetus. Without any proper medical equipment other than the rich experiences of the old woman during that time, she, in a dreadful condition, is carried to the trishaw bloodless. She gets an intense fever which brings to her death three days after the abortion.

* Falling Action The falling action occurs in the incident when Half Uncle asks for the winning number from Ah Bor’s ghost. When the other bondmaids are in frighten, claiming that Ah Bor’s ghost appears in the kitchen and often soft low moans are heard in the night, he fear of nothing. In fact, he is excited without any regretful feeling for his wicked action towards her that causes her death at the end. Conversely, he is eager of his planning to visit her for a lucky number so that he can become rich. In the darkness of night, he goes to her grave without anyone knows to ask for lucky number and promise a

favour in return. With all the complete procedures, Ah Bor's ghost appears. He faints after that and wakes up the next morning with body ache but a number pounds in his head. Due to his greediness, he goes there few times.

* Denouement The story reaches the ending with the death of Half Uncle. The enjoyment of wealth has turned him into a sickness. Any medicines do not work on him. Lying palely and suffering badly on the bed for a week, Aunt begins to worry. She finally gets a confirmation of his illness from temple medium. Ah Bor's ghost would not plead him in peace. In fact, she will keep on haunting him and let him suffers till death. Although Aunt has been to the grave for three times, serving good food for her, this would not appease her anger. In one of his dreams, he dreams of her holding a dead child that she thrown at him. His sickness has dragged for a full year, in a totally insane condition; he finally died and gets a relief.

* Characters * Half Uncle Half Uncle is the protagonist of this story. He, as the husband of Grandmother's half sister which is also called as Aunt, is a "thin" and "dry" man with "dirty teeth that he was continually picking and sucking in". He would wear only "a pair of loose cotton underpants" in which his "ponderous swinging inside the loose underpants" makes the bondmaids feel disgusted about him. Besides, he is described as a hard gambler. He would attach himself to anyone who could give him money to gamble or lucky numbers to bet on. He also uses his wife's position in Grandmother's house to have free meals. Not only that, he is a satyr who takes advantage at those young and pretty bondmaids.

Through the descriptions above, clearly he is an irresponsible man. During that bygone era, man should be working outside and earning money for the house's expenses. In spite of working or helping Grandmother's business, he would be loitering around the house and lying on the " long wooden bench in the corner of the hall", watching at the bondmaids and dreaming of getting rich by winning the lottery all day long. Moreover, he does not admit his crime after he rapes Ah Bor. He does not take responsibility on Ah Bor's condition. He does nothing until she is sent to abort the foetus and dies three days after the abortion. In fact, he even advises Grandmother to be alert for one or two of the kampong men who have been hanging around the house after dusk, waiting for the girls. He is the one who conducts the crime and yet he accuses on somebody else.

* Ah Bor Ah Bor, a seventeen year old girl who is owned by Grandmother, is a kitchen bondmaid. She is described as not pretty but has a pleasant looking. She is timid, childlike and too clumsy for needlework and therefore is assigned to work in the kitchen. Since she is young and her body has already a woman's fullness of beauty, she is unfortunately aimed by Half Uncle and ended up becoming his victim.

She is revengeful in the sense that she returns to haunt Half Uncle in the form of ghost. The concept of a life for a life is clearly seen in this issue. Even she has passed away; she would not let the person who causes her death to be free. Although he promises a favour in return and indeed he keeps his words, she haunts him and lets him suffer for complete a year till he dies. Additionally, the visiting of Aunt for several times with good food would not

soothe her anger. In fact, the only way to appease her is the death of Half Uncle.

* Grandmother Grandmother is an old woman with “robust appearance”. She is a sick woman whereby the cancer has been tormenting her for more than ten years. She has a business in bridal furnishings whereby she sells and rents “satin bed sheets embroidered with flowers”, “satin pillows”, “bolster”, “tasseled bed curtains” and “beaded slippers” for the bride and groom. All the bondmaids are bought by her to serve her life and business.

At the very beginning of the story, she is described as a very selfish woman in the sense that she does all forms of physical abusing on the bondmaids in order to control and for her own purposes. Since she wants to earn as much money as she could while she is still alive, she uses her powers and energies, forcing the bondmaids to work very hard for her like slaves without any return. In fact, they are treated harshly by her like cattle without care about their dignity.

In keeping their lowly station after owning them by body and soul, she gives them names with mundane objects of everyday existence such as “pig”, “smell”, “bun” and “female”. She pinches, slaps, canes, smacks and rubs ground chillies into them if they are thought to be neglected in their work. Believing that punishment is effective when it concentrates on that particular member of the body that has offended, she carries out the punishment on their previous unhealed wound. After a rebelled incident happens, she locks them in the house all the time. She even asks help from her half-sister to control them when she is out to town for business.

She is so cruel in such that she is heartless. She abuses those bondmaids so harshly that they do not seem like an individual or a human being. Especially on Ah Bor, when she becomes sickly and could not do work properly, she and Aunt nag, pin and slap her. The situation becomes worse and punishment is intensified when Grandmother and Aunt find out the fact she is expecting. She is such cruel that she increases the punishment when she already knows that Ah Bor is pregnant. In fact, she is a woman and any kinds of punishment should not be done on a expecting lady.

* Setting * Time Although a specific time setting is not mentioned in this story, it can be assumed that the story is set around the 1950s with prove based from the fact that the revelation of bondmaids or slavery actually existed and was practiced in that bygone era. It is the reality of the Singapore in the past that patriarchs and matriarchs actually own hundreds of bondmaids who serve them (citation). They can either be treated as slaves or prostitutes to fulfill the desire of the male members of the household. The Singapore Free press (1956) gives the fact that “ wretched girls have been sold into slavery...human beings are being bought and sold like so many cattle...somebody wanted a maid of all work to exploit without regard to normal employer-employee...”. So, this citation is concrete in such that bondmaids do exist and they are treated like “ cattle” (Singapore Free press, 1956) during that period of time. * Place

2. 3. 2. 1. Grandmother’s House The grandmother’s house, build of big stone located in a remote plantation is the place where all the bondmaids stay and few incidents take place here. A rebellious sixteen year old bondmaid named Ah Pow is the first and only bondmaid who is bold enough to against her and

successfully escapes from the house. A week after that escape, she splashes a large bucket of human faeces onto the whole front portion of the house.

These two incidents has lead to Grandmother becomes stricter and locks the rest of the bondmaids in the house all the time.

Besides, Ah Bor, one of the young and child like bondmaids who works in the kitchen is raped by Half Uncle in this house. Along with the abortion, she is then badly ill and passes away in this house.

2. 3. 2. 2. The Malay woman's hut This is the location where Ah Bor is taken by trishaw and aborted her four month foetus at a small Malay kampong. There lives a Malay woman who makes her living by taking away the “unwanted half-formed beings” and been doing so on at least fifty unwanted foetus. After the abortion, she is carried into the trishaw in an over fearful condition back to Grandmother's house.

2. 3. 2. 3. The grave of Ah Bor's ghost Ah Bor's grave is located in a plot of land near to the stone house. This is the place where Grandmother quietly buries Ah Bor with the help of Half Uncle and a few man from nearly kampong to dig a hole for the grave and lower the coffin. A week after her death, he visits her grave to ask for a winning number. His first success which leads him to his wealth has triggered his desire to visit her several times with the same purpose of asking for another lucky number.

* Society The story happens among the Singapore Chinese society. During the past, an individual's power is determined by his economy status. Thus, rich people contain more power and they tend to control the poor. They misuse the power to abuse the poor or low class people to reach their

purpose. This is what happened in the story that Grandmother abuses her bondmaids with various form of cruel punishments and yet she will not send to justice. Besides, the low class people include the poor, bondmaids, slaves and prostitutes will never be respected. In polite social language, those bondmaids are called bondmaids.

However, Chinese identify the bondmaids as “ mui chai” (little sister-negative connotation) (Singapore Free Press, 1956) which directly shows the disrespectful of wealthy ones towards them. In this story, Chinese names without any dignity and grandeur can be seen. For example, “ Ah Bor” (female) and “ Ah Pow” (bun) can be seen in the story to keep with their lowly station.

Due to the traditional Chinese culture, traditional China tends to value the male at the expense of the female. Female divinities, like earthly women, have less power than men who may be beaten and abused. That is the reason why rich master tends to take advantages on their servants or bondmaids in those days and they do not dare to tell or complain to anyone due to their status as a woman and slave. Just exactly like what happens on Ah Bor in the story that she could not or would not tell the name of the one responsible for her expecting. Even the other bondmaids know who does that but they do not dare to inform Grandmother and Aunt. During that era, the society is so unfair in such that women are always being abused but the man would not be sent to justice for any punishment.

* Themes 2. 4. 1. Social discrimination and sexual abuse among the wealthy on bondmaids based on a traditional Chinese culture Based on the traditional

Chinese culture during that era, social discrimination happens rather serious even in Singapore. Human beings are treated unfairly based on their class in the society. Principally, issues of sexual abuse come along with social class discrimination as the rich especially man tends to abuse the female servants or poor physically as well as sexually. However, the girls cannot make any changes or complains towards the issue and even the society will not look serious into this issue. At last, the justice towards this issue is not bothered.

This issue, again, can clearly be seen on the character of Grandmother and Half Uncle. Due to the status of Grandmother in the society in which she is superior and the bondmaids are inferior, she uses her power to suppress the bondmaids with various kinds of brutal punishment without any sympathetic feeling just to fulfil her own purpose of earning more money. The bondmaids have to work like slaves even they are sick or hurt after the punishment. Punishments like “ pinching, slapping and caning” are believed have become a daily like routine. The rules are stricken when a bondmaid finally against her.

They are all locked in the house all the time like prisoners. Additionally, with the appearance of Half Uncle, the life becomes even miserable and unsafe. He is sort of a people from upper class as he is relatives to Grandmother. While Grandmother and his wife, Aunt are around, he would physically abuse the bondmaids. Conversely, he would take advantages sexually on the bondmaids. Due to his status in the family and the power he gains, he sexually abuses one of the young bondmaids named Ah Bor and she dies after the abortion. Although the other bondmaids know who does that,

nobody dares to accuse his action. Obviously, the crime of sexual abuse is released free with impunity due to the power of the social status.