

Women as the ‘Other’ in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*

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This paper examines Hemingway's depiction of Brett Ashley and Jake Barnes in his *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) by using Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism. De Beauvoir's theory is employed to decide if the female character is depicted as ‘other’ or not? It is also used to analyse these characters from a gender-based point of view. This analysis showed evidence of female empowerment against male dominance and orientates the readers to examine the two characters on the aspect of subversion of gender roles. In doing so, this paper maintains the essence of de Beauvoir's idea within the novel where women have to focus on themselves and should have their own choices, regardless of any external forces that subdue these women into performing an assigned, stereotypical gender role. Accordingly, women have to follow their inner personal desire to achieve this goal and make their own decisions. This can be achieved only if they neglect the external forces that limit their choices. The paper found out that Brett is depicted as a powerful subject, which enables her to have sufficiency of power at deciding her own way of living. Whereas Jake is portrayed as an impotent man who is powerless and accordingly neglected as the ‘other’.

Key words: *Female empowerment, gender roles, de Beauvoir, existentialist feminism.*

Introduction

Hemingway, without doubt, earned the reputation as one of the greatest American novelists. According to Dubus (2012), he stands out as one of the eminent writers with a distinguished technique that enables the reader to comprehend and live the experience of the novels' characters. This invites researchers and critics such as Carrera (2011) to notice the way he

depicts female characters in his novels as misogynistic especially when he depicts them as creatures who cannot live away from a man's shadow and as sex puppets. Similar to the previous idea where Hanita Hanim Ismail and Wan Roselezam Wan Yahya (2016) specified on Malay men's ego when dealing with white women as illustrated in an eighteenth-century novel. These men consider women as the other in terms of political power. Women, accordingly, have been seen as creatures who have limited abilities when dealing with complicated political issues. They have no power to the men who have to control politics. So, they are always seen as other by men. Many of such abuse is observable, even in the present context. Malaysia, for example, is rich with gender issues. One of which directs to the discourse of sexual abuse that marginalises women, particularly those in relationships with domestic abuse (Mohd Safri Mohd Naiam, Ramalingam Rajamanickam & Rohaida Nordin, 2019). Of course, the politics between the genders has always revolved around the conception of role, which has long existed. Hanita Hanim Ismail and ForoughBarani (2018), for example, looked at roles as portrayed in local literary texts.

The Sun Also Rises (1926) is a story about Brett Ashley (henceforth, referred to as Brett) who meets her love, Jake Barnes (henceforth, Jake). The relationship suffers due to Jake's physical wound that made him impotent. Their relationship is an example of love that is reduced to sexuality and its emphasis (or lack of) in the relationship. In other words, the absence of sex leads to unattainable love, which is often short-lived. Brett is depicted as a sex machine or a sex puppet that is able to manage her relationships with men. Accordingly, such means of managing such relationships is observed in her ability to change her gender role as well as the concept of the 'Other', as based on de Beauvoir's concept of existential feminism.

It was then where women first gained some of their rights, changing society's traditional views on women. At the beginning of the century, women began to enter universities, thus gaining some of their civil rights despite past stereotypes (Barlow, 2000). Due to the previous changes, readers of Hemingway will observe the major male character on first impression as a stereotypical image of a strong and decisive man. As the plot thickens, this image is however ruined as the character gradually unfolds his weakness and vulnerability as a man. On the contrary, the female character who appears to be powerless and dependent at the beginning of the novel turns to be the strong and more experienced. Nagel commented on Brett as representing the new woman: "Brett is by no means the first representation of a sexually liberated, free-thinking woman in American literature but rather an embodiment of what became known as the 'New Woman' in nineteenth-century fiction" (1996, p. 92).

So this paper aims to investigate Hemingway's depiction of gender roles in *The Sun Also Rises* by exploring general situations that include women as new women in the first half of the twentieth century.

De Beauvoir and Existentialist Feminism

De Beauvoir wrote a book entitled *The Second Sex* (1953) that is considered as a great contribution to what existentialist feminism is. The major idea of existentialist feminism is not to look toward women experiences as a collective, but as individual experiences. Each woman has to focus on herself and choose her own intention, regardless of any external forces such as the patriarchal society, and culture that try to assign women within an already stereotypical gender role. Accordingly, women have to follow their inner personal desire to achieve these goals and make their own decisions. This can be achieved only if they neglect the external forces that limit their choices. So, this research applies de Beauvoir's concept of existentialist feminism as its theoretical framework to investigate Brett as a female character in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*.

One of the many interesting ideas that de Beauvoir pointed out is that women are often seen as the 'other' of men. As men identify themselves as free subjects through the effort of objectifying women as the other, de Beauvoir declared that such relationships are not clearly defined in societies. In other words, men identify themselves as subjects which restrain women from defining themselves, hence making them as the object. Because of this, she motivated women to change this domineering relationship and live their experiences as free human beings. Women ought to define themselves as subjects by taking active roles to realise freedom, instead of being dominated by men, "In her eyes, man embodies the Other, as she does for man; but for her this Other appears in the essential mode, and she grasps herself as the inessential opposite him" (de Beauvoir, 1953: 396). Here, de Beauvoir concentrated on the way each gender looks at the other or in other words, how they look at each other. On one hand, women perceive men as liberating and superior and on the other hand, perceive themselves as inferior and incomplete, thus needing men. These dichotomous perceptions are not mutually observed by the other gender. Unlike women, men look at their opposite as inessential, despite a similar perception of perception on women – women are meant to serve, and please the former. In such a way, women hope to realise happiness from their stereotypical condition, which is inferior to the superior man, as imposed by external factors that lead to the one-way destiny of marriage and thus, become the 'other'. Women are only created to be mothers who deal with the housework, bring up children and are treated as sex slaves, "for him [the man], she is sex - total sex, no less. [...] He is the Subject, he is the Absolute - she is the other" (de Beauvoir, 1953: 16).

To appropriate the investigation of Brett and Jake, in Hemingway's novel, this study depends theoretically on de Beauvoir's concept of existential feminism. Since women are mistreated and regarded as the secondary gender; such mistreatment was considered a lifestyle and acceptable, awarding men the privilege to overpower women. Men are seen as overpowering,

independent and central, whereas women are weak, dependent, and marginalised. De Beauvoir pointed out that society deals with women in an unfair manner; they are inferior as compared to men.

By using de Beauvoir's concept of existentialist feminism to examine Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, this study explores a women's ability to transcend beyond their gender roles and become independent subjects. It focuses on analysing Brett as a female character, as the paper assumes that she is not a typical woman who succumbs to the main thoughts of her society.

First, Women as the 'Other'

De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1953) contributed greatly to tenets of existentialist feminism as it became the crux of women's liberation where de Beauvoir believes in motivating women to attain and realise their own freedom by initially defining themselves. The essence of existentialist feminism is not to look toward women experiences as a collective, rather as individual experiences. So, this maintains the idea that each woman has to make herself a priority and make her own choices, regardless of any external forces such as the patriarchal society, and culture that try to put women to an already stereotypical gender role. Accordingly, women have to follow their inner personal desire to achieve these goals and make their own decisions.

De Beauvoir claims that women are often seen as the 'other' by men. As a result, she motivates women to change this domineering relationship and live their experience as free human beings. She also invites women to define themselves as active agents by taking active roles to realise freedom, instead of being dominated by men. "In her eyes, man embodies the Other, as she does for man; but for her this Other appears in the essential mode, and she grasps herself as the inessential opposite him" (de Beauvoir, 1953: 396). De Beauvoir concludes that girls hope to realise happiness and emancipation from their stereotypical condition. Moreover, she adds that in an unfair way, society deals with women as inferior as compared to men. De Beauvoir criticises the view toward women that they are only created to be mothers who deal with the housework, bring up children and be treated as sex slaves, "for him [the man], she is sex- total sex, no less. [...] He is the Subject, he is the Absolute- she is the other" (de Beauvoir, 1953: 16).

Second, Woman is Immanent Vs. Man is Transcendent

Another significant term introduced by de Beauvoir is the definition of the women's condition of immanence. In any normal relationship between men and women, there must be an interaction between transcendence and immanence. Indeed, de Beauvoir used the concepts of 'immanence' and 'transcendence' to make a women's conditions clear. Immanence is indolence within a situation, while transcendence is reaching out of the situation with

freedom. Unfortunately, men perceive themselves as transcendental subjects who are with free will, while women are essential objects who are passive, selfless and directed by men's decisions and desires.

According to de Beauvoir, marriage is the main social part that puts women in the state of immanence (1953). In such a case, marriage is no more than transferring a product from the first owner to the second one or from the seller to the buyer. After marriage, women have to follow their husbands, including the latter's religious beliefs where the former eventually become the other. "She is annexed to her husband's universe; she gives him her person" (de Beauvoir: 506). In contrast, marriage, to men, represents a step unlike other steps in life where it is a decision for them. This is contrary for women where marriage becomes a duty. This also represents a rejection of the Eternal Feminine which is based on the idea that follows the social beliefs that it is their role in life that makes women feminine. Defying it excludes them from the sphere of femininity. De Beauvoir, however, rejects the existence of the Eternal Feminine, as she questioned on the existence of Eternal Masculine. In other words, she confirms that women should eschew the collective vision toward them and look for their own lives, concentrating on forming their own subjective way of experiencing womanhood; becoming a woman. The idea of becoming here is essential, since women were never given the entitlement as an essential entity whose role is fixed and offered to her by the society. Her gender role is rather what she chooses. This role is fluid in nature; its state is constantly changing within its process rather than fixed and passive.

Analysis

The main characters in *The Sun Also Rises* are Jake and Brett who portray a perfect relationship at the beginning of the story. As the plot develops, Jack's impotency becomes more complex, complicating the plot and giving hints to the readers about the concept of a new woman. It changes their minds about the typical vision of woman as the other. So, the relationship between these two characters, Brett and Jake, is neither a stereotypical relationship between the subject and the object, nor a traditional image of gender roles. Messent (1992) highlights the interrupted balance of power in *The Sun Also Rises*. This is exactly what Sanderson observes: "Brett resembles a traditional man in her sexual expectations, and also Jake resembles a traditional woman in his sexual unavailability" (1996, 179). Accordingly, we perceive how Hemingway subverts the image of a powerless woman to the image of powerless man as detailed in the following sections.

(a) Brett

Brett is an example of a transcendental female character who subverts her presumable gender role. In *The Sun Also Rises*, Hemingway is scrupulous about depicting society's concerns

over gender roles. Upon the first reading of Brett, readers observe that she refuses the social standards of women through her physical appearance and the way she forms her persona. For example, her first entrance where Jake refers to her only as Brett – “With them was Brett” (*Sun Also Rises*, p. 28). Such an introduction implies a male character, but only diminishes the impression as Hemingway continues “She looked very lovely” in the next few lines (*Sun Also Rises*, p.28). There is another appearance of Brett in the novels that indicates gender ambiguity; she is a female but her behaviour and appearance indicates otherwise, suggesting a purpose for equality. De Beauvoir’s feminist existentialism adopts the idea that both males and females are free where they have the will and ability to define their own self-identity.

According to de Beauvoir, women are the other within the realm of patriarchy, and because of that, they can never obtain the true sense of freedom. In other words, de Beauvoir argues that the idea of being an equal to another means (directly or indirectly) subordinating oneself as the other and denying her right for private existence. Accordingly, de Beauvoir blames women’s own confusion in such situations that they doom themselves to limit their freedom as they accept this equation in the relationship between men and women. De Beauvoir says, “When this happens, I must recognise the other’s freedom and affirm the bond of humanity that ties us to each other” (qtd. in Bergofen, n.p). In this understanding, we find that Brett is capable of refusing any kind of confrontation to patriarchy in order to prove her true freedom. Because of that, Brett is confused. However, her confusion is revealed in her gender appearance. She behaves exactly as the traditional male behaves, such as with alcoholism and the way she dresses. She also refuses the traditional feminine role with regards to marriage and love. All these behaviours could be understood as promoting an equal status with the male characters. In other words, she refuses the idea of being the other.

A very clear example of her masculine behaviour is her alcoholism. She drinks a lot and mimics the male behaviour to a point that allows herself to be more conscious than the men; she is “a little drunk; just enough to be careless” (*Sun Also Rise*, p.29). She tries to prove her ability to drink in order to show acceptance in the all-exclusive male world, gloating over her being better than these men. In another example, Brett refuses society’s traditional way of looking at love and marriage. Once when Jake declares that love is an enjoyable thing in life, she replies, saying that it is “hell on earth” (*Sun Also Rise*, p. 35). She looks at love as if it is a tool given to men to control and limit women’s freedom. In feminist existential expressions, Brett desires a relationship with Jake. However, she understands the uselessness of this relationship not only because of his impotence but because of the limit that patriarchy sets on her freedom which prevents her from finding herself. It is a refusal to be compared to any other human being.

Moreover, Brett uses her physical appearance to reinforce her idea of freedom. When Jake sees her in the bar, he admits Brett as “damned good-looking” despite her wearing “a slipover



jersey sweater and a tweed skirt, and her hair was brushed back like a boy's" (*Sun Also Rises*, p. 30). This appearance advocates de Beauvoir's ideas that women – as the other - return to their dependency for the male, which is exactly what she never wants. If so, she visualises herself as the subjective self and men as the other in binary opposition, which is achievable through sex. She uses sex in order to control the relationship and what justifies her ideas of freedom are Jake's impotence and the fact that other men also pursue her. Throughout the novel, she jumps from one partner to another in order to prove her individuality and her inner freedom regardless of the society's traditional role and their outlook on love and marriage. However, this way of thinking alarms men that her rebellion against societal values weakens the men around her, such as Jake. Thus, Brett becomes a hazardous woman; one that hurts men around her, especially Jake.

Based on the aforementioned discussions, Brett embodies women's freedom, which is revealed through her appearance and behaviours. Apparently, the nature of her apparel is very similar to the way boys dress, especially her short hair. Her rejection of the typical feminine image invites male companionship simply because she behaves exactly like men – she smokes and drinks like them. These manners are similar to morally-loose men where she performs similar roles which are assigned to men in society, making her actions revolutionary. Her carelessness and indifference towards her feminine nature is obvious. This can be seen after her relaxed manners with men after each romantic affair where she detaches any form of commitment. She restrains herself and behaves the same way as men. For example, when Brett has an affair with Cohn, she sends him a message that the affair is just for amusement. Similarly, with Robert when she freely expresses her intention to continue the relationship. In her relationship with Jake who is her true love, she is very clear and does not hesitate when expressing that sex is the pre-condition for love. All these situations give clear hints that the traditional woman who is regarded as the other, no longer exists; instead the new woman takes over. Regardless of any other views about the incomplete freedom Brett gains because of financial issues, as compared to dealing with men as a prostitute in order to get money (as what Sanderson comments on), I argue that Hemingway draws these two pictures of Brett to show the degree the new woman is capable of achieving when dealing with men smartly. In other words, she is able to think freely without any fear regarding her choices in life. A very clear example of her clever way of thinking is when she refuses the offer by Count Mippipopolous (*The Sun Also Rises*, chapter 7). This is exactly what Nagel commented where, "Brett is not interested in exploiting her considerable erotic power for economic gain" (1996, p. 93).

To conclude, we observe that Brett deals with men around her carelessly and without any consideration for their inner feelings. This recklessness is usually ascribed to men in the patriarchal society. She neglects men and deals with them pragmatically without considering their feelings nor emotions. All of what she wants is money and amusement.

(b) Jake

Jake represents the weaker situation of women who are not able to decide anything in their life simply because of their gender, and here, he is impotent and incapable of playing his assigned masculine role when dealing with women as his sexual prowess malfunctions. This critical point draws the line between masculinity and femininity, robbing his opportunity to have Brett. Accordingly, he finds himself undoubtedly living a miserable life as he loses his traditional role as a man, albeit when he tries to escape from it by amusing his friends and drinking. Despite his similar lifestyle practices to that of other men like living freely and drinking, he is robbed from the ultimate satisfaction of having and living with the woman he loves. This indicates the significance of sex and its role in changing gender roles. Jake tries to control himself when dealing with his peers but he becomes helpless when he is with Brett. For instance, when he talks with Bill about his love of Brett, he gloats over his being accustomed to loving her for a long time. Yet, when Bill feels sorry for him, he unapologetically declares apathy, “It’s all right” and that “I don’t give a damn anymore” which catches Bill off guard. Jake reaffirms this, saying that “Only I’d a hell of a lot rather not talk about it” (*Sun Also Rises*, p.108). To the other side of the coin, when he is alone, he confesses:

I lay awake thinking and my mind jumping around. Then I couldn’t keep away from it, and I started to think about Brett and all the rest of it went away. I was thinking about Brett and my mind stopped jumping around and started to go in sort of smooth waves. Then all of a sudden I started to cry (*Sun Also Rises*, p. 27).

Jake is living in a very complex situation because he cannot stop the influence of Brett on him. He represents the weak image of men the other. Most of his monologues clearly express this situation, especially when he observes her behaviours with men around her. He clearly expresses his anger and his incapacity to tolerate, hoping that “I wanted to swing on one, anyone, anything to shatter that superior, simpering composure” (*Sun Also Rises*, p.17). Tyler commented on this, highlighting that: “Part of Jake’s anger perhaps stems from a combination of envy – they have what he lacks – and what he sees as the men’s misuse of their sexuality – they don’t use it the way he thinks they should” (2001, p. 51).

Jake does not receive well of Brett and Robert’s affair because of his jealousy for Robert’s ability to have an affair with her. I argue that this anger is not the usual type of jealousy as it represents an inherent heritage of masculinity to wonder how a woman could play with men in such a careless way. His impotency, however, represents men’s failure to dominate over the new woman.



Conclusion

The Sun Also Rises reflects Hemingway's vision about the new women of the twentieth century by illustrating women's new stature through his depiction of a major female character in the novel – Brett, who presents the free woman who departs from the men's world. Traditionally, according to Simone De Beauvoir, women are always neglected and considered as the footnote of society. All they dream of is a husband who deals with them as objects or as the 'other'. The image is different in *The Sun Also Rises*; Brett seems to be free and has the possible power that enables her to choose her future or her way of life. She rejects the traditional depiction of women and plays the men's role through her behaviours with the male characters in the novel. In contrast, the major male character, Jake, seems to be confused and without any will. He is mostly unable to deal with Brett because of his impotency. This impotency symbolises that women were regarded as socially impotent creatures and accordingly they are considered as the 'other'. So, we can conclude that Hemingway comments about male dominancy which is no longer existent through the depiction of Jake as the impotent and thus, as 'the other'.

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