



## MATRIARCHAL SOCIETY IN *THE SECRET LIFE OF BEES* BY SUE MONK KIDD

Teta Irama Setri<sup>1</sup>, Dwi Budi Setiawan<sup>2</sup>

*Universitas Teknokrat Indonesia*<sup>1,2</sup>

tetairamas@gmail.com<sup>1</sup>, dwibudisetiawan.dbs.@gmail.com<sup>2</sup>

Received: (April 2020)

Accepted: (May 2020)

Published: (June 2020)

### Abstract

This research discusses a novel which written by Sue Monk Kidd entitled *The Secret Life of Bees*. The writers aims to describe the matriarchal society issue that is often regarded as the opposed of patriarchy. This research aims to answer the question how levels of matriarchal society described in the novel *The Secret Life of Bees* through women characters in the story. This study applies descriptive qualitative method and typically library research. This research applies socio-historical approach in order to look at the relation between literary work and society's historical elements that happen in the past. At political level, August character shows as the matriarch or the leader in community with important role for overcoming conflict and decision making process. At economical level, it shows that matriarchal society common practice has right and same position in economic affair and giving gift each other to make the economic condition balance. Last, at spiritual and cultural level, it is described that women characters in *The Secret Life of Bees* believe in feminine divine which is the Black Mary and doing worship for her. In conclusion, *The Secret Life of Bees* novel clearly depicts matriarchal society based on the theory of Matriarchy by Heide Göettner-Abendroth.

**Keyword:** The Secret Life of Bees, Matriarchy, Matriarchal Society, Levels of Matriarchal Society, Socio-historical Approach

### INTRODUCTION

Generally, patriarchy and matriarchy are often regarded as two contradicting things. It is already known that patriarchy is social system based on the domination power of men in society. For example, man is the one who has to seek for job and woman is the one who has to stay at home. Otherwise, people mostly assume that matriarchy is the opposed of patriarchy, in which women considered as the one who dominate power in the society. This discussion is similar to the discussion of gender stereotypes that a woman should be feminine and a man should be masculine (Aryangga & Nurmaily, 2017). Furthermore, the masculine and feminine traits are deeply rooted in the society (Yunara & Kardiansyah, 2017). However, this concept brings misconception towards the definition of matriarchy itself. It is important to be clarified that the ideal of the harmonious matriarchy is not the mirror image of patriarchy. According to an independent scholar Göettner-Abendroth, she explains in the interview with *Dame Magazine* that if patriarchy is power over others, but matriarchy is power from within since it is not to have power over others and over nature, but to follow maternal values based on mutual respect (Hamilton, 2013). At some points, values in a cultural context define the right and the wrong (Lina & Setiawan, 2017). Further, modern matriarchy is not merely social structure based on maternal lineage; however, it is rather a maternal value as Göettner-Abendroth (2009) stated:

“Matriarchy is mother centered society as the most important function to insure its future. This social system is based on maternal values includes care- taking, nurturing, motherliness, peace-building, in which these hold for everybody for mothers and those who are not mothers, for women and men alike.”

From the definition above, matriarchy social system emphasize the role of mothers within society who take over all responsible for others include economic needs, social needs, or cultural and politics. It is not just a reversal form of patriarchy in which women ruling over men, however, it is more likely complementary equality between the genders and generations and it is not necessarily need mothers' biological relation. Furthermore, matriarchy does not only exist in the real society but also exists in the society within literary work since literary work is a mirror of society. It is in accordance with Swingewood & Laurenson (1972) who stated that literature is a direct reflection of kinds of social structure, family relationship, class conflict, and even divorce trends and population composition.

In this study, the writers uses this socio-historical approach as the most appropriate approach to analyze the object of analysis about matriarchy. According to Vygotsky in Oguz (2007) stated that sociohistorical theory aimed to create an account of human mental processes that recognizes the essential relationship between these processes and their cultural, historical, and instructional settings. Even though on the surface, the object of analysis probably seems to be part of feminism critics since it talks about women. However, according to Powell and François (2013), there is an important aspect of feminist thought that has been underutilized, which is human being as having a basis in interdependence within sociology in term of the relations on interpersonal and social and cultural levels. Hence, it is important to be understood that the context of matriarchy is not only about the issue of women and women's bodies but also the society as a whole, and it is known as a social system based on maternal values.

Matriarchy by Heide Göettner-Abendroth itself is investigating matriarchal societies in all over the world such as in Asia, Africa and America, it shows that matriarchal society do not serve to create hierarchies as it is common in patriarchy (Göettner-Abendroth, 2007). They show that different genders and generations have their own dignity, through complementary areas of activity. The reason is because the new matriarchal society defines as social system based on maternal values includes care-taking, nurturing, motherliness, peace-building, in which these hold for everybody for mothers and those who are not mothers, for women and men alike to have the same right and position (Göettner-Abendroth, 2007).

Regarding to the basic concept of matriarchal society which is about maternal values and power from within, henceforth, Abendroth (2007) stated that matriarchal society itself can be observed further on its levels of society as the matriarchal organization pattern, which are the social level, the economic level, the political level and the areas of their worldviews and faiths or known as spirituality and culture level. The explanation will be described below.

### **Social Level**

Matriarchal society women do not need to be biological mother in order to be acknowledged as a woman, because matriarchy common practice is a group of sisters in which they are not necessarily to have children in order to get what they want to have. The strong reason is because the basis building patterns of matriarchy that women with children do not simply only care for their children, but also care for others. It is possible to have *siblings-by-choice* to be invited to their community, brothers and sisters which can show social interaction skills, providing care and working for the welfare for others. matriarchal community choose members of advanced age to be their own "mothers", "grandmothers of their children", "mother's brother" and "grandmother's brothers of their children". Those older woman or man has important role as advisers and helpers for the whole community. They also can be the representative of the community to the outside world.

### **Political Level**

Political practice in matriarchal society comes from every day's life. The general functions are like to achieve decision and overcome community conflict. Those political practices in matriarchy commonly called *grassroots democracy*. Political practice in matriarchy prefers to prioritize all layers of community to reach consensus. There is no difference system implemented between a community house and the whole village. All people serve their right. Political level of matriarchal society require matriarch as facilitator of consensus decision-making processes at the levels of clan-house and also the one who mediate conflict and remind community ethical values that guide their life.

### **Economical Level**

In economical practice the members groups of siblings-by-choice would share a deep trust each other. The duty of matriarch, either man or woman as the keeper of peace has personally responsible for transparently

distributes the necessary goods to all members with perfectly fair and equal (Wolfstone, 2018). In order to make balance the economic condition that each member has mutual aid system, they can support each other with goods and money they have. Money is not the main mean to exchange, but it includes goods and services among the community members. They fundamentally create emotional bonds through wealth spread and cheerful heart when someone giving gifts each other. They also live under the maxim, *those who have shall give*.

### **Spiritual and Cultural Level**

The matriarchal society venerates the female ancestors. matriarchy believes in divinity existence in which the whole world defines as feminine divine, the Great Mother as the one who created every living on earth (International Academy HAGIA, 2009). Wolfstone (2018) also added in her study that cultural imaginary of matriarchal societies is elevated in cosmology and symbolic systems with female deities includes in the cosmology. Matriarchal society has free and creative worship of the Goddess that could drive the formation of spiritual affinity groups, symbolic matri-clans, new communities and the whole system of new matriarchal units.

Referring to the previous explanation regarding to the theory, the writers aims to reveal the depiction of matriarchal society in the novel *The Secret Life of Bees* written by Sue Monk Kidd. The background of time of *The Secret Life of Bees* is taken place in 1964 in which there was still an issue of racism and discrimination towards black people in America (1920-1969). Further, *The Secret Life of Bees* is talking about a 14-year-old girl Lily Owens who seeks the fact about the reason why her mother left her when she was kid and she really expected the presence of her mother's figure. Her wild decision to run away from home to seek those facts mostly influenced by her evil father who continuously doing violence towards her and told her that her mother, Deborah, did not love her. The story of *The Secret Life of Bees* above which is dominated by women characters encourages the writers to analyze the novel based on Heide Göettner-Abendroth's theory, as she proposes matriarchy as maternal values and divides it into several levels: social level, economic level, political level, spirituality and cultural level.

### **METHOD**

In this analysis, the writers applied library research and descriptive qualitative method since the result of this study will be in the form of statement not in the form of numerical data. Library research is applied to conduct a research by collecting information from books and journal articles related to the analysis, in this case a novel (Amelia & Dintasi, 2017). Qualitative research also consists of interpreting process that makes the world visible and its roots lies on social and cultural anthropology, philosophy, psychology, history and sociology (Mohajan, 2018). Therefore, it can be asserted that the type of this research is qualitative study in which it uses the method by observing the data source to gain the data. The data can be synthesized with the theory to find and define the pattern, and to define significant points (Samanik & Lianasari, 2016).

### **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Matriarchy social system emphasizes the role of mothers within society who take over all responsible for others include economic needs, social needs, or cultural and politics. It is not just a reversal form of patriarchy in which women ruling over men, however, it is more likely complementary equality between the genders and generations and it is not necessarily need mothers' biological relation. In the chapter two, it has been explained regarding to the basic concept of matriarchal society which is about maternal values, henceforth, Abendroth (2007) stated that matriarchal society itself can be observed further on its levels of society as the matriarchal organization pattern, which are the social level, the economic level, the political level and the areas of their worldviews and faiths or known as spirituality and culture level. Therefore, through this analyzes, the writers believes that *The Secret Life of Bees* novel depicts those matriarchal organization pattern in the matriarchal society.

#### **Social Level**

According to Abendroth's theory the basis building patterns of matriarchy that women with children do not simply only care for their children, but also care for other people surround their community. Therefore, in the modern matriarchal society, woman does not need to be biological mother in order to be recognized as a woman. Matriarchal social practice put forward maternal values includes care-taking, nurturing, motherliness, peace-building, as the priority to run the society and it applies to everyone. Therefore it can be said that matriarchy practice usually exists in a group of sisters.

It seen from this quotation, "I'm May Boatwright," she said. "I'm August's sister, too." She smiled at us, one of those odd grins that let you know she was not altogether normal person (Kidd, 2002: 104). From the previous quotation, it is introducing that the characters of August Boatwright, June Boatwright, and May Boatwright live as a group of sister.

Further, in the matriarchal society at social level, they have "matriarch" as the adviser and helpers for the whole community. A matriarch usually chosen from the older woman or man considering their age and experience to lead the community. In the story, August Boatwright character indicates as matriarch, since August is the oldest sister and the one who lead their family business as bee keepers. It is depicted through this quotation, "Lying on the cot in the honey house, though, all I could think was August is so intelligent, so cultured, and I was surprised by this. That's what let me know I had some prejudice buried inside me" (Kidd, 2002: 118). From the previous quotation that is narrated by Lily Owen's thought, August is not only having an advance age but she also having good experience in her life. That experience apparently creates August characters to be intelligent and well-cultured as Lily Owen thought. Besides, August as matriarch has important role in the story as the adviser for her house members. It is shown when August gave her advice to Zach when he got jailed.

The basic building of matriarchy which are about care-taking, nurturing and ensure the future of the community members is also proven through the narration when T-ray came and made a chaos forcing Lily to go back home with him (Kidd, 2002). Then August stand forward to strictly confirmed that she would take care of Lily's future. This kind of situations like being oppressed by someone else basically the thing that create social bound of matriarchal society. As it is mentioned by Abendroth theory in the chapter two which is the imposition of patriarchy upon the women community empower them to resist any kind of oppression and discrimination by giving response to actively participate in their own community and struggling towards self-emancipation (Kies, 2013).

### **Political Level**

The political practice of matriarchal society called as *grassroots democracy*, in which all people inside the community are the priority to reach consensus. Furthermore, the theory of matriarchy also emphasizes the role of matriarch as a leader for political practice, in which she/he accommodates all community affairs include overcome community conflict and decision-making. This political practice can be seen from the event when June did not agree with August if they welcome Lily and Rosaleen. June was debating August decision to keep Lily in their house (Kidd, 2002). From the dialogues, it could be seen that June refused to welcome Lily and Rosaleen as guest who need to stay in their house. The reason is strongly because Lily was lying and a white girl. June could not accept white people because all the racism issue was done by white people. However, August as the oldest sister, which here can be seen as the matriarch, tried to give June understanding that they should help Lily by not seeing on her skin color but as human, specifically little girl, who need help.

### **Economical Level**

In the chapter two, the economical level of matriarchal society is defined as a condition when members of groups include siblings-by-choice would share a deep trust of each other for their economic affairs. They have mutual aid system to make the economic condition balance. In the story, August's matriarchal community shows that all members have their own duties in their economical fields such as August the one who responsible of the bees farming, May the one who help in the house and help August with the honey, that is shown through quotation "may and I sleep out here sometimes when we're harvesting honey round the clock," (Kidd, 2002: 114) and June who worked as Cello player that is shown through quotation: she played music for dying people, going to their homes and even to the hospital to serenade them into the next life" (Kidd, 2002: 128).

August shows her trust on Lily as the new member in their community by giving task to Lily that is described through the quotation "You'll work with Zach and me, making the honey, doing whatever needs doing. Come on, I'll give you the tour" (Kidd, 2002: 114-115). From the quotation, it is clearly seen that there is no distinction of task between August siblings and the siblings by choice in the community. Even August did not mention that Lily would work with Zach only they will work together with August.

### **Spiritual and cultural level**

Spiritual practice of matriarchal society has been explained as the beliefs of society on Goddess and Great Mother that empowered women as part of society and generated beneficial relationship within their community.

This spiritual practice according to Abendroth is the continuous celebration of this world and life. In which it can be understood as the image of how matriarchal society perceive their world as peaceful world which the source is coming from women power from within. This kind of spiritual practice clearly seen in the event when Lily first introduced about the way August Sisters did pray to the Black Mary statue. August sisters called the Black Mary statue as our lady of chain indicates that August Sisters clearly beliefs on divinity as a feminine divine that also empower and unite them by the chain that she brought to them (Kidd, 2002). It is in accordance with Abendroth theory on spiritual level of matriarchal society that is said Mary as the one who generated beneficial relationship within the community.

In the cultural aspect of matriarchal society's spirituality, they have free creative worship of the Goddesses or Great Mother that could drive certain formation of spiritual affinity groups. However, spiritual and cultural practice in matriarchal society is commonly shown through festival of merit. The functions are to commemorate the struggle of their Great Mother and to express their gratefulness (Kidd, 2002). Celebrating Mary Day was becoming their culture in the last fifteen years. They continuously celebrate it together inside their house as a symbol of divine power from within, to release somebody's sorrows in their life.

## CONCLUSION

Finally, based on the evidence obtained from quotations in the novel, the writers concludes that the novel *The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd depicts matriarchal society that could be seen from women characters in the story, which are August Boatwright, May Boatwright, June Boatwright, Lily Owens and Rosaleen. The matriarchal society is described based on Abendroth theory which is observed through four levels; social level, political level, economical level and, cultural and spiritual level. In this case, the matriarchal society is described through characters' behavior and certain events that occur in the story. In this study all levels of matriarchal society are described through dialogues and narrations.

At the social level, the matriarchal society of *The Secret Life of Bees* shows the social characteristics of matriarchal society which is sisterhood. It is also described that there is a role of matriarch which is portrayed in August character as the oldest wise sister in the story. Furthermore, the matriarchal society at social level is clearly seen through the complementary areas of activity of each character in the story that apparently each character has equal position within the community. Meanwhile at political level, the women characters in the novel show the political practice of matriarchal society by overcoming community conflict, either conflict with one character and another, or self-conflict of one character.

At economical level, the matriarchal society of *The Secret Life of Bees* is described through behavior when August character, as the matriarch of the matriarchal society, deciding community decision to divide duties for other characters within the community. Further, it is also shown through the event when other community members, the Daughters of Mary, giving gift each other as one of the economical principle of matriarchal society. Meanwhile, the cultural and spiritual level of matriarchal society in the story is clearly seen through the spiritual activity of matriarchal community, such as August Sisters, Lily Owens Rosaleen and Daughters of Mary who devotedly worship for Black Mary as their feminine divine that give them power of life.

In conclusion, in order to know that certain society is categorized as matriarchal society, it is important to observe their behaviors and activity within their community, and then use precise theory as a guidance to find the result. This kind of method could be implemented as well in analyzing matriarchal society in a fictional society in a literary work. Perhaps, for the future researchers who are interested to conduct broader discussion about matriarchal society could focus on the relation with another issue, therefore, there will be an improvement in the social knowledge among society.

## REFERENCES

- Amelia, Dina & Dintasi, Febri Diantika. 2017. Ephebophilia suffered by the main character in the novel *Lolita* by Nabokov. *Teknosastik: Jurnal Bahasa dan Sastra*, 15(2), 81-86.
- Aryangga, Afri & Nurmaily, Ely. 2017. Women's power and stereotype denial in Pocahontas movie. *Teknosastik: Jurnal Bahasa dan Sastra*, 15(1), 46-58.

- Göettner-Abendroth, H. (2009). International Academy HAGIA [Online]. Retrieved from <https://www.hagia.de/en/matriarchy/>.
- Göettner-Abendroth, H. (2012). *Matriarchal Societies: Studies on Indigenous Cultures Across The Globe*. Peter Lang Publishing.
- Göettner-Abendroth, Heide. (2007). *The Way into an Egalitarian Society: Principles and Practice of a Matriarchal Politics*. International Academy HAGIA. Retrieved from <https://www.hagia.de/en/matriarchy/>.
- Hamilton, Jill. (2013). *Five Things We Know about Societies Run by Women* [ONLINE]. Retrieved on October 12, 2019, from <https://www.damemagazine.com/2013/05/10/five-things-we-know-about-societies-run-by-women/>
- Harken, Amy Lignitz. (2005). *Unveiling the Secret Life of Bees*. St. Loui: Chalice Press.
- Kies, Samantha Mallory. (2013). *Matriarchy, the Colonial Situation, and the Women's War of 1929 in Southern Nigeria*. Eastern Michigan University.
- Kurniawan, Heru. (2012). *Teori, Metode, dan Aplikasi Sosiologi Sastra*. Yogyakarta: Graha Ilmu.
- Lina, Desma & Setiawan, Dwi Budi. (2017). An analysis of culture shock from west to east as seen in Rielly's The Tournament. *Teknosastik: Jurnal Bahasa dan Sastra*, 15(1), 14-20.
- Mohajan, Haradhan, K. (2018). *Qualitative Research Methodology in Social Sciences and Related Subjects*. Journal of Economic Development, Environment and People, 7, 23-48. Retrieved from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/324151529>
- Oguz, Ayse. (2007). A look at transition from sociohistorical theory to sociocultural theory. *Journal of the Hasan Ali Yucel Faculty of Education*, 4(1), 1-19.
- Powell, Christopher & François Dépelteau. (2013). *Conceptualizing Relational Sociology*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Putri, Benedicta. (2010). *The Influence of Environment on Lily's Personality Development in Sue Monk Kidd's The Secret Life of Bees*. Sanata Dharma University.
- Samanik & Lianasari, Fita. (2016). Antimatter technology: The bridge between science and religion toward universe creation theory illustrated in Dan Brown's *Angles and Demons*. *Teknosastik: Jurnal Bahasa dan Sastra*, 14(2), 18-27.
- Swingewood, Alan & Diana Laurenson. (1972). *The Sociology of Literature*. Paladin.
- Yunara, Yurisa Yulia & Kardiansyah, M. Yuseano. (2017). Animus personality in Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire: A Game of Thrones*. *Teknosastik: Jurnal Bahasa dan Sastra*, 15(1), 7-13.