



GENDER ISSUES IN MARY NORTON'S NOVEL ENTITLED "THE BORROWERS": A LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract

Feminist literary criticism has been focused on the marginalization of women in literary texts and the efforts to deconstruct patriarchy through counter texts, such as Mary Norton's *The Borrowers*. This paper aims to review previous studies and expert opinions on Norton's *The Borrowers*, especially the arguments in the form of feminist literary criticism. This study employed George's (2008) model of literature review to review articles employing feminist literary criticism in "The Borrowers." The articles were gathered from books, academic journals, and previous studies on Norton's *The Borrowers*. The review reveals that the novel depicted a feminine and masculine environment, constructing biased gender roles and labor division that triggered efforts to gain emancipation and independence in the female character. Telling about miniature family who survived by "borrowing" items from a human, *The Borrower* is centered towards the young female who deconstructed the traditional binary oppositions concerning the work division and spatial division between males and females. Besides, *The Borrowers* also presented women's marginalization, women's struggles, and gender identity. Such revelation might be useful to extend the fight for gender equity, especially for the children as the target readers.

Keywords: *The Borrowers, feminist perspectives, library research*

Abstrak

Kritik sastra feminis telah difokuskan pada marginalisasi perempuan dalam teks sastra dan upaya untuk mendekonstruksi patriarki melalui teks tandingan, seperti *The Borrowers* karya Mary Norton. Tulisan ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji kajian-kajian terdahulu dan pendapat para ahli tentang *The Borrowers* karya Norton, khususnya argumentasi-argumentasi berupa kritik sastra feminis. Penelitian ini menggunakan model *literature review* George (2008) untuk mengkaji artikel-artikel yang menggunakan kritik sastra feminis dalam "The Borrowers". Artikel dikumpulkan dari buku, jurnal akademik, dan studi sebelumnya tentang *The Borrowers* dari Norton. Tinjauan terdahulu mengungkapkan bahwa *The Borrowers* menggambarkan lingkungan feminin dan maskulin, membangun peran gender yang bias dan pembagian kerja yang memicu gerakan emansipasi dan kemandirian dalam karakter wanita. Menceritakan tentang keluarga mini yang bertahan hidup lewat "meminjam" barang dari manusia, *The Borrower* berpusat pada perempuan muda yang mendekonstruksi oposisi biner tradisional mengenai pembagian kerja dan pembagian ruang antara laki-laki dan perempuan. Selain itu, *The Borrowers* juga menampilkan marginalisasi perempuan, perjuangan perempuan, dan identitas gender. Penceritaan tersebut dapat berguna untuk perpanjangan perjuangan kesetaraan gender terutama bagi anak-anak sebagai target pembaca.

Kata Kunci: *The Borrowers, perspektif feminis, kajian pustaka*

Introduction

Feminism is the movement that seeks to emancipate women from the marginalization caused by patriarchy. In 1960, feminist ideology started to be adopted to critically read literary works and became the beginning of feminist criticism (Abrams, 1999). According to Abrams, feminist literary criticism was strongly influenced by liberal feminist ideologies such as Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869), Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), and de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949; 1956). In Abrams's point of view, this early feminist criticism focused on how men dominate literary canons, both as authors and as main characters. For examples, Sophocles' *Oedipus* from Greek Literature in the Fifth Century B.C, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *King Lear* from the Sixteenth Century, Fielding's *Tom Jones* and von Goethe's *Faust* from the Eighteenth Century Literature, Dumas' *Three Musketeers* from the Nineteenth-Century Literature, and Joyce's rewriting of Latin Literature *Ulysses* (1992) in the Twentieth Century Literature. In the feminist critic's point of view, according to Abrams (1999), these canons are infused with patriarchal values that marginalize women.

Marginalization of women is structured within a patriarchal society, which systematically emphasizes and promotes men's interests at the cost of women's worth (Suwastini, 2013). Such society educates female children into women by internalizing values that are supposed to make them proper women. In de Beauvoir's words, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman ... It is civilization as a whole that produces this creativity ... which is described as feminine" (1956). With this cultural process, our society tends to regard masculine as active, dominating, rational and creative; simultaneously, the feminine is portrayed as opposing these characteristics, as someone passive, sociable, shy, emotional, and conventional. Millet (1970) mapped these differences into binary oppositions that undermine women as the less-qualified human beings: masculine/feminine, active/passive, dominant/submissive, rational/emotional, creative/conventional. Because these biased binary oppositions are systematically passed down from generation to generation, literature becomes one of the fertile grounds to reproduce patriarchal values as well as to counter this by revealing the patriarchal values in a work of literature or by creating literary texts that oppose patriarchal binary oppositions (see, for example, Blangsinga, Suwastini, Lasmawan, Adnyani, & Rusnalasari, 2021; Suwastini, 2011, 2013; Suwastini, Banjar, Tienty, Sasmita, & Nitiasih, 2020; Suwastini, Suprianti, & Fitrianti, 2018). Mary Norton's *The Borrowers* (1953) is one of the novels that try to portray women's marginalization through the personification of household items, the Clocks. The feminist central theme in this novel is very obvious: both in the choice of the household item as the main character that represents domestic sphere's and in the efforts of the Clocks to survive the human. Thus, the novel has been widely criticized using feminist criticism. The present study aims to review previous studies on Mary Norton's *The Borrowers* that have been conducted using feminist perspectives. This review acts as a preliminary study that can provide an overview of the various feminist approaches that have been applied in analyzing Mary Norton's *The Borrowers*.

Method

This study was a literature review focusing on the previous studies using feminist perspectives on the novel entitled *The Borrowers*. In this case, this study summarizes and synthesizes findings conducted previously by several researchers. This study used the model and the concept of a literature review from George (2008) as adapted by Ariantini, Suwastini, Adnyani, Dantes, & Jayantini (2021). The research procedures are presented in Figure 1.

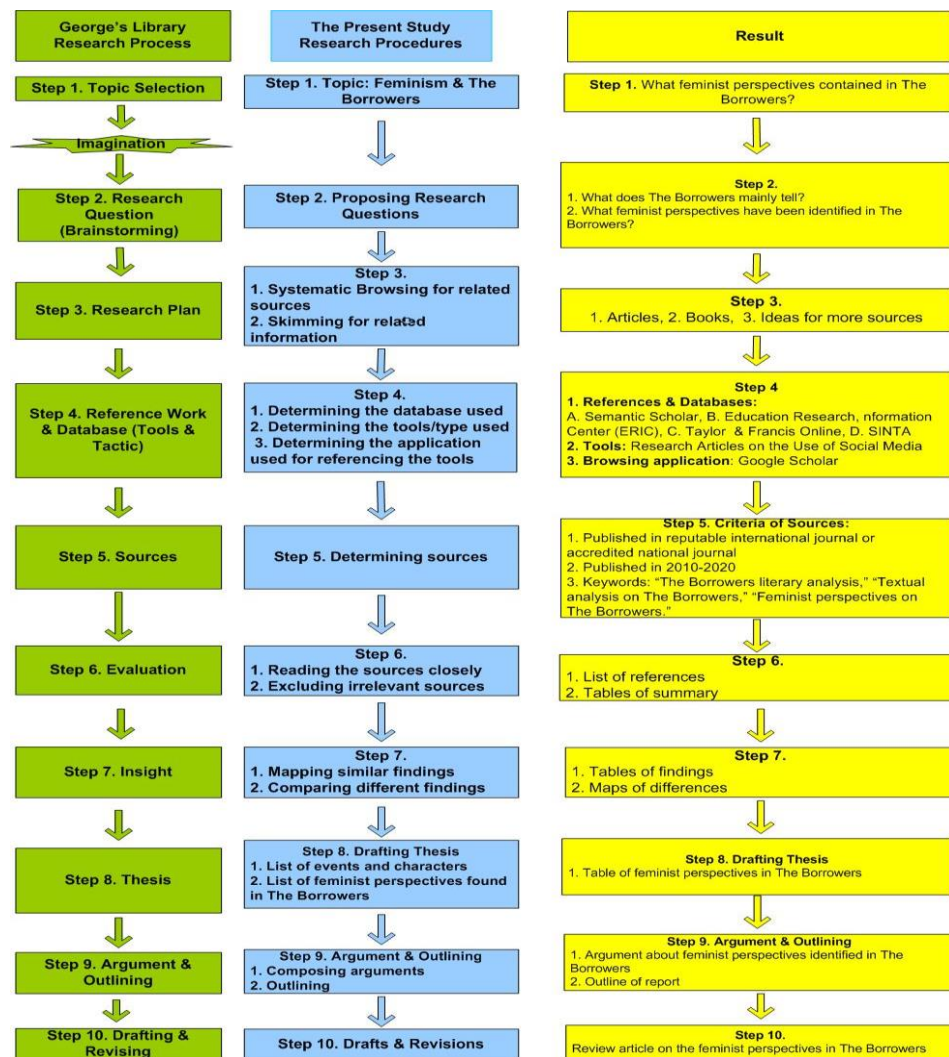


Figure 1. Library Research Procedure. (Source: George, 2008: pp. 66)

Figure 1. Research procedures adaptation

First of all, this research selected the feminism analysis on Norton's *The Borrowers* as the research topic. Second, research questions were formulated as follows: 1). What is Mary Norton's *The Borrowers* about? 2). What feminist perspectives have been identified in Mary Norton's *The Borrowers*? It was followed by determining the research plan, which included skimming and browsing related sources such as books, articles, and websites. It was determined that the sources to be reviewed were mainly articles of related research supported with relevant websites.

This research used Google Scholar and SINTA to retrieve related sources. However, the review was limited to open access sources due to the independent funding.

The articles selected for the library review were those published under the topics of Mary Norton's *The Borrowers*. The keywords used to retrieve the articles were: *The Borrowers* literary analysis, textual analysis on *The Borrowers*, and feminist perspectives on *The Borrowers*. The gathered articles were critically read, summarized, and synthesized. The feminist perspectives identified in *The Borrowers* were mapped and used to formulate the theses for answering research questions. The theses were used to outline the arguments regarding the brief overview of Mary Norton's *The Borrowers* and the feminist perspectives. The outline then was developed into the present article after being revised as suggested by colleagues and reviewers.

Results and Discussion

Brief Overview of Mary Norton's *The Borrowers* (1952)

The Borrowers is the first book's title in the five-series fantasy story about the Clock family written by Mary Norton. Three books were published in 1950, one book in 1960, and the last was published in 1980 (Gilead, 2015). According to Gilead (2015), *The Borrowers* story centers on an imaginary humanoid human race about 6 inches tall. The name was gained from how they survived by borrowing items from the human being or called "human beans" (Virginia, 2014). The word "borrow" actually refers to the word steal as they did not return the items. Borrowing is their only way to survive even though it is dangerous and uncertain, implying the problems of isolation and alienation in modern life (O'Malley, 2003).

The major characters in this story are Pod Clock, Homily Clock, Arriety Clock, and The Boy. Pod, Homily, and Arriety are miniature people who were around sixteen inches tall. As stated in the novel story, the family name "Clock" was taken from the place where they live. Clock family lived under the old clock in the big house located in London, even though their house was far from that clock. Pod Clock was a hard-working person and also a handyman. Pod Clock was the only person in the Clock family who went to borrow their things to survive. Homily Clock was a housewife who cooked and cleaned the house every day. Arriety Clock was a 14-year-old girl who liked to study and read books. Arriety Clock was not allowed to go out to borrow things because it was men's duty, and no woman had gone to borrow before. In comparison, The Boy character was a male figure who liked to help the Clock family until the Clock family reached its golden age.

The type of plot used by the author in this novel is a Nonlinear plot. According to Kim et al. (2018), a nonlinear plot is a technique that explains or illustrates events in non-chronological order. For instance, events in stories that use nonlinear plots occur in the past and present, and the events are not arranged according to what event occurs first in the story. In such a case, an event that happens later in the story can appear early in the plot. *The Borrowers* is told through the third-person objective point of view. According to Gill (1995), an objective point of view is a condition where the narrator knows everything that happens in the story. Still, the narrator cannot give any feeling, opinion, or expression toward whatever happens.

The Borrowers is known to be children's literature published in Golden Age between the 1950s and 1890s (O'Malley, 2003; Virginia, 2014). Virginia further explains that the distinction of The Borrowers lies in its intertextual connections with a broad range of other children's literature. The Borrowers surpassed its production period and found its connection to works of literature after and beforehand. The connections vary from similar genres to central issues brought by the novels (Virginia, 2014).

The Borrowers in Feminist Perspectives

Rustin & Rustin (1986) argues that Mary Norton's *The Borrowers* is laden with gendered-biased themes. Rustin focuses on how the novel highlights the differences between men's and women's works. Pod Clock was the only man in the Clock family. His duty was to go out and borrow things from the human's household. It is because the Borrowers lived from borrowing human things. Homily Clock was a housewife. Her job was cleaning the house and cooking. Rustin notices that the conflict arises because the Clock's daughter, Arriety, did not follow the traditional work divisions maintained by the Clocks. Arriety Clock wanted to leave her house and do borrowing, which was supposed to be a male's occupation. As a girl, Arriety Clock felt trapped at home, unlike what her mother felt. As a girl, she wanted to borrow, which should be her father's job. Thus, Arriety Clock became the agent of change that deconstructed the traditional binary oppositions concerning the division of work between males and females. Another deconstruction brought by Arriety Clock was the blurring of the spatial division. Where traditionally women should occupy the domestic space, and the men occupy the public space, Arriety Clock refused to stay at home and ventured out into the open.

Pace (1991) observes that Mary Norton's *The Borrowers* is written with a combination of feminist themes. The first theme is a woman's struggle to get out of her house and eliminate her loneliness. Under this theme, the novel is viewed by Pace as presenting one of the main issues in liberal feminist ideology: the rise against the confine of the domestic spaces. Within this theme, the house is depicted as an alien place that imprisons the main character instead of giving it a loving home. Pace observes that the alienation is starkly highlighted in the loneliness experienced by the female characters. The second theme is innocent childhood depicted in the figure of a miniature girl. Under this theme, Pace argues that Norton contrast human and the miniature people. Where humans are depicted in full-size persons, the main characters are depicted as miniatures. The contrast represents the hierarchical power relations between the two: human figures who are physically bigger represent power, while the miniature people, who are physically smaller, represent the oppressed. Within this oppression, the miniature people sought their gender identity, as represented by the genderless household item that the miniatures take.

Hopkins (2000) views Norton's *The Borrowers* takes from a series of ideas, problems, and anxiety that became the social issues of the 19th century. According to Hopkins, ideas and problems raised in this book describe a lot about masculine and the feminine environment, work, life in a changing world. Hopkins believes that Norton wants to make its readers feel the perspective of life in a world that is considered strange and familiar based on the process of magnification and miniaturization. He

insists that *The Borrowers* highlights the pleasure and anxiety of a place called home in general. Hopkins observes that these topics are taken from issues of size and point of view, where some consider the home to be the most comfortable place and the potential for anxiety, safety, and change, which children mostly experience throughout the world. This book discusses children and slips a message of concern for adults if children and adults have almost the same problem and are not much different (Hopkins, 2000). From a feminist's perspective, Hopkins adds, this story has a lot to say about size, point of view and deals with complex issues of gender identity.

Hopkins (2000) further explains that Norton's own record (written in 1966) about the origin of *the Borrower* shows that there is a gender aspect to the origin of *the Borrower*. Hopkins notices that each Borrower book has a young female Borrower as of the center of awareness. The absence of any brother for this young female character highlights the need for an organized women's movement, as separated individual women were trying to break the traditional ideals of gender roles and division of labor in the Clock family. As Hopkins observed, the division of roles in the Clock family represents the nineteenth-century ideals where middle-class women had very clear descriptions of what they could and could not do. With Arriety Clock, observed Hopkins, the traditional gender roles were finally shaken: in the beginning, Arriety Clock never left her house under the kitchen floor, she was always demanded to help her mother in the kitchen, she felt isolated and confined. As much as Arriety Clock's life looked very peaceful, Hopkins argues that the house's safety backfired on Arriety Clock as she felt imprisoned and limited. The following excerpt supports Hopkin's argument about Arriety Clock's feelings:

"It was only Pod who knew the way through the intersecting passages to the hole under the clock. Moreover, only Pod could open the gates. His wife and his child led more sheltered lives. . . . But there was a grating in the brick wall of the house. . . through which Arriety could see the garden. . . . and where birds came and pecked and flirted and sometimes fought. "The hours you waste on them birds," Homily would say, "and when there is a literary job to be done, you can never find the time. I was brought up in a house ... where there wasn't no grating, and we were all the happier for it. Now go off and get me the potato." (The Borrowers, p. 15).

The excerpt above was taken from the beginning of the novel, in which a third-person narrator described how the female characters reproduce the traditional domestic roles of women, albeit the change of view looming on Arriety Clock's horizon. Homily Clock represents the traditional values where women happily embraced their domestic roles. Homily Clock tried to educate Arriety Clock to do and feel the same. Nevertheless, when Homily Clock kept dutifully doing the house chores, Arriety Clock was caught looking out into the garden from behind the grating in the brick wall. The contrast between Homily Clock's ideal role of a woman and Arriety Clock's lack of domestic interest runs parallel with the contrast between where Arriety stood and what she looked at: the domestic confinement versus the freedom outside. According to Hopkins (2000), Arriety Clock's limited views through the grating is related to images

of women in the 19th century who were isolated in confined spaces and had little room to look outside.

Hopkins draws a further similarity through Arriety Clock's literacy: she often spent her time writing diaries. Like most women in the Nineteenth Century, literacy is part of a middle-class woman's basic skills. For the Clocks, it was also a must. Writing was common among the Clocks because Homily Clock regards literacy as a feminine and polite skill. Moreover, just like the Nineteenth Century women started to read more and to know more, Arriety Clock also used this literacy to deviate from her intended traditional roles within the house. Like the generation gap endured by the first generation of feminists, Homily Clock was blindsided by her ignorance of what Arriety Clock wrote in her diaries. The following excerpt supports Hopkins's argument:

"I know we've managed to stay when all the others have gone. But what has it done for us in the end? I don't think it's so clever to live on alone, forever and ever, in a great, big, half-empty house, under the floor, with no one to talk to, no one to play with, nothing to see but dust and passages. . . Egglestina had a tame mouse; Egglestina had yellow boots with jet buttons, and Egglestina did get out - just once!" (The Borrowers, p. 38)

The excerpt above highlights Arriety Clock inspirations about "leaving the house" as a form of liberation. For Hopkins, this literacy becomes the key to women's liberation; as Homily Clock came into knowledge of Arriety Clock's aspirations, she then started to permit Arriety Clock more freedom. Hopkins observes that Homily Clock then permitted Arriety Clock to borrow even though Pod Clock initially protested and said he "never heard of no girl going borrowing" (pp. 39). Hopkins highlights this as a breach of the traditional roles. This small breach created a crack in the well-kept traditions as toward the end of the novel, Arriety Clock was allowed to do masculine work outside the house even though the outside world was perilous.

García (2002) discusses Norton's *The Borrowers* by locating it as inter-war literature. For García, the novel depicts the difficult childhood of the children growing after the Wars. Within this time frame, the novel is filled with class issues and gender issues. García argues that during the post-war period, many families are still experiencing the process of healing from trauma, loss, and separation caused by the war. It has a severe impact on children; the widespread disruption to family life caused by the evacuation policy of children from the city center is a new experience and cross-class experience, which is often very disturbing. In addition, several problems arise, such as food shortages, crime, and sporadic and chaotic removals caused by the bomb explosion's impact, all of which is conveyed in the story of *The Borrowers*, insist García. Although the Clock family lived together, they had to live a meager existence, sharing the loss of separated family members. According to García, the class issues are highlighted by the boy's social status who changed the life of the Clock family: the boy comes from the pre-war world of upper-and middle-class Britain. In García's opinion, the boy story is further used to illustrate the differences experienced by generations of British men and women: holidays are rarely spent with family, but they will be sent to friends or relatives to be cared for.

García argues that much of the boy's identity is kept minimal in the novel to read the boy's separation from his family metaphorically. Here is the gender issue that comes forward: as the boy continued to be abused by Mrs. Driver, the housemaid, Arriety Clock was closely protected by her family. With Arriety Clock, the feminist issue is highlighted by her ambitious characterizations, argues García. Along with the change brought by the end of the war, Arriety Clock succeeded in gaining her family's support and deconstructing the traditional binary oppositions as Arriety Clock was permitted to do things that had never been done before by the female borrowers. García concluded that the problems and tensions that occur for his actions are described as liberation, although very dangerous.

Lightburn (2011) looks into Norton's *the Borrowers* in light of its adaptation into the *A Secret World of Arriety* in 2010, with the screenplay written by Japanese animator, director, producer, author, and manga artist Hayao Miyazaki. Lightburn focuses her view on the theme of "smallness" in the novel, confirming the issue of marginalization. Lightburn further emphasizes this marginalization by discussing the Borrowers' dependence on human beings and their lack of magical powers compared to other small heroes in works of literature such as Thumbelina, Tinker Bell, and the Lilliputians. According to Lightburn, both of these "smallness" brought more gravity to Arriety Clock's effort to leave the confine of her house into the "world" of the Big People. As borrowers, they must be careful when borrowing goods in the house where they were hiding to make them not be seen by anyone. When they are seen, they must immediately emigrate and find a new place to live, because otherwise their existence will be threatened. On top of these threats is, Lightburn argues, they depend entirely on humans, without being allowed to be seen by humans. They assume that humans cannot be trusted and endanger their populations if they have to coexist. Nevertheless, they coexist. In the narrative of *The Borrowers*, the distrust became the reason to establish the gendered roles where only men could go outside and borrow, while women stayed at home to cook: because borrowing is hazardous work and needs the skill to do it.

The marginalization of the Borrowers highlighted by Lightburn (2011) strongly resembles the marginalization of women. Where men and women are supposed to coexist, women (i.e., feminists) have to strongly distrust men. Feminists have their justified reasons for the mistrust, yet as what happened to the Borrowers, women simply have to coexist with men. What happened to the Borrowers when they got "caught" while "borrowing" human's things are alienation: they should start over a new life. It closely resembles what Faludi (1992) calls the "backlash" that every step forward taken by women can result in countless more steps backward. It is what happened to Arriety Clock when she ventured to leave the safety of her confinement and do what male Borrowers usually do, borrowing. She was constantly threatening to expose her family's existence at the cost of banishment and starting again in a different human house.

Conclusion

To sum up, Mary Norton's *The Borrowers* (1953) is laden with feminist themes and the issues of gender differences. Many studies have been conducted on the feminist

issues in this novel, some of them with different focuses: gendered work and space divisions, feminist struggles and gender identity, classical hierarchies that marginalized women, women, and wars, as well as threats for women's struggles. Some of the important points to be emphasized in the discussions of feminist ideologies and gender issues in this study are that the novel highlights the survival of small people and marginalized women and their gradual gains in emancipation. It could pose a strong message to the readers of this novel, especially for children who become the target readers of this novel: while the struggle for gender equity is long and seemed to be endless, women have gained a lot since the time of Wollstonecraft.

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