

THE REPRESENTATION OF PROLETARIAN FRENCH WOMAN'S
OPPRESSIONS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY IN VICTOR HUGO'S *LES*
MISÉRABLES

(Representasi Penindasan Perempuan Proletar Perancis pada Abad
Sembilan Belas dalam Novel *Les Misérables* Karya Victor Hugo)

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Abstract

This article discusses a novel entitled *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo which represents the proletarian French woman's oppressions in the nineteenth century. This article has three questions asked as the main problems which are also be the main goals in doing the research. The first question asks about the representation of proletarian French woman's oppressions portrayed in the novel. The second question is about the representation of French society in the nineteenth century in *Les Misérables*. The last question is the ideological position of the author. This research uses Simone de Beauvoir's perspective about woman's oppressions and the relationship between literary work and the social life written in *The Second Sex*(1953). A qualitative research and documentary technique are used to collect the data, as well as the inductive method which is used to analyze the subject matters. After doing the research, we found that *Les Misérables* represents the proletarian French woman's oppressions in the nineteenth century which is characterized by Fantine. Besides, we also found that Victor Hugo's ideology criticizing the government about the social condition especially woman's oppressions. Through *Les Misérables* he breaks the mystery of common people life and protests the executive government about the arbitrarily government toward common people.

Keywords: *Les Misérables* , woman's oppressions, the nineteenth century.

Abstrak

Artikel ini membahas sebuah novel yang berjudul *Les Misérables* karya Victor Hugo yang merepresentasikan penindasan terhadap kaum perempuan Perancis pada abad sembilan belas. Artikel ini memiliki tiga pertanyaan yang juga sebagai tujuan dari penelitian ini. Pertanyaan pertama menanyakan tentang representasi penindasan perempuan Perancis yang digambarkan dalam novel. Pertanyaan kedua tentang representasi masyarakat Perancis pada abad sembilan belas dalam novel *Les Misérables*. Pertanyaan terakhir yaitu tentang posisi ideologi dari penulis. Penelitian ini menggunakan perspektif dari Simone de Beauvoir tentang penindasan perempuan dan hubungan antara karya sastra dan kehidupan sosial masyarakat yang ditulis dalam bukunya yang berjudul *The*

Second Sex (1953). Penelitian kualitatif dan teknik dokumenter digunakan dalam pengumpulan data, begitu juga metode induktif digunakan untuk menganalisis pokok persoalan dalam penelitian ini. Setelah melakukan penelitian, kami menemukan bahwa Les Misérables merepresentasikan penindasan perempuan proletar Perancis pada abad sembilan belas yang ditokohi oleh Fantine. Disamping itu kami juga menemukan bahwa ideologi Victor Hugo adalah mengkritisi pemerintahan dalam hal kondisi sosial khususnya penindasan perempuan. Melalui Les Misérables dia membuka misteri kehidupan masyarakat biasa dan memprotes pemerintah eksekutif tentang kesewenang-wenangan pemerintah terhadap masyarakat biasa.

Kata Kunci: *Les Misérables* , penindasan perempuan, abad sembilan belas

Introduction

The oppression towards woman is the old phenomenon in the world including France. The kinds of the oppression can be physical, psychological, social, and others. The subject of the oppression can be done by the man or the woman herself in the work place, surrounding society, or even the family such as husband and parents. "More importantly, the analysis of the cause of woman's oppressions form the basis for any assessment of just what would have to be changed in order to achieve a society without gender hierarchy" (Gayle in Reiter: 2005:534).

The kinds of oppression in the nineteenth century wererecorded in the fiction novel by Victor Hugo entitled *Les Misérables*. "Literature represents life; and life is, in large measure, a social reality, eventhough the natural world and the inner or subjective world of the individual have also been objects of literary imitation" (Warren, 1978: 94). The quotation shows that literary work can be used as a reference of how the human behaviour and problem in society is. For those, we use *Les Misérables*, a novel which tells about French society after the

French Revolution, to be discussed in my thesis. *Les Misérables* is a novel which was first published in 1862 in France.

A woman main character in the novel, Fantine, is described as a woman who lives in the oppressed condition along her life. She is an uneducated woman who has an educated boyfriend. Their social status is widely different. One day, her boyfriend, Felix Tholomyes, left her with a sheet of letter. He wrote that he left her forever. Unfortunately, at that time Fantine was pregnant an illegitimate child. Later, Fantine entrusts her daughter named Cossette, to The Thernadiers family with a monthly payment. Fantine begins to live in the oppressed situation. Thernadiers family, who adopt Cossette, always ask money more than the agreement before. Fantine tries to do everything in order to get a lot of money, including being a prostitute.

There is a big social change in France at that time which is caused by the result of French Revolution. That is why we are interested in doing the research related to the proletarian woman's oppressions in *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo. The title is "The Representation of

proletarian French Woman's Oppressions in the Nineteenth Century in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*".

Research Methodology

This research uses qualitative research. In a qualitative research, the using of method is through interviews, observations, and the utilization of documents. "Qualitative research tends to be associated with words or images as the unit of analysis" (Denscombe, 2007:248). Qualitative research method is employed because we want to know the representation of French society in *Les Misérables* novel by Victor Hugo in order to analyze the oppressed woman character in the novel.

"Material object is the field object of the research and formal object is the object that is seen by the particular point of view" (Faruk, 2012:23). In this research the material object is the novel entitled *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo (1862). By this statement, the formal object used is the theory of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1953); *Western Civilization: Their History and Their Culture* by Edward McNails Burns (1958); *Simone de Beauvoir* by Claudia Card (2003); and *Simone de Beauvoir* by Ursula Tidd (2004). The other sources are a thesis by Khoirudin (2005) entitled "A study of The Main Character Leading to The Social Conflict in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* " and a dissertation by Badja Fariza (2011) entitled "The Position of Women in Thomas Hardy's Poetry" that we use as the previous researches. The additional data that we found from internet Artikel Ilmiah Mahasiswa 2015

which are available in the references are also used to consolidate the discussion in this thesis.

The whole important data which are taken from the novel and social condition at that time are categorized in order to understand the novel better. Those data are written in the discussion as quotations to strengthen the explanation. It is also used as a proof of the study. The quotations can be from direct quotation which is came from the experts about the condition of the women workers in the nineteenth century in France and the quotations taken from *Les Misérables* novel itself, about the action and condition of the characters or society. Based on the explanation before, this research uses Simone de Beauvoir's theory of woman's oppressions written in her book *The Second Sex* (1953), to process the collected data in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. The data which are used is only those which have significance to the problems to discuss and to get the specific or detailed explanation in the discussion.

The collected data above are analyzed by using inductive method. The inductive method is the process of reasoning that is applied to conclude the subject matter. "It means that the discussion goes from particular to a whole group of ideas, phenomena, or situations" (Young, 1982:10).

Thus, for the beginning, this research analyzes the novel and concerns with the proletarian woman's oppressions analysis of *Les Misérables*. Woman's oppressions theory from Simone de Beauvoir (1953) is used as a framework, specifically the social factors of

woman's oppressions. It makes the general description to analyze it. This research is not only explain the idea of Simone de Beauvoir's woman's oppressions, but also how the literary work can represent the society in the particular time. The particular data of the novel are the life journey of Fantine and the social condition of France in the nineteenth century.

Beauvoir's perspective on the relation between literary work and social life is used to discuss how Beauvoir argues about it. The creation of literary work is related to the surrounding life of people there. It can be defined as a historical record of human behaviour. She agrees to link human behaviour in the particular time with the literary works in order to give the information to the people in the future.

Result

The result of this research shows that *Les Misérables* represents the proletarian French woman's oppressions in the nineteenth century. Victor Hugo wants to protest the executive government that the common people are the victims of the arbitrarily government through *Les Misérables*.

Discussion

This discussion is divided into three parts. The discussion begins from the first subchapter which tries to map the representation of proletarian French woman's oppressions in the novel in the particular condition. We also analyze the representation of French society in the nineteenth century which is

composed in the second subchapter. In the third subchapter, we explain the ideological positions of the author.

Based on the meaning of the literal word, woman's oppressions mean an adult female who is ruled or treated in a continually cruel or harsh way. In our opinion, woman's oppressions are condition in which woman is treated differently and unnaturally than man in every aspects of life, such as sexual despising, giving a low wage to the woman worker, etc.

The oppression that is experienced by the women characters in *Les Misérables* come from the physical condition, the social status in society, and also their low education. In *Les Misérables*, the character that gets many kinds of oppression is Fantine. She is a young beautiful girl who lives in the miserable condition since she was child to the end of her life. She is an orphan who never knows where her parents live.

The representation of proletarian French woman's oppressions in the novel happens in the three cases: in love relationship, between the bourgeois and the proletarian class, and in the work place. Below is the discussions of three woman's oppressions cases. The young women named Fantine, Favourite, Dahlia, and Zephine have the lovers who are the university students. The couples are Fantine and Felix Tholomyes, Dahlia and Listolier, Favourite and Blachevelle, and the last is Zephine and Fameuil. Their life conditions are widely different in finance or family background point of view. Fantine and friends depend their life on the four men.

According to Simone de Beauvoir's perspective about woman's oppressions written in her book *The Second Sex*, we opine that the oppression toward Fantine is caused by the biological factor of her body (biology data). Her illegal pregnancy makes society ignore her, then it would be a psychological pressure toward Fantine's individual emotion.

Related to the real social condition of France at that time, Beauvoir (1956:132) said, "Napoleon Bounaparte forbade the investigation of paternity, he set stern condition for the unwed mother and natural child". In addition, Hugo also writes about the political condition in 1817. Below is the political description in the novel:

".....What separated two men more than an abyss was to say, the regicides, or to say the voters; to say the enemies, or to say the allies; to say Napoleon, or to say Buonaparte. All sensible people were agreed that the era of revolution had been closed forever by King Louis XVIII., surnamed The Immortal Author of the Charter."

(Hugo, 1862: 132)

From the analysis above, there is an oppression in Fantine and friends' love relationship from men toward women. The oppression toward Fantine and friends are not only caused by the Felix Tholomyes and friends but also caused by the women's coquetry toward men.

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The second kind of woman's oppressions in the novel is the oppression between the bourgeois and the proletarian class. The strict difference between bourgeois and the proletarian is about their daily life style. By having a lot of money, the bourgeois' life style is higher than the proletarian and disposed to be consumptive. The bourgeois becomes arrogant toward the proletarian and treats them arbitrarily. In contrast, the proletarian's life is miserable and oppressed because of their limited money. Their life is depended on the capital owner, the bourgeois. This situation makes an imbalance society.

In this section, we discuss Fantine's being oppressed by The Thernadiers family, the bourgeois class and inn-keeper at Montfermeil. Fantine and The Thernadiers family make an agreement about the month paid of keeping Cossette there first. Here is the conversation between Fantine and The Thernadiers family:

"...Will you keep my child for me?"

"I must see about it," replied the Thenardier.

"I will give you six francs a month."

Here a man's voice called from the depths of the cook-shop: "Not for less than seven francs. And six months paid in advance."

"Six times seven makes forty-two," said the Thenardier.

"I will give it," said the mother.

"And fifteen francs in addition for preliminary

expenses," added the man's voice.

"Total, fifty-seven francs," said Madame Thenardier.

And she hummed vaguely, with these figures: "It must be, said a warrior."

"I will pay it," said the mother. "I have eighty francs. I shall have enough left to reach the country, by travelling on foot. I shall earn money there, and as soon as I have a little I will return for my darling."

(Hugo, 1862: 170-171)

Through the conversation above, The Thenardiens family are the materialistic people. They are the lower middle class who oppress the proletarian people greedily in order to get a lot of money. Mr. Thenardier says that he will use the money to pay the credits and take the profit on the existence of Cossette in the family. If The Thenardiens family are the higher middle class people, they will not take a chance about the existence of Fantine and Cossette as a way to get a lot of money.

The bad moral of The Thenardiens family is caused by the social condition after the French Revolution. The middle class society in the novel has the immoral behavior because they want to have a lot of money. The Thenardiens Family never think how Fantine condition in M. Sur M but only think how to ask much money. In reality, the middle class society has a good job or business. In contrast, the middle class characters in the novel takes a chance to get a lot of

money from the bourgeois rather than doing a good business.

The oppression toward woman can happen everywhere including in the work place even though all of there are women. In this section, we discuss the oppression in the work place. The subject of woman's oppressions is not only a man but also a woman.

The subordination of woman makes them to be the object of oppression. Fantine as an uneducated woman, gets the impact of it to her life from she was child to adult. One case, Fantine cannot read and write except sign her name. It damages her life. When Madame Victornien, Fantine's friend in the work place, finds out the secret life of Fantine about her having a child at Montfermeil, she finds the secret life of Fantine from a public writer. If Fantine can write by her own, she does not spend her money twice a month to the public writer to write the letter to The Thenardiens family. Furthermore, Madame Victornien will never find Fantine's secret about her lovely daughter at Montfermeil. The debility of woman in science makes her goes back one step than man. Furthermore, the degeneration of morals society can damage another people. Madame Victornien character is the representation of degeneration of woman moral which damages another woman named Fantine. Damage means making someone broken or out of order. The lack of science of Fantine, especially writing and reading, makes her life miserable and being an object of oppression by another people.

After we discuss the proletarian French woman's oppressions portrayed in the novel, here we

discuss the representation of French society in the nineteenth century. The background of the novel begins from 1815 to 1832, which Hugo's life begins to touch down the political world in France.

“1815 is marked as the year of the discomfiture of Napoleon's army in Waterloo. They opposed the alliance of England's army and another European states. The discomfiture of Napoleon ended the era of The First Republic (1792-1804), and back to The Kingdom Era under the reign of Louis XVI.”

(Esfand, 2012:xi)

This era was called as The Restorian Bourbon. In the restoration era, the church had a big role in France political world eventhough the church did not has any absolute powers like before. The Restorian Bourbon was the era when the revolution struggler and the common people were prevented for a while, but one day they inspired the social fire from 1830 to 1832 to fight the monarch.

The woman condition in France in the nineteenth century was still divided by the social classes between the proletarian and the bourgeois class. Women were able to obtain employment as seamstresses, domestic servants, and factory workers.

The power of woman was needed in some kinds of working. In the Industrial Revolution, the woman power had a lot of contribution to the economic rotation along the nineteenth century. The freedom of

working indoor or even outdoor had been get by the woman such as being a shop keeper, home tailor, home servant, factory labor, and others. This was a good chance for woman to use their power to get profit financially. Society had accepted them in the public domain. But this condition could not totally solve the problem of woman's oppressions, especially the woman proletarian classes. The freedom of working toward woman was used to exploit the woman power by the man.

“At the beginning of the nineteenth century woman was more shamefully exploited than were male workers. Labour at home constituted what the English called the ‘sweating system’; in spite of constant toil, the working-woman did not earn enough to satisfy her needs. Jules Simon in *L'Ouvriere* and even the conservative Leroy-Beaulieu in *LeTravail des Femmes au XIX*, published in 1873, denounced odious abuses; the latter says that more than two hundred thousand women workers in France earned less than fifty centimes a day.”

(Beauvoir, 1953:135)

The explanatin above shows the miserable condition of the woman worker in France in the nineteenth century is. This is a scary fact of woman condition in the nineteenth century. Unfortunately, the woman was unconciouss to the matter that they

get. The working woman still became the pride and prestige to get the acknowledgment of the society as a human. In the middle of century, the woman worker began to be united in order to get the equality as the worker and to disappear the woman's oppressions. The feminist woman was struggling their political rights through the writings and the feminism movements. The movement of the association was so late as the data below: "In 1905, there were 69.405 women out of 781.392 unionized workers; in 1908 88.906 out of 957.120; in 1912, 92.336 out of 1.064.413 (Beauvoir, 1949: 136)". One of the factors of this was a lack of solidarity and collective consciousness of the woman worker to face the opening new chances for them. As the result, the female labour was regulated slowly by the government. Beauvoir (1953:137) said that only in 1874, when the campagne under the empire, there were only two provisions related to the woman: 1. For the immature woman: no time for working in the night; on Saturday, Sunday and another holiday, they must be free of working; and their time of working was not more that 12 hours a day. 2. For the over twenty years old woman: nothing but to forbid the woman working underground in mines and quarries.

In France at that time, there was the beginning of many emerging industrial plants requiring women workers to complete the production work. Some companies prefer to employ women than men because women are more thorough in their work and their salary is lower than men. This course can save the production costs of the company

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itself. While the women at that time find the social recognition by working outside of the house although they get a very low salary (Beauvoir, 1953:134).

Nineteenth century was a period when women get the freedom to express their life. Women could go out of house to earn money from the factory, doing a business, and so on. "It is important to emphasize the fact that throughout the Old Regime it was the women of the working classes who as a sex enjoyed most independence" (Beauvoir, 1953: 131). The quotation above explains that along the Old Regime, women get freedom to work in the outside or inside without any particular rules. It means women want to get freedom to express and earn money for their own living. Women also want to get the equality to the men in the work. Women of the lower class earn money by working at the factory to get month paid for their living.

Along the Old Regime, the women working class can do it freely without any particular rules. But in other hand, this independency of women does not provide a solution toward the social problems in France.

Beauvoir explains that women did not get the freedom in whole aspects. There were some aspects of life that oppress them especially women in the country who had an important role in a family.

Madame Victurnien is a figure who represents how the behavior of women workers in France is. Madame Victurnien looks for the secret life of Fantine in fact she was willing to spend some money to satisfy their curiosity of the private life of others. This phenomenon is an indicator that

women workers are not respectful to fellow women. Especially if one of them have an overbalance among them, such as Fantine who is the most beautiful woman among other workers. These are categorized as the oppression toward women workers. Indeed, there are several factors that led to the investigation of Madame Victornien toward Fantine's personal life. In general, the habits of the proletarian class, especially the women, can be represented to Madame Victornien character. The most vicious form of repression was after Madame Victornien know about Fantine's personal life, which was considered taboo and negative at that time. She reports it to the head of her company to immediately dismiss Fantine.

Fantine's friends in the work place want to discharge Fantine from the work place. After knowing the existence of an illegitimate child of Fantine, Madame Victornien is successful to do that, Fantine is discharged from the work place without knowing of M. Madeleine. After the discharging of Fantine because of her friends, once more she gets the oppression psychologically. She feels shameful to go out of home. The quotation below shows Fantine's condition that is oppressed by society.

“When she was in the street, she divined that people turned round behind her, and pointed at her; every one stared at her and no one greeted her; the cold and bitter scorn of the passers-by penetrated her very flesh and soul like a north wind. It seems as though

an unfortunate woman were utterly bare beneath the sarcasm and the curiosity of all in small towns.”

(Hugo, 1862: 205)

Fantine, as a woman worker character in the novel, is exploited by the employers and get the low paid. Victor Hugo creates Fantine character in the novel which has the particular goal toward the readers. By analyzing it, we conclude that through Fantine character, Hugo wants to tell that the miserable condition of women workers in the nineteenth century in France.

After discussing the representation above, here we discuss the ideological positions of the author in French society. Discussing the ideological, the biography of the writer is necessary to know in order to understand the life background of the writer. Victor Hugo, as a writer of *Les Misérables*, is a high class man in society at that time. He did not only a writer of the literary work, but also he was a member of National Assembly in France. As the member of National Assembly, he knew and near to the miserable life of common people like he wrote in his novel. In addition, his father had role in government who was being a Napoleon's army. For those, Hugo had a wide knowledge about how the political condition in France at that time.

Hugo also had a great attention to the development of woman's emancipation. His thought was realized into his literary work. As Beauvoir (1953:134) said, “the lofty notion of woman the regenerating influence persisted through the nineteenth

century and appears in Victor Hugo". Victor Hugo realized his lofty notion of woman in *Les Misérables* through some characters, they are Fantine, The Thernadiers Family, Madame Victurnien, and Jean Valjean.

Firstly, Fantine is being a victim of the oppression by French society. Fantine is a parentless girl who tries to find the prosperity of life in Paris by working at factory. When she has an illegitimate child from her bourgeois boyfriend, she is ignored by society. Her oppressed condition makes her never feels happy to the death because of her condition that is being a proletarian class. Secondly, The Thernadiers family describe the voracity of the lower middle class people toward the proletarian class. The Thernadiers family oppress Fantine cruelly. The Thernadiers family give a lied to Fantine that Cossette is ill then The Thernadiers family ask her a lot of money. This is a kind of oppression that is get by a woman character in the novel. Thirdly, Madame Victurnien is a woman worker of a factory in M. Sur M. city. She is described as a woman character who is jealous to the physical beauty of Fantine. Her jealousy aims to dismiss Fantine from the work place by break in the secret life of Fantine that she has an illegitimate child. This is a representation of a bad behaviour of women worker in France. Forthly, the injustice law is represented by Jean Valjean character who is jailed for nineteen years. This character represents the proletarian character that is being a victim of the injustice law and the complicated of the political system.

Through the discussion above, the ideology of the author is criticizing the government about the social condition including woman's oppressions. *Les Misérables* comes to break the mystery that happens to the common people life in France at that time. The conclusion is Hugo wants to protest the executive government that the common people are the victims of the arbitrarily government through *Les Misérables*.

Conclusion

Les Misérables is one of Victor Hugo's masterpiece literary works. Through reading this novel the readers can know what happened in France in the nineteenth century. This novel represents the social condition of the lower class society especially in Paris. Victor Hugo portrayed the way of life of women worker in Paris and how the women were oppressed by society and political condition well.

In the first part of fourth chapter, we discussed how the representation proletarian French woman's oppression in love relationship, the oppression of the borgeouis toward the proletarian class, and in the work place are. According to the analysis, we conclude that the representation of woman's oppressions above can be seen in Fantine character mainly. It begins from Felix Tholomyes' leaving from Fantine's life when she is pregnant an illegitimate child. Then, Fantine gets the oppression from The Thernadiers family who always asks her a lot of money by giving a lie about Cossette's condition. The last is Fantine's miserable life which is added by her friends in the work place

who treat her badly. Their aim is to dismiss Fantine from the work place because their jealousy of Fantine's physical beauty.

In the second discussion, we divide the discussion into two parts. Those are the social context of the novel and the condition of woman worker. This novel was written after the France Revolution, the second three decades of the nineteenth century. The social context at that time, especially the broken political condition, gives a big influence to Victor Hugo's writing. The society's perspective toward woman position also gives the impact to woman's life. The given chance toward woman to participate in social life did not solve the problem of woman's oppressions at that time. Woman still experienced the miserable life in the work place and society. Furthermore, the unconscious woman to be united increased the miserable life of woman worker at that time.

The last discussion is the ideological position of the author in society. *Les Misérables* is a literary work that is aimed to criticize the social condition of people. Victor Hugo tells the miserable life of common people and how woman is oppressed by society. This is a kind of good work to protest the executive government through literary work.

Finally, this thesis shows how woman's oppressions in France in the nineteenth century is represented by Victor Hugo through his novel, *Les Misérables*. The oppression towards woman in France in the nineteenth century is caused by the political condition of France, economical condition of the women themselves, and the social class in society.

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