

Feminist Character Irene Adler in Sherlock Holmes: A Scandal in Bohemia

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Abstrak – *Isu feminisme telah menjadi topik yang diperbincangkan selama bertahun-tahun yang mentransformasi beberapa bidang termasuk dunia sastra. Dengan adanya isu feminis di dunia sastra membuat banyak karya sastra yang mulai memunculkan karakter feminis. Salah satunya karya sastra dari Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, A Scandal in Bohemia yang memiliki karakter feminis, Irene Adler. Irene Adler merupakan tokoh sentral yang menarik dari kisah klasik Sherlock Holmes ini. Dikenal dengan kecerdasan dan kemandiriannya, Adler adalah karakter feminis dalam narasi detektif. Karakter Irene Adler menantang gagasan yang ada tentang perempuan dalam literatur pada saat itu. Penulis menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan kritik sastra feminis. Setelah menganalisis cerita A Scandal in Bohemia, penulis menemukan tujuh karakter Irene Adler yang merepresentasikan karakter feminis, yaitu berkemauan keras, tegas, mandiri, kebebasan berekspresi, percaya diri, kecerdasan strategis, dan memiliki kemampuan untuk menantang dan mengubah stereotip dan pandangan laki-laki terhadap perempuan. Implikasi dari penelitian ini adalah agar pembaca dapat memiliki pemahaman yang lebih baik mengenai bagaimana karakter feminis berkontribusi dalam pengembangan plot dan tema dalam karya sastra atau media tertentu.*

Kata Kunci: Irene Adler, Karakter Feminis, Kritik Sastra Feminis.

Abstract - The issue of feminism has been a topic of discussion for many years, transforming several fields, including literature. As feminist issues have emerged, many literary works have begun to portray feminist characteristics. One of them is Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *A Scandal in Bohemia*, which has the feminist character of Irene Adler. Irene Adler is an interesting central character in this classic Sherlock Holmes story. Sherlock Holmes. Known for her intelligence and independence, Adler is feminist in the detective narrative. Irene Adler's character challenges existing ideas about women in literature at the time. The author used a qualitative method with a feminist literary criticism approach based on the theory of modern feminism, which states that everyone has the right to determine their own path of life, regardless of the influence of their environment. After analyzing the story of *A Scandal in Bohemia*, the author found seven characters of Irene Adler that represent feminist characters, such as strong-willed, assertive, independent, freedom of expression, self-confidence, strategic intelligence, and the ability to challenge and change stereotypes and male views of women. The implication of this research is that readers can gain a better understanding of how feminist characters contribute to the development of plots and themes in certain literary works or media.

Key words: Irene Adler, Feminist Characters, Feminist Literary Criticism.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, the issue of feminism has been a topic of discussion that has been one of the most influential forces behind many social, cultural, and political movements. Humm (2015) stated that feminism issue also has transformed education, publishing, and the media as well as everyday language. Some people who speak out about feminist issues are silenced by the state and society around them, so they prefer to voice these issues in writing (Istifadah & Rohmana, 2022). Focus of feminist theory remains on the basic concept that since the beginning of human civilization, the literary world has been dominated by male writers and women's writing has been excluded from the main of culture and literature. Based on research conducted by Arizah (2020), it is stated that women are often able to struggle to achieve gender equality because women are often used as literary flowers that seem to push women.

Similarly, literary studies have touched on feminist themes by creating feminist characters. The portrayal of feminist characters has evolved over time, reflecting changing attitudes towards gender roles and equality. Feminist characters have become important figures in various forms of media, such as in works of literature and films that represent the struggles and triumphs of women in a patriarchal society. Initially, feminist criticism



started from feminists' desire to examine past works of literature to expose the image of women in the works of male writers. Generally, the works of the past presented women only as creatures that could be trivialized by the dominant patriarchal tradition (Kurniawati, 2020). However, there are also literary works from male authors who write stories with feminist female characters, such as Eowyn in "The Lord of the Rings" and Irene Adler in "Sherlock Holmes".

One of the most popular feminist characters is in the literary works written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Scandal in Bohemia*. The literary work of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Scandal in Bohemia* has captured the attention of readers for many years. The literary work 'A Scandal in Bohemia' presents one memorable feminist character to readers, Irene Adler. Despite only appearing in one story, Irene Adler has been a prominent character throughout Conan Doyle's literary work (Romero, 2019). "A Scandal in Bohemia" is a short story by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, featuring the famous detective Sherlock Holmes. This literary work tells the story of Sherlock Holmes being visited by the King of Bohemia, The Grand Duke of Cassel-Felstein. The King of Bohemia asks Sherlock Holmes for a favor to keep an eye on Irene Adler and take a photograph of her. In the past, Irene Adler was a woman who had been in a relationship with the King of Bohemia and had been photographed together.

However, the photo is very dangerous for the King who is now engaged to a princess. He feared that the photos could jeopardize his marriage. Sherlock Holmes then takes over the case and devises a plan to retrieve the photos from Irene Adler. However, in the process of Sherlock Holmes carrying out his plan, Adler manages to trick him with her brilliant idea. The story ends with Holmes admiring Adler's intelligence and integrity. This story is notable for introducing the character of Irene Adler, who is one of the most famous female characters in the Sherlock Holmes series, despite only appearing in one story. Irene Adler is an interesting central character of this classic Sherlock Holmes story. Known for her intelligence and independence, Adler is a feminist character in the detective narrative. The character of Irene Adler challenged existing ideas about women in literature at the time. Based on the opinion of Raina (2017), women at that time, in fact, were demeaned and not given the confidence to carry out social roles in the public or private sectors that would improve their economic conditions. In addition, women were discouraged from pursuing literary ambitions due to the patriarchal structure of society, a belief in the natural superiority of men.

To fill the gap between men and women, Virginia Woolf's book, *A Room of One's Own* (1929), with the theme 'Women and Fiction in 1928' laid the foundation for feminist criticism. The book discusses the views and attitudes of society that demean women's inferiority aimed at the oppression of women. She also argues that artistic genius is not a miraculous gift that one is born with. Rather, it flourishes in educated and upper-class society when two criteria are met, the first of which is having a space of one's own that symbolizes an independent space for women as individuals. The second is financial independence. When these two criteria are met, women will excel in the social field and literary works.

These criteria are in line with Irene Adler's feminist, independent, and financially independent character. Therefore, the researchers wanted to know more about Irene Adler's character and examine Irene Adler's actions, decisions, and interactions with other characters. By examining Irene Adler's character using feminist literary criticism based on the theory of modern feminism, we aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of her character and seek to contribute to the wider issue of feminist literary criticism. This study is differed from the previous studies because this study described each of Irene Adler's characters that are categorized as feminist characters. Therefore, this article will explore the representation of feminist character, Irene Adler, and its contribution to the development of plot on 'Sherlock Holmes: A Scandal in Bohemia'.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The design of this research is a descriptive qualitative design. This method is to find out the representation of feminist characters in *Sherlock Holmes: A Scandal in Bohemia*, Irene Adler. The researchers deal with a process of analyzing data display and finally interpreting the result of the analysis. Moreover, this design used feminism theory by using the approach of feminist literary criticism.

In general, feminist literary criticism is concerned with how ideology and social practices shape literary texts. Feminist literary criticism focuses on the literary topics of language, discourse, and textuality. Feminist literary critics argue that a reading of gender requires a broader cultural politics of race, gender, and other differences (Humm, 2015). Moreover, the theory of modern feminism states that everyone has the right to determine their own path of life regardless of the influence of their environment. (Megawangi, 1996).

Data required in this research are sentences in paragraphs that describe the feminist characters and its contribution to the development of plot on Conan Doyle's 'Sherlock Holmes: A Scandal in Bohemia'. The data is presented in written text. The primary source of data in this research that will be discussed by researchers was a literary work by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle entitled Sherlock Holmes: A Scandal in Bohemia.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After analyzing the literary work Sherlock Holmes: A Scandal in Bohemia by Conan Doyle, it was found that the character of Irene Adler represents a feminist character throughout the story. The researcher found several characters in Irene Adler that can be called feminist characters by some experts. Some of the characters are strong-willed, resolute, independent, freedom of expression, self-reliance, strategic intelligence, and have the ability to challenge and change stereotypes. These characters can be seen through the quotes from the characters and narratives that the researcher will describe below.

1. Strong-willed

The story of 'A Scandal in Bohemia' revolves around Sherlock Holmes who is asked by the King of Bohemia to retrieve a photo between the king and a woman named Irene Adler. The king is worried that the photo could reveal his past secret relationship with Adler which could threaten his marriage to a Scandinavian princess. The king had previously tried several times to get the photo from Irene Adler but none of his attempts were successful. Irene Adler still insisted on keeping the photo and would not hand it over to the king. Irene Adler would even threaten to send the photo to the bride-to-be's family, if the king still insisted on taking the photo from Adler. The story portrayed that Irene Adler has a strong-willed character. The quote that can show her character is as follows.

"Threatens to send them the photograph. And she will do it. I know that she will do it. You do not know her, but she has a soul of steel."

From the quote, it shows that Irene Adler not only threatened to send a photo that could threaten the reputation of a king and his marriage, but also confidently stated that she would do it. In the phrase *"I know that she will do it."* It emphasizes the belief that Irene really has the determination and decisiveness to carry out her threat. In the sentence, *"she has soul of steel"* needs to be underlined that the sentence reflects the character or attitude of Irene Adler who is not easily controlled and shaken by people.

Thus, Irene Adler's strong-willed character is reflected in her attitude that still stands firm in the face of pressure or threats, and continues to carry out her actions according to her own will, principles or goals. From the strong-willed character possessed and shown by Irene Adler through the quote, it is in line with Brownmiller's (2013) statement that one of the elements of femininity, where a woman is allowed to have ambition to maintain or do something.

2. Resolute

Irene Adler managed to make the king worry and believe her threat that she would send a photo of the two of them to the king's bride-to-be. Considering Irene's strong determination certainly made the King worried about Irene's resoluteness. This can be seen in the quote said by the King below.

"Didn't I tell you how quick and decisive she is?" (Page 13).

The King of Bohemia also described that Irene Adler not only had a beautiful appearance, but she also had a character that could compare to men. This statement is supported by the following quote from the King.

"She has the face of the most beautiful of women, and the mind of the most resolute of men. Rather than I should marry another woman, there are no lengths to which she would not go—none." (Page 6).

From the quote delivered by the king above, it shows that Irene Adler has a resolute character that even exceeds a man. Irene Adler's resolute character shows that she has one of the feminist characteristics that a woman does not have to behave or act politely and meekly, not daring to behave as desired like flowing water (Brownmiller, 2013). According to Salsabila et al. (2019), some literature describes female characters as weak, submissive, emotional, and irrational. Meanwhile, male characters in the literature are described as stronger, persistent, rational, and resolute than women. If literature continues to represent women and men like this, then it signifies gender inequality. However, in contrast to Irene Adler's character portrayed in Sherlock Holmes: A Scandal in

Bohemia. Adler is portrayed as a resolute feminist who is as strong as a man.

3. Independent woman

Irene Adler's character as an independent woman makes the storyline more interesting. Throughout the story, Irene Adler is portrayed as an independent woman who can support herself through her ability to sing. In addition, singing is one of Irene Adler's ways of expressing herself. It showed in the quote below on page 8.

"She lives quietly, sings at concerts, drives out at five every day, and returns at seven sharp for dinner."

According to Yaslinar (2015), a person can be said to be independent when he is able to overcome obstacles, have initiative and confidence in doing something without the help of others. With her singing skills, Irene Adler has her own income. This allows her to fulfill her own needs and have freedom of expression without the help of others. Irene Adler's character, who is independent in the economic or financial aspect, is related with Zhang's (1999) statement that one aspect of feminism that rejects the inequality and limitations of women to economic resources.

Even though, according to conventional Victorian assumptions, Irene as an opera artist would be labeled as an immoral woman who seeks social or financial gain through unethical sexual means; a classification that highlights the "borderline position" between gender and society (Roy and Putatunda, 2021). However, for Irene Adler, her singing skills, and the income she generates from her performances allow her to live a life that is not solely determined by the needs of others, such as her husband or society's expectations.

Independence is also related to self-expression. Irene's ability to sing and earn her own income enables her to pursue her passion for music, rather than being restricted by the traditional roles and expectations placed upon women in her time. This self-expression is an essential aspect of her character and contributes to her overall development as a person.

4. Freedom of expression

Irene Adler's freedom of expression is another aspect of her character that contributes to her empowerment. That character can be found in the story dialog on page 12.

"But, you know, I have been trained as an actress myself. Male costume is nothing new to me. I often take advantage of the freedom which it gives".

This statement highlights her ability to embody different characters and explore diverse styles. This freedom of expression can contribute to a sense of empowerment and creativity. Brownmiller (2013) in her book said that there is an assumption that it is not feminine to express strong opinions especially about something that is not controversial. However, Brownmiller herself was against this assumption because she believed that one of the feminist aspects is that a person can express themselves.

Moreover, Adler's transformative ability to change form and cross gender boundaries signifies her agency and control over her own body and identity. Adler has a feminist character in that she acts not for others, but on her own behalf and in her own sake (Primorac, 2013).

5. Self-reliance

Not only was Irene Adler persistent and strong-willed, she was also able to protect herself. She cleverly kept a picture of her and the King of Bohemia. Because it could be a guarantee or a weapon that would make her feel safe. Adler would try to keep the photo and show that she was not weak and could be overpowered by men. This is shown in the quote on page 13 as follows.

"I keep it only to safeguard myself, and to preserve a weapon which will always secure me from any steps which he might take in the future."

That quote from Irene Adler reflects a sense of self-reliance and empowerment. In a feminist context, this character could be associated with someone who has strong self-awareness and seeks to protect themselves in power dynamics, possibly related to gender or authority. This portrayal of self-reliance reflects empowering qualities and resilience associated with feminist thinking. It challenges the traditional notion that femininity is weak or inferior, and instead, emphasizes the character's unique strengths and qualities.

The character in the quote, Irene Adler, from the story "A Scandal in Bohemia," is often cited as a prime example of a strong, self-reliant female character. Described as persistent, charismatic, and independent, Adler is portrayed as someone who is not afraid to challenge the status quo and assert her agency. She outsmarts the renowned detective Sherlock Holmes, showcasing her intelligence and resourcefulness. This portrayal of Adler as a self-reliant woman who takes proactive measures to protect herself aligns with feminist ideals of autonomy and self-determination.

Tandon (2016) discussed the importance of self-reliance in the context of feminist theory. The article argues that self-reliance is a crucial aspect of women's empowerment, as it allows individuals to assert their independence and resist oppressive power structures. The author emphasizes that self-reliance should not be viewed as an individualistic pursuit, but rather as a collective effort to challenge gender-based inequalities and create a more equitable society.

The character of Irene Adler has been the subject of analysis and interpretation in feminist literature. Some critics have lauded Adler as a symbol of female agency and resistance, while others have criticized the character's portrayal as ultimately being dependent on male assistance.

6. Strategic intelligence

Throughout the story, Irene Adler is portrayed as smart and strategic. Irene Adler could realize that she was being followed and tricked by the amazing detective, Sherlock Holmes. She immediately strategized to trick Sherlock Holmes and the King of Bohemia. Adler's plan was so neat and well-thought-out that he was able to deceive and trick Sherlock and the King. In fact, Adler also disguised and dressed up as a man and then met Sherlock Holmes and deceived him.

Not only because of her persistence, strong will, and independence, but also because of her intelligence in strategizing, the kingdom of Bohemia was threatened. Adler's strategic tricks and plans were able to defeat the plans of the greatest detective of all time, Sherlock Holmes. This is evidenced by the narrative of Sherlock Holmes' story: A Scandal in Bohemia page 13.

"And that was how a great scandal threatened to affect the kingdom of Bohemia, and how the best plans of Mr. Sherlock Holmes were beaten by a woman's wit."

The quote highlights the strategic intelligence and wit of Irene Adler, a woman who outwits the renowned detective Sherlock Holmes. This theme of strategic intelligence is significant in the context of feminism, as it challenges traditional gender stereotypes and underscores the capacity of women to excel in strategic thinking and decision-making.

Critics have described Adler's portrayal in Sherlock Holmes: A Scandal in Bohemia as a strong female character who is as smart as the smartest man (Taylor, 2015). In the story, Irene Adler uses her intelligence, wit, and foresight to protect herself and her actions, ultimately defeating Sherlock Holmes and the King of Bohemia. This portrayal of a woman as a formidable and strategic thinker subverts the conventional narrative of women as passive or intellectually inferior. From a feminist perspective, the character of Irene Adler serves as a powerful symbol of female agency and capability, defying the limitations imposed by a male-dominated society.

Romero (2019) discussed the character of Irene Adler and her significance in the context of gender representation. The article emphasized that Irene Adler's intelligence and ability to outsmart Sherlock Holmes challenge traditional gender roles and contribute to a more nuanced and empowering portrayal of women in literature. This analysis underscores the feminist implications of Adler's character, highlighting the subversive nature of her strategic intelligence in a male-centric narrative. Irene Adler's ability to outwit Sherlock Holmes, a symbol of male intellect and rationality, serves as a compelling example of female empowerment and subversion of patriarchal norms.

7. Have the ability to challenge and change stereotypes

Irene Adler's various characters mentioned above, such as strong-willed, resolute, independent, freedom of expression, self-reliance, strategic intelligence, also influence the development of the plot of Sherlock Holmes: A Scandal in Bohemia as well as influencing the perception of other characters. After the King of Bohemia is fooled by Irene Adler's brilliant plan, he sees Adler as a woman who is as admirable and charismatic as a queen, which can be seen in the following quotes.

“‘What a woman—oh, what a woman!’ cried the King of Bohemia, when we had all three read this epistle. ‘Would she not have made an admirable queen?’”

“Well! I wish she had been of my own station! What a queen she would have made!”

In addition, Irene Adler's intelligence and persistence in making strategic plans also changed Sherlock Holmes' perception of women. Irene Adler's character in this story was able to change gender-related stereotypes, which is shown in the following quote on page 13.

“He [Sherlock] used to make merry over the cleverness of women, but I have not heard him do it of late. And when he speaks of Irene Adler, or when he refers to her photograph, it is always under the honourable title of the woman.”

That quote exemplifies the ability to challenge and change stereotypes, particularly those related to gender. The reference to Irene Adler, a character known for her intelligence and wit, suggests a shift in Sherlock's perception of women. This shift indicates a recognition of women's capabilities and a departure from the traditional stereotypes that undermine their intelligence and agency. The ability to challenge and change stereotypes is a crucial aspect of the ongoing struggle for gender equality. The portrayal of a strong and resilient female character, such as Irene Adler, challenges the conventional expectations and views that have historically hindered women.

Franks (2022) discusses the gendered nature of power and the particularities of women's representation in society. The article emphasizes the importance of challenging and changing stereotypes that perpetuate androcentric bias, which often results in unequal outcomes for women. The author argued that feminist activism should seek to create a more inclusive and diverse understanding of gender roles, in which women are recognized for their intelligence, agency, and resilience.

Researchers have mentioned seven Irene Adler characters that represent feminist characters that also influence the development of the storyline in *Sherlock Holmes: A Scandal in Bohemia*. The implication of this research is that readers can have a better understanding of how feminist characters contribute to the development of plots and themes in certain literary works or media. Future research is expected to compare the representation of Irene Adler with female characters in other literary works or media to provide broader insights, especially about the depiction of feminist characters.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of research analyzed using qualitative methods and the feminist literary criticism approach, researchers found several characters of Irene Adler in *Sherlock Holmes: A Scandal in Bohemia* that represented feminist characters. Some of these characteristics are strong-willed, resolute, independent, freedom of expression, self-reliance, and strategic intelligence, and have the ability to challenge and change stereotypes. Through her feminist character, Irene Adler challenged the social and gender norms of the time in terms of the freedom to express herself. She has a stable income and economy while passionately pursuing her passion as a singer. Her life was stable and she did not want to be restricted by the traditional roles and expectations of women at the time.

The characters possessed by Irene Adler are in accordance with the characters possessed by a feminist. Irene Adler's feminist character can be seen in several narrations and dialogues throughout the story. From the beginning, Irene Adler's character has been feminist, as shown in her strong will to send a photo to the Bohemian king's bride-to-be to threaten the king. Although the king repeatedly tried to take the photo, Adler remained steadfast and tried to keep it as best as she could. When Adler found out that Sherlock Holmes was spying on her, she also planned to trick Holmes back with her clever ideas and strategies. She is also an independent woman who is not afraid of losing or expressing herself. Therefore, it is Irene Adler's characters that can change Holmes' stereotypes and views on women.

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