Cinderella Complex in Elizabeth Gilbert’s Eat Pray Love

Oleh
Nungki Heriyati, S.S., M.A.

Abstract

This paper attempts to analyze women’s hidden fear of independence as reflected in Elizabeth Gilbert’s Eat Pray Love. Elizabeth Gilbert is strong-willed and self-determined woman, but in her helpless situation, she still needs others- a man- to help her out of problem.

The analysis uses feminist theory developed by Colette Dowling, Cinderella Complex. The idea of Cinderella Complex is based on the old myth of helpless woman that needs a man to safe her. This complex is named after the fairy tale, Cinderella. Although she does exhibit independence but the one who rescue her comes from an outside force, a prince-a man.

The method used in the paper is descriptive analysis which attempts to elaborate the data comprehensively and objectively. Conclusion will underline some problems regarding the symptoms of Cinderella Complex and exploring how Gilbert overcomes the symptoms.

Abstrak

Paper ini bermaksud untuk menganalisis ketakutan perempuan yang terpendam untuk menjadi mandiri yang terrefleksikan dalam karya Elizabeth Gilbert, Eat Pray Love. Elizabeth Gilbert adalah orang yang teguh dan berpendirian kuat, tapi dalam situasi yang sulit dia masih membutuhkan orang lain- laki-laki- untuk membantunya menyelesaikan masalah.

Analisis ini menggunakan teori feminis yang dikembangkan oleh Collete Dowling, Cinderella Complex. Ide tentang Cinderella Complex berdasarkan pada mitos tentang wanita lemah yang membutuhkan seorang laki-laki untuk menolongnya. Problem ini dinamai berdasarkan cerita Cinderella. Walaupun Cinderella memperlihatkan kemandirian tapi pada akhirnya yang menolongnya
datang dari luar bukan dari dirinya sendiri, yaitu pangeran, dengan kata lain laki-laki.

Metode yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini adalah deskripsi analisis yang akan menjelaskan data - data secara komprehensif dan objektif. Kesimpulan didasarkan pada gejala-gejala Cinderella Complex dan bagaimana Gilbert mengatasi gejala-gejala Cinderella Complex tersebut.

1. Background

Humans being are dependent in their early stage of life. They learn to be independent along with their adolescence. The demand on being independence is getting important when they become teenager, and it is parents and other adult’s responsibility to give guidance for youngster to achieve emotional independence. (Wulansari, 2010: 4) However, many women do not get their emotional fully developed. Their parents and surrounding have prevented them from being independence and stand on their own feet. Their parents do not give their daughter a risk to take responsibility for herself and solve problems by herself because they think that their daughter is too fragile and vulnerable. Thus, physical timidity or hyper-cautiousness, being quietly well-behaved and depending on others for help and support are thought to be natural. This is the reason why women become dependent and helpless which is called Cinderella Complex.

Cinderella complex is a term – first coined by Colette Dowling- to describe women rosy romantic images and ideals that she will be saved by prince charming. It is based on the idea of the female that as the story describes must be beautiful, graceful and polite but cannot be strongly independent. Cinderella has to wait for a prince to rescue her from the evil stepmother.

Nowadays, nearly every girl has been quite familiar with Cinderella since they were born. There are many Cinderella versions. No matter which version people are reading, most people will go into their own fantasy and dream along which caused the —Cinderella Complex to become real. It is true that today with reality we do not believe this tale can really happen; however, the idea of being saved by prince charming has not extinct yet. It is because the way they
were raised, as Colette Dowling underlies “Everything about the way we were raised told us we would be part of someone else-that we would be protected, supported, buoyed up by wedded happiness until the day we died.” (1981:1)

Nowadays, the cultural shift has changed the way women were looked at, thought about, and treated. Women are told to be dependent is wrong that they have to be independent and free. On one hand, women accept this notion happily. Yet, on the other hand, they are too afraid to take in charge of their own responsibility. In fact, women are more educated and have more freedom, but the way they were raised and the society where they live have not changed significantly. Thus, there is a discrepancy in women situation and the cultural expectation to them. Dowling points out, “Not all women suffer the accompanying fear in its acute or phobic state. For most it’s diffuse, amorphous thing, a gradual flaking around the edges.” (1981: 56). Since they are more educated, many see these women to be more independent and self sufficient than their mother was. However, when there is a crisis in their life, they begin to feel of the problem of dependency. This crisis happens when women begin to let other – man- to rule her life and give up her dream.

By the time she reaches marrying age, many an excessively dependent young woman finds the pretence of strength difficult if not impossible to maintain. She may have been a big achiever in adolescence but now she yearns to drop the mask and indulge her dependence. Without being conscious of it she looks for a situation in which she can give up her façade of self-sufficiency and ease back into that warm, cradled state reminiscent of childhood that’s so seductive to women – a home. (Dowling, 1981: 74)

Women cannot avoid the temptation to be taken care by someone in their marrying age. The romantic idea of living peacefully in a beautiful house, rearing her children and serving their husband seems too interesting to resist. Besides, they can avoid the stressful situation in the work force. In contrast to the romantic idea above, they find that household task distressing. They even do not get an appropriate appreciation on what they have done to their family
because the one who has the authority is their husband. Moreover, women do not have their own property - the house, car or anything they have are belong to their husband. 

Cinderella Complex not only touches on the dependency factor, but also focuses more on another problem of unrealistic expectations and resulting disappointment. The dependency issue could come in because the woman is depending on an ideal man to come into her life and make her happy.

The phenomenon of Cinderella Complex also occurs in Elizabeth Gilbert’s Eat Pray Love. The story highlights the searching for self-fulfillment, but during her journey throughout Italy, India and Indonesia, the symptoms of Cinderella Complex clearly showed - feeling unfulfilled, hating for being alone, and depending on others. Thus, it is interesting to analyze the problem of Cinderella Complex in Eat pray Love and to examine how Elizabeth Gilbert overcomes her problem through her journey.

2. Cinderella Complex in Elizabeth Gilbert’s Eat Pray Love

Elizabeth Gilbert has everything a modern American woman is supposed to want-husband, country house and successful career. All of those things do not make her happy and fulfilled. She left all that behind to find the ideal life of her own. In her searching for fulfillment, the symptoms of Cinderella Complex show clearly. The Problems that occur in Gilbert’s life is quite different with what her mother has. Since she gets the benefit of modernization that allows women to get education and compete in the work force, she is not dependent in economic terms.

Gilbert finds that her marriage disappointing; she realizes that her life is guided by the social construction. “but I supposed to want a baby. I was thirty-one years old. My husband and I – who had been together for eight years, married for six – had built our entire life around the common expectation that, after passing the doddering old age of thirty, I would want to settle down and have children (2010: 11)

Actually, she does want to be pregnant and has a child as what the society put out as the ideal of married woman in her thirties. Another striking point that makes her disappointed to her
marriage lies on her unfulfilled expectation to her husband. Dowling asserts that since women were infant we are told that somebody will take care of us and all women need to do is well behave. (Dowling, 1981: 2) Since her husband cannot be a breadwinner of the family, she is the one who become the primary breadwinner in the family. “why did I feel so overwhelmed with duty, tired of being primary breadwinner and the housekeeper and social coordinator, and the dog walker and soon – to the wife and the soon – be mother” (Gilbert, 2010: 13)

The important point that can be highlighted here is that Gilbert is disappointed with her marriage situation. It is based on her reluctant to work double in the work force and at home. She feels overwhelmed with the duty that she thinks not her responsibility - a breadwinner of a family. She still has the idea that her husband should be the one who is responsible for the family expenses. Because of that, her husband does not match with her perfection of a husband should be. Thus, she asked for a divorce.

Gilbert fells devastated by her divorce. In her loneliness, she is waiting to be saved. In fact, she is waiting for the outside force to safe her from her difficult situation. Then, she meets another man, David. Dowling explains that “Because of the way society sets them up, women never again experience the need to develop independence – until some crisis in later life explodes their complacency, showing them how sadly helpless and underdeveloped they’ve allowed themselves to be.” (Dowling,1981: 102). The wish to be saved exists within women, emerging when they least expect, permeating their dreams, and dampening their ambition.

Month passed. My life hung in limbo as I waited to be released, waited to see what terms would be. We living separately (he had moved into our Manhattan apartment), but nothing was resolved. Bill piled up, careers stalled, the house fell into ruin and my husband’s silences were broken only by his occasional communications reminding me what a criminal jerk I was. And then there was David.

Since she separated from her husband, her life becomes messy. Her career stuck because she cannot focus. Then, David comes to her life.
He is like the hero in Gilbert’s love story. He is a romantic figure, and he fulfills her ideal of man in Gilbert’s imagination.

But, oh, we had such a great time together during those early months when he was still my romantic hero and I was still living dream. It was excitement and compatibility like I’d never imagined. We invented our own language. We went on day never imagined. We invented our own language. We went on day trips to the bottom of other things, swam to the bottom of other things, planned the journey across the world we would take together. We had more fun waiting in line together at the department of Motor Vehicles than most couples have their honeymoons. We gave each other the same nickname, so there would be no separation between us. We made goals, vows, promises and dinner together. He read books to be, and did my laundry. (Gilbert, 2010: 23)

The description above shows the perfect relationship that Gilbert really wanted. As the story unfold, She finds that their relationship does not turn into what Gilbert has expected. Actually, she knows that David is her invented figure to fulfill her romantic images and ideals. “He was playing a character I had invented, which is somewhat telling... In desperate in love, we always invent the characters of our partners, demanding that they be what we need of them, and then feeling devastated when they refuse to perform the role we created in the first place” (Gilbert, 2010: 22).

Her notion of perfect man can be seen in Gilbert’s conversation with her mother. She confesses her trauma in seeing her father’s attitude toward her mother; she cannot comprehend why her mother is so submissive to his father’s authority.

What I grew up watching in my household was a mother who would receive her husband’s love and affection whenever he thought to offer it, but would then step aside and take care of herself whenever he drifted off into his own peculiar universe of low-grade oblivious neglect. This is how it looked to me, anyway, taking into account that nobody (and especially not the children) ever knows the secrets of marriage. What I believed I grew up
seeing was a mother who asked nothing of anybody. This was my mom, after all – a woman who had taught herself how to swim as an adolescent, alone in a cold Minnesota lake, with a book she’d borrowed from the local library entitled How to Swim. To my eye, there was nothing this woman could not do on her own (Gilbert, 2010: 108 – 109)

The major point from the above quotation is to show that the situation of her childhood has given a great effect to the development of her wishes of happy marriage should be. She cannot stand to have a husband as her father who is cold or to be in her mother situation who is submissive. In her view, her mother is self-sufficient person, but she shocks in learning that all that she wants in the marriage is the same with her mother wishes. Dowling claims that many young girls do not really know what her mother was. One reason mother remains shadowy is that she is intimidated by a forceful, vivid personality of her husband. Gilbert does not want to live like her parents. Thus, when she finds out that her relationship is in the same situation with what her parents did, she is deeply disappointed. She tries to let it go, but her phobia of being alone, makes her want to reunite to David again

My thoughts keep flying back to my failed marriage, and to all the attendant shame and anger of that event. Worse, I’m again dwelling on David. I’m arguing with him in my mind, I’m mad and lonely and remembering every hurtful thing he ever said or did to me. Plus I can’t stop thinking about all our happiness together, the thrilling delirium when times were good. It’s all I can do not to jump out of this bed and call him from India in the middle of the night and just – I don’t know what- just hang up on him, probably. Or beg him to love me again. Or read him such a ferocious indictment on all his character flaws.

The quotation clearly shows the neurotic double bind of hating the man because he cannot fulfill what she wants and needing his presence because she is afraid to be alone. Thus, there are a conflict between wanting to stand alone and wanting to hang on to someone which is caused by the cultural shift that forces women to be more
independent but do not give enough means to do so. Although Gilbert gets a high education and a good job, her parents raises her in a traditional way.

The need to be taken care makes her want to give up her dream and run to David arms again."So many times I had wished with David that I could behave more like my mother does in her marriage—indepen

dence, strong, self-sufficient. A self-feeder. Able to exist without regular doses of romance or flattery from my solitary farmer of a father” (Gilbert, 2010: 108) In fact, Gilbert fails to understand her mother real situation. She acts as independent and self-sufficient woman, but she is actually dependent to her husband. She needs her husband to take care of her, in return she accepts his authority.

Mostly, women are afraid to be alone, they believe themselves incompetence, any talents they may have had years ago, when they got out of school, have diminished since they get married. Their muscles and mind are unused. Years after years, their dependency grows stronger. Gilbert’s case is quite different with her mother. She is more independence in terms of economic situation but more vulnerable in the emotional. She cannot stand to be alone and unanchored. “Depression and loneliness track me down after about ten days in Italy” (Gilbert, 2010: 60). This shows that she experiences lack of emotional security because what she need is a constant level of closeness from the person she loves.

In her helpless situation, the one who help her is Richard. He gives her good advice to come up with her addiction to David

“I’m not laughing.” I was actually crying. “and please don’t laugh at me now, but I think the reason it’s so hard for me to get over this guy is because I seriously believed David was my soul mate.”

“He probably was. Your problem is you don’t understand what that word means. People think a soul mate is your perfect fit, and that’s what everyone wants. But a true soul mate is a mirror, the person who shows you everything that’s holding you back, the person who brings you to your attention so you can change your life. A true soul mate is probably the most important person you’ll ever meet, because they tear down your walls and smack you awake. But to live with a soul mate forever? Nah. Too painful. Soul mates, they come into your life just to reveal
another layer of yourself to you, and then they leave. And thank God for it. Your problem is, you just can’t let this one go.” (Gilbert, 2010: 198)

The conversation above shows Gilbert is reluctant to let David go since she believes that he is her soul mate. Richard tries to make her understand that she has to learn to let someone go when it should. Soul mate is like a mirror where she can see everything that can hold her way to get the future. David is a person who helps her to overcome her desperation because of her marriage failure. He has already done his part and now it is time for him to leave. In her recollection to her desperate situation, Gilbert tries to understand life more deeply and learn meditation to get a balance in life.

I keep remembering one of my Guru’s teaching about happiness. She says that people universally tend to think that happiness is stroke of luck, something that will may be descend upon you life fine weather if you’re fortunate enough. But that’s not how happiness works. Happiness is the consequence of personal effort. You fight for it, strive it, insist upon it, and sometimes even travel around the world looking for it. You have to participate relentlessly in the manifestations of your own blessings. And once you have achieved a state of happiness, you must never become lax about maintaining it….” (Gilbert, 2010:345)

Upon understanding what happiness means, Gilbert feel more relax and fell contented “This is what I would like to hold on to. Please help me memorize this feeling of contentment and help me always support it… Clearing out all your misery gets you out of the way.” (Gilbert, 2010: 345)

She not only learns from Guru in India, she also learns about life from medicine man in Indonesia Ketut Liyer, “At the moment, the person I’m enjoying the most is Ketut. The old man – truly one of the happiest humans I’ve ever encountered- is giving me his full access, the freedom to ask any lingering questions about divinity, about human nature” (Gilbert, 2010: 346)
Finally, she can overcome her misery because of her divorce and her separation from David. She even can develop her path to be independent emotionally.

I cannot help but notice that I am sailing to this pretty little tropical island with my Brazilian lover. Which is – I admit it! – an almost ludicrously fairy tale ending to this story, like the page out of some housewife’s dream. (Perhaps even a page out of my own dream, from year ago) Yet what keeps me from dissolving right now into a complete fairy-tale shimmer is this solid truth, a truth which has verifiably built my bones over the last few years– I was not rescued by prince; I was the administrator of my own rescue. (Gilbert, 2010: 439)

Gilbert does have a fairy tale happy ending with her prince charming, but she actually finds her own path towards happiness on her own by searching and learning about life. She finds the balance in her life by liberating herself from the farce of pretending to be anyone other than herself. She learns that she should find and administer her own happiness.

3. Conclusion

Cinderella Complex is a syndrome caused by the cultural treatment towards women as dependence and helpless. It is largely repressed attitudes and fears that keep women from taking full advantage of their minds and creativity, force them to wait for something or someone to change their lives. In modern times, women are more independent economically but they still linger on the old myth that someone will come to help them in their difficult situation. Elizabeth Gilbert is independence economically, but she shares the same fear to be alone and the same wish to be saved, as other dependent women do. In her journey in Italy, India, and Indonesia, she learns about life, love, and divinity. The most important things is she learns to administer her own happiness and to be independent.
4. Bibliography


