

Feminism for students in Hong Kong through Literature

Chi-sum Garfield LAU¹

Abstract

While modern societies often stress on equality and fairness, and it is also an undeniable fact that more women are getting important positions in various job sectors, women may actually be losing their grounds because of numerous established and deep-seated biased ideas against them. As gender perceptions are often ideologically constructed, many young students are unaware of the urgency or need to change the current situation. Consequently, this gives rise to their ignorance or even resistance as educators introduce the topic of feminism or gender criticism to them. Just like literature, gender concepts cannot be understood adequately in isolation from the study of the cultural environment in which they developed. Owing to this common trait shared by gender studies and literature, the approach of introducing feminist concerns alongside the study of literature is adopted.

Keywords: Teaching in Hong Kong, Tertiary education, Gender criticisms, Feminism, Literature

¹ The Open University of Hong Kong
E-mail: cslau@ouhk.edu.hk

1. Introduction

In 2017, Mrs. Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor became the 4th Chief Executive of Hong Kong. While it is ideally hoped that this first female leader could use her power and position effectively in improving the advancement of women, it is also important for educators to prevent the presentation of dangerous and unrealistic beliefs to students that women would eventually gain better social status as a result of having a female political leader. To make the problem worse, the curriculum of sex education in Hong Kong is still under-developed. Raees Begum Baig, who works as assistant professor at The Chinese University of Hong Kong's Department of Social Work, points out how sex education in Hong Kong has wrongly been misunderstood as educating students on reproduction. She comments that “the lack of sex education is to blame for the long-held societal expectation that women should have more family duties than men” (Ng, 2018).

In her research on teaching feminist writings to students of the 21st century, Sonya Andermahr points out the challenges faced by educators. She says, “the existence of a political women's movement is no longer part of students' experience; indeed, the women's liberation movement came to an end before the current generation of students was even born” (Andermahr, 2012: 13). This quote has partly explained why so many students are so insensitive and even ignorant towards issues related to gender problems in today's world.

As commented by the Sustainable Development Goals Report of the United Nations in 2018, women's “representation in national parliaments at 23.7% is still far from parity” (United Nations, 2018). Apart from the limited political rights of women around the globe, many women are still facing the infringement of their fundamental human rights. History books may have recorded that in the Middle Ages, “wives were required to wear chastity belts

for which only their husbands held the keys” (Praver, 2006: 17). While it would be easy to conclude how women in the past were treated as their husbands’ properties, it is shocking to learn that a married woman from a developed country in the 21st century is still subjected to a similar treatment. In 2003, a British woman wore a chastity belt and triggered a metal detector alarm at Athens airport. She explained that her husband “had forced her to don the medieval device to ensure she indulged in no extramarital sexcapades during a brief visit to Greece” (York, 2004). This inconceivable incident allows us to reconsider the actual progress of women’s advancement in the 21st century.

2. Objectives

Facing the insensitivity of young students and the conservative nature of sex education in the Chinese setting that views sex as a taboo topic, it is the main objective of this paper to discuss the possible methods and foreseeable challenges in teaching feminism to university students in Hong Kong. As gender studies is an interdisciplinary academic field, and the reading of literature provides students with scenarios regarding how men and women think, behave or live under the corresponding socio-cultural backgrounds, introducing feminism to students alongside the study of literature assists the stimulation of critical thinking while moderating their resistance against the topic. Within a fictional framework, the allegorical nature of literary works as reflections of some of the major concerns over gender emphasizes the gendering of real-life experience in our world.

3. Materials and Methods

In discussing the pedagogy of teaching feminism, Esther Sánchez-Pardo points out that “What constitutes a classroom as a learning opportunity is shared responsibility for the generation of excitement” (Sánchez-Pardo, 2017: 73). In order to obtain an overview regarding students’ perception, and to encourage them to brainstorm over the topic, students are given the responsibility to answer some very simple questions before introducing the subject matter to them:

Table 1: Questions given to students at the beginning of the class

Questions	
1.	Do you think we need to achieve gender equality? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes / <input type="checkbox"/> No
2.	Have we already achieved gender equality in Hong Kong nowadays? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes → go to Question 3 / <input type="checkbox"/> No → go to Question 4
3.	Provide two examples to support your answer.
4.	State areas that require “improvement” in terms of gender equality.

In the target group, around half of the students think that there is no need to do further on gender equality. However, not many of them could provide really convincing examples in supporting the argument. For many students, the answers could be something rather general or even superficial. Answers such as “Mrs. Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor has become the Chief Executive of Hong Kong and women could also become political leaders in many parts of the world” would be mentioned. Obviously the students pay no little attention to the fact that the name “Mrs. Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor” is an indication of how in both traditional Chinese and Western patriarchal circumstances, a married woman could seldom achieve

autonomy, not even in retaining her own maiden and family names without adding her spouse's surname.

The perception towards gender is often ideologically constructed. Other than the deep-rooted legacy of Confucian beliefs that emphasize the domesticity of women, the backward state of institutional policy is responsible for the ignorance of our youngsters. The following case shows one of the examples. As reported by the *South China Morning Post* in 2016, Hong Kong government refused to promote United Nations' International Day of the Girl. It is reported that the government "does not consider it necessary to actively support the international event on October 11 because it already educates school pupils about girls' empowerment" (Blundy, 2016). It is not the intention of this paper to comment on the inadequacy of institutional policy. Rather, this paper provides a suggestion on what educators at the tertiary level could do in raising students' concerns towards some of the very serious gender problems in our society.

To make students understand that some historical and cultural issues regarding gender have never been solved, a short story that enables students to compare the gender concepts nowadays with that of a preceding generation has been selected. The 1960 short story written by the Nobel Prize laureate Doris Lessing (1919-2013), "Our Friend Judith", is chosen as an example to demonstrate to the students how the question of gender remains noticeable in our world today. In investigating how the short stories of Doris Lessing explore the progress of feminist movements, Suzuko Mamoto explains that "The 1960s is generally said to be one of the most dramatic decades in modern history in terms of patterns of liberated sexual mores, sexual assertiveness and sexual orientation" (Mamoto, 2009: 1012-1013). In contrasting the situations faced by the protagonist in "Our Friend Judith" and women in our society, it is hoped that students could

critically evaluate whether we are approaching or turning back from the gender-equal utopia.

4. Results and Discussion

As the study of literature requires critical analysis and interpretation with reference to the specific socio-cultural backgrounds, selected examples from Doris Lessing's short story "Our Friend Judith" that center around the concerns of gender will be chosen for class discussion. The historical significance of these examples will be elaborated to students at different points. They will also be related to the contexts of China or Hong Kong to show to the students that the problem is both historical and contemporary, and shall affect our future. This paper includes the demonstration of two textual examples selected for further discussion with students, through which the situation of using this comparative approach in contrast with a more traditional approach without linking up the text with the local context will be exemplified.

4.1 The Notion of Spinster in Different Contexts

In "Our Friend Judith", the opening is marked by the tension between the protagonist Judith as a woman who has chosen to stay single and the societal expectation that pressurizes women to marriage. Specifically, the story begins with a discussion that labels Judith as "a typical English spinster" (Lessing, 2005: 179). In the English context, it is clear that the term "spinster" carries derogatory meaning. This term thus reflects how English is actually a sexist language. Linking this term to the cultural context, it is not difficult to see how the society has been imposing constraints on unmarried women, as if marriage is a crucial part of their lives, or essential for a fruitful womanhood. When a more traditional teaching approach is to be adopted, the teacher may link up this idea with theories on the relationship

between marriage and gift exchange. For example, Gayle Rubin (1949-) suggests how patriarchy devalues women as their values lie in their abilities or potentials of getting a man. It has been stated by Rubin that “To enter into a gift exchange as a partner, one must have something to give. If women are for men to dispose of, they are in no position to give themselves away” (Rubin, 1975: 175). Hence, for women being considered as having values, such values must also be derived in relation to men.

The traditional approach has the shortcoming of not being able to make students understand relevant issues in the contemporary world. They know that in societies that are more developed, most of the women could decide on their marriage. These women could often have choices other than marriage as well. Students often fail to see how some of the established traditions are still hindering women’s autonomy in our world.

To tackle this problem, class discussion could stimulate students’ awareness towards the corresponding terms of “spinster” and “bachelor” in local culture. In Hong Kong, Cantonese is the major language spoken by students who are ethnically Chinese. To illustrate the progress of our society, the teacher could point out the corresponding terms used in the past and at present:

Table 2: Corresponding terms of “Spinster” used in the past and at present

“Spinster”	
Past	Present
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 老姑婆 (old aunt / old maid) • 賣剩蔗 (leftover cane) • 蘿底橙 (orange at the bottom of the basket) • 攝灶罅 (wedged in the stove’s crack) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 剩女 (leftover woman)

Table 3: Corresponding terms of “Bachelor” used in the past and at present

“Bachelor”	
Past	Present
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 鑽石王老五 (diamond bachelor) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 光棍 (lonely pole)

There occurs an interesting observation that all the terms used in referring to unmarried women, both in the past and at present, are derogatory in nature. Meanwhile, a very positive term that was used in the past to describe unmarried men has gradually been replaced by a derogatory term at present. Students are then urged to evaluate the cultural and ideological significance behind the local terms that are associated with leftover women or women whom nobody wants. While it is not a must for women to get married nowadays, it is undeniable that women are still encouraged to get married. In other words, there exists a cultural ideology that it is better to be married. It is important to show to the students regarding the efforts made by the pioneers of feminist ideology in the past.

4.2 Infusing Historical Concepts in the Classroom

Due to the patriarchal mindset of treating marriage as women’s sole career, there existed the tradition of abandoning unmarriageable daughters in Europe. Margaret Walters depicts how these women would be sent to convents (Walters, 2005). She adds that “For some, this must have felt like life imprisonment; but for others, conventual quiet seems to have facilitated genuine fulfilment: it allowed some women to develop a talent for organization, and some were able to read and think” (Walters, 2005). Giving women an alternative to marriage and an extraordinary life experience not being subjected to patriarchal decisions was also suggested by Mary Astell (1666-1731). In her masterpiece *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, for the Advancement of Their True and Greatest Interest* (1694), Mary

Astell provides an outline on the establishment of a secular convent for women. She persuaded women to consider the cheerful experience of living in this secular convent by saying “Happy Retreat! Which will be the introducing you into such a *Paradise* as your mother Eve forfeited, where you shall feast on Pleasures” (Astell, 2002: 74). The convent is where women could live outside a system of male domination. Although this idea from Mary Astell was seen as pioneering and even revolutionary during her time, students in Hong Kong would find it hard to picture how this could be understood as an important progress in gender advancement. Living in Hong Kong where both genders could receive education freely, it would not be easy to imagine that our society is actually moving backward to patriarchy.

To allow students to reconsider the notion that it is often perceived as a good thing for a girl to be married to a man of good fortune, it is possible to demonstrate how the patriarchal control of economy affects women’s rights. When the comparative approach is adopted in the classroom, relevant concepts of establishing secular convent in the Chinese context and the resistance faced by the Chinese women in those days can further be explored. This discussion topic has several functions. Other than enabling students to comprehend issues related to Chinese feminism in the past, they could also reconsider the view towards marriage nowadays. This part of the teaching could begin with the appearance of secular convent in China in late Ming and early Qing dynasty. At that time, some Chinese women started to realize the oppression that they face. In her analysis on the earlier perspectives on women’s status in China, Li Yu-ning remarks that “The oppression suffered by Chinese women in premodern China was largely by men for the advantage of men” (Li, 1992: xvi). More Chinese women were determined to reject arranged marriage under patriarchy. Understanding well that the historical defeat of women lies in the patriarchal control of economy, these women

decided to live together and became financially independent through engaging in the breeding of silkworms. Later, when the sericulture industry collapsed in early Republican China, some of those women came to Hong Kong and worked as maids in big families. When married Chinese women had the tradition of wearing their hair in buns, these new and independent women also wore their hair in buns to show their determination of giving up marriage. In short, they have chosen to marry to themselves.

To further arouse students' awareness towards the notion of spinster in our world, the persistence existence of urging women to get married must be highlighted. Education may have little effect in changing's people perception towards this concept. For instance, it is a shocking fact that the idea of finishing schools revives in China in the 21st century. The history of finishing schools can be traced back to the later part of the 18th century, when private schools for girls from middle-class families flourished in Europe. Unlike modern education that stresses upon whole-person development, these finishing schools focused on equipping their students with good social etiquette and domestic managerial skills. It is obvious that these schools have one single aim, to make their graduates having higher chances of marrying well. In June 2018, *The Washington Post* reports that "Zhenjiang College and the All-China Women's Federation have been teaching female students how to dress, pour tea and sit" (Rauhala, 2018). The report also states the goals and details of the course:

The class, offered only to female students, aims to develop "wise", "sunny" and "perfect" women, where wisdom comes from studying Chinese history and culture, sunniness from oil painting and etiquette classes, and perfection from the application of (never too much) makeup" (Rauhala, 2018).

The reporter is for the point of view that declining birth rate in China led to the revival of conventional division of labor, with men as breadwinners and women as wives and mothers. Such an attempt to revive traditional gender roles actually limits the choices available for both men and women.

4.3 Fashion and Women

To further arouse students' interests regarding the topic on gender, the second textual example from Doris Lessing's story which could be used for analysis is the relationship between fashion and women. In other words, how women are being judged by means of their clothing and how the marital status of women may also affect their choice of outfits. In the story, a married woman named Betty has been given a Dior dress. She thinks that this dress does not suit her because of her identity. That she has emphasized the dress not being suitable for "a woman with three children and a talent for cooking" implies the conflict between the traditional roles of women as caretakers and the autonomy of females as individuals with full control over their own bodies (Lessing, 2005: 180). While Betty does not consider herself as having the right build for the dress, Judith looks gorgeous in this dress. Although Judith also knows her charm, she has decided to stay true to her character by returning to her "shapeless skirt and blouse" (Lessing, 2005: 180). What Judith has chosen would not highlight her female figure or feminine beauty. The shapeless design is a counteraction to the traditional image of women under male gaze. It form contrasts with the design from the older generations that emphasize the waistline and hence the power of reproduction. The Australian sociologist Peter Corrigan, summarizes how fashion could unite or separate various groups of people in the society:

Fashion represents nothing more than one of the many forms of life by the aid of which we seek to combine in uniform spheres of activity the tendency towards social equalization with the desire for individual differentiation and change (Taylor, 2004: 45).

In connecting how the choice of fashion in our daily life could be related to the textual scenario and gender criticism, students could be asked to express whether they are aware of the code of fashion that may have put a label on us.

To consolidate students' knowledge in this aspect, a brief history on the progress made in terms of women's choice of clothing can be introduced to students. The story of Doris Lessing was written in the generation when feminist movements evolved women in many aspects of their lives. For example, in the 1960s, trousers were no longer exclusive for outdoor work:

The early 1960s gave birth to drapeline jeans and capri pants. Traditionally, trousers had been viewed by western society as masculine, but by the early 1960s, it had become acceptable for women to wear them every day. (Singh, 2017)

Still, they were forbidden in the workplace. In the 1970s, office ladies could finally wear pants and heeled boots. Despite all these attempts to make women being men's equals, the biggest obstacle to women's liberty in terms of their choice of fashion is the established convention. In 2010, a female secondary school teacher in Hong Kong sued the school principal and the school where she used to teach for humiliating her publicly because of her choice of wearing pants to work (Chiu, 2010). In the 21st century, it happens that school principals still expect female teachers to wear dresses or skirts, an obvious sign of ignoring gender equality and putting the professionalism of female teachers aside.

Terre Des Femmes is a human rights organization from Swiss that focuses primarily on gender equality and feminism. In 2015, the organization created an ad campaign called “Don’t judge a woman’s worth by the clothes”. The campaign has successfully aroused worldwide attention towards the stereotypical associations that people have towards women and their choice of outfits. For instance, the lengths of her skirts, the height of her collar and high heels are also being labeled as indicator of her personality. The major problems are not only related to the untruthful representations of women, but women as passive objects being placed on a scale, not having freedom or their own sense of uniqueness. This very sad observation shows us that the world is not making sufficient progress in terms of women’s rights and gender equality. In comparing women nowadays with Doris Lessing’s depiction decades ago, the only difference is that Betty in the story gives herself the label as a married woman and a mother, thus not suitable for a particular type of clothing, while women in our world theoretically could dress in any way that they like, but subjected to harsh comments and criticisms.

Two major problems regarding the young students are that they have very little idea on the urgency of the matter and they have deeply been influenced by many established concepts and ideas. They are unable to see the need to make changes or at least, to stop the harmful rituals from spreading out further. In the following, I would use a vulgar example to demonstrate to the students regarding the problem of viewing women’s bodies under male gaze and the significance behind.

The term “career line” in Asian culture originates from palmistry or palm reading. It is a type of belief to learn a person’s personalities, fortune and even future by analyzing the lines on the hands. However, in the recent decade, this term has been used in Hong Kong in referring to women’s

cleavage. Aligning a woman's "career line" with her cleavage is an obvious indication of focusing only on women's physical aspects, rather than their real abilities. The wide usage of this sexist term in local newspapers shows that the problem of gender discrimination has actually been worsened. Fortunately, The Women's Foundation has a campaign called "My real career line". The campaign urges for concerns towards the problematic usage of the term and attention towards women's various potentials.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, no matter how little one could do, it is still crucial for educators to introduce the major arguments and historical events related to feminists from both the East and the West to our students. Through analyzing Doris Lessing's story "Our Friend Judith" critically, we hope that students could apply what they have read and learnt in both local and global contexts, so as to evaluate whether we are making real advancement, and what are the challenges and problems that we are going to face in the future.

It is also hoped that a more systematic quantitative research in finding out the actual perceptions of the students towards the topic can be carried out. To give students a more complete representation of gender issues, contemporary concerns towards the changing concepts of masculinity or men's roles, such as the topic of stay-at-home dads, should also be introduced and taken into consideration.

6. References

- Andermahr, Sonya. (2012). "Gender and the Student Experience: Teaching Feminist Writing in the Post-Feminist Classroom". *Teaching Gender*. Ed. Alice Ferrebe and Fiona Tolan. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan. 12-30.
- Astell, Mary. (2002). *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*. Ed. Patricia Springborg. New York: Broadview Press.
- Blundy, Rachel. (2016). "Hong Kong's young women still facing gender inequality as world marks United Nations' International Day of the Girl". *South China Morning Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/education-community/article/2026796/hong-kongs-young-women-still-facing-gender>
- Chiu, Austin. (2010). "Teacher sues over school dress code and being singled out at assembly". *South China Morning Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.scmp.com/article/714923/teacher-sues-over-school-dress-code-and-being-singled-out-assembly>
- Lessing, Doris. (2005). "Our Friend Judith". *The Norton Introduction to Literature*. Eds. Alison Booth, Jerome J. Paul and Beaty Hunter. Shorter 9th edition. New York: W. W. Norton & Company. 179-191.
- Li, Yu-ning. (1992). *Chinese Women Through Chinese Eyes*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Mamoto, Suzuko (2009). Doris Lessing: A Review of Four Key Short Stories from the 1960s. *Fukuoka University review of Literature and Humanities* 40(4). 1011-1035.
- Ng, Yupina. (2018). What Hong Kong can do to help women in work. *South China Morning Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/community/article/2135491/what-hong-kong-can-do-help-women-work>
- Praver, Francis Cohen. (2006). *Daring Wives: Insight Into Women's Desires for Extramarital Affairs*. London: Praeger.

- Rauhala, Emily. (2018). 'Hold in your belly ... legs together': Chinese College teaches female students to be 'perfect'. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/hold-in-your-belly--legs-together-chinese-college-teaches-female-students-to-be-perfect/2018/06/25/c0e1205e-6a21-11e8-bbc5-dc9f3634fa0a_story.html
- Rubin, Gayle. (1975) The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex. *Toward an Anthology of Women*. Ed. Rayna R. Reiter. New York: Monthly Review. 157-210.
- Sánchez-Pardo, Esther. (2017) 'It is a hell of responsibility to be yourself': troubling the personal and the political in feminist pedagogy. *Teaching Gender: Feminist Pedagogy and Responsibility in Times of Political Crisis*. Ed. Beatriz Revelles-Benavente and Ana M. González Ramos. Oxon: Routledge. 64-80.
- Singh, Namanpal. (2017). Fashion History: 1960s. *Medium*. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/@namanpalsingh/fashion-history-1960s-bdd87361c505>
- Taylor, Lou. (2004). *Establishing Dress History*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- United Nations. (2018). *Sustainable Development Goals*. Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment>
- Walters, Margaret. (2005). *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: OUP. Retrieved from https://books.google.com.hk/books/about/Feminism_A_Very_Short_Introduction.html?id=PCwdyaLCbXoC&redir_esc=y
- York, Vickie. (2004). Gal's Chastity Belt Triggers Airport Metal Detector. *Weekly World News*. Retrieved from www.weeklyworldnews.com