



GENDER AND CLASS IN SALLY ROONEY'S *NORMAL PEOPLE*

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ABSTRACT

Normal People (2018), a novel by Sally Rooney, presents issues of gender and class through its description of two different perspectives of the main characters, Connell and Marianne. This article examines how this novel depicts issues of gender and class which are portrayed through Connell and Marianne's relationship as a couple. Using narrative theories by Bal and Genette, as well as Haslanger's and Raewyn Connell's theory on gender and Bourdieu's theory on social class, this article focuses on how the discrimination of gender and class affects Connell's and Marianne's relationship. The findings and discussion show the oppression that Marianne experiences is associated with the internalization of oppression, sexism, and misogyny. The discussion also shows that hegemonic masculinity has a role in the matter of how the difference between Connell's and Marianne's gender and class is presented. Despite being superior in terms of class, Marianne is inferior in terms of gender to Connell who comes from a working class society. However, the novel presents how the main characters' perception changes as in the end they no longer problematize their gender and class. It can be argued that the novel shows both males and females have the agency to negotiate their respective positions despite their different social classes.

Keywords: agency, gender, hegemonic, masculinity, social class, Sally Rooney

ABSTRAK

Normal People (2018), novel karya Sally Rooney, menghadirkan isu gender dan kelas melalui penggambaran dua perspektif berbeda dari tokoh utamanya, Connell dan Marianne. Artikel ini mengkaji bagaimana novel ini menggambarkan isu gender dan kelas yang digambarkan melalui hubungan Connell dan Marianne sebagai pasangan. Dengan menggunakan teori naratif Bal dan Genette, serta teori Haslanger dan Raewyn Connell tentang gender dan teori Bourdieu tentang kelas sosial, artikel ini berfokus pada cara diskriminasi gender dan kelas memengaruhi hubungan Connell dan Marianne. Temuan dan pembahasan menunjukkan bahwa penindasan yang dialami Marianne terkait dengan internalisasi penindasan, seksisme, dan misogini. Pembahasan dalam artikel ini menunjukkan bahwa maskulinitas hegemonik juga berperan dalam hal bagaimana perbedaan kelas Connell dan Marianne dihadirkan. Meskipun Marianne lebih superior dalam hal kelas, ia lebih inferior dalam hal gender daripada Connell yang berasal dari lingkungan kelas pekerja. Namun, novel ini menyajikan bagaimana persepsi karakter utama berubah karena pada akhirnya mereka tidak lagi mempermasalahkan gender dan kelas mereka. Dapat diargumentasikan bahwa novel tersebut menunjukkan baik laki-laki maupun perempuan memiliki agensi untuk menegosiasikan posisi masing-masing walau kelas sosial mereka berbeda.

Kata kunci: agensi, gender, kelas sosial, maskulinitas, hegemonik, Sally Rooney

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INTRODUCTION

Rooney has written three novels to date, namely: *Conversations with Friends* (2017), *Normal People* (2018), and *Beautiful World, Where Are You?* (2021). *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People* are both adapted into Hulu series. Both *Normal People* the novel and its Hulu series adaptation received positive reviews from critics namely Holmes (2020), Mangan (2020), Poniewozik (2020), Russell (2020), and Cumming (2020). Since its initial release, *Normal People* the series has become a hit with casts such as Paul Mescal and Daisy Edgar-Jones.

There are similarities in all three of her novels: the stories are set in Ireland and one of the characters is always a writer (Frances in *Conversations with Friends*, Connell in *Normal People*, and Alice in *Beautiful World, Where Are You?*), and the characters use emails instead of text messages. Brookes (2021) describes Rooney's heroines as "without fail, always the smartest people in the room. They are also pretentious, priggish, self-absorbed and superior, condescending and driven by insecurity." This being said, her characters would often talk about the working class: what it means to be one and who the people considered as one.

Normal People (2018), Sally Rooney's second novel, presents issues of gender and class through its description of two different perspectives by the main characters, Connell and Marianne, via simultaneous perspectives of both characters. One of the novel's apparent focal points is the issue of the self, as Marianne and Connell are struggling with their self-perception. The portrayal of the distinctive alternating perspectives proves the stark differences of gender and class between the two characters.

In the novel, we see that at the beginning Marianne feels worthless and inferior to Connell as Connell treats Marianne with contempt. Connell sees himself as someone above Marianne in terms of gender, but he feels inferior to Marianne in terms of class. Towards the end of the novel, they both have grown so much in the way they see gender and class within themselves, causing them to no longer feel the way they feel at the beginning of the novel. In this light, this article aims to discuss the portrayal of the issues of gender and class through two different perspectives and focalizations of the main characters which is a testament to how this novel shows contrast in the different perceptions of gender and class. The primary focus is on delving into the narrative of gender and class issues and intricately exploring the distinctions that were built in gender and class dynamics.

The discussion is conducted by referring to Bal's (1991) and Genette's (1980) narratology regarding the function and significance of Connell's and Marianne's focalization, as it shows how the issues of gender and class are portrayed in the novel. Furthermore, in discussing the matter of gender, we refer to Haslanger (2012) regarding the internalization of oppression, misogyny, and sexism as well as Raewyn Connell (2005) regarding hegemonic masculinity. We will also refer to Bourdieu's (1987 and 1989) concept of social class, specifically concerning cultural capital, in discussing the difference between Connell's and Marianne's social background.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since its initial publication in 2018, studies on *Normal People* mainly focus on the matter of self and Marianne's response to the abuse and violence that she experiences. Eppel's (2020) observation particularly discusses the "self" as he believes that Marianne has a negative self-representation, while Connell is incapable of articulating his feelings. In the end, Eppel ultimately believes that despite the two troubled characters, they are their best self and worst selves with each other and only in this unique relationship can they truly be their "true selves."

Different from Eppel, Sarikaya-Şen's (2021) observation in her article mainly focuses on Marianne's silence, which is believed as a way for Marianne to cope with violence and that violence and abuse are considered normal for her. Sarikaya-Şen observes that in the end, Marianne stays loyal to her psychological wounds as they are, in a way, her identity. This

article concludes that Marianne's normality can be described as a paradoxical quest to define herself through her wounds. Our different view on this article is that Marianne is not disturbed by her "healthy and normal" relationship with Connell. Contradictory to this, we see that this type of relationship might have been the beginning of Marianne's taste of normality which then leads to her description of normality as a quest to define herself through her wounds.

On a different note, Pierini (2021) touches upon the matters of barriers for Connell and Marianne namely Connell's acceptance from his peers, and Marianne's feelings of unworthiness and inadequacy. Pierini states that the story concludes with Connell and Marianne's realization and recognition where they finally know what they want. Connell finally stands up for Marianne and he goes to therapy and acknowledges his anxieties. Marianne finally "liberated" herself from the abuse and violence that she used to seek which is what she thought she deserved. Pierini finally argues that Connell and Marianne ended up diminishing their barriers, or at least, being at peace with them.

On a different perspective, Donohue (2021) focuses on the topic of the search for self and the process of becoming which leads to an understanding that Connell and Marianne help each other in searching for their "self" and in their process of becoming. Donohue concludes that their search for self can lead to irrational decisions that result in them (Connell and Marianne) hurting each other. Meanwhile, an observation by O'Doherty (2020) shows that *Normal People* does not have elements such as sexual shame that complicate the story. O'Doherty states that one of the ideas the story is trying to convey is that even after cultural and political background are resolved, the problems in the past that we think had been over actually still exist.

These studies discuss topics on the self and how Marianne copes with the violence that she experiences, which helps us build our knowledge on those particular problems. Different from the matters discussed in the previous studies, this article will analyze the depiction of gender and class in *Normal People* through Connell and Marianne's perspectives.

Bal's conceptualization of narratology plays a pivotal role in the examination of Connell and Marianne's focalization. Analyzing the purpose and significance of the main characters' focalization provides a chance for the intricate discussion of how gender and class issues are portrayed in this novel. In delving into the portrayal of Marianne's internalization of oppression, sexism, and misogyny, understanding Bal's concept of transposed speech is required. Simultaneously, Genette's examination of narrative discourse serves as a fundamental tool in comprehending the utilization of perspectives within this novel. By discerning the distinction between the one who sees and the one who speaks, an exploration of Connell and Marianne's alternating perspectives can be undertaken. The comprehension of how the narrative structure gives out information according to the characters is crucial in the discussion of Connell and Marianne's alternating perspectives.

The discussion on gender draws upon Haslanger's insights, regarding the internalization of oppression, misogyny, and sexism. Haslanger's argument helps establish a connection between Marianne's abuse and her existence in a patriarchal society where men hold dominant positions which leads to Marianne's initial self-perception where she believes she deserves mistreatment and abuse that affects her relationship with others. Furthermore, the concept of hegemonic masculinity, as proposed by Raewyn Connell, is applied to explore how the main male character, Connell, utilizes this hegemonic masculinity to establish his position in Marianne's world. This concept helps explain the dominance that Connell holds over Marianne at the beginning of the novel.

RESEARCH METHOD

The method used to discuss the novel is a literary analysis focusing on issues of gender and class that are depicted in *Normal People* through Connell and Marianne's perspectives. The presentation of Connell's and Marianne's responses to issues of gender and class

throughout the five years helps to deliver the idea of how the novel portrays issues of gender and class through Connell's and Marianne's focalization. Afterwards, we analyze how the simultaneous perspectives of Connell and Marianne show the issue of gender and class which leads to the discussion on how the novel deals with those issues or the novel's attitude towards them. Furthermore, we study and show how Connell and Marianne's relationship grows positively as their perception and understanding of gender and class improves with time.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Gender and class in *Normal People*

The presentation of Marianne's abuse is related to gender and class issues. Hegemonic masculinity has a big play in the abuse that Marianne experiences. Her abuse starts within her family, specifically the physical and emotional abuse done by her father and older brother. It is also important to note that Marianne's mother also takes part in the abuse that Marianne experiences in her household, even if it is only emotional and not physical. Her father is abusive, leading to her older brother continuing the vicious cycle. Even after her father dies, Marianne is still under constant physical and emotional abuse by her brother and mother. The formulation of hegemonic masculinity began in the 1980s as it was understood "as the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men's dominance over women to continue" (Connell, 2005, p. 832). The pattern of abuse starts as early as Marianne's childhood, which was initially done by her father, brother, and mother, and then continued by Connell and the men Marianne dates. In discussing the pattern of abuse, there is a possibility that Marianne finds some hegemonic pattern familiar and manageable for her (Donaldson, 1993, p. 645) because she grew up in a patriarchal society with male dominance and abuse around her, which is why Marianne also engages in some masochistic relationships later on in her life.

Donaldson argues that the nature of hegemonic masculinity seen from feminist insight is generally the oppressive relationship of men to women (1993, p. 645). Meanwhile, Connell (2020) defines hegemonic masculinity as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (2020, p. 144). We believe this holds some weight in proving that the abuse Marianne experiences is related to gender because she lives in a patriarchal society where men hold the dominant position. Concerning this, Haslanger (2012) argues that whether we realize it or not, there is a social prescription on how to perceive gender, act upon gender, and what is allowed to be acted towards gender, especially towards a specific gender. Therefore, there is an inherent prescription that women are to be oppressed.

In the context of the presentation of Marianne's abuse, the hegemonic masculinity manifests in the toxic practices, including but not limited to physical violence, that the male counterparts in her life engaged in. Although Connell does not use violence and physical abuse against Marianne, he still has masculine dominance over Marianne. Thus, by engaging in these toxic practices, the men in Marianne's life adopt dominance over her. Seeing this matter through the concept of hegemonic masculinity helps to understand why Connell has a certain dominance over Marianne and the social dynamic Connell and Marianne have which leads to that dominance. However, we should first explore the matter of perspective and the reason why we have come to this understanding of perspective.

There is a common confusion between the question "who sees?" and the question "who speaks?" in understanding perspective (Genette, 1980). The simple answer to these questions is; that the characters, Connell and Marianne, are the ones who see. Meanwhile, the narrator is the one who speaks. Connell and Marianne are the characters whose point of view orients the narrative perspective; thus, they are the one who sees. Connell and Marianne recount the narrative; they are the focalized characters. The narrator sees everything "with" Connell and

Marianne, or in other words, the narrator sees as much as Connell and Marianne do, leading us to see everything that Connell and Marianne see. Connell's and Marianne's perception and focalization are the outcomes of what has been filtered by Connell and Marianne as the focalizer and as the characters whose point of view we read through.

Connell (2005) argues that hegemonic masculinity can be as easily adopted when it is desirable as it is strategically avoided at other moments by men. This argument can be seen in *Normal People* when the male character, Connell, being presented as holding hegemonic masculinity, demands Marianne not to disclose their relationship to anyone, especially their peers at school. However, when Marianne asks him to hit her during sexual intercourse, he refuses, an example of Connell strategically distancing himself from hegemonic masculinity. Connell utilizes hegemonic masculinity to position himself in Marianne's world.

Marianne's mother supports and accepts hegemonic masculinity and believes that abuse is normal, which is undeniable proof that she is abusive. This is reflected in the following statement from the novel: "Denise decided a long time ago that it is acceptable for men to use aggression towards Marianne as a way of expressing themselves" (Rooney 2018, p. 65). Thus, it leads to Marianne also accepting and internalizing abuse. This acceptance and normalization eventually lead to Marianne's internalization of oppression, sexism, and misogyny. These internalizations are evident in *Normal People*. One thing is certain: the profound hegemonic masculinity presence in *Normal People* plays a massive role in these internalizations that Marianne has adopted.

The internalization of oppression, sexism, and misogyny that Marianne adopts is presented through the narrator. The narrator in *Normal People* speaks according to the words of Connell and Marianne; the narrator does not offer their narration or thoughts regarding the narrative. Moreover, because of the transposed speech, the narrator only speaks out what the character thinks and feels (Bal,1990), as seen on page 138 of *Normal People* "... she feels disgusting and begins to hate herself, and these feelings trigger in her an overwhelming desire to be subjugated and in a way broken" (Rooney, 2018), in this context, specifically Marianne's. Therefore, the narrator follows Marianne's thoughts which is why we have to understand that Marianne internalized oppression, sexism, and misogyny.

Haslanger states that when sexism is internalized, "the individual woman takes on ideas, patterns of behavior, and a gendered outlook on things" (2012, p. 122). Marianne believes it is acceptable for men to mistreat her and that it is normal for men to abuse her. The pattern of behavior that Marianne adopts because of the internalization of sexism is the masochistic relationships that she engages in. In other words, Marianne is trapped in this pattern of masochistic behavior where she wants her partner to hurt her as that is what she considers normal, which is proof of her internalized misogyny. Consequently, these ideas and masochist patterns affect Marianne's attitude toward others, but more importantly, towards herself (Haslanger, 2012, p. 122). Marianne believes that she deserves to be mistreated and abused. Marianne sees herself as someone unworthy, someone inferior to the men in her life, especially her partners. What is worse than that is she has this belief that no one in her life, especially the men, could ever treat her right, that all men are bound to hurt her and make her feel small, just like her father and brother.

Constantinescu argues that there may be one possible explanation for the phenomenon of internalized oppression, "women are afraid of losing social rewards (the acceptance that comes with adopting the dominant attitudes, etc.) and also because self-stereotyping has the function of increasing personal and collective self-esteem" (2021, p. 122). We agree with Constantinescu to a certain extent because, in high school, Marianne does not care what others think of her or about the fact that she is ostracized, which is why it can be understood that at that time, Marianne does not desire acceptance from others. However, it can be argued that Marianne wants acceptance from others during her time in college, where she always makes herself smaller or backs down from an argument, which is something she would not have done

in high school. Thus, it can be argued that Marianne internalized oppression to keep the people around her. In other words, Marianne wants to keep the acceptance that she does not have in high school. Marianne chooses not to fight back and be as blunt as she is in high school because she avoids being labeled as difficult or pretentious. Regarding self-stereotyping to increase self-esteem, Marianne may stereotype herself as a normal woman, as how a woman should be; obedient and submissive. By stereotyping and seeing herself as a normal woman, Marianne's self-esteem improved because she felt like every other woman. Perhaps, she gets to feel normal, which is something that she never experienced before.

Moreover, Constantinescu (2021) argues that women internalized oppression due to the fear of being humiliated. However, in Marianne's case, we disagree. Marianne does not care about being humiliated. In fact, humiliation is exactly what she seeks in her masochistic relationships. This is in line with our previous argument regarding the pattern of abuse in hegemonic masculinity, which can also be used in understanding Marianne's internalized misogyny, where she seeks humiliation from men because of the familiarity she has experienced ever since she was young.

Constantinescu believes that "with the beginning of sexual development and the establishment of norms for attractiveness, gender conformity becomes a more prized behavior" (2021, p. 123). Marianne complies with Connell's demand to keep their relationship a secret. Marianne is unlikeable during high school because people think she is weird, snarky, and rude. She does whatever she wants without caring what other people might think of her. Therefore, the fact that Marianne does what Connell asks her to do, staying silent about their relationship, is proof of gender conformity. As a matter of fact, it is about prized behavior. By not acting in the way she usually acts (at least in terms of her relationship with Connell), she gets the prize of being in that relationship.

Hegemonic masculinity involves a specific strategy for the subordination of women (Donaldson, 1993), meaning that it consists of a strategy to keep women in a lower rank than men. This further proves that Marianne's abuse is related to gender because, in terms of gender Marianne is lower in rank than Connell, as proven by the hegemonic masculinity traits that he adopts to stay above Marianne. Connell needs to keep alive the dominance he holds over Marianne because he wants to sustain his only power over her and because it benefits him (Donaldson, 1993). This leads to the argument that Marianne's abuse is also related to class.

Connell being presented as having hegemonic masculinity tendencies keeps Marianne lower in rank than him because, in terms of class, Connell ranks lower than Marianne. Connell comes from a working-class family, while Marianne comes from an upper-middle-class family. The stark difference between Connell and Marianne is evident from the novel's first chapter, where we immediately know that Connell's mother works as a cleaner in Marianne's house. Financial matters are essential to Connell as he constantly feels insecure regarding his humble situation. Men who do not adopt hegemonic masculinity traits and are in active fatherhood feel that paid work is not that critical in defining themselves and that their relationships with their female partners are improved (Donaldson, 1993). Thus, because of the adopted hegemonic masculinity traits, Connell's definition of himself is influenced by the financial aspects of his life. That is why his relationship with Marianne is not great, as he feels inferior to her in terms of money.

Connell uses hegemonic masculinity to position himself in Marianne's world. However, to do so, he needs to know and understand where he stands in social class. Only then could he know and understand Marianne's place in social class. This notion is based on Bourdieu's sense of one's place argument, where he states that "this sense of one's place is at the same time a sense of the place of others, and, together with the affinities of habitus experienced in the form attraction or revulsion, is at the root of all processes of cooptation, friendship, love, association, etc.," (1987, p. 5). For Connell and Marianne, both attraction (Marianne to Connell), as well as revulsion (Connell to Marianne), are at the root of their relationship. Thus, knowing their

respective places in society and where the “other” person stands helps maintain their relationship.

The distinction between Connell’s and Marianne’s class is made clear through the alternating point of view in *Normal People*. In understanding the importance of Connell’s and Marianne’s alternating perspectives, we refer to Genette’s argument that the narrative can choose to regulate information according to the knowledge of the story’s participant (1980, p. 226). Every piece of information we have, especially regarding gender and class, is based on Connell’s and Marianne’s perceptions. Since Connell and Marianne are the focalizers, the narrator closely follows their perception. Thus, the perception in the novel belongs to Connell and Marianne. Rooney’s way of writing the novel shows the changes and growth of perspective, specifically about gender and class, that Connell and Marianne experience.

In discussing class, power relations are crucial to explore. Power relations hold a vital role in social dynamics, as seen in Connell’s and Marianne’s interaction, which is also why social facts such as how Marianne is ostracized and how Connell feels insecure and small in comparison to Marianne really constraints both Marianne and Connell in their social life. These examples are connected to power relations because although Marianne is superior to Connell in terms of class, in her social life she is still dominated by others. This supports our argument that although Marianne is superior in class, she is still inferior in terms of gender, and *vice versa* for Connell. In social interactions, especially during college, Connell is very insecure because he feels inferior to Marianne and her friends.

Where Marianne struggles with gender, Connell struggles in class. Marianne never has to experience Connell’s struggles because they belong to different classes with different socially valued resources. Marianne never has to worry about having a place to live, while Connell has to work during college to pay his rent. Thus, Connell and Marianne experience different forms of class struggle as they make different efforts and have different ways of living their lives.

Furthermore, Bourdieu’s theory on cultural capital is significant to explore regarding Connell’s and Marianne’s situation. Bourdieu, as mentioned by Joppke (1986, p. 57), argues that “cultural capital refers to cultural knowledge as a resource of power used by individuals and social groups to improve their positions within the social class structure”. When discussing the educational system in just meritocracy, Bourdieu, as discussed by Joppke (1986, p. 58), believes “students that the educational system favors possess a type of cultural capital that can be transmitted only by primary socialization within the family.”

Marianne’s family has always been superior in terms of cultural capital because they have this primary socialization such as language, how to deal with culture, etc. which starts within the family. Meanwhile, Connell’s family never has that. Connell does not have the head start that people like Marianne had when they were younger. Connell’s cultural capital comes through secondary socialization: school. However, interestingly, Connell is the most favored during high school, while Marianne is ostracized despite her intelligence and having the cultural capital so early in her life.

Through the presentation of the change in Marianne’s perspective of inferiority, this novel shows that she has an agency seen from her refusal to be dependent on Connell. Not only Marianne, Connell also realizes his agency as seen from his compliance with the decision to halt their relationship. Connell and Marianne realize that their gender and class are not problems that trouble them, specifically their relationship as a couple. The way that Marianne sees herself has changed in a positive light, “he brought her goodness like a gift and now it belongs to her. Meanwhile his life opens out before him in all directions at once” (Rooney, 2018, p. 266). Connell and Marianne can come to terms with their respective gender and class, and negotiate with their reality of gender and class in living their life.

CONCLUSION

By highlighting the agency that each main character has, Rooney shows the potential of being independent from the conventional perspective of gender and class issues in the patriarchal culture. A conclusion is reached; although at the beginning the female character is presented as someone oppressed who internalizes oppression, sexism, and misogyny, in the end, her perception of her gender has grown for the better. Although the novel begins with the male's and female's problematic views on gender and class, the temporal structure, specifically the five years of the narrative, helps deliver the growth and improved perception of their perspectives on the issue of gender and class. Therefore, according to the novel any oppression or hegemony should not affect the relationship of people with different gender and class. It can be accordingly concluded that the agency of males and females is fundamental in negotiating the patriarchal perspectives in the gender and class discrimination

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