

## **Call Me Bathsheba: A Novel Exploring the Impacts of Patriarchal Culture on the Prostitution Industry**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This creative work follows the journey of the daughter of a prostitute, in her attempt to survive after being kicked out of the house and find the biological mother whom she never met. It explores the theme of patriarchal culture that impacts prostitution industry and the complication of it. This realistic fiction novel was set in three countries which are China (Hong-Kong), Singapore, and Indonesia. The story highlights the reasons women enter prostitution explored in Barry's *The Prostitution of Sexuality* theory, and the physical and psycho-social impacts of slut-shaming happened to women prostitute explored in Benoit et al's *Theory of Social Stigma among Prostitutes*. It will also be elaborated on how patriarchy impacts both issues. Through these theories and project, I find that patriarchy causes many women decided to enter prostitution as it's the best choice they have at hand even though the work itself oftentimes harms them physically and psycho-socially through the whore-stigma that operates on the micro, meso, and macro level of their lives.

**Keywords:** patriarchal culture, women prostitution, whore-stigma, slut-shaming.

### **INTRODUCTION**

After doing research about women prostitution in Asia for my Asian Studies class presentation in semester 5, I know that this is the topic I want to work on my creative thesis. My creative work will be in the form of a novel. Novel is the most suitable form that I can use to deliver my message due to its characteristics. According to Burgess (2019), a novel is a considerably long prose that tells a story about human experience imaginatively. A novel is a type of fictional narration that has enough space to play people's emotions thoroughly by portraying humans' life issues. It is also a very effective tool to spread messages as it allows people to imagine and empathize with the described words. The power of novel in spreading messages lies on its drama, characters, and rhetoric (Burgess, 2019). An example of this kind of novels is *Uncle Tom's Cabins* by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Stowe's courage in talking about slavery had encouraged others to speak up, which later on ignited the Civil War that ended slavery in America (*Stowe's Global Impact*, 2021). In this way, novel would enable me to spread the anti-patriarchy message I want to deliver in a subtle but powerful way through the usage of fictional story. Besides, since the 18th century, novel has been one of the most popular forms of fiction among people due to the vernacularity of the language and the closeness of the issues covered with real-life issues (Mullan, 2018). I also found that based on Nielsen Book Research UK 2015, fiction for adults was the most popular category among the readers. As my novel will be targeted at adults, I find this a good thing for spreading the message contained in my story effectively.

I choose the Realistic Fiction genre for this creative work because this genre enables me to portray stories that are not real, but seem very possible to happen (Andrews, 2019). I want to make my story sound realistic and have a serious tone to emphasize the urgency/ importance of this topic. The characteristics of Realistic Fiction permit me to portray explicit and violent scenes (Allyn & Prentice, 2001) which I plan to write in order to highlight the damages that prostitution can do to a woman. Examples of realistic fiction novels that inspire me to write this story are *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* by Stieg Larsson. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* addresses the issue of the extreme

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patriarchal culture in Afghanistan especially under the Taliban regime while *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* mainly highlights the issue of sexual assaults on women in Sweden. Both of them manage to craft the issues very well in the form of a very thrilling and emotional story. I want my story to be enjoyable, yet can still successfully deliver the urgency of the topic just like those aforementioned works.

I am interested in exploring the correlation between the practice of women prostitution and patriarchal culture. Women prostitution is a very harmful practice of selling women's sex services to gain profit. It is known as the world's oldest profession that is still thriving and flourishing until today (Procon, 2018). The practice of women prostitution is said to be deeply rooted in the patriarchal culture in the society (Lim, 1998). According to the Asian Pacific Institute, patriarchal culture generally refers to a system where men hold authority over women in every aspect of social life due to the unequal power distribution among the genders. Gender is different from sex. According to Sechiyama (2013), sex refers to biological differences, while gender refers to the social role differences that are attributed to each sex. However, gender roles may seem natural because it looks like it is determined by biology. The gender stereotype that believes men are biologically sexually more active justifies the practice of prostitution where men can buy women to satisfy their needs (Kong, 2006). Another toxic gender stereotype is that women are supposed to look beautiful or even sexually pleasing to men. Women are considered to function as a satisfactory sexual object for men (Wolf (2002) as cited in Husnia (2013)). This makes women look as if they are destined to be sexually objectified. Therefore, in patriarchal societies, the industry of women prostitution is still very rampant. I really want to bring this issue into my creative work because I feel like many woman prostitutes in patriarchal societies have to face a really unfair condition every day. I believe the real problem lies on the patriarchal culture that impacts the reasons why they are getting into prostitution, the working condition, and the stigma given by the society.

Firstly, only a tiny percentage of women in prostitution are there because they really choose it (Farley, 2010). This fact triggers me to find out how patriarchal culture could affect these women's being in the industry and explore it in my creative work. Secondly, the working condition of women in prostitution is often harmful because of patriarchy's impacts. Many countries criminalize the practice of selling prostitution services, but not the buying of it (Farley, 2010). This makes johns (clients) feel free to do anything they want towards the women, while the women do not even have the courage to report the abuse done because of the illegal status of their profession. Women in prostitution, both the ones working with a pimp (a sexual service broker) and the ones working independently, are subjects to violence in their work (Farley, 2004). Sexual and physical violence are considered normative in this industry and generally are more violent or even involve weapons (Evendov and Stermac (2003) as cited in Farley, 2004). Most young women who work in this industry have been beaten or abused by both johns (65%) and pimps (66%) (Farley, 2004). Even women who work independently (without pimps) still often experience violence from the johns, for example like being robbed, receiving less than the negotiated fee or even no money, or being beaten by them (Kong, 2006). The violence that women in prostitution experience cause them a lot of psychological/ mental health problems.

The most common psychological problem experienced by 68% of prostitutes is PTSD (Farley et al. (2003) as cited in Farley (2004)). Most women prostitutes also experience sexual dysfunction with their chosen partners (Farley, 2004). Other than that, women prostitutes also have to endure additional mental burdens caused by the whore-stigma given by the society.

The whore stigma is also a gendered stigma originating in patriarchal belief. A prostitute is labeled as a 'bad' and 'morally corrupted' woman, while men who buy their services are simply seen as being 'naughty' (Peterson (1996) as cited in Kong (2006)). They often experience

insults and degrading behavior from people around them, for example, one participant of Benoit's survey in 2017 said that she is not allowed to play with her neighbor's children or even to touch them because they think her hands are 'dirty'. This stigma makes woman prostitutes become ashamed of their jobs and thus hide it from everyone, even their own family. To make it worse, in some countries, for instance like Hong Kong, the legal or police force also often exhibits public harassment and humiliation towards these women (Benoit et al., 2018). This could happen due to most countries' laws that criminalize only the pimping/ selling of sex work, but not the buying of it (Farley, 2010). This kind of law is very patriarchal in nature, it gives so much power to the men clients to do anything they want without any consequences, while on the other hand woman prostitutes cannot even seek legal protection. From this, it is clear that women prostitute's positions are really vulnerable because they don't have any bargaining power.

I believe this world needs to pay more attention to this issue because the industry of women prostitution has been an inter-generational problem among women in many societies, and is still. According to the Foundation Scelles as reported in Le Figaro, there are around 32-34 million woman prostitutes around the world in status quo (ProCon, 2018). The data also reveals that apparently Asian countries are the major contributor to that number. China alone contributes more than 5 million woman prostitutes to the world, as being followed by other smaller countries (ProCon, 2018). According to Jiang and Sanchez-Barricarte (2011), this is caused by the imbalanced sex ratio of men and women due to the one-child policy combined with the patriarchal culture there. Many families in China prefer having a son to a daughter. This phenomenon reflects the inequality between men and women there. Many fetus girls are terminated and not even given the chance to be born, then the ones managed to grow up are then justified to be bought for sex or marriage (Jiang & Sanchez-Barricarte, 2011). Even Singapore that is known as one of Asia's most sophisticated and modern countries apparently is still famous for its harbor being port for sex trafficking (Zein, 2020). Its people also still have a negative attitude towards woman prostitutes (Measures, 2020). Moreover, I have observed how the society in my country, Indonesia, often slut-shame woman prostitutes while protecting the male clients. This phenomenon happens not only among lower-class women, but also in high-end prostitution for example in the case of Vanessa Angel, an Indonesian celebrity who was arrested for her alleged involvement in an online prostitution platform practice (Nugraha & Bhwana, 2020). Public judgment mostly corners Vanessa but fails to address or even reveal the identity of her male client, who technically was also involved. Due to these reasons, I plan to set my story in Asian countries, which are China, or to be more specific Hong Kong and Macau due to their long history of prostitution in Asia (Edmonds, 1993); Singapore; and Indonesia. I will also highlight the issue of whore-stigma or slut-shaming, and use the mother-daughter relationship to show how prostitution has been an inter-generational problem that is hard to eradicate.

The title of my creative work is *Call Me Bathsheba*. My creative thesis will tell the story of Ruby Chow who is the illegitimate daughter of a billionaire Hong Kong man and a prostitute. After her father's death, she enters the prostitution industry to make a living while also looking for her biological mother. In her journey, she is being treated badly and disrespected/ slut-shamed. She will travel to three different Asian countries which are China (Hong Kong and Macau), Singapore, and Indonesia (Jakarta). In the end, Ruby finally realizes that all the sufferings that happened in her life are caused by the unjust system of the patriarchal culture, and this motivates her to build an NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) to help oppressed women, especially prostitutes around the world.

## **THE CONCEPT OF THE CREATIVE WORK**

### **Theme**

The theme of my creative work is about how patriarchal culture impacts women in the prostitution industry negatively. To apply this theme, my main character, Ruby Chow will embark on a journey of a career in the prostitution industry across three countries in Asia and experience hardships that affect both her physical and mental well-being. I will show how detrimental the effects of slut-shaming and whore-stigma to Ruby's mental condition.

I use the name Bathsheba to be put on the title although my main character's name is Ruby because Bathsheba is Ruby's biological mother's name and she plays an important role in shaping Ruby's identity and life. She continuously searches for her mother because unconsciously she is longing to find someone to whom she feels belonged and accepted. Since the beginning of her career, she will be using her mother's name as her stage name.

### **Plot**

Ruby Chow is the illegitimate daughter of a rich Hong Kong Electronic businessman and a prostitute. Her stepmother and siblings treat her badly. Ruby's father passed away when she was 16. The family kicked her out of the house, and as an illegitimate daughter, Ruby couldn't inherit even a penny from her father's wealth.

In the beginning, 16-year-old Ruby had to find a job to survive. She had to quit high school, and because she can't find any jobs, Ruby was forced to enter the prostitution industry. She also longed for finding her biological mother whom she never met. Thus, while working as a prostitute, Ruby investigated and collected information to search for her mother. At the rising action, her findings brought her to Singapore where she met Wang Ming, her mother's ex-pimp. Wang Ming exploited her badly.

The issues get more complicated, one day, Ruby met a client named David. He is a successful Indonesian businessman who often goes to Singapore to manage his business. David helped her out from Wang Ming. As Ruby got the information that her mother was sold to this club years ago, she decided to go there.

Ruby worked in Tucuxi while still searching for her mother. Ruby met David again, and her search for her mother became more intense until it finally came to a dead end. Ruby, at last, decided that she had to let her mother go. She then got a job as a professional model in Jakarta. Her beauty made her career sky-rocketed in just one year. Ruby was then a famous model and TV series star. Many of her co-workers envied her success. The climax happened when one day it was leaked on the national media that the national rising star, Ruby Chow was apparently also a prostitute. The whore-stigma done by the society through social media and slut-shaming done by them really did damage to Ruby's mental wellbeing until she almost committed suicide. David's wife, who was furious because her husband cheated on her, insisted on meeting Ruby and it turned out that she was actually Ruby's biological mother.

Last but not least is the resolution. After meeting and hearing her mother's story, Ruby finally realized that the patriarchal culture was what had made her and her mother suffer their whole life. Together with her mother, Ruby then built the Bathsheba foundation—a foundation helping oppressed women around the world to make their voices heard.

## Characters

Ruby Chow, 16-32 years-old. She is a really beautiful woman. Her father is an Asian and her biological mother is a Eurasian as her mother who is a military prostitute had her with a foreign man. She is tall and slender, and she has a mysterious black cursive tattoo at the nape of her neck. At the beginning of her journey, Ruby was a little bit naïve due to being raised in a wealthy and protected household, but she had grown more street smart as time went by. She is not religious and personally leaning more on to atheism although she is legally a Buddhist. She is not stupid, but not a genius/ prodigy either. She is not talented, nor passionate in any particular subject. She used to not know what she wanted to be, she only had one dream in life, which is meeting her biological mother. Ruby is generally a lone wolf. She is quiet, and not really sociable. Ruby's main strength is her capability to endure hardship as she believed that women like her were born to live in the darkness. However, when one day she was almost faced by a jail sentence, she reached a breaking point and couldn't take it anymore. She might be someone who lives in the darkness, but never a criminal. Her whole life Ruby never felt accepted, the need of having a sense of belonging affects many of her actions and decision-making.

Wang Ming, mid-70s. He is a short and plump old man. He is very greedy and exploitative. He is willing to do anything to make more money. He treats people, especially women, with no respect due to his own family's strong patriarchal background. He was one of the leaders of a dangerous triad in Hong Kong, owning many illegal businesses including the Crystal Dragon brothel chains all across Asia. Ruby's mother was sold to his brothel and made her work for free for so many years. When Ruby met him, he was in hiding from the Hong Kong police.

David, in his 50s. He is not so good-looking, but also not ugly, just the average. People respect him because he is generally nice and generous to everyone. He owns a big food-processing company in Indonesia. He was once living with the work-hard-play-hard lifestyle when he was younger. He often visits nightclubs and bars to relieve the stress he gets from work. He then stopped and settled down after he married Bathsheba, his wife, until recently when Bathsheba had fallen into a deep pit of depression. His wife couldn't get conceived and it made her miserable and became a person hard to deal with. David then went back to his old lifestyle to relieve the high level of stress that he got both from work and home. Whenever he was with Ruby, he felt like meeting with her wife's old self. He is inherently a charming and good-hearted man, but he also can't free himself completely from the patriarchal culture.

Bathsheba, in her late-40s. She is absolutely stunning. She has strong facial bone structures. Her body is also taller and curvier than Ruby's. Bathsheba is not well-educated and had solely depended on her body to survive. She practically grew up in Wang Ming's brothel, the Crystal Dragon Macau. Her step-father sold her when she was still a kid. She had become the brothel's property since then. Bathsheba was the name given by Wang Ming to her. When she finally could free herself from Wang Ming's tight grip, she changed her name to Tamara in the hope of recreating her life and identity. She is a shy and quiet woman. She doesn't talk much because she is ashamed of her past life and education level. However, she is a very patient and graceful woman who can be a really good listener to people who need it the most.

## Conflict

I will use both internal and external conflicts in my creative work. Internal conflict is defined as the struggle that the characters have within themselves, usually involving emotional problems (Betts, 2020). In my story I will use internal struggle to show Ruby's dilemma when entering the prostitution industry, her suspicion and fear of David at the beginning, her guilt when dating

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David, her struggle to decide whether to end her life or not. External conflict, on the other hand, means the conflict that happens when the characters have to struggle with external forces to achieve their goal. I will use both man vs man and man vs society as my external conflict. Ruby will have to struggle against her pimp, the police, and people who stigmatize her. These two types of conflicts would complement each other to make this story interesting.

## CONCLUSION

Through writing this creative work, I intend to show how many women entered prostitution in the very first place because it is the best choice they have at hand. Then, I would elaborate on how this practice could harm them physically and psychosocially. I would also show how patriarchy in a direct or indirect way impacts those two main issues discussed. In the story, firstly I show how after her father's death Ruby Chow was kicked out of the house without getting any inheritance due to the patriarchal culture. Secondly, she found difficulties in finding a gender-neutral job because she was considered 'too pretty' and 'too feminine' so that she was perceived to not have the competence required. This reflects how patriarchy valuing women mainly from their beauty and gender roles could hinder them from having equal opportunities. At last because of the financial problem she was experiencing, Ruby finally had to be a prostitute to survive. After entering it once, Ruby found it difficult to leave because she had been conditioned that this was where she meant to be, that she couldn't do anything else. Besides, I also tell other women's stories such as Iesha who was abducted from the street and sold to be a prostitute, Ruby's mother who was sold by her family to the brothel, and Ruby's grandmother who used to be working for military prostitution. All of those were the infamous traditional ways of getting women into prostitution that had been normalized by the patriarchal culture.

To dig on a deeper level, I use Wang Ming's back story to portray how people like him exist because of being raised in a patriarchal household. His cousin Mei Hua is an illustration of women who had internalized the patriarchal belief. Mei Hua believed she had a miserable life because she was ugly and had no sex appeal. Ruby's *mamasans*; Mrs. Lian and *Bu Mariani* are also examples of women who had internalized the ideology so that they don't feel guilty selling other women, but even feel that they were being helpful. Ruby's fellow sex workers also exhibited this kind of attitude by slut-shaming other prostitutes whom they think to be lower than them.

To show how the prostitution industry, affected by the patriarchal culture, harms Ruby physically I wrote scenes that explicitly portrayed how she was beaten by Wang Ming and the other men during her first week. I also mentioned the bad treatments she and her friends received from the clients here and there throughout the story. Ruby also experienced slut-shaming and injustice on micro, meso, and macro level that harms her psychosocial well-being. On micro level she was being shamed by the neighborhood around Red Swan, then her fellow modeling girls, and the public on social media after the news of her arrest broke. On meso level she experienced prejudice and violence from the police and healthcare authority. Last but not least on macro level Ruby experienced injustice from the legal system and the media. All of these slut-shaming injustices happened because the patriarchal culture had been too deeply ingrained in every stakeholder involved. The public, neighborhood, and fellow models were already internalizing the bad narrative about sex workers. The police and healthcare system also believed in the stereotypes attached to sex workers while normalizing the clients. The legal system and media were not on the sex workers' side and have the tendency to put the blame on the prostitute, which was Ruby.

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