



HERMENEUTICS PERSPECTIVE OF THE WORD ‘MEN’ IN THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

Rosyid Dodiyo

English Diploma Program, Humanities Faculty, Jenderal Soedirman University
Purwokerto

rosyid.dodiyo@unsoed.ac.id

Ade Christanty Yudha Bestari

English Education Department, Social, Economics, & Humanities Faculty, Nahdlatul
Ulama University

Purwokerto

acy.bestari@gmail.com

Abstract

The aims of this research are to reveal the meaning of “*men*” inside the text of the Declaration of Independence and to explain the hermeneutics perspective inside the meaning of the text. This research is based on descriptive qualitative analysis. The writer describes the facts of American Women demonstrating their movement in struggling their rights through American Congress found in the primary sources. In doing this, the writer uses hermeneutic as a tool to analyze the texts. The result of this research is to prove that gender problems related to language. It can be seen that in 1920 American women really started their independence after 144 years America had its independence from the tyranny of Great Britain.

Keywords: The Declaration of Independence, hermeneutics perspective, and American Women.

Introduction

America is highly recognized as a country that represents ideal values that are freedom, equality, prosperity, tolerance, and democracy. Its people highly value the concept of human and individual rights such as social, political, and religious freedom. *E Pluribus Unum*, comprehended as ‘from many become one’, signifies the importance of tolerance and respect in the democracy country. This philosophy of individual liberty is written down in the constitutions and the Declaration of Independence. Hence, every citizen is declared equal before the law and is free to embrace any political group. In religious concern, the United States government gives freedom to its citizen for the right to worship or not to worship any religions, even to disagree with the principle or norms of the mainstream religion.

The whole conditions make America to be the most influential country. There are many values to be learned by many countries including Indonesia. Its values fit to be applied almost in many democracy countries. Is it true that American values are the fittest value in the world? In fact, there are many problems in gender equality in the real life. Many women still struggle for their right in so-called the greatest democracy country in the world. The essence of “*men*” in the Declaration of Independence should be re-questioned because the text “*that all men are created equal*” does not have the same meaning as what we called equal according to gender equality.

In American history, debating about equal rights between men and women is something that cannot be solved (*an unfinished battle*). Women struggle their rights against men domination in every aspect of life (*pushing the limits*). They want to rearrange old social order of society that assumes if women can only be in domestic area. If it is seen from social order of society, the mainstream people of that time (even up to



now), most of them are Protestant and Catholic. Those religions clearly describe the role of women and men. There were described that women had lofty task which was in domestic area whereas men had more responsibility as breadwinner hence they must be respected more. Men misused this circumstance to force women's position lower than theirs. Those religions themselves genuinely teach about love and philanthropy.

If we traced back the history far behind, we could re-question that "did founding fathers prepare the governmental system especially Congress only for men?" For example, we never heard about founding mother in America. The concrete example can be seen in the text of the Declaration of Independence "*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness...*"

Hence "men" in here has meaning (plural) men or people (man and woman). Initially writer has the same opinion and concept that meaning and significance of "men" here in "... that all men are created equal..." have meant people (man and woman). If we trace the history of language, we will find that language has clump root from European or Latin is hardly sexes or gender. Therefore to know the exact meaning we must analyze not only by the meaning itself but also by the history.

Theoretical Framework

According to Smith in "*Can 'American Studies' Develop a Method?*", the best thing we can do, in my opinion, is to conceive of American Studies as a collaboration among men working from within existing academic disciplines but attempting to widen the boundaries imposed by conventional methods of inquiry. This implies a sustained effort of the student of literature to take account of sociological, historical, and anthropological data and methods, and of the sociologist or the historian to take account of the data and methods of scholarship in the field of arts. "I" am optimistic enough to believe that inquiries which have their starting points in various departments can converge as they are brought to bear upon a single topic, namely, American culture past and "present" (1980:14) It means that no ready-made method for American Studies. We must be a creative scholar in doing a research. We develop one for ourselves.

This theory is strengthened by Tremaine McDowell in *American Studies*. He observed restlessness among americanists or American studies scholars in that they wanted to move away from the rigid academic specialization and conventional disciplines (McDowell, 1948:3). He stated that American Studies should embrace past, present and future. The time reconciliation of past, present and future do not exist in linear line but in circle. It means that each time will relate to others. Past will influence present, Present will influence future (1948:5).

From those theories above, we can understand that culture cannot be separated from American Studies. Culture itself has close relationship with language. What we called language according to Claire Kramsch in *Language and Culture* is "the principal means whereby we conduct our social lives. When it is used in contexts of communication, it is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways" (Kramsch, 2000:3). This circumstance makes language become highly important in making social life. Language has three aspects in shaping culture that are *language expresses cultural reality*, *language embodies cultural reality*, and *language symbolizes cultural reality*.

According to Dickinson in Kramsch, "*Language and Culture*", culture is the product of socially and historically situated discourse communities, that are to a large extent imagined communities, created and shaped by language (2000:10). By all means



we can see that culture and language cannot be separated because culture is created and shaped by language.

To have a valid meaning in interpretation, we use hermeneutics theory. This statement agrees with Hans-Georg Gadamer in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*. He said “It seems to me to be no coincidence that among the various directions which contemporary philosophical research has taken, semantics and hermeneutics have assumed particular importance. Both have as their starting point the linguistic form of expression in which our thought is formulated. They no longer pass over the primary form in which our intellectual experience is given. Insofar as both of them deal with the realm of language, it is clear that semantics and hermeneutics alike have a truly universal perspective” (Gadamer, 2004:82-83).

Hermeneutics is etymologically derived from the Greek, *hermeneuein* ie, meaning "clear" (*erklären*, explain). The word is then absorbed to the German language and English hermeneutics. As a term defined as the word "doctrine of interpretative understanding of the process, is also about giving meaning or interpretation" (*die Lehre vom interpretativen verstehen, Deuten oder auch vom Auslegen*) (Hans-Georg, 1988:378) Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode* (Truth and Methods) contains the main points of his thoughts about the philosophical hermeneutics which does not only relate to the text, but the whole object of social sciences and humanities.

Method (Times New Roman, 12 pt)

In doing this research, library research is used in order to collect the appropriate data needed in analyzing the object material. The data taken from the Declaration of Independence are the primary data and can be considered as a reflection of a society in a certain period of time. The primary data is then supported by secondary data about American Women demonstrates their movement in struggling their rights through American Congress found in sociological and historical references.

This research is based on descriptive qualitative analysis; firstly, this study develops themes based on the topics that rise on the word “men” in *the Declaration of Independence*. The text of *the Declaration of Independence* is taken from Info USA issued by U.S. Department of State. The writer describes the facts of American Women demonstrating their movement in struggling their rights through American Congress found in the primary sources. In doing this, the writer uses hermeneutic as a tool to analyze the texts. Secondly, this thesis will review some books that can be pursued as reference. Thirdly, this study conducts an observation of the mental evidence that is found on the word “men” in text “.., *that all men are created equal*” of *the Declaration of Independence*. To pursue an analysis, this study stems to references. Lastly, it will draw a conclusion based on the findings of this study.

Findings and Discussion

The History of Meaning of the word “men” in Hermeneutics Perspective

The circumstance of white women is different from Native American women. The native women, before the whites came and exploited their nature and society, had higher position than the men had. Women took the lead in gathering the plant foods on which human survival increasingly depended (Cott, 2000:4). Native women were respected culturally and religiously because they controlled important role in working that activity. Their leaders were hereditary queens—who were thought to communicate with



the gods (2000:4). Women were policy maker in a family. The role of mother was very dominant.

These circumstances turn inside out after the coming of the whites. By means of different background that is brought by the whites, the native women are forced to release all attributes which are held all this time. Religion and culture that they have are forced to be converted to the whites domain where women are the subordinate of men. These conditions agree with the doctrine which is brought by the whites that is *Manifest Destiny*. The main concepts of *Manifest Destiny* according to Scott in “*No Small Courage*” are “*To spread the ideas of democracy and Christianity to native people*” (2000:252). With the understanding of that, the native women try hitherto to struggle their lost rights that are caused by the coming of the whites.

Different from native women, black women in here are considered as slaves with the understanding of that hence the struggle of equal rights is the struggle of white women. Basically, the struggle of equal rights of the black women similarly inclines to the struggle of equal rights of the white women. In fact, the white women learned how to struggle voting rights—we know more as suffrage rights—from the black men.

All those struggles will only be a dream for lullaby if none of them sits on American Congress chair. According to Parenti in “*Democracy for the Few*”, Congress is bicameral body, divided into the House of Representative, whose seats are distributed among the states according to population, and the Senate, with two seats per state regardless of population (2002:218).

American Revolution (1775-1783) is a conflict between 13 British colonies in North America and their parent country, Great Britain. It was made up of two related events: the American War of Independence (1775-1783) and the formation of the American government as laid out by the Constitution of the United States in 1787. First, the war achieved independence from Great Britain by the colonies. Second, the newly created United States of America established a republican form of government, in which power resided with the people.

At the same time, Americans were wrestling with the great political questions that the conflict necessarily produced: first, whether to demand independence from Britain; then, how to structure the new nation they had proclaimed (2004:118).

Actually there are long debates about the origins of the American Revolution whether the war’s aim was based on politic or economic. Brinkley stated that the longstanding debate over the origins of the American Revolution has intended to reflect two broad schools of interpretation. One sees the revolution largely as a political and intellectual event, the other as a social and economic phenomenon (2004:120).

Historians believed that not only economic problems but also political problems stimulated American Revolution. The colonists wanted to have their rights and power in England Parliament hence they have their representative in their mother country therefore they can control the voice of parliament related to their interest in New England. Brinkley stated that “Beginning in the 1950s, a new generation of scholars began to reemphasize the role of ideology and de-emphasize the role of economic interests. Brown (1955) and Morgan (1956) both argued that most eighteenth century Americans shared common political principles and that the social and economic conflicts the progressives had identified were not severe. The rhetoric of revolution, they suggested, was not propaganda but a real reflection of the ideas of the colonists. Bailyn, in *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967), demonstrated the complex roots of the ideas behind the Revolution and argued that this carefully constructed political stance was not a disguise for economic interests but a genuine ideology, rooted in deeply held convictions about rights and power. The Revolution, he exclaimed, “was above all an ideological,



constitutional, political struggle and not primarily a controversy between social groups undertaken to force changes in the organization of the society or the economy” (Raphael, 2001:120).

Many problems arose when the newly independent nation tried to create new governmental system (Flanders, 2000). The distribution of power seemed difficult to be solved because during the colonial times, most of the political offices involved the rich men who owned the property to run the office’s activity. According to Britannica Encyclopedia (2010), “The process of creating a democratic government during the American Revolution increased the prospect of social conflict. During the colonial era, most political offices had been occupied by wealthy men, and less wealthy Americans deferred to them. However, as early as 1770 Philadelphia workers protested against high-powered men who sought to control the political process with little regard for their involvement. By 1776 the backcountry farmers of Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, were instructing their representatives to the state’s constitutional convention to “oppose everything that leans to aristocracy or power in the hands of the rich and chief men exercised to the oppression of the poor.”

Michael Parenti in *Democracy for the Few* stated that “At first, influential Patriots refused to cede power to the lower orders. They insisted that voting and office holding be restricted to propertied white men. Conservative Patriots wanted to deny political rights to men who owned only a little property (Parenti, 2002:42).

Nevertheless, the American Revolution did undermine the control of the state legislatures by an oligarchy of wealthy planters and merchants. In 1774 fewer than one in five members of the assemblies had been artisans or yeoman farmers. After the war, men from these social groups formed a majority in some Northern legislatures and a powerful minority in the Southern assemblies. Claiming a “right to speak and think for themselves,” artisans formed Mechanics Associations and elected representatives from their own ranks. Yeoman farmers benefited from the increased representation of backcountry regions under the new state constitutions. Overall, the increased political activity of farmers and artisans was significant (2002:42).

The democratic reforms generated by the revolution were not fully extended to women. Women had not taken an active role in politics during the colonial era. However, during the revolution, educated upper-class women entered into political debate in private conversations and, less frequently, in public letters to newspapers. These women did not seek voting rights but some of them asked for a republican legal order that would give women greater individual rights. Under English and American common law, a woman was subject to the legal control of her father until age 21 and to the legal control of her husband upon her marriage. This meant that a married woman could not own property or make legal contracts for herself and was virtually subject to her husband’s will. Despite the pleas of Patriot women, including Abigail Adams, neither Congress nor the state governments took significant steps to enhance the legal rights of their female citizens (2002:44).

Women continued to be excluded from politics, as well. The state constitutions either restricted suffrage (voting rights) to men or imposed property qualifications for voting that effectively excluded married women (Tarr, 2003). The New Jersey Constitution of 1776 did allow the vote to all free adult inhabitants worth £50, but when widows and unmarried women began to exercise this right after 1800, new legislation in 1807 excluded women from the polls. (Brinkley, 2002:47).

Before the evolution of universal suffrage, most countries required special qualifications of their voters. In 18th- and 19th-century [Britain](#), for instance, there was a property or income qualification, the argument being that only those who had a stake in



the country should be allowed a voice in its public affairs. At one time, only men qualified for the suffrage. Many newly independent countries of Asia and Africa, during the transition from colony to self-government, had a literacy qualification for the suffrage. Some countries limit it to certain racial or ethnic groups. Thus, for example, South Africa, at one time, and the Old South of the United States did not permit their black populations to vote (Britannica Encyclopedia, 2010).

The Declaration of Independence

From the literary work above, we can conclude that Declaration of Independence is document in American history used by the 13 British North American colonies to proclaim their independence from Great Britain. The Declaration of Independence was adopted in final form on July 4, 1776. It can be divided into three parts: a statement of principle concerning the rights of man and the legitimacy of revolution, a list of specific grievances against England's King George III, and a formal claim of independence.

The document transformed the colonists' struggle with Great Britain from a defense of their rights as Englishmen to a revolution aimed at overthrowing the existing form of government. It did not establish a structure of government and should not be confused with either the Articles of Confederation or the Constitution of the United States. For the American colonists, the declaration was an announcement to the rest of the world that the colonies were independent from Great Britain; it also provided a rationale for this action.

The meaning of "men" in the Declaration of Independence is truly for "male"—especially white male only excluded black male or native male. The text also refers to exclude women or female whether they are white, black, or native.

It also represents the right of vote of New Englanders to avoid the interference of English Parliament in England. In order to truly work, however, representative government must represent all people. According to Marylynn Salmon in Nancy F. Cott, serious conflict between the American colonists and England began shortly after the end of the French and Indian War (1754-63). England had gone deeply into debt to pay for the war, and government leaders approved a series of tax measures meant to raise money in America to help reduce that debt. The new laws were opposed by many colonists, who were accustomed to paying taxes only at the local and colony level. Americans did not oppose paying England customs duties, and giving the mother country control over trade, for that was part of a mutually beneficial trading relationship between England and her colonies. But they did not want to become subject to the English Parliament in other ways. In particular, they did not welcome taxation by a governing body that cared more for the interests of the mother country than their own. Being part of the great British Empire gave the colonists many advantages, but those might all be lost if Parliament began to oppress them through burdensome taxes (Cott, 2000:132).

According to Parenti, "originally, the only people allowed to vote, and thus to be represented, were white men who owned property—a small percentage of the population. Gradually, voting rights were broadened to include white men without property, blacks, Native Americans, naturalized immigrants, and women". (Parenti, 2002:120)

Feminism Perspective of the word "men" in the Declaration of Independence

According to some feminists, English language is sexes because it does not have neutral meaning of word. They stated that language belonged to men. As Mary M. Talbot stated in Sarah Gamble, "As feminists began to search for existing scholarship on women, men and language, what little they found was highly androcentric. Linguistics has a long tradition of interest in language change, so that is what they encountered" (Gamble,



2009:140). Robin Lakoff's *Language and Women's Place* (1975) was an influential early work on gender and language from a feminist perspective; it explores two avenues: sexism in the English language and women's language use (2009:142). The theories convince that the meaning of "men" in the Declaration of Independence is male adult not referred to the others. According to Brinkley, puritanism placed a high value on the family, and the position of wife and mother was highly valued in Puritan culture. At the same time, however, Puritanism served to reinforce the idea of nearly absolute male authority. A wife was expected to devote herself almost entirely to serving the needs of her husband and the family economy (Brinkley, 2004:63).

Conclusion (Times New Roman, 12 pt)

From the evidence above, we can highly reveal the fact that the word "men" in the Declaration of Independence and the word "men" in the Constitution of the United States are really for white male who owned property not to all men. Moreover, then gradually declined to white male who did not have property, black male, native male, and women—white and black. Historically we can explain that the Founding Fathers had prepared the governmental system for "men".

What kind of hermeneutics perspective is emerged in these circumstances? The word of "that all men are created equal" in the Declaration of Independence really affects American society especially women. The hermeneutics perspective of the word "men" caused suffering to women in every aspect of life. They have to struggle their own independence to be acknowledged as citizens. In the early America, citizens in here were white male who owned property. Not all men were citizen. Women can be acknowledged as citizens in 1920 because in that time they could vote for themselves—144 years after America had its independence from Great Britain.

If we compare it to Indonesia, the women in Indonesia are considered as citizens in 1945 after we declared our independence from Dutch. Women could vote at that time in politics. Even Indonesia is not as great as America but we can be proud of gender equality in Indonesia because women were acknowledged as citizens as soon as Indonesia had its independence hence women did not have to wait until 144 years to be participated in governmental system. Perhaps America can learn about gender equality from Indonesia.

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