



**CALLS FOR THE SICK ROSE:  
HERMENEUTICS AND SEMIOTICS FOR FEMINISM FROM DIVERSITY**

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**“The Sick Rose” – From Songs of Experience**

O Rose, thou art sick,  
The invisible worm  
That flies in the night  
In the howling storm  
Has found out thy bed  
Of Crimson joy,  
And his dark secret love  
Does thy life destroy.

(William Blake, 1794)

“When I was reading this poem, I smelled the bloody and violent moods between two sexes. I felt a kind of ‘control’ in the atmosphere. There is an invisible bondage in this poem.” (from a reader’s response to *The Sick Rose*).

**Abstract**

In this case study research, the authors conceptualized hermeneutics and semiotics into the inquiry of poetry. They invited the graduate students in a reading course to read and to interpret poems. *The Sick Rose* was one of the six poems in this study. Hermeneutics is the interpretation of poetry, and semiotics is the exploration of the meaning of poems through signs. Readers from diverse racial, cultural, linguistic, and religious backgrounds read the poems, transacted their life experiences with the poems, and constructed signs such as drawing, music, dance, drama, culture modes, and storytelling to interpret the poems. Coincidentally, “feminism” became an outstanding theme in most readers’ responses to a poem, *The Sick Rose* by the English poet William Blake. This study shifted to the focus of breaking myths about gender role stereotypes, activating readers’ gender consciousness, and advocating women’s rights for social justice towards a world of understanding and equality.

**Keywords:** Hermeneutics; semiotics; feminism; gender role stereotype; social justice.

**1. Introduction**

In a graduate level reading course, before the authors introduced the theories of literary criticism, most students used the concepts of new criticism to dissect (Crammer, 2001) the poem, *The Sick Rose* (Blake, 1794) in terms of trees, flowers, nature, living, life and death. Later, the authors challenged students to employ various theories of literary criticism like hermeneutics (Gallagher, 1992), semiotics (Cunningham, 1992; Langer, 1978; Sebeok, 1978; 2001), transactional theory (Rosenblatt, 1978), and reader-response criticism (Beach, 1993; Cooper, 1989) in their interpretation or transaction of the poem through the lens of their unique life experiences. The authors invited every reader to read-aloud and think-aloud the poem individually, envision (Rosenblatt, 1978) the poem, share his/her vision of the poem, and draw a picture to interpret the poem.

**1.1 The Limits of the New Criticism**

The literary criticism like formalism and the new criticism, that focus attention primarily on the author, the content and the form of the literary works, in which the reader’s role (Eco, 1979) in re-creating literary works is limited (Eco, 1990), and the reader lost his/her stance in assuming aesthetic and subjective perspectives to read and to interpret the text (Rosenblatt, 1978). Reader Response theories were the new trend rising against these two criticisms since 1970s.

**1.2 Objective**

The purpose of this case study research was to challenge readers to transcend the traditional new criticism, that focused on the “right” interpretation of the literary works, and make them critical thinkers who were able to think from different perspectives, see with different eyes, listen to different drums, speak with different voices, and most importantly, the readers’ eyes were enlightened to examine their gender roles in the family, at schools, in the work place, in the society and reflect on their impacts on human rights as females as part of the society.

**2. Hermeneutics, Semiotics, Reader-Response, and Feminism Criticism**

**2.1 Hermeneutics**

Hermeneutics is the interpretation of poetry (Dilthey, 1972). During the hermeneutical process, many factors like reader, author, text, time, society, culture, history, etc. are all involved and conditioned by one another to build an interpretation of poetry, and the ancient Greeks acquired knowledge and wisdom through hermeneutical processes. The contemporary philosophers define hermeneutics as the interpretation of the world of the text (Gallagher, 1992; Ricoeur,

1970). Hermeneutics makes the world of the text an open universe, and invites readers to perceive reading through their unique lens.

## 2.2 Semiotics

Semiotics is the study of signs like arts, music, dance, drama, animation, cultural modes, etc. that humans created to mediate the world (Cunningham, 1992; Deely, 1994; Sebeok, 1978; 2001; Siegel, 2006). The world which we are living in is perfused with signs and call for interpretation (Eco, 1990). Vygotsky asserted that semiotics highlights the use of signs and brings with it a focus on meaning as central to human activity (Moll, 1997). The four components of semiotics are (a) signs – anything bears meaning; (b) semiosis – the construction of signs; (c) inference - reasoning of signs; and (d) reflexivity – the reflection on the construction of signs (Cunningham, 1992).

According to semiotics, a good language arts curriculum must be able to expand a learner's potential for understanding and communicating through a variety of signs, not only language (Leland & Harste, 1994; Short, Kauffman, & Kahn, 2000; Suhor, 1992). When readers are striving to communicate and construct different signs or sign systems to interpret their understanding of the text, and since the connection between different sign systems does not exist a priori, it would be an "anomaly" to learners (Siegel & Carey, 1989). To Peirce, "anomalies" which learners encounter in their daily lives drive the process of inquiry into the endless cycle of inference (Cunningham, 1992): abduction, deduction, and induction. Learners should be provided with opportunities to become actively involved in the construction of knowledge through these reasoning processes. In education, the shift from a knowledge transmission model to an inquiry-oriented model of teaching and learning can be achieved through the process of inference, or reasoning, in a social context (Siegel, 2006).

## 2.3 Reader-Response Criticism

Reader-response criticism (Beach, 1993; Cooper, 1989) is a school of literary theory that concentrates on the readers and their cultural, religious and life experience in literary works, in contrast to other schools and theories such as formalism and the new criticism, that focus attention primarily on the author or the content and form of the works, in which the reader's role (Eco, 1979) in re-creating literary works is limited or ignored (Eco, 1990). Reader-response theory recognizes the reader as an active agent who imparts "real existence" to the literary works and completes its meaning through interpretation. Reader-response criticism claims that literature should be viewed as a performing art in which readers create their own, possibly unique, text-related performance. Eisner (1978) confirmed that, in order to achieve a direct transfer of experiences, readers are challenged to employ words, artistic means and other medium, to parallel their feelings, tensions, and moods in their interpretation of literary works.

## 2.4 Feminist Criticism

In his observation of students' responses to a poem, Beach (1993) noticed that readers' gender role and attitudes, which are culturally constrained propensity to adopt "masculine" instead of "feminist" orientation, greatly affected readers' responses; while there was no single feminist theoretical stance on response. Feminist critics share a basic concern with the very limitations of responding to what is a largely a male canon and what they characterize as a male reading formation. Schweickart (1994) advocated the engagement of feminist criticism to complete reader-response criticism, since much of reader-response theory ignores the issues of race, class and sex, and gives no hint of the conflicts, sufferings, and passions that attend these realities. Feminism is a collection of movements and ideologies aimed at defining, defending, and advocating equal political, economic, educational, cultural, and social justice for women. Feminist theory, which emerged from feminist movements, directs to understand the nature of gender inequality by exploring women's social roles and life experiences; it has developed theories in a variety of disciplines in order to respond to issues such as the social construction of sex and gender. For example, Holly (1989) assured that feminism had dwelled long enough on the veils of human low status, lack of prestige, exploitation, and self-abasement. But, in her collection of feminist criticism, she envisioned many female literary characters who are self-reliant, independent, strong, courageous, that is healthy, sane and mature towards a feminism aesthetic. Facing the increasing of immigrant women populace in this country, Lum (2007) called for multicultural feminism which is concerned with women of diversity.

# 3. Design of Research

## 3.1 Participants

The authors designed this research as a case study, a naturalistic inquiry emphasized on the individual reader's uniqueness. Twenty-five students participated in this semiotic inquiry; and the six readers whose artifacts were selected for discussion in this study, happened to be ELLs from various racial, cultural and religious backgrounds. For sake of their family, cultural, political and religious concerns, they offered to identify themselves by colors, i.e. red, black, blue, green, pink, and purple, instead of their real names. Ms. Red is a Muslim from the Middle East, Mr. Black is from Taiwan, Ms. Blue is from China, Ms. Green is from India, Ms. Pink is an Asian American, and Ms. Purple is a Hispanic woman from Columbia. All are interested in poetic exploration.

## 3.2 Poetry

Research shows that forty percent of English language teachers dislike poetry because poetry is ambiguous for interpretation based on their inclination to the new criticism which limits the response to the literary works to the "correct" interpretation (Kintgen, 1983; Lu, 2000). Their other concern is that poetry expresses concepts and things by indirection, i.e. displacing, distorting, or creating of meaning (Riffaterre, 1978); and this indirection process confuses readers. But the interpretation of poetry from hermeneutics, semiotics, and reader-response criticism makes the poetic world an open universe inviting unlimited interpretation from readers (Eco, 1990) when the reader is evocating the poem during his/her transaction of his/her life experience with the world of the poem (Rosenblatt, 1978; Cooper, 1989).

## 3.3 "The Sick Rose" by the English poet William Blake

The authors favor poems by William Blake for his complex, elusive and visionary use of symbolism and allegory, and those characteristics make the interpretation of the poem, especially *The Sick Rose* (Blake, 1794) more complicate

and can invite more interpretations based on various readers-response criticisms and the readers' cognitive, social, cultural and religious experiences (Beach, 1993; Cooper, 1989; Cramer, 2001).

### 3.3 Data Collection

In a graduate level reading course, after the introduction of various readers response criticism theories, the authors invited readers to (1) "read-aloud" (Cramer, 2001; Hickman, Pollard-Durodola, 2009) and "think-aloud" (OczKus, 2009) poems individually, (2) "envision" (Rosenblatt, 1978) by observing the pictures that appear in their minds when they read poems, (3) construct signs like languages, art (drawing), music, cultural modes, etc. to interpret poems (Sebeok, 1978; 2001), (4) transact their life experience (Rosenblatt, 1978) with the world in the poems, and (5) share their drawings and their reflections by storytelling in the literacy circle meetings.

## 4. Findings from Readers' Responses to Feminism

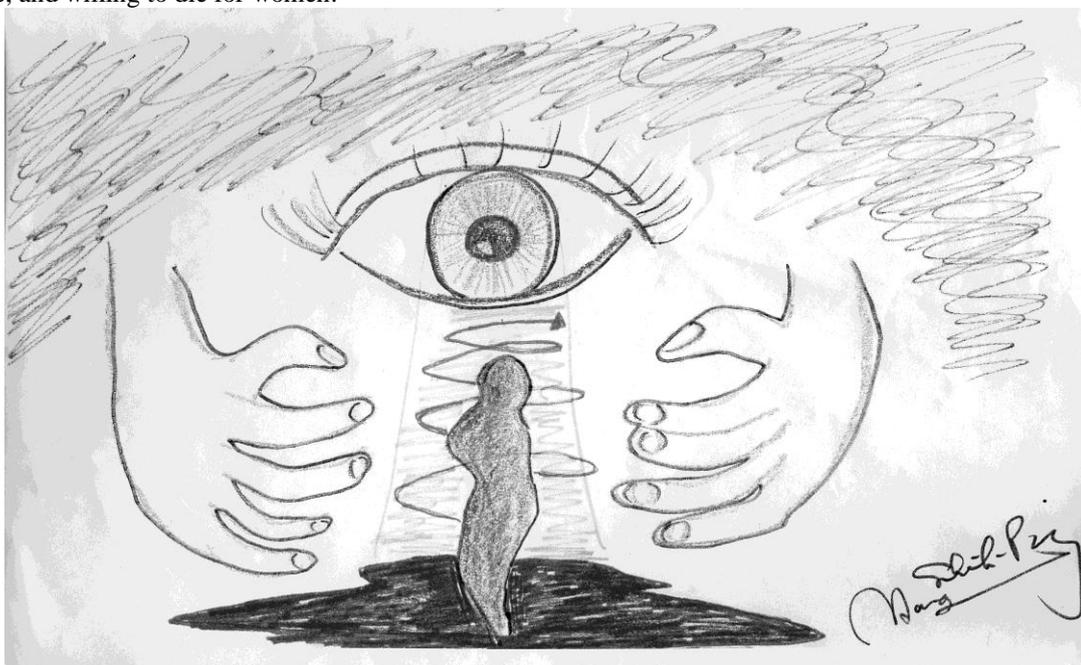
The six students out of twenty-five coincidentally mentioned about feminism, and feminism thus highlighted the theme in readers' responses to this poem, *The Sick Rose*. The readers from different racial, cultural and religious backgrounds became feminism activists using drawings and storytelling to proclaim their fury against the social injustice on women such as rape, oppression, prostitution, discrimination, domestic violence, sexual harassment, and patriarchal systems that degrade and despise women. They concluded that feminism affects society as a whole, rather than on an individual basis. They advocated gender equality, women's rights, woman's dignity, woman's self-identity, women's bodily integrity for abortion right, for legal protection of women and girls towards social justice in the modern society.

### 4.1 Mr. Black and His Drawing (see Figure 1)

Mr. Black's major was film and theater directing, and he had received very strict training in related fields such as art, music, dance, drama, playwright, stage management, and audio-visual techniques. As a young artist and movie maker, he was deeply concerned about many issues in the society, for example, the assault on women's rights, the political conflicts, and the global warming, etc. He was committed to use films to "purify" and to "educate" the society, and that commitment contributed to his career as an actor and director in films and theater.

Because of his intense artistic perception, Mr. Black was very sensitive in using lines and colors to express his interpretation of poetry. He said, "When I was reading this poem, 'the sick rose', I smelled the bloody and violent moods between two sexes. I felt a kind of 'control' in the atmosphere. There is an invisible bondage in this poem... No freedom! No release! It seems that the pretty woman is being bound by a kind of dark authority... You see! His pinky eyes reveal 'insanity' and 'lust', his rough hands reveal his grabbing force... He attempted to control her, and finally destroyed her. I was thinking of sexual violence, or child prostitute, that is very popular in a dark patriarchal society. Women are forced to be submissive to men, to violence from men." Mr. Black interpreted his anger with the assault on women's rights, and his anger against patriarchy for disgracing women and their rights in human history. Mr. Black criticized patriarchy, which defined female beauty as physical appearance. In his drawing, he used purple color to identify "noble quality". To him, women are noble; thus, he drew a delicate purple figure in "The sick rose". The noble woman is a victim in a patriarchal society.

Mr. Black also shared with the readers the history of a Chinese movie, "*Liang Shan-Po and Chu Yin-Tai*", a love tragedy like *Romeo and Juliet*. Mr. Black noticed the popularity of that movie in Taiwan and Hong Kong in the 1960s, and ninety percent of the audience was older women who admired Ling-Po, the actress, but she always played the role of a handsome and passionate man in Chinese movies. Mr. Black commented that the traditional aged Chinese women used this way to reveal their heart's desire for the handsome and passionate husbands while they were bound by the tradition and culture. That is, they were very traditional, and always felt ashamed of expressing love to any man they liked, and they did not have any right to select their own husbands, since most husbands were relative arbitrary in Chinese society at that time. To those aged women, the ideal husband would be like Mr. Liang Shan-Po in the movies, handsome, passionate, and willing to die for women.



**Figure 1**

The noble lady dressed in purple was struggling in the midst of the black cloud which signifies the dark political and patriarchy society. The evil guy with pinky eyes and rough hands raped her and killed her by violence. She was bathing in her own blood.

#### 4.2 Ms. Blue and Her Drawing (see Figure 2)

Ms. Blue asked her mother to brief her story, because she likened the past years of her life to a nightmare. She was a very happy and innocent young medical college student majoring in surgery. But, when she entered the sophomore year, she was commissioned to a remote countryside clinic to work as a midwife helping the country women abort baby girls because the red communism government enacted the one-child policy during and after the China Civil Cultural Revolution in 1966 to 1976. The other reason, most Chinese families need boys, at least one, to inherit the family name and property, while the government's one-child policy forced them to give up the baby girls. The life experience in the remote countryside was a nightmare. She changed her major to computer science upon entering graduate school.

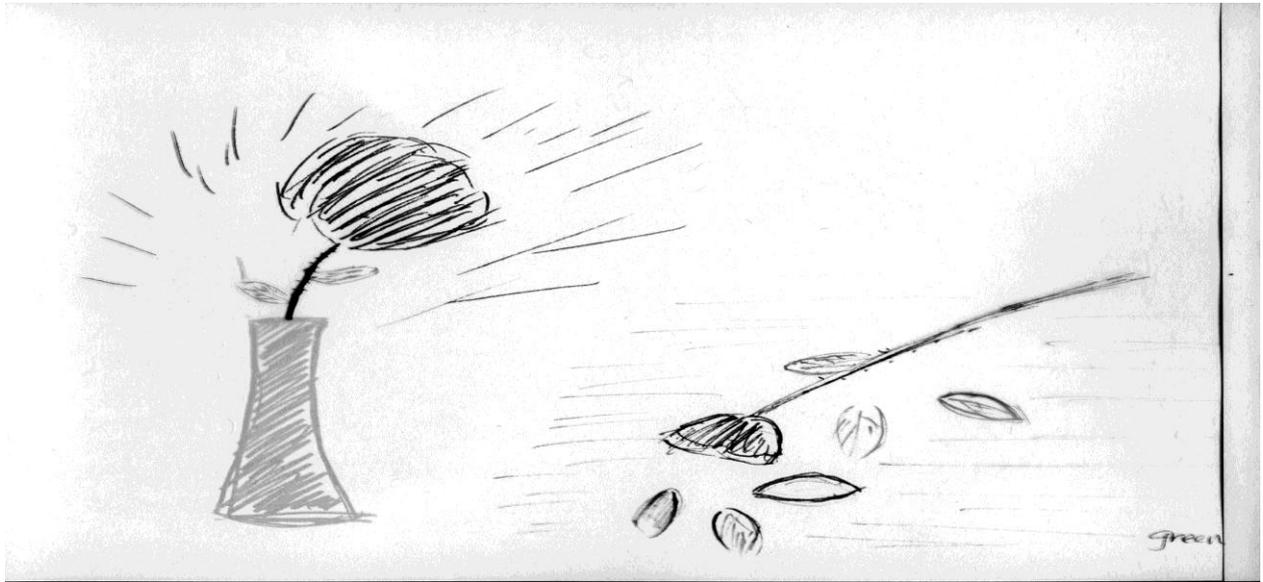


**Figure 2**

The baby girl was in the heart of her mom, but her mother could not protect and preserve her because of the political persecution, "the one-child policy" enacted by the red communism government during 1966-1976. The baby girl and her helpless mom were controlled by the red communist government (the gray color) and the Chinese patriarchal tradition (the black color on the top of the drawing).

#### 4.3 Ms. Green and Her Drawing (see Figure 3)

Ms. Green obtained a Master's degree in math and computer science. She and her high school sweet heart planned to marry in the US after graduation. However, his father came to attend his son's commencement, and discovered their love affair. The old man demanded US\$50,000 from her father as a dowry, but her father could not afford that amount of dowry. The old man separated them, and took his son home to India. The second year, her father found another young man for her. This time, his father demand only US\$10,000 for her dowry. They went back to India to celebrate the wedding. They lived happily even after.

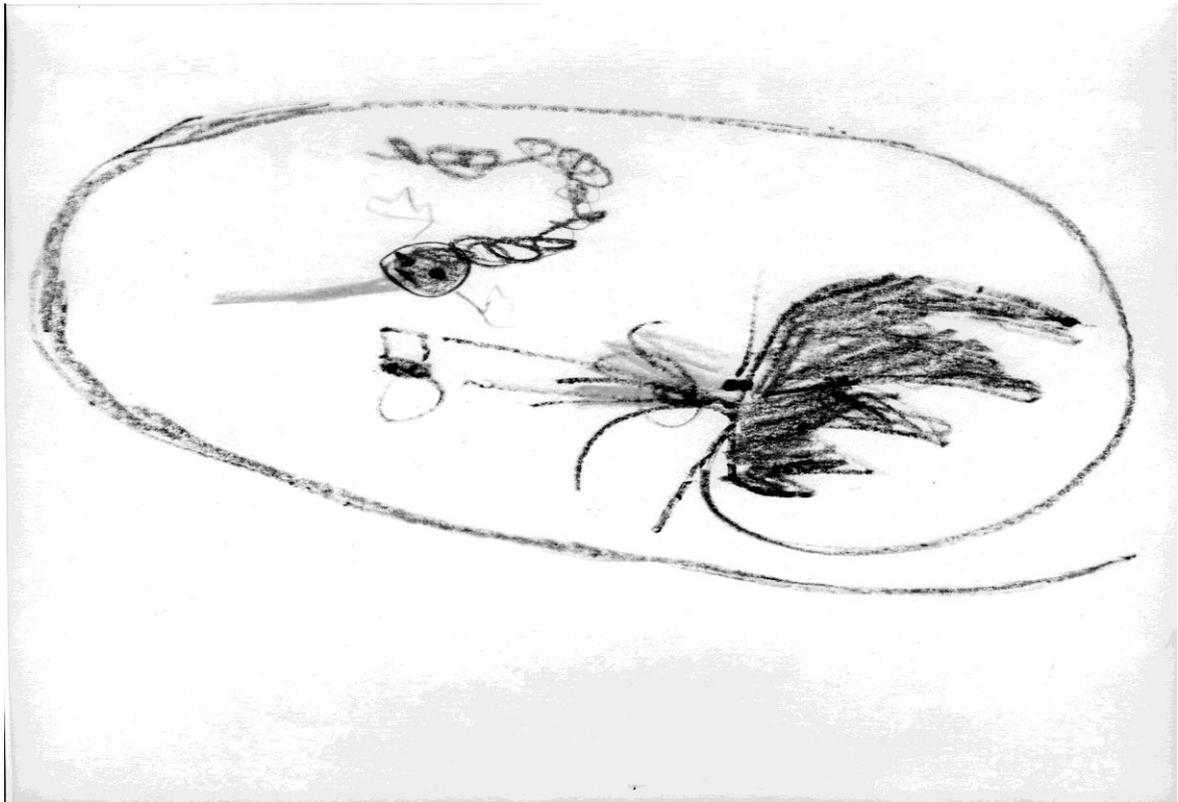


**Figure 3**

The same rose, once was abandoned on the ground, once was put in a vase. She has no right to make any decision for her marriage and destiny even she has a Master's degree in math and computer science and has a bright future as an engineer at IBM in California.

**4.4 Ms. Pink and Her Drawing (see Figure 4)**

Ms. Pink expressed her deep sympathy for her lovely educated grandmother who was a pioneer of Yoga fitness enterprise in Taiwan in 1980s, while always practices submissiveness throughout her life. She told Ms. Pink that Chinese tradition required "submissiveness" of women: to be submissive to her father before marriage, to her husband during married life, and to be submissive to her son or daughter in widowhood. Ms. Pink's grandmother married her husband by the arrangement of her father when she was 17 years old immediately after high school graduation. She listened to her father-in-law and her husband during married life. She turned to her elder son and submitted to him after her husband passed away. She does not speak for herself in order to keep the peace in the family. She was praised by her relatives and friends as an "Excellent Model of Woman".



**Figure 4**

Ms. Pink drew a very beautiful flower and a green smiling worm, but colored the rose petals brown.

**4.5 Ms. Purple and Her Drawing (see Figure 5)**

As a young Hispanic woman from Columbia, Ms. Purple fell in love with her American boyfriend at the first sight, without the consent from her family. But her American husband abandoned her and their two daughters three years after their marriage. She had to work very hard as a janitor in the University campus to raise herself and her two daughters in the U.S. She always sighed over her fate with tears.



**Figure 5**

A pretty young Hispanic woman was looking outside the window and shedding tears like the rain dripping outside her window.

**4.6 Ms. Red and Her drawing (see Figure 6)**

Ms. Red was a princess of a chief in Africa. After an arranged marriage, she and her husband, the son of another chief in Africa, came to the US for graduate studies. She tried to seek a legal way to keep her husband in the US, because she was afraid that she would lose her husband if they returned back to their country, as it was lawful for her husband to marry other three women in the Middle East.



**Figure 6**

Ms. Red drew a beautiful woman with silk black hair, pretty big eyes, half-open mouth with red lips, but Ms. Red did not draw the “hijab” to cover her head.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Silent wives

Blenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule (1986) used the metaphors of “silence” and “finding a voice” in the development of women’s sense of selves, minds, and ways of learning, and found that many women from various ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds had gone through a period of “deaf and dumb”. In this study, most readers, except Mr. Black, looked like “deaf and dumb” when they read the poem, *The Sick Rose*. Mr. Black’s responses and drawing astonished everyone and inspired everyone. Gradually they kept drawing their pictures to interpret the poem. Because of their mutual trust and respect, they became open to each other and willingly shared their transaction of the poem with their life experiences (Rosenblatt, 1978; Diltney, 1985). The five readers found their voices, and were no longer “dumb, silent wives” in the literacy circle meetings.

### 5.2 Gender injustice

5.2.1 Gender equity has been the universal cultural issue. Beach (1993) noticed that gender has been one of the challenges in different cultures based on his research on reader-response criticism, while the rights of girls and women are not equally regarded across the world. In the literacy meetings, the six readers kept complained about the gender injustice in their cultures. FAWE (2010) was very angry that in many developing countries, girls and women continue to be deprived of their right for education, many are forced into early marriages or are the victims of humiliating abuse. Luscombe (2014) reported that nearly 30 million people worldwide are exploited, and these victims are forced to work, marry, serve in wars or provide sex through modern slave trade and human trafficking.

5.2.2 Rape: The crisis in higher education in the U.S. Gray (2014) analyzed that one in five women will be the victim of a sexual assault on campus during college. America’s campuses are dangerous places (Linton, 2013). They all advocate the new law to keep female students safe. Joe Biden in *The White House Acts*, encourages the victims to step up; it’s absolutely time because the moral disapprobation of society is the most powerful tool for effecting change.

5.2.3 Afghan women are struggling for political election. Mahr (2014) reported that during the recent candidate registration period in Afghanistan in March, more than 300 women signed up to run in provincial-council elections. Ms. HS, a female candidate who was running for second vice president, told TIME, “We’ve always been ignored. This is the opportunity to show that women can be in a position of power.” This is a momentum for women’s participation in politics, for Afghanistan’s democracy.

5.2.4 Sandberg’s voice. Thirty years after women comprised 50 percent of the college graduates in the United States, men still hold the vast majority of leadership positions in politics and business. This means that women’s voices are still not heard equally in the decisions that most affect our lives. In her book, *Lean In*, examines why women’s progress in achieving leadership roles has stalled, explains the root causes, and offers compelling, common sense solutions that can empower women to achieve their full potential.

5.2.5 Conflict and a fine balance. After the release of the novel, *“The silent wife”* (Harrison, 2013), and the movie, *“The fault in our stars”* (2014), where Woodley, who plays the 16-year old cancer teen in the movie, made a conclusion, saying, “I think that if men went down and women rose to power, that wouldn’t work either. We have to have a fine balance.”

5.2.6 Gender movements in the U.S. Steinmetz (2014) said after the U.S. Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage in 2013, another social movement is poised to challenge long-held cultural norms and beliefs. For example, the transgender views sex and gender as two separate concepts: sex is biological, determined by a baby’s birth anatomy; gender is cultural, a set of behaviors learned through human interactions in the culture and society. Since the involvement of the U.S. Supreme Court in this complex issue, there will have more similar gender movements in the world.

## 6. Significance

### 6.1 In Early Childhood Education

6.1.1 Gender awareness in early childhood. Psychologists (Hyde, 2014; Robles de Melendez, & Beck, 2013) observed that gender awareness develops very early in childhood; and children can identify the gender of themselves and others by external clues such as dress, toys, and activities. Assignment of gender roles is one of the functions of culture, and children are able to distinguish gender roles through the socializing agents at home, school, society and the mass media. Shapiro (1994) noticed that children display “gender stereotypes” in play. She maintains that once children have achieved the sense of gender identity, the “powerful stereotypes” will follow them throughout their lives. Jalongo (2011) had the same observation result. Educators and parents should address gender equality as early as the developmentally appropriate time, not wait until children become more mature.

6.1.2 Gender stereotypes: Misogyny and Homophobia. Cushner, McClelland, & Safford (2015) confirm that gender roles in our society are “normative”. This means the ideas about values, attitudes, and behaviors that are closely related with sex or gender, have been coded by the social or cultural groups as norms, or stereotypes. For example, boys and men are expected to be aggressive, independent, strong, logical, direct, adventurous, ambitious, and self-confident; girls and women are expected to be relatively passive, dependent, weak, illogical, gentle, and emotional. We have all been socialized from birth for women to be sweet and nurturing and men to be tough and aggressive, and for women to be valued for the care they give while men are valued for their external accomplishments. Gender role stereotypes limit the cognitive and humane development of the youth by creating fear, anxiety, misconception, competition, alienation and hatred. Two forces, “misogyny”, the hatred of women; and “homophobia”, the fear of homosexuals, enforce the development of male and female stereotypes among children and young people in our society. Both forces degrade and even undervalue female quality and equity.

6.1.3 Class activities for collaborative learning among genders. Usually, misunderstanding, competition, stereotypes are the source of violence. A balanced curriculum with classroom management will help children develop their gender awareness, engage boys and girls in the activities for collaborative learning through social interaction, promote understanding and foster clarification of stereotypes about gender, culture, religion, and society (Robles de Melendez, & Beck, 2013).

6.1.4 Children literature and mass media. Educators like Norton (2001), Beaty & Pratt (2011) recommend reading multicultural literature, and watching multicultural movies by authors, directors, and illustrators of the target culture for authenticity and reliability, yet without bias or stereotype. Multicultural literature and movies help children become aware of people from diversity, and help to get rid of xenophobia, the distrust, fear, or hatred toward people from diversity (Tunnell, Jacob, Young, & Bryan (2012).

### 6.2 The Coordination and Collaboration of Family, School and Social Media.

Psychologists claimed that children develop gender consciousness, and gender stereotypes (Shapiro, 1994) very early when they are playing. That means, educators, parents, and social media should address gender equality as early as the developmentally appropriate time, not wait until children become more mature (Cushner, McClelland, & Stafford, 2015; Robles de Melendez, & Beck, 2013; Shapiro, 1994).

### 6.3 Acceptance and Tolerance.

Spradlin (2012) said that human sexuality is complex, and various members of society view it differently. Different perspectives often lead to the conclusion that “heterosexuality” is “normal”, and “homosexuality” is “deviant”. The individuals identified as sexual orientation may be LGBTQ members. For consideration of the fair access and treatment in education, employment, hospital, prison, military and other social activities (Steinmetz, 2014), these individuals always select not to disclose or identify themselves. The authors advocate the parents and educators to take positive stance of understanding, acceptance and tolerance towards the “deviant” ones, by protecting them from fear, anxiety, depression, bullying, alienation, exclusion, and assaults, and helping them build self-esteem for socialization, school and career success (Cushner, McClelland, & Sanford, 2015; Robles de Melendez, & Beck, 2013; Spradlin, 2012; Steinmetz, 2014).

## 7. Conclusion

In this poetic journey, through the poem, the readers find the courage to reflect on their own experiences of social and gender injustice. The poem also allowed readers from diverse racial, cultural and religious backgrounds to find a platform to activate their feminism consciousness, and to call for a just and equitable society from girls and women perspective. We need more women in power, and more committed and passionate early childhood educators as well as parents to break through the myth about gender stereotypes, sex violence and correctly conceptualize gender consciousness, gender identity into family and school settings regardless their cultural backgrounds. To the girls, women and “deviant” individuals, who have been suffering as victims of violence, and prejudice, the education system as well as the slow progress of social movements will heal their wounds.

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