

**Research Article**

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**Feudalism in the Abuse of Power in Ursula K. Le Guin's  
Semley's Necklace**

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**Abstract**

This research paper discusses feudalism in the short story written by Ursula K. Le Guin, entitled Semley's Necklace. The writers use sociological approach to analyze the textual and contextual elements in the story. The writers apply library research method in compiling data and information needed related to the research. In analyzing the phenomena in Ursula K. Le Guin's Semley's Necklace, the writers use the theory of Feudalism of François-Louis Ganshof and Marc Bloch. The result of the research indicates that there is a partnership inequality between the Lord-Vassal feudal system and the abuses of power committed by the Starlords as the ruling party that fails to prosper the inhabitants of Western Lands and exploits their property. The exploitation causes a rampant growth of poverty in Western Lands. The poverty causes discontent and jealousy on Semley as the protagonist in the story. The poverty, discontent, and jealousy bring Semley influence to decide to leave the manor to search for her lost dowry called "The Eye of the Sea". As a result, Semley loses her beloved husband, the only reason she goes away to bring back her sapphire-stoned necklace in a "one-night long" journey.

**Key words:** feudalism, abuse of power, lord, vassal

**1. Introduction**

Continual attempts to strongly build up a scientific relationship between social system and literary work have reached into an interdisciplinary scope called sociology of literature. It is certainly built by two different academic branches; sociology and literary

study. The concentration of sociology of literature is to analyze the correlation and implication between human's world and social system that feature the political and economic values in literary works. One of the literary works revealing the sociological phenomena is described in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Wind's Twelve Quarters*.

Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Wind's Twelve Quarters* shows us social criticisms of human and society's structure. Among the short stories, Ursula K. Le Guin has written the social phenomena in one of the compilations of short stories. The writers choose a short story entitled *Semley's Necklace* to be analyzed as it has a unique story closely related to Feudalism topic within the science fiction genre and sociology of literature. The short story tells about a young woman who has experienced discontent, humility, and contempt in the middle of feudal society. Living in a poor house, she has attempted to bring back her family's dignity, leaving her husband and daughter to search for the great treasure of her inheritance. The young female central character in the story named, Semley, lives in Western Lands in a planet called FORMALHAUT II. She is a descendant of Angyar, the highest class among other species. However, she lives in discontent of being Durhal's poor bride as they have to pay taxes as a tribute to the Starlords. Conflict is rising as Semley tries to search for the sapphire-stoned necklace that she believes as the lost dowry of her inheritance. Semley believes that if she is able to bring back her only treasure to her husband, a family pride would be back as there will be something 'worthy' to speak about. As Semley is seeking for the necklace, she leaves her home without realizing and knowing that she will finally lose her husband in a "one night long" journey.

Apparently, there is no previous studies that analyze Le Guin's *Semley's Necklace* before. The only analysis the writers have found is a brief explanation or the summary about the plot of the literary works. Therefore, the writers would like to do further research about feudalism phenomena in the story which covers the beginning of Feudalism in *Semley's Necklace*, the abuse of power in *Semley's Necklace*, and the effects of Feudalism in *Semley's Necklace*.

## **2. Methods**

### *2.1. Method of Data Collection*

In completing this research paper, the writers apply library research method to obtain relevant data and information needed. Library research method is any written information examined through the writers' own notes or other's published works. The compilation of data is in the type of book, notes, journals, magazines, or internet sites [1].

### *2.2. Research Approach*

Based on the background of the research, the writers use sociology of literature as the research approach in this paper. As Kennedy stated, sociological approach observes the

literary work within cultural, economy, or political views that is pointedly or vaguely expressed in the work (1995:1807)<sup>(2)</sup>. In this research paper, the writers analyze the social context in *Semley's Necklace*, especially the abuse of power as part of social problem in governing citizen's properties. The writers use the theory of Feudalism stated by François-Louis Ganshof and Marc Bloch to analyze the feudalistic issues mentioned in the research statements.

### **3. Discussions**

#### *3.1. The Beginning of Feudalism in Semley's Necklace*

##### *3.1.1. The Invasion of Starlords in Semley's Necklace*

The arrival of Starlords to Western Lands is not just a simple visit. Instead, they come with the huge planes and massive number of weapons as explained in the paragraph [3]. It is clearly explained that Starlords tries to invade the Western Lands. When the people of Western Lands are on the verge of a postwar downfall, Starlords appears and try to intimidate them with huge planes and scary weapons. Then, Starlords offers "generosity" in a way that actually makes the people of Western Lands feel cornered and have no other choices. This invasion can be analyzed as the beginning of Feudalism. Feudalism can be defined as a sociopolitical movement ruled by the monarch (the Lord) to take majority control over the surrender (the Vassal) in a granted land or given properties. The oppressed and exploited Vassals are given the obligation to pay a tax as a tribute for the Lord's homage. In addition, the supplies of the given land must be served to the Lord as the substitution of military service [4]

The writer finds that Feudalism occurs when an area or a country is unable to provide qualified infrastructure for its people. The service referred here is in the form of security and sufficiency in political and military terms. This country or region is in a very critical condition as it lacks of episcopal government and security system that could guarantee the welfare of its people. Hence, the aristocrats as Lords come as the "saviors" of the empire that is on the verge of destruction. However, in *Semley's Necklace*, the arrival of Starlords is quite intimidating considering they come with huge planes and unnerving weapons. Upon this invasion, a transfer of land ownership occurs.

##### *3.1.2 The Acquisition of Lands in Semley's Necklace*

Mostly, feudalism occurs when Lord as the landlord offers a plot of land to the Vassal and in return, the Vassal must provide services to the Lord as a form of their homage. However, in *Semley's Necklace*, the position of the Lord has been transferred from the Angyars (a folk that bore the highest race on the planet FORMALHAUT II) to Starlords. This is due to land acquisition which is derived from the war [3].

After the invasion of Starlords, the acquisition of lands takes place. The authority over the land has been transferred from the previous rightful owner, the Angyars (who do not have the power to protect his leadership land) to Starlords (nobles who offer to protect the empire from all external threats). After the acquisition takes place, the Lord's position has naturally moved from the King of Angyars to Starlords.

On page 7 to 8 of Semley's *Necklace*, it is told about how Starlords comes to invade and the people of Western Lands are forced to pay tribute taxes to them. Although it is not clearly explained about the process of land acquisition between both of the parties, it can be considered how the transfer of ownership process has occurred between Starlords and the Angyars. This is because it has been mentioned that they pay tribute taxes regularly to Starlords. The tribute is the cost they have to pay for Starlords' generosity for saving Western Lands from postwar collapse. However, by the acquisition of land does not mean that the people of Western Lands should be discarded from their territory. Instead, they are given the right to occupy the rented properties along with the obligation to pay taxes as tribute in exchange for military service. In this case, the people of Western Lands are still free to occupy the entire territory on the condition that they must serve the Lords, including taking care and protecting the land.

### *3.1.3 The Agreement between Lord and Vassal in Semley's Necklace*

After the land acquisition occurs, the role of the parties is clearer about who the Lord is and who the Vassal is. After the position of each party is clear, an agreement is made to be obeyed by each party involved. Basically, feudalism has a binding agreement based on three main concepts of Lord, Vassal and Fief. Below are the agreements acknowledged through a rite called Commendation Ceremony. The agreement is made to clarify the rights and obligations between the Lord and the Vassal. Following are the chapters of the agreement between Starlords as the Lord and the Angyars as the Vassal:

1. Starlords as Lord or landlord has rights to receive full service and loyalty from Vassal in deal for their homage to save Western Lands from post-war downfall. In this case, Starlords has an obligation to provide maximum protection for the people of Western Lands and ensure their safety from any external threats. As in the story, it is stated that the Starlords receives certain tribute taxes from the Angyars on a regular basis for an undetermined period of time in commutation for military service (Guin, 1975:8-9).
2. The Angyars as Vassal are allowed to occupy Western Lands. However, they only have rights to be in residence and do not have full authority over the land. In return, the Angyars are bounded to serve and put their utmost loyalty to Starlords. It is stated that the Angyars must pay tribute to the Starlords. The tax is given in substitution for military aid. However, because the Angyars are unable to provide military favors, they

pay tribute in the form of harvests and valuable items, such as gold and jewelry to replace it (Guin, 1975:8).

3. Fief is a plot of land or territory mandated by the Lord to Vassal to be guarded and cared for or it is a piece of land or property that is conditionally granted by Lord to Vassal. The harvests or treasures deposited regularly are part of the tribute which is also an obligation of a Vassal. Payment of taxes can also be in the form of money or weapons that can be advantageous for the interests of the Lord (Ganshof, 1952:96) [5]. In *Semley's Necklace*, the fief is the whole terrain of Western Lands itself because it is mentioned that instead of seizing a small patch of land, Starlords comes to conquer the entire Western Lands area (Guin, 1975:8). In this case, Western Lands are the areas subsidized to the Angyars to be occupied and protected. The privilege to live in Western Lands is certainly not granted for free. Tribute that has been paid from time to time is the cost that the Angyars have to bear as their service to the Starlords. This is explained when Starlords came regularly to collect taxes against the "doomsday" [3]

### *3.2. The Abuse of Power in Semley's Necklace*

#### *3.2.1. The Failure of the Lord in Prospering the Vassal in Semley's Necklace*

Essentially, Feudalism is an alliance that maintains the balance of privileges and obligations between one party and another. It is often assumed that feudalism is a social economic system that exploits the minor; however, this is not necessarily true. The original concept of Feudalism is the unity of the two allied factions who promise to support, to defend, and to protect each other's rights in an occupied property. Thus, the main idea is that the balance between rights and obligations of Lord and Vassal must not be one-sided. If it is found that one party has violated the laws or made the other party feel disadvantaged, the guilty may be given certain punishments according to the agreement between both sides.

In *Semley's Necklace*, it is clearly described that the substantial situations in Western Lands are in severe damage; the castles that have been destroyed after the wars, the ruined buildings without windows, even the cold-stoned floor in the residence of King Durhal—Semley's husband [3]. According to the rights and obligations of the Lord, the Lord's duty is to ensure the welfare of Vassal as they have sworn during vassalage. However, from the beginning of the story it is described that the infrastructure and economic situations in Western Lands tend to look poor and lack of many things.

In the story, the author describes the condition of infrastructure in the Western Lands that mostly have been collapsed. The buildings remain only the ruins of pillars. They live in uninhabitable houses with blazing sunlight that could blind anyone's eyesight. They live

in houses without windows and when the winter comes, they can feel the snow under their bare feet [3].

Moreover, the economic situation of Western Lands is also illustrated quite clearly. It is described how the Angyars enjoy their time together with poor conditions; sitting together without barriers within social class in a room where most of the walls have collapsed, sipping glasses of bitter wine while mingling and laughing in the cold of winter under the ruinous fortress that could not be able to protect them from the severe climate change. In other words, the nobles of the kingdom fall into poverty under their own throne [3].

The infrastructure and economic conditions described in the story happens after the Angyars have allied with the Starlords. This means that there is no even the slightest significant improvement after the alliance occurs between both parties.

Based on the evidences mentioned, it can be concluded that Starlords has violated the law in the vassalage agreement they have sworn years ago. During vassalage ceremony, the Lords have promised to guarantee the welfare of their people, to give them utmost protection including expelling the things that could harm the safety of Vassal. However, based on the evidences mentioned, there is no even a point that proves about the welfare that Starlords has promised.

Considering that Starlords has regularly obtained tax payments from Vassal [3], the development of Western Lands' infrastructure should be their responsibility to ensure the safety and comfort of the Angyar in carrying out their duties as a serf. The fact that Western Lands is once a rightful property belonging to the Angyars increases the fact that Starlords has abused their power to exploit the people of Western Lands.

### *3.2.2. Labor Exploitation in Semley's Necklace*

Based on the agreement of vassalage, the people of Western Lands are given the duty to distribute the products of the land to Starlords periodically. In the story, there is no evidence that mentions the part when the subordinate party has disobeyed the law. In fact, Starlords has received the products of labor the Vassals have produced for years without any break [3].

The products of labor they receive are not only in the form of harvests, they also took the mining products like precious stones and other treasures [3]. All of the labor products have been received by Starlords regularly in a long period of time since their first appearance in the planet. However, in such extent of time, there is no mutualism that happens between both sides as there should be.

It is contradictory to the law of Feudalism that emphasizes the balance of the advantages between Lord and Vassal; the people of Western Lands are the ones who give the most. Meanwhile, Starlords has frequently kept receiving the tributes without giving anything

back as the sovereign support they have promised to the submissive. The exploitation causes the welfare of the people of Western Lands to keep getting down. Managing the burden to distribute their products to Starlords, they could not even manage to fix their houses or enjoy delightful meals. In the story, it is mentioned how the folks enjoy the meal together in a ruinous dining hall with the unamusing meals in front of them [3].

Based on the previous evidences, it can be said that one of the abuses of power Starlords has done is the labor exploitation to the people in Western Lands. By this malicious act, poverty becomes unavoidable for the people of Western Lands as long as the Starlords still collects their taxes in every season.

### *3.3. The Effects of Feudalism on Semley in Semley's Necklace*

#### *3.3.1. Poverty*

Labor exploitation happens in Western Lands as the abuse of power that is done by Starlords causes poverty spreading throughout the whole empire. In the story, it is told how the nobles of the empire become poor under the throne [3]. Although some of the folks still possess valuable items such brocaded clothes, silver harness of for their animals, precious stones and jewelries, the welfare of majority is still considered low [3]. One of the most explicit evidences is the condition of Semley and Durhal's house that has a very cold floor and uncovered windows. In the winter, Semley could feel the snow directly under her barefeet [3]. Usually, nobles never suffer from the coldness of winter as they always live in a warm castle enjoying their prosperous life. However, Semley is so poor that she has nothing valuable to acquire unless a ruinous hall that barely could protect her body from the severe climate change, an old mirror hung in her room, and an old bridal gown that is supposed to be passed on to her daughter, Haldre [3].

#### *3.3.2. Discontent*

Considering Semley's status as noblewoman, her poverty does not affect on how the lesser folks treat her as the bride of the king. In every occasion, even the folks who still possess valuable items still manage to bow down and stand aside to let her pass whenever they see Semley's presence in front of them [3].

Other evidences can be seen when the midmen of Hallan sit beside her husband like he is not different from them, as Durhal has nothing outshining to show his pride of the king of Hallan [3]. This causes a sense of discontent to Semley. She does not feel enough of what she has. She feels like everything she has does not enough to show her authority as one of the noble kinds. On several occasions, she even sees some of the commoners walk in front of her with their gemmed coronet, jewelries, and golden brooch on their body [3].

Living under an exploitative feudal society becomes the reason of Semley's discontent in this story. As what she has observed on the social conditions of Western Lands, Semley believes that a family's dignity is based on the material possession, especially for men as husbands and fathers. Semley starts to compare herself with the others. She starts to think that a pride of one's own can be seen from what they possess. Since then, she starts to feel envious looking at others' valuable possession, especially when the wearer holds the lower status than her.

### 3.3.3. *Jealousy*

Wars make the Angyars pay too much price for their independence. Semley who bore the crown of her highest inheritance becomes poor in her own land. The taxes they have to pay to the Starlords leave her nothing to be proud of. The people of the lower class who bow to her wear outshining fabrics while all she has was a vintage mirror and Durhal's mother's old wedding dress [3]. This makes her feel envious that she even has to sew her torn clothes when her husband's cousin still manages to have silk blankets, diamond accessories, and beautiful dresses (Guin, 1975:9). Semley has reached to her limit when she sees some of the midmen sit beside her husband like he is not different from them, as Durhal has nothing splendid to show his pride as the king of Hallan [3].

No one has actually convinced Semley to search for the necklace; it is all her pure own intention. The poverty Semley has to suffer triggers her pride as the noblewoman of the Angyar. Therefore, Semley takes every way possible to search for her lost treasure in order to bring back her husband's pride. Jealousy gets the best of her that she is being materialistic and has been blinded by her sapphire treasure. She leaves everything behind to a very unknown place, just to find that she has gone for years and her reason to seek for her dowry has died before she knows.

## 4. Conclusion

Western Land, as explained in Ursula K. Le Guin's *Semley's Necklace* is the territorial inhabited by the Angyars including Semley and her family. Western Land is almost destroyed after wars that happen in the past several years. Later, Starlords come in the midst of chaos and offer an alliance. After the two parties agree to unite, they are involved in a feudal relationship.

There is no progress either in economic or infrastructure development in Western Lands even years after the alliance has been built. Instead, Starlords exploits the aids and harvests from time to time. The people of Western Lands are forced to pay tribute even when there is no reciprocity from the Starlords to prosper and protect the Angyars as promised. Therefore, the writers conclude that there is an act of injustice in Feudalism portrayed by Starlords in *Semley's Necklace*. The abuses of power in the story are the failure of the

Starlords to prosper the people of Western Lands and the labor exploitation within the lands.

Exploitation leads to the poverty to grow in Western Lands. The endless poverty in Western Lands has a big influence on Semley as the protagonist. Considering her status as a noble, she feels the urge to bring back her family's dignity as the royalty of the Angyar.

The effects of exploitative feudalism on Semley are poverty, discontent and jealousy. These effects cause her recklessly makes a decision to leave Western Land. Hence, without precise preparation, she decides to go to find her lost dowry. This short story ends in a tragedy with Semley who loses her husband. Ironically, the feudal liaison between Starlords and the people of Western Lands has ended years ago while Semley goes for her journey.

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