

Chapter I

Introduction

1. Background of the Study

Émile Zola is one of the most famous and controversial figures ever known on the French literary scene as he always makes his presence known in every aspect of society, not only in art but also in politics. Drinkwater ever states that Zola's personal life is noted through the sense of "pity and love of justice" (904). He never hesitates to let his name mentioned to any incidents in the society even though his actions will endanger himself. Saurat states that in 1898 Zola's sense of justice threw him into the Dreyfus's affair even though the affair made him have to hide in England for a period of time. Dreyfus was falsely accused of being a spy and condemned by the army tribunals. Knowing that Dreyfus was innocent, Zola wrote *J'accuse*, his courageous public letter to the

President, which was “an honor to the French nation and human spirit” (19).

In coherent with his sense of justice, Zola chooses a subtle way of saying out loud about the misery of low class people by writing a lot of novels about people who are oppressed by their surrounding. Therefore, his protagonists always try the best way to express their lives so that they can gain power needed for their survival. For instance, his Nana is about a courtesan, his Germinal is about the mine, his L'Assommoir is about drinking shops, and so on. All the places and occupations mentioned or told in his novels mainly belong to low class people, who are “the products of their heredity and environment” (Thody 139). These people have difficulties to have a better life or to move to an upper class as they are conditioned in poverty for so many years.

Furthermore, Lukács mentions that Zola’s fate is one of the “literary tragedies of the nineteenth century” (95). Although Zola has great talent and human qualities, such as pity, sentiment, idealist, and romantic, for the greatest things, he has been prevented from reaching his destiny by capitalism. As though to affirm that statement, Saurat says that Zola is “a candidate thirty-one times at the French Academy”, and he is always rejected because he rebels against the academicians (19). As Zola is a rebel, the academicians, the most influential men at the French Academy, refuse to give him an honor in spite of the fact that he is a prodigious worker.

Despite the unfortunate incident with the academicians, Zola still survives due to his unique ways of writing his novels, which are observation and spontaneous sentences. He always does an observation to collect data for writing his novels so that his novels really depict the environment or society as the way it is. For instance, to describe Nana's apartment, Zola did a personal research of the luxurious home of Madame Valtesse de la Bigne. There he saw the bed, a "bulging, sumptuous creation encrusted with gilt cupids and erotic bas-reliefs", and decided to make it as Nana's throne (King 127). Moreover, Zola disregards traditional rules of syntax, especially the use of the word "and" in the middle and at the beginning of a sentence (Berg 5). By doing so, Zola makes his sentences seem very spontaneous, like casual conversation.

In addition to that, Zola very often achieves a "simple straightforward" way of writing, which is not at all an easy exercise. His style is only his subject-matter, that is naturally displayed before the readers in its details, and that is a great art (Saurat 24). Therefore, the readers will immediately know if the novels are bad, dull, or uninteresting. For instance, Nana is a story about a courtesan who wins many men's hearts, especially the rich ones. These people come to see the first performance of the courtesan at the théâtre des Variétés, and they immediately "fall in love" with her. In writing the novel, Zola emphasizes only on Nana, not on the other characters in the novel. He describes Nana's actions, struggles, thoughts, and many others in details without flourish words, which makes the readers directly grasp the content of the

story and determine whether they are going to continue reading the novel or not.

Zola's international reputation as a novelist and a journalist also makes him worthy to be considered and studied. The readers can find his contribution in the Russian newspaper, *Vestnik Evropy* (Berg 8). Moreover, Hillegass adds that even though there are none or few pure naturalists' writing today, Zola's influence on the development of the novel has been tremendous. For example, he opens up a new subject matter for the novelists and supports his use of "lurid subject matter with philosophical principles" (78). Reaffirming that statement, Saurat says that "neither Galsworthy nor Sinclair Lewis" would have existed without Zola (21). Sinclair Lewis, a twentieth-century American writer, likes to write novels, which tell that human beings actually have no control over what happens to them. This theme is also Zola's fundamental depiction of what happens to various members of Rougon-Macquart family (Thody 139).

Zola's "Rougon-Macquart" series, consisting of twenty-two volumes, is his great contribution to French literature. This series describes in accurate details the one aspect of everyday life of the members of a commonplace family, such as the prostitution (Nana), the drinking-shops (L'Assommoir), the mines (Germinal), the railways (La Bête Humaine), and many others (Drinkwater 903).

The writer chooses Nana, instead of other series of Rougon-Macquart, because of its popularity. Published on 15 February 1880,

55,000 copies of Nana - the story of Anna, daughter of Gervaise Macquart and Coupeau - were sold in a few days (Conroy 239). Besides that, King states that music hall comedians joke about her, singers compose songs about her, artist – including Manet – paint her, and Paris goes wild over Nana. Nana is a favorite topic for discussion among the *salon* crowd for weeks, and it is socially essential to know something, at least, of her story (130).

Nana's uniqueness arouses the thesis writer's interest to choose this novel. This novel is a powerful indictment of the social decay which marked the reign of Napoleon III. Thus, Nana is portrayed as a successful courtesan, not "sentimentally or romantically, but realistically", which makes her story a sermon warning men against a devotion to lust (Magill 2510). When people read Nana, they get the clear description of the time and way Nana lives. They see Nana as a courtesan who has her ups and downs, the characteristic traits of Nana's friends and lovers that are different one from another, and the condition of the society at that time which is degrading.

Moreover, Leonard believes that Nana is an "investigation of a particular phenomenon of the period, the ascendancy of the *demi-monde*, a society existing in society, and threatening to devour its progenitor" due to the social decay at that time. The scope of the novel is a series of stages graduated in size and influencing each other until at last, Nana, the theatre (where she was first introduced to the society), and the *demi-monde* remold society in their own image (149-50). Through the theatre, Nana is

able to know other people, especially rich men, to her own advantages. Thus, she emerges from the theatre and creates her own *demi-monde* society, which finally covers and threatens to devour the “true” society. The fact that Nana is a courtesan who is so powerful that she can shock the “real” society triggers the thesis writer to study deeper about her.

Since Nana stands as “an instance of this artistry” and may be seen as Zola’s proof to recreate details and concepts into meaningful form and structure (Leonard 149), this French novel has been accepted as one of the canon literary work in the English literature. The first translation is done by Henry Vizetelly in 1884. Yet, the thesis writer decides to choose Nana, translated by Douglas Parmée in 1992, as the primary source of her thesis. Parmée has written widely on French studies and is a prize-winning translator from French, German and Italian (Zola i). The publisher of this novel is Oxford University Press, which has published other outstanding world classics.

In addition to that, the thesis writer is interested in feminism as in the real life, women are changing from being housewives to career women, an indication of the feminist movement. Women want to prove and to be recognized as themselves, not as someone’s sister, daughter, or wife. A “power feminist”, according to Wolf, views women as strong figures in which women usually “examine closely the forces arrayed against a woman so she can exert her power more effectively” (137). Most people, consciously or unconsciously, are familiar with term “power feminists” since people tend to view feminism as a movement that wants to win

certain rights for women through their strong wills to decide their own lives. Thus, feminists tend not to be welcomed warmly by the society.

Nonetheless, some women believe that they can also achieve power through their natural condition, as powerless figures. This belief is known as a “victim feminism”, which views women as “beleaguered, fragile, intuitive angels” (Wolf 135). For instance, if mothers dislike their children's behavior, they might hold themselves emotionally by ignoring the children. Realizing the change in the mothers' attitude, the children might introspect themselves and change their bad behavior. This makes that the mothers gain power over their children from their powerless condition.

Since the term “victim feminist” is uncommon to most people, the thesis writer wants to introduce these two ways of acquiring power, “strong” and “weak” ways, that can be found in the main female character of Émile Zola's Nana. Those two ways, “strong” way and “weak” way, are two contradicting views as the first one emphasizes on women's strengths while the second one gives the emphasis to women's weaknesses. Seeing that Nana has two techniques of gaining power and that they do not seem to contradict between one another triggers the thesis writer to study more about her characters and conflicts.

2. Statement of the Problem

As the thesis writer has pinpointed in the background of the study, Nana has her own ways of gaining power that do not contradict one

another. On one hand, she seems to be a strong woman who has a determination to decide her own life, and in this case, she uses a “strong” way to get power. Nevertheless, she also has some weaknesses that she uses to achieve power, which is known as a “weak” way. Seeing those two different characteristics, the writer is curious to know through which way Nana actually succeeds in attaining power.

3. Purpose of the Study

The writer feels that Nana sets a good example for two ways of achieving power. On one hand, Nana uses her strengths to gain power and the way chosen is known as a “strong” way. On the other hand, the thesis writer sees that she emphasizes her weaknesses to acquire power, and this is known as a “weak” way. Hence, by analyzing Nana’s characteristic traits, struggles and conflicts with the society, the writer can determine to which ways Nana uses to accomplish power, a “strong” way and a “weak” way. Furthermore, she wants to prove by using feminist approach that actually the “strong” way is the successful way for Nana.

4. Importance of the Study

The writer wants to tell the readers that there are two ways of getting power from feminist’s perspective. One way views women as strong figures who use their strengths for power, and the other one views women as weak figures with their weaknesses to power. Most people view women’s attempts to gain power negatively as they see that women and

power are two separate things; hence, any women's trials for power is not good. Furthermore, the writer hopes that this thesis may be useful to other students in exploring more about women from feminist point of view.

Besides that, the writer wants to encourage other students in the Faculty of Letters to read Nana - that according to critics is a unique novel - by Émile Zola, a French novelist, and other French novels. Most people are familiar with the English literature, writers, poets, or playwrights; thus, they seldom know other countries' literature. There are a lot of foreign literatures that have been translated into English and considered as canon literary work. Hence, the writer hopes that this thesis can arouse the readers' interest in other countries' literature as it is important for students, especially the students of the Faculty of Letters, to know and learn other kinds of literature to broaden their mind.

5. Scope and Limitation

The scope of this thesis is the main female character's life from her first appearance in the play, the Blonde Venus until her second comeback to her determination using her rights to gain power.

In addition, the thesis writer limits the analysis of this novel by discussing Nana, the main female character of this novel, as she has her two contradicting ways of achieving power she needs, as a "strong way" and as a "weak way".

6. Methodology

In analyzing this thesis, the writer is using primary data and secondary data. The primary data used is the novel Nana, which is written by Émile Zola, translated by Douglas Parmée, and published by Oxford University Press in 1992. The secondary data used to analyze the problem of this thesis are collected through library research and note taking. The data collected through this process are the critics' opinions, theories of feminism (a "power feminist" and a "victim feminist), and literary theories, namely characterization and conflict.

The thesis writer uses literary theories, as a support, to show Nana's characteristic traits and conflicts. The feminist approach is used to show that Nana uses both "strong" way and "weak" way to gain power so that it finally can be concluded that she succeeds in gaining power through her determination about what to do with her life.

7. Organization of the Study

This thesis is divided into four chapters. The first chapter, introduction, discusses about the background of the study, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, importance of the study, scope and limitation, and last but not least, methodology. The second chapter is the review of related literature whose main concern is the theories used to analyze the novel. The thesis writer uses feminist theories to know the two ways that Nana uses to gain power, the "strong" way and the "weak" way. In order to do so, she uses critics' opinion and literary tools, such as

characterization and conflicts to help her categorize Nana's type of feminism. The thesis writer analyzes the novel in the third chapter. In it, she proves that even though Nana has two ways of achieving the power needed, she is successful at exerting her "strong" way throughout her life to gain the power. The last chapter is conclusion which answers and concludes all the questions, facts, theories, and analysis mentioned previously.