



Female from Marsh: Metaphor, Symbolism, and Irony in *Where the Crawdads Sing* by Delia Owens

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ABSTRAK

Artikel ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui bagaimana Delia Owens menyusun makna-makna yang terdapat di novel *Where the Crawdads Sing* melalui elemen-elemen intrinsik seperti metafora, simbolisme, dan ironi. Dengan menggunakan teori New Criticism, penelitian ini dilakukan dengan hanya fokus pada struktur teks tanpa melibatkan konteks konteks eksternal seperti biografi penulis ataupun respon pembaca. Hasil dari penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa Owens menggunakan metafora-metafora hewan secara konsisten, seperti belalang sembah betina dan kunang-kunang betina untuk mempresentasikan kekuatan wanita di alam. Simbol-simbol alam, termasuk rawa, bulu burung, dan jalur air, memperkuat struktur makna dan membentuk pola cerita yang saling terkait. Ironi muncul ketika kekuatan wanita yang digambarkan sebagai hal yang dominan di alam namun tidak sesuai dengan yang ada di masyarakat di dalam cerita. Ketiga elemen tersebut mendukung satu sama lain dan menciptakan *organic unity*, yaitu sebuah kesatuan makna yang terbentuk secara struktural di dalam teks. Artikel ini menunjukkan bahwa melalui teknik close reading pada elemen elemen cerita, pembaca akan dapat menemukan kritik sosial yang tersimpan di dalam narasi pada novel ini.

Kata Kunci: *ironi; wanita, metafora, kekuatan, simbol*

ABSTRACT

This research aims to determine how Delia Owens constructs meaning in the novel *Where the Crawdads Sing* through intrinsic elements such as metaphor, symbolism, and irony. Using the New Criticism approach, the analysis is conducted by focusing on the structure of the text, without involving external contexts such as the author's biography or reader responses. The results of the analysis show that Owens consistently uses metaphors from the animal world, such as female praying mantises and female fireflies to represent the power and agency of female creatures in nature. Natural symbolism, including swamps, bird feathers, and waterways, strengthens the structure of meaning and forms interconnected narrative patterns. Irony arises when the power of women that is depicted as dominant in the natural world is considered deviant in human society in the text. These three elements support each other and create organic unity, namely the unity of meaning that is formed structurally in the text. This article shows that through a close reading of formal elements, readers can find social criticism implied in the narrative structure of the novel.

Keywords: *Irony; Female; Metaphor; Power; Symbol*

INTRODUCTION

Metaphor is one of the most fundamental figures of speech in the literary world, it allows authors to convey complicated meaning indirectly through imaginative comparison. According to

Abrams (1999), metaphor is a figure of speech that describes one thing with another thing without using conjunction words such as “like” or “as if”. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have a deeper interpretation of metaphor in their book entitled *Metaphors We Live By*, which stated that metaphor is not only a language tool, but it also reflects on how humans act and think. Therefore, the use of metaphor is not only functioning as an aesthetic purpose, it also has an important role in delivering the hidden meaning of the text.

In the novel *Where the Crawdads Sing* by Delia Owens, metaphor is used not merely as an ornament but also as a way to strengthen the thematic meaning which is hidden behind the narration. Delia Owens slips some natural metaphors which refer to the power and danger for women in the animal world, such as female praying mantis who eat their male after mating and female fireflies who manipulate the male species with mixed signals of their light just to kill and eat them. These metaphors are not just biological depiction; it also implies the tension between power and vulnerability in the female figure.

Kya, the main character, has a big love and interest for nature because she grows up in a marsh which has diverse natural resources. She has been observing nature since she was a child. She found that female praying mantis eat the males after they mate and female fireflies often give false signals to lure the males and then kill them. Initially, the information only occurs as scientific knowledge for Kya, but as time goes by, especially after she was betrayed by Chase Andrews and conscious of the threats and violence she faces as a woman, Kya starts to see the parallel between her and those animals. She realizes that in nature, women actually have the strength to survive and fight, different from the women’s position in society that is often weak and always a victim. This awareness becomes one of the reasons for how she develops her character stronger who will fight to survive.

As the reflection of the reality, *Where the Crawdads Sing* is one the literary works that project about the phenomenon in this world. Based on the statistical data by KemenPPPa (Kementerian Pemberdayaan Perempuan dan Perlindungan Anak), there are as many as 27.658 women who are the victims of violence throughout 2024 in Indonesia (Prasetyo, et al., 2025). From the data, it may be concluded that women are still the favorite target of abusive behavior until this day. It happens because society views women as weak creatures that do not have the power to fight or even to stand up for themselves. Hence, these problems deserve to be discussed until today where women remain the main victims of violence. With analyzing the novel, It will show how the author tries to spread the awareness about these problems that happened to women.

Where the Crawdads Sing is a best seller book written by Delia Owens and was published in 2018. It is a mystery, coming of age, and literary fiction novel that revolves around the main

character, Kya Clark. Kya is a unique girl who lives in a marsh and decides to isolate herself from the world after all of her family left her since she was a child. Being known as “Marsh Girl” by people in the town, Kya learns how to survive alone and makes nature her only friend and protector ever since her young age. Behind her loneliness, she develops a deep interest towards natural beauty and biology which shapes her point of view in life. The main conflict of the story appears when Kya is accused as a suspect in murder case of a man named Chase Andrews, who was in a relationship with her. Through back-and-forth plot and poetic narration, this novel told a story of loneliness, violence, love, and the struggle to be accepted and survive in a world full of prejudice.

This amazing novel has so many achievements even though it is the first Delia Owen’s literary work. It has sold more than 11 million copies around the world, making it one of the New York Times best sellers. In June 2021, this book also won the bestseller award in Japan. Moreover, it also won the British Book of the Year: Page Turner Award in 2021. Other than those awards, *Where the Crawdads Sing* topped some of national charts: 44 weeks on the NY Times Best-Seller list, #1 on Amazon Charts of Fiction, and #1 on IndieBound's Indie Bestsellers for Hardcover Fiction.

Delia Owens is an American author, conservationist, and zoologist who was born on April 4, 1949 in Georgia, America. Delia Owens started her fiction journey with *Where the Crawdads Sing* as her debut novel. Before that, she was a co-author of some nonfiction books about her life in Africa as a wildlife scientist, which were also bestselling books. One of her most famous books is called *Cry of the Kalahari*, an autobiography book which she wrote with one of her zoologist friends named Mark.

The main aim of this article is to analyze how Delia Owens uses natural metaphor, especially female praying mantis and female fireflies in *Where the Crawdads Sing*, the metaphor is used to describe the ambivalence of women’s power in nature versus human society. By using the New Criticism approach, this article focuses on a close textual reading to show how the metaphors shape the internal meaning structure of the novel, at the same time, it also bring out the deep irony: on one side, women are shown as strong predator in nature, while on the other hand, they become the victims of violence and injustice in human society. Through this analysis, the article is expected to show the harmony and the tension in the text, and provide critical insight about the relevancy of the theme today.

METHODOLOGY

This research used the New Criticism approach which emphasizes the importance of analyzing text as an autonomous unit, without external context such as reader response, historical background, or author’s background. New Criticism focuses on close reading of formal components in the text,

including symbols, metaphors, dictions, ironies, and narrative structure in order to find the complete meaning in one literary work. This approach views that each element of the text is connected and contributes to the whole meaning.

The methodology that is used in this study is text-based qualitative analysis by applying close reading technique to Delia Owen's novel entitled *Where the Crawdads Sing*. The analysis focused on the use of natural metaphors and symbolisms which appear throughout the text, especially the one that describes women's power in the animal world, such as female praying mantis and female fireflies. Those metaphors were analyzed to reveal internal irony in the narration; obvious differences between women's power in nature and their oppression in human society. Through careful reading on some parts of the novel, this research is to find how formal text elements work harmonically to convey the theme that the author wants to express.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

In the novel *Where the Crawdads Sing*, Delia Owens writes the narrative structure that is rich of the intrinsic elements such as metaphors, symbolisms, and ironies. These three elements not only become synthetic complements, but also function as main pillars in conveying the meaning. By applying the New Criticism approach, the text can be read as an autonomous structure, where each part contributes in the process of forming the whole meaning with finding the organic unity. Delia Owens does not emphasize the ideas or schemes through explicit statements, but she conveys them through repetition of motive, narrative contrast, and symbolic patterns which are engraved in the text. Therefore, the process of reading this novel should use the close reading technique in order to find out how the symbols and metaphors help build the harmony and tension of the story. Metaphors, symbolisms, and ironies are the center of the analysis in this research.

Metaphor

Metaphor is one of the main language tools that is used by Owens to convey the power structure in her text, especially the ones which are connected with the genders in the natural world. In this novel, there are two highlighted natural metaphors from the animal world, namely female praying mantis and female fireflies. She does not only mention their biological behavior in an informative way, but she also deliberately places them in the right and crucial time that really match and help the plot of the story. Female praying mantis who eat their partner while mating imply that the full control and domination are all in the female's hand:

...but while he probed about with his copulatory organ to fertilize her eggs, the female turned back her long, elegant neck and bit off his head. He was so busy humping, he didn't notice. His neck stump waved about as he continued his business, and she nibbled on his thorax, and

then his wings. Finally, his last foreleg protruded from her mouth as his headless, heartless lower body copulated in perfect rhyme. (Owens, 2018, p.325)

This quotation describes how female praying mantises eat their partner while the mating process is still ongoing explicitly. Owens uses biological narration in detail, that is not only a function to deliver the scientific information, but as a metaphorical tool to show female domination and independence in the reproductive system. Owens overturns the common logic about the active role of men in the sexual process by describing them as a creature that continues to “carry on with their duties” even though they are losing their head, body, and ultimately their existence. The female species in this narration are not described as a passive and dependent creature, but as the center of control and act. In the novel structure, this quotation strengthens a metaphorical pattern which is already built from the start. Owens states that female natural strength is not only in their ability to survive but also in the power over the survival of the species. Hence, these metaphors not only added the intensity of the biological representation, but they also became the key element in terms of the form of thematic meaning which is repetitive and integrated in the text.

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...Then she flickered a different signal, and a male of a different species flew to her. Reading her message, the second male was convinced he'd found a willing female of his own kind and hovered above her to mate. But suddenly the female firefly reached up, grabbed him with her mouth, and ate him, chewing all six legs and both wings. (Owens, 2018, p.167)

In the text, the act of the firefly is not explained morally or judgment, it is conveyed as a part of effective natural mechanism and not sentimental. Through the insertion of this metaphor, Owens widens the meaning of the female power concept, not as a form of aggression or manipulation, but as a part of a system that allows them to act with goals, accuracy, and consequence. This pattern of

metaphor enrich the overall text structure in terms of forming a cohesive meaning, as emphasized in the New Criticism approach.

Those two metaphors are not explained by the author reflectively, but shown as a part of the narration which should be interpreted by the readers. This is what makes it strong in the New Criticism approach where the meaning is not defined by the external context, but through the inter-textual relations. The metaphors reappear thematically when it comes near to the ending of the story, as it gives repetitive patterns that construct the connection between animal world and human society in the novel. Owens does not root the metaphors in the text as an ornament, but as a foundation of narrative structure that allows readers to find the meaning through repetition and contrast.

Symbolism

Beyond metaphor, Delia Owens also relies on symbolisms as a tool to construct the meaning in the text. The symbolisms in *Where the Crawdads Sing* are not only limited to inanimate objects or single objects, but covers all of the natural space which is the setting where the story takes place. Marsh, as the central symbol, functions as the physical space and structural representation from the alternative world who reject social norms conventionally.

Those looking for serious land moved on, and this infamous marsh became a net, scooping up a mishmash of mutinous sailors, castaways, debtors, and fugitives dodging wars, taxes, or laws that they didn't take to. (Owens, 2018, p.8)

In the marsh, the society rules do not apply. Living things prey on each other, hide, evolve, and survive without social structure intervention. Owens uses the marsh as a symbol of different order, which is one of the natural systems that shape the tension to the social system that occurs in the nearest city who refused the existence of the main character. Therefore, this symbol is simultaneously a symbol of freedom and isolation or loneliness. Freedom because it is free from the social structure and isolation or loneliness because it is isolated from the society.

Other symbols like birds' feather, waterways, and small boats also play an important role in the term of strengthening visual patterns which appear several times in the text. Kya's collection of bird feathers not only stands as her marker of interest toward nature; it is also a symbol of freedom.

But just as her collection grew, so did her loneliness. A pain as large as her heart lived in her chest. Nothing eased it. Not the gulls, not a splendid sunset, not the rarest of shells. (Owens, 2018, p.171)

The feelings of sadness and loneliness that the character feel support the desire of what she did while collecting the birds' feather. The birds' feather is a symbol of her desire to be free and represents her connection with the nature. The paradox is also showed from this symbol, how birds' feather becomes a symbol of freedom and emphasize the isolation of the character.

The other symbol is waterways. Owens presents the waterways as a symbol of connection, the choice of direction, and the movement that is not always linear.

Because even though the ocean was just beyond the trees surrounding the shack, the only way to get there by boat was to go in the opposite direction, inland, and wind through miles of the maze of waterways that eventually hooked back to the sea. (Owens, 2018, p.47)

Waterways become the symbol of connection because it connected Kya to the outside world. It also showed her relationship with the society and at the same time represented how isolated she was from the world because she needed to navigate alone. Besides, waterways also a symbol of the moral and emotional decisions Kya faces throughout the novel. It becomes the choice of direction: to isolate herself or to connect with others. While waterways are also the symbol of the non-linear movement. It is showed from the form of waterways that have a lot of branches or ways. It reflects how Kya's journey is not straightforward for reaching freedom, understanding, and belonging.

All of these symbols do not work in one single line of meaning, but they form a network of meanings that reinforce each other through repetition, consistency, and relation.

Irony

The last element that strengthens the meaning structure in this novel is irony. Irony builds with tension between structural elements in the text, not through dialogue or direct statement. Irony appears when metaphors and symbolism from the animal world which shows the power and domination of female species, are contrary to the social structure that prevails in human narrative in the novel.

Female fireflies draw in strange males with dishonest signals and eat them; mantis females devour their own mates. Female insects, Kya thought, know how to deal with their lovers. (Owens, 2018, p.325)

Owens shows nature as a system where female power is recognized as a part of the balance of life. Meanwhile, human society in the novel shows a structure that refused such forms of power.

These ironies are not presented explicitly in the text, but formed slowly through narrative comparison. Delia Owens constructs irony by letting the readers see and realize the mismatch between power that applies in nature and the injustice which occurs in the society that is described in the novel. By using irony as the link between metaphor and symbolism, Owens does not only emphasize the meaning, but also to strengthen the unity of the text where all the intrinsic elements are supporting each other to build the whole meaning of the story that she tries to convey to the readers.

CONCLUSION

Through the New Criticism approach, *Where the Crawdads Sing* can be read as a text that compiles its meaning in an intrinsic way through the use of metaphor, symbolism, and irony that are closely intertwined. Owens not only conveys social critics explicitly; she builds it using the consistent narrative structure which is full of tension. The metaphor of female animals such as female praying mantises and female fireflies not only function as biological features, but also form a meaning pattern which emphasizes the female domination in the natural system. The symbolism of the marsh landscape, bird feathers, and other natural elements reinforce the visual and thematic structure of the novel, while irony emerges as a tension between women's power in nature and their oppressed position in human society.

All of these elements work integratedly to create the organic unity in the text, which means a unity of meaning that does not depend on external elements or context, it is built from the relation between formal elements throughout the narration. Therefore, Owens manages to convey a subtle critique of gender inequality through the structural patterns in her text. This research shows that female power is not just a theme, but a structure inherent in the way the novel is shaped and read.

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