

# MOTHERHOOD IN THE AMERICAN WOMAN POET'S PERSPECTIVE: A SHORT GLANCE AT ALLEN'S "ROCK ME TO SLEEP"

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## ABSTRACT

*Article scrutinized one of the works of an American woman poet named Elizabeth Akers Allen. The poem under study entitled "Rock Me to Sleep". It was a portrayal of motherhood. The speaker of this poem is a woman who is longing for the love of her mother. She is seeking for a way to ease her pain since she feels that she has lost her own battle of womanhood. Although the mother remains absent, the readers of the poem can sense the powerful love of the speaker of the poem toward her mother. Method of this study was library research that carried out by applying descriptive analytical methods. Data were collected from the primary and secondary sources. Results of this paper are the writer of poetry wants to warn people that womanhood in the patriarchal society can create many problems, and the only remedy for those problems is motherhood. Article also proves that a writer does not have to be a feminist to produce a literary text which discusses the issue of women, which has become the focus of feminism.*

**Keywords:** motherhood, women poet, feminism

## ABSTRAK

*Artikel bertujuan untuk mempelajari salah satu karya penyair perempuan Amerika bernama Elizabeth Akers Allen. Puisi yang dikaji berjudul "Rock Me to Sleep". Puisi menggambarkan hal yang berkaitan dengan ibu dan keibuan. Penutur puisi adalah seorang perempuan yang merindukan cinta kasih ibunya. Ia mencari cara untuk menghapuskan rasa sakit yang ia rasakan karena ia merasa telah kalah dalam pergulatannya sebagai seorang perempuan. Walaupun figur tersebut tak tampak di hadapan pembaca puisi, akan tetapi kekuatan cinta sang penutur terhadap ibunya dapat dirasakan oleh mereka. Metode penelitian adalah kajian pustaka dengan menerapkan metode deskriptif analitis. Data dikumpulkan dari sumber primer dan sekunder. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan penulis puisi ingin memperingatkan bahwa kewanitaan dalam masyarakat patriarkal dapat menimbulkan banyak masalah, dan satu-satunya obat untuk masalah tersebut adalah ibu. Artikel ini juga membuktikan bahwa penulis tidak harus menjadi feminis untuk menghasilkan teks sastra yang membahas isu perempuan, yang telah menjadi fokus feminisme.*

**Kata kunci:** keibuan, penyair wanita, feminisme

## INTRODUCTION

People can easily find the discussion of mother (including the idea of motherhood) in literature. This discussion is not only found in the work of women writers (Rye, 2006).

The issue of motherhood is an interesting subject to be discussed. In many societies, mother is the central figure in a family and she has so many roles. As a woman, mother is not only seen as a mother for her children, but also as a teacher, a nurturer and many other roles. In some societies, it is the mother who gives both spiritual and moral formation to the family.

Article tries to analyze one of the poems written by an American woman poet named Elizabeth Akers Allen. The title of the poem is "Rock me to Sleep". As stated in an article entitled "Elizabeth Akers Allen (1832 – 1911)", this poem is a sentimental hymn to motherhood (2007). Therefore, this poem is really suitable with the aim of this article which tries to discuss the theme of motherhood that seen from the perspective of an American woman poet.

In conducting the research, the writer will use feminist approach. There are several reasons why the writer chooses the work of woman poet and employs the feminist approach. First, as mentioned by Montefiore, poetry produced by woman poet is a great source for people to experience and learn more about women (1994). Furthermore, it is important for people to study the literary work of woman poet since by studying it, people can listen to the silent voice of a real woman in a big country like America.

Second, it is interesting to study deeper about the work of one of the 19th century women poets. Since it is the time when literary works provide a new opportunity of occupation for many women. One of the examples is Emily Dickinson. Many feminist critics were interested in her works since, "She seized freedoms through the separate world of imagination." Thus, poetry in the 19th century has a significant place in the heart of American people, especially for the American women. (Gray, 1997)

As stated by Bomarito and Jeffrey, many American women who live in the 19th century have to face gender inequality. They can have and use their legal, social and political rights only in a small portion (2005: 1). Therefore, it is not surprising to see many American women are taught that their existence and also happiness is, "Defined only in sexual relation to men" (Friedan, 1997).

According to Sailus (2003), "During the 19th century and into the 20th, many women are bound to the domestic jobs and if they have free time, then they should spend it by doing several things to fulfill their family needs." However, there is also a positive effect of that so-called private sphere. It gives positive images toward women since they are seen as the guardian of morality and social cohesion. (Bomarito & Jeffrey, 2005: 2). Many women movements use those positive images to fight for the betterment of women. One of them is feminist movement. Andersen (1997:8) explains that those feminists want to open the society's eyes that women are as precious as men. Thus, the society has to treat those two sexes equally.

There are two opinions related to the issue of

motherhood. First, motherhood is seen as a uniting element among women. Second, it is also regarded as one of the points to deny women rights (Neyer & Bernardi, 2011). It is also caused women to be seen as "others" (De Beauvoir in Neyer & Bernardi, 2011). During the 18th and 19th centuries, motherhood has become the ideal form of femininity and it is also seen as human instinct since children need to be nurtured and protected by their mothers (Dally, 1983).

The discussion of motherhood itself is closely related to the discussion of mother-daughter relationship since in many societies mother is seen as the one who has to educate her own daughter. Chodorow (as cited in Natov, 1990) states that, "the cyclical pattern in which mothers pass on to their daughters what they have received from their mothers perpetuates the experience of the world as fluid and without boundaries". Thus, in many cases, the bond of mother and daughter is really tight and cannot be separated. However, this kind of relationship can develop only if this young girl aware that deep down inside she can see her mother in herself (Chodorow, 1991). According to Whiting, in the 19th century there was a portrayal of an ideal mother. These mother was "tender, constant, and true, sympathetic alike in prosperity and adversity to her children." (as cited in Banks, 2010). Her role was "to nurture, support and maintain the physical and spiritual well-being of her husband and her children" (Banks, 2010).

According to Nadeu (1995), "The strong relationship between mother and her daughter is one of the factors that inhibit the daughter from constructing her personal identity." Chodorow (as cited in Boyd, 1989) gives her opinion that the mother is the early care giver and primary source of identification for all children.

In literary texts, sometime the figure of mother is absent. This kind of mother is known as "spectral mother" and the absence of mother gives an effect to her children (Gevirts, 2012). Banks (2010) said that this absence provides a chance to engross the subject of motherhood with considerable speculative imaginings. He adds that the absence of the figure of mothers can be seen as a "*tabula rasa*" that underlines the essential task of those mothers in their children's development. However, Flax (1978) argues that when a young girl recognizes her own gender she becomes aware that the patriarchal system does exist and at this point she also learns that as a woman she has to struggle to gain equality.

## METHOD

This paper uses feminism approach to analyze the poem under study. It analyzes one of woman poet's works which discusses about woman's issue, especially the one which is related to the discussion of motherhood, as a result of women-marginalizing social construction. Feminism itself is concerned with women's efforts to gain equality with men. It believes that women should be liberated from oppression and get more chance for self-development.

In this study, library research is carried out by applying descriptive analytical methods. Data are collected from the primary and secondary sources. The primary source is the poem itself, while the secondary sources are

books, essays, journals and electronic data taken from the internet. They are organized, classified and analyzed. The result is presented in the discussion and the conclusion of the study.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Many works of women writers talk about mother-daughter relationship, especially the one which is related to the discussion of motherhood. Most of them are feminist writers, for example Toni Morrison in her *Beloved* (1987). In contrast, the literary text under study is not written by a feminist writer. However, she is able to produce such a vivid piece of art which describes the issue of motherhood.

The poem which is used in this study is a poem of 6 stanzas and 48 lines. From stanza one up to the last stanza, the speaker of the poem keeps yearning for her mother's love and affection by asking her mother to rock her to sleep just like the old time – *Rock me to sleep, Mother – Rock me to sleep!* –.

### a. Stanza One

Backward, turn backward, O Time in your flight,  
Make me a child again just for to-night!  
Mother, come back from the echoless shore,  
Take me again to your heart as of yore;  
Kiss from my forehead the furrows of care,  
Smooth the few silver threads out of my hair;  
Over my slumbers your loving watch keep,–  
Rock me to sleep, Mother – rock me to sleep!

Stanza one introduces the reader to the poem's speaker. When the speaker says –*Make me a child again just for to-night!*– (line 2), it is clear that he/she is no longer a child. However, although the speaker is an adult, she/he echoes her/his need to turn back the time to the past when her/his mother is still accompanying her/him (line 1-3).

Line 5 reveals more information related to the speaker's identity. This person wants to see her/his mother and she/he also wants her/his mother to kiss her/his forehead which is full of –*furrows of care*–. According to *Longman: Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2001), the word 'furrow' can be defined as a deep line or fold in the skin of someone's face, especially on the forehead. While the word 'care' is closely related to problem or worry. Thus, it is clear that the speaker of the poem's forehead is full of furrows because she/he has to face problems that make her/him sad. This line also can lead the reader to a conclusion that the speaker is really an adult since only an adult can have furrows. Furthermore, in line 6, the speaker mentions about her/his grey hair when she/he asks her/his mother to –*smooth the few silver threads*– out of her/his hair.

The first stanza does not only discuss the speaker's identity, but also gives information related to the existence of the speaker's mother. In line 3, the speaker shouts to her/his mother, –*Mother, come back from the echoless shore*–. This line gives a clue to the reader that the speaker's mother is no longer with her/him. The word 'echoless shore' symbolizes the existence of the speaker's mother that is unreachable. Therefore, this fact leads to the conclusion that the speaker's mother is only exists in the speaker's memory. In other words, the mother is removed physically from the speaker's adulthood.

The fact that the poem's speaker no longer can see her mother is in a way similar to the study of Banks. Banks

(2010) argues that the absence of mothers from the literary text gives a chance to the readers to engross the subject of motherhood with considerable speculative imaginings.

### b. Stanza Two

Backward, flow backward, O tide of the years!  
I am so weary of toil and of tears–  
Toil without recompense, tears all in vain–  
Take them, and give me my childhood again!  
I have grown weary of dust and decay–  
Weary of flinging my soul-wealth away;  
Weary of sowing for others to reap;–  
Rock me to sleep, Mother–rock me to sleep!

The second stanza tells the reader of the poem about the requests of the speaker to her/his mother. The speaker starts to ask her/his mother to eliminate her/his sadness and ease her/his pain since she/he feels so tired and helpless after all the thing that she/he has to face in her/his life (line 9-12). Moreover, she/he also wants her/his mother to rock her/him to sleep and turn back the time to her/his childhood. In fact, this is not her/his first request since in the first stanza the reader can see the same. In this case, the speaker sees her/his mother as her/his care giver because she/he wants her/his mother to come and take care of her/him (Chodorow as cited in Boyd, 1989). Dally (1983) gives more explanation about the mother's role. She stated that during the 18th and 19th centuries, motherhood has become the ideal form of femininity and also seen as human instinct. Therefore, the speaker's request to her/his mother is seen as a natural thing because mother's responsibility is to nurture and protect her children.

In relation to the 19th century's portrayal of an ideal mother, the mother of this poem obviously was a 19th century's favourite due to the fact that her own daughter sees her as what Chodorow calls a care giver (as cited in Boyd, 1989). This is in line with the statement of Banks (2010) who stated that an ideal mother is the one who is willing to nurture, support and maintain the physical and spiritual well-being of her daughter. So, it is not surprising to see the speaker is craving for her mother's care.

This stanza also gives more evidence about the speaker's identity. It is clearly seen in line 13 that the speaker is an old person since she/he describes her/himself as a person who has –*grown weary of dust and decay*–. In this stanza the speaker uses the word 'weary' repeatedly. In *Longman: Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2001) explains that the word 'weary' is a word which is used to show that someone is tired of doing something for a long time. By keep repeating this word, the speaker tries to emphasize that she/he feels very tired since she/he has to do and to face the same things over and over again.

In line 15, the speaker explains that for a long time she/he has to do so many things for others' sake –*Weary of sowing for others reap*–. This line also suggests that there are other parties who gain some benefits from the things that the speaker had been done. In this stanza, the speaker gives a clear picture of her/his difficult life. It is really dehumanizing since she/he has to please other people while deep down inside she/he feels tired of doing it.

In fact, the thing that has been through by speaker is also happened to most of American women during the 19th century. Sailus (2003) explains many women are expected to stay at home and do some domestic jobs. If they have free time, then they should spend it by doing some other things that are still related to their family

needs. Therefore, it is not surprising to see that many American women are taught that their existence and also happiness is limited to their roles as wives, mothers, and housewives (Friedan, 1997). Seeing the fact above, the researcher concludes that the speaker of the poem is an adult woman since she voices the same problems which are commonly faced by many women.

#### c. Stanza Three

Tired of the hollow, the base, the untrue,  
 Mother, O mother, my heart calls for you!  
 Many a summer the grass has grown green,  
 Blossomed and faded, our faces between:  
 Yet, with strong yearning and passionate pain,  
 Long I to-night for your presence again.  
 Come from the silence so long and so deep;—  
 Rock me to sleep, Mother—rock me to sleep!

Line 17 still has a correlation to line 15. In this line the speaker gives more explanation about those people who have gain benefits from her. She calls them as *–the hollow, the base, the untrue–*, and she feels tired of dealing with them. Based on *Longman: Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2001) when someone uses the word ‘hollow’ to describe someone else’s feelings or words, it means she/he tries to describe an insincere man/woman. While the word ‘base’ is used to describe someone who does not have good morals. On the other hand, the word ‘untrue’ can be meant as unfaithful. Thus, it is reasonable to see the speaker reactions toward those people because she feels that those people take a lot of advantages from her.

In the third stanza, the speaker is yearning for her mother’s presence. She wants her mother to hear her heart calls and come to see her since they have not met for ages (line 18-23). In the speaker’s eyes, her mother is the one who can give her an abundant of love, which cannot be given by others. In line 24, she repeats her request one more time to her mother to rock her to sleep. The speaker’s way of thinking in seeing and crafting for her mother’s love, once again highlighted the fact that her mother belongs to the 19th century’s ideal type of mother. It because of in the eyes of her own daughter, she is a type of mother who is willing to “nurture, support and maintain the physical and spiritual well-being of her daughter” (Banks, 2010).

#### d. Stanza Four

Over my heart, in the days that are flown,  
 No love like mother-love ever has shone;  
 No other worship abides and endures—  
 Faithful, unselfish and patient like yours:  
 None like a mother can charm away pain  
 From the sick soul and the world-weary brain.  
 Slumber’s soft calm o’er my heavy lids creep;—  
 Rock me to sleep, mother—rock me to sleep!

In this stanza, the speaker illustrates the relationship between her mother and herself. The speaker admits that there is no love like her mother’s (line 26) and no other type of worshiping which can last forever like the one her mother shows to her family (line 27). Furthermore, the speaker also realizes that her mother is a *faithful, unselfish, and patient* (line 28). Besides that, she also knows that her mother is the only one who can ease her pain (line 29- 31). Therefore, she asks her mother to rock her to sleep (line 32). In this case, the mother of the speaker is not only standing as the cure for her ‘sickness, but also standing as the source of love and care.

The way the speaker shows her admiration toward her mother is in line with Chodorow’s theory which is related to the cyclical system between daughters and their mother. It seems that the speaker is a daughter who wants to continue the cyclical pattern in which her mother tries to pass on to her. Their relationship seems so fluid and without boundaries (as cited in Natov, 1990).

#### e. Stanza Five

Come, let your brown hair, just lighted with gold,  
 Fall on your shoulders again, as of old;  
 Let it drop over my forehead to-night,  
 Shading my faint eyes away from the light;  
 For with its sunny-edged shadows once more  
 Haply will throng the sweet visions of yore;  
 Lovingly, softly, its bright billows sweep:—  
 Rock me to sleep, mother, rock me to sleep!

In stanza five, the speaker tries to speak to her long lost mother. Although it has been quite a long time that they have not seen each other, the speaker still remember about her mother’s *brown hair* (line 34). She really wants to feel her mother’s hair falls over her forehead just like the old times (line 34-35). In line 36, she explains the reason for asking her mother to drop her mother’s hair over her forehead. The speaker sees this action as an act of protecting her from the thing that she does not want to see *–Shading my faint eyes away from the light;–* (line 36). She wants to enjoy the happy moment of seeing her mother and also the soft touch of her mother’s hair while her mother rocking her to sleep *–Haply will throng the sweet visions of yore; // Lovingly, softly, its bright billows sweep; // Rock me to sleep, Mother—rock me to sleep!–* (line 38 – 40). Thus, based on this stanza, it is clear that the speaker sees her mother as the source of protection.

From this stanza, it also can see that the speaker is able to recall all of her memories related to her mother. It seems that the distance between the speaker and her mother is not really a problem for her. This case is explained clearly by Chodorow (1991). She argues that a close relationship only can be developed when a daughter aware that deep down inside she can see her mother in herself. Chodorow calls this as a primary identification – a sense of oneness; primary love.

#### f. Stanza 6

Mother, dear Mother, the years have been long  
 Since I last listened to your lullaby song:  
 Sing, then, and unto my soul it shall seem  
 Womanhood’s years have been only a dream.  
 Clasped to your breast in a loving embrace,  
 With your light lashes just sweeping my face,  
 Never hereafter to wake or to weep;—  
 Rock me to sleep, Mother—rock me to sleep!

Stanza 6 is the last stanza of “Rock me to sleep”. In this stanza there are several issues being discussed. Firstly, the speaker discusses openly about the reason for her misfortune to her mother. Secondly, the true identity of the speaker is finally revealed. Thirdly, the speaker discusses about her final request to her mother.

Stanza 6 is opened by the speaker’s request to her mother. She asks her mother to sing her a lullaby song which is used to be sung by her mother a long time ago. Her mother’s song can touch her soul *–Mother; dear Mother, the years have been long // Since I last listened to your lullaby song; // Sing, then, and unto my soul it shall–*

(line 41- 43). Thus, it is clear that the speaker regards her mother's song as a remedy for her sickness since it can touch her/his soul.

In line 44, there are two things that can be revealed. Firstly, it is related to the reason for the speaker's misfortune. Secondly, it is related to the speaker's gender. When the speaker says *–Womanhood's years have been only a dream.–* It is more convincing that the speaker of the poem is a woman since she has to face womanhood problems. In fact, those problems create a lot of difficulties for her which make her feel sad and tired (stanza 2). She used to think that as a woman she can show her true color without any burden to the society. However, her dreams break into pieces when she has to face the true. In this case, the speaker finally recognizes her own gender as the source of her misfortune. As stated by Flax (1978), "when a young girl learns about her own gender she becomes aware that the patriarchal system does exist and it forces her to struggle to gain equality". Conversely, in the case of the poem's speaker, she feels helpless and cannot do anything about it. Therefore, she says *–Womanhood's years have been only a dream.–* (line 44). It is in line with Flax's theory. As stated by Flax (1978), "when a woman starts to identify the existence of social inequality in her society, then due to her own gender, she will feel less socially esteemed". Moreover, the poor condition of the speaker, who feels helpless when she has to face the womanhood, can also be connected to the fact that she is motherless. Francus calls this phenomenon as spectral mother, where the mother's absence is seen as an absent force whose absence creates as many problems as it solves (as cited in Gevirtz, 2012). The absence of the mother's figure can be seen as a *tabula rasa* that underlines the essential task of her in her children's development (Banks, 2010). So, in a way the absence of the speaker's mother has highlighted the tremendous need of her mother's existence for her personal development.

Finally, the speaker concludes that her sexual identity is the source of her pain since as a woman she is bound to the patriarchal rules. Basically, the problem that she has to deal with is a common problem among the American women since many American women who live in the nineteenth century have to face gender inequality. They can have and use their legal, social and political rights only in a small portion." (Bomarito & Jeffrey, 2005).

Seeing those facts, at last she asks her mother to grant her with final request. As seen in line 45 – 48, the speaker wants her mother to hold her closely since she wants to feel her mother's *loving embrace* (line 45). She also wants to feel her mother eye lashes *sweeping* her face (line 46) while her mother hugs her with love. And finally she wants her mother to rock her to sleep for eternity – *Never hereafter to wake or to weep; –// Rock me to sleep, Mother–rock me to sleep!–* (line 47 – 48).

Based on the discussion of the last stanza, it is clear that the inability of the speaker to actualize herself is the source of her pain. Her inability can be seen as a common problem during the 18th century up to 19th century since as previously explained by Bomarito and Jeffrey (2005) that many American women have to face gender inequality. Thus, it is not surprising to see how miserable the speaker's life is. As seen in this stanza, the speaker finally realizes that she cannot reach her dreams because of her gender (line 44, stanza 6) and she is only able to do things that are allowed for her (stanza 2). This fact is in line with Friedan's (1997) statement that many American women are taught to see their existence and also happiness is defined only in sexual relation to men.

Another striking point can be seen from the speaker's perspective in seeing her mother. The constant grieving of the speaker and her strong will of finding her mother's long-lost love and affection lead to another conclusion. In sum, she feels an intense and overwhelming love toward her mother, although her mother no longer exists. As stated by Nadeu (1995) the absence of the mother will give the opportunity for the daughter to gain her freedom and solve her own problems. On the other hands, the continuous grieve of the speaker indicates that she cannot solve her womanhood's problems. She is in her serious need of protection and affection of her long-lost mother. Unfortunately, the absence of her mother and her inability to cope with her problems, then makes her decide to ask her mother to give her a way out to end her life *–Never hereafter to wake or to weep; –// Rock me to sleep, Mother–rock me to sleep!–* (line 47 – 48).

Therefore, one can see that the speaker really needs to ease her pain. Unfortunately, she cannot get her remedy since her mother remain absent. As stated by Gevirtz (2012), "The absence of mothers give effect to their children". Thus, in the case of the speaker's mother, in a way her mother has haunt her, although as a spectral mother, the mother cannot do anything to fix the problem of the speaker.

## CONCLUSION

Rock me to Sleep is a poem written by an American woman poet named Elizabeth Akers Allen. In this poem, the figure of the mother has a crucial position. Although the mother remains absent in the speaker's adulthood, the readers of the poem can sense the powerful and overwhelming love of the speaker toward her mother. It is obvious that she is seeking for a way to ease her pain since she feels like she has lost her own battle of womanhood. Her long-lost mother is her last hope who can save her from destruction.

After examining this poem, it proves that poetry can also be used as a medium to learn about women's experiences and perspectives on motherhood, especially during the 19th century. It also shows that Allen, as an American woman poet has given the examples of social problems that might happen to women, and those problems resulting in women's inferior feeling. In a way, she wants to warn people that womanhood in the patriarchal society can create many problems, and the only remedy for those problems is motherhood.

This paper also proves that a writer does not have to be a feminist to produce a literary text which discusses the issue of women, which has become the focus of feminism. A text which is not intentionally produced to empower the feminist movement, in fact gives contribution to it. Therefore, every literary text is potential to be an object of feminist study and it is a resourceful object to analyze further.

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