



Love and belonging across cultures: a comparative study of two Asian short stories

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ABSTRACT

Love and belonging are universal and essential to human needs as they transcend cultural boundaries. This comparative study conducts an analysis of Xi Xi's *A Woman Like Me*, set in Hongkong, and Agus Noor's *Kisah Cinta Perempuan Perias Mayat*, set in Indonesia. Both short stories narrate the struggles of their protagonists with love, belonging, rejection, and social isolation. Therefore, this study aims to analyze how the social stigma associated with professional activities related to or leading to death stands in the protagonists' way in regard to satisfying their emotional needs, to establish how social rejection and isolation contribute to their self-concept development, and to show attempts they make to fulfill the need to be loved and to belong in spite of cultural barriers. This literary criticism applies Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and a qualitative comparative literature approach to illustrate the cross-cultural challenges in Hong Kong and Indonesia. The results indicate that while both protagonists strive for love and belonging, they are alienated by society due to their professions. Cultural aspects also revealed how Hong Kong and Indonesia's view of death shape their experiences of rejection. This study places emphasis on the intersection of character motivation in the pursuit of love and belonging, societal isolation and rejection caused by negative stigmatisation across cultures.



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INTRODUCTION

Love and belonging are potent tropes that almost hum at the core of the human experience throughout cultures and across generations (Carducci, 2020). Themes of love and belongingness, both personal and as reflections of society in connection, acceptance, and closeness, can be pursued through romantic love, kin relationships, or social networks; the need for emotional connectedness is familiar to all (Allen et al., 2021). These dimensions of literature support insights into the struggles, joys, and complexities associated with forming meaningful relationships. Through narratives, characters seek to satisfy their desires for love and social belonging, just like people in the real world do in their quest for a place within communities and relationships (Leetsch, 2021). For this reason, these themes of love and belonging open up discussions of identity and self-worth, considering the human condition. This makes love and belonging imperative topics within a literature review, as they reflect personal experiences that are indicative of cultural values and social norms.

The main soil in which to place such an understanding of human motivation with regard to the themes of love and belonging comes from Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943). Maslow postulated that the structure of human needs is pyramidal, beginning with physiological and safety needs; above that layer, the third layer encompasses love and belonging, emphasizing a psychological connection with others, social relations, and desires for intimacy (Baumeister & Leary, 2017). As Maslow (1943) posits, after physiological needs are satisfied, individuals try to connect with others through friendships, family relationships, or sexual intimacy; therefore, love and belonging are central to the psychological processes underlying behavioural and emotional functioning. This theory proves instrumental in the analysis of literature by making sense of how characters are driven to pursue their need for connection, acceptance, and social incorporation (Pinkus, 2020). It adds meaning in that the motivations and communications of characters are judged through this lens while also highlighting the cultural and emotional significance of such themes.

The theme of love and belonging is a crucial discussion within literary criticism; these are needed in the realization of character development, plot movement, and thematic exposition. The comparative literature approach, however, allows one to establish a cross-cultural view of how specific themes in literature are represented, both in shared universal shades and in unique

cultural subtle shades. (Sahin, 2016). This involves an exploration of how narratives might reflect upon the social, cultural, and psychological dimensions of love and belonging, thus bringing a multilayered understanding of human connections. Therefore, placing texts from contrasting cultures can show how cultural backgrounds, societal norms, and historical contexts mould and shape depictions of love and a need to belong. In this respect, the comparative literature approach offers an advanced level of analysis of how two sharply contrasting narratives make their way through similar human experiences. It does this to provide a review that not only highlights similarities in the issues of love and belonging but also respects cultural diversity in their presentation and understanding (Wang, 2021).

Two powerful short stories come into focus within this study: *A Woman Like Me* by Xi Xi and *Kisah Cinta Perempuan Perias Mayat* by Agus Noor. Xi Xi's short story of 1983 is a replete tale of love, self-apprehension, and social affiliation in their conventional Chinese format. As opposed to this, in Agus Noor's short story published by Kompas in 2019, love, social condemnation, and personal identity take flesh in contemporary Indonesian culture. While both stories discuss the flawed logic of love and the need to belong for both subjects, they represent different standpoints because of their cultural and temporal settings. Through such narratives, this research ascertains how the character's experiences and choices have carried on the emotional connections and social bonds. According to Hokenson (2000), this cultural and contextual difference provides a unique platform for a comparative analysis of how love and belonging are expressed, challenged, and fulfilled within different societies.

There have been a number of previous studies that have focused on the themes of love and belonging within the context of literary works, applying different theories and methodologies to understand how these conceptions manifest themselves across cultures. Jaya (2017) conducted an analysis of *A Woman Like Me* by Xi Xi, focusing on its lexical cohesion through the lens of Paltridge's theory, employing a qualitative approach. Another study by Kristono (2014) also explored the same work, offering a semiotic perspective. The current study examined the extent to which the narration used irony to bring out the interaction between Hong Kong's modernity and its oriental traditions. In a related study, Tam (2020) talks about how love and belonging are expressed in contemporary literature in China, when "cultural norms, social expectations, and personal desires intersect at the moments of emotional fulfillment and social incorporation." These studies ostensibly present the fundamental understanding of how various literatures reflect on the themes of love and belonging in their respective cultural contexts.

Love and belonging are also themes in Indonesian literary studies, even though the studies dealing with them might not be so varied. Research

on *Kisah Cinta Perempuan Perias Mayat* was conducted by Hasanah (2021), exploring the figurative language used in the story using stylistic theory to identify the kinds of figurative language found in the story. In addition, Nugroho (2022) explores the social values contained in the same short story with a sociological approach to investigate whether it can be a learning material for students or not. Several studies on themes of love and belonging in other Indonesian literary works have also been conducted by various researchers, such as Nurhasanah et al. (2023), Nasir et al. (2019), and Djumadin (2021). The growing body of work represented here has several contributions: examining the psychological and cultural dimension of love and belonging in Indonesian narratives, foregrounding insights on how gendered tropes would be portrayed across a range of genres and periods.

Whereas previous studies could successfully bring to light the themes of love and belonging in various works of literature, a comparison analysis with a view to various cultural contexts has yet to be performed, especially between Chinese and Indonesian literature. This study, therefore, attempts to fill this gap by analyzing how *A Woman Like Me* and *Kisah Cinta Perempuan Perias Mayat* navigate the themes of love and belonging through the lens of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs focusing on: 1) how are the love and belonging needs of the protagonists described in both short stories, 2) how does the societal stigma associated with death-related professions in Chinese and Indonesian cultures lead to rejection and social isolation for the protagonists, and 3) how does the protagonists make an effort to fulfil their love and belonging needs despite facing rejection and social isolation. In the case of comparing these two stories, this research, as Mehrpouyan & Zakeri (2021) suggest, proves the universal aspects of emotional fulfilment and the unique cultural dimensions shaping each narrative. This would provide a means to a broader understanding of the representation of love and belonging, their challenges, and fulfilment within the varied literary traditions.

METHOD

Research Design

The research design applied in the study is within the realm of literary criticism, specifically an analysis of two short stories from two different countries (Fard, 2016). The methodology of the research paper employs a comparative literature approach that considers a cross-textual approach toward narrative styles, thematic expressions, and characterization from the different works. Comparative literature is a multifaceted lens within which the storytelling environment has been narrowly studied to see how different cultural and temporal backgrounds influence the storytelling process, especially those universal themes related to the feeling of love and belonging (Wang, 2021). Therefore, comparing these two short stories makes for an

informative discussion on convergence and divergence in their depiction of these themes, with an eye toward the exposition of how love and belonging manifest themselves within several unique contexts. In this direction, the research follows the theoretical framework of Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, specifically the third tier, which deals with emotional connection and social affiliation (Maslow, 1943). This theory forms the basis of understanding that, apart from being a thematic underpinning, the belonging/love urge becomes the motivating factor that dictates the nature of actions and relations of the characters. From the perspective of Maslow, stories are studied for in-depth analysis of how the human need for emotional attachments and social bonding is dealt with in various cultural and social settings (Yimer, 2019).

Research data

These two short stories are the sources of data in this research: *A Woman Like Me* by Xi Xi, published in 1983, and *Kisah Cinta Perempuan Perias Mayat* by Agus Noor, which was published in 2019 in Kompas. Both works are selected because they both deal with the same themes, love, and belonging, but present rich material for analysis within two broad cultural contexts, namely the Chinese and Indonesian ones. Since this study employs qualitative research (Ugwu & Val, 2023), the data deriving from these are the narrative structures, characterizations, and thematic explorations in both stories, which importantly explain the complexities of finding love and belonging in the protagonists' lives. A detailed reading and critical analysis of each text lets researchers spot the relevant passages, dialogues, and some essential moments of narration that depict the struggles, desires, and experiences of the character regarding emotional bonds and social belonging. This thorough examination allows for a nuanced comparison of how love and belonging are represented in these distinct cultural and temporal settings, providing insights into the diverse ways in which human connections are constructed and understood.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Data collection in this study, as Chenail (2012) argues, is a systemic process comprising the careful reading and thematic selection of textual elements that contribute to portraying love and belonging in each story. Quotations, dialogues, the interaction of characters, the development of the story, and the use of symbols are identified as critical elements on which the basis of analysis can be drawn. These have been selected because they best describe the motivations, psychological states, and emotions that characters undergo. The data collected are analyzed using the comparative literature approach (Gifford, 2021), which attempts to ascertain how each story, through

its plot, character arcs, and settings, deals with themes of love and belonging. Further guidance for the analysis is based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, especially regarding how the human need for love and social connections impels the characters in their actions and decisions. The paper, while comparing and contrasting the way each of these stories deals with the same theme, tries to show the difference in cultural and psychological dimensions underlying these stories (Buescu, 2023); hence, a deeper insight into how love and belonging are represented from diverse cultural and social perspectives.

FINDINGS

1. Characters' Love and Belonging Need

Love and belonging are the central themes of both *A Woman Like Me* and *Kisah Cinta Perempuan Perias Mayat*. The stories narrate how the protagonists of both works need love and acceptance. However, their striving to fulfil these needs is complicated by their professions, leading to rejection and social isolation.

A Woman Like Me

In *A Woman Like Me*, the protagonist's need for love and belonging is evident through her relationship with Xia. Even though her profession as a mortician, associated with death, is socially taboo, she desires emotional closeness. Her longing for intimacy is expressed through small actions and fleeting thoughts, such as imagining tying Xia's tie or cutting his hair.

"Would Xia allow me to cut his hair with them? Would he allow me carefully to tie his tie for him?" (Page 3).

The above datum illustrates her longing for personal connection and her hope that Xia would accept her despite her occupation.

However, the protagonist is fully aware of the potential for rejection, which creates an inner conflict. She consciously holds back from fully revealing the nature of her job, fearing that this disclosure will cause Xia to go away from her. This hesitation is apparent when she states:

"I agreed to show him where I work, and that will be the final chapter" (Page 163).

The datum suggests that she anticipates the end of the relationship once the truth is revealed. Despite this, her emotions for Xia are vital, as seen when she describes how a simple smile from him makes her feel uplifted:

"I've heard others say that when you truly like someone... that's exactly how I feel about Xia" (Page 163).

Her deep sadness and emotional weakness are further emphasized by her inability to express or enjoy her feelings. Even in moments of happiness, she is overshadowed by the fear of rejection and the belief that her profession makes her unworthy of love. As she reflects on their relationship, she notes:

"Sitting in a coffee shop with Xia, I had the appearance of a happy person, but my heart was filled with a hidden sorrow" (Page 163).

This emotional struggle reflects her desire for love, coupled with the anxiety of being judged for her work, creating an ongoing internal conflict.

Kisah Cinta Perempuan Perias Mayat

Similarly, in *Kisah Cinta Perempuan Perias Mayat*, the protagonist finds herself rejected due to her occupation as a mortician. Her need for love and belonging is manifested through the relationships she is trying to establish. However, potential partners withdraw after learning about her work. Early in the story, it is revealed that several men who had shown interest in her moved away since they knew her profession.

"Enam laki-laki yang menyatakan cinta seketika menjauhinya begitu tahu ia perias mayat. Sepertinya kematian dan cinta bukan jodoh yang baik." (Paragraph 1)

"Six men who confessed their feelings to her immediately stayed away from her when they realized she is a mortician."

This rejection highlights the social stigma attached to her work, which affects her ability to build or maintain romantic relationships. Despite this, the protagonist continues her search for love. She builds a relationship with a man who initially appears unbothered by her profession.

Despite these setbacks, the main character continues a persistent pursuit of love. She then gets into a relationship with a man who appears not to mind her profession:

"Ia tak keberatan dikenalkan dengan laki-laki itu... Bagaimanapun, lelaki itu tak terlalu mempersoalkan pekerjaannya" (Paragraph 18).

"She didn't mind being introduced to the man... After all, the man didn't really mind her job"

This is a clear indication that her desire is to be accepted, but societal judgment of her job can interfere with relationships. Even in a serious relationship where there is potential marriage between them, her profession remains an issue as the man's child becomes afraid after knowing her profession. This

further extends to show how societal perceptions deny her any form of permanent love.

"Aku akan senang kalau kamu mencari pekerjaan lain, yang tak membuat anakku takut," (Paragraph 3).

"I would be happy if you found another job, one that wouldn't scare my child"

2. Rejection and Social Isolation

There is harmful rejection coupled with social isolation in both works since the main characters of both stories are rejected by the society they live in due to their professions. Both feature social perceptions and fear related to death and mortuary work that isolate the protagonists from their circle of friends, prospective partners, and the wider community.

A Woman Like Me

The protagonist in *A Woman Like Me* is deeply isolated by the feeling that her being a mortician causes unease and fear in the people surrounding her. She reflects on her profession and how it affects her social life:

"In days past I had brought up the subject of my occupation to friends,... But all my honesty ever brought me was the loss of virtually all my friends. I frightened them all off" (Page 164).

This reveals the direct impact of her job on her friendships. Despite her attempts to be honest about her work, her friends move away and leave her isolated.

Over time, this rejection grows from mere dislike of her profession to outright fear, as she laments:

"At first it was just dislike, but it gradually evolved into fear, pure and simple" (Page 170).

This proves how deeply the societal fear of death, associated with her job, has permeated her relationships, turning friends into strangers. She also compares herself to a woman "surrounded by darkness" and wonders why anyone would want to associate with her:

"Why would a man who exists in a world of brightness want to be friendly with a woman surrounded by darkness?" (Page 172).

This imagery illustrates the metaphorical distance between her and others, as her job places her in the realm of death, away from the "brightness" of the world.

As a result of this pervasive fear and rejection, the protagonist describes her isolation sadly:

"I watched every one of them drift away from me, like wild animals before forest fire" (Page 170).

This simile powerfully evokes her experience of losing her friends, driven away by the fear that her profession instils in them. Her profession not only distances her from society but also impacts her self-perception, causing her to believe that she is fundamentally unworthy of love:

"A woman like me is actually unsuitable for any man's love" (Page 172).

This statement summarises how social rejection has affected her sense of self, convincing her that her work disqualifies her from forming meaningful relationships with others.

Kisah Cinta Perempuan Perias Mayat

Similarly, in *Kisah Cinta Perempuan Perias Mayat*, the protagonist's profession as a mortician leads to repeated rejection from those who initially express romantic interest. Despite her desire for love and connection, she finds that societal fear of her work keeps potential partners at a distance.

"Enam laki-laki yang menyatakan cinta seketika menjauhinya begitu tahu ia perias mayat. Sepertinya kematian dan cinta bukan jodoh yang baik." (Paragraph 1)

"Six men who confessed their feelings to her immediately stayed away from her when they realized that she is a mortician."

The above evidence proves that the immediate and intuitive response of men who initially appear interested retreat immediately upon learning her occupation. It reflects the powerful stigma associated with her work. The occupation becomes a point of rejection even in a relationship where marriage seems possible. A potential partner recommends that she change her job to one more agreeable to society.

"Aku akan senang kalau kamu mencari pekerjaan lain, yang tak membuat anakku takut," (Paragraph 3).

"I would be happy if you found another job, one that wouldn't scare my child."

This condition portrays that the people are afraid of death, and this fear gets passed from generation to generation which finally drives them to deny the protagonist's need for love and belonging. Furthermore, the environment

where she lives does not support her to achieve her goal, even her friends. As a result, she loses her chance to marry.

"Beberapa kawan menyalahkannya, menganggapnya membuang kesempatan menikah dengan laki-laki yang baik" (Paragraph 5).

"Some of her friends blamed her, considering her wasting an opportunity to marry a good man."

In addition, her social circle urges her to adjust the existing social norms and expectations that she is expected to resign from her job in order that she will be socially accepted. This difficult condition finally leads her to realize that true love must be without any conditions.

"Seseorang yang tak pernah bisa menerimamu apa adanya, tak akan pernah bisa menerimamu sepenuhnya" (Paragraph 4).

"Someone who can never accept you as you are will never be able to completely accept you."

3. Characters' Efforts to Fulfill Love and Belonging Need

Despite being marginalised because of their professions, the main protagonist characters in both stories continue to find love and a sense of belonging. Their determination to pursue relationships, even in the face of emotional struggles and societal judgment, reflects the fundamental human need for connection and acceptance.

A Woman Like Me

The protagonist in *A Woman Like Me* acknowledges that her profession challenges her efforts. While she may desire closeness on an emotional level, she cautiously guards how much she lets Xia in due to the fear of rejection.

"The main reason I didn't give a fuller answer to Xia's question was my concern that the truth would frighten him" (Page 164).

This inner conflict emerges as she withholds information to protect the relationship, knowing that revealing her work as a mortician may drive him away.

Despite her fears, she continues to pursue the relationship, holding on to hope that it might succeed, even after witnessing a "lucky omen" and acknowledging the emotional risks involved.

"I don't know why, after the appearance of this lucky omen, I continued going on pleasure excursions with Xia" (Page 164).

This passage demonstrates her human desire to maintain the relationship, even though she anticipates its eventual failure. At the same time, the protagonist's efforts are marked with sadness and resignation. She acknowledges her unworthiness for love due to her profession:

"A woman like me is unsuitable for any man's love" (Page 163).

This self-awareness reflects her emotional conflict—while she desires intimacy, she also believes her profession renders her unfit for it. Even in moments of happiness, such as when Xia is pleased that she does not wear makeup, she cannot fully experience joy because of the burden she carries:

"...but at that moment he was so happy; happy because I was a woman who didn't use makeup on herself. Yet my heart was filled with sadness" (Page 164).

This duality highlights her internalized belief that societal rejection of her profession will ultimately deprive her of true love.

Kisah Cinta Perempuan Perias Mayat

Similarly, in *Kisah Cinta Perempuan Perias Mayat*, the protagonist actively seeks romantic relationships although she realizes that her profession may hinder her from achieving her purpose. She maintains a long-term relationship with a man, a widower, reflecting her willingness to pursue love despite previous failures. This action indicates her hope for emotional connection, even after multiple rejections.

"Pernah ia berhubungan lumayan lama dengan seorang lelaki, duda beranak satu" (Paragraph 2).

"Once she had a long relationship with a man, a widower with one child."

Although her profession leads to some men pulling back, she remains open to relationships with those who seem more accepting. One relationship in particular shows promise—the man is mostly indifferent to her work.

"Ia tak keberatan dikenalkan dengan laki-laki itu... Bagaimanapun, lelaki itu tak terlalu mempersoalkan pekerjaannya" (Paragraph 18).

"She didn't mind being introduced to the man... After all, the man didn't really mind her job."

These findings underline the idea that both protagonists do not stop at nothing in acquiring what is needed emotionally, while at the same time being conscious of the obstacles that society sees fit to bring about. Their persistence underlines the powerful role, as driving forces, which love and belonging play

in enabling them to overcome external problems and inner struggles along the path toward attaining emotional fulfilment.

DISCUSSION

Characters' Love and Belonging need

The emotional problems of the protagonists in both stories originate from an innate compulsion that has always been linked with love and belonging. This is in very much agreement with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, suggesting that once basic needs for survival and safety are met, higher-order needs—enormously social ones related to romance—are put to the fore. This is because the stigma ascribed to them by their work as morticians denies them these very emotional needs. Even though their need for love is universal, the pursuit and denial of this need are culturally shaped by Indonesia and Hong Kong.

Love and belonging come third in Maslow's hierarchy to show how much it means to emotional well-being. These examples of stigma create the conditions where protagonists, refusing proximity, deny themselves emotional security. Their professions involve barriers which are all but impossible to transcend to satisfy the protagonists' emotional needs for love and connection. In *A Woman Like Me*, the main character pins her longing for love on Xia. She wishes to be with someone, but she fears her profession as a mortician keeps people away.

This inner struggle reflects on Maslow's belonging theory. Her job becomes a psychological wall that prevents her from being fully accepted. Failure to satisfy love and belonging needs develops into emotional distress; this can be seen in her loneliness and sorrow throughout the story. In *Kisah Cinta Perempuan Perias Mayat*, too, the protagonist struggles with her search for love amidst the blot on her profession of brooding shame. Although she tries to have some men get close to her, they all turn away whenever they discover what her line of work is. Maslow describes how without the levels of love being satisfied, the individual tends to alienate—which can be observed through the protagonist as she faces so much rejection. However, as told in the protagonist of *A Woman Like Me*, she goes about finding herself love, implying how strong this need for connection is despite public disapproval.

These are universal themes, especially in questions of love and belonging; however, the cultural settings create some very unique challenges. In *A Woman Like Me*, contemporary Hong Kong introduces traditional Chinese beliefs on death and impurity to further burden her pursuit of love (Cohen &

Ahern, 1976). Death was taboo; to talk about death or of people associated with death made people shun them, which in turn increased the emotional turmoil. This deep-seated cultural perception engraves in her the belief that she is "*unfit for love*"; she feels marginalized professionally and personally. Internalized stigma around death further complicates the capacity for relating, as she is disconnected emotionally.

Against another setting of culture, the main character in *Kisah Cinta Perempuan Perias Mayat* also faces rejection. Jobs dealing with death are stigmatized in Indonesia, where traditional communities have highly defined roles and societal expectations (Boon, 1979). She is considered to have an unsuitable profession to marry into, as even one man expresses concern about how his child reacts to her work: "*I fear my child is terrified of her job.*" This reflects the importance of harmony within the family unit in Indonesian culture, but it not only hinders her prospects for a partner but also creates discomfort within the family circle.

However, beneath such differences, both protagonists face the same core issue: social ostracism. The stigma associated with their work casts them both to the fringes of their respective societies, making it difficult for them to connect with people in Hong Kong or Indonesia. The reasons for this stigma differ based on cultural beliefs, but the inner torment they experience transcends cultural boundaries. Both protagonists suffer from low self-esteem, perpetuated by society's perception that their professions cannot coexist with love or family life.

Apart from societal judgment, self-worth is also a personal struggle for both protagonists. In *A Woman Like Me*, the question of whether someone "*smothered by darkness*" could ever be loved by those in the "*world of brightness*" reflects her inner turmoil. Similarly, in *Kisah Cinta Perempuan Perias Mayat*, the protagonist hopes for companionship but ultimately resigns herself to the belief that she may never find someone who can fully accept her. Maslow's self-actualization theory emphasizes the link between emotional well-being and self-acceptance, and both protagonists find it difficult to fulfill their love and belonging needs due to their struggles with self-worth.

The messages of love and belonging, as described in Maslow's motivation theory, are evident in both literature works. Despite the unique cultural barriers faced by the protagonists—whether in Hong Kong or Indonesia—their internal experiences are strikingly similar. The stigma surrounding their professions spills into their relationships, weakening their sense of self-worth and preventing them from achieving emotional fulfillment. While cultural differences shape the way they pursue love and

belonging, the shared struggle for emotional connection remains a universal experience.

Rejection and Social Isolation

Both short stories depict the emotional journeys of their protagonists in ways related to their work as morticians. The protagonists experience rejection and isolation from society, friends, and potential romantic partners, leading to a deep sense of emotional disconnection and loneliness. This rejection and their inability to fulfill their need for love and belonging result in inner turmoil and isolation, aligning with the concepts outlined in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

Both stories are reflective of societal views about death and mortuary work, eliciting fear and rejection. In *A Woman Like Me*, her loneliness escalates as she shares her profession with friends, who react in fear. "*In days past I had brought up the subject of my occupation to friends... But all my honesty ever brought me was the loss of virtually all my friends. I frightened them all off*" (Page 164).

The protagonist's alienation is not confined to her profession alone. However, it extends to her entire being, as she remarks: "*At first it was just dislike, but it gradually evolved into fear, pure and simple*" (Page 170). This response shows how societal humiliation impacts relationships and creates emotional isolation. In *Kisah Cinta Perempuan Perias Mayat*, the protagonist is rejected by men who initially express interest in her but quickly distance themselves after learning about her job. "Six men who confessed their feelings to her immediately stayed away from her when they realized that she is a mortician." This rejection dramatizes the discomfort associated with death in Indonesian society, where her job clashes with ideas of love and romantic connections.

These stories take on aspects of cultural background that add depth to the rejection experienced. *A Woman Like Me*, set in Hong Kong, roots the protagonist's isolation in traditional Chinese beliefs, associating death with bad luck and impurity. These beliefs create a social barrier, with people fearing contamination from her work. The protagonist is fully aware of this, saying: "Why would a man who exists in a world of brightness want to be friendly with a woman surrounded by darkness?" (Page 172). The metaphor of "*darkness*" describes how the stigma associated with death and her job makes her feel unlovable.

In *Kisah Cinta Perempuan Perias Mayat*, set in Indonesia, rejection stems from social beliefs about death and familial expectations regarding marriage. One of her suitors worries that his child would be scared by her profession, suggesting: "*I would be happy if you found another job, one that wouldn't scare my*

child" (Paragraph 3). This reflects the importance of family in Indonesian society, where a woman's career should not conflict with ideals of marriage and family harmony.

Both protagonists internalize the rejection they face, deepening their feelings of isolation. In *A Woman Like Me*, the protagonist feels more and more unworthy as she faces repeated rejection. What she says, "*A woman like me is actually unsuitable for any man's love*" (Page 172), reflects how deeply social rejection has impacted her self-esteem.

In addition, in *Kisah Cinta Perempuan Perias Mayat*, the protagonist is unacceptable because of her profession. She states defiantly, "*Seseorang yang tak pernah bisa menerimamu apa adanya, tak akan pernah bisa menerimamu sepenuhnya.*" Which translates to someone who can never accept you as you are, will never be able to completely accept you. Such realization does relatively little to dissipate the pain involving rejection and her failure to find emotional fulfillment.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs shows that with unmet needs of love and belonging, some sets of emotional instability are practically guaranteed. This is what happens with both protagonists, not because of any other reason but because both their professions bring about not only social but also emotional isolation. In *A Woman Like Me*, the protagonist keeps interacting with Xia, though he knows her profession may have pushed him away: "*Sitting in a coffee shop with Xia, I had the appearance of a happy person, but my heart was filled with a hidden sorrow*" (Page 163).

It is a sorrow due to inner conflict caused by rejection and isolation. In *Kisah Cinta Perempuan Perias Mayat*, too, her pursuit of love does not erase the isolation of the protagonist. She is aware that not everybody would accept her, but judgment from society keeps her at the edge, hindering her connectedness. The stigma of death and mortuary work in Hong Kong and Indonesia permeates into the emotional toll of rejection and isolation in the protagonists in both stories. In general, these feelings of insignificance and loneliness come out of some fear or cultural expectation that prevents a person from meeting his or her need to be loved and belong. These stories reflect a universal human emotion: that of denied connection and acceptance across cultures.

Characters' Efforts to Fulfill Love and Belonging Need

Both stories talk about the protagonists in their struggles to fulfill the need for love and belonging amidst societal stigma and personal emotional turmoil. Love and belonging, as per Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, become meaningful only when physiological and safety needs are met. Clearly, protagonists in

this position try to attain emotional connections, but because of the rejection by society and the personal conflict, it gets complicated. Love and belonging are, as established by Maslow (1943), pretty vital needs for psychological health; not being able to satisfy them brings emotional distress to both protagonists.

In *A Woman Like Me*, the protagonist pursues a relationship with Xia despite fearing rejection due to her profession. She knows revealing her job may jeopardize their relationship, yet she still seeks emotional intimacy with him. Her continued interactions with Xia reflect her desire for connection: "I don't know why, after the appearance of this lucky omen, I continued going on pleasure excursions with Xia" (Page 164). She conceals aspects of her profession to protect the relationship: "The main reason I didn't give a fuller answer to Xia's question was my concern that the truth would frighten him" (Page 164). This internal struggle between her need for love and fear of rejection reveals the emotional toll of her societal role.

In *Kisah Cinta Perempuan Perias Mayat*, the protagonist also makes efforts to establish romantic relationships despite facing rejection due to her profession. The determination being shown by her is when she gets into a long-term affair with a widower: "Pernah ia berhubungan lumayan lama dengan seorang lelaki, duda beranak satu" (Paragraph 2) which translates to once she had a long relationship with a man, a widower with one child. Her relentless pursuit of love – when she had been seen distancing herself from other men once they found out what she does for a living – revealed how desperate she is to belong. That struggle demonstrates her wishes for an emotional connection and social belonging within societal barriers.

While both works are films narrating tales of protagonists finding love in their respective perils, it is uniquely cultural factors that shape their experiences – with treatment shaped either by Hong Kong or Indonesia. Seen from the perspective of traditional Chinese beliefs regarding death and impurity, there is a great effect on the struggle of the protagonist of *A Woman Like Me*. She views herself as "unworthy of any man's love," death being a magnet for bad luck, and herself an outcast in society. This inner conviction comes forth most poignantly in the establishment of her affair with Xia – holding her back from complete surrender to her relationship, which she is afraid at any time might be rejected on account of cultural expectations. Thus, her career has placed her in a solitary position where her desire for love is protected from being fulfilled and hence serves as a formidable block toward the emotional fulfilment of that longing.

In the Indonesian setting of *Kisah Cinta Perempuan Perias Mayat*, the journey to love is equally entangled with cultural expectations, especially

those touching on family affairs. Aside from professional discouragements, her affair with a widower breaks up due to misgivings about how her work affects his family. It does, however, come into play when her partner gives voice to his unease with respect to his child's reaction vis-à-vis her profession: "*I would be happy if you found another job, one that wouldn't scare my child.*" One should not forget the role of family and family harmony in Indonesian culture; by those standards, a woman's profession determines not only her social acceptance but also her future marriage prospects.

However different the cultural contexts may be, the dilemma for both protagonists remains the same: in their desperate attempt to seek love and acceptance, both are barred by social verdicts—also known as death sentences. A yearning for emotional liaison and tragedy is shared by both protagonists. This, therefore, underlines the psychic need to be loved and attached to. However, their professions place them in the way of societal judgment, which inhibits them from achieving their emotional satisfaction. A look at both stories shows that internal emotional struggles, accentuated by societal expectations, hinder the protagonists in their fulfilment of emotional needs related to love and belonging. Their pursuit of relationships accounts for the very basic human urge to bond with other people; however, at the minimum, the social norms on death create a hindrance. In fact, this collection of short stories highlights that personal relations are big-time compromised with social stigma and just how cultural expectations of big time stand as a barrier toward fulfilling basic human needs.

CONCLUSION

This comparative research on the two short stories, one entitled *A Woman Like Me* and the other entitled *Kisah Cinta Perempuan Perias Mayat*, touches on the framing of two salient themes of love, belonging, rejection, and social isolation in a robe of social stigma attached to the protagonists' profession as morticians. Grounded on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, what they demonstrate is a human need to be loved and to belong driving behaviour even in the light of quite profound social rejection reflected by the two main characters in the two short stories. In both stories, the main protagonists reveal deep desires for emotional connection and acceptance; however, their quests are terribly disrupted by deeply embedded cultural taboos attributed to death. Traditional Chinese views of death as something impure and unlucky are de-emphasized in *A Woman Like Me*, further worsening the struggle of the protagonist to establish meaningful relations. It is that inner conflict, which has formed her according to societal dictations, that reflects a greater cultural fear of contamination due to her profession. For instance, the protagonist in *Kisah Cinta Perempuan Perias Mayat* is disowned by the

Indonesian social norms concerning familial roles and marital roles because such profession is considered incongruous with the idealistic view of familial harmony.

However, with the cultural differences that exist in the two stories, their characters exert the same emotional quotient. The struggle to which they tried to fulfil their needs of love and belonging is constantly disowned by the perceptions of society. In turn, the kind of rejection they face socially and emotionally ostracizes them from deeper connections with others for which they might strive. The stories they narrate also suggest an important way in which the cultural attitudes toward death deeply influence people's personal lives, including their associations, self-worth, and ordinary psychological well-being. The comparative study will perhaps bridge the gaps in universality between the need for love and belonging by showing how certain needs are being met or hindered in various cultural contexts. Both stories are two heart-wrenching examples of how judgment from society shapes individual experiences of love, acceptance, and isolation. From these themes to the very important literary explorations of human motivations and behaviours, deep insights are offered regarding a complex interplay between culture, identity, and emotional fulfilment.

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