

**THE STRUGGLE OF ANTONIA SHIMERDA AND LENA  
LINGARD AGAINST *PATRIARCHAL GENDER ROLES*  
PORTRAYED IN WILLA CATHER'S *MY ANTONIA***

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**Abstract**

Women is never ending issue to discuss. *My Antonia* is one of popular novel in early 20<sup>th</sup> century which is told about women's struggle. There are not many novels or literary works that discuss about woman's struggle against *patriarchal gender role* explicitly such as in *My Antonia* by Willa Cather. This topic will discuss about the struggle of Antonia Shimerda and Lena Lingard against *patriarchal gender role*. As already known, equality is very difficult to get for women in early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The phenomenon of inequality between men and women is being a trigger for women movement or usually called as feminist. The issue of inequality attracts women to start their movement against the *patriarchal gender role* which has been already existed in the society since a long time ago. Antonia Shimerda and Lena Lingard depicted in the novel as woman who decided to focus with their career rather than to get married. It is still taboo for woman to behave as feminist in that era.

**Key words:** *patriarchal gender roles*, struggle, equality, feminist.

**INTRODUCTION**

Women in early 20<sup>th</sup> century are still under the circumstance of *patriarchal gender roles* especially in America. Meanwhile, there were some women who start their movement to against these *patriarchal gender roles* in order to get their equality with men. This issue is very interesting because in early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the power of men is very strong in dominating in every aspect such as politic, economic, education and so on and women only stay at home. In society, men's stereotype is described as superior and women's stereotype is described as inferior which is called as social construction. It gives a privilege for men to dominate anything include in women's aspect. Women did not have any right to choose what they want to do because it has already controlled by men or society. Man is superior and woman is inferior. Those terms are constructed by the society. Based on Tyson, feminism is criticizing any fields such as economic, politic, psychological, or even education which is oppressed women

Broadly defined, feminist criticism examines the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women. (Tyson, 2006: 83)

From this phenomenon, this paper will discuss about the feminist issue depicted in *My Antonia* by Willa Cather. *My Antonia* was written by Willa Cather in 1918. Willa Cather is one of women writer in American modern literature. She told about her childhood friend by writing this novel. This novel is clearly portrayed the struggle of women in against the *patriarchal gender role* in their place. Antonia Shimerda and Lena Lingard are two women in the novel that against the *patriarchal gender role*. Antonia was described as migrant and bohemian girl who lived in Black Hawk, Nebraska. She worked in Burden Family and finally moved to city in order to get a job in order to help her family financial problem after her father's death. Lena Lingard is young girl who moved to city from her home town to get a better job to help her family financial condition such as Antonia.

Their purpose for getting a better life in the city was underestimated by many people around them because they are women. Most of their relatives are

doubt with both of them and thought that they will not be able to get what they want because they are woman. At that time, women should be a woman who has good behavior and stay at home which is not being a working girl and going to city. The inferior position was occupied by women in patriarchal society which has been culturally, not biologically, produced by social construction. Patriarchy continually exerts to underestimate women's self confidence and assertiveness; the absence point of these qualities are as proof that women are naturally and therefore correctly, self-effacing and submissive.<sup>1</sup> This paper dicusses about the struggle of Antonia Shimerda and Lena Lingard against *patriarchal gender role* portrayed in Willa Carther's *My Antonia* and the reason of Antonia Shimerda and Lena Lingard do against the *patriarchal gender role*.

## METHOD

### FEMINIST THEORY

Woman is being an interesting issue when it relates to the movement development in against *patriarchal gender role*. Society has determined that women should be emotional, weak, nurturing, and submissive and men should be strong, protective, rational, and decisive. These terms have become an absolute pattern for hundred years. But today, it is not anymore. Women has already woke up from their long sleep in unconsciously receive all the stereotype of gender role. Based on Tyson, she explained that *patriarchal gender role* is:

By patriarchal woman I mean, which can be defined, in short, as any culture that privileges men by promoting traditional gender roles. Traditional gender role cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; they cast woman as emotional (rational), weak, nurturing, and submissive. (Tyson, 2006:85)

In analyzing this paper, the writer will use feminist theory of *patriarchal gender role* and it will be supported by Simone de Beauvoir's theory about materialist feminist. This theory will help the writer to analyze the research problem. Feminist theory will reveal the struggle of Antonia Shimerda and Lena Lingard in against *patriarchal gender role* and their reason behind their struggle

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<sup>1</sup> Tyson, Lois. 2006. *Critical Theory Today*. New York: Routledge. Print. page 86-87

portrayed in the novel of *My Antonia*. As known, Equality is the main purpose that struggle for feminist. American feminism and French feminism believe in the importance of social and political activism in order to ensure equal opportunity and equal access to justice for women. French feminists are also concerned with the ways in which women's social or economic and psychological experience are connected.<sup>2</sup>

Although Simone de Beauvoir didn't refer to herself as a materialist feminist, her groundbreaking *The Second Sex* (1949) created a theoretical basis for materialist feminist for decades to come. In patriarchal society, Beauvoir observes, men are considered essential subjects (independent selves with free will), while women are considered contingent beings (dependent beings controlled by circumstance). (Tyson, 2006: 96)

Simone de Beauvoir's theory is used because one of the purposes of Antonia Shimerda and Lena Lingard is for getting a good job and having a good financial condition. As cited above that Beauvoir concerned with the economic right between men and women. Men usually get better place in economic field rather than women. Women cannot get some particular job because they are women and also have a different salary with men. Men got a higher salary rather than women. This phenomenon was criticized by Beauvoir which is also portrayed in *My Antonia* by Willa Cather.

## **FINDING AND DISCUSSION**

### **1. Antonia Shimerda against *Patriarchal Gender Roles***

Antonia Shimerda is described as strong girl, even she is an immigrant and bohemian girl but she had big spirit to reach her dream. Even Antonia lived with her poor family but it does not make her surrender with her life. She still had a big spirit to prove that she could be what she wanted to be. She learned English with Jim Burden (her childhood friend). She worked hard to prove that she could be like her brother. She wanted to help her family financial condition after her father's death. Lena Lingard also has similar condition with Antonia. She moved to city from her hometown to get a job to help her family financial condition but

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<sup>2</sup> Idem. page 96

she decided to make her own tailor shop and being a career woman. In this novel, the struggle of women in against the *patriarchal gender role* was described clearly. How the women characters in the novel were not behave as women stereotype but tried to break women's stereotype.

She was restless, headstrong girl, even then, who liked to astonish her friends. Later, when I knew her, she was always doing something unexpected. She gave one of her town house for a suffrage headquarters, produced one of her own plays at the princess Theater. . . . She is handsome, energetic, executive, but to me she seems unimpressible and temperamentally incapable of enthusiasm. (Cather: iv)

Cited above describes about the character of Antonia Shimerda portrayed in the novel. As already known, that one of *patriarchal gender roles* about women is weak. But she was described as strong and energetic girl. Since she was young, Antonia usually worked in the field to help her family farming, she also worked in Burden family. She did it all the works in order to help her family. Her family was immigrant and came to America in order to get a better life. Unfortunately, their family was cheated by someone and made them live in sorrow. So that's why, Antonia should be a strong girl to help her family financial condition. Even her mother had ever refused her idea of working outside but she could not do anything because the family financial conditional was bad.

She also described as handsome and executive girl. It means that she had broken the stereotype that women should be submissive because of the using of words "handsome and executive" are usually used to describe a man. Willa Cather described Antonia in different way. Even Antonia is woman but she was described as woman with man ability. She had masculine side in her attitude. She was strong, superior, and executive. She never thought that she was an ordinary girl who only stayed at home. She had her own perspective about her life. She would do anything to help her family's problem even she had to work in the family farm or being a servant in rich family.

Antonia had opinions about everything, and she was soon able to make them known. Almost every day she came running across the prairie to have her reading lesson with me. Mrs. Shimerda grumbled, but realized it was important that one member of the family should learn English. (Cather, 24)

Antonia also felt free to share her opinion. She was not afraid to deliver her opinion about her life to Jim Burden. Women should keep her secret to men especially with the one that does not have any relation with her like Jim but she said all her opinion to Jim without any purpose of emotional interest. She wanted to show to Jim Burden that she also had right to give an opinion. In the past, not many women had a chance to deliver an opinion even to their relative. Woman's opinion was not important but her obedient was more important for men. So that's why when women deliver her opinion briefly was one of a way in against the traditional gender role which women should stay calm.

Women did not allow studying especially for woman such Antonia who got double pressure of traditional gender role as woman and immigrant (bohemian) girl. Her father asked Jim Burden to help Antonia to study English before his death. Mr. Shimerda thought that at least one of her family's members can speak English properly. After that Antonia realized that she had to learn English if she wanted to be success. She studied hard with Jim burden so she was able to speak English properly and lead her to be able to go to city to find a better job.

Much as I liked Antonia, I hated a superior tone that she sometimes took with me. She was four years older than I, to be sure, and had seen more of the world; but I was a boy and she was a girl, and I resented her protecting manner. (Cather, 34)

From the citation above, it explains how society perceives *patriarchal gender role*. When Antonia was superior rather than Jim Burden, Jim Burden did not like it. Even Antonia was four years older than him but it did not merely about the age. The matter is Antonia was a girl and Jim was a boy. Based on *Patriarchal gender role* that women should be submissive and inferior but men should be dominant and superior. While Jim Burden showed his dislike to Antonia for her superiority to him, it really shows that even kids understand about patriarchal gender role very well. Meanwhile against this *patriarchal gender role*, Antonia tried to show that woman also could be superior rather than man. She showed to Jim that she was superior rather than him without related it with the differences of age but because she was women and she could do it.

Antonia ate so noisily now, like a man, and she yawned often at the table and kept stretching her arms over her head, as if they ached. Grandmother had said, "Heavy field work will spoil that girl. She will lose all her nice ways and get rough ones." she had lost them already. (Cather, 87)

The way how Antonia behaves is not represent the real women. When she ate with Burden's family, she showed a bad manner in the table. She ate noisily like a man and yawned often. Jim's Grandmother still believes on *patriarchal gender role* that women should behave like women. Having a good attitude while eating but Antonia almost had loose it all. She started to act like a man. Her attitude while she was eating together with Burden's family was in order to against the *patriarchal gender role* which is exist in their social life.

When Jim's grandmother said that Antonia has already lost her attitude as women, it implies that Antonia successfully acted or behaved as a man. It shows her struggle to against *patriarchal gender role* that women should behave well but men can behave as they wish for. Woman might not to be noise or yawned while eating with many people but man can be noise or yawned while eating with many people. Antonia wanted to break this inequality by acting like a man while she was eating with Burden's family

"Oh, better I like to work out of doors than in a house!" she used to sing joyfully. "I not care that your grandmother says it makes me like a man. I like to be like a man". She would toss her head and ask me to feel the muscles swell in her brown arm. (Cather, 96)

Her struggle in against the *patriarchal gender role* is by showing her willingness to work outside rather than stay at home. Based on *patriarchal gender role*, women should stay at home because woman was born to be nurtured. But Antonia did not agree with that, she wanted to work like a man. She thought that it is unfair because man could work outside but woman could not. Inequality in economic field was the trigger for Antonia to act like a man. She didn't care with Jim's grandmother's opinion about her. She even showed her muscle in her arm to Jim in order to show that she also could have a muscle like a man.

"Could you throw the wheat into the bin yourself, Tony? She knew what heavy work it was. "Yes, Mam, I did. I could shovel just as fast as that fat Andern boy that drove the other wagon". (Cather, 121)

The citation above also shows how Antonia proves herself to her master that she could be as strong as man. When her master asked her to do heavy job which was usually done by the male service and she suddenly said yes. It shows her struggle to against the *patriarchal gender role* by denying that woman was weak because woman also could do something that usually done by man. It implies that woman is as strong as man.

Lena's success puzzled me. She was so easy-going; had none of the push and self-assertiveness that get people ahead in business. She had come to Lincoln, a country girl, with no introductions except to some cousins of Mrs. Thomas who lived there, and she was already making clothes for the women of "the young married set." (Cather, 191)

## **2. Lena Lingard against *Patriarchal Gender Roles***

While Lena Lingard had her own way to against *patriarchal gender role*, she did not want to work under male oppression. She was not as strong as Antonia but she had a ability in making a dress. Her ability led her to have dream for being a success women tailor in the city. It was very uncommon for women to have her own business because most of tailor shop was dominated by man. But Lena Lingard showed that with her strong willingness for being a success woman, she could make her own tailor shop in city. Based on Simone de Beauvoir that woman and man are having inequality right in economic especially in the chance of getting a job and business. Here, Lena Lingard showed that she also could have a business like any other men.

"You will try to keep it under fifty for me, won't you, Miss Lingard? You see, she is really too young to come to an expensive dressmaker, but I knew you could do more with her than anybody else". "Oh, that will be all right, Mrs. Herron. I think we will manage to get a good effect," Lena replied blandly. I thought her manner with her customers very good, and wondered where she had learned such self possession. (Cather, 191-192)

Lena Lingard also showed her capability in servicing her customer which were not many people able to do that. Lena Lingard absolutely showed her struggle in against *patriarchal gender role* by having her own tailor shop. She could handle her own tailor shop just like any other tailor shop. Even she was woman tailor among man tailor in the city but she was brave to give an expensive



charge for her dress. It was very strange because only man tailor who usually gave charge for his dress in expensive price. It implies that woman tailor also can do as man tailor do. She tried to break the stereotype's wall that differentiates between man and woman in economic field.

Even there were many obstacles when she decided to make her own tailor shop but she believe that she could do it. Many people underestimated her attempt to have her own tailor shop because she was a woman. Based on *patriarchal gender roles* that women should stay at house and did not work outside or even made her own business. Because working outside and having business were man's duty and not woman's duty. Here, Lena Lingard wanted to show that not only a man who had a chance to have a business but also a woman because woman had same ability and capability like a man in running her business.

Lena shifted her pillow and looked up at me in surprise. "Why, I am not going to marry anybody. Did not you know that?" "Nonsense, Lena. That's what girls say, but you know better. Every handsome girl like you marries, of course." She shook her head. "Not me." (Cather 198)

Her behavior in running her business was not the only thing that she could do to against *patriarchal gender role* because she strictly denied one of the terms of *patriarchal gender role*. Based on the citation above, she did not want to get married. As known that nurturing is part of women gender role but, Lena Lingard stated that she didn't want to get married because she was not like any other girl. Other girls wanted to get married with handsome and rich man but Lena Lingard preferred to be success and carrier woman with her own struggle rather than marrying a rich man for her interest. Those are how Willa Cather described the struggle of Antonia Shimerda and Lena Lingard in against *patriarchal gender role* depicted in the novel. There is always reason behind the struggle of Antonia and Lena in against *Patriarchal gender role*. Here are the analysis of the reason why they against *patriarchal gender role*.

Lena laughed, "Well, it's mainly because I don't want a husband. Men are all right for friends, but as soon as you marry them they turn into cranky old father, even the wild ones. they begin to tell you what's sensible and

what's foolish, and want you to stick at home all the time. I prefer to be foolish when I feel like it, and be accountable to no body." (Cather, 198)

Lena Lingard had her own reason why she decided not to get married. She thought that married could make person's behavior changes. She thought that man would have different attitude while he/she was in friend relationship and marriage relation. She thought that man would change into bad attitude when he got married. Lena did not want to get stuck in the house so that's why she did not want to get married. According to Jennifer Hansen observes, "Beauvoir strongly believed that marriage. It trapped and stunted women's intellectual growth and freedom". In investing themselves so thoroughly in the accomplishments of their husbands and sons, Beauvoir claims, women are trying to escape their own freedom to fulfill their own potential in the world, a freedom that they often try to avoid because it is frightening: it demands personal responsibility while offering no guarantee of success or even of well-being.<sup>3</sup>

"Not me, I like to be lonesome. When I went to work for Mrs. Thomas I was nineteen years old and I had never slept a night in my life when there were not three in the bed. I never had a minute to myself except when I was off with the cattle" . . . . She remembered home as a place where there were always too many children, a cross man, and work piling up around a sick woman. (Cather, 198-199)

Another reason why Lena Lingard didn't want to get married was due to she did not want to be like woman in her family. She wanted to escape from her bad memories of her family and her young life. She had to work in Mrs. Thomas family while she was already nineteen years old. She could not do what she really wanted to do when she was young. But when she became a success and carrier woman, she really enjoyed her life. She didn't think that marriage was important for her life but the most important was how you could have a good financial condition. Lena Lingard thought that when woman lived in good financial condition than woman could be independent just like other man.

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<sup>3</sup> Tyson, Lois. 2006. *Critical Theory Today*. New York: Routledge. Print. page 97

## CONCLUSION

Antonia Shimerda was described as woman who against inequality between man and woman in the novel. As known, Antonia Shimerda is under double discrimination. First, she is a woman and second she is a bohemian (immigrant). Woman has been already discriminated by society under the term of *patriarchal gender role*. Bohemian is an immigrant community in America which is also discriminated under the society role. Antonia wanted to be a teacher but she could not because bohemian and Scandinavian were not allowed to get education and become a teacher. Antonia Shimerda did all struggles to against the *patriarchal gender roles* to get the same right with other. It is not merely about the inequality between man and woman but also inequality between woman and woman. She wants to prove that woman also could do same thing just like man.

It can be concluded that all the struggles that had already done by Antonia Shimerda and Lena Lingard in against *patriarchal gender role* is in order to get equality position with man. The two women show that they can act and behave like a man. These two women are breaking the *patriarchal gender role* which women should be weak, submissive, nurturing and emotional. Antonia is described as strong, handsome, executive and superior girl while Lena describes is described as independent and unmarried woman. All of their struggles are in order to get the same right in any field such as economic, education, social and any other field with man. Woman and man should have equal position in some aspects. Equality is their main purpose against *patriarchal gender role*.

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