

Antonia's Mannish Behavioral Transition in Willa Cather's Novel *My Antonia* Hanan Abbas Hussein

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Abstract

This paper aims to study Antonia's character and her mannish behavioral transition throughout the novel entitled *My Antonia*. Willa presents Antonia who shows her resolution and courage in facing and dealing with personal dilemmas and social circumstances. Willa portrays Antonia, who struggles in the new society and culture by working hard in changing the salty land of Nebraska and her destiny. Working in salty land day and night forces Antonia to lose her tender behavior and her beauty as a woman is changed too. She achieves her goals to live with her family in a new place with a dignity and respect though she looks like a man in her strength and body built. Willa Cather tries to explain that the major figure in her novel, Antonia, is characterized by strength, fortitude, and resolution. She is able to face difficulties of life and never surrender to them.

Keywords: Willa Cather, Antonia, Behavioral transition

الانتقال السلوكي الرجولي لانتونيا في رواية الكاتبة ويلاتا انتونيا خاصتي

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الملخص

يهدف هذا البحث دراسة شخصية انتونيا وسلوكها الرجولي المتحول في رواية انتونيا او انتونيا خاصتي. تعرض الكاتبة ويلاتا انتونيا كشخصية ذات اصرار وشجاعة عند مواجهتها او تعاملها مع مآسي شخصية او ظروف اجتماعية وتظهر الكاتبة ايضا صراع انتونيا في مجتمع وحضارة جديدة من خلال جهدها الحثيث في استصلاح الارض المالحة في نبراسكا ومصيرها هناك. فعملها في الارض المالحة ادى بها الى فقدان اسلوبها الرقيق وجمالها كامرأة. تحققت انتونيا اهدافها المتمثلة بالعيش مع عائلتها بكرامة واحترام في مكان جديد رغم انها تبدو كرجل بهيئتها وقوتها البدنية. وقد حاولت الكاتبة ان تبين ان الشخصية الاساسية في روايتها المتمثلة بانتونيا تتصف بالقوة والعزيمة والاصرار وهي قادرة على مواجهة صعاب الحياة واستحالة الاستسلام لها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: رواية انتونيا. السلوك الرجولي الانتقالي

It is well-known by readers of literature that American females in the Nineteenth century remained under the power of males whether her father or her husband . They lived in a rigid society which deprived them from their rights whether social, legal, and political issues. Concerning the female's social rights, especially the matter of education, women were forced to learn only subjects like cookery, needle work, and house wifely abilities. They were not allowed to have and continue their education. In fact, it was restricted to males. Females must stay at home and take care of children, even if there was work for them outside, this work was usually of low wages. The majority of females did not earn money as "their productive work remained invisible as it was conducted in the household"¹. Most males considered females fragile and emotional as Catharine Beecher, an American educator, states "women were best suited for domestic and moral housekeeping"² partly because she was against women and partly because she thought most females are weak and feeble.

At the end of the nineteenth century, female began to take her active role in the society because of the drastic change which was feminism. Women should be equal with males in their rights, "women are to do whatever they find to do with all their might, they are to be properly trained for business, profession, or art".³ Phoebe A. Hanaford is a writer who deals with equality of males and females calling for equality between the two sexes and never differentiates between them. Educationally, the state of women changed as a result of feminism, female should be educated sufficiently to enable them to choose the right decision and to arrange their livelihood in the case of marriage , Winifred Spaulding says" every marriage does not mean a home ...it was better to live alone and unloved a thousand years than to live in an impure home"⁴. The majority of women are treated badly and regarded as slaves. Elizabeth Staton said " marriage was a form of slavery" .⁵ Therefore, some females preferred to remain single than to wed. Lousia May considered marriage as a cage by declaring "liberty is a better husband than love to many of us"⁶, and illustrated that in her novel *Little Women* by the character of the mother who advised her daughter to stay single, because males treated females as creatures who always needed to be guided. She told her daughters that it is "better [to]be happy old maids than unhappy wives, or un maidenly girls"⁷

The state of women changed and most writers were moderate in dealing with the issue of equality between two sexes. As Hanaford (1829-1921)states in his book "Daughter of America" or "Women of the Century":

Every woman is a daughter of Almighty God, as every man is his son . Each was created in the divine image, and each the path of the duty and destiny is the same....He had given to neither of them the power over the other. Man was not made subject to women, nor should women be subject to men . Neither men's right nor women's rights should be considered, but human rights.....the rights of each, the rights of all.⁷

Although Willa Cather was not a feminist due to her comments "I have not a great deal of faith in women in literature.... The great masters of letters are men "⁸, and her attitude towards women was not temporary , but it appeared in her writings at the Home Monthly Magazine Pittsburg. She always expressed her contempt for women in her tones and essays, but she reflected the ideas of feminist approach in her novel *Antonia*. As a result of the examples mentioned in the novel, My *Antonia* may indeed be a feminist novel.

Willa Cather (1873-1947)sheds light on a witty immigrant woman in Nebraska called *Antonia*. She arrives with her family to a new place with no land and money, but she assumes her responsibility for her family's survival after her father's death. She takes a job as ahired girl and ready to make everything for her family. She works with Black Hawkian's family in a day and starts dancing at the night only to enjoy herself. Although Harling's family asks

Antonia to stop dancing , she rejects and decides to search for a new work with Mr. Cutter, a man who is known for seducing his hired girls and changing them into prostitutes. Antonia is a strong female who has the ability to secure herself and nobody can harm her or disturb her. She assures her confidence and strength when young Harry tries to kiss her, she " got one hand free and slapped him " (My Antonia, p. 206). Her work as a hired girl acquires Antonia more experience to secure herself and live rationally free. Antonia is pictured as an independent female when she accepts to work on the farm which is not a normal woman would do.

She faces her rigid circumstances in a new place by working hard to face the bare salty land of Nebraska with patience and strength. She works hard and "never complains"⁹ and spends her time in farming her land, while her brother is sent to school because " school is all right for little boys" (My Antonia, p. 123). She is a brave stereotypical woman who works much more than her brother. Antonia realizes that her only chance to survive is throughout work and patience to overcome the gender conventions. Antonia's work in land changes her from "a bright new dollar " to "tony" (My Antonia, p.329). Therefore, Antonia begins to lose her behavior as a woman and acquire a masculine behavior and appearance. Jim (her beloved) comments that Antonia's work in a land change her and makes her " rough and mannish"(My Antonia, p.165). Antonia works in her land and never fears to lose her feminist features but she likes her new status, neglecting Jim's grandmother's complaint that "heavy field work spoil [Antonia]" (My Antonia, p.125.) but Antonia assures "I like to be a man"(My Antonia, p. 138) to achieve her goals .

Antonia is full of life and energy as works hard like a bee without moaning "she [is] out in the fields from sun- up until to sun-down" (My Antonia, p.314). Her great efforts change "the treeless and vast unshelteredness"¹⁰ land to fertile land. In fact , Antonia considers land as sun which provides her with power and energy . After the accident of her illegitimate pregnancy from a bad man called Larry Dovnovan, she forsakes her beloved Jim . She decides to change the salty land and takes her inner power from "the plants [that] are standing tall and straight, high and pointed"¹¹. These plants represent Antonia in her resolution and strength. Antonia informs Jim that her happiness is related to the land "I like to be where I know every stack and tree, and where all ground is friendly.... I belong to a farm "(My Antonia, p. 343). Antonia considers the land as a symbol of life and illustrating her relationship to land , as "mother of land"¹² because the land is Antonia's rebirth after her suffering with Larry Dovnovan.

After a time, Antonia marries a respectable farm- man and she becomes a mother of many children. Although Antonia appears as a man in " flat chested.....little grizzled" (My Antonia, p.331), she never forgets her role as a mother and a woman. Antonia reveals that her name should be immediately followed by the land because they are part and parcel of each other. Harold Bloom states " both Nebraska and Antonia have beautiful qualities, they are both free and uncontrolled, they are both impulsive and untamed, yet they are generous , also [n]either the land nor Antonia spirit will ever be controlled"¹³. Antonia seems a strong female who never surrender[s] to wild land , but she transforms and creates " the country that was nothing but land The material out of which countries are made"(My Antonia, p. 7) . She works hard in planting an "broken soil" day and the night in order to create a fertile land. As a result Antonia's sons are tall and strong, because they are the epitome of the land .

Obviously, Antonia symbolizes the sun which provides the surrounding with light and warmth, while Jim symbolizes the moon who takes its light from the sun. Antonia changes the salty land and provides her family and sons with the spiritual light and strength. Patric Wishow has aptly mentioned that " luminaries symbolize Jim and Antonia with Cather's ironic reversal on conventional sun-moon symbolism"¹⁴

The salty land of Nebraska represents an obstacle to the immigrants peoples who come to settle in it. This obstacle is not easy but it needs patience and hard work to overcome it. Actually, Antonia struggles and faces the salty land by her resolution and working. Her work lifts her family from the buried life to life again. Although Antonia is a simple and bohemian female , she succeeds to become a warrior woman, who achieves her goal. Antonia is a witty female who intelligently becomes friends with the bare salty land , despite this land does not surrender to man even in a bitter winter:

Winter comes down savagely over a little town on the prairie the wind that sweeps in for the open country strips away all the leafy screens that hide one yard from another in summer.... The pale, cold light of winter sunset did not beauty- it was like the light of truth itself. When the smoky clouds hung low in the west and the real sun went down behind them, leaving a pink flush on the snowy roofs and blue drifts, then the wind sprang up a fresh, with a kind of bitter song, as if it said; this is reality, whether you like it or not. All these frivolities of summer, the light and shadow, the living mask of green that trembled over everything, they were lies, and this is what was underneath.(My Antonia, p.172-173)

This salty land submits to Antonia who transforms and changes it. Antonia overcomes the bitter land and reshapes "the country [that] was not but land....the material out of which countries are made"(My Antonia, p.7).She plants the broken soil which give its fruits and vegetables. By volition, Antonia faces the struggle of man, land, language, and culture. She succeeds in emerging herself with the family in a new life.

She loves the land and becomes an integral part that even the brown color of her skin reflects her close relationship to it. Harlod Bloom states" Antonia [is the] embodiment of agrarian ideal.[she]is mainly depicted in terms of natural land related images"¹⁵.She feels happy in acquiring the brown color of her skin considering it as a gift from land to her. Antonia's eyes also refer to the land , they are "big and warm and full of light like the sun shining on brown pools in the wood"(My Antonia, p.23).

Antonia expresses a high sense of responsibility, initializing the salty land. She has a masculine personality and Jim depicts her as "dark,...tall...[wearing] a seal skin coat and cap.... Talking about grain-cars and cattle like men "(My Antonia, p. 150).It should be mentioned the heavy work in the fields spoils her body and changing her soft neck " came up strongly out of her shoulders [like] draught-horse neck. [in addition] ...her arms and throat were burned as brown as a sailor's" (MA,122).Her readiness to know everything about farming problemsaffects on her behavioral. Hence she acquires the mannish qualities and she likes her new status.

For Jim, Antonia is a symbol of light and hope. She is "the embodiment of all treasured memories that go on giving [his life]meaning"¹⁶. Jim spends his life with no change and progress, failing to run his life. He fizzles in marriage and returns to Antonia lost and confused. He sees Antonia as a peaceful shelter to his failure in achieving his goals. Antonia feeds Jim's emotional vacuum and reinforces him to return to life again. She has something which" fires the imagination, [and] could still stop one's breath for a moment by a look or a gesture...she is a rich mine of life"(MA,353). This status explains Cather's belief that woman "help[s] manliness to exist...[since she is] a source of masculine purpose"¹⁷

Another strong female is Lena Lingerd, who appears as independent as Antonia. Lena accomplishes her dream of being a good dressmaker and keeps her tenderness and beauty. She is a professional in her job a matter that makes her society wonder how a delightful woman is not a prostitute, nor a mistress nor married. She struggles and becomes "a Benjamin Franklin type who works hard, builds a business, prospers, and remains devoutly attached to the work ethic". Willa Cather tries to show that Antonia represents the land which is changed

at the end of the novel . both have completely changed vs. Lena is the same, no change occurred throughout the novel.

In fact, Antonia is a female character who opens different interpretations around her; Randolph Bourne states that Antonia "is free and warm and glorious girl marries to a simple Bohemian farmer, strong, and good like herself to live happily thereafter as a paragon of contentment"¹⁸. She is a traditional female who finally achieves her dream of a happy life .While James Woodress sees her more than a traditional woman, for him she is the " symbol of American western myth"¹⁹ . Other critics view Antonia in a different ways for example Blythe Tellefsen 's view of Antonia is that she is a successful woman who changes herself from " immigrant working girl to semi Americanized farm-holding mother"²⁰. In fact, this novel deals with different issues but Blythe Tellefsen views *The Antonia* as a story of land that "relates the transformation of Nebraska from wild to prosperities state"²¹.

Conclusion

This research concentrates on the behavioral transition of the heroine, Antonia, from "the new dollar" to "tony" as her beloved Jim says. This transition does not come all of sudden . It comes gradually with her dealing with the land. Willa Cather presents Antonia as an independent female who was resolute in her determination to resist difficulties of life. Antonia changed her behavior from the fertile and blooming woman into a mannish one so as to achieve her goals. She challenges the gender's conventions, culture, and semi-dead land to reinvigorate life again.

Notes

1 Catherine Clinton and Christine Lunardiey, *The Columbia Guide to American Women in The Nineteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press,2000)p.3

2David G. Pugh, *Sons of Liberty: The Masculine Mind in Nineteenth-Century America* (London, England : Greenwood Press Westport, 1983)p. 65.

3 Martha J. Cutter, *Unruly Tongue: Identity and Voice in American Women's Writing, 1850-1930* (United States of America: University Press of Mississippi, 1999)p.11.

4 Peggy Pascoe, *Relations of Recue: The Search for Female Moral Authority in the American West, 1874-1939* (New York Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990)p.32.

5Charles Strick Land, *Victorian Domesticity : Families in The Life and Art of Louisa May Alcott* (United States Of America: The University of Albama Press, 1985) p.77.

6Ibid.

7Ibid

8Donna A. Behnke, *Religious Issues in Nineteenth Century Feminism* (Troy, New York: The Whitston Publishing Company, 1982), p. 117.

9 James Woodress, *Willa Cather: A literary Life* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1987)P.101.

10 Willa Cather, *My Antonia* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1954).p32.

11Deborah Fink, *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940*(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), P. 31.

12 Harold Bloom, *Antonia* (New York: Chelsea House, 1991).p.119.

13Ibid, p. 109.

14Ibid, p. 115

15Patric W.Shaw, *Willa Cather and the Art of Conflict : Re-Visioning Her Creative Imagination* (Tory, New York: The Whitston Publishing Company, 1992), p.60

16Bloom,p.107.

17Sheryl L. Meyering, *Understanding O'Pioneers; and My Antonia: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents*

(London: Greenwood, Press, 2002),p.61.

18Fletcher Angus, "Willa Cather and the upside-Down Politics of Feminist Darwinism,' A *Journal of Women's Studies*, Vol.34, No.2 (July, 2017),p.7

19Shaw, p.54.

20Ibid.

21Blyth Tellefsen, "Blood in the Wheat: Willa Cather's My Antonia" *Studies in American Fiction*, Vol.27, No2(Autumn, 1999)P.11.

22Ibid, p.11.

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