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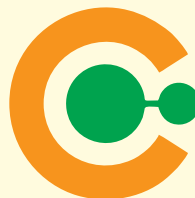
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Situational Exploitation of the Feminine Sensibility: Willa Cather's A Lost Lady

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ABSTRACT

Situational exploitation is meant for the mistreatment of the personalities in the different context based on the conditions and situations of the individuality. It acts for using someone unfairly for his/her advantage. It makes people think and act for the use or development of something for creating profit or progress in his/her business. It also pleads people for unfairly treatment of 'other' for their own advantages. It has been studied well in the different branches of knowledge. In English literature various writers and critics have pointed out such type of exploitation in their works and opinions. The present paper attempts to find out the situational exploitation of feminine sensibility in the selected novel of Willa Cather, A Lost Lady 1923.

Keywords: *Situational Exploitation, Feminine Sensibility, Identity Crisis*

FULL PAPER

Willa Cather (December 7, 1873 to April 24, 1947), an American updated writer of feminine sensibility was born on her maternal grandmother's farm in the Back Creek Valley, nearby Winchester, Virginia. Her family originally belongs to Cadair Idris, the name given to the Gwynedd Mountain. Her mother, Mary Cather was a former teacher while her father, Charles Fectigue Cather had 130 acres land to work on the liveliness of his family. Willa Cather is well known for her novels of life on the great plain, including *O Pioneers!* The Song of the Lark 1915, *My Antonia* 1918, and her Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *One of Ours* in 1922, a novel set in the background of World War I. In 2023, American Government made a Statue of Willa Cather in Saturday Hall in the capitol of United States of America from the State of Nebraska. Her life was mobile as her family moved from Virginia to Webster Country, Nebraska when Cather was only nine years old. After graduating from the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Cather was reported moving towards Pittsburgh for ten years, working as the magazine editor and high school English Teacher. At the age of 33 years, she moved to New York City for the rest of life. She also travelled various times widely and spent considerable at her summer residence on Grand Manan Island, New Brunswick. She spent the last part of her life (39 years) with her domestic partner, Edith Lewis before suffering from breast cancer and dying of a cerebral hemorrhage.

The story of the novel is narrated by Niel Herbert. It is an example of transcendent of realism which takes the incidental description of the novel, *The Great Gatsby* written by F. Scott Fitzgerald. The sharing characteristics of the novel can be correlated with each other in the sense of describing the old and new culture at the same platform of the conflict between the cultural idealism and coarseness. This novel can be categorized into literary regionalism which is a narrow account of a culture within a national experience. At the time when the novel was written, there was a reaction French Revolution and Napoleon's conquest and the general tendency of the writers was to expose the defeated culture in the society and this novel gives rise to the lost culture, structured around a vanished world. Hofstadter termed the novel towards the end of the age of Reform in which the small-town gentry, the bankers and lawyers were being swept aside by the growth of the national sensibility rather than the regional conflict. In reading the novel, one can see Captain Forrester representing old culture while Ivy Peters seems to expose the reality of new culture through his innovative ideas. Ivy can be seen travelling all over the United States while Captain is read in the charge of only region.

Cather's *A Lost Lady* is the bright example of her concise expression and individual talent for describing various feminine characters, explaining their social status and personal desires for updating themselves in the context of individual identity. Mrs.

Forrester is a young woman of beauty and grace, who brings an air of sophistication to the frontier ladies of Sweet Water. Marian was wound up in Sweet Water, which lay along the Transcontinental Railroad, through her marriage to the much older Captain Daniel Forrester. The novel can be read from the viewpoint of Niel Herbert, a young man who has grown up in Sweet Water. He idealizes Mrs. Forrester, even when he witnesses her decline. The novel is a contemporary edition which concludes with the recurrent conflict in Cather's work, between frontier culture and an encroaching commercialism. *A Lost Lady* came out on the heels of *One of Ours* (1922), which, disappointed critics for the most part, restoring her well-earned credit in the American literary canon.

The novel seems artistically crafted against the spirit of the title of the novel which narrates for some lady to be lost in the common consideration of human beings. The heroine of the novel Marian Forrester seems to have a new identity of survivor rather than a lost lady on the meaning of the title. In this use of irony, the novel is looking to be affected with various questions about the nature of the novel leading to the enlightening characterization of the novelist, how Marian became the lost lady from the perspective of the male gaze while she was attempting to be lighten up in the history of feminine enclosures. Most of the male society looked Marian beyond their prejudice gaze through her unfiltered conduct, which Neil seems to disclose on the part of the protagonist apparently. She can be found only lost in the common consideration of her whole being on the behalf of Neil's perspective. The novel seems to say that to understand her true character one must acknowledge that she encompasses many different traits and characteristics on the different part of her role.

In analyzing the novel one can say that Marian is the woman suffering from the sense of loving and lost in the patriarchy. She is the lady who does everything for others and tries a little to satisfy her dreamy world which makes her lost in the opinion of male society. The novel narrates the opinion of Neil in his two ideas about Mrs. Forrester who is described and compared with, "other woman was heavy and dull; even the pretty ones seemed lifeless—they had not that something in their glance that made one's blood tingle" (ALL, 32) but when he met her first, "he had never found one so attractive and distinguished as Mrs. Forrester" (ALL, 32). When he was a young boy, he romanticizes Marian and idealizes her in the eyes of her husband, "it was in her relation to her husband that he most admired her" (ALL, 65). Neil seems to appreciate the ideal quality of lady a for her husband by citing the behavior of Mrs. Forrester before knowing the fact about her relationship with Frank Ellinger but when he becomes aware of her illegal relationship with Frank, he leads to the heart break. It shows how Neil creates disenchantment after getting the reality of Mrs. Forrester who is considered something like the taboo in the feminine sensibility of the ancient writers. When he meets the incident of her extra marital relationship, he perceives the plurality in the character and conduct of Marian through which, "he had lost one of

the most beautiful things in his life" (ALL, 72) It the considerable point in the eyes of the critic like Morris Dickstien who points out, "there's a childish petulance and disenchantment about Neil's response to Mrs. Forrester's fall, which reveals how much he has put her on a pedestal" (Morris, 2).

In this way, Neil loses the ideality of Marian, but she is looking the same personality which appears to say that it is the perception of Neil which has made her lost in the trivial worldliness but Marian could be solely experienced personality of situation compromises. Neil like personalities assumes the ladies their own asset, "Neil was destined to hear once again of his long-lost lady (ALL, 147)". In this line the possessive pronoun "his" indicates that Marian is something that is authorized for Neil only. It means to say that the ladies have no right to breathe in full air and walk wherever they wish and it narrates the sensibility as the story ends with Marian in the form of a remarried woman who was able to fulfill her desired aim of traveling. After observing the incident, one can imagine the presumption of the male society which wants ladies to be imprisoned in the walls of the only room while male can move hither and thither and enjoy their life with anybody they wish. If the novel had narrated Marian suffering with pains and finally dying in the Sweet Water home, it would be good in the eyes of the male society but on the contrary of Neil's perspective of Marian, the novel compels its readers to have an exploration on the characterization of Marian in the context of the modern era.

In this connection, the novelist Willa Cather makes her thematic claim powerfully in the description of the novel, "It was not a moral scruple she had outraged, but an aesthetic ideal" (ALL, 72). Further, Cather clarifies her concept of feminine sensibility in the words of her female character, "Beautiful women, whose beauty meant more than it said...was their brilliancy always fed by something coarse and concealed? Was that their secret?" (ALL, 72) The novel as well as the novelist wants to know the real concept of aestheticism on which the women should be evaluated. This exploration questions in the possibility of feminine ideality which seemed to be fed up by the things and thoughts the male despised in their conducts. Chopin like critics ask for people's attention towards the ideality of women in what way they should behave likely having the fact of human body in all their complexities bearing the magic of contradictions in their characterization. These conscious critics are also calling the attention of the people towards the societal expectations that placed on women to behave in a way that idealizes them in the image of goddesses.

Thus, the novelist points out that most of the charismatic women like Marian Forrester are dealt with both 'elegant' and 'wild' experiences that can be meant in joyous mood of the ladies and deep despair of their situations. Rosowski like critics of the novel is of the view that, "There are two selves in each person, Cather suggests: a personal, worldly self-expressed with family and friends, and an imaginative second

self-expressed in creative work” (Rosowski, 162). Through this point, the novelist exposes the reality of men that this dichotomy seems very surprising to the men like Neil who considers women as something other than the complex human beings. The same essence can be seen in the perception of Neil for Marian who is looking present in all spheres of her characterization as she does not exist in conceptualization of human components. After the scrutiny of the novel, Rosowski writes, “The ideal human condition, described in Cather’s early novels, involves a synthesis of the two, with the outward-moving self-rooted in the settled personal self” (Rosowski, 162). In the perception of Neil, “The charm of her conversation was not so much in what she said, though she was often witty, but in the quick recognition of her eyes, in the living quality of her voice itself” (ALL, 58). It was so because his opinion was centered on her physicality rather than her witty and intellectual argument.

Further, Neil is attuned to her deep quality that is existed in the deeper essence that governs her character beyond the generalization of the characterization. He appreciates her quality after observing the secret of it, “that she couldn’t help being interested in people, even very commonplace people” (ALL, 58). If it could be appreciated by him in a true underlying essence of her character, then why Neil is upset to think over the same quality of Mrs. Forrester which might play her role in the observation of other men like Frank Ellinger but he wonders when he sees her with Ellinger, “what did she do will all her exquisiteness when she was with man like Ellinger? Where did she put it away?” (ALL, 84). Through her healthy discussion, Cather appeals her readers for paying attention to the ludicrous notion of the males that a woman could ‘put away’ her exquisiteness before others but she could put on for her lover/husband only. By pointing out such notions, she begs the attention of her readers to realize that this exquisiteness is not only present in Marian’s desirable moments for only one but it could be felt for others undesirably for.

If one loves anybody like Marian for her exquisiteness, it is to report that all elements of her exquisiteness come to be recognized as a product of her deeper essence in the evaluation of the personality. The quality of Mrs. Forrester which is criticized by Neil in the compartmentalized form of Marian, Captain Forrester realizes her best conduct for making her likeable in the company of others and with this the novelist created the difference between the attitudes of men who want ladies in the ideality of their own choices. For the women, it is very complicated to be likeable for every male who wishes everybody on his life accomplishments as Captain Forrester thinks: “to build a house that my friends could come to, with a wife like Mrs. Forrester to make it attractive to them” (ALL, 43). One of the best qualities, valued by Mr. Forrester in his wife is her charming attraction and liveliness which invites his friends to be lingered her about. He argues against this quality of Marian’s affairs that the contrary ability stems out from the same source of life, “The Captain knew his wife better even than she knew herself; and that, knowing her ...” (ALL, 122)

Thus, the novel argues that Marian is not lost to Captain Forrester who accepted her for all the complexities that she had, because he was able to see both aspects of her characterization and value her for the whole that created her identity. Studying in depth, Charlotte Goodman points out that “Cather apparently does not wish the readers to judge Marian’s sexual escapades during Daniel’s decline more harshly than he himself does... without apparent rancor or jealousy he examines an envelope his wife has addressed to her lover, Frank Ellinger” (Goodman, 159). Some male characters like Mr. Forrester are very mature to think over the issue while some trivial characters like Neil are looking to be partial towards the caste, race, and religion. Mr. Forrester’s “repose was like that of a mountain” (ALL, 39), depicting his constant emotional state that was opposite to Neil’s boyish nature of romanticizing spirit. It means to say that the statement spoken by Captain Forrester is more powerful rather than Neil’s. The Ivy Peters and the woodpecker scenes of the novel offer a judicial perspective which helps its readers to illustrate Marian as a survivor in the thematic concerns of feminine sensibility of Willa Cather. The female bird, standing for women in society was blinded by Ivy, that seems to narrate the constant pain of females like Marian who have capabilities to participate in the world but they have been impeded on by the patriarchal society. The bird like other women after having her eyes been mutilated, are looking compel to react in their frantic desperation which can be seen here, “crept its way along the branch and disappeared into its own hole” (ALL, 18). Marian must act in the similar tone of desperation on her phone call to Frank Ellinger and when Captain Forrester dies, she keeps herself recluses into her home by learning to survive in the trauma like the bird itself. She makes her readers understand through her restless struggle that she can not only survive successfully in her reclusion but she develops her ability to navigate in the world as a widow by making her own choices and financial decisions within the limited recourses, society has allotted to her, “So that’s what I’ve been struggling for, to get out of this hole... [w]hen I’m alone here for months together, I plan and plot” (ALL, 107).

In this way, one can see that Marian can leave her narrow world and restore herself in the concept of new marriage at a new place with new resources she was planning and plotting for and thinking outwardly, “I feel such a power to live in me” (ALL, 106). Like a reformative lady of Willa Cather, Marian can enjoy the world after reawakening spirit of her widowhood. The social and literary thinker Charlesworth points out that, “There is no way one can escape the experience of a social context that is like a stagnant pond in which we are the suffocating organisms” (Charlesworth, 60) but Marian does not want to live the life of suffocation of her widowhood that’s why she got interested in Frank Ellinger who enjoyed her first and after getting boring in his relationship, he started to bully her at the par of excellences which compels her to think over the statement of Charlesworth, “There is an absence of the social conditions that make optimism and hope a realistic life strategy” (Charlesworth, 60). Marian’s resistance against her situational exploitation can be seen in the words of Patricia Parker who

sees feminine sensibility into “the attempts to fix the meanings of appropriate identity and behavior, where such meanings are interpreted as controlling, exploitative and otherwise oppressive...” (Patricia, 257-291) To conclude, the present novel can be explored in words of Mary Jacobus, “Is there a woman in this text?” or ‘Is there a text in this woman?’ (Jacobus, 117-41) With this query, one can read this novel and find both feminine sensibilities of identity seeking ability, suffering with the situational exploitation of the patriarchy. Marian, who is looking wild enough to creek into and run through the frost, can also navigate her world of widowhood with some youths by spending money at any cost. She is the modern and moderate lady who loves her husband too much but seeks her chances of navigation in the fascination of relationships with others without any hesitation. She looks to be wrapped up in her pride but she can bring up the boys who are barefooted and bareheaded. She can laugh heartedly but feel emotionally at the pin of others. She can show her laughter and grief at the same time of any situation. In a short she is looking a complete character who has both sides of feeling which prevents her to be lost in the situational exploitation of the women in the world of patriarchy.

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