

**Tribhuvan University**

**Advocacy of Female's Freedom: Feminist Reading of Willa Cather's  
*Sapphira and the Slave Girl***

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### **Abstract**

*The Novel Sapphira and the Slave Girl* by Willa Cather with the theme of advocacy of female's freedom *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* was Published in 1940. It is her last novel of her literary career . This novel deals with Advocacy of female's freedom. In this novel the main character Sapphira, the grandmother wants the innocent slave girl either to be killed or raped by the evil rapist due to her jealousy that her husband might be having an affair with this slave girls . On the contrary, her own daughter Rachel Black opposes slavery and plans to take her away from the cruel intentions of her mother. As a representative woman of new generation the daughter Rachel not only defies slavery but by ensuring freedom of the slave, she also advocates for female's selfhood, freedom and identity. The novel is based on two treatments of a slave girl by two generations, old exercising authority and domination where as young advocating for freedom and struggling against the old where the voice of freedom looks strong and time demanded.

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## **I. Feminist Concerns in the Works of Willa Cather**

Willa Cather is one of the most distinguished novelists of the early twentieth century America, who raised voice against male-supremacy and endeavored to place women in the position of men. She is known for her advocacy of women's rights and their higher social dignity. She challenges men for their exploitation and domination over women and assaults on orthodox patriarchs for using their politics of power to suppress women in the society. She claims that a married woman is not a husband's puppet only to move to his couch, but his equal life partner to drive the family. She revolts against the corrupt Victorian male for their power seeking nature and condemn them for their snobbishness and misogyny to the women. She wants to strengthen women providing them the autonomous role of the heroes in her novels. So, her novels are not only the medium to entertain her readers but also the means to reform the society. In short, her novels are to reflect art for life's sake and this art she has substituted to the study of women, particularly with a focus on the difficult life of the new American women.

She was especially known for her novels. She was spokesperson of her time in the frontier land and a daughter of a sheep-raiser. This enabled her to involve herself in farming and she could see and feel the difficulties in farming and of farmer. Cather was born on the 7<sup>th</sup> of December 1873, at back creek valley near Winchester Virginia. Her father Charles Cather was an Irish descent gentlemen of Virginia and her mother Mary Virginia Cather, an Alastian. Her grandfather William Cather, had bought a farm namely Willo shade near Back creek valley. Her real life began when she moved to Red cloud, Nebraska.

She was born at her maternal grandmother's house where her father William Cather and mother Mary virginia Cather (Boak) were living there. Her maternal

grandmother Mary Virginia Boak had a great influence on Willa Cather and she recollected her at various times in her novels. Willa Cather was the eldest child of Cather family. Charles Cather moved his little family along with Rachel Boak to Willo shade. The house they lived in always comes in her creative writings in different forms. Later on, Charles moved to Red cloud, Nebraska, where her other three siblings James, Elise and John were born.

Cather got no opportunity to go to school at her early age in Virginia. It might be either by her mother's poor health or by her father's financial difficulty or by not having schooling facility in Virginia that she was prevented from her formal primary education in school. "But in the evenings, she read aloud to her grandmother from the English Classics, *The Bible and Pilgrim's Progress*" (1). She was very close to her maternal grandmother Rachael Boak who loved her very much and told her stories about the old Virginia men and women. In Brown's words Willa Cather's Virginia childhood is a prelude to her years of experience and preparation, not a part of them" (2) If her birth place works as a prelude to her future life, Red cloud soil and its pioneer women have acted as the actual materials and fictional characters in her novels. She herself says "The idea for all my novels have come from things that happened around Red cloud when I was a child" (3) She had entered Mid-west Nebraska at the age of nine and settled permanently in Red cloud at ten. It was the formative period of her life.

Her life in Virginia was highly enriched and tranquil and it proved to be very fertile for her creative- writings. E.K. Brown writes "Willa Cather's Virginia childhood is a prelude to her years of experience and preparation, not a part of them" (5). But her father sold Willo shade and moved her family to Red cloud, Nebraska, in 1884. It was the town that would figure very prominently in her writings.

In Red cloud she could see the real pioneer people and their society which became her sources, subject matters and themes of her novels and her characters are taken from contemporary society. She was enrolled at the University of Nebraska where she earned many friends and got inspiration from her teacher as well, Edith Lewis writes: “She felt that they first taught her to think and helped her to find imaginative thoughts and that she owed to them the early ideas of scholarship and art that gave direction to her aunt’s life and work” (95). After her graduation from the University of Nebraska in 1895 she began as a part time worker in a news paper. Then she moved to Pittsburgh in 1896 where she was introduced to Isabelle McClung, daughter of judge of Samuel Mc Clung. Her friendship with Isabella helped Cather in different ways. Both young women stayed and read together, walked and traveled many countries like, England Germany, France and so on. They met authors like A.E. Houseman, Dorothy Cornfield and others. Isabelle became for Cather what every writers need most, the helpful friends, the friendship got broken after Isabelle got married. Then Cather dedicated her novel *The song of the lark to Isabelle*.

The first book *April Twilights*, collection of poems by Cather, was published in 1903, became the morning star of her life. Meanwhile, S.S McClure had a high regard for literature and inspired Cather to write. During her tenure, Cather got chances to read various books and manuscripts on various genres from different fields. At the same time, Cather gained a good knowledge of writers from classical to modern, Virgil to W.B Yeats along with their techniques.

Cather utilized her creative writing skill in story writing with in two years that is around 1905, she succeeded to publish *The Troll Garden* as the collection of her outstanding short stories. These two books came as the imminent evidences of her

inventive ability, and it further inspired her to enter into any field of literature. Her poems and stories got full space both in home and society.

Consequently, Cather engaged herself so much in writing that after a few years, in 1912 she succeeded to publish her first novel entitled *Alexander Bridge*, with its reflection of unique reality. The novel dealing with an event of day to day life, remained most influential not only to the ordinary people, but it approached to knock the literary mind and intellectual minds too. In fact, it is a story of an engineer who remains in love with two women. On one side he loved his wife and on the other with a woman whom he loved in his youth. The love affairs of his youth which he revives to others wife, puts him in an odd position especially, and it invites his painful days. As being a woman Cather takes the subject matter of womanly life and shares it with the unusual and careless male sentiment.

Cather's first novel *Alexander's Bridge* is a story of a victorious and courageous bridge maker and his frustrated life condition. This novel is known as an impassioned autobiographical novel in male voice. The novel pictures weaknesses of artificial structure, and it could not acquire remarkable success.

After this less successful novel *Alexander's Bridge*, Cather wrote an artistic novel *O pioneers!* Which came in 1913. The novel has a simple style but is well organized. Interestingly the novel, at the same time is celebratory and elegiac about pioneer society and lost past. The novel has some historical implications in the sense that America, as a newly born country was filled with English, French, German, Swedish, Czechscandinavians, Bohemians and many other immigrants. Most of the sectors of Virginia and Nebraska were skill in pioneer state and this novel has a story of pioneer women of the frontier land who she had insight knowledge about. More importantly, Alexandra Bergson, the female protagonist, is presented with



autobiographical traits of Cather. The title of the novel was taken from a poem of Walt Whitman, *Pioneer O Pioneer* to whom Cather always praised in American literary field. Similarly, Cather seems to have been highly influenced by Henry Jameson in handling European theme in America. The novel has the feminist document in America and her later novels are not completely free from the themes of this novel. It means the theme is always repeated.

Cather's third novel *The Songs of the Lark* was published in 1915. This novel is the story of a moonstone girl- Thea Kronberg dealing with her continuous struggle and devotion to music and her ultimate success. The novel seems to be an echo of what Cather had already read especially that of Tolstoy, conveying an optimistic message 'God sees the truth but wait'. There is a subtle, autobiographical treatment of characters, especially Thea, the heroine of the novel. The heroine is her own person through which she had recorded her own life and life long struggle for art and literature. It is said to be her longest novel.

She has written another novel *My Antonia* in 1918 which is highly praised for her artistic style. It reflects the long process of reconciliation between Cather and her native land Nebraska. The vivid account of frontier land, the pioneer society and 'hired girls' is the strength of the novel. *My Antonia* is another story of pioneering life in Nebraska and contain autobiographical elements. The story deals with the life of hired girls especially centralizing on Antonia's struggle and labor. Hence, the central theme of the novel is the development and self-discovery of the heroin, Antonia. Cather's more like Jim than Antonia in the story. This reminds us of Cather's college life in boy's dress and hair, male voice and male name William Cather and Cather can be identified with Jim on this light. At the same time, the novel has been considered as an epic of the early struggle of Bohemians and Swedish people in Nebraska.

The novel *One of Ours* is also a popular novel written in 1922. The subject matter of this Novel is related to the writers' long journey to France. This is a story of a cloud wheeler, a frustrated and dissatisfied Nebraskan boy, who finds the meaning of life only after joining the American army and going to France to fight against Germany he was killed there. Here, the Cather remembers dearest cousin brother's death is the First World War in 1918. The impact of war is exposed as the negative aspect of human life no matter it makes the soldier suffer or the very public, but it hurts all. In the novel, the central character (protagonist) who is an army soldier fighting in the war, gets more frustrated of useless war. His interest in war gets lost and he makes his efforts to escape from the very oppressive life, which he is forced to spend. The background of the novel is similar to the background of *O Pioneers* and *My Antonia*. For this novel, Cather was awarded Pulitzer prize in 1923.

Then her next novel *A Lost Lady* was published in 1923. It is a story of an actual woman from the same pioneer society of Antonia and Alexandra. Though theme is different, Mrs. Forrester's situation declines unlike Antonia and Alexandra. Forrester belongs to the aristocratic frontier, Mrs. Forrester lacks the passion of the artist and pioneer heroism which were the heart of Antonia and Alexandra's achievements, Willa Cather seems to be conveying her philosophy of art which provides real pleasure in life but that perfect integration between art and life is obtained by heroic struggle.

*The Professor's House*, which Cather published in 1925, narrates a story of an idealistic scholarship adjustment to the Middle age. It provides ample information about the life style of the medieval scholars. By the help of the protagonist of the novel St. Peter, Cather expressed her grief at the decline of the values. It is about a middle aged professor St. Peter working hard to complete his responsibilities and

values of life. The famous 'Tom outland' story shapes the novel brilliantly. Tom is an intelligent and unconventional student of St. Peter killed in the First World War. The professor, in this novel is a true spokesperson of Cather, saying that religion and art provide a true sense of order to human society. His character and speech record Cather's later concept of materialized world. Thus, Cather has eulogized life and art through the professor and she has given St. Peter her own attributes. Hence, it becomes another autobiographical novel of Cather.

Cather has written short novel named *My Mortal Enemy* published in 1926. This novel is a record of Cather's journey and her witness of the great performance. It is a story of Myra Driscoll who was bought up by her rich uncle. Later she elopes with a moderate businessman who happened to lose his job in course of time. Then their search for job fails and Myra at last dies in poverty and bitterness.

The idea for the next novel *Death Comes for Archbishop* came to her after her meeting with D. H. Lawrence. The novel was published in 1927. It is a record of her pleasure in wandering and riding through the South West region fifteen years ago. It is one of her historical novels dealing with pioneer priests in the southwest. The novel is able to exploit a cultured religious heroism in the context of picturesque landscape and historical figures. The title of the novel is often criticized as misleading. It deals with Archbishop's death and is concerned with ecclesiastical and religious matters.

When Cather faced the death of her father in 1920, it shocked her greatly and compelled her to write *Shadows on the Rock* as a consolation for herself. The novel reflects vivid picture of her childhood, security of family and maternal influence with shows the historical aspect of her life. Cather has in this novel presented the reflection of catholic feeling and tradition in which she lived happily for a long time. The theme of this novel is a quest for clues about her own personal life. She has selected

affectionate fathers Euclide Auclair and his dutiful daughter Cecile as the characters of her novel to tell her own father-daughter relationship.

*Lucy Gayheart* is Cather's another novel published in 1935. This novel shows the devotion of the novelist towards art for its perfection. The subject matter of the novel is a love story of an attractive girl Lucy-Gayheart who falls in love with a musician Clement Sebastian. Unluckily, Clement dies of drowning in lake Como, Italy. Then helpless Lucy fights actively with her sister for art. Lucy, who involves herself in love affairs frequently, dies of drowning in a river like her lover Clement; There are the echoes of the *Song of the Lark* for there are since Chicago musical life as in *The Song of the Lark*. In this novel, Cather criticizes romance for an artist and conveys her message that a romantic artist's life without devotion to art is an utter failure.

Cather's last novel *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* was published in 1940. Cather selects her native village Shenandoah Valley for the setting of the novel and Virginia for the subject matter and characters. In this novel Cather redeems her ancestors and reveals how they are governed by both evil and good characters. *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* is a story depicting the evils of slavery of 1850s United States. The story revolves round the relationship between slave owner Sapphira Dodderige Colbert and her slave girl Nancy, the daughter of her slave Till. Sapphira, who is the wife of Miller Henry Colbert, the Negro employee at her own state, inherits her father's property with twenty slaves in Shenandoah valley. She manages her farm, while her husband manages her mill. Her widow daughter Rachel Blake, who is much shocked at her husband's death lives in the village with her two small daughters. As Henry Colbert treats Nancy as a human being, Sapphira suspects him and plans to badly ruin her. She invites Martin Colbert, the Miller's nephew to seduce her. Martin is provided

with raping opportunities. But Sapphira's daughter, Rachel Blake saves Nancy by taking her to the Canadian church. It brings clashes between the mother and daughter but the death of Rachel's daughter reconciles them.

Cather makes an attack on cruel Sapphira for her misuse of power and conspiracy against her innocent slave girl. She also blames her for her false charge her gentle husband. Henry, adding his name to the affairs with Nancy, Leonard Unger says, "*Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940) is Willa Cather's personal quest for her Virginian ancestors" (331).

In this novel, Willa Cather has drawn her characters from her own ancestors of the similar traits. Sapphira's daughter Rachel Blake is the fictional character of her beloved kind grandmother Rachel Boak, and Henry and Sapphira are the prototypes of her maternal grand parents, kind Jakob and Cruel Ruhman Seibert respectively. Till and Nancy, the slaves of Sapphira, are real blacks from Virginia working as slaves for Cather's grand parents. Mary Blake, the child daughter of Rachel Blake, is the prototype of Cather's mother Mary Virginia at her childhood. More over, the main character Sapphira, wants the innocent slave girl either to be killed or raped by the evil rapist due to her jealousy that her husband might be having an affair with slave girls' on contrary, her own daughter Rachel Blake opposes slavery and plans to take her away from the cruel intentions of her mother. As a representative woman of new generation, the daughter Rachel not only defies slavery but ensures freedom of the slave girl. She also advocates for female selfhood, freedom and identity. So, there is a strong basis to interpret this last of her novel as feminist concern, and shows the advocacy of female's freedom of her growing up experience in the American history and society of pre-emancipation era. At the same time, Cather has come to the

psychological implication of the environment; to the underlying sexual corruption under the institution of slavery which Cather with stood bravely.

The characters of the novel *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* are the representatives of Cather's ancestors presented in disguised appearance with second names.

Comparative study will be made on the author's ancestry, and the characters in the novel to find out the identical features between them.

Cather's Maximum contribution to the feminist writings have been the magnificent boons in rendering the social charge in the women's lives. She has presented the most conscious women with the real knowledge of internal and outer world. They are too knowledgeable to identity problems and theirs solution. They are entirely sympathetic, plain speakers, justifiably cautious, active and creative. All of her fictional women, except lost ladies, display wider range of their abilities, being all round, all important, all- powerful and all conscious. She has enriched her women with the feelings of co-operation and co-ordination, which non feminist males lack. Her women can smile at others happiness and weep at their misery. She has advocated for women's right, duties and jobs with a view to make them as independent as men. She has imagined of such a balanced world of men and women, where her women may have equal chances of jobs, social position and other rights as men.

## II. Feminism

Feminism is a general term covering a range of ideologies and theories which pay special attention to women's right and women's position in culture and society. It is a discourse that involves various movements, theories and philosophies which are concerned with the issues of gender difference, advocate equality for women and campaign for women's rights and interest. The term tends to be used for the women's movement, which began in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and continues to campaign for political, social and economic equality between man and women. Feminism is further defined in feminist theory:

As a movement seeking the reorganization of the world upon a basis of sex equality in all human relations; a movement would reject every differentiation between individuals upon the ground of sex, would abolish all sex privileges and sex burdens and would strive to set up the recognition of the common humanity of women and man as the foundation of law and custom. (7)

Feminists are united by the idea that women's position in society is unequal to that of men and that society is structured in such a way as to benefit men to the political, social and economic detriment of women. However, feminists have used different theories to explain these inequalities and have advocated different ways of readdressing inequalities and there are marked geographical and historical varieties in the nature of feminism. From the ancient time, it has been recorded that civilization had been overtaken by male deity worshipping, patriarchal cultures in which men were political military leaders and women were kept in subordination. In classical times and early Christian era, women were excluded from public and were made subordinate to men. For example, Aristotle in *politics* argued that women were

inferior to men and must be ruled by men. He called the female is female by the virtue of certain lack of qualities. St. Paul told Christian wives to obey their husbands and not to speak in church. Thomas Aquinas believed that woman is an imperfect man. Moreover, men regarded their sperm to be active to give form to ovum which lacked identity and waited for sperm to energize it. Similarly, Freud calls the girl suffering from penis envy. Throughout most of the second millennium in most societies women were deprived of property, education and legal status. They were made the responsibility of their husband if married, or of their father's or other male relatives if not. So, feminist criticism comes to counter such patriarchal notion. There is a long list of woman who protested against the discrimination, inequality prevailed in the patriarchal society. There were examples of exceptional woman who challenged patriarch structures in their lives and writings. For instance, a German abbess, Hildegard of Bingen defied the authority of male church leaders and an Italian writer and courtier Christine de-pisan defended woman and wrote biblical commentaries which challenged the patriarchal ideas inherent in Christianity. By the end of the century a number of woman writers, such as Mary Austell were calling for improvements in woman's education.

Historically, feminist thought and activity can be divided into two waves which began in about 1800 and lasted until the 1930s. It was largely concerned with gaining equal rights between men and women. The second wave which began in late 1960s has continued to fight for equality but has also developed a range of theories and approaches that stress the differences between women and men and which draw attention to the specific needs of woman.

Although the word 'feminism' was not used until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the emergence of recognizably feminist ideologies can be traced to the late 19<sup>th</sup>



century. The earliest form of feminism was concerned with equal rights for women and men. This meant equal rights for women and men. This means equal standing as citizens in public life and to some extent equal legal status within the home. These ideas emerged in response to the French revolution and American War of Independence, both of which advocated the values of liberty in equality. Feminists in France argued that revolutionary values of liberty, equality and fraternity should apply to all while woman activists in America called for an extension of the principles of the American declaration of independence to women including right to citizenship and prosperity.

First wave feminism originally focused on the promotion of equal contract and property rights for women and the opposition to the chattel marriage and ownership of married woman by their husbands. However, by the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century activism primarily focused on gaining political power, particularly the rights of woman suffrage, yet, feminist such as, voltairine de Clereand Margaret sooner were still active in campaigning for woman's sexual, reproductive and economic rights at this time. In Britain, the suffragettes campaigned for the woman's rights to vote.

In England, Mary Wollestonecraft wrote *A Vindication of Rights of Woman* (1792), in which she demands equality and better education for women, and made the first sustained critique of social system which relegated woman to an inferior position. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, a small group of middle class women in the United Kingdom began to call for better education, improved legal rights (especially with in marriage), employment opportunity and right to vote, Equal right. Feminism was given theoretical justification by John Stuart Mill, who wrote the *Subjection of Women* (1869), which was partly influenced by his wife Harriet Tayler. From the 1850s onward, the campaign for equal rights for woman become focused on the winning the

right to vote. Toward the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century, another strand of feminist thinking appeared which questioned social attitudes towards women including cultural and literary representations and social prescription for women's behavior. By the turn of century the media in the west become preoccupied with the stereotypes of the 'New women' who challenged the patriarchy not only by demanding equal civil rights but by defying conventions and choosing her own life style and cloths. By the 1920s feminist began to turn their attention from question of equality between women and men to issues which mainly concerned woman. For example, calling for improved welfare provision for mothers and children. These factors would become stronger in the 2<sup>nd</sup> wave of feminism.

The original impetus for 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminism came from social and civil rights movement which emerged in the 1960s in north and central America, Europe etc. The women's liberations movement which began in the United States, combined liberal rights based concerns for equality between men and women with demands for a woman's right to determine her own identity and sexuality. These strands of ideologies were represented in the seven demands of movement established between 1970 and 1978. These were equal pay, equal education and equal opportunity in work, financial and legal independence; free 24 hours nurseries; free contraception and abortion and demand for woman's right to define her own sexuality and end to discrimination against lesbians and freedom from violence and sexual coercion.

Central to 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminism is the notion that the personal is political; i.e. individual woman do not suffer oppression in isolation but as the result of wider social and political system. This ideology was greatly influenced by the writing of Simone De. Beauvor and Kate Millet, who drew attention to ways in which women were oppressed by the very structure of western society. In the *Second Sex* (1999)

simone de beauvoir raises the voice against man woman dichotomy as the male ideology makes woman the second sex. Women are made inferior which is just artificially made. Beauvoir further says that women are not born, but made, the human cultures have given supremacy to the sex that hunts and kills, and not to the one that gives birth, to masters of nature and not to the natural functions. The essay *The Second Sex* is an overall account of woman and tags given to woman. Giving her notion about the essay, The Second Sex M.H. Abrams notes, "The Second Sex is a wide-ranging criticism of identification of women as merely the negative object or 'other' to man as defining and domination subject who is assumed to represent humanity in general" (234). Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics* (1970), drew attention, to the ubiquity of patriarchy and to the ways in which it reproduced itself through the family and culture notably in literature. The recognition of endemic nature of patriarchy fuelled the feminist idea of universal sisterhood that women of all cultures and background can be united with their common oppression.

Second wave feminism emphasized the physical and psychological differences between woman and man. Some feminists Criticized traditional psychoanalysis, notably the Sigmund Freud for assuming that all people are or should be like men. They become concerned with ways in which women's perceptions were determined by the particular nature of the female body and the female roles in reproduction and childbearing. In France, the feminist theories Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray explored the ways of making new knowledge from the view point of the female body including the idea of woman writing. This strand of feminism, which became known as culture or radical feminism focuses on the difference between woman and men that they believed make woman superior to man and advocated female forms of culture. It was regarded as a step backward by many people who were working towards,

reducing the reproductive emphasis in women's lives. Its' opponents criticized it for essentialist idea that is reducing women bodies and for assuming that all women are same. The arguments continue over determinist idea that women are always bound to be caring and nurturing and that men are naturally aggressive.

A powerful strand of feminism is concerned with the way in which men have controlled and subordinated woman's bodies. For example, Mary Daly argues in *Gyn/ Ecology* (1979) that patriarchy coerced women into heterosexuality using violence to suppress women's power and sexuality. Feminist have argued that sexual and domestic violence are not isolated incidents but are central to the subordination of women by patriarchy. Feminist, notably Andrew Dworkin wrote powerfully against pornography as a means by which patriarchy exploits women's bodies and incites violence against women. In responses to these treats, feminist asserted woman's legal right to their own bodies, including the importance of the right to choose motherhood. They have also looked at the ways in which women might use motherhood as a source of strength and as a way of influencing future generations rather than as a means of reproducing patriarchy. In particular, some feminist have advocated different forms of parenting as single mothers or within lesbian relationship.

Feminism has often been criticized as Eurocentric by black woman and women in developing world. For example, Indian critic Gayatri Chakrawarti Spivak has accused Anglo American feminist theorists of making woman of the developing world, 'the other' by imposing western perspective on them. However, women from non-western culture have taken up feminist ideas and accommodate them in their own situation. For example, black feminists have developed perspective which takes account of the fact that they are doubly marginalized by race and sex.

By contrast, some Asian Afro-Caribbean and African American Feminists have developed politics which draw their ethnic origins as a source of strength. Feminism in America has linked oppression across gender, class, and social lines, although it has recently begun to focus more deeply on women's issues. In Islamic countries, a secular liberal feminism has developed that seeks to eliminate discrimination against women and to outlaw practices such as polygamy, seclusion in the home and the husband's privileged right of divorce. In India feminists have organized opposition to dowry system and subsequent dowry deaths where continuing demand of the grooms family not having been met have resulted in many brides being murdered.

Lesbian writers have argued that feminism has not paid attention to their specific needs. Audre Lorde has been influential in developing lesbian feminist theory by arguing that heterosexuality is a construct imposed upon women, through which men control women's role in reproduction and render lesbians invisible. Like some black feminist, she has argued for the political importance of asserting one's own identity.

Another variety of feminist thought, particularly strong in the United Kingdom is Marxist feminist theory. This extends the theory of production expounded by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engel's to examine the economic and material exploitation of women and the sexual division of labour especially in domestic work and child care and women's inequality within work place. In the United States similar position is taken up by materialist feminist who argue that women as a class are oppressed by material conditions and social relations. Marx felt that when class oppression was overcome gender oppression would vanish as well.

Socialist feminism connects the oppression of women to Marxist ideas about exploitation, oppression of labors, socialist feminists women as being held down, as a result of their unequal standing in both the workplace and the domestic sphere, prostitution, domestic work, child care and marriage are all seen by socialist feminist as ways in which women were exploited by patriarchal systems which devalue women and the substantial work that they do. Socialist feminists focus their energies on broad change that affect society as a whole, rather than on individual basis.

Post colonial feminists argue that oppression relating to the colonial experience particularly social class and ethnic oppression has marginalized women in post-colonial societies. They challenge the assumption that gender oppression is primary force of patriarchy. These feminist objects to the portrayal of women in non-western societies as passive and voiceless victims and the portrayal of western women, as modern, educated and empowered. Post colonial feminist today struggle to fight gender oppression within their own cultural models of society rather than through those imposed by the western colonizers. It is critical of western forms of feminism notably radical feminism and liberal feminism and this universalization of female experience. Moreover, it can be described as feminists who have reacted against both universalizing tendencies in western feminist thought and a lack of attention to gender issues in mainstream postcolonial thought.

Similarly, another variety of feminism, black feminism argues that sexism, class oppression and racism are inextricably bound together. Alice walker and other womanists pointed out that black woman experienced a different and more intense kind of oppression from that white woman. Angela Davis was one of the first people who articulated an argument centered around the intersection of race, gender and class in her book *Women Race and Class*. Post structural feminism also referred to as

French feminism uses the insights of various epistemological movements including psychoanalysis linguistics, political theory, race theory, literary theory and other intellectual currents for feminist concerns. Many post structural feminist maintain that difference is one of the most powerful tools that female possess in their struggle with patriarchal domination. Postmodern feminist approach to feminist theory incorporates postmodern and post-structuralist theory. The largest departure from other branches of feminism is the argument that gender is constructed through language. The most notable proponent of this argument is Judith Butler.

In recent years feminist thinking has had to react against the concept of post feminism which argues that women have achieved full equality and that there is no need for further activism. It has also had to tackle the phenomenon of backlash, as identified by feminist writers such as Susan Flaudi. In this men and women in political and other areas in the United States and United Kingdom are seen to be attempting to serve the achievement of feminism, for example, by launching renewed moral crusades against abortion and the single parent family.

Liberal feminism began in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and has encompassed the numerous issues such as education, slavery and voting rights. It is a mainstream of feminism that asserts equality of men and women through political and legal reform. It explains women's position in society. They seek compromise and rather search for equality. It focuses on women's ability to show and maintain their equality through their own action and choices. Liberal feminists basically raise the issues of the reproductive and abortion rights, sexual harassment, equal pay for equal work, health care, voting, education and brings to light the sexual and domestic violence against women. They emphasize upon the reform of society rather than revolutionary changes. This type of liberal feminism basically appeared in Virginia Woolf and Mary Wollstonecraft's

writing. Liberal feminist generally work for the eradication of intuitional biases and the implementation of better laws. Virginia Woolf is best known for her feminist writing in *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*, where she directly discusses the situation of women writers throughout the modern history. She is a feminist who disliked the word feminist. Her main concerns were deeper than men's anger at women, misunderstanding between the sexes and above all the psychological conditions under which women were brought up. Woolf sometimes imagined the society in which men and women would come together in purpose and desire. Thus, the theme of androgyny appeared in her work. Woolf's feminism went in its own direction. In the book *A Room of One's Own*, she explains the situation of women writers and addresses the question of why a sister of Shakespeare wouldn't likely have been able to write anything let alone a play. She would have had none of the material resources, breadth of human experience, money, time to do so. She would have been discouraged by everyone. In *A Room of One's Own* she writes, "A woman must have money and room of her own if she is to write fiction and that as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of women and the true nature of fiction unsolved" (13).

Although it was written over sixty years ago it remains a controversial text. It is filled with the ideas and arguments that are still alive today. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of Rights of Woman* will deserve its rank as the first great feminist work. Here, she went beyond her dissenter friends whose views remained strictly patriarchal. The fundamental principles enunciated here are that mind doesn't know the sex and that, as Claire Tomalis has remarked [...] "society is wasting its assets if it retains women in the role of the convenient domestic slaves and alluring mistresses, denies them economic independence and encourages them to be docile and attentive



to their looks to the exclusion of all else” (344). Discussing the attitude towards female character and education, in the chapter VI *A vindication of the Rights of women* she writes:

For instance the severest sarcasm has been leveled against the sex, and they have been repeating a set of phrases’ learnt by rote when nothing could be more natural, their highest praise is to obey, unargued, the will of man. If they be not allowed to have reason sufficient to govern their own conduct why all they learn must be learned by rote (396).

Here, in this book, she attacks the sentimental novel of her time for their harmful influences on women’s intellectual development which make women forget their economic, political privileges. These novels teach them to find happiness in love and refined sensual feelings. She stands as a whole against patriarchal society and its domination over females. She says a male is endowed with both power of judgment and power of reason. A male goes to public sphere, participates in social, economic and political aspect but females are compelled to participate in household work. They should be docile and submissive she should look beautiful and obey. She further opines that women’s confinement in socially guided codes and conducts that are patriarchal in behavior lead women to derogate their own sex.

Mary Wollstonecraft, one of the earliest liberal feminists emotional disposition is due to nature. She believed that if men were forced to be locked in the same cages that women are subjected to, men, would be over sensitive, narcissistic and self indulgent. She was greatly interested in women’s accessibility to education and believes that winning the right to an education greatly increased women’s battle for personhood. She wanted woman to attain what men of a similar class had in terms of opportunities and access to public activities. Activists like Betty Freidan and Gloria

Steinem in USA and Beatrice Faust in Australia exemplified new kind of liberal feminism. Another liberal feminist Naomi Wolf focuses upon empowering individual. She devotes considerable attention to the social obstacles women face and urges social reform of these obstacles.

Liberal feminists desire to free woman from the oppressive patriarchal gender roles. They stress that patriarchy defines women's lives by placing them in women acceptable role that are in line with feminist ideals. Classical liberal feminists want to overcome these obstacles by erasing gender discriminatory laws and policies enabling women to compete equally with men. Welfare liberals, on the other hand, want society to believe that women should be compensated for past injustices as well as eliminating socio-economic and legal barriers.

In this way, liberal feminists started as liberal political thought influenced by the writer like J.S. Mill. They emphasized on the development of liberal society where there is equality, understanding, co-operation and equal opportunity between sexes.

Radical feminism is current within feminism that emphasizes that patriarchal root of inequality between men and women, or more specifically social domination of women by men. It focuses patriarchy as a system of power that organizes society into complex of relationship producing what radical feminists claim is a 'male supremacy' that oppresses women. It challenges and overthrows by opposing gender roles. These type of feminist thought emerged as an important force in the western world in the 1960s. Radical feminists believed that eliminating patriarchy and other systems which perpetuate the domination of one group over another will liberate everyone from an unjust society. They also believe that the main rival of woman is patriarchy, which guarantees male supremacy and the subordination of women at work and home. So, they advocate for lesbian relationship to free themselves from men.

An important figure in the rise of modern feminism was Simon de Beauvoir who wrote a well known book *The Second Sex* in 1949. In this book, she reads the whole human history which has done injustice to women because women have been relegated to secondary position in relation to men. It is her narrative of woman's existential otherness. A mark of otherness is one's inability to shape one's psychological, social and cultural identity; Beauvoir analyzes men's depictions of women in biology psychoanalysis, history and literature opposing the statement in *The Old Testament* that woman is created out of man's rib Beauvoir says:

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents on society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and female which is described as feminine. (301)

Paternalism regards women as 'other' and man as one. This mystical otherness of woman has nothing to do with their nature. This otherness is a cultural construct. A female becomes woman after her birth. There is nothing womanish in her. It is the male discourse that defines women giving them patriarchal identities. Her main argument in this book is that women have always been thought of and treated as an object which regards women as second sex, inferior and weaker sex. In the title 'Myth and Reality' of the book she points out that myth is created by patriarchal ideology about women. The nature of patriarchy is egocentric which creates myth about women and these myths are just created to rule and subordinate women. The book even reflects upon the great collective myths about women in the works of great writers:

We have seen women as flesh; the flesh of male is produced in the mother's body and recreated in the embraces of the women in love. Thus, women are related to nature, she incarnates it; vale of blood, open rose, siren, the curve of hill. She represents to man, the fertile, soil, the sap, the material beauty and the soul of the world. She can hold the keys to poetry; she can be mediatrix between this world and the beyond: grace or oracle star or sorceress, she opens the door to the supernatural, the surreal. (944)

While talking about myth, she has talked about immanence and transcendence. Throughout the history man has occupied the transcendental position and women are pure to the position of immanence.

Radical feminists tend to be more militant in their approach. This type of radical feminism too appeared in Elaine Showalter's writing. Elaine Showalter for example, described the change in 1970s as a shift of attention from andro-text to gynotext. She coined the term gynocriticism, meaning the study of gynotext. In other words, it's a more of criticism done by the women, of the text written by women. The subject of gynocriticism as, she says are the history, style themes, genres and structure of writing by women: the psychodynamics of female creativity: the trajectory of the individual or collective female career; and the evolution or laws of female literary tradition (115). She divided feminist criticism in two types, that which is concerned with woman as reader and that which is concerned with woman as writer. *A Literature of Their Own* is one of the most influential works of recent feminist criticism where she has recognized the problem: the danger of universalism that would bury feminist critical activities in patriarchally founded discourse. Elaine Showalter's *A literature of Their own* describes three stages in the history of women's

literature and purposes a similar multipart model of the growth of a feminist theory. The first phase is feminine phase which is the phase of imitation of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition. The second phase is the phase of protest against the values and standards in favor of autonomy. The third phase is identified as the phase of self discovery and search for identity and journey within.

Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* can be taken as milestone in the rise of this stream. It symbolized the beginning of feminist criticism for it was the major book of feminist criticism in the United States. Here, she constructed her theory of sexual politics and derived the feminist idea from culture. She argued that the relations between men and women are power relations; that men tend to have the power and that sexuality enforces their power. She describes to be the sexual politics as the method by which one sex seeks to maintain and extend its power over the other subordinate sex. Her chapter's on D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer and Jean Genet was to demonstrate how destructively men write about women and their sexuality. It also condemns Freud as the prime source of patriarchal attitudes against which feminist must fight (150). For Kate Millet, the essence of politics in power and the task of feminist critics and theorist is to expose the way in which male dominance over female contributes the most pervasive ideology and provides it's power.

Millet's central claims are simple, and they essentially represent a formalization of the ideas that were already current in new women movement. According to her, the power relationship between men and women takes the form of male domination over women in all areas of life. Sexual domination is so universal. So, ubiquitous and so complete that it appears natural and hence becomes invisible (185). The patriarchal power of men over women is therefore basis to the functioning of all societies and it extends far beyond formal institutions of power.

The collaboration of Gilbert and Gubar has been extremely influential in the advancement of both the study of women writers and feminist literary theory their well known work. *The madwoman in the attic* (1979) traces the female literary tradition and thus combats what they term women's anxiety of authorship. They argue that in the past and into the present the writer's creativity has been identified virtually completely with men. They even argue that women don't fit into the patriarchal models of Harold Bloom's theory. 'Anxiety of Influence' they say:

Bloom's Model of literary history is intensely (even exclusively) male and necessarily patriarchal. For this reason, it has seemed, and no doubt will continue to seem, offensively sexist to some feminist critic. Not only, after all does Bloom describe literary history as the crucial warfare of fathers and sons. (1236)

Their focal thesis lies in creating a space for women's literature of creating a subculture unaffected by males and attacking male ego. Gilbert and Gubar offer a litany of the results of women's socialized anxieties; a variety of mental and physical illness, including anorexia, agoraphobia and claustrophobia.

Hence, most of the feminist critics believe that women have same mental capacity as their male counterparts and should be given the same opportunity in political, economic and social spheres. Feminist literature particularly in patriarchal society is to empower and free women. They believe that only a feminist struggle will significantly change the position, status, roles and relations between men and women. Moreover, it will bring some social changes which will improve the social status of women and eliminate the domestic violence. Women ask for cultural space for women like men. Demand for social Justice, racial equality educational reform, gender equity reinvigorates feminism.

Third World feminism has been described as a group of feminist theories developed by feminists who acquired their views and took part in feminist politics in so called Third World countries. Although women from Third World have been engaged in the feminist movements. Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Sarojini Sahoo criticize western feminism on the grounds that it is ethnocentric and doesn't take into account the unique experience from Third World Countries or the existence of feminism indigenous to Thirds World Countries. According to Chandra Talapade Mohanty, women in Third World feel that western feminism bases its understanding of women in internal racism, classicism and homophobia. This discourse is strongly related to African feminism and postcolonial feminism. Chandra Talpade Mohanty defines Third World geographically:

The nation states of Latin America, the Caribbean, sub Saharan Africa, south and south east Asia, China South Africa and Ocean contributes the parameters of the non-European third world. In addition, black Latin. Asian and indigenous people in USA, Europe and Australia some of whom have historic links with geographically defined third worlds also define themselves as Third World people. (5)

The use of the term "Third World women by western feminists have been widely critiqued. Mohanty uses the term interchangeably with women of color" (7) She argues that:

What seems to constitute women of color or Third World women as a viable oppositional alliance is a common context of struggle rather than color or racial identifications. Similarly, it is Third World women's appositional political relation to sexist, racist and imperialistic structures that constitutes our political commonality. (7)

Although, she uses the term “Third World women” Mohanty argues that western feminism appropriable the production of the Third World women as a singular monolithic subject “for a discursive colonization” (51). Furthermore, western feminism articulate a discursive colonization through the production of Third World difference, historical something that apparently oppresses most if not all of the women in Third World countries.

Gajendra Kumar, In the essay "Empowering the Third World women: The post colonial perspective" writes that western feminism has an ethnocentric bias in presuming that the solutions white women of west have advocated in combating their oppression are equally applicable to all the women on the earth. As a result, issues of race have been neglected which has prevented feminist from thinking about the ways in which Racism and patriarchy join each other, Besides white women have not been able to visualize themselves as the potential oppressors of the black and Asian women, even when trying to be benevolent towards them.

Third World feminists charge western feminism that it failed to account adequately with the experiences of the Third World women. Western feminist's assumption that all of us of the same gender across classes and culture are socially constituted as a homogenous group is criticized by these Third World feminists. Third World feminism basically tries to give response to the problem confronted by women in Third World context. Many Third World women confront different kinds of mistreatment within social context and cultures. The main problem faced by Third World women are domestic violence, dowry murders, discrimination early marriages and mismatched arranged marriages which are the problem totally different from the problem of First world.



Western feminists have produced an inaccurate and politically dangerous image of Third World tradition. Actually there is historical heterogeneity in the lives of women in Third World. So, producing singular Third World women image is just a western construction. A homogeneous notion of the oppression women produce the image of an average Third World women. It produces the images that Third World women are ignorant, uneducated, poor, family oriented, tradition bound domestic victimized which depicts their self representation as educated, modern, free to make their own decisions.

Coming back to how the western feminism address the problem of Third World women. We hear Hazel carby and other postcolonial critics exploring that black and Asian women are barely made visible within it discourses; and if at all they are addressed, their representation remains highly problematic. Their representation is Orientalist and their social practices are taken to be barbarous, from which the Third World women need rescuing by their enlightened western sister carby gives the example of western feminist horror concerning the arranged marriages of Asian women. In advocating an end to arranged marriage for Asian women because they are deemed oppressive, western feminists do not consider Asian women's views and assumed instead that their enlightened outlook is the most progressive and liberating.

The women in the Third World postcolonial societies, become victim of gender inequalities existing both in the indigenous and the colonial culture are often simultaneously oppress women, KetuH, Kartak who argues that in India, Mahatma Gandhi's fight against the British colonialism during the period around 1920-1930 used specifically gendered representation for building his kind of nationalism, but ultimately has least inclined to take up the cause of freeing Indian women from their patriarchal subordination to men. Several critics have hinted at a trend towards male.

Chauvinism to many forms of nationalism. Such icons of the nation as mother India or mother Africa are used in nationalist representation to reconstruct the image of the passive female who depends upon to the active males to protect her or restore her honor.

Uma Narayan, in *Dislocating cultures* takes aim at the related notion of nation, identity and tradition to show how western and Third World scholars have misrepresented Third World culture and feminist genders. Dislocating culture contributes a philosophical perspective on areas of ongoing interest such as nationalisms, post colonial studies and the cultural politics of debates over tradition and westernization in Third World context she says, “I am arguing that Third World feminism is not a mindless mimicking of western agendas in one clear and simple sense that for instance Indian feminism is clearly a response to issue specially confronting many Indian women” (13).

Issues that feminist groups in India have politically engaged with are the problem of dowry murders and dowry related harassment of women, Issues related to women’ education, poverty, work, health and with other issues that affect women’s lives. While women in western context might be unfamiliar with the violence against women connected to the contemporary functioning of the institution of dowry and arranged marriages.

Many mainstream western feminist perspectives have been criticized by Third World feminists for excluding or marginalization from their analysis and agendas, the interest and concerns of women who are additionally marginalized in terms of class, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation. Such exclusion not only generates inadequate feminist theories but also result in political agendas and public policies that fail to be

adequately responsive and to the interest of women from these marginalized groups.

Third World women are victimized by the unchanging tradition.

The black Third World feminists argue that the only focus upon gendered power and viewing women as a homogeneous group shadows the difference between women. The black women in America and white women in America don't share the similar level of subordination. The white women have to only suffer from gendered discrimination and inequality from white men, but black women have to suffer from double victimization. They not only suffer from black men's gender based discrimination but also from white men and women's racial oppression. The racial injustice and exploitation, double victimization of women never gets place in western feministic thought and theories. The Third World women are treated as slave domestic animals who are to be confined within the four walls of house remain submissive, docile and obedient. The Third World man never considers them to be important one. So, the suffering of Third World women is of its own kind. White feminists have founded a Universal category of women and those who don't share those norms are excluded as others, unable to represent themselves, quite and ignorant. The distinction between western feminists representation of women the Third World and western self representation is the distinction of the same order as that made by some Marxists between the maintenance function of the house and the real productive role of wage labour.

In direct attack on Mohanty and Trinh as well as bell hooks Sara Suleri argues that rather "than extending an inquiring into the discursive possibilities representation by the intersection of gender and race, feminist intellectuals like hooks misuse their status as minority voices by enacting strategies of belligerence that at this time are more divisive than informative. Suleri claims that Mohanty's. Claim to authenticity

only black can speak for a black; only postcolonial sub-continental feminist can adequately represent the lived experience of that culture points to the great difficulty posited by the authenticity of female racial voices in the great game which claims to be the first narrative of what the ethnicity constructed woman deemed to want.

Gywyatri Chakravarti Spivak essay, French feminism in an International Frame in her study on cultural politics problematize arise the relationship between Third World women and their representation via First World scholarship. She goes on to point out the problematic assumption that the system of knowledge can be generally applicable around the world. She also, problematizes the position of critic while recording her error in feeling empowered as a well educated women in the west who could help the less privileged women of the Third world.

In the next essay 'Can subaltern speak?' Spivak taking the help of the post structuralist thinkers like Michael Foucault, she challenges the notion that human individuals are sovereign subjects with command over their consciousness. These critics are victim of the assumption that they can be reliable mediators for the unrepresented voice of the oppressed, through whom, the oppressed can clearly speak. Spivak made it clear that the muteness or silence of the women as subaltern is created by the fact that even when they uttered words, they were still interpreted through conceptual and methodological device which were unable in rightly decoding their voice, hence the silence of the women as subaltern is a failure of interpretation and not failure of articulation,

Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in the essay 'Under western Eyes' 'especially focuses on western feminist discourse on women in the Third World and presents the critique pertaining to Third World Scholars writing about their own cultures, which

employ identical analytic strategies. Moreover, here he focuses upon the production of the Third World women as a singular mythic subject in some recent feminist texts.

Hence, the feminist approaches mentioned above are useful for us to find out the main causes how the protagonist of Willa Cather's novel *Sapphira and the slave Girl* searches the selfhood, freedom and identity by challenging the patriarchal norms and values. The feminist discourse has provided chances to understand that many critics have analyzed the novel as a good piece for the feminist issues. It has shown the way to know the female problems, identity, and existence.

### III. Advocacy of Female's Freedom

This thesis reasserts Sapphira's relevance not only to the center of the plot but also to the novel's exploration of gender, race and sexuality from a modern perspective, denying her victim status and asserting her place as prescient example of black female sexual autonomy. Sapphira's rape plot disquiets the novel's nostalgic tone and discredits its historical authenticity. The novel's nostalgic tone or evocation of Cather's ancestors, its plot hinges on a modern definition of black female sexual propriety. Traditional assumptions of black female libido are disrupted even from the beginning as the opening chapter posits that a black woman is not naturally lascivious but must be forced, with violence, into sexual immorality in order to alter her moral standing in the community.

The strong characters in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* are women. Each of them in her own way is toughened and tempered by adversity and manages to achieve her goals in life. Sapphira adheres to her aristocratic creed with a tenacity that commands respect, while Rachel has the courage to put her abolitionist principles into action. Nancy risks her life to achieve freedom. The novel is about Sapphira's efforts to assert her authority against her powerless bodily condition and about the manner in which she turns others into abstractions. In the story's epilogue 25 years later, Nancy returns as a dignified middle-aged woman to visit her aged mother and the folks she grew up with, now no longer slaves but still bound to the land. Thus, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* is the only one of her novels that takes place in Virginia and recreates a tale she heard as a child.

One thing is clear that it is women who transmit life's important virtues and values from generation to generation. In the novel, Cather does raise and face many of the complexities surrounding race, gender, authority, ethics and equality.

Formerly easy-going and kind to her slaves, Sapphira becomes an evil author only after her incapacity joins with her fear that Nancy has replaced or will replace her in Henry's affections. She is never totally comfortable about her move to a backwoods part of the state and becomes jealous of Nancy. In plotting Nancy's ruin Sapphira reminds everyone at the Mill Place that she is still alive and observant. Describing Sapphira, Catcher writes:

The Mistress had dropsy and was unable to walk. She could still stand erect to receive visitors: her dresses touched the floor and concealed the deformity of her feet and ankles. She was four years older than her husband – and hated it. This dropsical affliction was all the more cruel in that she had been a very active woman, and had managed the farm as zealously as her husband managed his mill. (10)

Sapphira is a fashionable young woman in Winchester when she married Henry Colbert. Henry is a man beneath her station and moved to a rugged backwoods village, where they have lived for more than 30 years. Twenty of Sapphira's slaves came with them. This caused somewhat of a sensation among the poor, non-slave owning population of the region. Therefore, even to this day the Colberts are admired but not well-liked. Henry successfully took over the village grinding mill, while Sapphira assumed the role of local granddame. They had three daughters, all of whom married and moved away. Henry is portrayed as a workaholic by Catcher:

The miller was a solid, powerful figure of a man, in whom height and weight agreed. His thick black hair was still damp from the washing he had given his face and head before he came up to the house; it stood up straight and bushy because he had run his fingers through it.

His face was full, square, and distinctly florid; a heavy coat of tan made it a reddish brown, like an old port. He was clean-shaven, - unusual in a man of his age station. His excuse was that a miller's beard got powdered with flour-dust, and when the sweat ran down his face this flour got wet and left him with a beard full of dough. (4)

Sapphira's motivation seems to lie more in an aristocratic sense of honor, while Rachel's appears to be based on genuine respect and caring for others. However, Rachel's husband died, and she returned to Back Creek with her two young children. She does not notice the manner in which her bodily powerlessness mirrors the powerlessness of the people, most particularly the women, she enslaves. Between the mother and daughter, the values change, but intermingle.

Cather powerfully and sparsely renders a Virginia world that is simultaneously beautiful. The historical essay and explanatory notes explore the novel's grounding in family, local, and national history. It shows how southern cultures continually shaped Cather's life and work, culminating with this novel and trace the progress of her research and composition during years of grief and loss that she described as the worst of her life. The novel elicits vigorous responses on the part of readers and critics one hundred and fifty years after its action takes place, and more than half a century after its publication. It also provokes harshly critical responses from readers who view Cather's constructions of racial and gender issues as dated. Once we reflect upon these issues, we can see that in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* Cather does raise and face many of the complexities surrounding race, gender, authority, ethics and equality still facing our culture.



### **The Aristocratic Sapphira Dodderidge Colbert**

Sapphira is a white slaveholder who owns and manipulates other human beings. She is a person who craves power and autonomy. From her crude invalid chair she rules the household and, in particular, the slaves. In holding slaves, she denies them their humanity as slavery makes functionaries of those who are enslaved. Sapphira's slaves are socialized into the assumptions that permit slavery and deny each other their common humanity. This permits her to divorce herself still further from any scruple over placing Nancy in harm's way. Sapphira suffers from severe dropsy and her swelling is so bad she can no longer walk. She is jealous of a young slave named Nancy, with whom she believes Henry is having an affair. Sapphira is the chief executive of her estate as:

Sapphira was usually present at their business conferences, and took some part in their discussions about the management of the farm lands and stock. It was she who rode over the estate to see that the master's orders were carried out. She went to the public sales on market days and bought in cattle and horses, of which she was a knowing judge. When the increase of the flocks or the stables was to be sold, she attended to it with Henry's aid. (24)

The division among the slaves makes Sapphira's plot possible, for it is unlikely that anyone who perceives the danger Nancy is in will act to stop what Sapphira, the hidden playwright, has started. A byproduct of Sapphira's plot will be the long-lasting feelings of alienation that her campaign against Nancy will engender among the slaves. That is why, Henry refuses Sapphira's initial request to sell Nancy, saying, "This isn't a slave-owning neighborhood. If you sold a good girl like Nancy off to Winchester, people hereabouts would hold it against you" (42).

After Henry reiterates, "I'll never sign for Nancy," his wife says to herself, "Then we must find some other way" (9). She intends to do some other way is to sell Nancy, so she prepares a plan to prove that Nancy is no longer "a good girl" (9).

Once Sapphira's scheme is laid out, it becomes evident that it reflects the social context of the twentieth century where the sexual morality of a female slave would be irrelevant. Exposing Martin's rape would destroy Nancy's reputation and it would not affect the former because he is a notorious rake and a visitor to Back Creek. Sapphira wishes to reestablish power over Henry, and Sapphira's despotism is obvious throughout the novel. She is a proud aristocrat now in her sixties and doomed to die of dropsy. The cold war between the husband and wife regarding Nancy is described as:

Sapphira sat looking out at the dripping trees and the thick amethyst clouds which hung low over the mill and blurred the tall cedars across the creek. She smiled faintly; it occurred to her that when they were talking about Bluebell, both she and Henry had been thinking all the while about Nancy. How much, she wondered, did each wish to conceal from the other? (53)

An irony of her condition and of her response to it is that she never notices the manner in which her bodily powerlessness mirrors the powerlessness of the people, most particularly the women, she enslaves. She overhears her cook's erroneous suggestion that her husband is sexually involved with Nancy and therefore decides to get rid of the slave. She wants to sell the beautiful and innocent slave, but despite being the master of the Mill House, cannot, since by law a woman cannot sell property without her husband's consent. Thus Sapphira invites Martin Colbert, her husband's nephew to visit, so that he might seduce or rape Nancy.

The clash between traditional and modern stereotypes arises in Sapphira's first chapter. Her belief that her husband, Henry, might be having an affair with his slave is historically accurate, and her vengeful anger is also understandable given a nineteenth-century plantation mistress's limited legal and social power. The rape conspiracy is intended to put an end to Henry's desire, yet the novel indicates that Martin's efforts actually arouse Henry's passion, not subsume it. Since Martin's lascivious presence alone disrupts Henry's fatherly affection for Nancy, so much so that he eventually begins to avoid her, there is no need for Sapphira or Martin to continue their rape conspiracy.

Sapphira will soon rot in the family cemetery, but should her vendetta against Nancy succeed, she will have written the fate of everyone within her jurisdiction. Much of the novel describes Sapphira's attempts to get rid of Nancy, first by selling the girl in Winchester, and later by importing her nephew to rape and destroy Nancy. This doesn't work either, primarily because Rachel takes Nancy under her wing and arranges her escape to Canada via the Underground Railroad.

In this way, she will hence live on in the aftermath of her plot. In this act of aggression Sapphira asserts the fact she is still a living being, capable of self-extension by abusing her authority at the Mill House. Her plot makes her a potent presence at the Mill Place and can be seen as a measure of her desperation in the face of death. The aging, dying and helpless Sapphira extends herself beyond the boundaries of her malfunctioning body by authoring the futures of those who will live on after her death. Her annual routine on the estate was:

Every year there was the gardening and planting, butchering time and meat-curing. Summer meant preserving and jelly-making, the drying of cherries and currants and sweet corn and sliced apples for winter.

In those days she often rode her mare to Winchester of a Saturday to be there for the Sunday service. It was because she had been so energetic, and such a good manager, that even from an invalid's chair she was still able to keep her servants well in hand. (76)

She feels that if Martin ruins Nancy, the young slave woman will no longer be the golden child for whom Henry has such affection and her husband will be stripped of one of his little happiness. Nancy will have had her position as mere chattel reinforced and the other slaves will have to pretend that Nancy's fate is of no consequence to them. If Martin's wedlock with Nancy results in a pregnancy, the consequence will be yet another child whose existence will be a reminder of the trauma, violence and scheming which led to that new slave's conception. Sapphira is not only able to imagine Nancy as the victim of Martin Colbert's unwanted sexual advances, she is fully willing to authorize such an occurrence and to do what she can to make Martin's conquest more probable.

### **The Slave Nancy**

It is a universal fate of those from whom the power to author their own fate has been retracted that later populations reattribute to them the power of authorship and speak of them as permitting it and Nancy's case is no different. Consequently, there must be something about Nancy that makes her more sexually desirable than her peers and the novel repeatedly describes the "eager affection" (17) that make her "warmer and more alive" than her reticent mother Till (43). Nancy's countenance certainly endears her to Henry, who describes her as "a soft spring breeze" (192).

The novel opens on a dinner quarrel. Sapphira Colbert has announced to her husband, Henry, her intention of selling a slave girl, Nancy, to neighbors. Henry refuses to countersign the necessary documents, although the slaves belong legally

to Sapphira. Sapphira, portrayed as a particularly strong-minded woman, begins to devise other means to rid herself of Nancy, who has lost favor because of a perceived favoritism paid to the lovely girl by Sapphira's husband.

Nancy's sexuality is thus a critical point of contention. Not only is her sexual reputation at stake, but Cather also constructs the plot around a pivotal detail. Sapphira assumes Henry and Martin find Nancy sexually desirable, and both eventually do. Nancy's erotic allure seems at odds with her child-like innocence. Her youthful vitality is her most attractive asset, particularly in contrast to Sapphira's age and debilitating illness. The novel's first full description of Nancy emphasizes her "white teeth," (17) "pretty face" and "slender, nimble hands" (18). Sapphira's jealousy is aroused by envy for Nancy's "blooming, fresh sexuality," (19). Actually Nancy did her work honestly for her master as:

When Nancy first began to take care of the mill room, she usually went down while the Master was at breakfast. Sometimes she had to go earlier, to take his freshly ironed shirts and underwear and put them in his chest of drawers before he locked it for the day. After a while she fell into the habit of going early. After her mother and Mrs. Blake, there was no one in the world she loved so much as the Master. She had never had a harsh word from him – not many words at any time, to be sure. (64)

Till, Jeff and Nancy are weak and petty people and they have been denied the means to make a family. Being slaves, the men are emasculated, women cannot avoid rape and spouses are chosen for or kept from them. Their children are endangered at every turn and they have no agency and no legal status to demand justice for them. They are condemned by their enslavers and by those who condone

slavery to lives of loneliness and alienation. The danger that Nancy went through is highlighted as:

Mrs. Colbert had turned on Nancy; that was well known. Now she had the worst rake in the country staying in her house, and she was sending the girl up into the woods alone, after giving him fair warning. Did she really want to ruin Nancy? Could her spite go so far as that? Rachel Blake closed her eyes and leaned her head and arms forward on her dresser top. She had known her mother to show great kindness to her servants, and, sometimes, cold cruelty. (169)

Till is a mother from whom the power to protect her child has been stolen and cannot act upon her parental responsibility to protect and advocate for Nancy. Both the ideology and the daily reality of slavery coalesce to render laughable the notion that Till or Jeff can protect Nancy. Nancy is the product of Till's union with either a Cuban painter or with one of Henry's brothers. Sapphira does not acknowledge that this union of Till's was more likely a rape than a love affair. Therefore, by presenting her mother's apparent complicity in Nancy's vulnerability to rape, Cather through Sapphira is posing issues of victimization and the power of authorship.

Southern ideology had long promoted an image of rapacious, primitive black female sexuality in order to justify sexual exploitation by white men. Nancy's sexual delicacy is a reversal of southern racial dichotomies which labeled white women as modest and pure and black women as primitive and licentious. It is also a symbol of modern refutations that promoted black female morality as an innate characteristic. Given these repeated references to Nancy's lineage, Cather confronts the tragic

stereotype by denying black female lasciviousness and the confrontation between Nancy and Martin as:

His tone was coaxing, but careless. She somehow didn't feel scared of him as he stood down there, with his head thrown back. His eyes were clear this morning, and jolly. He didn't look wicked. Maybe he only meant to tease her anyhow, and she didn't know how young men behaved over in the racing counties. (179)

Nancy's defensive tactics first become clear when she seeks help from Rachel to avoid being alone with Martin while picking laurel on the road. She also finds excuses to wake Sapphira when she hears Martin approach her in the corridor, and she evades his attempts further by shirking her assignment to clean his room. What is taken for granted in Sapphira's conspiracy is Nancy's sexual availability, that a white man could have her if he tries.

But the fact that even with her mistress's implicit consent her rapist must scheme to catch her, not have her on demand, belies the assumption that Nancy's sexual availability is absolute. Therefore, Nancy and some of the slave men do what they can to outmaneuver Martin, but reach the limits of their power. Later she enlists assistance from Sapphira's abolitionist daughter, Rachel, who plans her escape via the Underground Railroad. Ultimately, Nancy does escape and become something of a success in Canada and that part of her life is never detailed, but only briefly mentioned.

### **The Savior Rachel**

When she becomes irrationally jealous of her lovely young slave Nancy and is overruled by her husband Henry in her desire to sell her, Sapphira comes up with a plan to ruin the girl. So she invites the womanizing nephew Martin for an extended

visit. This book contains powerful emotions. It takes place in the slave-holding south, in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. Sapphira is the mistress of a number of slaves and is particularly abusive to one slave, Nancy, a young mulatto girl whom Sapphira suspects is sleeping with her husband. When Martin, the lecherous nephew comes to visit, he pursues Nancy aggressively and terrorizes her with the threat of rape. Helpless in her vulnerability, Nancy turns to Rachel, who demonstrates the compassion that her mother Sapphira lacks.

Sapphira is consistently unable to control her own daughter at any time in Rachel's life. Even as a child, Sapphira labels her as having, "always been difficult, - rebellious toward the fixed ways which satisfied other folk," (15) and as an adult Rachel defies her mother by having, "opinions on matters which did not concern women at all," such as slavery (132). Sapphira and Rachel are lay nurses who often visit and comfort the sick. Sapphira appears to do this work out of a sense of noblesse oblige, but Rachel feels empathy for the sick and less fortunate. She sets herself above nobody. Rachel is also an abolitionist at heart, but Sapphira is firmly convinced that slavery is not only necessary, but also moral. Rachel is described as:

Rachel was well-enough looking, in her father's masterful way, but no one could call her preety. She was reserved to a degree which her mother called sullenness, and she had decided opinions on matters which did not concern women at all. She was her father's favorite; that was natural, since she was just like him. (132)

Rachel has long countenanced her mother's possession of slaves and it is this last perversion that she cannot accept. It is Rachel that is the disruptive force of virtue in Sapphira's play. Her kindness and her daring are brought forth only on Nancy's behalf. The existence of the slave system and the fact that ownership of



humans is a form of abuse of those humans, do not move Rachel to action until this specific person stirs her sympathy and imagination. The underside of Rachel's act of human kindness is the realization that this is the first time she has acted upon her beliefs. Prompted by her mother's authorship of a play in which Nancy is physically harmed, Rachel writes a play of her own. She acts upon her own moral authority to create a scenario in which Nancy evades Martin's clutches and Sapphira's machinations. In Rachel's play, Nancy grows up, unmolested and free. Rachel dares to think it and to make it so.

In the absence of any vigorous action by Henry, Rachel becomes Nancy's savior. Rachel does not liberate Nancy simply because slavery is wrong. She does so to prevent Nancy from committing suicide in order to avoid Martin's sexual attentions. Rachel mentions escape to Nancy only after the youngster threatens suicide, despite admitting that she had, "seen how things were going" for "a good while now" (218). Rachel's decision to remove Nancy to freedom is a moral leap of faith, since under law she has no concrete defense or justification for meddling with what is defined as her mother's property. Unlike her father, Rachel is willing to do what is wrong under the law of the land to prevent a moral wrong from occurring. She will steal Nancy, her parents' property, away to freedom. She will even steal her father's money from the pocket of a jacket he deliberately leaves hanging by an open window to finance Nancy's escape. Rachel is the architect of the plan to send Nancy off as:

To the two women the plan seemed a desperate undertaking. No negro slave had ever run away from Back Creek, or from Hayfield, or Round Hill, or even from Winchester. But Mr. Fairhead was reassuring. He told them the Underground Railroad was now busier than ever before.

The severe Fugitive Slave Law, passed six years ago, had by no means prevented slaves from running away. (222)

*Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, is one of the novels that takes place in Virginia and recreates a tale Willa Cather heard as a child. Sapphira Dodderidge Colbert is a white slaveholder and a proud aristocrat now in her sixties who is doomed to die of dropsy. She owns and manipulates other human beings. She overhears her cook that her husband is sexually involved with Nancy, a slave girl. She wants to sell the beautiful and innocent slave, but despite being the matriarch of the Mill House, cannot, since by law a woman cannot sell property without her husband's consent. In order to teach Rachel a lesson she invites Martin so that he might seduce or rape Nancy and put an end to Henry's attraction to her.

One thing is clear, though that it is women who transmit life's important virtues and values from generation to generation. Sapphira and Rachel nurture the small community in which they live and serve as lay healers. While both women would attribute their efforts to Christian charity, Sapphira's motivation seems to lie more in an aristocratic sense of honor, while Rachel's appears to be based on genuine respect and caring for others. Between the mother and daughter, the values change and intermingle. She and Rachel have a cold relationship because Rachel is strongly against slavery. Later, Nancy assumes Sapphira's role of controlling matriarch without ever questioning the propriety of the existence of that role.

In the end, the foiling of Sapphira's plan gives Cather the greatest opportunity to revise southern stereotypes of black female sexuality with a modern interpretation. As a slave, Nancy's sexual availability is predetermined and, as a mulatta, her sexual allure is a threat, Cather puts a radical spin on racial stereotypes by allowing Nancy to wrest control of her sexual autonomy. But in order to

recognize Nancy's strengths, it is critical to move beyond Rachel's motherly attitude and Henry's now-shaken habit of seeing her. Despite her sometimes weak and hysterical temperament, Nancy is proactive in her own defense and aware of the dual threat Martin has become to both her private sexual self and her public sexual identity or sexual propriety. Nancy is a character type never before seen in Cather's oeuvre and still rare in white-authored texts in 1940, a black woman who refuses the white community's interpretation of her sexual identity and seizes control of her sexual fate.

#### IV. Conclusion

The strong characters in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* are women. Each of them in her own way is toughened and tempered by adversity and manages to achieve her goals in life, or at least hold off the chaos that she perceives surrounds her. Sapphira adheres to her aristocratic creed with a tenacity that commands respect, if not admiration. Rachel has the courage to put her abolitionist principles into action, unlike her father. Nancy risks her life to achieve freedom. Men, on the other hand, are morally weak and ineffectual. Sapphira's nephew from Winchester, imported for the sole purpose of raping and humiliating Nancy, is a stereotypical macho moron.

The novel *Sapphira and The Slave Girl* by Willa Cather is based on fictionalized family history where the main character Sapphira, wants the innocent slave girl, Nancy either to be killed or raped by the evil rapist due to her jealousy that her husband might be having an affair. On the contrary, her own daughter Rachel Blake opposes slavery and plans to take her away from the cruel intentions of her mother. As a representative woman of new generation, the daughter Rachel not only defies slavery but by ensuring freedom of the slave girl, she also advocates for female self hood, freedom and identity. The novel is based on two treatments of a slave girl by two generations. The old exercising authority and domination where as the young advocating for freedom and struggling against the old where the voice of freedom looks strong and time demanded.

After witnessing decades of extreme cultural unease about race, Cather chose to address how southern white society has constrained and defined the sexuality of black women and the price African American women pay for attempting to break free of these cultural stereotypes. Sapphira wrongly suspects that one of her slaves,

Nancy, is in an intimate relationship with her husband, and manipulates those around her to exact revenge.

When she comes to believe that Nancy is having a relationship with Henry, Sapphira first attempts to have her sold, but Henry refuses. The mistress then invites her nephew Martin for a long visit, creating the circumstances in which he might rape the slave. Martin's attempted rape is more menacing than actually violent and repeatedly portrayed slaves as preferring bondage to the alternative. Martin fails, but his mere presence prompts Henry and his widowed daughter, Rachel to assist in Nancy's escape. They intervene by helping Nancy flee to Canada. In an epilogue that takes place twenty-five years later, in 1881, Nancy returns to the Shenandoah Valley, and the point of view shifts from third person to first person.

Hence, the novel *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* centers on the family's matriarch, Sapphira Colbert and her attempt to sell Nancy Till, a mixed race slave girl. But the same plot of Sapphira is foiled by her husband and daughter Rachel Black. So, any research project will be based on around how the young generation, her daughter is advocating the voice of female freedom against her own mother. Hence the Cather's novel *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* searches the selfhood, freedom and Identity by challenging the patriarchal norms and values. The feminist discourse has provided chances to understand that many critics have analyzed the novel as a good piece for the advocacy of female's freedom.

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