

**Tribhuvan University**

**Search for Selfhood in Willa Cather's *My Antonia***

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in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the Degree of  
Master of Arts in English**

**By**

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This thesis entitled "Search for Selfhood in Willa Cather's *My Antonia*" submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University by Mr. Ashok Bhattarai has been approved by the undersigned members of the Research Committee.

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## **Abstract**

The protagonist, woman character, Antonia Shimerda in Cather's novel *My Antonia* is in search of selfhood in the male-dominated society. Because of the patriarchal society, Antonia faces series of male domination. Despite the suppression and oppression from the male-dominated society, Antonia never gets tired of her struggle. She is a conscious, bold and courageous lady who is against such domination. She rejects patriarchal rules and regulations as they are false concepts. Antonia crosses boundaries of such norms which keep women inside the kitchen. The patriarchal social structure raises many problems in her life, defying all their attempts to adjust in that very society. Finally, Cather's *My Antonia* is an attempt to search for the independent identity of woman character that helps to get rid of the burning sense of gender discrimination.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

### **Willa Cather: A Profile**

Willa Cather, who is especially known for her novels, was a spokesperson of her time in fearless and commanding voice. Cather was a pioneer woman of the frontier land and a daughter of a sheep-raiser. So, she experienced herself the farming and could see and feel the hardship of farming people. She was born on 7<sup>th</sup> December 1873, at Back Creek valley near Winchester, in the North Neck of Virginia.

Later, the family moved to Red Cloud, Nebraska, in 1884. It was the town that would figure so prominently in her writings. It was the frontier land especially in the south, and the pioneers who made their first settlement. In Red Cloud, she could see the real pioneer people and their society, which became her characters, materials and themes in different ways in different novels.

She attended public schools in Red Cloud and completed her school education from Red Cloud High School in June 1890. Then she joined the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. Her School and University years were very pleasant and successful. She got engaged herself in extra activities, besides her curricular studies, she earned many friends and gained love and inspiration from her teachers. Edith Lewis writes, "She felt that they first taught her to think, first helped her to find imaginative thought and that she owed to them the early ideas of scholarship and art that gave direction to her own life and work" (19). She was so much influenced by her teachers and friends that she has presented them in her works and

made them immortal. During her academic years, she gained the knowledge of Latin, Greek, English, French and German literature and language.

Because of her talent, good presentation and imaginative mind, Cather enabled her to be the center of interest and near and dear to the teachers and friends. She wrote excellent stories and essays and also got opportunities to edit the University Journals when she was still young. Thus, her college life was most formative, productive and creative.

Once, she almost resolved to be a doctor when she came into contact with Mr. Ducker, Dr. Mckeeby and Dr. Demerall but she could not leave literature as well. So, she tried to balance both for some years. But, later on, she had to leave science for literature, though she was keenly interested in it.

As her childhood was free, loving and unclouded, she became brave, independent, simple and unsophisticated, kind, helpful, social and sincere. She could easily mix up with all types of people. She used to cut her hair short and dressed boyishly. Her behaviour and dress as such show her to be an unconventional woman. Thereby, she started showing her boldness and fearlessness as she was of the opinion that both male and female are the equal human beings and should be able to enjoy the equality and liberty. She had already developed her interest in music and opera. Her love of music was born in her friendship with Mrs. Minor. Dr. Tyndale had known her taste well, so he arranged her to go to Chicago so that she could observe the grand opera and gain the knowledge about it.

Cather graduated from the University of Nebraska in 1895 and began her career as a part time worker in the newspaper. Then she moved to Pittsburgh in 1896 and accepted the position of editor in *The Time* and *The Leader* for four years. She worked hard and published numeral short stories in both papers. Though her income was pitiable, she used to send money to her home by reducing her expenses. Here, too, Cather had a circle of people who had love for music and theatre or they themselves were opera singers. Music was an emotional experience to her rather than intellectual interest but she has shown music as a form of freedom in the novels; *My Antonia* (1918) and *Lucy Gayheart* (1935). She has also shown vast knowledge and her talent through critical essays on music. Thus, she has written her stories and novels with the music loving characters, who have shown much interest in music, opera, song etc.

Cather started to teach in the Central High School as a teacher of English and Latin in 1901 and Alleghany High School from 1903 to 1906. She became a very successful teacher. During those days, she had to struggle hard for the preparation of lessons, journals and writing short stories and essays. As a consequence, she felt weak. But she had to continue this job for her bread and future preparation.

Cather's friendship, in Pittsburgh, with Isabelle proved very fruitful in her life. Isabelle provided Cather a nice room to run study perfectly. She supplied Cather necessary materials which inspired her to write novels and short stories.



Cather's first book *April Twilights*, collection of poems, appeared in 1903, then came *The Troll Garden*, a collection of short stories, and many others. Thus, after those years Cather was getting maturity and gaining popularity. After few years, Cather moved to New York to work as an editor, and later on, she became the chief editor of the *McClure*. During the time she worked for *MC Clare*, Cather got many opportunities to travel various countries and to read number of books and manuscripts on various genres from different writers. She met Sarah Orne Jewette in 1907 and they became close. Cather was deeply affected by Jewette and her books. Now, Cather had no time even to think about her own life and family. For many years, she kept on writing fine stories and novels with different themes and issues. She died in the morning of 24 April, 1947 at her home.

### **Willa Cather as a Novelist**

Women are being dominated and ill-treated according to the deep-rooted patriarchal rules and regulations from the time immemorial. Society has been formed by the male-oriented ideology which has kept women in the inferior position. Social norms and values, behaviours and all the other aspects of the society are controlled and guided by the male authority. Men use their so-called superiority to dominate social, political, cultural, economic and religious aspects. These aspects are made easy to fulfill male's purpose. In such a type of society, power is passed from male to male not to female, such as father to son. Daughters are not given any roles. So, women are helpless and their condition is miserable.

Patriarchy is the main ideology of the male-dominated society, which restricts women from going in the open air. It does not allow the women to enjoy equality. Women have been restricted to kitchen and home. Women are restricted to join or enjoy indifferent professions as patriarchy formulates the concept that male are strong and intelligent and female are weak and irrational. Whenever women try to break such restriction and boundary, they are graded and treated as second class or 'the other'. Patriarchy takes male sexuality as a symbol of power. This idea of the phallus as the center of rule is called phallogentrism which makes efforts to establish the superiority of male sexual organs and dominate the women bodies thereby dominate women in every aspect of human life.

Some conscious women, in the twentieth century, began a literary movement which is well known as feminist literary movement. Thus, the reality and holiness cannot be obstructed or rejected for long. The main agenda of this movement is to attack the so-called patriarchal norms and values made against women welfare. Feminist movement of literary criticism tries to establish the representation of women in the literature as men are and attempts to create the female's respected status in the society. For it "feminism has recovered and revered the writings of many women excluded from the so-called literary cannon and raised many voices against the cannon's sexual (and racial) exclusiveness" (Adams 7). Feminism is one of the many humanitarian voices related to social justice movement. It is also concerned with the equality between men and women. It is not always gentle and calm but appears sometimes in the form of

violent struggles and revolts. To emancipate women from the patriarchal ideologies and to free women from cultural restraints which restrict women's selfhood and identity within a narrow boundary are the main focus of this movement. The cultural definition makes the women as weak, irrational etc and limits their selfhood and existence within the male-dominated world. So, feminism aims to break the male hegemony.

The main aim of feminists, in a nutshell, is to establish women's original status and selfhood in the society by rejecting the male superiority and cultural domination, which helps them to dismiss the misrepresentation of women in the society. Feminism aims to provide women equal status, selfhood, education, employment as well as free expression of women experience. Gajab Kumari Timilsana says, "The word 'feminism' refers to the principle of asserting women's rights, independence and authority" (18). It focuses its attempt on providing women their own selfhood and autonomy and rejects the rejections of women as human beings. So, feminism endeavors to break the male domination, suppression and discrimination on the basis of sex, age, class, gender language and tries to keep balance of power between male and female.

Willa Cather has raised voice against male-supremacy and endeavors to place women in the position of men. Cather has written many novels and stories. She has written the novels not for pleasure. Her writings attempt to place women in independent and autonomous existence. Most of the novels written by Cather do have women 'heroes'

either with autonomous power or with the struggle to keep themselves alive in the society. So, these novels are written not only for entertainment but also with a holy aim to reform the society. Her novels stand the female heroes to attack the society for not allowing their autonomous role in the society. Gajab Kumari Timilsana notes on the theme of Cather's novels as, "Cather's novels are written in her different circumstances and different moods, but the main theme of these novels is to pour out her female experience to portray the true picture of women's life"(21). The true picture of female experience and portrayal can be seen in Cather's novel. She wants to improve the condition of women in society. So, she portrays true picture of women characters as if they are real and lively. The veil of phallogocentric norms is stripped off in her novels. Social realities are mirrored in Cather's novels. To establish female selfhood and autonomy, Cather's characters, in different ways, fight against patriarchal norms and values. Women characters are out of the temptation created by males. In short, Cather's female characters reject the showy love and cares of male for their freedom, selfhood, independent existence and identity. Her passion is for heroic individuals. Cather prefers them to be hardworking, determining toward their goal and does not accept any benefits that may hinder their autonomy. Thus, she put them all as women heroism to emancipate women from the male-dominated ideology and society.

Since its publication in 1918, this novel, *My Antonia*, has received widespread criticism and wide-ranging responses. Several critics such as Dorothy Van Ghent, Willard Thorp, David Daiches, Sharon O'Brien, Carl

Rollyson and many others have analyzed this novel from different perspectives.

Dorothy Van Ghent, commenting upon *My Antonia*, takes this novel as an autobiography. Ghent says, "In Miss Cather's next book, *My Antonia*(1918), there occurs a majestic, mysterious image that suggests, in another way, the timeless aspect of the subject matter which seems most naturally her own" (21). Ghent's comment upon this novel is that in different ways Cather is presenting her own autobiography and this novel is also an outcome like other novels.

Similarly, a critic of American literature Willard Thorp presents the view in another way. Thorp's criticism throws the clear light that *My Antonia* is the story of an affectionate protagonist who struggles her whole life to achieve her goal. Thorp also compares *My Antonia* with Cather's another novel *O pioneers!* Thorp says:

Fortunately *My Antonia* (1918) took the road of *O pioneer!*. It is the most masterly of her novels and one of the classics of our literature. The story is told by Jim Burden who as a boy arrived in Black Hawk on the train which brought the Shimerdas, the first Bohemian family to come to that country. Though Jim is the narrator ( and we follow him from the farm to the village, into the university, and the world beyond).The story belongs to Antonia, the affectionate Shimerda girl who becomes in the end a strong, greathearted woman, the most completely realized of Willa Cather's true pioneers.(58)

Thorp tries to say that *My Antonia* has a heroine Antonia Shimerda who lingers her whole life to be a strong and great-hearted woman.

Since Willa Cather is an unmarried writer, there has been tendency to view her works with the theme of unsuccessful marriage. Carl Rollyson, in *Encyclopedia of American Literature: the Modern and Post Modern Period from 1915*, surveys:

*My Antonia* (1918), regarded as Cather's masterpiece, is set in Black Hawk Nebraska. Jim Burden and Antonia Shimerda marry and mired in an unproductive farm. After several humiliating experiences, including marriage, Antonia remarries, asserts her rugged pioneer strength, and becomes the core of a new family. (390)

This comment made by Carl Rollyson takes this novel just as a woman's marriage, remarriage and a struggle in Black Hawk of Nebraska.

While commenting on *My Antonia*, critic Sharon O' Brien analyzes in the blurb this text and accepts Cather's Antonia Shimerda, the protagonist, as a 'heroic woman':

Antonia Shimerda of *My Antonia* (1918) is another of Cather's heroic woman. Arriving on the Nebraska frontier as part of a family of Bohemian emigrants, she survives her father's suicide and her own desertion by the father of her child. An unselfish nature allows her to undergo years of drudgery and still affirm and enduring passion for life and motherhood.

As Antonia Shimerda, of *My Antonia*, is from a Bohemian immigrant family, some critics, even survey this novel as a hardship and difficulty felt by the Bohemian immigrants.

Among many novels written by Willa Cather with the theme of female search for selfhood and autonomy, *My Antonia* was published in 1918. This novel deals with search for female selfhood. Antonia Shimerda is the protagonist of this novel who is always fighting for her selfhood as a whole for female selfhood. Antonia Shimerda is a strong-minded lady who never accepts male domination. She rejects the patriarchal rules and regulation. Antonia crosses boundaries of such norms which keep women inside the kitchen. Antonia is a creative lady. She was intelligent even she was in country of Nebraska and after her arrival in Black Hawk town and for the rest of life. As a Bohemian girl, she easily mastered the English language within a short period of time. From early childhood she was perfect in every work that she encountered.

Even being a girl she has boyish quality who easily accepts rain, heat and frost. Antonia never turns her back toward any difficulties that come before her as challenges. She never thinks, in terms of works, that she is a woman as the society defines what a woman is. With her own efforts, wherever she goes, she tries to be economically independent.

Antonia, not only in the country but also in the town of Black Hawk, always endeavors to establish her selfhood and autonomy. She never accepts male domination though the domination comes before her life in a series one after another. She wants to help her family earning

sufficient amount of money. She works in the house of Mr. and Mrs. Harling as a house-maid and enjoys the freedom outside at night as a dancer. She only accepts Mr. Harling till he does not obstruct her way of life. The moment Mr. Harling tries to stop her going out and enjoying her involvement in dance, she leaves his house and keeps up going with dancing, sewing and enjoying with other girls doing different works. Her plan to be a dancer and dress designer at that time of American society is an example of fighting against patriarchal norms for female autonomy, selfhood and distinct identity. Antonia tries to establish her selfhood as a dancer and dress-designer. Involvement of women in various professions rather than just inside the house is an attempt to emancipate women from cultural, economic, social and religious boundaries. When she goes to Black Hawk Town, she meets some friends who are also trying to do something through their own effort and they enjoy going to the dance-club as dancers at night. They do not bother about the comment they have to face with their house-lords and in the society.

Antonia never accepts any offers or any suggestions that hinder her freedom of life. After she starts living with Weak Cutter, she is still active with many works and busy earning money and getting experience. After she knows that Cutter is about to ruin her, she leaves him too before he makes his dream realize true. She is strong enough to make good decision to protect herself and keeps up with the mission of life.

While living with Larry Donovan, she has no freedom. She is also deserted by him with a baby daughter in the name of marriage. But



Antonia, though battered by the series of male domination and suppression, does not lose her hope for the betterment of life and her goal. The more she is undergoing with so many difficult situations, the more determined and stronger she becomes.

Antonia is a hardworking lady who never becomes tired of works. After she leaves Larry Donovan, she goes to the county. She goes to works in the farm from sunrise to sunset. She does not care about sun, rain and frost. She has passion for work and knows that she can enjoy her strength with it.

After she remarries Anton Cuzak, she realizes her freedom, selfhood and autonomous existence. She again works hard and lives with her leading role in the family. She buys land, and makes a grand building. She has many children but is able to make them feel happy. She has good understanding with her husband. She is a policy maker in the house and an example of hard-working woman. Antonia shows enough strength, endurance, determination and now enjoys her freedom of life and autonomy.

Not only Antonia Shimerda but other female characters of this novel are also bold. Lena Lingard, Tiny Soderball and others are able to handle their responsibilities equally well. They all are involved in different professions.

The prime source of this dissertation will be the text itself. The critical writings and reviews available on both the author and the text in relation to the topic of this thesis will be studied as secondary sources.

Furthermore, materials available in the library, in the internet websites and the instructions and suggestions from the respected teachers will also be taken as the guiding sources. Theoretical ideas developed by feminist writers as well as feminist critics, interpretation of gender or gender theory will be used as a tool for the analysis of the text.

The thesis will study how Cather's Antonia Shimerda, a female protagonist, tries to establish the selfhood and gets success revolting against prevailing norms and values of society. Other female characters who are involved in different professions and who are also successful will be accounted while justifying the hypothesis of this dissertation. Antonia's struggle throughout her life and whoever she comes in contact with and whatever she does in her life shall equally be focused in the research.

## **II. THE DISCOURSE OF FEMINISM**

Feminism indicates the feminist social movement which tries to find equal rights, status and power for women. It is also based on the belief to provide the equal economic, political and social freedom as a man enjoys it. This movement is sometimes called the women's liberation movement or women's right movement. In other words, feminism is the movement for recognition of the claims of women for rights, equal to those possessed by men. In terms of education, culture, religion, body and society, women are taken to be weak. On the contrary, males are considered to be strong in every aspect of human life. On the basis of this deep-rooted gender conception, men dominate women and women are taken to be inferior to men. Thus, the main mission of the feminists has become to change or revolt against such misconception and the gender construction. The female writers have written for the liberation of females from the domination of patriarchy as well as to establish women's position in the society.

Feminism is the search for female autonomy. Feminism seeks to achieve greater freedom for women to work and to remain economically and psychologically independent of men. Feminists go against prevailing norms of the society which try to treat women as an object of sexual desire and seeks to broaden both women's self-awareness and their opportunities to the point of equality with men.

Even though it is difficult to define feminist theory, it was thought that feminism could be divided into liberal, radical and revolutionary phases in the early feminist theorizing i.e. into those who argued for

equality as men, those who celebrated women's supposed difference from men and those who wished to deconstruct the system of gender difference. However feminist criticism is not a unified subject. It covers media, literature and civilization as well. Mark Hawkins views feminism as multidisciplinary field of knowledge and says:

Feminist critical theory has always been an interdisciplinary subject; for those who are primarily engaged in literary criticism, it has always been necessary to look beyond the boundaries of purely textual analysis in order to explore both the factors that contribute to the discriminatory treatment of women and those factors that enable women to resist and counter domination. (264)

There doesn't seem to be harmonious relation between men and women. Women are dominated by patriarchal ideology. They become silent because of this ideology. Thus, feminists try to break the silence of women. Defining feminists in terms of their work Maria Mies says, "Feminists are those who dare to break the conspiracy of silence about the oppressive, unequal man-woman relationship and who want to change it" (6). Mies talks in favour of women autonomy her, autonomy is the feminist effort to maintain and recreate the innermost subjective human essence in women. The feminist claim to autonomy means a rejection of all tendencies which underestimate the women's question and the women's movement. So, now feminists are in search of a situation where there is no center, no hierarchy, no official and unified ideology and no formal

leadership. As they say, there should be dynamism, diversity, as well as the truly humanistic environment.

As an intellectual approach, feminism seeks to understand how current relations between women and men are constructed and in the light of this understanding, how they can be changed. This project involves several interrelated activities. It should be described as the condition of women's lives, now and in the past women's lives and achievement need to be put in the picture. Feminists have paid attention to the difference between women and men. The sense of difference has been felt by the female because of increasing self-awareness among women, changes in their relations with men, and desires to extend their social roles. Thus, the changes in consciousness led them to search their selfhood and identity. Toril Moi defines feminists as, "the word feminist or feminism are political levels indicating support for the aims of the new women's movement" (135). Moi's views about feminism focus as a political movement trying to break the patriarchal boundary and hierarchy between men and women. Likewise, defining about feminism, *The Encyclopedia Britannica* views this movement as a movement for social, economic, and political equality. Britannica says, "The belief, largely originating in the west, in the social, economic and political equality of the sexes, represented world wide by various institutions committed to activity on behalf of women's rights and interest" (1768). *The Columbia Encyclopedia* views the feminism in similar way as a political movement for equality of women with man. About the movement, it says:

Movement for the political, social, and educational equality of women with men; the movement has occurred mainly in Great Britain and the United States. It had its roots in the humanism of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and in the industrial revolution. Women had been regarded as inferior to men physically and intellectually. Both law and theology had ordered their subjection. Women couldn't possess property in their own names, engage in business or control the disposal of their children or even of their own persons. (934)

*The Columbia Encyclopedia* suggests that this movement is the consequence of the discrimination of women in the every aspect of their lives.

M.H. Abrams, a prominent critic, in the same way, has given his view. He says, "Feminist literary criticism continues in our time to be closely inter-related with the movement by political feminists for social, economic and cultural freedom and equality" (234). Abrams views feminism as women's fight for freedom and equality. It is the search for equality in social political, cultural and educational aspects. In short, feminism is the search for autonomous existence of women.

Feminist criticism has tried not only the recognition of women's writing but also a radical rethinking of the concept of literary writing. Domination, suppression and inequality in every field for women cannot be continued for long as the conscious feminist criticism continuously goes on. Since feminist criticism is international in its resources, feminist

critics cross the national boundaries. They collectively demand to change the attitude of looking at women as inferior people and request to rethink the concept of literary studies.

### **Theorizing Feminism**

Even though Mary Wollstonecraft's "Vindication of the Rights of Women", published in England in 1792, has been called the manifesto of modern feminism, feminist critical theory can be said to have begun in the 1960s and 1970s with the works that questioned the representation of female characters in the male authored texts and also questioned the exclusion of the women writers from the canvas. Kate Millet sees power as an inevitable matter to change the society. In Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1969), she has expressed the fact that power is exercised in the society by subjugating women. She is of the opinion that women should be granted power to develop their status and career. Millet says, "Patriarchy dominates and treats the female as an inferior male. Power is exercised directly or indirectly in the civil and domestic life, to constrain women" (137). In the large canvas of literary works, women are merely presented as sexual objects. Their role is to please the males and they are also subservient to those of the central male protagonist. Power relation seems to have been maintained through the violence and domination. Women began to understand the tendency of patriarchy had its origin not in the realm of public politics but only in men's control over women's bodies, particularly their sexuality and their generative capacities. Millet has analyzed the sexual politics of literature in her work. She uses the

term 'patriarchy' i.e. rule of the father, to describe the cause of women's oppression. Patriarchal ideology suggests that there are only two identities a woman can have – if she accepts her traditional gender role and obeys the patriarchal rules, she is 'good' otherwise she is declared 'bad.' Millet reveals that power has been exerted directly or indirectly in civil and domestic life to constrain women. For Millet, the main cause of women suffering is patriarchy as it does not give the equal status for women. So, the women's place in patriarchal society is pathetic.

Elaine Showalter, an American feminist, published an influential work of feminist criticism, *Towards the Feminist Poetics*. Showalter surveys the literature written by the famous female writers of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. She argues for the separate canon building of the female's literary texts. She classifies that women write differently because of their different social experiences from those of men. Women are also different in terms of nature, race, culture and nation. So they cannot be studied universally. Showalter divides female writers into three phases. The first, the 'feminine' phase 1840-1880, represents writers imitating and internalizing the dominant male aesthetic standard. Next the 'feminist' phase, 1880-1920 represents radical feminists protesting against male values. And lastly, the 'female' phase, 1920 onwards, develops the idea of specifically female writing and female experience in a phase of 'self-discovery'.

After the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's "A Vindication of the Rights of Women" (1792), there appeared Virginia Woolf as one of



the major feminist writers of the twentieth century. Woolf, in her *A Room of One's Own* (1929), focuses the fact that a woman must have money and a room to realize her creativity. She directly opposes the "patriarchal" society that has hindered or prevented women from realizing their creative possibilities. Woolf's remark is taken as the first blow on patriarchal structure. She thinks about the plight of women writers. Woolf imagines a society where men and women could enjoy their freedom equally. She is the first critic to include the socioeconomic dimension as an inevitable part of the female writing Woolf says, "she must have shut herself up in room in the country to write and been torn a sunder by bitterness and scruples perhaps, though her husband was of the Kindest, and their married life perfection" (819).

A milestone in the rise of modern feminism is Simone de Beauvoir's book *Le Deuxieme* (1949, *The Second Sex*). This French writer's book became worldwide popular and raised feminist consciousness by appealing to the idea that liberation for women is liberation for women too. The book narrates the women's existential otherness where Beauvoir analyzes men's depictions of women in biology, psychology, history and literature.

*The Second Sex* reveals the pathetic condition of women's history for the first time and gives human society a new revolutionary direction to think about women and society? When the book was written and after for many years, Beauvoir believed the transformation of society to be the most target project on ground that it would bring women's full

emancipation. Beauvoir further says that women are not born, but made. The human culture has 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 women and tags given to women. Giving her notion about the essay, *The Second Sex*, M.H. Abrams notes:

A wide-ranging critique of the cultural identification of women as merely the negative object, or "other", to man as the defining and dominating "subject" who is assumed to represent humanity in general; the book dealt also with "the great collective myths" of women in the works of many male writers. (234)

Females are supposed to be mysterious beings and there are so many things which can't be understood about female. Males never understand those mysteries, but Beauvoir condemns their myths saying that menstruation, child birth and so forth are natural process and male made myths are false. She says that males also have their own naturalness which are never understood by females such as male sexual desire. She claims:

The myth of a woman is a luxury which can appear only if man escapes from urgent demands of his needs the more relationships are concretely lived the less they are idealized. . . . but along with luxury there is utility; their dreams were irresistibly guided by interest. Surely most of the myths had roots in the spontaneous attitude of man toward his own existence

and toward the world around him. But going beyond experience toward the transcendent idea was deliberately used by patriarchal society for purpose of self justification ; through the myths this society imposed its laws and customs upon individual in a picturesque, effective manner it is under a mythical form that group-in perative is indoctrinated into each conscience. (999)

Beauvoir condemns the male-made myths about women and says that this myth is just a mirage which is not related with reality. If one looks at them closely, they disappear from the existence.

Beauvoir also criticizes the cultural identification of women as merely negative abject or "other" to man. The notion of otherness of 'she' affects the social ideology. Thus, Beauvoir requests the feminists to break the patriarchal norms and values and establish female's distinct ideology which is necessary for women's selfhood and autonomy.

### **Women's Writing and Gynocriticism**

Gynocritics request the female writers to write with the effort they have got to show the power of women writers from which they can establish their own canon of writing. Thus, as K.K. Ruthven says "business of a feminist critique is therefore to reveal masculine bias in the most familiar genres" (115). It offers feminists to be the writers and less the reader of the text, it considers the history, style, themes, genres and structures of writings by women. Such specialized critical discourse is known as "gynocriticism" and the critics are "gynocritics."

Elaine Showalter in *A Literature of Their Own* (1986), says that like male writers females have a tradition of their own. She examines British women novelists since the Bronte sisters from the point of view of women's experience. She raises the women tradition of writing neglected by male writers. Showalter, emphasizing the importance of female writing, urges other writers "to construct a female frame work for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adopt male models and theories" (1227). Showalter focuses on making different cannon in literary writing of women. Showalter divides this tradition into three: (a) the "feminine phase" (1840-80) (b) The "female phase" (1880-1920) and (c) The "female phase" (1920- onwards). As Showalter says in this third phase female writers try to identify and analyze the female experience they have led this phase to what can be called a phase of self-discovery and autonomy.

The early gynocritical text which has most impressed the readers is Mary Ellman's *Thinking about Women* (1968). She belongs to the early political phase of modern feminism but anticipates more subtle developments. She attacks phallic criticism mocking Walter Pater's absurd notion of manliness in art which he defines as a fully conscious artfulness, a tendency of intuition and purpose. The spirit of construction as opposed to what is literally incoherent or ready to fall to pieces, and in opposition to what is hysteric or works at random.

Other women to contribute this trend of writing are Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. In the *Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), they argue that key women writers since the time of Jane Austen achieved a distinctive female voice. They say, "Simultaneously conforming to and subverting patriarchal literary standards" (31). The female stereotypes of angel and monster are simultaneously accepted and deconstructed. However, as Mary Jackson has pointed out, Gilbert and Gubar tend to limit women writer's freedom by constructing them as "exceptionally articulate victims of a patriarchally engendered plot" (34).

### **Gender: The Politics of Discrimination (otherness)**

Gender issue and feminism are interrelated. Feminism could not get its completeness apart from gender issue. Feminist critics hold gender as their primary matter for discussion. It is obvious that gender is primarily a social construct where certain roles are assigned to each gender. All the feminist writers always try to oppose the cultural construction of gender and the role that culture offers a woman. 'Patriarchy' always exploits the women on the basis of that very gender role. Patriarchy is thus, by definition, sexist, which means it promotes the belief that woman is innately inferior to men. This belief in the inborn inferiority of women is, called 'biological essentialism' because it is based on biological differences between the sexes that are considered part of our unchanging essence as men and women. In fact, many feminists celebrate those differences. But they do not agree that such differences as physical size, shape, and body chemistry make men naturally superior to women: for

courageous or better leaders. Feminism, therefore, distinguishes between the word sex, which refers to our biological constitution as female or male, and the word gender which refers to our cultural programming as feminine or masculine, which are categories created by society rather than by nature.

Talking about the traditional gender role that is imposed on woman, an American feminist critic Lois Tyson says:

A woman who has internalized the norms and values of patriarchy, which can be defined in short, as any culture that privileges men by promoting traditional gender role.

Traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing and submissive. These gender roles have been used very successfully to justify such inequities, which still occur today as excluding women from equal access to leadership and decision making positions.

(83-84)

Tyson clearly says that gender is the construction of culture and it promotes men as strong and the women as weak in every aspect of their lives.

Feminism is a necessary movement to divert the view of society which gives women the subordinate position. Women, from the beginning of human civilization, are being treated with worth ambivalence and misogyny. Women had to live in the discriminatory male-made culture on

the basis of sex, race, age, class etc. Such culture is the main boundary of their experience. Jane Freedman says, "distinction between biological sex and the social creation of the eternal feminine' is a precursor of the distinction between sex and gender that is common in much feminist theory" (14). The concept of patriarchy or sexism is the major ideological value which all feminist criticisms share as their motto. All the feminists agree that the entire cultural phenomena are dominated by a patriarchal value. Patriarchy plays a role not only in political system but also in literary and philosophical systems. There is a hierarchy made between male and female where male is the standard and female is subordinate. The woman is made to be subjugated by male.

Simone de Beauvoir, in her famous work *The Second Sex* (1949), says, "One is not born but rather becomes, a woman . . . it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature. . . which is described as feminine" (89). Gender, of course, does not have any relation with human anatomy but is completely a social construct. So, all the feminists are concerned with destroying the patriarchal ideology. In the literary texts women are always assigned secondary roles. They are ordinary, unimportant and marginal. Feminism criticizes the one sided evaluation of literature. Thus, most feminist theorists agree in rejecting the view that gendered traits are essential aspects of being a biological male or a biological female and treat gender differences as a socially constructed mode of organizing society and culture. This generalization, according to the gender, cannot give women equality and dignity.

Feminist criticism is related with new subject which was ignored by the traditional formal criticism. It shares subjects, subject matters, methods of reasoning, and epistemology that differ from those of traditional ones. Traditional philosophies include in themselves the masculinity idea of man as self, or normative, and woman as other, or deviant feminist critics apply these ideas to the text to challenge the basic masculinity assumption behind them. In other words, they challenge the weight of western tradition. Mary Ellmann's work *Thinking about Women* (1968) shows the presentation of women by male writers. She disregards the stereotypical presentation of women. Ellmann protests the opponent of the 'phallic criticism.' Maleness in literature is associated with rigid, closed definite style of male writing. She characterizes women's literary success as, "escape from the categories of womanhood" (248). Women writers are taken as writers who lack manliness in art. Texts written by females are thought to be open-ended, passive and indefinite. Ellmann thinks that neither all male writers write in 'male' way nor do all women writers write in 'female' style. Neither male writers nor female writers are strong enough or weak enough in writing style. So, all are equal in writing.

### **The Gender Theory**

The gender theory is the most developed form of feminism, in the late 1980s and tries to study sexual difference and its impact upon men and women. To provide authority to women's writing, French feminists project writing of the body, in the eighties. It is based on the genital and libidinal differences of women from those of men. Gender theory



emphasizes that every writing, either by women or men, could be gendered or widely believes that male also could be feminist writers. It opposes those feminists who believe that only women's writing can be feminist writing. Feminist criticism, as an analysis of gender, opens the textual field in discourse. Gender theory, unlike traditional feminism, brings men as theorists, critics and scholars into feminist criticism, from the margin to the center into literary analysis.

Feminist critics, through the use of sexual organ in writing, try to provide authority and power for women's writing, which was thought to be main cause to dominate women. The same tendency becomes the main weapon to uplift women's writing. They are trying to show the right use of possession. Cora Kaplan has given emphasis on phallus and explained:

The phallus as a signifier has a central, crucial position in language, for if language embodies the patriarchal law of the culture, its basic meanings refer to the recurring process by which sexual difference and subjectivity are acquired. (256)

The main focus of French feminist is to show that women are self-sufficient in themselves. Their effort is to help the women to be free from the patriarchal boundary.

Feminists write for freedom, autonomy and selfhood of the women. They think that men should take females as their necessary counterparts and help them to come in the independent arena. Women must be regarded as important human beings. Accepting such reality, some male writers began to write giving the autonomous power to women characters in their

literary writing. Women protagonists have individuality in their text. Consciousness and awareness that make female as equal human being is somehow the contribution of feminist movements. Feminists view that only a feminist struggle will particularly change the relation between man and woman that concerns issues such as sexuality, violence, gender discrimination, emancipation freedom and equality for women.

### **Women Selfhood and Autonomy**

It is believed that the emancipation of women and searching for their selfhood and identity have started from the nineteenth century onwards, which is vividly stated in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, when Helmer says, "Before all else you're a wife and a mother ." Nora says, "I don't believe in that anymore. I believe that, before all else I am a human being , no less than you-or anyway...you are" (592). So, the voice of Nora is the voice that has been raised by the women of the nineteenth century for liberation and salvation from the patriarchal norms and values, and search for their own self and identity.

The concept of selfhood and autonomy are closely related. This is the concept opposite to the objectivity. The concept 'autonomy' expresses the positive goal for the feminist movement. The concept of autonomy is the freedom from domination regarding the bodies and lives, emerged as the struggle in the context of body politics, the area where women's suppression and domination was most intimately and concretely experienced. About the autonomy, Maria Mies says, "The feminists claim to autonomy...means a rejection of all tendencies to subsume the women's

question and the women's movement under some other apparently more general theme or movement" (41). Selfhood and autonomy is associated with persons. We are autonomous to social processes which bring us into being as self for ourselves and others.

Identity is the social construction. Looking at the western female self, Alison Prentice and Ruth Pierson say, "women have a human need equal to men's for affection of need women should not have to make a greater sacrifice of autonomy than men" (164). Women in the patriarchal society had false identity. They were restricted to go outside from the house. Feminism is the movement which demands autonomous existence and true identity of female. The identity of person is the cultural representation. For true identity, selfhood and autonomy are the necessary components.

The feminist ambition to maintain and recreate this innermost subjective human essence in women is expressed and preserved in the concept of autonomy. Everyone is free to fulfill all her or his desire and needs that individual freedom is identical with the choice of the self activity and subjectivity of the person. Maria Mies focuses her view on autonomy and says:

Autonomy means the preservation of human essence in women...it is also a concept of struggle which was developed to demonstrate that the women wanted to separate from mixed, male dominated organizations and to form their autonomous organization, with their own analysis, programmes and methods.(40-41)

Writing for self is for visual portrait and signification. All the markers of possession and of the appropriation of the written object emerge from the tensions inscribed within the 'I'. Self is the representation of 'I'. Women are in search of 'I' or subjectivity. Simone de Beauvoir says, "In sexuality and maternity woman as subject can claim autonomy; but to be a "true woman" she must accept herself as the other"(1000).

There seem to be many concepts about selfhood and autonomy in the feminist movements. But the most common concept among feminist is 'individual woman', or ' the right to individual choice'. The emphasis on individual refers to the autonomous existence. Women in the patriarchy fought for their individuality. Women have united for their selfhood which was taken as the essential thing for women's development. If the person is independent he can live his life well. Feminists think that woman is a biological person or subject. This is the main feature of women which characterizes the feminist writing. In Louis Marin's view, "writing of the self-gives rise to a theoretical and methodological occasion allowing us to grasp with greater rigor and procession the manner in which these two sets of signifiers function"(199).

The individualistic sense of uniqueness and self consciousness is wide spread which is not shared to some extent by people. Self is inseparable from the network of kinship relation and social boundaries. The people from every culture and nation use the pronouns 'I'. Every person has feelings of selfhood and need their own identity and autonomy.

Selfhood is an essence which can be signified through signs of beliefs, attitudes and lifestyles. Selfhood is deemed to be both personal and social. It is concerned with the sameness and difference with personal and the social forms of representation. We take selfhood to be expressed through forms of representation which are reorganized by ourselves and by others. It is not a collection of characteristics that we belong to; it is something which is abstract: just we can feel. Selfhood is a struggle to preserve and continue the possession and autonomy.

The feminist approaches mentioned above are useful for us to find out the main causes how the protagonist of Willa Cayther's novel *My Antonia* searches the selfhood and autonomy by challenging the deep-rooted patriarchal norms and values. The feminist discourse has provided chances to understand the text. Many critics have analyzed the novel as a good piece of literature with the feminist issues. It has shown the way to know the female problems, identity and existence and their search for selfhood and autonomy.

### **III. SEARCH FOR FEMALE SELFHOOD**

#### **Introduction**

Willa Cather, a feminist novelist, in her novel *My Antonia*, presents a female protagonist who is in quest of selfhood and autonomy in the male-dominated society. In the Victorian period, women were subjected and dominated by the males. It was inevitable to break such system and ideology to emancipate women from the corrupted society.

Antonia, the protagonist of the novel *My Antonia*, struggles for the freedom and emancipation from the male-dominated world throughout her life. She never becomes tired of struggling series of male domination. Antonia does not agree with the patriarchal norms and values which stand as obstacles for the autonomous selfhood of women.

Antonia has got different attitude and behavior. She is not afraid of the society to work under any situation despite the chance to be outcast from the society. If she does not follow the rules and regulations of the patriarchal society, she will be attributed with unnecessary tags. In other words, Antonia never tries to accept all the rules and regulations as a credulous girl. In a sense, she is a revolutionary who always aims to establish women's selfhood and autonomy as men have in the society. The discrimination between men and women makes her always go against it. She thinks males and females are the equal human beings and must get equal rights to enjoy equality. Antonia thinks that if a woman has equal right, she also can do works as a man does. She goes against the long established idea that only the man is strong enough to do everything. In short, Antonia is a feminist, who struggles throughout life for the selfhood and autonomy of the women.

Female heroism is clearly shown in this novel. From her early childhood to the later part of her life, Antonia has her own uniqueness in the society. Though Antonia is a Bohemian girl and English is not her first language, she is such a creative and intelligent girl who could master it within a short period of time. Not only the new language in the new place i.e. Black Hawk of Nebraska, but also she is able to have her own opinion over everything. Her childhood friend Jim Burden, who is also the narrator in this story, says:

Antonia had opinions about everything, and she was soon able to make them known. Almost everyday she came running across the prairie to have her reading lesson with me. Mrs. Shimerda grumbled, but realized it was important that one member of the family learn English. (22)

She has made herself known as a hard-working girl in the mind of the people at the time. It was the time when she was not matured enough to go to the field for hard works. Antonia is not a shy girl to work, speak and play. She wants to be free from any impediments. She does not care of anything when it comes to her freedom. She is restless, always seeking prosperity through her hard work. She is never seen idle. She has her own way of thinking about the work, music and dance and does not want any means to stop her from forming her own idea about the struggle in life.

Antonia dares to do whatever comes in front of her. Her boldness is immeasurable. She challenges not only the human law but also the natural law. She is not afraid of natural problems such as heat, cold, rain, storm etc.

She is not a normal girl. Everyone in the frontier gets surprised with her strength. This strength, which keeps her going throughout life, is the main cause of her identity, "I ain't got time to learn. I can work like mans now. My mother can't say no more how Ambrosch do all and nobody to help him. I can work as much as him. School is all right for little boys. I help make this land good farm" (80). Antonia never feels herself as inferior to man. She thinks a woman is capable of doing hard works and has the strength to go through the difficulty of life. The narrator Jim finds her as a strong woman, "Antonia worked in the fields all day and did the chores at night" (85).

For the Bohemian family, Nebraska's prairie is a new land. From their socialization to the earning of their living, all the family members fear the new land but Antonia takes everything as natural. She knows and accepts well that she has to face so many ups and downs in her life. When her father is having his last days, he never forgets to take Antonia as extraordinary one. He thinks that Antonia is not like other girl. She has a mission in life that one day she would be able to complete the mission. This is all what his tone uttered probably. At the end part of his life, Jim Burden narrates this as: "I used to think of the tone in which poor Mr Shimerda, who would say is little, yet managed to say so much when he exclaimed, "My An-tonia" (81).

At the time when women were kept inside the home to involve in another profession was almost impossible. Women were treated as puppets and servants. To go with the different type of experience despite all the traditional profession was out of the patriarchal norms and values. Antonia



wants to work hard and at the same time she wants to get pleasure from the music in the dance club. Jim Burden narrates, "Antonia talked and thought of nothing but the tent. She hummed the dance tunes all day" (131). By this she wants to break the concept of male ideology that women need only male to get pleasure and happiness. Women were unable to cross the social boundary. Antonia challenges them by going to the dance club and enjoying the music as the form of her freedom. She wants to be a good dancer as well as a good cloth designer, "It was at the Vannis' tent that Antonia was discovered" (131). At the time, people believe that only a man can be great in different works. Antonia starts going to the dance club as a dancer, working in the house as a housemaid and sewing clothes as a dress designer. So, to break this concept Antonia tries to do everything which gives her new experiences as well as new idea and knowledge. All the works are the challenges for the patriarchal society.

### **Deconstructing Gender**

As people believe, women would be easily defeated by a single difficult situation they encounter in their lives and become too crippled to go through such difficulty in their lives while sons are supposed to be strong and courageous. But Antonia Shimerda aims to learn new thing to help better her learning and her family by choosing dance as profession, "She would break into a run, like a day. There were always partners waiting for her; she began to dance before she got her breath" (132). She is not only fond of dance and music but also talented. When she has been working as a hired-girl in the house of Mr. Harling, every time she seeks a

job outside to enjoy her leisure time with extra income. Moreover, she wants to enjoy the freedom of life and thinks that she is as capable as a man to earn her living with new jobs and with new experiences. Antonia is also a creative girl who could easily learn the things that come before her. As one of her friends Lena Lingard says, "Frances taught us to dance that winter, and she said, from the first lesson, that Antonia would make the best dancer among us"(113). Every evening she goes to the Vannis' tent to dance. Going to the dance club in the evening and dancing there up to late night can be taken as an exercise to be free and the expression of freedom. 'Dance' can be taken as the symbol of freedom in the life of Antonia. The dance club has become a place where Antonia enjoys meeting with the people from different walks of their lives. As a young girl, she has the chances to meet with the boys too, "The Vannis' tent brought the town boys and the country girls together on neutral ground" (130).

After Antonia's arrival in the house of Mr. Harling in Black Hawk town as a housemaid, she is performing her duty well in the kitchen as well as the works outside. She has good relationship with Mrs. Harling, her house lady, upto the time Mrs. Harling accepts Antonia as a girl who loves individual freedom and selfhood:

There was a basic harmony between Antonia and her mistress. They had strong independent natures, both of them. They knew what they liked, and were not always trying to imitate other people. They loved children and animals and music, they liked to prepare rich, hearty food and to see

people eat it: to make up soft white beds and to see youngsters asleep in them. They ridiculed conceited people and were quick to help unfortunate ones. Deep down in each of them there was a kind of hearty joviality, a relish of life, not overdilicate but very invigorating. (116)

This is how Antonia goes on enjoying living in the house of Mrs Harling as the latter also admires the way Antonia enjoys her freedom as much as a man could enjoy.

After Mr Harling condemns on Antonia's behaviour going to the dance club, being busy up to night, earning extra money and meeting with other girls and gaining more ideas and experiences about dress designing and music, Antonia does not want to live in his house. She does not like the way Mr Harling tries to stop her freedom simply because she is a woman and with the remarks that suggest that she must not extend her foot outside the home. Mrs Harling is also convinced by her husband. As the narrator Jim Burden says:

The next morning when Mrs. Harling and Frances tried to reason with Antonia, they found her agitated but determined. "Stop going to the tent?" She panted, "I wouldn't think of it for a minute! My own father couldn't make me stop! Mr. Harling ain't my boss outside my work. I won't give up my friends, either. (133)

Antonia is ready to leave the place where she thinks her freedom and selfhood is trapped. She has a mission that she is not going to accept

anything that restricts her autonomy. She is not going to give up the struggle until she realizes her selfhood. She has to make the decision to leave Mr and Mrs. Harling's house as they oppose her idea extending her freedom outside the house. It is a kind of patriarchal ideology that a woman must not extend her freedom outside the kitchen. The whole society does not want to see Antonia's autonomous existence. That is why her mistress also agrees with her husband, "You'll have to do one thing or the other Antonia," Mrs. Harling told her decidedly. "I can't go back on what Mr. Harling has said. This is his house"(133). This remark made by her mistress suggests us that the male authority reigns the whole house and every woman has to bow down towards male authority. Antonia disagrees with it and leaves Mr Harling's house.

After Antonia leaves the house of Mr Harling, she starts living in the house of Wick Cutter. Her aim is to denounce the male domination, wherever she goes, and to establish herself as an independent woman. About the Wick Cutter there is general saying in this society that he is not a good fellow and may exploit whoever the woman he may encounter. Antonia determines to be a strong woman who never forgets her mission in life. She says, "Oh, I can take care of myself! I'm a lot stronger than Cutter is. They pay four dollars there, and there are no children. The work's nothing; I can have every evening, and be out a lot in the afternoons"(133).

As dance, music and dress designing have become the symbols of freedom in her life, she does not want to give up these things at any cost.

She now, starts living in the louse of Wick Cutter. At first there is harmony between Antonia and her new boss but later on she does not like Cutter as he tries to ruin her virginity. Cutter, though in what form he may exists, is also a male comes from the patriarchal world. As he thinks a man has a power to subjugate the women and play the power over them, he starts hatching a plot to exploit Antonia's character. The narration in the story about Cutter says, "He was notoriously dissolute with women. Two Swedish girls who had lived in his house were the worse for the experience" (135).

On the other hand, wherever Antonia goes, she is always after the freedom of life that helps her to be independent and autonomous. She also never gives up her hard working and struggle in life:

After Antonia went to live with the Cutters, she seemed to care about nothing but picnic and parties and having a good time. When she was not going to a dance, she sewed until midnight. Her new clothes were the subject of caustic comment. (137)

Antonia rejects the patriarchal ideology that condemns the women's freedom and the role outside the house. The male dominated society, in one way or in another way, does not want a woman to be involved in economic activities. But it is Antonia who does not care about the general remarks of the society, and goes on keeping her mission forward.

Antonia has friendship with some girls such as Tiny, Lena and Anna who are also trying to seek their independent role in the male

dominated society. They all become active in the town of Black Hawk to get their roles in every aspect of the social life. They all seem to be boyish in their nature who do not have fear of being negatively comment in the society.

Antonia rejects living with her boss for the second time. Wick Cutter's immoral behaviour makes her think of leaving his house. In a sense Antonia has to suffer from the series of male domination that appear in different forms one after another. She has made her mind ready to leave the town and go to the country where her family lives. But she does not become hopeless and still believes her hardworking. She knows that with her hardworking nature and the struggle one day she would be able to keep herself in the position where she realizes her autonomous existence and selfhood.

Antonia gets married with Larry Donovan, a man as she thinks she would have good understanding. Antonia again suffers from this new relationship as she is a woman and he is a male. The male authority that Donovan gets from the society helps to desert Antonia in the name of marriage:

Poor Antonia! Everyone would be saying that now, I thought bitterly. I replied that grandmother had written me how Antonia went away to marry Larry Donovan at some place where he was working; that he had deserted her, and that there was now a baby. This was all I knew. (191)

From the narrator's, Jim Burden, words it is known that Antonia has to bear another male domination and suppression. A woman in the male dominated society is always taken as an object to be gazed at and a plaything for males. The series of male domination of Mr Harling, Wick Cutter and now Larry Donovan is the domination of woman by the patriarchal world.

However, Antonia is not a common woman who fears all these domination. It is strange; she is still with the hope in her mission of selfhood and autonomy. She again starts her hard work in the farm and does not care about rain, sun and frost. All the day, she goes to the farm and works there until the sun goes down to the west. She also does not give up her hard work at sewing. One of the women who helped her in the country says about Antonia, "She used to sit there at that machine by the window, pedaling the life out of it- she was so strong-and always singing then queer Bohemian songs, like she was the happiest thing in the world"(198). Wherever she goes and whatever she does she is battered by the male suppression but never loses her faith upon her own individual strength of hardworking. In the Black Hawk society of Nebraska, people would be remembering her as a strong and self-determined woman who never bow down before what may be the difficult situations come in her life. She keeps on going through such difficulties as a part of life and does not forget her great mission to realize selfhood and autonomy in her life. She thinks that women are counter parts of the males not a burden and women must struggle a lot to enjoy the freedom in life.

### **Female Heroism: Autonomous Self**

Antonia has her own mission of searching of the female selfhood in the patriarchal society. So she keeps on rejecting relationship with males and the place which try to hinder her mission. She always vows to achieve her goal of life. Leaving the house of Mr Harling, Wick Cutter and Larry Donovan is to promote her goal. She has her relationship with Lena Lingard who also shares the same feeling and has the same mission of life. The only difference between Antonia and Lena is that Antonia tries to seek her autonomous role in marital life while Lena takes marriage as a boundary that denies women's freedom and self hood. In other words Lena seems to be revolutionary in another way. Lena views the relationship with men and marital life and says:

Well, its mainly because I don't want a husband. Men are all right for friends, but as soon as you marry them they turn into cranky old fathers, even the wild ones. They begin to tell you what's sensible and what's foolish, and want you to stick at home all the time. I prefer to be foolish when I feel like it, and be accountable to nobody. (186)

Though in different manner, like Antonia, Lena also vows throughout her life to achieve her goal to be independent. Lena's successful story of her life also shows women heroism. With the view to realizing her autonomous role in family life, Antonia again becomes ready to marry, "Antonia get ready to be married" (196). Antonia agrees to marry Anton Cuzak. This marriage has become a successful one. Antonia has a leading role in policy



making and in every aspect of family life. As this time too, Antonia is still strong and working with great vigor to make the family better. She finds this relationship as warm and harmonious. There is good understanding between Mr Cuzak and Antonia. The narrator, when he visits Antonia at the latter part of her life, tells about Antonia:

The eyes that peered anxiously at me were-simply Antonia's eyes. I had seen no others like them since I looked into them last, though I had looked at so many thousands of human faces. As I confronted her, the changes grew less apparent to me, her identity stronger. She was there, in the full vigour of her personality, battered but not diminished, looking at me, speaking to me in the husky, breathy voice I remembered so well. (214)

Antonia is running the family with many children. They all are happy and well-fed. Still with her hardworking, Cuzak family is able to build a grand building, has so many cattle and field full of crops. Now, she is independent and has got respectable position from her husband and children too. One of her daughters says, "now, mother sits down and talks to Mr. Burden, we'll finish the dishes quietly and not disturb you" (215).

It is all because of her rejection of the series of male domination and not losing her faith upon the hard working in order to achieve her position as autonomous self existence. Antonia, throughout her life, is perfect in every work that comes before her. She is skillful in dancing, sewing clothes, cultivation, policy making and now even planting trees.

She loves greenery of trees that shows her positive view towards everything. About the trees that grow in her house compound, she says:

I love them as if they were people ... there wasn't a tree here when we first came. We planted every one, and used to carry water for them too- after we'd been working in the field all day. Anton, he was a city man, and he used to get discouraged. But I couldn't feel so tired that I wouldn't fret about these trees when there was a dry time. They were on my mind like children. Many a night after he was asleep I've got up and come out and carried water to the poor things.

(219)

Antonia shows that she is more capable than the men and is not easily battered with the ups and downs in the life. The way she keeps on going through the difficult situation also shows that she is an intelligent creature. Antonia, with Anton Cuzak, with her struggle, now, realizes her autonomous existence and selfhood. She has a leading role in policy making in the house. She makes the family, with many children, happy and prosperous. It is woman heroism going through all difficulties rejecting the domination of patriarchal world and coming to create an independent existence. Now she says:

No, I never got down-hearted, Anton's a good man, and I loved my children and always believed they would turn out well. I belong on a farm. I'm never lonesome here like I used to be in town. You remember what sad spells I used to have,

when I didn't know what was the matter with me? I've never had them out here. And I don't mind work a bit, if I don't have to put up with sadness. (221)

Antonia has got better experience about the corrupted world where there was hierarchy between male and female and female were always taken as an object to be subjugated by the males. With her strength, now, she creates such a situation with Anton Cuzak where she is able to realize her selfhood and autonomy. About the strength of Antonia the narrator Jim Burden says, "Yet his wife had managed to hold him here on a farm, in one of the loneliest countries in the world" (235).

These things show that Antonia Shimerda has established her name and fame in the mind of the people who take her as a determined, strong willed and independent woman. People remember her for her boldness. She will be immortal in her kind. Not only Antonia, other women characters of this novel are bold and responsible for their work. Lena Lingard has become a successful business woman. Tiny Soderball has succeeded in her business. And other minor women characters have also shown their strength in different walks of their lives.

Thus, it can be said that through the image of the bold, determined and courageous female protagonist, Cather, the novelist, is advocating the individuality, selfhood and autonomy of women in general.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

In a patriarchal society, a woman's position is deplorable and she has to accept either the suppression or go against it in order to create her autonomous existence. The question of selfhood becomes a subject of concern only when they are independent and liberal in the society with respect to their male counterpart. However, such independence and freedom for women rarely occur in a patriarchal society and as a result women suffer from not being recognized as self. On the very contextual

ground, Antonia Shimerda, of *My Antonia*, struggles for selfhood and autonomy. The protagonist is conscious, bold, courageous and determined towards her goal.

Cather prefers Antonia to be bold and strong and goes against the definition of woman in society. Cather wants to show that women are capable for struggle. Antonia never gives up her mission as she knows that one day she will be enjoying her autonomous existence. In order to make her mission successful, she has to face so many ups and downs in patriarchal society. Patriarchy does not want to see a woman living as a human being like a man. It also does not want women enjoying their basic human rights. So, Cather's Antonia has to reject the place and people one after another when she feels as obstacle in her mission. Antonia rejects the people like Mr. Harling, Wick Cutter and Anton Cuzak as they represent the quality of rigid patriarchy. So, Antonia is against the patriarchy and patriarchal rules and regulations.

As a feminist writer, Willa Cather advocates for the equal rights for women in every aspect of their lives. Cather also goes against the concept of gender as it tries to keep women in the rules that have been assigned to women long ago. As a consequence, Cather's Antonia is strong and bold. She doesn't fear with rain, storm, frost etc and shows that a woman is equally capable as man.

Multi-professionalism for women is acknowledged in this novel. The protagonist Antonia is trying to be economically independent with her skills of dress designer, dancing and other minor women characters like

Lena Lingard and Tiny are successful in dress designing and jewel business respectively.

*My Antonia* presents other interesting feature i.e woman heroism. Antonia seems to be going through her own struggle; Lena Lingard is totally against the marital life; and Tiny is much concerned to be successful in business. In the Black Hawk town of Nebraska, these women lead a kind of movement that everyone gets surprised.

Antonia denounces living with all the males except Anton Cuzak. After Larry Donovan, who deserts her in the name of marriage, Antonia remarries with Anton Cuzak with whom she realizes her selfhood and autonomy. It is all because of her life-long struggle. She, now, enjoys as a policy maker in the house. She also makes the family prosperous with her work and idea.

So, Antonia's struggle for independence and the rejection of male domination is an attempt to denounce patriarchal oppression in order to establish the selfhood and autonomy

Therefore, Willa Cather herself is to be taken as a feminist writer. Thus, her portrayal of Antonia Shimerda correlates with her ideas of the female as being equal in society. The present research can conclude that Cather has demonstrated Antonia as a conscious, bold and courageous woman who fights for women's rights against patriarchy. Antonia's courage, struggle and behaviour help her to denounce the domination of patriarchal society in order to attain the autonomy and selfhood in her life.

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