

## FEMINISM IN SINCLAIR LEWIS' *MAIN STREET*

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### **Abstrak**

Tulisan ini mendiskusikan tentang masalah feminisme di tengah masyarakat Amerika di era industri pada akhir abad sembilan belas melalui novel *Main Street* karya Sinclair Lewis. Pembacaan terhadap novel ini menunjukkan bahwa di penghujung akhir abad sembilan belas wanita Amerika mengalami diskriminasi dan tersubordinasi. Novel ini menyuarakan persamaan kedudukan antara kaum laki-laki dan perempuan di tengah kehidupan sosial.

### **Kata Kunci**

Feminisme, Sinclair Lewis, Novel, Main Street, Diskriminasi

### **Introduction**

Shannon pointed out that the central fact of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century American history was that the country changed from predominantly agricultural society to an industrial power. Most of the other developments of the period – an increase of national wealth, the rise of great cities and all of the consequences of the growth, the creation of a large class of wage earners, the huge increase in a human stream arriving in the New World from Europe, the change in the nature of politics, the beginning of an organized labor movement, the heightened

class antagonism, the change views about society and government...flowed from the cultural fact of industrialization (4).

In the twenties America got more developed. In this era, there were a lot progresses in many sectors such as the vast development in technology of machinery, building construction, automotive, and other developments that were more physical. But it seemed the physical development was not followed by the mental building. This could be seen from the number of business buildings such as factories, business centers, and transportation facilities that had increased significantly while the number of spiritual building such as churches was relatively small.

Leuchtenberg said America developed in many sectors in twenties. It was marked by the vast development in the technology of machinery, building construction, automotive and others which were characteristically physical. However, if we observed carefully, America in this age emphasized their development more on the physical buildings rather than the spiritual ones. It could be noticed how much money was allocated to build soaring skyscrapers mushrooming in the business centers in metropolis, factories, plants, and transportation facilities such as railways and highways. Compared it to the fund allocated for spiritual building such as church which was almost unheard. Such kind of attitudes clearly implied the behavior of the people who considered material comfort as everything and much important than spiritual buildings (15).

Palen stated that the period from 1920 to the present was usually considered the modern period of American change from rural life to urban society. It was the era of industrial development. This development was encouraged by technological advances requiring more areas (62).

Leuchtenberg asserted that Industry had created a powerful economy and on the surface, signs of material were apparent in the whole country. On the other hand the decade also witnessed problems of labor, the decay of religion, a conflict between old and new values,

and a 'war' between urban and rural values. In the twenties America was marked by revolution in morals. Here women began to revolt against masculine progressiveness, against over evaluation that women as love object, against being treated at worst as a species of poverty. The new women wanted the same freedom of movement that men had and the same economic and political rights (159).

Before, education was gradually developed for women. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was difficult for women to obtain formal and proper education. It was considered sufficient that girls learned to read and write. At the most they could go to the public grammar schools and private academies when sons were needed to work on family farms and classroom were vacant. However by the end of the century, elementary and secondary schools were available for women. The consequence was that more girls than boys graduated from high schools by 1890. Later on private academies, teacher training institutes and colleges were opened for women (Banner, 5).

Sinclair Lewis was one of the American writers who concerned with the American development. In his novel, *Main Street*, He told about the struggle of Carol Connicott as the main character to achieve gender equality. Using *Main Street* as the object of the study, this study is intended to find out the discrimination got by women and the efforts done by Carol to apply her feminist ideas to get gender equality. To solve those problems this study will apply a socio-historical and feminism approach.

### **Discrimination Experienced by Women**

At the beginning of the twenties, American women still experienced discrimination in many aspects of life. At that time it was still taboo for women to work or have a carrier outside. It is also experienced by Carol in which as a doctor wife she might not have a job outside the house. It would be better if she is staying at home to manage the house.

*"...She could not have employment outside. To the village doctor's wife it was taboo..."* (Lewis, 86).

Besides women are also taboo if they get involved in politics. In the society the involvement of women in politics would only lose their grace and charm. In this case women would be better to keep away from political activities and they would be more graceful to manage the household than being active in political movement.

*"And by the way, we must oppose this movement...Women haven't any place in politics. They would lose all their daintiness and charm if they become involved in this horrid plots and log-rolling and all this awful political..."* (Lewis, 142).

Many women who are working at many factories or working as servants, get too low salary in their job. They do not get enough salary that could fulfill their family need. Their works are cheaply paid.

*"...Don't you think it is hard on the rest of us when you pay so much?"* (Lewis, 92).

Women are really oppressed. They are not free to get along with anybody. It is experienced by Carol when she gets many protests from her neighbor just because she is so cordial to her servant.

*"...Every housewife in town is doubtful about your being so chummy with your Bea. All right to be kind, but they saw you act as though she were your cousin"* (Lewis, 97).

From that analysis it is clear that women get many discrimination in many aspects. Women are really not free to do any things they want. And it is caused by system that works in the society.

They are regarded as the subordinate of men. They can't do anything like what men do. There are many activities that they do such as being active in politics, having carrier outside are regarded as taboo. Besides, they are not permitted to get along with any body freely. As Norton says that before the twenties women were staying at home, doing domestic work such as protecting children, home and family, weaving clothes, cleaning the house, and providing food and meals (482). Meanwhile Sudjoko says that in the society, the different treatment about man and woman is already begun since they are still children. A Young girl is aimed to be able to carry out household chores, like cleaning up the floor, washing, ironing and taking care of her younger brother or sister when they are still in the process of growing up. However, boys rarely accept various kinds of admonitions. Women are confined by norm so that they can't be free like man. There are some opinions which clarify that women much better not go out by themselves. If they still do it, they will get a negative impression from the society (245).

The environment really has directed women not to be able to do things like what men do. In addition, there are still many activities that they follow are not able to upgrade the status or position of women the same as the men. In term of income, they even get lower salary compared than what men get. Yao says that in the traditional culture, gender relationship between patriarchy and matriarchy society are different. In the patriarchy society, women are submissive to men; they also do not have any freedom to take any decision or even to speak...in the society, life is dominated by men. In this case men tend to impose themselves on women and regard women as the number second society or as the subordinate (<http://gale.Tokyoprogressive.org.ok/articles/>).

### **Carol's Efforts Reflecting Her Feminism Ideas**

There are some factors that influence Carol to be a feminist. Some of them are from her own father and also the environment. That's why although Carol is born in a small village, Minnesota, she is not familiar with the prairie villages. This is because since her childhood, she is not

grown up in the prairie town but she grows up in Mankota in which there she can find garden-sheltered streets, besides she is also influenced by her father's attitudes that is learned and kind.

*"Though she was Minnesota-born, Carol was not an intimate of the prairie villages. Her father, the smiling and shabby, the learned and teasingly kind, had come from Massachusetts, and through all her childhood he had been a judge in Mahkota..."* (Lewis, 12).

Her father is such a democratic father that will let his children to read everything. In the library in her house she could find many books written by Balzac, Rabelais, Thoreau and also Max Muller. Here she could read many books that would enrich her thinking.

*"Udger Milfred's Pedagogical scheme was to let the children read whatever they pleased, and in his library Carol could absorb Balzac, and Rabelais, and Thoreau and Max Muller. He gravely thought them the letters on the back of the encyclopedias, and when polite visitors asked about the mental progress of the 'little ones' they were horrified to hear the children earnestly repeating A-And, And-Aus,..."* (Lewis, 13).

At college she wants to make a beautiful prairie towns. She feels sorry to know that there is nobody who is willing to take care of the ugly towns. At first, her idea is to become a teacher but after knowing the bad sceneries she finds in the prairie town she changes her mind. It has been her inspiration to change the prairie to become a beautiful town so that it would be comfortable to stay.

*"She sighed, "That's what I'll do after college! I'll get my hands on one of these prairie towns and make it beautiful...I suppose I'd better become a teacher then, but-I won't be that kind of teacher...Nobody has done anything with the ugly towns here in*

*the Northwest except hold revivals and build libraries to contain the Elsie books...". (Lewis, 11).*

It is the advice of her professor of English to learn about professional library-work in a Chicago school. Here she thinks a new plan. She wants to involve herself of asking children to read story books, helping young to find mechanic books or helping old men looking for newspaper, inviting to dinner with poets and explorers, or having a discussion with some scholars.

*"It was the advice of the professor of English which led her to study professional library-work in a Chicago school. Her imagination carved and colored her new plan. She saw herself persuading children to read charming fairy tales, helping young men to find books on mechanics, being ever so courteous to old men who were hunting for newspaper, invited to dinner with poets and explorers..." (Lewis, 14).*

Norton said that the twenties were also marked by the transition in the role of the people, especially women. In the past, women stayed at home, doing domestic work such as protecting children, home and family, weaving cloth, cleaning the house, and providing food and meals (482).

She likes children but could not just stay at home to manage the family. One thing that she wants to do was that she has to make use of the knowledge she gets from the college. She is really a woman that can't stay doing nothing.

*"Honestly, I love children. But there's lots of women that can do house work, but I-well, if you have got a college education, you have to use for the world...I want everything in the world!...I can't settle down to nothing but dish washing!" (Lewis, 15).*

Risjord stated that women were among the most devoted disciplines of the muckrakers, for it was they who subscribed to the mass circulation magazines. Much of what the muckrakers exposed, moreover, seemed to be within the female province. There were still strong taboos against the appearance of women in the public arena, whether on the stage or in the lecture hall. But by 1900 women had found a way to circumvent the restriction...Women might also expect to interest themselves in schools, libraries, utility rates, and streetcar facilities. These subjects comprised almost the entire agenda of progressive reform at the municipal level (613).

Carol tries to offer one of ideas about modern education using a special system that might be useful for the people.

*"Tell me, Mr. Most: Have you ever tried any experiments with any of the new educational system? The modern kindergarten methods or the Gary system?" (Lewis, 47).*

In this case Carol believes that lack of education, environment and also economic system could brings to 'poverty'. As Risjord said that progressives consisted of middle class, predominantly urban, often well educated, and committed to free enterprise capitalism...They believed not in natural laws that explained all behavior, but in changing processes that had to be constantly reinterpreted. Through the use of history and experience, progressives thought they could understand the social processes and manage them for human benefit. Thus poverty was not a function of a character but a product of environment, lack of education and the economic system (610).

She also proposes union labor and also profit sharing to the owner of the corporation as she thinks it will be useful for the corporation owner and also for the worker.

*"Do you approve of union labor?" Carol inquired of Mr. Elder... "What do you think of profit sharing?" (Lewis, 53).*



Carol ideas are really a feminist's ideas. As Grimshaw says that Feminism concerns with all sorts of question about human nature, human knowledge and reason, and human potentialities and well being which have been the concern of philosophers. Feminism arguments have used the concepts such as liberty, justice, equality, oppression, and liberation, concept of human nature and the self, of male and female nature, which are closely related to philosophical questions and issues (34).

She does not agree to retain the ugliness of Gopher Prairie. For her this kind of ugliness must be ended. She can't let it or just wait for the change. That's why she has proposed to invite a good architect to come to Gopher Prairie to give lecture.

*"Splendid? What shall we do? I've been wondering if it would be possible to have a good architect come here to lecture". (Lewis, 67).*

She is so angry to find that the salary of a servant is so low. She doesn't agree to it as she believes that servants has already worked hard just to fulfill their own needs. And because of their hard work, they deserve to get adequate salary.

*"...Carol was angry: "I don't care! A maid has one of the hardest jobs on earth. She has to wash flimsy dishes and dirty clothes..."But a maid does it for strangers and all she gets out of it is the pay" (Lewis, 92).*

It is clear that Gopher Prairie people give low wage to their servants. It shows the difficult life of the labor at that time. As Link stated that the economic revolution had created social problems of enormous magnitude cities that grew too fast, where million people lived amid squalor and misery; the exploitation of women and children; and a whole complex of problems caused by unemployment" (Link, 5).

Actually Carol wants fundamental changes to the town. She knows that all of the people: the industrial workers, the women, etc want the same things: to return to an age of tranquility and charming manners. They have been tired of waiting and just getting the advice to wait for a better life. They are tired of seeing that there were only a few people who can be individualists. They want their utopia to come true. They will be happy till they get what they want.

*"...I think perhaps we want a more conscious life. We're tired seeing just a few people able to be individualists. We're tired of deferring hope till the next generation. We're tired of hearing the politicians and priest...coax us, "Be calm! Be patient! Wait! We have the plans for a utopia already made...All we want is-everything for all of us!...We want everything." (Lewis, 197).*

Carol is hoping the fast changes that will bring to a better condition. She is so tired of waiting. Andersen says that feminism begins with the premise that women's and men's positions in society are the result of social, not natural or biological factors. Feminism generally sees social institutions and social attitudes as the basis for women's position in society. Because in sexist societies these institutions to generate liberating social changes on behalf of woman: thus feminism takes women's interest and perspective seriously, believing that women are not inferior to men. Feminism is away of both thinking and acting; in fact the union of action and thought is central to feminism programs for social change. As a result, feminism makes woman's interest central in movement for social change (9).

## **Conclusion**

During the industrial revolution at the late of the nineteenth or at the beginning of the twentieth century, American women still experienced many discriminations. They are still regarded as inferior creatures. They cannot do any things the same as the man can do. There

are many activities such as having a career outside, being involved in politics, being so free in friendship, etc regarded as taboo to be done by women. As a Feminist, Carol can't let it happen. However, it is not easy for her to get gender equality. As she finds many challenges from the society who still think that women are only good when they become 'a good mother'. But She does not give up. Using the knowledge and experiences she has, She does many activities applying her feminism ideas. She does all these things to prove that women deserve to be as equal as man in many aspects of life.☑

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