

THE GENDER ROLE CHANGE OF SCARLETT O'HARA AS A PORTRAYAL OF THE HIGH-CLASS SOUTHERN WHITE WOMEN'S LIFE¹

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Abstract: The high-class Old Southern United States women had played their gender roles as wives, dolls, drudges, playmates, breadwinner and heroines for both their families and country. The coming of the American Civil War in 1861 was one important event for these women to prove themselves as an independent figure in the danger of invasion and famine without help from men. From their beginning gender role as a graceful wealthy plantation mistress then suddenly reduced into poverty, Margaret Mitchell portrays the struggle of these women in the figure of Scarlett O'Hara as the protagonist character of her only novel.

Key words: Gender role change, Scarlett O'Hara, Gone with the Wind.

INTRODUCTION

The Old Southern United States in antebellum era was a land in which the rich plantation masters with their families and slaves lived. In her book,

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America's Women, Gail Collins (2004) explains that this wealthy society was a strong patriarchy system adopter. They believed that man is the master while the woman is his assistant. Man is superior, strong and powerful while woman is inferior, weak and graceful.

In reality, even the high-class women lived in a stunning world of parties and balls, their role was not more than an ornamental doll to display how rich their husbands and or fathers are. Furthermore, from their childhood until they died there were many society's rules that must be obeyed. However, it is important to realize that these ethics have a tendency to bind women only and strengthen male position as the master of the society.

While men could escape into the public realm: to town, to business, and to the outside world, women were described as a figure that spent their lives bounded to the domestic obligations, and therefore their happiness was more closely connected with family relations (Clinton 1928:38).

An ideal Southern lady was expected to be able to do their two primary jobs at the same time: as a graceful lady of the plantation and as a busy manager of the plantation. This condition is clearly illustrated in the figure of Ellen O'Hara, Scarlett O'Hara's mother below:

Ellen's life was not easy, nor was it happy, but she did not expect life to be easy, and, if it was not happy, that was woman's lot. It was a man's world, and she accepted it as such. The man owned the property, and the woman managed it. The man took the credit for the management, and the woman praised his cleverness. The men roared like a bull when a splinter was in his finger, and the woman muffled the moans of childbirth, lest she disturb him. Men were rough of speech and often drunk. Women ignored the lapses of speech and put the drunkards to bed without bitter words. Men were rude and outspoken, women were always kind, gracious and forgiving (Mitchell 1940:22).



The coming of the American Civil War in 1861 brought a great revolution that changed the high-class Southern United States white women's gender role. The old concept expectan ideal Southern figure is someone who is weak, graceful, and dependant on men's power, while a new concept believes that a woman should be able to defend her own life and be independent on men's power.

THE GENDER ROLE CHANGE OF THE HIGH-CLASS SOUTHERN WOMEN

The coming of the Civil War in 1865 forced all able-bodied men to leave their plantations to defend their country. As a result, the Southern United States white women must play their important part of the war machine. They had responsibilities such as raising confederate monetary, soldier recruitments, and supplying the confederate forces with food and clothing. These women worked in the vacant area that was left by their husbands. Some women worked in their plantations. Some became the keepers of stores, inns, and saloons. Some learned new trades. There were also several women who worked in a teaching field, government offices and factories (Hymanitz 1978:141).

This condition actually shows that the majority of Southern United States women were forced to leave their old lifestyle. In spite of becoming housewives only, or having fun in parties, now they had to become managers, decision makers, head of families, and income earners. These roles are actually assumed as men's responsibilities and so this event became the rally point of the gender role change of the White Southern Women, especially the high-class one. The word gender role change in this case refers to the new opportunity to be involved in public life, something that they did not get before the coming of this event (Collins 2004).

Like what has been explained in the two previous paragraphs, Southern land now had outnumbered the number of men, this condition however made the women live in danger of the invaders from outside and the rebellion from the local slaves inside the country. From the country itself, it is important to realize that without necessary protection from nearby white male neighbors, slaves will be harmful for their mistress. This condition can be seen in this following quotation:

Plantation mistresses had been left alone a great deal before the war. But then their slaves were not expecting to be freed any minute, and white male neighbors were normally nearby. During the war, the women were truly alone, and very few of them seem to have welcomed an opportunity to demonstrate their leadership skills. They began to flood the confederate government with petitions asking that their men be exempted

from duty in order to defend the lives and chastity of their wives and daughters from the local slaves (Collins 2004:189).

As time goes by, when Southerners began to lose the war, the condition became worse for all the Southerners including the women. They were not only facing physical enemies such as invaders or ex-slaves that might be attacking them anytime, but now they were also facing the bitterness of defeat and famine. Scarlett O'Hara, as a high-class Southern woman, was affected by this difficult condition and was consequently forced to be an independent figure. She had to take her new duty as a breadwinner by working in the field without slaves and overseers in order to survive.

It was beyond their comprehension that they no longer had a hundred slaves to do the work. It was beyond their comprehension that an O'Hara lady should do manual labor (Mitchell 1940:163).

When finally the condition grew better and the remaining men were already returned from the battlefield, it is interesting to find out that there were many of the Southern women that refused to return to their old gender role. Instead of returning to be a dependant plantation lady of the plantation, they prefer to be an independent breadwinner for their families, or at least as a financial supporter after their husbands or sons.

THE THREE STAGES OF THE GENDER ROLE CHANGE

Having been familiar with the Old Southern women history and the stream of stories of *Gone With the Wind*, it is important to realize that there are three important stages that had been passed by Scarlett O'Hara, so that she can be identified as a good representative for the high-class Southern United States women's life.

A. The first stage

First, Scarlett, in the novel, was born and grew up in Georgia. O'Hara's family is a wealthy and respectable plantation owner in the land of Old South. This fact, however indicates that Scarlett was a product of Old South civilization, in which Scarlett was born in a high-class social group and trained to be a lady of the plantation. If we read the story carefully, it is told that

Scarlett had received so many courses from her family and mentors in an academy that was designed to transform her to be a Southern lady.

Despite a succession of governesses and two years at the near-by Fayetteville Female Education was sketchy, but no girl in the county danced more gracefully than she. She knew how to smile so that her dimples leaped, how to walk pigeon-toed so that her wide hoop skirts swayed entrancingly, how to look up into a man's face and then drop her eyes and bat the lids rapidly so that she seemed a-tremble with gentle emotion. Most of all she learned how to conceal from men a sharp intelligence beneath a face as sweet and bland as a baby's (Mitchell 1940:22).

If we read the quotation above carefully and compare it with the historical source, we can find out that Scarlett O'Hara as a young Southern woman was trained to be only an ornamental doll for the Southern society and did not prepare her to work as neither a family breadwinner nor housekeeper. So that we can conclude that actually the education in the Old South was designed to prevent women to gain their independence from the power of men so there is a tendency to strengthen the patriarchy system in the Old South.

B. The second stage

The second stage of the gender role change of Scarlett O'Hara is marked by the coming of American Civil War in 1861. Like what has been explained before, the Southern women, including Scarlett O'Hara began to work to support the confederate army's finance. If we observe this fact carefully and compare it with the women condition in the previous stage, we will find out that in this stage, there is a quite big step concerning the gender role change. If it is illustrated that in the previous stage that a respectable woman should not use her hand to gain money, in opposition in this stage, women were needed to support the family's financial situation.

Scarlett O'Hara and many other high-class Southern women's gender role was no longer to become a fragile and dependant woman. Oppositely, now they were expected by their society to use their hands to gain money for their country. From their old gender role as a graceful and dependant plantation mistress now A Southern woman must become an independent figure of being an income earner, head of family, and decision maker.

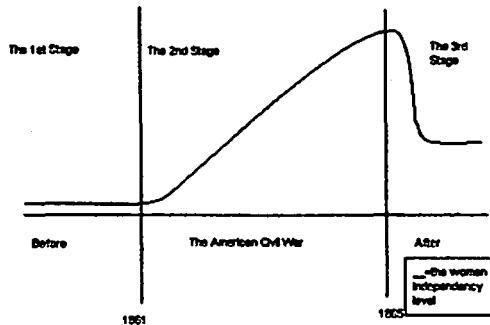
As the war passed and the situation grows more difficult, Scarlett O'Hara and many other women, however, still had to live under the danger of famine and invasion. Yet, around the end of the war, they were forced to keep themselves alive with no help from slaves and nearby white men. If we carefully observe this condition, we can find out that this actually becomes the peak of the Southern women's gender role. Scarlett O'Hara who once lived as a daughter of a rich plantation owner was suddenly reduced to poverty and had to work in the cotton field in order to survive. This condition strengthens the interpretation that Scarlett O'Hara was experiencing a great gender role change. We can see that in the beginning of the story, Scarlett O'Hara who was born in the high-class social group has to suddenly reduce her position to the lowest stratum of Southern Plantation i.e. being a plantation worker.

Based on the paragraphs above, it can be concluded that this second stage is actually the climax point for Scarlett O'Hara as an independent breadwinner until the return of the Southern men after the surrender of Confederate army in 1865.

C. The third stage

The beginning of the last stage of the gender role change of Scarlett O'Hara was marked by the return of the men when the Confederate army declares its surrender. If we read the novel and observe it carefully then we will find an interesting fact that there were many Southern women who kept their position as the family breadwinners (including Scarlett O'Hara). Some did so because of their own choice, and the others kept their position because of the situation. Seemingly, there were many women that keeping their role as family breadwinner or at least as a financial supporter. Scarlett O'Hara's unwillingness to give up her wealth and life dependently to her husband, Rhett Butler, no matter how rich he was can be a clear example of this phenomenon.

If we compare these situations with the situation in the second stage, we can find out that the men's return resulted in a decrease in the women's independency. The development of the Southern women's independency can be seen in this following chart:



As can be seen in the chart, we can find out that in the first stage the line shows that the independency level of Southern women is in the lowest level. However, as the beginning of the second stage, when the American Civil War begun and the women were forced to work, the line is increasing. This increase is continuing until the line reaches the end of the second stage i.e. the end of the American Civil War in 1865. In the third stage we can find out that the level of women independency is decreasing. But, it is important that the chart shows that the Southern women after the end of the Civil War were more independent with those before the coming of the war.

CONCLUSION

In brief, the gender role change of Scarlett O'Hara character in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* is a representative of the high-class Southern United States white women's life in the American Civil War era. From their early life as wealthy but dependent women, later on they are reduced to poverty, but with their struggle they were able to survive and develop a new life as independent and free women.

This essay proves that Scarlett O'Hara as well as many other Southern American white women had passed the three stages of gender role change that gave them a chance to prove themselves that actually women can be successful breadwinners and heads of their families. The civil war here actually is a stimulator for the Southern women to break the social chains so that they may make a big step to their independence.

Next as a reader, I conclude that actually place, culture and time are able to greatly influence not only the Southern women but also women in general. I believe these factors may give the women a chance to develop themselves as an independent female figure – otherwise women would only be bound in the golden cage of their patriarchy system. Nevertheless, my argument should be researched further to know whether the gender rôle change that happened to Scarlett O’Hara was, is, or will be experienced by women in general.

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