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## WOMEN AS PIONEERS IN WILLA CATHER'S *O'PIONEERS! AND MY ANTONIA*

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**Abstract:** American pioneers were the early settlers who came from Europe and other countries in search of the American dream of a new life full of possibilities. They embraced the unknown, charted unexplored territories and struggled to rewrite their destinies. And yet, the pioneering activity is usually presented as a male enterprise either ignoring the role of women or presenting them as weak, worn and unwilling partners. However, the literature written by women presents an entirely different picture providing a fresh perspective on the positive contribution of the women in the pioneer experience and nation building. The present paper examines two novels by Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Antonia* (1918), to get a feminist view of the dominant male discourse of the pioneers and their early lives in America. Cather moved to America as a nine year old child with her family and had a first hand experience of the hardships she has described in her novels. Her life in the frontier state of Nebraska during her formative years influenced and informed her literary style in describing the immigrant experience amidst the vastness of the western plains.

**Index Terms - Pioneers, Prairie, Frontier, Settlement, Adventure, American dream.**

There it was, heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun. Even while we whispered about it our vision disappeared... That forgotten plough had sunk back into its own littleness somewhere on the prairie. (Cather, *My Antonia*, 156)

This remarkable piece of writing has often been read as a celebration of prairie farming and of the place of the agrarian economy of these rich fields in the shaping of the national destiny. However, if read as a phallic symbol, the same plough offers another dimension to this celebration. Then, it may stand for the traditional view of the American dream which comprises the conquest of the virgin land by the daring pioneers, essentialized in their maleness, "The frontier myth is a male myth preoccupied with stereotypically male issues like courage, physical bravery, honour and male friendship" (qtd. In Fairbanks, 57). However, Cather seems to be rejecting this kind of myth making by presenting the plough magnified only because of the sun which is significantly setting. The quick disappearance of this image in its short lived glory is interesting after which it is established in its proper dimension. Cather seems to suggest that the hyperbolic presentation of pioneering as a male activity has completed its time span. Further the juxtaposition of the hard working 'hired girls', who are actually accomplishing this dream, and Jim seems to indicate the need for a new perspective. This paper proposes to study the importance of the woman's role in the pioneering experience with special reference to Willa Cather's *O'Pioneers* and *My Antonia*.

'Prairie' is a French term meaning meadows and may be used for area of land covered with grass is best described through the naïve eyes of child Jim, "Everywhere as far as the eye could reach, there was nothing but rough, shaggy, red grass, most of it is as tall as I... As I looked about me I felt that the grass was the country as the water in the sea" (Cather, *My Antonia*, 12). These grassy areas were largely unsettled till the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and offered the immigrants a chance to begin anew. "The Frontier was a land of rebirth, of beginning again, of exuberant hope... Idealism drove the pioneer onward no less than the hope of material gain." (Billington, 28) This chance was cherished by adventurous and imaginative people, so much so, that the Prairie came to be synonymous with the whole experience of pioneering. Before the nineteenth century the mid western Prairies were thought to be uninhabitable. "By 1800, however, the situation had become analogous to that of the Puritan forefathers in New England... the next was... new heaven and a new earth..." (Fairbanks, 35). The settlement took place in phases so that by 1860s the far eastern parts of Kansas and Nebraska were mostly settled but the true prairies were still unsettled. This was accomplished by the Home Steads Act of 1862 which offered 160 acres of free land to the foreign immigrants as well as well to Americans. This process was also assisted by the unfavourable conditions such as the volcanic eruptions in Iceland, famine in Ireland, persecution in Russia and rigid class demarcation in Scandinavia. These resulted in the opening of the several immigration

bureaus which encouraged people with promises of free and fertile land. Due to all above mentioned causes, the 1880's witnessed greatest ever wave of migration from Europe to Nebraska. Cather in the two novels under study records this massive wave of settlement.

In doing so, Cather "became a pioneer in American fiction" (Norris, VIII). To use a comparison given by Cather herself, like Virgil, she is able "to bring the Muse into [her] country" (Cather, *Antonia*, 169) thereby universalizing the particulars of the Nebraska she knew as a child. Cather's recording of her childhood experience with vividness and sincerity becomes in its own right a kind of pioneering because it signifies her recognition of "her own subject." Her originality can be discerned in the treatment of this subject which was close to her heart. Consequently, she shows a unique insight in the approach to this often recorded theme, "*O'Pioneers!* is the first of a group of novels in which the impact of a young country on the sad sensitivity of uprooted Europeans is presented with sympathy and an insight rare in American writers, even the most sophisticated of whom tend to regard the European immigrants as only too happy to leave the bad old world behind and settle down in the land of the free" (Daiches, 17). Cather seems to understand Mr. Shimerda's fretting after the old country which he tries to recreate through his sense of propriety in dressing up. Anna's grandmother lives in the past thinking herself in Norway and craving for fish. This is true of even Jim's grandmother who was "so often thinking of things that were far away" (Cather, *My Antonia*, 9)

Cather's achievement is significant also because of the presentation of meaningful role played by women in her novels in anchoring the displaced settlers to the soil. In doing so, she contradicts the conventional version of the prairie dream which celebrates male success marginalizing the woman. Previously in American fiction, the new found paradise repeated the pattern of the Christian one by making Adam the prime agent and Eve only secondary, unsupportive and even dangerous to this new world. This pattern emerges in masculine interpretations of the pioneering experience in fiction, history (His-Story) or arts. John Beans in his novel *An Army Without Banners* (1937) represents this typically gender biased review, "It is not in woman that the pioneer spirit stirs; the horizon does not beckon them... It was men only who pressed on across the great plains; the woman had just more little to say than the horses who drew the wagons in which they sat" (qtd. In Fairbanks, 6). The same prejudice colors the work of historians like Prescott Webb, who while appreciating the enthusiasm and adventure of men who "developed a hardihood which made them inflexible to the hardships and lack of refinements of farmers communities" (qtd. In Fairbank, 6), presents a negative picture of women as fearful and distrustful of the land while missing the refinement of former communities. A similar sentiment can be discerned in work of painters as Emmanuel Leutze, who presented larger than life male figures surrounded by weak infirm, frightened and even dying woman. In all the above quoted instances, there is an effort to perpetuate the myth of male endurance and consequent glory. "Yet for the writers and painters who wished to glorify the male myth there is no better way for showing courage, bravery, and honour in males than placing them beside helpless, fearful females" (Fairbanks, 58).

Willa Cather's pioneering novels can best be understood vis-à-vis such a background against the prejudices of which her woman characters shine out debunking the myth of feminine weakness, "As a woman, Cather was perhaps more sensitive to the ironies of the American Dream... Cather manipulates this accepted image, thus opening the male dominated dream of individual success in a competitive world to woman" (Harvey, 22). She accomplishes this by creating powerful and energetic women characters who achieve success, not despite of, but rather because of their womanhood. This idea is enhanced by the presentation of male pioneers as failures; thereby accomplishing a reversal of stereotypical male myth of success. This daring move, as compared to the earlier woman writers writing about the prairie, might have been influenced by the rise of the feminist consciousness in the second decade of the twentieth century when Cather was writing. Thus, Cather's woman characters defy the stereotypical woman presented in Prairie fiction. This process is noticeable in the very beginning of the pioneering experience, that is, the decision to move West. Woman have been conventionally shown as reluctant to do so and merely following their husband to the wilderness against their wishes. Cather subverts this popular notion by presenting Mrs. Shimerda who drags her unwilling husband to the promises of the new world. Antonia explains her mother's motive, "America big country; much money, much land for my boys, much husband for my girls.' My papa, he cries for leave his old friends... My Mama, she want Ambrosch for the rich, with many cattle" (Cather, *My Antonia*, 59). Mrs. Shimerda has been presented in negative terms but her motives are historically justified. "The urge to provide for children remained constant and powerful" (Billington, 27). On the other extreme is Mrs. Bergson who can never forgive her husband for bringing her to the west end of the world. However, this emotionally weak person also becomes an important decision maker in her refusal to leave the prairie when her sons want to sell the land, "I don't want to move again... If the rest of you go, I will ask some of the neighbours to take me in and stay and be buried by father. I am not going to leave him by himself on the prairie, for cattle to run over" (Cather, *O Pioneers!*, 59).

This iconoclastic tendency is expressed in the presentation of Antonia who does a man's work in the fields and shoulders the burden of farming after her father's death; a move symbolized by her stepping into her father's shoes. Later in her life also, she shows her capacity for physical work in the establishment of her own farm. Significantly, Antonia is not an exception because woman's active physical participation is a historical fact from the earliest days of Prairie settlement as recorded by a missionary, "What has surprised me... is to see some of the squaws with a bag of flour, 80 lbs., a small trunk and a soldier knapsack on her back, wading through mud and water to her knees... and a Child on the top of all" (qtd. In Dick, 3). The strength of Cather's women characters shines out against the physically as well as morally weak men like Mr. Shimerda who commits suicide overcome by the adversity of the new place. Mr. Bergson is on his death bed as the novel begins. The men are likable but "The woman gradually dominate because of strong personalities or because simply, the woman lives longer than then her male partner and therefore continues to demonstrate strength" (Fairbanks, 165). One reason for the failure of these men may lie in their wish to win, to get back what has been lost in the old world and emerge victorious; to which wish the new land does not cater. Cather, as well as the wild land, rejects this typically male stereotype of conquest. Therefore, men like Mr. Shimerda and Mr. Bergson who intend to make a mark in the new land meet pathetic ends. On the other hand, "woman occupy a very different space from that which men occupy. Having little compulsion to conquer space, they will establish themselves within space and despite loneliness and isolation establish a kind of compatibility with it" (Fairbanks, 74).

Though women's work is not recorded in the heroic adventures associated with pioneering, they were the moving forces behind every success. Women suffered great hardships which includes unfavourable climatic conditions, difficulty of living in sod houses and above all the isolation which was disheartening. This was complicated by the burden of family life and childbirth without any medical aid or rest. Lena remembers her home as a place where never-ending work was piled on a weak and tired woman distressed by a surly man and numerous children. Similarly Antonia remembers the difficulties of establishing her farm amidst a growing family. Despite these problems women were home makers who made even the sod houses liveable by their efforts. The household world provided an emotional warmth and security which instilled courage to face the problems. Moreover, they tried to recreate the traditional way of life in an alien world and thus preserved the traditions for the next generations as is evident from Antonia's teaching of the old language to her children. The importance of woman's role is realized in the absence of this harmony, as in the Shimerda household. Mrs. Shimerda's courage breaks down because of the uncouth conditions at home for which her lack of house keeping sense seems to be responsible. Women like Mrs. Bergson and Mrs. Burden provide the happy contrast, whose efficient housekeeping makes the life bearable in the prairies. Thus, women's housekeeping played a very important role in the success of pioneering. "Agricultural historians have frequently noted that men homesteading by themselves often failed because they did not have time to break the sod for field crops and also plant a garden, harvest, preserve and store the product" (Fairbanks, 66).

The women provided nutrition and variety through the products of her garden and in Cather's fiction gardens become synonymous with good housekeeping. To appreciate this fact, one needs to go back to the happiness experienced by Jim in his grandmother's garden after a feeling of being erased and blotted out. It is through the garden that he first starts feeling for the place. However, it is not easy to plant a garden after the back-breaking household chores and sometimes even field work as in Antonia's case. "We planted every one, and used to carry water for them too... Anton... used to get discouraged. But I wouldn't feel so tired that I wouldn't fret about these trees when there was a dry time" (Cather, *My Antonia*, 219). Understandably, it is only warmhearted women like Antonia, Alexandra and Marie who can maintain one while men with mean and mercenary motive as Lou and Oscar, can never have the patience to grow orchards, "An extended analysis of woman and their gardens in women's prairie fiction would reveal that the growing of flowers and vegetables symbolize the ability of woman to create and control their environment. This is one of greatest adventure for Prairie woman" (Fairbanks, 255). Accordingly, Mrs. Bergson describes the earliest difficult years on the prairie in terms of its devastating effect on her "garden all cut to pieces like sauer-kraut" (Cather, *O Pioneers!*, 60). The importance of garden becomes clear once again in the case of Peter and Pavel. Peter takes upon himself all the womanly chores like milking and gardening which not only sustains them in bad weather but also gives his personality a sense of warmth. This ability to cultivate gardens stems from a keen sense of optimism about the land with which woman can come to terms in their loving and trusting way. These women are sustained by their faith in land as a creative genius and do not give up even when men, ignorant of the mysteries of creativity, give it up as unproductive, "A sense of secrets of life is at the heart of woman's optimism. Belief in renewal and rebirth underlies the survival instinct in prairie woman... Men who have not developed this mutuality with earth are doomed to disillusionment, mediocrity or failure" (Fairbanks, 262).

Thus, women can form a bond with the land as with human beings. Cather emphasizes this point by "actually provid[ing] it with a tutelary genius quite in keeping with the spirit of Greek and Roman mythology" (Randall, 67). It reveals itself as an active force which resists all efforts to be forcefully won and men who come to ravish it are repulsed. "The land wanted to be let alone... It was still a wild thing that had its ugly moods" (Cather, *O Pioneers!*, 15, 20). However, it is capable of appreciating and even returning love. It bows down before Alexandra who meets it with "love and yearning" and the land in turn "seem beautiful to her, rich and strong and glorious" (Cather, *O Pioneers!*, 65). This mutuality is restricted to women in Cather's world because such love for nature is thought to be an anomaly in men as in the case of crazy Ivan. Woman's relationship with the land remains distinguished from that of men even after the land has revealed its richness. Men, like Lou, Oscar, Ambrosch value it only for the commercial reasons without making any effort to learn its finer contours. However, women carry on their task of preserving the beauty of the land as is clear in the tasteful organization of Alexandra's farm. Alexandra's finest expression is found in the soil in which she works to reveal her own personality and becomes "a kind of Earth Mother or corn Goddess, a Ceres who presides over fruitful land" (Daiches, 28). Her worldly success does not interfere with her mental peace because of this affinity with land. Antonia is another example of this contended outlook towards life. She is not a commercial success even to her contemporaries. Yet, in her success Cather presents a new version of the American Dream which need not essentially include material opulence. She represents all the richness of a person's relation with nature. "She had only to stand in the orchard, to put her hand on little crab tree and look up at the apples to make you feel the goodness of planting and tending harvesting at last" (Cather, *My Antonia*, 227).

These two novels focus primarily on the hardships of prairie farming, woman's active participation followed by a spiritual as well as worldly triumph. However, Cather provides other types of woman pioneers as she shifts the scene to prairie town. "The town counterpart to the plow-woman is the businesswoman who cultivates new ground in the market place" (Fairbanks, 202). Frances Harling is an example of this type. She manages her father's business efficiently while the son shows no such interest. Once again, Cather seems to suggest that her womanly nature contributes to her success which surpasses mere business sense. "Her interest in these people was more than a business interest. She carried them all in her mind as if they were characters in book or play" (Cather, *My Antonia*, 20). Frances' sympathetic nature, essentialized as feminine, is her emotional concern for the people she deals with. This seems to be an important reason for her success surpassing whatever is achieved by her father's coldness in business relations. There are other examples of successful women who are pioneers in their own right. Mrs. Gardener pioneers in bringing the latest fashions to the town through the various tradesman who stay in her hotel. Her interest in music indicates the leading role she is playing in generating artistic taste besides running the most popular hotel of the town. That the success of the hotel depends on her has been made amply clear. "It was Mrs. Gardener who ran the business.. Her husband... was a popular fellow, but no manager" (Cather, *My Antonia*, 117). The prairie towns offer chances of success to the "hired girls" working for the various houses. These girls are bearing their share of the burden of achieving success with the land even when they are in town. "The girls were always helping to pay for ploughs and reapers, brood-sows or steers to fatten" (Cather, *My Antonia*, 128) while they seek other alternatives opening new horizons for them. Thus, Lena learns dress making in the small prairie town and

becomes a successful dress-designer in San Francisco following the footsteps of her former mistress Mrs. Thomas. Lena also becomes a pioneer of an emerging feminist world view in her wish for freedom, her disapproval of conventional standards of matrimony, family life and motherhood. Tiny surpasses all the above mentioned women in her adventure in the gold country. In struggling with the extreme climatic conditions, Tiny's case rejects the myth of feminine delicacy. Her success as a businesswoman has been achieved at the cost of losing her three toes; thereby proving that women are capable of success in areas conventionally closed to them. Their success is not only commercial because we come to know of a girl Selma who is the first Scandinavian girl to become a teacher. She is a pioneer in her own right because the world of academics seemed to reject the non-English speaking foreigners as ignorant. However, not all the town-girls go away. Many hired girls come back to the country enriched by the experience of the town. Their success lies in being the mistresses of rich farms and giving their children a 'chance' to compete with the children of the town women they used to serve. Thus, despite being woman, they succeed and become the pioneers in the real sense of the world. "Gender may keep them on the margins of the male-dominated aggressive competitive scramble for success, but gender proves an asset in their efforts to achieve self fulfillment.. perhaps as their material success however is their double marginality as woman and as immigrants." Marginality seems to interest Cather. The blind pianist d' Arnault, the only male pioneer who is appreciated, is doubly marginal because of his blindness as well as his colour. He belongs to the far south, "where the spirit if not the fact of slavery persisted" (Cather, *My Antonia*, 119). These apparent obstacles, however, qualify him to be a pioneer in Cather's world thereby providing the contribution of the sexually and ethnically marginalized groups in chalking out of the national identity. Interestingly, no other man in these two novels can be called a pioneer. Even the "heroes" of the novel achieve a dubious kind of success. Jim is a very successful lawyer for a leading railroad company but "in helping to develop that great country, Jim's railroad is destroying it" (Dyck, 29). Thus, his success is achieved at the cost of manipulating the very nature which woman pioneer struggles to preserve. Similarly, Carl leaves the farm for learning engraving, an art which has to be practiced on dead wood. Cather's men are weak and Alexandra's vision of a man powerful enough to shoulder her burden is not realized within the domain of this world.

It can be argued that Cather, in her novel, is presenting a new kind of mythmaking ; that of the weak male as against the strong and sustaining female figures. However, she does not portray all woman as pioneers and all men as essentially failures. Her achievement lies in presenting a greater variety of male as well as female characters as against the stereotypes of her predecessors. Thus, we have lovable men as Mr. Shimerda, Jim, Carl, Otto and Pavel and also disgusting women as Mrs. Shimerda, Mrs. Cutter, and Alexandra's sisters in-law. Hence, her art seems more authentic. Even while she firmly launches her myth of successful women Pioneers, yet it is realistic because of her heroines' humane weaknesses and failures which they overcome before succeeding in their own ways. They embody new versions of Eve who actively participate in bringing forth a new paradise and are strong enough to overcome the hurdles in their way.

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