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Redefining Masculinity: A Comparative Study of Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* and Allan Grant's *The Woman Who Did*

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ABSTRACT

Illuminated by the idea that like women, Victorian men often felt the need to transgress or redefine the gender roles society assigned to them, I compared two distinguished New Woman fictions *The Story of an African Farm* written by the pioneer New Woman Olive Schreiner, and *The Woman Who Did* authored by Allan Grant to see how male characters embrace new models of masculinity. With a feminist perspective and a close textual reading approach, I intend to argue that the efforts male characters paid in redefining gender roles in embracing womanhood as free, fearless, and independent, accompanying them with love, understanding, and support have concerns for the integrity of both woman and men, and will lead to a healthy and beautiful human life.

1. Introduction

In *Woman and Labour*, Schreiner believes that sex relation between man and woman is the basis of human society whose integrity will lead to a healthy and beautiful human life (Schreiner "Woman" 6).^[9] Women who learn to respect themselves will not sell themselves to marriage for a stable life or higher social status. Mary Wollstonecraft also believes that when women gain independence in marriage, it will also benefit man because the peace of mind of a worthy man would not be interrupted by the idle vanity of his wife (Wollstonecraft 186).^[11] John Stuart Mill also approves woman's independence while he warns that woman who joins in any movement without men in considerable number are prepared to join them in the undertaking makes herself a martyr (Mill 193).^[6] To summarize their main points, we may see that men and women share combined interests. The social role of

women deeply affects men, the understanding and support from men are also crucial for woman's social and political liberation.

Womanhood as free, strong, fearless, and tender will probably be found in the heart of the New Man and an image of the most fully developed manhood also haunts the heart of the New Woman (Schreiner "Woman" 66).^[9] In the first New Woman fiction *the Story of an African Farm*, Olive Schreiner presented the two possible New Man: Gregory Rose and Waldo. With the rise of New Woman, the term "New Man" is inevitably called out as the companion of New Woman who will aid her in woman's emancipation with respect, understanding, and love. The quality of New Man is evident in the male protagonist Allen Merrick in Allan Grant's novel *the Woman Who Did*. This essay chooses to compare two works *the Story of an African Farm* and *the Woman Who Did* to see how Schreiner and Grant present their male

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characters in rebuilding gender modes. In the first part, this essay shall focus on the characterization of Gregory Rose and Waldo where Schreiner explores alternative modes of masculinity. Both Gregory and Waldo end tragically, but their tragedies can be seen as a spur for more potential New Man to come onto the stage. In the second part of this essay, the focus shall be turned to Allan Merrick, whose love, understanding, and respect for Herminia's highest aspirations succeed in shattering his traditional masculine beliefs and bringing the New Man. Finally, this essay shall come to the conclusion that the effort of both man and woman in building an equal gender relationship free from traditional gender modes will benefit the whole humanity.

2. Potential New Man: Transformation of Gregory Rose

Though Gregory Rose appears later in the novel, he draws no less attention than the protagonists, Waldo or Lyndall. When Lyndall first meets Gregory, she comments on him as "There goes a true woman— one born for the sphere that some women have to fill without being born for it...how pretty he would look sitting in a parlour, with a rough man making love to him" (Schreiner 79).^[8] Lyndall associates Gregory with feminine features because she sees in Gregory the potential to transgress his allotted sexual place.

Gregory's capacity to explore and realize his feminine potential towards sympathy and healing is central for him to evolve towards a New Man (MacDonald Chapter 5).^[7] His feminine potential is not fully released until he disguises himself as a nurse to tend for Lyndall in her last days. When he lifts Lyndall, she is so grateful because other people hurt her when they touch her. His gentleness and his devotion to Lyndall are most evident when he as an inexperienced man is praised by the doctor as "the most experienced nurse he ever came into contact with" (Schreiner 115).^[8] The shift in his masculinity invents in him a new, more human quality because he tends for Lyndall with pure generous selfishness, regardless of the social roles and norms that define him, without asking for any return, "he could feel its weakness as he touched it. His hands were to him glorified for that service" (115). Lyndall's struggle with unbearable pain strikes in Gregory's heart the burning pain that makes his heart bleeding. Lyndall's pain from childbearing is imperceivable for man. But Gregory can feel it and with his gentleness and devotion, he aspires to heal it. When Gregory kneels down and takes the little foot of Lyndall in his hand. He finds the foot that once infatuated him

become "swollen and unsightly, but as he touched it, he bent down and covered it with kisses" (119). He rubs the foot to release Lyndall's pain, trying to heal her with his pure love. The ability of sympathy and healing enables Gregory to understand woman's suffering and their longing to be relieved from it thus promote in men the longing for social changes. Only when men learn how it feels to be helpless and to be forced into dependency can they fully understand women's predicaments (Showalter 152).^[10]

Gregory does not initially seem to be a potential New Man when he believes manhood is gained through female subservience (MacDonald Chapter 5).^[7] Out of traditional manliness he regards Lyndall's horse-riding as queer and considers "if a man lets woman do what he doesn't like he is a muff" (Schreiner 84).^[8] However, when he proposes to Em, he embraces alternative masculinity because he doesn't impose his will on her, or arrogantly assume Em should love him back and make herself deserve his affection. In contrast with traditional masculinity that is seen in the stranger who comes for Lyndall. The stranger considers his proposal to Lyndall as a condescending kindness to a girl without wealth and position. In Lyndall's ironic description. "when you ask me to marry you, you are performing the most generous act you ever have performed in the course of your life" (98). Unlike the stranger, Gregory's uncertainty on his ability to win love, his emotional sensitivity, and feminine sensibility are signs of his respect for the other sex. When Em accepted, he doesn't take it for granted and think himself well-worth her love. Maybe that is why Em once talks to Lyndall "Our hearts are so cold; our loves are mixed up with so many other things" (72). On Gregory she says "But he—no one is worthy of his love. I am not. It is so great and pure." (72).

When Lyndall decides to relinquish Gregory and go with the stranger. She went to the grave of Waldo's father confessing that "I cannot bear this life! I cannot breathe, I cannot live! Will nothing free me from myself...I want to love! I want something great and pure to lift me to itself" (100). It is worth noticing that Lyndall describes the possible salvation of her from an unbearable life is "something great and pure" which is once used by Em to describe the love of Gregory. It can be inferred that only men like Gregory can save Lyndall from breathless restrictions in social life.

3. The Shared Aspirations of New Man and New Woman

Another potential New Man is Waldo. In Waldo and Lyndall's reunion, he comments that Lyndall has changed,

his attention is put more on her intellectual development than on her appearance because the first question he asked her is “Have you learnt much?” because he puts in mind that Lyndall once said, “When I come back again I shall know everything that a human being can.” (Schreiner 73).^[8] He believes in Lyndall’s ambition and approves of her ability in doing so.

In Waldo’s character we see an unusual combination of adult anxieties and childish naivety (MacDonald Chapter 5).^[7] Waldo rejects traditional manhood by remaining as a child in his soul, he also has adult’s concern because he is sensitive to all human suffering and highly sympathetic on woman’s plight. He urges Lyndall to take action for the new time to come when men and women love as equals as soon as each woman’s life is filled with earnest, independent labour (Schreiner 78).^[8] Waldo encourages Lyndall that “When you speak, I believe all you say; other people would listen to you also.” (78). Waldo’s understanding and respect for Lyndall’s ideals and his compassion for woman’s plight make him a New Man. But his tenderness and compassion make him unfit for the world of masculine competition (MacDonald Chapter 5).^[7] He is disillusioned from his journey in a world of oppression and brutality. It is Lyndall’s immaterial, transcendent presence in his life that keeps him from losing his soul. Only Lyndall is able to appreciate the depth of Waldo’s character, this is why Lyndall and Waldo may form a rare friendship of New Man and New Woman. When they communicate in a pure, sincere way, their minds are not disturbed by social and sexual inequalities.

In the light of Waldo and Lyndall’s friendship, this essay shall explore the friendship between Herminia Barton and Allan Merrick in *the Woman Who Did*. Mary Wollstonecraft comments on friendship as the most sublime of all affections because it is founded on principle and cemented by time. (Wollstonecraft 95).^[11] Herminia and Alan’s friendship is founded on mutual esteem. They remain friends because Allan understands Herminia’s ambition to be a free woman and her rejection of marriage without equality. Lyndall and Herminia’s thoughts merge when they both reject marriage that is based on women’s subordination. Lyndall thinks marriage for women means to “put my neck beneath any man’s foot” (Schreiner 73).^[8] Herminia regards marriage as slavery. She can’t marry when marriage still demands women’s surveillance and defends men’s supremacy. Both Lyndall and Herminia believe that women shouldn’t enter into a loveless marriage and sell themselves for a ring, a new name, and a higher social status which equals prostitution. As Lyndall declares that “Marriage for love is the beautifullest external symbol of the union of souls; marriage without

it is the uncleanliest traffic that defiles the world” (76). Both Lyndall and Herminia strongly reject entering into a relationship that will threaten one’s individuality and freedom. Herminia is luckier than Lyndall because she met Alan with whom they can love each other on perfect terms of equal freedom.

Herminia’s face strikes Alan Merrick as “above all things the face of a free woman...Something so frank and fearless shone in Herminia’s glance” (Grant 2).^[4] It is rare that a man whose first impression of a woman has its main focus on the moral and spiritual side of her being. It is rarer for a male writer to characterize his male protagonist as one who is able to appreciate the highest loveliness in both face and form of a woman and love her from her physical, intellectual, emotional, and moral aspects with equal attentiveness. “As her eye met his, that Alan, who respected human freedom above all other qualities in man or woman, was taken on the spot by its perfect air of untrammelled liberty” (2). When their eyes meet, the courage and nobility shine in Herminia’s free soul arouse in Alan the sense of liberation, they identify each other as the same fully rounded and harmonized human creature. Their souls are attracted to each other because they share the highest nature in which intellectual power and strength of will are combined with infinite tenderness and wide human sympathy (Schreiner “Woman” 6).^[9] Herminia means for Alan ideal womanhood that he has never seen before. As Schreiner notes in *Woman and Labour*, ideal womanhood as free, strong, fearless, and tender is engendered in New Man’s imagination by his own highest needs and aspirations (66).

When Herminia rejects Alan’s marriage proposal, she insists on forming a relationship with Alan as free love to set a revolutionary example for future generations. The suggestion frightens Alan because it means for Herminia an inevitable martyrdom. Though Alan believes to honor marriage and disgrace free union are “ignoble masculine devices to keep up man’s lordship” (Grant 16).^[4] He finds it unbearable if Herminia is put under the meanest and grossest judgments from people who misunderstand them. His hesitation comes not from worries about his position and prospects, but from the unwillingness to ruin Herminia’s reputation. For Allan, “to save Herminia from the faintest shadow of disgrace or shame he would willingly have died a thousand times over” (13). It tortures him so much in making a decision. On the one hand, he cannot bear to bring shame and degradation to Herminia. On the other hand, He doesn’t want to stand in Herminia’s way to deter her from realising her highest aspiration when he respected her so much for her generous concern for humanity (13). At last, traditional manhood in his

character turns more and more forcibly on him and he decides to be Herminia's guarding angel and save her from martyrdom. To be a guardian angel is a typical idea of traditional masculinity shaped by the pressures from a patriarchal world which lead modern men to exhaustion and disillusionment. Herminia tries to convince Alan's brain, intellect, and reason that their hearts of love and duty will stand strongly against convention. With her passionate confession on her love for Alan, the old masculine idols in Alan finally yields. He decides to join Herminia and bring their shared principles into practice.

Allen Grant has meditated on the question on New Man: "We have heard a great deal lately about the New Woman. Why so little about the New Man, who must inevitably accompany her?" (Grant "New Man" 1)^[5] In joining Herminia in her enterprise after struggles and inner torture, the New Man inside Alan Merrick triumphs over traditional manhood. During their sweet converse and companionship after their sacred consummation, Alan finds "the more he gazed into the calm depths of Herminia's crystal soul, the more deeply did he admire it... Gradually she was raising him to her own level" (Grant 19).^[4] It is Herminia who brought Alan to his moral maturity. Many other Alan's male contemporaries are like what Sarah Grand comments in "Woman Question": they are still in their moral infancy, it is women's duty to educate them. (Grand 32).^[3] Alan feels he is morally elevated by Herminia's highest nature. As he notes "true woman has the real Midas gift: all that she touches turns to purest gold" (Grant 8).^[4] Herminia has the power to raise Alan's nature to approach her own high level.

Allan Grant successfully gives us a well-developed New Man, though unfortunately, he dies in honeymoon. Alan leaves absolutely everything he possessed "to my beloved friend, Herminia Barton" (32). In Alan's dying words, he addresses Herminia as a beloved friend because he wholeheartedly supports Herminia's rejection of a marriage that threatens her independence and integrity. He carries their shared values and practice them to the last moments of his life. Though Alan dies young leaving Herminia alone in her enterprise, he is always the one whose transcendent existence in Herminia's memory gives in her endless power to endure the storm on her way to the emancipation of woman. Though Herminia ends up with suicide, she is lucky comparing to Lyndall, because she loves and is loved by a man who well deserves her love. Burdett noticed that Schreiner's portrait of the 'New Man' will, at last, deserve and meet women's complex love but she will, nevertheless, relinquish (Burdett 89).^[1] Neither Gregory nor Waldo wins Lyndall's affection. However, both Waldo and Lyndall die with their souls

keep on looking forth, uncompromising to social norms and restrictions. The tragic endings of New Man and New Woman may be considered as failures in their time, but they can also be seen as resistance against social corruption. Their death also carries Schreiner and Grant belief that their suffering will pave the way for social changes. When the equality of the sexes is reached, man will welcome to his home a sympathetic companion and a loyal friend (Dixon 266).^[2] Both women and men's effort in redefining gender modes will benefit the whole humanity.

4. Conclusion:

In conclusion, both *the Story on an African Farm* and *the Woman Who Did* provide for us with hopes of "a closer, more permanent, more emotionally and intellectually complete and intimate relationship between the individual man and woman" (Schreiner "Woman" 6).^[9] Both Schreiner and Grant envisage alternative modes of masculinity in the New Man. Having explored how Gregory's departs from traditional manhood in fully releasing his feminine potential to the ability of sympathy and healing, and how Waldo shares deep sympathy with woman's predicament by encouraging Lyndall to take actions for a better future to come. we may understand the necessity of New Man to come as New Woman's companion to support her in social and political liberation. The friendship of Alan and Herminia offers us glimpses of an ideal sexual union where women's highest aspirations are fully understood and respected by her companion. Schreiner and Grant's exploration of new gender modes opens for us a hopeful vision of the harmonious relationship between future men and women.

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