NEGOTIATING TRADITIONAL GENDER ROLES
IN LAURA INGALLS WILDER’S LITTLE TOWN ON THE PRAIRIE

Maria Angelina Chandra
Titien Diah Soelistyarini

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to examine how women negotiated traditional gender roles in the nineteenth century America as depicted in Wilder’s novel *Little Town on the Prairie*. In order to reveal how Laura Ingalls, the main character, accepts or refuses to assume the traditional gender roles, this study analyzes the characterization of Laura Ingalls using Feminist literary criticism. Laura’s negotiation is examined by comparing her portrayal in the novel with the ideal roles of women in the nineteenth century proposed by Wollstonecraft and Beecher and Stowe. This study reveals that throughout the novel Laura has made an effort to negotiate with traditional gender roles by accepting some of the patriarchal rules, while at the same time refusing some others. On the one hand, Laura fits some criteria of an ideal woman proposed by Beecher and Stowe as proponents of traditional gender roles. On the other hand, Laura also fits some other criteria of an ideal woman proposed by Wollstonecraft as an opponent of traditional gender roles.

**Keywords:** Traditional Gender Roles; Negotiation; Ideal Roles; Nineteenth Century Women; Feminism

1. Introduction

*Little Town on the Prairie* is the seventh book of *Little House* series written by Laura Ingalls Wilder based on her childhood in Wisconsin, USA. Considered as a masterpiece in classic American children’s literature, Wilder’s *Little House* series have become an interesting topic for academic research. In a study entitled *Constructing the Little House: Gender, Culture, and Laura Ingalls*, Romines discusses all the books in *Little House* series and dedicates one chapter for *Little Town on the Prairie*. However, Romines does not focus her analysis on the feminist perspective, but from the cultural background of the novel. She does not specifically analyze the main character, Laura Ingalls, but other characters as well. In another study, *Becoming Laura Ingalls Wilder: The Woman behind the Legend*, Miller focuses more on the biographical analysis of Laura Ingalls Wilder and draws a line between Laura as the author and main character of *the Little House books*. In his study, Miller attempts to answer the question how Laura, the little girl portrayed in this series, turns into an author of a masterpiece in classic children’s literature. Meanwhile, some other studies by McAuliffe, Seidman and Kilgore examine the portrayal of Indians (Native Americans) in *Little House on the Prairie* from different perspectives.

As this study aims to examine the negotiation toward traditional gender roles in *Little Town on the Prairie*, it raises a different issue from the previous studies mentioned above. In this novel, Laura is portrayed as a woman who has to deal with the patriarchal society and its rules that limit woman’s freedom. Unfortunately, not many people realize that there is an interesting feminist issue in this novel, which is categorized as a children’s literature. As Hunt states that feminist theory that contains in children’s literature aims to give the right understanding to children that honor and dignity are not belong to white man only but also for all mankind, including woman (115). Thus, this study is also expected to offer a new understanding of feminism in the work of children’s literature.

Born in 1867 in Wisconsin, Laura Ingalls is the second daughter of Charles and Caroline Ingalls (Felman 13). Relating the setting of time in the novel with the real historical background in that era, it can be assumed that when Laura was born, feminist activism had already been started because it had been nineteen years since the Seneca Falls Convention that is considered as the beginning of the first wave feminism. Gamble states that “In America, feminist activism started slightly earlier with the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, a meeting attended by 300 people (including 40 men) to demand an end to all discrimination based on sex” (32).

Since the feminist movement was initiated, many activists have gathered to oppose patriarchal ideology, which Tyson believes has classified women into two categories (89). A woman is considered as a ‘good’ woman if she accepts the traditional gender roles, and on the contrary she is labeled as a ‘bad’ woman if she refuses. The concept of traditional gender roles clearly restricts women in gaining their
rights and freedom as these roles ‘cast men as strong and dominant creature, while women as irrational, weak, and inferior’ (85). In the nineteenth century, women only gained limited freedom and this condition applied to almost any woman anywhere. There was only a little variety of jobs for them; therefore, the majority of women worked as housewives. This situation is clearly portrayed by Gilman, a nineteenth century American woman writer, in her poem *Suffrage Songs and Verses* as follows, “Housekeepers? Do you then, like those of yore, keep house with power and pride, with grace and ease? No, you keep servants only!” (5). Here Gilman firmly states that housekeepers are no more than a slave, and from this poem it can be inferred that nearly all women in that era dedicated themselves as full-time housewives with no ambition to work outside their domestic area. As her writings are much influenced by the condition in her era, Gilman often expresses the voice of women who demand for equal position and rights in the society.

In analyzing how traditional gender roles are negotiated in *Little town on the Prairie*, this study applies Feminist Literary Criticism that mainly deals with the role and position of women in the society as portrayed in literary works. In general, feminism focuses on the role between man and woman which is categorized as femininity and masculinity (Tyson 108). Thus, feminism concerns with how the society differs the role of man and woman. Jenainati and Groves states that the main differential factor between man and woman is biology (5). Biology here refers to physical appearances and physical ability, in which man is believed to be physically stronger than woman, and therefore, woman is often categorized as weak and inferior.

The feminist theory applied in this study is the one proposed by a notable first-wave feminist, Mary Wollstonecraft in her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. According to Jenainati and Groves in *Introducing Feminism*, “The major achievements of the first wave feminists were: the opening of higher education to women and the reform of secondary education for girls; and the enactment of the Married Women’s Property Act, 1870” (21). As the continuity of the previous independent feminists activities in the eighteenth century, the main purpose of first wave feminists is to fight against the patriarchal rules that dictats many unfair rules for women. At that time, a woman who opposed patriarchal rules was considered challenging traditional gender roles and patriarchal ideologies, and therefore, categorized as a bad woman.

In the nineteenth century, women tended to suffer injustice regarding their position in society. They also experienced discrimination in obtaining their rights to vote. The biggest momentum for first-wave feminist activism was Seneca Falls Convention in New York on 1848 in which three hundred men and women gathered in the convention to establish the Declaration of Sentiments and twelve resolutions whose main purpose was to provide justice and freedom for women express themselves in public (Tong 21). Along with other feminist activists, Wollstonecraft claims the right of women to gain opportunities for jobs outside domestic areas and a chance for proper education. Wollstonecraft (139) states that women are not supposed to stay in domestic areas and only do domestic duties. Instead, they should free themselves from those duties. Wollstonecraft argues that inferior role of women can turn women into a dependent creature with no ability to survive without any help from men.

As a qualitative research, this study aims to seek an answer of a question by collecting evidence (Mack, et. al. I) based on Wilder’s novel, as well as other sources, such as books, journals, and online sources. Close reading method is applied in the analysis of the characterization of Laura Ingalls and her negotiation toward traditional gender roles. The analysis is conducted in two steps: first, elaborating the requirements of an ideal woman based on two different points of view proposed by Mary Wollstonecraft as the opponent of patriarchal ideology and Beecher and Stowe as the proponents of patriarchal ideology; and second, comparing those requirements with the characterization of Laura Ingalls in the novel. The result of the analysis then will reveal Laura’s negotiation toward traditional gender roles.

### 2. The Negotiation toward Traditional Gender Roles

This part of analysis elaborates Laura’s acceptance and refusal toward traditional gender roles. The characterization of Laura portrayed in the novel is compared to the ideal roles of women in the nineteenth century proposed by Mary Wollstonecraft, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* and Beecher and Stowe in *The New Housekeeper’s Manual*. As each reference has an opposing standpoint of a ideal woman in the nineteenth century, this analysis will reveal the similarities and differences between Laura’s characterization and these two opposing perceptions.
2.1 The Ideal Roles of Women Based on Literary Works Written in the Nineteenth Century

The requirement of being an ideal woman is constantly undergoing changes. The criteria of a perfect woman in the nineteenth century are different from those of women nowadays. Therefore, it is necessary to look over the ideal picture of women in that era from two literary works written by different female authors. The first is *The New Housekeeper’s Manual* by Catherine Esther Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe first published in 1873 in New York. On the dedication page, it is written that the book is dedicated to all American women for they are responsible in determining the destiny of their nation based on their personality and behavior molded by the early training and preserved by the mature influences of home. From that statement, it can be concluded that Beecher and Stowe agree that women should be capable in doing housework. This perfectly fits the description of Laura Ingalls in *Little Town on the Prairie*. She is well-trained by her mother to handle domestic jobs, such as cooking, sewing, and many others. Laura as well as her sisters have always been told by their mothers, Caroline, to do housework properly, while at the same time reminded to always keep up their good grades at school.

The obligations of a woman is further illustrated by Beecher and Stowe as follows,

“A woman, therefore, needs to cultivate the habitual feeling that all the events of her nursery and kitchen are brought about by the permission of our Heavenly Father, and that fretfulness or complaint in regard to these is, in fact, complaining at the appointments of God, and is really as sinful as unsubmitive murmurs amid the sorer chastisements of his hand” (218).

From the quotations above, it can be inferred that a woman should be grateful for her nature as woman. By accepting her nature, she accepts traditional gender roles and therefore, can be considered as a good woman.

Nonetheless, Wollstonecraft has a different way on portraying an ideal woman. As a feminist, Wollstonecraft claims an equal position and also proper education for woman, which is not just a lesson about housework. She states that women need a proper education, ability to speak precisely, and also a well stored mind in order to have a power to live their life with dignity (82). Based on the novel *Little Town on the Prairie*, the characterization of Laura Ingalls somehow also fits with Wollstonecraft’s view on how a woman should be. The story shows how Laura dares to express her disagreement. The story clearly illustrates that Laura has an ability to articulate her thoughts and she also has a good self-esteem.

Wollstonecraft also states that women of that era are weak because their strength is already sacrificed for their beauty to gain their freedom through marriage (40). Wollstonecraft further affirms that a woman like that is nothing more than a dependence creature that does not even have any ability or strength to manage their family. They are like a robot that only does what they are expected to do and they cannot struggle for themselves outside their domestic sphere because they are only capable in managing households. This certainly opposes Beecher and Stowe’s view that a good woman should know how to manage households. In *The Housekeeper’s Manual*, Beecher and Stowe even dedicate a chapter on woman’s duties entitled “The Duties of Woman’s Profession”. This chapter is full of guidance for women on how to select furnitures, how to do housecleaning, and many more. Therefore, it can be concluded that a good woman is a woman who dedicates her time to become a full-time wife and mother who always stays home to manage her family needs.

On the other hand, Wollstonecraft prefers women gaining a rational education to just being taught about how to manage housework properly. She argues that a woman who is rationally educated can gain an equal position with man and will no longer be treated as a servant (94). In her book, Wollstonecraft often repeats her hope about an opportunity for woman to gain education because she knows that once a woman has better knowledge, she will not lose in any competition against man. However, Beecher and Stowe disagree with Wollstonecraft’s ideas. Thus, Wollstonecraft encourages women to be brave and not be trapped in their fears to work only in domestic area as housekeepers, wives, and mothers.

Wollstonecraft’s and Beecher and Stowe’s opposing views on the ideal roles of woman can be summarized on Table 1 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wollstonecraft</th>
<th>Beecher and Stowe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Able to struggle outside domestic area</td>
<td>Capable only in domestic area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dare to refuse patriarchal rules</td>
<td>Obey the patriarchal rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dare to claims an equal position with man</td>
<td>Voluntary treated as a man’s helper to do all domestic duties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had a proper education at school</td>
<td>Had a proper education about housework</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Table 1: Summary of Ideal Roles of Women |
Table 1. Differences on the Criteria for an Ideal Woman proposed by Wollstonecraft and Beecher & Stowe

2.2 Laura Ingalls’ Negotiation toward Traditional Gender Roles

As mentioned earlier, Beecher and Stowe argues that women should be grateful of their nature as woman for it is a dreadful sin for them if they complain about their domestic routines (218). However, Wollstonecraft does not agree if a woman has to bear in every bad condition, even when she suffers injustice. She also states that the ill-nature of woman will aggravate the woman’s misfortune (174). In the novel, it is portrayed how Laura Ingalls quite often grumbled about her obligations as a daughter and as a woman. When she went to town to work as a seamstress, she could make buttonholes perfectly, not because she loved to make buttonholes, but because she hated it so much that she had to master it so there would be no need to repeat it over and over. “She so hated making buttonholes that she had learned to do them quickly, and get it over with” (46). It is clear that Laura does not like sewing or making buttonholes, a typical job for a woman. Thus, in Beecher and Stowe’s point of view, Laura is considered as a sinner because she is not grateful in doing her housework.

Even though she was not always happy with housework, Laura succeeded in keeping the house clean while her parents were taking Mary to Iowa. Laura tried to manage the house the way her mother usually did. At first, she failed, but eventually she could manage it well. “We did the fall housecleaning for you, Ma,” said Laura, and Carrie chimed in, “We washed the bedding, and filled the straw ticks, and scrubbed the floors, and everything.” (121). Being able to manage the house, in this case Laura fits well with Beecher and Stowe’s criteria that require women to master housework.

Not only capable in managing the household, a good woman should also be able to manage her temper. According to Beecher and Stowe, it is very unlady-like to show anger in public (217). As a girl, Laura was not temperamental, but she was not calm either. She could suddenly burst out in anger and surprise the people around her.

Laura’s action is totally unacceptable for a good woman based on Beecher and Stowe’s ideal. Whatever happens, a woman should be able to control her anger and it is better to keep silence when she is possessed with anger in order to refrain the angry tones burst out from her mouth (216). However, when she was in high temper, Laura was often unable to keep her mouth shut because she was an outpoken person. In some parts of the novel, Laura is portrayed losing control over herself. She was totally different from her mother, Caroline, and her sister, Mary, who always spoke calmly even when they were angry. Someday after the New England Supper, Caroline showed her anger, but still she could control her tones and stay calm. When she felt exhausted, she only showed a little anger in her tone. "I am tired," Ma replied. A little edge to her gentle voice startled Laura. "And it wasn't asociable. It was a New England Supper." (232).

The way Laura and Caroline expressed their anger is totally different. Caroline’s tones raised a little bit while Laura’s tones raised higher. When Laura confronted Miss Wilder for punishing Carrie, her tone of voice could not conceal her anger. "Miss Wilder," she cried, "if you want that seat rocked faster, I'll rock it for you!" (159). Laura cried loudly and the exclamation mark at the end of the statement showed that Laura’s tones raised higher. She dared to cried over her teacher, indicating that she was not submissive. Another proof of Laura’s disobedience is when she refused to study because she did not want to be a schoolteacher. Beecher and Stowe clearly states that school teacher is a noble job and a woman who worked as a school teacher was placed in higher position than those who worked another job (18).
While Beecher and Stowe believes that women should mind their manners by controlling their anger, Wollstonecraft has a different argument. She believes that manners and morals nowadays is just an empty name because it is just a reflection from the earlier generation. The earlier generation of women believed that cleanliness and delicacy in domestic life are parts of woman's morality as the main pillars of modesty. She then argues that women should improve their self-esteem instead of just becoming the companion of men (29). Wollstonecraft explicitly states that woman's mindset about morality is wrong. Accordingly, Laura's outspoken behavior and unwillingness to comply with the patriarchal values imposed on her as a woman reflect Wollstonecraft ideals of a woman with self-esteem. Agreeing with Wollstonecraft, through her actions Laura showed that morality was not always about good manners and abilities in housework, but it was more about self-esteem.

Moving on to education, for Beecher and Stowe, education nowadays rejects sewing from their system which was properly used in school many years ago. Girls nowadays are put through algebra and other subjects which make them neglect their learning as a woman (317). Beecher and Stowe also states that the most important duty for woman is to manage housework and to solve the problems associated to household. Therefore, women must be taught about housework than mathematical or astronomical problems (58). As a nineteenth century woman, Laura concerned very much with her education and she was always thirst for knowledge. Even though she never really wanted to be a teacher, Laura loved to study. She still went to school in order to learn more knowledge, despite the fact that Miss Wilder was mean to her,. When her friend, Ida, asked her whether she would stop going to school because of Miss Wilder, Laura replied, "I wouldn't let anything keep me from getting an education" (166). When Laura and Ida would perform in school exhibition, Ida said that she was glad Laura got the longer part than her. Yet, Laura felt excited with her part. "It's longer, but we've studied it more and reviewed it oftener," said Laura. She was glad to have that part; she thought it more interesting” (274). This part clearly shows how Laura loved her education and even found the opportunity in the school exhibition as a challenge.

As much as Laura loved to study, it did not make her neglect her obligation as a daughter at home. Her mother had taught her to sew since she was a child. She also taught her to clean the house and prepare food. Laura even helped her mother to sew a dress for Mary. “When Ma had back-stitched the seams of Mary's dresses and carefully ironed them flat, Laura sewed the whalebone stays onto the underarm seams and dart-seams of the basques." (92). This serves as an illustration of how Laura was still able to able to keep a balance between her obligation for housework and her education.

When Laura and her family moved to their house in town, Caroline asked her children to help her do the housecleaning. They washed all the curtains and quilts, filled the beds with hay, and scrubbed every inch of the house. It can be inferred that Laura still did her housework while she was also fulfilling her passion to study at school. Here it clearly shows how two different views of women between Wollstonecraft and Beecher and Stowe fit in Laura's character. Wollstonecraft hopes that education for women is not confined only in domestic skill, but also about life skills. She believes that the confined education shapes women as weak and sentimental creatures who only seek happiness in love and are ashamed to neglect their domestic duties, nay, they were not interested with other things outside their domestic world (369). According to Wollstonecraft, woman's mind is already influenced by the perception that they must only think about romance and their obligations to fulfill domestic duties. Therefore, it never crosses their mind to claim their rights as human being to have an equal position with man. Laura Ingalls here is perfectly described by those two opposing views because she is not only well-educated but she is also competent in doing housework.

Being well-educated, Laura succeeded in becoming a teacher before she was even sixteen years old due to her intelligence. In the nineteenth century, a woman was allowed to be a teacher if only she was sixteen years old and up. Laura impressed Lew Brewster through her performance in school exhibition. At that time, Lew Brewster was looking for a teacher for the school in his district and he thought that Laura was the perfect person for that job. Once again Laura proved that she could balance her ability in doing housework and her intelligence at school. She was satisfied because in her teacher's examination she obtained a good mark for reading, writing, history, grammar, arithmetic, and geography. Mr. Williams, the county superintendent and also Laura's examiner, expressed his admiration toward Laura’s performance at the exhibition.
"So you're the young lady that wants a certificate!" he said to Laura. "There's not much need to give you an examination. I heard you last night. You answered all the questions. But I see your slate and pencil on the table, so we might as well go over some of it." (303)

All in all, it can be concluded that there are some criteria of an ideal woman proposed by Wollstonecraft that can perfectly describe Laura’s characterization. Yet, in some other situations, there are some of Beecher and Stowe’s criteria that also fit Laura’s characterization. To give a better illustration, the comparisons of Laura’s characterization and the criteria of an ideal woman proposed by Wollstonecraft and Beecher and Stowe can be summarized in Table 2 below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideal roles of woman proposed by Mary Wollstonecraft</th>
<th>Laura Ingalls’ negotiation toward traditional gender roles</th>
<th>Ideal roles of woman proposed by Beecher and Stowe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ill-nature of woman will aggravate the woman’s misfortune.</td>
<td>Laura Ingalls quite often grumbled about her obligations as a woman.</td>
<td>Women should be grateful over their natural as a woman.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman should not only capable in domestic area, but also good in education and life-skill.</td>
<td>Laura is capable in domestic area and also brilliant in her education at school and she is good as a seamstress in town.</td>
<td>Woman should master housework.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manners and morals nowadays is just an empty name.</td>
<td>Laura could suddenly burst out in anger.</td>
<td>Women should mind their manners, such as control their anger.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education for women is not confined only in domestic skill, but also about life skills.</td>
<td>Laura loves to study at school, but she never neglects her obligation as a daughter at home.</td>
<td>The most important duty for woman is to manage housework and to solve the problems associated to household.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: The Negotiation of Laura Ingalls toward Traditional Gender Roles

The table above reveals the way Laura Ingalls in negotiating with traditional gender roles. She fulfills Beecher and Stowe’s expectation to become a woman who is capable to manage housework, but at the same time she also fulfills Wollstonecraft’s expectation to become a woman who is also capable to work outside domestic area and has a good education. Laura succeeds in proving that she can handle domestic jobs, her education, and her job at town as a seamstress. Even though she does not fully oppose traditional gender roles, she has shown that she is not inferior, unlike other women who fully accept the patriarchal rules. Laura is also different from Ida Brown who always devotes herself to domestic duties. Laura is also different from Nellie Oleson because Laura concerns more with her education than simply worrying too much about her appearance. Laura is also different from Mary Ingalls, her sister, who is more submissive and prefers to stay at home and do housework. Laura Ingalls is quite similar to her mother, Caroline Ingalls, although Caroline is certainly calmer than Laura. Consequently, in this story Laura can be regarded as one of the symbols of the revival of feminist activism in the nineteenth century.

3. Conclusion

In analyzing Laura’s characterization using feminist literary criticism, this study reveals that Laura is trying to negotiate the traditional gender roles imposed on her by the patriarchal society of the nineteenth century. She is not a radical feminist, considering her young age, but she shows her effort to refuse some of the patriarchal rules that she disagrees with. At that time, women were required to master housework perfectly in order to be considered as a fine lady. It was not a big deal for these women to obtain proper education because the most important thing a good woman should have is an ability to do domestic jobs, such as housecleaning, cooking, sewing, and even selecting furniture. As a consequence, many young girls, with lack of education, ended in a marriage and just stayed at home to do the chores. However, luckily for Laura and her sisters, education is consiered as an important priority for them because their parents allow them to study at school. Given this opportunity, Laura shows her excellent ability in mastering school subjects. By doing so, she breaks an assumption that nineteenth century woman is less smart than man.

Nonetheless, Laura does not neglect her obligations as a woman. She still helps her mother to manage the house, sew a dress, and prepare food for dinner. She does not only work inside her house, but also works as a seamstress in the town. Even though seamstress is categorized as a domestic job, but Laura do her job in town, outside her domestic area. This can be considered as a good progress because woman in that time rarely worked outside their home.
Another proof that Laura is negotiating the traditional gender roles is shown through her excellent performance in school. She is the only woman last in the stage during spelling contest and the best performer in the school exhibition, and therefore, she is given a very loud applause. Regardless of her gender. Laura Ingalls has proven that intelligence, and not only physical appearance, can also attract man’s attention and earn her some respect.

To conclude, this study clearly shows Laura’s effort to negotiate with traditional gender roles by accepting some of the patriarchal rules and refusing some others. In some circumstances, she fits some criteria of an ideal woman proposed by Beecher and Stowe as the proponents of traditional gender roles. Meanwhile, in some other circumstances she also fits the criteria of an ideal woman suggested by Wollstonecraft as the opponent of traditional gender roles. Therefore, Laura has succeeded in negotiating the traditional gender roles by putting a balance between her roles in the domestic and the public areas.

3. Works Cited


