

## WOMEN REPRESENTATION AND OSCAR WILDE'S IDEOLOGY AS SEEN IN OSCAR WILDE'S *A WOMAN OF NO IMPORTANCE*

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### **Abstract**

The study talked about women representation and Wilde's ideology regarding women as portrayed in Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance*. The study was carried out using gender approach and specifically employed existentialist feminism and genetic structuralism theories. The results indicated that there were three types of women represented in the play including an open-minded woman, a rebellious woman, and an independent woman. Wilde portrayed those strong women characters to deconstruct the idea of patriarchal perspective in Victorian era. In Wilde's perspective, women could also think, act, and actualize their expressions as what men did. Thus, based on the discussion, regarding the human facts and his world view depicted in the play, Oscar Wilde's ideology was equality between men and women.

**Keywords:** women representation, ideology, existentialist feminism, genetic structuralism, equality

### **INTRODUCTION**

Oscar Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance* was firstly performed on 19 April 1893 at London Haymarket theater. The play of *A Woman of No Importance* followed the tradition of Wilde's comedies of manners. This genre aimed at critiquing and even satirizing the common dynamics of everyday Victorian society. Holman and Harmon defined comedy of manners as a type of comedy which dealt with "the manners and conventions of an artificial, highly sophisticated society" (1986: p.100). It emphasized the social life of the upper and middle classes. The play met its success and has been reproduced on stages in Europe and North America since Wilde's death in 1900. (Fisher, 2003, p.11).

Wilde's concern on the Victorian society came up as the result of such a transformation experienced by most of the Victorian society due to the Industrial Revolution. Due to the rapid growth of social and economic, the position of the middle class and upper class became stronger. (Danielova, 2009, p.5). Consequently, during the mid-1800s (to be specific to the Wildean tradition), the newly-created Victorian society experienced a conversion in society that allows for more people to become "well-to do". However, this situation made a problem in which these very persons began to act prudish, hypocrite and quite judgmental. Throughout his works, either novel or play, Wilde grasped the phenomena of those silly behaviors of Victorian society and brilliantly mocked them without they even realizing it. There were some aspects of Victorian lifestyle which has been criticized by Wilde. Those aspects could be sum up in familiar adjectives of Victorians: bigotry, prudery and hypocrisy.

All of those silly behaviors of Victorian society also made an impact on women position in the society. Victorian society placed women as the second citizen due to its patriarchal ideology. During

the era of Victorian, women were domesticated. An ideal woman, especially in the middle and upper class, was the one who stayed at home and managed all the tasks of a good wife and mother. Society demanded women to be the angel of the house; they were responsible to nurse children, govern the house and please the husband. Women who did not confront with the society would be alienated and considered as a failure.

It was the wife who made the home, who cared for her children within it, who brought her husband back to it when work was done, who provided the hot dinners and created the atmosphere of comfort and protection (Calder in Danielova, 2009, p.8).

Even though the Victorian society seemed to take a side on men by its patriarchal ideology, Wilde distasted the double standard perspective. He made use of his work, especially the play of *A Woman of No Importance*, to criticize the shallow point of view of Victorian society. He created several characters who surely broke down the standardized norms of women position in Victorian society. Hester Worsley was one of the female characters who was depicted as a free thinker; she did not hesitate to speak up and criticize Victorian's society's narrowmindedness. Another female character, Lady Arbuthnot, was depicted as an independent woman. She was a single parent and she worked hard to fulfill her son's need without a man beside her. Whereas, Wilde put a character of Mrs. Allonby as a cynical and flirtatious woman.

The existence of several strong women depicted in the play of *A Woman of No Importance* were interesting to note. It was in line with the women's existentialism concept proposed by Simone de Beauvoir. Existentialist feminism believed that the inferiority of women in such patriarchal society was the result of social construct. Beauvoir said, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman." (Beauvoir, 1989, p.29). It suggested that there were several norms existed in society which forced women to behave accordingly. Other than that, *A Woman of No Importance* could also portray Wilde's ideology by seeing his satirical way of criticizing the Victorian society. Particularly, the study was conducted to rethink the women representation in the Victorian era and Wilde's ideology regarding his perspective towards women.

There were several studies that have discussed Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance*. The first study is entitled *Queer Representation of Gender, Sexuality, Marriage and Family in Oscar Wilde's Comedies*. It was a thesis written by Anni Aalto in 2010 that emphasized on the discussion of gender discrimination, sexuality representation, marriage issue and family representation of Wilde's comedies (*A Woman of No Importance, The Importance of Being Ernest and Lady Windermere's Fan*). The next study was conducted in 2005 by Christina Markwart Esdaile, University of Oslo entitled *Ambivalent Acclaim: Examining Critical Reception of Oscar Wilde's Society Comedies*. She discussed about the genre of each comedy written by Oscar Wilde. She found that *A Woman of No Importance* belonged to melodrama genre. The study was not similar with the previous researches since it deals with the representation of women and Wilde's ideology in Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance*. Yet, all these studies provide more insights of the works of Oscar Wilde.

## METHOD

### Data Collection

The method used in this study was a library research. The sources were taken from the written materials in library and internet. Oscar Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance* was the primary data. Other supportive materials were taken from Oscar Wilde's short biography and historical background of Victorian women.

### Data Analysis

The method of analyzing the data was carried out using the descriptive analysis and Goldman's dialectical method. It means that the close reading of the play would result a primary data which then was analyzed using the theory of existentialist feminist and genetic structuralism. To find the women representation depicted in the novel, existentialist feminist theory proposed by Simone de Beauvoir was significant. The analysis was done by correlating all the data (dialog, monolog, narration) taken from the play with existentialist feminism concept. The historical background of Victorian women and Oscar Wilde's short biography served as the background information which were useful to cultivate human facts and world view applied by Wilde in his work. The dialectic correlations between the human facts in Oscar Wilde's world and his work eventually led to the ideology of the author.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Overview of Existentialist Feminism

The existentialist feminist sees that the inferiority of women in such patriarchal society is the result of social construct. There are several norms that govern how women should act and behave so that they are well-accepted in society. Beauvoir says, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No psychological or economical fate determines the figure that the human female presents in the society. It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature" (Beauvoir, 1989, p. 29). A woman, from the very beginning, is taught that to be valuable; she must try to please, she must make herself an object for men and so she should renounce her autonomy. She is treated like a live doll and is refused liberty. Since they are born, women are expected and formed as the feminine women in their family. As if, to be a good wife and mother is the exact purpose of their existence.

In patriarchal society, women are seen as 'the other' and placed as the 'object'. Men treat women as somewhat instable, mysterious, irrational and complicated. Women are also seen as the greatest gift but also the symbol of restrictiveness for men, love but also hatred, evil but also kindness and vice versa. Thus, from every aspect, instability and complicated matter always come up as the characteristics of women (Beauvoir, 1989, p. 214).

Meanwhile, regarding the marriage issue, some women in patriarchal society believe that the marriage is a destined path for women. In this matter, Beauvoir states, "Reared by women within a feminine world, a woman's normal destiny is marriage" (1989, p. 31). Women

are made to believe that marriage alone permits them to keep their social dignity intact. She is made to believe that in marriage she is elevated into a state of freedom, fulfilling her true role as a woman. But Beauvoir argues that, by envisaging fulfillment as the loved one and mother in marriage, a woman only ends up as a slave to her husband, she remains for the man the inessential Other. The social construct seems to be overwhelmingly affecting women position in society.

Beauvoir convinces that women can be a subject only by finding their true existentialism. To find the existentialism, Beauvoir proposed some concepts which were also adopted from the Jean Paul Sartre's existentialism. The first concept is to realize *pour soi* (being for itself) and *en soi* (being for others); it shares the belief that only by owning self-contained and fully realized being as a subject, women can pursue their existentialism. Only if woman becomes 'fully realized being', she can do something for other. Sartre says, human will only exist if he/she becomes what she/he wants to be (2002, p. 45). The second concept offered by Beauvoir is to own reflective awareness and non-reflective awareness. The reflective awareness indicates one's acknowledgement of self-existence, while non-reflective awareness suggests one's acknowledgment of other's existence. Only if woman stops eliminating herself for other, she will realize her true existence. The next concept of existentialism is to set the women mindset free from *mauvaisefoi* (bad faith). The bad faith here means all of the stereotype and strict construct attached to women by society.

### **Overview of Genetic Structuralism**

The theory of genetic structuralism proposed by Lucien Goldmann focuses on how author makes a use of human facts and the world view as the inspiration of his work. Goldmann says,

Such works "represent . . . the expression of world views, that is to say, slices of imaginary or conceptual reality, structured in such a way that, without it being necessary to complete their structure in essence, one can develop them into over-all worlds" (1977, p.160).

Thus, literary work is the result of its author interaction with the society where he lives in. Goldmann in Faruk adds, "literary work is human fact as well as world view resulted by the interaction of collective subject and the world surrounding" (1988, p.79).

Human fact refers to every activity and behavior resulted by human, verbal or physical, which is useful to be analyzed in science. Those facts can be social activity, political activity, individual activity, or cultural creation, such as art, music, literature, and philosophy (Faruk, 1988, p.71). Meanwhile, the 'world' created by the author in such a literary work acts as an expression of social structure, family relation, conflicts between two classes, or cultural

composition. The literary work, then, functions as the bridge to connect the character's experience, situation, and compilation of the historical background where the author lives.

### **Human Fact: Women Position in the Victorian Era**

Victorian era marked the big transition made by Englishmen in so many aspects of life. Due to the occurrence of Industrial Revolution, everything changed in this era. People made the transition from all the ancient and old-fashion way of living into the brand-new life based on the advancement of technology.

In this phase, people saw women as a cultural baggage which was blocking society's transition. People believed that due to all the natural instincts possessed by women (their weaknesses, clumsiness and irrationality), they could not follow the spirit of society transition just like what men did. Tyson says,

To her are attributed all the virtues associated with patriarchal femininity and domesticity: she's modest, unassuming, self-sacrificing, and nurturing. She has no needs of her own, for she is completely satisfied by serving her family. (Tyson, 2003, p. 90)

Ironically, the exact reason of this situation was the strict control of patriarchal Victorian society towards women. Women who followed the social convention, then, were identified as 'the angel of the house'. Their goal was no more than managing the family as well as they could. There was no other intention coming to their mind.

Women were marginalized and objectified during the Victorian era. What was done by the society was actually a kind of social construct for women based on the patriarchal perspective. The social constructs were done by using many strategies. Firstly, women were constructed and domesticized as a figure of mother or 'the angel of the house'. Women were expected to marry, have children, and keep a nice household. Those were the only acceptable roles for women during that era. They were encouraged to marry at the very young age or people would begin to call them 'spinster'. Bad perspective would be given for women who did not conform with the convention. Woman who stayed single and chose to pursue her true love would be called as "the fallen angel". (Johnson, 2001). This happened as women could only acquire the status of middle- or upper-class citizen when they got married to the appropriate one (the wealthy gentleman).

Tyson says in this matter, "to remain on her Victorian pedestal, the 'good girl' had to remain uninterested in sexual activity, except for the purpose of legitimate procreation, because it was believed unnatural for women to have sexual desire "(Tyson, 2003, p.90). At worst, women who performed such a forbidden deed, will be considered to fall from grace and they will suffer from physical punishment from the community or from her husband, which until relatively recently was encouraged by patriarchal law and custom. Women who do not conform with the society then will be alienated and get no place in the society.

### **World View: Oscar Wilde's Short Biography**

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) was a brilliant author, playwright, and wit. He was born in the middle of the Victorian age—the period of English history during which Queen Victoria reigned, from 1837-1901. During this period in English history, the country was undergoing many radical changes; all of which contributed to the way the people who lived during this period lived and thought.

Wilde distasted Victorian society as generally remembered by their narrow-mindedness, double standards, hypocrisy, sexual repression and extreme class-consciousness. He shares his rejection of the negative tendency of Victorian society throughout his works.

It can be seen in some of his works such as *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, *The Importance of Being Ernest* and also *A Woman of No Importance* that Wilde shares some kind of satirical device to criticize Victorian society. Women representation becomes one of devices used by Wilde to criticize the society.

Wilde portrays different characterization and fate for women characters in his works. For example, in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, he describes a 'fallen woman' who turns into an 'angel', which is represented by Mrs. Erylne. She saves her daughter, Lady Windermere to avoid being fall from grace. It is as if Wilde tries to deconstruct Victorian's perspective which merely judges a fallen woman to be always a failure.

Wilde's concern about women may come up as a result of his pessimistic view of Victorian society. In 1885, the England Parliamentary issued the Criminal Law Amendment Act which caused Wilde to be imprisoned. It happened due to the fact that Wilde was accused to commit sexual harassment towards his homosexual partner, Lord Alfred Douglas. Since then, Wilde fell on such a disaster and his life ruined. Soon, Victorian society judged him as immoral due to his homosexuality and his sodomy case. (Wakelling, 2000, p.8).

Presumably, Wilde's concern on women appears due to his bad experience as a gay/homosexual. Homosexuals were positioned also as the second citizen as well as women. Public blamed them to perform some kind of forbidden relationship. Henceforth, throughout his works, Wilde expressed his perspective of equality and humanistic by deconstructing and satirizing upper class Victorian lifestyle. (Wakelling, 2000, p.8).

Wilde's journey to America also improved his insight on equality and individualism as well as humanism. Wilde shares his pessimistic view of Victorian society in his comedy. On the other hand, Wakeling says, "Wilde maintained more positive views of American society as seen in his essay of *Personal Impressions of America*" (Wakeling, 2000, p.5).

In addition, Hussein summarized that Wilde had [in his comedies] to write problem plays, with a frankly destructive aim; confronted with the resistance and the fears of public,

he toned down his themes, thinned out the substance of his works, wound up his plots so as to please the shallow taste of the audience (2012: p. 77). Wilde's writing was dominated by the relation between life and art. This explains his mockery against the negative aspects of the society.

### **Women Representation as Seen in Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance***

Opposing the ordinary figure of Victorian women who were submissive, dependent, obedient, and weak, Wilde portrayed women to be more existentialist in the play of *A Woman of No Importance*. In this matter, women representation in Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance* can be classified into three types : an open-minded woman, a rebellious woman, and an independent woman.

#### **An Open-Minded Woman**

When Victorian women were characterized as someone who was old-fashioned, submissive, and conformist, the figure of an open-minded woman was the opposite of those characteristics. An open-minded woman can be defined as someone who possessed an open mind perspective. Open mind means "Willing to listen to, think about, or accept different ideas (Hornby, 1995, p 2583).. An open-minded woman began to show herself up and questioned every value attached to them. The awareness emerged due to the education level taken by women. In line with the existentialist feminist, education may lead woman to know her true existence right after she has recognized her passion and dream.

Wilde portrayed the figure of an open-minded woman in the play of *A Woman of No Importance* by showing the character of Hester Worsley. She was characterized as a new comer in England. She came from American society which shared different belief and values. As an outsider, Hester's position enabled her to see the Victorian society's fault and shortcomings more clearly. Hester also showed her democratic view which might be adopted from American education.

You rich people in England, you don't know how you are living. How could you know? You shut out from your society the gentle and the good. You laugh at the simple and the pure. Living as you all do, on others and by them, you sneer at self-sacrifice, and if you throw bread to the poor, it is merely to keep them quiet for a season. (Wilde, 1970, p.102).

The excerpt above suggested that Hester owned her individual perspective towards the Victorian society depicted in the play. She argued that the Victorian society was too selfish and they lived in such narrow-mindedness. She was a typical of an open-minded woman who was brave enough to show critical attitude towards the situation she encountered. She also acted as an existentialist woman who was brave to show her thought without being worried of other's judgment.

Hester also pointed out on the easy judgmental attitude of Victorian society. She confronted how people tended to easily despise women who were not following the rules as a disgrace and failure. Hester commented in this matter,

It is right that they should be punished, but don't let them be the only ones to suffer. If a man and woman have sinned, let them both go forth into the desert to love or loathe each other there. Let them both be branded. Set a mark, if you wish, on each, but don't punish the one and let the other go free. Don't have one law for men and another for women. You are unjust to women in England. And till you count what is a shame in a woman to be an infamy in a man, you will always be unjust, and Right, that pillar of fire, and Wrong, that pillar of cloud, will be made dim to your eyes, or be not seen at all, or if seen, not regarded. (Wilde, 1970, p.103).

This quote above suggested Hester's open-mindedness. As a woman, she showed her concern on other women. It signified her objection of double standard in Victorian society. Double standard here could be defined as "A rule or moral principle that was unfair because it was used in one situation, but not in another". (Hornby, 1995, p.1027). In this case, the double standard was applied in terms of gender. Society applied different treatments towards women: they were considered more inferior than men. As human beings, all men and women should have the same rights to go to work, share their opinions, or actualize their creativity, but in fact Victorian society condemned women to be fallen from disgrace if they went outside of their homes.

Hester's perspective was different from other Victorian women in her era. Other than conforming the society norms, she shared a belief that just because they were women, it did not mean that people could easily judge them with a bad stigma. On the contrary, if this was man who made a failure, the society would do nothing.

The figure of an open-minded woman represented by Hester might appear as Wilde's device to show his detestation of a double standard applied in Victorian society. Women were known as 'the other' and treated unfairly. Thus, Wilde shows his idea of equality by showing that woman could also stand her own thought just like what Hester Worsley did in the play of *A Woman of No Importance*.

### **A Rebellious Woman**

Victorian women were largely remembered as the passive and dependent agents. Their position in marriage was inferior to their husbands. However, in the play of *A Woman of No Importance*, Wilde deconstructed that patriarchal idea. Wilde created the character of Mrs. Allonby who was also known as a dominant wife and temptress woman. A temptress woman signified that she was a sexually attractive woman who set out to allure or seduce someone. Mrs. Allonby represented the figure of

rebellious woman. Rebellious could be defined as “Unwilling to obey rules or follow generally accepted standards of behavior, dress, etc” (Hornby, 1995, p. 3072) . In accordance with the definition stated above, Mrs. Allonby was depicted as someone who did not want to follow the rules.

Considering that usually it was only men who could perform such a disgraceful deed, how Wilde portrayed the character of Mrs. Allonby was interesting. Mrs. Allonby was considered to be a female version of Lord Illingworth, the most flamboyant man character in the play of *A Woman of No Importance*. As a wife, she was not the kind of inferior and submissive agent; as a woman, she was not passive. She and Lord Illingworth enjoyed each other's company and in Act I, when they were alone, she challenged him to make love to Hester, whom she was confident will resist. They were good at verbal fencing and the following was a typical exchange that showed how well-matched Wilde has made them.

LORD ILLINGWORTH. Shall we go into tea?

MRS. ALLONBY Do you like such simple pleasures?

LORD ILLINGWORTH. I adore simple pleasures. They are the last refuge of the complex. But, if you wish, let us stay here. Yes, let us stay here. The Book of Life begins with a man and woman in a garden.

MRS. ALLONBY It ends with Revelations.

LORD ILLINGWORTH. You fence divinely. But the button has come off your foil.

MRS. ALLONBY. I have still the mask.

LORD ILLINGWORTH. It makes your eyes lovelier. (Wilde, 1970, p. 94).

The excerpt above indicated that women and men could share similar perspective. Mrs. Allonby shared the quality of temptress just like what Lord Illingworth did. It was not only men who could express their naughty urge; women might also do so. However, the society might react differently on their deed.

Mrs. Allonby's attitude towards her husband also showed some kind of deconstructive idea. When other women were dependent and inferior to their husbands, Mrs. Allonby stood on the opposite side. She was very dominant in front of her husband, Mr. Ernest. This could be shown from some excerpt of her dialogue.

MRS. ALLONBY. When Ernest and I were engaged, he swore to me positively on his knees that he had never loved any one before in the whole course of his life. I found out then that what he had told me was perfectly true. And that sort of thing makes a man so absolutely uninteresting. (Wilde, 1970, p. 98).

MRS. ALLONBY. He should persistently compromise us in public, and treat us with absolute respect when we are alone. And yet he should be always ready to have a perfectly terrible scene, whenever we want one, and to become miserable, absolutely

miserable, at a moment's notice, and to overwhelm us with just reproaches in less than twenty minutes, and to be positively violent at the end of half an hour, and to leave us forever at a quarter to eight, when we have to go and dress for dinner. And when, after that, one has seen him for really the last time, and he has refused to take back the little things he has given one, and promised never to communicate with one again, or to write one any foolish letters, he should be perfectly broken-hearted, and telegraph to one all day long, and send one little notes every half-hour by a private hansom, and dine quite alone at the club, so that everyone should know how unhappy he was. And after a whole dreadful week, during which one has gone about everywhere with one's husband, just to show how absolutely lonely one was, he may be given a third last parting, in the evening, and then, if his conduct has been quite irreproachable, and one has behaved really badly to him, he should be allowed to admit that he has been entirely in the wrong, and when he has admitted that, it becomes a woman's duty to forgive, and one can do it all over again from the beginning, with variations. (Wilde, 1970: 100).

The excerpt above shows how Mrs. Allonby placed herself as the subject instead of the object of men. She was very confident to say that there were some different values of life which she held on. Even, she acted as the one who was more superior to her husband so that she could do anything but the husband would always come in his knees to take her back. She perceived the figure of an ideal husband as her own ideal without concerning on society's idea of man and wife in such a marriage. It indicated that Mrs. Allonby lived with her own rule and belief. She has been recognized her *pour soi* (being for itself) and *en soi* (being for other). She knew exactly what she wanted. In the perspective of existentialist feminist, woman could come up to her existence if she could escape from any restriction made up by the society.

Through the character of Mrs. Allonby, Wilde really deconstructed the idea of patriarchal society in the era of Victorian. Mrs. Allonby is the representation of a rebellious woman who can break man's domination.

### **An Independent Woman**

The figure of an independent woman was attributed to Mrs. Arbuthnot. A person who is independent refers to "Someone who is not depending on another person for one's opinion or livelihood". (Hornby, 1995, p. 1884). It was depicted from Mrs. Arbuthnot's status as a single mother and widow. Her scandalous past with Lord Illingworth made her suffered. She gave birth to Gerald Arbuthnot from her affair with Lord Illingworth, yet the father refused to take responsibility. Lord Illingworth did not

want to marry Mrs. Arbuthnot. Therefore, she borrowed her father's name to give a better future for her son.

In the eye of Victorian society, Mrs. Arbuthnot might be considered as the failure woman and she was also condemned to be the fallen woman. She was bound to the shameful status for all of her life. Therefore, Gerald Arbuthnot insisted her mother to marry Lord Illingworth in order to avoid society's judgment.

For other Victorian woman, marriage might be the easiest escape of the social condemn since through marriage, woman would get a better status. In addition, Lord Illingworth was an aristocrat himself. However, Mrs. Arbuthnot refused to marry Lord Illingworth. When Lord Illingworth himself insisted to marry Mrs. Arbuthnot, she also rejected.

GERALD. Mother, I will force him to do it. The wrong that has been done you must be repaired. Atonement must be made. Justice may be slow, mother, but it comes in the end. In a few days you shall be Lord Illingworth's lawful wife.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT. But, Gerald -

GERALD. I will insist upon his doing it. I will make him do it: he will not dare to refuse.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT. But, Gerald, it is I who refuse. I will not marry Lord Illingworth.

GERALD. Not marry him? Mother!

MRS. ARBUTHNOT. I will not marry him. (Wilde, 1970, p.133).

LORD ILLINGWORTH. We won't discuss that at present. What is of importance today, as yesterday, is still our son. I am extremely fond of him, as you know, and odd though it may seem to you, I admired his conduct last night immensely. He took up the cudgels for that pretty prude with wonderful promptitude. He is just what I should have liked a son of mine to be. Except that no son of mine should ever take the side of the Puritans: that is always an error. Now, what I propose is this.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT. Lord Illingworth, no proposition of yours interests me. (Wilde, 1970, p. 139).

Mrs. Arbuthnot's perspective of not marrying Lord Illingworth indicated her independence. She found herself capable of living her life independently without relying on man. Even though Lord Illingworth promised to take a full responsibility on the life of Gerald Arbuthnot, Mrs. Arbuthnot refused to believe. She had her choice; she had succeeded in taking care of Gerald since the day he was born.

Mrs. Arbuthnot's refusal to marriage also suggested her rebel on society's convention. She was not afraid of being considered as a disgraceful woman. She refused to feel guilty of what she had done. Being single would not give any disadvantages to other whatsoever. She was brave enough to live with her own choice. What she held on to was her happiness without concerning on other's thought. It surely could be considered as one of the existentialist characteristics. To get the mind free from *mauvaise foi* (bad faith), woman would finally find her freedom. Nobody had the right

to control woman's body and mind. It was a matter of choice she took that finally resulted on the consequences.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT. I owe nothing to other women. There is not one of them to help me. There is not one woman in the world to whom I could go for pity, if I would take it, or for sympathy, if I could win it. Women are hard on each other. That girl, last night, good though she is, fled from the room as though I were a tainted thing. She was right. I am a tainted thing. But my wrongs are my own, and I will bear them alone. I must bear them alone. What have women who have not sinned to do with me, or I with them? We do not understand each other. (Wilde, 1970, p. 134).

Mrs. Arbuthnot's deed gave her a consequence to be a figure of mother. Yet, she was fully aware of her choice. She chose to be a good mother for her son; and it was the only thing she wants to do wholeheartedly.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT. And yet, to bear you I had to look on death. To nurture you I had to wrestle with it. Death fought with me for you. All women have to fight with death to keep their children. Death, being childless, wants our children from us. Gerald, when you were naked, I clothed you, when you were hungry, I gave you food. Night and day all that long winter I tended you. No office is too mean, no care too lowly for the thing we women love - and oh! how I loved YOU. Not Hannah, Samuel more. And you needed love, for you were weakly, and only love could have kept you alive. Only love can keep anyone alive. (Wilde, 1970, p.135).

From the excerpt above, it can be seen that Mrs. Arbuthnot has become a subject when she consciously chose to be a single mother. Although his son believed that her problem would be solved by conducting a marriage, she had a choice of her own. Mrs. Arbuthnot's choice indicated her independence; her freedom of doing everything she believed in. This subjectivity also belonged to the particular characteristic of being an existentialist woman. It meant that, as a woman, Mrs. Arbuthnot was not trapped as an object of others. She could stand on her own belief and expressed her feeling freely. She also expressed her independence by saying that Mr. Illingworth is 'the man of no importance' in the last sentence of the play of *A Woman of No Importance*.

Wilde created the character of Mrs. Arbuthnot to sharpen his message of equality between men and women. Marriage in Victorian society was considered as an important institution. Unfortunately, the marriage's advantages in Victorian society went to men more than women. By showing the character of Mrs. Arbuthnot who despised marriage, Wilde continued his intention to bring about the issue of women's existentialism. It was true that patriarchal society urged women to marry in order to pursue more about higher status than love, but if they did not want to, then, it was not a problem as it was the women's own choice. In this matter, Wilde sharpened his message by speaking throughout Mrs. Arbuthnot who believed that marriage should be done because of nothing but true love.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT. I do not know it. I do not feel it, nor will I ever stand before God's altar and ask God's blessing on so hideous a mockery as a marriage between me and George Harford. I will not say the words the Church bids us to say. I will not say them. I dare not. How could I swear to love the man I loathe, to honor him who wrought you dishonor, to obey him who, in his mastery, made me to sin? No: marriage is a sacrament for those who love each other. It is not for such as him, or such as me. Gerald, to save you from the world's sneers and taunts I have lied to the world. For twenty years I have lied to the world. I could not tell the world the truth. Who can, ever? But not for my own sake will I lie to God, and in God's presence. No, Gerald, no ceremony, Church-hallowed or State-made, shall ever bind me to George Harford. It may be that I am too bound to him already, who, robbing me, yet left me richer, so that in the mire of my life I found the pearl of price, or what I thought would be so. (Wilde, 1970, p. 134-135).

The excerpt above showed how Wilde stood on his perspective that marriage should be done in the name of love. According to him, spoken by Mrs. Arbuthnot, it was no use marrying someone due to social responsibility because when one did not love one another, the marriage promise would not do any good.

### **Wilde's Idea of Equality**

From the discussion of women representation in the play of *A Woman of No Importance* above, it could be seen that the message which recurrently appeared was the issue of equality between men and women. Throughout the play, Wilde criticized double standard used in the Victorian society which considers women as 'the other'. Women were treated like second citizens who could not actualize their potential fully. Wilde showed his disagreement of the double standard by deconstructing the common idea of women representation in Victorian society.

Wilde created strong women characters in the play to deconstruct the standardized norms existed in the society. He wanted to speak up his idea of equality between men and women through several characters in the play. Hester Worsley represented the voice of new woman who believed that women could also think open mindedly. Just like men, women could also go to work, share their opinions, and express their creativity. Mrs, Allonby was another out of ordinary character who was illustrated as a flirtatious woman just like the flamboyant male character, Lord Illingworth. It was not only man who could be a rebel, woman also has a right to do so. Meanwhile, the independent woman was represented by Mrs. Arbuthnot. She refused to marry her son's father only to fulfil society's expectation. She could take care of her son alone, and status was not a big deal for her.

Through the three characters described above, Wilde put some kind of deconstructive ideas. Wilde wanted to say that men and women have the same rights as human. In this case, Wilde offered the ideology of equality between men and women. Both are equal, there were no gender discrimination. Men and women have the same rights to express their believe, feeling, and creativity.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the study, it could be seen that Wilde took a side on women in his play of *A Woman of Importance*. Wilde created the figure of existentialist women by deconstructing the patriarchal idea about women in Victorian society. Thus, there were three representations of women made by Wilde in the play of *A Woman of No Importance*, namely the open-minded woman, the rebellious woman, and an independent woman. The figure of open-minded woman shared the belief that the patriarchal values in Victorian society were unfair. Meanwhile, the figure of rebellious woman deconstructed the men's domination; she came up as the subject who could share similar perspective and experience with men. The independent woman believed that she could do anything without relying on men.

The representation of women as stated before was the manifestation of human facts experienced by Wilde. All the double standard, hypocrisy, narrow-mindedness and easy judgmental attitudes of Victorian people had insulted Wilde. However, it also inspired Wilde to produce satirical play in order to criticize the society. Opposing the ideal which existed in the Victorian society, Wilde offered some kind of new world view of his own in the play of *A Woman of No Importance*. The world view, as represented in the play of *A Woman of No Importance*, was the equality between men and women. Thus, throughout the play of *A Woman of No Importance*, Wilde shared the ideology of equality.

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