

## **The Clash of Values between April and Frank in their relationship in Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road***

**Fenny<sup>1</sup> and Soelistyo, L<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1,2</sup> English Department, Faculty of Letters, Petra Christian University, Siwalankerto 121-131, Surabaya 60236,  
East Java, INDONESIA

E-mails: fennz\_cutez88@yahoo.com; lsyuwono@peter.petra.ac.id

### **ABSTRACT**

This article tries to reveal the clash of value between April and Frank as the main characters in Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road*. Using the theories of gender role, power and motherhood, the analysis shows that April and Frank have different values even though they live in the same time, the 1950s. The differences of values create a clash between them and it affects their relationship as husband and wife. April Wheeler as the strong character in this novel has modern values from her era while her husband expects her to follow the value of the 1950s. These differences make them unable to fulfill their partner's expectation. It can be concluded that because their values conflict each other, they have difficulties in their marriage life.

Keywords: Clash of values, Gender Roles, Wife and Husband

Richard Yates is the writer of many books, screenplays, essays, letter and short fiction. Yates's first novel *Revolutionary Road* won National Book Award in 1961. (Richard Yates, n.d)

1950s is the period after World War II happens. After World War II, it gives great depression in America especially in economy. Moreover, after the World War II people usually give up on their dreams. The society usually does not believe that they can have a better life. As time goes by, people start to actualize the idea of American dream. They want something new in their life. Suburban area is the choice for them to start a new beginning by raising their families there. April and Frank Wheeler, who live in their own fantasies want to reach the American dream which is having a better life. April Wheelers wants to be an artist while Frank expects her to become a housewife to fulfill his expectation as an ideal woman. April is a different woman from most women in that era. She wants to change her life, so she asks Frank to move to Paris. Frank, who hates his job so much as a sales promotion in Knox, supports April's idea. Unpredictably, April is pregnant and Frank suddenly gets promoted by his boss. Facing this reality makes Frank change his mind and reject April's idea to move to Paris. In addition to that, both of them try to solve their problems in different ways.

In addition, the main characters have different values and this creates a clash between them. This clash must have some causes, that is why this article tries to find out why April and Frank have a clash of values in their relationship as husband and wife. April has modern value while her husband holds the value of the 1950s. In order to find out the causes, the concept of gender role, power and motherhood will be applied especially to analyze April and Frank's value.

### **MALE GENDER ROLE**

In discussing the main factors why April and Frank have a clash in their relationship as husband and wife, the concept of gender role will be applied here. The setting in this novel is the 1950s. During the 1950s, traditional gender role should be strictly followed in the American suburban life. Gender role in suburban area in the 1950s is usually very strict to control how men and women should act. The concept of role is to differentiate roles for women and men. Janeway (2011) identifies the dimensions of roles:

There are certain roles from the society for men and women to fulfill. In our culture, we assumed social life is through gender roles. Women are regarded as caretakers so they are expected to take care of their husband and children while Men should become the breadwinner of the family to fulfill his family's need and to show his masculinity (p. 57 – 58).

Based on social expectation, men and women's role are made by the society. Both of them are expected to do their roles based on their gender, like men should work in the public area and earn money to fulfill the need of the family. That is why man should be in the public area and become the breadwinner of the family while woman is expected to be in the domestic area as child-rearing. Women should focus her life to take care of her family. This concept is used to describe the life in suburban area especially in discussing what Frank believes about the values in 1950s. He believes that a man should become the breadwinner of the family to prove his masculinity.

Baker et al.(1980) explains that "power is the ability to make and carry out decisions. In most American families, husbands have more power than wives. Men also have more access to and control over resources than women"(p.123). In other words, men are believed to have a more power than women especially in decision-making. Men have right to control over women because of their gender as a man. The concept of power is used to analyze Frank's role. As a man, he believes that he has absolute power over his wife and children.

### **FEMALE GENDER ROLE**

Woloch (1984) says "The suburban housewife was the dream image of the young American woman" (p. 496). At that time, becoming a good housewife is a duty for women in 1950. Women are expected to dedicate their life to take care of her husband and children. In this novel, April's attitude is contrast with the concept of ideal woman at that time because she has modern value than her era. In addition, the concept of gender role also dictates that a woman should also becomes a good mother, the concept of motherhood is used to analyze April as the main character in this novel as a mother. Motherhood is the qualities or spirit of a mother ("Dictionary Reference", n.d.). Basically, as a woman, she is expected by the society to love and care of her children, but in fact she thinks her children as a mistake because they are the reason she cannot achieve her dreams.

### **APRIL'S VALUE AS AN INDEPENDENT WOMAN**

In this section, it will talk about April's value as an independent woman. April, as the main character in this novel, has different values from the women in the 1950s. Setting in this novel is 1950s while the image of an ideal housewife is based on the society's view in suburban area. Yet, April is different because her value is clashed with the value of the 1950s. Married woman at that time usually centers her life to take care of their husband and children. They are expected to stay in domestic area and spend their time to cook and clean the house while April's values are totally different from those values.

One of April's values as an independent woman is the desire to work. She does not like to depend on her husband while women in 1950s usually depend on their husband and they are expected to be happy by doing so. She feels, as a married woman, she does not have any choice except taking care of domestic area. Yet, April wants to prove that she can also become the breadwinner of the family. She thinks it will be better if she can support herself and her family. She wants to gain her independence by working as secretary. She believes if she works while Frank studies, they will have a better life. It is proven when April said to Frank:

The point is you won't be getting any kind of a job because I will. Have you any idea how much they pay for secretarial work in all these government agencies overseas? NATO and the ECA and those places? And do you realize how low the cost of living is, compared to here? (p. 147).

Here, it shows that April wants to become a secretary in Paris to support him and their family. She believes that her salary as secretary will be enough for their daily needs. She also wants to be different from her society because she thinks her status as a married woman will not become an obstacle to

make her dreams come true. This means that she wants to become a career woman while women at that time only focus their life in domesticity while she wants to be free. April considers herself as special and she believes that she has the same ability as her husband. Therefore, she wants to move out from her domesticity and work in public area like her husband, Frank.

The concept of woman depend on man does not fit April's character. April has a strong personality, while women at that time are usually identical with a weak and dependent personality. She wants to show that she has a different characteristic from the women at that time. However, Frank expects the different thing from April. He wants April to be dependent on him especially when she is in sadness or anger. For instance, when April feels sad because of her lousy performance in the Petrified Forest, Frank as a good husband feels "obligated" to emotionally comfort his wife but April does not like Frank to comfort her. She feels as a strong woman, she does not need to be comforted by anyone. April wants Frank to understand her gesture that she does not want to be touched when her feeling is bad. As it has been narrated in the novel:

he had hoped she would sit close to him in the car—he wanted to hold her shoulders while he drove—but she made herself very small and pressed against the passenger's door, turning away to watch the passing lights and shadows of the road (p. 25).

Through Frank's feelings, it can be seen that Frank hopes April to be dependent on him. He wants her to tell him about her feelings whenever she is sad. Frank wants to show to April that as her husband, he is a reliable man. However, this is difficult to do by April. April likes to face her problems alone without Frank's intervention. She feels comfortable to hide her feelings away. She does not like Frank to see her in her weakest condition. Therefore, conflict between husband and wife appears because each of them has their own values.

April's independence can also be seen when she tries to make a decision. She tries to become a decision-maker without Frank's permission. At that time, a wife usually does not have any right to decide something. They should accept their husband's decision because decision-making is usually done by a husband. For instance, April decides to abort her third pregnancy even though Frank rejects her idea of having an abortion. Yet, she believes that abortion is the only way to make it easier for them to move to Paris and start a new life. She thinks having a child will prevent her to achieve her dream in Paris. Therefore, she wants Frank to support her idea. It is proven when she says: "A little while! Two years? Three years? Four? How long do you think it'll be before I can take a full-time job? Darling, think about it a minute. It's hopeless" (p. 284). Here, it can be seen that April tries to persuade Frank to support her idea while Frank wants them to stay in Connecticut for a few years rather than move to Paris while April considers Frank's idea is hopeless for them. April also thinks arguing with Frank is the most effective way to make him support her idea. It can be seen through the conversation between April and Frank:

Listen. Listen to me. You do this—you do this and I swear to God III—

Oh, you'll what? You'll leave me? What's that suppose to be--- a threat or a promise?

And the fight went on all night. It caused them to hiss and grapple and knock over a chair, it spilled outside and downstairs and into the street (Get away from me! Get away for me!) (p. 67).

The conversation above shows the fight between April and Frank. Frank feels angry to her because he finds the abortion tools in their bathroom drawer. Unpredictably, April does not feel afraid when Frank tries to threaten her. April knows that Frank will forbid her act, thus she plans to do abortion secretly. That is why she buys the rubber syringe and hides it from him. That means that April tries to be a decision-maker for herself. She thinks her body is her own so Frank does not have any right to prohibit her action. Hence, she considers that Frank cannot stop her. She thinks by winning the argument with Frank, she can change his mind and supports her idea to move to Paris while in fact she loses. She knows that Frank's rejection will make her fail to achieve her dream which is moving to Paris. It makes April willing to do anything to make her dreams come true. In the end, she bravely takes a risk in order to achieve her dream. In other words, April's action shows that she makes her own decision without thinking about Frank's rejection.

## **FRANK'S VALUE AS THE BREADWINNER OF THE FAMILY**

This section talks about Frank's value which is becoming the breadwinner of the family. Men in 1950s are expected to work in the public area. The value of 1950s makes Frank try so hard to prove to the society if he can do his role well. Therefore, he should take a job in order to get some money to support his family. Besides, he also believes the concept of gender role that a man becomes the breadwinner and a woman becomes the home-maker. Hence, Frank wants to become the breadwinner while April stays at home. It can be seen through Frank's view:

The very kind of evening he had always imagined the Donaldsons and Wingates and the Cramers having, in which women consulted with women about recipes and clothes, while men settled down with men to talk of jobs and cars. In a minute, Shep might even say, How's the job going, Frank? (p. 88).

Here, it can be seen that he considers women in suburban area are identical with domestic area while men are familiar with public area. Women talk about recipes and clothes while men usually talk about job and cars. In addition, his neighbor will ask him about his job. Thus, he thinks his job is the most important things in his life. All the people around him in suburban area also believe in the same value. Frank is influenced by his surroundings like Donaldson and Wingates, his neighbors who believe that men should become the breadwinner. Therefore, Frank is forced to have a job because he should fulfill the society's expectation like the other men should do.

Frank feels his life change when he gets promoted by his boss. He starts to imagine that their life will be better if he takes the chance from his boss. His salary will be higher and it makes him change his mind. It is proven through Frank's feelings:

Besides: why think of accepting Pollock's money as a mere compromise solution, an enforced making-the-best-of-things until the renewal of her ability to support him in Paris?...Wasn't there a good chance that Knox, through Knox International, might soon be expanding its promotion of computers abroad?(p.285).

Here, it can be seen that Frank is tempted by the money that his boss offers. He thinks that his job will give them a better future because his job can lead to a satisfying career. Therefore, Frank does not want to leave his 'comfort zone' which is his position in Knox. He thinks that his position is the tools for him to get the acknowledgement from his wife and the society. It makes him start to enjoy his job. He wants April to think that his job is awesome. Hence, Frank wants to become the breadwinner of the family only to prove to the society that he fulfills the society's expectation as an ideal man.

## **APRIL'S INABILITY TO FULFILL FRANK'S EXPECTATION AS AN IDEAL WIFE**

April and Frank, both of them have their own expectation towards their partner. They also have different value in principle as an ideal spouse. The failure of April in fulfilling Frank's expectations becomes a reason for a clash in their relationship. Frank expects April to fulfill his criteria as an ideal wife. For Frank, an ideal wife is a woman who loves, cares and supports him in every aspect. Becoming a loving woman is the image of an ideal housewife at that time. He feels as a man, to be loved by his wife is the most important thing to achieve happiness in their marriage life.

As a man, Frank feels his pride is gone because April's attitude makes him feel that he is not loved by April. Therefore, he tries to grab April's attention by having an affair with another woman, Maureen Grube. In this case, he wants April to feel regret and change her attitude. He wants April to show her jealousy as the sign that she loves him. It can be seen through the conversation between April and Frank:

In other words you don't care what I do or who I go to bed with or anything. Right?

No, I guess that's right, I don't

But I want you to care!

I know you do. And I suppose I would, if I loved you but you see I don't. I don't love you and I never really have, and I never really figured it out until this week, and that's why I'd just as soon not do any talking right now. Do you see? She picked up a dust cloth and went into the living room, a tired, competent housewife with chores to do (p.380).

From the conversation above, it can be seen that April shows to Frank overtly by saying she does not love him while Frank wants her to feel jealous because he has an affair with Maureen. Frank thinks having an affair is the only way to prove his masculinity. He tries to find Maureen to satisfy his need to be loved which he cannot get from April. Actually, Frank thinks that April loves him so much and cannot stand without him. Unpredictably, April does not care for what he does. As her husband, he feels hurt and disappointed because April does not feel anything after knowing his act. Thus, Frank assumes that April does not love him at all. That means that April fails to fulfill Frank's expectation as an ideal wife.

As a husband, Frank expects April can fulfill his expectation not only as a good wife but also as a good mother. Being a mother is usually a natural process for a married woman. The society believes that a woman should have children because having children is a woman's nature. A good mother in Frank's opinion is a woman who loves and cares their children. In this case, April does not fulfill Frank's expectation as a good mother. Her inability to love her children can be seen from her disappointment of her first pregnancy. April considers her first pregnancy comes too soon and this reality makes her feel dissatisfied. It is proven as it is stated in the novel:

And one big thing went wrong right away. According to their plan, which called for an eventual family of four, her first pregnancy came seven years too soon...She refused to look at him as they rode; she carried her head high in a state of shock or disbelief or anger or blame—it could have been any or all or none of these things, for all he knew (p.65).

Here, it is proven that April feels angry to herself when she knows that she is pregnant. She cannot accept the reality that she will have a child. The only thing that she can do is blaming herself. She feels that her pregnancy comes too fast. Therefore, April's disappointment of her first pregnancy shows that she does not expect to have a child. April's attitude shows that she does not fulfill Frank's expectation as a loving mother.

#### **FRANK'S INABILITY TO FULFILL APRIL'S EXPECTATION AS AN IDEAL HUSBAND**

April expects Frank to become a good husband for her. April's ideal husband is a man who loves and cares for her, but Frank does not fulfill her expectation at all. For April, love can be seen from how a husband treats her wife. A husband should treat his wife tenderly. That is why she feels Frank should show his love to her through his act rather than words. In addition, April finds out fact that proves Frank is actually not an ideal man for her because the violence that he does in their marriage. He does violence to April when they fight. He uses physical and non-physical violence to April. First, Frank uses non-physical violence to April through his words. For instance when they fight, Frank even uses harsh word to April. It can be seen through Frank's words: "You're empty, hollow fucking shell of a woman..."(p. 398). Here, Frank uses harsh words to call her. In addition, Frank does not fulfill April's criteria as an ideal husband. Sometimes, he also screams and ruins everything such as breaking the chair or the other furniture when he feels angry to April. This violence means that Frank tries to dominate April. Frank thinks by doing violence, April can obey all his words. In fact, all the treatment makes April feel trapped in her role as a housewife. It is proven through the conversation between April and Frank:

You've never fooled me, Frank, never once. All your precious moral maxims and your 'love' and your nearly-mouthed little-Do you think I've forgotten the time you hit me in the face because I wouldn't forgive you? Oh, I've always known I had to be your conscience and your guts-and your punching bag. Just because you've got me safely in a trap you think you—(p.37).

The conversation above shows that April feels trapped in her role as housewife because of Frank's attitude. Frank only gives her promise before they get married if he can become a good husband for her in the future while in the reality he does not treat April well. He is rude to her when he thinks April does not want to obey him. All he wants is April does everything that he asks for her. Contradicting with the women at that time, April chooses to fight against Frank. While women should accept

everything that their husbands have done to them, April tries to show that she is brave enough to reject her husband's demand. The power of husband's domination at that time can be seen through one of the spouses in April's neighborhood, which is Milly and her husband, Shep

One Sunday night, after he'd been drinking all day and snapping at the children. She founded herself cowering in tears with the baby at her breast while her husband called her an ignorant cunt and broke three bones of his fist against the wall (Yates, 193).

Here, it can be seen that Milly accepts her husband's violence without any rejection. She is beaten, even her child, and she is even mocked by her husband. Shep not only does violence to her but he also uses harsh word to call his wife 'an ignorant cunt'. Getting all those kind of treatment, Milly only can stand and do nothing. All that she can do is crying. She even still shows her affection to her husband even though he does violence to her. Milly's passivity to her husband's violence actually shows the acceptance of women at that era. They do not have courage to go against their husband. A wife does not have any choice to react to their husband's treatment, except accepting them all. On that era, a husband is considered to have power over his wife. Being influenced by his surroundings makes Frank think he can do anything to April because as husband he has power to control over his wife. Violence is considered as something ordinary that happens in fight between husband and wife.

Despite her independence, April wants Frank to pay attention to her. She wants Frank to care for her when she is doing something. For instance, when she is busy doing a housework, she wants Frank to help her immediately without her demands. In fact, April feels disappointed with Frank's attitude. He does not want to help her to do domestic area including man's work. It can be seen through April's feelings as it has been narrated in the novel:

Everything about her seemed determined to prove, with a new, flat-footed emphasis, that a sensible middle-class housewife was all she had ever wanted to be and that all she had ever wanted of love was a husband who would get out and cut the grass once in a while, instead of sleeping all day (p.58).

Through April's thought, it can be seen that all April wants is a husband who cares for her by helping her do the housework. At least, Frank should do a man's work like cutting the grass. In fact, April feels that Frank does not care with her because when she does a 'hard' work, Frank does not do anything and even he lets her do a man's work by herself. This makes April feel that Frank only thinks about himself without thinking about her. Thus, April feels disappointed because Frank is far from her expectation as an ideal man.

From the analysis above, it can be seen that April and Frank have a clash of values and it affects their relationship as husband and wife. April wants to be different from her surroundings in suburban area by working to show her value as an independent woman while Frank wants her to stay in the domestic area to fulfill the society's expectation at that time. April wants to change their life while Frank is afraid to change. The differences of values also make them unable to fulfill their partner's expectation as an ideal spouse.

## **CONCLUSION**

April and Frank have different values even though they live in the same time, the 1950 era. From the analysis, it shows that Frank is really influenced by the values that are made by the society. He has the value of 1950s while April does not share her values at all. Frank believes that they should act in accordance with the concept of gender role at that time. That is why the difference of values creates a clash between them. Unfortunately, both of them do not realize that their values are contrasted. Moreover, both of them believe in their own set of values. They have different values in terms of job and having an ideal spouse.

Another thing, it can be seen that husband's power in 1950 especially in decision making is really strong. As a woman, April cannot go against her husband's value. It is proven when Frank rejects her idea, she cannot do anything to change his mind. April's action in sacrificing herself is only to show her rebellions to Frank's decision. April is considered as a rebel to the value of the 1950s. It

shows that woman at that time does not have any choice because she should obey her husband's demand. Man's power to be a decision maker is stronger than woman.

Moreover, a woman who tries to reject the society's expectation cannot survive in her life like April. When she tries to go out from the societal norms, she should suffer because of her attitude. The other fact is April feels more depressed because her husband does not share his values and thus April has no support from anyone. On the other hand, Frank subconsciously follows the suburban norms about gender role while April is against the norms of the 1950s. In fact, Frank's life is meaningless and he does not feel happy with it. Frank tries to survive from their surroundings while in fact he is helpless to reject the system in the patriarchal society. In addition, Frank also cannot survive from his surroundings. The only way that he can do is by following the society's expectation to make the society accept his existence. It can be concluded that someone does not have any choice except following the society's standard. When they try to reject the values as regulated by the society, they are the ones who have to bear the consequence.

## REFERENCES

- Baker, M.A., Berheide C.W., Greckel F.R., Gugin L.C., Lipetz M.J, Segal M.T (1980). *Women Today: A multidisciplinary approach to women's studies*. California: Wadsworth, Inc.
- Motherhood. (n.d).  
Retrieved from <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/motherhood?s=ts>
- Richard Yates. (n.d).  
Retrieved from [http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/27069.Richard\\_Yates/](http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/27069.Richard_Yates/)
- Wood, Julia T. (2011). *Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender and Culture*. Canada: Wadsworth.
- Woloch, Nancy. (1984). *Women and the American experience*. New York: Alfred A Knopf, Inc.
- Yates, Richard. (1961). *Revolutionary Road*. United States: Vintage Books. 1961.