



## **MAN'S ROLE DEGRADATION IN SAM MENDEZ'S "AMERICAN BEAUTY"**

**Emy Purnama Sari** ✉

Jurusan Bahasa Inggris, Fakultas Bahasa dan Seni, Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia

### **Info Artikel**

*Sejarah Artikel:*

Diterima Januari 2012

Disetujui Februari 2012

Dipublikasikan Agustus  
2012

*Keywords:*

*Man's role, Degradation,  
American Beauty.*

### **Abstract**

*The objective of the study is to identify Men's role degradation in Sam Mendez's movie American Beauty, how men's role degradation was described, the causes and the effects of men's role degradation in Sam Mendez's movie. This study uses gender role theory and social psychology approach to answer the question. I use qualitative descriptive method to gain the validity and prove the writer's assumption. The data that found in the film are in form of sentences, phrases, dialogues, action, and mimic of the character shown in the scene. In gathering the data, I took four steps; namely, identifying, inventorying, classifying, and selecting data. First, I watched the movie and read the scripts of film. Second, I inventoried the data, classified the data, and selected the data to answer the problems. The last, the data selected are interpreted based on its function to the topic. From this study I conclude that man's role degradation that described in American Beauty movie is about a man who faced the degradation of men's role and men's authority as a father and husband in the family. The causes are loss spirit of life, loss his confidence, changing gender roles, and economic changes. Beside that, the effects are not harmony relationship among the family and an affair in their marriage life.*

© 2013 Universitas Negeri Semarang

✉ Alamat korespondensi:

Gedung B3 Lantai 1 FBS Unnes

Kampus Sekaran, Gunungpati, Semarang, 50229

E-mail: [girly\\_0205@yahoo.com](mailto:girly_0205@yahoo.com)

ISSN 2252-6625

## INTRODUCTION

It is common thing in our society that the images of ideal women are being good housewives. On the other hand, men's fulfill the basic needs of life. In the another word, women stay at home, educate and take care of children, finish all their works, while men's works are to earn money. The different responsibility of men and women make them placed into two different positions, men are placed as the first people and women placed as the second people. According to Fakhri (2008: 12) gender inequalities make injustice condition for men and women but women as the worse victim of this situation. Because of that condition women can not do what men do and illustrated as powerless person in society. So, it can be said that in that condition women are placed as second people. The differences of role between men and women are caused by the different gender stereotype of men and women. According to Fakhri in his book *Analisis Gender dan Transformasi Sosial* (2008: 8), there are some stereotypes of women, they are sensitive, irrational, passive, emphatic, weak, emotional, and soft. On the other hand, men's stereotypes are insensitive, powerful, rational, aggressive, logical, active, and brave. The stereotypes between men and women above influence people's lives, so women are placed as second people in society.

The stereotypes of women and men are not something that people have got since they were born. Stereotypes are social and cultural constructions. Mansour Fakhri in his book *Analisis Gender dan Transformasi social* says:

*"Stereotipe selalu merugikan dan menimbulkan ketidakadilan. Stereotipe yang diberikan suku bangsa tertentu misalnya Yahudi di Barat, Cina di Asia Tenggara, telah merugikan suku bangsa tersebut. Salah satu jenis stereotipe*

*itu adalah yang bersumber dari pandangan gender"*(2008: 16)

"Stereotypes is always harmful and cause injustice situation. Stereotypes that are given certain tribes such as the Jews in the West, China in Southeast Asia, has been harm to these tribes. One type of those stereotypes is one which is originated from gender perspective"(2008:16)

Gender is one of the basic categories in our lives, and it comprises range differences between man and woman, extending from the biological to the social. The issue of gender exists since long time ago and it recently spreads out widely in society. As the impact of separation of gender, women are placed as the second people or placed in the weak side. They accept all conditions faced by them as a result of social construction. This view grows strongly in our society. Women only stay at home while men can work in the office. When women are given same chance as men, they can have two roles; they are house wife and career women. Taking care of children and doing household works are regarded as housewife's responsibility. In other words, doing household works are women's first responsibility although they have good career. Meanwhile men's responsibility is to fulfill basic necessities of life. Nowadays, the role of women little bit changes, and it makes the position of women also change in our society. Some years ago women were only housewives, but right now they have two roles, to be housewives and career women. In this modern era, when a number of educated women increase, it makes many career women appear in our society. Women with good career are common thing now. This fact increases the position of women in society. So, it can be said that right now women are not placed as a second people anymore. Technology is growing fast now, women can stand by themselves. They do not stay behind their husband anymore. Right now women can be

what they want to be, to be career women, earn a lot of money, be able to do anything as men, or I can say that they can take men's responsibility. Something like these happens in *American Beauty* film, beside that man's responsibility in this film are less than other men's responsibility commonly. The general men's responsibility is to earn money to fulfill their family needs, to be the head of family, to be the role model of their children but it does not happen in this film.

I use movie to be the object of the study because watching is one of interesting things to do beside reading or listening. By watching film, it makes viewers understand and feel familiar with something that conveys through the story. A film has a different way to reveal the theme of a film; it shows dialogues, moving picture, and mimic of the character in a film. Not only showing dialogues, moving picture, and so on, but film also portray of author's idea, feeling, thought, and attitude toward life. In Microsoft Encarta, movie or film is series of images that are projected into screen to create the illusion of motion. Motion pictures -also called movies, films, or the cinema- are one of the most popular forms of entertainment, enabling people to immerse themselves in an imaginary world (Microsoft Encarta: 2008).

## DISCUSSION

On this part, the study will be divided into two parts. Those are, how men's role degradation was described, the causes and effects of men's role degradation in Mendez's movie.

### A. The Description of Man's Role Degradation in *American Beauty*

It is a common thing in our society that men and women have their own stereotypes. The common stereotypes of men are active, dominant, independent, act as leader, self-confidence meanwhile the common stereotypes of women are quite,

dependent, strong need for security, aware feeling of others, express tender feeling. However, not all men and women have the character like what I have mentioned above. It is possible that their characters are changed because of environment, culture, and modern era. When the changes of characters deviate to be far from the common gender stereotypes in the society, it can be said that there is degradation happens. In the *American Beauty* film there is a family, this family consists of father named Lester, mother named Carolyn and one daughter named Jane. Lester is a journalist for magazine and his wife Carolyn is a real estate broker, their daughter is senior high school students. If people see Lester's family from out side it is like common family like others, but if it see from inside everything will change. From the outside, it is like a happy family because they have everything a house, car, and job but it just a fake picture because they do not live happily as a family. This is happened because the man role in this family did not work properly or I can say that man's role degradation faced by the man in this family (Lester). Lester is the male main character in this movie, and he faced some man's role degradation. In a family the role of man is not only a husband, but he is also a father. Being a good husband and father for his family is the responsibility of man in a family. Generally man in family has four roles they are a provider, leader, protector, and teacher. A good man in family should require four roles above if he wants to be a good husband, and father. A provider means in a family man as a husband and father should fulfill family needs, a leader means a man should be the leader for his family to lead his family to be a happy family, a protector means a man should protect his family from the thief and the bad effect of environment around his family, and a teacher means a man should be the good role model for his wife and children. In *American Beauty*, Lester described as a

husband and father who can fulfill the family needs, but he can not be said as a good father and husband because he can not run his third role as a leader, protector, and a good teacher for his wife and children properly.

a. *Man's Role Degradation Faced by Main Male Character (Lester)*

In a family, man has two relationships, the first with his wife and his daughter. As mentioned above, man has four roles in family as a provider, leader, protector, and teacher for his wife and daughter. In this analysis, I discuss about the role of man in a family as a leader, protector, and teacher for his wife and daughter. I do not discuss about the role of man as a provider for his family because in this movie I did not find the problem of men's role as a provider for his family that is faced by the male man character (Lester).

1. Role of Man as A Leader in Family

In our society, it is known that a man always be a leader in a family. That is what our society describes a man in a family. In this *American Beauty* film, there is one man named Lester Burnham that represents man's role degradation. Compared to other men's character in this movie, the main characters in this film is kind of man that does not have common gender stereotype of man. Even though he is a good man, he has a job to fulfill his family needs but he can not run his role as a leader for his family, properly. As a leader in family man has responsibility to lead his wife and children and solve the problem in family. Self-confidence and act as a leader was some of men's stereotypes. A good leader in family is a man who has leadership and confidence to lead his family. In this film, Lester as a leader for his family he does not only have the leadership but also he do not have the confidence to lead his family. It shows from the quotation below.

Lester : *Both my wife and daughter think I'm this gigantic loser and*

*they're right. I have lost something. I'm not exactly sure what it is. (00:04:00)*

The quotation above is Lester's expression in his mind when Lester and his wife go to work and his daughter is together with them. If I look at the expression "**both my wife and daughter think I'm this gigantic loser**" I can interpret that Lester is not confident person. His crisis of confidence can be interpreted from the expression, especially the word "**loser**". The word "loser" is usually used by the person who never wins in anything or person who loses in anything he does. As a leader who leads his family, Lester should not have that point of view because the word "loser" described as negative term. As stated above it described a person who loses in anything he does and this kind of person usually has no confidence because he loses in anything he does. If Lester has that point of view, it shows that Lester is not confidence person. The expression "**they're right. I have loser something**" can also be used to support my assumption that Lester has no confidence because most of that sentences stress his agreement about what his wife and daughter feels, and also his expression that "**I have lost something**". Relating to confidence and leadership, the phrase "**I have lost something**" can be interpreted as losing confidence and leadership. The way Lester thinks about himself can be seen as thinking negatively about his capability of a leader of a family.

2. Role of Man as A Protector in Family

The meaning of protector in this term is a person who protects his family from the thief and bad influences from his surrounding. As a protector, a man has a responsibility protect his wife, and daughter, but in this film Lester not described as a good protector for his family because he can not protect his family. We can see the Lester inability as a protector for his family from the dialogue below.

Jane : *I already do hate my dad.*

Ricky : *Why?*

Jane : *He's a total asshole; he's got this crush on my friend Angela, and it's disgusting.*

Ricky : *You'd rather he had the crush on you.*

Jane : *Gross. No. But it'd be nice if I was anywhere near as important to him as she is. I know you think my dad's harmless, but you're wrong.*

*He's doing massive psychological damage to me. 01:20:00)*

The dialogue above happen in the Ricky's house, Ricky is Jane's boy friend. If I see Jane's expression "*He's doing massive psychological damage to me*" in this dialogue Jane talks about his father Lester. The bold dialogue shows that Lester has done something that damages his daughter psychology. Lester as protector for his family must protect his family, a father who has the role to protect his family must not do the thing that harmful to someone he must protect that is his daughter. The dialogues above, it is clearly stated in Jane's dialogue that Lester has failed as a protector for his family.

### 3. Role of Man as A teacher for Family

The last role of man in family is a teacher for his family. As a teacher in family, a man has a duty to give the good example of attitude, behavior, and action for his wife and daughter, and he can also warn his family if they do something wrong. As a teacher for his family, a man is role model for his daughter because children usually look up his parents as their role model. If man wants to be a good role model for his children he must also have the good relationship with his family member, because if he has good relationship. It will be easy to run his role as a teacher for his family. In this film, Lester can not run his role as teacher properly for his family. We can see that Lester can not be a good teacher for his wife from this dialogue below.

Jane : *How could he not be damaging me?*

*I need a father who's a role model, not some horny geek boy who's going to spray his shorts... whenever I bring a girlfriend home from school. What a lame-o. (01:21:22)*

From the dialogue above I can see that Lester is not good role model for his daughter. I can see it from Jane's expression "*I need a father who's a role model*". From the expression, I can see that Jane needs a father who can be her role mode not a father like his father who can not give a good example to her because Lester like Jane's friend and Jane know about it. As good father for his daughter Lester must give good example of attitude and behavior but he does not that. As a father, Lester must give good attitude and be good role model for his daughter.

### B. Causes and Effects of Man's Role Degradation in *American Beauty*

A role is the behavior which is expected by someone with a given status in a group or society. In our daily life women and men has their own roles, that thing also happen in family life. The role of women is a mother, and men are a father. In a family, a problem about role between men and women sometimes appears in the surface. As an example a problem about man's role degradation in family that I find the movie entitled *American Beauty*. There are some factors that cause men's role degradation in a family. Usually, the cause of men's role degradation consists of two factors and they are internal and external factors. Internal factors happen from Lester himself and external factors happen from the people around him.

#### a. Internal Factor

As stated above, there are two factors that cause men's role degradation found in the above. They are internal factors and external factors, in this section I will explain more about the internal factor as causes men's role degradation happen to Lester.

Internal factor is factors that appear from Lester himself that cause men's role degradation. I can find internal factors from Lester character in *American Beauty*, he is the main character in that movie. I can see the further explanation below about internal factor that effect Lester's role degradation in family.

#### 1. Spirit of Life Decreasing

People will do the best in term of achieving their goals in life, for them everything is well-planned. They set their target based on the plan they made, and they do not want to loss any chance for achieving their target. However, not all people have the spirit like that and sometime people lose their spirit of life. Spirit is one of supporting factor for achieving the goal of life. The one factor that causes men's role degradation in Lester character is less of spirit of life. It is shown from the quotation below.

Lester : *I'm 42 years old. In less than a year I'll be dead, I don't know that yet and in a way I'm dead already.* (00:01:52)

The quotation above is Lester's expression in opening of *American Beauty* movie. From the quotation that types in the bold ink, I can see that the main character, Lester, is having a problem of losing his spirit of life. If I see the quotation "*In less than a year I'll be dead, I don't know that yet*" this quotation describes Lester's situation in future of American beauty movie. The quotation "*I don't know that yet*" tells about Lester's death and it will happen in less than a year but another quotation "*in a way I'm dead already*" explain about something different. The quotation "*in a way I'm dead already*" can be interpreted as Lester's expression toward his existence in family because his wife and daughter consider Lester as if he were "dead". It means that Lester no longer run his role as husband and father for his own family. A feeling like that cause Lester becomes a person who does not have spirit of life. Whatever, he does to his family, he never received appreciation from

their family. Besides not being appreciated, Lester is also not respected by his wife and daughter. So, there is no surprise if he does not do anything to change his image in front of his wife and daughter. From the quotation above, it can be interpreted that Lester has lose his spirit of life.

#### 2. Loss of Confidence

Self-confidence plays an important role in people's lives beside spirit. If someone does not have the confidence, that is person will be obstructed to do their role correctly. Lack of confidence is also a factor which causes men's role degradation that is experienced by Lester. I can see that Lester is not confidence person from the dialogue below.

Lester : *I'm 42 years old. In less than a year I'll be dead, I don't know that yet and in a way I'm dead already.*(00:01:52)

From the quotation above I can see that Lester is not a type of person who believes in himself. Lester is a leader in family, and he thinks that his wife and daughter think he is a loser, and he agrees with such thinking. A Leader of family should not think like that, if he had confidence that he has done his role as a leader of family correctly. A good leader of family must not confirm the assumption that he is a loser. Lester is not supposed to confirm the assumption that he is a loser, because the meaning of loser is very different with the meaning of leader in family. While Lester expression "they are right" shows that Lester is agree with the assumption that given by his wife and daughter that he is a loser who has a meaning as someone who has no confidence. Besides those internal factors, there are other factors that cause men's role degradation that happen to Lester. We can see from the explanation below.

#### b. External Factors

External factor is a factor that is caused by the influence of social environment and the people around. In this

case of men's role degradation that faced by of Lester, the cause is a change in gender roles and economic change.

### 1. Changing Gender Role

In this modern era, the role of men and women can be equal. In the world of work, women can be the boss or manager, and they can be same as men. In other words, women can work and earn income as a man. If I compare the role of women in the past, women can not do things like work outside the home to help her husband to fulfill their family needs like today. In the past the task of woman is being woman household, take care of children and take care of household activities at home. This thing is different with the role of men, both in the past and present the role of the man is being the leader of family or the backbone of the family in charge of fulfilling the family needs for his children and wife. They can work outside the house and choose the job they like. This is in contrast with what is happening today, right now women can do the same work and earn the same salary as men. The same thing also happens in *American Beauty* movie. In this movie, the major women character Carolyn (wife of Lester) is described as an ambitious career woman and he has his own business so he also has an income from his job as Lester. He is also described as an independent woman who is financially not depending to her husband. I can see the changing role of women in the *American Beauty* movie, women who previously only acted as a housewife now has grown into the role of housewife and career woman. It can be seen from the scene below.



(00:10:24)

This scenes illustrate the sign is planted in front of a home in a run-down

neighborhood. The Mercedes is parked in front of the house. Carolyn, wearing a smart business suit out from her car. She does that because she works as a real estate agent who is engaged in buying and selling homes. She is an independent type of modern woman, she worked hard to earn her own money. In addition, Carolyn is also a career woman who has a lot of business contacts and often attended parties held by companies and associated business relationships.

### 2. Economic Changing

The other factor of men's role degradation is the changing of economy. In this modern era the struggle of feminists have shown that women can be equal like men, women can do what men do and the people have to admit it. This was indicated by the increasing number of educated women and career women. With the spirit of feminism in this modern world, women have been transformed into independent women. The fact that the rising numbers of educated women also grows slowly has change culturally and economically. It shows by women who work outside their home and get a high position in work place and be successful career women. In the film *American Beauty*, I can also see through the major female character Carolyn (Lester's wife) has felt the economic change because he is the kind of woman who is independent and career woman, who can buy whatever she wants with his own money. I can see that from the dialogues below.

Jane : Look, Mom, I really don't feel like having a Kodak here.

Carolyn: [Gasps] **You ungrateful little brat! Just look at everything have! When I was your age, I lived in a duplex! We didn't have our own house.** (01:08:51)

From the dialogue above we can see that Carolyn help the family finance a lot. If we see the dialogues "**I lived in a duplex! We didn't even have our own house**", it shows that Carolyn not has good finance in the past, and she does not have her own house. From

the dialogues "*You ungrateful little brat!*", I can also interpret that Carolyn has a house by working hard as career women. It shows how mad she is, when her daughter not grateful with their condition right now.

Carolyn is type of independent career women because she can buy what she wants to buy, so that she has high sense of belonging of her asset inside or outside her house. I can see the example from the dialogues below.

Carolyn: *Uh, whose car is that out front?*

Lester: *Mine. 1970 Pontiac Firebird, the car I've always, and now I have it. I rule!*

Carolyn: *Uh-huh. Where's the Camry?*

Lester : *I traded it in.*

Carolyn: *Shouldn't you have consulted me first?*

Lester : *Hm, let me think. No. You never drove it. (01:15:02)*

From the quotation above, I can know that Carolyn has high sense of belonging, if I see dialogues "*Uh, whose car is that out front?*" in this dialogues, I see that she curious about a car that park in her yard. This is the first sign of the people who has high sense of belonging, always be curious about something in her house and if I see other dialogues "*uh-huh. Where's the Camry?*" she star to ask about what she has, she ask about her car. At the last, the dialogues "*Hm, let me think. No. You never drove it*" shows that everything in her house is her mine. The dialogues "*You never drove it*" show it clearly. That means if she likes that car, even her husband not allow to changes it, in other word, it shows that most of things inside her house she buy with her money because she has high sense of belonging. So, the role of Lester is supposed to give a living for his family, can be replaced by Carolyn although Lester makes his own money but Carolyn has the highs income. Causes of man's role degradation not only caused by Lester himself, it also caused by people around Lester that is his wife. Being career woman and have high salary than her

husband (Lester), make Carolyn to be dominant person in family. She has her own income and can buy anything she wants make her to be the one who have high sense of belonging in her family.

### C. Effects of Man's Role Degradation in *American Beauty*

In family, a man always illustrated as a leader in family. Man usually become a leader in the family, the character of leader in the *American Beauty* is bit different. In this movie Lester described the male lead is different from the figure of a man in general. He is described as a man who can not perform its role as a husband and father very well because he has experienced men's role degradation in the family. The effect of men's role degradation gives an impact to people around him especially his daughter and wife. In this movie, I can see the effects that occur in the Lester family after he faced men's role degradation. Further explanation can be found in the explanation below.

#### a. Family Relationships are not Harmonious

In general, disharmony in the family usually happens because of a lack of communication between husband and wife. The film also portrays disharmony between husband and wife who happen between Lester and Carolyn. They rarely talk their domestic problems, they just talk about things like jobs or their daughter. Their relationship survives only to maintain their image in society and to her only daughter, but their relationship is not harmonious. We can see from the dialogues below.

Carolyn: *Now, listen to me. This is an important business function. As you know, my business is selling an image and part of my job is to live that image.*

Lester : *Honey, do me a favor and say whatever you want to say and spare me the propaganda.*

Carolyn : *All right. Hi, Shirley! Listen. Just do me a favor. Act happy tonight.*

Lester : [High Voice] I am happy, honey! (00:30:18)

From the dialogues between Lester and Carolyn, I can see that they are not happy couple. They just sell their image of a happy for business purpose, we can see from this dialogue “*Now, listen to me. This is an important business function. As you know, my business is selling an image and part of my job is to live that image*”. The dialogue tells that they pretend to be happy couple because selling as a happy image is important part for Carolyn business. Other dialogue that shows that they are not happy is this dialogue “**just do me a favor. Act happy tonight**”, Carolyn asks her husband to pretend to be happy that is mean they are not happy in reality.

b. An Affair

The effect of men’s role degradation in the family not only causes the bad relationship that happen in family between husband and wife, daughter but also has an effect on cheating with another woman and men. Things like this also happens in the film *American Beauty*, because her husband can not run his role well so that his wife cheating with another men. It can be seen in the scene below.



(01:03:43)

This scene happens in a room. Carolyn is meeting with her business associates in a motel just two of them in that room, they are sitting on the bed next to each other while smiling happily. In the scene above I can see that Carolyn has an affair with her one of business relation. It is impossible that marriage women can do such that things she can not be in a room of a motel with other men, if Carolyn does with

her business relation that means her cheating on Lester. Usually, a business meeting never takes place in a motel.

It can be said that the effect of men’s role degradation not only affect themselves but also have an impact on those people around him especially his family. It has been proved by what is experienced by Lester and his family in the film *American Beauty*. Men’s role degradation that happens to Lester has affected his family's happiness.

## CONCLUSSION

Men’s role degradation is the degradation of role that posses by men. Degradation is a situation in which somebody has lost all self respect and the respect of others people. In the *American Beauty* movie the man’s role degradation happens to the major character (Lester Burnman). In the movie Lester described as a husband who loss his self respect and respect of others. He faced man’s role degradation. He can not run his role as a husband and father of his family appropriately. He is loss his role as a leader, a protector, and a teacher in family. And there are the causes and effect of that Lester’s role degradation. There are two factors that cause men’s role degradation in this movie, internal, and external factors. The internal factors is factor that comes from Lester himself, they are the decreasing of spirit in life and loss of confidence. Another factor that causes men’s role degradation in this movie is external factor, coming from the people around him and the influence of social environment. External factor consist of two factors, changing gender role and economic changing. Besides causes of men’s role degradation there is the effects of men’s role degradation. There two effects of men’s role degradation in this movie, the effects are Lester’s family not life in harmony and an affair in their marriage life.

## REFERENCES

*Atlantic Magazine*. July/ Agust 2010. (in  
<http://www.theatlantic.com>)

Fakih, Mansour. 2008. *Analisis Gender dan Transformasi Sosial*. Yogyakarta: Puataka Pelajar.

Microsoft ® Encarta ® 2009. © 1993-2008  
*Microsoft Corporation*. All rights reserved.

Mujianto, Yan., Zaim Elmubarok and Sunahrowi. 2010. *Pengantar Ilmu Budaya*. Yogyakarta: Pelangipublishing