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The Construction of Feminism in “Ten Years of Marriage”

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Abstract: The following essay explores the theme of feminism within Su Qing’s *Ten Years of Marriage*. It emphasizes the focal character Huaiqing who can be taken as representation of cultural norms in the patriarchal society during the “May 4th period” in China. Su Qing uses feminine discourse and unique narrative strategies to show women’s status as “others” and their survival dilemmas in the patriarchal culture, reveal their physical and mental constraints and refute the misogynistic idea of female being parasites of their husbands. Apart from displaying the physical and mental constraints inflicted on women, the novel makes a portrait of a bunch of pitiful and detestable females, exposing their flaws in an attempt to arouse their self-consciousness. Su Qing in this novel also deconstructed “male mythology” and subverted the supreme image of males in traditional culture by presenting a series of male images in a critical way.

Keywords: Feminism; Phallus; Deconstruction; Defects; Otherness

1. Introduction

“Feminism” is a basic theoretical concept of the Western Women’s Liberation Movement. This concept was introduced to China during the “May 4th” New Culture Movement, which set off a social trend of freedom and equality pursuit among Chinese women at that time. During the “May 4th” period, the rise of democracy and new cultural movements provided an opportunity for the emergence of Chinese feminism and women issues were recognized as one of the most important social concerns. Some great minds in China like Cai Yuanpei, Chen Duxiu, Li Dazhao, Hu Shi, Zhou Zuo Ren, Lu Xun, and Shen Yanbing engaged themselves in the active advocacy of the women liberation movement. The predominant magazine *New Youth* also opened a column to promote the female awareness campaign. Since then, female consciousness has been spreading widely in China with far-reaching influences.

In 1943, Su Qing published her novel *Ten Years of Marriage*, which expressively presents the story of Su Huaiqing, a representation of a lot of women with mixed ideologies at the time. Huaiqing, as a well-educated woman, is engaged with her fiancé Xu Chongxian at the command of her mother and drops out of school later in her pregnancy. Her life after marriage was not as she has expected. She was bored with the deadening routine of her life and tired of constant conflicts with her in-laws. After going through various discords and disappointments in her marriage, her husband’s cheating and estrangement is the last straw that she finally bites the bullet to file for divorce for her own value and dignity, which is staggering during the 1940s in China.

As the pioneer of female talks in the 1940s, Su Qing’s *Ten Years of Marriage* uses female discourse and unique narrative strategies to show women’s “other” status and survival dilemmas in patriarchal culture. Apart from displaying the physical and mental constraints inflicted on women, the novel makes a portrait of a bunch of pitiful and detestable females, exposing their flaws to arouse their self-consciousness. In addition to realistic depiction of women’s life, Su Qing presents a series of male images represented by Xu Chongxian, Su’s husband,

in a critical way, which deconstructed “male mythology” and subverted the supreme image of males in traditional culture (Yang, 2010). This bold challenge to the authority of men has stepped out of the male-centered culture and encourage female autonomy and independence.

Zhang Ailing once wrote it in *Looking for Su Qing*: “If you can see Su Qing clearly, you can probably know the female citizens of Shanghai. People only see the stylish Shanghai women, but are not aware of their tough personality. From the novel of *Ten Years of Marriage*, I know that this is credible.” (Qiu, 2017).

2. Resistance against the “Otherness”

The fate of Chinese women is intricately entangled with the fate of Chinese history. Ancient China was featured by self-sufficient agricultural production and feudal royal governance with Confucianism being the main ethical principle of the society. In this centralized hierarchical society where imperial power, clan power, and patriarchy were unified, women are always the one that is forced and ruled (Gu, 2011). For a long time, having no economic power and the right to speak, ancient Chinese women have always been silent in all perspectives. It is true that the birth of a patrilineal society is inevitable for the physiological differences between the sexes, but the intense gender hostility and gender domination in the socio-political and cultural system of the patriarchal society is like a “gender war”. It can be said that all the ritual, judicial, and ethical systems in the patrilineal society are aimed at women, with women as their opponents. For a long time, women have been subjected to the economic, physical and psychological abuse in the patriarchal society, being victim of “rape-like weddings” and unpaid enslavement, becoming the silent “others” in the patriarchal society, an empty signifier and eternal *Le Deuxième Sexe* (De Beauvoir, 2011). The feminist movement during the May 4th period aimed to gain gender equality from the psychological perspective, encouraging “new women” to free themselves from their families and strive for the realization of their individuality and values. Tragically, most of them had to yield to financial difficulties and give up their pursuit of freedom, which was naturally the Chinese version of Nora who ran away from her family in the Doll’s House.

At the end of the 1930s, Shanghai fell under the Japanese invasion, when people found it more difficult to earn their livelihood with the mounting national crisis. As far as freedom is concerned, with the weakening binding forces in the occupied area, female writers represented by Zhang Ailing and Su Qing started to have more freedom in writing taking no account of the conventional and dominant norms and requirements for women (Mu, 2006). Without the constraint of conceptual pressure and taboos, they were able to give an accurate and graphic depiction of the female experience. In the male discourse writing within the patriarchal society, women’s “physical experience” and “psychological experience” have been ignored for a long time, and the female group has always been in silent as “others” (Dai and Meng, 2004). In the novel *Ten Years of Marriage*, Su Qing tries to get rid of the object status of the female as illustrated in previous works. Through a large number of descriptions “physical and psychological experience”, women are transformed from “self-existence” to “consciousness exist” (Dai and Meng, 2004). *Ten Years of Marriage* deviates from the taboo of male discourse writing with a lot of passages describing women’s physical experience in the novel. The author presents us the pain Huanqing is going through at the beginning of her childbirth, “and later it hurts more often and gets increasingly unbearable, to which I have to grit my teeth and grasp the bed rails before I get it through.” The doctor said, “don’t move your butt, but I really feel that I must move, and I want to pee and relieve myself. I want to shit but I can’t. It seems that there is a chunk of big stuff stuck behind. I just can’t get it out no matter how hard I try. I am naked, not feeling cold, let alone shame. It hurts, it hurts, at first I was crying, then the voice became low and hoarse, then it was only breathless.” (Su, 2010). On top of the vivid description of pain, the story mentions some private issues like defecation and so on, which is unprecedented for a female writer.

In addition to bold and delicate narration of “pain” of females, the author also pays special attention to the psychological experience of women, and reveals the unique and hidden psychological depression of them in the patriarchal society. The novel has meticulously portrayed Huaiqing’s desire for her knight with “good looks and white armor”, her jealousy and hostility to the brash pretty widow Ruixian with “silver high-heels”, “silver cheongsam, firm and full breast”, her disgust for her rough sister-in-law Xingying who has “dull and dry hair, high cheekbones, and crooked head” (Su, 2010). Readers can also see her anger and resentment for those who are crass, plain boring and bigoted sexists around her. She has no one to turn to but stay alone with her grief, resentment and frustration in her strive for the independent life she has been yearning for.

Additionally, Su Qing bravely describes sex in *Ten Years of Marriage*, such as “sexual urge” and “menstruation”. In traditional Chinese culture, “sex culture” has always been marginalized, which is a taboo by Chinese traditional “ethics”. Women should feel ashamed of themselves for talking about sex and anyone who

defies it would be held in infamy as slut and adulteress. Under the patriarchal system, women are defined by their ability to reproduce, whose sexual desire are completely ignored and suppressed. In *Ten Years of Marriage*, Su Qing says frankly that sex is a normal physiological need and expresses women's strong desires for it, which is very pioneering at the time. Su Qing therefore becomes a bold daring rebel at the time. She demands release of women's forbidden sexual desires, believing that women will not be endowed with equal right until their sexual desire can be satisfied (Huang, 2010). Before Huaiqing gets married, she had so many fantasies about love and her growing lust for "cute chivalrous young man" gets to be overpowering. After marriage, instead of feeling offended, she kind of feels turned on when her husband makes dirty talks to her ears. These detailed descriptions of women's "physical and psychological experience" helps to elevate women from "things" to "people". The novel exposes the survival predicament of women in the patriarchal culture, denounces the persecution of women physically and psychologically by the male-centered system, and transforms women's self-existence into conscious existence (Dai and Meng, 2004).

3. Deconstruction of "Phallus-Centered" Male Mythology

"Patriarchy is a hierarchical system in which men have all or most of the power and importance in a society or group, which defines the relationship among different individuals in the society." (Li, 2009). In this centralized hierarchical society, a new paradigm of oppression comes into existence, with male being the dominating power and female they dominated. Women are deprived of all the rights as a complete person.

Men are the main body of society, who have decisive influence on women's destiny. They generally are the provider of wealth, status and a stable life for women who also expect to receive love, tenderness and affection from men. Compared with men, women are basically taken as inferior attachment. According to French psychoanalyst Lacan's theory, women in a patriarchal society will always be subjected to constant anxiety and shame for Phallus missing (the symbol of male genitalia, which is a symbolic signifier of father, patriarch) (Qi, 2010). Lacan focus on the function of the phallus as a signifier of lack and sexual difference. The phallus in Lacanian theory is not only the male genital organ, although it clearly carries those connotations. The phallus is first and foremost a signifier and in Lacan's system a particularly privileged signifier. Women cannot gain the sense of belonging and beat their anxiety until she can have a son, an imaginary Phallus, from a man. There is no respect for the "other" in a patriarchal society, who, as the object of patriarchal rationality, can only be considered if it can benefit the subject. This completely self-centered cultural view often makes men "deified" and are given the image of either "gentleman" or "hero" in literary works (Dai and Meng, 2004).

Huaiqing in *Ten Years of Marriage* has also imagined that the fiancé she has never met is a chivalrous hero like Zhaoyun in Chinese classic literary works with "vermillion lips and white armor", so that she can't restrain herself from being mesmerized by him and exclaims: "He is my hero", indicating the deep-rooted image of the supreme hero in the mind of women at the time. However, as the plot unfolded, the male hypocritical, selfish, and unfeeling nature gradually appeared before Huaiqing, shattering the male image of "hero" in her mind. Whenever Huaiqing demeans herself to ask for living expenses from her husband Chongxian, Huaiqing's narrow-minded husband, he would always appear to be bitter and indignant, as if to blame her for not being considerate. When Huaiqing is shedding tears out of embarrassment and aggrievances for not getting the money from him, instead of feeling remorse, he gets so explosive and furious, "get the fuck out of here! I am a fucking loser in your eyes, then why ask fucking money from me?" Especially when the husband and wife are at odds, this kind of "begging" is extremely humiliating. The husband can throw money on the face of his wife with some really mean words: "what's with your damn face?! I am so sick of it! I'd rather give the money to a hooker who at least bows and fawn on me!" Marriage is even becoming a way for sexual exchange, "from now on, never expect to get a damn penny from me! If you are not fulfilling your job as a wife, why should I slave to take bread back home?" (Su, 2010). Huaiqing's minimum efforts to maintain her dignity repeatedly end up in failure because of her financial attachment to her husband. When it comes to the money issue, the male sexist dispenses with the traditional ethics of "man being the breadwinner and women being the caregiver" and becomes contemptibly mean and small. This deadbeat husband doesn't want his wife to be an aspiring writer and thoroughly disapprove of her reading at home, rather, he would prefer to have a childlike little woman who is obsessed with dressing herself up than a brilliant scholar. Huaiqing's wit can be used to grade exam papers and take notes for her husband, and her abundance of leisure time can be wasted in trivial pursuit of games and fashion, but on in reading books and self-advancement. In order to preserve her minimum dignity and supplement the family, Huaiqing begins writing for magazines, which is totally provocative and is such a disgrace for Chongxian. "Xian's face is cold, and he demanded in a firm tone, 'please stop writing articles in

the future, I can give you the money’.” After seeing Huaqing writing to Yu Bai, the editor-in-chief of the magazine, he became furious and said, “get out of my place if you can’t cut writing!” He justifies himself by saying that “it is not a bad thing for a woman to study, but she shouldn’t just want to compete with her husband and discredit her husband. I believe that aspiring men would rather slave away to bring money home, and none of them are willing to let their wives show off their skills. “Among many things, this is just another example of the hypocrisy and selfishness of men in the patriarchal society. As the author Su Qing said: “I know that men are not afraid of their wife being too vulgar or boring, not afraid of their lavish spending and even horrible looks. However, being better than men and gaining autonomy is absolutely an unimaginable threat to men.” (Su, 2010). And it is this bigoted sexist who evades his responsibility when the family went down in the world, racketing around with no concern of his wife and children. His indifference, hypocrisy and irresponsibility were fully exposed when he abandoned his pregnant mistress, claiming that he could not live without his wife and children. Another example of defected image of men is Yu Bai, the talented editor in the publishing house, who is also to be blamed for his lack of respect for women. He is also helling around when days get tough, hurling a cup at his wife and kicking her violently when she talks back. Su Qing wrote in a shrewd and pungent tone in the article, “No man can fully appreciate his wife’s beauty, who is no attractive anymore but a cumbersome waste. He will eventually find her annoying and hate her, who can only give vent to their suppressed anger through physical abuses of their wives.” (Wang, 2004).

The “defect” description of the male image in the novel ruthlessly dispels the heroic image of men in women’s minds, restoring the authentic image of men in the “secular” society, and exposing the corrupted nature of the male chauvinist ideology for thousands of years. It exposes the brutal rule of men over women, and completely rewrites the male “heroic mythology” that have been passed down from generation to generation, achieving the goal of anti-Phallus campaign.

4. Female Image of the “Unconscious Murderers”

Beauvoir says in *Second Sex*, “A person is not born to be a woman but developed into” (Beauvoir, 2011). There is no physical, psychological or economic destiny that can determine the status of a woman in society. “Female” between male and asexual are produced within the whole development of human culture. It can be seen that the emergence of female “second sex” is the product of the long-term development of human society. In addition to criticizing male domination and oppression, women should also look at them calmly. The uniqueness of *Ten Years of Marriage* is that the novel can hit the nail on the head in its narrative of the defects of women. The portraits of women in Su Qing’s works are just like an array of “ugly women” who are misogynistic in mind, abusing and “killing” other women without any mercy.

4.1. Mixed Young Women

In addition to the heroine Huaqing, *Ten Years of Marriage* mainly portrays three young women, namely, the licentious widow Ruixian, her sister-in-law Xingying and her best friend Hu Liying. Ruixian is Chongxian’s sister-law, whose husband died young and has been dubiously intimate with Chongxian before he gets married and picked on his newly wed wife in every possible way. Her sister-in-law Xingying, a cheap and mean girl, is bitterly jealous and therefore bears a grudge against Huaqing. Hu Liying, a close friend of Huaqing, who has been badly afflicted with her unhappy marriage, has always been yearning for love and a stable and prosperous life. For this reason, she even had an affair with the husband of her best friend. The “love intruder” in the novel is young woman, a combination of “old thoughts” and “new behaviors”, who is used to taking men as “subjects” and relying on them to survive financially while at the same time dispense with the traditional restraint of ethic virtues imposed on women. As a woman with traditional values and new ideology, Huaqing also gave up her pursuit of romance after learning of her pregnancy and married someone she barely loved. When she found out the cheating of her husband, she struggled to maintain her shaky identifications and status in the marriage, sparing no efforts to degrade her friend, saying “marriage with a bitch is unreliable”, “no divorced woman can show her true love to her husband after remarrying.” Although she knows “what does chastity have to do with a woman?” (Su, 2010). To keep her name and her husband, she would not hesitate to hurt other women who had similar misfortunes with her, such as her widowed sister-in-law Ruixian, her friend Liying who was abused and abandoned by her husband, and her husband’s sister Xingying who is always the object of people’s ridicule for her appearance. When the husband was fooling around with other women, instead of divorcing him for her dignity, she tried to win the support of her conservative in-laws as a helpless victim. What Huaqing resists is not the unfair patriarchal society, nor gender discrimination. This endless struggle is not for love, but for survival,

for the food and clothing for her and her children, which makes her contemptible and sophisticated.

4.2. *Poor and Detestable Woman*

From the moment family appear in Chinese society, it was male-oriented. The expressions such as “the son’s inheritance of the father’s career” and “the son’s inheritance of the father’s will” represent the family order in Chinese society. In ancient China, a woman was required to obey her father before marriage, and her husband during married life and her sons in widowhood. Additionally, they should have four virtues, namely, the virtue of fidelity, physical charm, propriety in speech and efficiency in needle work. This kind of value based on male superiority makes female social “objects” and “others” attached to males. They are constrained within the norms designed by male society and gradually get lost their own identities. What’s worse is that women who have lost themselves impose the set of feudal ethics on other women, making them another batch of victims of patriarchy. In the patriarchal society, the only “profession” and only “honor” of a woman is to be a mother. Childbirth, not marriage itself, is a woman’s bar mitzvah. Only by raising a child can a woman get rid of her anxiety of missing. This child, this imaginary Phallus should be a male and a son. “Giving birth to a daughter” has almost become a disaster. The baby girl does not seem to be a baby, at least not a “complete” baby. It is just an empty joy, a “dumb firecracker”. Baby girls are just born to be “depreciating assets” for these women, and the delivery room has immediately become a “red room” full of ominous taboos. “What a pretty girl, take good care of your younger brother when you grow up”. Even my mother can only give some cold comforts when she took my hand and whimpered things like “be a good wife, be submissive, be patient, being a woman is always hard,as long as you have a boy next year...” All of this aroused Huaiqing’s indignation, “how can you have such a mean opinion of yourself, how can you degrade yourself like that just because you don’t have nuts!” (Su, 2010).

This ugliness is prescribed by men. The patriarchal society defines women as eternal objects and empty signifiers, and only the appearance of fathers, husbands, and sons can put an end to the emptiness of women. Even her mother and mother-in-law who were once victims of sexism turn themselves into accomplices of the patriarchal society, “Well, bloom first, then bear fruit!” In this case, this is the world in which women are cruel, abusive and contemptuous of other women. This is just like a mirror of women’s real existence in the patriarchal era when they are ignored and denied. It is this same group of women who end up being mean and ignoring other women and don’t display any trail of self-reflection on their own conditions. Through Huaiqing’s mouth, Su Qing exposed the ugly reality of these women, and uttered a long sigh of “Anguished at its misfortune, angered by its unwillingness to fight.” She tries to arouse the self-consciousness of women by means of examining the flaws and defects inculcated in women.

5. Conclusion

Su Qing’s novels use unique female discourse and narrative techniques to focus on the physical and mental experience of women, and show readers the true nature of women in the real world and their survival dilemmas under the patriarchy system based on the female perspective, which break male’s “hero” image and contribute to the deconstruction of male myths under the patriarchal culture. She let the new women in her pen make an independent voice of “up, up, up!” Due to the limitations of the times, Su Qing tentatively pointed out a “possible” path for women to save themselves. But in that transitional period between the new and the old, even independent spirit like Huaiqing who exclaim “I want to make something out of myself”, “I’m looking for a career, I want to speak out for girls in the world” can’t escape the fate of being manipulated by men as well. These women are wandering in resistance and pain, being afflicted in constant rejection and deep despair. This is Su Qing’s confusion and at the same time the confusion of that era. As time has entered the 21st century, men and women are getting equal in terms of legal, political, and economic status, but the feudal ideas that have been prevailing in Chinese society for more than two thousand years still haunted like specters. Eco-feminism points out that feminism does not intend to abandon to have a better understanding of men and women themselves so as to make themselves autonomous individuals. It calls for the establishment of an ecological moral ethics based not on the principle of governance but on the principles of reciprocity and responsibility. Modern women should accept themselves and get rid of the ideological concepts that are imposed on them, not to yield to gender roles and dominant ideologies, and refrain from seeking justice from male society as the inferior. Women are not likely to free themselves from the yoke of history until they can gain sufficient recognition of themselves, cultivate their gender independence in the way of thinking and discourse behavior so as to step out of the weak stage and grow into a pure woman without any implication of weakness and sacrifice, a woman who has the ability and talent to find their feet in the male world.

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