

# Differences of Women's View of Love Between East and West—Taking *Moment in Peking* and *The Scarlet Letter* as Examples

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## Abstract

Love is a wonderful flower in the garden of human emotion, which is an indispensable element in literary works. It not only represents the author's writing intention, but also reflects a certain era. In the past thousands of years, there have been many literary works dealing with the theme of female love. Their influence on the society as a whole is immense, such as Cao Xueqin's *A Dream of Red Mansions*, Hans Anderson's *The Daughter of the Sea* and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. These kinds of love-based works can always get readers a deep impression and are thought-provoking. From these works, we can see that love is embodied not only in behavior, but also in spirit. Based on the different views of love between China and the West, this paper analyzes the causes of the differences between Chinese and Western views of love through the outcomes of the female character's love in the two works of *Moment in Peking* and *The Scarlet Letter*.

**Keywords:** Yao Mulan, Hester, view of love, traditional thought

## 1. Introduction

Although *The Scarlet Letter* and *Moment in Peking* have the same love tragedy, there is a great difference in the protagonist's image shaping. And in this part, I will analyze the similarities and differences between the aspects of Chinese and Western philosophical thoughts, outlook on life, female consciousness and traditional women's morality.

## 2. Chinese and Western Philosophical Thoughts

Chinese philosophy is rooted in Goodness. Lin Ruzi, Lin Yutang's daughter appraised in 1940 that the greatest advantage of *Moment in Peking*

was not its vivid description of characters and landscape, or ingenious psychological depiction, but its philosophical views. The greatest feature of *Moment in Peking* is the philosophical views Lin Yutang presents between the lines. The heroine Yao Mulan explains her living philosophy which is the blending of Confucianism and Taoism. Mulan is "The daughter of Taoism" and "The wife-in-law of Confucianism". Although she wants to conform to Taoism and live together with Lifu, but she also wants to follow Confucian ethics and obey her parents' order to marry Zeng Sunya. In the end, she chooses to make friends with Lifu and gets married to Zeng Sunya whose family is

grateful to her family. From this, it can be seen that Yao Mulan does not escape the shackles of traditional thoughts and still obeys her parents' orders and the Goodness of the Confucian ethics. Lin Yutang shows his sympathy for the traditional Chinese women through the character Yao Mulan, who cannot master her own destiny when facing love.

By contrast, Western philosophy is more inclined to uphold Truth. Human to Heaven is not Affinity and Integration but how to recognize, how to discover the truth and confirm the truth. The concept of individuality in Western philosophy about values of life and meaning of life is: The values of life and the meaning of life are reflected in the pursuit and the practice of Truth by individual Human. The philosophy of the West emphasizes the priority of human beings, which strengthens the individual consciousness and the individual's pursuit of truth and self-value. Hester reflects Truth when facing her love for the priest. After she marries Chillingworth, she is not allowed to fall in love with others. But she dares to pursue her own happiness. This is her presentation of the pursuit of truth and personal value.

### 3. The Outlook on Life

It can be said that the influence of Taoism on Yao Mulan is profound. From childhood to adulthood, from the reluctant marriage to the silent love, from standing aloof from world affairs to entering WTO, her Taoist outlook on life is gradually maturing. And the heroine Mulan embodies a strong fatalism. From the experience of her life, she not only believes one's matrimonial destiny was decreed by fate, but also the entire fate of people cannot be controlled. Before Mulan flees with his father at an early age, Mulan asks her father when she sees his father burying the treasure of gold and silver in the ground "What can we do if the treasure had fallen into the hands of others when we came back?" Yao Sian replies, "If it is not the ordained master who digs out those treasures, they can only get a few jars of water." Mulan understands that the disaster and blessings of life are already doomed, and that people cannot control them. The blessings did not come from the outside, but from themselves. "If a person is to enjoy real blessings or all kinds of blessings in the world, he must have the virtues of blessing and then he can own blessing forever. In front of the blessed, a cylinder of clear water will turn into white silver; and in

front of those who should not be blessed, one cylinder of silver will also turn into a cylinder of clear water." This is the view of life that Mulan has upheld since her childhood. This view of life enables her to be happy and content with the world. This is reflected in her attitude toward love. Although she loves Lifu but she does not fight for each other's happiness. Instead, she gets married to Sunya she does not love.

Different from the outlook of Yao Mulan who can stay at ease under all circumstances, for Hester, the significance lies in the desire to achieve the value of life. Hester has a strong character. Individualism is the most important and core value of America and American culture. The American value of individualism is deeply influenced by Puritanism. In 1620, when the first Pilgrims set foot on the North American continent, they brought in traces of individualist culture. They traveled far and wide to seek freedom of religion. This is exactly how they valued individuality and pursued individualism. Individualism attaches great importance to individual freedom and broadly emphasizes the self-dominance and self-control of individuals who are not subject to external constraints. The 17<sup>th</sup>-century British philosopher John Locke defined that every person was unique and different from any other person. The United States immigration culture has a variety of sources and it emphasizes the development of self-consciousness. The core is to stress that people are independent individuals. Everyone has independent thinking and judgment and can decide on his own way of doing things. Hester has such a cultural imprint. And Hester can bravely fall in love with the young priest regardless of the Puritan forces. Since their love is not accepted, she boldly offers to elope with the priest. From these behaviors we can see that Hester embodies the spirit of individualism, self-value and truth.

If Hester's outlook on life is formed in the process of self-government, then Mulan's outlook on life and values are constantly shaped in the process of surpassing the mundane turmoil. Mulan's father once said to her, "If you are right, then you cannot be invaded." In Mulan's life, there are many times when she thinks of her father's words. And this Truth has become a guide in her life.

### 4. Temperament and Character

Yao Mulan in *Moment in Peking* lacks the

rebellious character and obeys the traditional ethics. When she is 10 years old, she is trafficked by traffickers. Zeng family saved her and gave her a second life. And in this experience, she meets Zeng Sunya who becomes her husband later. Sunya and MuLan grow up together, and thus, to some extent, they have some emotional basis, and Mulan believes that one person's marriage is destined. Honestly speaking, Sunya likes Mulan, and Mulan likes Sunya, too. But this kind of love is just like the emotion between brother and sister. However, the elders consider that they are meaning meant for each other. So they strongly hope Mulan can be married to the Zeng family and become head of the family. Because of this, her parents promise to make Mulan Sunya's wife when they grow up. Mulan herself does not raise objections but silently accepts it. Although Sunya is not outstanding, the Zeng family is rich, and this is, after all, a perfect match. After she meets Lifu, she feels happy. But unfortunately, because of her cowardice, she does not make any efforts to strive for her happiness. Instead, she buries her feelings deep in her heart and reluctantly marries Sunya. There is no love between men and women in this kind of relationship, but it is natural for men and women to respect each other and become partners in the future. As long as both parties are healthy, the rest is to obey their parents' words. Her parents' words make her pursuit of pure love in vain. It can be said that Mulan makes no efforts to struggle for her love, and even a hint of the idea of rebellion has never occurred. Although she is affected by some new ideas, receives a good education and learns from her classmates about Christianity against the traditional dogma of morality and of the marriage system of totally listening to parents' words, she still retains the obedience to fate like the old-fashioned women. Such obedience and weakness lead to the misfortunes of her love and marriage.

Different from Mulan's submissive and weak character, in *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester is strong, brave and dares to pursue her own personality and love. From the very beginning, Hester has shown her daring and wild desires with a gorgeous dress which is incompatible with the simple customs of society. She dares to believe in herself and the rights and power of love, and realizes that she has no happiness in her marital relationship with her husband, whom she does not love. In order to avoid the consumption of

this kind of life and gain new meaning of life, Hester bravely breaks the shackles of Puritanism and falls in love with the young priest Dimmesdale, and gives birth to their daughter Pearl, for which she commits the original sin. As a punishment, she has to wear the red letter A on her chest as a punishment. But she is not ashamed of this. When she stands on the scaffold and is humiliated by people and requested to speak out the child's father. In order to preserve the priest's reputation and status, she remains silent. Her brave pursuit of love makes her boldly face people's ridicule and then during the life with Pearl, Hester does needlework to maintain her life. When she is walking down the street, the priests would stop her and educate her, which attracts crowds to surround the poor sinful woman. Some people laugh at her and some people criticize her; even the little ones fear the woman because they have obtained some terrible information about this unhappy woman from their parents. The surrounding environment puts her in extreme pain, but she does not give up her pursuit of life. On the contrary, she bravely endures people's discrimination with her innate strength and rare abilities. Under the permit of a judge who is still constantly monitoring her, she builds her life with the meager income she has. It can be seen that if people want to pursue their own happiness and master their own destiny, they must dare to struggle with the forces that hinder their happiness. Only in this way can they grasp their own happiness.

Hester and Yao Mulan's personality typically reflects the aesthetic differences between Chinese and Western women's character images. The Chinese tradition regards peculiar tolerance and self-restraint as the beauty of the female character. The unique historical process and cultural formation of the Americas determine that their individual aesthetic orientation towards women tends to be independence and reality. The spiritual products of any ethnic group are the products of a certain era. In addition, it is related to the branding of the nation's long history and culture in the treasure-house of national memory. In this sense, the female characters bred by Chinese traditional female culture often have such qualities as gentleness, condescension, and tolerance. However, the formation of Hester's character is precisely typical of the American culture. In the early US, the Puritans eager for

reforms came to America with their dreams and hopes. People lost in the old continent, bankrupt farmers and absconded criminals came to the Americas with their acquired skills. Everyone came here to create their ideal home. But at the same time the barren land and dangerous indigenous Indians made them suffer countless difficulties every day. There, the harsh environment of the wilderness tested their bodies. Indians' arrows aroused them to fight for survival. With the gradual formation of this culture, people growing on this land are slowly being affected.

### 5. Female Consciousness

Mulan in *Moment in Peking* has no independent female consciousness in the face of her love and marriage. First of all, she cannot choose her own love partner. She loves and wants to marry Lifu, but the feudal etiquette forces her to follow her parents' orders, and thus, she has to marry Sunya. Second, after marriage, Mulan and her husband move to Hangzhou for some time, but her husband Sunya loves a rich and comfortable life and begins to feel unsatisfied with his family life; thus, he begins to pursue a female student in the Academy of Fine Arts. In this situation, Yao Mulan still chooses to stay with her husband and takes care of him. Faced with a loveless marriage and her husband's betrayal, she only chooses to be silent and even hopes that one day her husband might grow up. From these things, we can see that she has no freedom, no autonomy and no personal life of her own. She shows no female consciousness.

The famous literary theorist Jonathan D. Culler once said that "feminist consciousness has a greater influence on literary standards than any other consciousness theory." The heroine Hester of *The Scarlet Letter* shows a strong female consciousness. First, in the face of a loveless marriage and her husband's disrespectfulness, she ignores the Puritan ethics and bravely falls in love with a young priest and has a daughter. She believes that the pursuit of ideal love is the right of everyone, and has nothing to do with morality. When she is severely punished and wears a red A, which is the symbol of adultery, she does not feel depressed but is filled with an uncontrollable passion and she begins to boldly challenge the religious commandments. She sets the word "A" with a beautiful chic gold wire laced into a halo to make her shine. In the strange eyes of others, she survives with perseverance and does not allow male rituals to

restrain her. (Eagleton, 22) Second, in order to protect her daughter Pearl and the priest, she promises not to disclose the priest's true identity. In order to stop Chillingworth's injury to Dimmesdale, Hester bravely and fearlessly stands up and exposes her husband's hypocrisy and ugliness in order to stop her husband's injury to her lover. In the pursuit of freedom, when she is not understood and accepted by local people, Hester persuades the priest to flee with her from this loveless land and find a new place to live their life. Whether in the pursuit of love, or in the protection of the priest, Hester shows her desire for freedom and love.

### 6. Traditional Women's Morality

Traditional women's morality was the dominant ideology in ancient China. It was an important part of the Confucian ethics-politics theory and the fundamental criterion for regulating the moral behavior of women in ancient China. Traditional women's morality was the use of Chinese rituals and etiquette to bind women's rules and regulations. Its main contents were three points: Observe the requirements of women's courts, advocate women's virtues, and emphasize women's chastity. Observe the requirements of women's courts demanded that women should submit and obey men's domination throughout their lives; advocating women's virtues was actually a moral code for their wives. The traditional women's morality was defined by the male power and property inheritance system in the male-centered society to control and rule women. It generally maintained and represented men's rights and interests. It dominated and suppressed and destroyed women.

Mulan is "the daughter of Taoism" but also "a wife-in-law of Confucianism." Her father gives her the Taoist spirit, and the mother gives her Confucian morality. Her mother believes that her daughter must have the main virtues of a woman, such as respectfulness, affinity, humility, etc. Mulan must wash their own clothes and makes her own shoes. She must learn women's etiquette in society, such as how to give gifts, remember various festivals, how reward the maids etc. Her strict education makes Mulan a traditionally Good Wife and Mother. The first thing you want to be a perfect wife and mother is to follow your parents' words and do things according to your parents' orders. This is clearly reflected in Mulan's love of Lifu, but she has to obey her parents' orders to marry Sunya. In the



face of her husband's betrayal, she chooses to forgive him and wants to marry her good sister Sunya. Even in order to comply with women's morality and Mulan keeps a distance from Leifu. Mulan deeply embodies the traditional womanhood that is recognized by the whole society.

In the West, there is also the rhetoric of women's virtues, but Hester is different from Yao Mulan. Hester is reluctant to follow the traditional women's morality taught by her mother and is unwilling to be a woman who behaves like a traditional woman. It can be seen from the beautiful hair and she wears every day. In addition, Hester's dislike of marriage is mainly due to her husband's ignorance. Marriage is a helpless living accessory for Hester. Her husband, Chillingworth has almost no impression of Hester's psychology. In her opinion, the marriage brings her only pain. Therefore, she does not want to follow the traditional women's morality to continue to live with him. So when she meets Dimmesdale in Boston, she bravely loves him and pursues her own happiness. She will never let the traditional women's bond bind their own happiness. Compared with Yao Mulan, the traditional guardian morality can't be seen at all in Hester.

From the analysis of the cause of love tragedy in *Moment in Peking* and *The Scarlet Letter*, we can see the deep imprint of the traditional thought on them. First, Yao Mulan is kidnapped in the process of avoiding war. Fortunately, she is saved by the Zeng family. But this experience also makes Mulan unable to refuse when facing the fact that her parents ask her to marry Zeng Sunya. The fate of women is not mastered by themselves but by men. This kind of life situation also makes Mulan unable to control her own destiny. Although the heroine Hester in *The Scarlet Letter* is born under the rule of Puritanism, she herself has the character of pursuing freedom in the United States and yearning for independence and daring to struggle with traditional forces.

## 7. Conclusion

*Moment in Peking* and *The Scarlet Letter* are two classics because of the thought, the superb writing technique and the rich character images in them.

By comparing the similarities and differences between the two women's love tragedies, it is known that although their endings are the same

and they are the victims of certain times, their different attitudes towards love have made a difference in their situation. In their love, the timid and cowardly Mulan chooses to obey her parents' orders and marry the man she does not love, and finally becomes a victim of love, while the brave and self-confident Hester chooses to confront her loveless marriage and the Puritan forces. Then she becomes the master of love.

Although the author has analyzed the works by reading and consulting the literature carefully, there are still some limitations, such as limited data collection and the lack of depth in the analysis of both works. Besides, the two works may not be the perfect interpretation of Chinese and western women's views of love. Therefore, there is still room for exploration.

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