

The Change and Development of Female Images of Different Social Periods Reflected

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Abstract

Before the emergence of deconstructivism, the idea of gender binary opposition occupied the mainstream of social thought. Female was regarded as second gender, attached to male who occupied social resources, and female's subject consciousness was also weak. The proposal of deconstructivism broke this gender binary opposition, which belongs to the product of patriarchal society, female's self-consciousness also gradually awakened. With the development of society through different eras, the changes of women's status and thoughts in the real world are also accurately reflected in the literary works at that time. This paper takes the female images in three classic literary works in different social periods as the key point, including *Tom Jones* in classicism, *Jane Eyre* in Romanticism and *O Pioneers!* in Modernism. By analyzing the surface changes of these female images and the deep social reasons that promote such changes, this paper reflects the changes in social power structure and social resource distribution caused by the development of time and people's ideological liberation, criticizes the imprisonment and oppression of women in the old society, and witnesses the gradual awakening of female consciousness and the birth of a relatively just society.

Keywords: deconstruction, gender binary, female image, female consciousness, social status, classicism, romanticism, modernism

1. Introduction

Before deconstructionism was proposed, structuralism had always occupied the mainstream. Men and women were regarded as binary opposites. Men represented the main status and social value, while women were regarded as men's subordinates, existing to prove men's value. The images of female characters in literary works are flat and single at the beginning, doesn't occupy a major position in social resources, has no self-worth, and usually needs to depend on male characters such as their fathers, husbands and sons to live.

Most of their personalities are gentle and weak, and their lives are centered on taking care of other family members. But the proposal of deconstructionism criticizes the thinking of gender binary opposition in patriarchal society and tries to break this unequal thinking habit (Qiao 35-36). In addition to breaking the rigid social order, it also arises self-awareness of women who were imprisoned in the limit of patriarchal society. Female characters have more beliefs in fighting for themselves, realizing that they can also create value in society like men, and men and women have equal status.

A representative literary work can reflect the general social environment and values of the era to which the work belongs. Female images are generally in a marginal position in classical literature, and the images of female in romantic literature are gradually enriched, and then in modern literature, female can occupy a major place in the mainstream culture of society. The status of women in literary works is constantly improving with the development of society. Judith Butler's theory proposes that gender is an imitation of idealization forms, so traditional men are usually regarded as the occupants of social resources, the providers of family material life, and the right to speak and make decisions, while traditional women are seen as a group that serves men and contributes selflessly to family reproduction (Butler 955-960). Literary works of different periods show different degrees of performance of gender. From the most traditional role of dedication in classicism, to living independently without being attached to men in romanticism, and to taking on major social responsibilities in modernism. Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* respectively show the typical female images in the novels of these three periods and the changes and development of female images. Then, I will analyze this in details.

2. Classicism-*Tom Jones*

Tom Jones was published in 1749. At this time, the society was in the period of Enlightenment and began to criticize the capitalist feudal society. However, people's thinking was mostly feudal at that time, and the patriarchal family form controlled by the father was the main form, which means patriarchy had absolute authority. Because of men's control of social resources and power, women could only depend on men to survive, and they haven't awakened their self-awareness in thought, who regarded men as superior to themselves.

Sophia, the heroine of *Tom Jones*, is a typical representative of women in that era. She submits to the patriarchy and her destiny can't be controlled by herself. Her engagement to Blifil was decided by her father, because her father coveted Blifil's father's estate. In British society at that time, land was a symbol of wealth. Her marriage exists only as a tool for profit. So it can be seen that the fate of women in that era was beyond their own control. Although Sophia's aunt helped Sophia escape from her father's

control at this time, when a nobleman proposed to Sophia, her aunt urged her to agree regardless of Sophia's own wish. Her aunt was just attracted to the noble status of him, when Blifil was just a rich country gentleman with no status and power. Therefore, the elders of that era objectified women, completely disregarded women's own ideas, and only chose conditions that were beneficial to themselves and the family, using women's marriage as a bargaining chip. However, Sophia didn't take the initiative to take her own destiny into her own hands, she even said to her father, "without your consent, I won't marry anyone else" (Fielding 1212), which shows that women in that period also acquiesced in the fact that this kind of marriage was fully decided by the elders, and never thought about jumping out of this thinking to fight for their own happiness.

In addition to the oppression of women by the outside world, women in this period also disciplined themselves according to the requirements of society for traditional women, and psychologically valued patriarchy more than themselves. Most of the female characters are beautiful, slender and petite, pure and innocent in mind, believe in the nobility and purity of love, and regard marrying a good husband as their only life goal. Tom Jones, who fell in love with Sophia, wasn't a qualified lover. He had cheated on other women several times, but he lied a lot in front of Sophia. The pure Sophia was also easy to trust others, who believed Tom's lies and chose to forgive him. It can be seen that women at this time wouldn't resist when faced with unfair treatment, but chose to tolerate a series of mistakes made by men. They had extremely high moral standards for themselves but everything from men was acceptable. In addition to her lover, she also blindly obeyed her father. Even when she expressed her dissatisfaction with the proposed marriage to her father, she must firstly "express enthusiastically that she is filial and obedient to her father" (Fielding 409). Although her father completely regarded her as a tool for his own benefit, she was still filial to him foolishly. She said to her father that "I would rather die than disrespect you" (Fielding 474), "Please Let me dedicate my whole life to you and serve you." (Fielding 1212). So when women faced men at that time, they still put themselves in the lower position of service providers. There was also a fear of male violence, as can be seen from

Sophia's statement "If I disobey my father, what terrible consequences will I have" (Fielding 415). So at that time, due to objective and subjective reasons, women couldn't jump out of the rigid thinking of being attached to men and fearing male authority. They didn't think about the possibility of living independently without men. The social environment at that time also didn't give women this kind of condition.

To summarize, the female images in classical literature are all similar to Sophia. Due to the social conventions, they were generally controlled and suppressed by the society, who couldn't decide their own destiny. Also, there was a lack of fighting spirit to resist all the inequality.

3. Romanticism-Jane Eyre

Jane Eyre came out in 1847 and belongs to romantic literature. The society at this time has been influenced by the long-term enlightenment trend of thought, and most people, especially women, have already had a preliminary awakening of female consciousness, and their thinking will be much more open than that of the classicism period. They realized that women could survive in society by their own strength, not necessarily dependent on men. They could also have their own independent source of income, decide their own destiny, and dare to fight for their own interests when facing unfair treatment.

what have to be admitted is that the whole society was still under patriarchal control, and marriage was still a kind of confinement and exploitation for women, which can be seen from the "mad woman" Bertha Mason in the book. Bertha is a victim of patriarchal marriage, who is a tool used by Rochester's father and brother to drive Rochester out of the family. Therefore, Bertha was misunderstood by Rochester from the very beginning, and never got the love of her husband. And Rochester didn't dare to violate the family's decision, so he blamed Bertha for all mistakes, Rochester was like those who "acted in accordance with the concepts and principles instilled in them since childhood" (Brontë 324), which shows that in the Romantic period Women's marriage has also mostly become a tragedy driven by interests. After being treated with indifference and ignorance for a long time, Bertha finally broke out and was imprisoned as a violent mad woman. This actually shows the epitome of many women who were unhappy in

marriage at that time. Life destroyed their hearts, but the society blamed them for not being gentle enough, and attributed all the faults to women. But compared to the classicism period, when women faced such oppression, they didn't simply accept it. They didn't sacrifice themselves in exchange for the superficial peace and stability of the family. They would use their own strength to resist and fight. Because Bertha was dissatisfied with such a fake marriage, she was dissatisfied with Rochester's brutality of locking her in a secret room. In the end, she set fire to Rochester's entire manor, and didn't hesitate to take her own life into account to resist to the end. Besides Bertha, after *Jane Eyre* found out that her lover Rochester already had a wife, she didn't compromise on all this, but resolutely decided to leave Rochester to find her new life, instead of choosing to forgive and tolerate, she said that "however, in my heart, he has lost the pure sincerity, so I must leave him" (Brontë 518). It can be seen from this that women have begun to have a sense of self-determination when facing marriage.

In addition to possessing the spirit of resistance and struggle, women in the romantic literature period also began to gradually become economically independent and no longer completely dependent on men for survival. *Jane Eyre* wasn't a submissive person when she was young. After facing a series of abuses, she didn't complain about herself, but said, "I have been mercilessly abused, and I want to resist" (Brontë 62). She already had the idea of fighting against all injustices in her heart, and after leaving her adoptive parents' home and school, she kept thinking about finding a new job to support herself, instead of relying on men to survive. She has had the ability to gain a foothold in society. At this time, she "seems to have broken free from the invisible shackles, and finally struggled to enter an undreamed-of freedom" (Brontë 63). She doesn't follow the trend, and is firm in her inner choice. When Rochester was rejected by others because of burns and disfigurement, *Jane Eyre* rejected St. John's marriage proposal and followed her heart to be together with Rochester. At the same time, the wealth owned by *Jane Eyre*, which was inherited from her relative, also became her confidence. When Rochester didn't want to drag *Jane Eyre* down because of his current miserable situation, she said that "if you don't let me live with you, I can build a house by yourself close to your gate" (Brontë 757), the

phenomenon that men controlling property in traditional customs has gradually changed, and women have gradually begun to occupy social resources. At the same time, Jane Eyre puts men and women on an equal status, just as she said, "because we are equal" (Brontë 440), and she becomes what she calls an "independent person" (Brontë 757).

Therefore, in the romantic period, although the patriarchal society still suppressed women to a certain extent, compared with the weakness of classical women, the female characters in this period have made great progress in their open mind. They weren't willing to be in a position of being manipulated and controlled forever, and dared to fight for everything they want. Moreover, they also supported themselves by working in the labor palace, and would get rid of their attachment to patriarchy economically to a certain extent.

4. Modernism-O Pioneers!

Ah Pioneers was published in 1913. At this time, the whole society was in modernism, the economy and industry were developing rapidly materially, and the overall level of education has been greatly improved ideologically, when philosophy and social science has been widely disseminated. At the same time, the status of women in society has also been greatly improved, women's self-awareness has also been greatly awakened and liberated, and the deception of the patriarchal society has been gradually exposed. During this period, many literary works subverted the traditional image of women, replacing the advantages originally attached to men with women, so that women have the same right to work and speak as men, comparing with the previous two periods.

Although the status of women has been greatly improved, the female characters in this novel are still devastated by the dross of patriarchy to varying degrees. The beautiful and enthusiastic Marie has a controlling and bad-tempered husband who is very self-centered and regards his wife as his own property and deprives her of her freedom. In the beginning, Marie had been gentle and tolerant of everything about him, silently enduring this kind of marriage, and even regarding this as her own mistakes. She used to "out of admiration for him, completely at his mercy" (Cather 198), but when her husband began to bully her, she began to alienate him, and wouldn't cowardly choose to

compromise. The hostess Alexandra herself is the richest farmer, but her two brothers believe that "the property of a family actually belongs to the man of this family, no matter what the certificate says" (Cather 156), who competed for her property, took all the credit for gaining property on their own head, roughly blocked Alexandra's relationship and marriage, in order to prevent her property from falling into the hands of others. Therefore, even in modernist literature where women's status has been improved, women were easy to become victims of interests. But the difference is that women in the previous period were in a passive position, while Alexandra herself had absolute ownership of property. From this farce, she clearly realized the essence of oppression of women in a patriarchal society, nor did she intend to show weakness to this behavior at all. At this time, women were already aware of this patriarchal ideological deception, and could start from the most fundamental essence and directly hit the key points to stop this behavior from happening.

At the same time, the role of Alexandra is androgynous, possessing both masculine and feminine qualities, reflecting the complete liberation of female images in that era, not limited to just one gender. Firstly, her robust image is very different from traditional women. She is a "tall, strong girl" (Cather 28), "she wears a man's long coat" (Cather 28), her characteristic is also completely different from the gentle female image in the past. The author tries to endow Alexander with masculine characteristics in the traditional concept, so as to show a subversion of these characteristics that are regarded as the inherent wealth of men. In addition, Alexandra has wisdom and judgment. She "frequently reads the newspaper, understands the market, and learns from the mistakes of her neighbors" (Cather 49). In the end, the wasteland became a fertile land, which brought the family great wealth. This means that women have consciously stepped into the economic and political fields in that era, and had the right in the field controlling people's livelihood. They no longer only focused on love like traditional women in the past, and participated more in the social and public fields. Comparing with her, her lover Carl can be seen as a character with many female characteristics, who is completely different from the traditional male image, "he is slender, and his mouth is too sensitive, not like a boy's" (Cather 31), but he

has the kindness and consideration that were originally regarded as inherent qualities of women. Alexandra also has the pursuit of beauty, and the feminine qualities of being educated and polite exists in her identity. Therefore, they can both be regarded as androgynous characters. At this time, the female characters aren't limited to men, but are diverse and three-dimensional, beyond the limitation of gender, and become synonymous with beauty and nobility.

To sum up, the female images in modernist literature are subversive and transcendent, and the most free and open. They retained the common advantages of men and women at the same time, didn't limit themselves, strived to contribute to society, had the courage to break the shackles of the old traditions, and lived consciously for themselves.

5. Conclusion

To summarize, the development of female images in literature is generally positive, and both social status and self-awareness have been improving. Women are gradually separated from men to live independently in this society, and gradually have the right to possess social resources. In terms of ideology, women have also gradually stepped out of the misunderstanding of patriarchal ideology and began to formalize their own value. All these changes are inseparable from the development and progress of social culture, which also bring great benefit.

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