

Feminism Breaks Down the Imagination of “Romantic Love” in Marriage

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Abstract

Focusing on a controversial interview in China, we found that most Chinese women have big myths about marriage. From the perspective of feminism, this article backtracks origins and perceptions of modern marriage, and exposes the romantic love in marriage is toxic. This article claims that women are exploited not only in labor but also in sex. Thus, feminism clarify the nature of marriage and help women not to fool themselves.

Keywords: feminism, romantic love, unpaid labor, marriage, exploitation

1. Provocative Discussion Sparks Controversy

Recently, the interview about the conversation between Cheizuru Ueno and three graduates of Peking University triggered heated discussions among Chinese netizens (Quan, 2023). They used feminism as the topic and discussed with Chizuru Ueno the problems they faced in their life practice. But Quan's sharp questions and lack of in-depth thinking made them attacked by netizens. Half a year later, in another video responding to the controversy, they explained that their original intention of making this interview video was to increase Ueno Chizuru's popularity in the country, but they unexpected to suffer abuse and fierce attacks from netizens (Quan, 2023). In this response video, we can see some of their reflections, they realize that Peking University is the best university in China, so that people naturally have high expectations for them. Especially in the context of feminism,

people expect to see more academic and grand expressions. But they still have big myths about marriage (Most women face this dilemma).

2. Issues of Heteronormative Privilege

After watching the complete video, I found that there are indeed many offensive things in Quan and others' questions. In her statement, we could find that she believes that heterosexual marriage is something everyone must experience. It just as Johnson once mentioned love and heterosexuality seem 'natural' partners in social and sexual practice (Johnson, 2007, p.23). For example, Quan asked Chizuru Ueno, "Why did you not plan to start a family when you were in your early 20s? Was it because you were hurt by a man or was it because of the influence of your original family (Quan, 2023)?" [translation mine] These questions with heterosexual hegemony show that she believes that heterosexual marriage is something that

everyone should do, and that someone like Chizuru Ueno does not enter a heterosexual marriage shows that this person has some problems. It may be a problem of one's self, one's original family, or it may be that one has been hurt in the past. And such a statement is essentially the same as the exclusion and marginalization of homosexuals by heterosexual hegemony. When the public tries to explain why a person is homosexual love, they will try their best to prove that he may have been sexually discriminated against since he was a child or that there are some problems in his original family. These similar logics adhere to a kind of binary thinking, and these questions asked by Quan show a strong binary opposition.

3. Marital Bliss and Societal Pressures

During the conversation, three Peking University graduates touted the unmarried and childless Chizuru Ueno as the perfect feminist, and calling women who get married or have children like them defective feminists. This creates a false opposition. But in fact, in real life, under such a patriarchal background, women who insist on being unmarried and childless are at the bottom of the contempt chain. As Retnaningsih claimed, in the general consensus of Asian society, only marriage can make an educated career woman happy and perfect. Educated but unmarried career women were considered incompetent, demanding or too ambitious. Under the pressure of such a social environment, many women urgently need to find a soul mate or husband (Retnaningsih, 2013, p.9). We have to admit that in this patriarchal-dominated society where heterosexual marriage is hegemonic, people like Quan et al. have indeed received the dividends of heterosexual marriage. While under the context of unmarried infertile women facing such huge social pressure, Quan's arrogance and ignorance are reflected in the fact that she still longs for Ueno Chizuru to confirm her choice to get married and have children. She hopes that her temporary happiness in marriage will prove that her choice to enter marriage was not wrong. She fell into self-certification about the happiness of her married life and her explanation focuses more on her own personal experience, but this easily leads to equating personal experience with structural affirmation. Happiness in marriage is rare, and happiness in heterosexual marriages does not prove that heterosexual marriages themselves are without

problems, just as Chizuru Ueno said in video, "Unfortunateness in marriage abounds."

4. Illusions About Marriage in Feminist Discourse

After watching the video, I was surprised to find that although they were familiar with feminist theory, they still had illusions about marriage, and whether feminists should enter marriage has become a common confusion in China. This is why Quan repeatedly seeks the approval of Chizuru Ueno. I could sense that the three women in the video put a lot of effort into how to reconcile feminism with everyday practice. Compared with the fierce reactions of netizens, I do not want to judge the individual, but this video reflects a larger social subconscious, which regards the heterosexual nuclear family lifestyle as a social way that everyone must abide by. Therefore, this article attempts to start from the context of heterosexual hegemony and analyze the two concepts of marriage and love that are often confused, to let the mystery of romantic love can be unveiled, so that more feminists can recognize the inequality of structure of heterosexual marriage. But it is worth noting that feminism does not prevent women from entering marriage. Entering marriage blindly is not a free choice for women. Only when women truly understand the essence of marriage and still choose to enter marriage that can be called women's freedom of marriage.

4.1 Origins and Perceptions of Modern Marriage

When it comes to happiness in marriage, we must understand how the concept of modern marriage came into being. Modern marriage has unprecedented emphasis on the importance of love, which makes our understanding of marriage based on the imagination of romantic love. Just as Berscheid and Walster claimed, the prerequisite for the anticipation, approval and recognition of marriage is falling in love (Berscheid and Walster, 1978, p.148). Therefore, under the practice of this concept, we will firmly believe that love is the only correct basis for marriage, and gradually form the concept that marriage is equal to love. But this imagination of romantic love is a myth. Looking back at the marriage system and marriage customs in ancient China (ancient Western also like this), love has never been the core of marriage (this core position is only the interpretation of marriage by modern people). Wikipedia defines traditional Chinese marriage as a ceremonial

ritual in Chinese society that involves not only the union between spouses, but also the union between two families, a man and a woman, sometimes established by pre-arrangement between families (2023). Since marriage is inseparable from the family and involves the interests of both families, in ancient times, marriage was just an economic contract for the Chinese. However, influenced by Western culture, romantic love is interpreted as the most important concept in marriage in modern China.

4.2 The Toxicity of Romantic Love in Marriage

The concept of romantic love itself is dangerous. Romantic love is the excuse that blinds women from paying unpaid labor in marriage and family. Because you love me, you have to devote yourself to this family, so you have to fulfill the so-called natural mother's duty. But romantic love itself has become a huge shackle for women. When women are considered to enter marriage because of romantic love, many women unconsciously make a lot of sacrifices. For example, she will give birth because of this romantic love, and she will give up her career because of this romantic love. In *Of Woman Born*, Rich claims, for many women, the forced labor of childbirth is followed by years of unpaid work, which is nothing new. For example, in Britain in 1915, the Women's Cooperative Guild published a collection of letters written by the wives of manual laborers. These women had five to eleven children, along with several miscarriages. "The women were not only pregnant for much of their lives, but doing heavy labor: scrubbing floors, hauling basins of wash, ironing, cooking over coal and wood fires which had to be fed and tended." Rich writes. These women wrote of feeling depleted by childbearing, of struggling to care for their families, of finding that sex was becoming an unwelcome chore, and of wanting desperately to limit the size of their families (Rich, 2021, p.6). Compared with past, it is true that women in the new era have more freedom of choice, but in a Confucian patriarchal society like China, the freedom women have is very superficial. We can argue that choosing to be a housewife is freedom of choice, but in the current society, there is no positive understanding of the unpaid labor of housewives. Being a housewife should not be seen as a free choice in the liberal sense. Therefore, this kind of romantic love is poisonous, causing women to unconsciously rationalize the economic labor they put in in

marriage that is not recognized by the orthodox economy, and receive only very little economic compensation.

4.3 Unpaid Labor and Feminist Inquiry

Chizuru Ueno studies unpaid labor. In her book *Patriarchy Capitalism*, she explores how capitalism and patriarchy form a complicity relationship from the perspective of Marxist feminist theory. She also raises questions such as "Is housework also labor? How did the modern family and gender division of labor form? When motherhood conflicts with work, how should women choose (Ueno, 2020, p.204)?" Indeed, capitalism and patriarchy oppress women. As the production of goods shifted from homes to factories in the early years of industrialization, the economic concept of work was formulated. In 1880, women who took care of the family were considered productive workers, but by 1900, under the influence of capitalism, these women were classified as "dependents" with the same status as babies, young children, the sick, and the elderly (Zachorowska-Mazurkiewicz, 2016, p.128). Women are relegated to relegated "unproductive" housework and productive motherhood. Due to severe gender discrimination, these women are unable to work in factories and can only do unpaid labor at home. While, non-market work is classified as leisure, which devaluates the care-work carried out within the home and makes it invisible (p.130). But women's invisible labor is particularly important for the development of society.

4.4 Feminist Critique of Capitalist Accumulation

This issue is also mentioned in the famous Marxist feminist work *Caliban and the Witch*. Silvia Federici criticized and updated these theories based on Marx's theories of primitive accumulation and surplus value necessary for the development of capitalism. She believes that Marx's concept of primitive accumulation is important, but still flawed, because he places the extraction of surplus value entirely on the male workers who are exploited for surplus value in the factory, but they are only a very small part and not universal. She proposes that these male workers are not the only ones whose surplus value is extracted and used as a means of primitive accumulation. In this long process of primitive accumulation, women are the more invisible exploited people, both emotional value and reproduction (Federici, 2004, p.69-72). This

also reminds me of the concept of archives, just as Dever points that archives are Sites of promise and desire, and also sites of power and privilege implicated in violence and erasure (Dever, 2017, p.2). Women's social reproductive labor is erased and female workers are missing in history. But unpaid labour and care are important sources of comfort and support in people's daily lives. Without this type of labour people would not be able to survive both as individuals, and as society. Her point of view transcends the dichotomy of gender and class and believes that gender and class cannot be separated. Women are in a state of exploitation in gender relationship, and this exploitation is barbaric and violent. Just as Fergusun reviews "limiting women's control over reproduction and independent sexuality by prohibiting abortions and targeting women as the sources of non-procreative, "lewd" sexuality, stigmatizing women leaders of peasant revolts and alternative health practices so as to divide the working classes and weaken their resistance to land privatization and capitalist exploitation, and re-framing the ideology of the family to normalize the ideal relation for women as in the non-paid work of childbearing and childrearing (Fergusun, 2006, p.115)." It was state violence in wresting control of their bodies and reproduction from women.

4.5 Societal Reproduction and the Gendered Power Dynamics

This is the famous Marxist feminist theory of social reproduction. This practice, which has been constructed since the capitalist era, is continued in modern marriages. In heterosexual marriages dominated by patriarchy, women are naturally considered to be responsible for taking care of the family, and in the name of love. Even today, when most women are entering the workforce, women not only have to work outside the home to earn money, but also take care of their families. The reason given by patriarchal society for such an unfair situation is that women are defined as having a comparative advantage in housework due to their role in the reproductive process (Hewitson, 2003, p.269). In marriage, women have to pay a lot. Feminism can help women see the nature of marriage clearly before making the choice to enter marriage, and understand that taking care of the family is not her sole responsibility.

4.6 Beyond Labor Exploitation in Marriage

But exploitation in marriage goes far beyond labor exploitation. Another classical reading *Five Faces of Oppression*, Written by Iris Young, divides the concept of oppression into five different faces: (1) exploitation; (2) marginalisation; (3) powerlessness; (4) cultural imperialism; (5) violence. Among which we should emphasize the face of exploitation. It is not just the exploitation of workers' labor as Marxism understands it. Young pointed out that within the family, the exploitation of women was mainly sexual and emotional. She proposed that during sex, a woman transfers her sexual energy to a man through sex (Young, 1990). Heterosexual nuclear families are dominated by men or centered on male desire, so in sexual relationships, women often do not get sexual pleasure, while men derive great pleasure from sexual intercourse. So, they are exploited not only in family labor but also in sexual relations. Therefore, women in heterosexual marriages not only perform extra household labor, but are also exploited in sexual relationships. Whether it is labor exploitation or sexual exploitation, we need to return to structural injustice. Marriage that starts with romantic love eventually leads to the heterosexual nuclear family under the patriarchal structure, which is an important tool for governments and countries to manage people. It does so by placing everyone into what is called a nuclear family (consisting of a man, a woman and a child) in order to better enforce political rule. So, when talking about marriage, marriage must never be divorced from the social and political and economic context.

5. Marriage as a Structured Palace of Expectations

Against the background of such structural inequality, marriage is actually shaped as a palace that can fulfill all the dreams of heterosexual women, which is also the starting point for happiness. According to the oral histories of many women, it can be found that many women have constructed such a fairy tale since childhood, that is, when you are covered with white gauze, you are the happiest person in the world. But as everyone knows, for most women, the moment you put on a white veil is the beginning of your nightmare. In marriage, women need to pay and sacrifice a lot, and there has never been a court of justice that can provide justice for the structural injustices women encounter. Women's unhappiness in marriage is universal, which is why Chen and others have

been so strongly attacked. As students from the best universities in China and women enjoying the benefits of heterosexual marriage, when facing the feminist icon Chizuru Ueno, the questions they asked were limited to their personal experiences. However, this feminist icon is a kind of spiritual sustenance for most women who suffer in real life. There is already a lot of social pressure on unmarried, childless women in our society. This touches a nerve among women who have been traumatized by the institution of marriage.

6. Feminism, Marriage, and Individual Agency

Once discussed related issues with a Chinese classmate. She felt that as a highly educated woman who had taken courses on feminism, it was difficult for her to initiate a heterosexual relationship because it was difficult for her to play the submissive role, and she felt that there was a huge gap between theory and reality. Combined with the repeated self-testimony of Quan and others in the video, I found that whether feminists should enter marriage has become an issue. But feminism is not dogmatism. What feminism can bring us is that before we make some choices, we can clearly see its internal logic and understand what the oppression of this structure means. There is no need to dwell on whether feminists should enter marriage. The most critical issue is that we do not need to glorify the dirty things that happen in marriage. It is because we have studied feminism that we have the language to describe the oppression we suffer. As a feminist, whether you choose to enter marriage or not, you must at least maintain a critical spirit against heterosexual hegemony. Maintaining this critical spirit will not make you very entangled in your marriage, but will make you very clear. Because you will no longer be blinded by the construction of romantic love, and you will no longer rationalize your sacrifices in marriage. Compared with whether you should enter into marriage, whether you can fight for your rights in marriage is the most critical issue. Individual happiness does not equal structural happiness; Real freedom is that feminists have the right to choose whether to get married after seeing the nature of marriage. Just like Chizuru Ueno said in the video, "I hope we don't fool ourselves in our lives (Quan, 2023)."

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