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An Analysis of the Causes of the Tragic Female Images in Root-Seeking Literature in the Context of Feminism

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Abstract: Contemporary China is increasingly concerned about social issues such as gender equality and the status of women. In China's past, due to many factors, women's social status was often lower than men's, and women's basic rights were often deprived. The inherent stereotype of "men are superior to women" left over from these periods still has a certain influence in today's Chinese society. Such negative stereotypes have caused problems and obstacles to contemporary Chinese society's efforts to eliminate the prejudice and social phenomenon of gender inequality. To this end, this paper will be devoted to exploring the causes of the tragic female images in the modern Chinese social background shown in Su Tong's short stories (*Taking the Escape in 1934* as an example). Through the description of women in this period, the literary work vividly and truly shows the typical female image and the social status of this period. The author will use text analysis and feminist theory as research methods and theoretical basis to analyze the causes of these tragic female images.

Keywords: Root-finding literature, feminism, female image, literary criticism.

1. Introduction

This paper is based on the strong interest in traditional Chinese female images and their living conditions as well as the creation of traditional female images in root-seeking literary works. For other motivations, on one hand, "in tandem with the intensified gender discrimination and patriarchal backlash in Chinese society", on the other hand, "due to the limitation of the academic and political environment in China, there is very little systematic research on modern feminism"[1,2]. Due to the above factors, this study will focus on contemporary China's close attention to feminism, women's status, and other related issues, which has certain significance for thinking about how to effectively eliminate the relevant stereotypes of gender inequality and promote women's access to their natural and reasonable rights. This study mainly analyzes the causes of the tragic female images in *Taking the Escape in 1934*. Text analysis is used to understand and read relevant materials and literature. The advantage of this method is that it can analyze the female image in the works in depth and detail, which is conducive to the research.

This study will use the book *Taking the Escape in 1934* as the research material. This text is a short story created by contemporary writer Su Tong. Through the description of the changes in the fate of ordinary families in Fengyangshu Village, the passage outlines the escape from the declining countryside to the city. In the story, rural women are deserted by their husbands, their children are taken away by the sudden plague, and the men --their husbands constantly flee to the city in pursuit

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of new wives, material, and fame. These deserted women seem to be trapped in the ancient countryside by invisible forces.

The ultimate goal of this study is to analyze the causes of these tragic female images, draw a conclusion, and on this basis, reflect on the unfortunate situation of Chinese women in modern times, providing a feasible direction and countermeasures for contemporary China to deal with the stereotypes left over from history such as "men are superior to women". To achieve this goal, the author will use feminist theory as a theoretical framework. In the following part, the author will introduce the relevant theories of feminism.

2. Feminist Theory

"Feminism abbreviates women's rights and their empowerment." [3]. "Feminist struggles for autonomy, self-determination and a viable place that women can occupy as women in the theoretical and socio-political universe--as can be seen from the diverse yet interconnected essays presented here--have developed into a two-pronged or dual-faceted form. On the one hand, feminist theory has radically questioned and attempted to undermine the presumptions, methods, and frameworks of phallocentric or patriarchal discourses and disciplines. On the other hand, feminist theory has simultaneously attempted to explore and develop alternatives to these phallocentric systems, bringing into being new, hitherto unarticulated, feminine perspectives on the world" [4].

This paper mainly uses liberal feminist theory and feminist fertility theory to analyze the text. "Liberal feminism is a feminism of equal rights, i.e., egalitarian feminism; that is, it demands political equality women's right to vote and stand for election, access to the labor market, but also equal rights when it comes to marriage, education or work (equal pay)" [5]. Feminist fertility theory "have long insisted on the separation of biological and social motherhood and have rejected associations between motherhood and 'nature' " [6].

3. Analysis

This paper will analyze the causes of the representative tragic female images in *Taking the Escape in 1934* with feminist theory, as follows.

3.1. Women's Silence and Obedience under Traditional Female Ethical Culture

This study finds that in the work *Taking the Escape in 1934*, tragic women are often in the situation of losing their right to speak. In the face of suffering, change, and misfortune, they are accustomed to keeping silent and enduring: the rural woman is deserted by her husband and her husband goes to the city to work and look for new love, but she continues to live in the countryside, continues to raise children for her husband, she spends a long time waiting for him but never go to look for her husband; she is called a "disaster" by her husband, who later desert her; she maintains a kind of numb obedience to her husband, even in the face of her husband's sexual affairs and infidelity, she does not explicitly resist -- in this village, women almost completely lose the ability to fight against the status quo, while the men who have the right to speak are standing on the "high place" and arbitrarily judge women with absurd words such as "disaster". In this environment, women's image, dignity, and personality are wantonly distorted by men. Women in this casual evaluation gradually lost their self-will, and even began to self-deprecate and self-denial, because, in the environment of male evaluation, they have a distorted cognition of themselves: for example, in *Taking the Escape in 1934*, the heroine even falls into grotesque doubt. At one point, she absurdly thinks that the plague is spread by herself, she dreams that she is the legendary disaster woman, spraying poison. She thinks that her breast milk also carries the plague, so she no longer wants to breastfeed her child but chooses to feed her child with

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dews formed at night -- because these women think and live in the context of men, thus, men's long-term distorted perception of women actually has a negative impact on women's thoughts.

The author believes that women's way of thinking and behavior is subtly influenced by men who have more authority to speak in marriage and gradually a set of female ethical cultures conforming to male ethical culture has been formed, for example, in the traditional Chinese society during the 1930s -- the modern social culture still retains a large number of cultural customs that oppress and imprison women. Women who meet social standards should survive as "good wives and good mothers", women who are rejected by the public and are on the edge of society often exist as ominous disasters -- but these ethical models are the classification of women from the perspective of male groups as social subjects, which reflects that "the essence of Chinese traditional ethical culture is actually patriarchal culture" [7]. "At least it is an ethical culture in which male chauvinism dominates; since Chinese female ethical culture is generated in this background, compared with male chauvinism, Chinese female ethical culture is obviously a non-mainstream culture, and it can even be said that it is generated in the cracks of male chauvinism" [7]. In such an ethical and cultural environment dominated by male chauvinism, women's efforts to resist these ethical cultures and ethical models become ineffective, and any of their behaviors (including resistance) are still criticized, restricted, and bound by male ethical culture -- women in the book are helpless to the fact that they are judged, deserted and restricted by men. So, when they face the disaster brought by men, they are forced to choose to remain silent. As a result, the male ethical culture to a certain extent represses and deprives them of their own resistance ability and relevant rights which make them no longer silent and obedient.

3.2. The Limitations of Rational Decision-Making for Women in Unfair Circumstances

In this work, it seems that these tragic women cannot reasonably use their rationality. The fate of women is largely affected by external factors such as men and the environment of the times. They show a certain "blindness", impulsive, and recklessness. The irrational tendency is shown in the aspects of personal choice and self-determination of life and destiny. In *Taking the Escape in 1934,* the tendency is manifested as follows. First, women chose to give up their personal will and dignity and took the initiative to self-objectify and submit to men with better material conditions. For example, there is a group of women with "plum blossom mole" in the work, they are captive by wealthy men and are forced to tattoo "plum blossom mole", which means that they lose their independent will and autonomy and become men's private goods. Second, women are helpless to the men who deserted them. Being unable to restore their husbands, they just endure the tragedy themselves. Due to the lack of rational training, they can hardly make reasonable improvements, so they can only blindly allow such accidents to make their lives more desperate. They seem to be obstinately obsessed with the difficult and boring life in the countryside. In this immutable normality, making changes and escaping from suffering become something of a taboo. Third, when the heroine faces her enemy (such as her husband's lover in the city), she chooses an irrational way to take revenge, for example, killing the child of her husband's lover. In the end, the other side is also heartbroken and steals her only surviving child. The mother does not take revenge on her husband -- the root cause of her misfortune, but turns the object of revenge on another woman who is also a victim, such revenge is obviously irrational -- the lives of these women are disturbed by many factors, due to the lack of the use of more rational thinking and actions, which makes them be restricted everywhere in the face of life choices, so that they cannot make appropriate choices and decisions for themselves and ultimately fall into a tragic situation. Under such circumstances, women have always been unable to become truly sound individuals. Due to the lack of rational training, they have always existed and lived as appendices of men, which the author believes is the result of the lack of equality and freedom that they should have as individuals. On one hand, Mill's feminism "believing that equality is the key goal of women, and that equality is not only conducive to the development of women's rationality and nature but also

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helps to stimulate the progress of men and the development of society" [8]. Mill's feminism "refuting the belief that there must be a ruler within the family to make decisions" [8]. On the other hand, "Mill believes that giving women the necessary freedom is conducive to the cultivation of women's own rationality. 'The societies in which reason is best cultivated and the societies with the strongest sense of social responsibility are the ones that most strongly defend the freedom of individual action -- the freedom of each individual to control his actions with such legal and social constraints as his sense of responsibility and conscience will approve them' " [8]. Therefore, only when "society gives women freedom so that they can achieve rationality in the freedom of action, gain rational control of personal behavior and have a reasonable arrangement of personal life" [8]. It can be seen that equality and freedom are the necessary conditions for women to live a reasonable life. However, the women in the text have long been in the environment of the traditional ethical atmosphere that remains in modern China and has been inculcated with the values of gender inequality such as "men are superior to women" or the marriage concepts contrary to freedom such as "be loyal to one husband until death". Moreover, these women live in rural areas where these concepts and related institutions are more conservative. Their words and deeds are deeply bound by these concepts and systems. It is precisely because of this that they lose the channels to obtain equality and freedom, which leads to their inability to obtain and cultivate the corresponding rationality and, thus, unable to decide their own life and destiny more independently.

3.3. The Suppression of Women by Traditional Conceptions

In the works, the reproductive function of these tragic women is infinitely enlarged, their reproductive function seems to become their only and most important function, and their reproductive function is distorted to a certain extent. The right to control this function is almost entirely in the hands of their husbands, but women themselves lack autonomy over reproduction: In *Taking the Escape in 1934*, the entire function of rural women seems to be to produce children for their husbands, their reproductive autonomy is almost entirely subject to men, they are passive and constantly giving birth to numerous offspring, completely becoming fertility machines. The purpose of these women's lives is also centered around "procreation", at the same time, they become victims of the "procreation" function. Through marriage, they bear children for men, but the number of children they produce is entirely determined by men. After giving birth, their husband decides to leave the countryside and seek new love in the city. After being deserted by their husband, their lives revolve entirely around these children -- the products of these "fertility" processes. Even because of these children, they decided to confine themselves to this narrow and miserable village, raising children and making them grow up as healthy as possible became their only life mission and sustenance. However, when the lamentable plague comes and the children -- their only hope, die in large numbers -- everything is destroyed for these women when the husband's lover steals the only surviving child in revenge. They fall into utter and eternal despair -- the only meaning of their existence is robbed by fate.

Nevertheless, "feminism attempts to separate motherhood and womanhood to a certain extent" [9]. "Feminism rejects the idea that motherhood is a woman's nature and believes that motherhood is to some extent shaped by society and culture rather than innate. And because the female body has the meaning and value of autonomy, women have full autonomy over their bodies, so all the choices about reproduction should be made by women themselves, not only choose when to have children, how to have children, and how many children, but also choose not to have children" [9]. Moreover, "many texts of second-wave feminism of which Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectics of Sex* was perhaps, only the most far-reaching, proclaimed that women would only be free from oppression when freed from childbirth" [10]. From this point of view, the view of fertility imposed on women in the text is contrary to the feminist view of fertility and this distorted view of fertility leads to the suffering of women in the text.

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In addition, there are numerous depictions of maternal mythology that attempt to sanctify female fertility and fully bind the reproductive function to women, for example, there are numerous recurring episodes of men mating with women in marriage and women giving birth. In this described countryside, women's reproductive functions are emphasized, valued, and exaggerated. In this environment, it seems that everyone is a believer in the maternal mythology. However, in this cult, women are not only celebrated but also victims, "feminism reveals that it is the myth of motherhood that systematically excludes women from public life in a patriarchal society, so it is necessary to break the maternal mythology to eliminate reproductive alienation and realize women's freedom and liberation" [9]. It can be found that the worship of maternal mythology also leads to the inability of these women to get rid of the shackles of reproductive function.

4. Conclusion

The results of this study are analyzed from the perspective of feminism in Su Tong's *Taking the Escape in 1934*. The author believes that in this text: the traditional female ethical culture makes women silent and obedient; the lack of freedom and equality makes it impossible for women to decide their fate more rationally; maternal mythology worship and traditional fertility view make women covered by reproductive function. The author further draws the conclusion that the social status of women and men in modern Chinese society in the 1930s as shown in the text is unequal and the relevant rights of women are suppressed in various ways.

This study provides a certain reference significance for future research in this direction, which can mainly influence the feminist analysis and criticism of female images in root-seeking literature texts. Moreover, it also provides a feminist text criticism of contemporary Chinese society. In addition, from the perspective of literary criticism, this paper further provides relevant ideas for the problems and phenomena of gender inequality in today's Chinese society. In the future, the relevant research should focus more on the use of feminist theory to explore the critical direction of root-seeking literature or other texts that pay attention to national cultural psychology.

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