

An Analysis of the Feminist Core from Different Writing Perspectives

— Take Wang Anyi's Desire Writing as An Example

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, Wang Anyi's desire narratives and the private writing of the 1990s have attracted the attention of many scholars in the field of feminism. This paper summarizes the relevant research results in the current academic field in terms of the background, causes and evaluation. At the same time, with Wang Anyi, Lin Bai and Chen Ran as examples, it gradually explores the contrast among the feminist cores from different writing perspectives, mainly from three dimensions: first, the meaning of the existence of male characters; second, the attributes of desires; third, the sense of space in feminism. The conclusion can be seen that the feminism in Wang Anyi's desire narrative is the development of the feminism in the works of Lin Bai and Chen Ran, as well as the richer spiritual and social awakening of feminism.

Keywords: *Feminism, Desire Narrative, Private Writing*

1. PREFACE

Wang Anyi's desire writing in the 1990s is highly representative during the history of feminism, and the emergence of "Three Loves" also represents the awakening of the ontological consciousness of Chinese female writers. The feminism in the private writing of the 1990s is also prominent, of which Chen Ran and Lin Bai are the representatives in the first stage. This paper will focus on the relationship among Wang Anyi, Chen Ran and Lin Bai's feminism.

2. SUMMARY OF RELATED RESEARCHES

2.1. *Desire Narrative in the Works of Wang Anyi*

The concept of desire narrative first generated in the West and was introduced by critics when plenty of desire writing appeared in the 1990s. Greenaway Clarke Kirsty thinks "the dominant interpretation of medieval mystical writing associates women with the body and men with an apophatically-inclined spirituality." The emphasis on "desire" in the desire narrative refers to the psychological and physical desires focused on women and associated with women. The reason for this way of

writing is the concern of society and writers for the female characters.[1]

Peng Wenzhong put forward that the last decade of the twentieth century was a period of cultural relativism, with the disintegration of centralized values and the loss of the integrative function of culture, the entire literature was in a diversified and multi-dimensional state of transition, but in the "clamour", a powerful literary law emerged, that is, the desire narrative.[2]

Generally speaking, the "desire narrative" made its formal debut in the 1990s, and Wang Anyi is the representative of "desire narrative" of that era. Li Xuemei pointed out that the entire set of sexual texts Wang Anyi provided us with (Love in a Small Town, Love on a Barren Mountain, Century on the Hill, Mini, I Love Bill, etc.) are, without exception, stories of abnormal sexuality, with the primitive impulse for sexuality as a major theme of these novels, she named these stories "rhymes without rhyme". It is evident that the expression of desire exceeds the restrictions of that era. [3]Peng Wenzhong put forward that Wang Anyi's "Three Loves" are compressed expressions of desire that have always been obscured in women's experience. Jia Min and Chen Qiushi indicated that Wang Anyi's "Three Loves" are mainly concerned with marriage, family, love and lust, and are able to put forward a more

rational and transcendent perspective on human instincts above feminism, with the ultimate goal of achieving an ideal society in which both sexes live in harmony and mutual respect.[4]

The desire writing ultimately focuses on the gender, and how women should speak for themselves in a male-centered era? Wang Zhentaoclearly pointed out that *Rain, Rustle* indicates a direction of construction, while from *Cold Soil to Fuping*, it is not only Wang Anyi's description and presentation of gender relations in real life, but also her exploration and reflection on the construction of reasonable gender relations.[5]

Wang Anyi's description of women is "the body writing most deeply associated with the desire for life", which further reflects Wang Anyi's "most unique interpretation of the humanitarian connotations of sexual literature in the 1980s".

2.2. Female Desire in Private Writing

Xu Qunying thinks private writing is a kind of individual writing mainly for certain women in the 1990s. The creation subject focuses on the self-centered private life and marginal experience, resulting in a genre that is strongly autobiographical. This unique journey shows us the life experiences and value consciousness of women that the writer wants to express.[6]

Inspired by Western feminist theory, Lin Bai and Chen Ran boldly expressed women's sexual psychology and experiences in a straightforward and aesthetic language of sensation by the narrative rule of "desire" and the narrative way of "body language", then broke through the "Phallocentrism" and opened up a space for female voice.

Although as Ning Lin said: on the whole, this kind of writing failed to obtain maximum recognition and deeper discussion, and eventually fell into a writing dilemma. However, the uniqueness of their novels played a significant role in the lack of feminist literature in the society.[7]

To sum up, desire writing and private writing are two important writing styles in the 1990s, and both are important ways of literary narrative from a feminist perspective. There are commonalities between them, as they both focus on female characters and are feminist. However, there are also some differences in the feminism contained in the two, which will be analyzed later on, the novels of Wang Anyi, Chen Ran and Lin Bai will be taken as examples for the analysis of two kinds of feminist core.

3. CONTRAST OF FEMINIST CORE (TAKE THE WORKS OF WANG ANYI, CHEN RAN AND LIN BAI AS EXAMPLES)

The development of the market economy since the late 1980s has led to great changes in old values, cultural concepts and attitudes of life, and writers have gradually moved away from magnificent national (ethnic) narratives and returned to narratives of their own personal experiences, especially the feminist narratives. Wang Anyi was the leader in this wave of thought, and her 'Three Loves' laid a foundation for the desire narrative. Lin Bai and Chen Ran are the representatives of the private writing in the early 1990s, and their writing style is typical of private writing. Compared with them, Wang Anyi's style is both overlapping and progressive, and this paper will compare them in three dimensions.

3.1. The Meaning of the Existence of Male Characters

The feminism in the private writing is a more "extreme resistance" feminism that dissolves the existence of male, and the normal and healthy male perspective is missing from the text, with the banishment and symbolization of male characters as the main literary expression.

The phenomenon of "banishment" is most evident in the banishment of the "father", which is not only a physical father but also a symbol of patriarchy. Because social norms were male-centered at that time, female writers, as pioneers of female liberation, argued that women had to subvert the male-centered situation if they were to claim their rights.

The female characters in Chen Ran and Lin Bai's works always have a complex emotion towards the existence of "fathers", which intertwines the emotions of "patricide" and "affection for father". Whether Lin Duomi in *The Fighting of One Person* or Ni Aoao in *Private Life*, they are all people who lack the father's role in the family, who are lonely, closed and vulnerable. In their memories of growing up, the "fatherly" men gave them more horrible memories. Ni Aoao is also looking for a "fatherly man with enough thoughts and abilities to 'cover' me", which reflects the emotion of "affection for father" embedded in these female characters, they are eager for the missing fatherly love.

Although there are emotions of affection for father and patricide mixed in the texts, neither Chen Ran nor Lin Bai actually write too much about male characters in their works, and many of them do not even have names but are replaced by letters, being the main textual expression of male characters being symbolized in their literary works. For example, Mr. Q and Director D in

The Fighting of One Person, and Teacher T in Private Life, etc. This phenomenon reflects their deconstruction of the male world. The "unshakability" of the male world is shaken, and men are banished from the text or symbolized, which reflects the rebellion of these female writers.

However, in Wang Anyi's works, the male perspective is not missing, and the male characters are not "banished", she just weakened the male characters and still allowed the male characters to appear as important characters in the text. In terms of the gender relation, Wang Anyi's works embody a gentler feminism than that of the private writing: she explored the concept of gender equality. This concept is reflected in *Love in a Small Town*, in which the description of male characters changes from the traditional image of tall and strong men into a deliberately weaker image, and the image of women was improved. By neutralizing the traditional image of the petite woman and the strong man, Wang Anyi tried to show a new concept of gender equality.

In the talk on the creation of *Century on the Hill*, Wang Anyi mentioned a key word -- "balance". A "balanced" gender relation is the conclusion of Wang Anyi's exploration and reflection on gender relation. Moreover, in the process of Wang Anyi's exploration and reflection, we can find that she tried to achieve "balance" by constructing "imbalance". This construction of "imbalance" is achieved by deliberately improving the women of both sexes to a higher position, such as the girl from Jingu Lane in *Love on a Barren Mountain*, the "she" who raises the pigeon pair alone in *Love in a Small Town*, the female editor in *Love in Jinxiu Valley*, Wang Qiyao in *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, etc.

The banishment and symbolization of the male characters in private writing is more a reflection of the dilemma faced by female writers such as Chen Ran and Lin Bai in their search for a breakthrough in feminism, as women still present a state of escape and powerlessness in the face of patriarchy, and they did not find a reasonable way or a strong enough force to fight against the patriarchy, which reflects the limited nature of female self-construction. However, Wang Anyi's feminine consciousness is more mature, she broke through this dilemma and put men and women on an equal position. This expression has deepened Wang Anyi's understanding of female consciousness and is the "effective voice" that is closer to reality.

3.2. Attribute of Desire

The private writing takes female desire as the subject of writing, focuses on highlighting women's own body desires and gives sexuality itself an unprecedented ontological meaning. The emphasis is on the description of female masturbation and the special emotions among

women. Wang Anyi's description of desire treats it more as an object, discovering through the hidden desire of women for a higher level of desire.

The re-examination and brave opening up of the female body is an effective means for female to truly write about themselves and rewrite the female image under the norms of patriarchal culture. Chen Ran's writing is extremely careful in dealing with women's own physical desires, with the unique purity and elegance of literature. When it comes to the parts of the female body associated with organs, she described by evocative but not vulgar metaphors, such as "velvet balls", "feathers", "roses", "cracked cherries" and "prostitution", and used erratic poetic imagination to describe the behavior of female masturbation. In contrast, Lin Bai's writing is more direct and powerful than Chen Ran's, the female body is no longer replaced by metaphorical words, but is presented unobtrusively, and the primitive desire of women becomes more unrestrained and natural, with a sharp and unbridled power in the heat and agitation.

Wang Anyi's description of female desire is not the ontology of her writing, but an object, which is the derivative of the concept of equality between men and women. Female desire is not the core of Wang Anyi's works, but a communicative relationship, and Wang Anyi's aim in writing about this desire is to highlight a more equal relationship between men and women.

Love on a Barren Mountain is the earliest one in the "Three Loves" series. At that time, Wang Anyi didn't free herself from the constrictions of historical traditions and was still in a tentative and wait-and-see stage, and the relationship between men and women in the text was not yet completely equal. First, the awakening of female self-awareness is reflected in the fact that the girl in the Jingu Lane chooses her own objects of desire, that is, the soldier and the cellist. But her choice of the soldier is based on his excellent masculine qualities that match her own, and it is evident that the girl in Jingu Lane measures herself through a male perspective, and believes herself will be excellent as a brave and resolute man, the narrative is still dominated by the male. Second, when faced with the choice of emotional relationships, the girl in the Jingu Lane failed to take the initiative: her suicide after the soldier's threat is actually the main female character's banishment of self in the text, which reflects that Wang Anya's early exploration of the equalization of gender relations is still at the stage of enlightenment; female resistance to male power is tragic, but desire as an object, the appearance and choice of objects will follow the change, it is actually the expression of the gradual awakening of female consciousness.

As the subject of desire, the female in "Three Loves" have the active consciousness to find the object of desire, and as the object of desire, Wang Anyi expressed

a sense of female subjectivity through the changes in the subject's search for the object of desire. At the same time, the awakening of female desire is not only about physical desire, but also about female desire for protection and conquest, which is the awakening of female moral values. The private writing expresses the idea that "sex is up to yourself", which is a more elementary awakening of female desire, physiological desire is the reflection of the awakening of the animalistic attribute of female. What Wang Anyi wants to express is a deeper level of spiritual desire, which reflects the awakening of female social attribute.

3.3. Feminist Sense of Space

Female in private writing are almost always in a claustrophobic space, separated from the outside world by an invisible barrier that we could call it "room". Woolf's metaphor for female "own room", with its claustrophobic and secretive nature, it is an exclusively female space that is distinct from the male world. The "room" with the sense of boundary and concealment gives female who wants privacy a unique sense of safety and belonging.

Ni Aobao in *Private Life* said: "I have always been eager for a sole house, it is a premise for the inner life one can conduct." And, both before and after she wrote letters refusing treatment from her psychiatrist, there is a large description of the bathtub. For Ni Aobao, the claustrophobic bathtub means safety, order and whiteness, but the outside world is chaotic, noisy, dirty and dangerous, she wants to escape it and immerse herself in her own world. In addition, the "mirror" also appears frequently in Chen Ran's and Lin Bai's texts, becoming another "room" isolated from the outside world.

It can be seen that Chen Ran and Lin Bai's private writing emphasizes immersing oneself in the subconscious scenes they construct, isolating oneself from outside interference, thus constructing a secret space for women themselves, the embodiment of feminism is based on privacy, and we can consider it a private feminism.

Wang Anyi's feminism is not entirely the private feminism, but is embodied in the "human" who exists in society, and the sense of space is obviously much larger than that of private writing. Although the story of *Love in a Small Town* takes place in a repressed and enclosed practice room, it is not the secret space itself that causes "him" and "her" to keep having sex to break the shackles, but the social taboos that the secret space represents. With the end of the relationship between "her" and "him", the end of secret feminism is also announced. In its place is the awakening of her social identity as a mother. Although her physique gradually

changed from its initial plumpness to a peasant woman, and became an old woman with the ravages of age:

"Increasingly sluttish, with no care for clothing, dressed in disarray but still powdered."

——*Love in a Small Town*

The dishevelled clothes contrast with the powder on her face. Even as her physique gradually loses the youthful charm, she uses the makeup on her face to hold on to her original heart. In the face of rumors, she does not escape reality by death, but carries on with her two kids, feminism sublimated in the light of motherhood and became more pure by the wash of society.

The private writing is isolated from the outside world and lacks communication with society, and only the private female experience reveals the limitations of female self-construction. Such works lack realistic intensity and are mostly based on self-experience, which makes such "shout" somewhat monotonous and pale. Wang Anyi's exploration of female growth is presented in a social space, although the ending is imperfect under the pressure of society, "they" all have their own spiritual awakening and resistance, which is also a reflection of progress.

4. CONCLUSION

In this paper, the works of Wang Anyi, Chen Ran and Lin Bai are compared and analysed through three dimensions: "the meaning of the existence of male characters", "the attribute of desire" and "the feminist sense of space". The writer found that, first, the feminism expressed by Chen Ran and Lin Bai is unrealistic at the expense of sacrificing male characters. Wang Anyi's works do not completely banish and symbolize the male characters, but express the relative equality between men and women that the writer wants to achieve by intentionally weakening the male status and improving the female status. Second, Chen Ran and Lin Bai take desire as the ontology, and highlight the own physical desires of female, which makes female physically awaken as the animal human. Wang Anyi takes desire as an object, which gives female a richer sense of spiritual belonging and identity, and is an awakening on the level of the social person. Third, Chen Ran and Lin Bai construct a "Utopia" for their female characters, all of whom carry out activities within a relatively closed "glass shade". The construction of this imaginary ideal space makes her feminism extremely claustrophobic and secret. Wang Anyi throws her female characters into the large context of the era, breaks the "glass shade" of privacy through the analysis of different social relationships, thus achieving an awakening in the social sense. Therefore, the feminism contained in Wang Anyi's works is mostly set against the background of the realistic discourse system, which has more practical significance than the pure literary

discourse system constructed to realize feminism in Chen Ran and Lin Bai's private writing, this is also the embodiment of progress and has realized the docking of feminism and social discourse system in literary works.

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