

Feminist Critical Theory: An Analysis of the Changing Image of Women in Female Leader Online Novel

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ABSTRACT

It has been more than 20 years since Chinese online fiction first developed (1990). As a new branch of online fiction, Female Leader (i.e. fictions take women as protagonists) online novel have emerged in recent years (around 2010) and become a cultural phenomenon that cannot be ignored. It is possible to analyse the development of feminism in the field of online literature by combining it with feminist studies in a social context. The essay begins with an introduction to the relevant background, followed by a description of the current state of research and its shortcomings, as well as the theoretical framework of feminist criticism (FCDA) that will be applied. Next, two representative texts from different periods are analyzed using the two articles of the theoretical framework. Finally, the purpose of the study is to analyse what kind of demands for feminism are revealed in feminist novels of different periods, what are the progress and limitations of "feminist novels" and what kind of development can bring better results, at last, what we have learned and thought about.

Keywords: online fiction, female image, Female Leader.

1. INTRODUCTION

This particular form of literature-Chinese online fiction, was first born in Europe and the United States in the 1970s, and gradually become self-conscious[1]. For China, the 1990s - pushed literature into a market-oriented arena. The creation of the RongShuXia literary website in 1998 brought China into the era of online literature at the first time, then, the creation of the HongXiu literary website in 1999 and the Xiaoxiang Bookstore literary website in 2001 both set the stage for the creation of female online literature. Influenced by Taiwanese romance writers such as Xi Juan(2000), a large number of women's spiritual aspirations arose in response to the rapid economic development, and a sea of romance novels emerged from the websites of HongXiu and Xiaoxiang, which mainly target female readers. Around 2003, QiDian and Jinjiang literary website became widely known, it didn't take so long since JinJiang literary website occupied the main position of women's literature. The boundaries between male and female online literature became clearer, which leading to an increasingly systematic approach to online literature. The terms Female Channel and Male Channel have been used to refer to the group of novels mainly targeting women and the group of novels mainly targeting men. During this period, Female

Channel became more diversified, with themes such as reversal of fortune, rebirth and revenge. After 2010, the online platform entered a new period of development, which led to the creation of more novel reading platforms. Not only the large websites such as Zongheng Chinese Net, Palm League Literature, but also the niche platforms such as ChangPei Novel, kept not far behind. The classification of Female Channel became more refined, Romance, No Love, Lesbian, Gay and other categories had become the main categories, in addition to different kinds of romance novels, Female Leader from Female Channel had also emerged and became an popular theme in recent years.

2. LITERATURE VIEW

2.1. Current status

Mr. Ouyang youquan, a leading researcher on Chinese online literature, suggested that the main of online novel research output was focused on the traditional academics[2]. In terms of women's online fiction, XuMiaoMiao's publication Online Literature in Gender Perspective first incorporated gender perspective into online literary criticism[3], but it did

not explore further into other aspects. Besides, in the area of women's online fiction creation, articles such as *Research on the Narrative of Women's Writing in Online Literature* written by Qi Lixia[4] appeared. Lately, Shao Yanjun's *Annual Chinese Online Literature (Female Volume)*[5] thoroughly divided male and female fiction from each other. It further promotes the development of online novel criticism. What's more, Zhuang Yong's *Core Bibliography for Reading Chinese Online Literature*[6] integrates most of the influential women's online novels of recent years, incorporating new times, new issues, and new developments into a consideration of online literature in a relevant social context.

2.2. Lacking research

Firstly, research on online literature has mostly focused on its economic and social connections and commercial value[7], while deeper and detail studies of online fiction texts keep rare. Secondly, the criticism of women's online literature is still dominated by Western critical theory and lacks relevant innovation[8]. As the creation of online novels becomes diverse, the criticism of online literature should also keep pace with the times.

In addition, the research results of women's online literature focus on their courses, horizons of expectation. Women's online literature seldom integrated with the development of feminism in practice.

2.3. Purpose of the study

The feminist critical theory (FCDA) will be used in conjunction with specific texts for the following analysis.

Analyze the demands for feminism revealed in women's novels of different periods, taking into account the author's ideological tendencies and inner motivations revealed in the texts. A consideration of the progressive and limiting aspects of women's fiction and what developments can bring about better results. Our own perceptions and reflections on women's online fiction.

3. PRINCIPLES OF FEMINIST CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS(FCDA)

Michelle M. Lazar, the proposer of FCDA, takes critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a tool to raise people's critical awareness of social issues such as discrimination and inequality[9].

After this, gender inequality became an important research focus based on the concerns of many CDA scholars, which contributed to the creation of FCDA. In addition, feminist research also contributed to CDA research in the 1980s. Decades later, FCDA was formalized in order to clarify the contribution of

feminist thought.

Thus, FCDA not only inherits the Frankfurt School's knowledge of CDA, but also influenced by the development of contemporary critical feminist thought. It articulates the complexity and diversity of gender ideologies as a political perspective, raising the issue of gender ideological asymmetries and how to address them.

While maintaining a critical focus, the FCDA also argues that individuals' social identities change from one context to another and that the categories of femininity and masculinity, rather than being universal and binary, are diverse, changing and pluralistic.

Michelle M. Lazar identifies the five interrelated principles of the FCDA.

Firstly, the FCDA believes that gender is an ideology that divides people into two distinct groups based on sexual difference and naturalness. Secondly, Power is closely linked to feminist critique. Although the feminist movement has not ceased, the effects of male hegemony and patriarchal society have made it difficult for women to wield power. Thirdly, gender is performative and constitutive. FCDA argues that in the current historical period, men and women are consciously 'performing' masculine and feminine identities. Fourth, feminist criticism is reflexivity. Person or institution may use feminism for non-feminist purposes/Therefore, constant reflection on itself is necessary. Fifthly, FCDA's scholarship is considered analytical activism. Through research, as well as the propagation, making society more inclusive and making gender less of a primary prerequisite in determining self-consciousness and relationships with others is the ultimate goal.

Based on the two texts I have chosen, I will select the second and third theories to analyse for specific texts.

4. METHOD

Di Wang Ye was published by Heilongjiang Publishing House in 2007. It was hailed as a masterpiece of Female Leader novel.

Jiang Ji is an online novel written by Duo Mu Mu Duo, serialized in Jinjiang since 2016. It was named one of the Most Influential Online Novels of the Year in 2017.

The author has chosen these two texts not only because they are classics of the Female Leader novels, but also the different time periods in which they were written make them uniquely relevant for analysing feminist thought in different periods.

4.1. Feminist subordination and the patriarchal overtones inherent in it

Michelle M. Lazar suggests that power is a central focus of critical inquiry into gender identity and relations. Even today, the society is still tinged with patriarchy. The feminist ambivalence is mainly reflected in the perception of power in the texts of Di Wang Ye and Jiang Ji.

The heroine of Di Wang Ye repeatedly states: "The mission of men is to explore and conquer, the mission of women is to guard and shelter". There is no doubt that, making her husband famous is the highest point at which a successful woman can reach. The power she has comes from her family also the husband-in short, all come from others.

Not only around 2007, but also in recent years, most of the novels with female protagonists have fallen into the same dilemma; few women take pride in fighting for their power, as if it is shameful for women to be radical and ambitious. A woman must go through a process of 'Forced to be bad' before she can gain power, to show that all the ruthless things she does afterwards are forced upon her, that she has been pushed into a position of power.

Jiang Ji, on the other hand, portrays a different kind of heroine. When she was no longer content to be a behind-the-scenes wielder of power, she chose to show her political ambitions clearly. The text of Jiang Ji never hides the fact that she is a creature of power, that she has achieved power not by force but because it has nourished her and enabled her to realize her ideals and ambitions.

In contrast to Di Wang Ye(2007),the central idea of the text in Jiang Ji is that women need to earn their own power, not rely on others to give it to them, and that power given by others is often unsustainable.The female protagonist of Jang Ji(2016) finally gained the power and the freedom to take charge of her own destiny. This portrayal of women reflects that women's desire to wield power is no longer a shy topic, but has become a hot topic.

That is to say,the female protagonist of Di Wang Ye, who became the queen but still be afraid of losing the love of the male protagonist because she cannot bear children, shows us no only the limitations of ancient women but also the modern women-a large percentage of women still haven't broken the barriers of tragedy.

4.2. Outward Expressiveness in Feminism

Michelle M. Lazar argues that people take on a particular image of masculinity or femininity in a particular social and historical context. This also contributes to the creation of stereotypes.

The heroine of Di Wang Ye is outwardly in keeping with the traditional image with her beautiful appearance and noble status. And intrinsically, she was willing to be a virtuous wife.In order to give birth to the male protagonist and inherit the throne, she had to get pregnant despite her frail body.

Such sacrifice is praiseworthy virtue in a male-dominated society. Around 2007, feminist consciousness was still in its infancy, and becoming a female character behind successful men was a common trend.

In contrast, the heroine of Jiang Ji did not stand out in terms of her appearance, she was from a humble background and was known for her greed for lust. In terms of attitude towards other people,she did not aspire to maintain a beautiful appearance or earn a good reputation.Such an image seems a bit peculiar for the heroine.

These differences reflect the female author's reflection on the stereotype. During Jiang Ji's writing (2016-2018), a new period of feminism in China's Internet was ushered in. The developing of feminist's consciousness on Weibo brought new thinking to women, and women's aesthetics become free and diverse. This is one of the reasons why the portrayal of women in online novels is no longer confined to the perfect woman.

4.3. The ambivalence of feminist advancement

As the feminist movement has advanced and feminist thought has progressed, so has some false feminism has been popularised on social networking sites.Lazar suggests that all of us should reflect while seeing many false theories.

Di Wang Ye is ideologically characterised by traditional Chinese collectivist overtones. When the heroine's family needed her devotion, she chose to sacrifice her own happiness by giving up the love of her life to marry a man she never met. After her marriage, she chose to be dependent not on her family, but on her husband.She used her devotion to patriarchal power to gain her own power—for the author, the sacrifice seems to be praiseworthy and encouraging.

Conversely, the heroine of Jiang Ji was unwilling to live as a sacrificial lamb. Despite her adoptive father and the noble family made much efforts to satisfy her material desires, her heart developed a strong disgust and resistance when they forced her to do something.She believed that material enjoyment was only a shackle used by the patriarchy to confine women,though she liked to enjoy, she wanted to get everything by herself.

Volpova once said[10],"The misfortune of woman is to be surrounded by almost irresistible temptations; she

is not asked to rise to the occasion, but is only encouraged to slip down to reach the ultimate bliss. By the time she realises that she has been fooled by the mirage, it is too late".

From the two novels, we can see the thinking and change about feminism. In Jiang Ji written later, it denies patriarchal empowerment to women, then portrays an ambitious, power-hungry woman. This reflects the fact that in recent years, women no longer believe, as they once did, that the apex of feminism lies in the beauty of marriage and family. They believe in themselves,

5. CONCLUSION

From Di Wang Ye in 2007 to Jiang Ji in 2016, we can recognise some changes in the consciousness of women in the Chinese online world.

On the level of whether or not to become subordinate, the collective consciousness brought to women by traditional Chinese culture is fading, and the young women are more concerned with their own independence. As a result, women's long-standing dependence on male authority is fading, and they are looking to themselves rather than to others for help.

In terms of the external expressiveness of gender, the long-standing monolithic aesthetic shifted in other directions. Rather than being bound by beauty and virtue, female authors and readers want to express their inner support of a pluralistic, liberal aesthetic through different images of women.

Besides, women are more likely to be the active seekers than the givers. Women are recognising the importance of taking power into their own hands, rather than gambling on marriage or family and desiring to dispose of it from others. This is a further indication of how women are really thinking about the concept of 'independence' in recent years.

Last but not the least, women are thinking more deeply about feminism than in the past. Due to the bondage of traditional culture, it is difficult for women to think outside the current framework. But today, the statement "Being the woman behind the successful man is the highest achievement for women" is no longer popular. Women demand more Power and also bash feminism which seems real.

We need to look at how we perceive Female Leader novels from a dialectical perspective.

On the one hand, some Female Leader novels may have brought us more thoughts and a better understanding of the meaning of feminism, and even provided some reference for the feminist movement; but on the other hand, we need to keep reflecting on the falsity of Female Leader novels. Some feminist novels are actually just male stories told in female shells, and if

you replace the female characters in the stories with men, there is no difference, and this does not bring us deeper thoughts. In feminist research, we need to think objectively, and it is helpful to compare and contrast the various aspects of the study to get a clearer picture.

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