

Characteristics of the Female Discourse in Louisa May Alcott's Novels

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ABSTRACT

This article is a study of the relevance of Alcott's work novels and female consciousness. The ideology of "separate spheres" [1] prevailing in American society in the 19th century confined women to the family most of the time, but both in reality and in the literary imagination, women were constantly expanding their space outward. The work narrative in Louisa May Alcott's novels reproduces the process of women moving from "private sphere" to "public sphere". This article attempts to interpret this process, read Alcott's work novels in detail through the method of intertextual dialogue between the novel text and other texts, as well as the study of the social and historical context of the novel text, and explore the existence predicament of American women and the evolution of ethical ideas in the 19th century. This research has certain reference significance for gender consciousness and literary writing.

Keywords: Louisa May Alcott, Work novels, Gender consciousness, Female discourse.

1. INTRODUCTION

Anne Bradstreet, the first woman writer in American history to publish a personal collection of poems, once wrote the poem "The Prologue" to tell the hardship of female poets and even professional women. From the 17th century, when Bradstreet was born, to the 19th century and beyond, professional women have been unfairly criticized in terms of morality and working competence. Due to the unique fertility of women, until today, some people still believe that women naturally belong to the family. If women allocate their limited energy to public sphere, they will be deemed to have failed to complete the tasks of caring for the family and be condemned for negligence. In the 19th century, many women writers saw the potential for social work in women and, to varying degrees, began to call for the opening of career paths for women. In "Private Women, Public Stage: the Family Nature in 19th-century American Literature", Mary Carey discussed the special experiences of twelve 19th-century American women who were women writers in the private and public sphere.¹ [2] In fact, when

an American woman in the 19th century stepped on the "public stage" with one foot, her other foot had to stay in the "private sphere", which also created a unique work writing-mode in American female novels at this stage.

2. "PRIVATE SPHERE" AND "PUBLIC STAGE"

At that time, the widespread ideology of family worship in the United States made people believe that family is a more suitable living environment for women, and that wives, mothers, and "family angels" are the most suitable positions for women. In general impression, the inside of the family was warm, safe and feminine, while outside the family was harsh, dangerous and masculine. The public and private spheres were divided in the name of gender, especially in the middle class. Even if middle-class women had to go out to work, they were engaged in very "feminine" occupations. Similarly, going out to work didn't mean that women could give up family responsibilities. Many women writers in the 19th century used writing as a means of earning a living when something unforeseen happened in their family. When they were doing housework while writing to support

1. See: Marry Kelley. *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1984.

family, they often had the double identity of "family angel" and "new woman" at the same time. In view of life experience, it was difficult for these women not to involve women's work in their works or not to talk about women's relationship with family, work, and society. Indeed, being paid working women didn't necessarily mean that they could think deeply about the social phenomenon of women's work and express advanced concepts. In many cases, women writers only described this phenomenon relatively superficially in their own works, admitting the existence of the phenomenon of women's work. At other times, they would ask questions and answer themselves in their works. Should women work? What jobs should women do? In other words, what kind of work is "suitable" for women to do?

Many scholars who paid attention to gender issues believed that traditional academic research tended to belittle women in the name of "gender differences", use "division of labor" to marginalize women, and assign occupations with low salaries and not conducive to the advancement of social status to second-sex groups, such as housewives who took care of free housework, poorly paid nursing workers, babysitters, and kindergarten teachers, etc.. This also led to men in the patriarchal society to prepare and receive professional training for their future careers from birth, while women regarded marriage as the most "suitable" occupation. Only when they were not able to support themselves by marriage, such as being single and widows, and the husband's income was insufficient, they would begin to be engaged in work, but most of the choices available to them were some low-paying occupations that were not popular with men. In "The Subjection of Women", the sociologist John Stuart Mill also seriously discussed the issue of women's employment. He attributed women's delay in participating in social production to political factors rather than physiological factors, and believed that the ideology of women as "incompetent" was one of the tools for men to dominate women. Because if men recognize the equality of men and women, they would not be able to ensure the subordinate status of women, nor would they be able to squeeze half of the human race out of fairness in every aspect.² [3]In fact, his conclusion was similar to the predecessors such as Beauvoir. Everyone believes that the status quo of women's inferiority is the result of being

2. See: John Stuart Mill. *The Subjection of Women*. London: Longmans, 1870.

brainwashed rather than inherent. As a result, women accepted the natural definition of "incompetent" and were excluded from the competition for the best occupations. "Since they came into the world with a cry, they were destined to be unable or impossible to become suitable for occupations, and these occupations were legally open to the dumbest and most humble men. Or, no matter how suitable they were, they were not allowed to engage in these occupations, so that these occupations could be reserved for the exclusive benefit of men"[3]³.

3. "FEMININE" CAREER CHOICES

The actual situation is that a considerable part of the discourse system that persuades women to choose a career that is "suitable" for them is based on compliment and praise for the so-called femininity. This is different from Schopenhauer. This discourse didn't directly define women as stupid and emotional, but praised them for being more careful, more sensitive, and acuter in their "sixth sense". "Women's psychological system was not helpful for them to go beyond intuition, but aggravated their characteristics of behaving by feeling"⁴[4], therefore, women were not suitable for highly professional and highly competitive occupations. They were "only suitable for stationary occupations"⁵[4], and they should stay at home and be angels, cooks and nannies. From the perspective of men, especially men of the middle class and above, it was even embarrassing for their wives to go out to work. It was a duty that a decent man must perform to provide for his wife's leisurely life. A working wife showed the loss of her husband's dignity.

Although middle-class women in the 19th century didn't have full justifications and full equal opportunities for work, there have been female characters respected for their work in literary works. Compared with the images of "family angels" prevailing in the 1850s, these "new woman" images, which mostly appeared in the second half of the 19th century, possessed completely new concepts,

3. John Stuart Mill. *The Subjection of Women*. London: Longmans, 1870. p.91.

4. Alexander Walker. *Woman Physiologically Considered as to Mind, Morals, Marriage, Matrimonial Slavery, Infidelity and Divorce*. Birmingham: Edward Baker, John Bright Street, 1989. p.6.

5. Alexander Walker. *Woman Physiologically Considered as to Mind, Morals, Marriage, Matrimonial Slavery, Infidelity and Divorce*. Birmingham: Edward Baker, John Bright Street, 1989. p.140.

new thoughts, new attitudes, and even new appearances. As Martha H. Patterson pointed out when re-discussing the new American woman, there is no single definition of the "new woman" and it can take different forms depending on religion, class, political stand, race, nationality, and historical circumstances.⁶ [5]When American women in the 19th century were no longer satisfied with receiving education and managing housework within the family, they were "pervaded with dissatisfaction and desire for independence"⁷[6] and eager to gain new experiences on the "public stage", and they became representatives of the "new woman". It is not unusual for such women to appear in novels written by obvious feminist writers such as Mrs. Stowe. However, it is worth mentioning that moderate reformists like Louisa May Alcott also describe similar heroines.

4. THE "AMERICAN DREAM" OF WOMEN WRITERS

Jo in "Little Women" is a classic character with enduring charm. To this day, countless readers still care about this bluff girl who has short hair and wears men's clothes. The author has undoubtedly projected her own life experience on Jo: loving literature, being engaged in writing work to make money to support the family, believing that marriage and family are indispensable, but also being eager to carve out a career, etc. Compared with other female novels of the same period, the biggest feature of this novel is that it is still a best-selling classic, and scholars are also very interested in it. Even scholar Yang Jiang mentioned in the article "Remember Yang Bi" that the sisters had read the anecdote of the American novel "Little Women" when they were young.⁸[10]In this novel, whether Alcott "discussed the cultural space that was active and excluded by women in the middle and late 19th century" as Ken Parille put it⁹[7], or "sought a new perspective on female subjectivity and space" as Ann B. Murphy put it¹⁰[12], it is

undeniable that it does provide an image of a working woman who is keen to leave the private sphere and invest in social production — Jo.

Louisa May Alcott expressed her love for work more than once. In October 1856, she wrote: "I was born with the spirit of a boy. I can't wait to work, so I hold some of my talents in my hands and promote the world to progress; I'm braver than before and wiser because of failure".¹¹ [7]She also regarded hard work as a demonstration of high morality: "Today I feel very noble. I did a lot of cleaning alone, baked bread, mopped the floor, kept busy, prepared dinner, and wrote a chapter of 'Emotions'".¹² [7]¹² Alcott originally wrote because her household economy was in crisis and she had to borrow money to subsist. Becoming a best-selling author not only helped her pay off her debts, but also allowed her and her family to lead a comfortable and independent life. The benefits of work are great to Alcott. It is not difficult to imagine why she always speaks with pride when mentioning work in her diaries and letters: "Four stories in this month, earn 70 cents, send home 30 dollars, no debt".¹³ [7]"The books are selling very well and there is no debt".¹⁴[7] "Go home and start a new challenge. Twenty years ago I decided to do everything I could to make my family independent, and at the age of forty, I made it. The debts are paid off, including the illegal ones, and we still have enough surplus to live comfortably".¹⁵[7] Similarly, it is not difficult to understand why the characters in her works are always actively asking for work. In Alcott's eyes, work means pursuing the "American Dream" in her heart, representing a "good intention" and an inevitable guarantee for the realization of the "American Dream". As Harold Bloom said in his introduction to "Bloom's Literary Themes: The American Dream", one of the "Collection of Bloom Literary Criticism" series:

Women in Culture and Society, Vol. 15, Issue 3, 1990. pp.562-585.

11. Louisa May Alcott, Ednah Dow Cheney. *Louisa May Alcott: Her Life, Letters, And Journals*. Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1889.p.85.

12. Louisa May Alcott, Ednah Dow Cheney. *Louisa May Alcott: Her Life, Letters, And Journals*. Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1889.pp.168-169.

13. Louisa May Alcott, Ednah Dow Cheney. *Louisa May Alcott: Her Life, Letters, And Journals*. Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1889.p.196.

14. Louisa May Alcott, Ednah Dow Cheney. *Louisa May Alcott: Her Life, Letters, And Journals*. Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1889.p.211.

15. Louisa May Alcott, Ednah Dow Cheney. *Louisa May Alcott: Her Life, Letters, And Journals*. Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1889.p.262.

6. See: Martha H. Patterson. *The American New Woman Revisited: A Reader, 1894-1930*. Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2008.

7. Carolyn Forrey, "The New Woman Revisited" in *Women's Studies*, 2(1), 1974. pp.37-56.

8. Yang Jiang, "Remember Yang Bi", in Yang Jiang's "Yang Jiang Prose", Hangzhou: Zhejiang Literature and Art Publishing House, December 1994, pp.327-341. (in Chinese)

9. Ken Parille, "'Wake up, and Be a Man': *Little Women*, Laurie, and the Ethic of Submission" in *Children's Literature* (Storrs, Conn.), Vol. 29, No. 1, 2001. pp.34-51.

10. Ann B. Murphy, "The Border of Ethical, Erotic and, Artistic Possibilities in *Little Women*" in *Signs: Journal of*

"Like many powerful social myths, the American Dream lacks a clear meaning, whether in news reports or in academic analysis".¹⁶ [8] The "American Dream" in the minds of every American is different. From the perspective of Alcott's life experience, work has allowed her to pay off her debts and support her family. Even after decades of continuous work, she has allowed herself and her family to lead a decent life. She is very proud of the results of her work. If it were not for work, it would be difficult for her to obtain the freedom of wealth for the rest of her life. In her view, the "American Dream" means economic freedom, independent life, and a more comfortable future. The process of pursuing the "American Dream" is a process of work, a process of fulfilling "a beautiful wish". She writes this thought into the novel, substituting into the image of the heroine in her works. Meg and Jo were very sensible when their father encountered an economic crisis and actively asked to go out to work, because they believed that work would help them reduce the financial burden of the family. Even the positive meaning of work lied not only in making money, but also in being able to "train their enterprising spirit and self-reliance ability". Work is no longer a tool for making a living and a means of obtaining money. People who love work should naturally be rewarded spiritually, and those who do not love work are morally disadvantaged and should be criticized.

5. CONCLUSION

First of all, in Alcott's view, the capitalist market is a male capitalist labor market. To find a tiny space in the public sphere, the true ideal woman will no longer be a woman who meets the "real female" standards of obedience, chastity, gentleness, and kindness, but a "masculine" woman. This can be seen from the fact that she deliberately blurs the male and female qualities when she is shaping the female image, thus creating images of uncontrolled "tomboys". Secondly, Alcott sees the various social problems brought about by the development of capitalism, such as the disparity between the rich and the poor, the same work with different pay between men and women, and the employment of child labor, and expresses dissatisfaction and criticism against them. However, when facing social problems, Alcott can hardly come up with effective and systematic solutions.

16. Harold Bloom, "Volume Introduction" in *Bloom's Literary Themes: The American Dream*; edited and with an introduction by Harold Bloom; volume editor, Blake Hobby. New York: An Imprint of Infobase Publishing, 2009. p.xv.

Instead, she looks forward to using preaching and evangelism to deepen people's moral ideas in order to maintain a more harmonious labor market. This can yet be regarded as a kind and beautiful wish, but with limited results. It can be said that Alcott shows care for women, the poor and children in her novels, possessing progressive color of democracy and equality. However, it is one of her limitations that she rarely reflects on the privileges possessed by the middle class in which she lives, and instead shows her fear of class slippage, indirectly defending the inequality of class.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independently completed by Meilin Cao.

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