The Perception of Women in Chinese Female-Oriented Internet Literature During 2012-2021

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ABSTRACT

At present, the status of women is gradually improving, and more and more women choose to express their perspectives and ideas through the creation of romantic novels on the Internet, and many scholars are also analyzing the female perceptions behind this internet literature. Thus, it is very important and necessary to study the female perceptions that are shown in online romantic novels, and it can help people quickly understand the female perceptions' ideology and changes in a certain period or stage. However, few people classify and summarize the works of this period to observe the evolution of women's perceptions. Therefore, the purpose of our essay is to explore how the cognition of women has changed during this period by reading and analyzing scholars' analysis of the female perceptions behind online romantic novels from 2012 to 2021. This paper has summarized and analyzed about 30 essays from Google Scholar and China National Knowledge Infrastructure(CNKI). Essays on female-oriented internet novels are divided into three categories with their representative female character designs respectively: traditional romance novel, Superwoman and Matriarchy fiction, and Danmei (boys' love) novel. The result of this analysis demonstrates that the literary world fabricated by Chinese women in cyberspace is an imagined Utopia for them to escape the tense and trivial real life, also an experiment field of reconstructing the meaning of their gender.

Keywords: Chinese internet literature, female-oriented internet literature, danmei, matriarchy fiction, traditional romantic novel

1. INTRODUCTION

Chinese internet literature refers to the novels produced and read on the internet [1]. Among the huge amount of works[1]and consumers (see Table 1), there is a transparent gender preference. The gender difference in purchasing and producing different categories of internet literature works has been observed by the operators and utilized to divide their works into male-oriented, "male channel"(Nanpin), and female-oriented, "female channel"(Nvpin) [2]. Furthermore, this category is also used by academic critics[2]. The studies of female-oriented internet literature could be classified into three aspects. First, studies on different novel genres. This sort of study includes the studies on the aesthetic value of concubines' contest[3], the female representation in time travel novels [4] and queer novels [5][6]. In addition that these studies are mainly dissertations for the master's degree. The second sort of study is the studies on female characters in the novel which has been adapted to TV/Internet series. This kind of study most directly reflect consumer preference and contemporary culture through analyzing the hottest Intellectual Property[3] [7]. From 2015 to 2019, half of the popular TV series was adapted from internet literature works (see Table 2) [8]. Third, women self-awareness is the major frontier of the current study on female-oriented internet literature. Scholars congregate in analyzing the predicament of the representation of modern women [9] without discrimination in genres [10].

There are abundant fruits in the current study field, however, the categories of female-oriented internet literature are too specific while most of the internet literature works are sharing a similar narration mode [11]. There is less necessity in categorizing the genre than using character design(Renshe) as a prerequisite of categorizing [12]. This paper abstracts the most quintessential character design intertwining with its representative genre to see how does the perception of women changed during

2012[4]-2021, through the representation of women in three major types of female-oriented internet literature.

Table 1 2020.12-2021.6 Internet Literature User Scale and Using Rate

	2020.12		2021.6	
Application	User scale (million)	Using rate	User scale (million)	Using rate
internet literature	460.13	46.5%	461.27	45.6%

Source: *The 48th Research of Internet User*. Report from China Internet Network Information Center

Table 2 The Annual Summary of TV Series Adapted from IP

Item / year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
The total amount of IP and its occupation	19(38%)	12(40%)	27(54%)	30(60%)	27(53%)
The average amount of playback(billion)	3.240	5.884	5.060	5.872	
Amount of IP in the top 10 TV series	6	7	6	6	8

Source: Industrial Preferences and Creative Features of IP Transformation: A Statistical Study Based on Network Series [8].

2. AN OVERVIEW ON FEMALE-ORIENTED INTERNET LITERATURE STUDIES IN THE LATEST DECADE

2.1. The innocent and pure girl in Traditional romantic novel

Classic traditional romantic novels often have similar plots and routines. For example, heroes and heroines will have beautiful appearances and outstanding talents, and generally speaking, heroes will have higher social status and abilities than heroines [13]. In Gu Man's novels, the description of male images is always more delicate and perfect than female images. For example, He Yichen, the protagonist in the novel "My Sunshine", looks handsome, has strong learning ability, and has a high salary. He is a well-known elite lawyer in the industry and has a deep affection for the heroine Zhao Mosheng. Even after seven years, he still loves Zhao Mosheng deeply [14]. The male and female protagonists in "LOVE O2O" follow the same pattern. Whether it is Zhao Mosheng in "My Sunshine" or Bei Weiwei in "LOVE O2O", they are all beautiful, simple and kind, and capable of character, but compared to male protagonists, their abilities are still weak [14]. Readers fully respect the image of the perfect male. This phenomenon shows that women in the early 21st century, whether they are authors or readers, worship and rely on male power [14]. They construct different images of perfect men to satisfy their fantasies, which are too theoretical and not practical. In addition, the portrayed male protagonist unconditionally satisfies the deep requirement of the female protagonist. The female protagonist's career is not successful enough compared to the male protagonist and the female protagonist has to rely on the male protagonist's help in everything, which also shows the dependence of women on male power [15].

Another characteristic novel derived from traditional romantic novels is the Mary Sue romantic novel. The biggest feature of the Mary Sue romantic novel is that the role that assumes the perfect image in the novel has changed from the male protagonist to the female protagonist [16]. The female protagonist in the Mary Sue romantic novel normally has a charming appearance, a good family background, a perfect personality and outstanding abilities. They are no longer weakened, unable to take care of themselves, and uncontested images, but become like men, with strategy, courage, and daring to fight for what they want [17]. These advantages will attract multiple excellent male characters to love her at the same time. The main plot of the novel is related to the emotional entanglement between the female protagonist and different male protagonists [16]. The novel "Scarlet Heart " written by the famous writer Tong Hua is a typical Mary Sue romantic novel, the heroine Ruoxi accidentally travelled to the Kangxi period of the Qing Dynasty due to a car accident and she circulated among many princes due to her unique temperament [16]. The emergence and popularity of Mary Sue romantic novels reflected the gradual awakening of female perceptions at that time, but the dilemma could not be resolved [17]. It also demonstrates the lack of self-confidence of women in reality and their worship of patriarchy. Only in the virtual world could a woman be created perfectly which is the same as a man[16]. Whereas Mary Sue romantic novels are like a kind of spiritual food for women in reality, which is a fairy tale, escape and resistance [17].

2.2. The resilient powerful women in Superwoman and Matriarchy Fiction

Superwoman fictions depict versatile women, who have the privilege in appearance, intelligence and have the ability to acquire an equal or higher social status than man [18]. Also, glamorous and attractive, they can easily capture love and care from most male characters [19]. Synchronized with Matriarchy fiction, superwoman fiction shows females' eagerness to deconstruct the traditional woman figure represented in the heterosexual relationship through replacing love-oriented life with power-oriented life [20]. The female protagonist in *Empresses In The Palace*[5]— Zhen Huan, originally a pure white, innocent, and benevolent girl who trust the love of the emperor, blackened to be the empress dowager and the winner of the cruel royal life, with power-oriented ambition [21].

Writing "Herstory" to re-historicize a history is an essential approach to deconstructing patriarchy in internet literature, where the sole paid is imagination [20]. Superwoman fictions use time travel sending female protagonists back to the historical scene with modern ideology and technology. Living in the feudalism society, protagonists use the strategy of cross-dressing, showing their foresight on politics, military, economy, medicine, manifesting themselves as powerful as men. However, instead of reiterating the hardship of cross-dressing and self-defending, waiting for a perfect man's salvation, and plug-ins[6](Golden Fingers) is inserted in the narration for flattering female readers [26]. With time travel strategy, the literary world is distant from the real-life. Hence, self-identify and value pursued is established through a fantasy imagination [22].

Matriarchy fiction abandons the setting of patriarchal and feudalism society, creating an opposite world of authentic history, where man is subordinate while women have the unconditional privilege in inheriting, education, marriage, and participation in politics. (More specific definition see in[23].) It's superficially revenge towards the patriarchal history, overthrowing the original social gender and creating a male-like woman [24]. Matriarchy fiction, different from the Superwoman novel, waive shackles in real life and deliberately escape to the virtual space to establish a female utopia [25].

Superwoman and Matriarchy fictions explicit an urgent call of reconstructing female subjectivity and self-recognition. Cyberspace, where these novels are published, has offered a safe place for the call of isocracy and the practice of de-feminization since the actual living space has shrunk by employment discrimination and other public opinions [24]. Meanwhile, it is also the internet users' abuse of virtual discourse, collaborating with the lucrative goal of internet literature, and the retreat from the real-life issue that exaggerate the entertainment requirements of female-oriented novels and fail to generate a feasible cultural logic that can contribute to women emancipation [26].

2.3. The misogyny in Danmei novel

Dan Mei[7], origin from the Japanese translation of the English word — aestheticism [27]. Instead of depicting a true love story of two boys, it tends to be a duplicate of BG (the love story of boy and girl) novel, from character design to power relationship. Gong and Shou, the main characters in the BL novels, reveal a power dynamic that can't overturn in the relationship. Gong represents phallic power, the conductor of sex, and is more masculine in the relationship. While Shou shares a similar feature with women in a romantic relationship. Writers coupling two men who have an absolute disparity in their characteristics, Gong is powerful, wealthy, while pessimistic toward his miserable life; Shou, on the opposite, is usually wise, poor, unfortunate but still optimistic with life [28].

BL novel is not only an evolutionary version of romantic love but a utopia that women create for themselves. The coupling method, using two extremely different characters and creating tension inside the text is a classic approach to attract readers, and the resemblance between BL and BG fiction is also revealed by it [29]. In Danmei novel, coupling types change from powerful Gong X powerless Shou to powerful Gong X powerful Shou, then change to "beautiful" Gong X powerful Shou, which is now the most prevalent style of the couple. "Beautiful" man plays as a desired object showing the aesthetic judgment of women [28]. Not mean to impair the masculinity of the man, but to add some femininity to the character. And the difficulty of fulfilling this queer relationship in real life renders women vest this type of narration with spiritual and transcendent charm [26], which can be considered as a projection of ideal marriage or relationship of their own.

Many BL readers explain the reason for discarding traditional romantic novels as the discontent of the traditional stereotype of female protagonists, they use BL to escape the triviality of normal life which is a burden for the women who are both bread earners and housewives, to escape or protest against the inequality of gender in the mundane life [30]. Because men are the main characters in the homosexual novel, consequently, the female characters in the BL novel are thus marginalized. In some BL novels, female characters play the role of villain to set obstacles for the male characters [26].

In the production process of BL novel, a utopia of ideally loves juxtaposed the discontent of gender inequality in real life and the rebellion of female stereotypes [31]. Producers and fans of BL are creating a new discursive logic to allow them to challenge the existing aesthetic standard, gender norms, and Chinese masculinity [6].

3. CONCLUSION

During this period, the creation mode of romantic novels changed from the most classic model of "strong men and weak women" to the following Mary Sue model; from the traditional model of respecting patriarchy to the promotion of "Superwoman" and "matriarchy" fiction, and then to the popularity of Boy's Love novels. The changes in the form of these novels fully demonstrated the transformation of the perception of females. From the initial worship and dependence on male power, the consciousness of resistance gradually began to appear, from being male-centred to female-centred. Female characters are no longer weak and small, but begin to move closer to male images, becoming as rich, powerful, intelligent, and courageous as male characters. In this time, women began to resist and were no longer willing to be men's vassals. They looked forward to and worked hard to plan and fight for more rights and interests for themselves.

NOTES

1. In the year 2020, there are 2 million new internet literature works signed with internet literature publishing websites, and the average daily upgrade reached beyond 150 million characters. see The Blue Book of Chinese Internet Literature In 2020: http://www.chinawriter.com.cn/n1/2021/0602/c404023-32119854.html

2. For example, Annals of Chinese internet literature, edited by Shao Yanjun, is divided into volumes of Male-oriented and female-oriented.

3. In the context of internet literature, Intellectual Properties, or its abbreviation—IP, refers to the online novels which have a potential business value that can be adapted into web/TV series, games, or webtoons.

4. The first official seminar on Chinese internet literature was launched in 2012, organized by the China Writers Association.

5. *Empresses in the Palace* is also known as the *Biography of Zhen Huan*, which is also the original name of the adopted novel written by Liulian Zi.

6. Plug-ins, or known as Golden Fingers (Jin Shouzhi), are the game cheaters used in computer games, referring to born talent or fortunate events that happened to the female protagonists in the internet literature.

7. Also known as boys' love fiction.

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