

Interpretation of feminism in *Gone with the Wind*

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Abstract. In the history of American literature, '*Gone with the Wind*' has played an important role in the literature. In this book, Mitchell created a female image named Scarlett with persistent and indomitable characteristic. Scarlett has a typical rebellious character, takes a deviant path against traditional ideas, and does not yield to the traditional pressure from society. In this paper, the author analyzed Scarlett's characteristic from the aspects of value, marriage and family and explored the feminism from this female image.

1 Introduction

Gone with the Wind, written by American female writer Margaret Mitchell, is a love novel unfolds against the backdrop of the American Civil War. In the novel, the writer portrays a female leading character Scarlett O'Hara with rebellious spirits. Readers are impressed by Scarlett's constant pursuit for love and her doughtiness in struggling with homeland destruction caused by the war and the death of her families. Undoubtedly, it is a successful work and its most significant contribution is that it depicts different ideas and attitudes of males and females in the face of difficulties from females' point of view. Mitchell describes the positive spirit of Scarlett in dealing with difficulties: beneath the beautiful female appearance there is the strong will like a male. Scarlett rebels to social customs and is faithful to her heart, all of which suggest that Scarlett is a strong female. The work mainly carries forth feminism.

Gone with the Wind was first published in 1936, before which Mitchell took ten years to create the work. Before then, the Slavery Abolition and Feminism Movements profoundly influenced the traditional culture in the South of America. Mitchell being active in the media circle was notably impacted by the Feminism Movement and strove all her life to fight for women's political rights and Women's Liberation Movement [1]. She wrote novels mainly in the end of the first-wave feminism. So, it is inferred that Mitchell was influenced by the first-wave feminism. Scarlett, as the leading character in *Gone with the Wind*, is expected to be a noble lady in the upper class; while she behaviors in the manner against the expectation. It is seemingly harmonious when she behaviors in the ladylike way. Scarlett's behaviors make her seems like a traitor of the times and a male. In the research, the authors attempt to interpret Scarlett's rebellious spirits from the perspectives of her views of value, marriage, and family.

2 Value view: advocating the strong

Undeniably, western culture features individualism and spirit of adventure. In European and American literary works, leading male characters are designed to be fond of adventures, strong, and indomitable in difficult situations, like those in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, etc. In comparison, the females in these works are generally found to be weak with typical female characteristics, including being pure, tender and obedience. The female characters in Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*, and Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, are just like this. The females portrayed by male writers generally submit to and controlled by males. Whereas, Scarlett created by Mitchell is different from these female characters. Most obviously, the difference is illustrated by her value view which advocates the strong.

Inheriting testiness and boorishness from her tyrannical father, Scarlett is never an obedient girl. She likes to play with black children, climbing trees and throwing stones. Although there is some idea

of gentlewoman indoctrinated by her mother Ellen Robillard O'Hara and her grandmother, Scarlett inherits, Gerald O'Hara, her father's Irish descent. When living well, Scarlett shows her perseverance in pursuing Ashley Wilkes. As a woman advocating the strong and force, Scarlett always uses every means at her disposal to achieve her aims. She inherently is deviant, and does not care the social morality and etiquettes at that time. After Atlanta is occupied by the enemies, Scarlett feeds her whole family bravely and forces her sisters to work in the fields, picking cotton. She also works in the fields and walks to neighborhood plantations to look for food and ask for help. Even, she kills a Yankee marauder with a gun to protect her families. The courage in facing difficulties in the adverse situation is well demonstrated by Scarlett. As the above analysis, the difficulty does not make Scarlett surrender but motivates her Irish descent: an unflagging, strong female comes into being in the disaster caused by the war. While portraying the brave and strong image of Scarlett, Mitchell also creates the weak Ashley Wilkes. By using this contrast, the writer illustrates the attitudes of males and females in the face of difficulties [2].

From the point of feminism, the female characters illustrated by male writers in traditional literary works are gentle and considerate, and submit to males, while those do not have these characteristics are considered as bad women. However, in *Gone with the Wind*, instead of creating a perfect moral model with indomitable features, Mitchell endows Scarlett with some characters of a bad man. Scarlett is unwilling to be a housewife, the appendage of men, but comes out boldly in difficulties. She is not restricted by her position of a lady of noble birth nor the prescribed women's roles in the society then. She exhibits highspirited and unflagging spirits. Just as she says, "the Yankees can only destroy our materials, but cannot destroy our spirit". All these make us believe that Scarlett is a woman with strong will without pessimism and desperation. She longs for the future and deals with troubles boldly. This is rarely seen in traditional literary works written by males. By portraying such a female character, Mitchell expresses her new understanding for females, that is, females can be as strong and brave as males, and she suggests not judges and criticizes a brave female using the traditional moral standards.

3 Scarlett's attitudes towards love and marriage

Traditionally females are loyal to their love and marriage, and extremely serious about their husbands and reputation. Any woman who fails to observe these principles is regarded as a bad woman. In contrast, males are allowed to betray their marriage and love, and not criticized by the morality and the society. For instance, Mme de Renal a female character in Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* always feels guilty as she has an affair with Julien Sorel. Another female Mathilde is also devoted to Julien, who leaves Mme de Renal for Mathilde for a higher social position and money. Obviously, it can be seen from the portrait of the characters that male writers put opposite standards for males and females in love and marriage: less and more strict requirements for males and females, respectively. While, different description concerning love and marriage is found in *Gone with the Wind*. In the feminist writer's world, women cannot be trapped in the shackles of marriage and love but they are longing for a free life. Different from ladies in the upper class, Scarlett does not wait for the arrival of love but pursuits for it emotionally. She confesses her love to Ashley and plays tricks to win her love. Being not restricted as traditional women, Scarlett is an unladylike woman fighting for the love [3].

As a tradition, women are prudent for the marriage and care much about their reputation. It was a custom in the state of Georgia that women need to be loyal to their husbands and avoid to communicate with young men and show their faces in public. A model wife needs to take care of her husband and children and submit to her husband. If the husband is dead, she should be mourning for him and not remarry. However, Scarlett does not care these rules. She marries three times but never for love: her first marriage is to revenge Ashley, the second one is to protect Tara plantation, and the last one is for money. Scarlett's three marriages make her being criticized, and even her grandmother scolds her as a donkey. As early as Scarlett's first husband is dead, Rhett Butler bids for a dance with Scarlett, who accepts the dance while still wearing black. All these behaviors challenge the social

custom at that time and denounced by the public. Even her parents are indignant. To protect Tara plantation, Scarlett tempts the fiancé of her sister and marries for the second time. More scandalously, Scarlett runs a sawmill, hires criminals, and even drives through jungles by herself in spite of the disagreement of her husband, Frank Kennedy. After Frank is dead, she marries Rhett Butler soon, which brings lots censures. However, Scarlett does not care. It can be seen that Scarlett shows thorough feminism and contempt for the marriage attitude of traditional females. She persists her own ways and is not restricted by the outside world. Probably, Scarlett is reckless towards the marriage, but undoubtedly she is determined. Through Scarlett, Mitchell declares that forceful women cannot be bound by marriage. They can not only overcome tangible difficulties, but also have their own judgment and decision on the public opinions and moral censures [4].

4 Scarlett's attitude towards family

In literary works created by male writers, traditionally females are family-oriented and most of them play roles in taking care of their husbands and children. In addition, they should obey to their husbands and be devoted to the family. While those portrayed by female writers are not restricted in but ignore the family for their careers. This is probably because that to react against male authority, feminism requires females to discard the characteristics of traditional females and endow women with the features of men. So, females are not fettered by families and immersed in love, for example, the characters in *Top Girls* by Caryl Churchill.

Scarlett shows different attitude towards family with traditional females as well. Scarlett merely highly respects her mother Ellen, but is indifferent to her sisters, feeling they are cowardly, and looks down upon them. This is associated with her characteristic that advocates strong persons. In the family, Scarlett persists her own ways and does not obey to her husbands. She is not impacted by the death of her first husband as she does not love him. For her second husband, Scarlett is forceful and makes decision by her own. She looks down upon Frank and acts on her own, not minding her husbands' opinions on her. As to the kids, Scarlett also lacks of maternal affection. Not concerning much for her son Wade but feeling him annoyed, Scarlett finds she is impatient with him. For her daughter Ella is a burdensome. Although she gets along well with her husbands ostensibly, Scarlett behaviors in her own ways. We can see that instead of being restricted by traditional customs like other women, Scarlett is a self-centered new woman with strong subjugation. According to Scarlett's view towards family we can find that feminism is inimical to family and unwilling to play their role as a nurse in the family. For feminists, females are not standard wives and mothers.

5 Conclusions

In *Gone with the Wind*, Mitchell vividly portrays an able woman completely subverting the values of traditional females. The leading character Scarlett is fortitudinous, acts in her own way, deals with troubles bravely. Readers are greatly impressed by her firm and tenacious spirits. In the work, Mitchell explains her understanding for feminism: with beautiful appearance, females also have firm will like males. Being ready to struggle with difficulties and full of hope for lives, they never feel despair and corrupt. They maybe are considered as defectors of the moral standards according to the common customs, they determine their lives, make decisions by their own, and will never surrender to the outside world.

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