

A Feminist Approach to Explore Sarah's Image in the French Lieutenant's Woman

Lan Zheng

Xi'an Peihua University, Xi'an, Shaanxi 710100, China.

747481089@qq.com

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Abstract. John Fowls is a very outstanding figure in English literature studies, his famous work the French Lieutenant gained high fame, and the heroin Sarah is the representative of feminist who attempts to overturn the Victorian decadent social system. This paper manages to explore the images of female protagonist Sarah in the French Lieutenant's Woman with the help of feminist criticism theory. With exploring excessive social system, Patriarchal and ethical standards of Victorian age, the author gives the further exploration of Sarah's rebellious sprit, including her independence, her lonely and free figures; and through dissecting her mysteriousness, loneliness and free characters, the author explores the main heroin Sarah's rebellion sprit, her everlasting pursuing of selfhood, equal right and freedom, overthrown the traditional patriarchy ideology of Victorian age by her dissolute behaviors.

1. Introduction

The French Lieutenant's Woman is not only a popular novel, but an experimental masterpiece written by John Fowls, who is the most famous and outstanding novelists in the British literary circles. After it was issued in 1969, the novel gets great reputation, and was paid close attention by the whole literary fields at home or abroad; also, its author won a lot fame--- "the Silver Pen award" in 1969; "the W.B Smith Award" in 1970; as well as "Sons Literary award." The novel was known as a famous feminist novel, and a permanently significant work in the field of English literature. The French Lieutenant's Woman makes a complaint against and overturns Victorian England's social ethics. It is regarded as a masterpiece of female's awakening and development. The novel follows Victorian novel in structure and detail, so the novel is considered as a pastiche of Victorian fiction with the standpoint of twentieth century literary and social insight. After the novel was published, with its innovative theme and creative narrative techniques, the novel received different critics from different literature fields, especially the image of the heroine Sarah Woodruff, whose elusive, mysterious characters and behaviors overthrow the image of traditional Victorian woman. In addition, Fowls substitutes the traditional roundedness of narrative techniques with modern literary style, Sarah's mysterious characteristics, unique behaviors, and her amorousness appearance, and her selfhood and freedom received a lot of criticism in western literary world. Using the feminist autonomy theory to analyze Sarah's images, the paper analyzes Sarah's images from feminist perspective with the aim to manifest her feminist autonomy; through analyzing Sarah's intrinsic and extrinsic images, this thesis gives a systematic analysis and exploration of her autonomy; as well as through analyzing the novel, we can know that women are oppressed not by patriarchy economically, politically, socially, but psychologically, and all of western civilization is deeply rooted in patriarchal ideology, for example, in the biblical portrayal of Eve as the origin of sin and death in the world.

2. Brief Review of the Novel

The French Lieutenant's Woman is the best-known novel written by John Fowls and is also called the pro-mo. meta-fiction. Meta-fiction is a kind of fiction which concerns itself with the fictitiousness and the process of the creation of the fiction, as well as it is called a postmodernist form of writing about fiction in the form of the fiction. As well John Fowls write a nineteenth-century romantic or

gothic novel that is setting in romantic literary type of literature with twentieth century viewpoints, and succeeds in reappearing typical Victorian characters, dialogue and situations. The theme of the novel relates to a lot, the author's thematic description in this novel ranges from the relationship between art and life to the isolation that results from an individual struggling for freedom and selfhood. Through the theme description, Fowlkes's aim is to lay bare the truth of some prejudice and secular aspects of Victorian society, in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Victorian attitudes towards women, science, economics and philosophy are considered as minor themes within the main plot; there are two groups both working-class and women are revealed as being oppressed; as well both socially and economically in Victorian society that prohibits mobility for all vulnerable groups who is not middle or upper-class and male. Some social issues that Fowls wants to explore are disguised in a traditional romance.

3. Feminist Criticism Theory and Feminist Consciousness in the Novel

Feminist criticism is a kind of genre of literary criticism, and it mainly gives detailed study and avocation about the liberation and rights of women. Famous feminist writer Lisa Tuttle thinks that feminist criticism theory is a new question of old text. Feminist literary criticism stems from European and American countries in the late 1960s, which is regarded as a new type western intellectual discourse. In the late 1970s, Feminist criticism becomes a mainstream power in Western literary studies, what feminist criticism theory conceived mainly was applied to linguistic and literary matters. Since the early 1980s, feminist literary criticism obtains the rapid development, and diversifies in a large number of ways as well. The feminist criticism theory means that the writer uses literature reinforces to explore the oppression of women and women's social status. Jonathan Keller ever said: "feminist literary criticism has had a greater effect on the literary canon than any other critical theory; it is the most powerful forces of renovation in contemporary literary criticism" (Keller, 1982: 159). In addition, besides stereotypes, ideology and racial issues, feminist criticism may studies creativity and marginality even more?

In the *French Lieutenant's Woman*, John Fowls aims at exploring a morbidity society, people's hypocrisy and deep-rooted patriarchal system in Victorian age, he also satires on the society. Victorian society system is the patriarchy system; male-dominated social system, on the one hand, oppresses female's political, economic, psychological and social life; on the other hand, influences people's economical, psychological and social life; on the other hand, influences peoples who is consumed by the whole society, in people's eyes, she is the "other", or an "inferior". Just like the word described by the feminist critics Gilbert and Guar:

"The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination: the male voice had for too long time been the dominant one in society. They have been able to define and create images of women as they want in their male culture."

In the novel, John Fowls shows the readers the limitation of women's development in Victorian age, women have no rights to choose their own life, they lost their autonomous ideology, and they become the appendage to male.

4. Feminist Approach to Explore Sarah's Images

The literary genre of this novel is unique, in the novel, the author gives the main explicit description of the heroine---Sarah's characters, and Sarah's characterization is the main clue of the novel. John Fowls depicts Sarah's intrinsic characters, including her loneliness, free and mysteriousness images; and her extrinsic images as well, including her distinctive appearance, her attitudes toward marriage, and even her struggling against her master who is the symbol of Victorian social supremacy. Sarah's rebellion of patriarchy overthrows traditional women image completely in Victorian age. On the other hand, Sarah is also a seeker of selfhood, she manages to pursuit her freedom constantly, when she realizes the importance of spiritual and financial independence by the way of ignoring the authority of the male-dominated society.

4.1 Intrinsic Images of Sarah.

The novel starts with Hardy's poem "The Riddle", and also the author puts in two questions: "who Sarah is?" and "out of what shadow she come?" in chapter 12 of the novel, which seems puzzle the readers, and also establishes Sarah's mysterious, lonely and free intrinsic images. At first, Sarah is a cryptic figure. In the novel, Sarah's mysterious characterization is expressed from the very beginning to the end. With the development of the plot, Sarah's behaviors become more confusing and complicated. Sarah is called "poor tragedy", "a bitch" or "the French lieutenant's woman", and she never denies, and even considered herself as the follows:

No insult, no blame, can touch me. Because I have set myself beyond the pale. I am nothing, I am hardly human any more. I am the French Lieutenant's Whore. (Fowles, 1992: 246)

Sarah's mysteriousness character builds up step by step. Her behaviors, never restricted by people's view or social ethics, never took into account surrounding people's eyes, seek her own freedom and as on, vividly indicate her pursuing of autonomous consciousness.

Then, in the novel, Sarah's another obvious distinct character is loneliness. She is a lonely figure. Obviously, Sarah's loneliness is product of Victorian social conceptions. Sarah's father is the so-called "blue born", and his father's action, sends her to boarding school, is also one of main reasons which make her loneliness. As a daughter of a blue class, she has to learn on the day and earn money to pay for her education in the evening, she couldn't get on well with other pupils. They look down on her, she becomes the victim of the class society. Sarah seems like "a redundant person" who was abandoned by the surrounding people and the society. She separates all her life with the surrounding world, she becomes a loneliness "outlier". But on contrary, she looks like very "enjoy" such kind of lonely life, she always comes and goes freely, as if it has been become accustomed in other people's eyes, she should never build a friendship with an equal, never inhabit her own home, never see the world except as the generality to which she must be the exception. Actually, she lives in a world where loneliness is easiest to avoid, later, she seems wishes to be what she is. Generally speaking, what she suffers from her situation and social standard lead to her unique character---loneliness.

Last, Sarah is a libertarian and free individual in the novel. In the preface of the novel, John Fowls proclaims: "Actually, the theme of my novel is how a humble woman obtains her freedom in a completely no free society." Therefore, the constitution of the theme of this novel is embodied from the heroine Sarah behaviors for pursuing of libertarian and freedom. With her autonomous ideology, Sarah chooses to be a fallen woman, she makes up a love with a French lieutenant as casual, which makes herself as "the French Lieutenant's whore" or "an outcast". The people surrounding her are considered her as a shameful and deserted woman, but Sarah seems never care for it, on contrary, just because of her such shamed behaviors; she can enjoy liberation and freedom beyond the pale under such evils and notorious guilt. As well, Sarah's liberty will is also embodied the relationship between Charles and her. In the novel, Sarah can choose her life style freely which is different from that "poor" woman who lives in Victorian society, she can do everything what she wants to freely.

4.2 Extrinsic Images of Sarah.

Under the influence of patriarchy idea, female loses their existent meaning in Victorian age, women are accessory of men, woman is "other", they should not have their own ideology and ideas, and they have no any right to choose their own life and marriage. The definition of patriarchy given by some scholars likes this:

Patriarchy is a social system in which the man acts as the primary authority figure central to social organization, and in which father also holds authority over mother, children, and property. It implies that the system of male rule and privilege and entails female subordination. Historically, patriarchy embodies itself in the social, legal, political, and economic organization of a range of different cultures.

Sarah, a woman who is lived in Victorian age, suffers a lot from Patriarchy ideology and class system, but she pursues economic independence and selfhood bravely, seeks for freedom constantly, all her behaviors embody her desire for her own autonomy. Sarah is regarded as a seeker of selfhood and as a rebel against tradition Victorian social system. Sarah is full of new ideologies in her mind,

which is regarded as a representative of feminism theory. Sarah thinks firmly that the gender identity could be and should be challenged and transformed. Therefore, Sarah, as a rebel against Victorian social system, mainly embodied in the following three aspects: her struggling against her master who is the symbol of Victorian social supremacy, her distinctive appearance and her attitude towards marriage. And as a seeker of independence and freedom, Sarah used her own behaviors to revolt the prejudice against woman in western culture. In the novel, the author builds up Sarah's own minds step by step, in Sarah's mind, female should firmly change the deep-rooted ideology of such patriarchal culture. Woman must break up the bonds of patriarchal society if she hopes to become an independent female with an equal right. Therefore, Sarah is one of successful representations who is struggling to search for her selfhood, no matter what kind of society she is living in and do whatever she can do to gain her independence and freedom.

5. Summary

John Fowls' famous novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is considered as the classic feminist mate fictional work. In this novel, Fowls successfully narrates the images of the heroine---Sarah, who in order to seek her freedom and independence, constantly struggle against the traditional ethics of the Victorian social system, even regardless of the cost of her reputation. The thesis analyzes Sarah's autonomous images with the feminist perspectives through exploring Sarah's autonomous characteristics and actions. Sarah displays her determination to seek independence and freedom and lives on her own way that she likes. She is regarded as a cryptic and loneliness individual, a rebel in the Victorian age, a seeker of selfhood, independence and freedom by the way of her constantly battling with the Victorian society system. She managed to realize her dreaming life. Generally speaking, all her unique images and independent ideology make Sarah become a unique woman in Victorian age. Sarah's all kinds of inopportune ideas and behaviors bring an in-depth influence and reflection to those women who are still oppressed by patriarchal social system.

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