

An Analysis of Feminism in Woolf's Works

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Abstract

The development of feminism has a long history and has been constantly improving and developing. Virginia Woolf is an outstanding female writer in English literary circles in the 20th century, and she is also one of the main founders of modern western feminism. She puts forward many original viewpoints of feminism, and her series of works contain feminist ideas. Woolf's unique feminist thought and creation have attracted much attention and become the research topic of many scholars. At present, most of the researches on Woolf's feminism judge the value of her feminism by analyzing her creative techniques, the construction of female discourse, the tradition of female literature and the creation ideal of "androgyny", but to some extent, they ignore the feminist thoughts expressed through female image in her works. As a feminist writer, Woolf has shaped a series of distinctive female images, paying attention to the current situation of female survival and reflecting the demands of women. This paper explains Woolf's view of feminism by combining her works *A Room of One's Own*, and explains Woolf's feminist thoughts by analyzing the female images in her works *Go to the Lighthouse*, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Orlando*.

Keywords

Feminism; Woolf's Feminism; Female Images.

1. Introduction

Feminism can be traced back to the European Renaissance and Protestant. At that time, the consciousness of human rights began to awaken, and the concept of woman's human rights was also derived. But it was not taken seriously. After the French Revolution in the 18th century, under the influence of democracy and revolution, bourgeois women also tried to pursue equal rights with men. The seeds of western feminist thoughts can be traced back to the works of the 19th century writers such as George Eliot, Jane Austin, Bronte Sisters and Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

Virginia Woolf was one of the main founders of modern western feminism in the 20th century. She believed that if women wanted to free themselves, they needed to achieve equal rights with men. They must eliminate the bondage of patriarchal social tradition to women and dare to break the social traditions which bind them. They should become self-conscious independent women, In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf gave us a comprehensive interpretation of her feminism. Woolf combined feminist thoughts and literary creation to produce her own feminist literary theory. She put forward questions about women and creation, and made clear the conditions that women should possess in their creation. First of all, they should have a house of their own and a certain economic foundation. They should be spiritually independent. Secondly, women should have their own right to speak and construct their own literature. She creates a large number of female images in her works, and they constitute a world of women and become the treasure of feminist literature.

2. Woolf's Feminist Views and Feminist Creation

Woolf called on women to have their own room. In the Victorian age, writing was a legitimate occupation and hobby for men, but for women, it was easy to be ridiculed and despised by people around them. Under the social condition at that time, woman's creation was full of difficulties. Woolf believed that having a good environment and a private room were the most basic requirement for women's writing. Also, Woolf believed that women's creation should not only pursue the independence of material condition and have a room of their own, but also pursue the independence of spiritual space. Only when women get rid of the deep-rooted influence of patriarchy and realized their spiritual independence, could they find themselves and realize their self-value. For a long time, during the period of patriarchy, women were considered to have an important function of procreation. Raising children and housekeeping took up almost all of a woman's life. They didn't have enough time to write and earn money to become financially independent.

In the search for female writing, Woolf realized that even in the 16th century when poets and plays were very active, few British women made their own voices and wrote great female works. At that time, men occupied the dominant position of society and had absolute discourse power, so even if a small number of women were gifted, they could only be buried. She had a natural sensitivity to phonology and an obsession with acting. However, when she went to the theatre door and told people that she was going to act, she was laughed at by men. In those days, even a talented woman, if she wanted to apply her talent to writing, she would not only be despised and obstructed by the people around her, but also suffer and torment her own heart. In order not to be discriminated against and attacked by people around them, many female writers use men's names to publish their works. Therefore, Woolf called on women to challenge men's right to speak, to actively defend their own speech power, and to make their own voice. Woolf examined the relationship between women and literature in the 1920s. In a male-centered society, women were in an unequal social position. The narrow living space and lack of education made it difficult for women to have rights to create their own creations. Woolf believed that women should create for themselves, using women's literature to truly reflect women's economic and social status. Woolf's feminist thoughts were reflected in her works.

3. The Analysis of Female Images in Woolf's Works

This chapter discusses the female images in Woolf's works. At the beginning of the 20th century, England was a patriarchal society. Men were the center of the society. They dominated everything in the society. Though literary works can reflect social life, it is difficult to portray female images objectively and genuinely in a male-dominated society. The female images in the works of male writers are always classified into two extremes: the naive and beautiful angles or the complicated and selfish sirens. In fact, whether it's angle or siren, they all distort and repress women in different ways.

a. [The self-lost type]

In the view of Virginia, men were tyrants to women in both the family and the society. All that women can do was to obey unconditionally. Women could not challenge the male authority. They could not express the opposite view of tradition. They needed to forget themselves and lose themselves. *Mrs. Ramsay in To the Lighthouse*, who was based on Virginia's mother, was a classic example of a woman who had lost herself and succumbed to male violence. Under the influence of Victorian morality, Mrs. Ramsay presented to us the image of a good wife and a good mother. At home, Mr. Ramsay and her youngest son, James, became the focus of her life. Mrs. Ramsay was busy all day, tending to the needs of the family, helping the poor, or

matchmaking. Everyone demanded some kind of help and sympathy from Mrs. Ramsay. Mrs. Ramsay lived entirely for others.

b. [The rebellious type]

In her work, Woolf also portrayed many women who were not constrained by the social traditions of the time. They were bold and rebellious, who were the challenge to the patriarchy of that time. They were bright, intelligent, lively, energetic and enthusiastic, often surprising and incredible, such as Sally in *Mrs. Dalloway*. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf created Sally, a vivacious and intelligent girl. Clarissa envied Sally for her unique appearance and personality. Sally was bold and defiant, freed from social conventions and freed to live her life as she pleases. She dared to challenge men, even to challenge the supremacy of British authority. Sally had self-consciousness and her own sense of judgement and observation. The image of Sally represented Woolf's appreciation of rebellious girls.

c. [The independent type]

Virginia Woolf believed that woman's political gains in the right to vote and employment did not mean that women were equal to men. In order to emancipate women, it was necessary to free women from the ideological shackles of patriarchy. Woolf believed that women should be independent and have their own thoughts, opinions and insistence, like the female printer Lily in her works. *Lily in To the Lighthouse* was another female image that the author created carefully. She had the shadow of the writer and represented the writer's own feminism. Though Lily did not have the same good looking as Mrs. Ramsay, she had an independent spirit and a rich inner world. She was a new woman with an independent mind.

d. [The self-sublimating type]

The concept of androgyny is a great practice in Virginia Woolf's feminist writing. Woolf believed that only when a female element in the male mind and a male element in the female as well, there would have a balance between man and women. Otherwise, there would have an insurmountable gap between men and women. In *Orlando: A Biography*, this problem was solved. In the book, Orlando gained a woman's identity and perception by crossing gender lines, which allowed him to examine his past male experience and criticize it. In *Orlando*, Woolf turned her feminism into a love of reading and writing. Orlando's time and space span made him become a witness and critic of the development and evolution of English society and literature. His gender shift enabled him to challenge the androcentrism of literary tradition with androgynous literary thought. In Orlando's mind, there was a male side and a female side, so she reached a state of self-sublimation. Eventually, Orlando finished her poetry and won a prize which was a metaphor of the rise of women writers.

4. The Value and Influence of Woolf's Feminism

Woolf's feminist views have a great influence on the literary theories of later generations. Her views on the construction of female literary tradition, female discourse and androgyny have influenced the literary theories of Britain, America, France and other countries, especially feminist critical theory.

First of all, Woolf's feminist views influenced American feminist critics and writers, who inherited and developed Woolf's feminist views and guided their own literary criticism and literary creation. Among them, the American female writer Kate Millet is deeply influenced by it. In her work, *Sex Politics*, Millet analyzed the status of women in the patriarchal society from all aspects of society. She pointed out that women were dominated by men in the society and analyzed the existence of gender discrimination in the orientation of women in society. Woolf also believed that women were the second sex in the patriarchal society, and it was obvious that Millet was influenced by Woolf's feminist views. Woolf pointed out that male writers would shape women according to their aesthetic standards, and Millet also pointed out that the female

image in male writers' works was distorted. She proposed to reproduce the female image of the work from the perspective of women, which was the inheritance and development of Woolf's feminist views.

Woolf's feminist viewpoint has a profound influence on the creation of later writers. Doris Lessing, a contemporary British woman writer, was one of them. Lessing inherited and developed Woolf's feminist views and creative theory, and had the same female consciousness as Woolf. Most of the female images created by Lessing were women under the patriarchal social tradition. They have no economic foundation, no freedom, no self, which coincided with the female images of Woolf's works, such as *Mrs. Dalloway*. The image of Rachel in Woolf's *The Voyage Out* was similar to that of Martha Quest in Lessing's *Children of Violence Series* in shaping the image of women who are conscious of women and struggle for independence.

Woolf's feminist views also had a great influence on Chinese female writers, and Chen Ran put forward the trans-gender consciousness on the basis of Woolf's androgyny, and it is embodied in her works. The other one had to mention was Ling Shuhua. She had a direct conversation with Woolf, who encouraged her to create *Ancient Rhyme*, whose techniques were influenced by Woolf. Woolf's feminist view and literary theory had a profound influence on later generations, and have also been inherited and developed by later generations.

5. Conclusion

As an important figure in the history of feminism, Woolf's unique charm of feminist view lies in her own unique views on feminism on the basis of inheriting the views of the predecessors, combining her own background and personal experience of the times.

Woolf explained her feminist view in *A Room of One's Own*. She thought that women should be independent. First of all, they should be financially independent: having their own rooms and fixed income. Only with material independence can they achieve spiritual independence. Both material and spiritual independence were required for literary creation. She appealed women to construct their own literary tradition through literary creation and have their own discourse. She encouraged women to get out of their homes and broaden their horizons. Women should actively socialize and enrich their life experiences, so that they could widen the space for literary creation. She also put forward the view of androgyny. She thought that men and women should coexist. Only when writers had both male and female temperament, could they create good works.

Woolf recognized the oppression of women by patriarchal social tradition and pointed out that the female image in traditional literary works was a distortion of women. She called for the creation of a new female image. With her own creative talent and profound literary literacy, she created a series of female images for readers. Woolf interpreted her feminist views through these distinctive female images. As a feminist writer, Woolf combined the feminist view with literary creation, and her feminist view had a profound influence on the literary creation of later generations. It was mainly manifested in two aspects: literary theory and literary creation. Her feminist view had a great influence on feminist criticism in many countries. Although the current status of women's survival has greatly improved, it still needs to be improved. We can take Woolf's feminist thoughts and the present situation of contemporary development and strive for the further liberation of women.

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