

Gender Writing in the Novel the Flowers of War

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Abstract

The novel *The Flowers Of War* is a novel about war by Yan Geling , in which the fate of marginal characters such as church schoolgirls and prostitutes is written. This paper focuses on gender writing in novels, and concludes that Yan Geling's gender writing presents the following three characteristics: first of all, the language highlights the characteristics of biological sex; in addition, the situational setting of female groups from confrontation to reconciliation; Finally, women are always in the position of the protected.

Keywords

Yan Geling; The Flowers of War; Gender Writing.

1. Introduction

The novel *The Flowers Of War* describes the story of the low-level people facing the war together during the Nanjing Massacre in December 1937. People can deeply appreciate the weakness of women in *The Flowers Of War*. These women were temporarily sheltered by a relatively safe Wilson Church in the name of the Americans. More than a dozen female students studying at the Wilson School for Girls, because of their special relationship with the church, deserved shelter here. Qinhuai River prostitutes also entered the church as "hard intruders", and they are vulnerable groups who need to be protected by priests and soldiers. *The Flowers Of War* ended with the fact that the church itself could not be guaranteed, and female students and prostitutes in the Qinhuai River were also persecuted to varying degrees.

In the interview, Yan Geling answered, "Why did you choose the perspective of women to reflect the war?" She replied that she wanted to describe the bloody massacre from a special and not grand perspective. Among the 300,000 people who were slaughtered, nearly eighty thousand women were raped and killed , and said that "the most tragic sacrifice in war is always women, and women are the ultimate spoils of the conqueror", "No matter in any culture, the virgin is a symbol of holiness. If the occupier does not trample on the holiness, the conqueror cannot be considered a complete occupation." [1] Therefore, there are many descriptions of gender in the text to reflect the author's thoughts. This paper focuses on gender writing in novels, and Yan Geling's gender writing presents the following characteristics.

2. Linguistically: Highlight the Characteristics of Biological Sex

Yan Geling likes to put things under the erotic hat when narrating things. In terms of environmental description, the populus euphratica trees in the backyard of the church are described as "Several American populus euphratica trees that have lost all their leaves, like huge rhizomes stuck in the gray winter fog." [2] This kind of privacy-avoiding physical organ sounds uncomfortable, and adding sexual hints to the ruins of the war makes the cold winter even more suffocating. Taking a deeper look, this way of writing reflects the phenomenon of women as male appendages. From the aspect of gender writing, the physiological attributes of men are emphasized here, so that women who are not dominant in their physiological characteristics are in a subordinate position. The equality between men and women advocated

by Hélène Cixous in *From the Scene of the Unconscious to the Scene of History*[3] emphasizes that equality is the pursuit of cultural equality, not physical. Yan Geling put the physiological description at the beginning, laying the tone of the whole text, this physiological description violates the equality of men and women, in order to achieve the effect of repression of the reader.

When describing women's bodies, derogatory terms such as "disgusting", "sick" and "dirty" are used to describe women's bodies. This mainly comes from the narrator's perspective, who observes women from a female perspective. The narrator mentioned "my aunt Shujuan" many times. It can be said that this novel is more observed from the perspective of a female student, so when describing the prostitute's body, there is a strong personal emotion, such as feeling that the prostitute's arrival will make her feel uncomfortable. For example, it is felt that the arrival of a prostitute has stained the clean bluestone floor, a pool of dirty milk is used as a metaphor for the prostitute's body, and a dirty stinking maggot language is used as a metaphor for what the prostitutes say. Read between the lines to distinguish prostitutes from schoolgirls, pinning them to intruders. "A woman's body is exposed, like a puddle of dirty milk flowing out of two sable skins." This kind of antipathy against women by the same women can even arouse readers' sympathy for prostitutes and even the female group.

This dislike of women is also reflected in the reactions of the female students Shujuan to their menstrual period. During their menstrual period, female students feel disgusted because they have the same physical characteristics as prostitutes, and feel that this is an unspeakable thing. Sounds reasonable on the surface, but are menstrual periods really worth the nausea and shame of women? Not just for readers to reflect.

3. On the Plot Setting: From Opposition to Reconciliation between Female Groups

The relationship between prostitutes and female students can be divided into two stages: absolute opposition and relative opposition. The transition at this stage means that these two types of women sympathize with each other and reach reconciliation in the context of war.

The opposition between prostitutes and female students is particularly prominent in the early stage, mainly in the early stage of the survival situation. Compared with female students, prostitutes do not have the right to hide in the safe area, because the people in the safe area think they are unclean, even in the church. In the church, too, although the priest decided to take in the prostitutes for humanitarian reasons, the priest thought it was "blasphemous"[4] to let them live here. Efforts were made to get them into the safe zone and leave the church as soon as possible. Father Adonado roared at Agu: "Just do your thing! How polite are you to this kind of woman!" "The whole flower boat on the Qinhuai River will land in this pure land." Treating prostitutes as a group that pollutes the Pure Land, and denying female students contact with prostitutes, for fear of tarnishing the holy hearts of female students.

In terms of group habits, there are constant conflicts between prostitutes and schoolgirls. When the prostitutes first moved into the church, they had some pretentiousness of prostitute. However, this squeamishness was not the nobility in the bones, but the materialistic concept of the intoxicated. Because they could not use the bathroom, they fought with the female students. Domineeringly occupy the basement of the female student, and still don't forget to smoke, play mahjong and drink red wine. They insisted on washing their clothes when there was no extra water; they felt that they were all women and should be enjoyed regardless of the group, but they forgot that these did not belong to them; they were lazy, restless, and made a lot of noise. It is these small details that make the image of the prostitutes three-dimensional, and form a transformation with the sacrifice of life behind.

Different from prostitutes in essence, these female students are more about the self-esteem and self-love of students and the rebellion of adolescence. These girls are typical representatives of students, pure, self-loving, kind, brave and curious about the world. In this unforgettable war, the fourteen-year-old Shujuan experienced the first menarche in her life. When Shujuan hated the fact that prostitutes in the Qinhuai River lived on their bodies, she could not escape the physical characteristics of women like prostitutes. Such a menstrual period made her connect with prostitutes, so the strong smell of blood made Shujuan feel sick, female students have correct values in sex, they know self-esteem and self-love; When the Japanese army broke into the church and demanded to take them away, they chose to commit suicide by jumping off the building, and the world in their eyes has always been holy and cannot tolerate a little stain; When Agu was found drowning in a pond and brought back, the schoolgirls prayed for Agu.

These girls are also typical of adolescent children, rebellious and sensitive. They study at Wilson School for Girls, and their parents are high society people, different from ordinary female students, so they also carry a lot of arrogance and invisible sense of superiority. Meng Shujuan is independent and rebellious. She longs for friendship and wants to be the best friend of Xu Xiaoyu who is sought after by others. But Shujuan can't accept that Xiao Yu is too close to other girls, and the two in adolescence are reluctant to let go of their faces and talk, so such close friends sometimes fall into two factions. Xu Xiaoyu is willful and self-righteous, and repeatedly uses her father's special ability to mobilize the feelings of her classmates and herself, which reflects the dark side of human nature, and also changes her relationship with Meng Shujuan from closeness to estrangement. Meng Shujuan voluntarily gave up the opportunity to escape Nanjing with her. With a superior family, Xu Xiaoyu enjoys being sought after by others. Other girls are willing to "submit" to Xiaoyu in order to gain the light of Xiaoyu's father. This isolated situation gave Shujuan more opportunities to observe the lives of these Qinhuai River prostitutes.

The author sets up an image of Zhao Yumo that does not fit the characteristics of the prostitute group. It is a combination of excellent quality and low-level occupation. As a leader in the group, this implies that the prostitutes led by Zhao Yumo will stand up at a critical moment, laying the groundwork for the reconciliation between the two groups in the later stage.

In the original work, Yan Geling called Zhao Yumo "the combination of a gentlewoman and a prostitute". Zhao Yumo is sensible of the current affairs and looks at the overall situation. If you does not know her background, Yumo's dignified and elegant figure and arrogant temperament are like a young lady from intellectual family or a madam from a wealthy family. The female students believe that "Zhao Yumo is aware of current affairs, and he has washed away his dustiness in the territory of female students." Yumo's uniqueness comes from the "gentlewoman" that this group does not have. She is filled with knowledge and has a noble temperament. Zhao Yumo's sensible of current affairs is manifested in many aspects. First of all, before entering the church, she put down her dignity and took the lead in kneeling down to ask the priest for help, because she knew that the safe zone could no longer accommodate this group of women with special identities, and it was not easy to stay in the church. She let the priest understand by reasoning while move him with emotion, she only wanted to take these sisters to stay in the church and die clean and dignified. Secondly, Yumo knew how to repay the gratitude, because they occupied the cellars of the female students, which made these female students have nowhere to hide and were humiliated by the Japanese army. So when she learned that the Japanese were going to take the female students, Yumo was willing to lead the prostitutes to face the disaster. The novel pays a lot of attention and use to the prostitute group from the perspective of "my" aunt Shujuan. Thanks to the special relationship between Shujuan and Yumo, Zhao Yumo is Meng Shujuan's father's lover, which skillfully links the two groups of prostitutes and female students.

This group of prostitutes has experienced a series of growth from greed for life and fear of death to courageous and fearless. The motivation for these prostitutes in Qinhuai River to grow up is the suffering and separation of life and death they endured in the church these days. The author endowed the prostitutes with the excellent quality of self-sacrifice, which is in line with Yan Geling's idea of exploring the "maternal instinct" and "wifedom" in women. Just as Liu Yan believes that Yan Geling intends to explore the almost Buddha-nature of maternal instinct and wifedom in women[5]. Yan Geling created the image of a group of prostitutes who are affectionate and righteous, have self-awareness and a sense of national awakening. When the country was in crisis, when the female students were coerced by the Japanese army, the Qinhuai River prostitutes headed by Yumo resolutely decided to go to the disaster in place of the students regardless of their life. They broke the sense of inferior and lowly status of prostitutes in traditional literary works, and replaced them with noble, holy heroic writing. When choosing righteousness and morality, these prostitutes take on the important task of saving people and saving the country. At the end of their lives, these prostitutes, who had been discriminated against in ordinary days, became schoolgirls, taking off their bifurcate cheongsam and meeting the humiliation of the darkness and infinity, going to the Christmas party held by the Japanese. Although there were constant conflicts in the early stage, in the face of ruthless search and bombardment in the later stage, the two groups of women also grew up and began to cast aside their prejudice against each other and protect each other. At the time of crisis, in order to save the lives of female students, twelve prostitutes dressed up as girls and went to a Japanese Christmas party. Although the ending ends with the female students surviving in the church, the prostitute dressed as a "schoolgirl" is not a tragedy for the entire female group. In a short period of time, the characters in the novel have undergone huge changes, which inevitably being questioned that the plot caters to the audience, but through the confrontation between the two female groups in the early stage, the central idea of the novel is more prominent: "The horror is not limited to the rapist himself, but to the fact that in the face of the rapist, women are all equal, there is no distinction between noble and lowly"[6]"As for the rapist, the shameful and the shameless are all the same: the private parts of the most holy and the dirtiest girl are treated equally and the same."[7]

4. Survival Situation: Women become Protected Vulnerable Groups

The prostitutes of the Qinhuai River and the female students of the mission school have different endings, but they are always under the protection of the American church. The novel takes Wilson Church as the place where the story takes place. As a Catholic church belonging to the United States, Wilson Church is a neutral American territory on Chinese soil. Such a setting exists between the aggressor and the invaded, with a neutral perspective. To observe this war of aggression from the perspective of a neutral, it also temporarily won the "Deathless Gold Medal". But this situation is not absolutely safe. From the beginning of the church as an absolutely safe shelter, to the sound of artillery fire around the church. From "Adonado thought, did the United States and Japan declare war? Could it be that the display of the American flag has become a target for bombardment?"[8]"When the Japanese meet young and middle-aged male civilians, they will be arrested and shot. In contrast, American churches are more able to provide shelter."[9], it can be seen that in the early stage of the massacre, the Wilson Church existed as a safety zone, although as the aggression deepens, Wilson Church is no longer safe.

Due to the special advantage of the race, Father Ingman always rushed to the forefront when the enemy invaded. At the beginning of the arrangement of accommodation, several clergy left the hidden cellar to the women, and the work of finding rations and water was also the work of these men, which was actually a manifestation of the idea of "ladies first".

The priests and others in the church have a humanitarian spirit. Father Ingman, as a Catholic, a representative of humanitarianism, compromised and offered a helping hand countless times when lives were threatened. Whether for ethnic or gender reasons, the fact that women are in a disadvantaged position in war has always existed, which also hints at the tragic fate of this group of women.

Yan Geling takes women as the focus of writing both in terms of language and plot setting, and skillfully sets up the confrontation and reconciliation between the two female groups of prostitutes and female students. The final lamentable ending makes the conflict between the two groups at the beginning seem ridiculous and absurd. Leaving aside the plot to talk about gender writing, we see that women in war are extremely vulnerable and need to be protected, which may be the purpose of Yan Geling's writing this novel.

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