

How Was Emily Constructed to Be a Woman Noblesse? -- -An Interpretation of Emily's Identity from Feminist Gender Studies and Marxist Gender Criticism

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Abstract: By using the theory of Feminist Gender Studies and Marxist Gender Criticism, the writer analyses how Emily was constructed to be a woman noblesse. Woman noblesse refers to females in upper wealthy class in the Old South. They were symbols of the Southern aristocracy and prisoner of the past, and they were also dependants. Through analyses, the writer concludes that the Emily's identity was constructed by her family in three aspects: cognition, economy, and emotion. The identity was also constructed by the whole society in its marriage norm and social obligation. Her family and the society formed micro and macro environment trapping her inside and depriving her of love. The identity, woman noblesse, were both like a badge and a chain, bringing her a sense of superiority and imprisoning her in the Old South.

1. Introduction

Millions of readers are quite sure that the short novel, *A rose for Emily*, is a tragic love story about Emily. They may also be interested in Emily's identity. Who is Emily? Whom does she stand for? In his Selected Readings in English and American Literature Zhang Boxiang notes that "As a descendant of the Southern aristocracy, Emily is typical of those in Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha stories who are symbols of the Old South but the prisoners of the past." [1] Although portrayed as an old-fashioned and eccentric lady, typical of the Old South aristocrats, Emily was actually a victim of her family and the society. She longed for romance, but didn't harvest a happy ending.

It is not fair if we just attribute her tragedy to her personality and eccentricity. It is quite definite that her misfortune was closely related to her identity, woman noblesse. Woman noblesse refers to females in upper wealthy class in the Old South aristocracy. They were usually dependants of their families and the society. The tag of woman noblesse might be the source of her tragedy. She was born in a fallen aristocrat family in the Old South. What she had lost was not only wealth, but privilege and respect from people as well. What was left to her was only the tag, woman noblesse, thus she became "symbols of the old south but the prisoners of the past," and an outfit of the society.

So far, much attention has been paid to the rhetoric and narration technique of the novel. Few researches focus on how she was constructed to be a woman noblesse. The writer explores how her

noblesse was constructed in terms of Feminist Gender Studies and Marxist Gender Criticism. Through the exploration, the readers can have a better understanding her tragedy and misfortune. These identity constructions may shed a light on helping modern women fight for their rights.

2. Theoretical Background

The writer combines Feminist Gender Studies and Marxist Gender Criticism to approach Emily's identity in that the two theories both agree that gender is a product of social and cultural construction. Both theories value the textual analyses in literary criticism. However, Feminist Gender Studies focus more on how a female becomes a female in social and cultural environment, while Marxist Gender Criticism pays more attention to gender oppression and gender inequality.

2.1. Feminist Gender Studies

As an interdisciplinary study, Feminist Gender Studies concentrate on the phenomenon that is related to gender. It is an approach closely related to studies of class, race, ethnicity, sexuality and location. The philosopher Simone de Beauvoir once said: "One is not born a woman, one becomes one." [2] Based on his view, women's identity is a product of social and cultural construction. Gender studies don't study the biological difference between male and female, but between social and cultural differences. Gender studies also plays a vital role in feminist literary criticism. "In literary criticism and literature, feminist critics identify the writing strategies related to gender, including themes, words, sentences, style, images, narration, character portray, genres and so on." [3] Elizabeth Abel said "Gender and textuality all exist in gender difference." [4] Some feminist critics believe that the universal belief that there are differences between male and female result in oppression on women.

2.2. Marxist Gender Criticism

According to Marxist view on gender, gender is a socially and culturally constructed. In a given social and cultural settings, relationships between men and women are organized. Gender is also a product of a certain social institution. [5] In that institution social statuses for the assignment of rights and responsibilities come into being. Gender role in social life is determined by their status and this social stratification and difference in gender roles has developed into the ideology of gender inequality, to be more specific, in class-based and hierarchical societies. The critics of Marxist approach "are concerned with the relations between reading and social reality." This approach is based on two fundamental conflicts: the one from capitalism and patriarchal society, and the other from genders of different classes. they believe that patriarchy of the capitalism is the source of women's oppression. [6] Through the analyses in combination with social class and gender, they conclude that "In the oppression from class and gender, gender is a more important and more fundamental factor in our social relationship."

3. A Woman Noblesse Constructed within Her Family

The formation of identity is closely related to the immediate environment in which one grows up. The family offers a micro environment to build a person's identity in many aspects. Emily's identity as a woman noblesse was first constructed in her patriarchal family in three aspects: Cognition, economy, and emotion.

3.1. A Cognitive Construction

“One of the most important features in patriarchal society is men's autocracy, in other words, men are in the dominant position in every aspect of social dichotomy, while women's value is greatly belittled.” In a patriarchal society, males are in a privileged position in contrast to female as a whole and so is it in a family. It is taken for granted that in a patriarchal society husband often has the last word in the family and a father has absolute dominance over his daughter.

Her father's autocracy was one of the major causes that moulded Emily's identity. He was an aristocrat of the Old South and he bestowed his aristocracy to Emily. However, it is also he that strangled Emily's independence and turned her to be a dependant. When she was young, she had “a slender figure in white.”[7] we can imagine that she might not be that beautiful, but at least she was not lacking in followers. However, she lived in a patriarchal society, where her marriage was not up to herself. Her father dominated her, keeping her off any possible pursuers. “... her father a spraddled silhouette in the foreground, his back to her and clutching a horsewhip, the two of them framed by the back-flung front door.” This description vividly shows the past-aristocrat-like relationship between father and daughter. The father represented the authority and power, while the daughter played a role of a dependant. What did the horsewhip stand for? It seemingly represented autocracy of the patriarchal society. Driving away potential wooer of her daughter, the whip, however, was also a warning to any of her possible attempt to “step forward” from the background to the foreground. As long as her father was alive, she should stay behind her father and depend on him. It seemed that she readily accepted the role as a dependant.

After a prolonged period of domestication and taming, she was used to staying in the “back-flung” front door, accepting what her father arranged for her. She was moulded to be like a woman noblese. So, when her father died, “we remembered all the young men her father had driven away.” Along with the passage of time, she was almost thirty and still single. However, under her father's brutal autocracy, she was constructed as a woman noblese in her cognition. She despised the town people and refused to communicate with them, thinking that she had some superiority to them.

3.2. A Woman Noblese: An Economic Construction

Another tragedy coming from the oppression of patriarchy is that women have to be economically dependent on men. Wife has to be reliant on her husband, and daughter on her father. Just as Jane Austin wrote in *Pride and Prejudice*, “a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife”.[8] In Jane Austin's subconscious, marriage and money go hand in hand. A woman from a normal family, she must marry a man with a good fortune if she wants a decent life. That's why Elizabeth's mother has a strong wish that all her daughter married rich men. This was the case that Emily had to face. “When her father died, it got about that the house was all that was left to her.” Because of patriarchal autocracy, Emily never had any chance to be financially independent, so her father's death means the loss of financial support.

To be worse, her family proved to be the one that had long come down to earth, and the only thing that was left to her was a house, a symbol of the Old South. And she too was trapped in that old house, and was never able to come out of it. Being left alone, how could she manage to survive, since she was economically constructed as a woman noblese to depend on a man for a living. The only job she had done was giving china-painting lessons eight or ten years earlier. When her father died, Emily lost her income. Without a man to depend on, “she too would know the old thrill and the old despair of a penny more or less.” In this way, we can understand that Homer Baron was more than a lover to her. He was a financial source for her to depend on.

3.3. A Woman Noblesse: An Emotional Construction

Identity construction in the patriarchal society was not only reflected in the deprivation of women's economic self-reliance, but also in their emotional independence. As is shown in the case of *A Rose for Emily*, Emily had to depend on her father not only economically, but also emotionally. The day after her father's death, she told the town people that her father was not dead, and "she did that for three days." Why did she do so? The author, William Faulkner, explained in the novel that "we knew that with nothing left, she would have to cling to that which had robbed her, as people will." She was emotionally constructed "to cling to that which had robbed her," i.e., she was emotionally dependent on what had hurt her. What did the word 'that' represent? For Emily, the word, "that", not only stood for her father, but also the patriarchal society. Though they had hurt her, she clung to them.

In a patriarchal society, a man was the pillar of the family while other family members clung to him. She grew up in such a society, and clung to her father at first and to Homer Baron later. So, in this way, Homer Baron was more than a financial source, but a spiritual pillar for Emily to cling to. She needed a man to cling to. Even though she poisoned Homer Baron, she was still willing to sleep beside his dead body, because he and his body had been her emotional dependence.

4. A Woman Noblesse Constructed within the Society

The society provides a macro environment, influencing each family and each person. In the town where Emily lived, the town people acknowledged her identity as woman noblesse, and required her to be a real woman noblesse. They could not tolerate Emily's romance that went against their marriage norms and reminded her of noblesse oblige.

4.1. A Woman Noblesse: A Bargain in Marriage Market

According to Marxist feminism, gender is a product of social and cultural construction. There is no doubt that as the smallest unit of a society, a family embodies almost all the characteristics of the society to which it belongs. So, what is constructed in a family is a reflection of what a society tries to construct. In a male-dominated society, females are in subordinate status, playing a role inferior to males. "In philosophy, male spirit is always associated with female body, which has a strong connection with patriarchal society. Such a connection was abstracted from women's body, so that in status and marriage market they (men) can equal them (women's body) to merchandise".[9] Within such a background, women often had to accept forced marriage. In a forced marriage, women were often treated like goods to be sold at a good price for their families.

Such is not a rare case in the literary classics. In traditional families, their daughters' marriage had to be permitted by their parents or their elderly family members. It is because of the family's objection that Julia could not marry her beloved Romeo. For Julia, her marriage was not up to her, nor was Emily's up to herself. "Even with insanity in the family she wouldn't have turned down all of her chances if they had really materialized." What makes a good candidate for a woman noblesse? It had to be judged upon whether it was a good bargain for the family and an opportunity that they could be able to materialize.

The town people seemed to agree on the fact that marriage was like a bargain awaiting an opportunity to cash in on, so they had a pity on Emily, for she was not able to materialize. "People in our town, remembering how old lady Wyatt, her great-aunt, had gone completely crazy at last, believed that the Griersons held themselves a little too high for what they really were. None of the young men were quite good enough for Miss Emily and such." For the town people, marriage was an opportunity to cash in on, but the Griersons aimed to high so they missed out plenty of chances.

Emily's family was in a displaced time when the Old South had disappeared and there were fewer and fewer aristocrats readily available for them to materialize their marriage.

Wyatt echoed Emily in their marriage. They were willing to materialize their possible marriage, but were not able to. Fortunately, Emily was better than her great-aunt Wyatt in a way that Emily's father died when she was around thirty and she later met Homer Baron. Homer Baron was a day labourer, but not a man without a penny to his name. "The construction company came with niggers and mules and machinery, and a foreman names Homer Baron." Undoubtedly, as a newcomer with a little social status and money, Homer Baron was Emily's last chance to cash in on and she took the chance without any hesitation.

In the patriarchal society, marriage was like a bargain, and women were like merchandise waiting for a good price. Such a theme can be traced in many of William Faulkner's novels. Joanna Burden in *Light in August* is another case in point. She was like goods which were discarded by men at will. Emily, a woman noblesse from the Old South, was just an epitome of gender inequality in a male society. She was cognitively constructed to be a woman noblesse. As a woman noblesse, she needed to depend on an aristocrat. It was a social consensus. However, Homer Baron was not kind of origin. He was the Northerner, a day labourer. In the town people's mind, their marriage was not the kind that they were willing to see, so they gossiped that "a Grierson would not think seriously of a Northerner, a day labourer" and they even thought that "her kinsfolk should come to her."

4.2. A Woman Noblesse: Imposed Noblesse Oblige

Marxist feminists argue that gender inequality is the result of the development of the private property, there is that interconnection to class relationship.[10] In the novel, *A Rose for Emily*, Emily was a descendant of aristocrat in the Old South. Although the aristocrats in the Old South had declined after the Civil War, they still enjoyed some privilege the society. Let's take Emily as an example. Colonel Sattoris, the mayor of the town in 1894, "remitted her taxes, the dispensation dating from the death of her father on into perpetuity." She even inherited the label of the "respectable" from her father and she was actually proud of whom she was, since "carried her head high enough --- even when we believed that she was fallen."

Every coin has two sides, however. When people regarded her an aristocrat of the Old South, they expected that she would behave accordingly, or ladylike. When people "began to see him and Miss Emily on Sunday afternoons driving in the yellow-wheeled buggy and the matched team of bays from the livery stable," older people said that "even grief could not cause a real lady to forget noblesse oblige." It is obvious that noblesse oblige was socially and culturally constructed, affecting the thinking of everyone in the town. Town people hoped that "a Grierson would not think seriously" and they were against Emily's romance because it violated their deeply-rooted view on class and race. As for Emily, although she was dating with Homer Baron, she never gave up the status the Old South bestowed to her, for "it was as if she demanded more than ever the recognition of her dignity as the last Grierson."

We have long heard of the story of Cinderella and we know the girl of a poor family from lower class married the prince, a situation that had been long admired by all walks of life in the past. However, what if a girl of upper wealthy family dates a boy from a lower class? It would cause censure among people, for it goes against the aforesaid consensus. All these are the embodiment of gender inequality imposed on women.

In the case of *A Rose for Emily*, all the conflicts arose from displacement of their social class and gender. Homer Baron was a man of lower class, a day labourer from the North, while Emily was a female aristocrat of the Old South. Set at the heart of the conflicts between the North and the South,

between the ordinary laborers, the lower class and the noblemen, the upper class, their romance was bounded to be a short-lived one. Though Emily was poor, her identity as woman noblesse made town people regard her romance as “a disgrace to the town and a bad example to the young people”, and reminded her of “noblesse oblige”.

Interestingly, though women were the victims of this gender inequality, they were culturally and socially built to be the defenders of this inequality. When “the men did not want to interfere, but at last the ladies forced the Baptist minister to call upon her.” When their first attempt failed, “the minister’s wife wrote to Miss Emily’s relations in Alabama” to step in the matter.

Social hierarchy became a part in which women were involved in constructing and it also became a means by which they oppress themselves. The social hierarchy gave Emily the identity as woman noblesse. That identity gave her a certain privilege in the town, and the noblesse obligation as well. Woman noblesse was a displaced identity that Emily clung to and with that identity the town people forced noblesse oblige upon her, too. The town people wouldn’t allow her to date “a day labourer,” for it went against the noblesse oblige.

5. Conclusions

From the above analyses, Emily may not be that detestable. On the contrary, her experiences are well worth sympathy from the readers, because her tragedies were brought by the identity constructed by the patriarchal family and the society full of gender inequality. In the micro environment, she lived in a patriarchal family and was constructed to be a woman noblesse, a dependant, in her cognition, economy, and emotion. In the macro environment, the society acknowledged that identity and bestowed her marriage norms of woman noblesse and noblesse oblige as well. Emily was treated like a bargain in marriage market and deprived of last chance of love. Her family and the society jointly strangled her love. Emily was nothing but a tragedy, culturally and socially constructed in the patriarchal society. Deeply rooted in the society and culture, the identity as woman noblesse and noblesse oblige that came along doomed the fate of girls like her. So, if a girl wants to break away from the chains imposed by the society and culture, it requires a complete change in the society and culture.

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