

The Predicaments Faced by Women in Love Tragedies: Taking Peacock's Flying Southeast and Romeo and Juliet as Examples

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Abstract: Peacock's Flying Southeast and Romeo and Juliet are the representative works of Chinese and Western love tragedy. Although they are works of different genres, periods, and regions, they both end with the tragedy of love between the male and female main characters. Based on a feminist perspective, this paper compares and analyses the social constraints and predicaments faced by women in love tragedies in Peacock's Flying Southeast, and Romeo and Juliet. We found that the predicaments of the heroines in these two works mainly lie between two aspects: love and responsibility, and society and family.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Peacock's Flying Southeast and Romeo and Juliet are the masterpieces of Chinese and Western love tragedies. Although two works have many differences because of their different culture, they share many similarities. Especially, the portrayal of the heroines in these two works impresses people with their sense of femininity against feudalism. Based on document analysis and text analysis, the author will mainly talk about the similar dilemma faced by Liu Lanzhi and Juliet in two works from a feminist perspective, further explores the causes of women's dilemmas in different cultures and analyses their journeys in pursuit of freedom and happiness in the face of the oppression of feudal rites and ethics. According to it, we will deconstruct the stereotypes of traditional women in feudal society, and further understand women's struggles and the awakening of women's self-awareness in diverse cultures and times.

1.2. Literature Review

Many research work has been done to compare the two works from the aspects of love tragedy, characterization, and artistic features. Ding Dong points out that the two works are in diverse cultural categories, influenced by different historical cultures, national character and aesthetic psychology, and the presentation of character traits in the works will be different as a result^[1]. Characters in classical Chinese tragedies often tend to be commoners, usually the lower class of the society, with

weak resistance, and although the main character has the quality of struggle, he must submit to the majesty of feudal ethics and morality in the end. However, the protagonists of Western classical tragedies are aristocrats of prominent families, who pursue self-emancipation and freedom of love, and are rich in the spirit of resistance, rich in the spirit of resistance, and enhance the shock of the tragedy through struggle and destruction. Using comparative literary ethics, Qiu Limei explores how these two works are quite different in terms of the concept of tragedy, the aesthetics of tragedy, and the roots of tragedy, as well as the different concepts of love in the light of such differences^[2]. Yang Guoying compares the cultural background and characteristics of the times of the two works and discovers the same tragic spirit and tragic subject of the two works^[3]. Based on previous research, the author will analyse the commonalities between these two works from a feminist perspective.

1.3. Theoretical Foundation

This paper is based on the theory of feminism. The term feminism originated in France in the 19th century, it refers to a kind of social theories and political movements, which aims to fight for women's rights to be equal to men's in terms of political, economic, personal, and social rights, and criticize and advise on unequal relationships in society, thus contributing to the advancement of the gender equality movement^[4]. In the foreword to the first collection of Chinese translations of feminism, *Critique of Contemporary Feminist Literature*, published in 1992, the use of the term "feminism" was recognized by the academic community in China^[5]. Feminism theory discusses unequal treatment to women and embodiment of female gender politics, power relations.

2. The Period Setting of the Two Works

People who live in various times will invariably accept the social culture and the standards of criticizing right and wrong of that era. Therefore, to analyse the protagonists in different literary works, one first needs to understand the era in which these protagonists lived.

Peacock's *Flying Southeast* is one of the earliest full-length narrative poems in the history of Chinese literature, which is about the love tragedy between Jiao and Liu at the end of Han Dynasty. The heroine Liu Lanzhi is in the background of the Eastern Han Dynasty, a period when Emperor of the Han Dynasty promoted the idea of "Ban from hundred philosophers, venerate Confucianism", and feudalism tended to be perfected. The ruling class began to follow the rituals of the previous dynasty and to award prizes to women for their chastity. As the concept of chastity intensified, some books also began to establish requirements for women's lives, the rules in these books became shackles on the women.

Romeo and Juliet, based on a long narrative poem by Arthur Brooks, was written by Shakespeare about a forbidden love. The heroine, Juliet, lives in the Middle Ages, although the budding of capitalism has risen and many changes have taken place in society, including in culture, education, and politics, where traditional values are questioned and challenged. During cultural change, the Renaissance began to influence people's thinking. The socialist currents of this period revolved around the "human," emphasizing human emancipation and freedom of love. However, feudalism was still the dominant force of the times. Therefore, Juliet and Romeo's love was destined to be a tragedy from the start.

3. Female Predicament in Two Works

As far as the environment in which women live is concerned, the predicament of women is particularly severe in feudal society. Both Liu Lanzhi and Juliet in "*Peacock's Flying Southeast*" and "*Romeo and Juliet*" face their own dilemmas, which are manifested in the following aspects: the

predicament of society and family, and the predicament of love and responsibility.

3.1. The Predicament of Society and Family

Women's behavior and speech in family and social affairs provide a glimpse of the predicament faced by women in society and in the family. Liu Lanzhi in Peacock's *Flying Southeast* is portrayed as conforming to the male-dominated society's standards for a young and beautiful woman, which puts Liu Lanzhi under secular scrutiny. Additionally, Liu Lanzhi grew up under the influence of feudal rites, and she was a gentle and housekeeping woman, which conformed to the requirements of the feudal rites on the image of women. Liu Lanzhi was trapped within society's requirements for a wife, and she was recognized for her ability and character by being a competent wife. This is a social predicament that Liu Lanzhi had to face in the feudal society. Liu Lanzhi's married life was not a happy one, as her mother-in-law was not happy with her and tried hard to persuade her husband to marry another woman. In this era, the rules of Confucianism were followed by people, requiring children to obey their parents and women to serve their elders in their husbands' homes after they got married, and these rules became the tools of feudal patriarchal dictatorship. Therefore, even though Jiao Zhongqing genuinely loved Liu Lanzhi, he failed to convince his mother. When she returned home, Liu Lanzhi did not receive any understanding from her family, but she was suppressed and forced by her own mother and elder brother. In feudal society, the idea of patriarchy is reflected in men, but also in women who are victimized by the idea of patriarchy. Jiao's mother and Liu's mother are typical of this, as they use a bar scale to measure whether Liu Lanzhi's behavior is in line with the system of feudal rites and rituals. This is the family predicament faced by Liu Lanzhi.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet has the same social and family predicament. The families behind Juliet and Romeo are two feudal families and have been feuding for many years, and Juliet falls in love with the son of her enemy, which dooms their love to an unfortunate end. This is the social predicament faced by Juliet, who is unable to do anything in her small way to quell the strife between the two families. Patriarchal society imposes many restrictions on women^[6]. Juliet's marriage is dominated by her father, "I will make a desperate tender of my child's love: I think she will be ruled in all respects by me." Juliet's predicament within her family can be found in this quote.

3.2. The Predicament of Love and Responsibility

In the poem "*Peacock's Flying Southeast*" several lines depict Liu Lanzhi's happy married life with Jiao Zhongqing, but as Jiao's mother did not like Liu Lanzhi and forced her to return home. Because the feudal rituals of this era required that children must obey all the arrangements of their elders, under the strong pressure of Jiao's mother, even though Jiao Zhongqing and Liu Lanzhi did not want to be separated, Liu Lanzhi could only make a promise to Jiao Zhongqing that she would never forget her husband, and then returned home. However, after returning home, Liu Lanzhi is forced by her elder brother to remarry. Knowing that resistance is futile, Liu Lanzhi chooses to die to break free from the shackles of propriety, and at the same time to fulfill her promise to Jiao Zhongqing. It is Liu Lanzhi's love predicament that she is fortunate to have a lover in the feudal society but cannot stay together for the rest of her life. Additionally, Liu Lanzhi has multiple identities, assuming the responsibilities of honoring her parents and obeying her brother as a child and sister in her family relationships and serving her elders in her husband's family as a daughter-in-law. However, no matter how Liu Lanzhi's identity changes, she is indoctrinated by the corresponding identity. She is always in a dominated position and always carries the responsibilities of these identities, but she never has a self-identity or voice.

Juliet, as the heroine in the tragedy of love, cannot escape the predicament of facing love and responsibility. While Juliet is truly in love with Romeo, she hears that Romeo has killed her cousin,

which leaves her shocked and unable to accept it. Romeo's fiery and intense love defies Juliet, but the death of her cousin puts her in the predicament of choosing between love and domestic affection. Like Liu Lanzhi, Juliet could not escape the marriage that her family had arranged for her, for by enjoying the honor of being an aristocrat, she had to contribute to her family, and that contribution was to marry an earl. This is the responsibility that her family puts on Juliet.

4. The Heroine's Struggle

Liu Lanzhi is a beautiful, diligent, and well-mannered woman who almost meets the requirements of women in feudal society. However, Liu Lanzhi is not accepted by Jiao's mother and is loathed by her for no reason. The reason for Jiao's mother's dislike of Liu Lanzhi is two reasons: first, Liu Lanzhi and Jiao Zhongqing have been married for several years and have not yet had any children, and second, Jiao Zhongqing is overly fond of Liu Lanzhi, which makes Jiao's mother feel unhappy. In the Book, *Li Ji*, it is stipulated that a woman needs to obey her elders, and that after marriage, she needs to maintain a sense of propriety and etiquette with her husband to ensure family harmony^[7]. Otherwise, the male elders have the right to order the man to abandon the woman. Fortunately, Liu Lanzhi was not entirely domesticated by these feudal rites, and she began to realize the firm determination of Jiao's mother to expel her. Liu Lanzhi's self-respect required her to take the initiative to ask Jiao Zhongqing to return home. Unlike other women who are abandoned by their husbands in distress, Liu Lanzhi calmly arranges the affairs of the Jiao family, leaves her dowry, and leaves the Jiao family in a dignified manner. Due to the Han Dynasty rituals, a woman had to marry at a certain age and could not stay in her mother's house for long^[7]. Based on this feudal dogma, her brother forced her to remarry. Liu Lanzhi pretends to agree, but she decides to die in defiance of these ethical dogmas that oppress her. Death is not the best ending, but with all the constraints of feudalism, most women of that era would have chosen to submit to these rules. But Liu Lanzhi is a woman who maintains her own consciousness, and she finally breaks free from these constraints and succeeds in rebelling against the feudal ethical dogma and pursuing personal freedom and love.

Compared to the era in which Liu Lanzhi lived, the era in which Juliet lived was one in which capitalism and feudalism coexisted. And compared to Liu Lanzhi's ending, Juliet is to some extent more fortunate. Because the fact that Liu Lanzhi and Jiao Zhongqing are buried together after their deaths in *Peacock's Flying Southeast* does not mean that society approves of their act of defiance for love, but rather it is due to the funeral customs of the Han Dynasty^[8].

Juliet's spirit of resistance was not an awakening of self-consciousness, as in the case of Liu Lanzhi, but rather the influence on her of the ideas that emphasized the emancipation of human nature and the freedom of love during social change. Therefore, Juliet's spirit of resistance is a process of gradual change. Juliet starts out as a naive and innocent young girl, and as she begins to fall in love with Romeo, her understanding of love goes from vague to clear, and she possesses a sense of rebellion against feudal marriage and family authority. This resistance grows stronger as her parents arrange her marriage, and Juliette pretends to submit to their will. Her subsequent rejection of this wedding by her "death" is the climactic moment of her struggle against this revolt against feudalism and feudal morality. And while Romeo does not know the truth about her "death," Romeo kills himself on impulse, and Juliet chooses to kill herself without hesitation. Because this is the only choice, she can accompany her beloved, the only choice that will allow her to rebel against this feudal marriage imposed on her, other than that, she has no other choice. Therefore, Juliet's resistance is not reflected in the text at the beginning.

5. Conclusion

Peacock's Flying Southeast and *Romeo and Juliet*, as the classic representation of love tragedy are

well known to people in China and Western countries. As the heroines in these two works are very determined in their attitude towards love and self-seeking, and they both suffer from social and family oppression, these factors make these two works have common points. Based on feminist theory, this study focuses on the predicaments faced by the heroines in the two works through textual analysis. Although the genres of these two works are different, we find that the heroines in both works, Liu Lanzhi and Juliet, face similar predicaments, mainly the dilemmas of society and family and the dilemmas of love and responsibility. Finally, the heroines in these two works come from different cultural backgrounds, their spirit of pursuing love and rebelling against feudalism is the same. In the text, both *The Peacock* and *Romeo and Juliet* end in tragedy. Evaluated in terms of the results of their eventual revolt, Liu Lanzhi and Juliet gained freedom and love. Though both of their lives lead to death, death is something they share, and with their lives they ensure the integrity of their love and freedom. This study analyses the predicament of women in the two works in some degree of detail, hoping that the results of this study will inspire more scholars to do more research on these two works and provide analytical ideas for love tragedy works.

There are also shortcomings in this study. The feminist theories mentioned in this paper are mainly focused on the aspects of women's lack of identity and lack of women's discourse, failing to consider other aspects in feminism. In addition, the author studied the texts of the two works partially and did not read all the chapters carefully, so there are some limitations in the conclusions of the present study.

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