

The Predicament of Chinese Women in The Early 20th Century from The Perspective of Feminism —— Take Cao Yu's *Thunderstorm* and *Sunrise* as Examples

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Abstract. The background of this study is the dilemma faced by women and the development of feminism in China in the early 20th century. This study is mainly based on the playwright Cao Yu's two early 20th century drama works *Sunrise* and *Thunderstorm* as research materials, and from the character image, language characteristics, and other aspects of specific analysis. This study uses text analysis to analyze the writer Cao Yu's concept of women, the representative characters of Chen Bailu, Fanyi, and Shiping in the materials, and the characters' dialogue language characteristics. It is concluded that the predicament of Chinese women in the early 20th century is due to the conflict between the backward ideas of male superiority and female inferiority in the feudal patriarchal society and the emerging Western ideas of equality and freedom. During this period, feminism had a budding trend, but it was not systematic and thorough. Under the long-term rule of patriarchy, women's awakening consciousness has just begun, and everything is in a difficult stage of initiation and exploration. From this, it is concluded that Chinese feminism was oppressed by many parties in the early 20th century, but it was difficult to germinate.

Keywords: Feminism; Cao Yu; *Thunderstorm*; *Sunrise*.

1. Introduction

This study focuses on the dilemma faced by women and the development of feminism in China in the early 20th century. Since the early 20th century was a special historical period between the old and the new, this research is of great significance to the development of Chinese feminism. This study takes *Sunrise* and *Thunderstorm*, two drama works in the early 20th century, as the starting point, and develops them from the aspects of character image and language characteristics. These two works are both based on a corner of society in the early 20th century. *Thunderstorm* tells the story of the feudal family of two generations of grievances and fate entanglement. *Sunrise* describes the exploitation and oppression of the lower class by the decaying and dark upper class in semi-feudal and semi-colonial cities. The storylines and characters of these two works are representative, reflecting the development of the entire Chinese society in the early 20th century [1]. Therefore, this study uses the literature analysis method to search and read the language characteristics of female characters and characters' dialogue in the plays *Sunrise* and *Thunderstorm*, as well as the author Cao Yu's concept of women and other related materials and literature. The advantage of this method is that it can analyze the research materials of literary works well, which is conducive to the research. The ultimate research goal of this study is to see the dilemma of women and the development of feminism in China in the early 20th century from these two dramatic works. To achieve this goal, this study analyzes the author Cao Yu's life experience and female concept, the images of the three main female characters in *Thunderstorm* and *Sunrise*, and the language characteristics of the characters in the text, and finally draws the research results.

2. Literature Review

The development of feminism in China is a topic worthy of in-depth study. With the continuous awakening of Chinese women, feminist studies have also received attention. In *Gender and Politics: Feminist Movement and Literary Narrative in China in the 1930s*, scholar Yin Qin deeply studies the

relationship between the abolition of prostitution, marriage reform, etc. in the 1930s and literary narrative [1]. It also discusses issues such as women's careers and women's body liberation, showing the feminist movement in the 1930s, which is of great value to the study of the development history of modern Chinese feminism. However, the time frame of this article is relatively small, limited to the 1930s. This article will broaden the scope of research and focus on the development of feminism throughout the early twentieth century. In the article *Cao Yu and His Works Reading from the Perspective of Feminism*, scholar Zhao Can uses feminist theory to conduct a comprehensive and systematic analysis of Cao Yu's drama works from three aspects: Cao Yu's interpretation of female images, exploration of women's way out, and traceability of Cao Yu's feminist thought [2]. This article reinterprets traditional patriarchal culture from a feminist standpoint and attitude, and its viewpoint establishes a new research category for the study of modern literary history. However, its content mainly focuses on the analysis of the work itself and does not involve much in the social outlook embodied in Cao Yu's works. This paper will start with the special social aspects of the turn of the old and the new in the early 20th century, conduct feminist research, and supplement the existing research gaps.

3. Description

Sunrise is a dramatic work created by Cao Yu in 1935. In this drama, the protagonist Chen Bailu in the image of a young and beautiful social butterfly in high society, in the banker Pan Yueting's support lives a degenerate, comfortable life. But she also has a yearning for freedom. She longs to break free from the shackles of life, but she has no choice but to fall into the quagmire, struggling and unable to find a way out. She fell soberly, suffered soberly, and finally committed suicide in exchange for her liberation.

Thunderstorm is a dramatic work created by Cao Yu in 1934. This work is set in the society around 1925 and tells the story of the grievances and enmities within a feudal family. The main characters are Zhou Puyuan, the hypocritical and tyrannical feudal patriarch of the Zhou family, Fanyi, who is bound in feudal marriage, and the two sons of Zhou Ping and Zhou Chong. As well as the simple and tough Shi Ping, the slippery philistine Lu Gui, and the two children of Sifeng and Lu Dahai. The two families are bound together by fate, and all the conflicts erupt on a thunderstorm night. In the end, Zhou Chong and Sifeng were electrocuted, and Zhou Ping committed suicide. After the painful price, everything ended in a thunderstorm.

4. Analysis

4.1. The Author's Concept of Femininity

Before analyzing the work, it is important to analyze the feminist concept of the author Cao Yu himself. As Genette argues: "No matter how clear and direct a narrative may appear, it is never without the imprint of the judge." [3]. Cao Yu was born into a declining feudal bureaucratic family. He lost his mother when he was young. His father was a typical patriarch of a feudal family, and his growth environment was relatively oppressive. However, Cao Yu's stepmother, wet nurse, and sister all took good care of him when he was young, filling in his lack of maternal love. Cao Yu's dislike of feudal patriarchal oppression and his concern and respect for women were naturally established in such a living environment. Then Cao Yu entered Nankai University Middle School and was enthusiastic about theatre performance, joining the Nankai University New Theatre Troupe. He played several female roles in the troupe, including the heroine of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, *Nora*, among others. In the process of playing these female roles, Cao Yu can think more deeply from a female perspective and see issues from a female perspective. This experience deepened Cao Yu's understanding and empathy for women and had a profound impact on the portrayal of women in his works.

4.2. The Female Figure in the Work

Cao Yu's classic *Sunrise* describes the lives of the upper and lower classes in the semi-feudal and semi-colonial cities in the early 1930s. In this drama, the heroine Chen Bailu, supported by banker Pan Yueting, lives a hedonistic life of feasting and drinking and is active in the upper class as a social butterfly. But in fact, she is a woman who has received a new education. She is not completely numb. She still has a yearning for freedom and the germ of ideological liberation. She would want to leave with Fang Dasheng, and she would rescue girls who were bullied by the scum of high society. But due to the shackles of life, she had to rely on men and become a social butterfly in the upper class, wandering among various men. "The body should be seen as a subject, not as an object like biology", she was objectified and even sexualized by the patriarchal society [4]. "The idealized woman must be the object of male desire", and Bailu is such an existence [5]. The little girl she rescued also failed to escape the fate of being abused and committed suicide. The split between reality and ideals made her suffer a dilemma in her heart. She longed for escape and freedom more than anyone else, but she was already trapped in it and could not extricate herself. This contradictory and complex psychological state made her even more miserable, and eventually, she came to an end, seeking a release by suicide. "The sun has risen, but the sun is not ours." The helplessness of male hegemony, the inability to resist oppression, and Bai Lu's suicide make the plight of women in this era more naked [6].

Another classic work by Cao Yu, *Thunderstorm*, depicts the tragedy of a feudal bourgeois family in the context of Chinese society around 1925. The story tells the story of the enmity between the two families of Zhou Lu and the two generations. All the conflicts broke out on a thunderstorm night and ended in a thunderstorm. Shi Ping is an important female character in "*Thunderstorm*". She used to be a servant of the Zhou mansion. She developed a relationship with Zhou Puyuan when she was young and had a child named Zhou Ping. Then she was cruelly abandoned by Zhou Puyuan. After leaving Zhou Mansion, she remarried Lu Gui, a philistine villain, and raised her daughter Sifeng and her son Lu Dahai. But the fate is unfair, the daughter Sifeng went to the Zhou family's house as a servant, the son Lu Dahai in the Zhou Puyuan mine as a miner, and the Shi Ping and the Zhou family were implicated. Shiping is a typical Chinese old-fashioned woman, unlike Bai Lu, who has entered the upper class, Shiping is an ordinary working woman at the bottom. Shiping has been compromising with the feudal family and patriarchal society all her life. In her teenage years, she compromised with Zhou Puyuan, who played with her feelings. After remarrying, she compromised with Lu Gui, who shouted and reprimanded her. She gave in silence, like the vast majority of old Chinese women, having never owned herself, and lived as a subordinate to others under the discipline of the patriarchal society. As Beauvoir wrote in *The Second Sex*, she is a subordinate person, a minor in opposition to the main, with the male being the subject, the absolute, and the female the other [7]. She believes that the three roles of traditional women, namely motherhood, wife, and daughter, are not born this way, but are all made up [8]. As the mother of a child, the wife of a man, and the bottom of the class, Shi Ping has been exploited and oppressed all her life. "Their incarnation is predetermined in the patriarchy. So, the relationship of the woman to her body is made in the culture." [9]. Shi Ping is a classic example of the oppressed women in old China, and her tragedy reflects the suffering and fate of most women in old China.

Fanyi is also an important female character in the drama "*Thunderstorm*". She is Zhou Puyuan's wife and Zhou Chong's mother, a victim of feudal marriage. But she dared to love and hate, as fierce and bold as a thunderstorm, she pursued free feelings, regardless of the constraints of worldly ethics. She developed the urge to love her stepson, Zhou Ping, and directly expressed her feelings. But she was always trapped in the feudal mansion of Zhou Mansion, under the suppression of the patriarchal family, and finally broke out like a thunderstorm. Different from Shiping, Fanyi tried to break out of the cage in her predicament, showing the resistance and struggle of women under the feudal patriarchy. She boldly exposed the ugliness of the feudal family and attacked Zhou Puyuan's patriarchal concept of solipsism. She said she was not a mother and wife; she was trying to choose who she was rather than submit to an identity that society had given her as a subordinate. Or rather, she was trying to transform her identity as "the other," an independent personality, an unyielding soul. Although her

resistance was still feeble in the coercion of the times, it was precisely because of such female pioneers who dared to fight that the predicament of the times could be broken.

4.3. Linguistic Analysis in Works

The most important part of the drama lies in the characters' dialogue language, so this study makes some analysis of the characters' language in the text. The language of these two works shows the extreme inequality that has the voice over men and women, as well as the restraint, discipline, and suppression of women by men in language, reflecting a kind of discourse hegemony of male subjects. Taking part of the dialogue in *Thunderstorm* as an example, Zhou Puyuan said to Fanyi in the text: "As a mother, you should think about your child everywhere. Even if you don't take care of your body, you should also set an example for your child to obey." [6]. In this sentence, Zhou Puyuan emphasizes her identity as the mother of the child, which is a linguistic constraint on her, making her no longer an independent existence, but a subordinate of a male subject. Then the word "obeys", in Zhou Puyuan's view, women should submit to men, which also reflects the extreme inequality of women and men in the patriarchal society and the hegemony of men in society. When Zhou Ping and Fanyi were arguing over their feelings, facing Fanyi, who wanted to pursue freedom, Zhou Ping also showed the same male oppression as his father. He said: "You have no right to say such things, you are the mother of my younger brother Zhou Chong." [6]. He also used her mother's identity to restrain Fangyi's freedom, so that Fangyi could only stay in this Zhou mansion without the sun and continue to exist as an accessory. "You have no right to say such things" also means that in their eyes, women like Fanyi are bound to the family by default, have the voice over themselves, and have no right to pursue self and freedom, which is the embodiment of absolute male hegemony.

However, Fanyi had obvious rebellious thoughts. She said, "I am not his mother, nor am I Zhou Puyuan's wife." [6]. She is trying to become an independent person. Fangyi's resistance made Zhou Puyuan and Zhou Ping feel that he was an increasingly uncontrollable and undocile woman, so they gave Fangyi the identity of a "female lunatic". The father and son kept verbally instilling in Fanyi the idea that she was sick and that she was a lunatic. Zhou Ping said to her during the argument, "You are a monster I didn't expect!", "You are crazy!" [6]. Zhou Puyuan even forced her to take psychiatric drugs and forced her to see a doctor. Fanyi's own words also revealed Zhou Puyuan's suppression of her: "You don't have to hide it from me. I know, I know, he said I was sick and crazy, I know he wants you to look at me like this, he wants everyone to look at me like this." [6]. They kept giving Fangyi spiritual restraints they were afraid, afraid that Fangyi would get out of their control. Is Fanyi mentally ill? This is not necessarily, she is just a woman with a rebellious consciousness, she challenged the authority of the patriarchy, so she is "crazy". The condition for Fanyi to become a "crazy woman" is not whether she is crazy, but whether men want her to become a "crazy woman". Fanyi resisted, denying that she was a so-called lunatic, "I'm not sick, I'm not sick, I'm not sick at all. Don't think I'm talking nonsense.", "Don't imitate your father. Not crazy - I'm not crazy!... This is my last breath!" [6]. The outbreak of Fanyi was finally attributed to her being sick and crazy. At this time, her voiceover was completely deprived, and her resistance and shouting were simply erased by the light sentence "She is crazy". Because no one would pay attention to what a madman said, even if Fanyi had a strong sense of resistance, he could no longer express it. This was the dominant discourse hegemony of men. When a rebellious woman realizes that she is a subject independent of men, and realizes the irrationality of her heterogeneity and otherization, she will be marginalized or hover between the mainstream and the periphery [10]. The situation of Fanyi is the situation of thousands of women in the early 20th century. Under the feudal patriarchal society that has maintained for thousands of years, women have been deprived for a long time. Women have been in a position of marginalization, otherization, and subordination for a long time. The power of awakening is too small, and the voice that can be issued is too weak.

5. Conclusion

The result of this study is that the dilemma faced by Chinese women in the early 20th century originated from the conflict between the backward ideology of male superiority in the feudal patriarchal society and the emerging Western ideology of equality and freedom. The early twentieth century was a period of alternation between the old and the new. The situation of women in this period had its particularity. Their predicament was not only the oppression and exploitation in the feudal period but also the resistance and resistance in the new trend of thought. During this period, women who were beginning to awaken their consciousness yearned for resistance and freedom, but in reality, they repeatedly encountered obstacles and suffered suppression, eventually falling into deeper pain and despair. Under the class society, women at the bottom will also be oppressed by women from the middle and upper classes, which will further increase their plight. In other words, women at that time were facing multiple oppression and difficulties. Secondly, the development of Chinese feminism in the early 20th century. As a transitional stage between the old and the new, everything was in the early stage of initiation and exploration. During this period, a small number of women had begun to awaken. Feminism had a budding trend, but it was not systematic and thorough. Because the rule of patriarchy lasted for thousands of years, women's social status and the voice over it cannot be won overnight, and the awakening of women who grew up under patriarchal oppression will be an extremely slow process. In this period, only a small number of women could receive new education, influenced by ideological enlightenment, and some of them could have awakened consciousness. However, in a patriarchal environment, it is difficult for them to be completely independent. At this time, society is more of old-fashioned and underclass women who have not received a new education. The women's struggle is still at a very weak stage. Therefore, it is further concluded that Chinese feminism faced many difficulties in the early 20th century, but there is still a budding trend.

This study provides a lot of valuable reference significance for future research in this direction, mainly filling the gap in the research on the development of feminism in China in the early 20th century and affecting the interpretation of Cao Yu's drama from a feminist perspective. Future research should focus more on the direction of the development history of modern feminism in China, further improve the study of feminism in China, and promote the future development of feminism in China.

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