

The Influence of the Development of Feminism on Women's Self awakening in the 20th Century

-- A brief analysis of the characters in The Hours

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Abstract. The development of western feminism in the 20th century has experienced three waves. During this period, western women continued to strive for equal rights like men had through feminist movements and trends of thought, which provided an ideological and theoretical basis for women's awakening. In 2003, *The Hours* won the Oscar, bringing feminism into the public's view. The film tells of the inextricable relationship between three women of different times and the novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. The stories of the three heroines occur in the three waves of feminism respectively. Their struggle and growth represent the development of feminism in different periods, which is also an obvious feature of the unprecedented rise of women's gender consciousness. This paper mainly analyzes the film language of the three female characters from the perspective of micro or macro feminism and narrates them through the sequence of the film plot and time development, thus reflecting the influence of the development of feminism on women's self-awakening in the 20th century.

Keywords: *The Hours*; feminism; female awakening.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research background

Since the 20th century, feminism has entered a period of vigorous development. In the long period when "human rights" came into being, "human rights" did not include women's rights. With the social development at the end of the 19th century, people gradually began to fight for women's rights and awaken women's awareness of political participation. At the same time, Virginia Woolf, the pioneer of feminism, introduced feminism in her works. With the development of this trend of thought, feminism has gradually become a hot topic of discussion in the current society, and feminist literature and artworks have sprung up.

The Hours (2002) is a film work adapted from Michael Cunningham's novel of the same name, which tells the story of three women living in three different times who have been connected through Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. This work originated from Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. The three heroines lived in a period that coincided with the three waves of feminist development. From this perspective, the study was carried out.

1.2 Research Significance

Because of the particularity of the time in which the protagonist lives, we study the similarities and differences of female self-awakening from the perspective of feminist development and social ideological background. From the lines, composition and color, this paper analyzes the image characteristics of the three female characters in *The Hours*. Through comparison, it further elaborates on the benefits of feminism on women's individual awakening.

2. Three women

2.1 Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf is a representative of the rise of women's consciousness in the early 20th century. She believed that a woman must have "a room of her own" to write independently and pursue women's economic and spiritual independence. The film *The Hours* shows Woolf's predicament as a woman and her contribution to feminism.

2.1.1 Disciplined women

The film begins with Woolf walking into the river and the soundtrack "The Poet Acts" ringing out. The melody was repeated and suppressed like the sound of a river, which indirectly reflected the despair of women who had been disciplined for a long time.

Woolf is the first heroine in the film, and also a woman who is disciplined by the patriarchal ideology. In the film, she often has a close-up of writing, which highlights her identity as a writer and also symbolizes her initial exploration of feminism. According to Bloom's theory "the anxiety of influence", in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert, and Gubar put forward that female writers have "anxiety of authorship". In the patriarchal culture, women are regarded as inferior "second sex". Women are not allowed to have their self-consciousness, and women are forced to be in a passive position in the process of literary production. Therefore, Woolf's writing is not only simple writing but also a rebellion against the traditional patriarchal discourse. When Woolf talked to her husband Leonard, the camera cut to the flowers on the table. In the traditional concept, women and flowers are defined as equals. Flowers have no practical significance and appear as ornaments, just as women play a subsidiary role in the patriarchal society. On the other hand, flowers are also a symbol of the awakening of women's self-consciousness. However, the maid bought flowers for Woolf. Although she had self-consciousness, she could not practice them. This is one of the reasons why she chose to commit suicide. The violet on the table symbolizes eternal love and beauty, which visually echoes classical rural life, as well as Woolf's sharp thinking and eyes.

Clarissa Dalloway, a fictional female image created by Woolf, is also a disciplined woman. The first sentence of Woolf's novel is: "Mrs. Dalloway said that she would buy the flowers herself" [1]. Dalloway is the surname of Clarissa's husband, the heroine. The name of the novel is Mrs. Dalloway, not Clarissa, which reflects Woolf's emphasis on the right of the family name. In the West, a woman will be given her husband's surname after she gets married. The right to family name reflects women's loss of power, which is closely related to the patriarchal clan system for thousands of years. The development and change of the right of the family name correspond to the development and change of women's status, which is the best representation to mark the status quo of women's oppression. It shows Woolf's deep thinking on women's status.

In the film, the disciplined women also include Nelly, the maid. She is a typical traditional woman. Influenced by the patriarchal ideology, she does not understand Woolf and believes that the duty of women is to take care of the family. Nelly symbolizes the obstacles in the development of feminism, indicating that feminism is not only suppressed by men, but also by women who have been disciplined since childhood.

2.1.2 The pursuit of peace

When living in a small town, Woolf missed her life, her friends and art parties in London. The quiet rural life in Richmond, a small town, did not bring Woolf the peace she really sought, but only a superficial peace. The arrival of her sister Vanessa and her children brought her temporary happiness. Her kiss with her sister was not only a courtesy but also a temporary communication of the soul [2]. Woolf's niece used yellow roses to symbolize death when burying birds. The niece described the bird as "very peaceful", so Woolf knew that peace of mind was what she really wanted. She hoped that her sister and children could stay longer, but her sister's perfunctory hospitality made her sad and isolated. Woolf's idea of Mrs. Dalloway's final awakening in her writing in *Mrs. Dalloway* also stems from her insight into her own living state [3].

2.1.3 Attempt to leave and final death

After her sister left, Woolf secretly ran to the station to return to London and was found by her husband who caught up with her. When they argue at the station, the film features their facial expressions in turn to show Leonard's anger and Woolf's helplessness. Leonard said, "You have a history" and tried to control her behavior, which was a kind of imprisonment for Woolf in the name of love. In Woolf's time, mental illness was stigmatized, and mental patients were regarded as people without self-control, requiring the supervision of doctors and psychiatric hospitals. As Foucault put forward in *Madness and Civilization*, the attitude of capital society towards mental patients has changed from moral negation to rational negation to an irrational destructive force that must be controlled by reason. But Woolf was deprived of the right of self-determination by her husband, not only because she was a mental patient, but also because she was a woman [4]. Woolf shouted, "there's no such obligation", which means that she did not obey the responsibility of doctors and husbands and that women did not obey the responsibility of men. Finally, Leonard gave in and agreed to return to London with Woolf, which also symbolized the initial victory of women's rights.

When thinking about the ending of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf realized that she should face her life. In her view, death is not an escape, but a way to obtain peace. Therefore, she finally decided to calm her heart by committing suicide and also tried to resist in this radical way. In one scene, flowing water is an important symbolic image, which not only represents the long liberation of women and the passage of years but is also connected with death. Woolf chose to end her life by sinking because the state of the water is similar to the environment in which people live in the fetal period, which can give people a sense of security. At last, she sank into the bottom of the Eusai River with the stones, obtaining real peace and relief [5].

2.2 Laura Brown: Yes or No for Mrs. Brown

Laura Brown, the second heroine in *The Hours*, has made contact with Virginia Woolf through Mrs. Dalloway. Because of the resonance with the characters in the book, she realized her own survival predicament in the post World War II stage and made her own choice under the background of the times.

2.2.1 Gender division of labor under stereotype

Laura Brown, the second heroine on the timeline of *The Hours*, is an ordinary housewife in Los Angeles in the United States after World War II. As a victorious country in World War II, the United States formed an unprecedented social background of economic prosperity and a large number of new middle classes by selling arms during the war. Dan Brown, Laura's husband, came back from the battlefield smoothly and continued to struggle as a "war hero". From the outside world, Laura's life has been enough to make people envy: a stable husband, a smart son, a new life being nurtured, and a life free from worries.

In fact, this stage has entered the second wave of feminist development. In the first wave stage from the end of the 19th century to the 1960s, with the process of women gradually striving for their own rights and political participation, scholars such as Woolf and Beauvoir put forward their views on feminism, and the appeal of "equality between men and women" has gradually entered the public or male-dominated discourse. Even if the male power is not in the stage of complete hegemony, women still cannot completely choose their way of life. Harmonious family relationships, considerate husband and virtuous wife were the mainstream ideology of family in American culture at that time [6]. Because of this, the rigid gender division of labor existed in this period and was even stronger than in the war period. The mission of the women is to establish "an orderly and harmonious world, where children are safe (although not happy), men who have experienced unimaginable horror scenes and have behaved heroically and excellently, return to the home with bright lights, perfume, plates and napkins" [7]. Laura Brown herself is from such a background, and the well-educated woman feels a strong sense of separation under such a gender division of labor: it lays a clue for her story.

2.2.2 Pain and choice under the ban of the family circle

Before becoming Mrs. Brown, Laura had her own name: Laura Silsky, a free girl who loved literature. For Laura, taking the surname of their husband is also a plunder of her own living space. Only when she read Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway did she feel alive again in literature and resonate with the image of Mrs. Dalloway. Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy flowers and Mrs. Brown would make a cake for her husband's birthday when she realized that she could not even buy flowers on her own, and the news that her neighbor Mrs. Kitty was suffering from uterine disease, whether she would continue to live as Mrs. Brown had become a problem that Laura had to face. After seeing her husband off to work with a smile, she felt tired and suffocated when facing her son alone.

It is worth mentioning that the composition language used by the director to show the role of Laura is different from the other two: he uses door frames, roofs, windows, and other scenes without hesitation to show a "trapped" image. Long-term family depression, anxiety about her life, and the sense of the worthlessness of her "career" made her trapped in the cage forged by her family. Even if nothing had happened, Laura also had the idea of ending her life. The story of driving to the hotel alone also produced the classic scene of *The Hours*: flooded rooms and beds. Foucault explained in *Madness and Civilization* that water has the functions of "helping people" and "purifying". For Laura, the water submerging herself is the repression under the family circle and her own complex and delicate emotions. The three women in *The Hours* all have the image of "water". Water is not only oppression and suffocation like Woolf's sinking but also represents a return to the mother body full of amniotic fluid, a rebirth of life. Laura realized that there was still living life in her belly, and reason won in this game. Finally, she gave up suicide, but also completed her own self-exploration and made future choices in this experience. She returned home and made up her mind to leave the family after giving birth to the child [8].

2.2.3 Real exodus: fresh, active, breathing

When Laura finally gave birth to her daughter in October, she abandoned her husband and son and went to Canada alone to become a librarian. At this moment, Laura finally escaped the shackles of family and wife and returned to her own identity – no longer "Mrs. Brown" but "Laura Silsky", not a puppet named "wife" in a false happy life, but a real independent woman.

Even if the sudden way leaving of her family brought pain to herself and others, Laura did not regret this decision. This is a real sense of departure, spiritual and self-liberation. In the world of books, Laura can completely put aside her role of being loyal to herself. Instead of taking care of children, being kind to her neighbors, and struggling to make a perfect cake, she can appreciate the flowers her husband has imprisoned with his kind words and be a gentle wife and a kind mother. In a certain sense, Laura also returned to herself in the suicide action. The oppression they suffered was relieved and redeemed through the submergence of water. From another perspective, "returning to water" and "returning to the mother" also has the meaning of women's search of a self-destination.

Laura is the epitome of women in that era. Also, in the 1960s, countless "Mrs. Brown" awakened, breaking the patriarchal consciousness that emphasized the necessity of women as housewives in the previous decade. In 1963, Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*. As the first work in the second wave of feminism, it depicts the plight faced by women, deconstructs the "ideal female" role of a good wife and mother advocated by male-dominated society after the war, and calls on women to go out of their homes and be brave to realize themselves. During this period, the role of "Laura" shows the importance of refining individuality into commonness.

2.3 Clarissa Vogan

In the history of the development of feminism, the third wave of feminism really interweaved the features of early feminism in a complex way, making it new and gradually approaching diversification. Its purpose and significance mainly revolved around the trend of integration and coexistence. In the third wave of feminism, the diversity of feminism has witnessed the appearance of various branches such as homosexual feminism, deconstructive feminism, and psychoanalytic feminism, which has led

to women's self-awakening not only in women's rights and uniqueness but also more emphasis on individual diversity. It is an indication that personal identity is linked to many aspects and helps explore female awakening. However, in the film *The Hours*, Clarissa's self-awakening by people around her can reflect the impact of the third wave of feminism on women's awakening.

2.3.1 Being Bound and First Awakening

Clarissa's storyline in the film is still based on the life of a day, but at the beginning of the day, she has a discourse symbol that conforms to the third wave of feminism. She said: "I want to buy flowers myself." This line, first of all, confirms Woolf's writing. She said, "I want to buy flowers by myself." Second, it represents that people not only pursue equality in political power and status but also begin to have the first awakening in decision-making and independence. However, in the process of Clarissa's buying flowers, the dialogue with the florist owner again imprisoned the character in the past stereotype. Clarissa is bisexual, but when she bought flowers, she had hidden feelings for her heterosexual boyfriend. She introduced the feeling that the book was difficult to read to others, but at the same time, she denied that the heroine in the book was portrayed based on her. Her own desire for talent made her more attached to Richard's feelings, and her own identity was also in a vague circle. As an ordinary person, she is endlessly eager for talent. As a homosexual, she has to rely on a heterosexual boyfriend to live. At this moment, men are still playing an important role in women's life. At the beginning of the day, the elevator leading to Richard's house can best reflect the character's current state. For the film, the composition is the choice and reconstruction of the screen. In this original state, Clarissa's role setting represents the impact of the third feminist wave. A gay man went to the home of a heterosexual boyfriend in the past to take care of him, which also shows what kind of inherent impression the third feminist wave mainly wants to break. In the picture of the elevator for the first time, Clarissa is in the picture of being bound by the railing, leaving only a small hole to see her and the flowers in her hands. At this time, the subject is Clarissa. She is in a bound and watched state. Such a passive position choice can show that Clarissa's identity belongs to a bound state in her self-identity at that time. She needs to live with a man, and the third wave of feminism also aims to break this bondage. Therefore, homosexual feminism has also been derived.

2.3.2 Thinking and Struggling

The second part of the film mainly tells the unhappy conversation between Richard and Clarissa and the conversation between Richard's gay friends and Clarissa. Similarly, this part of the lines is very important, especially the male lines. The appearance of male lines indicates the views and practices under the male perspective of the third feminist wave, and whether men have played a role in it [9].

Richard is similar to Woolf, the first female leader. Both of them are mentally ill. It can be said that the male and female leaders in the third chapter are not living for themselves. They are living for each other because of their characteristics. This is also a place Clarissa has never dared to face. At this stage, Richard's line: "Mrs. Dalloway always holds a party to cover up the silence." "What about your own life, Sally?" and "When I die, you will think for yourself. What will happen then?" always remind Clarissa that her dependent life has no longer been her own, and her desire for talent has made her lose her independent female lifestyle and attitude. The third wave of feminism was a strong exploration of women's consciousness. Richard represented the role of the husband in most families in the male society at that time, because women had not completely changed their awakening consciousness. Their attachment to men and worship still existed in their own thoughts. In the film, Richard was used to expressing women's lives in such a straightforward way, which also gives women the pressure of self-awakening, and the third radicalization of feminism also shows in this respect [10].

2.3.3 Awakening and breakthrough

The third stage of story development should start from repeated frames. At this time, the elevator frames leading to Richard's house have transformed the subject from Clarissa to Clarissa's perspective

of looking to the peak. This kind of position transformation shows that women's awakening to their self-awareness is no longer dependence but independence and self-realization. The appearance of these frames paved the way for the sublimation of the final story. The setting of the elevator is a special symbol in the story, and its own setting is metaphorical: the cage like a prison can go straight up to the residence of a man. Clarissa's own homosexual identity, it shows that women at this time will not be bound by their own identity and will no longer be attached to a man alone, but they will pursue themselves and distinguish between "I" and "true me". In *Bad Girl/Good Girl*, one author said that "queer" was once used to mark the new political vision of this new generation of feminists. The third wave of feminism, different from the previous two waves, it paid more attention to individuality and diversity, which is reflected in the role set in the film. Clarissa is bisexual. Her life with Sally is no longer as awkward as the moment when Laura kissed her neighbor. As a heterosexual, Clarissa always misses her beautiful love with Richard and has endless expectations for Richard's talent, and she even lives on Richard. In fact, Clarissa believes that she needs to live by Richard, but she still lives with women in real life. Her understanding of self-identity is not completely clear, and she is afraid to face her entanglement. Rebecca Walker wrote: We are worried that identity will dominate and regulate our life, instantly oppose us to someone and force us to choose a fixed position. "The third feminism pays attention to" micro feminism politics ". In the end, Clarissa bravely faced her own gender choice and the ideal id from the role's daily life. In this change process, we can see that women are finally free from the impact of the third feminism on the female self-awakening. They come out of the original shackles and cages, face their own life directly, and no longer live for others.

3. Conclusion

Since the 20th century, the wave of feminism has gone from gender equality and sexual equality to gender identity. Under such a special background, the theoretical basis laid by the feminist movement has promoted the development of women's self-awakening. As one of the top ten classic female films of Oscar, *The Hours* has come to the fore in the Academy Awards, reflecting the profound influence of the feminist tide in the 20th century on the development of modern feminism. The endings of the three heroines in the film all have a tragic color. Virginia Woolf broke up with herself in order to get rid of the shackles of family affection. Laura Brown abandoned the image of a housewife and left home only to live her own life. Clarissa Vogan regained her independent self after Richard's departure. In the eyes of the public, they pursue themselves at the expense of others. The seemingly crazy behavior is the beginning of the female individual awakening. They do not want to revenge on the people who love them, but they want to fight against the society that makes women lose their self-consciousness.

As a representative film of feminism, *The Hours* makes feminism appear in the audience's view with the aid of mass media, which undoubtedly promotes the development of feminism in the 21st century and plays an important role in connecting the past and the future. In the peaceful era, feminism seems to have developed and grown, but the life that modern women enjoy is never easy to get. "In the year of peace, women also needed to fight to the death to gain independence." The predicament faced by women in the 20th century is hindering the self-realization of modern women in another invisible way. *The Hours* is like a mirror reflecting the reality of feminism. It expresses a very enlightening feminist position, shows women's resistance to gender oppression and constructs a space for women's free development. The appearance of *The Hours* on the world stage, to a certain extent, promoted the development of feminism in the 20th century and ignited the spark of women's awakening.

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