

A Comparison Between the Feminism of Scarlett and Melanie

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Abstract. Widely considered as a classic feminist work, there are many studies of *Gone With the Wind* from the perspective of feminism in academia. Most of these studies focus on the feminist spirit of its protagonist Scarlett, while the feminism of another important female character Melanie has always been ignored and even considered as the representation of women who completely accept the repression of patriarchy. Based on the text analysis, this research makes a contrastive analysis of Scarlett and Melanie, analyzes the similarities and differences between them and taps into their feminist spirits from the perspective of feminist literary criticism. By comparing these two female characters, the research finds the two main differences lie in their handling of interpersonal relationships and responses toward patriarchal rules are obvious—from the perspective of interpersonal relationships, the egoism of Scarlett contrasts with Melanie's altruism; in the face of the patriarchal rules, Melanie's female subjectivity and independence are not as noticeable as those of Scarlett. Although the differences between them are obvious, they still share similarities in their subversion towards the patriarchy and their occupation of a position more central than the male characters in *Gone with the Wind*. This research on these two female characters has implications for further studies of female character creation and feminist literary criticism, as well as the distinctive feminism of Mary Mitchell, reflected in her portrayal of these two female characters.

Keywords: Female characters; Feminism; patriarchy; Feminist Literary Criticism; Subversion.

1. Introduction

Originating in the nineteenth century, feminist literature went through a great development in the twentieth century when *Gone with the Wind* was composed by the journalist Margaret Mitchell. Since the 1930s, a feminist movement aiming to improve the status of women in politics, economy and education started. Such a social background made *Gone with the Wind* full of feminist spirit.

Apart from the social background at that time, her personal background of Mitchell also contributed to the advanced and three-dimensional images of female characters created by her. According to the author, the heroine Scarlett was created based on her idiosyncratic and independent grandmother, who moved to Atlanta from a rich plantation after marrying in wartime, often criticizing the idleness and uselessness of males [1]. Meanwhile, Mitchell's mother was also a female elite in Atlanta, who often took the author to participate in various feminist movements and delivered enthusiastic lectures there [1].

The social and personal backgrounds of Mitchell together resulted in the feminism contained in *Gone with the Wind*, which has been recognized and studied by many scholars. This literary work tells how the heroine, Scarlett, managed to survive and pull herself together in the American Civil War and the reconstruction period. The appearance of feminism reveals women's increasing attention on themselves and their rebellion and fight against the patriarchal society, which can be vividly shown in Scarlett's behaviors.

Currently, most Chinese studies of feminism in *Gone with the Wind* focus on the female image of Scarlett, seeing her as the symbol of feminism. Meanwhile, although a great number of studies analyzed Scarlett's successful subversion of patriarchy, there are also many studies researching female characters' tragic fates under the oppression of patriarchy [2]. Among all the feminist theories, ecofeminism was particularly popular, which has frequently been used for the analysis of feminist literature represented by *Gone with the Wind* [3].

As mentioned above, while many studies admitted the feminist spirit of *Scarlett*, another important female character, *Melanie*, was seldom considered as the representative of feminism [4]. However, every female character would reflect some thoughts of the author, who was greatly influenced by feminism. Therefore, in this essay, there are two main research questions— what are the similarities and differences between the two main female characters, *Scarlett* and *Melanie*; and how do their images reflect Mitchell's feminist spirit? To answer these two questions, under the theory of feminist literary criticism, the researcher would compare the literary images of *Scarlett* and *Melanie* from the perspective of their characteristics, their responses to the patriarchal requirements and their roles in the relationship between them. At the same time, this essay will also discuss the influence of *Gone with the Wind* on other feminist literature works.

2. Feminist literary criticism

Starting from the 1960s, feminist literary criticism can be mainly divided into two schools— the English and American schools and the French school [5]. Based on the concepts of these schools, the basic principles of feminist literary criticism can be summarized as follows.

From the standpoint of female writers, feminist literary criticism criticizes that in the history of literature, men have always been dominated. Feminist literary criticism focuses on the systematical study of genders, which includes developing gender poetic, establishing a theory for comparatively studying gender differences and striving to describe the distinctive visions of different gender roles on the basis of equality [6]. From the perspective of feminist literary criticism, the female images in male literature can be divided into two kinds— angel and devil, which both manifest the suppression and bias of females, and coquettish women exactly fall into the category of the devil [7].

The ultimate goal of this theory is to improve the cultural ecology and humanistic environment by criticizing the traditional male centrism, striving for gender equality and opposing gender discrimination, and emphasizing that women should be the center and subjects of activities. One outstanding way to achieve this goal is to discuss the female consciousness in literature, improve female images in literature and study the unique expression's way of women [6].

From the perspective of feminist literary critics, female characters in literature can be divided into three categories: those who accept the repression, transform repression into internal self-needs, and completely submit to patriarchy; those who subvert repression, bravely revolting against the patriarchy as female fighters; and those who seek balance and compromise between suppression and subversion, which leads to the split personality [8].

3. Differences and similarities in interpersonal relationship

In *Gone with the Wind*, the differences between *Scarlett* and *Melanie* can be easily witnessed in almost all aspects. The design of these two characters contributed to the strong contrast with each other, which further emphasized their personalities. From the perspective of interpersonal relationships, *Scarlett* was more egotistical, while *Melanie* was obviously more altruistic. Throughout *Gone with the Wind*, it is seldom to see *Scarlett* constrained by moral standards, and she would do anything to achieve her goal. She eagerly pursued *Ashley*, totally ignoring the possible negative effect of her pursuit on *Ashley* and *Melanie*. This pursuit was even throughout her three times of marriages. For *Scarlett*, getting what she wanted was far more important than the feelings of her husband and *Melanie*, even *Ashley*. To save *Tara*, *Scarlett* steals her sister *Suellen's* fiance, *Frank*, since she believes that *Suellen* was too selfish to let *Frank* spend money on rebuilding *Tara* if *Suellen* marries him. Although she did show regret for *Frank* and *Suellen* after *Frank* died, just as *Rhett Butler*, who knew her best, said, she would do the same thing again back in time. *Scarlett* can hurt others without any hesitation for her goal, just as she said when she returned back to *Tara*— “Even if I had to lie, steal, cheat or even kill. God will testify that I would not starve.” [9] The egoism of *Scarlett* indicates her independence, persistence and bravery, and she refuses to submit to or be controlled by others'

views. Such an egoism was reasonable and necessary for survival during the American civil war. According to feminist literary critics' classification, Scarlett should fall into the category of female characters who subvert repression, bravely revolting against the patriarchy as female fighters. However, in *Gone with the Wind*, she was more than revolting against patriarchy but also the war, bravely pursuing what she desired.

Different from Scarlett, Melanie is very altruistic and is depicted as the symbol of the good side of the old morality and traditional South. The egoism of Scarlett displayed females' independence, while the altruism of Melanie reflected the gentle power of women. Melanie's protection and care of Scarlett and Ashley, as well as her guidance of Rhett, vividly revealed her power as a southern gentlewoman, which greatly supported all main characters in the war. In spite of Scarlett's fascination towards Ashley and her dislike of Melanie, Melanie always supports Scarlett and warmly company her by her side. When Scarlett and Ashley were involved in an affair, she defended them with her warm attitude to Scarlett. When Rhett suffered from the great misfortunes of Scarlett's abortion and the loss of his only daughter, it was Melanie who went to comfort Rhett and guided him to the right things. She used her gentle power to care for almost everyone's hurt heart during the war. That also explains why Scarlett said her courage and confidence went with Melanie and described Melanie as her shield and sword. In Rhett's eyes, Melanie represented those gentle, strong and integrated Southern women. Though Melanie did not show her subversion of patriarchy as obviously as Scarlett did, in her relationship with Ashley, she played the role of the protector, who protected her husband from being tortured by this cruel world, and transferred this duty to Scarlett when she died. She occupied the central position in this relationship and reversed the traditional status of male and female. Therefore, from the perspective of feminist literary criticism, the image of Melanie was also feminist.

It is worth noting that, in comparison, Scarlett was more egotistic than Melanie. However, she did generously devote a lot to her family, who provided financial support for her family and took Melanie and her child back to Tara, even if this devotion came from some seemingly selfish motives. From Scarlett and Melanie, the power of women to protect each other instead of being under the protection of men can be found.

4. Differences and similarities of responses to patriarchal rules

Influenced by their characteristics, the responses of Scarlett and Melanie to the patriarchal rules were also different. There are many plots in the novel revealing Scarlett's rebellion and subversion in front of the patriarchal rules. At the fundraising party, Scarlett danced with Rhett, regardless of the patriarchal rule that widows in mourning could not dance. Seeing the great business opportunity after the war, Scarlett started to run a timber mill, again breaking the patriarchal rule that forbade women from operating businesses. For the operation of her business, Scarlett often interacted with northerners, which would be loathed by southerners. Her subversion of patriarchy and social rule brought her hatred from both men and women. Men's esteem was damaged by her success, while women attacked her for not following the patriarchal rules for women. However, in the face of the patriarchal rules and their power, Scarlett never surrendered but insisted on developing her business, which not only showed her subjectivity but also proved that females have the ability that is not inferior to that of males. Sometimes, Scarlett would even make use of southern men with her female charm for the development of her business. As a woman, she did not devote herself to men but made men serve her. From Scarlett, female subjectivity, and an androgynous quality can be found. Such an androgynous quality which has been reflected through the description of Scarlett's appearance from the start—"In her face were too sharply blended the delicate features of her mother, a Coast aristocrat of French descent, and the heavy ones of her florid Irish father" [9], was further enhanced and impressed readers with her outstanding business sense, even more, exceptional than males. The creation of Scarlett represents a breakthrough in female literary images and the subversion of stereotypical female images. However, there were also conservatives on Scarlett, which can be reflected in her submission to Ashley and scorn, as well as female intrasexual competition with Melanie in the early plot.

Nevertheless, at the same time, it was the drawback that made her image even more three-dimensional and classical.

Contrary to Scarlett's rebellious image, Melanie was a paragon of Southern women who was very feminine and met the demands of patriarchy, which explains why she has often been misinterpreted as the suppressed "angle" that would often appear in the male literature. Unlike Scarlett, her contribution to the family's finance was little, and her activities were limited to the family. From this perspective, the female image of Melanie is not as advanced as that of Scarlett. However, that does not mean that Melanie was willingly repressed by patriarchy. Although she did not go outside the house, Melanie never prevented Scarlett from rebelling against the patriarchy by operating the business and even gave her support by organizing the families and building good relationships with neighbors. Therefore, Melanie was completely different from women who accepted the repression and turned it into internal self-needs, just like female characters criticizing Scarlett for her unwomanly behaviors. When Scarlett was nearly overwhelmed by critics of her "affair", Melanie came forward to fight with the public to defend her, finally solving the crisis with her ability to deal with relationships with neighbors. Melanie helped Scarlett to care for her children so that Scarlett could save more time in running her business. Seldom doing immoral things or breaking the rule, She attempted to kill a man with a sword to protect Scarlett, who even lied to help Scarlett bury the body. Even in the moment of death, Melanie was still guiding Scarlett by stressing how much Rhett loved her. In spite of her tenderness, Melanie would bravely stand up to fight against the patriarchy to protect Scarlett, her female company. In *Gone with the Wind*, Scarlett goes out of the domestic life to provide Melanie with material support; Melanie tolerates and cares for Scarlett to give her spiritual support. In these two female characters, the power of women to help each other rather than relying on men can be clearly observed. Scarlett and Melanie represent the emergence of the new system and the good side of old system, which explains the strong contrast between them [10]. Meanwhile, their supports to each other symbolized the process of the new system absorbing the essence from the old system [10].

Another similarity between Scarlett and Melanie lies in their positions in this novel, which are more central than males. As a woman, Scarlett is the narrative center of *Gone with the Wind*, which can be proved by the statistics of character appearances shown as follows.

Table 1. The frequency of the four characters' appearances

Characters	Frequency
Scarlett	2479
Melanie	1185
Rhett	1085
Ashley	1019

As the table 1 indicates, the frequency of Scarlett is more than those of the two main male characters combined together.

Meanwhile, the whole book depicts the American Civil War and other characters from Scarlett's point of view, who enjoyed the most psychological description by the author. The central position of Scarlett in this book indicates the female consciousness of Mitchell and her endeavor to fight against patriarchal repression.

As for Melanie, she was the character appearing second most frequently, indicating that her position in this novel is also more central than males. Such a design can vividly show Mitchell's feminist spirit from the perspective of feminist literary criticism, which aims to make women the center of activities in the literary world.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Mitchell created two female characters that contrasted with each other. From the perspective of interpersonal relationships, Scarlett was more egoistic, while Melanie was more

altruistic. In regards to their responses to the patriarchal rules, the subversion and rebellion of Scarlett were more noticeable, who showed more female subjectivity and independence. Such a contrast designed by the author made both the two female characters more three-dimensional, which further highlighted their own characteristics. However, despite so many differences, there were many similarities between these two female characters as well. For example, they both occupied a more central position no matter in their relationship with men or in the whole story. Facing the cruel war, they chose to protect each other rather than waiting for men to protect them, though the ways they protected each other were different, with Scarlett providing material support while Melanie giving spiritual support. Besides, both of the two female characters rejected to conform to or require others to comply with the patriarchal rules that forbade women from establishing their own businesses independent from men's help. Therefore, from the perspective of feminist literary criticism, it is reasonable to draw the conclusion that these two female characters together manifested the feminism of Mary Mitchell, even though their feminism of them reflected in different aspects. These two characters break through the stereotypical female images created by males that can be summarized as "angel" and "devil", display the diversity of feminism, and inform that there is more than one way to represent the feminist spirits, which also reveals the unique feminist perspective of the female writer, Mary Mitchell.

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