

The New Woman in Critical Realism: Study on the Female Image of Becky in *Vanity Fair*

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Abstract: *Vanity Fair* is the outstanding masterpiece of British critical realist writer William Makepeace Thackeray. In *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray interprets the status and image of women in a patriarchal and money-centered world, attacking a decadent and hypocritical society, and at the same time creating a new woman, Becky Sharp, who is different from the traditional Victorian image of women. Although Becky comes from a humble background, she does not resign herself to her humble origins and tries to join the upper class, challenging the secular tradition and patriarchal system, and finally leading an ideal life and realizing her self-worth. As a typical representative of the new women in the period of critical realism, Becky's independent, strong, aggressive and rebellious spirit is considered to be the embodiment of the awakening of women's consciousness in the period of critical realism. This thesis will interpret the image of Becky in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* from a feminist perspective based on Beauvoir's feminist critical theory. Becky strives to pursue the life she wants and bravely rebels against the authority of the traditional patriarchal society, reflecting her independent, brave and self-worthy feminine spirit. In general, Becky is a warrior against money and patriarchy, and is a typical representative of the new woman who pursues independence in the period of critical realism.

Keywords: *Vanity Fair*; The Period of Critical Realism; Feminism.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

As Thackeray's outstanding masterpiece, *Vanity Fair* has attracted much attention since its appearance. Critics in the history of literature have made many comments on Becky Sharp, a woman with a distinctive personality in this novel. There are many different interpretations of her image. In the early essays, Becky was mostly regarded as a vain, selfish, ruthless, and debauched person who was only bent on pursuing fame, money, and power. It is widely believed that Thackeray's portrayal of this pretentious woman is a criticism of the hypocritical high society and the dominant Victorian value of money. However, it is undeniable that she is beautiful, bold, intelligent, capable, strong, and has all the qualities required of a capable female adventurer. As time went on, studies of *Vanity Fair* took on new angles and more diverse critical perspectives, and Becky's image began to be reinterpreted.

In the nineteenth century, feminism began to emerge, and many women were unwilling to be subjected to the oppression of male society. They stood up against male power, fighting for equal rights with men in economic, political, and cultural aspects and openly challenging it in various ways. Becky is a brave anti-traditional woman born in this context. She is smart, funny, calculating, strong, courageous, affectionate, and perceptive. As a woman of the lower class with no social background, she constantly pursues her ideal life, hoping to change her fate and fight against the oppression of the patriarchal society, embodying the challenge and subversion of the traditional image of passive and cowardly women.

In addition to being influenced by the historical background, another great influence on Thackeray's creation of female characters was his family's social background.

Thackeray was born in Calcutta, India, where his father was British and worked for the East India Company. To a large extent, Thackeray's feminist ideas came from his family—his mother, his wife, and his daughters. At the age of four, Thackeray's father died. His mother became his only spiritual support in his early years. In 1835, Isabella Javert entered Thackeray's life. Isabella suffered from mental illness and did not return to normal until the end of her life. What Thackeray held most dear became the most lasting pain in his life. Isabella was once his second pillar of emotion, but in the end, she became his deepest regret and pain. Thackeray's third pillar of life was his daughters. His daughters were his happiest times together, and his love for them sustained his spirit. In a money-oriented male world where social discrimination against women abounds, Thackeray's social background and the development of feminism had an impact on the writing and creation of the female characters in *Vanity Fair*. Thackeray hopes to awaken more women through the characterization in his work.

1.2. A Brief Introduction to *Vanity Fair*

The time period of nineteenth-century critical realism coincided with the reign of Queen Victoria from 1836 to 1901, which is also known as the Victorian era. The Victorian era was a time of hypocrisy and snobbery when money-oriented values prevailed and the gap between the rich and the poor was widening. The realist novel of the 19th century was called "the epic of bourgeois society". Critical realist writers described the main features of English society with vivid artistic skill and criticized the capitalist system from a democratic point of view. As a representative writer of critical realist literature, Thackeray witnessed a Victorian society that was corrupt, hypocritical, and chaotic. *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray's masterpiece of critical realism, vividly illustrates the lives and values of the entire middle class in 19th-century England. He mocks this decadent society, dominated by

money and male power, with a high degree of realism. Becky, the protagonist of *Vanity Fair*, is very representative of the character ravaged by this corrupting force of money and male power. But Thackeray does not portray Becky as a traditional soft woman but as a new woman who is not subservient to fate and authority.

The novel takes the lives of two young women, Becky Sharp and Amelia Sedley, as the main thread and presents a picture of the life of the English upper class in the early 19th century. The story of *Vanity Fair* unfolds in two threads that start from the same starting point, intertwine, and finally reach the same end. One of them is about Emilia Sedley, a kind and gentle woman who lives in a wealthy family; the other is about Becky Sharp, a witty, selfish, and debauched orphan girl. Both leave Pinkerton School for Girls in the same carriage, and both marry, over the objections of their families, two British officers about to take part in the Battle of Waterloo. Shortly after their wedding, the historic battle is fought. Amelia Sedley's husband dies on the battlefield, and Becky Sharp's husband survives the battle. For the next ten years, Becky lives a smooth life, climbing up the social ladder until she has the honor of meeting the king, while Amelia Sedley suffers great misfortune due to her father's bankruptcy. In this novel, Becky embodies the voice of the budding woman. In the process of self-realization, Becky encounters many difficulties and dilemmas, but after all, she takes the first step to rebel against patriarchy, and Becky's self-awareness is developed. Through this novel, Thackeray focuses on the status and role of women in a money-centered and class-conscious patriarchal society and attacks the corrupt and hypocritical society that promotes the Victorian concept of marriage and family.

1.3. Research Purpose and Significance

Feminism is still a hot topic today, both in literary studies and in today's society. The new feminine image was already evident in the literature of the nineteenth century and has been more realistically verified in subsequent social life, where women were no longer symbols of weakness and impotence but had greater power and contributed to society on an equal footing with men. Women novelists were important contributors to 19th-century literature, such as the three Brontë sisters, Austen, and Lady Gaskell. They entered the literary arena at the beginning of the nineteenth century and created the female figures that have since become well known. The study of the female figure in the writing of women writers is a common direction, from which we can feel the desire of women writers to rebel against the world and be respected and recognized. In order to better understand the history of feminism and its development in the nineteenth century, this paper will analyze the new femininity in the period of critical realism from the works of a male writer. *Vanity Fair*, as Thackeray's masterpiece, is not only a literary classic but also a portrayal of the social characteristics of the Victorian era, which is a microcosm of the times and a breakthrough of the traditional image of women. In *Vanity Fair*, the main character Becky, like all the characters in the book, has no absolute good or bad. All have the selfish and dark side of human nature but also have their own shining points. Through multi-level and multi-angle portrayal of character traits, Thackeray shows us the great influence of specific historical environments on people. In Victorian England, patriarchy was still the dominant ideology, and women had no status and dignity. Society was indifferent, and people were selfish. By

depicting Becky's character and fate, Thackeray not only shows the harm caused by excessive pursuit of fame and fortune but also criticizes and exposes the harm brought by the money-worshipping patriarchal society to women at the bottom, expressing Thackeray's dissatisfaction with patriarchalism.

This thesis aims to study Becky's image of the new woman in the novel *Vanity Fair* from a feminist perspective. In the process of self-actualization, Becky encounters many difficulties and dilemmas, but after all, she takes the first step to rebel against patriarchy, and Becky's self-awareness is developed. Through this novel, Thackeray focuses on the place and role of women in a wealthy and class-conscious patriarchal society and attacks the corrupt and hypocritical society that promotes a Victorian view of marriage and family.

2. Analysis of Becky's Character from the Perspective of Feminism

2.1. The Embodiment of New Female Characteristics in Becky's Character

2.1.1. Becky's Desire for Better Life

A person's character is inseparable from her family background. Becky's family background plays a seminal role in the formation of her entire complex character. Becky Sharp was born in a poor, lower-class family. On the one hand, her childhood was plagued by hunger, poverty, discrimination and inequality. On the other hand, she was not happy in her family and did not receive enough care from an early age. Her mother was a French dancer who sang opera, so she inherited her mother's artistic talent, with a musical talent for playing the piano and singing and an artistic talent for dancing and performing, which provided her with favorable conditions for entering high society. However, when Becky was eight years old, her mother passed away and the young Becky was left to live with her father. Her father was a poor, depressed painter who drank all the time but never took responsibility for the family. Becky, who should have enjoyed her childhood without restraint, began to bear the burden of the family too early, and prematurely experienced the miserable life that some people never experience in their lives. Compared with Becky's irresponsible father, Becky is completely brave and independent, able to take on the responsibility of the entire family. Growing up in poverty and hardship gave her many valuable experiences that children growing up in carefree homes did not have, and developed her amazing problem-solving skills. At that age, she was able to perform a variety of errands that other children her age could not do.

Thus, her poor family background gave Becky a taste of the bottom of society, and her rough childhood experience brought her into early contact with the darker side of society. The proud Becky was not beaten down by her tragic fate, nor did she complain about others. On the contrary, it is her tragic situation that allows her to become mature in an early age, to have a clearer perception of life and her own understanding. She began to realize clearly that in this society, only with a noble status can she be respected by others. So, she was motivated to get access to the upper class with her own intelligence and skills, to get the life she wanted. In order to get the life that she wanted, Becky never gave up, tried everything to get a foothold in high society, and kept working hard in a clear life orientation and planning to pave her own ideal path and achieve the high life she dreamed of. She combines the optimistic, kind and positive side of her

character to reach her goals and realize her dreams.

Therefore, the cruel society makes her grow into a smart and capable strong woman. Independent Becky does not drift into worldly prejudices and has her own judgment of people and things around her. She is talented in French, English, music, and plays the piano. She is also smart and worldly. For example, when nursing the wealthy old lady Miss Crowley, in order to get her family fortune, Becky carefully nursed and kept watch overnight. During the two weeks in the ward, she is exhausted, but she does not make a sound, and at the same time, she amuses the old lady with her wonderful imitations, so she soon wins her favor, and later Miss Crowley would not let anyone but her give her medicine. Next, Becky's second job was working as a teacher, housekeeper, accountant, and various other duties at the estate, all of which she performed with ease and considerable distinction, no less than men. Even Sir Peter Crowley, such a cunning and stingy man, also expressed his sincere admiration for this lovely girl. Becky shows her talent in handling various human relationships and her innate ability to manage things. She knows how to treat different people with different attitudes, and she uses her intelligence to manipulate her character with ease.

To conclude, In the process of Becky's struggle to realize her life's dreams, her struggle and enterprising spirit cannot be ignored. She relies not only on her beauty, but also on her wisdom, strong character and hardworking spirit. From her experiences and encounters, she showed the struggle and resistance to the polluted society at that time, a positive and enterprising fighting spirit.

2.1.2. Becky's Desire for Economic Independence

Simone de Beauvoir once said: "As long as one is not economically free, one's so-called freedom is only theoretical. It is through the relationship of gainful employment that a woman can truly separate herself from men, and when she is no longer a parasite, she can be truly free without any male intermediary between her and the universe." (Zheng, 2014:298)

Therefore, feminist theory desires women to gain economic independence. For a person to be established in society, it can be said that economic ability is the primary requirement. And in nineteenth-century England, and even in modern times, it was arguably very difficult for a woman to have sufficient independent financial means to support herself. Because today's society is a patriarchal one, women have been treated as subordinate to men since ancient times rather than as independent individuals with their own personal values. Women usually do not have their own careers but are taught to raise children and take care of daily chores. It is extremely difficult for a woman to make her own way in a male-dominated society.

Another representative feminist writer, Woolf, in *A Room of One's Own* describes men under the patriarchy as follows: "They are rich and powerful, but they carry in their hearts like a vulture, a vulture that is constantly tearing at their hearts and pecking at their lungs--the instinct to possess, the urge to gather impulse..." (Woolf, 2015:29) Therefore, we say that for women to gain true independence and freedom, independent economic resources are a fundamental prerequisite.

The Victorian era of the 19th century was hypocritical and snobbish, and the gap between the rich and the poor was huge. At the same time, in the capitalist society of that time, the mainstream value of money was also a great influence on Becky. Becky is growing up in this social background. In addition, Becky's childhood encounters and premature

maturity early let her realize the great significance of money, it can be said that the early years of poverty so that she has a persistent pursuit of money, she clearly knows that this is a competition for fame and fortune, decadent and hedonistic society, want to survive and change their fate, the prerequisite is money, only with enough money, you can get everything you want, to give her a sense of security and comfort. In this male-dominated society, she has to pursue a material life and be economically equal to men, which is also a way for her to pursue female emancipation and equality, and to resist male power oppression. Becky was financially self-sufficient, constantly enriching herself with money, and firmly believing that only when she had gained enough wealth could she join the upper class and live the life she wanted. Becky's financial independence was later reflected in her attitude toward her husband. She returned to London alone to negotiate with a large group of her husband's creditors and paid off her debts completely with 1500 pounds in cash. Even when her husband, Paul, was leaving for the war, Becky spent her morning joyfully sorting out her small coffers. Becky's sense of financial independence and her strong sense of property are certainly a challenge to patriarchy.

From these it can be concluded that Becky is a woman who desires financial independence. She wants to get rid of the control from the male authority and change the situation at the bottom through her own efforts. She is determined to pursue economic independence, gain social status, and realize her own value. Only when she has money can she be admired by others. Therefore, she relies on her own capital, constantly strives to pave the ideal road, and uses these conditions to change her life step by step.

2.1.3. Becky's Desire for Self-worth Fulfillment

During the Victorian period led by patriarchalism, women were not only powerless as subordinates of men, but also had no status and dignity in some cases. Becky, as a representative of feminism, not only accomplished the pursuit of status, but also was a seeker who constantly explored her self-worth. After her continuous efforts and failures, Becky finally, through her intelligent mind and beautiful appearance, becomes a member of the English high society by means of marriage and love, and transforms from a lowly and poor subordinate to a wealthy person with great wealth and self-respect. But after entering the high society Becky did not feel happy from the bottom of her heart, the dishonorable means behind those successes deeply tormented Becky's heart, and she once felt lonely and spiritually empty. In order to make up for her spiritual emptiness and enrich her life, Becky began to seek various ways to reshape herself, and eventually Becky gained spiritual satisfaction and spiritual solace in charity work. She began to engage in charity work enthusiastically, and through her participation in charity work, Becky not only gained the recognition of others, reshaped her own image, but also gained satisfaction and solace from her heart. As Becky's self-worth is continuously realized, her life also moves from darkness to light, from gray to color, and feminism gradually blossoms in this colorful light.

2.2. The Embodiment of New Female Characteristics in Becky's Character

2.2.1. Becky's Rebellion Against Patriarchal Authority

In a patriarchal society, women are considered to be inferior to men in terms of intelligence and ability, which determines the social image of women as weak and submissive. In the dichotomy, men are dominant and active,

while women are subordinate and passive.

In the novel, Becky's first challenge is the overbearing and domineering Headmistress Pinkerton, the patriarchal authority defender. Miss Pinkerton is not only the principal of the girls' school and has the highest authority in the school, but also has some reputation in the English high society of the time. Miss Pinkerton's weakness was her willingness to accept this patriarchal view of the world and to ignore its absurdity. Becky's rebellious spirit can be seen everywhere in the life of the girls' school. When the principal wants Becky to teach music to the younger children, Becky decisively refuses: "I don't do anything here but what I have to do" (Thackeray, 2001: 14). She bravely defended her right to work for free because she believed it was not her responsibility to do so. When Becky left the school, she threw away Samuel Johnson's dictionary, a symbol of authority, in front of the whole school.

2.2.2. Becky's Rebellion Against the Traditional Model of Marriage in the Patriarchy Society

The traditional patriarchal view of marriage is that men take the initiative and choose their spouses, or the family arranges the marriage. In the patriarchal era, women did not take the initiative to seek marriage, they did not have the right to decide their own marriage, and it was considered shameful to take the initiative to seduce men. Once they were arranged to marry, their bodies and minds no longer belonged to them, but were given away without reservation.

In a patriarchal society, men use their own values and aesthetic ideals to set the standards by which women are judged. The image of a virtuous, gentle, and considerate wife or mother has always been the object of men's praise. Living in such a cultural context, women have no rights or assets and have to rely on marriage to change their status. Beauvoir stated that marriage is the destiny given to women by social tradition (Beauvoir, 1952: 322). As she put it, marriage provided a legal guarantee for the protection of women and gave them a nominal status. It is this absurd and corrupt system that makes Becky want to change her destiny through marriage and rely on men to fulfill her desires.

After Becky left Pinkerton School for Girls, she tried everything to try to change her fate through marriage. With no social status and no help and support from her family, the intelligent Becky knows that a favorable marriage is the surest and safest way to change her destiny. In such a context, to change her life, she had to accept the rules of such a patriarchal society. For this reason, she becomes a professional actress, desperately trying to play all the female roles that men expect her to play, in order to get a pass to the upper class.

The first person she meets is Amelia's brother Joseph, and Becky curtsies to this gentleman with the greatest shyness. She touched Joseph's hand very gently when she shook it, then withdrew it with great nervousness and shyness. She pretends to be a timid and gentle girl, which fits the image of the "ideal woman" required by the patriarchal society.

In the process of Becky's search for a husband, she is always active, both Joss and Rowden are in a passive position compared with Becky, this active and passive is completely contrary to the values and marriage model of patriarchal society, which is Becky's rebellion against the traditional marriage model under patriarchy.

2.2.3. Becky's Rebellion Against the Traditional Model of Family in the Patriarchy Society

Becky's rebellion is also reflected in her subversion of the

traditional family model. The traditional family model is that the man is responsible for earning money and the woman is responsible for taking care of the family. However, due to the lack of financial income, men treat women as their appendages.

Kate Millet argues that "the primary institution of patriarchy is the family, and the family is the prototype of the basic unit of patriarchal society. The family acts as a small unit in society, and patriarchal authority not only enforces its members to submit to leadership, but also rules over family members through patriarchy". Millet, 1970:32) In a patriarchal society, the social status can determine the family status, the male is the dominant of this relationship, and the female needs to be dependent on the male for a better life. In patriarchal families, women are submissive and weak, and even if their husbands cannot provide for the family, they mostly just accept their fate without any complaints or efforts to change the situation. Becky, however, reverses this traditional situation.

In Becky and Rowden's husband and wife distribution, Rowden as a male is very incompetent. However, Becky is very witty and intelligent, premature maturity makes her develop a skill of reading people, and all kinds of people in the communication with Becky is always comfortable. For example, after marrying Rowden, they lived in continental Europe for several years and were heavily in debt. She knew her husband was not capable of dealing with creditors, so she went to negotiate with them herself. In dealing with the debts, her intelligence and social skills were appreciated by the public. Even Rowden was proud to have found a woman who could talk and sing and do anything. Rowden's admiration for Becky led him to listen to her willingly, to become her servant, and to do whatever Becky wanted. Becky gradually tames her husband, turning him into an obedient servant and herself into a master. This is a completely different family from the traditional patriarchal model. The matriarch is in charge and becomes the economic master, while the husband takes a secondary role. "He is her servant and personal servant. He ran errands for her, carried out her orders without complaint, and took her for rides in Hyde Park without complaint. He takes her to the theater box, spends time at the club during the show, and then picks her up on time." (Thackeray, 2001: 347) He performs tasks for Becky, takes her out, does her chores, watches her children, picks her up, and takes her for a ride, all of which are traditionally female tasks. As the leader of the family, Becky is in charge of the family's finances and economy, dealing with all kinds of problems and affairs, living a life of autonomy and dignity, making her a woman of independence and autonomy under patriarchy.

This family model, in which the woman is the breadwinner and takes charge of the family, while the husband takes a back seat and obeys the wife, is a complete reversal of the traditional concept of family.

3. Conclusion

This paper aims to analyze the new female image represented by Becky, the main character in *Vanities Fair*, during the critical realism period from a feminist theory perspective. By employing qualitative analysis and literature research methods, it systematically explores various aspects such as the social environment and its influences, Becky's character traits, and her manifestation of challenging the patriarchal society. Through analyzing Becky's character and her rebellion against traditional patriarchy, it can be

concluded that Becky is a representative of the new woman in the era of critical realism and a warrior against patriarchy.

Although Becky is born into a poor family, she is highly intelligent. Firstly, having encountered numerous ugly and evil things, she strongly opposes the unjust hierarchy, demonstrating her dissatisfaction with society. Secondly, she has no intention of relying on men to achieve her goals. Instead, she aspires to pursue financial independence so as to enter the upper class and gain social status equal to that of men. Thirdly, Becky does not conform to traditional marriage and refuses to resign herself to the socially established domestic role for women. She dares to challenge the patriarchal society and does not wish to be a traditional woman.

Becky has a strong sense of femininity and is an independent woman. Firstly, as an enterprising individual, she never gives up on her dream and makes every effort to conquer the world dominated by men. Secondly, as a rebellious woman, she never surrenders to anyone. Finally, as an intelligent and energetic woman, she knows how to make others love her so that she can fulfill her dreams. It can be said that Thackeray portrays Becky as a feminist fighter in a patriarchal society.

The novel *Vanity Fair* focuses on Becky as a new woman with distinctive characteristics. The common traits of these new women are independence, courage, rebelliousness, and relying only on themselves rather than others. Becky can be regarded as a microcosm and a typical representative of these new women. Like many female characters in the literary world, Becky is concerned about her own destiny and attempts to take it into her own hands. She is ready to challenge the standards of virtue set for women by the patriarchy, make subversive interpretations of marriage, love, and family, and threaten the social order that the patriarchy tries to maintain. In this sense, Becky is a feminist figure who embodies the spirit of feminism from multiple angles and directions. She has her own ambition, sense of autonomy, and personality. At this level, she is an independent woman.

Every woman can realize her own value, not only in literature but also in real life. In every era, there has never been a shortage of female figures like Becky and famous books like *Vanity Fair*. What is lacking is the courage and perseverance to achieve self-worth. The realistic inspiration from *Vanity Fair* should be that women should not be confined to marriage and family. Instead, they should strive for spiritual and financial independence to become new

women and pursue their own values.

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