

Exploring Feminism in Mao Dun's Novels: Character Analysis of 'Midnight'

Xinbei Xu

School of Languages and Cultures, Shanghai University of Political Science and Law, Shanghai, 201701, China

luwan@ldy.edu.rs

Abstract. *Midnight*, a novel by Mao Dun, portrays various female characters, which embody the diverse evolution of feminism in China at that time through female characters with different backgrounds and character depths. These characters provide both positive and negative examples for reference. This paper, delving into female characters in the novel, analyzes the implied female objectification and the preliminary awakening of feminism considering the impacts of different ideologies on female development and the era. Centering on feminism, the author first discusses the survival of feminism, then examines feminism in Mao Dun's novels concerning its development in China and theories in *The Second Sex*, ultimately finding the different survival practices of women and how they are developed. This paper proposes suggestions for the advancement of modern feminism with equality as the priority. Women can better achieve awakening by asserting their own existence, thus promoting equality between women and men.

Keywords: midnight, feminism, Chinese society, survival consciousness

1. Introduction

Midnight by Mao Dun is a classic realistic fiction in the history of modern Chinese literature. Against the background in the 1930s when people were oppressed by the semi-feudal and semi-colonial society, it not only sparks discussions on classes and historical situations but also sheds light on the diverse female characters created by Mao Dun's works.

In *Midnight*, Mao Dun created different characters inspired by reality. Unlike the explicit manifestation of male characters, traces of feminism have been progressing the plot in an imperceptible manner.

Presently, relevant studies by Chinese scholars concerning *Midnight* mainly focus on the following three aspects: the feudal society and awakening, the miserable fate of women, and critiques of character duplicity.

Articles concerning the feudal society and awakening often are set against the social context of colonialism and the governance of the Kuomintang (KMT) and reveal the cruelty of the ruling class and the oppression at that time through different characters and plot descriptions, using small-scale scenarios to represent larger phenomena [1]. Meanwhile, it employs communist figures to guide the awakening and establish social civilization, helping readers to understand and feel the power of mass awakening while not focusing on the gender of the characters.

Concerning the miserable fate of women, female characters crafted by Mao Dun embody the social and cultural connotations and women's sacrifice for love [2]. The description of gender relations and female intrasexual competition in artistic plot conflicts contributed to the description of women suffering negative impacts, thereby highlighting the male characters or reflecting the women's waning social influence. However, the unfair treatment women endured, which is manifested through the depiction of female workers and other revolutionary figures, has demonstrated the budding of feminism.

Concerning critiques of character duplicity, the multifaceted nature of the characters' personalities crafted by Mao Dun has made these characters more convincing and the plot conflicts unfold in an artistic manner. Mao Dun mentioned the two radical parties of feminism in his article on feminism, which prompted him to showcase the diversity of female characters in his writing [3]. Hence, the female characters developed by Mao Dun embody both the hopelessness under feudal oppression and the embrace of new ideas. To facilitate readers' understanding of the choices made by these characters during the specific period, characters are critically reviewed for their duplicity.

Based on previous studies, this paper conducts text analysis and discusses feminism as well as its connotation in modern literature through the examination of *Midnight*, while combining historical and feminist theories. This paper firstly analyzes specific female characters in *Midnight*, discussing the feminism embodied by their different images. It will be followed by the analysis of the overall survival status of women, which will be illustrated from perspectives of feminism development in China

and theories in *The Second Sex* respectively. Finally, this paper will put forward suggestions for feminism development in modern society.

2. Female Characters in *Midnight*

2.1. Objectification of Female Characters

2.1.1. *Exploration under Feudal Oppression*

Wu Huifang, the Fourth Miss of the Wu family in *Midnight*, accompanied her father Old Mr. Wu to Shanghai and was shocked after being exposed to modern life in the city [4]. In the first parts of the novel, Wu Huifang was chosen by Old Mr. Wu, who did not view her as an independent person, as one of his designated companions for the trip to Shanghai. As written in the novel, the description of "Even women in the countryside are dressed fashionably. However, my father never allows me..." directly shows patriarchal constraints on women's freedom and the objectification of women in old society [5]. After going to Shanghai, Wu Huifang, who was in a subordinate position, was attracted by the modern culture spontaneously and neglected the startled Old Mr. Wu. "Old Mr. Wu breathed heavily, huffing and puffing, while the Second Miss, the Fourth Miss and A Xuan did not notice at all due to the bustling noise in the city". It implies the beginning of women's exploration in the collapsing old society. In the latter part of *Midnight*, Wu Huifang once requested "going back to the countryside" and carried along *Tractate of the Highest One on Actions and Consequences*, a classic of Taoism, with her to relieve the pain. This plot not only reflects the confusion and puzzlement of women when confronting changes but also mirrors their subconscious inclination to submit to the oppression of patriarchy within the context of the old society even when they have left the original oppressive environment. It reveals a lack of self-awareness fundamentally. In the latter parts of the novel, she found comfort in dwelling on the past but was continually interrupted by other voices and reminded of women who were grounded due to accusations of misbehaving. It manifests that the patriarchy still cast over contemporary society while women were treated as family property and constrained by the oppressive rules of feudalism.

Across the novel, Wu Huifang's obedience to Old Mr. Wu who represents feudalism, her then adherence to Fan Bowen, and the suffer from Wu Sunfu's patriarchal authoritarianism have revealed the isolated status of women who were objectified. The objectification undermines the existence of Wu Huifang as a person but strengthens her subordinated position. As a woman growing up in the old society, she was bewildered when facing new ideas and was constantly taken aback by others, manifesting the miserable fate of women shaped by the era.

2.1.2. *Exploration under Feudal Oppression*

Xu Manli and Feng Meiqing both stepped into gray areas in romantic relationships.

Xu Manli danced at the funeral of Old Mr. Wu for the amusement of men. This chapter satirizes that no one cares about the death of Old Mr. Wu and only seeks entertainment. At her birthday celebration, Xu Manli, who was supposed to be the star of the show, only saw "six pairs of bloodshot eyes staring at her like they were looking at a monkey and expect it to perform some tricks". In the portrayal of Xu Manli, it can be seen that women were always surrounded by men and taking orders from them, who represented the oppression of capitalism and warlordism. "A sense of being toyed with slightly gripped her heart. After all, being commanded made her feel somewhat uneasy". The self-awareness of the character was not awakened but she felt uncomfortable instinctively, which reflects the severity of pressure she suffered. Social butterflies like Xu Manli are a group of women struggling for survival during that specific period, warning for women's later exploration.

Feng Meiqing in the early part of *Midnight* was a daughter of the national bourgeoisie Feng Yunqing, then was treated like a tool by her father to exchange market information and ended up being the secret lover of a comprador. Feng Yunqing pretended that he cared for Feng Meiqing, the daughter from his previous marriage, and acted like he was reluctant to send his daughter to other men. However, he hypocritically imposed moral values on Feng Meiqing, accusing her of unfiliality, saying "If she was disobedient, she would be a truly unfilial daughter". Meanwhile, Feng Meiqing degraded herself for social status and common family interests and willingly became the secret lover of the comprador class represented by Zhao Botao, engaging proactively in competition with other social butterflies (Liu Yuying). As depicted in the book, "but she (Liu Yuying) absolutely was in no mood to be jealous of Feng Meiqing for nonsensical reasons". Female characters like Feng Meiqing never seek to transform themselves but base their self-worth on men, thereby furthering female objectification. It embodies women's vague awareness of their social status and their unawareness of objectification. As a father, Feng Yunqing was in a superior position attributed to patriarchy and masculinity. His oppressive and complex behaviors towards his daughter reflect that the development of feminism is also influenced by men and that negative, unequal thoughts impose confining stress and misleading guidance on women.

2.2. The Awakening of Female Characters

In the character conflict portrayed in *Midnight*, female workers represented by Wu Guiying firmly resisted the exploitation of Wu Sunfu and other factory owners. They adhered to the communist ideology for the labor movement, manifesting the awakening of

feminism. Confronted with social inequality, women in the female worker union were more independent than those in Wu's house. They were not belongings of any family or power. They were united for being inspired by the idea of freedom and the spirit of resistance.

In the novel, women were less educated than men and fell into the trap of management, thereby resulting in power struggles during the strike period [6]. Therefore, the level of urgency of female survival increases as the impact of layoffs expands. Women began to show acts of defiance consciously in the context of social background at that time, exhibiting the initial awakening of feminism prompted by survival consciousness. By examining the female worker Ma Jin, it is found that she was rebuked and commanded by male leaders during the mobilization meeting and was teased by the male worker Su Lun, which demonstrates the underlying resistance from men during women's awakening. Meanwhile, Ma Jin disagreed with the reckless aggressive approach but lost the ideological debate, which reflects women's lack of knowledge compared to men.

In the context of social turmoil, the superficial awakening of women brought about by their disadvantaged status left over from the old society was not enough for female workers to overthrow the bourgeoisie. Women were unable to understand connotations of slogans and ideas. Hence, the inner awakening of women is necessary as time advances. The inner awakening of women should be heartfelt, clearly recognized, and unwavering. The superficial awakening of the female worker group was prompted by the times and ideological impact. These workers represent the silver lining in the path toward women's liberation. They transcend the typical traditional female images in Chinese literature, being samples of the transformation "from literary revolution to revolutionary literature" of the new culture movement and also a turning point in the aesthetics of female narratives in Chinese literature [3].

The depiction of such female characters reflects the constraints suffered by feminism in its budding stage within specific historical periods. Whether in the internal power struggles of the factory or the debate among the underground activists, women were struggling to survive amidst the chaos. Instinctively, they began to seek thoughts that could be used as weapons but were unable to develop and implement their own ideas. The national bourgeoisie represented by Wu Sunfu exploited female workers in the name of "revitalization" and never came to realize the independence of women's existence and their survival demands. Therefore, under extreme and multiple oppression, women were forced to reflect on themselves and seek help, uniting each other for mere survival to fight against the threat from the society and the dominant classes, advancing the liberation of both the society and women.

3. Survival of Feminism

3.1. Feminism in the Context of Chinese Society

The social background in the novel *Midnight* coincides with the period when western democratic ideas were introduced and national awakening emerged. Following these, feminism entered China. Before the emergence of feminism, China's traditional patriarchal culture imposed direct constraints and oppression on women due to China's lower productivity. After China's 1911 Xinhai revolution, feminism in China established the ideological foundation and expressed the inextricable relationship between women's rights and the nation through appeals from Cai Yuanpei and other figures [7].

Against the backdrop of the old society, the resistance awareness emerged due to social oppression was backed by western ideology. Attributed to the then status of the bourgeoisie, feminist ideas began to rise in China. In *Midnight*, the self-awakening of female workers conveys the idea of female politics, demonstrating that the survival of women in the context of the national revolution is also fraught with challenges. In the 15th chapter, the leaders of male workers intended to organize a strike. However, it was female workers who stood on the front lines to conduct the activity. This plot satirizes the ultra leftism while reflecting the original state of Chinese society at that time through the difficulties encountered by women on their path to equality [8].

Hence, the survival of feminism goes beyond the awakening of women to include the awakening of society. The numerous feminist theories can be summarized in one sentence, which is to achieve gender equality across the world [9]. The transformation of China's society conforms to the trend of the times and people's initiative, developing a unique path distinct from other countries. Likewise, feminism in China follows the same development path. The equality awareness at the core of feminism will not be manifested by simply repeating western democratic thoughts, like female workers who were unable to comprehend their slogan. Nevertheless, these obstacles are unavoidable to developing feminism. Constant explorations are necessary to break free from the oppression of an unequal system, fostering the internal self-awakening of women. Women, who were disadvantaged in the patriarchal society and suffered from internal struggles in times of turmoil, are transforming and playing an indispensable role in China's society. They are shifting from looking up to men to seeing them as equals, looking down on them, and even surpassing them [10]. Feminism in China develops with twists and turns in light of foreign thoughts and national self-liberation. In the context of modern society, women should seek equality across multiple fields while adhering to their requests.

3.2. Women in the Framework of *The Second Sex*

In the narratives of *Midnight*, although women were gradually breaking free from the constraints of the patriarchal society, some of them were being gazed at according to theories in *The Second Sex*. "The Second Sex" refers to women, who are also defined as the Other in relation to men. It is developed by the French philosopher and writer Simone de Beauvoir [11].

According to theories in *The Second Sex*, women's consciousness is considered as the object. Physically, social butterflies, lovers, and similar characters always appeared alongside rich men with higher positions, demonstrating the inferior position of women or reducing their image to merely an adjective for male identity. Xu Manli was a female character who lost her self-awareness. Within the identity of the social butterfly, women's position is attenuated to being men's private property, thereby being alienated as "the Other." It is a historical result of patriarchal ideology, shifting women from the self-state to the nonself-state [12]. Mao Dun intentionally put Xu Manli in scenarios with multiple men, showcasing the multi-level oppression women suffered at that time through different ideologies and behaviors of men from different social classes. As a "second-sex" symbol, Xu Manli played the role of pleasing and subordinating men, further diminishing women's consciousness of existence. Although Xu Manli enjoyed higher popularity than other female characters, she chose a life path that reflects the way for women to survive during a special period. They could only survive by being the object of men, leading to a miserable fate that prevented them from finding their true selves and the purpose of life [13]. The implicit description of female characters including women in Wu's house and mistresses explores the different survival statuses of women during the special period. Women were constrained by self-awareness, living environment, and clan system, being deconstructed after taking men's last names. It is a reflection on the development of feminism and an important warning about women's existence.

Meanwhile, the phenomenon discussed in *The Second Sex* is often accompanied by the existence of the Other. Under the gaze of the Other, women are assigned the value of objects and are used for information exchange, illicit relationships, and other practices that negate their selfhood. Subsequently, women change themselves according to social expectations and the guidance of the Other, basing their self-worth on men, thereby being objectified. An example for this would be the identity transformation of Feng Meiqing, representing her obedience to social expectations and self-weakening compromises. Therefore, on the path of exploring the survival of feminism, the negative impact of and the existence of the Other should be observed and mitigated while stimulating the awakening consciousness of the object. The aforementioned the Other, in the Chinese society depicted in *Midnight*, refers to the individual men after the whole imperial and patriarchal systems collapsed. In women's exploration during the period of social change, the existence of the Other is scaled down instead of disappearing. Male characters that imperceptibly waned the existence of women and see them as belongings, such as Feng Yunqing who sold his daughter for market information and Wu Sunfu who enforced patriarchal authoritarianism, all enjoyed male privilege under traditional social customs, thereby facilitating women to become the object. The Other is born in the society while the society is influenced by the Other, forcing women to awaken from within. It is an inevitable and necessary means to break free from being the object and regain self-awareness.

According to *The Second Sex*, there is competition among objects. Hence, identity is an essential prerequisite for self-awakening. The survival of feminism should be based on women's consciousness. If women are unable to understand and see themselves as a dependent identity, they will become the object that subordinates the Other. Moreover, the competition among objects will exacerbate gender inequality. Hence, internal differences among women and men's thoughts on gender equality cannot be neglected and should evolve and develop as modern society progresses.

4. Conclusion

It is evident that feminism was still developing in the context of Chinese society at that time through the discussion of female characters from *Midnight* and theoretical arguments. Nevertheless, it has begun to exhibit the survival instinct of women. By crafting complex and diverse female characters and portraying different male-female relationships, Mao Dun has presented women's self-exploration. During the course of introducing contemporary feminism, only by enhancing self-awareness and promoting equality can women be freed from oppression. Feminist activities that started from striking are approaches to achieve this goal. Delving into female characters created by Mao Dun, some were bewildered about how to while others never realized their own self-betrayal. These characters provide both positive and negative examples for the future liberation of women. The equality in feminism is the equality of all persons. The development of feminism requires support from multiple sides, extending beyond politics and education to include all the fields in which women are or will be involved.

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