

Analysis of the Image of “Wicked Women” in Literary and Artistic Work

Xichen Zhang^{1,a,*}

¹*Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication, Beijing, 102627, China*

a. lingyvxiezu@163.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: In the past, the main characteristics of female characters that people came into contact with in books, movies, and TV dramas were mostly kindness, integrity, magnanimity, and selflessness. They not only represented people's yearning for truth, goodness, and beauty, but also were used as growth templates for countless girls due to their positive images. But in recent years, it is not difficult to find that the most sought-after female characters are mostly bound up with negative words such as “revenge”, “madness”, “ferocity”, and “selfishness”. When we stand on the standpoint of feminism, it is not difficult to find that these “wicked women” who do not follow the principles of men in their behavior, whether they go out of their families to participate in social affairs, or face their own desires, boldly breaking through the constraints of ethics and morality, all reflect their sense of autonomy and desire to live the value of being a “person”. However, the outcome of these women is mostly bleak, even if they spend their entire lives fighting, they still cannot break free from the heavy shackles of patriarchal society. From this, it can be seen the difficulty of traditional customs and the difficulty of women's liberation. This article analyzes the oppression and positive significance of the image of “wicked woman” in patriarchal and patriarchal societies from an objective perspective through the study of the image of “wicked woman” and attempts to provide ideas for shaping more diverse female roles in the future.

Keywords: Wicked woman, Female image, Aesthetics, Different perspectives

1. Introduction

The study of character images is an indispensable part of the field of literary and artistic works research. The image of women in literary and artistic works not only reflects the thoughts and concepts of creators, but also reflects different levels of social history and culture, which is an extremely important research content. However, under the influence of the deep-rooted male-centered consciousness and complex subjective and objective consciousness, female images often present two distinct extreme distinctions: good and evil. In China, they can be reflected as chaste martyrs and evil spirits, while in the west, they can be reflected as saints and floozies. However, when people re-examine these two types of female images in modern civilized society with a contradictory view of the unity of opposites, people may find that their portrayal is mostly superficial and fails to demonstrate the individual consciousness expression and corresponding authenticity of women. This article integrates and examines the images of "wicked women" in Chinese and foreign literature and film and television works since ancient times, showcasing the rich connotations of the image of

“wicked women”; and analyzing the value of female images from both ideological and aesthetic perspectives, which is of great significance for reexamining and recognizing women's survival and autonomy consciousness.

2. Presentation of categories of images of wicked women

The word “evil” in modern Chinese dictionaries refers to a negative evaluation of a person’s behavior, thoughts, or characters. Although “evil” and “good” are antonyms, they cannot be simply binary opposites. The term “wicked woman” is complex and polysemous, and there is no clear and unified definition in essence. By studying various female images, the author summarizes three representative categories and analyzes them, striving to reinterpret the images of these “wicked women”, explore the relationship between political, cultural, and moral concepts and these women, and interpret the ideological and aesthetic values of these images.

2.1. Female images suffering trauma and distorted personality

Scholar Wan Yan [1] once explained human nature as: “Literary criticism has listed many aspects of human nature, such as naturalness, reality, historicity, sociality, collectivity, mass, individualism, and conscious agency. In summary, it still belongs to two aspects: soul and flesh, emotion and desire”. The oppressive environment, exploitation of class identity, and gender bias can all affect women’s psychology and behavior. If a woman’s personality undergoes alienation, it will exhibit a tendency to go against common sense and even harm or kill others. Countless myths and literature have documented these female images who commit extremely immoral conduct.

In Greek mythology, the queen of Libya, Lamia, attracted the attention of Zeus due to her outstanding beauty and became Zeus’ mistress. However, this relationship was quickly exposed by Hera, who was furious and took away all the children born to Lamia and killed them. Hera also cast a spell to turn Lamia into a half-snake monster, under the influence of Hera’s curse, Lamia would relentlessly slaughter and devour the children in every heartbreaking moment as revenge. Medusa, one of the three sisters of Gorgon, was once the priestess of Athena’s temple. Poseidon coveted her beauty and raped Medusa. Medusa once sought help from Athena to seek justice for herself, but Athena was angry that Medusa was not chaste, therefore she punished Medusa for not adhering to the principle of maintaining chastity throughout her life as a priestess and turned her into a monster with a snake body. Anyone who looked directly at Medusa’s eyes would turn into a stone statue. Helpless Medusa fled to the end of the netherworld, ultimately killed by Perseus. Lamia and Medusa, both of their tragedies arise from their beauty, and neither Zeus who cheated, nor Poseidon who raped, haven’t received any substantial punishment because of their supreme authority, other goddesses in the two myths also had to become the accomplices of male deities as perpetrators due to the inviolability of rights.

In addition to the persecution of men from the authoritative class, there are also women whose personalities are distorted due to the oppression of social environment and beliefs. Qiqiao Cao in “The Golden Cangue” [2] experiences extreme personality distortion under the long-term suppression of her thirst for money and passion. She not only destroys the marriage of her biological son, and tortures her daughter-in-law to death, but also corrupts her daughter’s love. By analyzing deeply, the characters who suffer harm but have nowhere to seek justice, and thus engage in personality distortion without any wrongdoing, one can discover the truth about women's cruel survival under environmental oppression, as well as the absurdity and tragedy brought about by women giving up their conscience to fight against injustice.

2.2. The image of a woman who is extremely selfish and driven by self-interest

According to the philosopher Schopenhauer, “as the most perfect objectification of the will to survive, human beings are correspondingly the ones that need the most among all living beings. Human beings are completely concrete desires and needs, a collection of thousands of needs... Therefore, any life completely disappears between desires and the attainment of desires” [3]. Desire follows closely in life. In ancient feudal society, women suffered from harsh environments and family constraints, therefore had a strong desire for comfortable life and freedom. In the rapidly changing contemporary society, women still have strong desires for poverty, material possessions and emotions. In most literary and artistic works, both ancient and modern, women who pursue power and personal desires often lose their conscience in the process of trying to satisfy their own desires, even if they harm others.

In the novel “Dust Settles” [4] by Tibetan writer Alai, Ronggong Tusi (the system of appointing national minority hereditary headmen in the Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties in the Southwest), as the only female Tusi at that time, wanted to maintain power while possessing more power and wealth. She without careful consideration and changed all the land used to grow food and other crops to poppy cultivation, resulting in a large area of food loss and a prolonged famine for the people in her territory. In order to maintain her status as a chieftain, Ronggong committed herself to marrying Maiqi Tusi to gain support from foreign aid. Despite her daughter’s feelings, Ronggong Tusi married her daughter to Maiqi Tusi’s foolish son. Originally, she promised the Maiqi family to pass on her position as a chieftain to her son-in-law. However, after the difficulties were resolved, Ronggong Tusi never fulfilled her promise. When Ronggong Tusi heard that Maiqi Tusi was about to pass on his position to the eldest son, she encouraged her daughter to seduce the eldest son at the banquet, as if she saw her daughter's original match as worthless. In Shakespeare’s novel “Macbeth” [5], Lady Macbeth is a female figure who uses all means to achieve her goals. She poisons the wine of the guards and encourages Macbeth to kill the king. The work almost blames all of Macbeth’s crimes on her, as if Macbeth was the culprit of this tragedy, while Macbeth is only the victim of “being instigated to kill by his wife”.

Feinberg described psychological egoism in his famous article “Psychological Egotism” as follows: “What anyone can ultimately desire or seek (as the end itself) can only be their interests”. From the “wicked women” who often tend to seek self-interest and even harm others at all costs, showing us the various manifestations of human nature during the postgraduate entrance examination. The various bad behaviors of Rongji Tusi stem from the harsh living environment and turbulent social conditions, coupled with the prejudice against women in society. She is afraid that her rights will be lost, leaving her in a helpless and bullying situation in this society. Therefore, Rongji Tusi tries every means to maintain her position. “Macbeth” is filled with female images of evil and demonization, Mrs. Macbeth is just one of them, reflecting men's fear and disgust towards women they cannot control and dominate.

In his famous article “Psychological Egotism” [6], Feinberg described psychological egoism as follows: What anyone can ultimately desire or seek (as the end itself) can only be their interests. This also indicates that anyone's motivation and purpose for actions actually rely on their own interests. This is manifested in the “wicked women” who often tends to seek self-interest and even harm others at all costs, and writers thus present us with the performance of human nature when it is tested.

2.3. The image of a woman who indulges in sexual desire and indulges in capriciousness

Whether it is the Chinese feudal society dominated by Confucianism or the western feudal hierarchical society deeply influenced by Christianity, women are inevitably oppressed and imprisoned in terms of sexuality. Even in modern society, influenced by long-standing moral

constraints, many cultures remain silent about women's sexual desires. Under the suppression of this concept of chastity and morality, many creators unconsciously portray women as “wicked women” when creating an image of women who are open to sexual views, making these women exhibit negative characteristics of indulging in their voices, disdaining traditional morality, and challenging ethical norms. Xiao Tian in Zhongshi Chen's novel “White Deer Plain” [7] is one of the most typical representative characters. Xiao Tian, who was in her prime, was sold to provincial graduate Guo, who was nearly seventy years old, as a concubine. For the sake of prolong lifetime, provincial graduate Guo forced Xiao Tian to use her lower body to soak dates for him to eat. As a victim of the feudal system of wives and concubines, Xiao Tian suffered from physical and mental devastation. In this situation, she chose to have an affair with Heiwa as a resistance, which led Xiao Tian infamous. After escaping from the clutches of provincial graduate Guo, Xiao Tian originally wanted to stay with Heiwa for a long time, but Heiwa couldn't accept the negation and contempt of their relationship from the clan order. She fled alone on the grounds of participating in the revolution. Then, Xiao Tian became embroiled in conflicts with Xiaowen Bai and others. Xiao Tian gradually became desperate for the world, using her own body as a weapon against patriarchal society, and ultimately died tragically. In the “Dream of the Red Chamber” [8], Third Sister You's charming and unique appearance hides a strong and resolute heart. She fell in love with Xianglian Liu and swore not to marry unless he does. After learning that Xianglian Liu had regretted her marriage, Third Sister You committed suicide in front of her lover, using her own death to fight against the injustice of fate and the oppression of feudal ethics.

In addition to the above types of rebellious female characters, there is also a type of female character who has emotional entanglements with multiple people just to satisfy their own emotional desires. In “The Water Margin” [9], Jinlian Pan was originally a maidservant of a wealthy family in Qinghe County. She was harassed by her male owner due to her beautiful appearance. After learning about this, the female owner became extremely angry and lost money by marrying Jinlian Pan to the dwarf and ugly Donald Lee. Jinlian Pan was dissatisfied with this marriage. She first took the opportunity to seduce Donald Lee's brother Song Wu, but after failing to seduce him, Jinlian Pan turned her gaze to Simonqin. To maintain an extramarital relationship with Simonqin, Jinlian Pan poisoned Donald Lee with arsenic and was ultimately killed by Wu Song, who came to avenge his brother. Emma in “Madame Bovary” [10] feels irritable and painful in the face of her husband's rigid and uninteresting personality, a monotonous and monotonous life. She places her yearning for a better life on illusory imagination, hoping to live a fashionable lifestyle as described in romantic novels she has read. Emma fell in love with Leon and Rodolfo successively, but neither of these relationships lasts long. Subsequently, Emma was deceived by the treacherous merchant Lheureux, and lost all her property in loan after loan. Knowing that she had no face to encounter her family again, Emma ultimately poisoned herself. In summary, it can be detected that the “wicked woman” who is obsessed with lust is constantly struggling in the contradiction between violating emotional conscience and resisting secular ethics, demonstrating the tragedy of women's social and spiritual isolation, the difficulty of achieving self-independence, and the inability to break free from gender bias.

3. The rebellious nature and value significance of the image of a wicked woman

The significance of the image of the “wicked woman” lies in the tragic aesthetic art. In the early stages of human civilization, beauty, balance, and harmony were the ideal standards for beauty. The beauty of tragedy arises from the dramatic conflicts and tragic artistic expressions in literary and artistic works. The rebellion and alienation of the image of the “wicked woman” helps us to deeply interpret human nature and observe various aesthetic aspects of female images. Under the heavy mental pressure and the hardships of the social environment, the “wicked women” gradually twisted her soul, causing harm to others while paying a painful price. It's tragic ending deeply presents the

influence and interference of women's role in the social environment, as well as the resistance to the ideal living environment, presenting the audience with a binary relationship between the two sexes that is both interdependent and antagonistic, causing the public to ponder deeply.

In terms of gender-based narrative perspectives, most male writers use a comprehensive narrative perspective or superimpose their self-view on male characters in their works to judge and position the "wicked women" characters, and rarely explore the underlying reasons behind alternative behaviors from the complex historical reality. On the contrary, female writers' projection of the "wicked woman" in their works presents the true face of women in real society. Through the rebellious behavior and complex struggles of the "wicked woman", they express the gender anxiety of women themselves, and reflect the determination and strength to build the discourse power of women as the main subject. When it comes to "crazy women in the attic", a feminist category represents a discourse expression that reshapes the imagination and visual meaning of women. Originally referring to Bertha Mason, the ex-wife who is locked in the attic by the male protagonist Rochester in *Jane Eyre* and emits mysterious and strange laughter, this has now become a metaphor: this "Madwoman" is not a true mentally deranged person, but is expelled by a patriarchal society, women who have lost their autonomy but still challenge the authority of men. Feminist critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Geba [11] argue that "female writers create dark copies of themselves and their female protagonists by projecting their anger and grievances into fearful images. This approach not only identifies but also corrects the self-definition imposed by patriarchal culture on them. The image of "wicked women" mentioned in this article not only represents women's rejection of the male-centered positioning and naming of women, but also represents the willingness of female writers to change the object status of female images. The portrayal of the image of "wicked women" starts from the life experience of women, breaks the traditional patriarchal aesthetic norms, and deviates from the cultural definition of women's vanity that has always been given by the patriarchal society. It has an impact on the construction of women's own gender culture and is a transcendence of traditional female image writing.

4. Conclusion

By integrating various images of "wicked woman", it is not difficult to find that their biggest limitation is the difficulty in breaking the shackles of the "other". French writer Beauvoir once proposed the view that "women are the absolute other" [12], believing that women use the "other" to perceive themselves. Some male creators, due to a lack of certain experience in the female gender, inadvertently create a relatively thin personality and only focus on a certain aspect of the female image when portraying the image of a wicked woman. Such flat characters can easily stigmatize women. The limitations are also reflected in the character's inability to escape the shackles of the "other". The life of a "wicked woman" is always influenced by male "other" factors such as her father, brother, husband, and son. For example, in "Dream of the Red Chamber", Xianglian Liu often gambles and drinks, having sex with prostitutes, but in turn accuses Third Sister You of her reckless and improper behaviors, causing Third Sister You to perish. How to construct an image that truly embodies female subjectivity is a question worth reflecting on. Although the image setting of "wicked women" has certain limitations, it cannot be denied that this type of female image allows the public to dialectically view the complex and diverse true attitudes of women, and to consider the value and significance of "wicked women" by combining different cultural backgrounds and female consciousness.

Of course, there are still some shortcomings in the paper, such as being limited by academic resources, resulting in a limited research scope and a lack of broader knowledge and in-depth exploration; when conducting comparative studies on the image of the "wicked woman" in different works, the analysis is relatively shallow, mostly listing the character's life experiences in the works,

and combining her relationship with other characters and the era background she lives in for a more superficial analysis, hoping to be supplemented and improved in the future.

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