

On the Contradictory Feminism behind the Contradictory Image of Eve in Christina Georgina Rossetti's Works

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Abstract

Emotions of paradox and ambivalence is the label of British Victorian poetess Christina Georgina Rossetti, as for this outstanding religious poetess, who is struggling in the conflicts between religious passion and secular longings, Eve is the contradictive mixture of “the first fallen woman” and “the mother of all living”. And in Rossetti’s view, all women are the daughters of Eve, born as another Eve, to understand these seeming inconsistencies and apparent contradictions, it is needed to examine in detail Rossetti’s view of Eve, for behind all her views on woman’s rights, duties, and privileges in this world stands the image of the first mother. Based on the contradictory image of Eve in her text, this paper analyzes the contradictions of Rossetti’s complicated feminism.

Key words: *Christina Georgina Rossetti; emotions of paradox and ambivalence; Eve; the feminism*

1. INTRODUCTION

Christina Georgina Rossetti (1830-1894) was a Victorian English poetess whose talent rivaled that of Lady Browning. Her poems are fresh and beautiful, long and plaintive, full of imagination and talent, and exuding a strong religious flavor, and they are “the clear sound of the tides of heaven” [1]. As a religious poet, Christina Rossetti saw or felt the gaze of God in almost every one of her 996 poems, and numerous religious figures appeared frequently in her poems. Eve was also one of the religious figures who appeared repeatedly in her poems.

Influenced by the Oxford movement and the Pre-Raphaelite school, Eve in Rossetti’s works is both traditional and subversive, both divine (religious) and human (secular), who reflects Christian Rossetti’s pious religious belief and her yearning for the secular life, wherein reflects the contradiction of her internal struggle, for all her life she struggles in the religious and secular contradictory feelings, Eve is “the first human slut” and “beloved first mother” and Eve’s complicated, conflicting and even contradictory images influenced Rossetti’s view of women and her attitude to women’s issues. Behind Rossetti’s view of women stands the image of the first woman and the first mother in the world —Eve.

2. THE CONTRADICTORY EVE IN CHRISTINA ROSSETTI’S WORKS

Rossetti struggled in contradiction all her life, and ambivalence is the summary of her feelings all her life. Rossetti’s contradictory feelings are also reflected in her works of ideas and characters depiction, Eve, is the

expression Rossetti’s religious and secular, traditional and anti-traditional contradictory feelings which are coexisting in the main female characters. When discuss Rossetti’s Eve, it is needed to remember that for Rossetti, Eve was a historical figure, rather than a character in the Bible, she is the world’s first female, and is also the first mother of human beings. Therefore, Rossetti in her poetry “Listening” reminds the reader: Eve is “our female ancestors” (your ancestress and mime) [2], she also, in *The Face of Deep: A Devotional Commentary on The Apocalypse* suggests indirectly that Eve was the mother of mankind.

In the traditional perspective, Eve is regarded as the root of “original sin” in the whole Christian culture, as well as the symbol of evil and lust. She was fixed as a specific symbol, and her image was the most powerful tool for punishment and redemption in the process of Christian ascetic practice, as well as a model for Christian believers. She was always condemned in the Christian culture [3]. In the traditional perspective, Eve always appeared as a pure negative image of “siren and slut”. The original sin of human beings was caused by the fall of Eve, so women represented by Eve were reprimanded by their theological godfathers.

Rossetti also inherited the traditional negative image of Eve in her works, in her *In the Letter and Spirit: Notes on the Commandments*, Eve is called “the first fallen woman” [4], “Let woman fear to teach and bear to learn, Remembering the first woman’s first mistake” [2] in her 15th sonnet “Later Life” flatly points out that the sin caused by Eve was “the first woman’s first mistake”, Thinking Eve’s fault is a cautionary tale for woman. “Eve sought knowledge, Mary instructed; Eve aimed at self-indulgence, Mary at self-oblation; Eve, by disbelief and disobedience, brought sin to the birth; Mary, by faith and submission, righteousness.” [6]

Eve's mistake also made Rossetti examine and think about women's intelligence. Rossetti said in her *The Letter and Spirit: Discipline Comments*: when Eve gave Adam the forbidden fruit to eat, her motive was pure, but her sin lied in her judgment when facing the evil, and she failed to make a wise judgment when weighing the intention of seducing snakes, so as to make Adam disobey God's will and to be driven out of the Paradise. Rossetti is skeptical about women's wisdom especially when they are at a crucial moment to make a wise judgment. Rossetti's subversive against traditional Eve were as follows: first of all, she is different from the traditional attitudes which regarding Eve as wicked, Rossetti shows her sympathy, forgiveness to Eve. On the issue of "original sin", though Rossetti also thinks Eve is not forgivable, but she is not the only sinner, the sin "should be Shared" [4], Satan and Adam are her partners, she also thinks Adam was not the only victims of original sin, Eve were also the victim of original sin, she was also expelled from the Garden of Eden, which embodies Rossetti's view of gender equality. In *Letter and Spirit: Precepts Annotation*, Rossetti said "Eve, equally with Adam, was created sinless." [4] From this, it can be seen that as a female writer, she didn't regard women as secondary sex like her most contemporaries in a patriarchal society, but regarded men and women as equal individuals.

Meanwhile, in Rossetti's works, Eve, who subverts the tradition, emerges as a virtuous wife and loving mother. Eve, in the traditional view, was neither a good wife nor a loving mother. As a good wife, Eve and Adam were equal and they love each other. In Rossetti's poem "Eve", Eve called Adam as "my friend", "my husband", "my lover" and "my brother". In her poem "An Afterthought", Rossetti described Adam in this way: Adam was not the victim of Eve, but her "loving husband, her treasure" [2]. Obviously, Adam was not a victim who was seduced by Eve and was driven out of the Garden of Eden, but Eve's dear husband, her treasure! As Adam's wife, Eve was successful. She was gentle, loving and worthy of her husband's tenderness. Look at how Eve in Rossetti's long poem "Eve" tenderly pours out her inner pain to the silent Adam: Hadst thou but said me nay / Adam, my brother / I might have pined away / I, but none other / God might have let thee stay / Safe in our garden / By putting me away / Beyond all pardon. [2] In these lines, Adam, whom Rossetti called "my brother" by the lips of Eve, and called the paradise they shared to live "our paradise", which is a glimpse of their conjugality. It is also in these lines that she admitted that it was she who brought pain and death to the world, and she was willing to bear the pain of "Paradise lost". What is more valuable is that Eve did not blame Adam at all, on the contrary, she only blamed herself.

It is really amazing that Rossetti dares to associate the first degraded female image in traditional sense with motherhood, which is a great stroke of Rossetti as a female poet who regards women as like this by breaking through religion, and is the expression of Rossetti's feminism.

3. CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S CONTRADICTORY VIEWS ON WOMEN BEHIND EVE

In Rossetti's view, all the women in the world are daughters of Eve and are born as another Eve. Therefore, Rossetti's recognition of Eve's image also directly affected her views and attitudes towards women and women's issues. In her ambivalent feelings, Rossetti describes a contradictory Eve that makes her love and hate, and she deny her and sympathize with her. The contradictory Eve also determines Rossetti's paradoxical view of women.

On the one hand, as a devout Christian who dares to bid farewell to love for faith, Rossetti believes in the traditional image of Eve in Genesis of Bible: Eve is a rib of Adam. She often reminds women of the fact that Eve was created by God as Adam's helpmate or assistant. The image of Eve was rooted in Rossetti's deep religious beliefs and traditions. Rossetti believed that the woman was the "rib" of the man, and created by God for Him. The social status of women is subordinate to that of men; The existence of the female is "for the sake of his happiness", "helpmeet" namely means women as men's "helper" or "assistant", "woman, serves God by serving men", "woman, in serving man, serve the God." [5] For the first woman Eve's first human mistake, Rossetti, as one religious poet deeply influenced by the Oxford movement, believes the way of their salvation lies in: love the man in humble way and sacrificially. On the other hand, the subversive image of Eve in Rossetti's works also profoundly reflected the reality of the "secondary sex" status of women in the Victorian era, which made Rossetti passionately yearn for the equality between men and women in her heart. In her own words, women should have "the equality between men and women under appropriate constraints" [4]. In Rossetti's Victorian era, "British women were firmly imprisoned in the shackles of their families, hiding behind their fathers, husbands and brothers and becoming their silent supporters" [7]. In this society, the male is active and dominant, and women are passive followers, women are oppressed and discriminated. Rossetti herself has long been suffered her brother Dante Rossetti's discriminative eyes around and ignorance, which is easy to find enough evidence from her works. In the Victorian era when women were "losing their voices" and "treated as second sex", Rossetti passionately desired and affirmed the equality between men and women in her thoughts.

For religious poet Rossetti, she lives in the religious world all her life, in the confrontation of tradition and anti-tradition, religion and secular, the former is absolute and inviolable. Therefore, the "feminist" voice that Rossetti often reveals in her works often disclose in the women's issues in reality. Because, in Rossetti's vision, the female problem is Eve's problem!

Therefore, on the issue of women, Rossetti not only longed for women to be educated like men, but also feared that education would make women think freely and disobey God. She believes that women can only serve as the

“helpmate” or “assistant” of men, and she also emphasizes the great spiritual power of women, which can affect men on a spiritual level. Rossetti is not satisfied with the fact that women cannot receive education like men in Victorian era, women like men, she hopes to be able to change all this one day. Her early close contact with the sisterhood of British higher education shows that she is eager to increase women’s ideological education and job opportunities, but she is afraid that women may like Eve, being free because of knowledge, being conceit because of being free, be rebellious for arrogance, which thereby affects women’s obedience and reverence to god.

Therefore, for modern readers, Rossetti’s view of women and her response to women’s issues are undoubtedly complex, conflicting and even contradictory. That is because behind Rossetti’s contradictory, conflicting and complex views on women’s issues stands Eve. And once again it is proved that Rossetti in her works contradicts Rossetti in reality, which confirms her progressive mind in ideal world and her conservative aspect in real world. It is understood that in Rossetti’s religious and secular coexisted mood, her contradictory feelings of secular tends to condescend to religion, and religion plays a role of leading decision in Rossetti’s soul. As a matter of fact, Rossetti dialogues with god all her whole life, and all her life she considers serving god as the ultimate criterion.

4. CONCLUSION

Struggling in the gap between religion and secularity, Rossetti’s feelings are complex and contradictory. All her life she looked up at God, but at intervals she glanced at worldly life. She seems to be contradictory, her attitudes toward Eve, her feminism, her views on the women’s issue on all reflect confrontation of tradition against anti-tradition, her struggling between religion and secularity, but it is reasonable, because in her world, religion has always been her spiritual home, nothing can shake Rossetti’s dialogue with god, her determination to obey god. This not only makes people feel Rossetti’s concern for women and thoughts on women’s issues, but also makes people feel the deep-rooted influence of religion on Rossetti, which makes people clearly realize that Rossetti was first a Victorian woman who “communicated with God always”, and then a poet who gave birth to a feminist voice.

Rossetti interprets her feminism with her whole heart: the conflict between reality and fantasy. Perhaps this is the reason for her beauty: her tendency to a “threshold” state described in her poem “The Threshold of a Monastery”: a state of constant yearning for pure beauty and her unconditional submission to God.

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