



Discussion on the Lack of the Maternal Instincts under the Perspective of Feminism

Taking Images of Mothers In "Madame Bovary" and "Cold Nights" as Examples

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Abstract. Both mothers' images in novel "Madame Bovary" and "Cold Nights" are described as indifferent mothers, because of the maternal deficiency. The female gender struggle which is included in this sort of maternal deficiency is limited, while the most of its content is a fixed feeling, consisting of the desire of wonderful life and the dissatisfied attitudes toward the real life. This essay uses the parallel study as the method, comparing the two mothers' images, in order get to know how this type of images are made and the reasons lying behind them.

Keywords: feminism, Madame Bovary, Cold Nights, maternity

1 Introduction

"In practice, understandings of women's human dignity are shaped by patriarchal norms centred on 'virtuous' behaviour, women's class, socio-economic status, and experience of violence"^[1] (Tann, 2024). Not only in the real world, but also in the history of literature, readers can always feel the influence of the Phallogocentric. Among literature, The building of female images often reflects male consciousness, at the same time, the judgement of these images are affected by whether they perfectly complete their responsibilities or not, which is totally formed by the patriarchal society. Under the circumstances, there is a sort of "bad woman" in literature, who ignores the imposed responsibilities and "betrays" the society. Whether it is Emma in "Madame Bovary" or Zeng Shu-sheng in "Cold Nights", they both showed rebellious temperaments of traditional values, and this "rebellion" also brings them spiritual pains. This essay would destruct images of Emma and Zeng Shu-sheng under the perspective of feminism, interpreting their maternal deficiency, in order to explore their desires of wonderful lives in the deep recesses of their minds and understand the traditional constraint on them.

2 Indifference——“Incompetent” Mothers

In both “Madame Bovary” and “Cold Nights”, writers shaped completely indifferent mothers.

In “Madame Bovary”, Emma didn’t like her daughter since she gave birth. When she heard that she had a daughter, she even fainted. After parturition, Emma paid no attention on her baby, just left her kid to the wet nurse. When visiting her daughter with her lover Léon, Emma showed disgust towards her daughter. “Then she put the baby, which had just vomited over her collar, back to bed. The wet-nurse immediately came to wipe it off, protesting that it would not show... (Emma) went out, wiping her feet on the threshold^[2]. (Flaubert, 2011)” When seeing her daughter vomited, Emma take her coat more seriously than her daughter. And it’s interesting to see that when she went out, she ‘wiped her feet on the threshold’ ^[2](Flaubert, 2011), which showed her disgust to both the house and her daughter.

Not only did Emma show disgust to her daughter when her daughter dirtied her coat, but she also felt impatient when her daughter tried to approach her. When one night little Berthe tried to approach her again and again, Emma said “leave me alone” and thrust her daughter away, which leads to result that her daughter cut her cheek on drawers, out came the blood. Just at that time, Emma rushed to snapped the bell-pull, not only showed her little attention, but also aimed to comfort herself. We could see when looking after her daughter at the dinner time, Emma thought herself was so silly to be nervous on this matter. Also, when explaining to her husband, Emma lied, which we could also see that she wasn’t truly worried about her daughter, she just worried about the influence of this matter, which was the root of her fidget. Under the circumstances, it’s not weird to see when her daughter slept, Emma said to her self: “It’s strange, how ugly this child is^[2].” (Flaubert, 2011)

In “Cold Nights”, the relationship between Zeng Shu-sheng and her son was also indifferent. Not only when shouted angrily by her mother-in-law : “But what about Hsiao Hsuan? You may not think it necessary to take care of your husband or me, but what about your son? You surely don’t intend to abandon him?”, she just replied coldly that the school would take care of him, but when prepared to leave, she also persuaded herself : “(Hsiao Hsuan) He doesn’t care for me either. Without me, he’ll live just as well. I can always help him, but I must not let him prevent me from going my own way. Even Hsuan can’t do that^[3]. (Ba, 1978)” Through these words, we could find clearly and easily that her son wasn’t essential in her mind, just as what she said, the only thing she really worried was her husband, not her son.

There were just fewer words described Zeng Shu-sheng when comparing with her husband, but through words between Hsuan and his mother, we could also find that the relationship between Zeng and her son wasn’t deep. After Zeng left home, Hsuan said to himself: “Useless. She doesn’t care for him, nor he for her. They don’t seem to have any affection for each other^[3].” (Ba, 1978) Also, Hsuan’s mother always complaint to her son that Shu-sheng seldom took care of her son. Through these words and character’s psychology, we could see that Zeng wasn’t a “standard” mother in this family, even paid no attention on her son, according to her mother-in-law’s opinion. What’s more, when Hsiao Hsuan came home and saw his mother, he “greeted her rather in-

differently”^[3](Ba, 1978), and he didn’t reply his mother’s letter on the excuse of school work. And Zeng also “knitted her eyebrows, quickly turned to her husband”^[3](Ba, 1978) to avoid looking at her son. Through the daily life between them, we could also find they were both indifferent to each other.

In both “Madame Bovary” and “Cold Nights”, writers shaped a lot of mothers who treated their kids sincerely and even doted their kids, especially the two mother——Charles’s mother and Hsuan’s mother. In their families, these two mothers could be regarded as “good mothers”, such as Hsuan’s mother. Whatever happened, she wouldn’t leave her son, even when her son had diseases and the war was approaching, she still took care and cooked for him, including washed clothes for others to earn money. So why did both Emma and Zeng performed differently from other mothers? What exactly affect them? And why did them perform indifferently when facing their kids?

3 Conflicts——Between the Dream Life and the Reality

Reason for Emma and Zeng’s “loss” which we called on the role of mother came from their contradictions between the reality and their dreams, to a great extent.

Emma used to expect her kid at first, just as De Beauvoir Simone(2012) said, in different time, women feel different about pregnancy^[4]. When hearing herself getting pregnant first, Emma experienced a great amazement and felt curious about pregnancy. She even transferred her various imagination and the dissatisfaction of desires on her children. As for her, having a boy seemed like making up. Because “A man, at least, is free: he can leaf through loves and lands and pass through obstacles, have a taste for the most remote joys. But a woman is continually impeded. Inert and pliant at the same time, against her she has the weakness of the flesh and the law’s subjections.^[2](Flaubert, 2011)” From there , we could find that Emma really expected her son, for which she would like to give a birth to a “hero”, who must be a boy. So when hearing her kid was a girl, Emma knew that it was impossible to satisfy her desires again and all her illusions were blew like a wind. At that time, women were just subordinate to men, to a great extent. Not only from Emma’s words and acts, but we could also find this fact during the novel: almost all women in the novel were just their husbands’ wives or their sons’ mothers, they didn’t have jobs, wealth, or their own status. If they married with their husbands, they should spend a lifetime to live with him, no matter how he treated her, just as Charles’ mother and his first wife, the widow of a Dieppe bailiff, who just wanted “a little bit more love”^[2] (Flaubert, 2011). They provided their husbands with their money and love, but their husbands didn’t like them anymore, which made them nervous. We even don’t know their names, which means we know nothing about them, except their marriages. They seemed like to have their own money, even status, but we should know exactly that their wealth and status used belong to their father and ex-husband, and after getting married, their wealth and status belonged to their husbands. They never belonged to these women, which just contains the ideology that women are subordinate to men, leading to the limitation of Emma’s identity pursuit^[5](Yu-Xin, 2021). It means female could never become successful without their

fathers, husbands and sons. That's the society lying behind Emma's real life. Under the circumstance, Emma fainted and shifted her dissatisfaction towards her daughter.

On the other hand, her daughter more like a symbol of social and real life responsibility. Daughter was the epitome of her marriage with Charles, the tedious, bland, non-passion and boring life. But Emma was just the sort of people who was unwilling to live a normal life, she would like to pursuit the passion and romance. Maybe the reason why she decided to get married with Charles just because" But the anxiety of a new state of mind, or perhaps the nervous irritation caused by the presence of this man, had sufficed to make her believe that, at last, she was in possession of that wondrous passion which up to then had remained like a great bird with rosy feathers soaring through the splendour of poetical skies. ^[2](Flaubert, 2011)" this sort of imagination rooted at the education she received when she was young. In convent, Emma sang the amorous songs of the last century, told stories about passions, sweetheart, tears and kiss, and dreamed of living in an old manor-house, "like those châtelaines in their long dresses" ^[2](Flaubert, 2011) ... she sank herself in these romantic dreams and stories, even wished to be married at midnight, by the light of flaming torches. But the real life couldn't satisfy her thoughts, which means, she never got satisfied and lived as expected. It could also be seen from the main narrative of the heroine, which was still "Emma" rather than "Madame Bovary", which reflected her sincere thoughts ^[6](Le-Chen, 2022). So she felt impatient and angry about all obstacles—the reality. Besides, in Emma's mind, chasing her autonomy played the most essential role in her life, the responsibility wasn't as important as her freedom. That's why Emma performed indifferently when facing her daughter, not only because her daughter broke up her dream to have a hero to make up her life, but the girl was also the epitome of her real life and responsibility, the same as obstacles in Emma's mind.

As for Zeng Shu-sheng, her son was the epitome of her dilemma. She was such a woman who was both healthy and accepted the modern education, that she couldn't stand to live in a family filled with disease and arguments. And this was totally different from Emma. Not only because she received modern education, but she had her own job at a bank. Although her mother-in-law thought Shu-sheng did nothing but dressed up herself well, she exactly supported all her family, including the money to pay for her son's education. She didn't need to be the subordinate to her husband. So she didn't need to hold all her desires on her husband or her son, which was really different from Emma. The only reason why she would like to be far away from this family was because of desires of health and peace in her mind. But her son was just the same as his father, lack of vigor, having "an anemic, adult-like stoical boy who had never been a child. Though only thirteen, he looked much older. ^[3](Ba, 1978)" That was what Zeng really wanted to escape from. In the novel, we could see that Zeng always asked herself "am I going to live like this for the rest of my life?" ^[3] (Ba, 1978), which showed her dissatisfaction towards this sort of life. Living in this environment, she felt withered. And her son couldn't let Zeng Shu-sheng associate him with health and vigor—what Zeng really needed. Therefore, when Zeng Shu-sheng decided to run far away from this sort of life, she had to be far away from her son.

4 Maternity——Nature or Trap

“There is no such thing as maternal ‘instinct’: the word does not in any case apply to the human species. The mother’s attitude is defined by her total situation and by the way she accepts it. [4]” As what De Beauvoir Simone said in “The Second Sex”(2012) , it’s not hard for us to understand why Emma and Zeng treated their kids indifferently. From “Madame Bovary”, we could easily see that all the things which Emma really wanted was romance, including both a romantic wedding and the dancing party which she bore in mind constantly. Also, from all these things, we could also see that she always put her feeling as the first rank, whenever she did things. What’s more, Emma has the courage to do what she wanted, such as having a romantic relationship, which differed she from others in the book. But her daughter broke up her dreams which a hero who was given birth by her could make up all her regrets. Under the circumstances, since her daughter was born, she showed disgust. The girl was just what Emma would like to escape from. It decided that Emma wouldn’t love her daughter sincerely, for the girl almost end up all her dreams.

Also, as for Zeng Shu-sheng at that time, she was facing with the approaching war and the home filled with disease and arguments. At that moment, all she expected was just a healthy and peaceful environment, such as Lanzhou, which was full of peace and health, far away from the war and phthisis, nobody would shout at her and call her “mistress”. But at that time, her son acted just as his father——lacking of vitality. Also, we could see that Zeng Shu-sheng always quarreled with her mother-in-law while Hsiao Hsuan talked with his grandmother more than his mother. He also performed indifferently when talking with his mother. That means, in this family, Zeng’s husband was the symbol of disease when her mother-in-law was the symbol of disease, and her son was the symbol of both things. So it’s normal for Zeng Shu-sheng to be indifferent to Hsiao Hsuan in daily life.

“Indeed, from childhood woman is repeatedly told she is made to bear children, and the praises of motherhood are sung; the disadvantages of her condition——periods, illness, and such——the boredom of household tasks, all this is justified by this marvelous privilege she holds, that of bringing children into the world.”(Beauvoir, 2012) But it should be pointed out that “like a disease, pregnancy affects the health of the pregnant person, causing a range of symptoms from discomfort to death” [7](Smajdor & Räsänen, 2024). To be honest, “the praises of motherhood” was formed by the society, a man’s society. In order to make women stand the nightmare of delivery without protests and ignore the risks they may face, men make up lies of maternity, forcing women to take care of their kids and calling these tasks and risks as responsibilities which female should have since they were born. These lies and responsibilities born with women are changed into ways for women to prove themselves. Women have to put themselves behind these tasks, trapped into maternal traps.

5 Conclusion

“... assessments of American literature have been biased in favor of things—male in favor, say, of whaling ships rather than the sewing circle as a symbol of the human community; in favor of satires on domineering mothers, shrewish wives, or betraying mistresses rather than tyrannical fathers, abusive husbands, or philandering suitors, displaying an exquisite compassion for the crises of the adolescent male, but altogether impatient with the parallel crises of the female.”^[8](Baym, 1978) Not only in American literature, in both novels we are talking about in the essay, we could also see that writers more like to blame the two female characters, for which Emma just lived a mimicry^[9](Xian-Feng & Xiao-Long, 2023), imitating the life she read in books and Zeng Shu-sheng was so selfish that she abandoned her family, rather than admitting their progressiveness. Emma and Zeng Shu-sheng exactly put themselves into the first order. One of them was sunk into the passion of romance, and the other received the modern education, which made them different from other mothers at their times. The maternal instincts of them was made by different reasons and it has its own progress. It should be recognized that maternity is a trap at all. Female, especially mothers are stuck in this type of prison for thousands of years, unconsciously devote themselves to their families, putting themselves behind all these responsibilities and tasks, finally becoming a great mother who is just in a prison. By researching both novels and comparing the two mothers, we could see how women fight with fetters of the society and traditions, and how hard when they try to do whatever they really want. Breaking the sacred "motherhood" can help us better understand women's so-called natural responsibilities, and can also help us better pursue our own lives.

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