

Analysis of Rebecca in Vanity Fair from the Perspective of Feminism

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze one of the main characters, Rebecca from the perspective of feminism to indicate Thackeray's view about women and to reveal women's destiny and tragedy at that time. William Makepeace Thackeray is a famous critical realist. Vanity Fair is his masterpiece, which gives us a vivid and true view of the life of the 19th century in England. Rebecca and Amelia best embody the author's intention of writing this novel, exposing and criticizing the fall of morality and evils existed in the people of the 19th Victorian age. Many scholars believe that Vanity Fair expresses the writer's feminism perspective and it's the beginning of the feminism movements. Amelia and Rebecca are brought up in different environments and have different characters. However, they have the same tragic ending. These two images the living ability, pursuits and tragic destinies of women in the man-orientated society. As a result, the author talks about their background information first. Then, the paper will study the two characters from the perspective of feminism.

Keywords

Vanity Fair; Rebecca Sharp; Tragedy; Feminism.

1. Introduction

In the early 19th century of England, there were filled with unrest, misery and cruelty in England. The ordinary people lived in a miserable life. People complain about the harsh reality. The critical realism of the 19th century flourished behind this background, that is a literary trend which reveals and criticizes the bad manners of the bourgeois society. Vanity Fair is regarded as an important representative of the critical realism novel of 19th century, and also the peak of Thackeray's literary career, which brings its author a lot of fame and reputation. It successfully creates various typical non-hero images of Victorian age. It gives us a true and vivid view of the 19th century of England focusing on the tragic destinies of the two contrasting girls named Rebecca Sharp and Amelia Sedley. By writing this novel, Thackeray attacked social evils of his age and the fall of morality of the society.

At the same time, feminism makes its appearance in the England and America with the development of various feminism movements. It is a hot topic for the letters of men, who express their view of points about feminism through the depiction of female characters. Vanity Fair is regarded as the beginning of feminism by many scholars, which shows Thackeray's view about women in the men-orientated society.

By reading the novel, we know that Rebecca and Amelia are the chief representatives of the women of that time. They both are the victims of the society, even though in different ways. Their tragedies are the inevitable results of the period. Living in a man-dominated society, they are doomed to suffer. From the view of feminism, we can have a better understanding of the whole novel. Furthermore, we will have a deep understating of the environment of that time, and have a better understanding of these characters. At the same time, as the women in the new

era, we are supposed to think about how to achieve independence, equality and get real freedom.

2. Literary Review

Since *Vanity Fair* was published, it attracted a lot of attention from the critics. Not only the modern scholars but also his contemporary novelists are interested in his work and appreciate his talent and gift for the creation. For example, Charlotte Bronte remarked that: "The more I read Thackeray's works, the more I am certain that he stands alone – alone in his sagacity, alone in his feelings...Thackeray is a Titan". However, not all the people agree with the appreciation of him. Some criticize and reject his realistic way of exposing the cruelty and fall of morality. According to the different study aspects, the study can be divided into several branches: the analysis of the character and image, the study on feminism and other little branches.

In China, the study of *Vanity Fair* started from the publication of Yang Bi's Chinese version of *Vanity Fair* in 1957. Chinese study on *Vanity Fair* can be divided into the following types: the research on the theme of the novel, research on the characterization and the research on the feminism.

For many years, scholars made many various researches about Rebecca and Amelia. However, most of the views on Rebecca are biased because she is measured by the standards of the man-orientated society. Many people think Rebecca is an immoral and wicked woman. From the perspective of feminism, Rebecca shows her independence and pursuits of equality and freedom. Through the comparison of the two girls, this paper hopes to provide a new perspective to study the feminism in *Vanity Fair* theoretically.

3. The Writer and the Work

William Makepeace Thackeray is not only a gifted and creative novelist, but also a representative of critical realists during the Victorian period in England, which produced a number of famous novelists and poets such as Charles Dickens, Alfred Tennyson and Robert Browning. Born in the hypocritical and satirical society, Thackeray spares no efforts to expose the vices and evils of his time and his novels mainly contain a satirical portrayal of the upper stratum of society. He focuses on the foul morality of human beings. In his opinion, it is not the political structure and organization that makes up the society, but human beings and their values of morality. It is his gift to use lots of idiolects to show the images, personalities and the backgrounds of the characters. George Eliot regards him as the most powerful living novelist.

With a humorous tone and wit, he depicts a true and vivid panorama of life of that society at his time, satirizing the cruelty, hypocrisy and unscrupulousness existed between the people of Victorian age, which makes him a great master in English literature.

Thackeray is famous for his novels, among which the most famous are *Vanity Fair* (1847-1848), *The New Comers* (1853-1855) and *The Virginians* (1857-1859). *Vanity Fair* is regarded as his masterpiece and the peak of his literary career, which had profound influence in the English literature.

The title of the novel is taken from Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* in which it was a fair, where it should be sold all kinds of things such as lands, delights, wives, husbands, lives, souls. Bunyan wants to expose the vices of his time and compares the society that time to a vanity fair. Here Thackeray has the same purpose and wants to achieve the same effect. The subtitle of the novel is "A Novel without a Hero". It indicates the author's intention to portray not individuals, but the whole society of *Vanity Fair*.

This novel portrays the scene of the early 19th century of England. This novel starts with the parting scene of two girls. They graduated from the Academy for Young Ladies on Cheswick

Mall, situated on a London suburb, where they have studied for 6 years. One is Amelia Sedley, the daughter of a wealthy merchant. The other is her friend: Rebecca Sharp, a poor orphan. This novel focuses on the lives of two contrasted girls, giving us a satirical life view of the 19th century England. Brought up in a wealthy and warm environment, Amelia is gentle, innocent and simple-hearted. On the contrary, suffering serious poverty and discrimination, Becky is shrewd, selfish and even unscrupulous. With different backgrounds and living environments, they have formed different characters. Gradually, they have gone along different paths and pursued their own love and happiness. However, both of them ended up with tragedies.

4. The Feminism Theory

“Feminism” originated from a French word “femme”, which has the same meaning as female. At present, feminism is regarded as a diverse collection of political and social movements initiated by feminists who struggle to find a position in a man-orientated society. They hold a view that women are equal to men and they should have the same rights as men.

The first feminism thought can be dated back to the 6th BC, Sappho. She is a Greek lyric poet, born in the islands of Lesbos, who wrote many poems depicting women. From her, we can know that feminism thought have been recognized by people at that time.

However, it is generally believed that feminism is from the enlightenment in the late 18th century, where it gains its supports and gets developments. The feminism developed quickly along with the Industrial Revolution. The publication of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* is the first document written for the modern feminism movement.

According to the feminism movements, feminism can be divided into three periods. The first wave of feminism movement was launched in the middle of 19th century and it continued to the end of 1920s. The main purpose of this movement was to win women’s equal rights for education, political position and employment. Therefore, the International Women’s Day was established in 1910. Furthermore, most of the women got the rights to receive education and get jobs and more and more women were able to participate in politics under the influence of the movement.

The second wave of feminism movement was raised between the 1960s and 1970s, which had the greatest influence and gained great success and achievements. The second wave not only included the aims of the first wave, but also it had something new. It was more radical and even made efforts to reform the social system in order to help women to gain their liberation. Kate Millett was the representative of radical feminism; whose *Sexual Politics* was a chief work of that type. What’s more, gender study appeared at that time, which helped women a lot to struggle for their equality. More and more feminists believed that the inequality existing between women and men was caused by the social system, not caused biologically.

The third wave happened from 1990s to the present. It originated a large number of feminism thoughts during this period. During the third wave, the distinction, deconstruction and decentralizing were paid a lot of attention. The main thought of the third wave consisted of four types: intersectionality theory as developed by women of color and ethnicity; postmodernist and poststructuralist feminist approaches; feminist postcolonial theory, often referred to as global feminism; and the agenda of the new generation of younger feminists (Mann & Huffman, 2005).

Some feminists believed that they won the war basically, but some held a view that more efforts should be made. Although they held different viewpoints, we cannot deny the great influence and achievements made by these feminism movements. First of all, women got the right to receive education. Secondly, women had more options to choose their jobs and the employment rate of women rose year on year. Thirdly, women had the right to vote and found positions in the political areas.

5. Women Images in Victorian Age

In the Victorian period, women have lower social status. Their fates are not in their own hands, but determined by men. They cannot receive the same education as man, so women are regarded brainless. They are attached to men and depend on them. In this patriarchal society, once woman gets married, she will become the accessory of her husband, which is a social convention rooted in people's mind. Woman should be obedient and reconcile to her husband, and all of her energy should be devoted to her husband and her family. If she refuses to accept these rules, she will be regarded as the monster. In order to be a normal woman in this society, they have to learn to be soft, reconcile and passive.

Amelia is a traditional women image in this period. When she was a child, she could get everything she wants. She is not treated unfairly, so she is soft, kind and gentle. After she marries George, she devotes her everything to him. For her, family is everything to her, and she can make any sacrifice for it. Even though, her marriage life is not happy as she imaged and her husband is a playboy, she is tolerant and forgives her husband. Amelia lacks of pride and confidence, she just accepts them passively when she meets problems and difficulties. She has no courage and never tries to change her fate. She is a typical women image in the Victorian period, who embodies obedience, softness, tolerance and dedication.

Unlike her, Rebecca is a representative of feminism. Although she looks down upon the corrupt society and mocks the inequality, she uses lots tricks and disguises in her life. She pretends to be soft and obedient in order to please men in order to win men's appreciation and praise. Because of her gifts and disguise, she seduces many men successfully. She knows that marriage is the only way for her to get a high social status. She spares no efforts to act as a soft and gentle lady. After her marriage, she tries to be a good wife and wins her husband's heart and love. However, she loves nothing. She only regards man and her family as a tool for her climbing. Her bravery and struggle show a fine example of feminist.

6. The Feminism in Rebecca

Rebecca and Amelia best embody the writer's intention to criticize the corrupt society and show some feminism thoughts and even some scholars believe that Rebecca is a complicated combination of femininity and masculinity. This part will analyze the two images from the perspective of feminism.

6.1. Pursuits of Independence

In a man-orientated society, women's fates are determined by men. They are men's accessories and have to depend on men. Traditional woman images have to obey social manners and they can make any sacrifice for their husbands and family. In order to change that situation, they have no choice but to fight for their freedom. The first step for women is to be independent. Rebecca Sharp refuses to accept the social conventions which confine women's behaviors and her independence express fully in this novel. Unlike Rebecca, Amelia is so soft that she has no courage to fight against conventions. She depends on her family a lot. This part will talk about their pursuit of independence.

Lack of high social status, Rebecca is born in a humble family. Her father is an artist, and teaches at Miss Pinkerton's school. However, he is addicted to drinking. When he is drunk, he always beats Rebecca and her mother, an opera actress. Her mother's profession is being looked upon at that time, thus it brings many humiliations to Rebecca. After her mother's death when she is just 8 years old, Rebecca's life becomes worse and worse. During the rest of her childhood, she lives with her irritable and bad-tempered father. Living in such poor environment and at the bottom of the society, Rebecca is looked upon and humiliated, and no one would like to make friends with her. Gradually, she gets to know the importance of money and power. In order to

be successful, she spares no efforts to struggle for her status and does lots of bad things, but has no idea that she has gone the path of tragedy.

In the long term, she forms an independent character, but she does not depend on others. Unlike other women, Rebecca is a good problem solver. In her whole life, she meets all kinds of problems, but she has her own way of solving them. She wouldn't be stumbled by these problems and troubles. She never accepts fate passively; instead, she struggles to change it. She is more independent and competent than traditional women images. Although some people think she is evil, her awareness of independence still is worthy to learn.

Born in a wealthy family, Amelia is much luckier than Rebecca. Her father is a wealthy merchant who is respected and admirable because of his kindness to not only his family, his relatives but also to his servants and employers. Although he has done business for many years, he is not snobbish and treats people with equality. He is not good at distinguishing between the good and the bad. A little influenced by her father, Amelia is innocent and simple-hearted.

Her brother is a collector of Boffley Wollah in the East Indian Company's Civil Service and always brings her a lot of exquisite gifts. Her mother is gentle and virtuous, and she always teaches Amelia the lady-like manners. Living in such warm and happy environment, she has been protected all the time and has no idea of the evils. She hasn't been suffered and has no idea of others' suffering. All of her things have been arranged by her family. She knows the feeling of being loved and get so many people's love, so she dares to love and make sacrifice.

The world of Amelia is pure and beautiful, so she is kind, innocent and tolerant. However, because of the lack of experience of the world, she is gullible, emotional and cannot accept the difficulties and failure. Therefore, she has no need to be independent. All her life is restricted by the social conventions and rules. Just like the traditional woman images, Amelia lives independently and she has to live to depend on her family and her husband. We can say that Amelia's fate is determined by others and in the hands of men.

6.2. Pursuits of Equality

Under the influence of feminism movements, some people insist that men and women have no difference and they should be treated equally. However, in this novel, the inequality between men and women and between different social statuses is quite obvious. In a patriarchal society, the inequality caused by various social rules and conventions are rooted in people's minds and it's hard to change it. However, Rebecca refuses to accept the social inequality and struggles for her equality. This part will talk about her pursuit of equality.

In the 19th century in England, the social status is restricted. Rebecca is as intelligent and beautiful as the girls from the upper class. But because of her inferior family, Rebecca is discriminated and neglected in her school and in the society. Born in a humble family, she cannot get love and respect from others. Having suffered so many unfair treatments, she fully understands the feeling of inequality. She aspires to get the equality. Instead of accepting the inequality, she makes counter backs for many times. When she graduates from Miss Pinkerton's school, Rebecca even can't get a cheap dictionary which everyone can get. In face of inequality, she does not accept it passively. When she teaches French in Miss Pinkerton's school, Miss Pinkerton wants her to teach music for free. But she immediately refuses it. She says she will teach music unless she will be paid. It is her first time to attack the inequality. After she steps into the society, she still asks the equal status like men. Though suffered unequal treatments, she believes that she is equal to men. She never thinks that she is lower than man and never gives up the pursuit of equality.

In a man-orientated society, men are the authority and women are inferior to men. However, Rebecca is not willing to obey the social traditions. What she wants is not only the sweet love, but also a equality social status in her family and in the society. In her marriage, she is the dominated and her husband is controlled in her hands. It is her unique charm that wins her

husband's appreciation and praise. She wins an equal status in her family and even she is superior to her husband.

Rebecca disdains the inequality and struggle to achieve equality. Her awareness of equality has been awakened. Rebecca's pursuit of equality changes the traditional woman images. She is the embodiment of independence and inequality. Her courage to struggle and fight is notable.

6.3. Pursuits of Freedom

Freedom is one of the key points of feminism thought and feminists believe that women are born with freedom. Feminism movements help women achieve their freedom gradually. However, it is covered by the social conventions in the man-orientated society. Women are limited and bound to men. They don't have the freedom to enjoy life and have freedom to do what they want. In this depressing society, some women begin to resist this kind of situation. Rebecca in *Vanity Fair* is a fine example. This part will talk about her pursuit of freedom.

For most of the women in the Victorian age, marriage is the protection for their life. They confine themselves in the cage of marriage and depend on men. They cannot see the importance of freedom and don't fight for their freedom. However, Rebecca is not like them. Instead, she pursues her freedom of marriage bravely and firmly. In the patriarchal society, women's marriages are managed by their parents. Their mothers try to find good husbands for their daughters. However, she lost her mother when she was a child. She has to depend on herself to find a reliable marriage to help her to get a high social status. She is not confined by the social environment, and she always has the freedom to choose her marriage.

At that time in England, the marriage should be matched, that is to say, a wealthy man has to marry a wealthy and decent lady. Rebecca is not willing to accept these rules. Though born in a lower class family, Rebecca wants to marry a man in the upper class. She ignores the social rules of marriage, and marries to Rodin, a man superior to her. What's more, for most of the traditional women, family is everything to them. In their whole life, they are confined to the circle of their family. They put all her time to her family and they have no time and freedom to do other things. But Rebecca is not confined by her family. After she marries Rodin, she still plays with men regardless of her husband. For most of the mothers, child is one of the most important things. For Rebecca, child means nothing, but a tool for her social climbing. She is never fettered by taking care of her son.

Although she is cruel to her family, but it shows Rebecca's pursuit of freedom. She is not like the traditional women who are restricted and limited by their families. Instead, she can do what she wants to do and pursues what she aspires. Her pursuit of the freedom of marriage shows her feminism.

6.4. Attitudes Towards Difficulties and Fates

Rebecca is a good problem solver. In her whole life, she meets all kinds of problems, but she has her own way of solving them. She wouldn't be stumbled by these problems and troubles. She never accepts fate passively; instead, she struggles to change it.

The first problem she meets is her low status. It's a big obstacle for to gain a high social status is this society. When she gets to know that marriage is the simplest way to power and status, she uses all kinds of ways to find a man who not only has the money but also has the power and gives her a status. In front of difficulties, Rebecca is never afraid or scared. After she marries Crawley, he loses the right to inherit the inheritance. She didn't lose her mind. On the one hand, she joined all kinds of parties to meet new men. On the other hand, she talked several lawyers to help Crawley win his heritance.

When Rebecca deals with problems and confronts with fate, she shows her smartness, diligence and also her optimism. Even in the worst situation, she never loses her mind. After she was abandoned by Crawley, she lived in a horrible life. However, she didn't give up and believed

that she would go back to the upper class again. In fact, it is this optimism that gives her endless power and energy to solve problems and fight against fate. When she lived in a horrible life, fortunately, she met her savior: Joseph. She quickly seized this opportunity to help her get out of this situation. Soon, she won the heart of Joseph and totally controlled him. Finally, after Joseph's death, she got the heritage and won the status.

In her life, there are so many obstacles and difficulties, but she never gives up. Instead, solving these problems shows her strong mind and optimism.

6.5. Strong Living Abilities

Living in a man-oriented society, women cannot support themselves with their own hands. Women have to depend on men's power and wealth to achieve their rights.

Rebecca seems to show great living abilities. Born in a lower class family, she knows the unfair rules of the society. She is often looked upon and humiliated by her classmates and teachers due to her poverty and lower class. As she grows up, she came to realize that it is not possible to rebel against the society. Although she hates the unfairness of the world, she still accepts the world with a kind of resignation. She realizes that it's impossible to fight against the conventions and unjust rules, so she accepts all of the unfairness and learns to command the rules of having a better living in the society. Gradually, she uses these rules as a tool of achieving social status.

Suffered so many unfair treatments, she became unscrupulous, shrewd and ambitious. All her life is full of climbing and struggling. She knows the simplest and the most direct way to success is to marry a wealthy and powerful man. She seduced many men, including her best friend's brother and husband. Though failed many times, she didn't give up. Even in a bad situation, she keeps struggling and fighting for her social status.

Rebecca is selfish, snobbish and immoral. At the same time, she is strong, optimistic and intelligent. Although we show our strong hatred to Rebecca, we also show our sympathy to her out of conciseness. Living in a hypocritical and immoral society where all the snobs flatter the upper class and look down upon the lower class, it is hard not to be influenced by this atmosphere. In vanity fair, she is the bad guy, but she also is the victim of the society.

6.6. Attitudes Towards Love and Family

For Rebecca, love is nothing. However, in order to make a living in this cruel society, Rebecca has to find a man with wealth and power. She wants rise from lower class to upper class with the help of man. So she decided to flirt with Amelia's brother, Joseph, although he is fat, ugly and lazy. Joseph ran and hid after he was drunk and lost his manner. Failed, but Rebecca didn't give up. Instead, she started a risk to find a new wealthy man. With proper manners and good talks, Rebecca quickly won the favor of Miss Crawley, especially the son Rawdon Crawley. She successfully seduced Rawdon and they married secretly. To her disappointment, Miss Crawley didn't accept her birth and Rawdon lost the right to inherit the inheritance. In fact, Rebecca loves nothing. Although, she married Rawdon and treated him kindly and gently like a qualified wife, she didn't respect him and give her love to him. For her, man is just a tool to help her to achieve her jumping to upper class. In fact, she doesn't care who she marries, as long as she can get wealth and power from her marriage. So Rawdon is completely obsessed with Rebecca and controlled by her.

Rebecca is good at attracting men's eyes even though she is married. She flirted with Amelia's husband and seduced him regard less the heartbroken Amelia. Her husband abandoned her when she sent him into prison to clean the path to success. When she meets Joseph again, she lost everything.

For most of mother, child is one of the most important things. But for Rebecca, son means nothing but also a tool for her climbing. She is cold and cruel to little Rawdon. After her son's

birth, she didn't spend time taking care of him, but was busy with flirting men and taking part in various parties. Rebecca is not a qualified mother, so she doesn't get her son's love. This may have something to do with her lack of maternal love. Her mother gives her a bad effect.

7. Conclusion

This novel gives us a vivid view of the patriarchal society in 19th century through the depictions of the two characters. From this novel, we can see Thackeray's sympathy to women. Rebecca's behaviors and actions are regarded as immoral and wicked by the people at that time. But in that society without equality and freedom, which one is good? Rebecca is regarded as a bad woman because of her breaking of social rules. She is not obedient and passive, and she never gives up fighting for what she wants. There are full of rebellious sprits in her heart. Her struggle and bravery in her whole life shows women's awareness of independence and freedom. Also this novel provokes us to think about how women could achieve freedom and independence and have their own life. Women should be self-reliance, self-help, self-esteem and self-improvement.

Vanity fair is a tragedy not only for Amelia and Rebecca, but also for the women living in that society at that time. The male-orientated society and money-orientated social system is the origin of their tragic ending. In that society, people's family background and money determines their social status. Women are men's accessory and tool and they have to behave as superior to men. They are the victims of the society. There is no winner in the Vanity Fair. No one can be escaped and no one gets satisfied in the Vanity Fair. Just like the end of the novel said: "Which of us is happy in this world? Which of us has his desire? Or, having it, is satisfied?" (W. M. Thackeray, 1994)

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