

## A Study of Colleen McCullough's View on Women

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**Abstract:** *The Touch* and *The Thorn Birds* are the most important and famous family sagas written by Colleen McCullough, the well-known contemporary Australian woman writer. In those two novels, McCullough has shown us the different life experiences of different women characters. Through their lives, McCullough actually tells us her view on women. This paper tries to analyze McCullough's view on women through discussing the different women characters. This paper comes to a conclusion that, according to McCullough's view, women need to establish a harmonious relationship between men and women so that they can get real happiness, freedom and equality.

**Keywords:** Colleen McCullough, View on women, *The Touch*, *The Thorn Birds*

### 1 Introduction

Colleen McCullough is a well-known contemporary Australian woman writer. She was born in the year of 1937 in a Catholic family in Wellington, New South Wales. This is a family which moves about a great deal, so McCullough spent most of her childhood in places outside her hometown. At various times, she lived in the areas of wheat growing, sheep raising, and sugar growing which later constitute the major background of several of her fictions, especially *The Thorn Birds*.

McCullough graduated from the University of Sydney. After graduation, she studied neurophysiology and finally became a medical technician. McCullough was a founder of the Department of Neurophysiology at the Royal North Shore Hospital of Sydney, and had worked there for several years. Later, she became a research associate in the Department of Neurology at Yale University and went to America. It is during this period of time that McCullough started her writing career.

The experience of working as a neurophysiologist helps her to make a lot of exquisite descriptions about women's physiology and psychology in her works. Therefore, people can get a true and vivid understanding of the female characters in her fictions.

McCullough is a versatile writer, "a writer of many genres". She has written many novels of different genres. For example, there are three romances and sagas, a psychological novel, a dystopia, a parody of romance and a series of historical novels. Among those works, the most famous and touching works are the two family sagas—*The Thorn Birds* and *The Touch*—which are often regarded as a companion volume. In those two novels, McCullough has created many female characters with different experiences and personalities. Through the descriptions of those women, McCullough actually portrays the true emotional experience of Australian women under the background of different social conditions, and reveals the final goal of women's real growth.

*The Thorn Birds* is McCullough's masterpiece, which created her reputation all around the world. It is a fascinating family saga, telling the life experiences and emotional courses of three generations of an Australian family—the Cleary family. The story of *The Touch* happens in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Australia. It is a story about the two generations of a family, in which McCullough reveals the oppressions upon women because of the uncultured civilization, and tells the development of women's self-consciousness. In both of the two novels, McCullough has created some vivid female characters. They also provide us a good material to study McCullough's view upon women.

Until now, there are some researches concerning the two novels of McCullough, but few of them have discussed McCullough's view upon women. This paper aims to talk about McCullough's view on women, which is also clearly reflected in the two novels. Through the analysis of the major female characters—Justin and Elizabeth—in the two novels, the paper tries to come to a conclusion that according to McCullough's point of view, women's real growth is the harmony of men and women. This

is also quite significant in the study of McCullough and Australian literature.

## **2 The Restraints of Body**

### **2.1 The oppression suffered by Elizabeth**

Elizabeth Drummond is the heroine of *The Touch*. She was born in the countryside of Scotland in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. She has studied in school for only two years and has never left her family. As the youngest child in her family, Elizabeth is always supposed to undertake the family responsibility. "...as the motherless youngest, she had spent all her little life being tyrannized by two terrible old men, her father and his minister of religion." Her father is the authority of the whole family, while her minister of religion is the authority of the church. Being similar to other women in patriarchal society, Elizabeth has always been under the control of men, both at home and in religious world.

Elizabeth's father is "a presbyter—an elder of the kirk". He is greedy and selfish, and he always regards his daughters as his own property. Therefore, when Alexandra Kinross wants to pay 1,000 pounds so as to marry his daughter Elizabeth, he had no hesitations in accepting the offer. In family, Elizabeth has neither right to struggle against her father's authority, nor does she want to. "It did not occur to Elizabeth that she might dispute this arbitrary decision about her destiny, either at that moment or much later." In fact, "The very thought of disobeying Father in such an important matter was more terrifying than anything she could imagine except a scolding from the Reverend Dr. Murray". From the very beginning of the story, we can see clearly that Elizabeth is a quite typical woman in a patriarchal world, who has been oppressed ever since her birth, and has no willingness to struggle against the authority and change her position.

Religion is also a great oppression upon women in that time, not only in spirit, but also in women's body. Because of the theory of the "original sin", women have been in a negative and lower position. Just as Dr. Murray told Elizabeth, "God gives pleasure in it only to husbands. Women are the source of evil and temptation, therefore women are to blame when men fall into fleshly error. It was Eve who seduced Adam, Eve who entered into league with the serpent, who was the Devil in disguise." Therefore, Elizabeth regards sex as a kind of corruption. This thought has given her such a great influence that even after many years of her marriage, Elizabeth has never got any happiness in the relationship between her husband and her. This later becomes an important source of her bitterness.

After marriage, Elizabeth has totally lost her freedom and free will. Her husband Alexandra is also a typical patriarchal authority. He also regards Elizabeth as his personal belonging. In this relationship, Elizabeth is not happy at all.

### **2.2 The awakening of female consciousness**

Although suffered from the oppression of her family and her husband, Elizabeth has never surrendered. During this period of time, her self-consciousness has begun to be awakened. At first, she tries to find some words to describe the control of her husband. "'Autocrat' was not a word she knew, so she used the word she did know, 'despot'." From that, she actually begins to get the discourse power back.

When she knows the relationship between her husband and his mistress Ruby, she bravely scolds and questions her husband Alexandra: "What a—an abominable situation! You keep a harlot mistress down in the valley, and a virtuous wife up on the heights, and never the twain shall meet! If she's Cleopatra, Medusa and I forget who else, what does that make me?" As the symbol of patriarchal family, Alexandra always controls Elizabeth's life at the very beginning of their marriage life. In his eyes, Elizabeth is just his private property. Elizabeth also questions him for that: "You bought me for your own purposes, and with no more compunction than you would have bought a side of beef."

This is a voice from the bottom of a woman. Elizabeth lives in a period during which women have no discourse power, but she bravely questions her husband. This is a very important and essential step for women to struggle against men's oppression and durance.

Later, she begins to go outside of her family. She likes to ride a horse to go to different places, because

“horseback was her favorite mode of escape”. She then finds The Pool, where she can occasionally get freedom and think about her true feelings. “...a worse than usual attack of wanting desperately to fly away from all constraints. From the moment she encountered The Pool, she went nowhere else if riding.” Her self-consciousness as a woman and as an independent individual is being realized and awakening.

### **3 The Liberation of Body**

#### **3.1 The revelation of Elizabeth**

In *The Touch*, The Pool is a quite symbolic place. It is in The Pool that Elizabeth begins to find her free will and independent soul, thus gradually becomes a mature woman. Also, she meets Lee Costevan at The Pool. Lee is the man who helps Elizabeth to experience bravely her true love and finally realizes her growth.

When Lee appears at The Pool, Elizabeth is attracted by his charm and his power of freedom. “He was naked, the light streaming over golden skin and a mane of straight black hair that fell down his spine to far past his waist. A Chinese? Then he turned in her direction, lifted his arms above his head and dived in a blur of movement to disappear with hardly a splash under the surface of the water...His private delight was almost painful to witness as he projected himself out of the water in a leap as high and powerful as one of the fish that lived in it; then, flinging back his soaking hair from his face, he lifted himself effortlessly out of the water on to the rock, gazed about, entranced, and stretched himself flat to bake in the sun...that beautiful, wonderful body that had no flaw, its muscles liquid beneath the smooth skin, the face rapt, frozen in perfect pleasure.”

For Elizabeth, the free body and charming appearance of Lee gives her a revelation, because “All her life she had yearned for freedom, had never encountered it personified in a human being until now, and it was unforgettable”.

This revelation gives Elizabeth some courage. After meeting Lee at The Pool, she falls in love with Lee. Years later, when Lee finds her again at The Pool, they finally tells the love to each other. That night, Elizabeth really experiences the beauty and sweetness of true love and responds the call of her desire from the bottom of her heart. After so many years, she eventually knows what marriage actually means. This is a liberation of women’s body. At this moment, this woman’s body has not been restrained within the patriarchal family. She learns to find out the real needs of her body. This behavior is quite rebellious, but is also very successful. After the liberation of her body, Elizabeth finds the way to her final growth and independence.

#### **3.2 The rebellion of Justin**

Compared with Elizabeth, Justin’s life and experience is quite different. In *The Thorn Birds*, Justin is the daughter of the heroine Meggie, and she is the third generation of the Cleary family. It is fair to say that her self-consciousness has been awakened ever since her birth, because she is such an anti-traditional woman.

Mary Jean Demarr once said, “Justine, the third generation of these women, is from the beginning very much her own person.” When she is a little girl, she “didn’t want to be hugged, kissed or made to laugh”, and everyone is firmly shut out by her. She always has her own thoughts and ways of doing things. Moreover, Justine is trying to be the master of her own life. At the age of seventeen, she makes a decision to go to Sydney to become an actress. This decision greatly surprises her mother Meggie, but Justine does not care about other people’s ideas. By becoming an actress, Justine wants to release and fully display her personality.

Justin often argues against women’s traditional ways of living, thinking that women can also have their own career. Justine has already been aware of the importance of women’s independence both at home and in society. She is trying to break the bonds, which have fettered women within the domestic sphere for so many centuries.

Justine is not a domestic creature at all. She says she “can’t see the point of frills in the kitchen”. Domesticity is an important virtue of women in patriarchal traditions against which Justine argues openly and bravely. When she is asked whether she wants to get married, her answer shows her scornful attitude towards marriage, as well as women’s unequal position in marriage.

As for Justin, her attitude towards virginity actually shows the liberation of women’s body. In the male-dominated world, women’s purity is regarded as an important virtue. They cannot lose their virginity to any men until they get married. Any woman who loses her purity will be immediately discarded by her family and her people. But Justin is brave and rebellious. About virginity, she says, “I have no intention of saving it for marriage...I’m just not sure who’s going to get the honor, that’s all.” In her mind, virginity is no longer some holy thing which she has to keep until she gets married. Moreover, it is her who has the right to choose the man “who’s going to get the honor”. That is to say, she is going to choose actively, instead of waiting to be chosen. Finally, she loses her virginity to a man named Arthur LeStrange, for the simple reason that she wants to be a good actress.

#### **4 The Harmonious Relationship Between Men and Women**

In *The Thorn Birds*, Justin finally meets the most important person in her life—Rainer. Rainer probably falls in love with Justine the first time they meet. Justine’s special temperament deeply attracts him and expels him to love her. Rainer’s love is based on his acquaintance with Justine. He understands that Justine is “a little monster” and is “bloody but unbowed”. He knows clearly what kind of girl Justine belongs to. Rainer is a man with great wealth and a good social status. In the old days, a man like him has the right to choose his own wife, no matter she agrees or not. But Rainer does not do that at all. He knows Justine and fully respects her. Therefore, Rainer only treats Justine as an intimate friend, although he loves her deeply. Their friendship lasts for many years. Just as Mary Jean DeMarr once points out, “Patiently, he does not rush her or force her to make choices she is unwilling or unable to make.” In this relationship, Rainer and Justine, male and female, are totally equal from the very beginning.

Rainer is using a sensible way to help Justine to pursue her own happiness. Finally, with the blessing and encouragement of her family, Justine marries Rainer. Marriage does not become the obstacle of Justine’s freedom and independence. She is promised that she can continue her acting career freely after marriage. Being Rainer’s wife, Justine is still an autonomous individual in society.

In *The Thorn Birds*, both Rainer and Justine are aware of the importance of equality and harmony between them. They love and respect each other, so they are able to live happily together. Justin has finished the growth as an individual woman.

In *The Touch*, Elizabeth also has similar thinking. Although experienced a quite unhappy marriage, she never gives up in male-female relationship. After she established the relationship with Lee and tasted the feeling of true love, she finally understands the importance of marriage. In fact, that is a marriage in which a man and a woman love each other, and in which a man and a woman are equal. Just as she said to her daughter in the novel: “Just promise me that when you marry—you will!—you marry for the right reasons. Liking, most of all. Love, of course. But also for the pleasures of the body. It isn’t supposed to be mentioned, as if it were something the Devil invented rather than God. But I cannot tell you how important it is. If you can share your private life with your husband wholeheartedly, nothing else will matter. You have a career of your own that’s cost far too much to abandon, and you mustn’t. If he wants you to abandon it, don’t marry him. You’ll always have sufficient income to live comfortably, so you can be married and still continue to practice your career.” From those words, we can understand the meaning of true love and marriage. It is also the real goal of a woman’s life. That is what McCullough always tries to tell people.

#### **5 Analysis of McCullough’s View**

From the story of Elizabeth, McCullough tries to portray the real situation of women. It is clear that

McCullough has already realized the oppressions women have always suffered from both their families and the church. In fact, in both of the two novels, McCullough clearly shows us women's bitterness and misfortunes during that period of time. The similar experiences can also be found in the life of Fiona and Meggie in *The Thorn Birds*. As we all know, Fiona and Meggie have never gained real happiness, just because of the oppression McCullough shows to us. Through their stories in the two novels, McCullough tries to awaken women's independent thinking and attract people's attention to women's situation. Only if people, or women themselves, realize the fact, can they really try to find some way to escape the poor and dependent condition. This is just the first thing women need to do in the feminist movement.

Moreover, from the story of Justin, McCullough shows us a quite extreme feminist image. She is able to control her life and to choose what she likes to do. She rejects a man's true love just because she doesn't want to be restrained. Justin's behavior is quite rebellious and revolutionary at that time, but it seems not to be the final ending of a feminist journey. McCullough finally arranges Justin's marrying Rainer. Through the happy marriage of the two, McCullough tries to tell us, the perfect goal of a woman's journey is to realize an equal and harmonious relationship between men and women. That is also a way to help women get real happiness and understand the meaning of life.

The harmony between genders is also an ideal goal of feminism. It recognizes gender differences, and meanwhile aims to pursue the equal rights, values, responsibilities, and opportunities between males and females both at home and in society. Just as what Virginia Woolf once points out in *A Room of One's Own*: "...it is natural for the sexes to co-operate...the union of man and woman makes for the greatest satisfaction, the most complete happiness...The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually co-operating."

## 6 Conclusion

*The Touch* and *The Thorn Birds* are the most famous family sagas written by Colleen McCullough. Through the portrait of different women characters, McCullough has objectively shown the real situation of women during that period of time, and critically tells us the true meaning of women's fighting and growth. In her novels, the establishment of the final harmony between men and women is the only and actual way to fulfill women's real happiness. Her view on women is significant. It provides us a brand new angle to think about feminist liberation, which is also quite worth of studying.

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