

## A Different Voice of Feminism: Self-salvation

ZHANG Yuying

School of Foreign Language, Jilin Business and Technology College, P.R.China, 130062  
Lih008866@163.com

**Abstract:** Doris Lessing and Margaret Atwood are prominent female writers in contemporary literary world. This paper tells us, if women really want to be independent, they must have self-awareness, divorce, homosexual or a room are not enough for women's liberty. Women should get rid of the patriarchal thoughts and discover their own values. Only after they get rid of ignorance and acknowledge that as the victim of male world, they themselves also share the responsibility for their current plight can they step out of dilemma and find a complete self.

**Keywords:** Women, Independence, Self-salvation

### 1 Introduction

In Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*, she used the term "patriarchy" (rule of the father) to describe the cause of women's oppression. Patriarchy subordinates the female to the male or treats the female as an inferior male. This concept of identity rests on the idea that women share the same experience: an external situation in which they find themselves — economic oppression, commercial exploitation, legal discrimination; and an internal response—the feeling of inadequacy, and a sense of narrow horizons. For a long time women and society all agree that patriarchy is main reason for the oppression of women and never cease to fighting with patriarchal society. Until now women have gained several rights though feminist movement, but they still don't realize real independence. Why? Women didn't realize that they should take responsibilities for the situation; they only blame patriarchal society and never reflect themselves to find answers form their own, although patriarchy is an important reason for the discrimination of women. Patriarchal society have existed for so many years, now we don't have enough energy to get rid of them in a short time, so we should take a self-reflection. Reflecting female themselves from their own acts and minds. Simone De Beauvoir said in *The Second Sex* "The women's effort has never been anything more than a symbolic agitation. They have gained only what men have been willing to Homosexual. Many women characters in novels of the 19th and 20th century are either driven into madness under the pressure, or forced to suicide in despair. The death is usually regarded as a symbol of freedom and rebirth, yet it cannot liberate women in reality for it is the most passive escape from reality and dilemma. Liberation, as well as freedom, has various forms according to one's sensation and understanding. It doesn't seem that the giving up of attachment with one's family and relations means salvation and freedom. When a woman finds her identity, finds her place in the society and can fulfill it with confidence and willingness, she has achieved her liberation. In 1972, Judith Viorst, a well-known author of children's literature, published her short, poetic, revised version of the fairy tale "Cinderella". Viorst's Cinderella is, after all, certainly not the Cinderella we remember. We all know the story of that Cinderella. Viorst's version of this fairy tale characterizes Cinderella a bit differently. In this re-creation, Cinderella now has opinions of her own. In the light of the day, she observes that the prince dose not seem to be as attractive as he was the other night at the ball. Asserting her own independence, she pretends the glass slipper dose not fit. Accordingly, there will be no marriage, for Cinderella herself has decided she does not want to marry the prince. This new Cinderella refuses to be defined as a "non-significant other". Unlike the old Cinderella, she will not allow herself to be shaped by her society. Viorst's re-created Cinderella wishes to debunk the false standards and beliefs about women, both in their lives and in their portrayal in literature, they have been carefully by the traditional Cinderella story. Women, says this Cinderella should not mindlessly wait for a handsome prince to come to the rescue. Women need not nor must not be like the traditional Cinderella: dependent creatures who without question or doubt accept the commands of their patriarchal society. Unlike the traditional

Cinderella, women must not weep about their lost in life but take an active part in creating and determining their own lives and their own futures.

## 2 Women as Victims

Doris Lessing was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 2007, she is an evergreen tree of British literature. She is one of the most widely recognized and most favored contemporary woman novelists. Doris Lessing hit the literary field in London by *The Grass Is Singing* in 1950, her first novel, which successfully won her worldwide fame and praise thereafter. As a “queen of Canadian literature”, Margaret Atwood also enjoys high international prestige for her remarkable contribution to English literature in novels, poetry, short stories and literature review. As a prolific writer, Margaret Atwood is the author of over 35 books translated into more than 30 languages; the recipient of many literary awards, such as the Booker, Canada’s Governor General’s Award and the Commonwealth Literary Prize. *Surfacing*, her early novel, was published in 1972. The two authors focus their attention on these aspects of women’s quest for identity: their dilemmas and choices, their perplexities and breakthroughs, their explorations and survivals. This paper will analyze the women’s questions according to two novels.

While fighting against patriarchal authority, Lessing and Atwood make us aware that women’s complicity is also responsible for the situation. It is not fair or enough to put the blame only on men for the establishment of a patriarchal state. Women’s awareness that their rights are closely connected with other women’s rights needs to be aroused. If they merely care for their own rights and neglect the rights of other women, they will be taken advantage of by some men for the purpose of building a male-centered world. At that time, no women’s rights can be guaranteed. In *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, Margaret Atwood groups the subjects of Canadian literature into “four basic victim position”. The victim position in sexual relationship of women is quite similar to Canada’s status influenced and threatened by the powerful American. In Atwood’s view, both women and Canada occupy a marginal position and both are an other. Position one: to deny the fact that you are a victim. This uses up a lot of energy, as you must spend much time explaining away the obvious, suppressing anger, and pretending that certain visible facts do not exist. Position two: to acknowledge the fact that you are a victim, but to explain this as an act of Fact, Will of God, the dictates of Biology (in the case of women, for instance), the necessity decreed by History, or Economics, or the Unconscious, or any other large general powerful ideas. You can neither be blamed for your position nor be expected to do anything about it. You can be resigned and long-suffering, or you can kick against the pricks and make a fuss; for who can fight Fate (or the Will of God, or Biology)? You are permanently excused from changing it. Position three: to acknowledge the fact that you are a victim but to refuse to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable. As in: “look what’s being done to me, and it isn’t Fate, it isn’t the Will of God. Therefore I can stop seeing myself as a fated victim.” Position four: to be a creative non-victim. Creative activity of all kinds becomes possible. Energy is no longer being suppressed (as in position one) or used up for displacement of the cause, or for passing your victimization along to others (Man kicks Child, Child kicks Dog) as in position two; nor is it being used for the dynamic anger of position three. And you are able to accept your own experience for what it is, rather than having to distort it to make it correspond with others’ versions of it (particularly those of your oppressors). The central question “who is responsible?” (222). The answers provided in the *The Grass Is Singing* and *Surfacing* are that responsibility lie mostly with female themselves. It is the same for women and although the protagonist shirks responsibility and shifts the blame onto others, after her spiritual and psychological journey she has to acknowledge that in the power conflict, she as a woman, has not only played the role of a victim, but also acted as a partner, an accomplice. It is only after the protagonist accepts the fact of her responsibility in her own destruction can she be the savior of herself and move from ignorance to knowledge, from speechless to language, from alienation to authenticity. The central question “who is responsible?”. Lessing said the free women in the novel understand how oppression of women is connected to the class struggle, who have professions and family, who lead independent lives;

but they are fragmented and helpless creatures, still locked into dependency upon men.

### **3 The Only Way for Women: Self-salvation**

Doris Lessing published her first novel *The Grass Is Singing* in 1950 and became well-known since then. In *The Grass Is Singing*, Lessing presented the readers a picture of the colonized land, offering the outsiders an opportunity to get a better understanding of the colonies during that period via the story of the protagonist, Mary Turner. The novel tells the story of a white farmer and her marriage to Dick. It focuses on how Mary Turner perceives her relationship with her husband, and with the white community in Southern Rhodesia, and with the native, and analyzes what roles Mary Turner plays in the three significant spots in her life. In the process of her self-identity, Mary Turner's relationships with men and with the black influence how she perceives her subject position in the settler society. When we first met Mary she was already in her mid-thirties, working in a town as a secretary, having escaped from an unhappy country and a drunken father. But she still remained a 16 year old girl, locked away in a girls hotel, and she would "still wear her hair little-girl fashion on her shoulders, and wore little-girl frocks in pastel colors, and kept her shy, naive manner" Within that community, Mary created for herself an "impersonal" world to protect her from facing the inner self with its repressed aspects: "she went on as companionable, as adaptable, as aloof and as heart-whole as ever, working as hard enjoying herself as she ever did in the offices, and never for one moment alone, except when she was asleep. Mary knew so little about herself, she could hardly establish her own identity. Mary lacks self-consciousness and self-identification about social milieu around her, which has never entered into her world. She is like an outsider, standing aloof from it and judging it with apathy and innocence. Her indifference, as well as her empty inner world deprives her of a value system to support her spiritual impetus. The self in her inner most being is taken no notice of by herself, which begins her bitter and painstaking journey on the spiritual wasteland. In fact, she has never searched for the "self" in her, which is ignored by her limited acknowledgment and arid consciousness. She has come to look upon sex as one of the punishment women must bear. It had never occurred to her that her father, too, might have suffered. 'About what?' 'She would have retorted, had anyone suggested it. 'He's a man, isn't he? He can do as he likes.' She had inherited from her mother an arid feminism". She resists the traditional role of wife by refusing adulthood, remaining "girlish", she likes the "friendly impersonality". Mary lived without self-identity. She tried to solve the problems by depending on others or escaping the dilemma. She just conformed to the society's standard by getting married but her marriage was doomed to failure from the every beginning. Her murky relationship with Moses, the black labored, led finally to her death. Just before her death, she came to realize that the cause of her present state was that she had been turning for outside forces to save herself. But it was too late. Mary came to the end of her journey. Mary attempted to bury her past, and the more she repressed it, the more Control it gained over her, destroying her capacity for facing or understanding the present.

Margaret Atwood's second novel *Surfacing* earned critical and popular acclaim in Canada and the United States after its publication in 1972. *Surfacing* is structured around the point of view of a young woman who travels with her boyfriend and two married friends to a remote island on a lake in Northern Quebec, where she spent much of her childhood, to search for her missing father. Accompanied by her lover and another young couple, she becomes caught up in her past and in questioning her future. Men's twin domination over nature and women, and traces back to the root of this twin domination—patriarchal dualism. The bleak sight the protagonist encounters on her back home and the human's exploitation, destroy, and slaughter on forests, lakes and animals she witnesses during her stay on the island force her to realize human's, especially men's invasion of nature. Men's domination over women in the novel is reflected by the author's description of four couples, namely the protagonist's parents, David and Anna, the protagonist and her ex-husband, and the protagonist and her present lover. Women from these four pairs. With no exception, are all at subordinate, passive and even victimized position; while their husbands or lovers who place themselves above women are the real rules. Patriarchal

dualism divides the world into opposed pairs of concepts, for example, man/woman, reason/emotion, culture/nature, mind/body, etc. it insists that men and anything with male qualities are superior to women and anything with female qualities.

Anna is not only the victim of the patriarchal society but also the accomplice of it. When Anna forgets to take her makeup to the island, the narrator tells her that she does not need it on the island as there is no one to see her. Anna replies that David does not like to see her without it, and in the very next breath contradicts herself by saying that he does not know she wears it. This self-contradiction shows how Anna has internalized the beliefs and expectations of dominant order. She wears it because she believes that it is expected, that women have to do make up in order to please men and thus maintain their place in the symbolic systems. When protagonist throws the humiliating films which take the naked Anna with rotten heron, Anna chooses to report her act to David and thus totally become an agent of the phallogocentric force. "Was desperate, her body her only weapon and she was fighting for her life ... she was fighting because if she ever surrender, the balance of power would be broken and he would go elsewhere. To continue the war." Anna has to allow herself to become a sex object since "he's got this little set of rules. If I break one of them I get punished, except he keeps changing them, so I am never sure". Although she feels angry about the rules, Anna never deviates from them. She remains a constant conformer to these rules. Anna even suspects that David's delight in punishing her and making her cry hinges on the fact that "he can't do it himself."

"I" have lost the ability to experience normal feelings, she recalls that her current man-friend, Joe was impressed by her coolness the first time they made love. She, on the other hand, found her behavior unremarkable because she did not feel anything. She is tortured by Joe's demand that she says she love him because she does not believe the word has any meaning. The protagonist's alienation from her feelings is reflected in her dispassionate voice. Everything is seen; nothing is felt. The small town, the cabin in the woods where she grew up, her three friends, even her memories are accurately recorded –or so it seems.

The protagonist's inability to feel is paralleled by an inability to act. Her selective vision holds fast to the illusion that she is helpless and "they" do things to her. Hurt and angry that her parents died before endowing her with their power, she accuses them of having hurt her. "They have no rights to get old," she complains, remaining blind to the pain her abrupt departure from home doubtless caused them. She remembers that once she thought a certain purple bean on a high pole was a source of powder I would have been evil." Her association of power with evil and her dissociation of herself from both reflect a typical female delusion of innocence. Hiding from her complicity in evil feeds a false belief that she can do nothing but witness her victimization. In order to regain her powder the protagonists must realize that she does not live in a world where only others have powder or do evil. At last she understands that she is losing touch with reality and acknowledges, "That is the real danger now, the hospital or the zoo. Where we are put...when we can no longer cope." Yet she determines that she will never be a victim again. If one cannot communicate, cannot feel, has no name, has been so thoroughly divided, one is like Atwood's protagonist at the beginning of the novel, psychologically dead. She describes her voluntary abortion as "a section of my life, sliced off from me like a Siamese twin, my own flesh canceled". Barbara Hill Rigney labels this protagonist as "a psychological suicide, a woman with no name, an artist with no art from and no past or tradition that she can recall correctly." Rigney discusses the failed aspects, the "lacks," which plague the narrator's consciousness and believes that the woman "fails in her responsibility to herself as much as if she had committed suicide" (40). The narrator has in essence destroyed the vital parts of herself through her abortion, through false or loveless unions with men, through rejection of her family, and through commercial corruption of her artistic vision.

#### 4 Conclusion

The two female protagonists are both victims in patriarchal society. Two authors hint the salvation of woman, or the liberation of woman, comes from within herself, from her inner freedom. Only can we

eliminate the binary oppositions and achieving some kind of harmony between male and female.

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