

The Feminist Thoughts of Moll Flanders in *Moll Flanders*

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Moll Flanders is one of Daniel Defoe's masterpieces. The protagonist—Moll Flanders is a female character from lower class that Daniel Defoe first depicted in his novel. The image of Moll Flanders has attracted the attention of many critics since it was created. Critics viewed her as a “whore”, because she had been married for five times in the comparatively conservative society. This paper attempts to analyze the feminist thoughts of the protagonist—Moll Flanders and makes an exploration upon Moll Flanders' fate from the perspective of feminism so as to encourage females to pursue whatever they want in order to acquire equal rights with men.

Keywords: feminism, resistance, equality, patriarchal society, pursuit

Introduction

Moll Flanders is one of the masterpieces written by Daniel Defoe (1660-1731), the founder of the realistic novel. Compared with the contemporary writer, Defoe runs in front of the times by his female consciousness to protect women's rights representatively at early times in England.

In *Moll Flanders*, Daniel Defoe portrayed an image of a woman named Moll Flanders. She was born in Newgate prison because her mother was a thief. Since her birth, she lost her parents and was brought up in an orphanage. Under the pressure of making a living, she got married for five times and she even gave up her self-esteem to be a mistress. As time went by, Moll gradually lost the charm of appearance, she also lost the means to support her living. As for a woman like her without enough education, she had no other choice but to be trapped into the fatal cycle to be a thief like her mother. At last she was expelled to Virginia. But what was fortunate was that she finally lived a life she dreamed of with her diligence and wisdom.

England was still a patriarchal society in 18th century. For women, the best way to gain social status and acquire recognition was marriage and it was thought to be the only way. However, under the influence of the Enlightenment, Defoe advocated that men and women should be equal in all aspects of social life and family life. His broad view helped him create the great piece of *Moll Flanders*. Nevertheless, to some extent, Defoe's feminism inherits from patriarchal consciousness.

Based on the view point of feminist criticism, the paper discusses the reason why Moll Flanders becomes a thief and prostitute, and a victim of the patriarchal society. This paper explores deeply into the text to find a new perspective and evidence to inspect Moll Flanders on the ground of women and encourages women to be brave and independent.

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Economic and Marital Influence on Moll Flanders' Tragic Life

No matter what changes the Industrial Revolution brought to England in the 18th century, obviously men still dominated the world. Under the mixed influence of the patriarchal society and the Industrial Revolution, men were superior to women not only in social status but also in economic status.

Since the 19th century, people gradually attach great importance to feminism. As the development of capitalism, people's notion has been changed. And female consciousness has been aroused. "In Moll Flanders, Moll Flanders was merely a victim of the male-centered society. She was driven by all the forces of the world to pursue the immoral things"(Holzner, 2001, p. 52). The inner conflicts of Moll Flanders was well recognized just as she felt what she did was contradictory to what she thought when she got married with the banker friend, "but I, prompt by that worst of Devils, Poverty, returned to the vice Practice, and make the advantage of what they call a handsome face, be the relief to my necessities, and beauty be a pimp to vice"(Daniel, 1971, p. 188). It is evident that what Moll Flanders did was not exactly out of her choice. What she intended to do was to get rid of poverty. At that time, money had the power to determine almost everything, including marriage, status, and even people's fate, especially women's fate. It was not her own fatal propensity that strengthened Moll's behavior but the continuous stimulation of the socio-economic necessity: "Give me not poverty least I Steal" (Daniel, 1971, p. 191). Such poverty brought about a lot of problems for people, particularly for women like Moll.

Between 17th and 18th century, it was a custom for a man to choose to marry the women who had a fortune. Unfortunately, Moll Flanders was a woman who did not have any possession. Though as a maid in her young age, she shared many chances with the daughter in her employer in Colchester. She had the opportunity to be educated and even she was more talent than any of them. As Moll put it herself:

The lady had masters home to the House to teach her daughters to dance, and to speak French, and to Write, and others to teach them Music; and as I was always with them, I learned as fast as they. (Daniel, 1971, p. 18)

But she lacked what they had already had since their birth—money. As for Moll, being a woman was a misfortune and being a woman without money was a double misfortune.

For example, Moll's second marriage ended up with tragedy like the first one. It brought her no fortune. Her money was almost wasted by her new husband. After the man was arrested, she left where she used to live and renamed Flanders. The reality of the society required Moll to develop a character which was totally different from what it was expected. She had to be strong, active, and flexible. In order to survive, Moll had to hide her real self and pretended to go in for the society. After several miserable marriages, she had to be submissive to the society beyond her own willingness.

Under the influence of both the economy and patriarchal society, Moll Flanders bore great pressure. Where there is oppression, there is resistance. All these pressure lays the foundation for the germination of Moll's feminism. She gradually wanted to control her life by herself and to set foot on the land she dreamed of.

Origination and Development of Female Awareness of Moll Flanders

"First-wave feminism thrived during 18th century and the early 20th century"(Angela, 2009, p. 125). Moll Flanders set on such a background so that Moll Flanders showed her feminist thoughts not only in her childhood, but also in her adulthood, "Her feminism was original and was much influenced by gypsies' thoughts of freedom"

(Langford, 1992, p. 164).

When she was eight, she should be sent to some rich people's home to be a maid. However, she did not want to be a housemaid radically, so she talked to her Mistress every day that she had the ability to support herself through her own diligence. When she was young, Moll had the chance to get in touch with the women of upper classes. For one thing, she admired those women, because they wore beautiful clothes and lived a wealthy life; for another, she wanted to become such a woman in the future. Yet, she decided to realize her dream through her hard work without doing illegal things. At that time, she made her ambition to be a "Gentlewoman". Maybe she did not understand what is "Gentlewoman" clearly. To gain a proper status in the society is also the aim of feminist movement.

From the examples above, readers learn that feminist thoughts first originated from Moll's childhood. Since she was young, she gradually acquired the strength to fight against the unfair treatment she experienced.

After the death of the younger brother, Moll had no one to rely on. Since then, she made up her mind to live a life with legal methods on her own. Her independence was strengthened as time went by. In the patriarchal society, women with independent spirit were viewed as pioneers.

Defoe does not have better ways for females to elevate their status, his only solution is to advice women to educate themselves so that they have the power to survive in the masculine world. Moll had good "learning abilities". She had learned cheating from her affairs with the elder brother. Moll and the elder brother had relationship, yet, the elder brother turned her into the wife of his younger brother, "diligently did... cheat him, and had the Thanks of a faithful Friend for shifting off his Whore into his Brothers Arms for a Wife" (Daniel, 1971, p. 58). Through the experience, Moll firstly knew how gentlemen could behave. They would use any method to satisfy their affections, and sometimes give up humanity and justice to secure themselves.

Moll gradually grasped something important from her marital life. She wanted to use what she had learned to remind her female friends that males and females were equal. In her mind, the disadvantages of women in marriage related to men mostly, "the Disadvantages of the Women, is a terrible Scandal upon the Men, and it lies here, and here only" (Daniel, 1971, p. 74). Moll thought that a hasty marriage was always the reason why a woman got a terrible husband in the most time so she advised women to obey the rules of a good marriage and think twice before they leaped, then females would have a happy marital life, "In a Word, there is no Woman, Deformity, or lost Reputation excepted, but if she marriages well, may be married safely one time or other". (Daniel, 1971, p. 76). These words seem to be the feminist manifesto. She encouraged women to choose a satisfied marriage based on her own life experience.

In Moll's adulthood, her feminism mainly is shown in her love affairs and marital life, which presents her rebellious spirit. Since then, her feminist sparking cast into her rest life.

Moll Flanders' Pursuit for Equality in the Patriarchal Society

"In the patriarchal society, men and women were unequal, not only in the marital life, but also in the social life" (Erikson, 1986, p. 89). Men played the active role in marriages, yet, women were subordinate to men. Males had the power to choose their wife randomly and inquired about their property condition, on the contrary, what females could do was merely obeying orders. After Moll's second marriage, Moll made friends with a young wealthy lady, who was courted by a young sea captain. He was very angry and abandoned the young lady because

she inquired his character secretly among his neighbors. Surprisingly, he then courted a poor woman with less fortune. Moll took this opportunity to help the young lady to take revenge to the man. She promised to her that she would “bring the man to her door again, and make him beg to be let in” (Daniel, 1971, p. 69). At first, Moll led the young lady to say to the people around her that it was she who terminated the engagement with the captain because he lied. She discovered that the captain had got married and did not have the fortune as he claimed. What’s worse was that he was very bad-tempered. Hence, she deemed that it was improper to marry him. In the meanwhile, Moll embellished the rumors by continuing making up story of the captain. Thus the captain’s reputation was destroyed. He had no choice but to go back to the door of the young lady. Then the lady “had her full Revenge of him” (Daniel, 1971, p. 71). The success of the revenge owed to Moll. She fought for the equality between men and women for herself, at the same time she helped her friend to play the equal role in love affairs and in the marriage.

Defoe uses a large amount of words to express the process of Moll’s revenge. One of the reasons is that it is the first success of Moll in the marriage market, though she is only a director in this case. The revenge presents Moll’s wisdom clearly and implies her resistance against the traditional custom.

To some extent, her pursuit for equality represents the awakening of feminism because the most important sign of feminism is to realize the equality between men and women. That Moll fight against men shows Moll’s resistance against the male-centered world.

Conclusion

In the money-obsessed society, a woman like Moll from a low social status merely has no property so as to live a tough life in the patriarchal society. However, in order to survive, she tries every possible way to support her life. In the beginning, she deems that marriage is the best choice. However, five failures in the marriages make her know that she has no other choice but to be independent. Later, she realizes that being independent seems not to solve all the problems that life brings to her. Thus, she begins to pursue the equal rights between men and women. She is so courageous that she is not fettered by the social situation of that time. Indeed, she does so much that can’t be accepted by the cotemporary people and the society, it has to be admitted that what she has done is driven by her pioneering feminist thoughts, and her courage to break the traditional rules in the patriarchal society is worthy of encouragement.

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