

George Orwell's Misogyny—A Feminist Interpretation of *Animal Farm*

WANG Xinyue

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

George Orwell, formerly known as Eric Arthur Blair, was one of the greatest English novelists, essayists, and critics of the 20th century. *Animal Farm* is the most famous political allegorical novel in the world. The most discussed topics about this novel are totalitarianism and utopia, and few people discuss this novel full of male color from the perspective of women. As a male-oriented novel, people can clearly feel that the female images in the novel are mostly negative, ignorant, obedient and enjoying the cozy life, and the female images created are mostly with the subjective color of the writer. Behind this phenomenon is the discrimination of male writers against women. Affected by patriarchal culture, male writers often belittle or suppress women in their literary works. This paper attempts to analyze the images of female characters in *Animal Farm*, and Orwell's tendency of misogyny from a feminist perspective. Orwell's works reflect the social status of women as the "second sex". It is easy to recognize his androcentrism, ingrained thoughts of gender hierarchy and intense misogyny.

Keywords: *Animal Farm*, George Orwell, misogyny, feminism

Introduction

The term "misogyny", commonly used in criticizing male-centered literature with feminist criticism, refers to distorting and belittling the images of women and the emotion and themes that attributing all crimes to women. In the view of feminist critics, the images of women depicted in traditional literary works, especially those of male writers, are mostly false images, which are not consistent with the images of women in real life, only reflect male writers' gender prejudice and their desire to subordinate women. Orwell's *Animal Farm*, with its brilliant political allegory, has aroused a huge response and become an anti-totalitarian classic. However, in terms of gender, it is full of thought of androcentrism, and Orwell's strong misogyny sentiment is reflected in the portrayal of women in the book.

Many critics and scholars have been expressed admiration and affection for Orwell himself and his works. But since the 1980s, Orwell has been criticized by feminists, argued that his works offer a portrait of patriarchal power, was colored by personal overtones and gender issues.

We can see in *The Orwell Mystique: A Study in Male Ideology* (1984) by Daphne Patai, she became increasingly aware of the profound misogyny "Orwell may not have been aware of the extent of his preoccupation with manhood and masculinity, but he was certainly conscious of his own misogyny and antifeminism" (p. 17). In *Every Intellectual's Big Brother: George Orwell's Literary Siblings* (2006) by John

WANG Xinyue, Master of Arts, postgraduate student, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

Rodden, he said that “The persistent theme of denigrating comments, attitudes, and imagery relating to women is simply much too strong, I think, to contradict” (p. 162). And from the analysis of the characters in *George Orwell’s Animal Farm* (2006) by Harold Bloom, we can also see that the descriptions of female characters are biased. In *Masculinity and Patriarchal Villainy in the British Novel: From Hitler to Voldemort* (2020) by Sara Martín, he considered that “The controversy about Orwell’s own patriarchal positioning and his manifest anti-feminism and misogyny erupted, precisely, around the year 1984” (p. 44). This paper intends to analyze Orwell’s work *Animal Farm* from the perspective of feminism, discuss the impact of Orwell’s tendency of misogyny on the females he created.

The Roots of Orwell’s Misogyny

Background of Times

Objectively speaking, Orwell lived in 20th century—an undoubtedly patriarchal society, so the patriarchal color presented in his works reflects the objective reality to a certain extent. The industrial revolution and the Second World War forced a large number of women out of the family and into various fields. With the change of this situation, women’s influence on society and women’s social rights are receiving increasing attention. All these changes make him hate women and advocate the superiority of male supremacy.

Background of Growth

However, the factor of the times only occupies a very small aspect. More importantly, Orwell’s growth experience plays a shaping role in his thought. Orwell’s evident misogyny should not be excused as products of his time, but judged by “standards at he himself proclaimed” (Rodden, 2006, p. 162).

Orwell was born in Bengal, India. When he was one year old, his mother returned to England with him, while his father stayed in India. Orwell spent most of his childhood without his father, so his mother took charge. He resented his mother’s position of authority.

Orwell was also unhappy with his mother’s decision to send him to boarding school. His *Such, Such Were Joys* are such a memoir of his school life which tells the story that he was beaten and abused by other classmates, more importantly by the capricious and domineering headmistress. From here, we find the reason why Orwell strongly dislikes female authority.

After coming of age, Orwell also expressed his opposition and resentment towards feminism. In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, He classified “feminists” and “nudists” as the same category, and thought that they were eccentric people who influenced the development of society. Therefore, Orwell did not agree with or even hated the women’s Liberation Movement in the 1960s. He was disgusted with women, especially those with revolutionary spirit and deviant ways.

Manifestations of Misogyny on *Animal Farm*

The Plunder of Female Discourse Power

The term “voice” is regarded by feminism as an important symbol of social identity. If females want to occupy a certain position in a male-centered society, they must have their own voice. But society is male-centered, and females are often in a state of aphasia, females in this social order can only be vague or silent. In *Animal Farm*, all males have the right of speech, such as Old Major, Napoleon, and so on. They are in the leading position and have the absolute discourse power.

When *Animal Farm* begins to descend into a totalitarian state under Napoleon, Clover becomes dismayed, but she does not have the discourse power to resist the pigs. She detects changes to the Seven Commandments but accepts everything the pigs say. In this sense, she becomes a witness to the corruption silently.

When Napoleon insists the hens must surrender their eggs, they try to refuse, but the rebellion is unsuccessful, they have to comprise silently.

Muriel, a well-educated white goat who are able to interpret what's going on, but who do not have the power to speak her minds. She found the Seven Commandments changed many times, but did not have the courage to speak out.

The Belittling of Females

Misogyny is mainly embodied as a kind of discourse power, that is, the demeaning of females' personality in the way of language and talk, which shows the extreme contempt of the patriarchy for females. In many of the classics, females are portrayed as foolish, greedy, cunning, fallen, etc.

Foolish Female Images

The most representative example is Mollie—a conceited, white mare. The author often uses the word “foolish” to describe her. For instance, the foolish mare Mollie shakes her mane while she crunches sugar. Mollie asks the most foolish questions. “She had taken a piece of blue ribbon from Mrs. Jones’s dressing-table, and was holding it against her shoulder and admiring herself in the glass in a very foolish manner” (Orwell, 1996, p. 41).

Evasive Female Images

The females on *Animal Farm* were portrayed as pursuing superficial vanity and self-interest, craving comfort and pleasure with no concern for revolution-related issues. Mollie, cat and Mrs. Jones are typical examples.

Prior to the revolution, Mollie and the cat were already pretty comfortable with their lot in life. Mollie loves sugar and wearing pretty ribbons in her mane, and she never cares much for the revolution. Mollie’s main concern is whether she will be able to maintain her comparatively decadent lifestyle after the rebellion.

The greedy and self-serving cat is indifferent to everything. She merely takes interested in participating in the rebellion when there is no toll or danger, and she is only willing to support revolution when it might help her.

As for Mrs. Jones, she was a timid and superficial woman who cared not for the affairs of state but for her own interests. When the animals revolted, Mrs. Jones “hurriedly flung a few possessions into a carpet bag, and slipped out of the farm by another way” (Orwell, 1996, p. 39).

Fallen Female Images

Mollie was accepting sugar and ribbons from the men, has even been caught in flagrante delicto allowing her nose to be stroked. She gave up the revolution completely and became a vassal of mankind. Here the author depicted Mollie in terms of a fallen woman of Victorian melodrama, reflecting his satire of female.

The Objectification of Females

Misogyny is also manifested in the promotion of the objectification of females under the rule of patriarchal culture, which gradually reaches its peak. Females are “goods” and “things”. Not only because they can carry on the family line for males, but also because they are machines for bearing children.

Females as Breeding Machines

Old Major said that he have over 400 children. Clover has four foals. Jessie and Bluebell had both whelped, giving birth to nine sturdy puppies. The four sows give birth to 31 piglets.

Even females have been brainwashed into thinking that it is glorious to have more children. You would frequently hear one hen talk to another, "Under the guidance of our Leader, Comrade Napoleon, I have laid five eggs in six days" (Orwell, 1996, p. 94).

Females Were Deprived of Custody

Males also deprive females of the right to raise their children. Hens were asked to sacrifice their eggs in exchange for money. After nine puppies were weaned, Napoleon immediately took them away from their mother, claiming that he would take responsibility for their education. Thirty-one young piglets left their mother when their born.

The Opposition Between the Both Sexes

A Comparison of the Status of Males and Females

Beauvoir classifies women as "Other". The Other is the inessential. The so-called "Other" is relative to males from the perspective of feminism. They set themselves up as the essential, as opposed to the Other. Males are usually in the dominant position, while the females are in the subordinate position. Orwell marginalizes the female roles and arbitrarily devalues females and describes them by stereotypes. Compared to depiction of males, which occupies a significant part, females appear only as background figures. Some female characters have been completely ignored, usually anonymous as a group.

A Comparison of the Appearance of Males and Females

Males are usually powerful, while females are weak. The difference in descriptions between the two horses is a stark example. Clover was described as "a stout motherly mare approaching middle life, who had never completely got her figure back after her fourth foal" (Orwell, 1996, p. 26). While the description of stallion Boxer is that "Boxer was an enormous beast, nearly eighteen hands high, and as strong as any two ordinary horses put together". "He was universally respected for his steadiness of character and tremendous powers of work" (p. 26).

A Comparison of the Behavior of Males and Females

Males usually represent diligence and bravery in the book. Females are described idle and irresponsible. Boxer have great muscles to do many hard works, he looks more like three horses than one. He adapted "I will work harder!" (Orwell, 1996, p. 113) as his motto and tirelessly build the windmill, ultimately fell down on the post. However, Mollie and cat constantly escape from the labor.

Conclusion

On the one hand, Orwell wanted to express his opposition to totalitarianism through *Animal Farm*. Farm animals can enjoy the fruits of their labor without the tyranny of humans, every animal can live equally. On the other hand, it expresses the discrimination and belittling of female animals, revealing his misogyny which shows the contradiction of his thinking. Objectively speaking, this is not correct behavior and thought, if there is no gender equality, then it cannot achieve the real sense of equality. This paper does not intend to deny Orwell's status as an outstanding writer in the 20th century and the political thought and literary artistic value

of his works, but to expose the other side of the thought of Orwell's works—his misogyny in works. Only by facing up to his limitations can we understand his works more comprehensively.

References

- Beauvoir, S. D. (2015). *The second sex*. London: Vintage Classics.
- Bloom, H. (2006). *George Orwell's animal farm*. New York: Infobase Publishing.
- Martin, S. (2020). *Masculinity and patriarchal villainy in the British Novel: From Hitler to Voldemort*. New York: Routledge.
- Orwell, G. (1996). *Animal farm*. London: Signet Classics.
- Patai, D. (1984). *The Orwell mystique: A study in male ideology*. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press.
- Rodden, J. (2006). *Every intellectual's big brother: George Orwell's literary siblings*. The United States of America: The University of Texas Press.
- Smith, J. (2013). *Misogynies*. London: Westbourne.