

A comparative study between Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin and Zhang Ailing's love in a fallen city

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Abstract: Harriet Beecher Stowe and Zhang Ailing are two renowned female writers who enjoy highly comments in the history of female feminism literature. They are writing from their own experiences and female perspectives to awaken the females and common people to pursue personal happiness and freedom. Besides, they advocated to transfer feminist ideas into daily behaviors. Harriet Beecher Stowe's advocacy of abolishing slavery promoted the large-scale social thinking, echoing the abolition movements in Britain and France. Her feminist ideas not only broke the shackles from being male's attachments of females, but also changing the weak and fragile images of females. What's more important, she led the American society to rethink about slavery and female position. However, the Chinese female writer, Zhang Ailing, as one of the

“Four Female Talents” her feminist ideas are still restricted to be a fancier attachment to males. The ultimate goal of females’ fighting and calculating lays on male for financial support again. From her masterpiece, *Love in a Fallen City*, the heroine still puts great efforts on entertaining males for material’s sake. From the spiritual level, females are still inferior to males, even with the strong and harsh words in the novel. The feminist ideas of Zhang Ailing represented the conflict and struggle of Chinese females of that era between feudal thoughts and modern thinkings. This essay explores the two female writers’ feminist ideas on comparative literary criticism. The similarities and differences between them were also identified through comparison between feminist ideas and leading figures of the novels.

Keywords: Harriet Beecher Stowe, Love in a Fallen City, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Zhang Ailing

INTRODUCTION

America and China achieved liberation after fierce struggle and fights, from the America’s *Emancipation Proclamation* during the Lincoln’s presidency and China’s The May Fourth Movement, an anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism, cultural, and political movement in early modern China, the two countries shared a lot in common in terms of liberation. Even under the similar social circumstances, two countries walked quite different roads towards personal freedom and self-value achievement. These changes got reflected in literature works, *Uncle Tom. ’s Cabin* and *Love in a Fallen City*.

Harriet Beecher Stowe and Zhang Ailing are two prestigious female writers who are prestigious internationally for their own masterpieces *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Love in a Fallen City* which reflect their feminist ideas on liberation, the strong will of pursuing personal happiness, freedom and unique independent ideas perfectly.

Uncle Tom’s Cabin encouraged countless slaves to pursue freedom. It tells us the story of a black loyal and diligent slave named Tom in Kentucky who was still sold by his owner, Mr. Shelby to cover his debt after Uncle Tom worked for him for many years and on the journey to New Oreland he saved a girl named Eva who was a Christian too and they became close friends. Because of Sam’s kind behavior, Eva’s father took Tom away and he became their servant. Though Tom was sold to an evil and mean slaveholder later after Eva’s death but he was always ready to help anyone who needed help, such as the servant girl Cassy and Elisa to be free. Harriet Beecher Stowe cast one of the greatest literary images, Uncle Tom, who is the embodiment of God in the world (hang, Mengyun . 2016.p249). Harriet Beecher Stowe tried to offer a solution to liberate the slavery by love to all which means religious method. Uncle Tom was so selfless even his third slave owner Legree whipped Uncle Tom to death, Uncle Tom forgave him and under his guidance and encouragements, all the slaves achieved their dreams and unite with family members again in the dreamland for slaves, named Libera in Africa, a free and wonderful country for slaves.

Zhang Ailing was one of the earliest “Four Talented Ladies” during the “May Fourth Movement” period in old China; the other three were Bing Xin, Lu Yin and Feng Ruanjun (Zhang Yuxiu, 2008,p 5). Her only happy ending masterpiece *Love in a Fallen City* has always been praised as the beginning of females’ awakening in China. *Love in a Fallen City* told us a love story about a lady named Bai Liusu. After all the money

was grabbed by her brothers and sisters-in-law, she decided to seduce the man who was originally designed to be introduced to her sister to take a revenge and move out of that family at the same time, even when she knew that the man was wicked and cunning, who just looked for lovers. Women's low status and incapability of supporting themselves made them follow this sorrow way so as to survive (Youjing, 2008). A deep and clear understanding of Chinese women's desolate situations and helpless fates gave the writer inspirations to depict Chinese women's suffering from social and patrilineal suppressions with a purpose to expose those pains to public not to twist libel or attack Chinese women which became a treasure in feminism research (Kong Youjing, 2008, p48). Mr. Fu Lei once commented on *Love in a Fallen City*, said: "Flirting, which almost takes up half of the novel, is some spiritual games of those hippy hedonists. Although they are smart, elegant, and funny, those games are in the end extraction of the nearly morbid society" (Fu Lei, *Collected Works of Fu Lei*, 238).

This research will answer two research questions:

Research Question 1:

What are the similarities in terms of feminism ideas between the two female authors reflected through their masterpieces?

Research Question 2:

What are the differences in terms of feminism ideas between the two female authors reflected through their masterpieces?

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Harriet Beecher Stowe was born in a devout Christian family who moved to Cincinnati, Ohio in 1832, where is opposite to the two typical states Indiana and Illinois which enjoyed a long history of keeping slavery in the plantations. Harriet Beecher Stowe grew up in a peaceful religious family which can be seen from her family members. First, her father Riman Bishop was one of the most representative Calvinist and pastor in the 19th century and her mother was a devoted Christian, her brother Henry was the most renowned orator and her husband was a knowledgeable scholar of Bible. This special religious family atmosphere granted Harriet Beecher Stowe with mild personality, kind nature and keen on social and moral issues. From her childhood to her adulthood, Harriet Beecher Stowe witnessed countless tragedies and horrible stories of the slaves, which brought her stabbing pain and startles. These pains were the earliest motivations that encouraged her to write a novel of slaves' real stories to advocate people to abolish slavery in America. Apart from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe also wrote several other novels of the same theme, such as *Dreid*, *The Story of the Dark Moorland*, *The Pearl of the Island* and so on. All the works reflected the religious feminist empathy of pursuing freedom and happiness for all, especially the slaves.

While Zhang Ailing was born in a renowned but declining royal family in Shanghai, where the traditional courtyard which was always full of the mean and harsh survivals of bygone ages who not only complained about the vanish of the past golden days but also sought for special treatment by taking advantage of their seniority. Zhang Ailing's father was one of them who relied on opium badly but her mother was one of the modern ladies then who divorced the drug addict husband and studied abroad. Her

story gave Zhang Ailing great encouragement but at the same time, Zhang Ailing's step-mother, a traditional yet spiteful woman, tortured her both physically and spiritually. It's not difficult to feel the darkness and gloomy from her works in which lived so many evil, calculating and mean females who are in great shortage of affection and chase after love in their crazy ways. On the other hand, her born mother who chose to divorce with great encouragements against traditions to study painting abroad planted a seed of pursuing personal freedom in her heart. Her born mother's overseas experience granted Zhang Ailing with another new world. Thus, Zhang Ailing's feminist ideas wander between traditional qualifications for being a good woman and the modern standards of being morally independent.

Both the two female writers created impressive and unique literature works to encourage all people, especially females to pursue freedom, dignity, and happiness. Females are not confined to daughter, mother, and wife, but also single woman. They created vivid images in their works to represent their feminist ideas and great expectations for women, Uncle Tom and Bai Liusu inspired countless females to rethink about their life and fight for personal and social freedom, equality and human rights.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the year of 1852, Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote a novel named *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, led to the outbreak of the American civil war and was regarded as the “real saviors of society”, as many scholars commented (Ammons, 1977). In this novel, the devoted Christian Uncle Tom, also “the embodiment of mother's love” (Stowe, 2009) encouraged countless black slaves to pursue their freedom, happiness and forgave the evil who once treated them horribly. Many female intellectuals follow their consciousness both at home and abroad, especially Stowe Lady's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, President Lincoln once commented when meeting her, “A small woman's a little caused a war.”, which praised her that her novel started the emancipation of the black slaves of the south part of America (Baoguo, 2018). This works by Harriet Beecher Stowe echoed the anti-slavery movement in Britain and France, motivated the countless black slaves to pursue freedom, also the female slaves to be independent as a mother, a woman, and a girl to “break the unfair and unreasonable system” (Anderson, 1991).

While *Love in a Fallen City* came into being in the year of 1943, since when it has always been considered as the earliest female literature works which depicts the real pathetic life of females in the semi-feudal and semi-colonial country in China who can only achieve sustainable life through marriage (Qingchao, 2020). In other words, this novel aroused the readers' first time thinking over female's personal happiness and self-value under the special social background of China. Mr. Fu Lei once commented on *Love in a Fallen City*, said: “Flirting, which almost takes up half of the novel, is some spiritual games of those hippy hedonists. Although they are smart, elegant, and funny, those games are in the end extraction of the nearly morbid society” (Lei, 2010). “The unfriendly and harsh social circumstances forced the evilness out of a female which is against the Chinese traditional values” (Bojovschi, 2020) to calculate for benefits, even sacrificing the body.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article will be spread under the theme of feminism which is also defined as womanism. Feminism has never regarded men as targets of struggle, but as collaborators and allies, it is a political proposition that takes gender relations as the central topic of political research, opposes gender discrimination, oppression, and exploitation, and pursues gender equality and women's liberation. Feminist theory aims to understand the nature of inequality and focuses on politics, power relations and sexuality. Themes of feminist inquiry include discrimination, stereotypes, objectification (especially sexual objectification), the body, oppression, and patriarchy (Li, 2023).

As the internationally recognized theoretical foundation of feminist criticism, Simone de Beauvoir, depicted in her book, *The Second Sex* (1949), females are always regarded as second in gender sequence. Even the females come with a descent profession, still she needs to go “juggling the duties of Girl Scout mom, Sunday school teacher, Trips to music lessons, and homemaker” (D'ignazio, et al, 2023). While the males are relatively absent in these scenes of life. De Beauvoir claims that femineity is not inherent but is assigned by patriarchy and patriarchy's social rules. She summarized the female's attachment to male situation to three factors. First women were always taught to help men; secondly, women were encouraged to externalize the aspects of femineity such as docility, selflessness, beauty to validate themselves in a society; thirdly, women have enjoyed lesser rights than men (Raina, 2017). Therefore, the self-reflection and self-awakening is essential in the process of liberating females themselves. This self-identification is also facilitated via personal contact with feminist ideals through friends or family (Nelson et al., 2008; Reid&Purcell,2004).

Literature clearly identifies a variety of reasons for feminist self-identification, it provides a specific definition of feminism and simply asks women whether they endorse the definition (Swirsky, et al, 2016). Delmar (2018) pointed out the strong connection between social movement, self-awakening and feminism. The influence of social events can definitely assist the females awaking and struggling to fight for freedom. Which is reflected vividly in the two masterpieces. The following section will be based upon this social regulation on females in three aspects, personal growth, family influence ad social changes.

METHODOLOGY

Literature comparison refers to the process of comparing different works of literature—whether books, poems, essays, or other written works—to understand their commonalities and differences. “The function and task of comparative literature is to compare literary phenomena with each other” (Trung Tran 1, et al,2020). Thus, this article compares the key themes from the two female writers' masterpieces, not only the similarities but also the differences. The author's different feminist ideas will be reflected obviously through the analysis of key figures and themes (Hui,2020).

“The goal of literature comparison is to gain a deeper understanding of the literary works” (Xiyuan,2021) being studied and to appreciate their unique qualities and contributions to the field of literature.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the discussion above, here is the answer for the two research questions. The similarities between female authors are demonstrated in the following section.

Research Question 1:

What are the similarities in terms of feminism ideas between the two female authors reflected through their masterpieces?

I. Encourage Individuals to Liberate Oneself

Harriet Beecher Stowe encouraged all the people, especially all the black slaves to find a way to liberate themselves through Uncle Tom, who didn't achieve freedom but gave others, hopes and assistance. Elisa is the embodiment of her feminist ideas, who represents the great power of motherhood. As a woman, Elissa suffered horribly from her owner, however, as a mother, she became brave and struggled to fight against all odds. She is the representation of motherly love and implied freedom was possible as long as you had the strong motivation. The other key figure, Uncle Tom, represented the opposite destiny of not fighting for freedom. Even he did help others willingly and selflessly, served his slave-owners dutifully, the violent and harsh treatment never left him. The slaves under suppression needed to fight for freedom desperately. As George Christ said in the novel, "Give Me Liberty Or Give Me Death" (Harriet Beecher Stowe, 2005, p 205). Compared with harsh slavery, there is no second choice but to fight.

It's the same true with Bai Liusu in *Love in a Fallen City*. Bai would lose her shelter overnight if she couldn't remarry soon. Because all her money had been taken away by her brothers and sister-in-law. Zhang Ailing put her feminist desires through this figure. She encouraged all the females of all classes and from all fields to strive for personal happiness through the image of Bai Liusu because she never demoralized and felt powerless. She knew that Fan wanted a woman of typical eastern features so she always bent her head down in front of Fan which represented the obedient, gentle and shy features of traditional eastern woman. This bending head down moment cast Fan successfully and he couldn't move his eyes off Bai. Zhang told all the women a feminist consciousness that you can be Bai as well if you recognized yourself first and took actions.

II. Never Surrender Against Sufferings from Family and Society

Second, they never surrendered easily even confronted with difficulties and sufferings. Uncle Tom didn't give up the hope of dreaming of freedom even after he was sold, betrayed and beaten badly to death. He believed that God would grant them freedom till the last minute of his life. With the last breath, he forgave not only Simon Legree who beat him to death but also influenced and reformed the two mean supervisors Sambo and Kumba who became sincere Christians later. Uncle Tom was the embodiment of Jesus, and big love (Mengyun, 2016). Harriet Beecher Stowe's Christianity added a possible dream of obtaining freedom for oneself to this novel. Her feminist ideas were reflected through the other two female slaves Cassy and Eliza. They never lost their dream of being free even after being sold from one plantation to another, especially Eliza who even escaped from Mr. Shelby's plantation when she heard that Mr. Shelby wanted to sell her son by accident. To be with her son, she performed a mother's wisdom and bravery to the full degree which can be seen from how she

answered the enquires calmly and rationally when she met the police officers; another one, she observed that Mrs. Bird lost her child from her outfit who also helped her escape successfully later. All her behaviors proved that a woman, even a slave, would liberate herself and obtain happiness if she could take advantage of any chance that was helpful to her and never gave up for the child's sake.

This unyielding spirit existed in Zhang Ailing's works too. After years' cynicism and fleers, Bai Liusu finally got the hope of finding herself another nest. Fan Liuyuan this young gentleman with a big fortune came up, even though he was supposed to be introduced to her sister but Bai Liusu intentionally seduced him because this gentleman would be her last chance to help her get rid of her brothers and sisters-in-laws' cynicism. In traditional culture, a divorced woman is the symbol of unfortunate. Instead of feeling depressed, she took advantage of her charm, talents and artifice to win Fan Liuyuan's attention and love. Even after being rejected by Fan, Bai never lost hope. She decided not to marry him but to live with him as his ladylove as her step in her plan and the Hong Kong war did help her dream come true later. Bai never lost the hopes of a bright future and this is the biggest motivation. For the females of that era, they are struck between "The three obedience and the four virtues" and the modern freedom ideas. Zhang Ailing expressed her feminist ideas of realizing your dream and being strong enough to follow your heart. However, feminist ideas finally lay on males for financial support.

Research Question 2:

What are the differences in terms of feminism ideas between the two female authors reflected through their masterpieces?

I. Different Writing Resources and Inspirations from Family and Childhood

Harriet Beecher Stowe herself was a devout Christian so in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, she created many devout Christian images, such as Uncle Tom, Eva and so on. Uncle Tom was the symbol and personification of God in real life. The image of Uncle Tom was the perfect combination of Joseph from *Book of Exodus* and Jesus from the *New Testament* because Uncle Tom Joseph was sold as a slave by his brothers and Uncle Tom was sold to cover the debt as well. Both of them never hated the relatives and friends who sold them but instead they worked hard, diligent and capable. But at the end of the novel, Uncle Tom died because of harsh whipping, even under this situation Uncle Tom forgave the two supervisors who beat him and with preaching to them till the last second of his life, Uncle Tom took away all the sins of these people. This is exactly the salvation of God who loves all the humans.

And the image of Eva was actually the embodiment of angel who was so pure, kind and treated everybody, including the slaves equally and friendly. When she knew she was dying she begged her father to liberate all the slaves they had before her death, and she gave all the servants in her house a strand of her golden hair which was the symbol of a part of her flesh. This plot was also from the *Bible*; Jesus gave his disciples bread and said, "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." (Corinthians 11:23-26) before he got caught by the Roman soldiers. This plot represents that Eva is the spiritual guide of these people around her. Her death evoked people's inner spirituality to pursue kindness and goodness. It's obvious to feel the mild, soft and selfless affection from religious power to encourage all people, including females to achieve happiness and freedom.

In contrast to Harriet Beecher Stowe's quietness and generous love to all, Zhang

Ailing's works were relatively sharp and crazy. Her work was known for her amazing grasp of people's psychology and her particular attitude towards life which was seldom seen at her time. Her works frequently dealt with the tensions in love between men and women. Her special writing style was in close connection with her ups and downs in life. All the images she created have a strong connection with her decomposed honored family, broken home and inadequate parental love all of which became the original sources for Zhang Ailing's writing and many female images that were psychologically twisted showed in the works.

Zhang Ailing's thoughts were relatively radical. As one of the disadvantageous female writers during the May Fourth Movement, influenced greatly by the social and cultural conflicts particularly appeared in that age. Caring about humanity's evilness of common people was her writing characteristic. There was no victory over fate, or triumph over reality in her novels. But there were just some born lusts and desires. Tragedies came along with people's fates. They were eternal. Nobody can stop this trend.

She had an excellent traditional educational background and was greatly influenced by Western Cultures. We could say that Zhang Ailing was a lady between new and old. She was good at classic Chinese but also knew much about Western Manners. Her crazy or bold writing style also told that the traditional Chinese women were destined to fight against those old things and pursue for own happy lives.

II. Different Avocations on How to Obtain Freedom

First, Harriet Beecher Stowe advocated a social movement to abolish the slavery while Zhang Ailing encouraged the females to seize any chance that can change her life but inevitably still put personal happiness on a man. Harriet Beecher Stowe criticized the slavery harshly but with no criticism on the slaveholder. It's impossible for her to start a war between slaves and slaveholders as a devout Christian but it's understandable for her to evoke people's inner sense of sympathy toward slaves through Uncle Tom's tragedy and Eva, the innocent young lady's kindness to all. In a Christian's eyes, the God's love and self-sacrifice can bring salvation to all. It's quite effective and possible for America to liberate the slaves through religious power to become a civilized and democratic country.

Whereas Zhang Ailing's advocacy was relatively narrow which mainly led females to be brave enough to pursue the perfect fiancé, even seduce. Because a man with enough money or a good fortune was still taken as the guarantee for a woman's stable life when women had no methods to achieve self-sustain in that era. Bai Liusu seduced the man named Fan Liuyuan who was supposed to be introduced to her sister. As soon as she knew Fan was a British emigrant and was quite rich, the most importantly, single, the divorced and optimistic lady Bai began to seduce Fan because she knew the man would be her last chance to escape from the gloomy and snobbish family who only tried to make money out of her marriage and exploited her fortune in the past years even after her first divorce. Bai successfully seduced Fan by showing him all her charms and talents as a traditional and qualified lady, even though seducing would be against her moral values.

As a feminist writer, Zhang Ailing are eager deeply that women can get rid of the tackles of history, culture and psychology. She hopes that women can be elegant and free existences. Her feminist ideas are realistic. She recognizes and accepts women's social roles as an independent existence. But she never apotheosizes women's existences. Money is of great importance, which can manipulate women's fates, yet can

also change women's fates if they are able to support themselves.

In a word, Harriet Beecher Stowe put the literary work in the direction of pushing social movement to liberate the slaves and she believed everyone should have equal social status and rights and we could say that her ideas were relatively higher than Zhang Ailing's ideas that mainly focused on personal pursuit of a rich husband, not to a social level. During the early period of the "May Fourth Movement", Lu Xun once made a speech named "What happened after Na La left?" pointing out that there were only two ways for Na La, or women like Na La, with no method of making a living, no economic position: coming back home or becoming depraved. This depicted Zhang Ailing's ideas clearly and thoroughly. In this novel, Zhang Ailing produced her answer to Na La's future. Through Liusu's failure to make Fan Liuyuan marry her, she talked about poor Chinese women's tragic fates. They couldn't live without men's financial support. This was called Servility Consciousness (Xu Yao, "Inner Inspection and Enlighten", 77) of traditional Chinese women, which came into being through thousands of years' accumulation of trying to survive in man-oriented societies.

III. Emphases on Education to Achieve Financial Independence

Harriet Beecher Stowe put a lot of strength on education for the slaves to improve their life spiritually or at least to have some basic education to be civilized while Zhang Ailing focuses on female education, such as reading, dancing and so on to find a better man as her destiny. This feature made Harriet Beecher Stowe's characters divided into two main kinds, first kind, the white people, such as Eva and her father, St. Clare, who believed that the slaves will wake up as long as they can receive proper education and slavery would break up into pieces; in other words, with the influence of education, slaves would come to realize the laws which defined slaves as commodities is not right, and they would strive for freedom and modifications of laws too. And the second kind, the slaves, who had been ignorant, uncivilized and numb towards their misfortunes which began from their birth. Because they were apathetic to their destinies, being a labor. George Harris was the exception, and he was the only one who realized the cruelty and unfairness of slavery, but all of his peers had no idea at all about why they were born slaves and how to find a solution to get rid of their identities.

This was the reason why Harriet Beecher Stowe advocated education to them through St. Clare's words. However, Zhang Ailing's works were not so innocent, kind and ignorant as those in Harriet Beecher Stowe's. They were typically traditional and well-educated ladies, dressed in cheongsam, being quite capable of writing calligraphy and dancing, yet influenced by Western civilization which made them totally good at calculating and know the ways of world clearly, deeply and well. They always tried their best to seize what they want. But an atmosphere of loneliness and a color of tragedy permeate Zhang Ailing's works even when the heroines succeeded and got what they want.

What's more, the funny point is that Zhang Ailing criticized both Western and Eastern cultures, through Liusu's marriage and asked women to care about own fates. Economic independence was the basis of a life with dignity, controlled affections is the guarantee to a free life, most importantly; females should be equipped with feminist consciousness of being independent, cast away from attachment to male, and extricated themselves from the set social status as a slave to marriage.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Despite a member of abolitionists, Harriet Beecher Stowe revealed the decay and backwardness of slavery through her classic novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which played a crucial role in pushing the Civil War and remodeling the relationship between white people and black people. Slaves were required to be abolished by more and more people and finally, slaves were liberated at last. Harriet Beecher Stowe not only depicted a perfect future for slaves but she points out a better relationship between white people and black people which is to be equal, friendly, and fair. She succeeded in encouraging many females to pursue personal identity, freedom as well.

While Zhang Ailing slashed the patriarchy society badly because in that unfair society, women could only trade their bodies for food, clothes, and shelter. Bai Liusu was a woman of this kind. In a traditional Chinese society, even the women accepted excellent education, still the ultimate goal is to serve the man. Zhang Ailing couldn't get rid of the influence because the heroine's happy ending is to marry a rich man.

In a word, no matter you are slave or a woman, you should find the inner self first, recognized yourself as a person, but not as an attachment to slaveowners or to a man. All humans, not only women, were born with rights to pursue happiness because humans are born intellectual and rational, just as the white people and men. All humans could choose their own lives, just as the white people and Chinese men. Women were able to lead, just as men were. These are the key ideas both Harriet Beecher Stowe and Zhang Ailing tried to convey to readers.

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