The (Wo)man Emancipation in May Fourth Era

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Abstract. This paper aims to disclose the point that the advocacy of woman emancipation in the May Fourth era is articulated with that of individual emancipation. I will borrow Yang’s idea of “(wo)man emancipation” to analyze Hu Shih’s The Greatest Event in Life and Lu Xun’s Mourning the Dead, to illustrate the point that the feminist narrative is omitted in the grand narrative of May Fourth Movement. Instead, it is treated as a subjected discourse in order to serve for the larger discourses of “individual versus family”, “new versus old”, and “modern versus tradition”. Even Lu Xun’s concern for the status of new women is articulated with the crisis of consciousness intellectuals suffer. It is pathetic that the real woman is silenced in the process of history, the history manipulated by males, which has been the dilemma of women in man-centered literary discourse the whole time.

Introduction

In the May Fourth Movement, along with the advocacy of individual subjectivity, woman emancipation and the identity of “new woman” are being put forward. Nevertheless, the control of this promotion is manipulated and disciplined by the male intellectuals themselves that time, while woman’s own identity dilemma is treated in an inferior position. Thus, I will borrow Yang’s idea of “(wo)man emancipation” to illustrate that how female emancipation articulates with individual emancipation in May Fourth Movement [1].“(Wo)man emancipation” here means that woman emancipation is treated as a tool subjected to man individual in the man-centered May Fourth discourse. Nevertheless, analyzing how intellectuals deal with the “other” issue, which is woman emancipation, can still be regarded as a lens to look into the changed narrative and tone of May Fourth period. In the early stage of New Cultural Movement, intellectuals such as Hu Shih, was interested on calling for individuals to develop the self-awareness out from the traditional ethics. He thus adapted the spoken drama of Ibsen’s A Doll’s House into The Greatest Event in Life and reinvented a Chinese Nora Tian Yamei. Under this one act play, more and more young people steps out of their home, breaks the traditional social norms and pursue their own desires. However, in the post May Fourth era, modernists such as Lu Xun, was dispirited and disappointed by the dilemma of Chinese nation. Therefore, in this essay, I am going to argue that the gender conflict is unintentionally or intentionally omitted in the grand narrative of May Fourth Movement in order to serve for the discourse of intellectuals by analyzing the cultural adaption of Ibsen’s Nora conducted by Chinese male intellectuals, such as Hu Shih’s The Greatest Event in Life and Lu Xun’s Mourning the Dead.

Revisiting the May Fourth Movement

The May Fourth Movement has two aspects; one is the mass protest movement against imperialism launched in May 4th 1919 by college students in Beijing, while the other one refers to the intellectual enlightenment movement happened from 1915 to 1921. In this essay, the May Fourth Movement refers to the later, the May Fourth New Cultural Movement, including New Literature and the May Fourth Literary Revolution promoted by intellectuals such as Chen Duxiu, Hu Shih, Lu Xun, etc. Yang argues that the era of New Cultural Movement is the only period when individualism was regarded as an essential and “fundamental philosophical value”, so that it is
known as “the age of discovery of humanity” in China [1]. The modernists reject traditional Chinese ethics by advocating freedom, individualism and humanitarianism learnt from the West. During this period, Chinese modern intellectuals introduced and adapted western plays into Chinese context in order to call for the liberation of individuals. Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* is one of them, which is famous for its sharp attitude toward marriage norms in 19th century’s Europe. It used to stir great controversy since it presents a rebellious story of the female protagonist Nora, leaving her children and husband because she develops the strong desire to discover herself. Hu Shih even came up with a term “Ibsenism” (Yibusheng Zhuyi) to describe this kind of realist literary work concerning social problems and promoting individualism. Ibsen confines that his thought was provoked by the belief that “a woman cannot be herself in modern society” as it is an exclusively male-dominant society “with laws made by men who assess feminine conduct from a masculine standpoint” [2]. For Ibsen, the gender conflict in patriarchy society plays a key role in this spoken drama. According to Yang, Nora thus becomes a heroic icon representing “the dual liberation forces of man and woman’s emancipation” [1]. It seems that many young followers were inspired by the famous quotation of Nora “I believe that before all else I am a human being, just as much as you are”, walking out of home and pursuing the free marriage and personal desires by breaking social bounds [3]. However, compared with the advocacy of liberation of human beings, the promotion of women’s emancipation is actually unintentionally omitted, subjecting to the strong courses of “individual versus family”, “new versus old”, and “modern versus tradition” conducted by male intellectuals in May Fourth era. The gender conflict is no longer the major theme of Chinese *A Doll’s House*, becoming the encouragement of young (wo)man rebelling against the family and traditional Chinese ethics [1]. But a few years later, witnessing the ups and downs of Chinese revolution, modern intellectuals such as Lu Xun, are “disappointed and dispirited”, the literary works transforming from the uplifting narrative of individualism into “the grim image of despair and nothingness” [4].

### The Neglected Feminist Narrative

Hu Shih’s *The Greatest Event in Life* (Zhongshen Dashi) is one of the first dramas written in the new literature style, dealing with the dual discourse of individual and female emancipation. After being published in *New Youth*, this one act play was staged by students all over around Chinese society since it highlights the problematic arranged marriage and traditional norms. *The Greatest Event in Life* can be considered as a localized Chinese adaption of Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*. The 23-year-old female protagonist, Yamei Tian, eventually walks out of her family to pursue her free marriage and love relationship with Mr. Chen, whom she meets when studying overseas. But Tian’s mother insists on rejecting their marriage simply because a fortune-teller tells her that Mr. Chen and Tian Yamei’s birthday (Shengchen Bazi) do not match. Tian feels upset about her mother’s superstitious thoughts until her father comes back home. Tian’s father stands by her, holding the opinion that one should not believe in what fortune-teller said since it is too superstitious and old-fashioned. However, it turns out that Tian’s father disagrees with the marriage as well. Although he does not listen to the fortune-teller, he agrees with that the family name of Chen and Tian cannot be together in marriage according to the ancestral laws. Having failed in persuading her parents, Tian Yamei, the 23-year-old girl, eventually walks away from home with Mr. Chen’s encouragement [5]. At the finale of the play, she escapes with Mr. Chen, leaving a note for her parents. Although even the playwright himself does not consider this drama as sophisticated or artistic, it provides a case to critically study the narrative of May Fourth Literature concerning the female emancipation.

It is undeniable that Tian in *The Greatest Event in Life* acts as the role model like Nora, leading young followers who are yearning for autonomous subjectivity to walk away from family and break traditional bounds. Under the influence of the drama, lots of young men escaped from arranged marriages family posed while unmarried young women ran away from their families for free love relationship. Yang states, going against arranged marriage was usually regarded as “a symbol of independence” at that period [1]. However, the gender self-awareness is subject to the grand
narratives of individual emancipation and rejecting tradition although the role model in the play is a woman. In the case of Nora, she devotes herself to the family and marriage, only getting her husband’s denouncement in return. She gradually realizes that her gender as a woman is the reason why she has the same subordinated status in either her father or her husband’s family by saying that “here I have been your doll-wife, just as at home I used to be Papa’s doll-child” [3]. Nora develops self-consciousness out from her husband’s cruelty, forming “an affirmation of the existence of her own ego” [1]. And Nora also confines that she should educate herself since her husband is not the one that helps her out. Inspired by Nora, many people in May Fourth era regard lines like “I must think things out for myself” as their mottos [3]. But they neglect that Nora’s self-consciousness as a human being derives from her gender awareness and inferior position, resulting in her awakening as an autonomous individual. Before the often-quoted line of “I must think things out for myself” is Nora’s strong feminist narrative “before all else I am a human being just as much as you are” [3]. Many people just take the second half of the statement that shows Nora’s individualist attitude toward traditional norms, unintentionally or intentionally omitting her bold feminist narrative that shows her determination that refuses to be subordinated to patriarchal hierarchy.

Furthermore, Ibsen portraits more about the unbalanced position and power existing between two genders while Hu Shih pays more attention to how the traditional power such as superstition and religious believes interfere individuals. At the setting of the beginning, there are several paintings hanging on the wall, some are traditional Chinese ink drawing while some are Western oil painting. Audiences can immediately sense that Tian’s family is the mixture of new and old, modern and tradition, which is quite typical at that joint of Chinese modernity. It seems that this family has been influenced by West. But the female protagonist cannot pursue her own marriage, which is no difference with the traditional past. Compared with the gender conflict in Ibsen’s A Doll’s House, the main conflict here is more about the generation gap, the relationship between individual and collective family. The younger generation such as Tian and Chen symbolizes the “new” modern youth who wants to pursue freedom, while Tian’s parents who use fortune-teller’s words and ancestral laws to prevent her daughter’s marriage present the “old” superstitious old generation of Chinese family. So, for Chinese females, Yang argues, there are two homes which represents two different cultural values. One refers to “the parents’ home that the heroine escapes from” filled with authority and superstition, while the other one refers to husband or “fiancé’s home that she walks into” is “the home of successful individualists after returning from their battle against authoritarianism” [1]. Obviously, the localized A Doll’s House by Hu Shih draws equivalence between refusal of family norms (such as arranged marriage) and individualism. The issue of individual freedom replaces that of woman emancipation, and the dilemma of Chinese culture in May Fourth period overshadows the dilemma of gender. In this sense, the appeal of woman emancipation is more like (wo)man emancipation since the woman is being neglected and subordinated.

The Crisis of Intellectuals

Criticizing Ibsen “was by no means responding for the benefit of society to a problem that had arisen in that society”, Lu Xun poses and tries to answer the question that Hu Shih might not foresee or might not be able to answer, “what happens to Nora when she leaves home” in Mourning the Dead. But does it mean that Lu Xun really turn his focus on the woman emancipation instead of (wo)man emancipation? Does he try to find a way out for women? According to Decker, the oppressed condition of new women that time is essential since it reveals “something the text holds more important: the moral responsibility and potential hypocrisy of the mind defined as masculine” [6]. Thus, again, we can contend that Lu Xun is exercising another mode of wo(man) emancipation, illustrating “how the representation of woman’s despair actually reflected the male intellectuals’ despair – their crisis of consciousness in the post May Fourth period” [7]. As a leading intellectual of his era, Lu Xun’s concern for the status of Chinese new women is articulated with the crisis of consciousness intellectuals suffer.

Mourning the Dead is an aesthetic representation from the perspective of a May Fourth romantic
intellectual, presenting a failed romantic story of a young couple during the May Fourth period. Zijun, the female protagonist, was encouraged by Juansheng and his modern ideas, walking away from her old-fashioned family and cohabiting with him. In their early stage of love relationship, Juansheng and Zijun, like thousands of Chinese youth of their era, has much to share with each other, the new ideas, or the changes they made in the society. In their experience of sharing new culture and modern ideas, as Juansheng later recalls, “the shabby room would be filled with the sound of my voice as I held forth on the tyranny of the family, the need to break with tradition, the equality of men and women, Ibsen, Tagore and Shelley… She would nod her head, smiling, her eyes filled with a childlike look of wonder” [8]. Juansheng at first acts as a mentor like Mr. Chen in The Greatest Event in Life, introducing new ideas and leading the female protagonist gain her subjectivity as a free individual. However, after an ephemeral happy life, Juansheng starts to find that Zijun no longer appears as charming as she used to be. His love for sublime Zijun gradually runs out in the repeated meaningless daily life filled with trifles. Finally, he tells her that he no longer loves her. Zijun thus leaves the new family he walks in and comes back to the old-fashioned family she belonged to, and soon dies.

As Zhu revealed, Juansheng’s fluctuation of emotion which “revolve around the two literary images: the sublime and nothingness” runs through the entire story [4] The turning point of Juansheng’s attitude happens when they are living in a daily life like the ordinary people. Before, for him, Zijun is sublime when she claims that “I’m my own mistress. None of them has any right to interfere with me” [8]. At this stage, Juansheng is an “enlightener” equipped with modern ideas while Zijun acts as the receiver who absorbs his new ideas. But when Zijun actually walks away from her old-fashioned home, she becomes the one “who embraces the sublime ideal with her own body, transcends the conceptual ideal that Juansheng breathes into her” [4]. In other words, their roles have been reversed. Juansheng loses the superiority as an “enlightener” while Zijun becomes the loftier one. For him, witnessing her own wife woman transforms from a receiver into such a sublime existence is “almost traumatic experience” [4]. Zijun is thus unfairly treated as the one that should be responsible for Juansheng’s loss of selfhood, while in fact her position “is nothing but emptiness” [1]. Woman’s despair in dominant male-dominant literary discourse was actually subjected to man’s own crisis, while the true despair of woman was rendered and treated as less important. Compared with the regret for the dead Zijun, Juansheng, as a romantic intellectual, seems regrets more for his own loss of selfhood. The whole story is told through Juansheng’s first person narrative, so that the readers cannot tell if the past Juansheng retells the truth or not. The real woman is silenced in the process of his-tory. Despite of the loss of selfhood, the loss of confidence in Chinese modernity is another symbolic meaning of Juansheng’s attitude. Like Decker states in his article ‘Living in Sin: From May Fourth Via the Antirightist Movement to the Present’, Zijn’s positive response to Juansheng’s new ideas makes him realizes that “Chinese women were not as hopeless as the pessimists make out” [6]. So, at this stage, Juansheng can still foresee the future. However, after cohabiting, Zijun shifts her enthusiasm into everyday trivialities, Juansheng starts to lose interests on her. For him, “Zijn’s “emancipation” symbolically demonstrated his/China’s rightful claim to the status of ‘modernity’” [6]. Similarly, her failure is typical for “him of his/China’s failure, not just that of her own or even of Chinese women, to be modern and emancipated” [6]. So, what Lu Xun tries to convey in Mourning the Dead is actually the crisis of intellectuals suffered in post May Fourth era, the loss of selfhood and the disappointment of Chinese modernity.

Summary

In conclusion, the (wo)man emancipation refers to the fact that woman emancipation is being replaced by the generalized man emancipation and the gender conflict is overshadowed by the conflict happens between old generation and young generation, tradition and modern. The intellectuals in the man-centered literary discourse have the control of woman emancipation in May Fourth era. Hu Shih’s The Greatest Event in Life and Lu Xun’s Mourning the Dead both look into the issue of female emancipation, but their focuses are actually serve for the grand narrative of May
Fourth period. As what have mentioned above, the real woman is silenced in the process of his-tory, the history manipulated by male intellectuals in order to serve a larger and stronger sense of narrative. However, through analyzing the way male intellectuals deal with the issue of woman emancipation can indirectly reflects the uplifting narrative of May Fourth Movement at early stage and the dispirited crisis of intellectuals in post May Fourth era.

References


