

Feminism in Lu Xun's "Regret for the Past"

Xia Liu¹, Zhirui Teng^{2,*}, Ying Wang³

¹College of Arts, Xi'an Technological University, Xi'an, Shaanxi, 710000, China

²College of Arts, Renmin University of China, Beijing, 100101, China

³School of Foreign Languages, Tianjin University of Commerce, Tianjin, 300000, China

*Corresponding author: ritatrz92@ruc.edu.cn

Abstract:

Lu Xun, one of the representatives of feminism movements in China at the first stage, clearly empathized with Chinese females' fate and called on Chinese women to awaken their feminist consciousness, playing an important role in the development of feminism movements in China. However, women were not treated equally to men in his description. Zijun, in Lu Xun's work *Regret for the Past*, is a woman dependent on male domination and lacks independent consciousness. This paper explores the progress of feminism in Lu Xun's works and the limitations of his description of independent females based on an analysis of the text *Regret for the Past*. Lu Xun strongly called on women to empower themselves, free their personalities, and awaken their feminist consciousness to become independent individuals. However, the paper argues that Lu Xun's examination of feminism also had some limitations due to its male thoughts and narrative perspective.

Keywords: Lu Xun; *Regret for the Past*; Feminism.

1. Introduction

At the beginning of the 20th century, Western feminist ideas were introduced to China. *Regret for the Past* poetically and sadly monologue about his memories and confessions of Zijun. And in the form of notes from Juansheng's first-person perspective. It is a representative love-themed short story created by Lu Xun [1]. Lu Xun integrated feminism and personal femininity into his creation. It is of great value for exploring the self-awareness of Chinese women, that is, female consciousness, during the May Fourth period and modern times. The study of feminism in *Regret for the Past* is significant for women in establishing a healthy view of women and life in the new era.

However, there are also limitations and shortcomings in the cognition of feminism because of its male narrative perspective. Studying the embodiment of feminism in *Regret for the Past* is not only of literary value but also of guiding significance for women in establishing healthy values in the new era. This article will further deepen the understanding of the progress and limitations of feminism in Lu Xun's book *Regret for the Past* based on reference and summary of existing research results and combined with the author's understanding of *Regret for the Past* and feminism.

This paper takes the background of the 1920s as the start-

ing point [2], focusing on the life experience and personal image of Zijun to study how Lu Xun's works reflect the development of modern feminism in China. The paper provides a further interpretation of the progress and limitations of feminism in *Regret for the Past*.

Using literature analysis, the study mainly relies on the Global Academic Express (CNKI) to collect and sort out research findings on background information, character analysis, and the embodiment of feminism. After a meticulous literature review, the paper combines these findings with new insights to establish a theoretical foundation. The paper also uses a case study approach to analyze Lu Xun's interpretation of feminism in *Regret for the Past* by examining the portrayal of Zijun's female image. This analysis aims to understand the progressiveness of Chinese feminism and the limitations of feminism in works written by male authors in the 1920s [3]. At the same time, the paper uses causal analysis to explore the relationship between the 1920s background, the image of Zijun and Juansheng, and the causes influencing Lu Xun's understanding of feminism. Through these methods, the paper seeks to uncover the significance and value of feminism in *Regret for the Past*.

2. "Regret for the Past" and Its Research Background

Regret for the Past was written in 1925, and it was Lu

Xun's only short story related to love. The story consisted of Juansheng's monologue about his tragic love affair with Zijun during the May Fourth Movement. Inspired by the movement's new ideas, the couple pursued ideals of free love and independent marriage. They fought against the feudal forces and finally lived together. However, after cohabitation, Zijun occupied herself with mundane chores and became a housewife satisfied with daily routines. Juansheng found that such life differed from the elegant lifestyle of progressive youth in his imagination, leading to his sarcasm and estrangement from Zijun. Their relationship ultimately crumbled, culminating in Zijun's tragic demise and Juansheng's lifelong regret.

Since its release, *Regret for the Past* has received significant scholarly attention. Before the 1990s, most researchers criticized the incomplete awakening of Zijun's feminist consciousness, primarily through the perspective of Juansheng. However, in the past three decades, scholars have tended to interpret the ideological enlightenment of Juansheng, and some researchers have explored Juansheng's dual personality. For example, in his "Analysis of Ironies in *Regret for the Past*," Lin Jin discusses the implicit author's satire on Juansheng, suggesting a deeper layer of authorial critique [4]. Discussions among scholars have extended to the cause of the love tragedy of Zijun and Juansheng, Zijun's personality, and the existential confusion faced by young people amidst the ideological fervor of the May Fourth Movement [5].

Meanwhile, Lu Xun's works, renowned for their profound insights and distinctive artistic features, have been adapted by numerous artists since 1981. Thirteen adaptations of *Regret for the Past*, including modern dramas, movies, and operas, attest to its enduring relevance and cultural impact [6]. Indeed, *Regret for the Past* has exerted a significant mark on ideology, literature, and the arts, serving as an important reference point for research on feminism in Chinese literature in the early twentieth century.

3. The Progressive Nature of Feminism in "Regret for the Past"

In pre-modern society, Chinese women were tragically confined to a fate of subjugation. Denied public presence and subjected to arranged marriages by their parents, they existed merely as extensions of men, seemingly living solely for their husbands [7].

The novel "Regret for the Past" vividly portrays the awakening of women, represented by Zijun, during the spirit of the May 4th Movement. Zijun emerges as a new woman who liberates herself from feudalism and embraces the freedom to choose her marriage. Inspired by the ideals of the May 4th Movement, she breaks free from the shackles

of her feudal family and bravely engages with Juansheng. They discuss topics ranging from feudal families to gender equality and Western writers such as Tagore and Shelley. At the same time, Juansheng told her about the new idea of "breaking old habits and calling for equality between men and women" [4]. These conversations broaden her horizons and inspire her spirit of rebellion.

Contemplating how to defy patriarchal norms and attain personal autonomy and marriage freedom, Zijun embodies the essence of the new woman. She thought about how to rebel against the patriarchy and how to gain personality and freedom of marriage. These ideas are a brave challenge to the patriarchal family and the real awakening of new women. Zijun refuses to be a mere slave or victim of the feudal family and marriage system. She firmly asserted, "I am my own, and none of them interfered in my rights" [1]. At this time, Zijun emerges as a forerunner who advocates for gender equality and women's rights, embracing the enlightenment of new ideas with courage and strength.

The romantic relationship between Zijun and Juansheng is also a form of rebellion against traditional values, such as "the will of parents and the proposal of the matchmaker." They decided to get married without anyone's consent. In people's eyes at that time, it corrupted public morality and damaged feudal ethics [7]. Despite facing strong opposition and societal pressure, Zijun remained undeterred in her pursuit of independence. She did not hesitate to break the feudal cage, even if it meant breaking her relationship with her family.

In Lu Xun's view, feudal traditional morality and backward ethics put Chinese women in the position of men's private property for a long time, and no woman has the right to be independent of men. He points out that China's national inferiority also exists in women. It is like "the abused daughter-in-law has become a mother-in-law and still abuses the daughter-in-law" [8]. Lu Xun fought against the traditional ideas of feudal society throughout his life. He advocated for the emancipation of the Chinese people's minds and women's liberation from the shackles of traditional thoughts. His aspiration was for Chinese women to break free from the shackles of societal norms and attain true confidence and independence.

Lu Xun deeply felt the persecution of the Chinese people by feudal etiquette and also clearly understood that the national inferiority of the Chinese people urgently needed to be eliminated. He advocated equality between men and women and sympathized with women living in the traditional feudal etiquette. He believed in women's right to pursue love and that they should not be bound by "chastity" in traditional morality [4]. They should pursue their rights and no longer be an accessory to men.

4. The Limitations of Feminism in Lu Xun's Works

Regret for the Past is the only short fiction in Lu Xun's life works. Since its publication, critics have valued it for its unique form, narrative perspective, and content ambiguity. However, the voice of female criticism has been notably scarce. Thus, interpreting Regret for the Past from a female perspective is significantly meaningful [9]. Although it showcases progressive intellectuals of the May Fourth period, their innovation succumbs to the constraints of entrenched old ideologies.

At the novel's beginning, Zijun emerges as a character of firmness and courage, willing to resist her family, including breaking off with her uncle, to pursue love with Juansheng. In this period, she embraces new ideas and lives together due to shared interests.

Yet, this progressive attitude is ultimately limited. Although Zijun accepts these ideas, which are more advanced ideas at that time, she remains unable to break free from old ideas. After they live together, the initial spark of love gradually extinguishes. Zijun's actions reveal a departure from the noble image Juansheng had of her; to live, she has to meddle around her neighbors and handle housework like feeding chickens and dogs and cooking. When Juansheng loses his job and their life has no material guarantee, Zijun never considers looking for a job to support this family. This also indicates that feminism during the May Fourth period, although it has made some breakthroughs, is still not thorough.

The male protagonist, Juansheng, finds that Zijun has become increasingly ordinary and has gradually lost love for her, and he tells her so. Unable to bear the fact that Juansheng no longer loved her, Zijun died in despair, and her father took her. This indicates that, during the 1920s, although feminism had made breakthroughs in China, it still had limitations. For example, the female protagonist always puts herself in a subordinate position to men. She persists in the idea that the female should care for her husband and housework. This indicates that there is still a need to break free from the shackles of thought regarding feminism. Zijun is depicted as an enlightened figure, "a fleeing Nora," and Juansheng's wife. Besides, the character of Zijun shows an obvious sense of emptiness. The character is constructed by Juansheng, reflecting the aphasia situation of a female in a patriarchal society and the oppression and harm inflicted on women by patriarchal society [10].

Because of gender issues, this work inevitably presents the issue of a male perspective. Some researchers have conducted studies on this issue. For example, while criticizing the harm caused to women by patriarchal society,

Lu Xun also explores the way out for female liberation, showing both progressive aspects transcending the times and the limitations of his thoughts. Studying this issue helps us to have a true and comprehensive understanding of Lu Xun [11]. Looking at the entire text of Regret for the Past, the limitations of the perspective are indeed shaped by the historical and social background. From a feminist perspective, narrating women's stories from a male perspective leads to a certain degree of subjectivity in the narrative.

From a narrative perspective, the character of Zijun, which we know, is also written from a man's perspective. Throughout the text, there are very few objective descriptions of Zijun's character, and almost all of her images are reflected in Juansheng's perspective [12]. While remembering the man perspective, many actions of Zijun from the male perspective are disliked by Juansheng, a new enlightened intellectual accustomed to male dominance. For example, when Juansheng proposed to Zijun and knelt on one knee, he felt a sense of disgust and aversion. This is because, in his intrinsic thinking, women are still in a subordinate position, and kneeling to someone of lower status goes against his instinct, making him unwilling to recall it.

5. Conclusion

Based on textual interpretation and related literature research, the paper dialectically analyzes feminism in Lu Xun's "Regret for the Past," discussing both its progressiveness and limitations. As a prominent leader of the New Culture Movement, Lu Xun dared to encourage and support females from a male perspective. He revealed the true life of Chinese women like Zijun and explicitly pointed out that it was females' loss of dignity, lack of income sources, and oppression in feudal society that caused their dependence on males. Lu Xun strongly called on women to empower themselves, free their personalities, and awaken their feminist consciousness to become independent individuals. Through the love tragedy of Juansheng and Zijun, Lu Xun criticized men who acted like Juansheng in real society and hoped to eradicate patriarchy in a male-dominated society.

However, limitations always coexist with progress. Zijun failed to completely free herself from patriarchy. Her words, "I belong to myself," did not result from feminism but from her blind worship of her lover, Juansheng. Meanwhile, Lu Xun's examination of feminism also had some limitations due to its male thoughts and narrative perspective. He believes female tragedies were bred from backward social and economic systems. However, in reality, females' economic independence does not directly affect

the success or failure of marriage. Institutional reforms can only lead to the pseudo development of feminism. Females cannot win respect and understanding without the elimination of sexual stereotypes, social discrimination, and criticism of females. Therefore, dialectical research on feminism in *Regret for the Past* contributes to females' uniqueness and independence, which is valuable and meaningful in constructing a harmonious society.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally, and their names were listed alphabetically.

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