Feminist Narratology and its Localization Practice in Chinese Contemporary Literature

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Feminist narratology is a combination of feminism and narratology. It first appeared in 1980s, and is still an important branch of “post-classical narratology” that is still thriving in international academic community. The practices of feminist narratological analyses are still in a marginalized state in compare with its theory and the interpretation of feminist gender politics. Current research of Chinese modern and contemporary literature has its own creative points in localization practice of feminist narratology, and some even challenge western discourses and improve our own feminist narratological studies; while on the other hand, we also have kinds of deficiencies and should pay more attention to the fluidity of China’s social contexts and the special features of the contexts of Chinese literature. As a kind effective research method, feminist narratology will play a more important role for Chinese literature of 21st century.

[Keywords: Feminist narratology, Localization, Chinese contemporary literature]

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of China’s economy and culture, Chinese female literature and studies have also come into the ne’w era, which are not satisfied with
the position of a follower to the West, but an independent practitioner, even an
inventor. The topic of “feminist narratology and its localization practice in Chinese
contemporary literature” is just from this academic background, and this paper is
to introduce this academic tide by one of well-responded papers (published in

2. Late-development of Textual Readings of Feminist Narratology
   in China

   Feminist Narratology is the combination of feminism and narratology, which
   begins in 1980s originally in the West (especially in USA) and becomes an
   important school of “postclassical narratology” soon. And the representative
   works include The Narrative Act: Point View of Prose Fiction by Susan. Lanser,
   Gendered Inventions : Narrative Discourse in Victorian Novels by Robyn R.
   Warhol, Having A Good Cry: Effeminate Feelings and Pop-culture Forms by
   Robyn R. Warhol, etc. It can be considered as a kind of feminist study from the
   perspective of language, structure, rhetoric or other literary forms, or a type of
certain narratological study from the gender perspective. Therefore, it makes up
   the blindness of ignoring historical and ideological contexts of traditional
   narratology with gender perspective, and supplements feminism with
   narratological objectivity and technicality.

   1980s is the time of China’s reforming and opening to the world, and the
   theory of feminist narratology is concerned by Chinese scholars quickly, which is
   not behind the world’s tide as other feminist schools. However, compared with
   theoretical awareness, textual readings on modern and contemporary Chinese
   literature in the perspective of feminist narratology are weak and marginalized.
   For a long time, most literary interpretations of feminist narratology are in the field of
   foreign literature study, and we are quite short of relative close readings of Chinese
   modern literature, quantitatively and qualitatively. Even if there are a few case
   studies, their academic influences are usually still weak and faint, which are not be
   concerned enough in literary circle. Needless to say, even though some studies are
   titled with the words narration or narratology, they still focus on studies of literary
   contents, not the actual forms, such as Lingering Feminist Narration in the Edge by
   Yu Jianxiang, Marginalized Narration : Case Studies of Female Novels in 20th
   Century by Xu Dai, etc. Briefly, compared with the theoretical studies and textual
   analysis of contents, feminist and narratological interpretations from perspective
   of forms should be in urgent attention in Chinese literary studies.

3. Contexts of Time and Language : Problems of China’s Literary
   Feminist Narratology

   Studies of feminist narratology should strengthen and have their full
   localization, which must respect Chinese literary contexts and social contexts
completely. At this point, the current research still have some drawbacks, and here are places we can do better:

China’s social background and spirit of the time should be concerned during studies of feminist narratology, which is quite different from the western theory. Studies of western feminist narratology usually choose works of Victorian Time in 18th and 19th century, because only in an era of oppressing voices of women, could female writers adopt oblique and pictorial skills of feminist narratology to show their individual views. So do Chinese writers. They usually put the story into time of Great Cultural Revolution, which is different from the West, although women don’t feel free, either. On the one hand, the once suspended types of writing as diary, letter, first-person narration, limited perspective, etc, have returned to literature, which broader women’s discourses; on the other hand, male-cultured ideology in perspectives of class, ethic, society are still strong, so women’s voices have to express by implied, oblique, even compromised style. For example, Love is Unforgettable by Zhangjie and Tales in Spring by Yu Luojin, which were published in 1980s, both adopt first-person narrative voices spontaneously, as following Lanser’s theory. There is a subtle gap between the narrator and heroine, while the two are also overlapped now and then, which express the spiritual conflicts of the heroines and make dialogues with readers and can be explained by “attractive narrative discourses”. In a time of women’s lacking opportunities to express herself, we can see the narrator’s awkward subjectivity from her humble attitudes to try to attract and appeal to her readers: on the one hand, she expects to show herself and find herself independently; while on the other hand, she has to considerate the cultural tradition of gender and dare not to say them out fair and square. For example, in Tales in Spring the heroine continuously talk with readers in such words, “dear, are you still listening to my story, aren’t you tired of my chatterbox?” “How can I explain my feelings of that moment, my readers?” The story is interrupted by these now and then, which illustrates an image of unconfident figure and has a little conflicts with the heroine’s brave love experiences. And all those subtle literary complexities can be explained by studies of feminist narratology.

Therefore, in a limited cultural time for women’s expressing themselves, narrative rights of showing their voices bravely just means equal rights of gender. That is to say, the way which women find out to express their own minds basically equals to their victory of self-fulfillment in the actual world. However, this is based on the certain time. If in a more open time and society, when and where women can express themselves in various ways, high optimistic voices or low quiet voices of the narrators may be usually related with the authors’ own personalities and styles, not so politically. Meanwhile, some Chinese studies overlook the changes of time and misapply feminist narratology at certain extends. For example, there are comments to cheer the victory of feminism of Hello, Ladies by Chi Li that heroines hold the discourse power to fill the whole texts with their own voices and leave men as the voiceless narrated figures. Men have no discourse power and their
inner feelings do not be heard in the text. But these only reflect the structural style of the work, because the novel is published in 1998, when female writers are active and can use various styles, at least almost as free as male writers. So, not all unlimited discourse power of women lead to gender rights. When female authors don’t care much on authorities of narrative, just as male authors, a more open and equal society is coming for women. And Chinese studies of feminist narratology should pay more attention on this problem.

Another problem comes from different styles of different languages. In the West, feminist narratology mainly focuses on form of English texts, whose grammar, syntax, structure and rhetoric almost all follow rules of the language of English, such as studies of “free indirect speech”, capital letters, names, orders, etc. However, some Chinese studies of feminist narratology also focus on “free indirect speech”, which is not a type of original Chinese grammar. The mixed “ambiguous discourses” between the narrators and figures are ordinary in Chinese language, not an special and unique literary rhetoric discourse. If only standardizing English “free indirect speech” and considering it as the field of fighting for discourse power, the common state of it in Chinese novels will not be so politically meaningful and short of feminist senses. But that’s not the fact. At this point, Chinese narrative tradition must be concerned and Chinese female novels also have their own feminist characteristics, although not in the form of western “free indirect speech”. We have our own styles of feminist forms. For example, in novels of Chen Ran and Lin Bai, emphasis characters and brackets are applied to express special feminist meanings, and studies can’t copy western theory to interpret them.

Problems of western feminist narratology itself should also be considered seriously. Western theories have their own drawbacks and Chinese researcher can’t blindly copy and follow them in any case. Fortunately, there are acute Chinese scholars saying them loudly and faithfully, such as Shen Dan, professor of Beijing University, have talked about the theoretical mistakes of Lanser’s differentiation of “public narrative” and “secrete narrative” in an international symposium, which shows Chinese scholar’s dedication to feminist narratology. Not all women’s discourses to women are confined to personal field and with the publication of literary works, some women’s discourses in styles of diaries, letters of memoirs are also open to the public. Therefore, factors such as if there are narrated or not, what kind of gender of the narrated person, have limited influences on their feminist meanings. And when we study texts as Diary of Miss Sophie by Ding Ling, all those should be considered in order to localize feminist narratology clearly and correctly. Blindly coping and following western theory will not be helpful, even lead to misreadings and mis-interpretings. On the contrary, some research works do not quote any concepts or principles of western feminist narratology, but have wonderful reasonable analyses, such as monographs by Chen Sunxin and Wang Kan. And they are the real localization practice of Chinese feminist narratology.
4. Reasons of Marginalized Position of Chinese Feminist Narratology and Further Studies

Predicaments of feminist narratology in China do not only come from scholars’ personal academic choices, but our whole literary and cultural tradition. Narrative analyses, critics of formalism, detailed readings, all those required feminist narratological factors are still not familiar enough for Chinese academia, especially compared with the profound tradition of ideology studies. As for studies of female literature, contents’ studies have been concerned seriously and universally, because their literary interpretations can be related with women’s actual states to the utmost, while studies of forms are usually considered to be confined in literary texts. Furthermore, feminist narratology usually need close reading in details, while case studies seem to be a little “narrow” and “trivial” compared with studies of literary thoughts or grand tide in Chinese literary academia. The “level” of journals which prefer to public papers on single writer and work is usually not so high as on literary tide or groups of writer and work. All those effect the preference of feminist narratology among Chinese scholars.

Another problem is the choice of texts of feminist narratology, because not all works can offer practical and efficient academic resources for interpretations of feminist narratology. Especially in a commercialized society, many Chinese writers only consider how to write a story which can be easily written, read, or adapted into film and plays, and don’t care much about narrator, perspective, structure, quotation, rhetoric, or other narrative skills. But they are indispensable materials what analyses of feminist narratology just urgently need. If stories are written so casually, how can researchers take them seriously to do their studies of feminist narratology? For example, in the 21st century theory of “authorities of discourse” proposed by Lanser has been disregarded or put aside slightly by some female writers. Except a few works as Records of Women’s Gossips or China in Liangzhuang, there are not so many valuable texts in the perspective of narrative. Those also prevent feminist narratology from further development.

Therefore, how to take advantages of western theory of feminist narratology and overcome the restraining factors to actualize its real localization, is the big task for Chinese scholars. And of course, feminist narratology is a promising academic tide in today’s studies, whose progress and problems will be a typical case for the world, not only be limited in China. As an international academic issue, I hope scholars around the world concern the topic and make sustainable development of studies of feminist narratology in the long run.

Note

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