

# *The Awakening of Women's Consciousness in the Patriarchal Society—Take "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Enchanting Shadow" as Examples*

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**Abstract:** Pu Songling and Edgar Allan Poe are the representative characters of Chinese and Western Gothic novels respectively. Their female characters, Nie Xiaoqian and Madeline, are both oppressed by the patriarchal society and suffer from physical and mental torture, but instead of compromising on this, they burst out with a stronger awareness of resistance. This paper mainly analyzes the awakening of Nie Xiaoqian and Madeline who are in a disadvantaged position under the patriarchal society in the midst of oppression.

## 1. Introduction

Both Chinese and Western Gothic novels are characterized by romance, horror, and the supernatural. The Chinese Gothic novels are represented by Pu Songling and the Western Gothic novels are represented by Edgar Allan Poe, both of whom are unique in their respective fields.

Chinese Gothic novels are mainly about anecdotes, legends and ghost stories. It reflected the superstitious culture of the society at that time. And many of them are based on folk strange events, which to a certain extent can reflect the thinking and life of the lower class people. Pu Songling's "The Enchanting Shadow" is a household story in China, enduring for more than 300 years, and has been remade into movies and TV dramas. The image of Nie Xiaoqian is even more deeply rooted in people's hearts. Although she is weak, she is persistent in her heart and yearns for freedom, and she bravely seizes the opportunity to escape from the devil's oppression and realize her own salvation.

Western Gothic novels were popular from the late 18th century to the middle of the 19th century. Gothic novels of the 18th and 19th centuries were mostly about haunted ancient castles, with strong colors of horror, bleakness and decay, through which they criticized the destruction of human nature by the industrial society, and affirmed that many phenomena in the life were complicated and inexplicable, especially unexplainable by rationalism. Thus, Gothic novels naturally became the best way for people who were dissatisfied with the status quo and could do nothing about it to vent their emotions and liberate themselves under the Industrial Revolution. Allan Poe's pioneering depiction of psychological horror opened a new chapter in the history of the development of Western Gothic novels, and had a far-reaching influence on the modernist and postmodernist literature of the West in the twentieth century (He Muying 1999)[3]. *The Fall of the House of Usher*, published in the September 1893 issue of Burton's Gentleman's Magazine, is one of the most

famous of Edgar Allan Poe's Gothic novels. Although there is not much description of Madeline in the whole piece, she is the key character that drives the whole picture, reflecting the oppression and resistance of women under the patriarchal society.

## 2. The influence of writers' biographies on works

Although Pope and Edgar Allan Poe lived in different periods of time, they were both intellectuals who spent their lives in poverty and disenchantment, which had a significant influence on the creation of their works.

The era in which Pu Songling lived was the early Qing Dynasty. During this period, women were always in a disadvantaged position. Under the feudal ideology, women's fate was decided by men such as fathers, elder brothers and husbands, and women were in a disadvantaged position under such a patriarchal society. Especially women at the bottom of the society, their destiny can only be controlled by men, like a kind of objectified thing, without any dignity and status. However, the female characters in Pu Songling's works are different. In *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, Pu Songling has portrayed many women with independent personalities, who break through the constraints of traditional thinking and take the initiative to pursue their own freedom.

It was his life experiences that enabled Pu Songling to depict such lively and courageous women. Since his youth, Pu Songling had been fond of recording anecdotes, but this was not a proper occupation for a people who had to take the examination, so he was often discouraged or ridiculed by his friends. However, looking back at his life, he was still a scholar until the age of 50, which implied that it was not the writing of novels that prevented him from getting merit in the examination, but rather his repeated failures in his official career that made him depressed and unhappy, and he recorded the darkness of the society and the imperial examination system in *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* by means of anecdotes to express his disappointment at the hopelessness of the career path. In his later years, Pu Songling's life became even more miserable, to the extent that he had to borrow money from his friends to make ends meet. It was because of the corrupt society and bureaucracy that he was able to understand so deeply the society and the people, and the women under the patriarchal society, that he was able to write the masterpiece *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, which portrayed many courageous women with a sense of resistance.

Edgar Allan Poe also had a very miserable childhood, his parents died when he was young, and he spent most of his short life writing and editing, but he was poor and downtrodden. One of the more controversial aspects of his life was his marriage to his 13-year-old cousin, Virginia Clemm. However, these controversies did not affect their happiness and his wife always supported him even in the most difficult times of his life. She is arguably the most important person in his life, which had a major influence on Edgar Allan Poe in creating female characters and many of his works are thought to be based on her.

One of the female characters, Madeline, was also created in relation to the changes caused by the Industrial Revolution. In the second half of the 18th century, the rapid development of the industrial revolution exacerbated domestic tensions and led to a series of rebellious struggles. In the face of these social changes, the family structure was reorganized. Each member of the family had to strictly abide by his or her own role, and women needed to provide a constant stream of energy in the operation of such a structure, which was undoubtedly centered on patriarchy (Yang Xiawei, 2011)[5]. Under the double pressure that the family puts on women, it creates great anxiety and fear. When personal beliefs collapse or when women's sense of resistance awakens, the family and society powered by the energy provided by women will collapse. The creation of *The Fall of the House of Usher* seems to predict such an end.

### 3. The awakening of female consciousness

Both Pope and Edgar Allan Poe portrayed the women they created as very rich and thoughtful.

Especially Pu Songling, he always used various methods to describe the qualities of the female characters, reflecting the kindness, bravery and determination of the women.

Nie Xiaoqian's emergence was very miserable, representing the vast number of ordinary women at that time, who received a lot of oppression from patriarchal forces and were forced to do things they didn't want to do. In the story, Nie Xiaoqian was coerced by a demon which symbolized the cruel and ruthless patriarchal rule at that time. The patriarchal society oppressed women, like Nie Xiaoqian who was not even spared to be a ghost after her death, and still coerced them to serve the patriarchal society. And she became a ghost prostitute. Although Nie Xiaoqian was unwilling to do the thing of harming people, she did not show the slightest complaint before the two demonic accomplices. This was because she realized that not only was it useless, but it would also lead to even greater persecution. Although she was persecuted often thought of resistance, but because she could not see the people who can help her and she was very weak and had no power to save herself, she had to keep this thought in mind. Instead of compromising on this, she actively sought out opportunities to gain her freedom (Chen, 2005) [2]. Until she went to Ning Caichen's bedchamber to lure him first with sex and then with money, but still unsuccessful, she immediately realized that Ning Caichen was very upright and reliable, and immediately strengthened her determination, told him the truth, and pointed out a way for him to be spared. And she was not so simply said on the end, but thought long term about pre-assumed that after the failure of the plan, and she also wanted Ning Caichen to take away from her bone in order to eliminate future problems, which showed the depth of her thinking and the meticulousness of her mind. After Nie Xiaoqian was rescued, she once again bravely told Ning Caichen that she wanted to marry him. In the end, after passing the test of Ning Caichen's mother, the two of them live happily together. It is enough to show that Nie Xiaoqian is resourceful and dares to resist the patriarchal society and pursue happiness. Nie Xiaoqian's determination to escape from oppression represents the courageous spirit of women at the bottom of the social class who dared to save themselves and rise in resistance when they were oppressed by the dark forces of the patriarchal society.

Although Edgar Allan Poe does not describe Madeline much, Madeline plays an important role in the development of the whole plot, and Madeline's final awakening and death show to the greatest extent Madeline's awakening of consciousness against the patriarchal society.

In *The Fall of the House of Usher*, Madeline, Roderick's twin sister, is trapped in the house of usher for a long period of time due to a mysterious family disease. She is deprived of socialization and friends, and gradually develops a sensitive and fragile character. A mysterious family disease kept her in perpetual fear of death and being trapped in the house of usher caused her agony and desperation, and her eventual burial alive was extremely frightening and agonizing for her. Although she was described in only a few sentences in the novel, the pain of being oppressed and ignored by the patriarchal house of Usher can clearly been seen. But again, she didn't succumb to that, but fought back in her own way. Although she had a family disease, she insisted on seeing a physician all the time. Being ignored all the time, she chose to keep appearing in front of her brother to make her brother "bury his face in his hands" and "trickled many passionate tears". In spite of being buried alive by her brother, she fought to get out of coffin. At the end of the novel, she escaped the coffin and "remained trembling and reeling to and fro upon the threshold. Then, she fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother, and in her violent and now final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpe, and a victom to the terrors he had anticipated". She faced dilemmas and challenges of her own identity and self-realization, but at the moment of her death at the end, she was actively resisting the oppression and moral dilemmas brought to her by the patriarchal

society, reflecting Madeline's bravery and fearlessness.

Nie Xiaoqian shows autonomy and strong will in the story. She did not want to be subordinate or victimized by the male protagonist. She owned her own ideas and decisions and strove to break free from her bondage to pursue her own survival and happiness. Madeline also had resisted in their own way. They refused to become an object, a tool for profit, a spiritual consumer product for men, and resisted patriarchal society in their own way. Although they were oppressed and destroyed, they did not give in to this and give up carrying on with their fate, instead, they rebelled against the oppression of the patriarchal society in their own way and actively pursued freedom and liberation (Zhou Danqiangyu, 2015)[4].

#### 4. Male beneficiaries and perpetrators behind women

Whether it is in *The Enchanting Shadow* or *The Fall of the House of Usher*, the appearance of female characters is always depicted as fantastically beautiful. In *The Enchanting Shadow*, Nie Xiaoqian always wears a white dress and is described by others as if she is a character inside a painting. This is enough to illustrate her beauty. For the male characters, the only thing that attracts them is beauty, and the oppression and misery of women are not seen by them, but become their tools for killing or toys for fun.

The male characters in *The Enchanting Shadow* and *The Fall of the House of Usher*, as beneficiaries of a patriarchal society, take out their suffering and injustices in the society at large on women, who were in a disadvantaged position at the time.

Pu Songling was unsuccessful in the imperial examinations in real life, so in his novels, the image of the scholar is described in a positive and sympathetic way. In *The Enchanting Shadow*, Ning Caichen is a typical scholar. When facing the temptation of Nie Xiaoqian, Ning Caichen cursed her in a rude way, emphasizing his integrity and the fact that he did not give in to beauty and money. After helping Nie Xiaoqian out of her misery, he took her home at her pleading which sounds very passive of Ning Tsai-Shen. While he took the beautiful, capable and intelligent Nie Xiaoqian as his wife when his former wife at home soon fell ill and dead, In *The Enchanting Shadow*, it seems that Ning Caichen is forced to accept the death of his wife and marry Nie Xiaoqian, but in fact, Ning Caichen is the biggest beneficiary, he can no longer take care of his wife who has been sick for many years, and married the young and beautiful Nie Xiaoqian and succeeded in the examination of the meritocracy.

In *The Fall of the House of Usher*, Roderick is described in great detail, whether it is about his appearance, his sensitive mental state or his bizarre behavior and family illness. Under Edgar Allan Poe's description, he seems to be the victim, suffering psychologically and physically, trapped in the house of Usher for a long time, but he kept transferring his pain to the outside world. His state of madness made "I" equally afraid and terrified within just a few days of his arrival, not to mention Madeline, with whom he has spent many years, and who, whenever he sees her, "buried his face in his hands" in the novel. Because the pain of seeing her makes him think of his future end, and because he struggles to escape from taking out his physical desires on her. This ambivalence is so strong that he decides to bury his twin sister alive at the end (Gu Benying, 2019)[1]. Despite the fact that he suffered from both physical and mental torture, he chose to use his sister, who is in a vulnerable position in Patriarchal Usher family, as an object of venting and commits mental and physical violence, not treating her as a whole person.

Whether it is a scholar or an aristocratic figure, in the novels of Pope and Edgar Allan Poe, they are always portrayed as victims, but in fact, they are the ones who have a vested interest and hide themselves behind women after they have gained their benefits.

## 5. Conclusion

Nie Xiaoqian in *The Enchanting Shadow* and Madeline in *The Fall of the House of Usher* both suffered from the oppression and torture from the patriarchal society and had to be reduced to the subordinate products of the patriarchal society. But instead of giving in to the patriarchal society, they found themselves in the midst of their own struggles and dilemmas, and found the right opportunity to rebel. Men in a patriarchal society undeniably have vested interests, but they have to pretend behind women's backs that they are forced to accept these interests and draw unlimited nourishment from the women. It is undeniable that Pu Songling and Edgar Allan Poe's portrayal of women's roles is very detailed and reflected the awakening of women's consciousness. However, due to the limitation of the time, the depiction of female characters' values and behaviors still has some feudal elements.

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