

What Happens after Nora Walks Out? ——Take Regret for the Past and A Room of One's Own as Examples to Analyze Female Liberation

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Abstract:

At the commencement of the 20th century, concurrent with the transformation of the socioeconomic structure and the augmentation of individualistic consciousness, the feminist narrative in both the Eastern and Western contexts grew increasingly assertive. The character Nora in Ibsen's plays significantly contributed to the consciousness awakening among women. *Regret for the Past* can serve as a sequel to *What Happens after Nora Walks Out?* Delineating the roads and ultimate fate of a consciousness-awakened woman. Concurrently, the eminent Western author, Virginia Woolf, initiated an exploration of feminism within the narrative of *A Room of One's Own* marking a significant juncture in the Western feminist movement's trajectory. This scholarly work involves a meticulous exegesis of the literary texts within *Regret for the Past* and *A Room of One's Own*, examining the diverse experiences of women's liberation across various historical periods. Research indicates that the status of women has enhanced subsequent to societal emancipation, with women's liberation being concomitant with their endeavor for gender equality. Subsequently, the Women's Liberation Movement has achieved additional advancements. It is incontrovertible that research has demonstrated the necessity of social emancipation as a prerequisite for the advancement of women's liberation. Presently, given the enhancement of women's societal standing, when running away from home, which had been given the meaning of awakening, was no longer the only option. What contemporary avenues are available for women and what novel challenges confront the cause of women's liberation?

Keywords: *Regret for the Past*; *A Room of One's Own*; Female Liberation; Feminism

1. Introduction

During the *May Fourth Movement*, the concepts of free love and independent marriage emerged as pivotal components of the ideological emancipation of that era. Influenced by Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Nora has emerged as a renowned prototype embodying the emancipation of women. Nora's departure inspired a multitude of awakened women across the nation to emulate her actions [1]. Nevertheless, it remains undetermined what the outcome will be for Nora following her departure. Mr. Ibsen himself addressed this inquiry by stating, "That does not reflect my intentions during the composition of my work. I merely crafted poetry [2]." In 1923, Lu Xun decisively exposed the fate of Nora in his lecture: *What Happens after Nora Walks Out?* Either a degenerate or a return [2]. In the year 1925, Mr. Lu Xun crafted his initial iteration of the short story *Regret for the Past*, a narrative that poignantly encapsulated the destiny of the intelligentsia

amidst the *May Fourth Movement*, subtly intertwining the motif of amorous affection with the larger tapestry of their plight [3]. He was acutely conscious of the societal issues underlying the phenomenon commonly referred to as Nora's departure, and cogently argued that women must possess absolute economic autonomy in order to truly effectuate a departure.

Concurrently, Virginia Woolf, a renowned Western author renowned for her stream-of-consciousness narrative technique and a seminal figure in feminist literature, issued *A Room of One's Own* in 1929, which was derived from two seminal addresses delivered at the University of Cambridge. Wolff observed: "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction [4]." It is evident that when discussing feminism, the essence of Woolf and Lu Xun's perspectives can be traced back to the materialistic plan.

At present, the self-awakening and liberation of women continue to be significant concerns. *Regret for the Past*

underscores that societal emancipation is a prerequisite for individual liberation and autonomous matrimony. *A Room of One's Own* established a benchmark for feminist discourse, elucidating how women's liberation within traditional societies was encumbered by societal pressures [5]. In the 21st century, as societal liberation continues to advance, the constraints on women in society have significantly lessened. Currently, the challenges confronting women are primarily centered around the erosion or absence of individual consciousness. This treatise endeavors to examine the manifestation of feminine consciousness and the emancipation of women through the lens of varying epochs, while also delving into potential avenues for women's advancement in the contemporary era.

2. Zijun, Who Awakened in Love, Died in No Love

In *Regret for the Past*, the narrative is unfolded from the male perspective, as Juansheng reminisces about his past with Zijun with a sense of regret. Upon discussing the topics of familial autocracy, the erosion of entrenched customs, and gender parity, as well as referencing the works of Ibsen and Tagore, Juansheng found Zijun consistently respond with a serene and acquiescent demeanor, her eyes alight with the innocent curiosity of a child. At this juncture, Juansheng assumed the role of mentor and guide, fostering Zijun's independent thinking. When Zijun declared her independence, "I am my own person, and no one has the right to interfere with me!" Juansheng expressed optimism regarding the future prospects of Chinese women. Nonetheless, this affection becomes the impetus for Zijun to depart; at this juncture, Zijun is deeply ensnared within this asymmetric love. That is to say, Zijun's departure from her domicile and her profound affection for Juansheng stemmed predominantly from her amorous inclinations towards the opposite gender and her idealistic solipsistic fantasies concerning him.

The novel concepts introduced during the *May Fourth Movement* challenged the established order of the traditional society, and akin to Nora, Zijun defied the feudal patriarchal structure, departing from her abode. However, as Lu Xun posited, the consequence of Nora's departure may lead to either a degenerate or a return. During their cohabitation, Juansheng transitioned from a sentimental proposal involving "holding her hand with tears streaming and kneeling on one knee" to professing, "Love necessitates constant renewal, growth, and cultivation." In the end, it became "If you only know how to hold a man by his coat, even soldiers can hardly [6]". Despite having his own perspectives on love, Juansheng remains ignorant of the processes involved in the renewal, growth, and gen-

eration of love. But He elected to scrutinize Zijun with such an attitude, progressively undermining her seldom encountered spirit [7]. In the stark contrast between the fantasy of "love" and the reality, Zijun awakens to "love" but also withers away in it.

In preceding literary works, certain authors have employed the concepts of "harm" and "deception" in relation to Juansheng to elucidate the underlying causes of this tragedy. In this instance of a partial awakening in a love fraud, Zijun was similarly afflicted by amorous delusion. Upon analyzing the essence of Zijun, the epitome of the Chinese Nora, one is unable to avoid recognizing the arduous quest for autonomous love and matrimony that women of the *May Fourth* era embarked upon. But the pursuit of love and marriage for women remains a fantasy of "love" for the dating pool. As a national allegory, *Regret for the Past* exposes the male-centric cultural hegemony and seductiveness inherent in the "Nora's Exit" phenomenon [8]. In the traditional society characterized by material insecurity and the subordinate status of women, the female often perceived the autonomy in spouse selection as a paramount aspect of emancipation. The fundamental concept primarily revolves around the male demographic, accordingly overlooking the self-awareness of women during the process of awakening. The cultivation of "awakening" and "autonomy" consciousness is entrusted to romantic and marital relationships involving male groups. The essence of free choice in matrimony primarily revolves around the concept of "Freedom", which, in essence, revolves around granting women a higher degree of respect more than an extensive array of choices. During the *May Fourth Movement*, the female faction erroneously perceived the act of "selecting a spouse" as the pinnacle of emancipation, despite their physical relocation from their abodes, the notion of dependency on men was ingrained in their psyche to a profound extent.

Zijun, as Nora of the *May Fourth Movement*, was awakened and it was difficult for her to return to her dreams, so death became her ultimate destination. Awakened in a long-old dream, but unable to find a way to break out of the iron house, one is inevitably forced to sacrifice painfully in the gap between dreams and reality. However, her sacrifice was not rendered futile, but rather contributed to a more profound reflection within the female liberation. As mentioned in *What Happens after Nora Walks Out*: "What did she take with her besides her awakened heart? ... She must be better off, with a suitcase full of provisions, to put it bluntly, she must have money". Dreams are good. Otherwise, money is important. As a prelude to *What Happens after Nora Walks Out*, the book *Regret for the Past* target audience for this book is not men, but women. This so-called love novel is written for those women who

have awakened under the enlightenment movement, but are unable to transcend traditional values. Concerning the resolution for women's emancipation, LuXun proposed a path that included "equal distribution" and "equal power", followed by freedom of love and self-determination in marriage [2]. The tragical conclusion of Zijun's narrative, albeit partly attributable to the blind spots inherent in her quest for self-actualization, was predominantly influenced by the conservatism and backwardness of her thoughts and the times. The prevention of tragic occurrences necessitates financial and authoritative resources, which are predominantly reliant on heightened productivity and societal emancipation. In the absence of an enabling social milieu, expressions of individualism and the intellectual liberation become but hollow pronouncements. This is why the inevitable tragic destiny befalls individuals such as Zijun, who share the plight of women.

3. Reinterpretation of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*

A Room of One's Own is a classic work of feminism that explores the theme of "women and fiction". In the opening of the essay, Woolf states her viewpoint that "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction [4]. " In other words, a woman wants to have her own hobby, she must be economically independent and have a space of her own for her imagination.

In Chapter 3, Woolf posits a hypothetical scenario: What if Shakespeare really did have a gifted sister named Judith, and what would her life have been like? Upon a thorough analysis of the content within the article, one can readily observe that conventional women have paths that have been predetermined since birth, Judith assisted in the supervision of the family's culinary preparations during her formative years. After growing up, her kin orchestrated a union between her and a prosperous local entrepreneur. Nonetheless, she adamantly refused to entertain any compromise, choosing to depart from her home, even harboring aspirations for an acting career. Nevertheless, Judith, having abandoned her domicile, ultimately could not elude the specter of death. The constraints imposed by prevalently discriminatory societal attitudes inflicted profound distress upon this prodigiously gifted woman [9]. Although Woolf focused the essay on female creativity, an inspection through the lens of feminine self-awareness unveils the tragedy was precipitated by the era's backwardness and male-centric dominance. Consequently, Woolf passionately advocates for the arousal of such self-awareness within her writing. She said, "Only when they stop complaining about injustice and money and adopt a resolute attitude to bear all the indifference, criticism, and

temptations, and mobilize themselves like zealots, can they bring 'Shakespeare's Sister' back to life again [4]." Furthermore, Woolf introduced the notion of "androgyny", elucidating that every individual is governed by both masculine and feminine energies. An harmonious amalgamation of these dual sexualities constitutes a state of being that is natural, comfortable, innovative, luminous, and whole [8]. Woolf convinced non-feminists that the absence of female Shakespeare was not because of women's weakness, but because of social pressure [5]. She articulated distinctly that it is unrealistic to liberate women solely through the power of the times and society, and that only when women themselves become aware of independence and liberation in the course of social development, when the binary thinking within their psyche achieves a balance of equivalence, that women can experience a genuine awakening. Prior to that era, the concept of single-sex thought was dominant, and the realization of female individual value was often subordinate to the male groups at the center of society, such as fathers and husbands. Fortunately, one might be able to inherit from collateral relatives and gain economic freedom. However, economic self-sufficiency does not equate to true independence; it merely suggests a diminution of external constraints and an augmented influence over the "puppets" that one can self-manipulate [2]. At this juncture, what women require is a more profound intellectual illumination and a heightened state of self-awareness; otherwise, they may inadvertently adopt the oppressive characteristics of their male counterparts, merely cloaked in female attire. Individuals who are less fortunate may employ matrimony as a strategy for social advancement. Despite being relieved from financial concerns, they continue to be subjected to the domination of their spouses. Women became the puppets of their husbands. It may be posited that the attainment of self-awareness constitutes a sufficient condition for the emancipation of women, whereas the acquisition of absolute economic autonomy represents an indispensable requirement for such liberation, and the absence of either would render the process incomplete.

4. The Integration of the Individual and Society, Material and Spirit.

Zijun's valiant and chaste love was sanctified and immaculate, and her tragical denouement elicited a profound sensation of shock among the audience. However, her ultimate sacrifice was merely pertinent to herself. For other women who had not attained enlightenment, it merely represented a tragic spectacle. Upon observing it, one might experience a sense of sorrow, yet it was swiftly forgotten. As LuXun insightfully states, "It is not worth be-

ing shocked by temporary sacrifices; it is better to engage in profound and enduring battles [2].” In contemporary times, individuals exhibit poor memory capabilities, and personal sacrifices merely result in fleeting excitement. Subsequent to the wane of the topic’s prominence, Fortunately, perhaps a scant number of individuals will retain memory of this occurrence; yet, it stands to alter nothing. Zijun’s “demise” encapsulates the wound of the revolution within the bygone societal context, and it doubly serves as a cautionary admonition. Women’s liberation does not require successive sacrifices, and while women’s awakening is underway, women’s “exodus” is still taking place. How to make the “Nora” groups who live like duckweed still have the ability to survive after running away from home is a problem that women groups and the whole society need to continue to solve.

One can discern from *A Room of One’s Own* that Woolf’s feminist ideology is constructive and impartial. She extolled the imperative for women encumbered by societal constraints to comprehend the immediacy of agitating for an equal societal standing, as well as the necessity to pursue “economic self-sufficiency” on an individual level. For individuals who have already established a substantial material foundation, she cautions against succumbing to hollow pleasures, which may progressively deplete the poetic essence inherent in their written work [9]. During the process of self-enlightenment, she also advocates that women should possess the capability to live. The emancipation of women necessitates a unified matrix of both material and spiritual welfare, where material prosperity lays the groundwork for intellectual liberation.

Furthermore, the emancipation of women is inextricably linked to the liberation of society as a whole. The seminal contributions of the *May Fourth New Culture Movement* to the intellectual enlightenment and advancements of women’s liberation are indisputable, and it has realized notable accomplishments in comparison to Western nations. In 1920, the National Beijing University and the Nanjing Normal University officially began to admit female students, while the proposal for female admission at the University of Cambridge in Britain was rejected in 1921 [10]. With the progress of times, women’s groups have been advocating for gender equality and their calls for equal rights have been accepted by society. Since the 21st century, the progress of society has brought more convenience to women, and the century-long struggle has made it possible for women of the present generation to have unimpeded control over economic rights. The once “Nora walks out” is no longer the inevitable path of female awakening. Staying at home or going out has become a choice, and when women individuals realize that they are living for themselves, we might as well say that

going back is also a kind of happiness. Chinese contemporary feminist literature reflects on and examines these phenomena. Many female writers consciously tend to depict the psychological activities and material lives of women, creating many classic feminist texts. Some of them stay at home to enjoy their own “room”, while others long for the joy of family reunion. Some are carefree and set out to see the world. These choices are not right or wrong, as they live for themselves and define their own happiness. Besides the literary field, in recent years, the development of TV dramas has also seen the emergence of various “strong female lead” character scripts. A “strong female lead” is a character who plays an important and dominant role in the plot. They have distinct personalities, clear goals, and independent thoughts. They achieve great success in both their emotional and professional lives. However, as more and more “strong female lead” scripts are copied from one another, there is a growing tendency to be impatient and even to depict other women in a negative light to highlight the so-called “strong female lead”. The significance of the phenomenon of individual rivalry among women to the development of the female group still needs to be verified. But there are still many more outstanding and classic female characters who are positive and active, even though their images may not be perfect and there are problems that cannot be ignored. Nonetheless, these individuals do not entirely conform to societal expectations in their interpersonal relationships, possessing distinct and autonomous personalities of their own, with their lives being lived for themselves [11]. To a certain degree, they genuinely encapsulate the perspective articulated by Zijun “I am my own”.

5. Conclusion

Regret for the Past and *A Room of One’s Own* both revolve around narratives pivoting on female protagonists. In the conventional societies of both the Eastern and Western regions, the relationship between the sexes is commonly manifested as contentious. The awakening and emancipation of women were frequently denounced by patriarchal structures as alien elements. During the process of exploitation and silencing, the female collective gave birth to the thought of “escaping”, which is undoubtedly an audacious denunciation of the patriarchal society’s prolonged oppression of women. Without the emergence of feminine consciousness, it is impossible to initiate significant social transformation. The standing of women serves as a critical indicator of a nation or country’s civilizational level.

The narrative *What Happens after Nora Walks Out* unveils the fallacy of the female awakening proposition within

the traditional societal context, underscoring the inextricable link between a woman's destiny and the societal constructs that shape it. Following the seminal historical event of "Nora's Exit", the liberation of Chinese women still faces an arduous process. Intellectual autonomy and material stability represent prerequisites for the awakening of the female collective. While the stinking rich may be despised, in the throes of perpetual survival expenses, talk of liberation and awakening devolves into vacuous discourse, eroding the essence of such concepts.

In the 21st century, advancements in productivity and changes in production relations have expanded the developmental prospects for women. Following a century of concerted struggle and significant sacrifices, the question of whether women should pursue external live or remain in internal spheres continues to hold relevance, necessitating further reflection and exploration.

The advancement of feminism necessitates ongoing efforts, and the awakening of female collective is still insufficient. In any discourse on women's emancipation, the overriding concern should be the awakening of the dormant female individual, coupled with the quest for the significance of their existence. Subsequently, the acquisition of economic real power follows as a pivotal pursuit.

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