

Feminist Thoughts Revealed in Rose-Colored Teacups

HUI Jingrui^{[a],*}

^[a]School of Foreign Languages, Northeast Petroleum University, Daqing, China.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

A.S.Byatt's famous story *Rose-Colored Teacups* presents a simple story between mother and daughter. Young fashionable daughter broke her mother's old sewing machine left by her own mother. Before bursting into a fury, mother remembers a similar story that happened to her at her daughter's age. When she broke some rose-colored teacups sent by her mother's friends, her mother's responses were very furious. This paper aims to give an in-depth analysis of the feminist thoughts revealed in the story.

Key words: Conflict; Mother; Daughter; Pink

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INTRODUCTION

A. S. Byatt, a very famous English woman novelist, poet and a Booker-Prize winner for her magic novel *Possession*. In 2008, *The Times* newspaper named her on its list of the 50 greatest British writers since 1945. Byatt is also known for her short stories. *Rose-Colored Teacups*, one of her short stories collected in *Sugar and Other Stories*, is typical of her feminist thoughts. The writer chooses a very trivial incident as the object of narration. At the beginning of the story, an old lady, Veronica, maybe in her fifties, is imagining a tea party which three young women are attending, held in a college

bedroom. Here the author gives a detailed description of the setting and characters. Suddenly her imagination is interrupted, and she is brought back to reality by her daughter's calling from upstairs. Her daughter, Jane, an undergraduate, peremptory and wailing, are misusing Veronica's sewing machine which has been left to her as a present by her mother and then grandmother. The machine cannot work because of Jane's rude operation. Before Veronica lost her temper, she recalled a similar incident that took place when she was an undergraduate. In her memory, she broke some rose-colored teacups sent by her mother's old college friend "to take back a new generation of the college" (Byatt, 1992, p.36). Although Veronica doesn't clearly explain why the teacups are broken, the reason is possibly similar to that her daughter has broken the sewing-machine, casual and careless. "She had not liked the teacups. She did not like pink, and the floral shape of the saucers was most unfashionable. She and her friends drank Nescafe from stone mugs or plain cylinders in primary colors." (Ibid) Similar experiences make the mother produce a strange understanding and tolerance to her daughter. The conflict is resolved in a peaceful way.

1. CONFLICTS

On the surface, there is only one conflict between Veronica and her daughter Jane. In fact, there are two conflicts, one between Veronica and Jane in reality, the other between Veronica and her mother in memory, both concerning mother-daughter relationship. However, the results of the two conflicts are different. Finally Veronica successfully controls her temper because she soberly realizes that "She could not reproduce that fury against Jane" (Ibid). Then naturally her memory goes back to the past when young Veronica broke the teacups. Her mother must have burst into a stormy anger since she "abruptly remembered her own mother's voice in the 1950s, unstrained, wailing, interminable, how could you, how could you..." (Ibid.).

The writer does not clearly state what serious result has been produced by the mother's fury. However, during the narration, we can find a striking change in Veronica. When she was young, she liked neither pink nor teacups, but in her visioned tea party, she overdid pink. In that shabby college bedroom, the three women carry a rose-colored teacup in hand. The setting is ornamented with roses, too. In her imagination,

She could see the chairs very clearly, one with a pale green linen cover, fitted, and one with a creased chintz, covered with large, floppy roses...and through the window, between the rosy chintz curtains, there was the unchanging college garden with its rosebeds and packed herbaceous border... There were leaves coiling into the picture round the outside of the window-frame-- a climbing rose, a creeper, what was it? (Ibid., p.33)

She could see the tablecloth, white linen with a drawn thread-work border, and thick embroidered flowers spilling in swags round its edges, done in that embroidery silk that is dyed in deepening and paler shades of the same color. She mostly saw the flowers as roses, though many of them, looked at more closely, were hybrid or imaginary creations. She was overdoing the pink. (Ibid., p.34)

There is no other special reason to explain Veronica's change except her mother's fury. Byatt gives a very detailed description about Veronica's helplessness after her mother's anger.

Veronica remembered packing the pink cups. Something had been terribly wrong. She remembered moving around her college room in a daze of defeat and anguish barely summoning up the strength to heap the despised crockery, all anyhow, into the crate...But although she could remember the fine frenzy in which the fate of the teacups had seemed immaterial, the cause was gone. Had she lost a lover? Missed a part in a university plays? Said something and regreted it? Feared pregnancy? Or had it been merely vaguer fears of meaninglessness and inertia which had assailed her then, when she was lively, and had been replaced now by the stiffer and more precise fears of death and never getting things done? (Ibid., p.37)

Fortunately, Veronica has learned a lot from her own mother-daughter conflicts which become a lesson to help her deal with the relation between her and Jane. The successful resolution of the mother-daughter conflict is maybe the most encouraging change in the story.

2. FEMINIST THOUGHTS

2.1 The Same Room

At Veronica's visioned tea party, three unnamed young women appear in the same room. In fact, it is an impossible tea party in that these three young women belong to different generations. From the context, it can be guessed that they should be Veronica, her mother and grandmother. The woman sitting at the end of the bed is probably her mother because at the end of the story, Veronica "detected in her mother's cream-colored dress just a touch of awkwardness" (Ibid., p.38) while at the beginning of the story she describes this woman as "pale

head", "a clotted cream or blanket-wool color" knee-length shift (Ibid., p.33). Another woman is harder to see is Veronica herself because she "had to resist seeing it as she had always known it, pepper and salt" (Ibid.). Veronica was a woman of fifties. It is natural for a woman of such an age to be grey-haired but she does not want to face her age. The last woman must be her grandmother. In the author's description, this "dark woman, in a chair, had long hair, knotted in the nape of her neck" is one of the two shingled woman who at the end of the story, raised the teapot and poured amber tea into rosy teacups" (Ibid., p.38). The rose-colored teacups, which carry a special and symbolic meaning, have the sense of inheritance. In this way, it can be concluded that the woman pouring tea into rosy teacups must be Veronica's grandmother.

Under the writer's narration, the time and space have been broken and the three young women of different generations are put in the same room, which means similarities among them three. First, there is no man in the room which is occupied only by women. Woolf once said, "A woman must have money and a room of her own" (Woolf, 2002, p.6). A room of their own is realized in Veronica's imagination where the women of three generations live together just like sisters among them a special sisterhood has formed. According to feminism, sisterhood refers to a special relationship among women who help and understand each other on the basis of similar suffering condition. The story talks about the problem of generation gap among three women. However, the writer expects to resolve the conflicts between generations by way of sisterhood. In the story, it is just because of the relevant experiences that Veronica forgives her impudent daughter. Besides, in the struggle to dissolve phallogocentrism, sisterhood will be powerful and decisive. Second, the room is a bit special because it is a college bedroom. On one hand, it means the three women here are well-educated; on the other hand, despite their good knowledge background, they are confined to the little shabby room while young Jane "was unusually at home because of some unexpected hiatus in her very busy social life, which flowed and overflowed from house to house, from friend's kitchen to friend's kitchen" (Byatt, 1992, p.34).

2.2 Rose-Colored Teacups

In the story, the rose-colored teacups carry symbolic meanings, so do the sewing machine left by Veronica's mother and grandmother. Both the gifts have a sense of inheritance. The rose-colored teacups are presented by Veronica's mother's old college friend to take back a new generation to go to college. But the undergraduate Veronica does not like teacups, neither does she like pink. Then by accident, she breaks some of the teacups which irritates her mother. However, in her fifties, at the visioned tea party, she ornaments the settings with roses and too much pink. Moreover, each of the three

women carries a rose-colored teacup in hand. It is evident that Veronica has been changed and accepts the rose-colored teacups or pink color as time goes by. According to tradition, pink represents women. In many western countries, young couples with new-born baby boys are usually presented gifts of blue color while those with new-born baby girls are presented gifts of pink color. No doubt pink is the favorite color of Veronica's mother's and her college friend's. In a word, pink belongs to that generation. Young Veronica's dislike of pink symbolizes her rejection of women's traditional identity. When she broke the rose-colored teacups, she attempted to break away with women's traditional role. However, after this, she confronted the fury from her mother. The shape of teacup reminds us of woman genitals, stands for women's tolerance and generosity. The reason that Veronica's mother and her college friend love teacups lies in that they have identified themselves with the traditional role imposed on them by patriarchy. After Veronica broke some of the rose-colored teacups, her mother's anger reveals a fact that women have been assimilated by patriarchal values.

In the story, two gifts inherited from last generations are very meaningful. One is the rose-colored teacups; the other is the sewing machine. Both the gifts lead to conflicts between mother and daughter. Just as I have discussed in my paper "Analysis of Women Images in *To the Lighthouse*", "In many classical works, women are described as some hard-working ones busy with knitting, weaving or needlework" because "Women are unable and unwilling to write their own history and often resort to needlework" (Fitzwilliam, 2000, p.12). Sewing machine is also a symbol of women's traditional role. In the overwhelming patriarchal society, this traditional role is prescribed by men. Through this prescription, women are confined to household and unable to compete with men in any other field. Secondly, women have to accept passively this traditional role imposed by men and learn to get used to it, losing their own identity and even becoming defenders of patriarchy. Thirdly, sewing has become women's special means of expression (Hui, 2015). In fact, women have taken part in the social activities in their special way. "Her (Veronica's mother) mother had been only moderately efficient with the thing, though she had used it to make do in the war, turning collars, cutting down trousers, making coats into skirts, and curtains into dungarees." (Byatt, 1992, p.37) In this way, women have tried their best in the war as a special helper. However, it is also in this way that women are confined to the house just like the scene described at the beginning of the story. The difference lies in that the three women are confined to a shabby college bedroom, which maybe means that these well-educated women are conscious of women problems including generation gap and have the ability to face and solve. The sewing machine is left to

Veronica, but is broken by her daughter Jane just as she has broken the rose-colored teacups many years ago. Veronica resolves the conflicts in a peaceful but different way from her mother. Break itself in the story has a revolutionary meaning. It is possibly a change, a turning point in women's consciousness of their own position. When proud and extravagant Jane walked out of the room singing a song, the ending became hopeful and expectant.

2.3 Clue of Time

At the beginning of the story, three young women of different generations appear in the same room like sisters. Thus time and space seem to be broken and vague. However, there is actually a clear clue of time. The sense of time mainly lies in the presents left by last generations. The sewing machine belongs to Veronica's dressmaker grandmother in the 1890s who "had also done hand-embroidery, cushions and handtowels, handkerchiefs and 'runners' for dresser-tops." (Ibid., p.35) "Veronica's mother had had the machine as a wedding present in 1930; it had been second-hand then." (Ibid., p.35) When the sewing machine was sent to her mother as a wedding present, the machine carried a hope what kind of wife the mother wished the daughter to become. Obviously, Veronica's grandmother hopes her daughter to be a traditional wife, too. Likewise, when the rose-colored teacups were sent to Veronica as her college present, they are also given a symbol of inheritance of women's traditional role. Although as an intellectual woman, her mother obviously dislikes the tradition. "The force of her mother's rage against the house and housewifery that trapped her and, by extension, against her clever daughters, who had all partly evaded that trap, precluded wholehearted mourning." (Ibid., p.36) The narration goes on. "Veronica had had it (the sewing machine) since 1960, when Jane's elder sister had been born. She had made baby clothes on it and nightdresses. Only simple things. She was no seamstress." (Ibid., p.35) Interestingly, the imaginary teaparty which the educated women of three generations have attended was held in 1920s.

In *A Literature of Their Own*, Showalter divided women's writing history into three periods.

First, there is a prolonged phase of imitation of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, and internalization of its standards of art and its views on social roles. Second, there is a phase of protest against these standards and values, and advocacy of minority rights and values, including a demand for autonomy. Finally, there is a phase of self-discovery, a turning inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity. An appropriate terminology for women writers is to call these stages, Feminine, Feminist, and Female... I identify the Feminine phase as the period from the appearance of the male pseudonym in the 1840s to the death of George Eliot in 1880s; the Feminist phase as 1880 to 1920, or the winning of the vote; and the Female phase as 1920 to the present, but entering a new stage of self-awareness about 1960. (Showalter, 2004, p.13)

When Veronica's grandmother worked as a dressmaker in the 1890s, women's suffrage movement reached its peak. Women's living conditions must have been influenced by the sensational movements. When the visioned tea party was held in the 1920s, the English women had just won the rights to vote. In spite of these, the sewing machine was sent to Veronica's mother as a wedding present in 1930s, "though she had used it to make do in the war, turning collars, cutting down trousers, making coats into skirts, and curtains into dungarees" (Showalter, 2004, p.35). Here another problem has to be mentioned. During World War 1, women took an active part in the wartime work and this had a great impact on the English traditional concept of sexes. Angela Woollacott holds the fact that English women of upper and middle class take an active part in the wartime work has accelerated the process of their going into the professional fields. Before World War 1, all the male politicians and the press held that women belonged to personal fields and families while men belonged to the political stage, to work. But the particularity of war makes women go into the working fields controlled by men, engaged in decent work, which no doubt has changed men's traditional ideas (Lu, 2011). So to speak, World War 1 is the decisive factor for the women to win the rights to vote. In *Rose-Colored Teacups*, Veronica's mother makes use of the sewing machine to make do in the war, which also hints women's active participation in urgent and social affairs in another World War in a special way.

The sewing machine was finally presented to Veronica in the 1960s when her eldest daughter was born. But one point should not be ignored that in the 1950s, the undergraduate Veronica irritated her mother because of the smashed teacups. Because of the incident, the traditional mother-wife role has been shifted to Veronica, too. However, the machine was finally broken by her daughter Jane in 1980s when woman has discovered her true self. Young Jane, the representative of new women, does not appear in the bedroom, who finally walks out of the house and leads her own life. That is the revolutionary and all new starting in women's emancipation.

SUMMARY

In this short story, narration has been broken, which starts with a vision teaparty in the 1920s when English women just won the rights to vote. Then the narration shifts from imagination to reality mingled with true memory of the past. Then the frame of narration changes from the past memory to reality, from reality to the past and finally ends with a vision again. When three young women of three generations are put in the same room, the problems revealed in the text are synchronic. But when the sewing machine was passed on generation after generation, the problems are diachronic and developing. After Veronica and Jane reconciled with each other about the sewing machine, Jane rolled out joyfully, "Lord make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days, what it is; that I may know, that I may know how frail I am." (Byatt, 1992, p.38) The words show clearly that women have really gone into a stage of self-awareness.

At the beginning of the story, three women at the visioned teaparty are waiting for someone; while at the end of the story, the object appears who are young men. In fact, in this way, the story went back to the past when these women's fate were changed by the men. However, the ending is a bit different because "Veronica saw him smile with the wide and shapely smile that had just reappeared, deprecating and casual, of Jane's different, darker face" (Ibid). Young Jane has also owned the same deprecating and casual smile, which are a symbol of hope.

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