

The Conflict between Chinese and Western Female Heroes and Traditional Heroism from a Feminist Perspective - Take *Hua Mulan* and *Scarlett* in Literature as Examples

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Abstract:

A hero is broadly defined as an outstanding individual who has demonstrated unparalleled courage, extraordinary intelligence, and tireless fighting spirit in the face of adversity, hardship, and other dangerous situations. Whether in literature or film, the image of heroes is widely portrayed and meticulously crafted, which profoundly impacts audiences, motivating them to aspire to and emulate heroes. As a cultural phenomenon, heroism is formed based on the image of heroes and develops with the evolution of historical and cultural backgrounds. From the perspective of feminism, this paper compares and analyzes the Chinese heroine Hua Mulan (*Ballad of Mulan*) and the Western heroine Scarlett O'Hara (*Gone with the Wind*) to explore the heroic qualities embodied in the role of female heroes, as well as the differences and conflicts with traditional male heroism. The research intends to enhance knowledge of gender roles in heroic myths and further feminist theory. This essay challenges conventional heroic tales by highlighting the development of female heroes and exposing the dominance of traditional male heroics.

Keywords:

Heroism, Hua Mulan, Scarlett O'Hara, Cultural Differences, Gender Roles

1. Introduction

The term “hero” has a profound emotional connection with individuals. However, what exactly is a hero? Generally speaking, a hero stands up in the face of adversity, gives their life for a worthy cause, and battles against obstacles with courage and intelligence. Heroes represent the fundamental ideals of a society in addition to being the spiritual representations of the era and the country. Even though heroes come from different nations, socioeconomic levels, and cultural backgrounds, they all have the same heroic traits.

Heroism rises with the shaping of the image of heroes, yet the concept and pursuit of heroism vary in Chinese and Western cultures because of disparities in values and life experiences. However, heroism typically highlights bravery and selflessness in the face of hardship, inspiring people to tackle challenges head-on, pursue personal ideals, or promote social harmony and advancement.

With the development of society, the elevation of women's status, and the rise of feminism, literary and creative works started to depict female heroes. These pieces, which start from a female point of view, highlight women's quest for self-worth and their bravery in speaking up.

It is significant to discuss female heroes to promote women's self-esteem, alter societal perceptions of them, and elevate their social standing. To assist women to build their self-perception, this paper compares and examines the two female heroes - Hua Mulan in the Chinese *Ballad of Mulan* and Scarlett in the American *Gone with the Wind* [1] - from a feminist viewpoint. Its goals are to examine the distinctions between Chinese and Western female heroes, the struggle with conventional heroism, and the image of female heroes from a feminist perspective and their challenges to traditional heroism.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Feminism

Feminism is a social movement that aims to oppose discrimination, oppression, and exploitation of women, in order to safeguard women's legitimate rights and interests and achieve gender equality. Historically, the feminist movement has experienced three significant waves.

The first wave emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and the central issue was the struggle for women's suffrage, that is, political rights. Although this struggle yielded remarkable results, with women gaining political participation, it did not fundamentally change the status of women in society, and male-dominated social structures continue to oppress women.

With the further awakening of women's consciousness, the second wave of feminism broke out in the 60s and 80s of the 20th century, and the focus expanded to broader issues such as reproductive rights, equality in the workplace, domestic violence, and sexual liberation. During this period, women's studies such as Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* proliferated, and the establishment of numerous women's organizations provided strong support for social movements.

Since the 90s of the 20th century, the third wave of feminism has continued to this day, emphasizing diversity and inclusion, and focusing on the rights of women of different races, cultures, and sexual orientations. Feminism in this period focused more on individual differences and gender issues from a global perspective.

Feminism encompasses several schools of thought, each with its unique approach to theory and practice. Liberal feminism advocates for gender equality through reform and legislation; Marxist feminism argues that gender inequality is rooted in the capitalist system and needs to be addressed through economic reforms; Radical feminism sees patriarchy as the root cause of female oppression and advocates the subversion of existing gender structures; Ecofeminism links feminism to environmental protection, arguing that both are oppressed by the same structure;

Postmodern feminism focuses on the impact of language, culture, and identity on women. Each genre has its uniqueness and learning value, which deserves respect and respect.

In general, feminism has made great contributions to the promotion of gender equality in the continuous evolution and development and has played a vital role in the self-development and social status of women. Feminism has not only changed the legal and social structure, but also profoundly affected cultural concepts and personal identity, and is an important driving force for the progress of modern society.

2.2. Heroism

Heroism is a spirit and action of heroism, tenacity, and self-sacrifice in the face of a major historical mission. It involves an individual's willingness to overcome extraordinary difficulties, assume unconventional responsibilities, and have the courage to resist the reactionary and dark forces of society and the harsh tests of nature. The concept has its roots in ancient myths and legends when heroes often possessed superhuman strength and made great contributions to humanity. In short, heroism is the extraordinary quality displayed by those who stand up at critical moments and fight for higher ideals and justice.

The expressions of heroism in China and the West are distinctively different due to their differences in historical and cultural backgrounds. In the West, heroism is often closely associated with individualism and free will, emphasizing the individual's independent action and self-actualization in adversity. Heroes in Western culture tend to break the mold, challenge authority, and pursue personal glory and freedom. In the East, especially in Chinese culture, heroism is more associated with collective interests and moral responsibility, emphasizing the individual's dedication and sense of responsibility before society and the state. Heroes in Eastern culture often sacrifice their interests for national justice, social harmony, and national interests.

In addition, with the development of the times and the progress of society, the connotation of heroism is constantly enriching and expanding. In modern society, ordinary people who have contributed to science, education, human rights, and environmental protection can also be called heroes. Their actions and spirit also inspire people to pursue higher ideals and values. Heroism is not only an important part of cultural inheritance but also an important force in promoting social progress and civilization development. It encourages extraordinary courage and determination in the face of difficulties and challenges and inspires people to work together for common goals and beliefs. The diversity and contemporaneity of heroism make this concept shine in different cultural and social contexts.

However, heroism has traditionally been portrayed more as a masculine trait, with female heroic roles often marginalized. This tendency reflects societal stereotypes and expectations of gender roles. In many cultural narratives, women are often portrayed as supporting roles for male heroes, rather than independent, subjective heroes. This marginalization not only limits the diversity and complexity of female heroic roles but also reflects the social structure of gender inequality. To achieve gender equality, these stereotypes need to be challenged and changed, the role of feminine heroes elevated, and the contributions of women in history and modern society need to be more widely recognized and respected.

3. Mulan: A Detailed Explanation of Eastern Female Heroes

3.1. *Ballad of Mulan*

The folk song *Ballad of Mulan* is a lengthy narrative poem in the Northern and Southern Dynasties of China(420-589AD). Together with *A Pair of Peacocks* *Southeast Fly*, they are collectively referred to as “Yuefu Shuangbi.” A woman named Mulan, who disguised herself as a man, served in the army for her father, battled on the battlefield, and returned from triumph, is the primary character of this poem. She did not want to be an official; all she wanted was to be with her family at home. Mulan’s valiant and daring attitude, pride in protecting her family and nation, and bold and compassionate nature are all highly praised in the poem. She embodies the values of the people and has made a well-deserved hero in the eyes of the populace by concentrating admirable qualities of morality and effort, wit and bravery, enthusiasm and filial devotion, and low-key simplicity.

3.2. *Mulan’s Heroic Narrative Expression*

As Mulan’s heroic deeds are a gem of ancient Chinese literature, and her story exemplifies the challenge of traditional gender roles and the celebration of the power of women [2]. During the Northern Wei Dynasty, in the face of the invasion of northern nomads, the Northern Wei regime stipulated that each family should send a man to fight on the front line. *Ballad of Mulan* mentioned that the twelve volumes of the military book all had the name of Hua Mulan’s father, indicating that Mulan’s family was listed as a military household. Due to her father’s advanced age and frailty, and there were no other adult men in the family, Mulan decided to disguise herself as a man and go on the battlefield for her father.

Mulan’s decision not only reflects her deep affection and filial piety to her family but also shows her rebellion against traditional gender roles [3]. At that time, when society recruited only men to serve as soldiers to defend the family and country, she was fearless, disguised as a man to serve in the army for her father, which reflected her challenge to the role of the male gender. Mulan’s story shattered the prejudice that “women are inferior to men”, and her performance in a military life even surpassed some men. She finally returned triumphantly and became a veritable heroine.

After the war, Mulan gave up the official position granted by the emperor and chose to return home to reunite with her family. This choice not only reflects her deep affection for her family but also reflects her indifference to fame and fortune. Mulan’s story concentrates on admirable qualities such as morality, hard work, wisdom, bravery, enthusiasm, and filial piety. Mulan finally becomes a folk hero. Her image not only embodies the core values of traditional Chinese culture, especially loyalty, filial piety, and righteousness but also conveys deep feelings for family and country.

Mulan’s story has inspired countless women to pursue their dreams and values and has become a symbol of female strength and independence in Chinese culture [4]. Her story has not only been widely circulated in China but has also been translated into many languages and spread around the world, serving as a bridge to promote communication and understanding between different cultures. Through the story of Mulan, people can better understand the breadth depth, and unique charm of Chinese culture [5].

4. Scarlett: A Rebellious Southern American Female Hero

4.1. *Gone with the Wind*

Gone with the Wind is the masterpiece by American female writer Margaret Mitchell, a novel that won the Pulitzer Prize for Literature in 1937. Set against the backdrop of the American Civil War and post-war reconstruction in the 60s of the 19th century, the novel depicts the social upheavals and twists and turns of personal fortunes of that era through the eyes of its heroine Scarlett. Scarlett is the daughter of the owner of Tara Manor, an ambitious and energetic woman. Her life changed dramatically with the outbreak and the end of the war. The war led to the collapse of the social fabric. Scarlett had to face the destruction of her homeland, the death of her loved ones, and the hardships of life. In the process, she showed perseverance and survival wisdom. Her image is complex and three-dimensional, with both selfish and cold sides, as well as bravery, strength and kindness.

Through this work, Margaret Mitchell not only tells a story of love and war, but also shows the role and power of women in social change. *Gone with the Wind* has become a classic of feminist literature, and its portrayal of female heroes and its challenge to traditional heroism still have important literary and cultural value.

4.2. *Scarlett's Heroic Narrative Expression*

Scarlett O'Hara is the heroine of *Gone with the Wind*, and her heroic deeds and images are profoundly revelatory from a feminist perspective. Against the backdrop of the American Civil War, Scarlett demonstrated female strength and an independent spirit that transcended her time [6].

Before the outbreak of the war, Scarlett was the eldest daughter of Tara Manor, and her life was full of elegance and romance of the southern aristocracy. However, the brutality of the war forced her to grow up quickly, transforming from a teenage girl who only cared about love to a pillar of the family. Faced with the tragic destruction of her home, Scarlett did not choose to escape, but bravely took on the responsibility of rebuilding her home. Her tenacity and courage were on full display during the war, not only did she work in the fields herself, but she even shot and killed people when necessary to protect herself and her family.

Scarlett's heroic deeds lie not only in her struggle for survival but also in her challenge to traditional female roles. In the social context of the time, women were expected to be submissive and gentle, and Scarlett subverted these stereotypes with her practical actions. Not only did she rebuild Tara Manor materially, but she also rebuilt her personality spiritually, becoming an independent and confident woman.

Scarlett's image exemplifies the core value of feminism - autonomy. Her financial independence was based on personal effort, and she not only bought a sawmill after the war but also ran it herself, despite social opposition and the constraints of tradition. Her success has not only improved the lives of herself and her family but has also set an example for other women.

Scarlett's heroic image is significant from a feminist perspective. Her images and stories have become an important milestone in feminist literature, influencing countless readers and later literary works. Scarlett's story is a process of self-awareness awakening and growth for women, and her heroic deeds and images will forever inspire women in their quest for independence and equality.

5. The Conflict between Female Heroic Roles and Traditional Heroism

The conflict and contradiction between female heroes and male-dominated traditional heroism is an important topic in feminist studies. These conflicts not only reveal stereotypes of gender roles but also reflect the limitations that society places on women's expectations. Solving these problems is significant for contemporary women's self-identity and self-improvement.

5.1. *Stereotypes about Gender Roles*

In ancient China, women were often expected to follow the norms of the three obediences (to father before marriage, to husband after marriage, and to son after the death of husband) and the four virtues (morality, proper speech, modest manner, and diligent needlework), and their roles and powers were severely limited. They do not have the right to make their own decisions; they are at the mercy of the men in their families; and they are not allowed to pursue their ambitions. They are of low status and are always expected to be submissive, gentle people who avoid sharp edges, which leads to their intellect and abilities often being overlooked. In the eyes of people, men are often the ones who dominate and give orders, while women are the ones who obey and follow carefully. In addition, their physical freedom is completely restricted, they are not allowed to interact with the opposite sex, and the slightest mistake will be surrounded by words such as disobedience to women's morals and lack of chastity. Such social structures and cultural backgrounds have created profound inequalities and oppression for women. For example, the widely admired Confucian concept of "Men's work centers around outside, women's work centers around the home" limits women's activities to the family, while ignoring women's potential and contributions in other areas of society.

Mulan's story is particularly prominent in such a social context. Her act of joining the army on behalf of her father not only showed her deep filial piety to her family but also challenged the stereotypes and restrictions of women in society at that time. Mulan's story shows that women are just as capable of showing the same courage and strength as men, and even succeed on battlefields traditionally considered men's realm. Her story became a subversion of traditional gender roles. Not only did she excel on the battlefield, but she chose to return to her family after the war rather than pursue personal glory or power, which is also distinct and in conflict with traditional male-dominated heroism. These deeds reflect Mulan's devotion to her family and her reinterpretation of traditional female roles.

Mulan's story has important implications for contemporary women. It reminds people that despite historical oppression and inequality against women, women are still able to overcome these obstacles and achieve self-worth through courage and wisdom. Mulan's image inspires women to break through traditional roles and pursue personal freedom and development. At the same time, her story has also prompted society to re-examine and rethink the expectations and limitations on women and promote the progress of gender equality and women's rights. Through Mulan's heroic deeds, it is easy to see that despite the deep stereotypes and oppression of women in ancient society, the power and contribution of women cannot be ignored, and they play an important role in history and culture.

Meanwhile, Scarlett lived in the American South in the mid-19th century, an era dominated by tradition and strict social norms. In the social context of the time,

women were expected to conform to a set of restrictive gender roles and behavioral norms. Their access to education and knowledge is limited, and it is generally accepted that women's primary role is to raise their children and take care of their husbands, rather than to work outside the home or participate in social activities. Women's worth is often closely related to their marital status and social status, and they are financially dependent on men and have no property rights or inheritance rights.

In such a social environment, women face multiple injustices. First, their educational and professional opportunities are severely limited. There is a general perception that women should not pursue higher education or work in traditionally male fields. Secondly, women have a lower status in marriage and the family. They must submit to the authority of their husbands and fathers and even have little say in family decisions. In addition, women are deprived of their social and legal rights. They cannot own property, enter into contracts, or trade without the permission of their husbands or fathers.

Scarlett's story reflects these injustices. Despite her extraordinary courage and independence, her actions and choices often clashed with the societal expectations of the time. For example, her actions to protect Tara Manor during the war and her post-war entrepreneurship to survive and rebuild her home, are challenges and subversions of the role of women at the time. Scarlett's story sheds light on the stereotypes and oppression of women in society at the time, while also showing women's resilience in the face of these limitations.

Scarlett's image and her journey, from a pre-war little woman to a post-war independent woman, embodies the core values of feminism - autonomy and equality [7]. Her story inspires women to break out of traditional roles and pursue personal freedom and development, becoming a symbol of female heroism. Through Scarlett's heroic deeds and images, it is clear that despite the deep stereotypes and oppression of women in ancient society, the power and contribution of women cannot be ignored, and they play an important role in history and culture.

5.2. The Masculine Gaze and the Power Structure

The idea of the male gaze means that, according to the conventional view, males are the dominating position to observe and women are frequently the objects to be observed. Women had low status under the previous social norms, while males had riches, fame, and power. Men were accustomed to looking at women with contempt. In addition to being socially acceptable and widespread, this hierarchical relationship gave birth to a plethora of laws and doctrines that dictated to women what they should do, how they should appear, and how they should act while promoting men's strength and dominance.

Women's independence and vision are frequently restricted in such a setting, and their skills and ideas are disregarded. However, Mulan's tale deviates from that trend. In that male-dominated barracks, she not only concealed her feminine identity but also managed to remain hidden for twelve years, during which time she accomplished several noteworthy feats. In the male-centered discourse-dominated society at that time, women were oppressed and could not go to the battlefield to fight. Hua Mulan was forced to disguise herself as a "man" to do what men could do at that time due to the demands of a patriarchal society. However, her actions ultimately demonstrate her disobedience to the male-dominated society and the growth of her ego. Mulan's

narrative is refreshing since she not only rises from the underclass to the top of society but also represents a woman's self-awareness. She challenges traditional male viewpoints and power structures by demonstrating that women are just as courageous, powerful, and capable as men.

Scarlett lived at a time when prejudice against women was very prevalent in society. She was not the type of lady who would meekly fit into established roles before the start of the war. She inherited her father's courage, knowledge, assertiveness, and informality. She is reluctant to confine herself to male aesthetic standards, to repress her natural inclinations to satisfy male expectations, and to be a weak woman under the male gaze. Rather, she strives for an equal partnership between men and women, and to a certain degree, she even hopes to control the dynamic between men and women [4].

Scarlett is brave, strong, smart, self-reliant, and aggressive. She actively spread out once the war ended, and she would do so as long as it benefited her. She does not hesitate to use her beauty as a negotiating tool to survive and seek a better life. In addition, she gained a significant fortune by purchasing a timber mill, which at the time was quite uncommon and even unorthodox—after all, how could a lady come out and conduct business? However, Scarlett demonstrated that she is capable of displaying an autonomous female awareness even in a patriarchal environment via her deeds. She has evolved from a traditional Southern lady to a modern woman who defies expectations and is not afraid to be herself.

All these changes reflect her self-awareness, desire for autonomy and authority, defiance of the male gaze, and subversion of the established order of power. In addition to earning a place for herself, Scarlett's story shows the resilience and courage of women in the face of social injustice.

6. A Modern Reinvention of Heroism

Gender awareness plays a crucial role in promoting gender equality. The awakening of gender consciousness means that individuals begin to recognize the unfairness of gender roles and expectations, and how these inequities affect social structures and individual opportunities. To achieve equality between men and women, actions should be taken to improve today's conditions.

6.1. Gender Awareness and Educational Reform

Thought is the precursor of all actions and provides the foundation and motivation for people's behavior. Education not only imparts the foundational knowledge and skills that enable individuals to understand the world more deeply and adapt to social development, but also develops critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and the ability to innovate. Education, especially gender equality education, helps to internalize these perceptions and translate them into positive social change.

Gender equality education can cultivate children's awareness and respect for gender equality from an early age. Through education, children learn that everyone, regardless of gender, deserves equal opportunities and respect. This education helps to break down gender stereotypes and encourages boys and girls to freely explore and develop their interests and potential, regardless of gender.

Besides, gender equality education is essential for the development and progress of society. It means not only equal treatment of men and women in education,

occupation, and politics but also the elimination of gender discrimination, violence, and oppression in society. Achieving gender equality can also increase economic growth and increase productivity and efficiency. This contributes to building a just, equal, and prosperous society and promotes the development and progress of individuals and societies.

Education about gender equality can also raise the status of women in society. Women can gain independence, self-growth, and confidence through education, increasing their chances for personal development. Women can take the initiative to fight gender inequity and develop self-defense skills through education. Women benefit from increased resources and possibilities, which increases their autonomy and freedom. However, gender equality can also give males greater resources and chances to assume societal and familial responsibilities more fairly. By dispelling myths about traditional gender roles and empowering people of all genders to follow their aspirations, gender-responsive education fosters a more varied, inclusive, and progressive society.

6.2. Media and Sociocultural Impacts

As one of the main channels for information dissemination in modern society, the role and influence of social media should not be underestimated. It greatly accelerates the circulation of information, expands the scope of information dissemination, and enables all kinds of ideas to quickly spread to all corners. Social media's instantaneous and interactive features have made it possible for conversations on gender to occur in real-time, involving more people and increasing awareness of the issue. This has led to a greater concern for gender equality in society.

Social media's propagation of gender equality aids in dispelling gender stereotypes and advancing social and cultural advancement. By posting success stories and highlighting women's accomplishments in industries on social media, gender equality campaigners can question conventional gender norms and inspire more women to follow their aspirations and ambitions.

Additionally, social media offers a venue for the dissemination of instructional materials, allowing gender-neutral materials to reach a larger audience, including underserved populations and remote locations. Women can also use social media to create networks and communities that offer resources and support. These groups can serve as forums for women to exchange stories, offer guidance, and support one another, strengthening their unity and group efforts. Social media also gives women a platform to display their accomplishments and skills, which raises their social standing and influence.

6.3. Policy and Legal Support

Laws and regulations relating to gender equality have many advantages and serve as a strong basis for creating a society that is inclusive and just.

Equal status for men and women can be ensured by policy and legal assistance, which can also give women equal chances in social welfare, political involvement, and work. This advances gender equality in society in addition to enhancing women's economic independence and social standing. Women can more accurately represent the diversity of society and advance pluralism and inclusion in laws and policies when they are included in political, economic, and social decision-making processes.

Setting laws and regulations that are gender-equal can promote economic prosperity and social stability. Women can boost their total productivity and innovation when they have equal possibilities for promotion and are allowed to fully engage in the job market. Since everyone has equal access to resources and opportunities, it helps to lower crime rates and achieve social-gender equality.

Last but not least, the next generation's growth and development are significantly impacted by rules and regulations pertaining to gender equality. They provide a more equal and non-discriminatory environment for children to grow up in, which promotes the development of positive gender views and relationships.

7. Conclusions

All in all, this article provides an in-depth comparative analysis of the Chinese heroine Hua Mulan and the Western heroine Scarlett O'Hara from a feminist perspective. By exploring the heroism embodied by these two female heroic characters, this paper reveals their differences and conflicts with traditional male heroism. The story of Mulan and Scarlett challenges the traditional heroic narrative and shows the resilience and courage of women in the face of societal expectations and limitations.

The image of Mulan, derived from the ancient Chinese *Ballad of Mulan*, shows that women can also be a hero. The audience is familiar with and fond of her courage, filial devotion, morality, loyalty, and strong spirit. Her story conveys a deep sense of family and country, celebrates the strength and wisdom of women, and breaks the traditional notion of male superiority and inferiority. At the same time, Scarlett, the protagonist of *Gone with the Wind*, represents the rise of feminism with her bravery and self-breakthrough. Her struggles in a patriarchal culture and her financial and spiritual independence serve as a beacon of hope for all women.

This essay challenges the traditional heroic story by emphasizing the development of female heroes and exposing the dominance of traditional male heroism. Simultaneously, several specific actions are suggested to encourage improved gender equality growth and execution, as well as to foster a more progressive, pluralistic, and inclusive social climate and to establish the prerequisites for attaining gender equality. The benefits of gender equality are all-encompassing, not only enhancing the development opportunities of individuals but also making an important contribution to the overall progress and prosperity of society.

In summary, the story of Mulan and Scarlett not only provides a strong role model for women but also provides strong cultural support for the achievement of gender equality. Their valiant actions and portrayals encourage women to defy expectations and achieve personal growth and independence, while also forcing society to reconsider the constraints and expectations imposed on women. These efforts could lead to a more just, equal, and prosperous society.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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