

# Research on Feminist Consciousness in Byatt's Possession

Tan Feng

School of Humanities, Geely University of China, Jianyang, China

**Abstract:** The novel *Possession* is one of the most influential works of British female writer Byatt. The story of the novel integrates the Victorian era and the modern and contemporary periods. Through the comparative analysis of the female characters in the two different periods, it explores the living conditions of women, the dilemma of closed living space, and the difficulties in their pursuit of love and career. The consciousness of ideology is displayed vividly and vividly. The feminist consciousness expressed by Byatt is revealed from the main aspects of women's social life they embody. Explores the repression of women in a male-centred society.

**Keywords:** *Feminist Consciousness, Byatt's Possession, Theoretical Analysis*

## I. INTRODUCTION

British novelist Antonia Susan Byatt's *Possession* is considered a perfect work, a magnificent feat in the history of literature. The main story line of the novel can be summarized as follows: the protagonist of the novel is an independent woman who initially lives in a closed environment and only engages in some common business with a female friend, and then a man from the outside world gradually illuminates her. her life. Afterwards, she alienates and even betrays her friends for the common goal between them, while also hurting the heart of the man's first wife. Byatt's novel contrasts and contrasts "women behind men" with women who value independence and struggle for individuality: Victorian Alan Ash with Christabel Lammont, modern Vale Compare with Maud. Faced with pressure from the opposite sex, women naturally turn to friendship or sisterhood for some support. The author's display of female friendship reflects the spiritual desire of female writers to find and construct a female alliance to resist the center of male power.

The following sections analyze the women's lives represented in the novel by these characters, and the similarities and differences between each pair of juxtaposed counterparts; in addition, women's social roles as wives and mothers in society are explored, shattering the myth of women's marriage. The stories of Victorian poet Christa Bell and modern scholar Maude can be called the experiences of intellectual women struggling to survive and pursue careers in a patriarchal society. Since women are not allowed worldwide freedom, they have to create a space for themselves in which they are partially equal to men. This limited freedom provided by the Tower of Fear is a treasure for women, who are reluctant to even choose to leave. Both Victorian women and modern women were invariably oppressed by some kind of closed space created by men. But even this cramped space is not free from male prying eyes or intrusions. For women, it is their outer life, not their inner life, that captures the imagination. When women are pretty, people treat them as if they were property. They will become a property or an idol, or even angels who submit to the will of men. Beauty can be a hindrance for women who wish to separate physical attractiveness from ingenuity and gain attention by thinking rather than looks. Beauty can even be seen as evil to women who should be denied or even punished, as Roland and Maud

discussed in Ash's poem *The Witches*. Almost all women fall victim to this prejudice. Maud has beautiful long blond hair, which is considered an unnatural color to please men. Feminists can even foresee what happens to Maud when he gets up to speak at a conference.

A plot-level investigation of the novel reveals Byatt's sense of history and feminism, while the willingness to expose the true relationship between Victorian poets Rudolph Henry Ash and Christabel Lammont has given rise to modern scholars Roland and Maud's life points the way. The two modern scholars traced the traces of the past step by step, and finally found that their own situation was very similar to that of the lost lovers.

But she still sees Ashe as a close lover and thanks God for meeting them. Although two modern scholars initially dismissed love as illusory and their strong desire to distance themselves from it, the love story between the two Victorian poets eventually encouraged them to acknowledge the meaning and power of love. The concept of "living history" is proposed in the novel. Byatt's vision spans Roland and Maud's romantic pursuits and Rudolph and Christabel's past romances, and attempts to explore the different layers in the relationship between past and present. This exploration extends to surveys of general relationships between dead artists and living scholars, as well as surveys of contemporary literary scholarship and biography.

## II. THE PROPOSED METHODOLOGY

**Women's abundant artistic creativity. In her highly feministic works,** she adequately expresses her determination in keeping independence of her mind and soul, which doesn't conform to the expectation of male-dominated society upon women. According to Victorian moral code, women should recede into the house and be sacrificing, devoted and selfless, so LaMotte doesn't get the social status she deserves and soon sinks into oblivion. Enclosed with some of her poems, she once wrote a letter to a great poet, saying, "Are These Poems? Have I—A Voice" (*Possession*, 7), which are declined with courteousness. At that age women couldn't involve in public discussion and had no verbal power publicly, so the poetess had never had her voice before her death. Although in the heart of cotemporary women, "She [LaMotte] is both an acknowledged writer of some importance and a woman thus a sign of hope, a leader, for all of us" (*Possession*, 5), her talents for poetry are suppressed severely. No one appreciates her uncommon brilliance in poetry writing, and she says, "I live in a Turret like an old witch, and make verses nobody wants" (*Possession*, 9).

LaMotte is acknowledged as an unproductive poetess and her works—even the epic *Melusina*—are not well remembered and researched. As a scholar who works on Victorian poetry, Roland even doesn't know if La Motte has written the epic or not. On the contrary, Ash—LaMotte's lover, enjoys a high reputation as a real poet, though LaMotte is well matched with Ash in poetic writing. Motherhood inspires LaMotte's best poetry but also ends her creative life as a writer. When she gets

pregnant, her poetic talents are thrived and the epic Melusina is completed. But LaMotte nearly stops the writing of poetry after she gives birth to a child. In order to cover her affair with Ash and keeps her own autonomy, she gives her child to her sister. Her love for her daughter makes her come back and lives with the family for the rest of her life, and willingly accepts the torture of not being able to tell her daughter the truth while seeing her everyday.

**During the years she lives with her sister, LaMotte mainly writes fairy tales for children**, which are neither well-accepted by the public, nor appreciated by her daughter. Her genuine poetic production, like epics, stops after the affair and the child. She is muted by childbirth. In *Possession*, Byatt figures many versatile Victorian female characters and contemporary female intellectuals. But they have no verbal power and can't give their voice publicly. In spite of their talents, they can't be accepted by the society and the public. They are marginalized but they realize their repressed living state and struggle for their autonomy and independence continuously. Finally, Victorian female characters regain their voice after a hundred years, so do contemporary intellectuals in their research of Victorian female characters. Western feminist theorist Viviane Forrester once said that "What do women's eyes see? How do they carve, invent, decipher the world?"

I don't know...I only know what men's eyes see". The cultural tradition is actually the result of male's eyesight and voice. From the naissance of literature, western traditional narration takes male's consciousness as its center to show male's psychology and taste. Male-dominated narrative voice covers the truth that female's voice is obliterated and effaced thus protrudes the male's advantageous position and the principal role they played in verbal power. The poetess Christabel LaMotte is the representative female character of Victorian period in *Possession*. She is a figure of new woman with certain modern consciousness. She embodies the writer's ideal of equality between man and woman. She is well-read and versatile and she composes many marvelous poems and shows Being misunderstood and ignored, LaMotte is eager to participate in the society and utters her voice. In one of her poems, she complains women's destiny to be the outsider and the expeller of the society and gives the idea that women's "doom" is "To Drag a Long Life out/ In a dark Room", while men could go into the world and "be martyred/ Any where" (*Possession*, 5). Also, in one of her letters to Ash, she says that "My solitude is my Treasure, the best thing I have. I hesitate to go out. If you open the little gate, I would not hop away—but oh how I sing in my gold cage—(*Possession*, 2).

The outside world, though much desired by LaMotte, is not designed for women's practice. It is a world belonging to men. In stead of keeping quiet, to "sing" in the "gold cage" expresses LaMotte's decision of trying to give her voice by writing in the male. world rather than being tortured in solitude and muteness. But during her lifelong time, she couldn't achieve this goal though with great efforts. Although she is muted during her lifetime, her secret love affair, her works and her whole life are uncovered in contemporary society mainly through her own correspondence, poems and stories.

**When LaMotte and ash decides to end their relationship, LaMotte writes to Ash and claims all their correspondence back**, "all my letters without fail" (*Possession*) Seemingly, this behavior is her choice of keeping silent, but instead of destroying her correspondence with Ash, she keeps them in a doll. After that, she writes a poem about dolly, which says that "Dolly keeps a Secret/ Safer than a Friend" (*Possession*). In the

process of searching for evidence of their love affair, Maud remembers the poem, and discovers that "It sounds, in here, like a treasure-hunt clue" (*Possession*, ). Therefore, LaMotte intentionally keeps their letters and leaves the poem as a hint which makes it possible for the letters to be discovered and their affair revealed. In a way, it is LaMotte who reveals the affair, and she wants it to be revealed. She keeps the record of their love, and tells the world about her love story by the mouths of others. She regains her voice and makes a great impact. Ellen Ash is muted by marriage.

Female voice has once lost in the history, but it's a sorrow that it is still absent under contemporary social and cultural background. The tragic destiny of women's silence and muteness recycles. Maud, as the offspring of LaMotte, becomes a scholar specializing on the work of LaMotte. Being a literary scholar in modern times, Maud presumably has much more freedom than her predecessors. People are likely to believe that, with her learning and independent life, she is equal or superior to most men, like Roland. However, although she sometimes feels the independence and strength, she has never been free enough to express herself. She is a critic instead of a writer, with things to say only on other's works. Talking about LaMotte and her thoughts and ambitions gives Maud a way of expressing herself. Maud shows her understanding of La Motte's seclusion and she herself also leads a secluded life. She tries hard to let others accept her feminist ideas 22 Victorian poetess LaMotte, Ellen, Blanche and Sabine. Many voices in these female texts converge a collective female verbal authority. A hundred years later, female voice, which was excluded outside the public field controlled by male verbal power, is ventilated and listened by the public.

**The contemporary scholars also get their verbal power in their research of Victorian predecessors.** 2.2 Their Frozen Living Environment Women were once the object of worship at th 21 but gains no favorable response. In this sense, both the Victorian poetess LaMotte and the contemporary scholar Maud, are restricted and secluded, and are never truly accepted by the world. For Beatrice Nest, her original interest in Ash is repressed by the assumption of her instructor that Ash is too profound and complicated for a woman, and that editing Ellen's journal "might be a suitable undertaking—something certainly new, modestly useful, manageable and related to Ash" (*Possession*, 127). Therefore, the way she intends to use to express herself is obstructed. Val met Roland at a Fresher's tea party when she was in university and lived with him since then. They sign up for the same courses and join the same societies; they sit together in seminars and go together to the national Film Theatre. Val works as a secretary to support Roland with his school work, but she succumbs to Roland's male verbal power and she never quarrels with him. "Val said less and less, and when she argued, offered him increasingly his own ideas, sometimes the reverse side of the knitting, but essentially his" (*Possession*, 16). Women adhere to male's verbal power consciously or unconsciously and assess the world and themselves with "his" eyesight.

They speak through "his" voice and express "his" opinions, then gradually lose their own voices in longtime silence. In the process of contemporary academic research and unfolding the secret love affair between the Victorian poet and poetess, the women scholars, such as Maud, Leonora and Beatrice Nest, play a pivotal role and utter their bright voices. Maud turns to be LaMotte's descendant and give her own voice through LaMotte poetry studying. She gives her real female voice in virtue of her predecessor. "Towards dawn, from a long way off, her [Maud's] clear voice crying out, uninhibited, unashamed, in pleasure and

triumph" (Possession, 551). Roland has to admit at last, "You turn out to be a central figure in this story" ((Possession, 548). In Possession, Byatt creates many kinds of historical texts and brings in various voices and let these voices developed freely. The novel takes Maud's academic research as a starting point to dig out a great number of poems.

Victorian poetess LaMotte lives in the damp and secluded environment, which is just like "an egg, a perfect O, a living stone, doorless and windowless, whose life may slumber on till she be Waked—or find she has Wing to spread" (Possession, 152). The independent space women rely on is like an instable shell wrapping a small yolk, which is narrow and close, tender and fragile, but it also contains the free life that will spread wing one day. Maud, who lives in the twentieth century, also shares the same feeling, "I keep my defences up because I must go on doing my work. I know how she felt about her unbroken egg. Her self-possession, her autonomy" (Possession, 549). The unmarried contemporary scholar Beatrice Nest, like an octopus in ocean, lives secluded in Mortlake, "curled torpidly round her hoard, putting up opaque screens of ink or watery smoke to obscure her whereabouts" (Possession, 126).

But a room of one's own is also a place that restricts women and isolates them from the world, and it is also a prison that imprisons women's body and mind. The independence and principal part they play in their own space is at the expense of their social marginalization. This existential contradiction restricts women's existential and developmental space. Therefore, women often sink into life dilemma.

### CONCLUSION

In Byatt's opinion, women should keep independent and autonomous, which is the foundation of their career. In Victorian age, married women were expected to be at home, run a respectable household and rear children. They had no self, but could only pride for their family member's achievements and feel ashamed of their family. Byatt believes that sexuality and possessive love are obstacles to women's success in career. When this conflict appears, women should make a thorough

break with men, which is the only way for them to go on with their career and keep their autonomy. member's scandal.

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