

Feminist Voices in Boy's Love Literature: Subverting Gender Norms and Empowering Women

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Abstract: Boy's Love (BL) literature is a creative genre that has become popular online in the past 20 years. It mainly describes the emotional life of homosexuals, especially gay men. It is an important and controversial part of the Internet subculture active among young people. However, contrary to its content, the creators behind BL literature are often non-gay young women. Women create and appreciate BL novels through the Internet to express their demands for aesthetics, pure love, and equality. This kind of gender writing that breaks tradition has a bright spot of feminism, and though this may take a long time, it can help create a more friendly living space for women in a patriarchal society. This article analyzes female writers' subversion of male images in BL novels, thereby proving that BL culture satisfies women's demands for a more profound social status and equal rights and contributes to breaking the patriarchal society.

Keywords: BL culture, Female creation, Female demands, Patriarchal society

1. Introduction

Tanbi (たんび) is a new word translated from Japanese. The word "Tanbi" first appeared in the Japanese aesthetic literature of modern literature. The original intention of Japanese aesthetic literature was to "oppose naturalism that mainly exposes the ugly side of human nature and to find sensual beauty and revel in it to pursue the meaning of literature [1]." In the 1970s, this concept was introduced into the comic industry to depict a pure love story between beautiful boys that does not involve fetation, also known as Boy's Love or BL.

BL culture is a type of culture in which heterosexual female creators write about the romance of gay men, and it has gained popularity online in the past 20 years. It originated in Japan in the 1960s and 1970s and was later introduced to China in the 1990s. With the development of the Internet and social media, it has evolved into a diverse and expansive subculture. BL culture is also constantly developing and deriving a series of cultural themes and forms, including novels, animation, music, film, television, etc. It is rapidly spreading on the Internet through new media, resurrecting a large audience, and its influence is expanding.

At the same time, the corresponding discussions on BL culture have become increasingly diverse, complex, and contradictory, and the debate from the perspective of feminism is one of the prominent issues. In the current Chinese social context, with the vigorous "Me Too" movement, the discussion

of gender issues in Chinese society has become increasingly acute. In particular, the dissatisfaction and resistance to the traditional patriarchal thinking in East Asian societies have attracted the attention of the whole society. As a culture in which male love stories are written mainly by female writers, BL culture is regarded as the product of women's self-demand in this battlefield of gender practice, and it is believed that its emergence and dissemination will give women more access to society.

Therefore, this paper starts from female writers' original texts and reverse writing of male images, exploring the hidden female demands in BL culture and breaking the stigma of the patriarchal society that women are deeply burdened with. What women pursue in BL culture is not just aesthetics and love, through the analysis of the writings of female writers in this paper, women's desire for equality, respect, and recognition can be seen as well.

2. Reverse Writing of Female Writers in BL Literature

BL, as a social subculture, is attracting more and more attention, and the continuous expansion of female BL writers must have its roots in society. As a carrier of women's self-expression, BL literature reflects women's inner consciousness and emotions. Female writers play the leading creators in BL culture and are the promoters of the emergence and prosperity of BL culture. Interestingly, the vast majority of these female creators are heterosexual.

For example, the well-known BL writer Feng Nong once shared her original intention of creating BL literature in the "Research and Creation of Internet Literature Genres" class at Peking University. She said: "I write about BL not to support homosexuality but to help those whom the pressure of public opinion or social judgment has hurt. They cannot openly pursue their rights. I feel sad about this and worry that one day I will become one of the victims [2]." As Feng Nong said, many female BL writers hope to encourage sexual minorities to pursue their rights through the creation and dissemination of their works and help them seek broader social recognition. In addition to supporting sexual minorities, these female creators are pursuing more profound social changes by creating and disseminating BL literature.

"BL novels are essentially women's gender stance based on their subjective consciousness. Using men as aesthetic objects, BL novels write about, identify, and appreciate different men, usually handsome men [3]." Not only that, in terms of the personality of male characters, BL novels often code them as having a feminine temperament. In a patriarchal society, it is men who define women's gender temperament and moral conduct, but women among BL writers reverse this right. This kind of reverse writing itself is considered feminism, and it subverts mainstream recognition. The masculinity of male characters is reversely written from appearance to personality to satisfy their aesthetic enjoyment.

In addition to distinguishing the male protagonists based on their appearance and personality characteristics referring to the heterosexual gender model, female BL writers also apply issues such as childbirth and virginity in the heterosexual world to BL novels. BL stories seem to describe same-sex love, but in fact, they are just imitations of the heterosexual world.

In the past, there was an inseparable relationship between fertility and women, so Beauvoir believed that fertility was the direct cause of women's enslavement. "Motherhood is, after all, the most skillful way to make women enslaved. I am not saying that every mother Woman automatically becomes enslaved - there can be certain ways of survival that make motherhood not equal to slavery, but modern motherhood remains unchanged. As long as people think that women's main job is to raise children, it will be inconvenient for women to join politics and technology. Further, people will not doubt the superiority of men. ... Since it is almost impossible for us to tell women that washing dishes is their sacred task, we tell women that raising children is their sacred task [4]." At the same time, another feminist representative, Wollstonecraft, on the contrary, believed that reproduction was an essential goal for women to achieve in their lives [5]. However, in BL novels, fertility has become

a male ability. BL writers allow men to have children like women and forcefully add assumptions based on traditional concepts of men and women into BL novels.

In Chinese culture, loyalty can be understood as purity. In the past, it referred to loyalty and chastity to superiors or masters, as well as loyalty and chastity between husbands and wives. However, the word chastity gradually evolved into a requirement for women. That is, women must maintain chastity and keep their innocence, but men have never been required to do so. Even in modern society, some people still point fingers at a woman who has lost her virginity but laugh at a man who has never lost his virginity. Behind the two completely different attitudes towards men and women on the issue of innocence is the power control over women established by the patriarchal society through sex. Since it is a discursive control over women's sexual behavior, men hardly have to abide by it. Nevertheless, in BL novels, there is a group of men who are required to keep their virginity. This male requirement for virtue does not simply reflect the reversal of gender relations but is a mockery and re-examination of traditional gender concepts by female BL writers.

3. Women's Pursuit in BL Literature

The creative behavior of female writers is a flash of feminism and a rebellion against the male order. A series of social behaviors of female fandom groups are regarded as female practices that give meaning. They express their inner demands through the creation and appreciation of BL works.

3.1. Women's Pursuit of Aesthetic Attributes in BL Literature

First of all, BL novels satisfy women's pursuit of aesthetic attributes. Since ancient times, China's social structure has given men continued dominance in transforming from matrilineal to patrilineal clans. This evolution has restricted women to the feudal concept of wifely submission and virtue for a long time and cannot emancipate their bodies and minds [6]. In social evaluation standards, there is apparent unfairness in evaluating men and women. Men are judged based on power, status, ability, and wealth, while women are limited to appearance, housework ability, and personality. In particular, appearance has always been critical in evaluating women's status. Men even use women's appearance as a criterion when choosing a mate, while women's pursuit of men's appearance is dismissed as those who do not keep the virtue of women. These socially recognized standards ignore women's evaluation, causing women's pursuit of beautiful boyish looks in BL culture to become a resistance and challenge to the patriarchal system and aesthetic attributes.

As women's education level improves and their status gradually becomes equal, they realize their self-worth and try to use their abilities to prove that they are not "vases." Despite demonstrating the same working abilities as men, women are still constrained by patriarchal consciousness. In Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, aesthetic needs belong to higher-level needs and are one of the higher-order needs of human beings [7]. Therefore, female BL writers pursue the pure and non-reproductive romance between beautiful boys in BL works, which satisfies their pursuit of high-end aesthetics. This trend of dating aesthetics is not just an admiration for external beauty but a redefinition of beauty by female groups, becoming a compelling challenge to traditional beauty standards.

3.2. Women's Pursuit of Pure Love in BL Literature

Secondly, BL novels show the pursuit of pure love. The love between men in BL stories breaks social norms and delivers the pure ideal of being willing to do anything for love. Compared with the kind of love in general books, which is bound by marriage and childbirth, same-sex love in BL novels is not subject to such restrictions and appears purer [8]. BL fans believe that male-male love challenges social norms and is initially tragic, but the hero's choice and courage are touching. The purpose of marriage or reproduction does not bind this kind of love. It is far away from the utilitarian color of

attachment between men and women, becoming a model of pure love [9]. In reality, relationships are often subject to many constraints and conditions. The relationship between men and women involves family, material conditions, marriage and childbearing obligations, and the exchange of interests, which makes the relationship heavy and lacking in beauty. BL fans believe true love transcends boundaries, leaving only pure love itself. This discussion of pure love is an idealization of love and a profound reflection on society's norms and expectations for love.

3.3. Women's Demands for Gender Equality in BL Literature

Finally, BL novels satisfy women's demands for gender equality. The rise of BL culture marks the rise of female consciousness, which is no longer satisfied with the status bound by tradition but pursues equal social status between men and women. More and more BL works are emerging on the Internet, attracting many female audiences. The reason why they like these works is closely related to their social status and psychological appeal. Historically, women have been in a passive position for a long time, and men have dominated everything. However, the settings in BL works break the traditional concept, endow men with feminine qualities, create an equal love affair between men, and avoid inequality between genders. This reflects the desire of contemporary Chinese women to pursue equal social status and not want to be bound by tradition and patriarchy.

BL culture represents women's resistance to traditional male dominance. For a long time, literary and artistic works have focused on female appearances, while male images have been depicted relatively rarely. The focus of BL works is the love between men, which is created and appreciated by female writers. They determine the fate of male characters to a certain extent, subverting the concept of male dominance in reality. Although women long for gender equality, it is difficult for them to achieve it [10]. Therefore, they seek a transcendent perspective in BL works to observe the emotional entanglement between men, from men appreciating women to women respecting men. This culture caters to women's general pursuit of gender equality.

4. Conclusion

As a unique form of expression of youth subculture, BL literature challenges society's traditional evaluation standards of gender with its anti-traditional gender writing behavior. This unique literary form has attracted widespread social attention because of its outstanding academic nature.

By creating and appreciating BL works, a female practice that reflects their demands for aesthetics, pure love, and equality has been realized. BL literature breaks traditional social evaluation standards, especially the limitations on women's appearance, and provides space for fellow women to pursue high-end aesthetics. Under the influence of Western concepts of romantic love, women date a pure love that transcends everything. However, since pure love is often missing in real life, they can only seek it in BL works that show the love between men. In BL works, the relationship between aggression and acceptance is an ideal emotional relationship constructed by women, offering women's demands for equality. This relationship reveals that women know the differences between themselves and men in all aspects. They can bravely express their demands, but they are also profoundly burdened by the stigma of patriarchal culture. This allows people to deeply understand the helplessness and struggle of women when expressing their demands.

Overall, it can be seen that BL culture is not only a shining point of feminism but also a product of a patriarchal society with gender inequality. It reveals the complexity and contradiction of women in their pursuit of equality and freedom and, at the same time, provides people with a new perspective for understanding and paying attention to feminism.

Since the research perspective of this article is all from the perspective of women, there is a lack of men's perspective. With the expansion of the gay male population, the number of men reading BL

novels has increased sharply. Therefore, future research can start from the male perspective and study the demands of men in BL novels and the writing styles of male BL writers.

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