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## Educational Thoughts of Western Radical Feminism

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### Abstract

Since the 1960s, radical feminism has gradually been an important faction of the western feminism. Influenced by the trend of western modern educational thought, radical feminism, as a branch of feminism educational thoughts, mainly embodies in the fact that it reveals the problems of the patriarchal system in education and the encounter of female teachers in the patriarchal system. It advocates the reform of school curriculum through personal reflection and consciousness promotion, and examines the definition of knowledge. Therefore, an objective and dialectical view of the western radical feminism educational thoughts can provide some useful reference for the current female education in China.

**Key words:** Feminism; Radicals; Educational thoughts

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### INTRODUCTION

Feminism, the theory that men and women should have equal political, economic and social rights, first appeared in English in 1895. From the perspective of genetics, the development of feminism has mainly experienced three stages: the first stage began in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries and reached its climax in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. And then, the various demands of feminists were ridiculed

and finally suppressed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The second stage began in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and lasted until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. During this period, many feminist ideas were adopted by the government and translated into the social system. However, they also attracted strong opposition and were suppressed. The third stage began with the civil rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s, during which feminist theories flourished and gradually spread from the west to the whole world (Shang, 2006, p.50).

In the long process of development and evolution, many genres are well developed, such as liberal feminism, radical feminism, socialist feminism and postmodern feminism, cultural feminism, ecological feminism, the third world feminism, black feminism, psychoanalytic feminism, lesbian feminism, etc. Although these schools focus on different points and propositions, they aim to expose and challenge the male-centered gender system and improve women's social status. Some researchers point out that feminism has the following characteristics: (1) it has obvious gender orientation; (2) it advocates ideological diversity; (3) with great randomness, the emotional catharsis is far more than the rational thinking; (4) it shows the unusually mild style (Shao, 2008, p.311).

There have been quite a lot of researches on feminism educational thoughts in the field of education, but it is not enough to make a special study on the educational thoughts of a certain school. In the process of the development of feminism, radical feminism, as an important school of feminism, has exerted an important influence on education. This paper makes an analysis upon the radical feminism and its educational thought and makes a brief comment on it.

### 1. OVERVIEW OF RADICAL FEMINISM

#### 1.1 Radical Feminism

Radical Feminism is also called Cultural Feminism, which mainly represents young, well-educated white middle

class women. In the late 1960s, various radical feminist ideas and behaviors came to the forefront. Members of the “new left” were dissatisfied with their attitude to them by the socialist and populist groups of the “new left”. A faction strongly identified with the contemporary women’s movement was founded. They played a vanguard role in the “Women’s Liberation Movement” in the west, taking patriarchy as the main source of gender inequality, and advocating to fight for the complete liberation of women by taking the private field (family or bedroom) as the main battlefield.

This young school varies greatly, but has the same or similar basic tendency, mainly regarding the causes of women’s problems. They are convinced that women have been oppressed longer than other social groups such as rank, class, race, ethnicity, etc. women’s oppression is the most common of all human societies. And the abolition of private ownership, the elimination of apartheid and other social changes are helpless. They believe, with empathy, that the class or hierarchy has been opposed between the sexes for a long time, which needs to be explored and dealt with independently (Xu, 2006, pp.252-253). Radical feminism focuses on male violence against women and on male control over women’s sex and fertility. It holds that the fundamental source of women’s oppression is the domination of men over women’s bodies, which is realized through two ways: The first is through ideology, including the production and sale of pornographic materials and the contempt of women’s thinking patterns; the second is through the way of practice, including male-centered marriage and property law, deprivation of women’s reproductive rights, sexual violence and so on. The main views of radical feminism are: (1) the theory of patriarchy; (2) personal is political; (3) the general colonization of women; (4) advocacy of “biological revolution” (Wang, 2007, pp.19-21).

### 1.2 Representative Figures and Related Works

By the early 1970s, radical women had formed their own basic ideas. In 1970, Kate Millett’s landmark book *Sexual Politics* was published, which for the first time took the patriarchy, namely the institutionalized gender oppression, as the core concept of female theory, laying a solid foundation for the theoretical development of radical feminism. Other radical women’s books published in the same year include: *Dialectic of Sex* by Shulamith Firestone, *The Female Eunuch* by Germaine Greer, etc. In addition, a large number of manifestos, speeches and essays have been published. Since then, important new works, such as *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (1973) by Mary Daly, *Man Made Language* by Dale Spender (1980), etc.

After the mid-1970s, the radical women’s movement was widely criticized. There was a trend of self-reflection within the radical feminism. And a new generation of theoretical representatives emerged. Most of them

questioned and argued about the defects of over-simplicity and bias of the previous generation, and made more in-depth discussion on the central issue of patriarchy, in an effort to make its ideological system more comprehensive and reasonable. Their major works include *The Politics of Reproduction* (1981) by Mary O’Brien, *Right-Wing Women* (1983) by Andrea Dworkin, etc.

It is worth mentioning that some radical women broke through the political framework of western capitalism and began to “break into” the private life to denounce gender domination. They put forward the new slogan of “private affairs are politics”, and made bold explorations in thought, theory and practice, and made some achievements, which made outstanding contributions to the “women’s liberation movement”. However, it cannot be denied that radical feminism has failed to reveal how biological gender becomes social one, which has an ethnocentric view and ignores class differences. Namely, radical feminism advocates gender antagonism (Li, 2005, pp.46-52).

## 2. THE MAIN CONTENT OF RADICAL FEMINISM EDUCATIONAL THOUGHTS

In the second climax since the 1950s, education was a special area of concern for feminists. On the one hand, education is important for people’s social gender formation, and on the other hand, they believe that education may play an important role in eliminating gender inequality (Thomas, 1990, p.2). After the 1960s, radical feminism educational thought, as a feminist educational thought, gradually formed a genre in the study of feminist education theory, whose main content includes the following four aspects.

### 2.1 Specifying the “Patriarchy” in the Field of Education

“Patriarchy” is an important point of radical feminism. It refers to the mechanism by which the father acts as a parent. The “masculine system” is not a new term coined by Kate Millett of the school. Her contribution is to inject new meaning into the concept, thus expanding the meaning of the concept: the first refers to male domination Female; the second is the male elders who ruled the younger generation. (Li, 1997, p.110) The male system exists at all levels of society, and its power permeates all aspects of life. Therefore, Millett believes that male power has become the most popular ideology in Western culture, and unequivocally reflects its fundamental concept of power” (Millett, 1991, p.38).

Excepted for women, the more they receive education, the less confident they are, and the less they see themselves, because women are denied in the entire education system and education content. The male system is a social construction, the most fundamental

cause of women's oppression, and a background factor for the analysis of gender issues in schools. Radical feminism believes that "hidden curriculum" is a means of reproduction of male system in schools, and it is a cultural construction form that requires profound gender analysis. Gender inequality in covert courses allows both boys and girls to receive education in schools, but ultimately there are huge differences in academic achievement, subject bias, professional development, and personality development. They believe that the use of segregation strategies for single placement or the creation of gender-sex schools is the most radical way to address gender inequalities in "hidden courses".

## **2.2 Revealing the Encounter of Female Teachers in the Education System**

Radical feminists reveal and criticize the problems in the process of feminization of education. After the formation of compulsory education systems in most western industrialized countries in the late 19th and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, education, especially teaching, was called "female work". Especially after World War II, women were gradually excluded from most educational management positions. A school model in which male managers lead female teachers begins to appear and, in most cases, continues to today (Weller, 2006, p.543).

Many radical feminists have conducted extensive research on female teachers. One of the ways they believe that men dominate society is to separate the private world from the public world. As a patriarchal accomplice, female teachers transport children from the private world to the public world. Grummet believes that this is the result of both men and women trying to oppose their internalized object relationships. "The male tries to rediscover the suppressed "other" by arranging her to appear around him. He regulates this appearance because he controls—as a manager, a member of the school board, a textbook author, and Publisher—course. His political control and her escape from the mother's symbiotic relationship by gaining access to the father's public domain... The patriarchal pedagogy is achieved through the feminization of teaching" (Pinar, 1994, p.170).

The male system curriculum reflects the epistemology of the subject and the guest, which reflects the desire of men to pursue influence and control. Men of all walks of life want to engage in what can be called productive work, which can claim grain, energy, legal codes, political parties, healing and peace (Grumet, 1988, p.22). The curriculum excludes female essentially, and it relies on the neglect, control, and induction of women and others to achieve their patriarchal goals. The culture of the classroom is patriarchal, soaking in competition and rejecting private, intimate, and psychological things. "In his absence, she taught through his authority, and she told the children that the human life story guaranteed that the classroom culture was reproduced" (Pinar, 1994, p.170).

## **2.3 Promoting the Transformation of School Curriculum Through Personal Reflection and Awareness Raising**

Radical feminists place special emphasis on sisters' feelings and believe that all women should unite to fight for the liberation of women. Radical feminists in education advocate the transformation of school curriculum through personal reflection and awareness raising, and some feminists achieve this goal through collaborative learning and research. The process of cooperation allows everyone in the group to be supported and encouraged by other members, and he/she in turn inspires others (Chen, 2007, p.14). Janet Miller questioned the way in which she constructed the socially constructed expectations of women into her own expectations as a teacher. She asked herself: "To what extent social and cultural expectations and stereotypes in what way has it become a "personal" expectation? How do these awaken women's perception of themselves and their potential to receive education and educate others?" When she raised these questions in class, she found herself encountered a terrible silence. Later classes became the position of teachers and students to break the silence and make everyone become "sound" cooperative learning and research. Many radical feminists question the established female identity as Miller does. The process of questioning is also the process of cooperation, as Florence Howe evaluates, "Women will no longer be content to pass those 'Received heritage'; on the contrary, women who already have knowledge and women who are becoming knowledge hope to 'break the habit pattern'; for the first time, feminists question the fundamentals of education in an organized way – the curriculum And the content of the course, the knowledge itself. Let us re-examine all the issues, let us not accept anything that is taken for granted. In the end, if we do not examine and examine its cultural bias, we refuse to pass the 'accepted heritage'" (Miller, 1996, p.62).

If female teachers want to change their role as accomplices in patriarchy, they must criticize and construct their ideology model through reflection and awareness raising. Grummet believes that the difference between male and female consciousness lies in the difference in patterns, which are extended by the individual's perception of the phenomenal world and then written into the culture, philosophy, ideology and education that constitutes human beings. Female teachers who are going to participate in teaching to provide a richer channel for human possibilities and initiative must read the dark side of their stories to discover their intentionality (Grumet, 1988, p.74). This process of awareness rising provides support for women to see themselves and their world in new ways.

## **2.4 Examine the Definition of Knowledge**

Some radical feminists believe that the knowledge in the curriculum is composed of masculine knowledge, and the

value of knowledge is judged by men, so that men have the privilege to continuously create social knowledge and maintain their “superior” status, thus, the patriarchal system is continuously regenerated (Peine, 2003, p.389). In the school context, masculine knowledge is institutionalized through hidden courses and through the selection and deletion of knowledge. Hidden curriculum is to give the role of men with independent, separation, rational, brave, perseverance, etc. The characteristics of the instrumental, giving women the sensibility, weak, imagination and expressive features, and then the men of instrumental features over the expressive features of women, superior knowledge to unconsciously accept the male stereotypes. Men also maintain the consistency of male knowledge by selecting and deleting certain knowledge, such as selecting only historical events that meet the male standard as teaching materials in history subjects. In the late 1970s, Barbara Mitrano found that mainstream methodologies and the way knowledge was conceptualized and examined reflected patriarchal social attitudes. Collins characterized this attitude as objective, rational, linear, logical, analytical, calm, profit-seeking, aggressive, bureaucratic, exclusive, and goal-oriented. She is in favor of the circular, mysterious, unified, emotional, reflective, public and inclusive educational orientation contained in feminism and women’s experience (Peine, 2003, p.385).

The subject with the greatest gender bias is science. The radical feminism criticizes the biological determinism and social determinism on the issue of explaining the masculinity of science and thinks that the alliance of science with men and masculinity is the ideology of patriarchy culture and science. The reason is not sexism in the social structure and activities of science, as social determinists say, but that science itself is a male science (Wu, 2000, p.56). Therefore, radical feminists criticize many intervention strategies adopted by liberal feminists to change the disadvantage of girls in science and math, arguing that those intervention strategies only try to create conditions to attract more women to participate in math and science, but cannot solve the problem of separation between science and women. In the patriarchal society, the gendered tendency of science is not only manifested in the gender stratification of science and the authority structure of men, but also in the whole ideological framework, methodological standards and value system of science. Radical feminists stripped away the sanctity of science and revealed its nature as an accomplice of male domination (Huang, 2009, p.144).

## CONCLUSION

In many schools of feminism, compared with “the other”, radical feminism can form its own school, develop its own school and occupy an important position

in feminism, which is inseparable from its theoretical contribution. At the same time, needless to say, the school could not overcome the theoretical blind spot by “itself”. Radical feminism is devoted to discussing how the male order world oppresses women, which is the reason why women could not turn over. They believe that only by eradicating the world could women be liberated. Some lesbian separatists even argue that “men are the enemy”. These claims ignore the complexities of working-class women, black women and the third world women.

In educational practice, some radical measures of radical feminism, such as gender separation or class separation, have not reduced men’s discrimination against women. Some of their strategies to reconstruct women’s life stories, women’s scientific research and women’s art teaching model can help women to understand themselves beyond patriarchy. In universities, the teaching strategies and research work of radical feminism have enabled women’s studies to flourish. However, these efforts did not fundamentally touch on the gender order in the society. Compared with liberal feminism’s recognition of male superiority, radical feminism went to another extreme: female characteristics became superior. It can only replace the old oppression with a new one (Huang, 2009, pp.145-146). Bell Hooks pointed out that “the purpose of feminism is not only to benefit women of a certain group, race or class. It does not give women privileges that men do not have. It has the power to change the way we all live in a meaningful way” (Hooks, 2001, p.32). The wave of feminist education comes into being and develops with the development of feminist movement, which has exerted an immeasurable influence on the contemporary thought and education field (Xiao, 2006, p.93).

The radical feminist educational thought, as a branch of feminist education thought, should be born in this background. We should look at its education thought objectively and dialectically, absorb and draw lessons from its reasonable elements, and serve the female education in our country today. We should also see its limitations of The Times, avoid and abandon its defects and deficiencies, so as to avoid radical behaviors or negative influences in female education.

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