

# A Study of Female Image in Beverley Farmer's *Gerontissa*\*

Hongmei Li

School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Xihua University, Chengdu, Sichuan, China

**Abstract**—The short story *Gerontissa* by the Australian feminist writer Beverley Farmer, highlights women's real life experience with the technique of stream-of-consciousness. It presents *Gerontissa*—an educated old lady's reminiscent touch of the youth and sentimental grief over the old age. Lost in her memory of youth, she recalls her two husbands, the painter lover and others, with the ubiquitous recurrence of her nude portrait, mirror and writing, which gives an insight into the ambivalence of educated women's inner world as well as unfolds women's destiny as "object" and "other" in the patriarchal society.

**Index Terms**—women, "other", subject, object, patriarchal society

## I. INTRODUCTION

Beverley Farmer, an Australian feminist writer, in her short story *Gerontissa* borrows her title character from T·S·Eliot's 1920 poem *Gerontion*, and tells an old lady *Gerontissa*'s sentimental reminiscence about her youth along with her apparent frustration with her life now. With the help of the stream-of-consciousness technique Farmer captures a few moments of the old lady's life ever and now, consequently scrolling a portrait of an educated lady who is trapped in a succession of hardships, exiles and loneliness against the backdrop of WWII. Meanwhile attributed to Farmer's proficient knowledge of impressionist and post-impressionist painting, light, shade and color will matter a lot to artfully correspond to what the lady thinks and feels. The story, like most modernist writing, is very conversational. When in her Melbourne tenement, the old lady is opening her fragmented narration about the past and the present, she is frequently referring to the mirror, her nude portrait and her writing. Undoubtedly all of these three function well as significant symbols in the revelation of women's obscure destiny in the patriarchal society.

## II. MIRROR

Mirror for long has been a necessary item in human life. Human beings could not see their own images if not relying on a mirror or others' gaze. But the image reflected in the mirror could not supply a complete picture of the subject, for it has been influenced unconsciously by social ideology and morals. Particularly for women, this image always reminds them of the requirements from the outside. Locked, trapped in it, they will be driven to obsessively study their self-images. The female image is the social construct as Anne Edholm points out that "images of women's bodies and faces are central to the construction of gender, to notions of fundamental, biological difference between the sexes and to ideas of appropriate sexuality"(Edholm, 1998, p.155). The Chinese scholar Zhang Zongzi comments that "Mirror...in men's aesthetic association is never separated from women's body, especially their looks." (Zhang Zongzi, 2007, p.29) In other words, determining the play of mirrors, as in the fairy tale *Snow-white*, is the male gaze.

### A. *Mirror and Image*

Mirror is the instrument to showcase women's beauty and indulge women in that beauty. At the same time mirror is also a telling evidence of transient beauty as Sabine (2005) claims that mirror, like the sand glass, declares the end of an hour, reminding people of the limited time. *Gerontissa* as an old woman lives in a room with mirrors on every wall, where she could not help sighing: "...I who wore diamonds and pearls...(now) I am embedded in a mask of wrinkles...I am embedded once and for all in old flesh", "Age has congealed on me like wax". Her beauty is gone and could never come back. Such figurative language as "wax", "mask" indicate the lifeless body. Her decaying image thus contrasts sharply with her lasciviously sensuous body in her nude portrait. More important, *Gerontissa*'s room with mirrors on all walls imprisons her as if she is caged by her different images, unable to distinguish her true self. Sabine (2005) says there is a conflict between the true self and the image. People could only allow their images reflected in the mirror to confront that image others see. Put it differently, the image reflected recalls the idealized female image which the patriarchal society has created and with whom women must always compare. The identity of a woman is thus based on how she looks, which is in close relation with how she is seen by others (mainly men). Appearance defines her culture and feelings as well as her social value. The self-image looks as only apparently real; it is a projection of something else, a sort of distortion. Therefore, the mirror, by locking the women in the double image, deprives her of

---

\* This paper is sponsored by key research fund of "Foreign Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, Xihua University".

the ability to be herself, to speak for herself. She must be passive. It is so difficult to maintain a position against patriarchal social schemes that the well-educated Gerontissa feels compelled to “prepare a face, a surface; looming at me in the pane...I know it is absurd. All is vanity. I do it for the girl under the wax mask. For her sake, too”. According to Felicity Edholm, “female vanity is itself a subject of representation” (Felicity Edholm, 1998, p.154). Gerontissa “has been” many women in her time and she “expected to attain ease and amplitude in ripe old age...”, however, what she has attained is “detachment. solitude”. Gerontissa is then “tired of living”, realizing she had spent the whole of her life in front of the “mirror” wonders “now many of us pliant women, embedded like bees in the amber of our mirrors, believed we must come to this?” The mirror here, loses its power of controlling the image since the woman’s real image does not correspond to the one constructed by the patriarchal system.

In addition a mirror is the stage, too, where people could make up and disguise into new images, where women could pretend to be young girls to be admired and dreamed of by men. As soon as her beauty, youth fade, together with her health she will no longer be the object of “gaze” in the male-dominant society, for “decaying body could not stimulate desire, mirror ruthlessly witnesses and reflects the ugly body and despair. The old woman intends to seek for her youth while indeed what she sees is her phantom” (Sabine, 2005, p.233). Gerontissa claims that “I resigned myself to solitude only when my mirrors left me in no doubt that I was old and ugly, though hale—praise be to God, as they say—and hearty still.” Simon de Beauvoir has a similar statement about the relationship with self and others, which becomes more complex and painful in old age since it is others who decode when one is old: “the dangerous age”, she said, “is marked by certain organic disturbances, but what lends them importance is their symbolic significance”(Beauvoir, 1989, p.587). Gerontissa is of the age “at which in the cultural world to which she belonged, women are no longer seen as objects to be looked at, when they are no longer sexualized by the look, no longer the object of the gaze”(Beauvoir, 1989, p.165).

By contrast Gerontissa’s nude portrait records a desirable femininity, which intensifies the idealized female image in terms of both health and beauty. Bertagnin thinks “although the mirror can be an actual mirror, or an actual reflection in a mirror-like surface, it can also be another’s gaze” (Lucia, 1995, p.18). Her nude portrait in this sense is an art piece under males’ gaze.

Historically speaking, the painter of the nude portrait usually is a man while art models for life drawing classes are usually women who are expected to pose nude and more often do a series of poses with little direction, though visually non-obstructive personal items such as small jewelry and eyeglasses may be worn. These women models are silent, anonymous and unacknowledged, except supposed to pose the most ideal visual image in men’s gaze: a beautiful girl with rosy cheeks, red lips and supple knees. In the portrait time is freezing on the moment of perpetual youth—it seems that the beauty could transcend time and space with her physical charm kept intact. Yet it is apparent to see through the cruelty of time: youth and beauty are inseparable; with the passage of time, beauty will be gone, too.

In the short story *Gerontissa* a nude portrait sees a glamorous lady in her prime. “She is still long, sumptuous and shadowed, spread along the bed as if congealed, and stoked by tongues of candlelight. At her throat, an amber necklace.” The candle, as it is, symbolizes flight of time. Nevertheless at this moment, as the candlelight and amber necklace glow in shifting darkness, vigorous Gerontissa attains her enchanted beauty. Incidentally the phrase “as if congealed” helps to freeze this moment, and ends up in the elevation of eternal beauty, ease and nobility. The portrait throws old Gerontissa back to the painter, her lover Marcel whom she encountered in Paris. Marcel was dead. Gerontissa is in her decay by age and ills: her ankles swells, her knees shaken, her hands and feet frozen. It is safe to conclude that her nude portrait has two implications. On the one hand it repeats the cliché about woman’s “non-significant other” as the object of man’s desire and inspiration. She was once the art model, who was not simply the subject of art, but also often thought of as Muses, a source of inspiration. On the other hand it reveals women’s doom in face of merciless time. The beauty in the nude portrait is a self-conceited young girl, who once shared the same enthusiasm for art with Marcel and who would abandon Marcel after realizing he was only a zealot of art. When she is old, in desperate loneliness, the sumptuous beauty could only become her haunted memory. If her portrait was Dorian Gray’s picture, she would remain beautiful forever, with her confidence, egoism and sensuous life. Therefore her portrait is more a paradox of a middle-class woman’s mentality: a strong assertion at youth while self-pity, self-denial at old age.

### B. *Mirror and Memory*

Mirror is the medium connecting the present and the past. In this short story, the old lady when sitting before the mirror is lost in her memory of two husbands, father, artist lover and cousin Anne.

Her first husband is a Greek man Panagiotis. After marriage they live in the countryside of Greece for a while, where “Women, decent women” are supposed to stay in “whitewashed kitchens gossiping and embroidering” while coffee houses are the world of men. She occasionally transgresses the social norms which are constructed as absolute. “After church one Sunday she dressed up in her husband’s second best suit, sauntered in among the dour men playing tavli, and ordered an ouzo”. The high price for doing so is that she is raped by her husband. Kitchens and coffee houses are the established boundaries to separate men and women. Clothing is associated with gender, marking the difference and considered fundamental to the wearer’s identity. Annette Kuhn, underlines the potentiality of clothing “to disguise, to alter, even to reconstruct, the wearer’s self” (Kuhn, 1978, p.53). Therefore, Gerontissa’s transgression is a threat to the patriarchal system, a threat to the gender identity represented by clothing and the boundaries of implicit social

prohibition. When she is violently raped by her husband in the enclosed room, sexuality in cross-dressing is wiped out, the disguised woman is turned into the female image again. Aristotle asserted that “the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules and the other is ruled.” Thomas Aquinas and St. Augustine declared that women are really “imperfect men”. Charles Darwin announces that women are of a “characteristic of... a past and lower state of civilization.” (Bressler, 1998, pp.180-181) Males as masters have power and define cultural terms and roles while females are powerless, who have only two alternatives: submission or self-destruction.

The painter Marcel is one of her lovers in youth, also the painter of her nude portrait. Generally speaking to many artists, art is considered as their life and naturally they may not take love seriously. They need women basically because they need inspiration and the object for painting. Gerontissa comments that Marcel “Une Garae—malade pour l’amour de l’art”, which underlines her unhappiness with her position/role in this love affair. She is only the nude model, gazed by him; she is only the servant, looking after him when he is sane and drunken. She leaves the brutal husband and gives herself to the artist but she has not yet attained her position as the “subject”. What deserves special attention is that Gerontissa voluntarily chooses to leave Marcel not because of revenge for his insane dedication to art, but because of her pursuit of equality in the love affair.

Her second husband Tom is a journalist, who was shot in New Guinea during WWII. Tom’s appearance in her life is of vital importance, not only as her savior but also a savior of the world peace. “(He) brought me back to Melbourne just before war was declared forty years ago.” Tom at the proper time rescues her and lives with her in the peaceful countryside of Melbourne. Their pastoral moments in the countryside are far from the madding world, romantic, enjoyable and enchanting, especially when “the flat red bay at sunset aglow with street lamps”. Pastoral life seems to be the absolute opposite of violence and dictated notions, with gentle hands it protects a young couple in love. However, the war is inevitable even in Australia which is far away from war-stricken Europe. Tom as a male journalist must be involved in the war, for historically males are required to defend their countries and homes with sacrifice, wild patriotism and moral integrity. Usually the war drags men to the battlefield while keeping women from it. Nevertheless most women are negatively influenced by the bloody war for they have lost their sweet life, their husbands, their homes, and hopes. Literally speaking it is the war that has torn down families and destroyed love. Think deeply, it will find the truth is men and women perform different rights and obligations: in the patriarchal society, love is a necessity for women whereas for men including Tom love is a luxury because morally speaking nation’s call is superior to love, and they must play heroes and abandon love when the war approaches.

The above analysis helps to reach the conclusion the patriarchal power is ubiquitous such as social rules or norms, war, and painting which have perpetually presents or represents women as silent “Other”. To her Greek husband Gerontissa is the object of his desire and violence, who possesses her and assaults her at will; in her artist lover’s eyes she is his inspiration, serving him both in his work and life; Tom, her second husband treats her equally, yet unfortunately the war takes Tom away and plunges her into the abyss of life. The three men in her life factually see the temperament of her father. It is her father who has shaped her image, occupation, attitude to life and favorite type of men.

Her father born in Paris has the temperament of a poet. In her memory, mother is always absent so her father plays the double role of parents, instructing and enlightening her by what he acts and speaks. The first enlightenment certainly is the language. He teaches the daughter French from childhood, and leads her into the world of literature, reading symbolist poetry, by Charles Pierre Baudelaire in particular. It is the father who brings the “banned book” *Les Fleurs du Mal* (*Flowers of Evil*) from Paris to Melbourne, stimulating Gerontissa’s zealous passion for poetry. She reads the poems in it, commits them in memory, savoring the beauty, and surviving them in her mind even when she is too tired of life. As is widely acknowledged, *Les Fleurs du Mal* is renowned for its depiction of the ugly and the dark, along with the gloomy, ghastly mood. It associates with decadence and self-indulgence, dealing with the feelings of anonymity and estrangement from a newly modernized city Paris where people are drowned in desires, lifeless and hopeless. This sort of decadence aesthetics has been planted in her mind and will witness its potential impact on her life of sensuous preference. Her nude portrait is one telling example, which is borrowed from Baudelaire’s *Une Charogne*: “une femme lubrique” (a lascivious woman). With the linguistic instruction comes the second enlightenment from her father, given father’s dandy life style in Paris: it raises her curiosity about Paris and its style. When she is a grown-up, she has lingered in Paris several times, where she encounters her love, then leaves him and then returns after WWII, losing all things. It is safe to say the father is her guide in life, unconsciously designing her career. Her many lovers in youth, her infatuation with the Greek husband and painter lover Marcel witness father’s traces of life: to live and die in desires and art. Her second husband Tom is the male ideal. He achieves balances between life and art, desire and duty, neither indulged in sensuous pleasures nor bounded by art. That is why Tom will still frequently come into her mind when she, an old lady, lives in the cheap Melbourne apartment alone. Moreover Tom, unlike other men who only survive in her mind, does live in her real life. That old man trudging about alone in the Melbourne street, scrawling in his notebooks, is Tom’s scapegoat, who Gerontissa says “has a look of my Tom about him.”

In the memory aroused by the mirror, the only female character is her second cousin Anne. Anne, like her “wore men’s formal dress”. Between her and Anne there seems to be unspeakable relationship. For twice she called “Anne, my darling”. It is also noticeable that she met Anne at Molyvo on Lesbos when breaking up with her Greek husband. The island Lesbos as known is where the Greek poetess Sappho lives and maintains close relation with other females. From

this island is the English word “lesbian” derived. Therefore, Anne’s drowning in the clear sea appears to be a planned suicide after their quarrel about young Gerontissa’s infidelity. If we agree that they are unorthodox when wearing men’s suits, then their subtle love affair could be more shocking in that post-war society. Obviously Gerontissa and her cousin are both rebellious women, challenging moral endurance and social acceptance. They pursue what they like, but end up in tragedy—Gerontissa in mournful solitude and Anne in early death. Factually to conform to the prescribed sex roles dictated by the society, which is what Kate Millet calls sexual politics, women must establish female social conventions for themselves by establishing female discourse, literary studies and feminist criticism. Simply put it, writing counts greatly for gender construction.

### C. Writing

Writing in Farmer’s stories is repeatedly reinforced, sometimes “seen as a redemptive force and the chance for a new beginning” (Lucia, 1995, p.11). As for Gerontissa, writing is what she can do. She realizes it clearly that mirror or another’s gaze has its controlling power. The statement “Mirrors downy with dust” in fact reveals the unreliability of images reflected in mirrors. Since the mirror fails to show the real self, writing will become the must to represent the self, to record the self. Writing can not only refresh the memory, but challenge the male-dominant writing tradition with female writing. In this short story Gerontissa took notes in the street, sipped Turkish coffee and reread everything she kept and wrote hour by hour, this short story included. She “intend(s) to leave behind, as proof that there was more to me than cold flesh stiffening in black rags on a rented bed.” In this sense this short story is rather her autobiography, in which she directs towards the interior part of the female world, highlighting the gaze “inside”. It helps to break away the male writing tradition from the outside and treats the female as the subject who narrates, experiences, observes, and writes. While Gerontissa’s identity as the subject is incomplete. When she is in recollection she appears passive and inferior. As she says “there was more to me than cold flesh stiffening in black rags on a rented bed”, she is complaining about her old age, her conformity to the patriarchal system. Writing in her mind is not so much a weapon to rebel against cultural ideals and norms as an unconscious action either to record or to kill time.

## III. CONCLUSION

In this story Gerontissa remains in most situations submissive and weak in her relation with men. Her occasional transgression of her stereotyped roles as in her departure from Marcel and her love with Anne, does not generate any decisive results. After break-up, she still chooses to come back to the normal life. After all in the patriarchal society, the woman is prescribed as docile and helpless “Other”. The father is the typical representative of patriarchal authorities who raises the daughter and gives her education, consequently shaping her personhood, her perceptions about the life and world. This is what Simone de Beavoir has said “humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him.” (Beavoir, 1989, p.23).

The whole story is about time. Time on the one side accumulates wisdom and knowledge and on the other side directs to decay, loneliness, and sorrows. The mirror image sees the decay of female beauty as well as reflects the ideal female body. The mirror meanwhile seals one in the unhappy memories as well as takes one into a wonderland as in fairytales. Gerontissa, a decaying beauty feels mournful and even indignant over her loss of beauty and health. She looks into the mirror and finds her image betrays a lot that female ideal socially constructed. She is “indignant at decay”, “bounded by it as if by an old skin” and “prepare(s) a sur-face”. It may be reasonable to say the story partly deals with “decaying beauty”, the recurrent concern of artistic representation. This concern yet indicates the established criterion: women exchange their beauty and youth for love, marriage and happiness. The old age could only stir anxiety and hopelessness.

This reminds us of the epigraph of *The Waste Land*, which reads: “For I myself saw with my own eyes the Sibyl of Cumae hanging in a cage; and when the boys cried to her, Sibyl, what do you want? She used to reply, ‘I want to die.’” The Sibyl of Cumae is a prophetess who has been given long life by Apollo but has failed to ask for eternal youth and health. She is both the guardian of a sacred cave and a gatekeeper of the underworld. Her misfortune to be shut in a cage and to wither away is emblematic as she is of life in death, of a desperate struggle to attain salvation. So is Gerontissa. She is “tired of living” at the end of the story like the ancient prophetess. Death to them is the final release, which says farewell to all pains, physically, emotionally and psychologically.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Annette Kuhn and Ann Marie edited. (1978). *Feminism and Materialism: Women and Modes of Production*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- [2] Bertagnin, Lucia. (1995). *Narrowing the Aperture: Beverley Farmer’s Short Stories*, Diss. Brisbane: University of Queensland.
- [3] Bressler, Charles E. (1998). *Literary Criticism, An Introduction to Theory and Practice*, 2nd ed., Houghton: Houghton College Press.
- [4] Felicity Edholm. (1998). *Feminist Ethics and the Politics of Love: Feminist Review*, London: Psychology Press.
- [5] Sabine Melchior-Bonnet. (1994). *Histoire du Mirror*. Paris: Editions IMAGO.
- [6] Simone De Beavoir. (1989). *The Second Sex*. Translated by H. M. Parshley, New York: Vintage Classics.
- [7] Zhang Zongzi. (2007). *Skeleton in Mirror and Witches*. Beijing: Panorama, (3): 29.

**Hongmei Li**, was born in Shanxi Province, China in 1978. She received her master's degree in literature from Sichuan University, China in 2004.

She is currently an associate professor in the School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Xihua University, Chengdu, China. Her research interests include English literature and American literature in the twentieth century.