Abstract

This study aims at a critical analysis and interpretation of four main protagonists - the Jia Sisters in Hong Lou Meng (The Dream of the Red Chamber 《红楼梦》). Since its first publication in 1791, this novel has continued to attract enthusiastic response and criticism among literary circles right up to the present. Hong Lou Meng is unique in Chinese Literature for it not only has a profound ideological content, but also an art form so brilliantly integrated with it that readers are fascinated and moved by it. With superb artistry the author Cao Xueqin (曹雪芹) presents a panoramic genre - painting, a whole gallery of highly individual yet typical characters. Since Hong Lou Meng is a very complex novel, our critical discussion may properly begin by introducing some of its most important characters and reviewing the highlights of its plot.

The Jia Sisters are chosen to be studied as they are a group of major figures whose positions are seen to correlate with the flow of the novel. Through detailed descriptions of their daily life, the author succeeds in depicting their different idiosyncrasies, thoughts and feelings. With the use of dialogue, he shows with remarkable skill, the individual character of each personality. Each of the four sisters is used to represent a type of womanhood whose fate is tragic under the burden of a feudal system.

These four chief characters are given a chapter each in the thesis. Within each chapter, attempts are made to evaluate the fate of the Jia Sisters as written by Gao E (高鹗). Since Hong Lou Meng is a piece of unfinished monumental work, Gao E continues to finish writing the last forty chapters; while completing the novel,
he goes back to the original and makes certain revisions which go
counter to Cao Xueqin's original intention. In completing the novel,
Gao E fails to achieve the artistic attainment of Cao Xueqin in his
portrayal of the life of the four sisters. The findings also confirm
Cao Xueqin's intention of using the Jia Sisters not only to represent
the tragedy of women during his period, but also to depict the four
stages of the Jia family from its peak to its decline.

_Hong Lou Meng_ is indeed a great novel which belongs to a fine
literary tradition. With its substance and refinement of artistic
expression, it is a turning point in the development of Classical
Chinese Literature.

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