Analysis of the Thorn Phenomenon in the Emotional Process of the Cleary Women in *The Thorn Birds*

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**Abstract.** *The Thorn Birds* by Colleen McCullough talks about love and destiny. Based on the background of the novel, the paper analyzes the connotation of the female character in the story and explains the clues of thorns for each thorn birds in the three generations of Cleary women. The purpose of the paper is to help understand the characters from a new perspective.

**1. Introduction**

*The Thorn Birds* is a novel written by Colleen McCullough, one of the most influential contemporary Australian writers. It describes the development history of three generations of women in the early period of Australian colonization, as well as the development history of Australian women from the early period of colonization to the modern society. Based on the love disputes between the heroine Meggie and Father Ralph, the novel narrates the love stories from 1915 to 1969. Fiona and Paddy are the first generation, Meggie and Ralph are the second, and Justine and Dane are the third. The author represents the emergence and development of female consciousness in the early immigrant families in Australia under the historical background.

In the preface of the novel, it is said that the book talks about love and destiny, and the legend of the thorn bird runs through the whole story. It is said that there is such a bird that sings only once in its life, which is more beautiful than the songs of all the creatures in the world. From the moment the bird leaves the nest, it is looking for the thorn tree, and it didn’t rest until it gets one. Then it put the body into the longest and sharpest thorn and let go of its voice among the wild branches. In the dying moment, it is free from its own pain, and that song even eclipses the lark and the nightingale. The incomparable song in the legend comes with the thorn that pierces the heart. [1]

Some people will give up for what they think is of great value. These people’s values are against the universal values and dare to implement them. For example, for the most beautiful voice, the thorn bird gives up life. In the universal values, life is more important than a good voice. In the heart of the thorn bird, it can abandon the life for the most beautiful voice.

**2. Main Female Characters in the Novel**

Rebellious women boldly pursue their own happiness. Although the specific path of their emotional experience is not the same, they embody different views of love. They attach importance to their own feelings and pursue marriage based on love, so they pay a heavy price for it on the different times. Fiona falls in love with a married husband, but she doesn’t want to be his lover. She wants to marry him and live with him forever. But the family’s prestige does not allow her to do so, and she has to marry another man, suffering a lot. Meggie has never been able to hide or give up her love for Ralph, even after Ralph gives up her in order to realize his personal ambition. Although she also gets married, it was also a marriage without love, which doomed Meggie to suffer for a lifetime from the beginning.
In their emotional development, Western women pay attention to their independence of personality. Gender equality, first of all, is the equality of personality. On the issue of marriage, people tend to pay attention to the equality of personality to a certain extent. [2] Fiona married Paddy for her family and her reputation, but she is equal to him in the marriage. She is a faithful wife and she thanked Paddy for giving her a home, but she would never blindly yield. In Meggie and Justine, the independence of personality is more obvious. Their marriage is their own choice, not their parents.

3. Explanation of Thorn Phenomenon in Main Female Characters

This novel describes the life experience and emotional process of the three generations of the Cleary Women with their own characteristics—Fiona, Meggie and Justine, who have gone through a road of love covered with thorns.

3.1 The First Generation Women of the Cleary Family

Fiona Cleary and Mary Carson are the first generation women of the Cleary family. In this patriarchal society, Fiona has become a male accessory, while Mary’s pursuit at the cost of self-sacrifice has resulted in her loneliness. Thus we can see that in the first generation of immigrant families, women cannot control their own destiny.

As a thorn bird, Pagihan is the longest and sharpest thorn Fiona pursues. She pursues love, and has struggled and resisted for her own happiness. But her struggle is short-lived, and she finally gives in to her fate and becomes a silent thorn bird, spending her life in silence.[3]

But Fiona’s short and deep love is worth remembering in her whole life. That’s why Fiona loves Frank more than any other child. But she is lucky. God gives her the right to be loved. Paddy is a good husband who deeply loves his wife with inferiority and respect. But behind her expressionless face lies Fiona’s deep gratitude and respect for Paddy. After his death, she breaks out and knows that Paddy maintains her a secure family, and he is the tenderest and most worthy of love, but regrets of her own coldness toward him. She has always been indifferent to her husband and children, although sometimes she repents, but still indifferent to problems.

3.2 The Second Generation Women of the Cleary Family

As the second generation, Meggie finally decides to rise up and take the first step of women’s independence under the suppression of religious and cultural concepts. Meggie is the most striking thorn bird in the novel. Ralph is her longest and sharpest thorn. When they first met, the age difference is not in any way hindering their mutual attraction. When the meggies appeared in front of Ralph, the little girl ignites the flame of passion that had extinguished for many years. When the family appeared in front of Mary Carson, Meggie puts her little arms around Ralph’s neck. She is so dependent on him. When Ralph introduced the boys to Mary, she hardly listened. She was too busy observing the priest and Meggie. This kind of understatement has rich meanings. On the one hand, Mary, who has been widowed for many years, falls in love with young and unrestrained Ralph. On the other hand, the intimate behavior of Ralph and Meggie causes Mary’s jealousy and anxiety. Mary knows that Meggie’s presence means that she would never get Ralph. As a result, Mary, as narrator, tells readers that the love story between Meggie and Ralph begins.[4]

In the decades since then, Meggie has become a mother of two children, and Ralph has become a Cardinal of the Holy See. One has the family and children she longed for, one has the teaching post he has been striving for, but they have lost the most cherished love. However, Meggie is also lucky. Although she can’t combine with Ralph by law, they have never separated emotionally.
3.3 The Second Generation Women of the Cleary Family

Starting from Justine, the third generation female of Cleary family, independent modern female consciousness comes into being with the development of society.

Justine is a thorn bird, but her longest and sharpest thorn is her brother, Diane. Unlike her grandmother or mother, Justine did not pursue a love she could not get in her whole life. She even plans not to marry. Just because she doesn’t want to get married with someone and then she gives up love. Because she is not the child that Meggie expected, she has been ignored by Meggie since she was born. Therefore, Justine has shown her independence from an early age. She shows a strong sense of possessiveness and responsibility in Dane, as if Dane only belongs to her. Even when she is an adult, she and Dane always maintain this close relationship. However, just as God did not show mercy on Fiona and Meggie, God also mercilessly deprives Justine of her love Dane.[4]

Dane’s death certainly gives Justin a heavy blow, which makes her fall into infinite pain and self reproach. However Dane’s death awakens Justin’s true feeling and leads her to a healthy emotional path. Dane is her last song, which is also sad and pathetic. Justin is a different kind of thorn bird. After the end of the song, the lonely and indifferent Justin is exhausted. But Justine finally came out of the shadow of Dane, accepted another important man in her life, Rainer, and found her happiness on the painful cliff.

4. Conclusion

With the development of society, women’s consciousness is becoming more and more mature and women are becoming more and more independent. After World War II, with Australia’s complete political and economic independence, the whole national consciousness has gradually formed, which also plays an important role in the development of personal consciousness.[5] With the process of economic internationalization, Justin has got achievements that the previous two generations could not achieve, including successful career and happy family. From Justin’s success, it can be concluded that the third generation of immigrant families, women’s awareness has finally developed.

_The Thorn Birds_ describes the growth story of three generations of women in the Cleary family, which can be interpreted as the mature development of Australian female consciousness. Through the exploration of the development of the three generations of female consciousness of the Cleary family, McCullough reappeared the development of female consciousness from the early colonial period of Australia to the modern society, thus composing a new song of women’s self-development and the development of women will continue in the future.

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