The Construction of Discourse Authority of the Silent Women—Reading *I Stand Here Ironing* From the Perspective of Feminist Narratology

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*I Stand Here Ironing* is Tillie Olsen’s first novel of her back to writing after several years’ silence. It reflects the real living condition of marginalized women through the description of a daughter by the mother’s memories. Based on Susan S. Lanser’s distinction of three modes of narrative voice in feminist narratology, this paper analyzes three narrative voices in this novel. Olsen employs multiple narrative voices in the novel in order to release the voice of the marginalized women in the silence, she destroys the male’s authority and constructs the discourse authority of silent, poor working-class women.

*Keywords*: feminist narratology, narrative voice, marginalized female, discourse authority

**Introduction**

Tillie Olsen, the beloved fiction writer, is self-effacing in person, “I haven’t published a lot of anything,” she said. And she is partly right. Her output has been relatively small, but she makes up for that in quality. She is famous for the short-story collection *Tell Me a Riddle*, few writers have got such wide respect based on such a small body of published works. She was born in 1913 in Omaha, Nebraska. She showed early promise as a writer-part of what became her novel, *Yonnondio*, was published in 1934. But she spent much of her life working full-time jobs and raising four children. In 1955, Olsen won a Wallace Stegner Fellowship at Stanford University, which allowed her to do her first sustained writing in twenty years. She published *Tell Me a Riddle* when she was fifty. That book includes the much anthologized *I Stand Here Ironing, O, Yes, Hey Sailor, What Ship?* and *Tell Me a Riddle*. Her *Tell Me a Riddle* received the first prize in the 1961 O. Henry awards as the best story of the year. Most of her stories are anthologized, put into films and translated into 13 languages.

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Literature Review Abroad and in China

Foreign study of Olsen began in the 1960s, along with the development of the feminist movement in the United States, her works contained the female consciousness was showing up. To the 70s, feminist constantly explored the female writers ignored by the history, Olsen’s works could be published in this period. Because her works could truly reproduce the voices of women in the left-wing cultural movement in the United States, she attracted much attention. Since the 70s, the study of Olsen focused primarily on feminism, the left-wing culture, ethnic minorities.

Feminism research began in the early 70s, A. B. McElhinney and Annie Gottlibb from the earliest women and maternal role analyzed Olsen’s work, explored the author’s feminist thought system. In 1987, Elaine Neil Orr in the book *Tillie Olsen and a Feminist Spiritual Vision*, by analyzing the characters in the *Tell Me a Riddle* and *Yonnondio* from the view of gender, race, class, under the constraints of silence and resist, pointed out that the creation inspiration of Olsen owing to her strong female consciousness. In 2009, Panthea Reidde wrote a book *Tillie Olsen: One Woman Many Riddles*, specifically discussed Olsen’s female image, and discovered the author’s features of feminism.

To the nineties of the 20th century, the left-wing cultural studies have been widely concerned. Deborah Rosenfelt and Erika Duncan have viewpoint of Olsen’s political movement and the experience of the communist party, positioning “socialism” of his work. In 1981, Deborah, in his paper “From the Thirties: Tillie Olsen and the Radical Tradition”, made a conclusion that the women’s status was very low in Olsen’s novels, and he contributed it to Olsen’s theory of communism.


To sum up, after discussing the literature review about Olsen and her works, we can find that problems about studying her works are still existing even though we had made some achievements, such as lacking of the rendering of her works in China, the research view is very single, and the depth and breath of the study are far from enough. As for Olsen’s short stories, *I Stand Here Ironing* has a version, but a few scholars have studied this story, some just learned the growth and development of her daughter Emily, while this paper will study the story from the perspective of feminist narratology, especially the three modes of narrative voices in the theory. It gives us a new way to interpret the story and the author, the silent and marginalized women struggle for building their discourse authorities.
**Feminist Narratology**

Feminist narratology is the most influential branch of postmodern narratology and has enjoyed a history of development of about three decades in the West. As it is implied by the name, feminist narratology combines the investigation of narrative form with gender politics. Feminist narratology began in the mid-1980s, as its name suggests, within the domain of narratology. Initiated by American scholar Susan Lanser, feminist narratology appeared in 1980s under the development of interdisciplinary study. Her *The Narrative Act: Point of View in Prose Fiction* was published in 1981, in which she took the lead in breaking the shackle of classical narratology and integrating the research of narrative forms with feminist criticism. In 1986, Susan Lanser proposed joining the analytical structuralist narratology with the feminism as a way. The two essential works on feminist narratology are *Toward a Feminist Narratology* (1986) and *Fiction of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (1992).

In China, Professor Shen Dan has made great contribution to bring in feminist narratology. She has delivered successively “Narrative and Gender Politics: On Feminist Narratology” and “Discourse Structure and Gender Politics: On Discourse of Feminist Narratology” in 2004 to present the development of feminist narratology, the differences between feminist narratology and classical narratology as well as feminist criticism, and also the major approaches to do research on in the light of feminist narratology. Feminist narratology aims at fighting for the equality between the two opposite genders and changing the marginal position of women writers. The main intention is to probe into narrative strategies and structural features in order to do research on gender politics under the social and historical context.

In *Fictions of Authority*, Susan Lanser picks up a mutual term “voice” to join feminist criticism and classical narratology together, then focuses on the three kinds of narrative voice, namely authorial voice, personal voice and communal voice, and associates technical exploration of narrative voice with gender politics in feminism to achieve a certain kind of narrative authority.

From the explanation above, feminist narrative voice, point of view (focalization) and free indirect discourses are the major approaches in terms of feminist narratology, and have become a way of identity and power for the silenced women through narrative discourse. Through precise analysis, the paper intends to illustrate how Tillie Olsen successfully deploys the narrative voices to construct the female or mothers’ narrative authority.

**Narrative Voice in Feminist Narratology**

For feminist narratology, point of view (focalization) and narrative voice are the two elementary narratological approaches. The term of point of view solves the problem who sees. Then in the following discussion, narrative voice will be examined.

Chatman argues: point of view means the perspective in terms of which the expression is made. Voice, refers to “the speech or other overt means through which events and existences are communicated to the audience” (Chatmen, 1987, p. 153). Obviously, voice is a notable word for the feminist, and then the basic question about voice is that “who tells the story”, Chatman classifies “overt” and “covert” narrators depending on the presence of a narrator in the text. An overt narrator is one who refers to him/herself in the first person, one who directly or indirectly addresses the narratee, who offers reader-friendly exposition whenever it is needed. A
covert narrator, in contrast, is one who exhibits none of the features of overtness listed above: specifically, he/she is one who neither refers to him or herself nor addresses any narratees, who has a more or less neutral voice and style, who is sexually indeterminate, who does not provide exposition even when it is urgently needed. “Covert narration can be most easily achieved by letting the action be seen through the eyes of an internal focalizer” (Chatman, 1978, p. 113).

Susan Lanser in Fictions of Authority asserts, “voice is an equally crucial though more term in narrative poetics, it designates tellers, as clear from both authors and non-narrating characters-of narrative” (Lanser, 1992, p. 4). Lanser revises voice in the structuralist theory, and according to her, narrative voice is a vital term that mediates nicely between narrative and feminist theory. She divides the voice into: authorial voice, personal voice and communal voice, and we will discuss the three modes of narrative voices in I Stand Here Ironing. Authorial voice represents a kind of narratology which is extradiagnostic-heterodigetic and the narrator’s ego potentially exists. This narrative voice demonstrates its identity in the phallocentric society, the narrators who intentionally tell their own stories. Personal voice may be public or private, but they belong to autodigetic narrators who self-consciously tell their own stories. Communal voice stands for a common definable community or the various voices in the assemblage. Narrative voice is produced under the social, economic, and literary conditions, which stands at the intersection. Through analyzing these three modes of voice, Lanser makes the contribution to the structuralist poetics and the term, voice is used both by feminist and by narratologists.

A Brief Introduction of I Standing Here Ironing

This novel seems to tell us a very simple story: a mother, standing at the ironing board, performing a routine task, responds mentally to a difficult question put to her by an unidentified teacher: “I wish you would manage the time to come in and talk with me about your daughter, I am sure you can help me understand her.” The mother is being asked for the very aid she may need in order to assist her daughter, and then the mother began to recall her daughter’s 19 years’ growth course.

Authorial Voice in I Standing Here Ironing

According to Lanser, authorial voice is a kind of heterodigetic, public and potentially self-referential narrative mode which is traditionally called third-person narration. In this narrative mode, the narrator does not participate in the fictional world but exists outside the novel. Consequently it possesses a privileged status among the three narrative forms and claims broader power of knowledge and judgment. By choosing the word “authorial”, Lanser gives explanation that “it is not to imply all ontological equivalence between narrator and author but to suggest that such a voice (re)produces the structural and functional situation of authorship” (Lanser, 1992, p. 16). The narrator stands on a kind of ontological level from the character, and is differentiated from the author. Hence the omniscient narrator is designed to present the reality objectively and the authorial voice that the narrator produces helps achieve the author’s authority.

Authorial Voice: The Voice of Olsen’s Life

At first, we knew Tillie Olsen is a Jewish American writer, this identity makes an important effect on Olsen’s works. As we know, the life conditions of Jewish American writers were not so good at that age, and
there are a lot of contents in the works of Jewish American writer concerning female living situation from the perspectives of gender, nationality and history change, among which the rich female living consciousness expresses Jewish female erosion, struggle and pursuit to the immigration life. It reflects that the Jewish American writers have a better design to the Jewish female with their own life self-consciousness and awakening consciousness. In *I Stand Here Ironing*, we can also find the strong living consciousness that Olsen conveyed to us. The mother and her daughter led a tough life during the Great Depression, they were abandoned by her husband and she was adopted by herself. However, the mother never gave up in the life, she found a job hashing at night so she could take care of her daughter in the days, she had a strong life-consciousness even though she faced a lot of difficulties, such as the bad economic conditions, the institutional and educational systems, the patriarchal ideologies.

Tillie Olsen, she is married and has raised four daughters in San Francisco, she once described out of deep personal experience that, for twenty years or so, she led what she calls the “the triple life” of mothering, housewifery and working full-time as a transcriber. However, Olsen still kept on writing, and her writing life was saved by a Stanford University creative writing fellowship in 1955 and a Ford grant in 1959. And then she got the O. Henry Award in 1961. She once said that women who write must continue to “voice the unvoiced.” After reading this novel, we would find that the mother in this novel has a similar life condition as Olsen. In *I Stand Here Ironing*, “Except that it would have made no difference if I had known. It was the only place there was. It was the only way we could be together, the only way I could hold a job” (paragraph 13). The mother had to work to support the family even she knew the condition of nursery was quite bad, she had no choice and helpless. Oppressed by the life and society, she chose to keep on going in her life, and she struggled for her voice to be heard by the whole society. Both of them are oppressed by the life and the society, their voice can not be heard. Thus the author, Olsen as a silent, marginalized female writer, she wants to build the discourse authority, and the voice of the mother in the novel is also the voice of the author.

In conclusion, Olsen expressed her own voice as a Jewish American female through the mother in the story, and she constructed the discourse authority of the silent and unvoiced women by the authorial voice.

**Personal Voice in *I Stand Here Ironing***

According to Lanser’s theory, personal voice refers to narrators who are self-consciously telling their own histories. She does not intend with this term to designate all. “Homodiegetic” or “first-person” narrative, that is, all those in which the voice that speaks is a participant in the fictional world—but only those Genette calls “autodiegetic” in which the “I” who tells the story is also the story’s protagonist (or an older version of the protagonist) (Lanser, 1992, p. 19). Autodiegetic, is a variety of homodiegetic type, which to some extent represents the strong degree of the homodiegetic which refers to when the narrator is the hero of his narrative (Genette, 1980, p. 245). A personal narrator claims only the validity of one person’s right to interpret her experience (Lanser, 1992, p. 19). Authorial voice and personal voice are mutually complementary. Since authorial narrator claims broad powers of knowledge and judgment, while personal narrator claims only the validity of one person’s right to interpret her experience, authorial narrative is understood as fictive and yet its

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1 This quotation indicates the corresponding paragraph in this novel, and the same to the following quotation.
voice is accorded a superior reliability, while personal narrative may pass for autobiography but the authority of its voice is always qualified (Lanser, 1992, pp. 19-20).

In *I Stand Here Ironing*, the narrator is “I”, that is the mother in the story. Olsen chose the unknown mother as the narrator, she just wanted to show how difficult the life is of an ordinary mother/woman at that age. It was rare in the literature history that female or woman was the narrator or the protagonist, that is to say, Olsen tried to deconstruct the male authority and build the female discourse authority by the mother’s narration. Personal voice in the story is the voice of the mother, with her narration, we can construct an image of the mother’s own development: her difficulties as a young mother alone with her daughter and her painful months of enforced separation from her daughter in the depression; her gradual and partial relaxation in response to a new husband and a new family as more children follow; her increasingly complex anxieties about her first child.

Life is hard for both the mother and the daughter, “I was nineteen. It was the pre-relief, pre-WPA world of the depression. I would start running as soon as I got off the streetcar, running up the stairs, the place smelling sour, and awake or asleep to startle awake, when she saw me she would break into a clogged weeping that could not be comforted, a weeping I can hear yet” (paragraph 9). Even though the cry was never to cease, the mother still showed her active resistance to her circumstances.

During the progress of Emily’s growth, both the mother and her daughter met a lot of troubles, but they never given up the hope to voice freely their inner thought and love. The mother tried her best, though sometimes in vain, to love and protect her daughter. “I let her be absent, though sometimes the illness was imaginary” (paragraph 38), because of the school was a worry to Emily, the mother changed her attitude to the school and her decision was also the resistance to the educational system at that time. “ I think I said once: why don’t you do something like this in the school amateur show?” (paragraph 46), stimulated and urged by her mother, Emily began to perform pantomime, and she received many happiness in the performance, meanwhile the relationship between mother and daughter changes subtly. Emily talked the happenings in school to make the mother laugh, “Why did you want me to come in at all? Why were you concerned? She will find her way” (paragraph 52), the mother now believed that everything would be OK in her daughter’s future life.

Through the mother’s narration, the personal voice in the story, Olsen successfully released the voice of this ordinary oppressed and poor working-class mothers.

**Communal Voice in *I Stand Here Ironing***

Communal voice is a term named by Lanser to indicate “a spectrum of practices that articulate either a collective voice or a collective of voices that share narrative authority” (Lanser, 1992, p. 21). But communal narration does not refer to the use of an authorial voice that resorts to an inclusive “we”, nor the divergent perspectives on the same events or the multiple narrations. It refers to “a practice in which narrative authority is invested in a definable community and textually inscribed either through multiple, mutually authorizing voices or through voice of a single individual who is manifestly authorized by a community” (Lanser, 1992, p. 21).

As we know, communal voice means either a collective voice or a collection of all kinds of voices that share narrative authority, in the *I Stand Here Ironing*, we could find these two kinds of voices are existing at the same time. The voice of the mother not only represents the personal and the authorial voice, but also the voice of a group of females living in the bottom class of the society, a group of marginalized females. At first, the mother
represents the helpless young mothers in the depression, they were inexperienced mothers and they abandoned by the males and life and the society are constraints for them. Through the mother’s narration, the voice of a group of the marginalized and silent females could be heard by the society.

“I nursed her. They feel that is important nowadays. I nursed all with the fierce rigidity of first motherhood, I did like the books then said” (paragraph 6). Here the 19 years old mother failed to receive any material or mental aid, the only thing she could do is follow “they” or the book—that means the society or the authority. “She was two. Old enough for nursery school they said” (paragraph 12). Lacking any people or government help, at the suggestion of the anonymous “they”, the mother sent her daughter to the nursery though she knew it was a bad place to her daughter, she had no choice but to follow “they”—the society and the standard. Moreover, “They persuaded me at the clinic to send her away to convalescent home in the country” (paragraph 26), after Emily’s episode with the measles, “they” appeared again, whenever the mother was to make a decision, the anonymous “they” were to preach, to chide, to give multivocal views. In the story, the voices of institutional authority pervaded the lives of the mother, and the poor working-class females.

Combining these two kinds of communal voices together and the voice of the anonymous “they” has an advantage and occupies the whole society, then the author, Olsen wanted to break this control through the voice of the mother, which stands for a group of the ordinary marginalized and working-class females. What is more, Olsen tried to construct the discourse authority for that group of females by the communal voice.

Conclusion

As the author, Olsen seems to defend the established social order, in fact, she challenges the patriarchal society. She always appeals to females to speak for themselves, and we know the protagonists in Olsen’s works are usually the silent, marginalized, working-class females. They revolt gender discrimination, deconstruct male discourses and build their own discourse authorities.

In the Olsen’s work I Stand Here Ironing, the narrator is an unknown mother with the image of silence, helpless and she is longing for voice her own voice freely. While we know that, the females, especially the mothers in the Great Depression, did not have the choice to express their voices and inner thoughts because of the pressure from the marriage and society and life. In this novel, though silenced by the life circumstances, the mother had never given up the hope to voice freely her inner thoughts and love. And in the end, with the growth of her daughter, the mother became more independent, and she finally voiced herself loudly, and she encouraged her daughter to be brave to be herself and keep the discourse, “never be the dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron”.

This paper makes an attempt to analyze the novel from the feminist narratology. Based on Susan S. Lanser’s distinction of three modes of narrative voice in feminist narratology, Olsen combined the three modes of voice together to give her own voice that she tried her best to give voice to the unvoiced silent women who were still distant from the world of literature as well as in their actual lives. Moreover, Olsen tried to deconstruct the males discourse authority and release the voice. She achieved the discourse authority of the marginalized, poor working-class women.
References


