

## An Analysis of Female Self-realization in under the Tuscan Sun from the Perspective of Feminism

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### Abstract

Frances Mayes is one of the most known female writers in twentieth-century American literary world. *Under the Tuscan Sun* written by Frances Mayes is a well-received one that documents her travel in Italy. The detailed description of natural landscape and careful examination of female self-realization in this work are insightful and impressive. This paper mainly analyzes female self-realization of the figure in *Under the Tuscan Sun* from the perspective of feminism. It reinterprets the cause, process and achievement of female self-realization based on gender equality, social liberty and self-independence which are advocated by feminism. This paper tends to gain new understandings of self-realization of females' value.

### Keywords

**Under the Tuscan Sun; Feminism; Social value; Self-realization.**

### 1. Introduction

Frances Mayes is one of the most known female writers in twentieth-century American literary world. She is considered as a prolific writer since she has created many poetry in her life including *Climbing Aconcagua* in 1977, *Sunday in Another Country* in the same year, later on she publishes *After Such Pleasure* and *The Arts of Fires* etc.

Mayes also publishes many great novels, such as *Bella Tuscany*, *Toujours Provence*, *The Tuscan Sun Cookbook* and *The Discovery of Poetry* when living in Tuscany. Two years after the publishing of *Under the Tuscan Sun*, it becomes No.1 on the best seller list of *New York Times* and shapes the model of ideal lifestyle. It can be noted that Mayes is a very embracing person who would like to discover different cuisines, cultures and history of various nations. She has a passionate heart towards art and architecture which has been mentioned in her works and those encountering in her travel have also provided inspiration for her.

Mayes lives in a derelict villa in the rural part of Cortona of Tuscany which is a region in Italy in order to release the pressure of life. She spends most of her time in Tuscany where he can get close to nature. Her motivation of writing novels originates from her life experience and nature. Later, during the journey, she does not know anyone in the town and spends all the money she has to buy this home and lives by herself. But through enriching her life experiences and increasing the number of her friends she eventually finds who she is and what she really desires in life.

This paper analyzes female self-realization in *Under the Tuscan Sun* from the perspective of feminism. It consists of five parts. Chapter One is introduction. It gives a brief introduction to Frances Mayes, including her life experiences, writing styles and achievements in literature. Chapter Two is literature review of female self-realization in *Under the Tuscan Sun*. Previous studies on this work can be divided into two kinds of perspectives: the ecologism and the aestheticism. Chapter Three gives an overview of feminism which is a major social theory and has many perspectives to look into the gender relationship. Chapter Four focuses on analyzing how the character achieved self-realization from the feminism perspective. It is analyzed through the cause, process and achievement respectively. Chapter Five is conclusion. It summarizes the core opinions about this thesis. From perspective of feminism, this thesis aims to gain new understandings of female self-realization in *Under the Tuscan Sun*.

## 2. Literature Review of Analysis of Under the Tuscan Sun

The topics dominating Mayes' work always include nature, harmony and life. In general, it's evident that many people focus on nature and life, when looking into *Under the Tuscan Sun*. From their thoughts, there are two perspectives: the ecologism and the aestheticism.

From perspective of ecologism, *Under the Tuscan Sun* includes wonderful travel notes, which shows the natural beauty of Tuscany. Ecologism (ecological center) is different from an ideological doctrine anthropocentric, which considers respecting human nature, to seek their own survival and development at the same time. "This book is a gift dedicated to the sun and dedicated to the people who love the life"(Swapna, 2001:12). "You will discover original nature as you never see before, and the equally original people for whom timeless nature, ancient heritage and modern lifestyle coexist in harmony" (Butler, 2001:98). These comments are linked with the beauty of these people in a friendly and harmonious life. This perspective follows the natural laws of ecology and ecological rules, achieving the equality between human society and the natural environment. This novel links human and nature closely from the perspective of ecologism, constituting a harmony and balanced picture.

Most people analyze *Under the Tuscan Sun* in the aesthetic image from perspective of aestheticism, such as sunflower, water, dove, house, snakes and etc. "Tuscany, the closest place to heaven on earth"(Frances Mayes, 1997:25). From this view, these images strengthen brave persistence, optimism and tireless efforts of the new figure of women. In fact, a mediate link of aesthetic practical image has to undertake a process from the formation of the common aesthetic consciousness to the actual model of beauty. Some comments point out that sunflower, metaphor of the sun flower, is a symbol of showing calm, strong, self image of women. This unique aesthetic feature is a major feature in the performance of work. Flowers, ancient buildings, peaceful countryside, leisure life and rich food lead to the reader's emotional resonance which jointly creates a harmonious atmosphere of aesthetic effect. *Under the Tuscan Sun* is not only about the romance encountering in the Mediterranean country Italy, the ups and downs in the Journey of Frances has indicated the path to self-fulfillment as well. However, this perspective pays much attention to those aesthetic images, connections between human and nature are neglected.

Previous researches are hardly conducted on the feminism concept in the *Under the Tuscan Sun*. Mostly researches focus on the life journey of a woman. According to studies in the past about the development feminism from a social point of view, stating from the feminism concept is necessary and it is the inevitable result of social revolution, since women are becoming more aware of their own rights and determination to fight for their right is strengthened. Actually, through Mayes' journey, she witnesses the universal truth that females should always be aware of realizing their own living.

## 3. An Overview of Feminism

### 3.1 The Definition of Feminism

Feminism theory, which emerges from feminist movements, aims to understand the nature of gender inequality by examining women social roles and living experiences. Feminism is a range of political movements, ideologies, and social movements that share a common goal: to define, establish, and achieve equal political, economic, personal, and social rights for women. This includes seeking to establish equal opportunities for women in the education and employment. Feminists typically advocate or support the rights and equality of women. "It is seen that there are various campaigns and activities around the world to advocate the rights of women, such as the right to vote, to hold public office, to work, to receive equal wage, to require education and to have property" (Evernden, 1999:223). Moreover, it also supports women to have equal rights in the marriage, to enjoy maternity leaving at work.

Feminism begins to own its position mainly in France in the 1890s. With the development of Feminism, it finds its popularity among the whole western world. Then there are more feminist campaigns to protect more rights of women, and those movements are considered as major stimulus for some important historical social changes regarding the rights of women. Later on, it has emerged

the feminist theory which is derived from feminist movement around the world. It should be noted that the theory mainly adopted to fully interpret the essence of gender equality, and it can be achieved through by analyzing the social role of woman and experience in this world. In the twenty-first century, feminism continues to extend beyond the complexities of western society and even beyond strict gender notions of “female”.

### 3.2 The Features of Feminism

Feminist aims to understand gender inequality and focuses on gender politics, power relations, and sexuality. While providing a critique of these social and political relations, much of feminist theory also focuses on the promotion of women’s rights and interests. Themes explored in feminist theory include discrimination, stereotyping, objectification (especially sexual objectification), oppression, and patriarchy.

Feminism lays stress on gender equality and affirms female value. To sum up, gender equality means the equality of value, right, dignity, opportunity and obligation existing in the field of politics, economy, culture, society and family.

Feminism also advocates the rights of women in social status and the life, and further stresses that women have the right of inner freedom including the enrichment of mind, the growth of wisdom and the motivation of creativity.

Feminism is in separated from independent economic view and professional view. Female self-independence has rich connotation which means female should have the consciousness of independent personality and independent economic foundation.

## 4. Female Self-realization in Under the Tuscan Sun from Perspective of Feminism

### 4.1 The Cause of Female Self-realization in Under the Tuscan Sun

In *under the Tuscan Sun*, Mayes presents the image of women losing marriage and possessions. Originally, her experiences reflect her despairing thought and ruin her. Then, she sees that all married women are trapped into marriage, devoting themselves to men and becoming the victims of their husbands. It’s obvious that the situation of women is closely related to the social environment in which they live. After accepting her friend Patti’s advice, Mayes has a trip to Italy. When she arrives in Italy, she is amazed by the nice scenery in Tuscany and she buys a nearly damaged villa at impulse. From then she realizes the differences between American and Italy in society and culture.

Except for the influence of society and culture, the entire process for Mayes to move her house also indicated the personal recovery from her tragic experience in the past. The cause of self- realization for Frances in this novel can be analyzed through two aspects including external causes and internal causes.

#### 4.1.1 External Cause of Society and Culture

Mayes encounters different persons with various characters in the village in process of rebuilding the villa. Different countries create different cultures, so different cultures influence female status and mind. The female protagonist faces emotional crossroad where she has to face the sad experience to divorce. Mayes hopes to seek for the comfort and recovery through traveling to Italy. That is to say that not only in body, but also in mind America and Italy both bring her totally different experiences.

In America, although more and more women take part in almost every political, economic, cultural and social area due to the civil rights movements and the female continuous struggle for equality and liberty. It seems that female status is greatly improved. In fact, in this patriarchal society of America, female mind and action are still controlled and restrained. “Mayes experiences the most miserable period of her time when she is divorced with her husband, and even though it is her husband who cheated on her she still lost her beloved house. She accepts the truth because her thought has been naturalized and institutionalized by this patriarchal society and male-dominated consciousness” (Frances Mayes,1997:45). However, the society of Italy is distinct from that of America. Mayes

describes Tuscan as an energetic and free city where everyone enjoys their lifestyle. "Italy is not just a geographical concept, but also represents a vision and culture" (Frances Mayes, 1997:78). Many descriptions of natural views and humanistic feelings attract me most. All of these are the society of Italy in miniature. This trip to Italy is seen as a journey to look for self-recovery through different countries. This process shows how the protagonist seeks for her conventional gender role and expectation from the society so that she can have a better understanding of her female identity.

In the nineteenth century, American culture promotes to develop a kind of value that women should obey the moral code and play an important role of mother and wife. Although this situation is improved gradually, women have more rights in education and profession. They are still under huge pressure from this society. Mayes' career is in a situation of bottleneck during her divorce. Mayes has to face all the critics and judgment from social norms and cultural tradition that divorce will be considered a stigma although it is the faults of her husband. However, Italian culture carries a bright and hopeful atmosphere. Florence, the capital Tuscan, is the center of the Renaissance. Romance, enthusiasm, free and charm from Italian reveal in Tuscan which adds more glory to this special and classical city. Not only the lower class but also female can find their own value and identify there. "During her travel to Italy, she has experienced the local culture and values which make she fall in love with that country and later on she decided to stay in Italy" (Abbott, 1996:56). Mayes is gradually immersed in exotic culture and feels the freedom and liberty.

#### 4.1.2 Internal Cause of Self-reflection

Except for the influence of society and culture, there are also other matters which further strengthened Mayes' determination of self-realization. In *Under the Tuscan Sun* Mayes has to suffer from the sorrow and pressure in the society. She is also not aware of the social oppression and disregard for her. Betrayal from husband, failure of marriage, loss of property and tough in career all torture her. She even thinks of these experiences as the fate. When Mayes arrives in Italy, she falls in love with a man but later on finds out the infidelity of the man as well. It can be seen all of those experience and encountering of Frances have made her realized the unequal treatment and prejudice towards women even though they are playing their role properly. The society and cultural convention impose too many rules on the women so that they are unable to seek for true happiness. Fundamentally, most of these misfortunes have a close relationship with the lack of self-awareness of women. Female self-awareness is the focus of female herself and female has a unique understanding of the independence and value. The lack of self-awareness is the result of the suppression of female self-awareness. The character of obedience forms female mindset and lifestyle. However, with the change of cultural environment, female thoughts begin to change and they begin to think about life. From then, their self-awareness is awakening. In the novel, unfamiliar surroundings inspire Mayes' thinking about life and fate. Facing the external pressure from the society she is in deep desire to find herself where she can enjoy freedom. Mayes struggles to acquire her own identity. Her self-reflection from internal mind and heart is derived from her longing for her own identity.

During the journey to Italy, Mayes is not able to forget her sad past and always fails to do everything at first. She begins to deny herself. In the novel, the lawyer of Mayes plays a role of external pressure for her. He is very egotistical and is very unsympathetic towards the experience of Frances. Some of the views from others lead to her ignorance of self-value. The definition of female in traditional culture is mostly consistent. Most women take on the responsibility as wives and mothers. They seldom have their own place independently in any field in the society. That is to say, this society doesn't give women a chance to realize their values. In the novel, it has a writer who grudges on Mayes due to a bad review she has given to his book. The writer laughs at her divorce and the bottleneck of her career. Obviously, Mayes denies her self-value. She starts to ask herself of the questions who she is and what she really wants to be in life.

## 4.2 The Process of Female Self-realization in Under the Tuscan Sun

### 4.2.1 The Discovery of Social Value

In male dominated society, a female's value is often reflected by the male she relates to. Women lack education and experience. Their living space is extremely narrow, which makes their mind constrained. So the opportunity of showing themselves and the ability of realizing their values are also suppressed. For female, the change of living space affects the discovery of social value. The new life of Mayes after her divorce started from her arrival in Italy, she does not know what she was doing in this place. And later on she gets involved in rebuilding an old and damaged house. In *A Room of One's Own*, in male society, Virginia Woolf emphasizes that women with a room belonging to their own represents their pursuit of freedom and desire under male oppression. As it is mentioned in her statement, "a sense of the place is entirely a matter of smell and instinct". Mayes said, "I am just very interested in the idea of a house as a metaphor for the way one lives. Jung says when you dream about a house you are dreaming about the body in extension I dream about a house a lot" (Doing Dewey, 2014:69). Moreover, in the novel that since Mayes is always on the move which gives her a sense of insecurity, therefore she has a strong attachment towards houses. She believes house is a tool for human soul and she also believes that the houses are important to us. Born in the South, she holds strong beliefs that place is the fate for someone as well, where you are is who you are. The identity of the individual is closely related to the identity of the house as well. It can be observed that the quest of Frances for her social value is closely attached to her strong sense of belonging to a place through her attachment to Italy.

Over time, Mayes gradually becomes aware of the existence of social value. When she is in America, she can't accept all of the bad news. Her friend Patti tells her that she needs time to forget her unfortunate experiences. Mayes is in difficult process of forgetting and forgiving. Then she feels depressed, frustrated, and lost. Lastly, she gets self-examination, self-motivation and self-independence. She spends nearly three years to restart her life. Although this process spends much time, Mayes succeeds to get out of trouble. After accepting Patti's advice, she tries to enjoy the sunshine, the scenery, the culture, the food and the people in Tuscany. She does not know anyone in the town and spends all the money buying this home and lives by herself. But it is through buying and living in this house that she eventually finds what she really desires and how realizes her social value in life. Once tested by the time, all good results will come out.

Without friends' help, Mayes doesn't achieve her social value. She starts her trip to Rome where she met Marcello who introduced Postiano to her. They have certain feelings to each other and she starts to think if he is the next lover of her life. This encountering enables her to understand that she still has the passion to seek for herself. She feels very content as long as she has people around her to care about her. "At this point, Mayes felt the inner fulfillment and she completed the things she always wanted to do in life. She never planned for this trip but she later realized happiness is at her door for a long time" (Plumwood, 1997:56). When she rebuilds her old house, she encounters different characters. Mayes makes friend with Katherine who is an English woman at her middle age. Katherine always encourages her to start her new life and forget about the past. Katherine is an important figure in the novel who has a major impact on Frances, she tells her that no matter what happens, it is important to keep your childish innocence. From this process of seeking for a suitable place to stay and eventually settling down in this lovely town, she finds out her true value in the society. She is not only a married woman who takes care of family, she has a multiple role here in Tuscan where she is an independent female. It helps her understand that there are more things she can do than simply remorse on her sad past, and being engaged in social activity makes Mayes have more enjoyment.

### 4.2.2 The Discovery of Self Belief

Everyone needs a strong belief in his mind. In the novel, Katherine says, Between Austria and Italy, there is a section of the Alps called the Semmering. It is an impossibly steep, very high part of the mountains. They built a train track over these Alps to connect Venice and Vienna. They built these

tracks before there was a train in existence that could make a trip. They built in because they knew someday the train would come. Mayes is touched by these words. When facing frustration, we should change our mind and strengthen our belief. If she comes to Tuscany in order to escape from the past, it's better to think her action as a change in order to forget the past. This change is not to deny her past, but to awaken her belief.

“When Mayes lives in Tuscan, she experiences various activities such as doing housework, dreaming in her house, cooking with people, and traveling around the area. All of those engaging activities provide something new and fresh in her life ” (Frances Mayes,1997:133). “The moment when she sees the house, she is confident that it will be an important part of her seeking for new identity and will assist her finding out her own belief. In this town of Italy, she finds out things that it can provide her with positive energy, she used to be doing housework all day long in her old home San Francisco and that does not bring her happiness and sense of satisfaction” (Yung-yu, 2013:23). There are more important things for her to do in life such as traveling, preparing her class instead of being usually very busy at work and housework. In this process she falls in love with the house and the land. The house allows Frances to dream in peace and this is what exactly she is looking for in life. “She recalled that when she was young, she usually sits on the window and stares at the backyard. Her experience while she was a child deeply impacts her in that she is always longing for a place which offers her freedom” (Frances Mayes,1997:145). Therefore, it has long been in the mind of her that the place is related to the belief of the person living inside, this kind of sentiment also stimulated the house seeking of Frances in Italy.

In Tuscan Mayes gets away from the hustle and bustle of San Francisco and feel free to dream in this peaceful environment. She can get close to nature and indulge herself in the healing power and she is able to forge a new belief in this therapeutic process. Besides the natural beauty, she claims that cooking is another instrument for the understanding of human soul. She is very pleasant every time she tries to prepare the menu before going for shopping. Cooking becomes a delight in her life and brings her a great amount of enjoyment to have authentic living method. She finds out the patience, courage as well as resilience she has inside herself even after her heart is broken by various incidents in her life. Through both material and spiritual satisfaction Mayes eventually finds her self-belief.

### **4.3 The Achievement of Female Self-realization in Under the Tuscan Sun**

#### **4.3.1 The Right of Freedom**

The pursuit of freedom for Mayes is derived from simplicity in life. She feels the life through the renovation of her dream house where she felt so at home. Living in Tuscan she is able to put efforts in her own farmland and harvest her own olive oil as well as vegetables. She can also invite her friends over to cook for delicious meal which provides her with the utmost feeling of freedom. Moreover, the traveling experience makes her feel her own freedom in this world. Traveling enables her to broaden her intellectual horizon and obtained the spiritual consummation with the local culture. She starts the trip from the historical place of Cortona and finishes at the wildest Tuscan where she settles down. “She found out that ancient tombs which are still unearthed, and the remains of Romans, the churches, the theatres, the museums, the small cafes etc. She was shocked by the inspiring wonder and felt the power of the past” (Alida, 2010:132). Mayes experiences her soul attached to the nature. Working on the farmland enables her to realize the significance of living which is the freedom she can have in life.

In this small town, she feels the fusion of past and present, and it is timeless. She enjoys the clothing, the flower, the trees and she believes that this is one of the most civilized towns in the world. She learns from Italian that the means of life is authentic living. Her journey is very beneficial for her to rebuild her own identity. She is very interested in discovering the past history and the daily activities of people in Tuscan, through communication with local residents. She can dream in her house in peace, plant grass and harvest on the farmland, cook her enjoyed meals and travel around to experience the local life. Mayes is so immersed in the local way of life and she can go native to feel very much at home. It is through going natural and being simple that Frances identified the eventual happiness and pleasure.

### 4.3.2 The Right of Equality

When Mayes is in San Francisco, Frances has a double roles to play as both a professor in the university and a wife taking care of the own family. The dual pressure on her makes her feel a lot of pressure in life. Even though it is her husband who eventually cheated on her and it is Frances who lost her property during the divorce. The society still has certain prejudice towards Frances as a divorced woman. "She feels the unfair treatment imposed on woman in this world and females have to take the responsibility despite it is the male who makes the mistake"(Frances Mayes,1997:145).

It is in Tuscan, the small town in Italy that Mayes feels the simplicity of life, people don't have so much judgment and prejudice. Everyone there has the right for equality to enjoy their own life. Women can build house, own their farmland and harvest on the field. Women can also get close to nature to enjoy the freedom outside family matters. She feels women can enjoy the same life as men. She enjoys cooking for friends, traveling to discover the past and present, obtaining authentic living method etc. The pursuit of equality in the novel forms a sharp contrast with the beginning when the protagonist suffered from a lot of inequality from marriage and the society. Therefore, from this work it provides enlightenment for people to realize the importance of rights to seek for equality in life. This novel calls on female to fight for their rights and equality in gender, culture, profession and society.

## 5. Conclusion

*Under the Tuscan Sun* can be seen as a masterpiece of Frances Mayes. It is a novel which shows a strong sense of feminism. There is no doubt that it is related to the personal experience of her. Hurt by her husband and the sad divorce, she is disappointed. It is through this accidental trip to Italy that she eventually found her authentic living between wilderness and civilization. All of these influence on her work.

Previous studies on *Under the Tuscan Sun* are from different perspectives and have their own conclusions. From perspective of feminism, the female self-realization in this novel should be highlighted. This novel includes not just wonderful travel notes without cultural sense or aesthetic images without connections between nature and human. It also includes female-realization that female seek for gender equality, social liberty and self-independence.

In *Under the Tuscan Sun*, Frances Mayes reflects the real life experience of herself in understanding the role of women in society and family. She has pressure from the society and culture, even though she takes all the responsibility as a female, the society still treats her unfairly. The lack of self-awareness and ignorance of self-value make her lost. Through the journey, she gets close to natural scenery, enjoys interacting with the local people, the delight and refreshing experience. She regains her confidence. She struggles to acquire her own identity and is in deep desire to fight for her own rights.

The whole process of female self-realization shows that women should take the courage to fight for their own rights, the rights to pursue for gender equality, the rights to seek for freedom as well as the right to enjoy independence. In any fields of society, women have their chance to challenge themselves. In politics, culture, profession, gender and family, they have the same rights as male. From America to Tuscan, this trip helps Mayes find her true self-belief and refine her own identity. She has a fresh life to start and she does not feel miserable by her past anymore. She eventually gets her ideal house where she can have a peaceful dream and live an authentic life, and this enables her to acquire true self-realization and moves forward from the bitter past. Her experiences encourage every female that they do not need to bear the prejudice of society, just to seize their rights, to accept every challenges, to continue the struggle for their freedom and equality.

Feminism provides a new perspective to look into female self-realization in *Under the Tuscan Sun*. It can find that the strong influence of feminism on Mayes work. Even though this thesis has conducted detailed analysis on the life development of protagonist during her trip to Italy and how she achieves

self-actualization during this process, it still requires further research to be conducted so as to reveal the path of feminism.

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