

Original Paper

Hesitating, Lost, Reborn: Analysis of Female Images on “*When We Were Orphans*”

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Abstract

“When We Were Orphans” is a novel written by Ishiguro Kazuo, winner of the 2017 Nobel Prize in Literature. In the novel, Banksy’s mother Diana, his girlfriend Sarah, and his adopted daughter Jennifer are representatives of different female types. Based on feminist literary criticism, this article interprets figures of the three females with distinct personalities and reveals the inevitability of their fates.

Keywords

female images, When We Were Orphans, feminist literary criticism

1. Introduction

In the novel “*When We Were Orphans*”, Banks, a British teenager, lives with his parents in Shanghai Concession and returns to England due to the mysterious disappearance of his parents. Years later, Banks has become a well-known detective in British high-class society, but he always has a mystery about his parents’ whereabouts. In order to untie this knot, he returned to Shanghai and launched an investigation in the midst of today’s war and memories of yesterday to find out the truth about his parents’ disappearance. So far, many scholars have analyzed the book “*When We Were Orphans*” from many aspects, such as Chen (n.d.) using this book as an example to analyze Ishiguro Kazuo’s narrative ethics to trigger readers thinking about the future fate, Song (n.d.) to analyze the protagonist’s exploration of childhood memories to reflect the humanistic care of history in Kazuo Ishiguro’s writing, and few scholars analyze the female images of this book from a feminist perspective. During the process of Banksy’s grow-up, his mother (Diana), girlfriend (Sarah) and adopted daughter (Jennifer) play an important role, this paper analyzes the characters of the three women in the novel from the perspective of feminist literary criticism, and explores the status of women in the social context of the time and the reasons for women’s tragic ending.

2. Banksy's Mother, Diana---Hesitating between Family and the Self

Diana is Banksy's mother, who has been missing her since returning to England from Shanghai as a child, and wants to return to Shanghai to find her and find out the truth about her disappearance. Throughout his upbringing, Banks always thought of his mother as having a different kind of beauty: "It is true that she looks elegant and dignified, slim, and even a little reserved and arrogant, but there is no lack of tenderness and virtue in her eyes that I will never forget" (Ishiguro, 2015). Most descriptions of Diana's personality traits in the text are expressed through Banksy's recollections: in Banksy's childhood memories, his mother would have daily meetings with some officials and talk to them and express her opinions and raise objections. However, no matter how Diana changed, she was still not accepted by society. After several years, when Banksy look up politic newspaper, he did not find any information about his mother, but a name of his mother's friend. It can be seen that the development of women's subjective consciousness is difficult, most women suffer invisible oppression in the patriarchal society, when traditional women become mothers, most of them choose to focus on the family rather than the career, when the dual roles of family and career conflict, women's work roles are often subordinated to the family, reflecting women's compromise and recognition of traditional concepts and values.

But Wollstonecraft, the central figure of feminism at the time, she believed that women's emancipation and motherhood were compatible, and that they could do well in their careers even if they become mothers (Li, 2021, p. 49). Early image of Diana was more of a career-oriented woman, although she did not have a fixed position, she devoted herself to the fight against opium. Compared to the wives of other officials, Diana showed the image of an independent individual with a sense of resistance. When Banksy's father was lost, Diana met a lot of base persons and she was treated by her friend. After that, she lost her belief and began to doubt her own. In the second half of the novel, Diana is willingly controlled by a male warlord for the sake of Banksy, even if she is mentally tortured by the warlord, and she is willing to become his "slave", she pins her hopes on Banksy's fantasy of a better life in the future, missing Banksy, hesitating in her family, and finally losing herself. From this, it is known that Diana has been in a passive state, she is unable to break free from the "shackles of a patriarchal society", enduring the pain of giving up self-esteem and freedom, and even if she has ambitions, she cannot get the respect she deserves, and this patriarchal thinking is the root cause of gender discrimination.

This story takes place in the middle of the 20th century, the feminist movement has entered the first wave, and the status of women has been significantly improved than before, but Diana is still not accepted by society, on the one hand, the old society was dominated by men, and women could not break the stereotypes of the world on their own, on the other hand, Diana herself was still trapped in the shackles of traditional women, hesitating between family and self, not realizing self-emancipation, and finally being suppressed by the patriarchal society and losing herself.

3. Banksy's Girlfriend, Sarah-Lost in Dependency

In *"When We Were Orphans"*, initial image of Sarah is described as "a woman who values herself." She is ambitious and cultured, but as the plot develops, Sarah gradually compromises with reality and eventually returns to an ordinary life. In the first three story plots, Ishiguro Kazuo highlights the character of Sarah Hemmings by the words of other characters, and Sarah is well known in high-class society. In Banksy's mind, he thinks that Sarah is beautiful and she has some unique personal highlights. Banks noticed that Sarah had a hint of sarcasm on her face when she talked to other men, which made Banks curiously interested in her. For some time afterward, Banks learns about Sarah's past through second-hand reports and tries to talk to her, but Sarah's cold and unforgiving attitude dampen his enthusiasm during the conversation.

Early in the story, Banks thinks Sarah is just an arrogant lady who wants to be in high-class society and has no one in her sights, but when Sarah and Banks meet each other again, Sarah's words make him reacquaint himself with this unique girl. Sarah thinks that city life restricts her personal freedom, she does not want to follow in the footsteps of many city girls, in the old society, "the orders of parents, the words of matchmakers", but Sarah is not willing to be at the mercy of others, she does not want to waste her life on useless men, she said that the reason for being in high society is that she wants to find outstanding men.

The gender concept of a patriarchal society is that boys should be trained to have a sense of rational citizenship, and at the same time girls should be trained to please men and have children for them, and this gender concept is fiercely criticized by the representative of feminism, Wollstonecraft, who advocated that both men and women should be educated rationally and that women's marriage and childbearing must be based on rational choice (Li, 2021, p. 75). Social background of gender inequality has bound Sarah, but her mind is more than that of most traditional women, trying to take marriage into her own hands. To a certain extent, Sarah has got rid of the shackles of the old society, and relied on female consciousness to find her own life. In this dimension, Sarah's determined and confident female figure has a sense and tendency to confront sex discrimination.

However, Sarah was not lucky in the later period, and she didn't get the respect she deserved in the marriage she chose. Through years of baptism, she chooses a man who thinks she is outstanding, but her husband belittles her in full view, "I love that people mistake my wife for a prostitute. That's why I go to places like tonight so often" (Ishiguro, 2015). When Sarah heard, she just smiled and said she was fine without anger. After her marriage, Sarah was a kind of distortion and transformation of Sir Cecil from his own aesthetic interests in a patriarchal society, and the stereotype was forever engraved on Sarah. In the beginning, Sarah would defend Sir Cecil, but after a while, Sarah realized the gap between her ideals and reality, she completely lost faith in Sir Cecil, and she finally realized that she could not fulfill her ambitions, but Sarah did not give up looking for someone to rely on, and she turned out to pin her hopes on Banksy, but she ended up living alone all her life.

After marriage, Sarah unconsciously forgot her "original self", lost herself in marriage, gave up her

emotional independence, tried to cater to her husband, voluntarily endured the pain of marriage, pinned her future on others, and finally became a “victim” of a patriarchal society. From a feminist point of view, Sarah has not really gotten rid of the gender “shackles”, and bound by male thoughts. Although Sarah has a female consciousness, she has been looking for a dependent object, and she has not worked hard to change her social status, thus becoming her husband’s “puppet”, in the relationship between the sexes, Sarah has not been given the right to speak and decide. Faced with this dilemma, Sarah, like most women, chose to escape rather than rebel, on the one hand, patriarchal ideas have permeated society, and women cannot change the status quo, and on the other hand, Sarah herself has not completely broken away from traditional female thinking, which ultimately leads to a tragic end.

Diana and Sarah have the same thing in that they both have non-traditional female ideas in the early stage, but Sarah’s obsession with dependence on others is not self-independence, Diana tends to be with family rather than be concentrated on herself, and neither of them could get rid of the shackles of women in the old society, internalize traditional ideas, and become “objects of materialization”. But Banksy’s adopted daughter, Jennifer, is different from them in that Jennifer is affirmed by the people around her and receives higher education from society, most importantly, she always insists on herself and lives for herself.

4. Banksy’s Adopted Daughter, Jennifer-Reborn in Restriction

Jennifer is Banksy’s adopted daughter, and in the process of spending time with Jennifer, Banks discovered that she was different: “To be honest, she does have a remarkable sense of poise, especially the ability to face life’s setbacks with smile” (Ishiguro, 2015). He adopted Jennifer, because they both had similar experiences, “a couple drowned in a shipwreck in Cornwall two years ago, leaving their daughter alone. The 10-year-old girl is currently living with her grandmother in Canada” (Ishiguro, 2015). Jennifer and Banksy were separated from their parents during their childhoods, but unlike Banksy, Jennifer has an optimistic outlook on things, believing that the girls have no malice when they encounter unequal treatment at school. Jennifer did not give up on herself after experiencing setbacks, but insisted on herself and treated others with courtesy, Jennifer was like young Diana, daring to be herself, but the two ended diametrically opposite.

Mary Wollstonecraft believes that the fundamental method to change the tragic end of women in society is education and guiding women to become independent with quality and thoughts is the primary task of family education (Zhao, 2023, p. 37). After reading the novel, it could learn that Jennifer inherited the inheritance of her parents, Banksy gave Jennifer more moral support, he let Jennifer receive a complete school education, and he try to help her adapt to the new school life, when Jennifer encountered difficulties, Banksy timely enlightened Jennifer and encouraged her to bravely face the truest thoughts in her heart, Banksy promised Jennifer that she would always be by her side, and after the two argued, Banksy would apologize to Jennifer. Banksy’s attitude towards women is different from that of other men in the novel, he gives Jennifer the respect she deserves to a certain

extent, and treats Jennifer in the same position, not as an “accessory”, and because of this, Jennifer is not bound by traditional society and bravely pursues her dreams.

In addition, Jennifer herself is different from the other two women in that Jennifer always insists on herself, face life's setbacks with smile, and adapts to the environment to her best strengths. When Jennifer interviewed servants, her independent personality made Banksy thought that “She has unusual quality, even if she was faced by sorrow” (Ishiguro, 2015). Similarly, Jennifer quickly adapted to her new surroundings when she went to her new school, laughing and telling Banksy that the dormitory was poor but without grumble. In the early storyline, Jennifer was innocent, and treated what happened in life with a warm heart, and even in the later storyline, after several years, she did not collapse due to difficulties but became more mature and stable. After Banksy returned to London, he lived with Jennifer in the countryside for a while, and in order to make Banksy happy, Jennifer took him to the church to enjoy the scenery even though the weather is cold, and told Banksy about her life in a relaxed and happy tone, Banksy believed that Jennifer had passed through a dark tunnel in her life and reached the other side. Although she doesn't know what the future holds, Jennifer will not accept defeat easily. At the end of the novel, the conversation between Jennifer and Banks is described, and it can be learned that Jennifer lives in a poor environment and she is talked about by the tenants because she is unmarried, but she does not give up enjoying life, and she has more courage to face unknown difficulties and setbacks. No matter what stage of growth Jennifer is in, she is able to enjoy the world with a positive and optimistic attitude, and no matter what environment she finds herself in, she is able to assert herself and live for herself.

5. Conclusion

As an international writer, Ishiguro Kazuo reflects on the pervasive gender issue in “*When We Were Orphans*”. The three women in the novel all have new-age femininity, Sarah has high aspirations, Diana devotes herself to her career, and Jennifer sticks with herself, but the three women have different ends, and the unequal treatment suffered by Sarah and Diana hints at the reasons for their tragic ends. On the one hand, the deep-rooted patriarchal ideology at that time was prevalent in society, and even if they had advanced ideas, they could not escape the predetermined outcome of women, and on the other hand, Diana and Sarah did not put their own development first, pinned their hopes on others, and failed to fight to the end, which was due to their own limitations. Ishiguro Kazuo's beautiful ending of Jennifer contrasts sharply with the tragic ending of the other two women, so that readers truly understand that feminism pursues “equality between men and women in all mankind”, and women's struggle against social inequality highlights the development and progress of society.

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