

Original Paper

An Exploration of Marginal Female Images in *The Sot-Weed Factor*

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Abstract

The Sot-Weed Factor by the American writer John Barth is a long historical novel with strong black humor. Parody, metafiction and other writing techniques are applied in the book, which has become one of the representative works of postmodern literature. The author deliberately shapes a group of marginalized female character images and tries to show the complexity of human nature and the absurdity of life in a special culture environment, expressing his deep sympathy for the tragic fate of vulnerable class. This paper attempts to analyze humanistic care and practical significance in the contemporary world through combing and summarizing female images and their awakening consciousness in the novel through post-modernism historical perspective.

Keywords

Female Image, Marginal Figures, *The Sot-Weed Factor*, Post-modernism, John Barth

1. Introduction

“Modernism saw a major advance in the status of women in society, but it was also a period of struggle and anti-struggle,” (Hanna, 2016) Julian Hanna, a famous literary critic wrote in her book *The Core Concepts of Modernist Literature* (2016). The outstanding American writer, John Barth’s *The Sot-Weed Factor* was exactly published in 1960, at the height of radical feminist movement. “Among my ambitions in writing *The Sot-Weed Factor* was to perpetrate a novel so thick that its title could be printed horizontally across its spine.” (Barth, 1984) There are many rebellious but meaningful characters in this great book, in which the female images have typical postmodern characteristics. Xiao Chengxiao, a Chinese domestic scholar also believed: “The 1960s was a special period in the history of the United States, during which the women’s liberation movement, the counterculture movement and other events happened as a real history.” (Xiao, 2021)

From the perspective of grand structure, *The Sot-Weed Factor* is a long masterpiece that Barth intentionally parodies Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones*. After careful and patient reading, the attentive readers can often feel the deep sympathy and implicit praise for the female characters in the lines.

“Malden itself was becoming every day more evidently a gambling house, tavern, brothel, and opium den.” (p. 294)

“Shifting with masterly nonchalance from tetrametric to pentametric verses, he next proceeded to flay the inhabitants of his poetical bailiwick--*that Shore where no good Sense is Found, But Conversation's lost, and Manners drown'd* . . .”(p. 295)

There is no doubt that Barth's delicate refinement of character language and ironic description of traditional historical figures make this novel have profound social value, which goes beyond the scope of parody in the purely literary sense. Zhuli, a Chinese feminism critic concludes: “The rise of the women's liberation movement has brought about the vigorous development of feminist literary criticism.” (Zhu, 2011, p. 7). And a western scholar, Mary Allen pointed out that Barth might be the person who integrated the feminine characteristics of the new age into literature. The images of marginal women in *The Sot-Weed Factor* were complex and multi-dimensional, and the sex workers focused on the contradictory unity of the physical slut and the spiritual lady. Barth satirized a wide variety of men and praised females' pure and kind inner character without deliberately mock any of their characters.

2. Carnal Figure: Women's Cries and Struggles

Although women's deviant behavior seems to be the external expression of their subjective active consciousness, the social environment is the decisive influencing factor. In the 17th century European and American society, most lower-class women existed as relatively weak individuals, living in strange primitive natural environments (Atlantic or Indian tribes in North America), in addition to the dependence of men almost no other way to survive, no matter when and where they could only be marginal characters—the value of their existence seems to be only for the pleasure of men. They strove to make their own authentic voice, and resolutely fight against external forces. However, with the development of the story, it is not difficult to find that women can spontaneously help others in the harsh natural and social environment, reflecting the valuable beauty of human nature and universal value. They were not only the indispensable guide and guardian of the hero's growth, but also the author's deep concern and sympathy for the vulnerable groups.

2.1 Body's Carnival and Scream

The famous literary theorist, Bakhtin Michael (1895—1975) pointed out that all the preexisting hierarchical relations and differences in official titles were temporarily abolished in the carnival, and people seemed to be reborn for the sake of new and purified human relations. In *The Sot-Weed Factor*, women's principal tickets to talk in the male world were their appearances and bodies. After the gender bias disappeared, they could obtain relatively equal social status and voice in the catalytic environment of alcohol and biological desire. In the eyes of most secular men, the contemporary female was only a kind of commodity that could be traded for money, and the greatest value of women was to offer provide sensory pleasure to their customers. Carnival activities targeting females were quite common in *The Sot-Weed Factor*, which were mixed with their weak cries, but full of appeals and calls for fairness, justice and pure love.

As a woman living in the bottom of society, Joan Toast must show her attractive glamour in order to seek the basic survival and social discourse: she had warm brown eyes, a voluminous figure, and tight, seductive skin. A casual touch of her delicate hand gave Ebenezer an electric thrill and a strange attraction that ignited the passion in his nature.” (*The Sot-Weed Factor*, p. 31) Although this female protagonist had already a fixed male lover---John McEvoy. “ She loved her John for all……They seemed, in fact, a

devoted couple, and jealous.” Joan still became a public and popular topic of gossips and even the bet of men in London’s Lockett Tavern, allowing them to examine and admire her with strange and purposeful eyes, and carnival in the environment of extravagance and money. “No one-crown frisker Joan, but a two-guinea hen well worth the gold to bed her.” From the puritan viewpoint, the relationship between men and women was unconventional. However, Joan was the first grown woman with whom Ebenezer Cooke fell in love deeply.

“He sweated, blushed, and dreamed two score ragged dreams. He studied the ears Joan Toast had touched, as though by study to restore their tingle, and when he could by no means succeed, he recognized with alarm that it was his heart she now had hands on” (*The Sot-Weed Factor*, p. 35).

Then, she appeared as not only McEvoy’s associate (who, girl as well, was both his love and his living), but also a momentous wager between Ebenezer and Ben Oliver in the Part I of full-length novel. Obviously, the topic of human beauty and enjoyment was an important part of the social orgy of gentlemen. Only after showing attractive figure shapes could women attract men around them, obtain a certain economic income and equal opportunity to speak, so as to ensure their financial life, and then it was possible to further shout for the legitimate rights of individuals. But at the end of her life, she steadfastly refused to be visited by all men, no longer willing to bear their sights, including her legal husband and doctors.

“She refuses,” Anna reported a minute later. “She says she hath no quarrel with me, but wishes to die without having to endure the sight of another man. Not e’en Dr. Sowter may come near her anymore.”

Therefore, it could be seen that she had developed a strong sense of autonomy and independent personality, daring to resist the patriarchy that once harmed her.

Similarly, Mary Mungummory was also a professional and traveling social butterfly who paid a great price for her calf love in adolescence. However, after becoming swineherd—“a large and blowzy woman of middle age”, she would still sincerely helped Ebenezer get warm clothes, being regarded “the most virtuous person I met in Maryland.” (*The Sot-Weed Factor*, p. 547). Then she told him the tragic story of Mr. William Tick and private history of Charley Mattasin, which to a certain extent satisfied the vigorous curiosity of the young “poet” and touched his soul deeply. Although Mary was not the main character in the fiction, she was willing to appear in time and lend a helping hand in time when strangers were in danger, and successfully helped them out of danger. Moreover, as the narrator of a legendary story, her identity, social experience and specific vision provided the poet with new writing materials and inspiration, thus becoming an indispensable part of the grand narrative strategy. Although being a floating tramp prostitute, she could even pose a philosophical question about the nature of civilization and barbarism with well-read gentlemen: “Does essential savagery lurk beneath the skin of civilization, or does essential civilization lurk beneath the skin of savagery?” (*The Sot-Weed Factor*, p. 383) Sometimes she failed to offer a satisfactory answer to friends’ difficult question, the lady had rich life experience and was diligent in thinking. Besides, she told the information or stories of lots of figures including missing Anna Cooke, Billy Rumbly--the Indian from Maryland and the miller Harry Russecks to the leading male teller, Ebenezer. Although Mary might inadvertently make some logical errors due to personal cognitive problems, she was still a very vital link and clue in the interlocutor and played the transitional role. Thus it could be concluded, Mary appeared as an indispensable storyteller, spectator, narrator and recorder in

the third part of the novel according to Barth's design. Representatives of vulnerable groups have gained a certain degree of discourse power.

2.2 The Contrast and Struggle of Females' Identity

On the surface, most of the women or girls in the book were in a relatively humble position, and almost all of them were in favour of sexual openness, such as Joan Toast and Mary Mungummory, Anna Cooke and so on. They were pure and beautiful girls in the beginning, relying on their own and suffering a lot in the journey of wandering in the foreign lands. Most of them became swine maid, pirate or barbarian captives with vulgar speech and behaviors. But this kind of writing did not represent Barth's discrimination and prejudice against women. On the contrary, he had always been concerned about the change of women's social status. In an interview, Barth clearly expressed her sympathy for the female of his generation: "If you are a girl, your career choice is to be a wife and a mother; If you are lucky or poor, you may become a teacher, a secretary or a nurse." (Barth, 2015, p. 7) Thus his attitude towards contemporary feminism could be learned clearly here. Even females were forced to engage in menial work for a long time, suffered from serious illness and death, the women in Barth's fiction still kept noble feelings and unyielding fighting spirit. They retained the gentle and virtuous female characters in their hearts, and made every effort to protect their love and family affection until the end of life.

In the sense of reality, discrimination and negation of women in the mainstream American society led to the distortion of women as prostitutes in the novels of the 1960s. The social identity brought by the body imprisons women's freedom and seriously infringes their right to pursue free personality expression. Therefore, they had no choice but to wander in different regions and countries, adopt different names so as to obtain different identities, and thus fought against traditional secular forces. Joan Toast, for example, used to assume a name as Susan Warren, became the true master of Malden Hall, and legally punished her beloved and innocent husband in the end. Different names represent different identities and opportunities for survival. Susan's outlook on life was relatively pessimistic, believing that the real world was absurd and full of uncertain evil, so the so-called macro history was also unreasonable. The active struggles of female groups were not only a counteraction to the mainstream patriarchy but also an external expression of individuals striving to overcome themselves in the reality world. And this kind of fight was resistant and striving for the upper reaches. In the final analysis, what they pursue was still personal freedom and family happiness. From this perspective, women's search for self-identity and desire of basic human rights like equality and love had broader and deeper social significance. They were truly one of the main representatives of vulnerable groups.

2.3 Physical Torture and Mental Suffering

Julian Hanna believed that, "the term 'feminism' is often used to describe popular culture or any product that is outdated." (Hanna, 2016) Contrary to men's modern innovative temperament, women are more inclined to nostalgia and emotion. Therefore, radical feminists often suffer great physical and mental torture and pain in their processes of self-proving value. As Hanna pointed out further, "masculine" language was used to describe the modern and stylistically innovative, while "feminine" terms were used to describe either the products of mass culture or anything outdated or passe-in other words, whatever modernism opposed.

The marginal women in *The Sot-weed Factor* had overdrawn their lives in advance because they tasted the forbidden fruit of sexuality too early or too much, and had frequent relations with the opposite sex.

Some of them were infected with deadly syphilis and opium addiction, and some were kidnapped and pillaged by pirates, then their physical and mental health was seriously destroyed.

“That instant when he stepped out on the deck, how many women heard -- in England, Spain, and far Cipango -- the footfall of the rapist on the stair, or in the path behind? The ranks of women ravished, hundreds and thousands and millions strong, of every age and circumstance -- the centuries rang and echoed with their cries; the dirt of the planet was watered with their tears!” (*The Sot-weed Factor*, pp. 167-168)

Because women could not fully control their own fates, lack the basic materials and skills of surviving and fighting alone, they must pay greater prices in the process of forcibly breaking through old conventions and customs. Their miserable endings were not simply due to themselves, but the lack of free subjective choices, coupled with the additional effects of deep social thrust. The huge “invisible hand” of social environment was controlling everything, leading the lower social class to suffer from physical and mental hardships.

3. Spiritual Lady: The Cultural Pursuit of Marginal Characters

In the traditional western culture and society, the images of women were expected to be good-looking and elegant ladies, who must be competent to care for their husband and children and maintain family harmony. Women’s misfortune in reality left them no capability to keep beautiful looks and fair body shape for a long time, but the inner truth could still be the ideal pursuit of marginal figures. However, the new American women in the 1960s tried to break through the inherent stereotype, pursued the liberation of personality, and stuck to the spiritual stance of individual freedom and publicity at the same time.,

3.1 Traditional Lady Image

The word of “lady” usually refers to beautiful and virtuous women. In the previous concept, a lady is regarded as a kind of feminine charm conforming to social ethics in the aspects of grooming, speech, behavior, family upbringing and cultural understanding ability. The traditional lady must have beautiful appearance, gentle inner heart, humble moral, virtuous quality, maintenance of social ethics and moral intentions, to maintain the moral needs of purity. They focus on highlighting the cultivation of women’s innocence and kindness, reflecting the traditional value of virtue, without losing the value of modern society. Lady sentiment means that virtuous temperament can make women more charming and communicative taste, and better reflect their social status. Lady is a title that both exudes the classical atmosphere and permeates the spirit of times. Although it is impossible to establish a set of standards to describe the group of ladies, we can explore and refine the inner characteristics of the spirit of ladies, so as to observe the lady education one after another. Generally speaking, “beauty, elegance, goodness and strength” are the four characteristics of lady spirit, and the focus of lady education should be “seeking” them with their heart and soul.

While the new lady, also known as modern lady, inherits the characteristics of independence, equality, wisdom and smart temperament from the traditional one, but it is not a complete return or copy. Under the background of new era and culture, lady has been endowed with diversified connotation. They should have noble moral character, independent personality, dignified and elegant demeanor, and good psychological quality. At the same time, appearance, behavior, conversation, social environment and people are also several aspects and criteria to be considered in defining a modern lady.

The majority of marginal women in *The Sot-Weed Factor* were poor harlots with struggling for a living. They constantly fought with cruel fates and reality, trying to get rid of the predicament of reality, and finally realized the meaning of life, even reached the peak of self-realization. Although their social fame were not good at all according to the traditional moral values, most of them were reasonable in interpersonal communication and defended personal dignity and social justice actively with pure and kind souls. Therefore, they could be called “spiritual ladies”. These images of being marginalized women in the works were the externalization of Barth’s personal feelings and thoughts. It reflected his careful thinking of historical anecdotes and real society, and revealed his sympathy and care for the vulnerable groups.

3.2 The Phenomenon of Marginal Women

As special marginal characters, the group of women have always received more attention from western sociologists and writers. German-American social psychologist, K. Lewin (1890-1947) first put forward the concept of “marginal human”. He believes that the concept of social change can also be applied to the change of individual social psychology. That is to say, the change of social status is also capable of influencing the psychological and behavioral characteristics of individuals. However, marginal groups might be spiritual pioneers with their own unique experience, ideas and beliefs. One of their obvious characteristics is the humble position in finance and untamed character. Homeless female workers, as one typical kind of marginalized figures, intend to highlight the truth, goodness and beauty of individual spiritually after their bodies or faces get aged and ugly. Therefore, no matter how unrestrained their words and deeds are, they will not hinder own inner yearning for ideal love and marriage. This is an important internal cause of the special cultural phenomenon from feminism.

From the social level, the special image of women workers has typical cultural significance of periods. According to Marx Weber, “Prostitution is as much a cultural phenomenon as religion or money.” (Weber, 1999) Because the common denominator of these three is that their historical and contemporary forms of expression involve human cultural interests, the values contained in them are easy to stimulate people’s cognitive impulses. Obviously, women images in *The Sot-weed Factor* had a great influence on men such as “poet laureate” ---Ebenezer and his mentor Burlingame. Joan Toast, for example, was undoubtedly Ebenezer’s favorite woman whose physical beauty became a unique kind of poetic catalyst, even a simple physical touch can trigger his infinite imagination. “He studied the ears Joan Toast had touched, as though by study to restore their tingle, and when he could by no means succeed, he recognized with alarm that it was his heart she now had hands on.” (*The Sot-weed Factor*, p. 35) “Am I waked to the world from a thirty-year sleep?” he asked himself. “Or is’t only now I’ve begun to dream? Surely none awake e’er felt such dizzy power, nor any man in dreams such bursting life! Hi! A song!” (*The Sot-weed Factor*, p. 40) From here we see that, it could be believed that she guided the naive college students to grow up in the material and spiritual world, and tried her unwavering best to protect true love, blessed marriage and common homeland. Ebenezer scarcely noted her departure, so full was he of his love; he strode feverishly about the bedchamber, hands clasped behind his back, pondering the depth and force of his new feeling. Henry Burlingame III, another important male protagonist, was expelled from Malden manor-house because of his suspicious affair with Ebenezer’s elder sister, Anna Cooke. But thenceforth He got a precious opportunity of embarking on a new adventure. His attitude to gender identity was nihilistic to some extent: he neither fully understood his student’s adherence to virginity, nor had any strong

subjective judgments about this. He was suspected to be a pragmatist, and his ambiguous attitude towards gender partly reflected an absurd outlook of American academy on the ideal life in the 1950s. Although the mentor would often satire Ebenezer's obsession with physical purity and poetry, he had any scarce prejudices about them in the actual process of companionship.

At the time of Barth's creation of this novel, there was a growing awareness that men were not fundamentally different from women, and it seemed meaningless to emphasize the social distinction between male and female too much. "By the time he (Ebenezer) found some visitor's saddled horse and mounted, the image of Joan Toast had somehow got blurred with that of Burlingame, on the one hand, and his own cause merged in some way with Anna's on the other, so that the two pairs stood in an opposition no less positive for its being, presently at least, not quite identifiable." (Barth, 1967) This vague fusion of images in the main protagonist's ideology implied the similarity and complementation of the two characters, at least some spiritual resonance. Consciousness gender artificially constructed may have only physiological significance, but it should not be elevated to the level of public morality or religious law, otherwise it may infringe on civil liberties and invade others' privacy heavily. Therefore, it could be said that Barth tried to eliminate the binary opposition of gender and further called for the real equality between men and women in the post-modern American society.

3.3 Cultural Identity of Post-modern Women

There is no doubt that post-modern feminism is an important part of postmodernism in theory, thought and methodology. Western feminism has been formed and developed since the Enlightenment era in the 18th century. Western academic circles generally believed that Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) was the most important feminist work of the pre-19th century. Mary Ellen evaluated in her treatise that Barth might be the very person to lead literature into a new era of female characterization. It could be seen that Barth would certainly show us a different female world in his works. As an outstanding representative of American postmodernist literature, Barth was quite good at simulating and imitating western classic literary works, especially European carnival rewriting. For instance, the alcoholism and lengthy stories paraphrase in *The Sot-weed Factor* easily made Ebenezer dizzy lots of times. Barth's experimental novels, *Giles Goat-Boy* and *Chimera*, were both parodies and rewriting of ancient Greek fables or myths. Just as a Chinese professor, Wang Jianping, pointed out: "From the perspective of methodology, the historical discourse in postmodern novels has the dual function of theory and practice. In other words, postmodern novels break the boundary between literature and history, theory and practice." (Wang, 2011).

Because postmodernist aims to question traditional values dominated by white men, using the strategies of mainstream culture itself to challenge and disrupt its processes from within, parody becomes the central ideology of some marginalized groups. Feminist literary criticism also began to enter the mature post-modern period. The biggest feature of postmodern feminism is the emphasis on femininity and respect for female experience. Specifically, the period of feminism from the 1980s to now mainly emphasized the objective existence of gender differences between men and women, and no longer blindly pursued gender equality in the previous stage. The basic slogans and demands put forward by contemporary feminism "directly or indirectly express and realize the basic goal of post-modernism to rebuild human culture." (Gao, 2005) Women scientists, politicians and artists have appeared on the world stage, and their achievements were universally recognized. After successfully fighting for cultural

identity and social recognition, postmodern women also bear a more important historical responsibility, not only for their own interests, but also for the well-being of others and groups. Therefore, postmodern novelists “deconstruct and subvert fictional worlds while rebuilding a real world that recognizes differences, respects others, and develops sustainably.” (Chen et al., 2019)

4. Conclusion

By creating these female images, John Barth expressed his sympathy and concern for the situation of contemporary women. He ruthlessly revealed the prejudice and discrimination against women, as well as the statuses and roles of marginal groups in society. At the same time, these female images also reflected the author’s criticism and reflection on the nihilistic view of women. By compiling the legendary stories of marginal female characters, he explored the profound themes of love, humanity, morality and so on, trying to arouse mass readers’ deep thinking and discussion on these phenomena. In general, most of the women roles designed in *The Sot-weed Factor* were in the fringe of mainstream society, and the artistic images were complex and multi-dimensional, so they not only had the disrespectful characteristics in the bodies but also the quality of innocent and kind in their spirit at the same time. These innovations showed the complexity and contradiction of the female images in a certain period, reflecting author’s deep thinking and concern about the historical and contemporary female issues. As is well-known, women are the indispensable half for men no matter in which era, and vice versa. The harmonious unity of genders is one of the necessary preconditions for the stability and prosperity of a family and even the whole country.

Author Profile

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Project Overview

This thesis presents a preliminary study from “2024 Graduate Research Innovation Fund” at Xinyang Normal University, titled as “Historical Narrative Strategies in The Sot-Weed Factor” (Project ID: 2024KYJJ053).

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