

The Awakening of Female Subjectivity: A Comparative Study of Ocean Imagery in Poseidon Family and “At the Bay”

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Abstract: Both Katherine Mansfield and Yuhui Chen are outstanding Marine novelists. As women, they stand on their special perspectives to show us a different ocean to readers. This paper focuses on the female subjectivity in “At the Bay” and Chen, which is closely related to ocean imagery. “Ocean” is a representative of women, rather than what used to appear in most of the literature works. They use ocean imagery to show that the ocean is the embodiment or implication of female consciousness and subjectivity.

1. Introduction

Katherine Mansfield grew up comfortably in a small colonial town and received a proper education in Wellington. Her writing began during her high school years. After attending Queen’s College in London, her writing talent was discovered and she began “systematically preparing herself” to be a professional writer. She specializes in short stories and become famous for it. Throughout her whole life, she used all of her effects to innovate of form and content of short stories, which made her become the pioneer of short stories. “At the Bay” is one of Mansfield’s famous short stories, which mainly talks about a story of the struggle of Beryl, Kezia, and Linda. They are stuck in affluence and search for freedom. Her work is a great expression of a female’s desire to construct a free and open area.

Yuhui Chen is a multi-identity writer with experience in both drama and journalism. Based on her personal experience and family history, she has written a lot of autobiographical novels. In 2005, Chen was born and awarded heavyweight. *Poseidon Family* talked about a story that happened in three generations. As the cover of the book shows, this book is “a Taiwan fable with fathers’ absence”. All of the females in this family have to reconstruct their relationship through the ocean and the power of Mazu (the most important goodness in coastal regions of China). They find spiritual sustenance in Mazu and break the male-first stereotype in sacrificial activities.

Ocean is a common imagery, especially for writers who live in coastal regions or have sailing experiences. However, most of the ocean images are used to symbolize manly features, such as the captain's eyes being full of courage and ambition, which is just like the ocean; or the father’s back as wide as the ocean, which assumes responsibility and tolerant all aspects in surrounding. When

talking about the power of the ocean, females are seldom mentioned. In some female writers' works, they notice the lack of female depictions of power in coastal regions. Females are also depicted as powerful as the ocean, because of their steadfastness perseverance, and resilience in their lives.

In this paper, the main topic is female power which is reflected by ocean imagery. In "At the Bay", power means that female characters can realize the truth of lives and rejudge traditional obligations of women. In this story, ocean imagery embodies the crisis of the female character's life, which is calm on the surface but with a rising tide under it; In *the Poseidon Family*, power refers to females who can rewrite their family history rather than follow patriarchal traditions, which tends to put females as the subordination. In this book, ocean imagery acts as a boundary and carrier. It pushes "I" to find my roots and sort out the history of my past generations.

2. The Similarities of the Implication of Ocean Imagery in Both Works

2.1. Introspections of Female Status and Responsibilities

In both works, the ocean imagery is used to represent female characters' introspections of their status and responsibilities.

"At the Bay", in part seven, there is a description of the ocean. "The tide was out, the beach was deserted; lazily flopped the warm sea." (Mansfield 193)^[1], in this part, the ocean showed up like a tired old man, just like grandma. She was thinking of her son William, who died of sunstroke. Under the scorching sun, her son was dead; just as the ocean was doing at that time. The deserted beach is just another description of herself, paid all of her water away because she lost the meaning of her life – her son. Just as she said "To look after them as a woman does, long after they were out of sight." (Mansfield 196). Children are one of the most significant parts of a woman, they paid all their lives for them. Losing their children is just like losing the meaning of their life.

For another character Beryl, Beryl is one of the female characters, who always wear a "mask". She pretends to get close to her sister's husband Mr. Stanley, to beg for a living or some economic support; she flatters the other males to find her true love or someone who can take her away from a life of dependency. On the one hand, Beryl said "'Good-bey, Stanley,' sweetly and gaily." (Mansfield 182). This shows her ingratiation for Mr. Stanley. On the other hand, "She was glad to be rid of him." (Mansfield 182). Her behavior is often frivolous and flattering so that she can get close to what she pretends. But she is also suffering, for her helpless, so she has to wear her mask. Just as what is shown in the end, when Beryl's niece Kezia says "Father is home with a man and lunch is ready." She has to make her mask ready, dress herself, and continue to curry favor with the other males in her life. Her introspection is a so-called "sober sinking". She knows the predicament, which leads to her mask-wearing. She knows Mr. Stanley can not help her with anything in return, but she has to rely on him through her ingratiation.

"The sound of the sea was a vague murmur, as though it waked out of a dark dream." "All was still" represents her life, the life that shows her inability to escape from reality. Part 12 is full of Beryl's interior monologues and imagination. As a young girl, she is eager for adventure and exciting life. Living in a traditional family, she wants someone who will find the Beryl none of them know, who will expect her to be that Beryl always.

For Chen, almost all the females in this novel have no father/husband. Zhengnan Lin, as a grandpa, abandoned his wife and children in order to pursue his dream; Yinan Lin, as an uncle, devoted himself to political works and then fled to Brazil; Erma, as a father, marooned himself for shaking sensuality. Because of these, all the women have to confront the reality. They need to rewrite the family pedigree and reconnect the chain between males and goodness in the past. All in all, because of the "lack" of a father/husband, females have a chance to contact where they are viewed as "impure".

At the beginning of the novel, three generations are apart as lone islands. They pay much more attention to their own life, rather than the connection of their connection. Just as I said, “For me, I just feel like I have a home, but actually no.” (Chen 3)^[2] However after the ocean appears, things turn different. “The tide is a special tie. It will take stray children back home.” (Chen 264) The tide of the ocean washed the beach, clattered and murmured. It is a sound for calling. The ocean, with wane and wax, is a calling for “me” to recreate the history and make Female’s stories clear, to find her roots. Ocean imagery is an urge for “me”, asking me to find the connection of each lone island and tie them together with rippling waves.

2.2. The Awakening of Subjectivity

Both two works use ocean imagery as a reflection of fluctuating female consciousness and awakening of subjectivity.

For “At the Bay”, Linda’s awakening is because of a special “comparison”. Linda thinks “It was always Stanley who was in the thick of the danger. Her whole time was spent rescuing him, restoring him, calming him down, and listening to his story.” Stanley, her husband always needs rescue and care, and he always shout out his pain and sorrow. However, Linda said “and what was left of her time was spent in the dread of having children”. With her thoughts getting deepen, she begin to think about herself and her obligation of having children. The ocean turned different, “A cloud, small, serene, floated across the moon. In that moment of darkness, the sea sounded deep, troubled. Then the cloud sailed away, and the sound of the sea was a vague murmur, as though it waked out of a dark dream. All was still.” (Mansfield 214-215) The ocean keeps murmuring, just like Linda and other females pour out. Their feelings will not be repressed. Though they can only express their feeling in some that are not evident, they begin to rethink their status and what they have suffered till now.

His husband is working for their family, so his pain is understandable. When things come to Linda, they turn different. Because “having children” is viewed as a duty for women for a long time, even from when women exist. Males will consider a housewife has the easiest work in this world, as they only have to stay at home and play with children. From their perspectives, this work is relaxed and even cannot be called a work. However, for Linda, this work killed all of her dreams about a beloved man and a warm family.

Linda’s awakening of Subjectivity begins with the reflection of so-called women’s duty. Is that reasonable? Why “she was broken, made weak, her courage was gone, through child-bearing”? Her complex struggle is the start of her awakening.

For Chen, one of the awakenings starts with the rewrite of a mother-daughter relationship. Jingzi, as a mother, because of her shortage of her own family, tries all of her effects to flee her original family. Because of that “I” was fostered with someone else, which led to “I” lack of a sense of belonging when “I” first came back home. This novel originates from her sense of “no home”. This autobiographical novel is a kind of research of “My Home”, which contains the sense of “no home” and the search for her roots. When “I” stays abroad, she gets a strange sense of connection because of the two god statues (Clairvoyance and Clairaudience). Actually, they are the subordinates of Mazu. They push “me” to find my roots through an endless ocean. The courage and decision to rewrite family history is the end of her awakening of subjectivity.

3. Rippling, Murmured Sea Vs. Interconnected Sea

In Mansfield’s novel, there are numerous descriptions of the surroundings. At the beginning of the novel, we can see the whole sight of the ocean. “It looked as though the sea had beaten up softly in the darkness, as though one immense wave had come rippling, rippling – how far?” This is a

sight of a tranquil ocean. As a typical use of a symbol, the ocean symbolizes the life of all the female characters, such as Linda. She lives in a wealthy family in the coastal regions. Fancy housing, a lot of children, a beloved husband, she owns a lot of things. Her life is just like the ocean, looked peaceful had full of happiness. However, as the novel writes “and what was left of her time was spent in the dread of having children”. She is torn apart by the ordeal of giving birth. At the end of the novel. “A cloud, small, serene, floated across the moon. In that moment of darkness, the sea sounded deep, troubled. Then the cloud sailed away, and the sound of the sea was a vague murmur, as though it waked out of a dark dream. All was still.” The end of the novel shows that the crisis still exists.

This time, the facts about the ocean appear. It is not as tranquil as its surface but has a strong and dangerous billow under its surface. It is a reflection of Linda’s life, and crisis in Clam, which are also two main topics of Mansfield’s short stories: the crisis under the green leaves and the problems in daily lives.

In Chen, firstly, the ocean imagery appears as a connection. The storytelling is combined with the description of the ocean. The most important feature that the author mentioned is the connection feature of the ocean. Her coming home is because of the calling of the ocean, the reconnecting of the author and her mother is constructed by the ocean.

Secondly, the ocean is a carrier of belief. Because of the ocean, Mazu can become a mutual belief for all the females. In the past, females connected with Mazu through melas. Women even disappear in ritual activities. In daily life, men go to sea, women can do daily ritual activities. However, when men come back, there is no place or only the end of the line can leave some place for women. In addition, Mazu is goodness, who owes to associate more closely with women. However, the reality is totally opposite. In the novel, because of the absence of males, the other females finally have a chance to appear and reconnection with Mazu. For Chen, the ocean imagery appears as a connection and carrier. It contains the push to seek her roots and mutual belief for all generations.

4. Glimpse Vs. Reconstruction

The main way to awakening is “glimpse”. Glimpse is the essence of Mansfield’s short stories, which means a sudden spiritual awakening. At the end of the 19th century, the world was caught in a disorder, people lost their basic confidence, and their lives became fragmented. They lose the ability to view the world in peace and calm, which means they can only glimpse at the world in nervousness.

For the characters in “At the Bay”, “glimpse” is the main way to realize their awakening. We can distinguish the different situations after viewing the different oceans. What turned “clam ocean” into “murmured ocean”? Is the cloud? The cloud is just a glimpse chance for females, when the cloud cuts out moonlight for a while, the ocean will get the chance, Just like females, they find out what affects their life and start “murmuring”, start bursting in silence way.

“In a steamer chair, under a manuka tree that grew in the middle of the front grass patch, Linda Burnell dreamed the morning away.” She starts her thoughts with a tiny yellowish flower. She loves each tiny cute flower, but most of them cannot escape from their fates – fellen. Then her thoughts came back to when she said she was gonna marry Stanley Burnell. “Oh, papa, fancy being married to Stanley Burnell!” She was so excited to marry her dream love. However, she falls into an abyss. The reality is not what she thought at the beginning. There is no fairy tale in real life. Her beloved – Stanley Burnell shows his love to Linda, but also cruelly pushes all of the males into the situation of being blamed. Just as he said in chapter three “The heartless of women! The way they took it for granted it was your job to slave away for them while they didn’t even take the trouble to see that

your walking stick wasn't lost." For Linda, the tiny yellowish flower is just like herself. Growing full heartedly, but finally will fall to the soil. She has a wealthy life but becomes a marginal figure because heavy fertility pressure pushes her into self-denial. But this kind of self-denial is another reflection of her awakening – through reinventing self-understanding to get a personal improvement.

Bell Gale Chevigny said female's writing relating to females, is a kind of replay of her relation with her and her mother. In some way, it is a reconstruction of herself.[3]

In Chen, the narrator "I" comes back home and views all the dilemmas of three generations. For their values, "I" uses query and finally compromises with them.

For the past generation, females have an unbridgeable gap in gender theory. All the mother-daughter relation is "back to back", which means because of psychological trauma, they pull in the opposite direction. For example, I was "abandoned" by my mom, and when she came back and asked me to stay with her, I paid much more attention to pursuing myself rather than cure the past trauma. Under the pressure of patriarchy, a son is more important than a daughter. This is a complex theory: a mother, physically and emotionally, wants to be close to her children, but is limited by the social theory and common gender discipline. This contradiction pushes a daughter away from her mother, only through a re-write of family history from a female perspective can daughters have a better understanding of their mothers, and finally, achieve reconciliation.

The awakening method in Chen is a kind of relief. Females know their gender limitations, and accept their existence in the past, but use their effects to change them in the future.

5. "Obligation" of breeding Vs. Second Sex Plight

In the coastal regions, the job is related to physical strength and other physiological factors. That is why in the past, most of the coastal works were taken by males. For women, their main job is taking care of other family members and breeding. With the technology developing, the job that needs immense strength is replaced by machines, which means the gap between males and females is reduced. However, this historical inertia affects even today, which means that care work and having children become a female duty.

For "At the Bay", Linda is bound by the obligation of having children. "She was broken, made weak, her courage was gone, through child-bearing. And what made it doubly hard to bear was, she did not love her children." (Mansfield p.192) At this point, the ocean is murmuring, just as Linda, "the murmur" in some way is a kind of tearing. She is smashed by the pressure of having children. However, as an on-looker, others can only see the white foam as a part of Linda's dead soul. The heavy pressure of having children crushed her. In some, she is blamed for the identity changes: from her premarital period as the pearl of her family to an object of desire and fertility machine in the bourgeoisie after her marriage.

In China, Mazu is one of the most important goddesses in the coastal regions. Her original name is Moniang Lin, and she is a normal girl living in Fujian Province. Mazu commonly known as the "Goddess of the Sea", is the goddess in charge of maritime shipping. Before putting out to sea, all the crew will have a ceremonious ritual for Mazu to pray for safety and harvest.

In daily life, the major believers are females. However, when fishing vessels return, there is no place for females. They can only stay at the end of the line, and ask pray from Mazu. Even in the marine field, the female is a symbol of unluck. In coastal regions, there are a lot of conventions that push females into an unbalanced situation. Such as in Fujian folk custom, a fisherman can not enter the maternity room, otherwise, he will get no harvest.

In Chen, the relationship is affected by the values of "prefer boys to girls" and women are limited by the second sex status of females in traditional Mazu belief. In the beginning, women had no right to worship Mazu, even though they were women.

6. Affiliations

During 1950-1970, “gender balance” and “women hold up half the sky” called for more movements. Women can gain more job opportunities than in the past. However, society needs more female perspectives. Like Chen, the refind and rewriting of female family history is what is lacking in the past. For “At the Bay”, the female perspective shows an unknown side of gender plights. The ocean is connected with females. The primary perspective of males has taken the uniqueness of storytelling. However, history is not only about males. Just like “At the Bay” and Chen, there are several female writers who use their pen to draw a picture of women’s family history, which is a tiny part of male-centered marine folk culture. Through their writing, the topic of women’s acceptance and rebellion against their own destiny is potent, just like the weave under the tranquil surface of the ocean.

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