

Interpretations of Brautigan's Novels from the Perspective of Feminism

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Abstract: Richard Brautigan wrote in the 1960s, and his novels contain a large number of female characters, presenting readers with a slight thumbnail of the living conditions of women in the 1960s. In novels such as *Abortion: An Historical Romance 1966* and *In Watermelon Sugar*, Brautigan reveals the oppression and contempt of the three heroines, Vida, Margaret, and Pauline, by describing their fates in a male-centric society. At the same time, these three protagonists realize the oppression of male centrism on themselves and their resistance to different degrees. However, unfortunately, their actions of resistance all fail. Given this, this article will use feminist Simone DE Beauvoir's "the other" point of view and Judith Butler's theory of "performance" theory to examine the three heroines. To reveal in the male-centered society, they are regarded as the other and their performances in a dilemma. Furthermore, this article will discuss the meaning of their efforts to break the male centralism and to analyze the meaning of women's rebellion in contemporary society.

1. Introduction

American poet and novelist Richard Gary Brautigan (1935 -- 1984) was born in Washington, D.C. In 1957, Brautigan published his first collection of poetry *The Return of The Rivers*. Two years before his death, he published ten novels, eleven collections of poetry and one collection of short stories. Among his numerous works, Brautigan is best known for *Trout Fishing In America* (1967) and poetry collection *The Pills Versus the Springhill Mine Disaster* (1969). However, public's interest in Brautigan disappeared after 1970. In 1984, Brautigan, a poet and novelist, who had long lived on the fringes of American literature, shot himself at his home in San Francisco.

2. Literature Review

1985, American critic Brook K Horvath published "Richard Brautigan's Search for Control over Death" from the perspective of fighting against death. Brook believes that Brautigan's three novels, *A Confederate General From Big Sur*, *In Watermelon Sugar* and *the Abortion*, fit the theory of death proposed by Ernest Becker, that "The irony of man's condition is that the deepest need is to be free of the anxiety of death and annihilation, but it is life itself awakens it, and so we must shrink from

being fully alive.”¹In the author’s opinion, Becker aims to emphasize that human beings are always afraid the death, but people exist because of life, so if they want to escape from life, the first choice is to enter death, and the second choice is to quench their passion for life and to enter the state of numbness with no pursuit of the meaning of life. Also, Brook found that the main characters in these works are falling into a state of numbness. These characters belong to a kind of “anti-hero”, which is the opposite of traditional hero character. For example, some of them choose to hide in the world of watermelon sugar instead of the real world. They are aimless in their daily lives, not afraid of death, and lack of passion in every life. Combining the phenomenon of the American revolution and the action of counterculture in the 1960s, the author proposes that the motive of Brautigan’s is to severely criticize the mainstream American society at that time, as well as the increasingly emotionally detachment people under capitalism the industrial society. Brooke’s paper has recuperated, combining carefully with society. However, I think his discussion starts from the concept of “escape”, this paper analyzes the emotionally distant portraits of the characters. Nevertheless, Brook lacked explaining the connection between the numb heart and the escape of death. Besides, Brook did not tell the readers how to evade the fear of death by becoming indifferent.

The 1960s was the time when the counterculture movement reached the peak. Under the influence of movement, the second American women’s liberation movement blossomed. The author observes that previous scholars focused on the analysis of the images of male protagonists but did not pay attention to female images in Brautigan’s works. The biggest reason, from my perspective, is that his female characters are often embellished with stories rather than the noticeable parts in his works. However, the author believes that through the analysis of female images, we can further discover the status of women in the complex society. Therefore, this paper wants to examine Brautigan’s female protagonists through feminist criticism.

The text analyzed in this paper is *In Watermelon Sugar* and *Abortion: a Historical Romance in 1966*. One of the reasons is that these two works have similar backgrounds, both of which took place in the most intense period of the counterculture movement(1967)and the growing of the second feminist movement(1966).The other is that this paper found that most of the women depicted by Brautigan were similar; They were beautiful but not intelligent female images. Compared with the female protagonists in other works (such as the twin sisters in *the Hawkline Monster*), we can find that the characters in the two works, *In Watermelon Sugar* and *Abortion*, were presented in dull and numb with beautiful and stunning appearance. *In Watermelon Sugar*, Pauline and Margarete are female characters with distinct personalities. while in *Abortion*, Vida is female character with extreme courage. However, I found that face that these female characters in the story exit as accessories of men. These women show how woman experience double oppression from both men and American societies in 1960. Because hippies are “the other”(the opposite of self) in mainstream society, also, they are limited to the identity of women, so they become the other through the eyes of men. Because of this, this paper will use the feminist perspective and the postmodernism perspective to interpret Brautigan.

3. Methodology

Brautigan’s writing began in the late fifties and raised to a peaked in the sixties. At the same time, after the second women’s movement in the United States, American feminist literary criticism emerged. It absorbs the views of Simone DE Beauvoir, the founder of French feminism, her view on the “other” of women, and develops intense social care in the United States. According to the

1 Ernest Becker. *The Denial of Death*. New York: Free Press. 1997. p66.

classification of Jin Li's paper "American feminist movement · female literature · feminist criticism", American female criticism is mainly divided into three aspects: one is to criticize the male prejudice in literary works written by male authors, such as criticizing the fantasy and unrealistic portrayal of female images in male works. The second is to study female writers and their works, such as the writing of Woolf, Hannah Arendt, and other female authors. The third is to construct the theoretical discourse of feminist criticism, such as post-modern feminist criticism and postcolonial feminist criticism. In this paper, by analyzing characters found that fiction *In Watermelon Sugar* and *Abortion*. In the use of the mainstream view, three women in these two fictions are a typical marginalized by the mainstream society of the hippie female image, with the hippie internal view of men. They belong to the traditional female population, who are beautiful, but lack of personality. Based on this contradiction, we use the perspective of feminist criticism to analyze the character image. This paper will focus on the discussion of how women are made by nature, and how they are constructed by society in the gaze of men, which can enable us to understand the protagonists deeply, find the implicit thoughts of the author.

4. Background

The second world war changed America greatly. In the postwar '40s and' 50s, on the one hand, the U.S. economy was booming. American science is advancing rapidly and production is entering the post-industrial era. The American people are getting richer, and consumerism is on the rise. On the other hand, the great black migration movement occupied many American cities and intensified racial conflicts among the people. Elite prevails, and the uneducated people are marginalized. Political McCarthyism and cold war policies made people nervous, especially the atomic bomb brought by the cold war, which intensified people's doubts about scientific and technological progress and social development. The American people, especially the middle-class children born in this social reality, feel the spiritual emptiness that is the opposite of economic prosperity. Paul Goodman, Allen Ginsberg and others appeared at this time and became spiritual icons of the young people in the 1960s. Goodman advocated collectivism. He believed that the loss of faith among young people was due to the overly emphasis on individualism in American society.² Therefore, Goodman went against the mainstream and proposed that people rebuild the sense of warmth in society. Allen Ginsberg, the poet who represented the opposition to elite education, was kicked out of Columbia University, openly admitted to being gay, and in his poem "howl" he strongly criticized the ruthless American society and called on young people to seek spiritual liberation and freedom.

Under the impetus of internal and external forces, the American youth in the 1960s raised the banner of resistance. The first move was the black civil rights movement, the second is left intellectual movement held by intellectuals, then is the hippy counterculture movement, at the end of the 60's, the feminist movement and the protestation of Vietnam war came out. Regarded as a spiritual icon by hippies, Richard Brautigan wrote about hippy communes in *In Watermelon Sugar* (1976): in Ideath, a fictional candy commune, the protagonist "I" has an affair with two girls. One is the gentle Pauline and the other is the grotesque Margaret. The story begins with the protagonist's relationship with Pauline and ends with Margaret's jealous suicide. In another book, *Abortion: An Historical Romance 1966*, published in the 1971, Vida felt oppressed and humiliated in the gaze of men and hated her body for years. Although she successfully completed the act of defying the male social rules of abortion in the United States, where abortion was still illegal, she still chose striptease as her career and returned to the miserable situation of finding self-worth in the male gaze. If the three women are

² O'Neill, William L, *Coming Apart: an informal history of America in the 1960's*, Chicago: Quadrangle Books. p258.

examined in the context of the times, there is no doubt that they are suffering from men. They both struggle with the marginalization of the mainstream community, and with male stereotypes of women's "tenderness", "beauty", "conformity", and "incompetence".

5. The Cry of the Repressed Women

The women among the hippies, because the majority of women are still at a disadvantage in the male-dominated world, so these women are obviously marginalized in the society, lack of voice, and difficult to get respect. Pauline and Vida, the two heroines of *In Watermelon Sugar*, both embody the stereotypical view of their life and personality traits in the mainstream view of male elitism. First, they are mentally indifferent. To love, Pauline lacked awareness. She never felt the sweetness of love. Moreover, she never felt afraid when danger came. Even at the scene of the bloody mass suicide, Pauline only angrily took out a mop to clean the blood. Secondly, their behavior is abnormal; Margaret's behavior is absurd, with no rules. She is always bigoted and fixed on the same floor. What is more, she is so obsessed with collecting garbage that she spends all day and night searching through the garbage that her room is filled with garbage. After knowing her partner was unfaithful, Margaret did not argue with him and died.

If we look at Vida in *Abortion*, we will find that she is also a lonely youth. She had no friends and lived alone in a small attic with only a blanket, a table, a record player and some Beatles records. After falling in love, she hid with a bookstore clerk in a small San Francisco bookstore, lacked professional skills, had no formal job, and had to go out for an abortion when she became pregnant. Despite her repeated attempts to distance herself from the rebellious youth by stressing that "I am not a beat generation", the reality is that she and the rebellious youth are in a similar situation and still suffer from the same social marginalization. Later, although she broke through the restrictions of male laws to abort the children, but still returned to the strip club to work, to serve men for a living.

Beauvoir, the pioneer of early feminism, and Judith Butler, the scholar of late feminism, both believed that women were not born, but were shaped according to the needs of society: "Her education has encouraged her to alienate herself wholly in her body, puberty having revealed this body as passive and desirable"³ In *In Watermelon Sugar* and *Abortion*, the female characters praised perform according to the expectations of male society for their beauty, obedience, and family, whereas those who refuse to perform are discarded and die.

There is no natural femininity or female destiny, for women, like all people, are free and independent from birth. And then, the formation of the character and temperament are required by society. Beauvoir's important feminist work *the Second Sex* only advocates that men regard themselves as the primary sex while women are excluded as the secondary sex attached to men: "Woman has always been, if not man's slave, at least his vassal. The two sexes have never divided the world up equally."⁴

It is often men who make the rules. In these two works, male figures play the role of leaders or saviors, while female figures are less significant in comparison. We can find that in the setting of the number of characters, there are as many as ten male figures in *In Watermelon Sugar*, while only two female figures. In a normal commune Ideath there is no doubt to see the dominance of men. Furthermore, the storyline revolves around two female protagonists, but the author does not pay attention to their inner thoughts. In the world of watermelon sugar, men are the leaders; they go out

³ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. New York: Vintage Books, 2011. p668.

⁴ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. New York: Vintage Books, 2011. p9.

to work and plant grains. Women either cook and wash dishes for men in the kitchen or languish in the garbage. It is worth noting that the villains in the story are a group of men, who are a group of leaders. The group of man that author portrayed use blood and death to defend their truth, showing a kind of fearlessness and bravery. The only two women, Pauline and Margaret, are incredibly monotonous, and the most commonplace for Pauline is the kitchen, which is often said to be “the battlefield for women.” The place of the kitchen is a metaphor for family and housework. On the one hand, women are too busy with kitchen chores to focus on self-improvement and social competition. On the other hand, the kitchen produces food, which represents the basic care that women provide to their family members. The narrator repeatedly praises Pauline for her perfect cooking, beautiful appearance, and gentle personality, such as “She looked beautiful in the light if the lantern. Her eyes sparkled.”⁵Beyond that, it is hard for the reader to perceive anything else about her.

As for the deviant Margaret, the author’s description of her is mostly negative, and readers’ most profound memory of her is the image of an enthusiastic garbage collector. “Every place you looked there was something forgotten that was piled on another forgotten thing.”⁶Emotionally, for Margaret, the narrator experienced boredom, contempt, abandonment, and indifference to her death. Moreover, her antagonist Pauline, the narrator, feels her submissive femininity and then finds happiness, peace, and security in her relationship. The combination of the virtuous Pauline and the narrator of writing as a career reflects the continuation of the “nuclear family” structure in the 1950s in the United States, in which men were the breadwinners and women were the household keepers. In other words, she succeeded in replacing Margaret as the narrator’s partner because she perfectly met men’s expectation that women should be at home. This arrangement was a victory of men’s discourse, and also revealed the author’s approval of the value orientation of the man should be at home while the woman should be at home.

In *Abortion*, the female characters have completely different personalities from those in *Watermelon Sugar*. Vida, the heroine, is beautiful with outstanding appearance and cheerful and charming personality. She knows how to drive a car, has been educated in the university, and has traveled far and wide. By contrast, the narrator of the story, he looks more like an evader. He did not receive a higher education, worked here and there to support life, and even used to rely on women to support the living. his life of the last few years has been a hermit in a cramped bookshop. To overstate the point, just to take a plane, can let him feel everything is so new and strange. However, even so, comparing with the bold and distinctive heroine, the hero is a weak autistic plot setting. The story still follows an illegitimately male heroic line, placing Vida in a position to be rescued -- it was the cowardly protagonist who saved her life and reopened her life by bringing her out of her inferiority complex. Such plots in are some far-fetched, seems to be aimed at the direction of the plot setting male savior identity and the service, this is the endorsement of some by women as the patriarchal culture of the ancient stories, such as in Greek mythology the most intelligent of the goddess Athena without her, from her father’s head, as a way of showing his father’s wisdom and greatness.

Having empowered themselves, the rule-makers then used the male gaze to see the woman. Gaze means to see for a long time. However, in its connotation, it refers to a method of carrying power or desire entanglement to watch. It is usually the product of vision-centrism, in which the viewer is granted the privilege of seeing and establishes his subject position through seeing. “When the viewer becomes the object of seeing, he experiences the power pressure brought by the viewer’s vision and

5 Richard Brautigan. *Trout Fishing in America, The Pill Versus the Springhill Mine Disaster and In Watermelon Sugar*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin/Seymour Lawrence. 1980. Kindle Edition.p2324.

6 Richard Brautigan. *Trout Fishing in America, The Pill Versus the Springhill Mine Disaster and In Watermelon Sugar*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin/Seymour Lawrence. 1980. Kindle Edition.p3068.

materializes himself by internalizing the value judgment of the viewer.”⁷ And the theory of feminism is gazing at natural academic context, gender oppression of women are male in gender studies, and gaze theory subject about the other, the control of women by men gaze of desire and power, on the one hand, is the object of desire of male gaze, on the other hand from belonging to male under the rule of the main body. In *Abortion* and *In Watermelon Sugar*, the male protagonist’s gaze on the female character is almost throughout the whole text, everywhere.

Vida in *Abortion* is an image constructed under the gaze of a man. This gaze, expressed in the form of praise, actually implies oppression. Vida’s outstanding appearance has been mentioned quite a few times. As the standard description of her beauty: “she had dark hair, a perfect face, and a body that was not as full as it should have been.”⁸ and “She had a look that men of this age most yearned for.”⁹ The beauty of women can be divided into many kinds, such as beautiful, lovely, intelligent, and so on. However, obviously, through the narrator’s description, we can only put Vida’s beauty in the sexy, sensual, provocative category. Apart from the fact that she is sexually attractive, it is hard for the reader to tell anything about her appearance. Besides, the author spends much time portraying how Vida’s unparalleled beauty can be attractive, even destructive, as she walks through the airport, all men’s eyes are drawn to her. “everybody was of course looking at Vida. I had never seen a girl attract so much attention before”¹⁰ Beside guys, Vida is also attractive to girls, when she appeared in the restaurant, all the women were jealous, “every man in the restaurant had been instantly alerted to Vida’s beauty and the woman, too, in a jealous sort of way.”¹¹ There is even a man to die for her, and before he died, the last sentence he said is also praised her beauty, the reason, why the author portrays Vida’s beauty using a large number of chapters in detail, the first is to show the men to women in the aesthetic appearance of concrete, demanding standards, secondly reflected the male to the female is in the shallow, superficial sensory aspects of aesthetic, and third, but also implied a male due to partner with a strong appeal to other men, and the resulting ownership of a subtle psychological sense of vanity.

Besides, in the narrator’s eyes, Vida is just a beautiful dumb woman. This coincides with the long-term and patriarchal society and to hold on women’s intelligence and appearance of a rigid point of view. In the once upon a time, the girl did not enjoy the right to education. To the later, people think that girls can’t in the achievement of science and engineering, to the modern times, men feel smart girl not pretty, not smart enough to mind beautiful girls. The narrator is a typical one who holds this kind of stereotype. He thinks that Vida has deviated from her due social attribute and highlighted her value as a sexual object. The male protagonist and Vida live in the bookstore for a long time. Although the protagonist is introverted and disconnected from the outside world, he does all the work in the private bookstore, a closed scene similar to the family, and the delicious coffee and delicious cookies are created by Vida. When the protagonist needed to go out and make a phone call, leaving Vida alone in the bookstore for five minutes, he worried that she would not be able to do even five minutes of basic work, the relationship between the narrator and Vida actually echoes once again the paradigm of the “nuclear family” in American society shown in *In Watermelon Sugar*, that is, the rigid pattern of men working and women cooking.

From my perspective, where have an oppressive will derive revolt. In *In Watermelon Sugar*, Pauline’s resistance to male authority is indirect and subtle. Although her main traits are gentleness and submissiveness, when her home is threatened, she finally steps out of her feminine kitchen and

7 Liu Mingming. *From Being Seen to Revolt: the change of the other in gaze theory*. Wuhan: Central China Normal University. 2016.

8 Richard Brautigan. *the Abortion: An Historical Romance* 1966. New York: Pocket Books. 1972.p115.

9 Richard Brautigan. *the Abortion: An Historical Romance* 1966. New York: Pocket Books. 1972.p115.

10 Richard Brautigan. *the Abortion: An Historical Romance* 1966. New York: Pocket Books. 1972.p115.

11 Richard Brautigan. *the Abortion: An Historical Romance* 1966. New York: Pocket Books. 1972.p115.

chooses to take on the responsibility of defending it with her male members. Her resistance is exceptionally subtle, compared to the male members' direct and courageous counterattack, all Pauline's awakening under the significant threat is just an expression of some anger. Another female figure, Margaret, can be seen as the opposite of Pauline, a female character who directly and strongly opposes male expectations. "I" (male protagonist) forbid her to go to garbage mountain, she still got her own way, every day went to garbage mountain to find treasure. As for Vida in *Abortion*, her resistance is twofold. One is that she has finally stepped out of the body hatred that male eyes bring and felt the confidence to herself she should have. The second was the abortion she had. In the United States in the 1960s, abortion was frowned upon by traditional Puritan doctrines and contrary to the family values advocated by the mainstream society, it was not a right for women. For the sake of her better, she did not hesitate to choose to lose the child in her belly, which had to be said to reflect a definite awakening of self-consciousness.

Brautigan did give the three women a chance to rebel, but they inevitably failed, once again becoming vassals in a male-dominated world. Pauline, a cautious rebel who ends up in the kitchen, is eventually a flattened character. Margaret, who does not follow the conventional sense, makes the male protagonist utterly bored with her, and the protagonist finally witnesses Margaret's death by hanging, but indifferent, miss the opportunity to save her and indirectly cause her death, she entirely becomes the ghost in the patriarchal world. As for Vida, Brautigan brought her back into the male eye in a different way -- she ended up working as a stripper in a night club.

To sum up, the three heroines in the two stories share the story of hippie women in the 1960s who suffered from the double oppression of society and men, and they were eager to resist and eventually failed. Though we are always eager to see other endings and expect the male author to create influential female representatives, Morrison's heroine who fights for freedom and succeeds never appears in Brautigan's story, nor in Kerouac's novel, nor in Ginsberg's poem. In 1960s America, authoritative and independent female images seemed to be appreciated only by women, while in the pen of male writers, beauty, tenderness and sexiness seemed to constitute the critical words of perfect women.

In the 1960s, men and women were not yet equal, gender dualism occupied a central position. The society with male chauvinism as the center held an ambiguous attitude towards the resistance of women, who were still struggling for freedom and equality. At the same time, the postmodern literature formed in the same period has broken through the soil and germinated. It has broken through the shackles of the traditional realistic literature and the modernist literature and continuously absorbed and rewrote the old literary forms, forming a unique and dazzling literary landscape.

6. Conclusion

This paper examines previous research results and proposed to start from the perspective of feminism and postmodern realism to analyze the novel *Abortion* and *In Watermelon Sugar* by Brautigan. The text uses a multi-analysis method, respectively, to conclude as follows. Firstly, the two novels all followed a male-centered perspective on gender issues, formed mode of binary opposition. The men in these two stories all play leaders in work, and the positive image of women, in character and appearance, are fitted with the performance theory proposed by Judith Butler. The theory is about women is not born as opposed to men, but rather regulated by society. Especially by men according to their desires. The two works specifically reveal the existence form of the rigid performance theory. For example, first of all, the male requires the female to put the housework first. Secondly, in terms of aesthetics, men require women to be beautiful and sexy. Furthermore, the male characters show their disregard for female characters' working ability and wisdom. Secondly, the author finds that the

novel follows the inherent pattern that women who try to break through the framework set by men suffer from inevitable failure, which further strengthens the androcentrism and performing theories.

This paper holds that the writing of literary works is inseparable from the soil of reality, and work with absurd color is bound to reveal more or less the imprint of the times and society. Brautigan combined fiction with reality to create three women who are both familiar and contain their characteristics. They are the false protagonists in the novel and the epitome of the vast number of women in American society at that time. Their plight shows the truth, showing that after two feminist movements in the 1960s, women's survival situation is still not optimistic. They struggle in the gaze from male, they resist, and finally succumb, becoming one faceless performer after another that serves a male audience. Although the 1960s have been far away, the ideal state of equality between men and women is far from being realized, the study of the situation of women still has rich significance, which is worth our continuous thinking and reflection today.

In today's world, the status of women in East Asia is still meager, and the preference to have a male baby are still prevailing. Some girls are never born and been killed as babies because of their gender. Girls in society are firmly bound in an invisible but sturdy cage. Their bodies are disciplined, and halter tops that are not long enough and not high enough at the neckline are often frowned upon. Their lives are arranged. Girls who unmarried or childless are treated as outliers. Others usually despise them, and even looked down upon by their families. In the United States, women have been discriminated against in the workplace, harassed in the office, and conservative forces have made a comeback in recent years. In many places, girls' reproductive rights have even been denied once again. Furthermore, in other parts of the world, the physical persecution of women imposed by circumcision continues. Given this, although this paper analyzes a series of oppressions in the patriarchal society and the failure of the female protagonist's resistance, the unsuccessful struggle still means awakening, so this paper holds a positive attitude towards their rebellion. Androcentrism in the western world the mainstream for many years, in contrast, feminism appears only more than one hundred years, and the history of feminist criticism is only a few decades, what are further theories and methods to shake the androcentrism, remains to be other researchers found and improvement in practice.

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