

An Exploration on the Resistances of the Characters in Small-Town Literature

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Abstract: In small-town literature, small town is sometimes symbolized as a trap, or metaphorized as an iron house or a madhouse, imprisoning the characters in it. In turn, all those characters endeavor to resist or rebell against such a capture or fetter in various ways. Their ways of deviance can be represented by imagination or fantasy, body or sex, escape or leave and reformation or revolution, which can be narrated as a conflict between the individual and community of small towns. From the conflict, we can read between the lines hero 's or heroine 's aspirations in small-town society.

Key words: Resistances; Fantasy; Body; Escape; Reformation; Small-town Literature

INTRODUCTION

In the eyes of some authors, small town is the pronoun of poverty or confinement, e.g. commodity deficiency and cultural poverty or culture lag, just as "an iron house", called by Lu Tsun, imprisons body and mind. As a result, the characters have to suffer the suffocating or unbearable atmosphere. In the small-town literature, such sufferings may turn into different resistant symptoms of some characters: imagination or fantasy, body or sex, escape or leave and reformation or revolution, which also reflects the tension between the individual of the townspeople and the community of small town.

IMAGINATION OR FANTASY

Imagination or fantasy can be a means to resist the dominant ideology, for fantasy is a private experiencing which can't be colonized by the outside power. In small-town society, it can become a kind of resistant strategy. The hero or heroine at times pictures or imagines a good life in her or his mind to refuse or transcend the dull everyday life. Imagination is generally construed as a form of liberation, a process whereby the mind breaks its shackles and can envisage situations and issues far beyond its evolutionary heritage (Mithen, 1996). Nonetheless, the temporary liberation in imagining can't find a real route out of the containment of small town. In a small town of Northeast China, Aunt Cui not only enjoys shopping and wearing the fashionable clothes and shoes but also expects to enter modern school for study so that she might have a colorful modern life. However, her aspiration for modern living is at odds with the feudal moralities of the town. An arranged marriage by her family leads to her sickness and death at last. As a weak woman in a small town, she can only use silence to resist the arranged engagement though she aspires for a modern free life in her heart. Similarly, in a small town named Orchard, little Tao Hong can't be married because her mother's prohibition on her marriage, for fear that she may also be abandoned by a man just like her fate. In her mother's confinement, she can just fancy weddings while she is sewing for other girls' trousseau. In the hamlet of Leyden, David and Maria have been in love for many years, for they visit and help each other in a loving way. Nevertheless, David never openly propose a marriage to Maria though she is preparing her trousseaus, waiting for his proposal and imagining their wedding. Their

regrets may be the consequence of Maria's filial duty of looking after her feeble mother. In some way, Ideal marriages can just stay in heroines' mind owing to the powerful hindrance of ethical or moral rules or conventions in small town. The institutions lag so far behind as to prevent free minds married. At other times, an ambition or a dream may as well remain an unfulfilled delusion on account of misunderstanding or extra burdens. Also in small town of Orchard, a teacher in a primary school as he is, Ho Wenlong tries to write his literary work, for his dream is to become a writer. But he can't finish his manuscripts because of heavy workload and family chores. The bankruptcy of his writer dream results from his burden which can't be shared by his wife or others. More often than not, the realization of great ambitions or dreams are blocked by the discourses of power in small towns, for the power of discourse can turn "somebody" into grotesque. In the small town of Winesburg Ohio, many "special talents" seem eccentric or abnormal, for they fancy a different ideal picture in their minds: "Out of the dream Wing Biddlebaum made a picture for George Willard. In the picture men lived again in a kind of pastoral golden age..." , "a great restlessness was in her and it expressed itself in two ways. First there was an uneasy desire for change... it was this feeling that had turned her mind to the stage... they didn't seem to know what she meant..." Unfortunately, their mind can't be understood and is ignored or thought of as queer for a laughter. The cultural poverty is shown clearly in the minds of townpeople. For another thing, the material poverty can make townpeople imagine modern life outside. In a mountain village of China, the countryside girls like Xiangxue are looking forward to the urban living in that she and other countryside girls are chatting curiously about the equipment on the train and the things brought along with the passengers while looking at the temporary stopped train. Especially for Xiangxue, to fulfil her big wish, she exchanges a basket of eggs with a pencil box on train because she can't buy it in her village. The ownership of a pencil box seems a big satisfaction or pride in the eyes of country girls: She wiped off her tears, took the weed out of her plait, then, holding up the pencil box, ran toward the crowd ahead." In a small town of South America, Mick can only by herself come discreetly to listen to some music from some rich house at nights because she has to take care of her baby brother during day time. Only from the music can she find some solace in her little lonely heart. Also, in another McCullers' writing, Frankie is always indulged in the fantasy of her brother's wedding and living in Alaska: the frozen ocean, the glacier, the Eskimo ice houses.... Contrary to her mind, she can't go with her brother there owing to her family's thwarting and her escape also proves a failure. All in all, on account of institution lag, cultural poverty or commodity deficiency, many townpeople may form a dreamy picture in their mind to imagine her or his ideal life so as to resist the dull or suffocating life in small town in that they can't shake off the fetters of moral or ethical duties. Sometimes, this inner resistance may turn into an out or open opposition to the power of small-town society.

BODY OR SEX

In the male-dominating culture, more often than not, female body is regarded as a symbol of sexual desire. On the one hand, men consider women's bodies and sexual desire as the source of men's degeneration and ruin. On the other hand, men have a strong hunger for women's beautiful bodies. In small town, heroines' sexual desire is looked upon as an evil as to be denounced or condemned. Simultaneously, the desire of the town people is projected on the bodies of heroines. Therefore, fettered in such a contradictory control of complete denouncement and possessive desire, women have to survive by means of her body, for they must depend on their body as an access to the men's world. In small-town writing, the characters especially heroines sometimes use their bodies as a means to make living or sometimes as a kind of weapon to confront with the moral orders of small town. In the Town of Qing River, Pan Jinlian puts on a dissolute show with Xi Menqing to feed their sexual desires, defying Confucian ethics during Ming Dynasty, but she is killed by her pre-husband's brother Wu Song who is a guard of the ethical order. Chi Yun, as a daughter of rice shop's boss in a small town, has relations with several men to feed her desire and to challenge the patriarchy only to be abandoned by her sex partners. In the Village of White Deer Plain, as an outsider, Tian Hsiao'er uses her body as a means of living in the patriarchal clan, only to be philandered and taken

advantage of. She becomes a victim in a phallogocentric society of a small town which can't tolerate her sexual rebellion. In a northeast town, Mu Ying is cross-questioned and humiliated by Red Guards for her sexual relations with several men, satisfying male voyeur's sex desire. It is also true in small towns of America. In the Town of Salem, because of adultery, Hester Prynne is jailed, stigmatized, and exiled. However, she wins the respect of the community by her kind heart at last. The brave facing the consequence of adultery repairs or reconciles with the community moral values. In the town of Winesburg, stirred by a desire, Alice Hindman who has been abandoned by her boy friend Ned Currie, runs a naked body adventure in the street on a rainy night. However, she can not satisfy her wish to be loved. Such a temporary release from body restraints leads her nowhere. In the Town of Bottom, Sula finds only comforts in sleeping with men after she becomes a whore, and dies without any one beside her, which shows she is a pariah discarded by her black town people. All of them try to liberate their bodies to some extent to give vent to their suppressed libidos, or utilize the body as a means to survive, which is denied by small town's moral and ethical rules that body should subject itself to the power of phallus centre that set the taboo of sexuality and nakedness. Crossing such a prohibiting boundary will be shunned, condemned or punished by the town people. In short, as a transgression of ethical orders, body resistance shows townspeople rebel against the community law in a desperate way, for they go too far beyond the forbidden zone set by the law-maker, threatening the social institution. Such a confrontation will lead the opponent to isolation or ruin in a male dominating society. More often than not, some town people choose to escape from the surveillance to avoid face to face conflict.

ESCAPE OR LEAVE

Escape or leave is a tactical way characters to dodge away from the small-town constrains or moral criticism, for the escapees can shrewdly avert a direct opposition with the community of small town. They run away or leave for different reasons or aims: for free life, for survival, for trouble or duty shun. In small-town literature, heroes or heroines can be forced to leave (exiled) or can leave at his or her own will. In Hardy's countryside writing, Eustacia Vye can't find her living at Egdon Heath content and blended into the local community. She tries every means to escape through the power of men, first marrying Clym, but bound by the married living instead, then attempting to elope with Wildeve, but drown dead. Eustacia's tragedy illustrates the overwhelming power of fate or destiny in the mystery of Egdon Heath. From modern aspect, the female weakness is also highlighted in the masculine society of the village, for she keeps herself away from the village while she has to take advantage of male power to flee her trap, which leads to the tragedy of death without doubt. Also in Southwest China, Deng Yaogu is determined to marry a citizen in the city of Chengdu so as to extricate herself from the countryside living. However, she ends up with the marriage with a stupid and honest man in Town of Tianhui. This inability to attempt to escape is more obvious in Anderson's small-town fiction. Elizabeth runs risks of dating with several men privately in order to run away from the town of Winesburg. Taken in by the married women's suggestions, she marries Tom Willard, a shop clerk in her father's hotel against her natural will. Her marriage is doomed to be a trap which fetters her until lamentable death. In the small-town stories of Canadian author Alice Munro, the theme of running away is prominent in marriage for heroines such as Carla, Grace and Juliet. They flee the town mainly out of passion or because of suffocating dullness in the town. But they seldom obtain what they want in their escape. In short, through the strategic marriage, small-town girls can't escape successfully to seek their ideal modern life. Even in the era of the women liberation and independence, Barbara's dream becomes disillusioned in leaving small town to accomplish her life ideal due to her blind sex satisfaction with men. Women's failure in running away from small town, to some extent, also reflects the formidable power of male-dominating town. On the other side of the coin, Leave or flight may symbolize a kind of growth in small-town narratives. The story that Huck runs away from the restriction and discipline of his father and Douglass also reveals his renouncement of the parochial morality and growing maturity in searching for independence of mind. As the narrator in the stories of Winesburg, George Willard's leave in some way

represents the author's expectation of Willard's self-reliable adulthood. On the contrary, Frankie's failure in running away from the town, to some degree, indicates her immaturity in achieving the independence of personalities and it also implies the inescapable loneliness in the town. In summary, escape or leave is the symbol of relinquishment of small-town living style all at once, underlying the independent wish or desire of heroines or heroes to seek her or his own modern free life. The failure or success in such a flight or leave indicates the power antagonism between the individual and the community. The failure shows the flabbiness of the heroine or hero. The success symbolizes the independence or maturity of individual personality. Such a passive act in resisting the small-town containment also implies some initiative compared with the imagination. But more active rebellions come from the reformation or revolution in an attempt to change the community of small town.

REFORMATION OR REVOLUTION

Harboring a great blueprint or ambition in their minds, reformists or revolutionists try their best to change small-town institutions or enhance the minds of townspeople. As a native of Egdon Heath (a British village), Clym Yeobright, fed up with the jewelry business living, returns from Paris to his hometown to become a schoolmaster in order that he can enlighten the countrymen's heart through education. But his strive is bound to be lost cause, for it goes against the historical tendency. When George acts a school master in Flat Crick, a hoosier village in America, he is challenged by the villagers' physical force, for the local position is determined by stronger body instead of intellectual mind. It is true as well in China. As a school teacher in the town of Lotus, Xiao Jianqiu is sympathetic with and helps the widow and her daughter left by his classmate who dies in the revolution battle. Nevertheless, his kind-hearted conducts only bring the reproofs from townspeople. As a result, he is forced to leave the place; in a school near a small town, as a head master, Jiang Bingru tries to carry out his liberalist education only to meet the feudal obstruction from the local gentry represented by Tiger Jiang. Even in the modern times, the new school master makes every effort to prevent the cherries from being picked by the villagers. Instead, the school is involved in the trouble of paying medical fee for the stealer's wound. In the end, the school has to treat the villagers with a feast to console the anger and resolve the problem. Above all, through education or example, the reformation or enlightenment can't alter the cultural poverty of small town once and for all on account that they encounter various hindrances from the local people one way or another. But other attempts at reformation or revolution are made. In a village of South China, being a open-minded landlord himself, Liang Cai makes every effort to coordinate the interests of the parties concerned in the small town to solve the thoroughfare problem of ships in the countryside canal. Nonetheless, he simply meets the cold shoulders. His efforts and cost prove in vain. In a small town of South America, Dr. Benedict Mady Copeland, a black man, strives to publicize the democratic thoughts and public ownership of Marxism among his race. But his remarks can't be understood by his country fellows thoroughly though they sound powerful. Carol Milford, bearing a dream for country town, marries into a small town named Gopher Prairie in Central America. She wants to put what she has learnt at college into improving the culture dullness and philistine atmosphere in the town. However, she is attacked by the gossips of the townspeople and is compelled to leave for work for a short time in a city in case that she might be infected with the village virus. The family love and duty makes her reconciled and return home in the end. All the ambitions or efforts to enlighten the townspeople or enhance the cultural living in small towns prove feeble and futile faced with the formidable obstinate power from local people. But at times, there are some promising events that show the improving hope of small towns. When a general comes to a distant town out of the way, he utilizes his resource and drive to help rescue the sick and to improve the transportation conditions as well as the reforest of the hill. His resolution and action move the townspeople though he dies without finishing his causes. Additionally, as a real case, Wendy Welch and his husband open a little bookstore in a small town called Big Stone Gap in Virginia. Their bookstore gradually changes townspeople's attitude toward reading, and as a result, they are accepted by the townspeople. Two stories above may suggest

that reformation or revolution go well under its way in a gradual progress in favor of the townspeople's interests and minds. In short, reformation or revolution indicates a hope of positive and constructive change to the small-town society.

CONCLUSION

Resistances of the heroes or heroines range from the inner imaginations to the outer confrontations, varying in the intensity of conflicts between the individual and the community. On the one hand, such conflict reveals the individual's aspiration for modernity in small towns. On the other hand, it also reflects the oppression or imposition of small towns on the individuals. The tipping side of the seesaw mainly rest upon the power of the community of the small town. Within the community, the individual character can choose to endure the moral pressure by imagination or fantasy to immune from the outer influences. At other times the individual resort to body or sex to release the oppressive desire. More often than not, he or she take tactical escape or leave to evade the confinement or containment. Sometimes the social ambition urges individuals to reform or revolutionize the current situations of small towns. All these deviances or aberrations reveal small towns' changes or developments in social minds of townspeople during modernization.

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