

Doomsday Redemption

—Moral Solicitude of *The Children of Men*

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Abstract: In her science fiction *The Children of Men*, P.D.James depicts the scene of doomsday from three literary perspectives: belief crisis, social crisis and emotional crisis. She also points out the way to achieve redemption: to regain belief, to return to emotions and to hold in awe of human life. This fiction inherits the great tradition of English novels by showing deep moral solicitude.

1. Introduction

P. D.James (Phyllis Dorothy James) is the most famous woman writer, enjoying the great reputation of “First Lady of Whodunit”. She won rewards of such fiction in English-speaking countries for many times. When interviewed by Paris Review, she said, “To write whodunit is an excellent experience for a serious writer because it is easy to write bad ones but difficult to write good ones, and compared with serious literature, whodunit is a better way to reflect the real society.” *The Children of Men* is one of such books, in which P.D.James displays to us one world with on children and future. The human race has become infertile, and the last generation to be born is adult. Oxford historian Theodore Faron, apathetic toward a future without a future, spends most of his time reminiscing. Then he is approached by Julian, a bright, attractive woman who wants him to help get her an audience with his cousin, the powerful Warden of England. She and her band of unlikely revolutionaries may just awaken his desire to live, and they may also hold the key to survive for the human race. In this novel James not only portrays the world of the doomsday, but also points out a way of salvation by inheriting moral solicitude tradition of English literary.

2. Three Crisis

In *The Children of Men*, P.D.James shows three crisis: belief crisis, social crisis and emotional crisis.(all the quotations are from *The Children of Men*(2006))

2.1 Belief Crisis

In this novel, the world suffers severe compact in belief crisis, “...a young deer from the Magdalen meadow had made its way into the chapel and was standing peacefully besides the altar as if this were its natural habitat. The chaplain, harshly shouting, had rushed at it, seizing and hurling prayer books, thumping its silken sides. ... tears streaming down his face: ‘Christ, why can’t they wait? Bloody animals. They’ll have it all soon enough. Why can’t they wait?’”(p.36) The chaplain was so desperate and helpless. While at the same time, religion is used as a tool to make money. “For the first two years after Omega we had roaring Roger.... Roger still has a following for his weekly Tv slot. He was moulding himself on the popular idea of Testament prophet, pouring out his comminations in a powerful voice.... His message is simple if unoriginal: Man’s infertility is God’s punishment for his disobedience, his sinfulness. Only repentance can appease the Almighty’s rightful displeasure, and repentance is best demonstrated by a generous contribution towards Roger’s campaign expense.” “Rosie McClure, the evangelist, is in town.... Rosie is the latest and most successful of the television performers who sell salvation and do very well out of a commodity which is always in demand and which costs them nothing to supply. ... by the end of the rally the happy converts are generally throwing themselves into each other’s arms and casting notes into the collection buckets with reckless enthusiasm.”(p.49) The driver who comes to take the narrator

spoke with extraordinary bitterness, “Perhaps His experience went spectacularly wrong. Perhaps He’s just baffled. Seeing the mess, not knowing how to put it right. Perhaps not wanting to put it right. Perhaps He only had enough power left for one final intervention. So He made it. Whoever He is, whatever He is, I hope He burns in His own hell.” (p.91) The ordinary woman Miriam says this way, “Believe in God? No, it’s too late for me. I believe Julian’s strength and courage and in my own skill. But if He gets us through this maybe I’ll change my mind, see if I can’t get something going with him.” (p.188) After reading through the novel, it is not difficult for us to know that all people are struggling in the belief crisis from the clergy to common people.

2.2 Social Crisis

Doomsday is coming and the social life was in a mess. In this novel, P.D. James describes as follows, “All over the world nation states are preparing to store their testimony for the posterity which can still occasionally convince ourselves may follow us, ... We are storing our books and manuscripts, the great paintings, the musical scores and instruments, the artifacts. The world’s greatest libraries will be in forty years’ time at most be darkened and sealed. The building, those are still standing, will speak for themselves. The soft stone of Oxford is unlikely to survive more than a couple of centuries.” (p.2) People are preparing for the last day of the world, and has lost basic desire of life. “Our interest in sex is waning. Romantic and idealized love has taken over from crude carnal satisfaction despite the efforts of the Warden of English, through the national porn shops, to stimulate our flagging appetites. But we have our sensual substitutes; they are available to all on the National Health Service. Our aging body are pummeled, stretched, stroked, caressed, anointed, scented.” (p.7) Life is no longer one precious thing. “It was in that year, 2008, that the suicide increased. Not mainly among the old, but among my generation, the middle-aged, the generation who would have to bear the brunt of an ageing and decaying society’s humiliating but insistent needs.” (p.8) At the same time, the young generation is no longer a hope of society. “Perhaps we have made our Omegas what they are by our own folly; a regime which combines perpetual surveillance with total indulgence is hardly conducive to healthy development. If from infancy you treat children as gods they are liable in adulthood to act as devils.” (p.11) In such a society, everyone feels in danger, there is no hope for everyone and the society. Theo’s old-aged colleagues dare not let other people know their inconvenience and embarrassment for fear that they will be considered as social burden and have to go to Quietus (kill themselves in an organized way).

2.3 Emotional Crisis

Personal emotions is as well endangered. The narrator of the novel doesn’t love his mother, holding such a feeling towards her: “I didn’t love her but I did steal for her. I learned early and at the kitchen table that there are ways of avoiding, without guilt, the commitments of love.” (p.24) It is the same to his child. “I didn’t feel affection for my child, although I would have felt more had she been prettier—she was a miniature caricature of Helena’s father—more affectionate, more responsive, less inclined to whine.... She had been dead for twenty-seven years and I still think of her with complaint.” (p.29) If one man does not love his mother and child, it is hard to say he could show warmth to others. From indifference to his mother and child, he develops a personality who does not want to be responsible for others. “I know, or I think I know, when my terror of taking responsibility for other people’s lives or happiness began, although I may be deceiving myself; I have always been clever at devising excuses for my personal shortcomings.” (p.25). The narrator holds no love for his wife Helena. “Why did I marry her? I married her because she was the Master’s daughter and that conferred prestige; because she, too, had taken a degree in history and I thought we had intellectual interests in common; and because I found her physically attractive and was thus able to convince my frugal heart that, if this wasn’t love, it was still as close to it as I was never likely to get.... Being the Master’s son-in-law produced more irritation than pleasure; her intellectual interests were non-existent.... The sexual attraction? Well, that lasted longer, although subject to the law of diminishing returns, until it was finally killed when I killed Natalie (his daughter)” (p.115) “I am fifty years old and I have never known what it is to love.” (p.133). As a

man without love, Theo lives in great emotional crisis.

3. Three Ways Out

The famous scholar Lu Jiande says, “For one great writer, it is not enough to be aware of the evil. He must make his reader realize that it is the light from tradition that makes the evil nowhere to escape. In British literature tradition we often feel that light and strength of moral care. If it completely disappears, the works which discovers evil will lose its striking power.”^① P.D. James is one writer who holds moral care. After portraying all the crisis in doomsday, she points out ways of redemption which includes: regaining belief, returning to true feelings and holding awe in human life.

3.1 To Regain Belief

In belief crisis, though the strength of belief is weak, it is there and never disappears. “A small number of colleges with more than usually eccentric collegers or an obstinate determination to ignore reality still used their chapels for worship, some even reverting to the old Book of Common Prayer.” (p.34) One old priest insisted on using old Bible. In their escape, Julian and Luke still do their prayer, “He saw them. They were only fifty yards away from clearing and the car, kneeling in a small green patch of moss. They were totally absorbed. Luke had set up his altar—one of the tin boxes upturned and spread with a tea-towel. On it was a single candle stuck in a saucer. Beside it was another saucer with two crumbs of bread and, beside that, a small mug. He was wearing a cream stole. ... They were totally absorbed in some primitive game; their faces grave and dappled by the shadow of the leaves. He watched as Luke lifted the saucer with two crumbs in his left hand, placing his right palm above it. Julian bent her head lower so that she seemed to crouch into the ground.” (p.174) “The words, half-remembered from his distant childhood, were spoken very quietly but came to Theo clearly. ‘Hear us, O merciful Father, we most humbly beseech thee; and grant that we receiving these thy creature of bread and wine, according to thy Son our Saviour Jesus Christ’s holy institution, in remembrance of his death and passion, may be partakers of his most blessed Body and Blood; Who, in the same night that he was betrayed, took Bread.’” “Even Rolf, who is stubborn and has no religion, also sees Luke as the miracle-worker who would turn dry crumbs into flesh, the bringer of luck, the possessor of mystic powers and ancient charms, whose very presence among them could propitiate the dangerous gods of the forest and the night.” (p.175) When Luke died, Julian told Theo, “Luke would want us to say the Burial Service. His prayer books is in his pocket. Please do it for him.” (p.194) So Theo begins to read. “At first his voice sounded strange to his own ears, but by the time he got to the psalm the words had taken over and he spoke quietly, with confidence, seeming to know them by heart.” (p.194) In escape, Theo puts all his hope on the small shed, and in haste he begins to pray: “Oh God, he prayed, please let it be there, let it still be there.” It was the first time he had prayed in forty years, but the words were less a petition than a half-superstitious hope that somehow, by the strength of his need, he could will the shed into existence. At the end of the story, Julian gives birth to a new human being. She asks Theo to christen for her baby: “Christen the baby for me. Please do it now, while we’re alone. It’s what Luke would have wanted. It’s what I want.” Faced with the newborn life, Theo was moved, “His tears were falling now over the child’s forehead. From some far childhood memory he recalled the rite. The water had to flow, there were words which had to be said. It was with a thumb wet with his own tears and stained with her blood that he made on the child’s forehead the sign of the cross.” (p.241)

3.2 To Return to True Feelings

When we consciously are aware of other people, of their rights, obligations and interests our action and choice will be restricted.^②

^① Lu Jiande, *Highly Hanging Drawing Cloth*, p.106

^② Lu Jiande *Sneaking Squid* P.88

Theo was once indifferent to others around him, and didn't want to hold responsibility for them. But in his contact with Julian, he began to learn how to take care of and sympathize others. His sympathy began with his feelings towards his parents. Through retrospection, he realized, "It occurred to him now, for the first time, how little joy his parents had had in their lives and how little he, the only child, had contributed to that meagre store." (p.79) He begins to become guilty to his wife and child. "He had been more ready to hurt his wife's feelings and deprive his daughter than to inconvenience a pub bar full of strangers. He wished there could be one memory of his dead child which wasn't tainted with guilt and regret." (p.70) For his old colleague Digby Yule, a retired classics don from Merton, he becomes full of sympathy. "It occurred to him that it was in his power to say: 'If you're not comfortable where you are there is plenty of room with me in St. John Street. I'm on my own now. It would be pleasant for me to have some company.'" But before this when his tutor wanted to move in, he firmly refused.

After he holds considerations for others, even in fleeing Theo can harvest generous feelings. "I still know practically nothing about them: their parents, their families, their education, their loves, their hopes and desires. Yet I have never felt so much at ease with other human beings as I have been today with four strangers whom I am now, still reluctantly, committed and one of whom I am learning to love." (p.176) The seeds of love begin to sprout. "The emotion he felt towards her was as mysterious as it was irrational. He needed to understand it, to define its nature, to analyse what he knew was beyond analysis. But some things now he did know, and perhaps they were all he needed to know. He wished only her good. He would put her good before his own. He could no longer separate himself from her. He would die for her life." (p.226)

3.3 Holding Awe in Human Life

Theo loves Julian and holds awe in her baby. When he knows she was pregnant, he cannot help but "... kneel, unconsciously, not thinking of it as a gesture of homage but knowing that it was right that he should be on his knees. He placed his right arm around her waist and pressed his ear against her stomach. He couldn't hear the beating heart, but he could hear and feel the movement of the child, feel its life. He was swept by a tide of emotion which rose, buffeted and engulfed him in a turbulent surge of awe, excitement and terror, then receded, leaving him spent and weak. For a moment he knelt there, unable to move, half-supported by Julian's body, letting the smell of her, the warmth of her, the very essence of her seep into him." (p.154) "That moment when he had knelt at Julian's feet, had felt her child move under his hand, had bound him to them irrevocably." (p.159) He knows that he only needs to be loyal to Julian and her child. When Julian is in her delivery, Theo gives his hands, holds her from behind, "...their faces were so close that it was his sweat mingled with hers that from time to time he gently wiped away. The primitive act, at which he was both participant and spectator, isolated them in a limbo of time in which nothing mattered, nothing was real except the mother and her child's dark painful journey from the secret life of womb to the light of day." (p.227) The baby was born, and full of life and hope. "The baby had needed no encouragement to suck. He was a lively child, opening on Theo his bright unfocused eyes, waving his starfish hands, butting his head against his mother's breast, the small open mouth voraciously seeking the nipple. It was extraordinary that anything so new could be so vigorous....They lay half-doing in a wordless calm and it seemed to Theo that there rose from the child's warm flesh, transitory but stronger even than the smell of blood, the strange agreeable aroma of the new-born, dry and pungent like hay." (p.230)

4. Conclusion

Like realistic novelists of Victorian era P.D. James holds a meticulous look into the society and shows a strong awareness of social criticism and moral solicitude. Like one steel-wire performer P.D. James not only focuses on the amusement value of novel, but also its literary function of reflecting social reality. She pays much attention to the spiritual status of modern people. She creates "round" characters in *The Children of Men*, Like Theo, Julian, and Mariam. All of them have clear personality and a strong background. P.D. James is not only a detective fiction writer, but

also a novelist with moral responsibility and moral solicitude. She inherits the tradition of moral solicitude from British novelist Jane Austen and is a successor of Victorian tradition. In this novel, she tries to jump out of modernist moral horizon, and explores the ways of moral rebuilding and moral returning. To James, doomsday doesn't mean a hopeless situation, it maybe means rebirth.

References

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