

Being Bullied, Despair and Harming Each Other: the Lament of Underclass Females in China

Zhang Hongyong

College of Humanities, Yunnan Agricultural University, Yunnan Agricultural University, Panlong District, Kunming City, Yunnan Province, China

535250550@qq.com

Keywords: *Slow boat* to Hong Kong, Literature of women at the bottom, despair, stirring strains

Abstract: With Zhou Zixiang's novel collection *On a Slow Boat to Hong Kong* as the object, this paper analyzes the female images in the novel and finds that the novel mostly portrays tragic female images of "being insulted and battered". Its observation and reflection on the society reveals "the solidity and opposition between classes making their mobility and reconciliation hopeless". At the same time, it also describes a phenomenon worthy of attention among the characters at the bottom of society, that is, "the underclass characters harming each other". As a kind of "artistic reality", the novel is still based on "real life"- the author makes her experience from the underclass of the society source of her novel. Her works reflect the living conditions of the underclass females to some extent, especially her experience of being bullied, her despair toward the future life and the inter-harming among the weak females at the bottom of society. Zhou Zixiang's novel collection is a lament of females at the bottom of society in China.

1. Portraying the tragic characters of "being insulted and damaged"

Dostoevsky, a famous Russian writer, creates many classic figures "who are insulted and damaged". "He describes the tragedy of bullied and insulted characters from two aspects: psychological tragedy and social tragedy."^① Zhou Zixiang has created many female characters at the bottom who are insulted and damaged, whose tragedies are not only caused by themselves, but also by the social environment, such as Molly in *On a Slow Boat to Hong Kong*, Ningmei in *It is Snowing in her World*, Lvyue in *Flowers of Women*, Wanlin in *A Woman Named Wanlin*, Li Qiao in *The Gate of Destiny*, and Baturu's mother and Su Xue in *Baturu's Secret*.

Unattractive Molly with low education in the short story *On a Slow Boat to Hong Kong* comes to Hong Kong from Wuhu in the mainland and works on a cruise ship, and she is appointed to such departments where attractive appearances are not necessary as room service department, laundry room and kitchen".^② In these departments where too much technology is not needed, what she does is all laborious and dirty work. Molly's hands will be swollen once she passes plates,"^③ Here, women should work as men. In order to change this situation, she exchanges herself with the vice-captain for better living condition, but she is abandoned by the vice-captain. In despair, she jumps to the cold water on a rainy night.

Lvyue in *Flowers of Women*, whose husband Qiao Xiaoliang betrays her and elopes with a rich woman Zeng Li, opens a flower shop and makes a living hard in the flower market with her pretty appearance and profligate laugh. Such an unfortunate woman meets Shen Zijian, owner of a furniture shop, who is "generous" and mature and shows his concern for Lvyue who loses emotional dependence. Lvyue thinks that she has met a good man, but Shen Zijian is also a man playing with women's affection, taking away her potted plants and flowers worth over ten thousand Yuan. Then Lvyue is stuck in the emotional and economic dilemma again. At this time, a middle school teacher Mo comes into her life with his meticulous care and "romance". He can talk much about a potted flower-"willows are soft and curling in every household, just like the waist of a 15-year-old girl".^④ "The picture in his PPT is not a monarch orchid, but the silhouette of a woman leaning against the door frame and quietly looking at the distance, behind whom is a cluster of flowers. The silhouette

is Lvyue looking at the world outside the flower shed." ^⑤ Mo completely moves Lvyue whose emotion contains lust." ^⑥ Lvyue gradually comes out of the shadow caused by her former husband Qiao Xiaoliang and finds emotional dependence from Mo. However, she finds that he is only keeping secrets from his wife and having affairs in the past two years when his wife goes abroad and that she is actually a "superfluous person" and Mo is just a moral hypocrite. Ironically, in the past two years, Mo has been rated as a model teacher by the school, and his dignified and hypocritical image has been the cover of a magazine. Lvyue's first love is defeated by the external material temptation to her husband Qiao Xiaoliang. Then she is cheated in middle age by Shen Zijian, a mature man. After being struck both emotionally and economically, she thinks that she finally meets a good man who can heal up her broken heart, only to find that she is cheated by Mo who is more secretive, camouflaged and dignified. It can't be harder to find a woman more miserable than her.

Wan Lin, a married woman in the novella *A Woman Named Wan Lin*, falls in love with a married man, Dr. Jiang, because such a mature, steady and careful man can perceive her subtle emotional changes and he behaves weak like a "child" when they are together, which makes Wan Lin, a kindergarten teacher, suddenly exude her maternal care. With their relationship going closer, Wan Lin divorces and has an idea to marry him. But "Dr. Jiang has a ruler both in his mind and in his eyes." ^⑦ The two rulers can measure the objects who he has an affair with at any time and Wan Lin is just one of them. Although ordinary, the story shows Wan Lin's image of being insulted and damaged.

In the short story *The Gate of Destiny*, the heroine Li Qiao "has a stall in the cold wind. The mobile phone shells and all kinds of small pendants on the stall are blown in disorder by the wind and she stretches out her hands to pull them back one by one." "It is a pair of thin and frozen-red hands". ^⑧ An urban management officer named Liu Huansheng sympathizes with her and helps her with her stall after work in the evening. As time goes by, they fall in love. Then Liu Huansheng is transferred to the Municipal Institute of Chemical Industry due to his good performance at work and is married to the head's daughter soon, becoming the director of Infrastructure Department. He has never forgotten Li Qiao who did a small business at a stall with him a few years ago. Years later, they meet again at a massage shop. Married Li Qiao is massaging the guests with sunglasses. "My husband is mentally retarded and our son is also a fool." ^⑨ After breaking up with Liu Huansheng, she "is heartbroken, and loses her soul." ^⑩ Then she works in a massage shop, "It was said my work was just regular massaging, but it was not up to me after working here. A guest took a fancy to me and asked me to have sex with him. I didn't want to do that and scolded him. But I didn't know that he was a gangland. He brought people to hit me the next day. They hit me with a broken beer bottle whose glass poked into my eyes. I lost my left eye". ^⑪ This scene reminds people of the famous case of Deng Yujiao. Just like the title of the novel "The Gate of Destiny", Li Qiao can't walk out of this destiny gate in her whole life. At the end of the novel, Li Qiao is blind. She even says, "I believe in the destiny".

Zhou Zixiang also creates another kind of insulted and damaged females whose perpetrator is the "invisible" society in her novels. In the short story "On a Slow Boat to Hong Kong", "Molly's mother collects the scattered flour in front of the mixer in the flour factory where she works. When she pours it into the mixer again, the mixer rolls her hands and the huge traction quickly engulfs her hands in the machine." ^⑫ The seemingly accidental family changes are actually the plight of the underclass. "Baturu's Secret" is another kind of narration of working novels. The story doesn't happen in a city or factory. It is about a little boy named Baturu, who is called a murderer by his classmates. All the children in the school shout, "Baturu's mother is a murderer, Baturu's mother is a murderer." ^⑬ Baturu's mother is "a dirty and eccentric woman" who has no husband. The protagonist of the novel, Su Xue, is a woman who escapes from a city and becomes a teacher at a primary school in the prairie and whose husband He Yiman is a gambler. Two sad women drink together, talk to each other and uncover the secret of Baturu's mother. "It doesn't matter to be poor. Why do you have to leave us to work in the city so far away? I just want a family together!" ^⑭ "But what should we do if not going to the city? We have a large number of family members, the old and the

young. We need money to feed everyone. How can we afford that? Why don't those factories open more in the village? Then my husband doesn't have to go so far to work."^⑤ "All year round, he doesn't come home even once. All the farm work is mine. I have to do farm work and raise children. I can't straighten up because of the heavy work. He goes to the city for work, leaving his parents for me to support. When my father-in-law died, there was no one to carry the coffin. I ran around to ask the villagers for help. I am just a woman, but everything is on my shoulders! I can't do it." "I waited for him year by year, but I never saw him. I even didn't know whether he lived or not. I would rather he died in front of me. At least I could guard his grave!"^⑥ "Yes, I killed him. But I didn't want to do it. I just didn't want him to go! He only came home once in a few years and he had to leave again after only a few days. I had no idea how to keep him stay. I put sleeping pills in his food, not to poison him. I just wanted him to sleep. If he missed the train, he would not leave! But I put too much...".^⑦ This is a kind of recessive violence against women. "Left-behind women" are harmed due to social development, unbalanced regional economic development and other various problems resulting from migrant working, which, a sad "reality", should attract the attention of the contemporary society.

2. The solidity and opposition between classes making their circulation and reconciliation hopeless

If it's the opposition between the underclass migrant working group and the company's managers or bosses, there is almost no reconciliation and integration between the two classes in Zhou Zixiang's novels, or the rising channels for the former are closed. Molly in *On a Slow Boat to Hong Kong* can have a relatively decent life as a civil servant in a mainland city like Wuhu. Once her family falls into an economic downturn, she has no choice but to go to another place for work. Molly wants to change her job from a waitress passing plates at a cruise ship in Hong Kong to an administrative and civil servant in the manager's office. So she has sex with the vice-captain. In the end, without getting what she wants, she has an abortion and suicides in the sea. Molly's boyfriend A'chang is willing to work in the cruise restaurant. He hopes to save money, marry Molly and go back to his hometown. But Molly doesn't want it. Li Xiuniang in *The Best Cook in the World* participates in the cooking competition in Tampines Area, Singapore. If she wins the first prize, she will have the opportunity to change her identity as a migrant worker and obtain the Singapore green card reasonably and legally. What's dramatic is that she fails due to her disciple's "making trouble" at the last moment. For girls like Li Xiuniang, they don't have a strong desire to change their current status through hard work. What they want is very simple, that is, they can earn more money to improve the living condition of their family. These working girls are different in Zhou Zixiang's works and in Zhang Tonghe's works in which the girls in the latter need to support the family and to obtain more experience. "According to a survey, males express that getting a higher income is the main purpose of working away from home, while females are eager to 'have more life experience'". Unlike males, females have no home to return to. According to Chinese tradition, when a male gets married, he will take his wife with him to his parents' home; he will always have a home in the village where he was born. Once a female grows up, she will never go home to live with her parents - nowhere is her home until getting married." These girls regard going out to work as their life experience before marriage because it is difficult to go out of the family after marriage.

Perhaps Zhou Zixiang is not intended to change the fate of these girls at the bottom society through some books about them. She just speaks out intentionally or unintentionally for many times. For example, in *The Daughter of the Singapore River*, she expresses her idea through Xiaoou - "when going abroad, she (Xiaoou) knows that there are more than six million Chinese like herself in the world scattered in unknown places. Are they looking forward to a dawn just like her in such a long night?" "Migrant working, a word full of vicissitudes, is the sigh of countless females spending their youth on the machine, the assembly line machinery and tiring operation in workshop of the factory". Xiaoou and Jiang Shaohua, a Singaporean engineer, fall in love. When they are going to see the Jiang's parents, "the case about a Chinese girl Liu Hongmei shocks Singapore". The girl from the northeastern China, a factory worker, is brutally killed by her boss, a Chinese Singaporean.

Through preliminary investigation, the police find that it is a crime of passion, which may result in her death due to forced marriage". If these female workers want to change their fate, they can only depend on marriage, just like Liu Hongmei. In *On a Slow Boat to Hong Kong*, Molly tells the vice-captain that she is pregnant and asks him if he can divorce and marry her. The vice-captain says no and asks Molly to have an abortion. In the end, Molly jumps into the sea and dies in despair. In *The Story of Loss*, He Benchang and Sun Qianqian work together and fall in love. He says, "She doesn't need to board the cruise ship we work on anymore. Maybe next time she comes back, she will no longer be a waiter, but Mrs. Lin, wife of Lin Yuenan, a bank clerk in Hong Kong." This is a case of changing identity through marriage. "For many people who come to Singapore to make a living, what they want most is becoming a PR (permanent resident of Singapore) and then a citizen of Singapore. How difficult it is to be a PR? Besides working experience for many years, a lot of advanced studies and examinations are also needed. On this road, losers are everywhere, but there are still many people going on and on." We can see how difficult it is to change one's identity. The only thing left is suffocating despair.

The circulation between different classes is almost closed in Zhou Zixiang's works. On the one hand, she writes about the hardships of working overseas, and warns all overseas workers, especially women that it is extremely difficult to integrate into the local society, the whole country and even become its citizens. She reminds them of their identity and their task to exchange foreign currencies into RMB and send them back to the mainland every month.

3. Mutual harm of women at the underclass society

Zhou Zixiang's novels also portray such a kind of characters, that is, the working girls or the "common people" living at the bottom of the society cheat and harm each other. Bi Xiaoni in *The Daughter of Singapore River* is harsh on Xiaoou whose work number is 429. She makes various obstacles to stop Xiaoou from mastering the operation skills. She hopes that Xiaoou cannot pass the examination during the internship period, so that she will be sent back to the mainland. At the same time, with the emotional care of a female worker Fanyuan who makes "love dumplings" for her and the guidance from Jiang Shaohua, a Singaporean engineer of the electronics factory, Xiaoou pass the exam successfully. When she thinks everything goes well and she is going to be promoted to the group leader, she is informed that the one who becomes the group leader is Fanyuan who picks up the head's daughter from school after work every day" and makes dumplings for the head". In Bi Xiaoni's view, all the female workers "create difficulties for each other". In Ding Yan's book *Factory Girls*, she writes about how the working girls create difficulties for each other. The author "sneaks into" an audio-visual box factory as a girl who is looking for a job. The heavy physical work almost exhausts the female workers. "Every time I try to close my eyes, or eat something, or take out my cell phone to watch the time, the group leader will appear suddenly and shout at me. "You have to be careful, someone will snitch." When Fang tells me the secret, I feel colder and colder." All the female workers in the factory "keep eyes on each other and then report to the group leader privately to get the benefits they want. They are not angry at the fact that they have to punch in six minutes in advance for so many years. Instead, they always stare at the new, weaker and ignorant people. What the documentary literature describes is very similar to what Zhou Zixiang portrays in her novels.

In the novella *The Story of Loss*, "He Benchang from a small county in Shaanxi Province and Sun Qianqian from a distant mountain in Sichuan Province are perfect lovers among mainland Chinese working in Hong Kong. They work as waiters on a luxury cruise ship in Hong Kong." At last, Sun becomes Mrs. Lin, wife of Lin Yuenan, a bank clerk in Hong Kong and He goes back to his hometown and opens a small supermarket. He marries a "rich woman" with mental problems who is also miserable and amorous. She has mental problems because she liked a married man. Her father, a boss doing coal business, gives He Benchang some money and requires him to marry his daughter. He Benchang opens a small supermarket with the money and supports his wife with mental problems in a small town. Originally, everything is good. Unexpectedly, two insurance salesmen, Li Mengyao pretending to be a college student from Lianhua University and Ding Yi who

is a saleswoman familiar with He Benchang cheats him 180,000 Yuan. By following Li Mengyao, he finds out their secret. Then he cheats Li Mengyao to the wild and finally rapes her. He Benchang is just a man who loses his girlfriend and gets some pension money by marrying a woman with mental problems. But it is surprising that he is cheated by two women. At last, he retaliates wildly. It is a kind of mutual harm among the typical "common people" at the bottom society. This kind of writing and observation by Zhou Zixiang is not the imagination of the novel and Ding Yan's documentary literature has made a good proof. As a universal human nature, the "intrigue" among the bottom characters is often more cruel, merciless and even without any rationality, and often goes crazy.

Women are vulnerable groups of the society and what women at the bottom of the society suffer from should be paid attention to instead of being ignored. Although novel is a kind of art, the artistic creation originates from life and it is a reflection of the real life. Therefore, the misfortune of the bottom females should be avoided to be a common misfortune in the real society.

Acknowledgement

Fund project: This paper is a phased achievement of the Social Science Youth Program of Yunnan Agricultural University (2015SK09).

References

- [1] Qin Yu, The Affronted and Harmed Tragic Characters. Foreign Literature Studies. 1991(10). P42.
- [2] Hou Zixiang, Going to Hong Kong by a Slow Ship. Writers Publishing House. June, 2018.
- [3] Leslie T. Chang, Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China. Shanghai Translation Publishing House. March, 2013. P 58-59
- [4] Ding Yan, Factory Girls. Foreign Languages Press. March, 2013. P27, 27