

The Main Characters' Identity Dilemmas in *Stone Sky Gold Mountain*

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In the gold-rush era, a large number of Chinese people pour into Australia to obtain a large amount of wealth. However, the reality is that they had to endure prejudice and work hard to find gold in this strange land in order to obtain fortunes. *Stone Sky Gold Mountain* expresses the hardships of the Chinese people in that era, and also reveals their identity dilemmas. Based on the identity, self, and the other in the post-colonial theory, this paper analyzes the identity dilemmas of the main characters, such as Lai Yue and Ying, and seeks their identity choices and self-worth.

Keywords: identity, self, the other, racial discrimination

Introduction

Stone Sky Gold Mountain is a novel published by Mirandi Riwoe, an Australian female writer, which is set in the gold-rush era in Australia and deals with timeless questions of identity and belonging. Its writing style is special with three storylines. It seems that every character's story is separate but actually it is closely connected and worthwhile being discussed. It introduces the siblings Ying and Lai Yue who tried to make a living in the strange country to repay their family's debts in order to save the whole family. However, this land was not so wealthy as they had expected. What they aimed to do was to make more money to go back to their hometown. In Australia, they were put in a tight spot without gaining the respect of the natives. In the end of the story, the two siblings confronted different kinds of dilemmas, and made their identity choices. What's more, other characters were also in dilemma to find their identities in the remote and unfamiliar country, such as Meriem, Sophie, the indigenous people and others.

Literature Review

To further understand the identity dilemmas described in the history novel, some of the previous studies of the novel will be provided. First of all, it is necessary to share some researches in China. Qian Chaoying analyses the identity of Australia from different angles, pointing out the continent's multiple post-colonial situations and multiple identities. Qian declares that "Australia's 'cultural war' involves the disposal of indigenous people" under the influence of the "White Australia Policy" (2009, p. 8). What's more, although the

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Chinese were the first people to enter the Australian mainland outside the local aborigines (Qian, 2009, p. 9), they were unfairly treated during the gold-rush era. In some degree, it is understandable as even the native aboriginal people were expelled by the white. In the novel, it is obvious that the Chinese gold diggers have to possess a permit to dig gold; otherwise they will be expelled. Kong Weigui announces that "during the gold rush in Australia, Chinese suffered from serious racial prejudice and discrimination" (2010, p. 96). In addition, Kong asserts that the conflict of economic interests between Chinese workers and white gold miners is the direct cause of the anti-Chinese movement. Besides, racism and the huge cultural differences between China and the West also depend on the anti-Chinese movement (Kong, 2010, p. 98). There is no doubt that the tendency of racial prejudice is caused by many of other reasons, but here in the novel, most of Chinese people at Qing Dynasty were too coward to protect themselves and they were influenced by feudal thoughts deeply. Thus, many of them had to suffer from the oppression of the white people. For example, the braids of Chinese men had become the object of common ridicule by the white people in the novel. And if the braids were cut, it was impossible for them to return to China as that was unacceptable.

To be mentioned, there are few studies of this book abroad that can be found, but it is crucial to mention the question of identity and the other in the post-colonialism theory. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Wadie Said emphasizes that the colonized are called "the other" by imperialism, so we must abolish the established "the west"/"the other" binary opposition model and the complex network of racial and religious prejudices (Bressler, 2006, p. 240). In *Stone Sky Gold Mountain*, Chinese people and the aborigines were regarded as the others who were badly treated and lived like an animal without respect, but Lai Yue and Ying took efforts to find their identities by returning to the homeland rather than serving the white people in Australia. The two female characters, Meriem and Sophie, also tried hard to make a living by themselves. While with the simple descriptions of the aborigines in the novel, most of them were killed crudely; they even had no right to resist the white and lost their identities in the land.

In a word, this paper generally discusses the identity dilemmas of the main characters and their identity choices at the end of the 19th century. It includes the destinies of Lai Yue and Ying, as well as their identity choices. Simultaneously, the identity crisis of the female images and the indigenous will also be simply provided to compare the sufferings of the outsiders and the aborigines. By analyzing their destinies, we can understand the history of that era when Chinese gold miners suffered from the ghost of the "White Australia policy" even though it had already been abolished, as well as the effects of racism which alerted us that history cannot be forgotten.

Lai Yue's Identity Dilemma

As an elder brother, Lai Yue took the responsibility of taking care of his little sister Ying who pretended to be a boy and attempted to make more money for going back home. However, it was very difficult for Chinese gold miners to find big gold in the area of rubble and there were so many miners that gold was not enough for them to share. Therefore, Lai Yue cherished every piece of gold he dug out and he had to stand hunger only with a thin porridge to support himself every day. After suffering from terrible situations for a long time, he made the mistake of stealing which makes him regret it a lot. He was under the heavy stress to protect Ying and make money as he even had no ability to resist the oppression of the white officers. Such as, each gold he had dug was probable to be grabbed. Later as a carrier, he was too lonely and desperate to live in the world, and then he committed suicide.

In general, Lai Yue was only a representative of Chinese gold miners in the strange land who had to endure the discrimination, poverty, and hunger. It was the terrible experiences that let him get into trouble and determine to die. As the other, he was excluded by the white people and failed to find his own identity in the country. In fact, death is another way of searching for self.

A Competent Brother

Lai Yue was the only relative of Ying on the continent and was responsible to accompany her. In the land, the siblings suffered from hunger and poverty, but Lai Yue still tried his best to make Ying better and stored gold to go back to the homeland. In the plots, their meals were only porridge which could not fulfill the stomachs, so Ying treasured every meal; even sometimes it was only some water. For example, "Ying sips the porridge from the lip of the bowl. She glimpses something black in the rice and...imagining that it's a cube of preserved duck egg...Only three more mouthfuls...the porridge is finished"¹ (Riwoe, 2020, p. 28). Before leaving China, they thought that Australia was full of gold resources and they could become rich to save their mother and brothers. In fact, they had to think how to make good use of each meal; otherwise they would die in hunger.

When Ying was ill by accident, it was difficult for Lai Yue to pay for the medical expenses but he still took efforts to cure her. "Each time he hands over a piece of gold, he feels as if he is parting with that exact shape of his younger brother's flesh. He decides to offer the doctor some of Chee Fatt's money" (Riwoe, 2020, p. 97). Although they had experienced such a dilemma, Lai Yue had to give the hard-earned money to the doctor to save the injured Ying. For the sake of Ying's health, they left the barren gold-mine area to Maytown even if they might be bullied. What's more, he helped her find a stable job in Jimmy's shop but finally, he became a carrier, suffering from terrible conditions.

Reading through the book, the responsibility hurt himself indirectly. For instance, when he knew that an aggressive Chinese, named Chee Fatt, did not aim to return home, he decided to steal his money and succeeded. In some degree, the action of stealing was comprehensible as he could not bear the sufferings anymore and only wanted to return home as soon as possible. He had to take the responsibility to gain money and then save the whole family. But there was no doubt that the thievery destroyed Chee Fatt's life even if he was regretful about that. Later, he yearned for more money so he gambled and then lost everything. He even regarded himself as the burden to Ying, for example, "He thinks of Ah Kee's last words—that he owes Ying. Has he been speaking with Ying? Perhaps they are both trying to get rid of him...Has he become such a burden?" (Riwoe, 2020, p. 173). However, such inferiority complex was led by his heavy stress. In such dilemma, he had to make more money; even the ways were wrong. In his opinion, he was the eldest son; he had to save money even though he had to starve and work for the white people which will be laughed by other clansmen.

A Desperate Vagrant

In the description of the novel, Chinese people were despised and treated unequally. As an elder brother, Lai Yue was mature that he saw through everything but failed to avoid being bullied. He knew that he was in dilemma so he was not sympathetic to others, such as "[D]on't be stupid, Ying. We can't help him. We have our own things to carry. It's too unsafe to wait around" (Riwoe, 2020, p. 125). Nevertheless, he could not get rid of being hurt both physically and spiritually by the white people.

¹ Riwoe, Mirandi. *Stone Sky Gold Mountain*. Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 2020. References are hereafter given parenthetically in text.

While he served the white as a shepherd even if he was not willing to work for them, he felt like he was a stranger when “[E]ach insect bite that pockmarks his skin, each welt that scores his flesh, reinforces how unwelcome he is, how his banishment is almost complete” (Riwoe, 2020, p. 211). He even ate only for sustaining himself as “the joys of eating will not be his until he returns home, among his mother, brother and sisters” (Riwoe, 2020, p. 215). Lai Yue was deranged when his purse was dug by the two white partners, bellowing that “I’ll kill them, I’ll kill them” (Riwoe, 2020, p. 377), but he was too weak to fight against them.

Finally, he decided to hang himself with a rope to die, so “[H]e draws the end down towards himself on the other side, pokes it through the other loop until the length of rope catches tight to the branch” (Riwoe, 2020, p. 445). Taking all of his life experiences into consideration, it is acceptable that he has been in despair for a long time. After he lost the precious property, he lost the faith of living as it was impossible for him to make money any more with delicate health. He rejected to live like a zombie again and then he determined to release himself. Therefore, the action of suicide is actually a kind of self-liberation.

Ying’s Identity Dilemma

In the novel, Ying had to disguise herself as a boy; otherwise she was not permitted to dig gold and would be treated differently from boys. As a little girl, there was the risk of being raped and bullied. Thus, she could only pretend her as a boy to avoid being injured. Sometimes she wandered about whether she would freely live in the land by understanding that “freedoms, she realizes, that are associated with both a lack of family to watch over her, and with disguising herself as a boy” (Riwoe, 2020, p. 259). During the journey, she did not come to term with the poverty and hunger but attempted to support her by herself. However hard she had experienced, she was still warmhearted to others, such as the maid Meriem. Besides, she tried to make money by herself and work diligently.

Besides, she was brave and virtuous, such as she was helpful to everyone even though the person was despised by other people. In the barren land, she considered her as a common person who obeyed the unequal rules even if she was suspected of injuring Sophie. With the help of her friends, she was lucky to return to her homeland. Just as the saying goes, “God only helps those who help themselves”. One of the reasons why she succeeded was that she had the courage to confront the dilemma and lived by herself.

An Innocent and Kind Girl

It is obvious that the novel not only exposes the discrimination of different races and women, but also shows the hope of a harmonious relationship between each other regardless of one’s cultural background. Ying’s innocence and kindness reveals that she is still hopeful and confident to live harmoniously with others in this remote land.

On the way of going to Maytown, Ying witnessed someone who was too exhausted to hurry on with his journey and collapsed by the side of the path. She pleaded Lai Yue to help the person, saying that “brother, we can’t just leave a man here. He will die” (Riwoe, 2020, p. 125), but it did not make sense as they were risking their head. In Ying’s opinion, despite how hard the life was, she would provide the help to them. What’s more, after working in Jimmy’s shop, she was acquainted with Meriem. When Meriem was in danger, she gave a hand to her, declaring that “I was helping a lady. The one who comes here sometimes... There’s something about the woman that Ying finds pleasing” (Riwoe, 2020, p. 213). Later, they formed a strange relationship as they felt in love with each other.

In other words, the love between the two female characters was worthy of being discussed. Ying was eager to be free instead of staying at the shop everyday, so she sneaked off to relax at night. For example, “[S]lipping along the streets in the dark, peering into shops or establishments to see how others bide their time...It’s looking in on how the Europeans spend their time that she finds fascinating” (Riwoe, 2020, p. 193). Here it is apparent that she was interested in knowing of the foreign people. Therefore, after meeting with Meriem, she was happy to make friends with her. Due to her innocence and kindness, they built a harmonious relationship and when she was in trouble, Meriem would do everything she could do for her. Although, the life was difficult, she was satisfied and optimistic to stay in Maytown with friends.

A Self-Keeping Wanderer

At the beginning of the story, Ying was attentive to find more gold and never worried about the food they ate even if they could not reduce hunger. From the portrait of finding gold on the hot days, the hardness was evident, such as “she drops to her knees and scrabbles through the dirt, ignoring the sharp pangs that travel up her forearm from her injured fingertip. Her insides clench with excitement, but she is patient” (Riwoe, 2020, p. 31). When she was too weak to continue the journey, “[S]he takes the preserved plum from her pocket and, her arms heavy, she edges it past her lips. She has to roll it in her mouth three times before there’s enough saliva to taste the sugar, the aniseed” (Riwoe, 2020, p. 127). She imagined every meal as the delicious food she ever ate with her mother.

While working in the shop, she had learned to observe what she saw, noticing Jimmy’s attitude to the European because “his act is a shield, that he becomes everything they expect of him” (Riwoe, 2020, p. 163). During the process of making a living, Ying grew up and comprehended that they were excluded, such as she interrogated the white by saying “[W]hat if I born here? Will I belong Maytown?” (Riwoe, 2020, p. 201). In fact, as an outsider, it is difficult for her to be accepted by others. Moreover, she even could not protect herself when she was suspected of injuring a woman even if she just walked through the place where the accident occurred. What she could do is to leave this land to rebuild her life with the help of her real friends. In general, the way she found her identity was to keep a real self without being injured by others despite how terrible she had experienced and confronted.

Other Characters’ Identity Dilemmas

Besides the siblings, there are other characters that support the development of the story. The novel briefly describes the destiny of the aborigines and divides a storyline to introduce Meriem. From the description, the Chinese and the indigenous were cruelly treated. The white people looked down upon Chinese, such as “them chows always have gold around, the greedy buggers...Greedy fucking buggers” (Riwoe, 2020, p. 197) and they always bullied the weak Lay Yue, but actually the gold was not easy to be gained, as it was their patience and diligence that helped them possess a few golds.

At the same time, the indigenous people were also belittled by the white blatantly. In addition, at the end of the 19th century, women’s status was lower than men’s, especially the prostitute and the maid, such as Sophie and Meriem. They were all regarded as the others who could not be accepted by the native rationally. The aborigines were even deprived of the right to life and freedom.

Indigenous People Without Right of Existence

It is acknowledged that the indigenous people existed before the white people in Europe “discovered” the

new continents, and suffered from a great deal after the establishment of the white immigrant countries, especially after the enforcement of the "White Australia Policy". This novel implicitly portrays the terrible experiences of the indigenous. In the movie *Australia*, the aborigines are very close to nature, but the appearance of the European breaks the balance between the aborigines and nature. Meanwhile, they even had no right or identity to survive on the continent. Simultaneously, Chinese people in this country had to face unequal rules, such as

Ah Kee smacks his lips on the rice wine. His cheeks are flushed. "It's unfair...I can't believe that we are taxed so much more heavily than people from other lands. I simply can't believe it. It's unfair. Many of the diggers here are as foreign as we are, speak other languages, cook different foods... 'But they are white'". (Riwoe, 2020, p. 157)

The country was dominated by the white people and the Chinese had to listen to them regardless of the inequality.

On the way to Maytown, the aborigines were attacked by the white people with guns, while the white did it only for fun, such as "the guard's mouth widens into a wolfish smile, revealing a chipped tooth. 'The niggers got a dressing, that's what happened'" (Riwoe, 2020, p. 135). Although Lai Yue was fearful of the black, killing an aborigine in a flagrant way was unbelievable to him. For example, "[H]e saw the native man stumble, look down incredulously at the cavernous bullet wound the white man's rifle had blasted into his chest. His blood a splatter of pomegranate seeds" (Riwoe, 2020, p. 171). Nevertheless, such brutal behavior really happened and the dignity of the indigenous people was trampled upon. For them, they even had no rights to stay in Australia but disappear in others' sight. In a word, the identity dilemma was no identity.

Women in Low Status

Due to the influences of patriarchy and feudalism, women's status was lower than men's. In this novel, Chinese people were regarded as heathens which made common white people alienate or even despise them. It was similar that women were also looked down upon by others. Women like Sophie and Meriem were marginalized without certain identities based on the descriptions.

In the novel, Sophie was a prostitute to serve men, but she still shewed respect to Chinese people for the sake of making money, claiming that "[I]f I don't take their custom, I'd not make any money..." (Riwoe, 2020, p. 251). It sounds ridiculous that the women's status was lower than the Chink in the white people's eyes. But her flattering attitude to the wicked Clem revealed her inability to the authority. Sophie was incapable of fighting against Clem, such as "[U]sually so merry and matter-of-fact with her other custom. Reduced to a pretty washcloth around that man" (Riwoe, 2020, p. 261). It is similar to Sophie that she had to endure Clem, "for each time Clem visits Sophie, it's as though he tightens his hold on her. Treats her as his chattel, refusing to pay his way" (Riwoe, 2020, p. 259). Although she was badly hurt by Clem, the police would not think he had done this.

To be mentioned, the maid Meriem was the same as other people who were biased toward the Chinese at first. But after the acquaintance with Ying, she changed her mind and formed an intimate relationship with her. When Ying was in danger, Meriem took a risk to remind her to protect herself, coming Jimmy's shop and requesting him that "[T]ell Mei Ying she mustn't visit me. It isn't safe. Tell Mei Ying" (Riwoe, 2020, p. 425). The friendship between Meriem and Ying shows women's self-help, even if their capacity is limited.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the main characters' identity dilemmas are clear and everyone resists the external pressure with obstinacy. When Lai Yue could not bear the poverty and hunger, he is so desperate that he decides to commit suicide to pursue freedom; when Ying has to get rid of being caught, she continues to live in another place by herself; when the aborigines are attacked, they are unable to fight against the authority but accept their destiny; when Sophie and Meriem are despised, they still keep real to others even if they themselves are in dilemma. In general, everyone confronts the identity dilemmas and makes their own choices reasonably.

The deformed relationship between Ying and Meriem reflects the intimate feelings beyond race as the racial discrimination is meaningless. They accompany each other and rely on each other in the strange town. Since the journey to Lai Yue, he could not bear the pain, put the burden on himself, and longed to go home. However, he constantly encountered misfortune, and finally despaired, taking suicide as a relief. These main characters confront their identity dilemmas but they are brave to make a living by using their own methods.

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