

# Norma Jean's Identity Pursuit in "Shiloh"

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Bobbie Ann Mason is one of the representatives of American new southern writers. Her short story "Shiloh" is about the broken marriage of a southern American family. Starting from the family reasons and under the background of the times, this paper reveals the identity crisis faced by the heroine Norma Jean under the pressure of her broken marriage, economic pressure, and the social transformation of the Woman's Liberation Movement. In order to get out of the identity crisis, Norma Jean is struggling in pain and seeking identity in confusion, which challenges the traditional male hegemony. The heroine Norma Jean's identity construction shows her awakening of female consciousness. Woman's self-identity and self-independence have been realized, and the transformation from traditional women to new women has gone through the process of awakening, growth and independence.

*Keywords:* identity crisis, identity pursuit, identity construction

## 1. Introduction

Bobbie Ann Mason didn't start writing novels until she was nearly forty years old. Her first work was published in *The New Yorker* in 1980, and her first novel collection, *Shiloh and Other Stories*, was published in 1982. *In Country*, published in 1985, was adapted into a movie of the same name. She won the Hemingway Award for *Shiloh* in 1983 and the NEA Award in the same year. In 2000, she was shortlisted for Pulitzer Prize for Literature with her memoir *Clear Springs*. Through the analysis of Norma Jean's identity pursuit in the novel, this paper reveals the individual's destiny trend under the background of the conflict between traditional culture and modernization, and reveals the literary and practical significance of Mason's novel creation. It is of great significance to the study of American short stories in 1980s and contemporary southern literature.

## 2. Norma Jean's Identity Crisis

The great changes in her family made her confused and lost. Getting married early made Norma Jean lose the opportunity to receive an education and made her lack the process of growing up. "He married Norma Jean when they were both eighteen, and their child Randy was born a few months later" (Mason, 1982, p. 8). Under the trend of sexual liberation, an unexpected pregnancy disrupted Norma's life rhythm. Under the pressure of the traditional view of chastity, they chose to marry for the sake of their children, for their responsibilities and obligations. However, Norma also regrets her youth because of her identity as a mother. She said to her

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husband Leroy "But I have this crazy feeling I missing something" (Mason, 1982, p. 7). She felt that her life was missing and incomplete. As a full-time wife, Norma lives a passive life and devotes her time to her home. She lacks opportunities for social contact and communication. She is psychologically imbalanced and anxious and lacks a sense of security.

As a long-distance driver, Leroy refused to work after experiencing the psychological trauma of a car accident. Even if the wife repeatedly advises her husband to find a job, the husband is still unmoved. The unemployed husband puts Norma facing family financial pressure. Norma changed from a housewife to a pharmacy worker. The identity of the husband changed from breadwinner to wounded king. The traditional family structure of men and women begins to disintegrate.

The great changes in society are pushing her. Woman's Liberation Movement makes her struggle with the transformation of traditional women and modern women. When Norma was leaving Leroy, he asked "Is this one of those women's lib things?" Leroy asks. "Don't be funny" (Mason, 1982, p. 17). Norma Jean herself was in a state of contradiction. She was in the second wave of feminism at that time. However, women themselves were not very determined, not very active, not very engaged and understanding. The wife fits certain thoughts of feminism, but the awakening of this feminine consciousness is not thorough enough, and it is in the embryonic and early stage.

### 3. Norma Jean's Identity Pursuit

Norma Jean's identity pursuit is reflected in the transformation of traditional gender roles. Different from traditional women and men, Norma Jean fitness is an invasion of men's sphere of influence, which also contrasts with the strength and state of physically injured husbands. Norma exercises her pectoral muscles. She warmed up with a "three-pound dumbbells" and then transitioned to "a twenty-pound barbell". "She reminds Leroy of Wonder Woman." Even Leroy "dodging as she swings the barbell in an arc" (Mason, 1982, p. 5). Muscularity and strong physique are obvious male characteristics, and plump curves or slender body are female characteristics. Norma's figure shows obvious male characteristics. The tender beauty of women disappeared in her body. Building muscles helps Norma purify the body and mind. It not only strengthens her physique, relieves stress, and regulates her mood, but also helps to cultivate her persevering habits, self-transcendence, and the will to face difficulties. "However, once the masculinity is weakened for various reasons, such as the loss of sexual ability, the loss of strong physique and the decline of economic ability, the originally balanced patriarchal family relationship will be impacted and even disintegrated" (Wang Zhongqiang, 2014, p. 37). Physiologically, the strong Norma is in sharp contrast with the injured Leroy. The physical strength is conducive to Norma's establishment of family prestige and tilts the balance of family status and rights to her.

Norma Jean's identity pursuit is also reflected in her interest cultivation. She studies music and writing and participates in such creative activities. She plays a musical instrument. At first she played "Christmas songs" then learn every tune in "the sixties songbook" and "adding variations to each" (Mason, 1982, p. 7). She goes to night school for "an adult-education course in composition" "She spends her evenings outlining paragraphs" (Mason, 1982, p. 13). Norma is clear about her goals and acts quickly. When she cannot resolve the conflicts within the family, she seeks to change herself. Music can give people strength, vent their inner happiness, sadness, tranquility and forge ahead. Norma cultivated his sentiment in the performance of music,

gained life enlightenment, and enriched his spiritual life. Reading and writing helped her heal her soul, express her emotions, and record beauty. At the same time, these creative activities enabled her to increase her self-confidence and sense of accomplishment, and to gain growth. No longer constrained by limitations at home, and no longer being an angel in the room, the broad social living space enables Norma to obtain nourishment from it, and to be inspired by her talents.

In addition, Norma Jean's identity pursuit is manifested in the reduction of her dependence on her husband and her mastery of the right to speak. "Norma Jean drives, and Leroy, sitting beside her, feels like some boring hitchhiker she has picked up. He tries some conversations, but she answers him in monosyllables" (Mason, 1982, p. 16). Under the patriarchal culture, women are more dependent on the family and men, and are in a dominant position. It is more difficult for women to give up the sense of security brought about by dependence in the relationship between the sexes, while men are more independent. After the car accident, Norma took on the important responsibility of family finance and worked in the pharmacy and gained financial independence. Norma's reduction of dependence on her husband shows her mature and independent characteristics. The attitude of the wife can also be seen from the dialogue between husband and wife. "I want to leave you. No, you don't. Yes, I do. I won't let you. You can't stop me. Don't do me that way" (Mason, 1982, p. 17). Different from the traditional women's solemnity, the gentle and elegant style of acting. In the face of her husband's efforts to save the marriage, Norma showed a decisive and resolute attitude. It shows the courage of post-Southern women to break through the shackles of traditional marriage, showing their expectations for life and a yearning for freedom.

#### **4. Norma Jean's Identity Construction**

Norma Jean's identity construction reflects the germination of female consciousness and her reexamination of family relations, which is also the manifestation of opposition and autonomy. "Am I also the king who dominates everything here?" "It was a self mocking question" (Kalb, 1995, p. 118). Leroy is aware of the complete loss of his social status, family status, and economic status. He had a foreboding that Norma would leave him soon. "The men in Shiloh are marginalized in both life and career, and become the 'second sex' and 'other' of women" (Yang Li, 2012, p. 215). Norma has a strong physique, internalized education, and gained her own female value through study and work. With the progress of society, Norma's self-survival ability has become stronger. The gap between husband and wife's physiology, spirit and abilities has also become larger, and conflicts have become more intense. The prevalence of the feminist movement made Norma no longer passively endure, but accept it. The awakening of self-consciousness makes Norma want to grasp the initiative in life, dominate her own destiny, challenge the traditional patriarchy, and pursue a new life.

The author Mason sets up suspense at the end, and the open end pushes the fate of the characters into the unknown once again, leaving room for readers to imagine. "Now she turns toward Leroy and waves her arms. Is she beckoning to him? She seems to be doing an exercise for her chest muscles. The sky is unusually pale-the color of the dust ruffle Mabel made for their bed" (Mason, 1982, p. 18). She waved to him maybe just excited about the scenery she saw from the cliff and wanted to invite Leroy to enjoy it. Or she is still just doing fitness exercises. The author did not give a clear answer to the ending of the marriage of Norma and Leroy. Scholars have mixed reviews for his open ending. Robert Towers thinks that Mason open ending to cater to the

special hobby of magazines such as the New Yorker, which makes her novels lack of diversity (Towers, 1982, p. 40). Albert Wilhelm thinks that it is an important way to maintain Mason's artistic choice and philosophy (Wilhelm, 1998, p. 100). As a post-Southern literary writer, she did not choose a grand theme story but used simple and simple stories to reveal some social phenomena and social problems to arouse people's attention, change and self-modeling.

## 5. Conclusion

Norma Jean, as the epitome of the social women at that time, showed the confusion and loss of women's identity. Norma Jean's pursuit of identity shows women's survival dilemma and their efforts to strive for their due status in the embryonic period of feminism. She gradually broke the silence, challenged the patriarchy, she is no longer passively attached to men, found a new sense of identity and belonging. Norma Jean's self-salvation embodies the concern for the fate of women, expressing the yearning for freedom and reflection on the value of life. Women's mastery of their discourse power and the awakening process of their identity consciousness show Norma Jean's unswerving pursuit of gender equality and spiritual independence.

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