

An Analysis of Gender Displacement in “Shiloh”

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Bobbie Ann Mason is an outstanding contemporary American writer of the New Southern tradition. In 1983, she won the Hemingway Foundation Award for her short story collection *Shiloh and Other Stories*. The short story “Shiloh” discusses the change in social relationships between men and women. In her work, Mason pays particular attention to how social and environmental changes affect people’s social roles and gender attitudes. This paper explores the crisis of gender displacement in “Shiloh” from the perspective of identity, thereby reflecting on gender relations as a whole.

Keywords: “Shiloh”, gender displacement, identity

Introduction

Bobbie Ann Mason is a famous contemporary American novelist and one of the most representative figures of the New Southern writers. She was born on a farm in Kentucky, a southern state of the United States. Therefore, she has a deep understanding of traditional values, agricultural civilization and customs in the Southern area. This is one of the reasons why her works mainly focus on the lives of the American struggling class. Mason’s first collection of short stories, *Shiloh and Other Stories*, was published in 1982 and she won the Hemingway Foundation Award in 1983. “Shiloh” is one of the stories in this collection. In this story, Mason pays attention to social and environmental changes’ influence on people’s social roles and gender attitudes.

When Mason wrote “Shiloh”, the United States was going through a large-scale feminist movement. Women left their homes and began to pursue a new female image of economic independence, freedom, and equality. The traditional family order fell apart. In terms of values, sexual liberation became more and more intense, penetrating into the lives of ordinary people. People’s views on marriage also changed, and the divorce rate kept rising. This was also a huge impact on the traditional Southern civilization.

In the traditional patriarchal family structure, masculinity occupied a dominant position in the binary opposition to femininity. This made women are in a subordinate position for a long time. “The masculinity that maintained patriarchy included men’s sexual ability, competitiveness, economic ability, psychological health and so on” (Wang, 2014, p. 38). However, once masculinity is weakened for various reasons, like loss of sexual ability and decline in economic ability, the originally balanced patriarchal family relationship will be impacted, or even fall apart. In Bobbie Ann Mason’s short story “Shiloh”, this balanced relationship is broken, and the heroine who was originally weak, gradually takes the dominant position in the family. The relationship between the couple goes from balance to imbalance.

The King Is Wounded

Leory's strength gradually weakened in the marriage relationship due to the physical and mental wound. Before the accident, Leroy was a truck driver for 15 years. He and his wife, Norma Jean, lived a traditional married life. Leroy was the main source of income for the family, and his job driving long-distance trucks showed that he had both physical strength and strong determination. His name means the king in French. During that time, he was the center in the family. Because Leroy's masculinity and Norma Jean's femininity fit perfectly into the traditional balance of a patriarchal family, their relationship was built on a stable structure.

However, the balance is broken for the car accident. “He injured his leg in a highway accident four months ago...He has a steel pin in his hip. He will probably not be able, to drive his rig again” (Mason, 2001, p. 144).

This accident dealt a heavy blow to Leroy's masculinity. For one thing, Leroy's physical condition changed after the accident. Following the crash, he underwent surgery and no longer possesses the same robust physique he once had. It is particularly worth noting that the accident resulted in surgery on his hip socket, where steel pins were implanted. It can be inferred that Leroy's sexual capacity has been impaired. But the sexual potency is precisely a core component of dominant masculinity. “Leroy's original sense of self was built upon traditional, phallus-centered patriarchal ideals” (Bently, 2004, p. 159). For another, the accident also undermined Leroy's economic ability and social status. From a traditional perspective, a man's dominant role in the family is determined by his economic value. If he loses this economic ability, it also means he loses his dominant position within the family. His career as a truck driver had once provided him with a substantial income, placing him in a dominant position within the family's financial structure. However, after the accident, he was too afraid to drive again, and the original economic dynamics of the family were overturned.

Besides, Leroy's mental state also changes significantly. “His legs had nearly healed, but the accident had left him so fearful that he never wanted to drive a long-haul truck again” (Mason, 2001, p. 146). What also seemed strange was that Leroy, who used to have a rugged personality, now became lost in fantasies. For example, he became obsessed with the idea of building a toy log cabin at home. In the short 18-page text of “Shiloh”, the phrase “a log cabin” is mentioned as many as thirteen times. Building a house of his own was his most genuine desire and his way of trying to give his wife a sense of belonging. For him, building the log cabin meant rebuilding his position in the family and restoring his identity as a husband. Another sign of Leroy's psychological change was that he began to buy marijuana, using drugs to numb himself. Therefore, Bentley (2004, p. 150) argues that “His masculinity has also been castrated mentally”. From above examples, it can be seen that Leory is losing the traditional prior status in the family physically and mentally.

The Invader Is Awakening

As Leroy underwent the changes in his masculinity, his wife Norma Jean usually grew more dominant. The balance of power in the family began to tilt in her favor. Norma Jean's name is the real name of Marilyn Monroe, which suggests she embodies delicate, beautiful, and sensual femininity. However, the author also points out that “Norma” derives from “Norman”, linking her name to the Normans, who are invaders. This implies that Norma Jean has intruded into the traditional sphere of male power, and thus Leroy will lose his dominant position in the family. Norma Jean has not use direct confrontation with Leory, but taking up a series of activities that pointedly do not include Leroy (Morphew, 1989).

To begin with, Norma Jean begins to display dominant traits through her body. “Building herself up” has become a regular part of Norma Jean’s life (Bucher, 1991). She starts exercising and showing off muscles that symbolize masculinity. According to Foucault (1980), the body vanishes as a biological entity and becomes instead a socially constituted product which is infinitely malleable and highly unstable. In the story, Norma Jean seizes every free time at home to persistently work on her pectoral muscles. “I’d give anything if I could just get these muscles to where they’re real hard” (Mason, 2001, p. 144). Stirred by Leroy’s accident, she is determined to make herself strong and fit. The weight set and pulleys originally intended for her husband’s recovery therapy are now used by her instead. Norma Jean’s body grows powerfully sturdy, while her husband becomes noticeably thinner and has to walk favoring his injured leg. This comparison reveals the woman’s strength in the family is awakening.

Besides, Norma Jean’s wisdom is emerging. She spends more time on herself gradually. Wisdom is indispensable for a controller. Hence, education has become one of the powerful weapons used by inspired women to fight against men (Yang, 2012). In “Shiloh”, Norma Jean does not have a high level of education, but she gradually begins to take night classes and enrolls in adult education courses. In the evenings, she spends her time writing articles or reading books. She shifts her focus from leisure and entertainment toward improving her mind. Over time, this change creates a growing gap in cultural and cognitive levels between her and her husband.

Meanwhile, Norma Jean’s attitude for food also reflects her changing attitude. “Eating is about more than physical nourishment or sensual pleasure. Instead, it is about power: power over life, and power over death, power over the self and over the Other” (Cozzi, 2010, p. 6). In the story, Norma Jean used to prepare for food that her husband likes, without thinking her own taste. But then, she focuses more on her own job. She goes out early and “eats a cereal, leaving the bowl on the table” (Mason, 2001, p. 122). This change makes her husband realize the importance of her cooking. It also reveals that Norma Jean has the opportunity to choose whether to cook or not. Her life changed from the man-centered mode to the self-centered mode.

Conclusion

This paper explores the rigid and unhealthy gender relationship in “Shiloh” and examines the manifestations and causes of the gradual reversal of roles between men and women within the family. Leroy is shattered by the accident but his wife is gradually improving. This opposition ultimately leads to the tragic end for the couple. In reality, gender relations are like a scale. Harmony can only be achieved through balance. Superiority does not guarantee happiness; whether male or female, the pursuit of equal status must take the other’s feelings into consideration, so as to achieve lasting harmony.

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