



Construct Women's Subjectivity during the Quest-Gender Writing in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*

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ABSTRACT

Since its publication in 1966, Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* has aroused widespread concerns and discussions in both China and abroad. This book being regarded as the pioneer work of the post-modernism and masterpiece of black humour, relevant research serves to figure out its post-modern features from uncertainty, entropy, linguistic games to narrative traps. The present study is concerned about politics, history, law, religion, race, and racial oppression contained in the novel, as well as the author's innovation of the quest mode, while ignoring how the heroine Oedipa strove to construct her subjectivity during her quest for the secret of Tristero System. This paper will focus on gender writing in *The Crying of Lot 49* with the assistance of feminist criticism, Jacques Lacan's psychological analysis as well as the concept of cultural hegemony by Antonio Gramsci, which together point out that the main achievement of Oedipa's seemingly absurd quest is to break away from the constraints of patriarchy and gradually construct her own subjectivity as a woman.

Keywords: Thomas Pynchon; *The Crying of Lot 49*; Women's Subjectivity

Introduction

Widely identified as a magnum opus of post-modernism, Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* has elicited interest all across the world and is still intensively analyzed today. Born in 1937, Pynchon suffered from World War II, and he grew up in a turbulent society with various anxiety and simmering conflicts. The professional background of physics provided him with a unique perspective. According to second law of thermodynamics, the whole world is an isolated and closed system in which the entropy keeps irreversibly increasing, and finally the universe will be devastated in heat death. For Pynchon, the growing entropy symbolizes the overload of information in the society and the lack of effective communication and mutual understanding among human beings. To withstand this devastating tendency, Pynchon advocates the quest for meaning and the pursuit of significance. *The Crying of Lot 49* is also a story of quest, yet the protagonist, strikingly different from the traditional pattern or any other book of Pynchon himself, is a woman, while all the main characters she encountered in her journey are males. In addition, the destination of her trip is neither the wealth her ex-boyfriend left her, nor the myth of Tristero System, but her mental awakening and the acquisition of female subjectivity. The shift from inertness and obedience to self-awareness and rebellion Oedipa conforms to the doctrines of the second wave of Feminism, which strove for the internal rights of women as well as the end of their subservient state. Therefore, it is worthwhile to analyze the gender writing in this book and to reveal the feminist allusions and metaphors in this book.

Previous research focuses on the post-modern techniques or linguistic features of *The Crying of Lot 49*. For instance, the spells and riddles in this novel which contribute to its uncertainty were meticulously scrutinized by Dan Hansong (2007) and the metaphors and images were profoundly analyzed by Kong Lixia (2007). Its connection with and representation of society and history are also under adequate research. For example, by studying the historical writing of *The Crying of Lot 49*, Liu Fengshan and Duan Guohua (2013) discovered Pynchon's concern about racial problems like Native American's existence, African American's bitter history and the Jewish people's racial disaster during WWII. However, Pynchon's gender writing hasn't got sufficient attention. Although Liu Xuelan (1998) has noticed the outstanding identity of the protagonist as a woman and connected it with the social movement of feminism, she didn't delve into the text to analyze how Oedipa's gender contributed to

her unique quest different from any other literary texts. This paper is going to analyze Pynchon's gender writing in *The Crying of Lot 49* with the assistance of feminist criticism, Jacques Lacan's psychological analysis as well as the concept of cultural hegemony by Antonio Gramsci.

The body of this paper contains three parts: how Oedipa suffered from male gaze and sexual objectification, how she was restrained by cultural hegemony and mirror-image relation and how she grew to be self-conscious and acquired subjectivity.

Oedipa as a Victim: Male Gaze and Sexual Objectification

More attention should be attached to the fact that although the protagonist of the novel and the subject of the quest is a woman, Oedipa is the only female figure among a dozen main characters. According to Spivak (1985), the subject-constitution of individuals in the 19th century comprised two parts, one confining women to sexual reproduction in family, while the other linking men with the soul making of the outside world. However, in the 1960s when Pynchon wrote the novel, the sharp distinction between female and male still lingered. During the World War II, lots of women began to work because of the lack of male labors, yet the promising prospect of the financial independence of women soon collapsed when the war was over. Women were once again expected to be an "angel in the house" and it was difficult for them to find a decent job, let alone achieving a successful career. Most women had no choice but to marry for financial insurance, and their reliance on men in turn put them in an inferior state which allowed men to gaze at women freely and view them as a sexual object whose only value was to satisfy men's desires.

Strikingly, almost every man Oedipa encountered in Chapter 1 to 3 sexually harassed her to some extent. In chapter 1, when Oedipa turned to her family lawyer Roseman for assistance, "Roseman tried to play footsie with her under the table. She was wearing boots, and couldn't feel much of anything. So, insulated, she decided not to make any fuss. 'Run away with me,' said Roseman when the coffee came. 'Where?' she asked. That shut him up." (4) Roseman's flirt with Oedipa was unreasonable because there was no emotional linkage between them, and his reaction also indicated that his proposal was irresponsible and flirtatious. What's more, Roseman was a lawyer, who symbolized justice, institution and law. A man with such a responsibility tried to seduce his client, which shows the degeneration of the relationship between men and women and how severely women were sexually objectified. Besides, it can be seen from the attitude of Oedipa that she felt offended by Roseman's sexual harassment, yet she was somehow resigned to it, which indicates that she was fully aware of women's inferiority in the patriarchal society, and she was more or less used to the harassment of men. Therefore, she decided to be calm and numb lest more trouble would come to her. Her insensibility was a way to protect herself from the inescapable male gaze, as well as their attacks.

In Chapter 2 when Oedipa got to know that the hotel manager Miles was a singer in a band, she proposed to help him because her husband worked in a radio station, yet what the boy did was to ask to sleep with her for he thought that was what she wanted in return (6). Firstly, whatever his purpose was, his action and speech were undoubtedly sexual harassment for Oedipa. Secondly, it is interesting that the power relation between them was a reversal of normal gender relations. Being a sixteen-year-old drop-out, he was fully aware of the permeate sex trade in society and the sexual exploitation the privileged imposed to the unprivileged. Therefore, sexual relation was only the reflection of power relation and in his contact with Oedipa, he was unconsciously acting like a female, because Oedipa was the one older and richer. It shows the binary opposition inscribed in his mindset that the inferior side could, voluntarily or involuntarily, provide sex service for the superior in

exchange for other benefits. In accordance with the financial as well as social state of women, the inferior one, in most cases, was female. It was not until 1920 that women got the right to vote and it was not until the 1940s that a majority of states made women eligible for jury duty. In the 1960s when the story of Oedipa happened, the political status of women was still low. And the law was full of gender discrimination. For instance, the equal pay for equal work was impossible for women, which rendered it strikingly difficult for women to support themselves. In addition, government advocated that the value of women was restrained to family. As Charlotte Gilman revealed in her *Women and Economics*, the so-called real women were the product of a specific historical era, and women were divorced from social activities and lost their economic role, leaving only their sexual function. All her behaviors were centered around selling sexual goods and making efforts to highlight their sexual characteristics. That is why in *The Crying of Lot 49*, when men encountered women, their first thought was whether sexual relation was possible no matter what their social roles were.

In front of the motel Oedipa checked in, there was a statue of nymph, and “the face of the nymph was much like Oedipa's, which didn't startle her so much as a concealed blower system that kept the nymph's gauze chiton in constant agitation, revealing enormous vermilion-tipped breasts and long pink thighs at each flap. She was smiling a lipsticked and public smile, not quite a hooker's but nowhere near that of any nymph pining away with love either.” (5) Nymph, the Greek goddess, has been a symbol of nature, feminine beauty and holiness for centuries. Even such an image was eroticized in modern society. The similarity between the face of nymph and Oedipa suggests that they were both victims of the male gaze that objectified and eroticized women.

Oedipa as an Accomplice: Cultural Hegemony and Mirror-Image Relation

According to the concept of cultural hegemony by Antonio Gramsci, “consent to the rule of the dominant group is achieved by the spread of ideologies—beliefs, assumptions, and values—through social institutions such as schools, churches, courts, and the media, among others. These institutions do the work of socializing people into the norms, values, and beliefs of the dominant social group..... Cultural hegemony is most strongly manifested when those ruled by the dominant group come to believe that the economic and social conditions of their society are natural and inevitable, rather than created by people with a vested interest in particular social, economic, and political orders.” (Cole, 2020). The theory can also be applied to gender issues. Oedipa, despite her biological identity, identified with the ideology of patriarchy and accepted her role as an “angel in the house” painfully. She felt suffocated and repressed, but it never came to her that she should change her lifestyle and her present state was the result of gender discrimination. In her view, men's sexual harassment and even their sexual relationship with juvenile girls, which was deemed as rape in law, were natural and inevitable, so she never thought of fighting against it.

Mucho, the husband of Oedipa, was a pedophile who frequently had sex with teenage girls, of which Oedipa was fully aware. Yet as a woman brainwashed by patriarchy, what worried her was whether Mucho would suffer from penal code instead of the interests and suffering of people of her own sex. She was so accustomed to her husband's abnormal sexual addiction that she would sometimes fancy Mucho's affair with “a seventeen and what is known as a hip one, whose velvety eyes ultimately, statistically, would meet Mucho's and respond, and the thing would develop then groovy as it could when you found you couldn't get statutory rape really out of the back of your law-abiding head. She knew the pattern because it had happened a few times already, though Oedipa had been most scrupulously fair about it.” (Chapter 3, 11) Mucho's habit of having sex with minors

was not only illegal but also proof of male's exploitation and persecution to female. Yet Oedipa was his accomplice and never tried to stop her husband. Her thoughts were totally ruled by patriarchal discourse, which deprived her of subjectivity and rendered her to identify with male behaviors and values.

In describing Mucho's sensitivity, Pynchon put women in juxtaposition with movies and cars as objects Mucho coveted, which is the typical way of the objectification of women in a patriarchal discourse which descended women to things whose value were to arouse the desire of men. And the later description of "a salad of despair, in a gray dressing of ash, condensed exhaust, dust, body wastes" indicated the eroticization of females. (Chapter 1, 2) Viewing Oedipa as his accomplice, Mucho made no secret of how he coveted young girls in front of her. He bluntly told his wife, "I'm too horny, now. What I should be is a young father, a big brother. These little chicks call in with requests, naked lust, to Punch's ear, throbs in every word I say." (Chapter 1, 2) It is the kind of talk men would tell each other without the presence of women, and it is weird for a man to speak to his wife like this, and the fact indicates Oedipa's role as the appendage of her husband. She had no subjectivity, therefore, Mucho didn't have to think of her feelings or thoughts. Not only did Mucho think so, even Oedipa herself accepted her inferiority. When they both were laden with problems and wanted to tell each other, it naturally came to her, "let Mucho go first." (Chapter 1, 1)

Moreover, Oedipa not only tolerated his husband's sexual exploitation of minor girls, but also showed understanding of other men's pedophilia. For example, in Chapter 6, when "Metzger and Serge's chick had run off to Nevada, to get married" and when she was aware of Serge's desire to date an eight-year-old and "that he was hanging diligently around playgrounds and should have some news for them any day", she showed no shock or indignation. (Chapter 6, 43) It is strange for a woman to be so numb about such horrible actions and thoughts. What is most possible is that she, in order to protect herself from the omnipresent misogynist atmosphere, chose to neglect such information intentionally and resign to women's role as the sexual object of men's fancies.

As Lacan points out, a person's sense of self-identity and sense of unity is first established through mirroring, which he calls the mirror-image relation. (2001) It not only refers to the self-image acquired by the subject in the mirror when he or she is an infant, but also the self-image acquired through the gaze of the other's eyes. Our identity is formed by looking back at ourselves under the gaze of others, in the process of constant contact with others. In the previous instance of the statue of the nymph, Oedipa unconsciously identified with it, which would in turn strengthen her impression that women were supposed to look sexy and attractive.

The most important case is the metaphor of tower, which frequently appeared in the novel. In Chapter 1, Oedipa felt like caged in a tower like Rapunzel, the princess captured and locked down in a tower waiting for a prince to save her, and it was Pierce, her ex-boyfriend opened the door of the tower with "one of his many credit cards." (4) In this paragraph, Oedipa compared herself to a submissive, persecuted and dominated woman like Rapunzel who had no subjectivity, no independent personality or life, and could only be trapped in a narrow space, waiting for men to rescue her. The story referred to women's living conditions back then. They were trapped in family, and could only be connected to the outside world through men. However, to be saved by a man was just an illusion, because men were actually the persecutors of women, and women's reliance on men only rendered them fragile to the trap of marriage and family. In addition, the mentioned credit card is a metaphor for the conspiracy between patriarchy and capitalism. It was the inferior financial status of women that made them insecure and have no choice but to expect men to support them. However, as Spivak

points out, the value of women's labor in the family is much greater than that of men's financial support, so men are actually squeezing women's surplus value. (1985) Furthermore, it should also be noticed that the ideology contained in fairy tales is very detrimental to women's independence. The passive female images in Oedipa's mind were just like images in the mirror which deeply influenced and shaped her definition of herself, which made it difficult for her to escape such imagination and have a broader life.

Moreover, Oedipa also recognized herself in "an exhibition of paintings by the beautiful Spanish exile Remedios Varo: in the central painting of a triptych, titled 'Bordando el Manto Terrestre,'" which "were a number of frail girls with heart-shaped faces, huge eyes, spun-gold hair, prisoners in the top room of a circular tower, embroidering a kind of tapestry which spilt out the slit windows and into a void, seeking hopelessly to fill the void: for all the other buildings and creatures, all the waves, ships and forests of the earth were contained in this tapestry, and the tapestry was the world." (4) Through this description, we can easily figure out the traditional female image: pretty, frail, and hopeless. She had to be pretty so that she would be attractive to men, and she must be hopeless and in trouble, so that men had a chance to save her, for she was not capable of living independently. It must be noticed that the fairy tales were told by the males, through which they spared no effort to shape the image of women according to their own wills. Besides, as the male discourse was the dominant culture, women unconsciously soaked in such ideology and tried to be physically attractive instead of mentally independent, which made it even harder for them to figure out the sexual discrimination in society, let alone fight against it.

Oedipa as a Rebel: Women's Awakening and Acquisition of Subjectivity

The Crying of Lot 49 is an adaptation of the traditional quest mode, and the main achievement of Oedipa's seemingly absurd quest is to break away from the constraints of patriarchy and gradually construct her own subjectivity as a woman.

The image of the tower mentioned above was family in concrete and patriarchy in the abstract. "Pierce had taken her away from nothing, there'd been no escape. What did she so desire to escape from? Such a captive maiden, having plenty of time to think, so one realizes that her tower, its height and architecture, are like her ego only incidental: that what really keeps her where she is magic, anonymous and malignant, visited on her from outside and for no reason at all. Having no apparatus except gut fear and female cunning to examine this formless magic, to understand how it works, how to measure its field strength, count its lines of force, she may fall back on superstition, or take up a useful hobby like embroidery, or go mad, or marry a disk jockey. If the tower is everywhere and the knight of deliverance no proof against its magic, what else?" (Chapter 1, 4) This paragraph is full of metaphors. The tower, omnipresent and inescapable, is a metaphor for the oppression of women. What trapped her in the tower was the "evil magic", which symbolized patriarchal ideology. Besides, women who wanted to fight against patriarchy had to choose from four methods: superstition, hobbies, madness or marriage. Superstition is a metaphor for witches in history, while hobbies are a metaphor for women's writing. Madness reminds people of the madwoman Mason in *Jane Eyre*, which is a representative of feminist writing and a symbol for women's potential subversive energy. The last sentence euphemistically implies that the marriage system cannot save women. Marriage itself is complicit with the patriarchal system, that is, part of the dark magic, and therefore unable to fight against patriarchy. Oedipa made the wrong decision of marrying and became trapped in the tower, unable to get out. She even suffered from mental illness and hallucinations.

However, the property Pierce left her provided her with a chance to get out of family and enter the domains of men. With the support of the legacy, Oedipa went through various experiences, through which she began to acquire subjectivity and gradually became independent and determined. As Pynchon himself pointed out at the beginning of Chapter 3, “If one object behind her discovery of what she was to label the Tristero System or often only The Tristero (as if it might be something's secret title) were to bring to an end her encapsulation in her tower..... As if (as she'd guessed that first minute in San Narciso), there were revelation in progress all around her.” The life in the tower refers to Oedipa being imprisoned in the narrow space of home, while the Tristero system, the legacy left to Oedipa, was not only wealth, but also the right to step out of home and go into the wider male-dominated world. What can support her was wealth. Therefore, most scholars' neglect of the importance of property in this novel is inappropriate because women can get along with men easily only with the support of capital. (Chapter 3, 11)

“Much of the revelation was to come through the stamp collection Pierce had left, his substitute often for her—thousands of little colored windows into deep vistas of space and time: savannahs teeming with elands and gazelles, galleons sailing west into the void, Hitler heads, sunsets, cedars of Lebanon, allegorical faces that never were, he could spend hours peering into each one, ignoring her. She had never seen the fascination.” (Chapter 3, 11) Pierce's stamp album is a symbol of the outside world. His obsession with the stamp album and neglect of his girlfriend Oedipa implies that men had the opportunity to contact the wider world, so their eyes will not stay on the women who can only stay at home. Oedipa's unconsciousness of the glamour of stamps shows that her narrow vision and living space made her lose the ability and willingness to break through the constraints of family. What the stamp later informed Oedipa was what it meant to live free from the oppression of patriarchy. As the quest proceeded, Oedipa was increasingly active and brave. She became interested in various things, which led her to meet with all kinds of people and be independent, mature and persistent.

Oedipa gradually gained subjectivity in the process of pursuit. She no longer showed obedience to men and was no more dominated by them. Instead, she had her own opinions and ideas, and she began to ask Metzger and others to cooperate with her. Besides, she would firmly defend herself when rejected and questioned by males. For instance, when Nefastis proposed to have sex with her, instead of being numb like before, she “screamed, and fled.” (Chapter 5, 37)

What's more, during her quest, Oedipa's power-relation with men gradually changed from inequality to equality. Besides, she obtained increasing subjectivity and independence. When she encountered difficulties, Oedipa no longer waited for men to save and instruct her, instead, she tried to solve them with her own wit and tactics. For example, she pretended to be a stakeholder to get confidential information from the engineer Stanley Koteks she met for the first time in a bar. (Chapter 3, 23)

Conclusion

The Crying of Lot 49 is full of feminist allusions and metaphors, and Oedipa's quest is actually her acquisition of subjectivity as a woman. At the beginning, like Rapunzel, she was constrained in family, the suffocating tower. And the legacy left by Pierce provided her with a chance to come out of the field of women and go into the territory of men. When she first encountered different men, she was under severe sexual harassment, yet she didn't dare to straightforwardly express her disgust and refusal. Besides, she always asked men for help, as she had no idea how to dispose of Pierce's legacy.

However, as the journey proceeded, Oedipa was increasingly courageous and independent. She

tried to solve problems with her own intelligence and bravery. In addition, though still under harassment, she could reject it directly. At last, she turned into a mature subject who was able to take care of others, like the old man on the stairs.

Oedipa's identity as a female is the reversal of the traditional quest mode, which contains Pynchon's concerns about female interests. Therefore, it is worthwhile to pay attention to the gender writing in this book, and further study can analyze other allusions in *The Crying of Lot 49*, which may lead to new discoveries.

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