



The Construction of Female Subject Identity in *The Grapes of Wrath*

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Abstract

The description of those females in *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck is very impressive, among whom Ma Joad is depicted in such a way as one of the most important figures for the whole story. Though sharing some similarities with the traditional women in the past English novels, Ma Joad is very different. The close connection with as well as differences from the traditional gender role pattern are combined in this woman. It is just through the newly-opened window of differentiation that the reader can reconsider females and construct a new female identity. Mainly from an ecofeminist angle, the paper is going to study the consistency to and differences from the traditional gender roles of women exhibited in the novel, expound on the changing subject identity of women throughout the novel, in order to prove that female subject identity in the novel is beyond essentialism and dualism.

Key words: *The Grapes of Wrath*; Traditional gender roles; Female subject identity; Ecological consciousness

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INTRODUCTION

In patriarchal society, there's a tendency to put man/woman, culture/nature, reason/emotion, etc. under binary opposition. Women are expected to follow all kinds

of social rules set by men, and are often considered inferior to men, just as Greek philosopher Aristotle viewed that "the natural world is like a household in which some have greater responsibilities than others, and consequently greater authority, relations of 'ruling-and-being-ruled' occur spontaneously and ubiquitously within it" (Lovibond, 2006, pp.12-13). As for the relation of men to women, Aristotle regarded it as "a union of the naturally ruling element with the naturally ruled, for the preservation of both" (Lovibond, 2006, p.13). Women's contributions are usually underestimated and ignored. However, ecofeminism is against such exploitation of women, nature, and other socially disadvantaged groups. "It articulates the theory that the ideologies that authorize injustices based on gender, race, and class are related to the ideologies that sanction the exploitation and degradation of the environment" (Sturgeon, 1997, p.23). By combining environmentalism with feminism, ecofeminism aims at the emancipation of women as well as of nature, on the basis of which a new set of subject identity theory is constructed. Accordingly, rather than "the other" as tools in the background, nature, non-human being, and women are regarded as independent subjects with their own existence value, and an indispensable part of integrated whole. In fact, this concern is already expressed in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. It calls social attention to peasants' living condition, and emphasizes women's role in various aspects of life, while at the same time warns the society of ecological crisis, inspires a reconsideration of the relationship between human and land, human and nature, men and women, etc., and reconstructs the subject identity of nature as well as women.

According to traditional gender roles, women are often connected to nature, both considered inferior to men and culture. "While the mind and its capacity to reason are associated with masculinity, the body, together with our emotional sensibilities, are associated with the

feminine” (James, 2006, p.29) . F femininity is interpreted as being emotional, dependent, obedient, passive, mindless, fragile, caring, nurturing, domestic, etc., while masculinity is granted with such features as being rational, independent, aggressive, smart, tough, sociable, etc., which exhibit a strong control and manipulation over nature and women. However, as to the construction of female subject identity, the ecofeminists will never efface the differences by classifying women and nature as the same and consistent unity, nor overemphasize the differences between human and nature so as to rule nature. The ecofeminists acknowledge the consistency of women to nature as well as the differences between them. *The Grapes of Wrath* is such a typical text that female subject identity is reconsidered and reconstructed. While admitting the consistency of women to nature, the novel discloses the differences between women and nature. On one hand, in terms of consistency, a case in point is that female personal pronouns are used in place of nature and other things. For instance, the males in the novel mostly use “she” or “her” in their references to land, cave, pork, car, parts of car, and incidents, etc. Another example is that the description of nature in the novel often contains feminine features, such as “The full green hills are round and soft as breasts” (Steinbeck, 1992, p.362).¹ On the other hand, in terms of differences, the construction of Ma Joad’s subject identity, which is different from the traditional gender pattern, underscores the differences between women and nature, but never denies the consistency of women to nature and traditional gender roles. The novel reveals the living condition and social status of American country women and other women of the lower class in the 1930s, esp. represented by Ma Joad. Although there are already a lot of researches in the novel domestically and abroad, there’re still not enough researches on the female subject identity from an ecofeminist angle. Through the depiction of these women characters with a consistency to the traditional gender pattern and some differences from the traditional gender roles as well, the subject identity of women breaks the wall of “essentialism” and “dualism”. Mainly from an ecofeminist angle, the paper is to study the connection with and differences from the traditional gender roles of women exhibited in the novel, expound on the changing subject identity of women throughout the novel, in order to prove that female subject identity in the novel is beyond essentialism and dualism.

¹ All the quotations from the novel is from the version: Steinbeck, John. *The Grapes of Wrath*. New York: Penguin Books, 1992; hereafter the quotations from the novel will be only marked by page number.

1. THE CONSTRUCTION OF FEMALE SUBJECT IDENTITY CONSISTENT TO TRADITIONAL GENDER ROLES

In the novel, Ma Joad’s subject identity shares some characteristics with traditional gender roles. The femininity has formed through women’s interactions with nature and society. The consistency of traditional gender roles is mainly exhibited from the following aspects:

Firstly, Ma Joad and some other women characters are responsible for house chores and duties as expected by traditional gender roles. The spot where Ma Joad first appears in the novel is a kitchen, in which she is busy preparing breakfast for the family. The conversations between Ma and other characters often happen during the time when she is doing housework. In fact, women’s duty in endless housework is socially stereotyped in some sense— “But the theme of limitlessness within the ethics of care emerges once we attend precisely, to the cynical and interminable nature of such service: ‘A woman’s work is never done’, or as Simon de Beauvoir observes, it is such as to condemn the worker to ‘immanence’ because of the continual need to repeat actions such as feeding and cleaning” (Lovibond, 2006, p.21). The universal living condition of women at that time is revealed in the novel through Tom, Ma’s eldest son. “‘Women’s always tar’d,’ said Tom. ‘That’s just the way women is, ‘cept at meetin’ once an’ again’” (p.113). Women are expected to be devoted to their family. The mother image under the pen of Steinbeck is just like this. Through the whole story, it’s Ma who mainly takes care of cooking, cleaning, washing, and etc.. On the way to the west, she keeps on mentioning the wash tub that can’t be taken along, which not only reflects her habitual devotion to her family, but also comprises a part of female subject identity. Actually, apart from Ma, some other female figures also shoulder similar house duties, such as Sairy Wilson, the woman the Joads meet on the way, who voluntarily assists them with their supper preparation while Ma helps Pa to bury the grandfather. Another example is that on the next morning when the Joads arrive in the Weedpatch Camp, Tom was wakened up by some sound from a young woman working at the stove, with a baby on her crooked arm. “And the girl moved about, poking the fire, shifting the rusty stove lids to make a better draft, opening the oven door; and all the time the baby sucked, and the mother shifted it deftly from arm to arm. The baby didn’t interfere with her work or with the quick gracefulness of her movements” (p.303). Here Steinbeck sings highly of women’s contribution to the family life by detailing their movements in the housework. Traditionally it is often taken for granted that women exhaust themselves in doing house chores, but the novel calls our attention to women’s hard endeavor, invokes our reconsideration of women’s value in both family and society, and inspires a reconstruction of female subject identity.

Secondly, Ma Joad and some other female characters treat people with generosity, sympathy and care. Ma insists on bringing the preacher Casy along to California despite the limited room and food in the truck. She tries her best to offer other people as much assistance as possible. For example, she provides the Wilsons with some food and money. Another example is that when the Joads arrive in California, they first pause in Hooverville, where Ma worries not only about her own big family's food shortage, but also about other strangers. That's why she feels helpless when she can't give a hand to those starving children around. "I dunno what to do. I got to feed the fambly. What'm I gonna do with these here?" (p.269) The extremely limited food can help partly to fulfil her duty to her family, but can far insufficiently help in her sympathy for strangers. In addition, Rosasharn, Ma's daughter, generously saves a starving-to-death stranger with her own milk in spite of a cruel fact that she just gave birth to a still-born child. Ma Joad and her daughter reach agreement on assisting the dying man. "And the two women looked deep into each other. The girl's breath came short and gasping. She said 'Yes.' Ma Smiled. 'I know you would. I knowed!'" (p.475) Rosasharn finally

loosened one side of the blanket and bared her breast... "There!" She said. "There." Her hand moved behind his head and supported it. Her fingers moved gently in his hair. She looked up and across the barn, and her lips came together and smiled mysteriously (p.476).

The whole novel ends here, which contains huge significance. Breast feeding is one of the vital attributes of women in raising the offspring. Women's milk sustains life and connotes mother love. Just as nature continuously provides human beings with abundant resources, women contribute constantly their own power to human's existence. The consistency of women to nature is confirmed here. Besides, Rosasharn's milk saves a stranger man rather than sustaining her still-born baby. On one hand, Steinbeck praises women's generosity, fraternity and care for others; on the other hand, the novelist longs for a harmonious relationship between men and women, one human and another, man and society. Rosasharn's mysterious smile resonates with her earlier "sly smile" (134). Through the two different smiles, we can find that Rosasharn already surpasses the former self, and becomes more strong, optimistic, and humanitarian. The salvation of the stranger in some sense compensates the loss of her baby. Through helping others, she finally finds her own value and female subject identity.

2. THE CONSTRUCTION OF FEMALE SUBJECT IDENTITY DIFFERENT FROM TRADITIONAL GENDER ROLES

Despite the consistency of women's characteristics to the traditional gender pattern, the differences from the

traditional gender roles are tremendously impressive in the novel. The differences enhance as the story develops. From those differences, a very "untraditional" female subject identity is presented. The differences can be found mainly from the following aspects:

Firstly, Ma Joad is depicted as being calm, wise, brave, rational and decisive, which according to traditional gender roles, are usually the traits of masculinity. Reason is considered superior to emotion. These seemingly advantages of men are possessed by a woman in the novel. Therefore, the traditional view of "essentialism" and "dualism" are subverted, and a new female subject identity is established. For example, at the start of the novel, Ma unexpectedly sees her eldest son Tom returning home after several years' separation. Exhilarated as she is, Ma consciously controls her emotion in time so as to relax the atmosphere. "Then she knew, and her control came back, and her hand dropped" (p.78). In reality, the calmness is of great necessity for the family in such a turbulent environment, as it's said, "But better than joy was calm. Imperturbability could be depended upon. And from her great and humble position in the family she had taken dignity and a clean calm beauty" (p.78). A second example can be found in Ma's timely rational prevention of Tom's impulsive violence responding to the insult from a rude soldier on duty. "Tom stiffened. His hand crept down to the floor and felt for the jack handle. Ma caught his arm and held it powerfully" (p.292). Ma's calmness and rationality form a sharp contrast to Tom's impulse and sentiment. On top of that, another example also shows Ma's wisdom, courage and decisiveness. When the Joads are crossing the desert near California, the grandma passes away just beside Ma in the truck. In order not to stop the whole family (including her pregnant daughter and two young children) in so dangerous a desert, Ma holds the death news to herself, and lies beside the dead grandma. When they are passing an Agricultural inspection station, an officer orders them to unload all the stuff in the truck, in which case the corpse will be discovered and they will definitely be stuck in the desert for a long time. At this critical moment, Ma comes up with an idea. She claims to the officer that there's a sick old lady in the truck waiting to see a doctor, and swears that they have no seeds or fruits or vegetables, etc.. Finally, they are allowed to pass without unloading the truck and being delayed. As we can see, Ma bravely takes the responsibility and composedly handles the accident with wisdom and decisiveness, which are much far from such traditional gender roles of women as dependence and mindlessness. The subject identity of Ma Joad subverts the old pattern of femininity and establishes a new type of female subject identity.

Secondly, the differences from traditional gender roles can be found from the varying interaction pattern between Ma Joad and the male figures on their way to California and in their living there. At the beginning of the story, Ma, like the other women, is silent behind

men. A general picture of women's living condition and social status at that time is presented. "The women and the children watched their men talking to the owner men. They were silent" (p.33). Like the children, women have no say in the important negotiation. They are left silent in the background, and passively wait for the negotiation result. At the family meeting of the Joads before they set out, the seat arrangement very well exemplifies the family status of women. As the nominal family head, the grandpa sits on the running board of the truck, facing his two sons—Pa Joad and Uncle John, who just squat there. It puts, "That was the nucleus" (p.104). Then the third male generation—Tom, Connie and Noah stroll in and squat, forming a half-circle with Grandpa in the opening. Ma, Granma, Rosasharn stand behind the squatting men. The children Ruthie and Winfield hop beside the women. The seat arrangement reveals on one hand that women and children are always together, for fostering children is a social expectation on women at that time; on the other hand that Ma and other women are put inferior to all male adults in terms of family and social status.

However, the situation changes gradually as the family moves toward west. The variation of environment brings about a variation of man-and-woman-interaction pattern, and thus a variation of women's family status and discourse right. On their way to California, the old pattern of life is totally broken up, and too many new things break in. Take the relationship between Ma and Pa for instance. Ma's first serious "revolt" breaks out when the car of the Wilsons driven by her younger son Al breaks down. Her eldest son Tom suggests that Al drive the family and the Wilsons in their own truck, leaving him and Casy to fix the car and catch them later. Pa agrees. Nevertheless, Ma objects strongly for fear that Tom would be separated from them again. "Pa was amazed at the revolt" (p.176). When Pa tells Ma "we made up our mind" (p.176), he doesn't include Ma or any other females into the "we". Women are supposed to follow the decisions made by men. However, Ma doesn't give up but goes on threatening that she won't go unless Pa whips her, and that she will take revenge then.

The whole group watched the revolt. They watched Pa, waiting for him to break into fury... And Pa's anger did not rise, and his hands hung limply at his sides. And in a moment the group knows that Ma had won. And Ma knew it too. (p.176)

Pa is at a loss when facing an unprecedented rebellion from Ma. Then Ma continues her reasoning with other males such as Tom and Uncle John. At last, Ma wins the negotiation, just as it is said "She was the power. She had taken control" (p.177). Women are no longer left behind men as background, but stand forward to have a say

and even redirect a decision. However, a detail deserves our attention. During the whole "revolt", Ma holds a jack handle in her hand. The jack handle acts not only as a weapon to guarantee her safety, but also a weight to strengthen her power and her rights. As we can see, there's never an easy way for women to gain their rights and rebel against traditional rules and gender roles.

Ma's influence booms more and more in the later family decision-makings, such as whether to move out of the Weedpatch camp to look for jobs in Marysville, what shall they do after Tom revengefully kills the murder of the preacher, how to treat the love between Al and Anggie, etc. The variation of men-and-women relationship is directly mentioned by Pa—"Pa sniffled. 'Seems like times is changed,' he said sarcastically, 'Time was when a man said what we'd do. Seems like women is tellin' now...'" (p.368). Finally, Pa accepts the new situation as he says, "Funny! Woman takin' over the fambly. Woman sayin' we'll do this here, an' we'll go there. An' I don' even care" (p.442). As we can see, the interaction pattern between men and women changes with the westward process going on. Ma's female identity is gradually more and more different from the traditional gender roles. She walks from the back to the front. A new subject identity comes into being. Furthermore, a more harmonious and mutually-respectful relationship is established between the two genders. It's like what called for by ecofeminist Val Plumwood—"sensitivity to other members of our ecological communities"; "others as active presences and ecological collaborators in our lives", and etc. (Plumwood, 2000, pp.69-70).

CONCLUSION

To sum up, the depiction of women characters, mainly represented by Ma Joad, goes beyond the wall of "existentialism" and "dualism". Besides consistency to the traditional gender roles, there're many differences from the traditional gender pattern. Women are not only devoted, dutiful, generous, and caring, but calm, rational, wise, brave, and decisive. Facing the great change in environment, women outdo men in many ways, just as Ma Joad says "woman can change better'n a man... woman got all her life in her arms. Man got it all in his head" (p.442). From the earlier silence to the latter gain of negotiation rights and even "leadership" in the end, the female subject identity of Ma Joad is under reconstruction. Therefore, to some extent, the westward process is a process of constructing a new subject identity, as a result of which, Steinbeck presents the reader with a broader and deeper understanding of women than the past.

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