

A Comparative Study of the Image of "Tainted" Women in Autobiographical Feminist Literature: A Case Study of *Memories of a Female Thief* by Dacia Maraini and *The Glass Bug* by Lin Bai

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Abstract: This article focuses on the "tainted" images of women in autobiographical women's literature. The so-called "tainted" women are those whose behaviors and characters deviate from the general perception and moral requirements of women in traditional society. In this paper, I will choose Teresa, the heroine of Maraini's *Memories of a Female Thief*, who was forced by the "patriarchal" society to live on the streets and steal for a living. She was then transferred to all the Italian prisons with countless trials and tribulations, and finally released from prison after half of her lifetime wasted. Nonetheless, she still retained a pure heart and kind nature, embracing life with passion and hope, and resisted the cruelty she faced with resilience and strength. At the same time, I will choose Lin Zhuzhu, the heroine of Lin Bai's *The Glass Bug* as another object of my comparative study, who, seeking to establish new relationships between men and women, ventured alone into the studio during the golden age of cinema, entangled with four men and even had ambiguous relationships with women.

Keywords: Autobiographical Literature, Feminism, Stigmatized Women, Comparative Study

1. Introduction

The images of female protagonists in modern literature often serves as a mirror which reflects the evolving roles and challenges women face within society. Dacia Maraini's work "Memories of a Female Thief" and Lin Bai's work "The Glass Worm" provide two distinct yet thematically intertwined images of women striving in the complex personal and societal circumstances. Maraini, an Italian feminist writer, and Lin, a prominent voice in contemporary Chinese literature, both use their protagonists to explore the connotation of female autonomy, desire, and social restrictions.

In "Memories of a Female Thief", Maraini presents a woman who challenges conventional morality, revealing the inner turmoil and rebellious spirit of her protagonist in a world that marginalizes her choices. Similarly, Lin Bai's "The Glass Worm" launches an in-depth discussion on the psychological and emotional conflicts faced by her protagonist, navigating a path of self-discovery against traditional expectations about gender relations. Both narratives, though grounded in different cultural backgrounds, underscore themes of identity and resistance, making them pioneers of female self-awareness.

This comparative study aims to analyze how Maraini and Lin construct their protagonists in ways that both challenge and conform to cultural norms surrounding femininity. Through an analysis of the protagonists' inner conflicts, motivations, and relationships, this article seeks to highlight the similarities and differences of female identity in literature, exploring how each author utilizes her narrative to question societal definitions of morality, independence, and womanhood. By examining these two texts, an insight will be gained into the shared and diverse experiences of women across cultural divisions, shedding light on the universal and culturally specific challenges of being a woman.

2. Research background

Being in a patriarchal world, women are often recognized as "silent". They are often ignored and, with the passage of time, gradually rolled over by the wheels of history. However, looking back at history, we often find that the most horrifying thing is not that women's voices have been drowned out, but that their images have been gradually distorted and typecast. For a long time, women in literature are depicted as Sonia in *Crime and Punishment* and Ophelia in *Hamlet*, who are deprived of all selfish desires and symbols of "impurity", and become "holy women" who are worshipped and admired by people; they are also depicted as Carmen in *Carmen*, who was branded as a "slut, demoness", a source of evil that will be forever reviled by the world because of her personal desires. The emergence of autobiographical feminist literature can be said to have broken this phenomenon. From the perspective of women's ontology, it re-gives women flesh and blood, and makes readers realize the real inner world of women through delicate descriptions. Especially valuable are the literary works with "tainted" women as the protagonists, whose behavior often makes them the target of social criticism, but from them, we can still see the light of life and humanity. The works of Italian author Dacia Maraini and Chinese author Lin Bai, as world-renowned female literary giants, are profoundly representative of the portrayal of "tainted" women from different perspectives. In this paper, I will compare and analyze the images of Theresa, the thief, and Lin Zhuzhu, in the works of the two authors from the purpose of genre and characterization, and extract the inspiration they bring to us.

3. The role of autobiographical genre

In both works, the choice of genre plays an extremely significant role in characterization. Both works use autobiographical narrative. Such a narrative structure has a huge advantage. In previous literary works created by male writers, the writers tended to stand in the perspective of bystanders, recording and judging what happened. Such a perspective, in effect, judges and gazes at the characters. Male writers tend to categorize women into three types: angelic women, demonic women, and devilish women. These three types of women's images reflect the traditional male-centered cultural psychological characteristics, and express the male mentality: the angelic women's image expresses the ideal women's standard of obedience to their husbands in men's minds; while the demonic women's and devilish women's image expresses men's fear and hatred of women's subjectivity [1]. In contrast, the women's literary works created by using first-person autobiographies not only have clear subjectivity, but also have a strong infectious power, which makes the women's literary works more attractive, and more effective. The first-person autobiography has a strong infectious force, eliminating the distance between the author and the characters, allowing the author to convey her own experiences and feelings directly to the readers through the character's self-narrative, avoiding shaping the protagonist into a patterned image of a woman according to the author's subjective imagination [2]. Such a narrative mode reduces the judgmentalism, increases the authenticity and infectiousness, and makes it more convenient to portray the "shortcomings" of the female characters.

At the same time, the greatness of the two works lies in the fact that they are not simple retellings of the protagonist's personal experiences, but rather, through the author's processing and embellishment, they humorously and skillfully sublimate the protagonist's personal experiences to the level of reflecting the general situation of most women, so that the works can become the spokespersons of women's voices. *Memories of a Female Thief* is based on a woman named Teresa, a woman prisoner whom Maraini interviewed. The book tells the story in the form of a memoir about how Teresa was persecuted by her in-laws and locked up in a mental hospital, then lived on the streets by stealing. As a result, she moved from one prison to another, and was finally released at the age of fifty-two, then eventually turned over a new leaf. Maraini once said, "I wrote three drafts of *Memories of a Female Thief*, and I didn't want to do it in a negative way, that is to say, I didn't want to copy the story as it was in the way of anthropological research, I wanted to bring myself into the world in which Teresa lived, to infuse it with something of mine and make it one; I wanted to build a close relationship with Teresa, to make my book the result of that relationship; thus making my book the result of this exchange." [3]. *The Glass Bug* is the story of a woman named "Lin Zhuzhu". Lin Bai combined her early experience of working in a movie studio with a variety of fictionalized scenarios to create a story about a woman who is struggling with the relationships with five men in her life at the same time. These two works seem to have very different plots, but in fact they are both re-creations under the name of "I", and the writer gives them a vivid soul through the first-person perspective.

4. Purpose of protagonist portrayal

Although the two works adopt the same autobiographical genre and the heroines are morally blameworthy, the author's intention behind them is not the same. Lin Bai's portrayal of Lin Zhuzhu's emotional life lies more in the identification of self-subjectivity through the liberation of one's own desires. In Lin Bai's eyes, in order to find the "I", one must first see the "I". Instead of maneuvering among five men, she is actually chasing her own desires. This pursuit of the self is also reflected in her nude modeling career. At this point in time, women are truly starting to please themselves, and showing the beauty of themselves has become the absolute goal. Lin's nude modeling is not an object to be admired and referenced, but rather a cathartic way of finding a subject-object identity, a way of self-soothing in which she can act as a lover of her own [4]. In terms of exploring ego and gender, *The Glass Bug* reaches depths that transcend the times. According to Lin Bai, Lin Zhuzhu "hardly ever felt any repression in terms of looks or clothes" because "I often didn't realize that I was a woman." [5]. At the same time, when faced with the advances of Hai Hao, a lesbian who only wanted to see her as a prey to release her carnal desires, she proposed to become an equal partner in a homosexual relationship with her, rather than both still playing the role of men and women in a traditional social relationship. This idea goes far beyond "feminism is the exclusion of some stereotypical men" and conveys to the reader that "women are not born female, but are molded by the society they live in, and what is really important is the equality of human beings and the subjectivity of each individual", which is also in line with Beauvoir's view that "women are not born, but rather gradually formed." [6].

On the contrary, Maraini's work is influenced by the theory of "female solidarity" in the United States in the seventies and eighties. The theory shows the main aim of the feminist movement: with physical and psychological commonality and similar experiences, women can come together by forming a power group to overthrow male dominance [7]. Maraini's work was influenced by the theory of "female solidarity". She openly affirmed the value of this theory in an interview: Although it is a difficult and unusual practice, because the patriarchal world has lived on the division of women. Having established, thanks to the various women's movements, that solidarity among women is a heat counts for female group, and even if it is not applied, it functions as a benchmark of an ideal coexistence [8]. Thus the deeper meaning behind the portrayal of women in *Memories of a Female*

Thief is often focused on the social level. Compared to the individualistic writing style of *The Glass Bug*, which was even criticized for being overly obsessed with the self, "the author is too immersed in the years of the 1980s, when youth and literature coincided, to be able to extricate herself from them, and does not have a more in-depth reflection on the 1980s," [9]. Maraini's work obviously focuses on a larger level, beyond the issue of women's struggle for equal civil rights as men's, dispels the myth that once a woman has a job, she can seek her own emancipation, and points the finger directly at the entire political and economic status of contemporary society, abandoning the illusion of generalized social equality and proposing the goal of radically altering the realities of modern society. From this, we can see that the reason why Teresa is reduced to the status of a woman at the bottom of the ladder of the hierarchy who is not morally accepted by society is because of the persecution of her father, husband, and even the oppression of patriarchal society as a whole. The reason why the author makes such a woman as the protagonist is to convey the message that "there is no place for women to breath in a patriarchal society" and to call for women's unity in overthrowing the unequal social system.

However, in terms of exploring women's own personalities, *The Glass Bug* offers more thoughts and discussions than *Memories of a Female Thief*, whose discussion of female relationships is limited to contrasting male callousness by depicting female friends helping each other and treating the lesbianism that Teresa encounters in prison as an anomaly in an unequal society. In contrast, *The Glass Beetle* clearly breaks away from the inherent social concept of "women". It can be said that Lin Bai gains a sense of femininity by losing the feminity, and gains faith by losing the faith [10].

5. Conclusion

The Glass Bug and *Memories of a Female Thief*, as outstanding works in the world of feminist literature, are both autobiographical narratives that tell the stories of "morally imperfect" women, but with different emphases. For Lin Bai, the search for self-meaning is a lifelong journey for women, while for Maraini, "letting the ravaged reality speak" and "recognizing and expressing those who are excluded from society" are the dominant ideas throughout her creation. Her heroines are often women who have been rejected by the real world, showing their rebelliousness in rejecting and denying the inherent roles that society wants them to play. Both works have their own focus, and each of them guides and leads women on a journey of psychological and social discovery towards a broader life.

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