

# Feminist Writing in *Notes of a Desolate Man*

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**Abstract**—Owing to the controversial feature of the topic — gender, identity cognition, and political metaphor, and the gorgeous but downcast scene of the last phase described by Zhu Tianwen, *Notes of a Desolate Man* has been well received since it was published. However, deeper things are hidden behind the "homosexual text" and "language alchemy", i.e. feminist writing. This paper aims to analyze the feminist writing mode and political & historical propositions contained in this work.

**Keywords**—Zhu Tianwen; Feminism; *Notes of a Desolate Man*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Since its publication, the novel *Notes of a Desolate Man* written by Taiwan writer Zhu Yan has attracted the attention of literary critics and the whole society. Then, whether critics or ordinary readers, they are mainly concerned about the bold exposure and careful description of gay men in this novel. It is undeniable that homosexuality is indeed the most obvious feature of the novel, but it is not the only and not the most important theme, it is just a narrative part of the work. Through the writing of gay men, Zhu carried out her negative writing experiment, constructed the historical viewpoint of feminism, and implicitly expressed her view of Taiwan politics.

## II. FEMININE MODE OF WRITING

Works with sharp-cut male characteristics often contain a grand historical background and historical architecture, which will endow the works with a sense of thickness and vicissitudes. But works highlighting female characteristics will wittingly or unwittingly dispel the grand background, replace it with individual emotional experience, privatize the narration and emotional expression, and become an epic that the existence of individuals deals with time.

In *Notes of a Desolate Man*, the story is narrated by setting the desolate man as first person, and numerous discussions have smashed the integrity of narration. After the story is restored, it is discovered that such a confession note is about self-redemption for sinking into lust in the past and a journey of heart concerning identity cognition. The emotional experience is extremely privatized, and no meticulous description is given to the historical background, as if it was a witch who can summon memories through the veil of time. The desolate man recalls a certain past time by

relying on memories about different human bodies, rather than the subject matter of a certain era.

As a female writer, Zhu Tianwen pays attention to gays' life, and makes a statement via the identity of a haggard gay over forty years old, which is quite rare. She answered this question at the acceptance speech when *Notes of a Desolate Man* won the First Prize of A Million Literatures, "The person abandoning communication and refusing the general trend appears with a gay's identity in this novel, but in most cases, he might belong to one kind of human beings — desolate man." In the work, the desolate man is a person that drifts away from the boundary of men's world, that cannot be accepted by the rules and orders of men's world, and that has to live in women's world. The desolate man is a borderline person walking beyond the social order. The reason why Zhu Tianwen chose gay as the writing subject might be related to the fact that feminists treat both gays and women as borderline persons of the patriarchal society.

Zhu Tianwen began to write novels at senior high school. Due to the influence of family education, she spent a long time in copying Eileen Chang's language style, and was naturally classified as "Writers of Zhang's School". Many years later, "Zhang's style" can hardly be traced in Zhu Tianwen's works, but Zhang's influence still exists. If people say Zhu Tianwen learned little from Zhang when telling love stories in early days, then *Notes of a Desolate Man* is the mark that Zhu Tianwen made a gorgeous turn on the road of writing. She proceeded toward the direction of "grandmother" without hesitation, and took her own way, more than equal to this task [1].

It is Eileen Chang's skill to describe desolation with gorgeous scenes, which is also evident in *Notes of a Desolate Man*. The philosophy of cherry blossoms dying at the height of their beauty" [2] runs through the whole article. In April, cherry trees bloom like raging fires, while Yao suffering from AIDS extinguishes the fire of life by refusing the redemption. The homosexual lust represented by the desolate man is also beautiful and cruel, which is noticed, sacrificed and abandoned immediately after use.

In the text, general descriptions about colors in the periodic table of colors appear repeatedly. The desolate man chants his own scriptures, i.e. the periodic table of red and green colors. "Water red, the round rising sun is water red. Silk red, the short sleeve is silk red. Pink, the make-up is pink. Thorn-pluck red, the jumping fish is thorn-pluck red....." [3] The gorgeous color is the echo and sublimation

for the world of desire where lust gallops, and meanwhile, it is also the materialization of memories. The protagonist Shao chats with his friend he has known for many years in the circle of gays, and they exchange with each other about the experience of hiring bodies. Their talking is full of flower and essential oil names, and it is a world of colors and fragrance. Homosexuals are the hermaphroditic soul, and "a female flower blooms in the male body". They are born with colors, and survive on sense organs. Zhu Tianwen described an external world totally different from people's cognition from a peculiar angle of view, performed the charm of feminine writing, and laid more emphasis on description about sense organs and details to break the narration process by abandoning the special emphasis on narration about history and events in male narration. Written materials no longer act as the tool of narration and plots, but become the real intention of writing. Besides, writing also turns into a more initiative life practice. Zhu Tianwen revealed this intention through the desolate man Shao in the text: to withstand forgetting with writing. I write, therefore I am. I will throw the pen and abandon writing at the moment when I cannot write, because I will no longer have emotions, consciousness and shape.

Numerous descriptions about gays' lust in *Notes of a Desolate Man* show a kind of female sexual experience and sex psychology, which appear in a fearless rebellion posture. In this way, a bold impact is caused to the restricted zone of patriarchal erotica.

Erection, yes, erection calls out the missing day like spell. When people stayed close to each other in the falls, I clearly felt that Yao's erection firmly reached my belly like a fist. Though people separated soon, I was very anxious to freeze such true feelings with fixing agent in the process of being obsessed with the memories, so that I could see, observe and understand it. When awakening in chaos, I was threatened by myself and hid it in the underworld. After meeting Jie six years later, it broke through the soil and swallowed me.

The dumbness and edema in his voice could not escape from my ears even though they were very far away. It must be the chase of weekends, and people played with several people in the steam room. Our organs were still swollen, and the fire of desire burned. It was insatiable, but ended up with exhaustion. I was tempting. After spit a mouth of saliva on the palm, I rubbed it and could not stop, as if I could not stop dancing after wearing a pair of magic shoes, until exhaustion and death. Various kinds of body fluids covered all bodies and then covered him. They were glued into a layer of facial mask smelling like slush, which wrapped him like cobweb. On the morning and at the night, at the street with rubbish and flying dust, white smoke emerged from the metro ventilation opening on the ground, and his tottering shadow like fly scalded my heart.

Different from meticulous depiction about pure flesh in the world of desire under typical male writing, in such a female world, the carnal copulation becomes a rite, which is the code word of entering the world of homosexuals. Besides, more attention is paid to experience at emotional level. When completely describing the scene of copulation between men,

Zhu Tianwen also disclosed an ambiguous attitude toward such a cruel world of lust. On the one hand, the desolate man's praise for "erotic utopia", "people's commune of hedonists", and "homosexuals having no motherland" approves a certain kind of gay identity, and treats it as a force of expanding human sense experience boundary and resisting paternity and country. On the other hand, the desolate man compares gay to the fly, abnormal element, prostitute, and vampire. Their sexual desire is "a foul smell in the body", and their sexual intercourse make people "feel like vomiting". Moreover, contradicting the standpoint of resisting paternity, the desolate man cannot approve gay movement, but yearns for Levi-Strauss's gold structure, i.e. traditional male and female difference theory and monogamy of heterosexuality. The desolate man praises the stability of marriage contract, which is compared with the "cruel" lust ecology of gay's circles. Therefore, the importance of political metaphor in *Notes of a Desolate Man* surpasses the superficial theme of homosexual. [4]

### III. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF FEMINISM

In *Magnificence at the End of the Century*, Zhu Tianwen put forward her feminist manifesto, "The lakes are deep, quiet and blue, like a bottomless pit. They tell her that the world established by men with theory and system will collapse, and she will survive on the memories about smell and colors. Besides, the world will be reconstructed from here." In *Notes of a Desolate*, she laid more emphasis on deconstruction of patriarchal history and awakening of women's independent consciousness. The fantastic landscape that "a female soul is hidden in a male body" is presented via the identity of a gay crooked man, "feminine utopia" is rectified, and the conventional men's history that exists for a long time is modified. In the narration about the history of thousands of years, men are major historical roles, and various historical books lack records about women, but the desolate man writes in the note:

"I always acclaim that the feminine body is his own creature, and he is created by himself. He just shows, and the showing is equal to existence and happiness. Just as what is told in the myth, the body filled with stars has swallowed the sun and become a horizontal line. When the sun passes by his body, he creates night, and then he creates a new day by giving birth to the sun."

"I wonder the so-called divinity is the feminine. The masculine body is the rib stripped from Adam's body."

"The myth has revealed the hidden fact, the nature has created women, women have created men, and men have created history. In terms of history, man has written down a story about human beings according to his own intention. He wrote down that woman was made of a rib from his body, and wrote down that woman's original sin of eating the forbidden fruit of knowledge. But in my opinion, man has stolen and eaten the forbidden fruit of knowledge. He began the binary opposition. He began the abstract thinking. He observed, analyzed and narrated. He created a system which matched but was different from nature. It is an object so different from nature, and the male deity usurped the female

god's position. The female god's rage became male deity's original sin. Please remember the goddess said that there was an era in which you strolled alone, roared with laughter, and bathed nakedly. The goddess turned back and entered the termination of myth, giving place to social order. The goddess's sadness has become the Garden of Eden that we've lost."

The above discussion overthrows the theory of man's history, and points out the context that "the nature has created women, women have created men, and men have stolen rights and created history" by setting the myth as a clue. In the theory of "feminine utopia" advocated by *Notes of a Desolate Man*, women are real founders of world civilization. They are the closest to nature and the reflection of "divinity". But men, who are created by women, have rewritten the history when systemizing and theorizing the civilization.

Besides the desolate man who sincerely praises the feminine temperament due to his own sexual orientation, Beibei that the desolate man Shao once chased after also expounds a large segment of "discussions on women" in the text, so as to repeatedly explain the orthodoxy of feminine history through various means and break the "male-centered historical view". [5]

Zhu Tianwen explained, when her teacher Hu Lancheng passed away, he just began to write Chinese Women. She had a cherished desire at that time, and hoped to complete the draft. After completing *Notes of a Desolate Man*, she said to Zhu Tianxin that her cherished desire about Hu was realized. In this sense, such historical perspective of feminism is inherited from Hu Lancheng's viewpoints.

#### IV. COVERT POLITICAL EXPRESSION

In the writing style and historical perspective of feminism, Zhu Tianwen faintly expressed her reflection on order and movement through the words of the desolate man. Her opinion is greatly different from the previous men's view of power, and stands out from general female writers' tradition of not talking about politics.

The desolate man drifts away from social order, and some persons will interpret it as decomposition of existing order. But actually, it's not. "Yao believes in organization and movement, but I am pessimistic and never participate in talks involving more than three people." This is a channel for the desolate man to escape from the society, and meanwhile, it is also a way for him to avoid getting involved in political chaos. He is pursuing his own stability. Under the trend of gay movement that "queers" advance triumphantly in modern times, the desolate man is naturally reproached as conservative. Homosexuals have no motherland, father and elder brothers. The campaigners such as Yao blame this social order is unfair, complain that others cannot understand, and want to justify their existence. The desolate man tells Yao, "Our world is wild and desolate, which our mothers can never understand. It is not that they are unwilling to understand, but they just cannot. All common people cannot do this, and their order is also very vulnerable." When the

order is dispelled in surface, Zhu Tianwen also indirectly expressed her sympathy for social order.

The desolate man's praise for marriage is also the desire for a stable social structure and being accepted by the society to a large extent. The desolate man recalls heavy blow of first love. Yao is completely informal and suffers from AIDS, while he was also born for lust. In this way, the cruelty of homosexuals' world of lust is described. When he needs a healthy environment for self-healing, he will choose to go to his younger sister's house, because his younger sister has a satisfactory family, and such atmosphere makes him comfortable. When his lover Yongju goes out, he enjoys the feeling of chastity, "just like white camellia, which blooms its prosperous petals only when the right person enjoying the flowers arrives". Unrestrained in the past, lingering in the world of lust once, he said, "Only people who have led an unrestrained life know that restraint is such a happy and important thing." They restrict desire depending on ceremony and love. Zhu Tianwen undoubtedly held high the value of ceremony in erotic dialectics, but such value of ceremony is not directly equal to the repression of ceremony. Zhu Tianwen hoped to emphasize the value of love ceremony and love rite. [6] In an era filled with doomsday complex and denying everything, Zhu Tianwen actually wanted to maintain the traditional order.

In the beginning of *Notes of a Desolate Man*, the author put forward some cautionary words, "This is a decadent time and an era of prediction. I am closely tied up with it, and sank to the bottom, the deepest bottom." Zhu Tianwen's acceptance speech might be able to imply the political sentiments hidden in the text. "As a common person, I witness that the political and commercial economic structure centering on Li becomes perfected every day, the gap between the rich and the poor in Taiwan deteriorates violently during several years, people in power modified the constitution for one person, which surprised all legal and political scholars, and the largest opposition party cannot perform the supervision duty based on various kinds of complexes and thoughts, so thousands of absurd farces happen." The desolate man is not only a person on the margin in gender, but also the dissenter of "political and commercial economic structure" and "hegemonic discourse". [7] When people are dissatisfied with the current situations, they will often react in two ways. Firstly, they will change positively, such as campaigners like Yao; another kind of persons will cherish the memory of the past golden age, and lean to conservatism, such as the desolate man and Zhu Tianwen.

#### V. CONCLUSION

The novel repeatedly mentions that the desolate man recalls the scene in which he shouts loudly "long lives the great man" among the dreamy crowds of people, groups of flags and flowers in the square. In the eyes of the desolate man, that is a happy era, "people just trust, and there is no doubt." It is orderly and mathematic, approaching the gold structure under Levi-Strauss's pen, "The problem of identity does not exist. The God sits in heaven, and the man's world is in peace." Later, he realizes that "a great man is also a

man". But compared with the present time, that historical scene is endowed with a different meaning by the desolate man, and it is a kind of memory for the "original motherland" that he can never return, as the complete order structure has disintegrated in reality.

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