



# Body Politics and the Writing of Desire

## A Comparative Reading of “Boule de Suif” and “Lust, Caution”

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**Abstract.** The study is based on Foucault’s concept of “body politics” proposed in “Discipline and Punish”. It conducts a close reading and comparative analysis of “The Ballad of the Sad Café” and “Lust, Caution”, examining the motives behind the behaviors of the protagonists from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds in the two works. Furthermore, the study explores how women’s ethical bodies resist in the context of war. It raises readers’ concerns about the issue of women’s ethical bodies in modern society.

**Keywords:** body politics · Feminism · sustainable development · the Writing of Desire

## 1 Introduction

After 1990, a group of female writers with strong female consciousness emerged in China, and the study of the body entered the field of literary studies because of the enlightenment of female subjectivity. Although the time of domestic research was relatively backward on a global scale, interpreting literary works from the perspective of “body politics” has become a key and hot research topic in recent years.

Ge Hongbing systematically sorted out the theoretical system and history of “body politics” in his book “Body Politics” [1]. The concept of “body” was first brought into the field of literature by Li Qiaomei, a doctoral student at Sun Yat-Sen University, in her article “The Narrative of the Body in Contemporary Chinese Literature (1949–2006)” [2], in which she systematically examined the relationship between literature and the body during these 50 years from the perspective of the discipline, liberation, and indulgence of the body. This can be summarized as the process of neglecting the body to the body dominating the literary world. Since then, there have been many text analyses based on the perspective of body politics.

In analyzing foreign texts, Wu Jiajia [3], Huang Yuchen [4], and Jiang Tiange [5], using Margaret Atwood’s works as an example, respectively studied “Surfacing”, “The Handmaid’s Tale”, and “Alias Grace” to explore how Atwood reconstructs female subjectivity in her works.

In analyzing domestic texts, Li Ye once analyzed Lu Xun’s novels, trying to restore the experience of the Chinese people’s bodies during the social transformation period and their self-identity and imagination under this experience. [6] Zhu Fujiao used “The

White Snake” as an analytical object to reveal how the political ideology of a particular period controlled and infringed upon individual bodies. [7].

However, in the study of Zhang Ailing’s works, there are fewer works that start from “body politics”. Wu Xiaojia proposed in her article “Body against ‘Body Politics’” that “Lust, Caution” has dual deconstruction and uses the body to deconstruct the national state. [8].

In the study of “Little Reunion”, domestic scholars are accustomed to comparing this novel with domestic works: Hou Jianfang compared and analyzed it with “The Golden Lotus” to explore the “great power of women” [9], while Wei Huaying compared and analyzed it with “When I Was in Xia Village” to reflect and criticize war from the perspective of women. [10].

In conclusion, it can be seen that there are already abundant studies on comparative analysis of texts based on “body politics” theory, both domestically and abroad. However, there are still some details that can be supplemented, such as the lack of literature comparing and analyzing “Lust, Caution” with “Little Reunion”, insufficient attention paid to the analysis of characters’ inner psychology and motives behind desire writing, and inadequate emphasis on changes in the identities of the protagonists and further exploration of female dedication plots from the perspective of “body politics.”

## 2 The Writing of Desire in “Lust, Caution” and “Boule de Suif”

In the passage “Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque”, the concept of the “triangle of desire” [11] is proposed by René Girard. The author argues that the very nature of desire is not a straight line between the subject and the object of desire, but rather involves the intervention of a mediator or “the other” that influences the subject’s perception of the object.

Wang JiaZhi has basic material desires such as food, drink, shelter and transportation, and she can satisfy these desires if she plays the role of Mrs. Mai. In the “chaotic” political space of war, she is temporarily stable, and this sense of security makes her forget her own poverty and lack. However, this sense of security is short-lived and makes her feel uneasy and anxious, hoping to dedicate herself to a certain group in the hope that the stability of reality can be maintained.

The influence of the medium can directly or indirectly act on the object of desire, causing the object to fall into an illusion of value. In the desire to become a patriotic revolutionary, the medium of desire, namely her classmates, pushed Wang JiaZhi further and further away. The group pushed her towards Liang RunSheng, a role that she found repulsive, only because Liang RunSheng had sexual experience, while Kuang YuMin, whom she admired, had a bad attitude towards her loss of chastity. This shows that the influence of the group on individual desires is powerful and can change the individual’s desired object and values. Kuang YuMin’s bad attitude towards her also reflects the discrimination and exclusion of society towards women who have lost their chastity, reflecting the shaping and influence of individual desires and identity in wartime society.

As a result, a desire that should not have belonged to her took the upper hand, “Every time I’m with Yi, it’s like taking a hot bath, washing away all my pent-up frustration, because everything has a purpose.” [12] So she transferred to another object of desire,

seeking a sense of belonging, and ultimately went down the wrong path, losing her direction.

For Boule de Suif, the carriage is also a temporary shelter in chaos, and food is abundant for her. In the absence of food for others, she generously shared her food, showing a generous and tolerant quality. However, the medium of desire also almost made Boule de Suif hallucinate, mistaking the false appearances of these people as true, thinking that she had almost become one of them, a noble patriot.

But the hypocrisy of the medium doomed Boule de Suif's dream to be shattered. When the Republican Army made a despicable invitation to Boule de Suif, she showed strong patriotism and refused with disgust. The medium was based on self-interest, and behind Boule de Suif's back, he criticized her harshly. Under the flowery words of these high-ranking people, even the nuns joined the persuasion campaign, using "God" as the other, and even though they realized that the enlightenment discourse based on historical truth and doctrine was nothing but a "noble lie", they deluded themselves into applying it to Boule de Suif. In the end of Boule de Suif's story, she was sent back to her original identity, while the others were spared hunger and cold because they had prepared enough food, and Boule de Suif once again faced the threat of death.

Therefore, whether it is Wang JiaZhi or Boule de Suif, only when they face death directly can the protagonist see the truth of life and survival. In this process, they can truly return to themselves and regain their inner balance.

### 3 Dual Identities in "Lust, Caution" and "Boule de Suif"

The definition of body politics is "the two-way struggle of control and resistance between power and the body" [13], which includes the regulation of the body by power and the struggle of the body against power. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault stated that "the body is directly involved in some sort of political field; power relations directly control it, intervene in it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to perform certain tasks, display certain ceremonies, and emit certain signals. This political intervention in the body is closely linked to the economic use of the body through a complex interaction; the body is essentially subjected to the intervention of power and domination as a productive force. However, on the other hand, it can only become a labour force when it is controlled by a certain system of conquest; only when the body has both productive capacity and is tamed can it become a useful force." [14] In this system, it seems that all thoughts and behaviours that are based on knowledge are discourse.

As discourse covers both relatively closed individual spaces and more unlimited public spaces, means of achieving regulation objectives through violence are becoming less and less, and instead, seeking to maintain order through the incentive of desire. Under this concept, the representation of "body" in the literary field can be roughly divided into two categories. The first category is the "real body", which becomes the object of knowledge-power regulation, the vital unit of the state and the nation. The second category is the material extension of the body in discourse. The body is no longer the self-need of the individual but becomes an objective and real collective entity, such as a nation. These bodies are "desire objects constructed by language (including words) with metaphorical and metonymic functions" [15], and desire is a feasible way to reflect on discourse.

In Eileen Chang's "Wool Comes from Sheep——conversation about Lust, Caution", the opening emphasizes that Wang Jiazhi was only a "wool-picker" who "got into espionage with the impulsion of patriotic sentiment and some like-minded students", [12] Therefore, Wang Jiazhi's true self is still that of a girl and a student, not a specially trained spy. Eileen Chang portrayed a female college student with human and normal human weaknesses rather than a typical spy. Attempting to play the role of an upper-class lady was destined to fail. *Boule de Suif* was identified as a prostitute and bore a bad reputation, but she showed great dignity, national self-esteem, and patriotism. Her sacrifice did not receive recognition or respect from others, like a mirror reflecting the vulgar and mean faces of the powerful.

In "Lust, Caution", Eileen Chang pointed out that power is an aphrodisiac, especially in the world of high society. "You know, if women are attracted to men in military uniforms, it doesn't matter whether they are French or Prussian. Isn't that embarrassing enough? My God!" [16] This narrow definition of power shapes Wang Jiazhi, who is young and naive, into Mrs. Mai, who is deeply trapped in the myth of power, and transforms the prostitute Yee into a patriotic zealot who despises the Prussians. It is evident that power, within this narrow scope, plays a crucial role in the establishment and transgression of dual identities, while the larger discourse implicit in desire controls the behaviour and motives of the characters.

#### 4 The Body of Ethics for the Female

Foucault's theoretical model suggests that "with just one gaze, one supervisory gaze, each individual becomes humble under the pressure of that gaze and becomes their own supervisor." [17] Foucault's model emphasizes surveillance through gaze rather than using violence and material restraint to make each person their own supervisor. Thus, everyone is under social surveillance, with women under the surveillance of male-dominated culture and their bodies bound by standardized gazes, unable to deviate. In the special political arena of war, women's subjectivity construction involves their relationship with others in society, and ethnic identity is an important aspect. Under these conditions, Maupassant and Eileen Chang chose different attitudes towards the struggle against the male gaze.

Maupassant empowered women by involving them in politics and nationalism and used others to empower women. During the resistance to the unreasonable demands of Prussian officers, Fatty became determined in herself. Sex is no longer a personal behaviour, but rather collective. If she surrenders her body to the enemy of her own nation, she becomes a traitor to the country. However, the weak men in the carriage use her, forcing her to become a toy for Prussian officers in the name of patriotism and willing to sacrifice her virginity. In the end, her reproductive organs make her lose her personality and become a tool to be used.

Eileen Chang, on the other hand, empowers women by separating them from politics and nationalism and empowering them through their own bodies. In "Lust, Caution", the description of Wang Jiazhi's body contains a sexual connotation of the male gaze, such as "As soon as she sat down, she hugged his arms, with one elbow resting on the outer edge of her breasts, the fattest part of the southern hemisphere. This was her usual

skill, sitting upright on the surface, secretly eroding and melting away.” [12] Wang Jiazhi used the charm of her body to break the role of women as passive objects, and controlled her own body and emotions, winning important information and intelligence for her spy work. However, the traditional “chastity concept” became the resistance she faced when constructing subjectivity. In the corrupt concept that women should maintain the privacy of their bodies, exposing their bodies in public is seen as immoral and shameful. As a spy, Wang Jiazhi’s body is already subordinate to the entire society. Therefore, she not only faces the risk of losing her body morally, but also being accused and rejected by society, thereby weakening her subjectivity. At the end of the story, Wang Jiazhi’s soft heart towards Mr. Yi led to the collapse of the student organization, and her self-construction was ultimately suppressed by politics.

In a social context where the body is seen as a battlefield, people desire to reflect their high spiritual level and life status through the regulation of the body. However, in this society, due to their perceived weakness and social constraints, women often cannot take more defensive measures in the face of stigmatization and are easily redefined. Regardless of resistance or acceptance, women’s bodies cannot escape political constraints in this social context. Therefore, whether voluntarily or involuntarily sacrificing oneself, both are contemporary myths of body disorder. These women often face frequent redefinitions of their identity and struggle to achieve consistency between self-identity and social identity. This constant identity transformation often has a devastating impact on them. In a wartime environment, women often bear more negative impacts, including threats to their bodies, redefinition of gender roles, and weakened social status, among others. All these factors have a serious impact on women’s subjectivity, making it difficult for them to find their own position and value, which is one of the great harms of war to women.

## 5 Conclusion

In summary, this article examines the representation of female consciousness and the specific manifestation of the relationship between the body and politics in the works of “Lust, Caution” and “Boule de Suif”. It reminds us that in the special political field of war, individual desires and identities are shaped by external discourse. Foucault’s theory of “body politics” provides intellectual resources for analysis: in a patriarchal society, gender is not only a biological feature but also a complex social construct. In this construction, men are usually endowed with higher social status and power than women, while women are often viewed as secondary and dominated groups. In this context, women’s bodies are often seen as commodities that can be exchanged, controlled, and dominated, meaning that women’s bodies no longer belong to themselves but become the property and object of control of others in society. Women’s bodies may be used in power relations such as sexual acts, marriage, childbirth, and job opportunities, limiting their autonomy and subjectivity. Despite their efforts to break through the collective norms and boundaries of female bodies, women still face failure. Whether voluntarily or involuntarily, the ethical body of women is ultimately suppressed. Focusing on the ethical body of women can better understand the pain and difficulties of self-identity of women’s stigmatized ethical body in the chaotic political field of war.

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