

Negotiating the Existential "Other": A re-examination of Female subjectivity in Roth's "In Trouble"

Haoyang Zhu

Sichuan University, China

Abstract

"In Trouble" excerpted from Philip Roth's novel *When She was Good* shows the plight of women in the family crisis and their struggle to transcend themselves. This essay will use Beauvoir's "the Other" to interpret the subjectivity of the heroines Lucy and Myra in the novel. "The Other" has the characteristics of immanence, alterity, absoluteness and alienation. The writer will elaborate on the mapping of the "the Other" in the characters of the novel from the following two aspects: (1) The construction of the female identity of the Other in the family, (2) Objectification of women's reproductive rights. To a certain degree, analyzing this novel from the perspective of feminism can provide a new way to explore Philip Roth's stereotype of "misogyny".

Keywords

Beauvoir, Other, Philip Roth, In Trouble, Feminism.

1. Introduction

Philip Roth is one of the most successful novelists in America, whose novels are very popular and have won many mainstream awards in the United States. Meanwhile he is also vilified by some critics. Roth is considered by some critics, newspapers and readers that his works contain his "misogyny" tendency. It is a very serious accusation. Patricia Meyer Spacks believes that Roth's work has little awareness of women's status as full-fledged human beings, with possible purposes unrelated to men. Mary Allen believes that Roth projects his enormous rage and disappointment with womankind... as a man who rails at the world because he has never found in it a woman who is both strong and good. (Shostak, 271) Julia Keller, the Tribune's cultural critic, writes of her position: Philip is a provocative and prolific genius—but because he's a great writer with a large and terrible flaw: His women have no souls. (Keller, 1) On the whole, the core of the above views is that Roth neglects the subjectivity of female roles. They are dissatisfied with the negative images of female in Roth's novels, and by extension, they believe that Roth's works are actually a reflection of his personal thoughts, and gradually evolve into "misogyny". However, instead of using these critical remarks to prove or reject the misogyny of Philip Roth, the writer intends to explore a new interpretation of the women in his novel based on *In Trouble*.

"In Trouble" which is excerpted from his novel *When She was Good* written in 1967 indicates the epitome of the 1940s in the Midwest United States. and it is Roth's only novel with a female protagonist. However, this novel doesn't receive much more attention in domestic and foreign than Roth's American Trilogy. And it has received has often been dismissive. Many critics see the novel as Roth's literary vengeance against his ex-wife Margaret and have allowed this autobiographical interpretation to cloud their criticism. (Shostak, 115) But I argue that if we want to discuss the female images in Philip Roth's works, we must not miss his only novel with a female as the protagonist. The writer uses Beauvoir's "the Other" to analyze the main character in the work from family, reproductive rights, and provide readers with a new direction.

2. "Other" in patriarchal family relations

Simon de Beauvoir proposed her idea of "The Other" in *The Second Sex*. "The moment when man asserts himself as subject and free being, the idea of 'the Other' arises".(Beauvoir 2011, xxiii) "The Other" has multiple meanings, but when Beauvoir applied the "other" to the situation of women, the other only showed the objectification of women, representing the situation of women being excluded and oppressed.(Bai 2023, 15) Beauvoir denied the binary opposition between men and women in the traditional sense, and put forward that men are the subject, self, and women are the object, the other. In Beauvoir's view, the reason for these two situations is not only that women are not economically independent, but also that women are still subconsciously regarded as men's vassals in the social history of thousands of years of patriarchal culture. This subconsciousness is terrible. Not only do men take women's subordinate status for granted, but most women's thinking is also imperceptibly influenced by patriarchal culture, and their ideas have also been alienated. In *In Trouble*, Lucy's family is typically dominated by patriarchy. We can find several evidence to indicate how "the other" is in a subordinate position.

2.1. Myra: The absolute "other" in family

Beauvoir argued "a closed-off realm where women are interior, passive, static, and immersed in themselves." (Beauvoir 2011, 32) Women have historically been confined to a restricted domestic environment, leading to a gradual diminishing of their subjectivity and transcendence, and consequently becoming appendage to men in societal roles. Under the historical background of this story, in 1940, the labor force participation rate for women in the United States increased by 7 percentage points compared to the beginning of the century. (Sklar, 2009) Women's family status should be improved. But the image of the Other in this story is obviously different from that of women who are traditionally bound in the family. Duane, as the representative of patriarchy, is an out-of-work alcoholic, unable to support his wife and child while Myra, who is in a subordinate position, has a source of income. So we could find that even though women no longer rely on men in terms of economic income, Myra is still dominated by Duane because of long-standing social norms. This means that Myra has become an absolute other and an object that has completely lost its subjectivity.

In the story, Duane repeatedly used a commanding tone to ask Myra to sit down and not interfere with his daughter's conversation. "Myra, sit over there. Sit, I said." "First, Myra, sit down. And stay done." "Myra, you be still." (Roth 2009, 11-12) Myra obeyed these orders every time. Under the influence of long-term patriarchal culture, even though she has a higher source of income than men, she has been used to obeying her husband's orders. At the same time, she also conveyed to her daughter that she would obey her father: "You have to give him a chance".(Roth 2009, 9) Ironically, in this process, she did not show concern for her pregnant daughter, but always defended her father who intended to force her daughter to have an abortion. In this process, she can feel the deprivation of autonomy, but she naturally accepted it. Maybe she also tried to break through the absoluteness of the Other. "She made a move to the bed. Her husband looked at her and she retreated." (Roth 2009, 12) She also tried to break her husband's order, but apparently she gave up subconsciously in the end. Her obedience to men has gone deep into her heart, and she has been completely alienated as a male appendage.

2.2. Lucy: The suppression of patriarchy on women's rebellious consciousness

In Lucy, we can also see the layers of shackles set by social norms on women - whether women are still women or not, which seems to have been stipulated by society. As Beauvoir stated, "Women's place in society is always that which men assign to her; at no time has she ever imposed her own law." (Beauvoir 1989, 77) Lucy pretended she was not pregnant because it could help her feel "she was the same girl in the same body, and in the same way too-

alone".(Roth 2009, 5) It seems that her identity as a girl is not innate to her, but rather bestowed upon her through nurture. Her behavior of getting pregnant before marriage, which does not conform to social norms, has put self-identity at risk. Not only that, Myra also advised her to follow her father's arrangements in the family. "But is Daddy Will your father or is your father your father?" (Roth 2009, 9) These words emphasize the father's position as the head of the family. But Lucy is not willing to become the Other like this. Because she doesn't like anyone in this family, she thinks her father is a "Town drunk" and her mother is very weak. In this story, she always stood in a superior position to talk with them and tried to fight against the secular ideas. She once reported her drunken father to the police, got pregnant before marriage, and fought against the will of her family not to have an abortion, all of which reflected her rebellious consciousness. She realized the deprivation of her autonomy by patriarchy, and if she continued like this, she would become like her mother, completely subservient to men, attempting to change her own destiny. However, in the end, she chose to get married to break free from the control of her patriarchal family and pursue her own ideal life. In fact, she still placed her pursuit on men and once again became the other.

3. "Other" in reproductive rights

The reproductive role of women has a significant impact on their status the Other. For a long time, women have been unable to freely choose whether to have children or abortion. This story describes the abortion events in two different periods. Pregnancy and abortion are clearly led by men, and women have no room to refuse. But the difference is that, on the one hand, Myra is in the absolute position of the other side and voluntarily accepted abortion after the great depression, while Lucy's rebellious consciousness led her to refuse abortion, so she married and left her family of origin. On the other hand, Myra got pregnant after marriage, while Lucy got pregnant before marriage. Lucy's behavior was considered more immoral in that era.

3.1. Myra's Abortion - Men Squeezing Women's Value

The economic crisis of the Great Depression caused most men to lose their jobs, greatly impacting the male dominated social relationships at this time, particularly in terms of fertility. In 1937, the American Medical Association officially abandoned its opposition to the birth control. In 1938, a survey conducted by *Women's Home* showed that 79% of American women agreed to use contraception.(Yalom 2022, 380) Birth control has become a social consensus at this time, and has also driven the development of the contraceptive industry. At the same time, the number of abortions has also increased significantly. With Dr. Tausig estimating in the *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology* that around 15000 women die from abortions in a year.(Zhou 2008) From here, we can see the reason for Myra's abortion in the story. Faced with Duane's unemployment and decline, Myra can only start running her family business to cope with the economic crisis, and her family is unable to afford the life of another child. But her status as an outsider did not change as a result. At this time, contraceptive drugs had become popular and affordable, but the relationship among the sexes was always in the hands of men, so Myra had no right to choose whether to have children or risk her life to have an abortion. But they beautify the reason of abortion: everything is for Lucy. This reason seems to give Myra a false support, making her feel that she had abortions for the survival of her daughter, but in fact, Myra subconsciously ignored her unemployed and alcoholic husband. After all, she has been defending her husband, accepting his violence and enjoying it. After experiencing such pregnancies and abortions, Myra's alterity was further solidified.

3.2. Lucy: Is refusing abortion a rebellion or a compromise?

At the beginning, we could clearly see Lucy's attitude towards pregnancy - she had lost her autonomy in reproduction. "Something was growing inside her body, and without her

permission!" (Roth 2009, 1) Lucy seems to have realized the loss of herself. Her pregnancy was not approved by her, and she had the intention to resist secular ideas but had no way. She can only choose to have an abortion or marry with Roy against her father. If she had an abortion, her life would be threatened, but I think this is a secondary reason. The more important reason is that she does not want to bow down to her most despised father. Her arrogance and superiority towards her family made her unwilling to be trapped in this family. Lucy argued, "I refuse to live your life again." (Roth 2009, 17) She needs to find a breakthrough point to change the situation. But sadly, at this time, she could only choose men to change the situation. She still subconsciously placed herself in the position of the Other, which deeply reflected Lucy's long-term struggle and powerlessness in a male-dominated society, and could only tragically rely on marriage to achieve her life's pursuits. Although Lucy is always in the position of the other, she also shows her intention to show transcendence. Maybe the outcome is not satisfactory. To some extent, her rebellious consciousness is affirmed.

4. Conclusion

"Woman is not born, she is made." According to Beauvoir, women's other status is not innate but gradually formed. Therefore, if women want to get rid of the status of others and realize their transcendence, they must fight against the ideology of patriarchal society. This also indicates the consequence, which is almost impossible to achieve. Under the patriarchal system, Lucy and Myra are always dominated by Duane in the family. Myra has been trapped in it and cannot extricate herself. Lucy is struggling but will eventually be destroyed. Philip Roth realistically depicts the true images of American women after the great depression. Maybe it is a tragedy, maybe it's a smear on women. However, readers can experience the sorrow and weak resistance of women under the oppression of patriarchy, which can make everyone aware of women's situation and continuously promote social equity.

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