

The Sociality of Tragic Fate of Marginal Characters from a Masculinist Perspective

- An Example from the Film Mr. Tree

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Abstract: The protagonist of this film is Mr. Tree, an over-aged youth, unemployed and mentally ill, who lives at the bottom of Chinese rural society. Through the subjective perspective of him, a marginal character in the society, the film reflects on and crises the social problems faced in the process of development and transformation of contemporary society under the domination of the patriarchal system, and this paper will discuss how this process is based on the dual identities of 'grassroots' and 'male'. This paper will discuss how this process has caused irreparable damage to the fate of the marginalized characters represented by Mr. Tree, who is both 'grassroots' and 'male', as well as the inevitable social factors for this damage to occur, so as to analyse the plight of the underclass under the domination of the patriarchal system from a masculine point of view. The male survival dilemma under the domination of patriarchy is analyzed from a masculine perspective.

Keywords: grassroots, patriarchy, social critique

1. Introduction

In the context of the flourishing of gender theory in contemporary society, the image of male figures has begun to receive widespread attention. Marginalized figures are individuals who are on the fringes of society, restricted by social structures and values, and who often suffer discrimination and exclusion from society. Despite the values of diversity and equality in today's society, however, in a patriarchal society, the value of a social individual, especially a male, is inevitably based on the notion that social status and social resources are fundamental. Starting from the social situation of marginal male figures and the social difficulties they face, this paper considers how marginal male figures with the gender identity of 'male' can seek to realize their personal values and break through their individual dilemmas in the context of a patriarchal society, and considers the alienation and diversion of the individual's initiative to pursue a better life under the constraints of a patriarchal discourse. It also pays attention to the phenomenon of alienation and diversion of the individual's ability to pursue a better life under the constraints of patriarchal discourse.

This paper mainly adopts the descriptive research method, starting from the individual, small-cut social phenomenon reflected in the film, elaborating on the social background and historical roots of this phenomenon, answering the social nature of this phenomenon, and analyzing the causes. There is also a vision of how and what can be done to mitigate the social problems caused by

such phenomena, and investigating the support and resistance from society while the grassroots and the margins of the society are independently exploring their living space.

2. The Dilemma of the Male Individual as ‘Grassroots’ and ‘Marginal’

Since Spivak published his famous article *Can the Subaltern Speak?* in 1985, the concept of the ‘subaltern’ has been the subject of extensive attention and study by many sectors of society. On the basis of Antonio Gramsci's Prison Notebooks, Spivak firstly proposed the concept of ‘subaltern’ , and gave it a concrete explanation, and then, through continuous application and transformation, he pointed this abstract concept to the ordinary people who are obscured by multiple discourses and are marginalized in the economic and political fields-grassroots. Reference: Spivak points out in his article *Can the Subaltern Speak?* that the authentic voices of the grassroots are obscured by multiple discourses of power, which leads to the conclusion that the grassroots cannot speak for themselves, and the label branded on the grassroots is ‘silence’ [1].

Mr.Tree, a man living in the countryside of Northeast China, repairs cars for a living and is unmarried at an advanced age. He is dismissed from his job after a work accident in which both of his eyes are injured, and his life has become even more difficult after becoming unemployed, making him a representative figure of the ‘grassroots’. In the situation of the lower class, the sense of loss brought about by the difference of economic status in society permeates their lives. In the film, there are many plots like this: when a few primary school students get into a fight, Mr.Tree goes to fight for the one being bullied, but he is disliked by the child with the question of ‘who the hell are you’; when the younger generation of him-Erzhu, colluded with the village chief's brother-in-law to take over the land that belong to Mr.Tree to build a mine, Mr.Tree asks in a drunken mood, ‘Why didn't you tell me before you took over my field’, but the cautious words in exchange for the rage of Erzhu, he want to hit Mr.Tree but is blocked by the crowd. Then Erzhu chase Mr.Tree into the house and demand Mr.Tree's kneel down and let Mr.Tree apologize to him. Mr.Tree says ‘Bro,that’s all my fault’ as he kneel down.

In the article *Can the Subaltern Speak?* ,Spivak points out that the voices of the grassroots are obscured by multiple discourses of power. In the face of power, their voices cannot be heard, and they do not even have the right to speak for themselves. The powerful groups shout more and more, while the vulnerable groups are more and more silent. This is also deeply and strongly reflected in miner groups in the film. The film unfolds its narrative in the social context of Ruiyang Mining Company opening a mining factory in Wangdu Village and the local authorities forcing the villagers to relocate by administrative means. In this process, the villagers are forced to respond with ‘have nothing to say’ and be silent - as the collusion between the village chief who is the guardian of the collective benefits, and the miners, leads to the suppression of the villager's reasonable demands and legitimate rights by the artificially distorted system and power. One of the silent miners is Mr.Tree's friend, Xiaozhuang,a 20-year-old man. The young man lose his life in a mine accident, and when facing the interview by the media about the truth of the accident, his workmates, under the deterrence of the authority hidden behind the curtain, they just kept saying nothing by waving their hands, shaking their heads, and other silent and powerless body language. Behind this phenomenon is the truth of the deprivation of the right to speak of the grassroots, and the important driving force behind the loss of this right is the ‘patriarchal discourse’ that strangles the throats of the grassroots with their authority. The important contributor to the loss of this right is the ‘patriarchal discourse’ that strangles the grassroots with authority. Reference: Secondly, Spivak points out that patriarchal discourse is one of the discourses that lead to the "silencing" of the grassroots [1].

3. The Antagonistic Symbiosis Between Patriarchal Society and Vulnerable Individuals

‘Patriarchy’, literally ‘rule of the father’. It is derived from the Greek πατριάρχης (patriarkhēs), ‘patriarch or chieftain’, and is a compound noun of πατριά (patria, i.e., fatherhood). The term patriarchy was once used to refer to the authoritarian rule of a male head of household; however, in modern times the concept can also be used to explain the social phenomenon of adult males being dominant both in the family and in society. There are two characters who symbolise patriarchy in the film: the village chief, who was autocratic, and Mr.Tree's father, who had been dead for many years but always bothered him.

3.1. Patriarchal Authority Outside the Family

The village chief join hands with the mining company for his own personal gain and use his authority to order the villagers to relocate. Radio appeared continuously in the film as a symbol of power in Chinese rural society. ‘According to the instructions of the Jitai Municipal Government, in order to ensure the normal production of Ruiyang Mining and to safeguard the lives and properties of the villagers in the coal-mining area, the relocation of Wangdu Village has already been carried out,’ and ‘Attention, villagers, it has now been decided that on top of the original ¥50,000 compensation for each household, additional incentives for villagers who have not yet relocated , the mining group is going to give us awards’, the village chief through the normative political discourse, the people's spokesman and the identity of the defender of the benefits of the privileges granted to complete a sacrifice of collective interests to achieve the monopoly of the right of individual purposes. At the wedding banquet of Gao Peng, a villager in the Wangdu Village, a woman reflected to the village chief the problem of leaking windows in her house and wanted to get help, but is skilfully dismissed by the village chief in a few words. The village chief, who is originally the spokesman for collective benefits, has become a ‘big headman’ under the ‘patriarchal system’ of the new era in the historical stage of the transition between the old and the new in the rural society and the succession. Reference: Background exchange under the new ‘enclosure movement’ [2].

3.2. Patriarchal Authority Within the Family

In the process of Mr.Tree's transition from his true state to his non-real state, the image of his ‘father’ always haunts him. When he was young, Mr.Tree was haunted by the memory of his father, punished his older brother who had been convicted of hooliganism, and killed him in the process. The image of his father appears in Mr. Tree's fantasies several times in the film. When he goes to Changchun to join his old friend Chen Yixin, who had become a famous teacher of Olympic mathematics, and when he was writing on the blackboard after cleaning up the classroom at night, it is as if he had seen his father pushed his way in with a serious face, seemingly questioning Mr.Tree as to why he is in such a place like this - a place that has nothing to do with ‘peasants’, ‘countryside’, or ‘grassroots’, it represented Mr.Tree's inner inferiority complex in terms of his social status and identity. On the night before his wedding, Mr.Tree is dissatisfied with his younger brother for not being able to borrow the car he want, and then there is an accidental fire. When Mr.Tree fight with his younger brother and fall unconscious, he dream of his ‘father’ is cremating his elder brother, and then he rush up and press his father underneath him, strangling his father's neck and saying, ‘Go away, don't follow me as you are gone’, and this is the last time his father appeared in Mr.Tree's dream in the film. With the words ‘Brother, why don't you give me a dream? I am going to get married’, Mr.Tree awakening gradually, this is also the completion of his personal spiritual ‘patricide’, as a ‘vulnerable man’ in the perspective of masculinity, and a real sense of rebellion against patriarchal power. Reference: After he strangles his father in the film, he sees his

brother for the first time in his fantasy. This also shows that in the presence of his father, it will inevitably lead to the absence of his elder brother. By strangling his father, Mr.Tree achieved control over his own destiny, and although he was heading towards madness in the end, he was able to make a courageous rebellion [2]. In the second half of the film, 'Older Brother' replaces 'Father' and appears frequently in Mr.Tree's dreams.

3.3. Move to Nihilism under the Patriarchy

On the day of Mr.Tree's wedding, 'Older Brother' appeared for the first time with his sister-in-law. Just as the two of them sang *You are like a fire in the winter* at Mr.Tree's wedding, 'Older Brother' is the fire that ignites Mr.Tree's inner desires, and of course, brings light to his life. The image of 'Older Brother' filled Mr.Tree's inner world, and under the watchful eye of 'Older Brother', Mr.Tree's life seems to be on the right track. He married to Xiao Mei, gaving prophecies to the other like a psychic, starting to be respected by everyone, and becoming the ribbon cutter at the Mining Group's ceremony... Thus, he has escaped his father's gaze and gradually became the person like 'Older Brother' whom he aspired to be. Reference: The spirit of his brother, who has returned from the dead, is constructed in his mind to provide Mr.Tree with a little solace in his isolated and missing life [3].

This path of resistance lead to nihilism, Mr.Tree got mad, everything was his fantasy, all resistance was an illusion. As one of the 'grassroots', he cannot really break the authority. He challenged the traditional patriarchal authority, but he himself was also being assimilated by it. He disliked his brother's borrowed wedding car for its lack of grandeur, and asked Erzhu to kneel down by pretending to be a god...At the same time, the underlying cause of becoming a 'prophet' is also the desire for patriarchal authority. In this regard, director Han Jie said 'Becoming the village's prophet after some kind of stimulation is the key point for Mr.Tree to change his own embarrassing predicament and regain his dignity. He makes the young man who kneeled down in front of him willingly prostrate before him, and also cuts ribbons and thinks about the future with the big boss who attracts investments to the village. Mr.Tree's status as a prophet may in fact be nothing more than a bluffing trick, which fits in well with the prevailing attitude of the ordinary peasant of the present day - cowardice to the limit will recapture its dignity with a sense of extreme intensity and with the ferocious qualities of an animal.' Reference: New Youth, Issue 45 Deconstructing Mr Tree: a film's idealism [4].

4. Rethinking the Reality of the 'Grassroots Narrative' under Patriarchal Rule

In the second half of the film, Mr.Tree acquires the ability of prophecy. At first, his crazy talk is only teased by the villagers, but as his prophecies come true, Mr.Tree is honored as the village's god. At the opening ceremony of the mining company, Mr.Tree is in formal dress and cut the ribbon with the boss, thus Mr.Tree experience a transformation from the silent and vulnerable group in the patriarchal society to regaining the right to speak. In the first half of the film, Mr.Tree is disliked and asked 'Who the hell are you', or when his friend Xiaozhuang accidentally rubbed against Erzhu's new car, Mr.Tree goes to make peace with him and said 'Xiaozhuang is my friend, please forgive him for my sake', but he was pushed away by Erzhu. All of them are in great contrast[5].

In the second half of the film, Mr.Tree is undoubtedly out of his mind. But the crazy words that come out of his mouth are fulfilled one by one, which is a kind of dialectical transformation between 'insanity' and 'sobriety', 'fantasy' and 'reality', 'disorder' and 'regularity'[6]. Whether in Erzhu looks for Mr.Tree to give him the prophecy, Mr.Tree pretends to be a god to let Erzhu shut down the mining factory, or in the opening ceremony of the mining company, Mr.Tree think about the future of the company and put forward ridiculous suggestions to the boss.In essence, all of that

are using absurd words to express the truth[7]. The treatment is also an irony of the blind obedience to patriarchal authority and the fanaticism of absolute political correctness and worship of spiritual leaders. This idea is similar to the anthropologist Frye's suggestion that 'The first restraints came from people who were in a trance, drunk and speaking differently, and the prestige of such people was very much related to the ancient respect for anomalous forms'. The anthropologist Frye states that 'The first restraints came from people who were in a trance, drunk and speaking differently, and the prestige of such people was very much related to the ancient respect for anomalous forms'. Mr.Tree's transformation from madness to a representation of divinity aptly confirms this [8].

5. Conclusions

The accelerated polarization of social classes as a result of economic development is an inevitable trend and direction of the society. The widening gap between the rich and the poor and the expansion of the urban-rural divide have made the situation of the grassroots increasingly being a social problem that requires widespread attention. Among them, young men from the grassroots, represented by Mr.Tree, who are unmarried, disabled and unemployed, are one of the more prominent types of marginalized figures in grassroots. On the one hand, gender gives them both privileges and shackles. Under the patriarchal system, being a member of the grassroots, gender has become the original sin, increasing the gap between their social status and self-perception. Under such a social background, they are more eager to be recognized by the patriarchal society and the mainstream authority, and thus take a series of measures. However, being at the bottom of the social ladder, they are deprived of the right to speak, and their socioeconomic ability is not enough to support them to achieve something recognized by the patriarchal authority. Under such contradictions, they are prone to negativity, and may even resort to extreme behaviors. In this film, Mr.Tree is stimulated by this kind of mentality, and he goes to absurdity and madness totally. Therefore, from the perspective of masculinity, we can realize what kind of social dilemma that the grassroots are facing under the patriarchal system, and the recognizing and thinking of this social problem will bring us some guidance and inspiration in reflecting on the patriarchal system and solving the survival dilemma of the grassroots.

At the same time, this paper is limited in that it only explores the plight of vulnerable and marginalized individuals from the perspective of a patriarchal society, which is the result of a complex and lengthy social process. For the existence of this phenomenon and the trend of its continuation, we have not yet proposed specific and accurate solutions. The author believes that, to a certain extent, the social gap between the rich and the poor is one of the important factors leading to the emergence of this social dilemma, so the realization of the common wealth of society is the key to alleviate this situation, and in the process of realizing the common wealth of society, the promotion of the social well-being of such groups is obviously also very important. Economic and social issues may be two sides of the same coin, and the author believes that we should focus on both sides of the coin when dealing with them, and endeavour to go hand in hand, so that we can better and more quickly resolve the livelihood issues.

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