

“Mystery” and “Foil” – A Study on Lise’s “Other” Image in The Brothers Karamazov

Fangyuan Li

Nankai University

3389471689@qq.com

Abstract. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Lise is a female supporting character whose narrative presence is relatively limited. However, as Alyosha’s “lover”, Dostoevsky invests a great deal of emotion in this young woman, intentionally creating a character who is lovable. Yet, Lise’s character reflects a disciplinary influence of patriarchal discourse. Although her image presents an outward sense of rebellion and independence, she is further trapped in the mold of traditional discipline, embodying characteristics of “the Other”. Her attempts to break through the traditional female image and patriarchal order are not significant.

Keywords: The Brothers Karamazov, Lise, female, Other

1. Introduction

1.1. Lise in *The Brothers Karamazov*

The Brothers Karamazov holds a significant position in the history of Russian literature. In the novel, Lise is a supporting female character with limited narrative space. As the “lover” of Alyosha, who is clearly favored by the author and described as someone who “everyone liked, ever since he was little” [5], Dostoevsky pours a great deal of affection into this young woman, deliberately shaping her as a likable character. However, Lise’s image reveals a disciplinary aspect of patriarchal discourse.

1.2. Literature Review

The Brothers Karamazov has been a central focus in the history of literary research, with varying attention in domestic and international scholarship.

1.2.1. Domestic Research

In general, there have been certain research achievements related to *The Brothers Karamazov* in domestic scholarship...

1.2.1.1. Translation

In 1918, Zhou Zuoren translated W.B. Trites’ *The Novels of Dostoevsky* into Chinese, and it was published in *New Youth*, which mentioned parts of *The Brothers Karamazov* under the name “Garamashuf Brothers” [13]. In 1921, the twentieth issue of *Literary Weekly* published *An Overview of Dostoevsky’s Works*, referring to *The Brothers Karamazov* as “Karamazhov Brothers” [6]. In 1947, Geng Jizhi’s translation of *The Brothers Karamazov* was published by Shanghai Morning Light Publishing House. In 1953, Wei Congwu’s translation of *The Brothers Karamazov* was included in a collection of selected works published by Wenguang Bookstore. According to Zhou Fangting’s research and summary, by the 21st century, there were nine major translations of *The Brothers Karamazov* in circulation. In addition to the two mentioned above, there are the 1996 co-translation by Xu Zhenya and Feng Zengyi published by Zhejiang Literature and Art Publishing House, the 1998 translation by Rong Rude published by Shanghai Translation Publishing House, the 1999 translation by Zang Zhonglun published by Yilin Press, the 2001 co-translation by Nian Xun and Song Ling (published by Yanbian People’s Publishing House), the 2002 translation by Wang Youci (published by Taiwan Xiaozhitang Press), the 2003 co-translation by He Maozheng and Feng Huaying (published by Beijing Yanshan Press),

and the 2004 co-translation by Sun Shaozhen and Wang Guangming (published by Huaxia Publishing House) [11]. The introduction and translation of these works have been a subject of scholarly attention. Zhou Fangting's master's thesis, *Messianic Consciousness and the Rebirth of Meaning*, provides a detailed discussion of the evolution of different versions. Tian Quan-jin's *Dostoevsky's Introduction and Reception in China* offers a "brief cultural analysis" of the history of these translations [4]. Zha Panyan's *An Examination of Geng Jizhi's Translation Style through the Chinese Translation of The Brothers Karamazov* discusses the vocabulary, sentence structure, and rhetoric of Geng Jizhi's translation [2].

1.2.1.2. Research

Using the papers published on China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) as an example, a search with the keyword "The Brothers Karamazov" yields 32 academic journal articles and 13 theses. When searching by topic, the results are 128 journal articles and 27 theses. In these studies, most researchers focus on textual analysis. The Brothers Karamazov embodies Dostoevsky's philosophical thoughts, which, in many cases, outweigh the importance of the narrative. This has led to studies exploring various themes, such as the discussion on the theme of evil. Wang Xin's *Dostoevsky's Systematic Reflection on Evil: An Analysis Based on The Brothers Karamazov* examines Dostoevsky's views on evil expressed in the text, discussing his thoughts on "the causes of evil", "types of evil", "the dissolution and redemption of evil", and "the meaning of evil" [7]. Meanwhile, other researchers have focused on themes like religious thought, the theme of patricide, and the nature of humanity in the text. Additionally, due to Dostoevsky's "polyphonic" narrative structure, studies on the narrative in *The Brothers Karamazov* are also a key area of interest. Most of these studies are based on Bakhtin's "polyphony" theory. For instance, Zhao Meng's *The Polyphonic Structure of the Novel The Brothers Karamazov* analyzes the integration of polyphonic novels and polyphonic theory [14]. Character analysis in *The Brothers Karamazov* also occupies a significant proportion of the research. Some studies focus on the portrayal of children or mothers in the novel. Regarding female characters, which is relevant to this article's discussion, Gao Chao's *The Disciplining, Resistance, and Breakthrough of Female Characters in Dostoevsky's Works: A Case Study of Crime and Punishment and The Brothers Karamazov* examines the "disciplining of the body" and "disciplining of the soul" experienced by characters like Sonia, Grushenka, and Katerina, as well as their acts of "resistance" and "breakthrough" in the texts. Gao acknowledges that Katerina possesses characteristics of "breakthrough": "Katerina, who has masculine traits, establishes a true sense of self-awareness and eventually breaks through the constraints of male discipline" [3].

1.2.2. International Research

In terms of international research on Dostoevsky, the achievements are relatively more abundant and the framework more comprehensive compared to domestic studies. The book *Contemporary International Scholars on Dostoevsky*, edited by Zhang Bian-ge, categorizes contemporary international scholars' discussions on Dostoevsky into sections such as "History and Frontiers", "Theoretical Exploration", "Textual Analysis", "Philosophical Interpretation", and papers presented at the international conference *Dostoevsky in the 21st Century Cultural Context: Tradition and Modernity* [15].

1.3. Research Methods and Research Significance

In Simone de Beauvoir's work *The Second Sex*, she points out the "Other" characteristics that women exhibit in the narrative of literary works. "She is everything man dreams of and everything he cannot attain. She is the ideal mediator between benevolent nature and man, yet also the temptation of unconquered nature, standing in contrast to everything good... She is the origin and source of man's reflection on his own existence and on any expression he can give to that existence... Man seeks his complete self through her because she is the All. That is to say, in the sense of the secondary, she is the All, which means she is entirely the Other" [9]. Beauvoir argues that women are "fabricated by men" [9], that they represent what people expect of her, in contrast to her true "self". Under the male discourse system, women are mysterious, uncontrollable, and possess a mystical naturalistic quality, capable of being imbued with all meanings, taking all forms of "the Other", while excluding only her true self. This paper is based on Beauvoir's theory and seeks to apply feminist criticism to analyze the character of Lise in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Due to Dostoevsky's evident partiality toward the character Alyosha, his arrangement of Alyosha's lover, Lise, is by no means random. To some extent, Lise embodies the author's view of women: Dostoevsky may have believed that a female character like Lise could at least serve as an object of affection. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin mentioned a distinctive feature of Dostoevsky's writing: "There are many independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, composed of truly valuable different voices, creating a genuine polyphony" [1]. However, the theory of the unconscious in literary creation emphasizes that the author is influenced by the subconscious during the creative process, with these influences reflecting the author's knowledge structure and latent ideas, often without the author's awareness. If Dostoevsky's works were similarly affected by such unconscious influences, he might inadvertently reveal his own value biases when creating different voices. This limitation is almost unavoidable. Therefore, understanding the character of Lise may provide some insight into Dostoevsky's views on women.

2. Summary of Lise's Appearances

Here is the professional English translation of the provided table:

Table 1. Brief Summary of Lise's Appearances

Chapter	Plot Summary
Volume II, Chapter IV: A Lady of Little Faith	Lise makes her first appearance, teasing Alyosha, and expresses guilt in front of the elder.
Volume III, Chapter XI: Another Reputation Sullied	Lise sends a love letter to Alyosha.
Volume IV, Chapter IV: At the Hohlakov's	Lise helps Alyosha bandage the wound caused by Ilyusha's bite. Alyosha intends to visit Katerina, but Lise becomes angry, teases him, and sends him away.
Volume V, Chapter I: An Appointment	Alyosha tells Lise about being rejected after offering money to the officer's family. Lise confesses her feelings to Alyosha in person.
Volume XI, Chapter II: A Weak Foot	Through Madame Hohlakov's narration, Alyosha learns that Ivan visited Lise, and she didn't like him. Lise hits her maid and then repents.
Volume XI, Chapter III: A Little Demon	Lise debates "evil" and "patricide" with Alyosha, and asks him to deliver a letter to Ivan.
Volume XI, Chapter V: Not You, Not You!	Ivan refers to Lise as a "little demon".

3. Lise as the "Other"

3.1. The "Other" in the "Mystique of Womanhood"

When Lise first appears, she speaks in a "slightly neurotic" manner to the elder Zosima, complaining about Alyosha: "When he came to say goodbye two years ago, he said he would never forget that we are eternal friends, eternal, eternal! And now he suddenly fears me, does he think I'll eat him up? Why doesn't he want to come near me? Why doesn't he talk to me? Why won't he come to our house? Did you forbid it? Yet we know that he goes everywhere else. I can't invite him, but if he hasn't forgotten, he should be the first to remember" [5]. This is a girlish complaint, portraying her as a somewhat childish, fearless "child-like" character. She never hides or glosses over her thoughts, speaking her mind freely without much regard for external factors. Piaget pointed out that during the preoperational stage (ages 2-7), there exists a tendency toward "egocentrism", where children believe that others see the world in the same way they do. Lise assumes that Alyosha "should first think" about their agreement and believes Alyosha should have the same consciousness as her. This perhaps explains why Lise appears "childish" in this scene, showing a tendency toward the willfulness and irrationality typical of children. Even her mother, Madame Hohlakov, comments on this aspect of her: "Oh, you're always so willful, Lise, no one can tell what you're really thinking" [5].

This childlike "willfulness" brings with it a sense of imperfection, but one that also caters to a "contradictory male desire". When such irrational, childlike thinking is attributed to a woman, it reinforces a certain feminine stereotype. Beauvoir mentions: "Caprice is unpredictable... She deceives and evades, she is elusive and two-faced—and because of this, she greatly satisfies man's contradictory desires... The purity of the girl brings hope of all kinds of indulgence; no one knows what kind of corruption her innocence conceals. She may be close to plants and animals, but for social forms, she is correctable; she is neither a child nor an adult. Her shy femininity arouses no fear, only a little unease" [9]. Lise's capriciousness and lack of rationality when facing emotions make her unpredictable and difficult to anticipate or understand, endowing her with the characteristic of "feminine mystery". This mystery is rooted in men's fear and fantasy of women—women are not seen as equals who can be fully understood, but rather as inherently mysterious and unknown, like natural entities, making them "Others" in contrast to men.

Alyosha's response to Lise further illustrates his perception of her as the "Other": "You are worthy, Lise. In just a few days, I will leave the monastery completely. Once I re-enter the world, I know I must marry. He (the elder) also reminded me of this. Whom could I marry better than you? ... Who else would want me but you? I've thought about this over and over. First, you've known me since childhood; second, you have many qualities that I lack. You are more cheerful than I am; most importantly, you are purer than I am. I've already seen so much of the world... Oh, you don't know any of this, but I am also a Karamazov! You like to laugh and play around—and even make fun of me—what does it matter? On the contrary, laugh as much as you like, I love your laughter... When you laugh, you look like a little girl, but you think like a wise, compassionate saint" [5].

In this confession, Alyosha first dispels Lise's worry that she is "unworthy of him", explaining why she is suited for him: they've known each other since childhood, she has qualities that exceed his, she is pure and innocent, and she possesses a certain level of thoughtfulness. He refers to her as "a saint". "The beauty, warmth, and intimacy that man desires from woman no longer have a physical nature. She no longer represents something immediately tangible, but becomes the soul of those things. Her innermost hidden and pure existence, more unfathomable than the mystery of her body, reflects the true face of the world" [9]. The sanctification of women, attributing to them characteristics beyond their own, is itself a form of othering—viewing women as embodiments of forces outside themselves, as noble and mysterious entities worth exploring. It could be said that when Alyosha perceives the combination of childlike willfulness and the saintly, pure, and natural "wise thinking" in Lise, her "feminine mystery" is doubly reinforced in his mind, and she becomes even more of an "Other" distinct from him.

3.2. The "Other" as a Foil—Independence in Subjugation

After analyzing Lise's appearances, it becomes evident that her character is almost entirely shaped around Alyosha; apart from her family and Alyosha's brother Ivan, Lise has little interaction with others and is largely removed from the narrative, serving as a vehicle for thoughts. She is, in many ways, created as a female character for the sake of Alyosha's love.

Her commentary on events is designed to inspire Alyosha, offering him clarity and helping him ascend to a higher level of thought, though this influence is limited to Alyosha alone. For instance, in her debate with Alyosha about equality, she questions: "Listen, Alexei Fyodorovich, isn't there some contempt for him, this unfortunate man, in the way we reason, no, in the way *you* reason... No, perhaps I should say in *our* way of reasoning... In the fact that we analyze his soul so high-handedly and confidently declare that he will accept the money? Isn't there a measure of contempt in that?" [5]. Lise is not a character who simply follows others blindly—she has an independent mind, her thoughts are free, and she is capable of engaging in thoughtful debate. But all of this ultimately serves the development of the male character: "She is free when under his command, she does not simply echo his thoughts, but she also yields to his arguments; she resists him wittily, yet ends by admitting her fault. The stronger his self-esteem, the greater the risks he takes: conquering Penthesilea is far more spectacular than marrying a compliant Cinderella." [9]. Through Lise's doubts and reflections, Dostoevsky fabricates the image of an ideal woman in the male imagination.

Lise's initial complaints about Alyosha reflect her personal psychology and a rebellious attitude toward theology: "Why did you make him wear this robe?... He'll trip and fall when he runs..." [5]. Yet immediately after, she realizes the irrationality of her thoughts and apologizes to the elder Zosima in a self-deprecating manner, negating her own value: "Don't be angry with me, I'm a fool, a worthless thing... Perhaps Alyosha is right not to visit this ridiculous girl, maybe he is doing the right thing, the very right thing." [5]. Similarly, in her argument with Alyosha about reading letters and surveillance, she responds: "I am fully convinced, completely willing! And more than that, I swear I will never eavesdrop on you, not even once, never! I won't read any of your letters, because you're right, and I'm wrong. Even though I really want to, I know myself well, but I still won't do it, because you believe it's dishonorable. From now on, you are my God..." [5]. In her confrontations with Alyosha, she ultimately abandons her own thoughts, submitting to his guidance and agreeing with him.

The more independent and rebellious Lise becomes, the more her thoughts seem to inspire Alyosha, and the more she embodies the characteristics of the "Other." This contradiction lies in the fact that her character exists to serve the development of the male figure in the narrative. Her resistance and independence make her submission all the more striking, especially in relation to Alyosha—whom Dostoevsky intentionally elevates—thereby highlighting Alyosha's intellectual and moral superiority. Her independence exists to accentuate Alyosha's brilliance, and she is shaped and molded by the male gaze as an ideal object for Alyosha. A more obvious piece of evidence is that nearly every time Lise expresses her inner feelings, she immediately follows with self-negation, using words like "ridiculous," "sick," or "foolish" to demonstrate her humility before social norms. Through this self-negation, she abandons her individuality and submits to traditional discourse. No matter how noble or notable her thoughts may be, they ultimately serve as a tool for Alyosha's love. The more rebellious and uncontrollable she is, the higher Alyosha's status rises. From the moment she was created as Alyosha's lover, her subjectivity was erased; she was destined to be the pure "Other," Alyosha's possession, like a mirror reflecting his glory and helping him achieve transcendence, making his character more vivid and full.

4. Conclusion and Reflection

As a female supporting character and Alyosha's love interest in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Lise's character reflects the disciplining nature of the male-dominated discourse. She was created to serve Alyosha's love, inevitably embodying the dependency characteristic of the "Other." Despite exhibiting surface-level rebellion and independence, her character falls deeper into the confines of traditional norms and discipline. Her challenge to traditional female roles and patriarchal order is limited and not clearly visible.

However, this limitation may have been unavoidable for Dostoevsky during the creative process, as it was likely influenced by the time period, collective unconscious, and various other factors. It may also be related to the narrative structure and focus of the story, where character development serves the needs of the plot. These reasons are perhaps worth exploring further in future research.

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