

# A Comparative Study on the Images of Prostitutes in *Boule de Suif* and *The Flowers of War*

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## Abstract

Prostitutes have long been a topic of intense debate and interest in literature. *The Flowers of War*, a masterpiece by Chinese American author Geling Yan, and the renowned novel by French author Maupassant, *Boule de Suif*, are two outstanding novels that deal with prostitutes. This paper aims to analyze from two angles in order to conduct a comparative study on the portrayal of prostitutes in these two works: the first part examines the particular portrayal of prostitutes in each work, and the second part discusses the shaping of the image from two aspects—the description of appearance and the opposing characters. The study offers sources for later literary works and research on prostitutes.

## Keywords

*The Flowers of War*; *Boule de Suif*; Image of Prostitutes.

## 1. Introduction

Since ancient times, the profession of prostitutes has always been controversial and judged. In most societies, they are considered a symbol of moral corruption. However, it is undeniable that, whether in history or in contemporary society, prostitutes play a special role, and their existence and image reflect multiple aspects of society, such as culture, politics, gender, and economics.

*Boule de Suif* by Maupassant and *The Flowers of War* by Geling Yan both feature prostitutes as a profession. Both works are set against the backdrop of war and tell the tragic experiences of these women. The two authors have similarities and differences in their depiction of the prostitute image in their respective novels, which is worth exploring and studying by scholars.

## 2. Analysis of Prostitutes' Image

### 2.1. *Boule de Suif*

#### 1. Dedicative

*Boule de Suif* is an image of a French prostitute in the novel, with low social status and being spurned by the world, but she is pure and simple at heart and kind in nature. Although *Boule de Suif* fled Rouen with nine other people in a carriage, the people in the carriage rejected her with one voice. In the eyes of these upper-class people, *Boule de Suif* was vile and unclean. Those ladies commented on her, some even accused her of being a "social shame" in front of everyone, and some men were looking at her with an evil leer, all of which made "*Boule de Suif*" feel miserable. This group of people always disdained talking with *Boule de Suif* until they were reduced to a situation of necessity. When the carriage was halfway through, everyone felt hungry, but there was no place to eat nearby. Among the people in the car, only *Boule de Suif* brought a basket full of mouth-watering food, which compelled the other nine people to actively

communicate with Boule de Suif. Boule de Suif didn't care about their previous denigration of herself, treated them with kindness and shared all the food she brought with them. This was Boule de Suif's first dedication, which was exchanged for the short-term friendliness and hospitality of other people in the carriage, but these were all superficial hypocrisy.

Mournfully and ironically, Boule de Suif's second dedication should be defined as "being dedicated" more accurately, which was a last resort under the cold-blooded nature. The escape journey of this group of people was not smooth sailing, and they were intercepted and detained by Prussian troops on the way. The key point of "release" lay in Boule de Suif, since the Prussian officer asked Boule de Suif to commit herself to her despicable requirements. For this request, Boule de Suif refused without hesitation, so their party continued to be detained. When others learned about it, they expressed deep sympathy for Boule de Suif's experience at first, but they still couldn't get rid of their egoism soon. Everyone was thinking for themselves, and the false sympathy turned into wrath at Boule de Suif's rejection of this request and took Boule de Suif's selfless "dedication" for granted. When Boule de Suif was away, this group of hypocritical upper-class aristocrats secretly began to plot how to persuade Boule de Suif to take the initiative to "sacrifice". After Boule de Suif came back, they convinced Boule de Suif in different ways. It seemed that everyone was standing on the moral high ground, and it seemed that Boule de Suif was a commodity that could be traded at will, and no one cared about her feelings. Boule de Suif finally compromised, not for herself, but for others not to be held here because of her refusal. However, this compromise did not win the gratitude and sympathy but greater resistance, prejudice and disgust of others.

## 2. Patriotic

For Boule de Suif, based on her strong patriotism, there were two principles in her heart: one was to refuse to have sex with the enemy, and the other was to refuse to have sex with others under the eyes of the enemy. These two principles could also be manifested in Boule de Suif's actual actions. For the first principle, the carriage was stopped by Prussian soldiers and detained in a hotel. And the release condition was to coerce Boule de Suif into sex with Prussian officers. In the face of this bare-faced request, Boule de Suif declined without thinking twice. For the country and Boule de Suif herself, this was an insurmountable bottom line. In her view, it was nasty and shameful to have sex with the enemy, which was a betrayal of the country and a destruction of her beliefs and principles. And Boule de Suif's second principle was reflected that night when Cornudet followed Boule de Suif to her room, but she also refused. Cornudet said, "What is this to you?" Boule de Suif said, "Don't you understand why? Sometimes this kind of thing can't be done. Isn't the Prussian in this house?[1]"(Guy de Maupassant 31) This was really shocking. Boule de Suif's patriotism was absolutely not superficial, but a heartfelt, authentic and implementable spirit. When Cornudet heard Boule de Suif's words, his heart was bound to be in awe.

However, she hesitated when patriotism contradicted the collective interests. If Boule de Suif were a cold-hearted person who didn't care about the life and death of others, she could always stick to her patriotic principles. Nevertheless, some people could give up their bottom line for their own interests, and even forced others to abandon their bottom line. On the first day, after hearing what happened to Boule de Suif, all the people in the same trade were also in solidarity with Boule de Suif, denouncing the crude and overbearing Prussian officers. The next day, others began to complain why Boule de Suif didn't go to the Prussian officer in private and accept his request to surprise everyone. On the third day, no one wanted to talk to Boule de Suif. When Boule de Suif was not present, Mr Bird's wife publicly abused Boule de Suif as "dirty hooker" behind his back, and everyone began to make suggestions on how to break Boule de Suif's psychological defense line and persuade her to agree to the requirements of Prussian officers. At the beginning, they talked about the dedication of the ancients, and tried to find some novel stories to hint at Boule de Suif, but she didn't go in. The old nuns, who had always

remained neutral and silent, also began to express that kind of "dedication" implicitly owing to her own interests. If it was for some legitimate reason, it was respectable. She also insinuated that many people may die as they could not wait for her help because of the delay these days. Boule de Suif remained silent after hearing this. Then, the count, who had always shown respect for Boule de Suif's independent will, began to persuade her, "So, would you rather let us stay here, like you, and suffer all kinds of atrocities from the Prussians after they are conquered than make a concession and agree to do what you often do in your life?" [1] (Guy de Maupassant 44) What the count said was literally moral kidnapping, strongly suggesting that this kind of dedication was just a very common and ordinary thing to Boule de Suif, which was her job. As long as she agree, she can save everyone's life. Is there any reason disagree to the request of the Prussian chief? In the end, Boule de Suif broke her patriotic bottom line for the collective benefit.

## 2.2. *The Flowers of War* (taking Yumo as an example)

### 1. Tenacious

Zhao Yumo is a typical prostitute image in *The Flowers of War*, and her life was terribly bumpy. She recalled that she was born into a well-educated family but unfortunately, her family came down in her parents' generation. When she was ten years old, her father mortgaged her to uncle who was a gambler. After his uncle died, Yumo was sold as a prostitute. She has been living in a brothel along Qinhuai River since she was fourteen years old.

Yumo realized at an early age that it took constant efforts to find vitality in turbulent times. She studied from childhood and regarded fame and fortune as extremely crucial things. Over the years, she has become the belle among the prostitutes on the Qinhuai River. In order to survive and be safe, she was tenacious and persevering, otherwise she and her companions would not have the opportunity of hiding in the church basement for survival.

Indeed, most of the thirteen women at the bottom of the society had similar experiences. They were forced to fall into whore, but with later efforts and dogged will, they became the best in the prostitute industry then.[1]. (Yuxuan Peng and Zaiqin Peng 16-18, 29) At that time, prostitutes had no social status and rights. However, Yumo Zhao did not easily surrender, she always believed that she could gain respect and status through her own efforts and talents. At that moment, it was awfully tough for the prostitutes to earn a living. They must rely on their own skills and connections to survive, and they had to tackle all kinds of challenges and pressures every day. However, Yumo Zhao had not been defeated by these difficulties. On the contrary, she regarded these difficulties as challenges and opportunities, and constantly improved herself and perfected herself.

Zhao Yumo's success was not only due to her talent and hard work. More importantly, she had a tenacious heart and sufficient courage. She was never afraid of failures and setbacks. On the contrary, she regarded them as chances for growth. She believed that as long as she worked hard, she would be able to realize her dreams and goals.

### 2. Fearless

In that period full of fear and agony, 13 prostitutes took refuge in the church with a group of female students. During the war, gunfire echoed through the streets and tragic events occurred from time to time, which made everyone trembling towards the enemy and the war. On Christmas Eve, a Japanese officer invited the female students in the church to a banquet. In the name of singing poems, it was actually a conspiracy of the executioner and the rapist. However, no one dared to refuse the invitation, let alone those poor female students.

At this critical moment, Yumo had a brainwave and came up with the strategy of "Palm civet for Prince" and volunteered to take the place of the girls to attend the party. Reluctant to cut off fashionable perms, remove gorgeous jewelry, these beautiful prostitutes put on rough and plain cloth. Their feat of bravery aroused the shift of attitude and sincere respect of all the people in the church.

The thirteen prostitutes sacrificed themselves to save those pure female students, calmly and firmly handed over their lives to the Japanese army. With trepidation inside, they did not show any fear outside, as they knew that what they did was right. This was a manifestation of selfless and fearless spirit.

This historical story was not only a story of prostitutes' bravery and sacrifice, but also a reconstruction of human values. In that cruel era, prostitutes were cast aside by the indifferent society, and they lost their dignity and freedom. However, in that church, they demonstrated their value and dignity with their own actions. They became the protectors of that group of female students and became one of the greatest figures of that era. Even in the darkest moment, the dignity and value of human beings will never be obliterated. Justice and courage will come out of generate in the most unlikely place and change the fate of the whole era.

During the Nanjing Massacre, Chinese People suffered murder and rape by Japanese troops, with more than 300,000 victims, which were extremely ruthless and outrageous, leaving anguish and unbearable memories for the victims and future generations. In such a historical event, the courage and sacrifice of 13 prostitutes brought people endless touch and shock.

### 3. Image Building of Prostitutes

#### 3.1. Description of appearance

##### 1. Boule de Suif

Flaubert, Guy de Maupassant's mentor, upholds the creative concept of "being objective and emotionless", and Guy de Maupassant is deeply influenced by it.[2]. (Yanan Qiu, 24-25) Therefore, in his literary creation, he always adopts an objective narrative mode without subjective colors. However, when describing Boule de Suif's appearance, he unconsciously depicted her glamorous charm as a woman and her attraction to the opposite sex vividly and livelily. The first is the description of Boule de Suif's figure. "Short and round, fat as a pig, with puffy fingers constricted at the joints, looking like rows of short sausages; with a shiny, tightly-stretched skin and an enormous bust filling out the bodice of her dress." Boule de Suif's voluptuous figure made people covet her. Such a dramatic portrayal make people can't help but envision a wonderful and moving image of Boule de Suif in their minds. In addition, Boule de Suif's face is also vividly portrayed. " Her face was like a crimson apple, a peony-bud just bursting into bloom; she had two magnificent dark eyes, fringed with thick, heavy lashes, which cast a shadow into their depths; her mouth was small, ripe, kissable, and was furnished with the tiniest of white teeth." Maupassant initially compared Boule de Suif's face to a "crimson apple" by metaphor, and then compared it to a "a peony-bud just bursting into bloom", livelily depicting Boule de Suif's face with things we are familiar with. Then, personify the eyelashes and write that "they cast a shadow into their depths". Maupassant's description of Boule de Suif's appearance is rather brilliant.

##### 2. The Flowers of War (taking Yumo as an example)

In the description of Yumo's appearance, we can see her beauty with elegance and dignity. First of all, with regard to the beauty with elegance, Yumo's first action after her appearance was "suddenly kneeling down at Father Ingermann, slightly having her head down", which left a deep impression on people. This showed Yumo's sincere request to Father Ingermann, hoping that the Father could take them in. This kneeling and "slightly hanging her head" fully revealed her humility and dignity. Secondly, Yumo, as a "top prostitute", also has beauty with elegance superior to ordinary people. In the novel, the author describes Yumo's appearance in many places, including her thick hair, the shape of her face, her short chin and her big black eyes. Although these depictions cannot make readers understand Yumo's feminine charm completely, we can get a deeper understanding of her glamour through her dialogue with Fabi-the assistant of the priest. For example, "Fabi found that her silhouette was enchanting and her figure was

captivating as well", "He felt that her black eyes not only seduced people, but seduced them with stories deep in them". In the "Midnight Party" with the soldiers, Yumo's supple and curvaceous was vividly displayed. "a long, thin and soft waist like weasel, is twisting in discord with her buttocks and shoulders", "There is a big pile of hair hanging on her shoulders, which is much crazier than Yumo in wiggling", "Yumo's round and plump yet not large buttocks are rolling in a cheongsam", "She lowered her eyelids with her tipsy face and her smile only on two lips, and her voice was so mellow", "She once again twisted her body to officer Dai, with a quick winks, and dropped her eyelashes to cover that dazzling eyes.[3]. (Geling Yan 95) And, recalling the love that passed away in the past, Yumo's beauty was also mixed with a nostalgic vibe, such as "The warm love given out by the drunkenness gave her two pieces of rouge". After browsing through the text's description of Yumo's appearance, her soul-stirring, graceful beauty was all in the words. By and large, Yu Mo's beauty is a combination of dignified and graceful, moving but not vulgar, elegant and noble.

### 3.2. Opposing figures

#### 1. Boule de Suif

In this novel, the main antagonists are Boule de Suif and other people in the carriage.

From the perspective of social class, Boule de Suif, who lived as a prostitute, belonged to the "lower class", reviled and lacked dignity, and whose livelihood depended entirely on the gifts and favors of others. However, the other passengers in the carriage were the opposite. They were either aristocrats, the rich, nuns, wealthy businessmen, who belonged to prominent and powerful "upper class". They always lived a happy life and often acted arrogantly.

From the point of view of human nature, Boule de Suif is an admirable woman, who has selfless kindness and pure character. She never held grudges or revenge but always insisted on an optimistic and kind attitude. On the journey in the coach, when others forgot to bring their rations in a hurry, Boule de Suif generously shared her food without getting cross because of the insult. When all of them were detained in the hotel, Boule de Suif finally satisfied the shameless demands of the Prussian officer reluctantly. Her courage and sacrifice were honorable yet heartbreaking. However, others didn't reciprocate her kindness like Boule de Suif did. When she was tortured by hunger, they put on a gesture of being irrelevant and completely forgot her kindness. This sort of indifference and ingratitude was rather disappointing and deplorable. Boule de Suif gave herself to a Prussian officer for the sake of collective interests, yet after all the people have been released, the other nine people did not express any gratitude or sympathy, instead, they swore at her, which was full of ridicule and insult.

Finally, observing the reaction when facing the enemy, we can explicitly see everyone's personality traits. As the Prussian soldiers appeared in front of the crowd, the others were at first impassioned and enthusiastic, overflowing with patriotic fervor and discontent and disgust with the Germans. Nevertheless, when they actually confronted these vicious soldiers, they were terrified, silent and obedient. On the contrary, Boule de Suif never succumbed to the enemy, rejected the cheeky request of the enemy without hesitation, expressed his patriotic enthusiasm in a way neither servile nor overbearing, and gave a lesson to the others with her own practical actions.

By comparing the behavior of Boule de Suif and other people in the carriage, we have seen the nobility of the so-called "lower class" and the inferiority of a group of "upper class" people. By such a contrast, the author uncovered the reality of the harsh social hierarchy at that time, the huge gap between social classes in capitalist France, and the hypocritical emotions and intimacy based on capital, all of which are fully reflected in the author's writing.

#### 2. The Flowers of War

In *The Flowers of War*, the most prominent opposites are female students and prostitutes. The setting of this opposition is elaborate and clever, and is the key that propels the novel's plot forward. By describing the differences between female students and prostitutes in terms of dress, speech, behavior and experience, Geling Yan emphasizes the opposition between them, which is not limited to the specific episode of prostitutes going to the welcome party for female students. The schoolgirls are portrayed as innocent, young, immature and educated; on the contrary, prostitutes are portrayed as heavily made-up, vulgar and ignorant, low-ranking, lacking knowledge and cultivation. Female students are regarded as spiritual images, while prostitutes are physical images. However, if we deeply explore the reason behind it, we will find that this confrontation was the result of the absurdity and cruelty produced by a male-dominated society. The appearance of prostitutes as a profession was inseparable from the desire and drive of men.<sup>[4]</sup> (Fusang Wang 68-69) Prostitutes exist for the purpose of satisfying the physical needs of men. As objects of consumption, they are deprived of their sexual autonomy and are forced to submit to their male customers. When women participate in sexual acts as prostitutes, what they experience is a conscious carnal transaction and no longer the satisfaction of normal physiological desires. Furthermore, the roots of the profession of prostitution, whose creators are predominantly male, are inextricably linked to men. In a patriarchal society, men naturally occupy a dominant position, while women are subordinate. Influenced by patriarchal ideology, men have struggled to maintain their superior political, economic and social status. Without the economic support and affirmation of men, it is difficult for the sex trade industry to exist and continue to grow as a profession. Yet, some men not only seek sex and lust, but also demand chastity from women due to their strong possessive nature. In *The Flowers of War*, Geling Yan unveils the cruel contradictions by setting up a dichotomy between two distinct identities, female students and prostitutes. She turns two groups of women who are also women into enemies, and unafraidly displays visually the schoolgirls' hatred for the prostitutes. Certainly, this also paves the way for the subsequent change of their views on them. The two dyads seem to be in opposition, but they are both female, of similar age, and in their prime. The prostitutes also entered this profession out of choice. People do not distinguish between high and low, and should not be defined by their profession or status.

This paper compares the works of Maupassant and Geling Yan in regard to the specific image of prostitutes and the portrayal of prostitutes. In considering the specific image of the prostitutes, the most prominent image of "Boule de Sulf" is dedicative and patriotic, while the most prominent image of "The Flowers of War" is tenacious and fearless. The Boule de Sulf eventually committed herself to the Prussian officer for the sake of the collective interest, while the prostitutes in *The Flowers of War* eventually went to the banquet in place of the schoolgirls and suffered the tragic end for them. In terms of the portrayal of the prostitutes, this paper discusses the two dimensions of appearance and the opposing characters, respectively. Both authors describe the image of prostitutes in detail and vividly, showing the image of prostitutes in their respective books to the fullest. In both novels, there are very distinctive antagonists. One is the "Boule de Sulf" and "the others in the carriage", and the other is the "prostitutes" and the "schoolgirls". These two groups of opposites are what the author wants to show to the readers, and they are also worthy of in-depth examination. Through the study of prostitutes, we can have a better understanding of the development and changes in society, and reflect on our perceptions and opinions on issues such as morality and gender.

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