

Beyond Marginality: Frank's Transgression in *The Wasp Factory*

Xinyao Yu

School of Foreign Languages

Guangzhou Huashang College

Telephone:18562508439

Address: No.1 Huashang Road, Zengcheng District, Guangzhou
China

Abstract:

Iain Banks's debut novel The Wasp Factory is wealthy of transgression and rebellion. However, it seems at odds that the main protagonist Frank's transgressive act has thus far escaped due attention from critics. By analyzing "his" double marginalization and failed transgression, this paper explores that Frank's tragedy unveils the inferior position and the miserable fate of women in the male-dominated society. It is worth noting that the wasp factory in the novel is not merely the isolated island, but also the patriarchal system that shackles Frank. Even though Frank leaves the island in the end of story, the inescapable patriarchal authority still leaves "him" trapped. The Wasp Factory seems to be a shocking and supernatural gothic story, but it displays the most common and the cruelest power relations in the real life: male and female, the oppressor and the oppressed.

Key Words:*The Wasp Factory*, Transgression, Marginality, Frank, Iain Banks

1. Introduction

Over the course of Iain Banks's literary creation, transgression has permeated in all his fiction. Arguably being one of the "most inventive, experimental" Scottish trans-boundary writers in the contemporary era (Colebrook et al. 2013, p.8), Banks crossed over boundaries and limits of genre, and established himself in the both fields of mainstream fiction and science fiction (Petrie, 2004, p.119). Apparently, it is Banks's dissatisfaction with a location within a singular genre that earns his literary status as a non-canonical author of subversive novels. Apart from the authorial positioning within different genres, it is noteworthy that "the hybridity" of Banks is also manifested in the construct of specific literary works, in particular "the way he moves playfully over and across a variety of boundaries" within one fiction (Colerbook et al. 2013, p.13). For instance, his debut novel *The Wasp Factory* fuses the darkly violence and terror of the Gothic novel with a Bildungsroman of a Scottish adolescent (Wang, 2016, p. 82).

It seems to be a cliché to discuss transgression in *The Wasp Factory*, as the novel's traversing the border of genre and text has been fully examined. In the article titled "Iain Banks: the Scottish trans-boundary writer", Wang (2016) maintains that the novel excels over the border in genre and that it is a bizarre mixture of Gothic style and Bildungsroman pattern (p. 82). Moreover, Cox and Carside (2013) study inter-textual relationship between the novel and other literary works. In addition to the overlapping references in plot and character setting, they also explore that *The Wasp Factory* inherits the core motif of *Frankenstein*, which arouses the public's attention to reflect on the misuse of science (p. 136). As to the protagonist Frank's transgressive act, however, critical acclaim has been slow to respond. The above three scholars just stop at the surface and do not examine a more thought-provoking way of transgression in the novel. Although Liu (2009) highlights that Frank transgresses the borders to extricate himself from marginalized status in the patriarchal system, where absolute "male supremacy is advocated", she has not developed a detailed description of Frank's marginalization and transgressive act (p. 30). Thus, it may be ripe time to devote attention to Frank's double marginalization and spatial transgression in *The Wasp Factory*.

This paper argues that Frank's marginalization and transgression epitomizes women's subordinate status in the patriarchal society. Also noteworthy, it introspects about the repression and dangers of absolute patriarchal masculinity. The paper will firstly investigate Frank's double marginalization, whether in the public space or in the domestic space. From external to internal, Frank is stripped of "his" own identity and trapped in a dilemma as a "marginalized" other. By analyzing "his" transgression in the island and the discourse space, the paper elaborates "his" doomed failure in reconstruction of identity. At last, the paper concludes that it is omnipresent patriarchal authority that shackles and oppresses Frank, like the wasp caught in the wasp factory.

2. From Public to Domestic: Frank's Double Marginalization

As *Los Angeles Times* writer Silverblatt (1993) has proposed, protagonists of transgressive fiction, who feel constrained by the rules and values of society, would rebel against the social norms and search for their self-identity in an illicit

way, from which repression is seen as a potentially destructive force to trigger one's transgressive act (para.2). In *The Wasp Factory*, Frank's journey of spatial transgression is also instigated by his marginalized state and repressed desire. Like the powerless wasp caught in the factory, Frank Cauldhame is trapped in the panopticon-like world dominated by his warped father, whether physically or mentally. The small island, where the Cauldhame have possessed for decades, is nearly geographically secluded from the mainland. The desolation and marginalization of their living environment, to some extent, brings about Frank's isolation from the outside world. Apart from Frank's brother Eric, whose whereabouts are unknown after an accident, Frank's irresponsible father Angus is the only one who has lived with "him" all the time. Through drug-induced hormonal treatment, Angus has obliterated Frank's born sexuality and transformed her into an "androgyny". That is to say, Frank, neither male nor female, is a marginalized "other" who is excluded from the normal mainstream society of two sexes.

Furthermore, Angus's hegemony is fully embodied in the control of mind and Frank's seclusion is further intensified by the indoctrination of distorted values. No more than a part of a scientific experiment investigated by Angus, Frank "was never registered", has "no birth certificate" to prove "his" identity legally, let alone the legitimate right to education (Banks, 1988, pp.13-14). More tragically, blinded by twisted lies of the father, Frank firmly believes in "his" gender identity as a "castrated" male and is deeply traumatized by the "loss" of masculinity.

In addition, monarch-like Angus has his own will thrust upon his "son" and reestablish a new ideological system to imprison "his" mind. Obsessed with measuring things, Angus considers it to be "useful and character-forming" and urges Frank to grasp all the measurements and be prepared to answer "the idiotic questions" about measuring every part of the house (Banks, 1988, p.11). Regardless of Frank's thirst for knowledge, Angus just "fooled" "him" by answering "his" "honest if naive" questions with "utter rubbish", like "Pathos was one of the three musketeers" and "Vitreous was a town in China" (Banks, 1988, p.14). As Foucault (1977) explicates, knowledge and power are inseparably interconnected, as evidenced by his statement that "the formation of knowledge and the increase in power regularly reinforce one another in a circular process" (p.185). By means of sticky homeschooling to dominate the acquisition of knowledge, Angus's brainwashed domestication successfully ensures his authority and separates Frank from normal people in the external world.

Deeply influenced by "his" misogynic father, Frank is not saddened by absence of mother, but represents unconcealed hatred to her. With internalized "male supremacy", Frank even stresses that "[his] greatest enemies are Women and the Sea" and further "weak and stupid" women are innately subordinated "in the shadow of men"(Banks, 1988, p. 43), which is thus ironic as "he" is proved as a female at last.

It is apparent that since Frank's childhood, no one guides "him", nurtures "him", or teaches "him" the correct ideology about world and life, owing to the abnormal family structure and the alienated parent-and-child relationship. Even worse, Frank could not go to school or make acquaintances with anybody of "his" own age. According to Frank, Jamie the dwarf living in the mainland is "his only real friend"(Banks, 1988, pp. 51-52). Due to lack of communication with others, Frank knows nothing about how to make friends or how to live in harmony with other people.

Although Frank once thought of "venturing further and getting to know more people" in the town, his brother Eric's accidental insanity causes his hope to come to naught (Banks, 1988, p. 52). Most of people in the town despise Frank as lunatic as Eric, which involves "him" in endless rumors and prejudice from others. As Frank crosses the bridge to the town, the only channel connecting the island with the mainland, it is not unusual to notice that those people "would run from [him], or shout rude things from a distance" (Banks, 1988, p.52). On this account, "he" is compelled to "restrict [his] brief visits to the town a taciturn minimum" (Banks, 1988, p.52). As a synonym for horror, "Frank'll get you" even has been an effective warning for some mothers to discipline their ill-behaved children (Banks, 1988, p.52). But over time, irritated by those who discriminate against "him", Frank would easily get into "his" temper, and then "he" would deliberately scare children or would play some malicious tricks. By this way does Frank take revenge for people who disgust and resent "him". Nevertheless, "his" behavior undoubtedly deteriorates "his" relationship with people in the town. The growing antipathy from townspeople towards Frank declares the least possibility for "him" to integrate into the external world.

Detached from the public space, Frank has nothing to do but to wholly rely on "his" only shelter: the island, the place where "he" instinctively thirsts for a secure and dignified retreat. As bell hooks highlights, domestic space would have been the one site where "we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside public world" (Banks, 1988, p.42). That is to say, one's own home is essentially functioned as a sheltering space to guarantee both physical and mental well-being. More importantly, the domestic space should be a nurturing space where one's self-identity is cultivated, developed, and then reconstructed if it is undermined in the hostile external world.

However, Angus's inescapable and invisible surveillance in the island intensifies Frank's marginalization as an incompatible "other" in the domestic space. Angus changes the island, along with the house, from a refugee to a panopticon that shackles and victimizes Frank. It is worth noting that the island bears a strong resemblance to the panopticon, not only because of the geographical seclusion, but also due to the similar mechanisms of authority, surveillance and power to control Frank. As what Foucault (1977) denotes, the panopticon is an "enclosed, segmented space, [...] in which the slightest movements are supervised, [...] in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure [...] all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism" (p.197). In *The Wasp Factory*, it is Angus who takes control of Frank's life. It seems that he invisibly monitors every move of Frank. According to Frank's narration, "he" is indulged in torturing and slaughtering small animals alone. At the same time, Frank appears to be obedient and assumes that "he" has successfully kept "his" secret from "his" father. But to his surprise, Angus knows everything about him clearly and warns him not to go out "killing any of God's creatures" (Banks, 1988, p.13). What is more thrilling is that Angus sees through all the disguise of Frank and points out that "he" is the frenzied one who should be in the madhouse rather than Eric (Banks, 1988, p.13). It could be seen that Frank is utterly stripped of freedom and independence, and everything about "him" is in the hands of Angus.

Acting as the supervisor in the watchtower centered in panopticon, Angus manipulates arbitrarily his authority to restrict Frank's freedom and to reinforce the internal hierarchy in the island (Foucault, 1977, p.215). In order to conceal his lack of official identity, Frank is disciplined to hide "himself" from the police Diggs and to "pretend [he] didn't live on the island all the time" even though the island is also a part of "his" possession (Banks, 1988, p. 51). Even in the house, Angus also confines Frank to the designated space. For instance, Frank is forbidden to enter father's study, no matter how curious "he" is about "what [Angus] actually does in there" (Banks, 1988, pp. 15-16). It is apparent that whether one is admitted to the study or not serves as a concrete reminder of one's position within the domestic space. It seems that the study is a privileged space only available for those who seizes the authority or takes dominance over the space, like Angus. Ironically, Frank, who entitles to own the island and the house, is reduced to a shackled "prisoner" largely constrained in liminal space. Foucault (1979) points out that apart from geographical functions, the space "permits an internal, articulated and detailed control", closely related to civilization, norms, social status and power relations (p.172). In this regard, the spatial boundary between the study and Frank is not merely the geographical separation, but a manifestation of unbalanced power relations and oppressed patriarchal authority.

The island, as a panopticon, has become the disciplinary space where Angus imposes his own ideological system and distorted canons upon Frank. In other words, the domestic space interiorizes the patriarchal authority, which results in Frank's inferior and marginalized status.

As one could not construct his identity without communicating with himself and others to the world around, Frank, shackled physically and spiritually, ignores "his" own authentic identity and lacks of self-knowledge (Zulfiqar, p.65). In a nutshell, "he" is trapped in the inescapable hedges constructed by "his" father, who absorbs himself in weaving lies to keep the maintenance of his male dominance. From body to mind, from external to internal, Frank is nearly marginalized from the mainstream society as well as the mainstream values.

Nonetheless, Frank's unsurpassed aspiration about masculinity has predestined "him" not to be a passive and docile puppet manipulated by Angus. As "he" becomes mature gradually, Frank's growing dissatisfaction with "his" marginalized status stimulates "his" consciousness to transgress the predominant constraints.

3.From Marginalized to Centered: Frank's Spatial Transgression

As to the relationship of body and space, Xie Na (2010) illustrates that the body is the source of space and spatial production, and it is also the result and the objective of spatial production (p. 68). To reconstruct one's new identity in the space, it is a must for anyone to transform the existing discipline and one of such endeavors is transgression.

Transgression, defined as an intentional conduct "to go beyond the bounds or limits set by a commandment or law or convention, it is to violate or infringe" (Jenks, 2006, p. 2). Derived from the Greek language, transgression initially conveys "the idea of one deliberately breaking a known law" (Burdette, 2010, p. 213).

In addition, transgression in The Bible is spoken as being a sin or committing a crime against God and the laws of the God. However, in the contemporary society, people are increasingly on the verge of being discontent with the constraints of order, norms and shared values since every limit or boundary carries within itself "its own fracture, penetration or impulse to disobey" (Jenks, 2006, p. 5). Apparently, the "impulse to disobey" is also fully revealed in Frank. Deeply traumatized by emasculation, Frank never gives up "his" aspiration as an "honorary" man who he ought to be (Banks, 1988, p.118). The "loss" of phallus, which symbolizes the loss of authority, even kindles "his" rancor to subvert the pre-existing power relations and reconstruct a discourse space for "himself".

Overwhelmed by the wrath from “his” subordinate status in the island, Frank spares no effort to undermine Angus’s patriarchal power and to take the dominant role in the “father-and-son” relationship. By building the sacrifice poles as “[his] early-warning system” to deter “anybody who set foot” (Banks, 1988, p. 10), Frank also asserts that “[he] was in no mood to allow even the slightest encroachment on my territory” (Banks, 1988, p. 47). It is apparent that “my territory” signifies Frank’s ambition to achieve the complete governance of the space, which is previously predominated by his father. Furthermore, “his” renaming the location of the island blurs the boundary between Angus and Frank, the centered and the marginalized. Obsessed with hyper-violence and slaughtering, Frank blindly believes that it is the symbol of idealized manliness and masculine perfection and that it could compensate for “his” supposed emasculation. Furthermore, in order to claim “his” ownership of their habitat, Frank even designates specific sites in the island as locales of symbolic meaning: the Snake Park and Bomb Circle, where Blyth and Paul “he” killed were respectively disposed of; the Skull Grounds, where “he” unearthed the skull of the bulldog Saul; and the Bunker, which held the severed heads of gulls, rabbits, mice, owls and small lizards. The naming ceremony bestows Frank strength to “feel good” and helps “him” regain the sense of achievement and belonging (Banks, 1988, p.64). To some extent, Frank has indeed grasped “his” longing authority and acquired “his” “identity-construction” as the center of the island through the “process of labeling” (Sarup, 1996, p. 14). In terms of domestic space, Frank occupied the loft as “his” entire domain and the shelter of the wasp factory, where he establishes an exclusive space to resist Angus’s dominance.

In addition to spatial transgression based on the physical space, Frank crosses the boundary of the ideological system disciplined by Angus. For instance, “he” creates a “religion of the self”, which is endowed “him” with the supernatural power of second sight (MacDonald, 2013, p. 125). As Frank grows up, it is not difficult for “him” to observe the drawback of the educational mode and the unreliability of Angus, who “might tell [him] something” “if [he] is lucky” (Banks, 1988, p. 8). On this account, Frank pretends to be submissive and seeks other channels to acquire the knowledge and information, such as the wasp factory. Over time, the wasp factory takes the place of the ideological system indoctrinated by Angus. By the patterns and clues, the supernatural power of the wasp factory teaches Frank about unrevealed truth and the methods to prophesy the future (Banks, 1988, p. 37). More importantly, “he” even has access to contacting “his” brother Eric via the ritualistic system of the factory (Banks, 1988, p. 49). Although the predication is far from convincing, Frank has created “his” own discourse space based on the wasp factory and reconstructed the perception system beyond Angus’s control. In the world mapped by the factory, the producer Frank is not marginalized any more. Instead, it is Frank who dominates the power relations reestablished. To put it in another way, Frank turns “himself” to be the one who has the final say about everything, including the fate of the wasp.

Immersed in ecstasy as the usurper, Frank seems to have conquered Angus’s patriarchal oppression. By traversing the boundary of disciplinary space and constrained ideology, Frank seems to have fulfilled “his” dream and have been crowned as the unchallenged lord of the island. A sudden reversal comes as Frank seizes the opportunity to invade into Angus’s study, the last disciplinary space not belonging to “him”. As soon as Frank enters the study, “his” world is utterly devastated by “Hormones-male” Angus feeds “him” and the fake male genital. The fact that “he is the biological she” overthrows Frank’s previous knowledge about “himself” and declares that “he” is “fool all along” (Banks, 1988, p. 183). In fact, Frank is not “Frank” but “Frances”. There is no doubt that the exposure of the secret proclaims the invalidity and meaninglessness of her resistance and transgression. In other words, Frank’s transgressive act is doomed to failure due to the incorrect perception about “his” identity and the misjudgment about the boundary “he” tries to transgress. To transgress is not merely to break a predetermined code, not an impulsive rebellion against normative social or cultural constraints. Instead, it is the illumination of the limits, which arouses the contemplation of what kind of limits or boundaries it infringes upon (Miller, 2000, p. 143). Essentially, the real boundary is not the unequal power relation between Angus and Frank, but between Angus and “Frances” (Banks, 1988, p. 181). But mistakenly, what Frances resolves to subvert is Angus’s dominance over the “castrated” male other than his repression on the female, the real one who is victimized and marginalized. Hence, based on the misunderstanding of the force which controlled her life, Frank is destined to fail in his transgression of the existing boundary and reconstruction of self-identity.

As the constant monarch in the microcosm of empire, the father has controlled over the fate of Frank all the time and hinders her from transgressing the correct boundary, letting alone exploring “how far it is possible to exceed” (Foucault, 1980, p. 34). Furthermore, after the brainwashing domestication, Frank’s longing for masculinity is rooted in her mind, which causes her subconscious repulsion about the female identity. For instance, Frank even “shiver[s]” when thinking of “intercourse” or “giving birth” like a “normal woman” (Banks, 1988, p. 182). Tragically, Frank’s prejudiced perception and rooted hostility to women has degenerated her into a conspiracy of the misogynistic patriarchal masculinity. It intensifies female community’s subjugated status as well as Frank’s own marginalization in the patriarchal society, as she is an integral part of female group biologically.

Ultimately, from “disbelief and fury to stunned acceptance”, Frank attempts to forge new relationships by abandoning “his” encumbering pursuit for masculinity and introspecting about “his” past merciless slaughter. Frank’s alternation is also underlined in the last part: Frank is more inclined to forgive her father rather than kill him in revenge. More noteworthy, she claims that “[she]’ll have to go” and moves away from the spatial representation of her barbarian misogynistic masculinity (Banks, 1988, p.182). With regard to the final image of Frank, who motherly cradles her brother’s head, Petrie interprets it as her embracing feminine, which symbolizes her recovery of femininity and maternity (as cited in Falcus, 2013).

Additionally, much more concern from commenters is concentrated on the ending paragraphs of the novel. The scholar MacDonald is optimistic about Frank’s future as she decides to leave the island and begins her new life. To illustrate this, MacDonald illuminates that freedom of self-identity would be successfully reconstructed when these “restricted and dogmatic” “conventions and indoctrinated beliefs” are “undermined or simply left behind” (Banks, 1988, p. 127). Yet this paper holds a different view because even had Frank been Frances, she would still be marginalized. Miserably, even escaping the house and the island leaves Frank still trapped in the factory.

As Frank recognizes that “[e]ach of us [has] our own personal Factory” (Banks, 1988, p. 183), for Frances, the wasp factory is not merely the house, the island or Angus’s prevailing power, but also an epitome of the patriarchal system. Frances would have found herself on the face of the factory if she leaves the island, but it does not suggest that the system of containment is destroyed or that she is free from the patriarchal authority. Instead, she would have been no less insistent trapped in the marginalized world dominated by the males (Craig, 1999, p. 233).

4. Conclusion

To sum up, by explicating Frank’s double marginalization and transgressive act, this paper exposes Angus’s patriarchal oppression over women in the panopticon-like disciplinary space, which plays a predominated role in victimizing, marginalizing her and causing the invalidity of her transgression. Apparently, the tragic life of Frank epitomizes the predicament of repressed women who are trapped in the patriarchal system. In the last part of this astonishing and unsettling tale, seemingly, Frank has recovered from the nightmarish catastrophe manipulated by the father, and states that “now it all turns out to have been for nothing” (Banks, 1988, p. 183). Moreover, the “cleared” weather and the sky of “no storm, no thunder and lightening” implicates the calmness, brightness of Frank’s world (Banks, 1988, p. 180). Nonetheless, even the passing of time could not release the pain of Frank or completely cure her trauma. Her marginalized fate never ends, because where there is the power, there is the repression. To put it in another way, without women’s awakening of consciousness and effective revolt, the dark clouds of patriarchal oppression will still be hanging over their heads.

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