

The Research on the Depiction of Female Identity in Eileen Chang's Novellas

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Abstract. Female liberation is a grand topic in Chinese modernization. Analyzing female identity in Chinese literature in the 20th century, especially in female authors' works, helps people get a closer picture of the traits and processes of the women's rights movement. This paper provides a close reading of the female identity in four well-known Eileen Chang's novellas, "Love in a Fallen City", "Aloeswood Incense", "The Golden Cangue" and "Lust, Caution" as a way to discuss Eileen Chang's attitude towards female individualism and female liberation in China. Female autonomy and subjectivity are two themes that Eileen Chang repeatedly discusses in her novellas, emphasizing her wish and support for female individualism in China. However, her female characters' pain and tragic ending reveal Eileen Chang's pessimistic attitude towards the resolution of female struggles and the uncertainty towards female liberation in China. The author hopes to make some contributions to relevant fields through this research.

Keywords: Eileen Chang; novella; female identity; female liberation; individualism.

1. Introduction

Eileen Chang, also known as Zhang Ailing in Chinese, was a renowned female Chinese-American author. She was one of the most well-known Chinese-language writers during the 20th century, best known for her vivid lyrical prose, insightful character depiction, and significant cultural and historical values in her works. Eileen Chang grew up in Shanghai and attended college in Hong Kong. Shanghai and Hong Kong were two significant political and financial centers in East Asia during the 20th century, and the uniqueness of these two cities influenced both Eileen Chang's life and works, resulting in her particular focus and evocative thoughts on the theme of love, female identity, and societal change.

Previous Studies on Eileen Chang mainly focused on cultural context and historical significance, the portrayal of female characters, unique aesthetic choices and writing style, transnational and comparative studies, and cinematic adaptations.

Gendering, which refers to the social and textual methods used to assign male or female identities to experiences, objects, and individuals, likely held a distinct position within Chinese modernity compared to its role in the preceding imperial era [1]. Gender, especially the female identity in the Chinese context, is a significant aspect in examining social changes and the modernization process. This paper will also set Eileen Chang's portrayal of female characters as the main topic; however, unlike the previous studies, this paper will relate Eileen Chang's novellas with the Chinese New Cultural Movement and modernization to discuss the interrelationship between female identity and the historical and societal context.

This paper will use several of Eileen Chang's novellas as the textual base for detailed analysis, including "Love in a Fallen City", "Aloeswood Incense", "The Golden Cangue" and "Lust, Caution". These four novellas are well-perceived by both Chinese readers and foreign readers. This paper will discuss the depiction of female identity in these four novellas through female individualism and struggle. Part two of this paper mainly focuses on female individualism, which shows female autonomy as a way to resist patriarchal suppression and female subjectivity through expressing personal desires. Part two will discuss the ideal liberated female identity; however, part three will reveal how these female individuals struggle and surrender under realistic pressures. By analyzing the diverse perspectives Eileen Chang focuses on in depicting female identity, the paper enables a

more profound understanding of gender issues and Eileen Chang's attitude towards women's liberation during that period.

2. Female Autonomy and Subjectivity in Eileen Chang's Novellas

Females were always considered subjects affiliated with males in the Chinese patriarchal system. Autonomy and subjectivity are two essential aspects of female liberation and will be discussed respectively in the following two sections.

2.1. Resistance Against Patriarchal Suppression: Female Autonomy

Under the influence of Confucianism, China, before modernization, executed an entirely patriarchal system, emphasizing hierarchical relationships, social order, filial piety, patrilineal lineage, and fixed gender roles. Under the Chinese patriarchal system, females were always marginalized, facing various retractions. The Three Obedience and Four Virtues is a traditional ethical and moral code in Confucianism and has been set as the primary regulation for all women in Chinese society for centuries. The Three Obedience refers to the female's obedience towards their fathers, husbands, and sons in their different life periods [2]. The Four Virtues refers to female virtue, female words, female bearing, and female work [3]. These principles emphasize the dependence of women towards men and reveal the inferior role of females in family and society. Under the patriarchal society, Chinese women faced suppression from all aspects, including political, financial, educational, and personal liberty.

The New Cultural Movement was a revolution in cultural, intellectual, and political aspects of Chinese society during the early 20th century. It is one of the most essential movements that directly drove China's modernization process. The New Cultural Movement emphasized overthrowing the feudal traditions, advocacy for democracy and science, literature and language reform, and women's rights.

The Chinese elites who led the New Cultural Movement encouraged women's liberation as a way to promote more profound reform throughout China. They mainly focused on four aspects: education, career, the ban on foot binding, and love and free marriage. By doing so, they wished Chinese females could evolve into the "new woman".

Nora is a female character from a Western three-act play, "A Doll's House", composed by Henrik Ibsen. In the Chinese context, Ibsen is predominantly recognized not as a conventional dramatist but rather as a pioneering intellect with a profound avant-garde sensibility and a distinct ideological inclination. This recognition is particularly prominent for his portrayal of certain defiant female characters [4]. In "A Doll's House", Nora is required to be an obedient daughter, a compliant wife, and a responsible mom, which is very similar to the code of the Three Obedience and Four Virtues. After realizing the gender inequality behind these requirements, Nora rebels towards the patriarchs and leaves the house.

"A Doll's House" was introduced to China by elites who went back from studying abroad, and Nora became the symbol of women's rights and the "new woman" in Chinese society. Eileen Chang, who experienced the New Cultural Movement during her childhood and early career, was also strongly influenced by the liberation thoughts. In her novellas, there are many traits of the "new woman" that are promoted by the Chinese elites.

The female protagonist of "Love in a Fallen City", Bai Liusu, is a woman who requests a divorce and goes back to the Bai household. Although women claiming divorce was allowed at that period, it was still a rare event. In the story, the Fourth Mistress mentions that she also wishes to divorce, but she does not, as "I still have some sense of shame [5]!" This exclamation reveals that divorce was still considered shameful in society. However, Bai Liusu holds an entirely opposite attitude. When the Third Master suggests she return to her ex-husband's household, Bai Liusu refuses immediately. "The divorce went through some seven or eight years ago. Are you saying that those legal proceedings

were empty non-sense? You cannot fool around with the law [5]!" Bai Liusu refuses to accept the patriarchal norms anymore and uses the law, a symbol of modernization, to protect herself.

Besides the modernized thought on marriage, Eileen Chang's highlight on female autonomy is also shown in the education aspect of the female characters. For example, Ge Weilong, in "Aloeswood Incense", is a student studying in Hong Kong; she leaves her home and stays with her aunt to continue studying. Wang Chia-chih in "Lust, Caution" is a female college student who joins a student activist group and wishes to help assassinate Chinese collaborator Mr. Yee.

Eileen Chang's emphasis on female autonomy is a central and enduring theme in her body of work. Her stories inspire and resonate with readers during that period and nowadays, reflecting general expectations towards female independence and involvement. By setting these "new woman" beliefs as the basis of female identity, Eileen Chang reflects her strong impulse for female liberation and support for female rights in China.

2.2. The Traditionally Unspeakable Desire: Female Subjectivity Revealed by Sexuality

Sexuality and lust are inherent desires in human nature; however, because of the influence of Confucianism in Chinese traditional culture, sex has always been a taboo topic in Chinese society. Among this topic, female sexuality is even more prohibited and suppressed. Expressing desire is an unacceptable and shameful behavior for Chinese women. After Chinese modernization, though there was still strict censorship on sexual topics in literature, female sexuality became a common theme. However, within socialist China, the definition of identity was primarily framed in relation to one's class alignment and political affiliation rather than being predominantly focused on sexual distinctions [6]. In the literature and films published during this period, it is common to see female soldiers disguise as countrywomen to approach the enemy or female spies using their bodies to allure the opponents. Under the socialist cultural production and visual representation, there is no female self, but only female figures defined by class [6]. These women thus lose their female identity and are defined by collectivism and class identity.

Unlike these works, Eileen Chang included female sexuality in most of her works as a way to rescue female sexuality from socialist rhetoric and masculine fantasy, or to explore the body and sexuality as a means of self-expression [6]. In her works, these female characters, no matter heroes or villains, are individuals with their own desires and subjectivity.

In "The Golden Cangue", Ch'i-ch'iao, a tragic woman sold by her brother to become the wife of a disabled man in a wealthy family, suffers from a deficiency in love and confidence and becomes a monster driven by endless material desire at the end. In the story, Ch'i-ch'iao expresses her disgust towards her husband and affection towards her brother-in-law. "Go sit next to your Second Brother. Go sit next to your Second Brother." She tried to sit beside Chi-tse and only got onto a corner of his chair and put her hand on his leg [5]." Through this short interaction, Ch'i-ch'iao expresses her strong emotions repressed in her heart. Her dissatisfaction with the sexual desire emphasizes her tragedy of being sold by her brother and forced to tolerate the loneliness. Though Ch'i-ch'iao becomes a villain at the end, this paragraph expresses her inner thoughts and subjectivity, helping the readers to understand her distorted psychology.

In "Lust, Caution", the female protagonist Wang Chia-chih is also aware of her sexuality and values her individualistic desire over the collectivistic goal. Though Wang Chia-chih is a female activist who aims to assassinate Mr. Yee, she falls in love with him after becoming his mistress. At the end of the story, when Mr. Yee purchases a diamond ring, Wang Chia-chih plunges in thought. Out of nowhere, she recalls a saying, "the way to a woman's heart is through her vagina [7]," and reveals her feeling towards Mr. Yee. At last, she gives up her mission and saves her lover, Mr. Yee. This is Eileen Chang's direct response to the collectivist female sexuality shown in the socialist literature. Eileen Chang rejects putting the collective interest before individual interest and lets the character follow her deepest self. By doing so, Eileen Chang sets female sexuality and subjectivity as a way to express individuality [8].

Enabling women to express their natural desires is one of the ways to evoke female consciousness and support female liberation. By openly discussing female sexuality, Eileen Chang, on the one hand, connects female sexuality with female subjectivity and, on the other hand, shows her resistance to both the conservative, old-fashioned Chinese culture and socialist collectivism discourse as she liberates women from societal norms that restrict and confine their physical freedom [8].

3. What Happens After Nora Walks Out: Female Struggle Under The Real-Life Pressure

"And yet once Nora had awakened, it was not easy for her to return to dreamland, so her only recourse was to leave; but after she'd left, she soon faced the inevitable choice between degradation and returning home [9]." This is a quote from a speech by Lu Xun, one of the most significant figures in contemporary Chinese literature. The original story of "A Doll's House" never mentions what happens to Nora after she leaves her house. Lu Xun believed that a "new woman" like Nora would be unable to survive outside the household. They would either degrade or return home after their enlightenment. Instead of contempt towards female independence, Lu Xun concluded this viewpoint after examining the actual social situation during that period. Women, who were encouraged to rebel against the patriarchal system, mainly lacked education and living skills.

The cruel reality faced by the "new woman" is also depicted by Eileen Chang. For example, Bai Liusu, in "Love in a Fallen City", returns to the Bai household after her divorce. This is one of the situations suggested by Lu Xun. However, this is not a lasting solution towards the cruel reality. Soon, the Bai family declines, and the family soon aims at this returned daughter, who adds more financial burden to the family. The hostile attitudes of the family humiliate Bai Liusu, but she has no solution. As she says herself, "I have not studied much, and I can't do manual labor, so what kind of job can I do [5]?" She is raised under the influence of the Three Obedience and Four Virtues. Though she is awakened now, her essence is still a woman who does not acquire much education or skill.

As Bai Liusu is driven to despair, her final solution is to marry a rich man and depend on his wealth. Again, she throws herself back to the patriarchal system. This must be a tough solution decided by an enlightened woman. Eileen Chang uses vivid narrative techniques to reveal Bai Liusu's gradual degradation. As soon as Bai Liusu decides to use marriage as her means of survival, she returns to the room and stares at the mirror. "She had the kind of slender figure that does not show age, her waist eternally thin, her breasts girlishly budding. Her face had always been as white as porcelain, but now it had changed from porcelain to jade - semitranslucent jade with a tinge of pale green [5]." Eileen Chang includes a long appearance description of Bai Liusu's psychological activity. The first description, "does not show age", directly reveals her concern about being too old to be remarried and emphasizes her purposefulness. Then, her sight moves down to her body. "Waist" and "breasts" are two body parts that represent female sexiness. "Face", "cheeks" and "eyes" are parts that people will see first when they meet her. This mirror sequence delivers a strong sense of the female gaze. Female gaze, accompanied by male gaze, are two terms proposed by British feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey. In a society shaped by sexual inequality, the enjoyment of visual engagement has been divided into active/male and passive/female roles. The dominant male perspective imposes its fantasies onto the female form, objectifying female to gain pleasure [10]. Gaze represents the power to look. Empowered by the patriarchal system, the male is the one who has the power to look at the others. The male gaze objectifies women and degrades them from individuals to pure visual and erotic satisfaction for spectators. In literature and film, the female gaze, as opposed to the male gaze, usually represents the subjectivity and rebellion of female characters as they confront the patriarchs by empowering themselves with the right to gaze. However, in this mirror sequence, Bai Liusu's female gaze is not an empowering gaze; instead, she objectifies herself. The metaphors she uses to describe her skin are "porcelain" and "jade". These two objects are goods commonly used in trade between China and the West. This corresponds to Fan Liuyuan's identity as a businessman returning from Britain and the later sequence of Fan Liuyuan calling Bai Liusu a real Chinese woman.

Thus, Bai Liusu's female gaze here successfully objectifies herself as a trading bait, expressing her wish to use her body to exchange Fan Liuyuan's money. In the later story, Bai Liusu willingly becomes Fan Liuyuan's mistress as Fan Liuyuan promises her steady financial support.

The female protagonist of "Aloeswood Incense", Ge Weilong, also experiences a similar transition. She is a female student who studies in Hong Kong. This student identity gives her the trait of modernity. However, the destiny of being objectified is hinted at her first appearance. "She wore the special uniform of Nanyang Secondary Scho... all in the late Qing style. Decking out coed in the manner of Boxer-era courtesans—that was only one of the ways that the Hong Kong of the day tried to please European and American tourists [5]." Ge Weilong lives in the modernized Chinese period; however, her student uniform is still "in the late Qing style", implying her old-fashioned inner thoughts behind the modernized student identity. Some westernized traits on her clothes are purposefully made "to please European and American tourists". Though Ge Weilong is an innocent female student, she is already unknowingly displayed as an ornamental object by the government to foreigners. The incompatible characteristics in her identity foreshadow her tragedy in the later story. In order to continue her education in Hong Kong, she lives in her aunt's house. In exchange, Ge Weilong is forced to attend various upper-class parties. Her youth and beauty are used as bait to help her aunt meet more wealthy men. In this process, on the one hand, Ge Weilong is objectified by her aunt; on the other hand, Ge Weilong herself also falls for the irresistible materialistic life. In the end, in order to marry the man, she loves and keep this materialistic life, Ge Weilong keeps the sexual trade with wealthy men semi-willingly. At the very end of the novella, when Ge Weilong sees the prostitutes being humiliated on the street, all she can say is, "But how am I different from those girls [5]?"

The transition of Bai Liusu and Ge Weilong from the awakened new woman to such degradation is cruel and real. Their endings are strikingly similar to what Lu Xun predicted about Nora after she leaves her home. A similar tragic fate repeatedly occurs in Eileen Chang's works. The realistic and sarcastic narrative style reflects Eileen Chang's pessimism towards Chinese women's lives.

Eileen Chang uses her stories as a way to both reflect on the cruel reality and call for attention to the awkward circumstances that the Chinese "new woman" is experiencing. These women are liberated in thoughts but imprisoned by reality. They are trying to become "new women", but society is still lagging at the old stage. This inconsistency causes struggle and tragedy for the "new woman".

Eileen Chang also hints at the solution for female struggle in her stories. The materialistic theme in Eileen Chang's stories resonates with the fact that economic freedom is the foundation for women's liberation. Her stories appeal to Chinese women to acquire financial independence and Chinese society to provide more support to empower women. However, being the foundation does not mean a solution. Like Lu Xun says, "Are you no longer a puppet once you have won economic freedom? No, you are still a puppet. It's just that you are less subject to others' control and more in control of other puppets [9]." The overall solution to female liberation in Chinese society requires a tremendous amount of time, money, and revolution, and Eileen Chang's pessimistic attitude reveals the uncertainty of this process.

4. Summary

By analyzing the female identity in Eileen Chang's four well-known novellas, "Love in a Fallen City", "Aloeswood Incense", "The Golden Cangue" and "Lust, Caution" this research discusses Eileen Chang's tendency to shape female characters and her attitude towards female liberation in Chinese society during the mid-20th century. Female autonomy and subjectivity are two common characteristics of Eileen Chang's female characters. Eileen Chang repeatedly depicts women's control over her marriage and education and their self-awareness of sexual desire, emphasizing female individualism. By comparing Eileen Chang's female characters to the traits of the "new woman" promoted during the New Cultural Movement, this paper reveals Eileen Chang's wish and support for female liberation in China. However, after investigating the realistic struggles female

characters go through in the stories, this paper concludes Eileen Chang's attitude towards female liberation as pessimistic. In Eileen Chang's stories, her strong wish and pessimistic attitude appear simultaneously, revealing a solid uncertainty towards Chinese female liberation.

This research compares the "new woman" promoted by the New Cultural Movement with Eileen Chang's female characters as the main topic, which is not done in previous studies of Eileen Chang's works. This paper links a Chinese feminist discourse initiated in the early 20th century and the female identity in literature works during the mid-20th century. This connection reveals the process and influence of female liberation in Chinese society and thus provides a clear picture of Chinese people's attitudes towards the gender issue during the 20th century.

This paper only analyzes four novellas created by Eileen Chang in the early stage of her career; therefore, the time span of the discussion is limited to the mid-20th century. Future researchers could consider analyzing Eileen Chang's later works and compare her attitudes towards female liberation with her early works to expand the completeness of this research topic.

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