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The Struggle for a New Identity: A Study of Taiwanese Feminine Fiction

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Abstract

Taiwan's colonial experience in a sense illuminates Taiwanese women's struggle for a new identity. The imperial-colonial dialectic is repeatedly found in contemporary Taiwanese feminine fiction, which can be examined from various perspectives. Firstly, there are recurrent portrayals of haunting memories of the past and the present struggling out of the past. Secondly, scenarios of dominance and submission, conquest and annihilation (or imprisonment) are characteristic of many works. Thirdly, there is vehement affirmation of the value of the peripheral and the marginal and celebration of the struggle toward independence. As a result, diasporic experience and the patterns of journey, quest, and exile are especially relevant in the

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search for a new identity. Nevertheless, there is a limit to the kind of radical gender discourse contemporary Taiwanese feminine fictions embrace. If radical experimentalism has the virtue of shattering "woman" as a traditional category, the political efficacy of women's struggle may inadvertently be destroyed in the process of achieving such goals.

Key Words

Taiwanese feminine fiction ; identity ; subjectivity .

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In the tradition of Taiwanese literature, a tenacious trend is the so-called literature of protest, which may well be the legacy of colonial Taiwanese literature. Writers of that period often employ various tactics to drive home their critique of the imperial power and to voice their protest over the inhumane treatment of the Taiwanese people. What is more, gender has been treated as a metaphor for imperialism, and one often sees that "gender . . . is not simply a question of sexuality but also a question of subdued labor and imperial plunder" (McClintock 5). This legacy, in a sense, is what may inspire us in our study of contemporary Taiwanese feminine fiction. If contemporary Taiwanese feminine fiction is characterized by the struggle for a new identity, that struggle can be envisioned as a variation, although in a different context, of the imperial-colonial dialectic. The quest for female subjectivity, in other words, is inextricably entangled with various power relations. This paper, an investigation of the crisis of identity and the quest for female subjectivity in contemporary Taiwanese feminine fiction, therefore foregrounds the image of women as 'colonized.' The imperial-colonial dialectic, moreover, will be examined from various perspectives: haunting memories of the past and the present struggling out of the past; scenarios of dominance and submission, conquest and annihilation (or imprisonment); affirmation of the value of the peripheral and the marginal and celebration of the struggle toward independence.

One interesting aspect of contemporary Taiwanese feminine fiction is the juxtaposition of, or even deliberate antagonism between, the past and the present (or the future). For the female protagonists, their identity construction has much to do with rejecting patriarchal designation of the female self, a gesture aiming at salvaging the mutilated self from haunting memories of the past. Patriarchy is envisioned as an overwhelming imperial presence, and the colonized women cannot but look for alternative ways to flee patriarchy. There are various attempts at reconstructing history — women's history, in which political, social, and personal issues are often intermingled. One novel entitled *Capable Woman* (Nyu Chiang Jen) is a case in point. It portrays a capable woman — a new type — who rejects women's traditional roles and becomes a successful career woman. In the story, the protagonist Xin-hua is juxtaposed with, and indeed differentiated from, her friend Chang-xiu, a traditional woman. If Chang-xiu's piteous fate as a wife and a mother echoes that of generations of women in the past, Xin-hua's alternative career, as she herself envisions, may set a good example for future women.

Yet Xin-hua's dream may prove to be merely ephemeral. A short story "The Rapeseed" ("You-ma Cai-zi") by another female writer, Liao Hui-ying, attempts to demonstrate that it is never an easy task for Taiwanese women to reject patriarchal designation of the female identity. The work, to begin with, portrays a girl, A-hui, struggling with haunting memories of the past and endeavoring to gain a new identity. If identity formation has much to do with how one sees and recounts one's past, A-hui indeed deliberately examines her past as a way to envision an alternative future for developing female subjectivity. Ironically, however, the work demonstrates instead "the tenacious legacies of imperialism" (McClintock 15) on the one hand and the type of unstable identity that women are faced with on the

other. The story recounts generations of Taiwanese women suffering from patriarchal discrimination. A-hui, although a modern woman, also cannot steer clear of the stereotypical designations accorded to women. Characteristic of the work are various “epithets” connoting gender discrimination. Interwoven into the text, they become a kind of litany spelling the death of anyone attempting to revolt against patriarchy. For example, shortly after the beginning of the story, we hear A-hui's grandfather telling her mother that the fate of a girl is like that of a rapeseed because neither can have sway over their own lives (13). This message is faithfully conveyed by A-hui's mother to her own daughter:

> What are you grudging for? Girls are just like rapeseeds. . . . I have been treating you and your brother quite fairly. Although we are very poor, I still let you go to school. Others like you would have become workers. Your brother is the heir of our family; how can you hold grudge against him? (29)

Here what is illuminating, firstly, may be the satire on female bonding or optimistic celebration of women's lineage, as the mother here is but an instrument of patriarchy. Secondly, we may also detect the kind of “unstable subjectivity” (Sharpe 11) that contemporary Taiwanese women are often faced with. Through education, they may eventually gain a certain degree of independence, intellectually and economically, but in some aspects gender restriction and sexual subordination remain tenacious. Women may enjoy a dominating position of class, but there is still a subordinate position of gender. The exercise of female power and the articulation of female desire, in other words, can never guarantee the attainment of women's full

subjectivity.

This crisis of identity that characterizes contemporary Taiwanese women is further articulated in the image of mad women suffering from the conflict between marriage and self-development. A short story by Yuan Qiong-qiong, ”Fever” (“Shau”), portrays the story of a woman confined by marriage and who gradually comes to possess a split personality. Madness and confinement, indeed, are but two sides of a coin, and the protagonist ‘An-tau’ dramatizes the image of a “mad woman in the attic.” Being confined in her marriage, An-tau cannot tolerate a husband who could enjoy freedom. One day, as the husband suffers from high fever due to his having caught a cold, An-tau locks him in their room, taking good care of him and yet not allowing him to go out and see a doctor. Even when the illness becomes very critical, An-tau still would not bring him out, and the husband eventually dies. If An-tau's subversion of power relations entails damage to others, another mad woman, Wei-liang, in “The Love of Wei-liang” (“Wei-liang Di Ai”), demonstrates masochism in her tragic attempt to keep her “home.” intact Orphaned in early childhood, Wei-liang is exclusively devoted to her husband and children. She serves as a maid, nurse, cook, etc. to her family. However, all her labor amounts to nothing. The shattering of her home, symbolized by the husband's illicit affair, smashes her and renders her a mad woman who eventually destroys herself.

If An-tau and Wei-liang represent those who cannot transcend the patriarchal past, there are others who see marriage as the source of evil and who deliberately adopt subversive strategies to envision an alternative future for female subjectivity. To reject marriage, to be a single parent, or even to become a concubine are among the various new strategies adopted. The title of one short story, ”A Happy Single Woman” (“Kuai-le di dan-shen nyu-lang”), may well be the

self-evident manifesto for this trend of thought. Characteristically, women suffering from marriage and love problems are juxtaposed with those single women whose lives are always described in utopian terms: their residences are paradises and their lives are blissful. A more desperate subversion may be found in those stories which portray women deliberately choosing to be a single parent. Economically independent, these women simply want no relationship with men except to make them pregnant. “The Most Memorable Season” (“Zui-xiang-nian Di Ji-jie”) is a case in point. Its mock-heroic plot of a pregnant woman seeking a temporary “husband” to provide her child with a surname may be envisioned as a parody of the story of generations of men looking for wives to carry on their lineage.

Yet the subversion may remain superficial. In those stories in which women become concubines, for example, the breaking of social and gender taboos ends up reiterating patriarchy. In several stories by Yuan Qiong-qiong, subversive potentials eventually lead to mere irony as the concubines cannot envision relationship with men other than those that are defined by patriarchy. Thus, the title of one of Yuan's stories, ”Her Own Heaven” (“Zi-ji Di Tian-kong”), remains ironical just as the name of the protagonist in another story, *The Apple will Smile* (Ping-quo Hui Wei-xiao), Bright (Quang-ming), ironically indicates that there is nothing bright in the story. Furthermore, in those stories depicting economically independent — and therefore domineering — new women, one frequently finds that patriarchal evils are repeated even if gender roles are exchanged. In “A Happy Single Woman,” for example, the domineering woman, Xin-xin, repeats patriarchal patterns in her dealings with her “little” boyfriend, not allowing him any autonomy. Another “little” man in the story, “Little Yeh” (“xiao-yeh”), uses women's money uneasily,

unable to steer clear of patriarchal ideology. Even domineering women themselves are still conditioned by patriarchy. One typical instance is “Mundane Evil” (“Hong-chen jie”), in which the domineering woman Liang Xin-xin still fears people slandering her patronizing a “little” boyfriend. In some of these works, female centrality is articulated at the expense of male otherness, which ironically indicates that in a sense nothing has improved, since the old dichotomy is still there, with all the inequality, oppression, and discrimination it entails. This strategy, moreover, is deficient and disturbing according to Jean Bethke Elshtain:

> …there appears at least initially to be a strong advantage for the purposes of political struggle in having a readily defined adversary--a demonized Other. But if this Other is biologically bound, the liberatory strategy in fact turns murderous. (203)

Yet murder and terror continue to be the keynote of many works of contemporary Taiwanese feminine fiction, in which the basic pattern of dominance and submission can often be detected. The theme of women as a subdued group exploited sexually and economically is recurrent, and Li Ang's *Husband-killing* (Sha-fu) is a most famous example. The work, a moving tale of a country girl persecuted by her husband and eventually murdering him in revenge, is unique in its focusing not on educated middle-class urban women but on illiterate lower-class rural girls, the latter being under different levels of exploitation from the former. This focus on women's intrinsic differences, it would seem, may be one of the reasons why the work enjoys immense popularity. As Jean Radford judiciously comments, “sexual difference has to be related to other kinds of difference: class,

ethnicity, sexual orientation" (97). In this compelling story of a rural girl's piteous victimization and heroic rebellion, we indeed feel that if utopia is one for women, dystopias may be numerous for them.

Husband-Killing is unprecedented in laying bare the primitive drives of men — sexual, palatal, economical — unmitigated by any consideration of propriety. In the primitive and bloody world of *Husband-Killing*, food and sexuality are morbidly interrelated, testifying to the fact that women are often exploited both economically and sexually. Various passages are deliberately composed to serve this purpose. In the very beginning of the story, for example, the mother of Lin Shi, the rural girl, is shown greedily chewing two rice balls given her by a soldier; her hunger is so overwhelming that she simply ignores the soldier's sexual assault. This is a most vivid example of the exchange economy which is to be the leitmotif of the entire work. Lin Shi's marriage is another case in point. Her uncle marries (or rather sells) her to a butcher, Chen Jiang-hai, because ：

> …Butcher Chen will give him pounds of pork every ten or fifteen days. At that time when everything is scanty, this kind of gift is really more handsome than anything else. Little wonder that neighbors enviously say that Lin Shi really has good luck, that she, being so skinny, can nevertheless be exchanged for so much pork. (83)

Butcher Chen therefore regards food as the source of power. If Lin Shi submits to him, he will bring her an ample supply of food. If, on the other hand, she is not obedient, he then will stop giving her food and starve her. Sexually abused and economically exploited, Lin Shi has twice attempted to be independent by looking for some jobs. And

yet this is not what Butcher Chen can tolerate. The type of patriarchal-imperialist ideology epitomized by him simply would not allow women to achieve any autonomy. Eventually, Lin Shi takes revenge by cutting him into pieces, revolting against the objectification of women and symbolically projecting women's split identity back onto the male body.

Another fiction by Li Ang, *Labyrinthine Garden* (Mi-yuan), is marked by the deliberate mingling of sexuality and politics. The fate of women and that of Taiwan are not only juxtaposed but also conspicuously integrated in that women's subordinate positions epitomize Taiwan's colonial status in the past. The work deals with the story of a girl, Zhu Ying-hong, from an ancient family, whose ancestors were pioneers (and even pirates) moving from mainland China to the island of Taiwan, and subsequent generations witnessed the colonization of Taiwan first by Japan and then by political powers from China. The passivity and femininity that characterize Zhu Ying-hong point to the role of Taiwan as a feminized Other dominated and manipulated by masculine colonizers. If Zhu Ying-hong eventually attempts to discard her passivity, the endeavor also symbolizes Taiwan's precarious aspiration for autonomy. The garden in question is an intricate symbol in this regard. Originally an imitation of Chinese gardens, the garden had undergone various transformations in which native plants—that which can best adapt to the circumstances—were introduced and the garden as a result became more lively. Although an accidental fire destroyed the entire structure, at the end of the story we see that Zhu Ying-hong, availing herself of her newly won power, dedicates herself to the restoration of the garden. The kind of new identity that Zhu Ying-hong hankers for and enjoys, eventually, is also what Taiwan may possibly achieve in the future.

Both Lin Shi and Zhu Ying-hong, in a sense, epitomize the rejection of women's traditional roles and the recognition that there should be other alternatives to the fate allotted to them. Nevertheless, according to Judie Newman, "after the awakening (that we are not what we were), came the question: 'Who are we?' and that can be a very hard question." (3) There are, therefore, in more recent works, deconstructive efforts dedicated to the affirmation of the value of the peripheral and the marginal and celebration of the struggle for independence. If women's autonomy has much to do with the rejection of the center usurped by patriarchy, then affirmation of the value of the peripheral and the marginal may be a functional reversal in the quest for a new identity. Stylistically, there are various postmodern strategies employed as counter-hegemonic devices. Su Wei-Zhen's *Silent Island* (Chen-mo zhi-dao), for instance, is experimental in style. There are two protagonists, both called Chen-mian, and the work sees the simultaneous development of the stories of these two protagonists. What is more, the two stories are deliberately intertwined with each other so that the reader has to shift constantly between the two stories. Indeed a shifting perspective, a destabilizing of the center so as "to reinstate the marginalized in the face of the dominant" (Ashcroft et al. 175), may be what the author has in mind in devising her "twin" narrative.

The technique of "collage" is another postmodern strategy employed by those experimental writers. Zhu Tian-wen's short story, "Fin de siècle Glory" ("Shi-ji-mo de hua-li"), is an amalgamation of variegated cultures. It depicts fin de siècle Taipei as the meeting place of issues from almost every part of the world, and the protagonist Mi-ya is a girl immersed in a world of exotic fashions, colors, and scents. Things Eastern / Western, elitist / popular, urban / rural, etc. are all present, and one sees the new women journey

among them and drift among them, loitering in a new identity inaccessible to traditional women. Another fiction by Zhu Tian-wen, *Notes of a Desolate Man* (Huang-jen shou-ji), also carries postmodernist implications in the articulation, and indeed juxtaposition, of various discourses and ideologies. Philosophy, cinematology, art, etc. are all present, abruptly presented without any links in between, testifying to a shifting world where everything seems but ephemeral.

Diaspora, therefore, may characterize the type of new identity upheld in these Taiwanese feminine fiction. Thematically, one often sees the characters journey from one place to another, changing from one job to another, shifting from one partner to another, and even switch from one gender to another. *Silent Island* is a typical case. The two female namesakes, given their differences in background, career, temperament, etc., are nevertheless alike in their wanderings in life, their self-exile, and their promiscuous sexual relationships. This kind of diasporic experience, as Stuart Hall would explains may be "defined ... by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of "identity" which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity" (119-20).

Diasporic identities in contemporary Taiwanese feminine fiction are indeed variegated. "Woman" as a traditionally understood category has been deconstructed, and radical gender discourses are employed to dismantle the arbitrary dichotomy of man/woman and to designate the performativity of gender. There are women with multiple identities (*Daughter of the Nile River* (Ni-lo-he nyu-er)), characters exemplifying the fluidity of gender (*Silent Island*), homosexuals (*Notes of a Desolate Man*), and even androgynes (*Fin de siècle Glory*). Take *Notes of a Desolate Man.* for example. What is radical first of all may be that the woman writer writes in the persona

of a homosexual. This in itself is already a rejection of the traditional dichotomy and a pinpointing of the fluidity of gender. Moreover, the work is a deliberate attempt at constructing and justifying an alternative world — even a utopia — of homosexuals, unveiling their world and thereby contesting all those values associated with terms such as "normal," "natural," and "legitimate." Its radical gender discourse, then, is an endorsement of the peripheral and the marginal, and of the utopia the work hankers for may be a gesture celebrating the struggle toward independence.

In this somewhat utopian moment for women eager to dismantle their colonized roles, however, one may have some reservations about the political efficacy of such a radical gesture. First of all, the employment of postmodern strategy, the celebration of stylistic experimentalism, may itself be complicitous with patriarchal ideology as the "practitioners and adherents" of postmodernism "are almost entirely male, white and metropolitan" (Newman ix). Another critic, Craig Owens, even goes so far as to say that postmodernism "may be another masculine invention engineered to exclude women" (61). Secondly, as Padmini Mongia rightly points out, "the hybrid subject" is often in danger of "aspecificity and ahistoricity" (7), and therefore lacking in political efficacy. In other words, the deconstruction of women may eventually entail the effacement of women, ironically endorsing the dominance man has enjoyed. In fact, Patricia Waugh has attempted an explanation for the postmodernist exclusion of women:

> At the moment when postmodernism is forging its identity through articulating the exhaustion of the existential belief in self-presence and self-fulfillment and through the dispersal of the universal subject of liberalism,

> feminism … is assembling its cultural identity in what appears to be the opposite direction. … [W]omen writers are beginning…to construct an identity out of the recognition that women need to discover, and must fight for, a sense of unified selfhood, a rational, coherent, effective identity. (6)

Stylistic experimentalism and radical gender discourse may thus have only limited value as strategies in resolving the crisis of identity for women, and it is here that the call for "the deconstructive and the political to go hand in hand" (Ashcroft et al. 177) becomes especially relevant.

To recapitulate, this paper has been mainly concerned with investigating various tactics employed at problematizing and contesting the image of women as 'colonized' in contemporary Taiwanese feminine fiction. The rejection of the patriarchal past, the subversion of male dominance, the resort to postmodern experimentalism and the adoption of radical gender discourse are among diverse strategies employed in the attempt to resolve female crisis of identity. Given the limited efficacy or even superficiality of these endeavors, contemporary Taiwanese feminine fiction as a whole is indeed a moving testimony to the struggle of Taiwanese women in general.

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