Morbid Beauty of Females in Lin Bai's Novels

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Abstract. Chinese female writer Lin Bai's works are considered representative of China's feminist literature in the 1990s. Sex is a major theme of Lin's novels. Lin focuses on alienation of females' sexual consciousness in modern commodity economy era. From the standpoint of feminist writing, in an extremely personalized tone, she writes of modern females' efforts to be rid of patriarchal discourse and realize their own value. However, the morbid beauty of females embodied in her novels and tragic life of female characters reflect setbacks to the efforts.

Introduction

Lin Bai has long been seen as a representative of China's feminist literature in the 1990s. What does feminist writing mean? It's a process of seeking and returning in which females are coming back from afar, and from the other side of culture. There has been a constant existence of female consciousness in Lin Bai's novels, which by definition is self-awareness of females as men's counterparts. It focuses on female characters’ inner thoughts in self-development. Sex is a major theme of Lin's novels. With the responsibility, insight and sensitivity of a female writer, she writes about alienation of female's sexual consciousness, portrays the morbid beauty of women, and probes into their awareness of self-value. The writer also explores females’ struggle to break with the fate of being written by patriarchal discourse. Furthermore, the novels are a outlet for the writer's desire to seek women’s self-value in a transitional period of Chinese society, and to deconstruct the powerful traditional phallus literature, although the tragic lives of female characters render it a remote dream.

The morbid beauty of females is reflected in the love between female characters, which is the alienation of their sexual consciousness, an unorthodox and radical way to challenge patriarchal discourse, as well as a chronology of female growth and struggle against male dominance.

The Ultimate Weapon of Struggle for Survival

In the 1990s, a transitional period of China's economy, every Chinese was put to unprecedented test in the wave of commodity economy, especially women. In the prevalent social norm of male dominance and gender discrimination, they are subject to more risks of unemployment. The threats of hard reality are putting increasing pressure on their shoulders. Contemporary females are actually embarrassed by women's liberation: by the male-dominated public criteria, their failure in most competitions was simply due to the fact that they are not men. In her writing, Lin focuses on the destiny of females in this transitional period. All her works are chronology of individual female lives glowing with morbid beauty. From Solo War, to Watching Empty Years, to Say it, Room, to Glass Worm, in the long melancholic chronologies, Lin presents a collection of portraits of fresh female
images with her sensitive and vivid writing. The female characters are simple yet willful, aggressive yet reserved. They are confined in their own fantasies, while resolutely plunging into the flame of life. As defiant angles and magnificent creations by women themselves, they are inexplicable and elusive to men. With feminine perseverance and vitality, they attempt to leap out of the overwhelming darkness of phallus tradition shaped by male-dominated history. Despite their struggles, bruises and wounds, can they find the way out?

From the novel Solo War, to Watching Empty Years, to Glass Worm, the three heroines in them, Duo Mi, Yao Li, and Lin Zhizhu, constitute the trinity of women, representing the long march from girlhood to maturity to real-sense femininity. As Lin Bai states in the preface of Solo War: “A solo war means a hand clapping itself, a wall blocking itself, a flower destroying itself. A solo war means a woman marrying herself.” In fact, defeating a person is to defeat him or her from inside, the most vulnerable part. Duo Mi's story is presented from the perspective of her as a girl and, later, a teenager. She lost her father at a very young age, and drifted apart from his mother. The experiences overshadow her entire life, and that's why she turned to other females to compensate the lack of maternity in her life. Yet, she shied away in panic from the love of same sex. On the other hand, to an immature Duo Mi, males are either fatherly instructors or malicious seducers, until the encounter and love with Mr. N ruthlessly marked the end of her adolescence. Yao Li is the adult version of Duo Mi, who is an intellectual female and goes through affairs with three men: Zi Su, an amazing upright man, Li An, a sophisticated womanizer, and Xu Lan, a sunny big boy. Only Li An established a stable relationship with Yao Li, while her romances with Zi and Xun are just short-lived. From Duo Mi, fighting an innocent and miserable solo war, to Yao Li, disappointed and indifferent to men, watching empty years, to Lin Zhizhu, an independent and unruly woman, living a colorful life like a glass worm, they constitute a trilogy of women's growth and breaking away from male control in a morbid manner. Moreover, other female characters like Luo Minzhen in Tranquility and Fragrance and Ju in Drifting Away are also trapped in the same tragic destiny.

The morbid path of defiance is dangerous yet tempting. Nan Dan in Solo War and Yi Ping in Water in the Bottle are such pioneers bold enough to venture into the forbidden domain of same-sex love. Their desperate love, bright youth and blazing life light up the secluded and gloomy life of their lonely lovers. In this patriarchal society suffering shortage of love, men's trivial pursuit of fame and interests pale in comparison with the magnificent love between these women. Despite their failure, Nan Dan and Yi Ping's defiant posture offer an alternative for women to escape from patriarchal society. Although Duo Mi in Solo War is fascinated by female bodies, she says: "it's only about admiration of their beauty. The sexual desire is practically nil." "Panic grips me when I look back on it. I'm terrified by the thought that I might be a born lesbian. So I struggle against it, trying to fit into the ‘normal’ folks.” Luce Irigaray argues that the phallic economy places women alongside signs and currency, since all forms of exchange are conducted exclusively between men. Women, like commodities, are moved between men based on their exchange value. By becoming lesbians, women refuse to be commodities and subvert the cultural order of Patriarchal society, just like "a commodity refuses to enter the market."

The establishment of self-sufficient female discourse space in Lin's works is achieved through two approaches: (1) Breaking the norm of heterosexual love to get rid of the yoke of male discourse. The purpose of depicting same-sex love is to achieve mutual equality and respect in a relationship by transcending gender. (2) Resisting male-dominant society to liberate females themselves. For example, the loving and affectionate female world of Zhu Liang and Qi Ye in Chair in the Winding Corridor, as opposed to the ruthless cutthroat world represented by two male characters Zhang Meida and Zhang Xida. The two women’s intimate friendship is practical deconstruction and physical subversion of the patriarchal order.

With courageous frankness, Lin Bai writes about the unspeakable love between women, as a challenge to the deepest taboo in traditional civilization, and as a pioneering advance towards self-liberation of females. It's employed as a writing strategy to resist the male-dominant society and phallus culture, and to seek inner condolence on the part of women. With equality, freedom, dignity
and fairness as its spiritual core, Lin's novels display female's independent consciousness in face of plights and adversity.

**The Sole Spiritual Home of Maturing Women**

Females retreat from the rat race of commodity economy, turning to love for consolation. But what is waiting for them in the materialized spiritual home? The lonely souls in Lin's works are dying for love, but they fail to find a loving harbor for them to rest in. Lin Bai sympathized with the traumatized women in disillusioned love myths, who are like beautiful flowers of romance crushed to dust by harsh reality. And the decay of their sexual consciousness is so heartbreaking.

The failure of Yao Li in *Watching Empty Years* to become a lover or a mistress or a wife is due to her incompetence and disqualification for all of the roles in terms of appearance or desire or virtues. As a result, her short-lived marriage only lasts for a week, and her affair with Li An ends in tragedy. The seemingly affectionate Li An turns out to be a playboy who is playing her as a doll. With outright disregard for her feelings, Li An would spout his year-long love affair with another woman, ending with the shameless remark: "It's between you and me. Let's keep it a secret to my wife." He tactfully keeps the extra-marital relationship from his wife by faking innocent conversations on the phone. In the end, the awareness of him as a sick womanizer leads to Yao Li's disillusion with men.

Lin Bai's deconstruction of love between women and men, unwedded or married, is cool-headed. Frustrated by the fight for survival and battles between genders, women go back to the retreat to reflect on themselves. To this point she is left with no one to love but herself or another woman, which is to ultimately justify her as a narcissist or lesbian.

In the novel *Water in the Bottle*, Lin Bai speaks through the mouth of her character Yi Ping: “We just want something deeper than friendship. I'm often pondering. What’s the point of living in this world? For me it's to love someone. It doesn't matter if that someone is a man or women, as long as we relate to and resonate with each other.”“There's bound to be a very, very good friendship between women to the point of love.” *Chair in the Winding Corridor* even manages to build a loving and warm female zone out of the cruel heartless male world. The portrait of same-sex love in Lin's novels reflects female's struggle to renew themselves in pursuit of inner peace, which is the essence of writing of sex as the ultimate weapon and as spiritual home, its morbidity so radical and desperate.

The bold and sensitive sex description by Lin is not intended for sexual arousal, but for exploration of social ideology and development of female consciousness. Lin Bai once said: “As a female writer, I'm trying to fight the overwhelming dual influence of mainstream discourse and male discourse, to release the tabooed personal experience from suppressed collective memories.” The real liberation and independence of females ultimately depend on all the individuals' awareness, men or women, and on overcome of the entrenched patriarchal ideology. Only when the entire social values and collective unconsciousness is rid of male dominance, can females be liberated in a real sense.

As the representative of China's female writers since the 1990s, Lin Bai's writing of same-sex love, along with contemporary writers like Chen Ran, opens another door to female consciousness. Their works greatly expand the boundaries of female consciousness and enrich its connotations. The novels also reflect relentless self-exploration and self-accomplishment on the part of female writers themselves. They make unique contributions to women's self-awareness and salvation, as well as to the diversity of contemporary literature. Yet it's a long way before the final realization of female liberation, which still requires massive efforts.

**References**


