

The Site of Contestation: A Study of Women, Place, and Identity in Chinese and Western Literature

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ABSTRACT

Many Chinese and Western writers often use different geographic locales or place women under various institutions/situations to explore notions of place, gender and identity. Women's perpetual struggle for voice and space and their conscious or unconscious quest for selfhood and integrity are central concerns of many Chinese and Western literary works published since the late nineteenth century. A close look at such texts as Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Lawrence's "You Touched Me," Glaspell's "A Jury of Her Peers," Cao Yu's *Thunderstorm* and Li Ang's *The Butcher's Wife* shows not only the agonies and sufferings of women in general, but also elucidates how home can easily become a place of threat or fear, a place that subverts individual growth. In the course of their discussions, writers reveal those social, moral, or cultural implications or assumptions at work and try to map out a route of growth or change for their female protagonists.

KEY WORDS

autonomy, domesticity, deprivation, gender, home, hysteria, identity, insanity, patriarchy, repression, suppression, victimization, violence



Place, identity and their interrelationship have been popular topics for literary investigation over the past few decades. Interests in various aspects of women's lives, especially their frustrations as well as aspirations, however, can be traced back much earlier to the nineteenth century when writers in both Chinese and Western literature began to explore the role or roles of women in their respective society. Writers often situate women in different geographic locales or place them under various social institutions either to portray their constant struggle for voice and space, or to delineate women's rising consciousness and their ultimate quest for identity. They often highlight women's "transformation" or "initiation" as a result of the latter's interaction with others in specific localities. Some writers may choose to explore the "fate" or "plight" of women and discuss that in relation to female subjectivity, which subsequently leads to discussions on women's gendered relationship with the opposite sex in society. There are also burgeoning interests among writers who focus explicitly on women in relation to the notion of private space or place, and deal with home as the site of contestation between husband and wife on the one hand or as the primary site of ownership and autonomy for many women on the other.

It is a known fact that literature can be gendered, with explicit or implicit views on the way men and women behave. That explains why many writers deliberately place their characters in specific locales in order to examine different aspects of the female self. Viewed in this light, the setting in twentieth-century literature often ceases to be just "the background against which action takes place" (Harmon 477); it becomes, in many instances, the site where individuals struggle hard to

establish their self and identity either in the family or in society. A close study of the interplay between women, place, and identity in a number of selected texts from Chinese and Western literature shows how a specific place like home ceases to be a place of nuptial joy for the married couple. Instead, the home setting has become a site of contestation where husbands and wives struggle for power, supremacy, dominance, or autonomy. Traditional gender roles and their representations are often questioned, challenged and scrutinized in such a home setting. Women's subsequent transgression of gendered stereotypes in one form or another further shows their attempts to establish their private space and to develop a new form of consciousness characterized by a better understanding of their own selves, their relation to the world in general and to the sexual "other" in particular.

Henrik Ibsen's (Norwegian, 1828–1906) much-discussed play *A Doll's House* (1879) represents one of such early exemplary texts that centres its discussion on women's self-awakening against the context of home. The playwright turns the home setting into a testing ground for gender relationship and allows Nora, the protagonist, to explore her own self and place in the seemingly confined space, that is, home. While the husband, Mr. Helmer, sees his home as a place of domestic harmony and nuptial happiness, a place of refuge for his wife, the "hunted dove," who is saved from the talons of a hawk (224), the wife, Nora, regards home as a confined space, as a prison-house that prevents her from a free exploration of her self and from a glimpse of life beyond her threshold. As she succinctly relates her situation to her husband, Nora finds neither autonomy nor recognition at home:

When I lived at home with Papa, he used to tell me [Nora] his opinion about everything, and so I had the same opinion. . . . He called me his little doll, and he used to play with me just as I played with my dolls. Then I came to live in your home— . . . I mean when I passed out of Papa's hands into yours. You arranged everything to suit your own tastes, and so I came to have the same tastes as yours. . . . I've lived here like a pauper—simply from hand to

mouth. I've lived by performing tricks for you. (226)

Circumstances allow Nora to see clearly her relationship with her husband, that her husband has never recognized her as his equal in all their years of marriage. This realization of her stereotyped roles as daughter, wife and mother leads Nora to reconsider the notion of home and her own position in it. It dawns on her that she has always been regarded as a mere plaything, a little skylark, and a frightened little songbird (223) at home:

But our home has been nothing but a playroom. I've been your doll-wife here, just as at home I was Papa's doll-child. And the children have been my dolls in their turn. I liked it when you came and played with me, just as they liked it when I came and played with them. That's what our marriage has been, Torvald. (226)

It is interesting to note how Nora comes to question the validity of using her social roles assigned her in defining her as an individual. For the first time in life, Nora comes to see how her individual self has been negated by her loved ones on the one hand and unconsciously repressed, if not ignored, by herself on the other. It dawns on her that she has never seriously considered herself as an individual before, but has been more than happy in performing her socially assigned roles in the past. With such an understanding of her situation at home, Nora openly asserts her self before her husband, and consciously transgresses her socially well-defined territory by leaving home. Her conscious act of dislocating herself from her secure and comfortable home at the end of the play shows her detachment from her old self defined by her social roles. It also marks the birth of a new consciousness in Nora, whose determination to search for her identity and autonomy is accentuated and celebrated. There lies an irony, however, in Ibsen's treatment of women like Nora, who struggle for selfhood and wish to be their own "masters" in life, when one notices that their act of defiance has left them "without space in their own homes" (Malin 286).

While Nora's act of leaving home is perceived as "unreasonable"

and quite insane from the male's perspective represented by her husband, the same act shows Nora's sense of meaning and direction in life, and her resistance to social definitions that tend to confine her to "the doll's house of bourgeois femininity" (Showalter 5). Her departure further signifies Nora's conscious attempt to create a space/place for her newly gained identity. The open confrontation between Nora and her husband in the final act allows Ibsen to foreground an increasingly complicated situation in the marital world where traditional gender roles were questioned and challenged and gender relationship debated and redefined. Viewed in this light, Ibsen's play openly calls for a thorough re-examination of existing stereotyped gender roles in his contemporary Norwegian society; it further represents the playwright's conscious and radical advocacy for women's rights and for the development of women's private space in the family and in society.

Ibsen's idea of home as a place of confinement for women is also dealt with in a succinct way by D. H. Lawrence (1885–1930) in his short story "You Touched Me" (1920). In this celebrated short story, the setting serves a central role in underpinning the protagonist's geographical isolation and her sense of alienation and estrangement. Placed against a working class setting, the middle-class protagonist, Matilda Rockley, feels isolated in the mining community as a result of differences in sex, education and class:

The Pottery House was a square, ugly, brick house girt in by the wall that enclosed the whole grounds of the pottery itself. . . . Through the hedge could be seen the desolate yard, and the many-windowed, factory-like pottery, over the hedge could be seen the chimneys and the outhouses. . . . In a thorough industrial district, it is not easy for the girls who have expectations above the common to find husbands. The ugly industrial town was full of men, young men who were ready to marry. But they were all colliers or pottery-hands, mere-workmen. (107)

Highlighted in the story is not merely Matilda's physical isolation among the colliers in an ugly industrial town but, more importantly, her

emotional deprivation, sexual repression and spiritual alienation. Similar to Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, the home setting in Lawrence's story is depicted as a sealing place where women are confined and female identity suppressed. The geographical locality is further used to shed light on the psychological and emotional condition of Matilda, whose femininity is inhibited and her female self subverted. As revealed in the story, Matilda is forced to assume a pseudo-male role as the "master" at home when her father Ted Rockley was taken ill. Not only is she expected to shoulder the family business, but Matilda is also obliged to perform a pseudo-wife role in taking care of her bed-ridden father after her mother's death. The isolated home setting in this case reinforces the emotional and sexual deprivation of Matilda in her defined socio-cultural contexts. It is apparent from the story that home has never been a loving and caring shelter for the unmarried Matilda; it has always meant a place of obligation, tension and frustration for the old maiden. The subsequent return of Ted Rockley's adopted son, Hadrian, further complicates her life, turning Matilda's home setting into a battlefield for power and domination between the sexes.

The confrontation between Matilda and Hadrian, who returns after years of wandering to claim his place in the family, can be interpreted as a contestation of the male and the female for supremacy. Matilda assumes it is only natural for her and her sister, Emmie, to inherit their father's property after the latter's death. That explains why she is so shocked when she finds that her father is prepared to leave her and her sister nothing unless she agrees to marry Hadrian, the only eligible bachelor in town. Matilda's forced marriage with Hadrian shows the subservient position held by many women in the family. In this case, one notices how Matilda, in spite of her expressed reluctance, is handed over from her dying father, Ted Rockley, to the young man, Hadrian. Matilda's helplessness in the situation epitomizes the plight of many women in early twentieth century when women were not merely spatially restricted to their home setting, but they were also spiritually deprived and emotionally abused. Like Matilda, many women had no control over their own destiny. Lawrence's story clearly shows how a woman can easily be treated as a commodity or as a man's property to

be passed on from one man to another. Although Hadrian and Matilda's marriage at the end can be interpreted as an unconscious breakaway from isolation and alienation for Matilda and a rejuvenation of the Rockley family in Lawrentian terms, such a treatment of gendered relationship in a home setting remains unsettling to the contemporary reader for one notices the perpetuation, if not celebration, of male supremacy and the subversion of the female self before the male order.

While Lawrence emphasizes that it is Matilda's accidental "touch" of Hadrian that transforms both of them, rekindling the vital forces in these two beings, who have so far been leading a mechanical and spiritually barren life governed mainly by their rational faculties, his treatment of the tension between Ted/Hadrian and Matilda seems to reinforce the subversion of the female self before the dominant male forces. Viewed in this light, this simple tale narrates not merely a story about the location or dislocation of the female self, but it is also a tale about the usurpation of power, the denial of autonomy and the disarmament of women in a confined home setting. Matilda's bewilderment in the course of events further reveals a general lack of power and control on women's part over matters concerning their selfhood and future life. In an implicit way, Lawrence presents the traumatic effect of socio-cultural changes in the early twentieth-century British society where women could easily be silenced by men or forced by circumstances to repress their femininity or negate their female self for mere survival and/or familial-social approval. Such women might or might not be able to understand the cause of their predicaments, yet they were fully conscious of their feeling of captivity. Matilda's gender can thus be interpreted as a confined "place" or "space," preventing her from living a full life defined by her female self and her autonomy.

It is interesting to note that writers in China also expound such interplay between place, gender and identity over the past century. An early example is Cao Yu's (1905–1997) *Leiyu* [Thunderstorm 1934] in which the clash between husband and wife, each attempting to create a space of their own, is highlighted. Cao Yu deliberately places his female protagonist against a confined domestic setting to bring out the latter's sense of loss and alienation within her own community as a

result of difference in gender roles. In a comparable way to Ibsen's and Lawrence's texts, the enclosed family setting in Cao Yu's play represents the confining traditional Chinese society in miniature and is used to accentuate Chinese women's spiritual isolation and emotional deprivation at the time.

Home denotes not so much a place of love, peace and harmony but a site for perpetual disappointment, frustration, suppression and tension in the Chinese play. The fact that the male protagonist, Zhou Puyuan's mansion is eventually turned to become a mental asylum shows explicitly the playwright's view of the Chinese feudal system under which the individual self was often subverted, leaving only the world of madness as the only refuge for those who refuse to conform or be confined emotionally, morally or spiritually. It is made clear in the course of the play that home for the Zhou family has never been a cradle for the nurturing of one's soul. Instead, it represents a place haunted by tradition and conventions that tend to suffocate everyone living under its roof. As Joseph Lau succinctly puts it, "the Chinese patriarchal family system is . . . stifling . . . to the emotional growth of the individuals" (21), and it is against such a backdrop that Cao Yu depicts the tragic fate of women in transitional China and advocates for drastic socio-moral changes in China in the 1930s.

The Zhou family is presented as a miniature of the Chinese society at the time and its master, Zhou Puyuan, is seen as the embodiment of traditional views and conventional practices. Viewed as a tyrant in the family, Zhou Puyuan uses all means to subvert personal growth and discourage self-expansion among his younger subordinates at home. As a result, no one feels comfortable at home for it has become a prison-house for Zhou Puyuan's children and wife, Fanyi. In some sense, Zhou Puyuan is like another Mr. Helmer in Chinese clothing for he regards his wife as his "property," as a plaything, but never treats her as his equal. Zhou has never considered the needs of his young wife, Fanyi, who feels bored and suffocated in a family filled with Zhou's memories of the past and his dictatorial commands. Like Zhou Puyuan's maid-mistress, Shiping, who has been denied of her place in the Zhou family although she has given birth to the first child

in the Zhou family, Fanyi has been deprived of voice, choice, honour and space in the Zhou family. Fully aware of her marital captivity and spiritual confinement, Fanyi seeks help from her stepson, Zhou Ping, hoping that the latter would rescue her from her desperate situation. However, she is destined to meet disappointment because Zhou Ping proves to be a weakling, not strong enough to assert himself in a family resistant to change. Brought up in a tradition-ridden Chinese family, Zhou Ping dares not challenge his father, who embodies the Confucian ideology and the conventional socio-moral practices. Caught in a web of incestuous relationship, Fanyi is eventually led to see Zhou Ping's inadequacy and cowardice as well as her hopeless condition at home. Like Shiping, Fanyi comes to feel the overarching power of Confucianism which, with its prevailing patriarchal morality and gender prejudices toward women, tend to deprive women of all hopes for happiness and for self-realization in their course of fulfilling their stereotyped gender roles in the family and in society. As seen in the play, Shiping was forced to leave the Zhou family for her presence puts Zhou Puyuan's reputation at risk, while Fanyi in her own right tried to indulge in her "forbidden" love with Zhou Ping only to find her frustration and desperation intensified as a result.

In the Chinese play, home is turned into a site of contestation, an arena where women struggle to voice their discontent and in their own ways create their own space of autonomy. However, women often find no way out of the labyrinth for they are permanently trapped in the "architecture of an overwhelming male-dominated society" (Gilbert xi). Their failure in asserting themselves as individuals with a clear sense of self and integrity in the Chinese society represented by the Zhou family shows the reactionary socio-moral forces at work that tended to place women in a victimized position. It further points out the plight of women who seems fated in one way or another. Whether they choose to accommodate existing socio-moral demands on them and compromise as Shiping did, or they choose to rebel and to fight against their fate by voicing their grievance and frustrations as Fanyi did, they seem to be destined to a life of suffering and unhappiness. The portrayal of these two women's gradual road toward insanity in the Chinese play

certainly registers, in a disturbing and ironic way, the traumatic effect of traditional morality and conventional gender ideology on individuals, especially women, in early twentieth-century China. When reality proves to be too harsh and hostile for these women, leaving them with neither breathing space nor prospect, the world of insanity seems to offer them an escape, an alternative mode of “existence,” that is beyond conventional socio-moral scrutiny. This seems to confirm what Shoshana Felman says about women’s madness, that madness is “the impasse confronting those whom cultural conditioning has deprived of the very means of protest or self-affirmation” (2).

While insanity may be regarded as a form of refuge, a means of resistance, or a desperate outcry on women’s part in Cao Yu’s play, it can also be treated as a form of rebellion of the subversive self in a number of literary works that address specifically the perverse behaviour of married women, who are forced by domestic abuse to the edge of hysteria. As mentioned earlier, the relationship between self, gender and place is often treated in an intricate way by authors both Chinese and Western for more than a century. The absence of women’s voice and space at home and the subversion of the female self have been seen as major causes of many women’s insanity in literature. It is interesting to note, however, that insanity can be depicted either in the form of mental illness as in the case of Cao Yu’s *Thunderstorm* or in the form of violent or perverse behaviour. This is certainly the case of Minnie Wright, who is forced to violence, in Susan Glaspell’s (1882–1948) “A Jury of Her Peers” (1917). Minnie strangles her husband, John Wright, to death after twenty years of emotional abuse and physical isolation at home. As in the other cases discussed earlier, the home setting in Glaspell’s text is presented as the site of contestation and the geographical locale plays a significant part in illustrating Minnie Wright’s familial-social condition as well as her spiritual deprivation:

[John Wright’s house] looked very lonesome this cold March morning. It had always been a lonesome-looking place. It was down in a hollow, and the poplar trees around it were

lonesome-looking trees. (90)

It is shocking to note how a happy and lively young woman who used to sing joyously in the choir can be “silenced” and deprived of her “voice” after marriage. Weighed down by her domestic duties and family obligations, Minnie’s individuality is repressed and her self subverted. Her husband’s insensitivity and tyrannical rule in the family leave Minnie with a life of deprivation. She finds herself deprived of all forms of social life and means of communication with the outside world after her marriage. Her husband, John Wright, wants only peace and silence in his household where he could relax after work. Minnie’s wish to install a telephone or to keep a canary at home to relieve her from her deadly existence is considered as unreasonable and intolerable by her husband. Her wish to relate to the world outside and to create a space or a world of her own at home with such simple acquisitions as the telephone and the canary is denied. Furthermore, her desire to go beyond the confines of her home is interpreted by her husband as a challenge to his male supremacy and domestic authority. Thus Minnie’s struggle against deprivation in a family characterized by spiritual and emotional aridity clearly elucidates not only her conscious attempt to change her situation but also her lonely battle against her victimization in a patriarchal society.

Like Nora in Ibsen’s play and Fanyi in Cao Yu’s *Thunderstorm*, Minnie exists as a mere subordinate to her husband, a self-effacing wife at home with no support whatsoever offered to her. Like the other women characters discussed earlier, Minnie’s physical confinement and spiritual suffocation are highlighted to show many women’s painful road toward self-expression and self-liberation against an unfavourable world governed by prevalent patriarchal prejudices and outdated male chauvinism. By unfolding the motive for the murder case, Susan Glaspell scrutinizes the stereotyped views, including prejudices, of men and women in the American society, highlighting the dominant tendency of people, both men and women, of her time to ignore women’s cry for recognition in the family and integration into society and their need for emotional and spiritual support in a domestic setting.

As evidenced in the text, women in Susan Glaspell's story are presented as "properties" of men, to be solely responsible for the household chores at home, to be always responsive to their husbands' demands, and to be easily slighted by men for the trivial things they perform or aspire in life. In most instances, housework and domestic duties make up the entire life of many women and consume all their energy, leaving them with nothing that could call their own. As presented by Glaspell, women are not just confined physically to their home setting, but they are also trapped in their socially assigned gender roles that tend to affect their self-perception as well as their perception of the world.

In studying Minnie Wright's domestic life from the perspective of two married women, who were summoned by their husbands to the crime scene to fetch an apron and a shawl for Minnie, Glaspell underpins the fundamental problems underlying man-woman relationship in early twentieth-century American society. She criticizes not only male prejudices against women's contribution to the family, but also women's own problem of internalizing male expectations of femininity and domesticity. Women's work at home is often slighted, if not entirely ignored, by their husbands who consider housework trivial and insignificant. However, women are also partially responsible for their frustrations and unhappiness in marriage for they have been too ready to succumb to their sexual "other" in the family.

Minnie's perverse behaviour in killing her abrasive husband further draws one's attention to the impact of domestic life, with its physical confinement, spiritual aridity and emotional deprivation, on the woman. The violent death of the canary under John Wright's brutal force prompts Minnie to strike back, to assert herself as an individual and to rectify the injustice done to her and to the innocent bird, which has been her only companion in her lonely domestic life. The analogy between the forced "silence" of the canary and Minnie's "songless" life after marriage shows Glaspell's provocative treatment of gender relationship in marriage. It is apparent that women's confinement to the kitchen and their dissent remain ineffectual, and their oppression or abuse often takes place behind domestic doors. The visit of Mrs. Hale

and Mrs. Peters with their husbands to the Wright family after the murder, however, allows the reader to get a close look at Minnie's stifling existence behind the closed doors of her so-called home. The fact that Minnie Wright requests that her apron and shawl be brought to her while in jail clearly shows how she has succumbed to her domestic role assigned her and accepted her plight as part of her "fate." For Minnie, it does not seem to make much difference whether she is kept in jail or not, for she has been so used to captivity of another form—the spiritual and emotional imprisonment at home. As long as she has her "habits" with her, she will feel "at home." The idea of home as a prison-house is never made more vivid as in Susan Glaspell's text.

Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters' visit to the Wright family after the murder case, however, provides a new perspective to the woman issue in the story. Their silent scrutiny of the murder scene allows the two women to gain insight about their own situation as women, inviting them to examine their similar existence and fate as married women. Through the perverse lens of a hysterical woman, the two women come to realize that they, too, have been trapped in gendered relations characterized by their husbands' stereotyped gender views and patriarchal prejudices against women. It is through these two women's perspective that the reader gradually comes to understand the intensity of women's suffering and the severity of the issue. Minnie's subversion of her female self to male authority, her failure in seeking autonomy at home, and her subsequent suffering under patriarchal prejudices make the two women see their own deadly existence, prompting them to take charge of their lives. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters choose to abandon their old selves as traditional housewives leading a passive life of subservience and assume a new identity as "enlightened" women consciously seeking an existence of action and control over their own fate. For the first time in their lives, these two women take charge of the situation. As comrades, they regard Minnie's murder of her husband as a revolt, as an extreme form of resistance on the wife's part when she could no longer bear her husband's abuses. It is such an understanding that leads Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters to decide to be "the jury of her peers," to take the law into their own hands and support Minnie by

eliminating all evidences from the murder scene without their husbands' notice or approval. These women's solidarity and defiance against the male authority at the end signify the birth of a new consciousness, a form of newly gained autonomy on women's part and a sense of heightened subjectivity, revealing in a way "the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual[s]," their sense of themselves and their ways of understanding their relation to the world (Weedon 32).

Interesting enough, Li Ang (1952–) also echoes the traumatic effect of domestic violence on married women in her prize-winning novella *Sha Fu* [The butcher's wife] (1983). Li Ang situates her female protagonist, Lin Shi, in a conservative fishing village in the southern part of Taiwan. From childhood, Lin Shi has been socially marginalized as a result of the "crime" committed by her mother, who traded her body with a soldier in exchange for food. When Lin was older, she was "sold" to a sadist Chen Jiangshui, who treated her not as his wife but as his sexual slave whose sole existence is to gratify his animal instincts:

For Chen Jiangshui this was going to be a quick one. He was merely toying with Lin Shi, trying to humiliate her. Seeing a woman howling in pain beneath him gave him immense pleasure, as the satisfied glint in his eye and the mirthless laugh proved. (Li 90; Goldblatt 20)

As an uneducated woman, Lin does not know her rights as a human being nor does she possess a sense of selfhood. She only feels deprived and exploited in her so-called home—a place characterized not by love and respect but by endless physical violence and sexual abuse.

The conservative and materially deprived village setting allows Li Ang to dramatize notions of oppression and repression and to expose human primitive drives and animal instincts as well as women's plight in precise and vivid terms. Women in her novella struggle not so much for power and supremacy as for mere survival in a "cannibalistic" world where its inhabitants are seemingly indifferent, if not hostile, to one another. Women like Lin Shi and her widow-neighbour, Auntie

Ah-wang, are prime examples showing women's extreme sufferings under a rigid feudalistic village setting. For mere survival, these women, young and old, have been forced to abide to prevailing patriarchal practices that tend to confine women to socially assigned gender roles and stereotypical sexual roles. Auntie Ah-wang's self-negation and sexual deprivation have eventually driven her to the perverse habit of peeping and eavesdropping, which seem to provide her with momentary excitement and satisfaction in a life of boredom and extreme repression. The fact that she lacks knowledge of her moral confinement and sexual/emotional deprivation makes her situation even more pathetic. Instead of fighting against her predestined "fate" as a widow deprived of all chances of happiness and fulfillment in life, Auntie Ah-wang has accepted her trapped situation without question. What she does not understand is that in doing so she has also accepted the patriarchal values, together with the male prejudices against women. Other women's indifference to Lin Shi's suffering and their harsh criticism on the younger woman clearly indicate their ignorance of their pathetic situation:

Auntie Ah-wang was still talking: "Take me, for instance. I was prepared to kill myself if that's what it took to show I had the courage of my convictions. That's all a person needs to get by in this world." The tone of her voice became contemptuous. "A person doesn't have to moan and groan all the time to try to make people believe she's having a good time. It's people like that who give all women a bad name." (Li 167; Goldblatt 101)

It has never occurred to these women, Auntie Ah-wang in particular, that Lin Shi, the orphaned woman living next door, needs their support and protection. Never has it occurred to them that they share a similar life and fate like Lin Shi, that they are all victims in a predominantly male society, with their rights and dignity stripped off. Auntie Ah-wang's mockery reveals not so much her criticism as her jealousy. Blind to Lin Shi's suffering, Auntie Ah-wang assumes that the young woman has been too imprudent and indiscreet as to "voice" her nuptial

“joy,” the kind of “joy” that she is forever denied as a widow.

Through the detailed description of Chen Jiangshui’s brutal treatment of his wife and Lin Shi’s torturous life and humiliation behind the domestic door, Li Ang elucidates the implicated relationship between sex and power and discusses the role and status (or to be more precise, the lack of status) of Chinese women in the remote Chinese village setting. It is worth noting how women, regardless of their nationality and socio-cultural background, may resort to manslaughter when domestic violence and emotional or sexual abuses become intolerable. As seen in the texts discussed earlier, women often resort to violence not so much for revenge as for self-preservation and mere survival. That marks the case of Minnie Wright and Lin Shi, who have been tortured either physically, sexually, psychologically, and/or emotionally by their husbands at home. For these women, home is not only a prison-house confining them to a life of domesticity but also a torture room where their dignity and humanity are stripped to pieces and their self torn apart without mercy by their husbands.

As Li Ang delineates in a detailed manner, Lin Shi has attempted but in vain to develop autonomy and achieve self-sufficiency at home by raising ducklings (Li 177; Goldblatt 119), but her husband denies her even of such hopes. Like John Wright’s killing of the canary, Chen’s murder of Lin Shi’s ducklings (Li 181; Goldblatt 120) reveals his brutality, selfishness and abrasive character. He shows neither respect to life nor concern for his marriage partner. Through this single character, Li Ang epitomizes the prevailing primitivism and male chauvinism in the remote fishing village in Taiwan. Chen’s subsequent slaughter of the pig before Lin Shi further brings to the foreground the idea of cannibalism that underpins the entire text (Li 195; Goldblatt 134). Not only does the pig slaughtering act illustrate Chen’s cannibalistic character as a butcher, but it also shows his perversion as a husband, who constantly intimidates his wife by acts of threat and violence, exerting at the same time his power and supremacy over his victimized wife. For the first time in her life, Lin Shi realizes that there is a certain form of similarity between the fate of the slaughtered pig and her own. It dawns on her that there is no great difference between

her existence and the pig's for both are at the mercy of her butcher-husband, that both are trapped in an existence of no prospect. Lin comes to understand that she has been "slaughtered" many times and in many ways by her butcher-husband and that there lies nothing before her but starvation, humiliation, deprivation and death. The oppression Lin Shi experiences and her own life-long repression, together with her anguish and anger over her hopeless situation, all prove to be so harsh that Lin Shi is driven to the point of hysteria. Her husband's intimidation and open threat during the subsequent sexual act finally prompt Lin Shi to strike back. As revealed in the novella, Lin Shi's act of violence, of cutting her husband into pieces in his sleep, is carried out in a state of delirium, showing her hysteria as well as her intense fear and desperation. Conscious of her trapped situation at home, Lin Shi's sight of the bloody scene in the slaughterhouse and Chen's death threat dramatically "transforms" Lin Shi, allowing her to see her own desperate condition. With no one to turn to for help, with her safety and integrity at stake, with her self perpetually denied, and with her existence at risk, Lin Shi has no option but to strike back for sheer self-preservation. Instinctively she senses that she is "caught" in a "life or death" situation, thus forcing her to action, to take charge of her own future by killing her butcher-husband. As observed by Daisy Ng, Li Ang uses the home setting to explore gender relationship and portrays in a shocking way victimized women's struggle to free their bodies from being the property and propriety of men (182). Like Nora and Minnie, Lin Shi represents yet another type of women who are forced to act, to get out of their trapped situation by rejecting the self-sacrificial role socially imposed upon them. While Nora consciously rejects her confined place at home and seeks self-fulfillment in life by leaving her family, Minnie unconsciously shows her defiance against the injustices done to her and the canary at home by taking revenge on her husband although she does not seem to have a full grasp of the implication of her action. In Lin Shi's case, she asserts herself in a moment of heightened confusion for circumstances give her no other alternatives. Her domestic life has been hell to her, stifling her to death. The fact that she finds herself fighting a lonely and

losing battle behind doors proves to be unbearable, thus leading her to strike back in the same way she was struck. However, Li Ang shows that Lin Shi remains a “sacrifice” in society for she continues to be marginalized by the village folk, who show no sympathy for her even after the murder. The villagers, including women like Auntie Ah-wang in the fishing village, fail to understand her sufferings and the ordeals Lin Shi has gone through. They remain “unenlightened” and indifferent to Lin Shi’s suffering after the manslaughter incident, blaming Lin Shi for not abiding to her gendered role:

In my [Auntie Ah-wang’s] opinion, Lin Shi didn’t have enough sense to count her blessings. Just think, by marrying Pig-Butcher Chen she had no parents-in-law to lord it over her, no brothers- or sisters-in-law to care for, and no need to go to sea or work in the fields. She could eat whatever she wanted without lifting a finger. I don’t know how many generations of virtuous cultivation it takes to be able to live that kind of life, but she didn’t know a good thing when she had it, and that’s why she wound up like she did. (Li 201–2; Goldblatt 141–142)

Auntie Ah-wang’s open criticism at the end epitomizes the ignorance of the village folk and brings to the limelight the “horror” of the situation, which lies not so much in the sufferings, abuses, or acts of violence portrayed as on the mute acceptance or internalization of patriarchal values and chauvinistic mentality by women like Auntie Ah-wang. Blind to her own confined situation, Auntie Ah-wang sides with the general public in condemning Lin Shi and upholds the socio-moral prejudices against women. It is this “interior colonization,” to borrow Kate Millett’s words, of women by men that readers find most unsettling in the Chinese tale (Millett 24–25). Unlike Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, who come to see their plight of women in a domestic setting after the murder case, Auntie Ah-wang and the other women in the Chinese village fail to understand those social and political constructions at work that prevent them from living a full life of their own. They fail to see their “victimized” and marginalized

positions in the fishing village characterized by primitivism, patriarchal values and outdated socio-moral practices. One may find Auntie Ah-wang's criticism "unreasonable," especially when it comes from a woman who has been deprived of any hope of happiness in life after her husband's death. One may also consider her "mad" for she expects every woman to suffer like her. Although Auntie Ah-wang has no living husband to fight against, she has been fighting with "ghosts" of all forms—ghosts who tend to confine her not only physically and socially, but also sexually and spiritually. Being a widow, she has been socially and morally "sentenced" to a life of deadly and ghostly existence. She has chosen to conform, to abide to her assigned gendered roles in society only without knowing that it implies a life-long battle against her own self, against the "ghosts" of desires and aspirations through constant self repression. It is apparent from the novella that it is her repressive life that has eventually driven her to the verge of madness as evidenced in her perverse behaviour. Her ghostly presence overshadows not just Lin Shi's life, but it also haunts the entire fishing village, allowing Li Ang to criticize openly those patriarchal mentality and traditional values that continue to haunt the Chinese society. The picture presented in her novella seems a bleak one because women remain helplessly caught in their desperate situation with no sign of enlightenment.

It is apparent from the selected texts discussed above that women in various cultures and societies are expected to play a series of approved roles, particularly those of daughter, wife, housewife and mother. These socially assigned roles, however, often demand the negation of the individual self and the subjugation of identity in a family context. The representative literary works discussed clearly shows that changes in stereotyped gender relationships can be extremely difficult, if not painful or impossible, at the personal or domestic level because the site of contestation is often hidden from the public eye. While female characters such as Nora, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, seeing their confined space at home and their "trapped" situation in the gendered relationships, decide to rebel, to take charge of their lives and "fate," other women characters like Matilda, Shipping

and Auntie Ah-wang choose to compromise and succumb to social and familial demands, without knowing that such a decision ultimately leads them to a road of no return. It is their lack of self or self-understanding that makes them vulnerable in their engendered power relationship with men. In the cases of Minnie Wright, Fanyi and Lin Shi, who resort to violence for self-preservation, one is led to see the conservatism and resistance of tradition-ridden societies to change. The traumatic effect of domestic abuses on these women in their confined space at home is dramatized in the form of insanity or perversity. It is disturbing to find that the world of madness or a life of perversity seems to be the only possible “home,” or the ultimate place, for these women whose “transgression” is condemned by the public. In studying how Chinese and Western writers address the woman issue in the contexts of space and gender, one comes to better understand the rich and changing landscape of both Chinese and Western literature and culture over the past century. A close look at women’s lives in a confined family setting in the selected texts supports the view that women’s self consciousness is of primary concern for these Chinese and Anglo-American writers. Not only do these writers register the agonies and sufferings of women of their time, but they also discuss the social, moral, or cultural implications that underpin their texts and try to map out a route of growth or change for women. Battles fought behind the closed doors of home prove to be vital battles that many women have been forced to face in life if they wish to lead a fulfilled life or to find a place of their own. It is with great honesty and openness that these writers deal with such issues in literature, showing at the same time the tremendous impact of social norms on the shaping and constructing of the female self and the urgent need to re-evaluate existing stereotyped gender relationships and related socio-cultural practices in the societies portrayed.

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