

The Dark Persephone Myth in Li Ang's *The Butcher's Wife*

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the mother-daughter relationship in Li Ang's novella, *The Butcher's Wife*, a work which is greatly associated with the story of the western Persephone myth. In a parallel pattern, both stories deal with the mother-daughter dyad, the abused and vulnerable female, the intrusive and destructive force of the male, and the scenes of the Underworld. Like the myth of Persephone, symbolizing male violence, *The Butcher's Wife* magnifies the necessity of feminine power constituted by the preoedipal fusion of the mother and the daughter. To Li Ang, the connection of mother and daughter is revealed through her narrative pattern of repetition and parallelism, indicating the cyclical structure of matriarchal culture.

Significantly, the heroine's final killing of her husband, a representation of male violence, is performed out of a desire to retain the maternal virginity and the sense of wholeness. The killing is a metaphorical discourse of revenge, a discourse of male castration, the discourse of the reversal of the speaking subject moving from the male to the female, from the father/husband to the mother/daughter narrative.

KEY WORDS

desire for maternal union
female subjectivity
Jacques Lacan
killing as an act of rewriting

mother-daughter dyad
narrative strategies
Persephone myth
preoedipal fusion

Li Ang
male intrusion/violence

The Butcher's Wife
underworld



The loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter, is the essential female tragedy.

—Adrienne Rich, *Of Women Born*

As the death of the father has always been an archetypal rite of passage for the western hero, now the death of the mother as witnessed and transcended by the daughter has become one of the most profound occasions of female literature.

—Elaine Showalter, “Toward a Feminist Poetics”

Regarded by critics as one of the best novels presenting the issue of woman and sexuality,¹ *The Butcher's Wife*² has always been considered to be a work concerning women's oppression and their unequal struggle to claim their own selves against male dominance. In this study, I would demonstrate that the female protagonist's suffering of both the sexual abuse and the absence of mother has inevitably links the work itself to the western Persephone myth. In both cases, the mother-daughter union is destroyed by the patriarchal force and the feminine sexuality is always associated with violence and destruction. In a sense, Li Ang's *The Butcher's Wife* presents, perhaps, among the modern Chinese literature, the darkest and the most bitter Persephone image. The text echoes the Persephone myth in terms of, thematically, the author's focus on the issue of sexual politics: how the entrapped marginalized woman could reclaim her own identity in a patriarchal society where the male are the rulers and the maternal bond becomes the vital political weapon in women's refusal of the given objectified

role.

Li Ang was born Shi Shuduan in 1952 at Lugang in Taiwan, the youngest of three literary sisters. She became one of the most influential Chinese woman writers for her bold exposition of women's sexuality, and, more significantly, for her being a woman writer possessed of a strong sense of modernism among her peers of the 1980s (Lü 285). Her modernism may be understood from her narrative techniques, which blend the westernized discourse of cynical and Kafkan existentialism (Goldblatt 151) with the manifestation of "cultural nostalgia" (Chang 179) in the thematic and linguistic levels.³

The story of Persephone not only embodies the archetypal image of woman who is raped and abducted by force, it "also underscores the abridgement of women's control over their own destinies because of their vulnerability to physical and sexual abuse" (Hayes 14). In a similar manner, Li Ang's heroine in *The Butcher's Wife* undergoes the sexual abuse by her butcher husband ever since she was forced to marry by her uncle for the exchange of a few pounds of pork. Tortured and under an absolute control, the heroine is totally deprived of identity and the rights of an individual. The intolerable abuse finally leads to a final mental breakdown of the heroine, and in a dream-like situation, she kills her husband with the butcher knife in a dark night, by the guiding moonlight, recognized by the insane daughter as a mysterious symbol of the long absent mother.

However, Li Ang's tale is an "unsuccessful" version of the Persephone myth in the way that the female protagonist, being left alone without a powerful mother to rescue her, suffers an eventual mental and emotional collapse and is forced to kill her persecutor to end her excessively tormented life.

Centering on the motherless heroine, the story of *The Butcher's Wife*, based on an actual homicide occurring in Shanghai in the 1930s, describes the tortured life of a peasant woman, Lin Shi, an effectively orphaned child though she initially survived with her mother in the streets after her father's death. Driven by starvation, Lin's mother was found and accused by clansmen of adultery for prostituting herself to a soldier for two rice balls. The destiny of Lin's mother remains a mys-

tery after the incident. Lin Shi is sent to live with her indifferent uncle's family to serve as the housekeeper, and is later traded to marry the pig-butcher Chen Jiangshui, a man who exposes Lin to constant intolerable sexual abuse with his sadism. The butcher's prohibition and curse on Lin's attempt at economic independence pushes her into an extremely helpless position and finally, in a frenzy, she kills her sadistic husband.

Li Ang's *The Butcher's Wife* is a narrative about women's struggle to gain subjectivity and voice, about the daughter's desire to obtain the psychic wholeness and union with the mother, about the refusal of the tyrannical patriarchy, and about the return of the repressed feminine. Revising the Persephone myth, Li Ang provides rare autonomy for her heroine and begins the story with the tragically forced abrupt separation of the mother and the daughter. In the opening pages of the main text, the starving mother's seemingly satisfied facial expression, while being pinned down by the soldier—the food in her mouth—is condemned by her clansmen as an expression of sexual gratification rather than as the temporary end of starvation. Though raped by the soldier in exchange for food, Lin Shi's mother is subjected to the "blind justice" of the male-dominated community and disappears mysteriously thereafter.

The absent mother remains an unknown to the reader and her daughter. Yet the physical disappearance of the mother returns through her daughter's fantasy, in the form of a protective, powerful, and vengeful female ghost in the final scene. Li Ang's empowerment of the mother by the literary design of maternal mystification may suggest that the feminine power may be asserted in the supernatural world, a sphere free of male dominance, a realm using the sign system from nature, as opposed to the one from the culture employed by the male. Challenging the male symbolic system based on the patriarchal culture, Li Ang celebrates feminine power by providing the divinity to the dead mother's ghost, which functions as a goddess to the daughter. Sharing with the same concern of the Persephone myth, Li Ang sees, in regard to the erosion of the male authoritarianism, the need for the image of the woman spirit as the essential element for the feminine symbol

system. As man exercises his authority over woman, "[t]he affirmation of female power contained in the Goddess symbol has both psychological and political consequences. Psychologically, it means the defeat of the view engendered by patriarchy that women's power is inferior and dangerous" (Christ 278). The Goddess affirms, as Carol Christ remarks, "the female power, the female body, the female will, and women's bonds and heritage" (276). The supernatural power of the female spirits, whether woman ghost or goddess, is particularly worshipped by helpless women like Lin Shi for protection in their ill fate.

Lin loses her mother at the age of thirteen, at a stage between late childhood and early adolescence when one has the hardest time coping with the loss of a same sex parent (Edelman 37). The deep loss, however, surges to the fore during Lin's motherless adolescence, as she begins experiencing dramatic physical and emotional changes, the start of menstruation, her first female rite of passage. In mythical significance, as indicated by Naomi Lowinsky, the beginning of menstruation, along with mothering and birthing, is one of the feminine mysteries, the profound and vital experiences that link mother and daughter.⁴ However, for the motherless Lin, the menstruation, the natural cycle, is never a way to access the connection with her mother, but a horrifying experience.

But the onset of Lin Shi's menstrual period nearly became a neighborhood joke because she created such a scene when it happened. Not that the women didn't sympathize with her for being motherless and frightened, but they had to laugh when they saw her sprawled out on the floor, screaming, "Save me, I'm bleeding to death." (*BW* 10)

Li Ang leaves her heroine in an entirely isolated state, without either the mention and conscious recall of her lost mother. The implication of Li Ang's narrative is that the daughter's remembrance of her mother is not forgotten but repressed at an impressionable adolescent stage, for Lin witnessed her mother being raped. This traumatic and horrible experience caused an irrecoverable and permanent scar in her

memory of her mother and her concept of sexuality, forever associated with rape. Lin's witnessing of the soldier's sexual invasion of her mother is so unacceptable to her that it destroys the wholeness of the maternal image. The moment of seeing her mother being sexually assaulted is, for Lin, the moment of separation from her original desired love object. Similar to the Persephone myth, the daughter protagonist's original link with her mother is interrupted and disconnected by the aggression of the male sexual attack. The girl's concept of sexuality is, thus, forever associated with the act of rape, the violent form of sex, the most primitive and vicious mold, with the implications of punishment, exile, and death.

Lin's last memory of her mother is endowed with a symbolic significance, with the mother's wearing her bright red wedding dress and tied by the clansmen to a pillar in the big ancestral-hall as the punishment for adultery. The suggestive wedding dress, with its red color associated with blood, may serve Li Ang's narrative in foreshadowing the inevitable upcoming act of revenge: the killing of the invader, represented by the sadistic butcher husband.

It is, then, a derivative reaction for Lin to allow the anxiety of the maternal loss to trespass into her dreams, which is the very sign of post-traumatic symptom. It is believed that "[t]he violence or mutilation often involved in sudden deaths such as suicides, homicides, and accidents may consume a daughter's thoughts, even invading her dreams, and often takes on elements more horrific in imagination than they were in reality. Children who witnessed or were physically involved in the death have another layer of distress added to their loss" (Edelman 78). Lin's dream in the early section of the text, while she is living with her uncle, is part of her last image of her mother—the big pillar that her mother is tied to.

Several pillars, so tall they impale the clouds, disappearing into a pitch darkness that stretches on endlessly. Suddenly, a rumble of thunder, moving inexorably nearer and nearer. Then a loud boom. Not a trace of flames anywhere, yet the pillars become instantly charred, without so much as wob-

bling. Finally, after the longest time, dark red blood begins to seep from the cracks in the blackened pillars. (*BW* 10)

The image of the pillar, psychologically, in Lin's dream may entail her drive for masculine force and authority, the Lacanian Phallus, the *nom-du-père*. According to Lacan, the Phallus is the most important signifier for the emerging human subject, represented in the figure of the father/husband and associated with culture and language in the approach of psychoanalysis, which makes possible the Symbolic Order and the separation from the non-consciousness of the Imaginary. Lin's desire is the desire for the representation of the Phallus, the authority and autonomy. Her desire suggests her necessary search for a whole identity after the loss of the mother, her origin.

While the mother disappears shortly after the rape scene, the daughter begins her hellish life as the object of sexual abuse by her husband. In her narrative design, Li Ang associates the mother and her daughter with the same fate, both suffering the misery of hunger, sexual attacks, and helplessness. The mother's sexual mistreatment in the male-centered community, as well as her economic condition, are repeated and re-experienced by the daughter. The beginning scene of the mother, which is extended throughout the whole drama of the daughter's life, serves as Li Ang's paradigmatic view of women's life as a repeating pattern of dehumanization and abuse. The distress of women's repression would return again and again, from generation to generation, from mother to daughter. The repetition in the daughter's life style of that of the mother has, for Li Ang, twofold meanings: first, women's history repeats itself, and second, the sameness of the life of the mother and the daughter indicates their eternal fusion and the oneness unifying them in the preoedipal phase. With these narrative parallels between daughter and mother, Li Ang foretells the eventual union of both women.

Significantly, Lin's memory of her sexually attacked mother overshadows her marital relationship. As noted by Marianne Hirsch, "Freud insists that the mother remains an important figure in the adult woman's life, often determining the nature and quality of marital rela-

tionships" (99). Lin's view of sexuality as the representation of oppression and violence, as the result of her remembrance of the rape scene, becomes the fatal and decisive factor in the formation of her relation with her husband, Chen Jiangshui. Unlike Hades's valuing his captured Persephone, Lin's husband abuses her verbally and sexually. Lin's relation with her butcher husband is, thus, one of alienation, silence, and humiliation. Chen imposes himself through the controlling vehicles of language and sexuality, and with them he denounces Lin's own self. Without ever being named, but called "slut" (*BW* 96) by Chen, Lin is debased as a woman without identity and dignity.

Chen's abnormal sexual appetite, in demanding his wife's crying out in the sexual scenes, is but a reflection of his uncertainty about his own dominance. Chen's concept of the family and his relation with Lin thus are structured politically, in that the relationship of husband and wife is defined as that of controller and the controlled, which can be achieved through the governing of the most primitive issue—sexuality. Through Chen, Li Ang presents the most destructive scenes issued by sexuality, a portrait that corresponds to Kate Millett's view of female sexuality in male-centered society. As she indicates: "Patriarchal societies typically link feelings of cruelty with sexuality, the latter often equated both with evil and with power [. . .]. The rule here associates sadism with the male and victimization with the female" (44).

The strength that supports and enables Lin to maintain the will to continue her life is her belief that Ah-wang, the old woman living next to her, to whom she could transfer her dependence and reliance from the maternal loss, is, according to her maternal fantasy, her surrogate mother. However, Lin's total acceptance of Ah-wang blinds her capability to detect the old woman's hypocrisy and ingenuity. Shamed by her own hidden adultery being explored publicly in a quarrel with her daughter-in-law, Ah-wang attempts to hang herself, according to her, to prove her innocence. Fearful that the incident may have shaken her authority in the community, the old woman draws the public focus onto Lin to force her to become the target of social criticism. Later, the old woman vengefully transmits her private jealousy into a public issue by denouncing Lin's "cry for sexual pleasure" as a degeneration of

women's morality. Ah-wang performs this so called "social justice" by using language, the male signifier, as her instrument to punish the already oppressed Lin. Ah-wang's language, devastating to both the mother and the daughter in their association with sexuality, is exemplary of the aggression of male authority on female sexuality.

However, not until Lin accidentally overhears Ah-wang accusing and vilifying her and her mother with a group of gossiping women on the issue of sexual morality does she awaken abruptly from her maternal fantasy of Ah-wang. Ah-wang's vilification develops into a fatal explosion to Lin when she turns the cursing focus from Lin to her mother.

"Like mother, like daughter [. . .]. Did you all know that her mother committed adultery with a soldier about ten years ago, [. . .]. They were coupled together so tight no one could pull them apart? [. . .]. If someone was about to be raped, don't you think she'd run away? Or at least scream and put up a fight? [. . .]. I'd like to know how someone could be raped without even having her clothes messed up [. . .]. Who ever heard of someone sighing and moaning with pleasure while she's being raped? So that's where she learned to scream like that! [. . .]. That's right! You can't get tender shoots from a rotten bamboo stalk. I'm sure her mother never imagined that neglecting her daughter's education when she was a child would be the cause of her own death—you see, the little one ran off to get help while her mother was having the time of her life. [. . .]. Daughter following in her mother's footsteps. What's the difference between a woman like that and those bitches in Back Street?" (*BW* 103-04)

The disclosure of the repressed memory of Lin's mother becomes a scandalous event in Ah-wang's authorial malediction, in that the heroine's mother's divine image is marred and profaned. From that moment of overhearing the old woman's accusation, Lin totally dis-

connects herself from the community, breaks from the self that associates with Ah-wang, and returns to the memory of her mother.

In a helpless state, Lin attempts to search for financial independence by raising the ducklings, which is seen by the butcher Chen, the incarnation of male ethos, as a humiliation of male dignity and capability, an act ridiculing man's envy of the female capacity to create her own life. Chen suffocates her attempt at liberation by forcing the physically and mentally weak Lin to work in the pig slaughter house, an experience heightening her hysterical tendency. To Lin, the journey to the slaughter house is but a journey to the underworld. As the butcher Chen is closely associated with death and the dead, he resembles Hades carrying the maiden off into the underworld. The slaughter house is the realm of death, a metaphor of the hell, with an eerie darkness that evokes the presence of an underworld. Upon entering the slaughter house, our heroine is threatened by the horrified scene,

She stood dazed. For a brief moment she truly believed that she had entered a dream world and that what she was witnessing now could be nothing less than the hell so often described to her by Auntie Ah-wang. (*BW* 134)

It is a journey witnessing the act of killing, comprised of images of blood, violence, and screams. The touch of the bloody, warm, and sticky pig organs and intestines is the touch of death itself, which all enhance, as well, the threatening atmosphere of the slaughter house.

The visual contact with the killing scenes forces the fragile Lin into a mental split, mixing traumatic reality with dream. The escape from the world of death is, however, not a successful one, as Lin later suffers the inevitable madness, shown by her begging money on the street for buying the sacrificial food for her supposed dead mother. This loss of her consciousness, ironically, frees Lin's repressed memory of her mother from the patriarchal censor and thus enables her to return to the site of the unconscious realm for the imaginary fusion of the mother and the daughter. To Lin herself, her praying to her mother is a way of maternal communication and connection that she could

perform only at the moment of unconsciousness. In her demented condition, Lin is totally possessed by her mother's image. Later, the butcher Chen's cursing of her mother is but a total destruction of Lin's origin, a destruction worse than Chen's sexual abuse to her. Chen's verbal rape of her mother fatally evokes Lin's reminiscence of the mother in the rape scene years ago; the mother is conjured up from her grave to return through the channel of the daughter's memory. It is Lin's desire to return to the scene of her childhood, in order to halt the soldier's sexual intrusion of her mother, a desire that causes her to envision the visage of the soldier in the face of the butcher in the final killing scene,

The broad-backed, thin-edged knife was extraordinarily heavy. Lin Shi gripped it with both hands and stabbed downwards. In the surrounding darkness, the face of a man in a soldier's uniform flashed into view—there was a scar running from his eyebrow to his chin. Then it was a squealing, struggling pig with a butcher knife buried at an angle in its gullet, buckets of dark red blood gushing from the wound, the animal's body wracked with convulsions. (*BW* 138)

As the soldier/butcher is the metaphorical obstacle to the fusion of mother and daughter, Lin seeks to blur the boundaries between mother and daughter traced by the father/husband signifier. The fantasized flash-back is for Lin a way of re-writing and re-creating the history of the mother and the daughter. The imaginary return to the rape scene endows her with an opportunity to change the role of victim into that of a victor, that of desired object into the speaking subject. The act of re-writing and re-creating is accomplished through the performance of the *hand*, a masculine gesture enacted by Lin, which is sufficient to term her a phallic woman. Her transformation from the passive and submissive woman to the active masculine one is aided progressively by Chen's damnation of the mother and ultimately turns her emotional protection of her mother into an explosive act of vengeful killing. The murder is Lin's revenge for the initial maternal separation.

(BW 138)

Marianne Hirsch has observed that the Homeric “Hymn to Demeter” is about the relationship of mother and daughter, which “comes into being only through the intervention of the father/husband who, here, does not occasion an irreparable separation but offers the occasion for narrative itself” (1989, 35). With a plot closely linked to the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone in its thematic implication, *The Butcher's Wife* presents a narrative centering on mother-daughter bond that is initiated because of the butcher's rape, the male intrusion. In Li Ang's text, the butcher literally functions, like Hades in the myth of Demeter, as the male barrier separating the mother-daughter dyad. Structurally, the mother-daughter narrative is engendered by the father/husband invasion, which, at the same time, has to rely on the textual resolution structured by the narrative of the continuous merging of the mother and daughter. The narrative of the mother-daughter link in *The Butcher's Wife* locates its center in the daughter's reminiscent desire to regain the lost mother, her attempt to keep the continuity of her mythical connection with the deceased mother, and her responses to the intrusion of male aggressive interference. All of which are represented as powerfully threatening to the narrative of the father/husband plot. In *The Butcher's Wife*, the narrative of the butcher is doomed to be dissolved in the confrontation of the daughter's agony and her desperate insistence on the return of the mother. The rejection and removal of the father/husband narrative is, to Li Ang, only made possible by the spiritual and mythical unification of mother and daughter, by the mother's asserting her divine feminine power (the moonlight), and by the daughter's performance of the masculine murder.

Like the myth of Persephone voicing directly to male violence, *The Butcher's Wife* magnifies the necessity of feminine power constituted by the preoedipal fusion of the mother and the daughter in relation to the perpetuity of the natural cycle. The feminine power, for Li Ang, is prefigured by the mythical and supernatural associations of moonlight and feminine blood—birth blood, menstrual blood. All that relates to maternity and origin has embodied the unceasingly natural

cycle and the continuity of life. In its textual significance, the reminiscence of the mother suggests the myth of eternal return of the maternal legacy and the subsequent eternal unification with the daughter, testifying to the belief that “the fertility of the earth is in some mysterious way tied to the continuation of the mother-daughter relationship” (Gilligan 23).

Adapting the revised Persephone myth and the Gothic elements, Li Ang begins her main text of *The Butcher's Wife* with the separation of mother and daughter and ends with the mysterious reunion of both women, which is an assertion of the continuation of matrilineage and the ultimate return to the origin. The re-appearance of maternal presence in the daughter's revolt against the representation of male persecution proves to be Li Ang's celebration of the enduring and persevering female power that passes from mothers to daughters. To Li Ang, the connection of mother and daughter is symbolized by her narrative patterns of repetition and parallelism, which indicate the cyclical structure of matriarchal culture. The beginning is the mother being exiled by the male authority, while the ending is the daughter's reclaiming of selfhood with a masculine gesture of re-writing the mother's oppressive text with the phallic knife. The technique of the omniscient point-of-view is related to the thematic significance of the mystification of the dead mother, whose perspective is that of the omniscient Mother. The mother, as Li Ang would admit, is looking over us. The mother is always present with the daughter, and with each of us.

NOTES

¹ According to Howard Goldblatt, *The Butcher's Wife* has earned her the title of “the most consistent, successful, and influential writer of sexual fiction in Chinese.” See “Sex and Society: The Fiction of Li Ang,” in *Worlds Apart: Recent Chinese Writing and Its Audience*, ed. Howard Goldblatt (Armonk: M.K. Sharpe, 1990) 150.

² The original Chinese title is 殺夫 (*Husband-killing*). The English title: *The Butcher's Wife*, translated by Howard Goldblatt and Ellen Yeung (San Francisco: North Point, 1986). Subsequent English

citations will rely on this text, and the work will be cited parenthetically as *BW*.

³ Li Ang's "cultural nostalgia" is observed from the presentations of theme and language. Linguistically, the native dialect, Taiwanese, is used in *The Butcher's Wife* as part of the main expression of her narrative. Thematically, among the early 1980s Chinese women writers, Li Ang, according to Chang, turns "consciously to folk traditions and native subject matter" (179) in her writings.

⁴ See *Stories from the Motherline*, by Naomi Ruth Lowinsky 6–9.

⁵ For Ng, Lin's murder "does not lead to an awakening of Lin or other women," (195) an argument that is allied with Cai Yingjun's comments of Lin's failure in attaining any self-awareness (98, qtd. in Ng 196) and with Joyce Liu's conclusion that Lin's breakdown "does not mean any triumph of her self-awareness or self-assertiveness, but a total collapse" (73, qtd. in Ng 196). For Gu Tian-hong, however, the act of murder displays an heroic image by the demonstration of the "divine justice" on human evilness (43). Also, for Zhang Xi-guo, the killing is a rite of husband-killing (30).

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