

Female Identity in Contemporary Chinese and Western Literature: Zhang Xinxin and Virginia Woolf

Lau Kam-fung

ABSTRACT

Modern Chinese feminist literature, particularly that of Zhang Xinxin reveals that its heroines' difficulties in achieving self-identity, is complicated by culture. Though Mao's Communism proclaimed equality for male and female, in actuality, Communism merely replaced the Father in the system of patriarchy. The social role of female is still constructed as being a victim, now, not just to her family, but to the state as well. Females trying to achieve independence and self-identity hurt themselves psychologically when they attempt to break with the traditional roles of daughter, wife, and mother. And when they attempt to enter the academic arena, they find themselves competing with males who are younger than they are and who are more highly educated. Zhang Xinxin's story *On the Same Horizon* explores the difficulties Chinese women have in achieving self identity, in much the same way that Virginia Woolf does in her writing.

KEY WORDS

feminism
women and fiction
role fulfillment

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self fulfillment

Under patriarchy, woman's identity is constructed as man's subordinate, and woman has no individual self. Woman can realize herself in the fulfillment of her roles as daughter, wife and mother. In traditional Chinese culture, a woman has to obey her father before marriage, obey her husband after marriage, and obey her son after the death of her husband. Yet such a formulation of female identity is shattered in contemporary China. In this paper, I will demonstrate how the formation of female identity is approached in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and Zhang Xinxin's *Zai tongyi dipingxian shang* [On the same horizon].

The story, *On the Same Horizon*, takes place in the post-Mao era, when there is an identity crisis owing to the collapse of ultra-collectivism. Previously during Mao's reign, "the position of husband and wife in a family, like the balance between one and the other in the ecological system, is naturally formed from the beginning" (41). So the heroine accepts the wifely obligation entirely by sacrificing herself for the sake of her husband, just like one sacrifices oneself for the sake of the Communist collectivity. She abandons the last chance of sitting for the university entrance examination so as to help her husband start his business in Beijing, hoping that he will attain artistic success in a more favourable condition. This shows that what dominates her mind is still a fixed concept of the subordinate and relational identity. It also reflects that the role of woman does not change much in Communist China even though Mao Zedong had publicly claimed that man and woman are equal, and woman is given same legal rights and status as man. The heroine's selfless sacrifice and submissiveness are perhaps indebted to the new form of patriarchal politics in Communist collectivism, which requires one of total submission to the Communist Party, a replacement for the father figure. As pointed out by Tonglin Lu in the book entitled *Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Chinese Literature and Society*, "the ideological basis for the traditional patriarchy has not truly been shaken by the aborted women's emancipation in China" (8). Yet after the fall of the Gang of Four, there is repudiation of Communist collectivism, for it is believed that the sufferings during the Cultural Revolution are caused

by extreme repression of individuality. Such an ideological change results in an identity crisis in the heroine, who tries to assert her individual self through the construction of a new female identity. The disbelief in a collective identity as a member of a class or the Communist Party leads to the search for one's identity as an independent being.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf calls for the abandonment of the traditional female identity as man's subordinate and an establishment of a new female identity as an independent entity. She believes that women are as capable as men, and therefore are able to establish their own business if they are not bound by domestic obligations. In Zhang's story, *On the Same Horizon*, the heroine also has such feminist thinking. She thinks that woman, as an individual, should be the same as man, in fulfilling her self instead of her roles as wife and mother; because though husband and wife are respectively one half of the whole, her husband cannot substitute her in fighting for what she needs. The following monologue reveals her recognition of the traditional femininity which hinders woman's self-development and illustrates the necessity to liberate woman from the family ties in the construction of the new female identity:

In the struggle for survival, the gentleman's motto of "Ladies first" never exists. We [man and woman] are the same. Where can I retreat to? Can I abandon the little pursuit of ideals? Give birth to a baby, and be bound forever, so as to satisfy him [her husband]? No, when I lose everything, unable to be on equal footing with him in work and mind, I will still lose him. When I have not put my interests and pursuit of ideals as a game for intelligence and embellishment, from the beginning to now, I cannot maintain a balance with him, and with this family. I can still get nothing. (42)

The heroine's new identity is egoistic and politically feminist in nature. The heroine places her self-interest on top of everything. As a

result, she is reluctant to resign to the traditional femininity, which demands of woman selfless sacrifice to the family. As the submission of the self to the Communist Party becomes problematic, the submission to the male can no longer be justified. By re-examining a wife's role in the family, the heroine discovers that a wife is a victim of wedlock, for her self-submission, which satisfies her husband's desire, is at the expense of her self-development. In the end, only man benefits from woman's self-sacrifice while woman could still get nothing from it, so the heroine no longer believes that female submissiveness is worthwhile and rewarding. She is therefore determined to live for herself, instead of for others, be it her husband or the Communist collective.

In Zhang's story, the heroine's feminist awakening in the construction of her new identity as an independent entity instead of as man's subordinate, echoes with Virginia Woolf's. By examining women's achievement in literary writings, Woolf discovers that women are victimized under patriarchy, for they are deprived of the opportunity of developing their talents, cultivating their own individual selves and making money by their own hands. They are brought up in man's society, live under man's protection or shadow, and therefore can only be forced to accept man's values. So Woolf believes that women's liberation does not depend only on improving women's material conditions but also cultivating women's self-consciousness. Yet in fighting for independence, women, who are in an underprivileged condition, have to face strong competition with men in their career pursuits on the one hand, and to overcome their weaknesses on the other. Woman, being both an individual human being and a female, has to strive harder than man in the process of self-recognition, self-assertion and self-realization.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf, as a woman writer, through the thinking and re-thinking of "women and fiction," finds out the scarcity of women in literature as being a result of male dominance, thereby urging women to join in the writing profession. She believes that women who are not intellectually, morally and physically inferior to man, should find self-realization in their career in-

stead of family only, though they are at a great material disadvantage when compared to men. In Zhang's story, the heroine, like Virginia Woolf, is awakened to the unfavourable social conditions for feminine self-cultivation, but still insists on being a career woman. When she determines to join in the contest with other people in the competitive world, she immediately realizes that she is at a great disadvantage. On the one hand, the new society seems to offer her a new opportunity to develop her talents; on the other, she is not as competent as her opponents, who are much more highly educated, experienced, and much younger than she. Worst of all, she is married and is therefore disqualified for the university entrance examination. Yet, the heroine is a feminist, who, like Virginia Woolf, rejects being man's subordinate and strives to establish a new female identity that is different from the traditional. She believes that woman can do what man can do.

Yet in constructing her new identity, the heroine in Zhang's story has to face a lot of difficulties. As she says, "This world has not changed much for men, but it has changed tremendously for women" (95). In order to establish the new female identity as a free individual, women are under great pressure, both socially and psychologically, for they have no models to follow. Patriarchal culture endorses man as the subject of desire, and woman the object of desire. As man has never suppressed his self under the threat of the opposite sex, he can always take the active role of pursuing his personal desire, whereas woman can only take the passive role of transforming her personal desire into other forms, like accepting the success of the husband as her own. In Zhang's story, the hero, like his male forerunners, takes an active role in reacting effectively to social changes, thereby becoming more and more famous as a painter. His male subjectivity is politicized as power in his self-assertion and domination over his wife. However, the heroine, brought up differently from men and deprived of such progressive qualities, becomes a victim in reacting to social changes. Without any models to follow, the heroine is unable to take effective action, thus failing in her career pursuit. Her passivity causes her to internalize all social changes into marital conflicts. So

what she gains, before becoming a successful film-directress, is endless remorse. When she sees her friend's baby, she feels guilty for her abortion. After she leaves her husband, she still cares for him. She is doubtful whether she has made a correct decision. At one time, she wants to resume her old self and be an obedient wife who is under the protection of her husband; while at other times, she wants to develop her new self and be an independent woman.

The gender differences in the process of self-assertion as mentioned above are fully manifested in terms of the conflict between self-fulfillment and role-fulfillment in the heroine. In order to live an independent life and establish her business, she has to cut off all the family ties by abandoning her wifehood and maternity. Yet such a denial of traditional femininity puts her on the brink of psychological breakdown. As Virginia Woolf points out in *A Room of One's Own*, woman's own weakness is the greatest obstacle for women's emancipation. Unlike man, woman is not taught to develop her self and be well-equipped in the life struggle. In Zhang's story, the heroine's struggle for self-autonomy is not only limited to fighting for equal rights with man and financial independence, but moral justification for the cultivation of the new female identity at the expense of traditional femininity. As for the hero, he does not have to struggle for such a moral justification, for he does not have to abandon traditional masculinity in the whole process. Unlike the hero, who finds no difficulties in the construction of his male identity, the heroine has to undergo a bitter process in the construction of her new female identity which is completely different from the traditional. That is to say, man and woman are not on the same horizon in constructing their gender identities respectively.

To sum up, the new female identity constructed in Zhang Xinxin's *On the Same Horizon* and Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, share the same feminist attributes that gender is culturally constructed and therefore can be changed. Society is changing, and the patriarchal values adopted in China and the West are no longer justified. Theoretically, gender difference should not pose as an obstacle for women in their self-fulfillment. Yet in reality, owing to

the long history of male domination, woman is at a great disadvantage in asserting her self as an individual rather than man's subordinate. As a result, the heroine in Zhang's story has many frustrations in constructing her new female identity as an independent entity. And Virginia Woolf, a pioneer of feminism in the West, foresees woman's unfavourable conditions in fighting for independence.

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