

Deconstructing Patriarchy/ Reconstructing Womanhood: Feminist Readings of Multicultural Women's Murder Fiction

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ABSTRACT

Man-slaughtering or the murdering of husbands by women has attracted increasing social and scholarly attention recently. In the West, literary texts depicting the oppression of women in the family and work place and their act of revolt through killing their oppressors are being rediscovered and reexamined. In a growing body of feminist texts of the non-Western counterparts, similar motif of man-killing has become a symbolic gesture of the victimized women's resistance toward patriarchal domination in cultures which legally sanction exploitation of women.

This paper compares three representative works involving man-slaughtering by feminist writers, namely, Li Ang's *Butcher's Wife* from Taiwan, Nawal El Saddawi's *Woman at Point Zero* from Egypt, and Bessie Head's "The Collector of Treasures" from Botswana, to shed light on the underlying subversive nature of these literary texts. It adopts the feminist approach across cultural boundaries to reread the three fiction from the non-Western cultures of China, the Arab world, and South Africa. In terms of feminism, the personal/political/legal struggles between the "muted" and the "dominant" groups, between the "female killer" and the patriarchal "symbolic order" are explored. In terms of comparative study, the similarities and differences with regard to the heroines' oppression and rebellion, as well as the writers' literary representation and vision are examined.

KEY WORDS

feminism
feminist fiction
womanhood

murder fiction
patriarchy
husband-killing

With the rise of feminism and feminist consciousness, the theme of man slaughtering, and especially husband killing, in literature by and about women has begun attracting scholarly attention in the West. In American literature since the 1920's and 1930's specifically, stories and plays concerning the oppression of women and their "revolutionary" act of revenge through murdering their oppressors have been rediscovered and reexamined by some feminist scholars.¹ Similar literary phenomena can be found, not surprisingly, in non-Western traditions. In quite a few feminist works of the 1970's and 1980's from China and Africa, for example, the recurrence of this man-killing theme reveals the "brutal realities" of the patriarchal exploitation toward women in terms of money and sex and the female victims's act of resistance and revolt.

We may wonder why man-killing is a recurrent motif in women's literatures? Why do women kill and how do their societies respond to it? What are the backgrounds of these female "murderers," their incentives and the results of killing? How do feminist writers reflect and represent the murder case from reality into fiction? Above all, what is the significance behind and beyond the actual killing by these seemingly "ordinary" women from the everyday life—daughters, housewives, prostitutes, abandoned women, single mothers—who actually live on the cutting edge of patriarchy? Questions of this kind shall be the starting points to ponder, to meditate upon while sorting through and untangling the mysteries of three representative stories.

As Lilian Robinson aptly describes a recently rediscovered husband-killing story by Gilman as "radical" and "revolutionary," the purpose of this paper, following the same spirit, is to compare and contrast three representative man-slaughtering stories by non-Western writers—from Taiwan Li Ang's *Butchers Wife*, from Egypt Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, and from Botswana Bessie Head's "The Collector of Treasures"—to shed light on the underlying subversive nature of these works. I propose that these three works are feminist fiction challenging multicultural patriarchies

not so much due to the heroines' vengeance through the act of killing as due to their rebellious spirit of resisting total patriarchal control, their longing for the female values of gentleness, bonding, compassion in worlds where these appear impossible, as well as their and/or the writers' ability to voice their own "truth" and vision through the act of telling and writing.

This paper adopts the feminist "gyno critique"² approach across cultural boundaries and the comparative multicultural perspective to reread three women's murder stories from the non-Western cultures of China, the Arab world, and South Africa. In terms of feminism, the personal/social/political struggles between the "muted" and the "dominant" groups, the lack of and need for female values and spirituality, as well as the issues of female aesthetics and creativity will be explored. In terms of comparison, the similarities and differences with regard to the female heroes' oppression and rebellion and the writers' representation and vision will be examined. Specific attention will be paid to the rise of female values of non-aggression and bonding implicitly or explicitly revealed in these works as alternative of interconnection outside the alienating, destructive modes of patriarchal domination.

This paper focuses on three different yet interrelated issues surrounding the murder mysteries. The first issue deals with forms of domination in patriarchal worlds and the female victims' individual ways of resistance and rebellion. The second issue deals with the heroine/writer's act of telling/writing as literary means of subversion and self empowerment. The third issue focuses on the issues of female bonding and sisterhood as spiritual visions beyond the act of killing. Through revisioning these tragic stories, it is hoped that the suffering that many women bear and the strategies they employ to cope and survive will echo and inspire more creative ways of erupting total patriarchal enclosure.

I. Multicultural Feminist Writers and Dystopian Worlds

A.

One contemporary Taiwanese women writer whose work is intentionally "feminist" is Li Ang. Li Ang's dark dystopia in the *Butcher's Wife* carries a powerful message by portraying a male-centered world in which violence and domination rules while female values of connection and understanding are virtually absent.

Li Ang was influenced by Western feminist thinking and the women's movement in Taiwan. As a talented writer, she started out at age 17 dealing

with sensitive topics related to young women from her hometown Lugang, especially notable for her depiction of their emotional and sexual world.³ During the 1970s, she apparently came in contact with works by and about de Beauvoir, Woolf, Greer, among other feminist writers and was fascinated by them.⁴ As a young female writer entering the male turf of writing on issues related to gender, sexuality and power, Li Ang was met with public disapproval.⁵ Despite obstacles, however, in the early 80's she completed *Butcher's Wife* (*Shafu*, literally "killing one's own husband")—one of the most disturbingly powerful works in the history of Taiwanese literature, exposing patriarchal oppression and exploitation through the subtle manipulation of food, money, and sex.

Butcher's Wife is a story of the trials and tribulations of Lin Shi, a young peasant woman from the fishing village of Lugang in south-eastern Taiwan, at the turn of the century. By presenting the mysterious case of such a peasant woman's "murder" of her husband first through news reports, then through the story, the author leads the readers through Lin Shi's life from various perspectives to bring them to their own conclusion with regard to the cause, effect, and significance of such a tragic event. The unequal relationships between men and women in marriage, biased social customs and religious superstitions, as well as the powerful control exerted by "gossip," "rumors," and the media in a patriarchal society are portrayed, questioned, and challenged in the course of uncovering the mystery of her intention to kill her husband.⁶

Although the novel won her a literary award and wide recognition, it was actually misunderstood and received rather negatively by the reading public and critics due largely to their perception of the explicit sexual descriptions in the novel as "perverse" and the climactic act of murdering one's own husband as "immoral" regardless of the reasons.⁷ One of Taiwan's most controversial writers, Li Ang was not only rejected by the conservative "dominant" group on the one hand for being "outrageous," and promoting disharmony in the family and society, but also regarded by some local feminists as being too elitist, and not "radical" enough.⁸ Above all, both groups criticized the tragic ending of *Butcher's Wife* and its pessimistic, gloomy outlook for Chinese women. Suffering from the pressure of severe criticism in her homeland, the book was, ironically, much better received in the West by some sympathetic critics,⁹ resulting in its translation into several foreign languages, such as English, German, French, Japanese, among others.¹⁰

Though pessimistic on the surface, Li Ang's *Butcher's Wife* is a political work which protests sexual violence by depicting the realities of it.

Through killing patriarchy metaphorically in the novel, the status of women in Taiwan is moved a step forward symbolically. Contrary to widely held views of *Butcher's Wife*, Li Ang's novella, I believe, is a subversive work of art that actually deconstructs rather than reinforces the destructive forces of aggression, domination and thereby opens up various possibilities for feminine principles of mutual communication and compassion.

B.

Nawal El Saadawi (1931-), a medical doctor and Egypt's former Director of Public Health, is a staunch activist of women's rights and a feminist novelist. In the 1970s, she began writing about Middle Eastern women and sexuality and published landmark works in Arabic, such as *Woman and Sex* and *The Hidden Face of Eve* dealing with what it means to grow up female in an Islamic world, and with women's issues, such as sexual aggression against female children, the circumcision of young girls, prostitution, marriage, and divorce. El Saadawi started writing fiction since the 1950s, publishing short stories and novels about Egyptian women and their struggle and rebellion against Islamic patriarchy. Among them are *Woman at Point Zero*, *Two Women in One*, and *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*. Her books dealing with sexuality, though often best-sellers creating strong impact, were censored in Egypt.¹¹ El Saadawi was forced to resign from her post as director and editor of a Health journal and imprisoned for some time due to her uncompromising feminist and political stances.

Woman at Point Zero (1973) is a story about the suffering and struggle of Firdaus, a high-class prostitute from a farming village of northern Egypt. By unveiling the "wild truth" of the prostitute's murder of her pimp first through the psychiatrist/author's account of her visit and interview, then through the protagonist/narrator's personal "confession" to the author, the heroine's real identity and her intention to kill gradually unfold through her all-embrasive, powerful voice.¹² The sexual violence and exploitations imposed on women in the forms of excision, child molestation, marital abuse, sexual harassment, and prostitution, as well as social/political control by the "police," the "government," and the media in the patriarchal Egyptian society are exposed and challenged through the heroine's autobiographical narrative of her own account and the author's rebellious act of listening and writing down the entire story.¹³ El Saadawi's novel, though well-received outside her homeland, was banned by the Egyptian government by critics.¹⁴ Though dark and gloomy on the surface like Li Ang's "phallic hell," Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, I argue, is a radical feminist novel which reveals the author's strong indictment of her won society by depicting the brutal realities

of it. Through the killing of the pimp—who is the symbol of a patriarch in this case—the absolute authority of the Egyptian-Islamic patriarchy is questioned and challenged. Above all, the power of women's voice/writing and courage derived from female principles of gentleness and openness are rediscovered and emphasized in the text.

C.

Bessie Head (1937-), one of the most acclaimed black African woman writers, was born in South Africa and later moved to neighboring Botswana as a form of self-exile. Her unique racial background (a lower-class black father and middle-class white mother) results in her sense of marginality, unbelongingness and "statelessness."¹⁵ Her personal experiences (marriage and divorce) and suffering (her mother was condemned as "mad" due to her "immoral" relationship with a black boy and later committed suicide) contribute to her interests in the status and position of women in Africa, especially in their struggle to redefine their own sense of "identity" in the patriarchal world. Although she is hesitant about the term "feminist," her novels and short stories such as *Maru* (1971), *A Question of Power* (1974), *The Collector of Treasures* (1977) reveal a great deal about the lives of African women, the breakdown of family life,¹⁶ and the growth of feminist consciousness.

"The Collector of Treasures," the title story from the 1977 collection, is about the pain and hardship of Dikeledi Mokopi, an abandoned wife and single mother of three sons, who committed the crime of "murdering" her husband in the village of Mahalapye, Botswana. According to Head, the background of the story was given to her by "wom[a]n who rear illegitimate children on [her] own."¹⁷ The "truth" of the killing is gradually revealed through a sympathetic storyteller's careful reweaving of significant accounts of the peasant woman's life. Traditional practices such as polygamy and the abandonment of wife and children (known as "talaq" and "la'am"),¹⁸ women's issues such as sexual abuse and exploitation of women's body, as well as the economic and emotional difficulties for single mothers/parents, are dealt with critically from a feminist perspective.

Compared with Li Ang's and Nawal El Saadawi's works, Bessie Head's story reveals much more hope and spiritual vision in terms of women's struggles for self-assertion in the "unholy" land of African patriarchy. Consequently, her work received more positive feedback than her Chinese and Egyptian counterparts, despite misreadings from some critics.¹⁹ The significance of "The Collector of Treasure," I believe, lies not only in the emphasis of women's spiritual awakening and the importance of female

solidarity but also in her vision of the "new men" and her artistic creativity in giving birth to her powerful literary work through deep listening, empathy, and echoing/writing.

II. Women's Killing as Resistance and Revolution

A.

Li Ang's *Butcher's Wife* is a powerful piece of feminist fiction that aims to destabilize subtle but pervasive patriarchal control and to shock the readers into awareness. Hers is a dark dystopian work that serves to deconstruct the phallogocentric world of sexual oppression and repression. Ideologically, it provides critiques of dehumanizing practices with regard to sex and money, such as arranged marriage, control of food, and sexual assault, both verbal and physical.

In *Butcher's Wife*, Li attempts to subvert a dystopian patriarchal hell by depicting a peasant woman's resistance and rebellion against its total control. In the news reports presented as a prologue at the beginning of the novel, Linshi is condemned by an anonymous newspaper reporter in an authoritative, "logical," "rational" tone of voice as a "fatal," "immoral" woman who kills her husband for the sake of another man. According to the news: "Chen Linshi's confession defies *reason and logic*, for, since ancient times, a murder of this sort has always been the result of an adulterous affair. We urge the *authorities* to launch a thorough investigation to determine the identity and precise role of the secret lover in this case... the killing of a man by his wife is a moral issue that affects all of society... [the] *authorities* must treat this case with the utmost severity..." ("News Report #1," emphasis mine). The image of Linshi here as a "debauched" woman who should be severely punished as a moral lesson for all other women, however, is gradually deconstructed in the text through the narrator's skillful unfolding of Linshi's life story and the use of recurring symbols and dreams.

Instead of being an evil woman, the female protagonist turns out to be a silent victim in the male-dominated rural village. The readers are told that as a poor orphan, Linshi and her widowed mother were driven out of their own house by the relatives who claim that women have neither inheritance nor property rights. We see her at a young age witness the virtual raping of her mother by a soldier in exchange of food. After her mother was forced to "disappear" from the village, the unprotected, uneducated Linshi was taken in and later married off by her uncle to a butcher in exchange of a monthly supply of pork. In addition to being used as a monetary object, she was

treated like a sexual object, abused, beaten, and harassed by her brutal husband, bringing her to the brink of insanity. In presenting these facts that are absent from the news report, Li Ang undercuts the authoritative journalist's representation of Linshi and gradually renders the newspaper account implausible.

On a symbolic level, the image of Linshi as a powerless victim is often associated in the main text with that of a dehumanized puppet and a helpless animal. Deprived of proper food and nutrition, her appearance is described as plain, flat, as if carved out of a piece of "wood"—she is skinny, with "long face, long hands, long legs" (81), yellowish dry skin, and a stiff body. Her blank gazes and mechanical motions bespeak her pathetic death-in-life state of being. Deprived of experiences of warmth, joy and any knowledge of sexuality, her existence is further reduced to that of a sex object or a frightened animal. The recurring image of "black bloody pillars" in her dreams (82), for example, symbolizes her unresolved fear, anxiety, and sexual repression from past traumatic experiences. The scene of helpless pigs squealing before being slaughtered by the butcher is repeatedly compared to that of Linshi's screaming at her husband's physical violation and assault in their marital bed (88).

The dystopian world of *Butcher's Wife* is the butcher's slaughterhouse. Linshi is likened to the "bound pig" waiting to be sacrificed; Chen Jiangshui, the husband, is associated with the butcher's knife, the image of "penis" as the essence of phallogocentric control. The brutal slaughtering of pigs by the butcher thereby symbolizes the aggressive sexual possession and violent victimization of the female bodies, as the following paragraph vividly suggests by associating his slaughtering of the pigs with his sexual domination of Linshi:

This was Chen Jiangshui's moment. As the knife was withdrawn and the blood spurted forth, he was infused with an incomparable sense of satisfaction. It was as though the hot stream coursing through his body was converted into a thick, sticky white fluid spurting into the shadowy depths of a woman at the climax of a series of high-speed thrusts. To Chen Jiangshui, the spurting of blood and the ejaculation of semen had the same orgasmic effect.(75).

The ultimate control of such an enclosed patriarchal hell is, however, challenged by Linshi's "defiant" act of murder. In a dream-like, nightmarish atmosphere, we see the starving, harassed,²⁰ abused wife getting up in the

middle of the night; half-crazed, she grabs her husband's knife that shines under the eerie moonlight and kills the sleeping butcher coolly as if dissecting a pig:

...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... I must be dreaming... I'll open up the abdomen and see... She reached in and scooped out a handful of intestines, all warm and long and tangled together. She scooped out more and more, finally coming up with a tangled mass of noodles... She raised the knife and hacked and hacked... I must be dreaming, she thought. I should cut off the head next. As she hacked away with the knife, she kept thinking, I must be dreaming. Why else would there be so much blood? She hacked with the knife. Hacking, hacking she reached the feet. Parts close to the body still had big chunks of meat on them. The pig's feet must not be done yet, that's why the center is still red, with all that strong-smelling bloody liquid draining from it. She chopped a few more times until it was all reduced to a pulpy mound of flesh and blood. (138-39)

The act of taking over and using her husband's knife—a symbol of phallic power here—subverts the existing relationship of the male and female, the dominant and the dominated. The power of a repressed woman's "wild" psyche that has been buried deep inside her unconsciousness is finally released and reclaimed, albeit in a maddened, surrealistic state.

B.

In *Woman at Point Zero*, the author reconstructs for the reader the story of the female protagonist, Firdaus, a prostitute's resistance against patriarchal exploitation and domination. As a prostitute, a murderer, and a prisoner who is soon to be executed, Firdaus, nevertheless, is depicted as calm and courageous from the beginning of the novel. The prison doctor does not believe that such a "gentle" Firdaus could be a "murderer" (1-2); then woman warden thinks Firdaus is "an innocent woman and does not deserve to be hanged" (2) and responds to her more enthusiastically than to a "Presidnet of the Republic" in the eyes of the author/narrator (5). Even the author herself sort of an "authority" figure—a doctor doing research on the "mental affliction" or neurosis of women prisoners, is overwhelmed and struck by Firdaus' "absolute fearlessness" (iii) and her power of voice. In

contrast to following the authorities, judgments and the newspapers' "lies" (106), the author/narrator turns toward the heroine herself to "listen" to the "truth" of her own life story.

Similar to Li Ang's *Linshi*, Firdaus turns out to be a victim in the patriarchal Egyptian context. Born in the family of a poor peasant farmer, Firdaus belongs to the lower class. When young, being forced to work in the field, she was beaten and circumcized by her own mother (13). Sexually molested by her own uncle, Firdaus was later taken to live with and serve the uncle and his wife. Running away from her uncle's house, she was then forced to become a prostitute who was subsequently abused, beaten, exploited, and harassed by her customers and her pimp, bringing her to her final act of revenge. Instead of being a "savage and dangerous woman" (100) as the police proclaimed when they arrested Firdaus, the female protagonist was a victim of patriarchal domination of the female body.

The patriarchal world of *Woman at Point Zero* is the pimp's whore house and the state's prison cell. While the women prisoners are compared to "animas," lurking behind the "iron bars" of the patriarchal laws (ii), Firdaus is degraded by the exploitative pimp, Marzouk, as a "slave" to be controlled by him, the "master." Marzouk reasons with Firdaus:

"...There are only two categories of people, Firdaus, masters and slaves."

"In that case I want to be one of the masters and not one of the slaves."

"How can you be one of the master? A woman on her own cannot be a master, let alone a woman who's a prostitute.

Can't you see you're asking for the impossible?" (95)

Firdaus finally realized that in such a society all women, including prostitutes and wives, are forced to "sell their body at a price" (91) and be used as monetary and sexual objects. They are the "body machine working day and night" (94), the "muted" group exploited by the "dominant" one at their own expense.

Similar to Li Ang's *Linshi*, who was pushed to the psychic edge to kill as if to protect herself unconsciously, Firdaus fought back as the pimp threatens to kill her:

"His hand started to reach for the knife he carried in his pocket, but my hand was quicker than his. I raised the knife and buried it deep in his neck, pulled it out of his chest and plunged it deep

into his belly. I struck the knife into almost every part of his body. I was astonished to find how easily my hand moved as I thrust the knife into his flesh, and pulled it out almost without effort. My surprise was all the greater since I had never done what I was doing before." (95)

Similar to Linshi, Firdaus is abused by her "master"; similar to Linshi, Firdaus takes over her master's knife; similar to Linshi again, Firdaus kills the master with seeming "ease". However, while Li Ang's heroine kills on a subconscious level, her Egyptian counterpart carries out her act of killing on a conscious level. In fact, Firdaus's act of defiance lies more in her courage to stand up for what she wants in front of her "master" and her fearlessness in responding to his threatening actions than in the actual act of killing, as the following passage illustrates:

I tried to slip through the door, but he pushed me back and shut it. I looked him in the eye and said, 'I intend to leave.'
He stared back at me. I heard him mutter, 'You will never leave.'
I continued to look straight at him without blinking...I saw from the expression in his eyes that he *feared* me as only a master can *fear* his slave, as only a man can fear a woman... I caught hold of the latch of the door to open it, but he lifted his arm up in the air and slapped me. I raised my hand even higher than he had done, and brought it down violently on his face. (95, emphasis mine)

The power of Firdaus lies in her "sharp" eyes "like a knife" that finally cut through patriarchal lies, that "read" through the master's fear (96) and kill it "metaphorically" with her "steady, unwavering" gaze (6). In contrast to the pimp's knife, which is a symbol of sexual/economic violence and domination over women's bodies, Firdaus's "visual" knife is an insight bred from life-long pain and suffering that leads to fearlessness of death and awakening to "truth."

C.

In "The Collector of Treasures," Bessie Head retells the tale of Dikeledi Mokopi, an abandoned woman in Serowe, Botswana, who attempts to define herself and her sexuality outside traditional African mores. Although Dikeledi and four other female prisoners are all "punished" by society for their similar "crimes" of husband-slaughtering, it is worth noting that far from

condemning them as evil and cruel, Head depicts as kind, loving, and caring (88-91) women victimized by the patriarchal society.

Indeed, the pain and loneliness of these women in the story bespeak black women's lives of oppression in African cultures. We are told that the female protagonist Dikeledi was raised by her uncle after her parents died and was married to Garesego Mokopi against her own wishes. Deserted later by her husband for other women in town, Dikeledi nevertheless managed to raise her three sons single-handedly without Garesego's support. After eight years, however, due to rumors, jealousy, and his desire to dominate Dikeledi's body and life again, Garesego came back to his deserted home in the village to reclaim his "territory" and "masterhood" without any concern shown toward their children, nor the eldest son's secondary education. Facing the choices between succumbing to her man's harassment and running away to escape his total control, Dikeledi chose rather to end the life of the "evil man" (91) and to turn herself in to the police.

The critique of polygamy, infidelity, abandonment, and sexual exploitation is made evident in the text quite clearly and straightforwardly not only in condemning Garesego as evil, but also in comparing him to an "animal," as the narrator describes him:

That kind of man lived near the *animal* level and behaved just the same. Like the dogs and bulls and donkeys, he also accepted no responsibility for the young he procreated. (91)

The power of men like Garesego lies solely in his penis, a symbol of male privilege and sexual domination. Dikeledi's conscious act of killing by cutting off his genitals is therefore a symbolic gesture of subverting patriarchal values of sexual aggression and transgression, as the "murder" scene suggests:

Then she bent down and reached for the knife under the bed which she had merely concealed with a cloth. With the precision and skill of her hardworking hands, she grasped hold of his genitals and cut them off with one stroke... A massive spurt of blood arched its way across the bed. And Garesego bellowed... She stood and watched his death anguish with an intent and brooding look, missing not one detail of it.

In contrast to Linshi who grabbed her husband's butcher's knife to kill, Dikeledi, the "madhousewife," used the kitchen knife that symbolizes her

skill at work and her dedication to the care of her children. In contrast to Linshi who kills on a subconscious level, Dikeledi and her sisters in prison know what they want and act upon it accordingly. Indeed, the ultimate power of Dikeledi lies not so much in her final deed of killing as in her integrity in standing up to what she truly values, her ability to nurture and relate to other human beings (her friends Kenalepe and Paul, for example) on a day-to-day base, and her talents in creating works of "art" on her own. If the energy of Firdaus lies in her eyes and voice as discussed above, that of Dikeledi resides in her "hands of power"—her skillful hands that cook, knit, sew, weave, that caress, touch, comfort, and connect the kind "treasures" of human hearts together.

III. Women's Writing as Literary Subversion and Empowerment

A.

In addition to the powerful act of killing, the narrative styles and structure of the three works serve to resist and subvert the male-constructed "truth" on the one hand and to reconstruct women's own stories and give them voice on the other.

Li Ang, for example, in her attempt to deconstruct patriarchal "truth," assimilates main-stream male discourse in *Butcher's Wife* to depict patriarchal "reality." The main text of the novel presents an enclosed, exclusive, suffocating male-centered dystopia. Those who follow the patriarchal "rules" are endowed with the power of "truth" and control. For example, early in the story, the elders of the Chen clan, in the name of traditional virtue, condemn Linshi's mother for being "unfaithful," "shameless" and expel her from society simply because the starving widow exchanges sexual favors for a bowl of rice. The gossiping villagers who blindly accept and spread rumors about Linshi and her mother for being "tainted" and "possessed" by evil spirits also reinforce the subtle control of that society. Even butcher Chen, himself an outcast due to his lowly profession,²¹ is given the power of control over his wife by being a bread-winning husband. He never looks at Linshi directly, never calls her by name, often yells at her or scolds her with dehumanizing and degrading terms such as "bitch," or simply "woman". In contrast, Linshi and her mother, who do not appear to voluntarily follow the rigid rules of the society are chastized and stripped of any power. They belong to the "muted group" excluded from the dominant one in terms of gender and class.

The formal structure of the text is like that of a "frame story"—with

news reports at both the beginning and the end as the sub-texts that introduce and conclude the main text. The news report that openly condemns Linshi and warns all Chinese women against "foreign," "new" ways of life serves as the first layer of subtle social control through the means of media from without:

Surely all the women who saw [Linshi] will take heed and refrain from initiating foreign women, who are always clamoring for equality and the right to attend Western schools. Such demands are actually little more than excuses for a woman to leave house and home and make a public spectacle of herself. They comprise a mockery of the code of womanly conduct and destroy our age-old concepts of womanhood. ("News Report #2")

The authoritative voice and seemingly "just" tone of the reporter here bespeak the phallogocentric control. Other more visible "technological" controls in the main text, such as clan rules, social customs, morality, superstition, and gossip as mentioned above, form a second tight web to imprison the characters.

The male discourse of the text which intricately frames the female protagonist is, however, challenged and destabilized through the author's use of irony, sarcasm in the news reports, and the act of killing under the dream-like, gothic atmosphere. The two news reports commenting on female virtues undermine the general social attitude toward Linshi in particular and women in general. The "muted" discourse that comes out at times in Linshi's dreams at night are mostly related to her repressed sexuality. Her act of killing carried out in a state of "madness" can be seen as a symbolic reclaiming of female psychic power—released in the realm of the "wild" subconsciousness, the powerful vengeance of Medea and Medusa. The killing of her husband is thus a symbolic gesture of subverting patriarchal control. In addition, her hacking of numerous pigs' tongues in the murder scene serves as a symbolic act of counteracting malicious gossip of the village women who internalize patriarchal values and vent their anger, resentment, and jealousy on their female "others."

B.

In contrast to Li Ang's *Butcher's Wife* in which male discourse is adopted and then subtly subverted, Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* incorporates female discourse to reconstruct the oppressed women's "reality" with their own voices and words.

The form of the novel resembles a medieval "frame" story with three

chapters and two narrators. Chapter one and three are the author/narrator's account of how she met the female protagonist Firdaus and how the latter eventually revealed her "true" life story to her after initial avoidance and resistance. Chapter two is the story of Firdaus in flashbacks from her own first person viewpoint.

The hierarchical relationship between the doctor/author and the prisoner/narrator is disrupted in the text, however, first by the prisoner's silent "rejection" of the the doctor's visit and interview and then by her sharp eyes (like a "knife"), "proud" voice, and her completely "fearless" demeanor in the presence of the doctor/author. Transcending the barriers of gender and class, the author is able to reach and record the life of a woman prisoner while the narrator is able to voice her own "truth" from the lowest stratum of the patriarchal society.

The novel is autobiographical and personal. In the preface of the work, we are told by Saadawi that she "wrote this novel after an encounter between [her] and a woman in Qanatir [women's] prison" (i). As a doctor and as a dissident persecuted by the government, and a "feminist author," her personal/social/political interest in Egyptian women's mental "neuroses" and life in the "prisons" led to her "inspiring" encounter with Firdaus in real life, the woman with "gentleness" and the courage to kill.

The story is Firdaus's personal account of how she was oppressed and exploited as a daughter, a cousin, a wife, and a prostitute in the patriarchal Egyptian society; how she transforms from a victim to a courageous, free woman. As a prisoner soon to be executed, Firdaus tells her own story to the doctor/author in a steady, "fearless" tone of voice: "Let me speak. Do not interrupt me... They are coming to take me at six o'clock this evening... This journey to a place unknown to everybody on this earth fills me with pride" (11).

The lesson of the story does not, I suggest, lie in the brutal act of killing itself but in the narrator's courage to expose the ugly "truth" of reality to her own people and to the author. As Firdaus narrates:

I am speaking the truth now without any difficulty. For the truth is always easy and simple. And in its simplicity lies a savage power... death and truth are similar in that they both require a great courage if one wishes to face them. And truth is like death in that it kills. When I killed I did it with truth not with a knife. That is why they are afraid and in a hurry to execute me. They do not fear my knife. It is my truth which frightens them. This fearful truth gives me great strength. It protects me from fearing death, or

life, or hunger, or nakedness, or destruction. It is this fearful truth which prevents me from fearing the brutality of rulers and policemen. (102-03)

Firdaus's story serves not only as the strong protest of a female prostitute and prisoner against the exploitation of women's bodies in Egyptian society but also as an empowering example for the discouraged author to continue her work as an activist and feminist writer. Saadawi's very act of writing down such a woman warrior's story is itself a defiant gesture challenging phallogocentric "truth" and reaffirming the power of women's own voices, as the author concludes: "... her voice continued to echo in my ears; vibrating in my head, in the cell, in the prison, in the streets, in the whole world, shaking everything, spreading fear wherever it went, the fear of the truth which kills, the power of truth, as savage, and as simple, as awesome as death, yet as simple and as gentle as the child that has not yet learnt to lie" (106).

C.

Bessie Head's book *The Collector of Treasures* is a collection of tales of people in a Botswana village. The last four stories, including the title story, are specifically told to her by village women who rear illegitimate children on their own. Following the spirit of African oral traditions, Head listens and records the spoken tales of these native female storytellers; pushing the boundaries of male literary conventions a step forward, she borrows, retells, and reinvents these women's tales with her own unique vision.

The relationship between gender, telling/writing, and authorship is a key to understand the power of the short story "The Collector of Treasures." By retelling the murder tale by and about downtrodden native women from her womanist²² viewpoint, Head opens up a literary/imaginative space where voices of people from the margins are heard and exchanged.

Head's unique ways of subverting phallogocentric order and enclosure in her work are demonstrated first by the use of dialogue and humor. Open dialogues and energies flow freely not only among female storytellers and the author, among trusting friends and neighbors, but also among women prisoners in the jail. The sense of humor and cynical smiles bespeak the narrator/author's understanding and sympathy toward the act of husband-killing.

Head's sense of spiritual mission—to be a storyteller who "shapes the future" of black women²³ lies in her creation of the "new man" character in the story. In sharp contrast to Li Ang's and Saadawi's works in which positive

male figures are absent, the appearance of Paul Thebolo—a kind man who brings order, peace, harmony, and happiness to people around him—is distinctive and significant. Indeed, the author/narrator's desire to change the oppressive situation of the patriarchal world is so intense that she even interrupts the narrative of the second part of the story (Dikeledi in flashback) and begins lecturing about men in an authorial position. Between the "two kinds of men" in the society, Garesego belongs to the kind that is evil and is submerged from the picture, while Paul, the hope for African women, is brought to the forefront by the author.

With the creation of the "majestic" Paul—one of Dikeledi's treasures—the female values of kindness, of peace and harmony between women and men, and of caring are placed in the center, replacing the male "evil" force of oppression and exploitation in terms of both gender, class, and race. Above all, the generousities shared among women and the understanding and love they extend to one another form wrap bonds of womanhood which is, I believe, the true "treasure" and the vision that the author/narrator intend to share with her characters, storytellers and readers.

IV. Beyond the Killing

A.

More than simply creating examples of woman who rebel against suffocating patriarchy, all three authors enclose these acts of revolt within a patriarchal society which punishes the rebellion. Moreover, all three works suggest that the greatest threat to patriarchy posed by their antiheroines lies in something besides the simple act of murder.

The triumph of Linshi is only temporary and transitory. She is eventually sentenced to death as a transgressor of patriarchal structure. Killing violence with violence does not obviously solve the root of the problems in reality and the function of her action lies in its symbolic gesture of resisting complete patriarchal colonization and control over her body. The moral of the story, I suggest, does not lie in the combating act of killing itself as some critics maintain but rather, in the gradual revealing of the naked "truth" through the stripping off of the many-layered "lies" that wrap around the murder mystery. Far from encouraging the readers to emulate the heroine's drastic act of revenge, Li awakens us to the poignant struggle of a sexually abused woman on the verge. The hope of Li Anglies ultimately in the reader's understanding of the ugly "reality" and their awakening to the urgent need to change such a dehumanizing, and sexist society.

From victim to villain, however, Linshi is seen by some critics as not a heroine with feminist consciousness and therefore not a true "victor." Li Ang, however, has argued that it is unrealistic for a peasant woman such as Linshi to be completely aware of her predicament in order to rebel.²⁴ In addition, several signs of resistance on the heroine's part throughout the novel are neglected by the critics from my viewpoint. For example, Linshi's sense of independence is shown through her carefully saving up the money—"Kai-bao chien" ("Deflowering money")—her husband gives her after the first night; she raises ducklings not only for the hope of financial autonomy but also for companionship and joy (the only time we see her smile in the story is when she feeds the ducklings); in the end, she even consciously resists her husband's advances in bed and refuses to moan and scream to satisfy his morbid, sadistic demands.

Furthermore, in the news report of the epilogue, presumably published after the sentencing of Linshi, the readers are told that in reality, the woman from Shanghai, where the entire story is based on, eventually escapes her death sentence due to the end of war in China with Japan. Such an arrangement in the sub-text, I suggest, signifies the disruption of the total domination/enclosure of the patriarchal order and reveals signs of hope for both the "resisting" heroine in fiction and in reality.

B.

Similar to Linshi, Firdaus is sentenced to death to pay for her act of rebellion against her prescribed role. She is punished by the "authorities," however, not so much for the deed of killing as for that of unveiling the patriarchal "reality" as Firdaus states:

They put steel handcuffs around my wrists, and led me off to prison. In prison they kept me in a room where the windows and the doors were always shut. I knew why they were so afraid of me. I was the only woman who had torn the mask away, and exposed the face of their ugly reality. They condemned me to death not because I had killed a man—there are thousands of people being killed everyday—but because they are afraid to let me live. They know that as long as I am alive they will not be safe... (100)

In fact, the function of her killing the pimp lies not only in its subversive gesture of resisting the economic and sexual exploitation of her body but also in her ability to finally stand up for her own agenda. Far from celebrating the combating act of violence, Firdaus's killing is depicted as a

wounded woman's instinctual, "wild" response to protect her own threatened life and much treasured sense of autonomy. Indeed, it is in the "fear" in her persecutor's eyes before the killing that our heroine is awakened to the truth and to her own source of power.

In contrast to Linshi, who only has a vague sense of self and autonomy and whose rebellion is more on a subconscious level, Firdaus is a heroine with clear feminist consciousness. First, she sees through the "savage" truth of reality that all women are used and persecuted one way or another by the systems and institutions that reinforce crime and plunder (100-01). Second, she reclaims her long-lost power through her conscious actions (her determination to leave, killing in self-defense, turning herself in, refusing to sign her legal appeal, ect.) and gestures (eyes and voice). Finally, she is able to transcend the boundaries of life and death by her new bred sense of "fearlessness" and ultimate freedom:

I have triumphed over both life and death because I no longer desire to live, nor do I any longer fear to die. I want nothing. I hope for nothing. I fear nothing. Therefore I am free.... The freedom I enjoy fills them with anger. (101)

Firdaus's eyes and voice are the "real" weapons that cut through patriarchal "lies" for they carry with them tremendous power of "dangerous" truth from a woman who goes through hell and comes back; her fearlessness in the face of death (leaving such a horrible hell behind) shows her uncompromising courage, her spiritual liberation and triumph.

In addition to the awakening and transcendence of Firdaus, the hope of the work also lies in the author/narrator's willingness to listen, to understand and to acknowledge a fellow sister in "misery and despair" (iii). The efforts she makes to reach Firdaus in the first place; the time they share in the dark, cold, empty enclosed prison cell before Firdaus's execution; her final realization of Firdaus's true courage; the act of writing Firdaus's story into fiction—all demonstrate the significance of the author as a feminist activist and writer. The hope of this work thus lies in the trust and opening up between two women and their courage to reveal the "horrible truth" to the world.

C.

Similar to Linshi and Firdaus, Dikeledi was condemned by the patriarchal "authorities" for having committed the crime of "man slaughtering" (88) and was taken away to prison by the "impersonal,

uncaring" (87) police. Head's story, however, reveals much more hope and optimism beyond the act of killing than Li's and Saadawi's. First, Dikeledi is only sentenced to life imprisonment, a lighter "punishment" than given to Firdaus and Linshi. Second, the act of husband killing here is dealt with from a light-hearted, "humorous" perspective in the story. Furthermore, the sisterhood that the five women prisoners share marks the unique vision of Head's female consciousness.

The first section of the story is significant in that it reveals how Dikeledi is treated in jail and how her act of "murder" is viewed there. In contrast to the other two works, Dikeledi's killing is dealt with in a touch of cynicism and humor, as the following paragraph demonstrates:

'So, you have killed your husband, have you?' the wardress remarked, with a flicker of humor. 'You'll be in good company. We have *four* other women here for the same crime. It's becoming the *fashion* these days....' (88, emphasis mine)

The implied sense of understanding and sympathy from the wardress' tone of voice is made even more explicit by other female prisoners' greetings and kind concerns toward the female protagonist:

Kebonye shook her head sympathetically,...
'And what may your crime be?'
'I have killed my husband.'

'We are all here for the same crime.' Kebonye said, then with her cynical smile asked: 'Do you feel any sorrow about the crime?'

'Not really,' the other women replied.
'How did you kill him?'
'I cut off all his special parts with a knife,' Difeledi said.
'I did it with a razor,' Kebonye said. She sighed....

A little silence followed... then Kebonye continued musingly: 'Our men do not think that we need tenderness and care. You know my husband used to kick me between the legs when he wanted that. I once aborted with a child, due to this treatment....' (89)

Indeed, far from being condemning these women's act of killing, it is seen as a symbolic protest and rebellion against the brutality of the patriarchal domination/exploitation. The sense of humor, cynicism, and sarcasm in their

language can be seen as a verbal "weapon" that undermines male discourse on the one hand and gives birth to female dignity and power on the other.

Above all, the female values of caring, kindness, and mutual appreciation are emphasized in the story as alternative ways of life. As these female "criminals"/outcasts chat, work, smile, comfort, and support one another, they transform, paradoxically, the darkness of the human "hell/jail" in to the "other"/feminine space where they can come home to and rest finally in peace, into an alternative community to the patriarchal society outside. As Firdaus's friend Kebonye stresses: "We must help each other" (91), it is in the spirit of deep listening, of kind understanding, and of shared joy and love among woman (and men) that the last treasures of Dikeledi, of the other female prisoners, and indeed, of all (African) women reside. Such is the hopeful message and golden treasure that is, I believe, at the heart of Bessie Head's tragic murder story.

Notes

¹ See, for example, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *Madwomen in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), Gayle Greene *Changing the Story: Feminist Fiction and the Tradition* (Indiana University Press, 1991), and Lilian S. Robinson, "Killing Patriarchy: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the Murder Mystery, and Post-Feminist Propaganda" *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 10 (1991): 273-85.

² For a detailed discussion of "gyno-critique" or "gyno criticism," see Elaine Showalter, *New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature & Theory* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), esp. pp.125-43, 243-70.

³ See Howard Goldblatt, "Sex and Society: The Fiction of Li Ang" in his *Worlds Apart: Recent Chinese Writing and Its Audience* (New York: Sharpe, 1990), pp. 150-65.

⁴ Most of these works are translated by Yang Meihui and O Yangzi. See Ying-Ying Chien, "Women, Feminism, and Creativity: An Interview with Li Ang," *Chung-Wai Literary Monthly* 17.10 (March 1989): 185.

⁵ See Goldblatt, "Sex and Society," pp. 150-51.

⁶ The story reminds us of the "mad housewife" plays in the early twentieth-century American literature, such as "Trifles" by Susan Glaspell in which the stifling environment of an unequal marriage and isolated village life lead to the heroine's murder of her husband. I surmise that this play might have been a possible source of inspiration for Li Ang.

⁷ See *New Waves of Feminist Criticism (Fonggi yunyong de nuxing*

zhui piping), (Taipei: Gufong, 1988), pp. 254-90, 344-61.

⁸ In the preface of *Women's Opinions* (Taipei: Shibao, 1987), Li Ang explained how and why she was viewed by a few intellectual friends as "conservative," and "encouraging a bourgeois women's movement," pp. 2-4.

⁹ See for example Howard Goldblatt, Carolyn See, Richard Burgin, among others. Scholars participating in the 1986 "Commonwealth Modern Chinese Literature" conference held in Germany were considered especially "open-minded" by the author with regard to the reception of *Butcher's Wife*.

¹⁰ See the preface of Li's new novel *Lost in the Garden (Mi-yuan)* (Taipei: Li Ang Series, 1991), in which Li explained how, with understanding and support from critics/readers in the West, she overcame inner and outer pressure and picked up her pen to complete the new book. pp. 1-2.

¹¹ See Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke eds., *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing* (Indiana University Press, 1990), esp. 386-404, including an interview with El Saadasi.

¹² See Sherif Hetata trans., *Woman at Point Zero* (New Jersey: Zed Books, 1991), p. 7. Hereafter quotes from this book will be referred to in this edition.

¹³ The title of French translation for this novel is *Ferdaous: A Voice From Hell (Ferdaous: Une Voix a L'Enfer)*, which emphasizes the "voice" of a woman who goes through hell and comes back with the "truth." See Badran, p. 386.

¹⁴ See for example, *Woman Against Her Sex* by Georges Tarabishi (Saqi Books, 1988), esp. pp. 13-34. and the Introduction.

¹⁵ See Ketu H. Katrak, "From Pauline to Dikeledi: The Philosophical and Political Vision of Bessie Head's Protagonists," *Ba Shuru* 12.2 (1985): 26-28.

¹⁶ See Bessie Head, "Note on Back Cover," *The Collector of Treasures* (London: Heinemann, 1977). All quotations hereafter will be taken from this edition.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ "Talaq" is the verbal repudiation of a man's wife by simply pronouncing the term three times; "la'am" is the verbal repudiation of his children. See Robin Morgan, *Sisterhood is Global: The International Women's Movement Anthology* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1984), pp. 763-65.

¹⁹ See Femi Ojo-Ade, "Bessie Head's Alienated Heroine: Victim or Villain?" *Ba Shiru* 8.2 (1997): 14.

²⁰ Linshi was forced to witness a pig slaughtering scene earlier by her

husband as a punishment for her attempt to be "independent" by saving money and raising ducklings on her own.

²¹ In traditional Chinese culture, a butcher is one of the lowest professions based on the belief that excessive killing of animals results in bad karma and ill fate.

²² See Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (San Diego: HBJ, 1983), pp. xi-xii.

²³ See Craig Mackenzie and Cherry Clayton eds., *Between the Lines* (South Africa: National English Literary Museum, 1989), pp. 13-15.

²⁴ Chien, "Interview with Li Ang," 184-85.

