

Taking Off: A Feminist Approach to Two Contemporary Women's Novels in Taiwan

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SUMMARY

Here I show how two contemporary Taiwanese women's novels, which depict the role of women in traditional Chinese society, ultimately call our attention to the perplexing question of women's relation to language, to the signifying process governed by patriarchal rules. But while T'i Hung, in Hsiao Li-hung's *The Lane of Sweet Osmanthus*, gains a certain power over language through her desire to author her own life story, Lin Shih of Li Ang's *The Murder of a Husband* never gains such power. Rather, silence and inarticulate cries are Lin Shih's only defense against the sexual violence of her husband and of the public (patriarchal) discourse. Perhaps a truly "feminine writing" is, as Cixous says, an "impossibility that will . . . always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system"

KEY WORDS

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public

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discourse
inarticulate
defense



In appearance, speech may well be of little account, but the prohibitions surrounding it soon reveal its links with desire and power. This should not be very surprising, for psychoanalysis has already shown us that speech is not merely the medium which manifests-or dissembles-desire; it is also the object of desire. Similarly, historians have constantly impressed upon us that speech is no mere verbalisation of conflicts and systems of domination, but that it is the very object of man's conflicts. --Michel Foucault

Although women's fiction has become a quite conspicuous literary phenomenon in Taiwan over the past ten years, it has so far received very little serious, critical attention.¹ If we share Helen Cixous' view that *voler* (to steal; to fly) is that special gift of women, then, this article could be regarded as a "take-off" in the sense that it tries to appropriate some room in the realm of critical discourse for contemporary women novelists. We take off with methodological tools that we borrow freely from Western feminist criticism. *Nous volons*. But the act of taking off (clothing) is also an alluring act of denuding. Roland Barthes says that what is involved in the act of reading is Oedipal pleasure--"to denude, to know, to learn the origin and the end" (10). If the site of writing is usually imagined by men as the body of woman, what do they see when they encounter a woman's text? Freud sees nothing when he looks at the woman because the female difference,

eluding his gaze, not only defeats his comprehension but is quite beyond his imagination.² Thus, it is hardly surprising that patriarchal discourse should fail to "see" anything in women's fiction that is marked by the absence or negation of the male norm.

The present article, therefore, can be said to stage a performance of denuding, to take off and to disentangle strips of textual covering, to expose the places in women's writing which often elude the male gaze. But, in the attempt to satisfy the male scopophilia so that what is usually constructed by men as the absent and the negative can be seen and therefore incorporated into their system of representation, am I falling into the trap of victimizing women by transforming them (their texts; their bodies) into objects to be mastered by man's sight? Or is this striptease a tease of the master's insight? And what would be the alternative to this staging of a textual performance in compliance with the rules of patriarchal critical discourse other than total silence and hence absence of critical discourse for women's writing?³

Our performance will take two women's novels as the center of our stage: Hsiao Li-hung's 蕭麗紅 *The Lane of Sweet Osmanthus* and Li Ang's 李昂 *The Murder of a Husband*. Though different in many respects, these two novels share many features. Their writers are women and both novels tell the life stories of women. Moreover, both novels deal with female protagonists' relationships to patriarchal discourse and their efforts to cope with its power. Ultimately both novels call our attention to the perplexing question of woman's relationship to the operation of the signifying process governed by patriarchal rules. *The Lane of Sweet Osmanthus*, depicting the female protagonist's desire to author her own life story, brings us face to face with the difficult question of woman and writing. If, as Julia Kristeva says, sign and time belong to the Father, what does a woman do when she attempts to seize the sign and control the temporal shape of

the narrative of her life story? In a way, *The Murder of a Husband* offers an answer to that question. The female writer, trying to defeat patriarchal discourse with her narrative language, suggests that a woman can wreak vengeance on patriarchal discourse if she chooses to place the pen in her service. However, as we shall see, the pen, as a phallic symbol, is a double-edged knife that cuts both ways. The vengeance the writer hopes for is achieved only at a high price. It seems that our reading of these two texts, uncovering and discovering at the same time, simply opens up more questions to be covered by further reading/traversing. In that sense, this essay is a take-off.

I. Telling stories: Hsiao Lihung's *The Lane of Sweet Osmanthus*

The Lane of Sweet Osmanthus and *The Murder of a Husband* tell the life stories of two women in traditional Chinese society. Significantly, both begin with a language that not only is alien to the female protagonists but also encloses them before their narratives begin. The text of *The Murder of a Husband* begins with a news report that "sentences" the female protagonist before the narrator starts to narrate her story.¹ In *The Lane of Sweet Osmanthus*, the story begins with the female protagonist's confrontation with the language of other people. When the narrator first leads us into the interior world of T'i Hung, she, a very small child then, is busy defining herself in terms of a language alien to her and looking at herself through the eyes of other people:

Whenever those people, especially Chin Hua and Yin Hsing's mother, passed by her home, they always saw her in an embarrassing state of disarray. If she was not cleaning the threshold on bended knees, then she was standing on tiptoe on top of a stool, cleaning the windows overhead with a mop fastened to a bamboo

stick. When their glance fell on her unbound feet, an insidious smile always sneaked into their eyes. In the past, hadn't they always had good words to say about her? They spoke frankly then, without any sly implications. Now it was different! It was all because of what the old Auntie next door had said! And they remembered it all!

Old Auntie Wang had simply said during a chat: "Of all girls, T'i Hung certainly is the prettiest on our lane of Sweet Osmanthus. I dare say that in the whole area of Pei-men-yu, no other girl can really surpass her in beauty. She is only a little girl now, but wait and see!"

Just because of these words, the two sisters, Chin Hua and Yin Hsing, hardly ever dropped by to say a few words. Even their mother began to treat T'i Hung in a very strange way! (2-3)

With a Lacanian gesture, the story of T'i Hung begins. T'i Hung's first consciousness of herself as a gendered subject coincides with the entry of language into her world. This is also the moment that she becomes aware of the symbolic order that has prescribed roles for different sexes. When she looks down at her unbound feet through the eyes of others and makes up her mind to have the smallest pair of feet in her hometown, T'i Hung has already signed a pact with the symbolic order that operates according to patriarchal paradigms. In Lacan's view, when a child discovers language, it also discovers the crucial notion of difference. The child then not only becomes conscious of him/her-self as a gendered subject but thereby succumbs him/her-self to the prescribed role that he/she is supposed to play in the symbolic order. In Terry Eagleton's words, "by accepting the necessity of sexual difference, the child becomes properly 'socialized'" (66). In ancient China, foot-binding was a sign of sexual difference, a sign that indicated the femininity of a woman. When T'i Hung

makes up her mind to possess the smallest feet in her hometown, she not only has begun to write her life story but has already projected her story into a discourse governed by patriarchal paradigms. From the consciousness of other people's language, to the consciousness of the self and the prescription of its gender, to the entry into the social structure of signification, the very beginning of the story about T'i Hung has already foretold the crucial role that language is going to play in her life story.

Foot-binding, therefore, signifies T'i Hung's surrender to the power of patriarchal discourse, for foot-binding is not simply a mark of a woman's femininity but is also a gesture of farewell to her freedom. With her feet tightly bound, a Chinese woman is supposed to travel along the road that patriarchal society has prescribed for her. Foot-binding marks a woman's loss of freedom and her subsequent inscription into patriarchal discourse. Seen in this light, T'i Hung's remarkable skill at embroidery and weaving appears poignantly significant. When she is still a maiden, T'i Hung is already famous for her needlework. This draws the attention of a rich and powerful local celebrity--her future parent-in-law. Thus, we may say that what T'i Hung is weaving is in fact her future, a secure position in the patriarchal socio-familial structure. But as her needlework delivers her from poverty, it also pins her down into a vast traditional family network in which every movement she makes is subject to public censorship. In her story, images associated with the notion of weaving or needlework often suggest the idea of imprisonment.⁵ For example, when describing the luxurious life that T'i Hung enjoys as Madame Hsin, the narrator says that "in the long run, she certainly will look like a figure woven with colorful thread on a piece of cloth, with eyes and nose and mouth though without movement" (p. 126). Again, on page 346, in the eyes of a maid-servant, the image of T'i Hung as it is reflected in a mirror is just like that of a statue of Buddha decorated

with all kinds of jewelry. Framed within the mirror and laden with rich jewels, T'i Hung, the respected Buddha, certainly finds it difficult to move. Thus, if T'i Hung's needlework secures a position for her in the patriarchal structure, it also weaves her into a cocoon which, with all its rich grandeur, leaves her very little room to move around in.

Ironically, the needlework that pins T'i Hung down to a narrow space was originally intended by her as a means to escape her seemingly predestined imprisonment. Like many women in traditional Chinese society, T'i Hung believes that her fate is already written in the lines of her right palm. Seeing that a line cuts straight across her right palm, she believes that she is predestined to be a widow. For, in Chinese tradition, a man who marries a woman with this sort of palm line is expected to die young. With her needle and thread, she tries to fight against Fate, against the lines on her right palm that are supposed to govern her future. In other words, if Fate has already woven a future for her, she wants to weave another future for herself. For her, the needle is an instrument of rebellion, a means to escape the encroachment of her fate. Her belief in a future of widowhood is strengthened when the dead body of her brother is brought home from the sea. At this point, T'i Hung is not married and she is falling in love with a fisherman who works with her brother at a sea company. The sea accident that makes her lose her brother also makes her believe that if she marries the fisherman, she will definitely be widowed in another sea accident and thus fall into the trap of fate. Her needlework, which turns her into the daughter-in-law of a rich family, is thus intended by her to fight against the needlework of Fate--the configuration of lines on her right palm that she believes have already foretold her future. Ironically, the future she tries to weave for herself turns out to be her predestined future because her husband dies two years after their marriage, making her a widow as the lines on her right palm had prophesied.

Although her husband's unexpected death at an early age renders futile her struggle against fate and turns her into its mocked victim, it nevertheless has something compensatory in store for her. That is, the early death of T'i Hung's husband makes it possible for her to appropriate the power of what Lacan calls "the name of the Father." In Lacan's psychoanalytical theory, Freud's biological father is transformed into the notion of the name of the Father, the Father as a symbolic figure signifying the Law. To all the members of the Hsin family, T'i Hung is the Law now that she has become the head of the family. Thus, if we say that T'i Hung, in the choice of her spouse and her foot-binding, projects her life story into patriarchal discourse, ultimately she becomes the Law, the issuer of statements, the Father who controls the operation of patriarchal discourse. Although she cannot fully control her own fate, she now possesses the power to control the fate of others. Her words become that fate. Thus, when T'i Hung overhears two maid-servants gossiping about her ambiguous relationship with a Taiwanese opera singer named Hai-fu-jung, she immediately issues a paper that sends them off to a madame famous for sadistic treatment of her maid-servants. There, they are supposed to stay for the rest of their lives. And when T'i Hung gives the word, Pi-lou, the daughter-in-law whom she disliked at first sight, is forced to leave her husband. As the head and the Law of the family, T'i Hung becomes the all-powerful author capable of writing or rewriting the life stories of other people.

As the symbolic father, the person who issues the law, and the author of stories, T'i Hung is virtually in charge of the operation of patriarchal discourse to which she had subjected herself at the beginning of her own story and into which she has inscribed her own narrative. However, it costs T'i Hung a lot to speak that language and to become the symbol of its power. Language, to borrow Julia Kristeva's words, is "a system of signs (first, rhythmic and intonational difference,

then signifier/signified) which are organized into logico-syntactic structures whose aim is to accredit social communication as exchange purified of pleasure" (150). To speak that language means first of all to repress the body and the freedom to enjoy its *jouissance*. We may recall that T'i Hung's inscription into patriarchal discourse is made with the ritual of foot-binding. This pain-inflicting process, an act that crushes and distorts a part of T'i Hung's body, certainly indicates how the pact with patriarchal discourse is secured only at the cost of the body and its pleasure. If we believe with Lacan that to enter the symbolic order (language) is to become a prey of desire, then T'i Hung, who, in the eyes of other family members, stands for the law and the sublimating Word, is never that unitary self she presents to the world. Twice in her life, she strays away from the course of the narrative she has written for herself in an attempt to quench her desire for woman's *jouissance*. First, it is an ambiguous lesbian-like relationship with a female Taiwanese Opera singer, and then it is a secret affair with a male servant whose appearance reminds her of her first smothered love. But these attempts to satisfy her long repressed sexual desire which is supposed to be purified out of her narrative are put to an end when allusions to them begin to be heard in the bad quarters of the family. As the beginning of her story shows, the language of other people always signifies the strongest censoring force for T'i Hung and she always defines herself in terms of that language. This is the language of patriarchal discourse, for it represents the moral voice of patriarchy. T'i Hung, while seeming to be in control of the operation of this discourse, is herself also subject to its rules.

Like many protagonists in the nineteenth-century Western *bildungsroman*, T'i Hung tries to compose her own life story and control its narrative just as an author would control the narrative he creates.⁶ In other words, what T'i Hung wants is the authoritative power of the author-father. Specifically, what

we read in *The Lane of Sweet Osmanthus* is not exactly the story written by T'i Hung, but a story about her writing her life story. These two stories do not exactly converge. The story T'i Hung presents to the readers of her world is the successful life story of Madame Hsin which resembles the fabulous story of Cinderella. But the story the readers of the text of *The Lane of Sweet Osmanthus* read is the story of a tormented woman torn between the desire for the paternal Word and the desire for a woman's *jouissance*. We may say that what separates these two stories is the distance between what Lacan calls the subject of enunciation and the enunciating subject. The subject of enunciation, T'i Hung the character in the story she writes for herself and presents to the public, is a unitary image signifying success and authority, whereas the enunciating subject, T'i Hung the writer who composes that story (and indeed it is a "story"), is in fact a split subject. If *The Lane of Sweet Osmanthus* is a story about T'i Hung's writing of a story, then what is dramatized in the text is the tension between these two stories with all their convergences and divergences.

In the text, T'i Hung's split subjectivity results in a sense of self-alienation and a dream-like atmosphere.⁷ Take the following passage as an example. At this point, T'i Hung has just returned from Japan where she delivered and successfully got rid of the child she had with the male servant:

Lying in the delicately carved bed of red wood, T'i Hung seemed to be half asleep and half awake. She woke up several times at night. When she had become conscious, she wondered where she was. It seemed that she was far, far away in a straw bed in a foreign country. Biting hard on her lips and sweating profusely, she was trying to squeeze something out of the pores of her skin. The lower part of her body was bleeding terribly. She saw a lock of baby's hair in the blood,

sometimes it was black and then red, and then black, and then red. . . .

All of a sudden, everything was different. It was the moment of dawn, clear and wet. The fresh air was something peculiar to fishing towns. . . . It seemed that she heard a familiar, sad melody. It was the melody floating out of the pipe of the blind man who used to pass by the lane of sweet osmanthus of her childhood.

In the back quarters of the Hsin mansion, she would not be able to hear that! She must be in the shady hut by the sea, cuddling up to her mother in that bamboo bed and struggling hard for survival. . . .

When she fully woke up, she saw her red-wood bed with the warm blankets spread on it and the silky screen hanging down on both sides. On the bed lay a woman, and she failed to recognize that that woman was nobody else but herself! (344)

The woman lying in the delicately carved red-wood bed is the enviable Madame Hsin while the one who looks at her is T'i Hung. The former is a character in the latter's story. T'i Hung is and is not herself. The author and the character fail to merge into one not only because in writing one's own story, one cannot avoid changing oneself into a fictionalized product, but also because T'i Hung, in writing a success story for herself, is forced to desperately repress the other side of herself, her body and its desire.

When T'i Hung is engaged in the act of writing her own life story, she is often plagued by the feeling that she has been transformed into a character in a play who simply repeats something that has been performed before. For example, in the passage that describes her bitterness over the death of her husband:

Like an experienced actress, she performed whatever

was hastily passed on to her. She had learned to memorize all those lines and songs from an early age. Now they simply rotted inside her.

People who saw her crying so hard, hitting her own chest and stamping her feet, would always be reminded of the actress on the stage who was playing the role of one mourning somebody's death: a woman crawling at a fast pace on her knees.

But the louder she cried, the less she felt inside. It was not because she was not sad. She cried so hard that she had already hurt her throat, she was so sick of it.

She had seen so many persons dear to her die one by one before her eyes. They got drowned in the river made of her tears. She was not just paralyzed; she simply concluded that, since the matter of life and death had long been settled by fate and could not be overturned anyway, she would certainly fall into the trap of fate if she cried for the death of someone dear. How did fate know that she would have so many tears to shed?
(179-180)

Having had three mourning experiences, T'i Hung has learned to regard mourning as an unavoidable ritual empty of meaning. She is simply required to perform a part that has been repeatedly performed before. All of a sudden, the line between reality and drama is blurred, and T'i Hung's life seems to acquire a dream-like dimension. The analogy between reality and drama appears again in a passage that describes the hollowness of T'i Hung's widowhood:

She suddenly realized the meaning of the play she saw at Li Ch'ing-feng's while she was still a maiden in Pei-men-yu. She now understood why, in the play, gods still had complaints to make about their life in heaven. A day in heaven was equivalent to a whole year on

earth. While the goddesses of the Yao pond passed a day in heaven, people in the mundane world would experience a lot. They were just like the fish that was being cooked in a pot and turned over from one side to another; they would have enough suffering. They died and came back to life again in each terrible catastrophe, experiencing again and again the repetitive cycle of death and rebirth.

That goddess, standing in the line of the heavenly gods, never suffered incarnation, and yet she yearned for the mundane life and she complained! (225)

Just like the goddess who yeans for the eventful life of the mundane world, the young, widowed T'i Hung is sick of her life to which nothing will ever (and indeed is not supposed to) happen. While in appearance she is leading a goddess-like life without worry, in fact a sense of hollowness is gnawing at her life. Suddenly, it seems that she is transported onto the stage and becomes that lonely goddess looking yearningly toward the mundane world.

No matter whether it is a confusion between drama and reality or a confusion between dream and reality, the subject who experiences such confusion must be a split subject, a person who is alienated from him/herself. For when one sees oneself in a dream or in a play, one is at the same time the character that is being observed and the spectator that is doing the observing. In some sense, we may say that the novel is based on the split subjectivity of T'i Hung. From the very beginning of her story, T'i Hung has been shown to be a split subject who sees and defines herself through the eyes of others. Seen in this light, the blurring of drama and reality or dream and reality in the text can be taken to reflect the split subjectivity of the protagonist. Indeed, such a device is found in many Western Gothic novels in which dream often turns out to be the other side of reality and reveals the hidden,

repressed psyche of women in a tyrannical patriarchal structure.⁸

In conclusion, we may say that *The Lane of Sweet Osmanthus* dramatizes a woman's relationship to patriarchal language. The protagonist not only projects her life story into the framework of patriarchal discourse but also attempts to seize the masculine power of father/authorship. In the story she writes, it seems that she indeed succeeds in those attempts to some degree when she becomes the Law and the Author of other people's stories though she is never fully in control of her own story. She presents a story to the public in which she plays the role of the perfect woman in patriarchal discourse, but the true story about her is actually the story of a woman raging for power and pleasure, both of which are supposed to be denied to women framed within the patriarchal discourse. The text is thus made up of stories--stories told by and about T'i Hung, stories that are often in conflict with each other.

II. Defeating Others, Defeating Itself: Narrative Language in Li Ang's *The Murder of a Husband*

If stories make up the world of *The Lane of Sweet Osmanthus*, in Li Ang's *The Murder of a Husband*, a story of the female protagonist, Lin Shih, is framed within stories already told by other people about her. Before the narration proper begins, the whole of Lin Shih's life and the case of her murdering her husband have already been reported in the newspapers. Thus, when the writer begins to tell the story of Lin Shih differently and presents the story from Lin Shih's viewpoint, her intention is all too clear. By juxtaposing her narration with previous narrations about Lin Shih, the writer tries to rescue Lin Shih out of the patriarchal discourse that victimizes her. In other words, narrative language in the text is construed as a means of liberating Lin Shih from the prison-house of others' language.

It is interesting to note that in both the novels we discuss, the female protagonists are defined in terms of a language that is alien to them. In *The Lane of Sweet Osmanthus*, as we have already mentioned, T'i Hung's life story begins with the language of other people as she tries to define herself in terms of that language. *The Murder of a Husband*, like *The Lane of Sweet Osmanthus*, tells the life story of a woman and, significantly, the narrative begins with a newspaper report that sums up the life of the woman before the narrator begins telling the woman's story. In other words, before Lin Shih's life story begins, she has already been defined by a language whose nature is essentially public and patriarchal. To borrow Gilbert and Gubar's phrase, Lin Shih is already "penned up and penned."⁹ The news report not only refutes the motive for the murder confessed to by Lin Shih but offers in its place what the reporter thinks is a more probable explanation of the case:

When asked why she killed her husband, Lin Shih said that he had always acted in a rather obnoxious way. Every day he gambled and got drunk, and then came home to beat her for fun. He knew that she was afraid of seeing bloodshed, but he forced her to go with him to the slaughter-house to watch him butcher pigs. On the day the event took place, the husband came home with a butcher's knife. Seeing that his face had a rather threatening expression, she was afraid that he would do something cruel to her. Therefore, when the husband fell asleep at dawn, she butchered him in the way she had been him butchering the pigs. She thought that since he had killed numerous pigs in his life, her murder of him was in fact a sort of vengeance for the lives that he had taken away.

The above confession by Lin Shih obviously does not make much sense. Since ancient times, the murder of

one's husband never took place unless motivated by adultery. There must be a man behind the scene. The court should look further into the case. . . . (pp. 75-6)

By representing the voice of public censorship, the news report not only encloses Lin Shih in its sentences but passes sentence on her. In the first part of the passage we quoted above, Lin Shih's voice seems to be heard when she makes her confession. But this voice is muffled as soon as it is heard because the writer of the news report immediately refutes what she says and dismisses it as something not to be believed. Thus, the only language that defines Lin Shih is the language of the news report, the voice of public moral censorship. At the end of the narrative, we are presented with a scene in which Lin Shih's women-neighbors comment maliciously on the case. Interpreting her cry of pain while she is having sexual intercourse as a cry of pleasure, they make all kinds of distortions of her life story. The end of the narrative, like its beginning, thus suggests the power of language over Lin Shih's life. It appears that Lin Shih has always been the victim of the language of other people. The operation of language in these two cases is comparable to a rape that violently and cruelly crushed Lin Shih and disabled her. Lin Shih is thus not only a victim of her husband's sadistic sexual violence but also a victim of the violence of public language.

The writer, in writing the story of Lin Shih, apparently intends the narrative to be read as a protest against the symbolic rape of Lin Shih by patriarchal language. Entering the interior world of Lin Shih and presenting the whole story from her point of view, the narrator uncovers what is covered up by patriarchal discourse which not only tries to impose a definition of Lin Shih but also tries to make it the authoritative version of truth. In the the story told by the narrator, the suffering of Lin Shih as a victim of a patriarchal structure is exposed and her muffled cry of pain is heard.

Narrative language in *The Murder of a Husband* therefore embodies a radical attempt to undercut the authority of patriarchal discourse and undermine its power.

As we have shown in the case of the news report, Lin Shih has become a prisoner of patriarchal discourse even before her life story begins. With her voice muffled, she has no chance to speak for herself or invite an alternative reading of her story. In the story, Lin Shih is likewise deprived of her voice. Weak in her control of language, she is forced to take silence as her feeble defense. Throughout the story, she is presented as a quiet woman. On just a few occasions does she attempt to speak. The first time is in the early period of her life when she is frightened by the sight of her menstrual blood and, about the same time, when she is troubled by a dream full of symbols of sex and violence. But no matter whether she tries to talk about her menses or her dream, she is always in want of an attentive audience. Soon, she is left alone. Missing her listeners, Lin Shih is finally exiled to the realm of silence.

Although we seldom hear her speak, we do hear her cry. Encountering the sadistic violence deliberately inflicted by her husband in their sexual intercourse, Lin Shih, unable to avoid or resist it, can only cry out in pain. But soon her voice is muffled as she learns how her cry is interpreted by her neighbors. One day Lin Shih, on her way to a river to wash clothes, overhears her neighbors talking about her:

. . . She stopped and listened. Someone was talking. The voice was rather husky. It must have been the voice of Ah-wang-kuang. At that point, the person was saying: "Lin Shih was really . . ." Some fragmented phrases were followed by a burst of laughter, and Lin Shih could discern the high-pitched voice of Chuen Chih among the voices of the others.

By instinct, Lin Shih stopped and hid herself behind a door that was left half open. This time she could hear

better, and the voice of Ah-wang-kuan continued: "As for men, I had the guts to do everything to show my innocence. If a woman really makes up her mind to do something, what can't she achieve?" Then contemptuously: "Strange that she always cries out so loud! She probably thinks that nobody knows how good it feels! This woman ruins the good reputation of us women. I waste my tongue on her! (164)

From then on, Lin Shih bites her lips and refuses to make any sound no matter how cruelly her husband treats her in their intercourse. She is silenced. We have mentioned in our discussion of *The Lane of Sweet Osmanthus* that words circulating in the back quarters of a traditional family or in one's neighborhood often have decisive power over the protagonist, for they represent public censorship to which the protagonist is subject. Now, if Lin Shih, when overhearing her neighbor's unjust comments, has no power to overturn that condemnation and can simply resort to silence as a way of vindicating her innocence, the narrator takes up a more aggressive posture. Leading us to explore the interior world of the suffering Lin Shih, the narrator shows us what Lin Shih really is and tells a story about Lin Shih that is quite different from the stories others tell about her. In other words, if Lin Shih is a silenced woman victimized by other people's language, the narrator avenges her victimization through a language act that defeats the language of other people.

However, if the narrator's narrative activity successfully helps Lin Shih out of one form of victimization, it also traps her into another. Since Lin Shih is constantly threatened by the violence of other people's language and her husband's rape, it is quite natural that she develops agoraphobia and often seeks to hide herself from the external world. As the contact with other people often brings pain, Lin Shih finds happiness and peace only when she is alone. The only happy

moment she has is when she stealthily stuffs herself with food in the kitchen. As soon as someone intrudes into her secret world of private enjoyment, her happiness is ruined. To be alone is the only possibility of escaping the violence of the external world. Seen in this way, the narrator's narrative behavior, while protecting her from the violence of other people's language, is comparable to the sexual behavior of her husband. The pen (penis) forces Lin Shih open so that it can come inside and make inscriptive marks. To push the point a step further, when the narrator describes the interior world of Lin Shih, is she not trying to force Lin Shih out of her hidden corner and expose her to the external world of which she is so much afraid? Moreover, remembering that pen, penis, and knife are almost interchangeable symbols in literature, we may stretch our metaphor even further. In the story, Lin Shih's husband is a butcher and Lin Shih, under the threat of her husband's sadistic rape, is constantly compared to the pig waiting to be slaughtered. On numerous occasions, the cry of pain uttered by Lin Shih is compared to the cry of pigs when they are being slaughtered (e.g., 84,88,90). In several bloody scenes, we see her husband stab his knife into the bodies of pigs; and in many similar bloody scenes, we see him force himself into the body of Lin Shih. Seen from another angle, is the narrator's narrativity not an act similar to that performed by the butcher? Both lay the body of Lin Shih/the pig out on the butcher's table and penetrate it with a pen/penis.

Following the narrative is an appendix: "Chan Chou Shih Murdered Her Husband 詹周氏殺夫." The appendix tells the story of a woman, Chan Chou Shih, who kills her butcher-husband because his sadistic treatment of her drives her crazy. Later, Chan Chou Shih is sentenced to death and carried to the market place to suffer the humiliating gaze of the public. This story, originally included in a collection of anecdotes written by another writer, apparently is the source of *The Murder of a Husband*. If we perform a Derridian gesture and

treat the appendix as part of the text, then the superimposition of the story of Chan Chou Shih on the story of Lin Shih generates a sense of cyclicity, suggesting that the history of Woman is only a series of repetitions. The time and place may change, but the story of Lin Shih (Chan Chou Shih) simply repeats itself incessantly. Their story is the story of numerous women driven crazy by the tyranny of the traditional social structure. They are the "madwomen in the attic."

It is important to note that on top of the death sentence, exposure to the gaze of the jeering and censoring crowd is intended as the severest punishment for Chan Chou Shih. Lin Shih, according to the news report that appears at the beginning of the novel, suffers exactly the same treatment. Like Chan Chou Shih, Lin Shih is carried on a truck and exposed to the censoring eyes of the crowd as the truck circles around the city. The end of the book thus corresponds to its beginning. In both cases, to be carried along the streets and exposed to the public gaze is a severe punishment for the convicted. We have mentioned in the above discussion that Lin Shih suffers agoraphobia. If there is ever any happy moment in her miserable life, it is when she can hide herself in a secret corner, momentarily absolved from contact with the outside world. Now, when the writer penetrates into her psychological world and transcribes her interior thoughts into words to be circulated in the book market and read by the public, is the writer not forcing her to endure the same punishment of exposure to the public gaze? In the story, Lin Shih is not only traded off by her uncle as merchandise but is herself trading sex for food. Her existence is based essentially on the economy of value exchange. Now, when Lin Shih is transformed into words and displayed in the book market to be purchased, is she not repeating her fate of always being treated like merchandise, an object to be exchanged?¹¹ Finally, when we read her and subject the writing about her to criticism and incessant argument, are we not in some sense

also participating in the ritual of public censorship and becoming members of the persecuting crowd that watch her being carried from one street to another? No matter how sympathetic the writer and the critic intend their writing to be, is their language not placing another layer onto the language that has already enclosed Lin Shih, thus pushing her a step further into the imprisoning labyrinth of language? Without the writer's narrative, Lin Shih will be forever enclosed in hostile patriarchal discourse represented by the news report at the beginning of the book and the gossip of her neighbors at the end of the narrative. But does the writer really succeed in liberating her from the prisonhouse of other people's language?

Like *The Lane of Sweet Osmanthus*, *The Murder of a Husband* tells a story about a woman's relationship to language. But unlike T'i Hung, Lin Shih never gains any power over language. Silence and inarticulate cries are her only defense against the violence of the external world--the rape by her husband and the rape by the public's language. Lacking a voice of her own, she can only be defined by a language alien to her. The problem is that, as we have pointed out, no matter how sympathetic the language is intended to be, it is apt to be transformed into a form of imprisonment as soon as it is uttered. The only way out of the dilemma seems to have Lin Shih be the teller of her own story. But what kind of narrative would we have if the inarticulate Lin Shih is really made to be the narrator of her life story? Probably it can only be a tale, to borrow the oft-quoted lines from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, "Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, /Signifying nothing."

Coda

If *The Lane of Sweet Osmanthus* depicts a woman's aspiration for authorship and the problems she encounters in

her attempt to seize the pen, *The Murder of a Husband* calls our attention to the dangerous trap that a woman might easily fall into if what she wants is not simply to seize the phallic sign but to subvert it from within. The question for a woman writer, as Helene Cixous points out, can never be "a question of appropriating [men's] instruments, their concepts, their places for oneself or of wishing oneself in their position of mastery" (114). But then, what is the correct feminine practice of writing? Various theories all have their say on this matter, but it seems that none comes up with a truly satisfactory, practical method.¹² Perhaps, to quote H el ene Cixous again, "It is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded--which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system; it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophico-theoretical domination" (253). We have explored through our discussion of two women novelists' texts the complicated issue of woman's relationship to signs. Now our efforts have led us to a question that so far has not been properly answered. Maybe it is with this open-endedness that the present essay should stop. For, after all, phallic closure would not suit an article whose very discourse inscribes a feminist gesture.

Notes

¹ By women's fiction, we mean fictional works by women that deal essentially with women's experience.

² See Luce Irigaray, "This Sex Which Is Not One" in *New French Feminism*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (1980; rpt. New York: Schocken Books, 1981) 99-106.

³ Cf. H el ene Cixous's remarks that "It is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that

is, in a place other than silence. Women should break out of the snare of silence. They shouldn't be conned into accepting a domain which is the margin or the harem." See her "The Laugh of the Medusa" in *New French Feminism*, p. 251.

⁴ See Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), 13.

⁵ Many feminist critics find that nineteenth-century literature by women is characterized by a strong impulse to dramatize women's imprisonment in a patriarchal structure. For a discussion of women's anxieties about space in the literature of nineteenth-century and twentieth-century women, see Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, pp. 83 [92. Cf. also Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (New York: Doubleday, 1976) 90-112.

⁶ In his *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (1984; rpt., New York: Vintage Books, 1985), Peter Brooks argues that the desire to plot one's own life constitutes the basic narrative drive in many nineteenth-century and twentieth-century novels.

⁷ Although, according to Lacan, split subjectivity inevitably occurs on one's entry into the symbolic order and hence is the lot of every man and woman, women, compared with men, often encounter more difficulties as they try to position themselves in relation to the symbolic order governed by the name of the Father. In women's texts, the split character of the female characters is often foregrounded. Cf. Cora Kaplan's "'Speaking/Writing/Feminism,' On Gender & Writing" in *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Mary Eagleton (Basil Blackwell, 1986), 180-181. On the other hand, split subjectivity is also believed by many feminist critics to reflect women's fragmentation in patriarchal society. Cf. for example, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 75-83.

⁸ For a discussion of the female Gothic, see Ellen Moers, *Literary Women*, 90-112.

⁹ *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 13.

¹⁰ The relationship of women's silence and their consequent subjection to men's writing is summed up adeptly by Xaviere Gauthier: "Throughout the course of history, [women] have been

mute, and it is doubtless by virtue of this mutism that men have been able to speak and write. As long as women remain silent, they will be outside the historical process." See her "Is there such a thing as women's writing?" in *New French Feminism*, 162.

¹¹ Cf. Luce Irigaray's remarks on women as exchange-value for men in "This sex which is not one" in *New French Feminism*, p. 105.

¹² For a discussion of various French theorists' views on this matter, see Ann Rosalind Jones, "Inscribing Femininity: French Theories of the Feminine" in *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn (1985; rpt. London and New York: Routledge, 1988), pp. 80-112. "Part II: French Feminist Theory" in Toril Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985, rpt., London and New York: Routledge, 1987) is also helpful. Luce Irigaray, Helen Cixous, and Julia Kristeva try to posit a link between women's bodily experience and feminine writing. However, this view of the female body as a source of feminine writing is not shared by all feminist theorists. See Ann Rosalind Jones, "Writing the body: toward an understanding of *l'écriture féminine*" in *Feminist Criticism and Social Change: Sex, Class and Race in Literature and Culture*, ed. Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt (New York and London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 86-101. Cf. also Deborah Cameron's *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* (The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1985).

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