



Yan Qigang

**FEMINIST
LITERARY
CRITICISM AND
FEMALE WRITERS
IN CANADA AND
CHINA**

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1

Introduction:**Feminisms and Feminist Literary Criticism
in the West and China**

Canadians and Chinese, separated by their geographical distance and ideological difference, do not know enough about each other's literary works, particularly those written by women. Since the 1970s, Canada has witnessed a new flowering of fiction written by women. Many of these women's works describe the lives of women, and they are mainly concerned with exploration and survival, crossing boundaries, challenging limits, and glimpsing new prospects. They are characterized by the direct engagement with the cultural and social problems that women face. For Chinese women writers, the last decade is considered to be a new era. The Chinese literary scene of the post-Mao era saw the emergence of hundreds of stories with love themes, most of which problematize and challenge the traditional conception of love. More significantly, the emphases of Chinese feminist writing were more political in the sense that women writers were expressing angry feelings of injustice rampant in their social and political life and were striving to raise women's "political" awareness of their oppression by men.

This book explores and investigates the different thematic concerns and narrative strategies of Canadian and Chinese women writers. More importantly, this book also demonstrates that although the female characters of the Canadian and Chinese women writers have different cultural backgrounds and face different social, political, and economic problems, they have much in common. They all express a strong feminist consciousness: they reject passivity, they refuse to accept victim positions that have been imposed upon them, and, above all, they are developing a strong and unquenchable desire to search for their own identity. To appreciate such literary values as embodied in Margaret Atwood, Mavis Gallant, Joy Kogawa, Alice Munro, Wang Anyi, Zhang Jie, and Zhang Xinxin, Western feminist literary theories and Third

World feminist criticism will be used.

Western Feminist Criticism

Western feminist scholarship received its impetus from the women's movement of the late 1960s and 1970s, but it participates in the more general dethroning of authority initiated by Freud, Marx and Saussure leading to "a redefinition of ideas of human nature and reality which has problematized traditional concerns of literary criticism, including established canons and ways of reading."¹ Feminist scholars focus on diverse social constructions of femaleness and maleness in order to understand the universal phenomenon of male dominance. Simone de Beauvoir's statement that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman . . . it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature" summarizes the thesis of her *The Second Sex*.² Taking this as a point of departure, recent feminist scholarship proceeds to "deconstruct" the social construction of gender and the cultural paradigms that endorse it. As Greene and Kahn put it, "[f]eminist scholarship both originates and participates in the larger efforts of feminism to liberate women from the structures that have marginalized them, and as such it seeks not only to reinterpret, but to change the world."³

¹Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn, "Feminist Scholarship and Social Construction of Women," in Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn, eds., *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1985) 2.

²Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Knopf, 1964) 301.

³Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn, "Feminist Scholarship and Social Construction of Women," in Gayle Greene and Coppélia, eds., *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1985) 2.

Western feminist criticism draws on a number of discursive strategies, in particular, Marxist and Deconstructionist. Marx himself had little to say about the oppression of women. The major benefit of Marxism for women who call themselves Marxist feminists is that it shows how to analyze a social system with a view to getting it changed. Two well-known statements by Marx have provided those feminists with a point of departure: "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it," and "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness." By contradicting widely accepted doctrines, Marx was attempting to put people's thought into reverse gear. First, philosophy has been merely airy contemplation; it is time that it became engaged with the real world. Translated into a feminist point of view, Marx's first statement then reads: "We intend to change the world so totally that someday the texts of masculinist writers will be anthropological curiosities."⁴ All activities therefore become instrumental to that end, including the study of literature, which is not to be undertaken simply for "its own sake" in a belletristic or aestheticist manner, but as a means to transforming readers who will then proceed to transform the world. Feminist criticism must be an oppositional practice based on resistance to the dominant hegemony. Secondly, it is believed that cultural life, social institutions, and legal systems were the creations of human and divine reason, but "Marx reverses this formulation and argues that all mental (ideological) systems are the products of social and economic existence."⁵ Marxism identifies capitalism (and the modes of production on which it is based) as the material base of class system, which is the source of all oppression, and declares that the specific subjection of women will end with the general demise of oppression which is to follow

⁴Andrea Dworkin, *Our Blood: Prophecies and Discourses on Sexual Policies* (New York: Harper, 1976) 9.

⁵Raman Selden, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* (Kentucky: the UP of Kentucky, 1985) 23.

the destruction of capitalism.

Feminists rely on Marxist categories of economic production to include women in an account of social and productive life. Marxist feminists claim that socialist feminism is their bridge to freedom. They see it as a radical, disciplined, and all-encompassing solution to the problems of race, sex, sexuality, and class struggle.⁶ They argue that only by overthrowing the economic system of capitalism can they liberate women and everybody else who is also oppressed. For socialism as an economic system would reorganize production, redistribute wealth, and redefine state power so that the exploiters are expropriated and workers gain hegemony. In a socialist society, they believe, male supremacy would not function, because socialism connotes a higher form of human relations that cannot possibly exist under capitalism. Unfortunately, so far large-scale experiments in radical socialization have produced only unsuccessful results.

While socialist feminists have been deeply concerned with the social construction of femininity and sexual difference, they have been uneasy about integrating social and political determinations with an analysis of the psychological ordering of gender. Socialist feminist criticism tends to foreground the social and economic elements of the narrative and socialize what it can of its psychological portions. It is assumed that women's anger and anguish should be amenable to repair through social change. Therefore, "[a] positive emphasis on the psychological level is regarded as a valorization of the anarchic and regressive, a way of returning women to their subordinate ideological place within the dominant culture, as unreasoning social beings."⁷

⁶Nellie Wong, "Socialist Feminism: Our Bridge to Freedom," *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, ed. Chandra Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991) 290.

⁷Ann Rosalind Jones, "Inscribing Femininity: French Theories of the Feminine," *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn (London: Methuen, 1985) 99.

Other feminists disagree, however, that the narrow economic focus of much classical Marxist thought will permit female oppression to disappear as a result of economic revolution, because socialist feminism based on Marxist thought seems unable to explain the particular conditions of women as an oppressed social group and to make significant contributions to their transformation. Although socialist feminists are right in sensing that women's lack of economic independence plays an important role in their oppression, it would be wrong to assume that economic independence, or simply the ability to earn an income, is all it takes to solve all the problems that women face in their daily life. This is because the lingering power of patriarchy consists of both economics and ideology. More specifically, although the oppression of women is indeed a material reality, it is also a question of sexual ideology concerned with the ways men and women perceive themselves and the opposite sex in a male-dominated society, and perceptions and behavior which range from the brutally explicit to the deeply unconscious.⁸ Marxism can neither explain women's private, unpaid work (which could not be placed in the category of labor) nor account for the role of domestic and familial life in the class organization of society. Even Engels himself admitted that "while [I] and Marx always regarded the economic aspect of society as the *ultimate* determinant of other aspects, [we] also recognized that art, philosophy, and other forms of consciousness are 'relatively autonomous' and possess an independent ability to alter men's existence."⁹ French feminists, in their efforts to reject a "masculine" authority or truth, have developed a great interest in the Lacanian and Derridian types of post-structuralist theory.

Implicit in much of Anglo-American feminist criticism is the assumption that "the text, and language itself, are transparent

⁸For further discussion of this problem, see "Appendix II: Female Victims in Western and Chinese Plays."

⁹Raman Selden, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* (Kentucky: the UP of Kentucky, 1985) 24.

media which reflect a pre-existent objective reality, rather than signifying systems which inscribe ideology and are actually constitutive of reality."¹⁰ French feminists, on the contrary, consider the feminine to be unrepresentable by conventional language, because such a language is a masculine construct that thrives on female absence. As Greene and Kahn put it:

French feminist criticism, which participates in Derridian deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalysis, has presented a radical challenge to humanist-empiricist assumptions. The most radical feminist literary criticism has been informed by structuralist and post-structuralist French thought.¹¹

French feminist theories, based upon Derridian deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalysis, center on language as a means through which men have reinforced their claim to a unified identity and relegated women to the negative pole of binary oppositions that justify masculine supremacy: subject/object, culture/nature, law/chaos, man/woman. As Ann Rosalind Jones summarizes:

Julia Kristeva posits the concept of the semiotic, a rhythmic free play that she relates to mother-infant communication, and looks for in modernist writers. Luce Irigaray emphasizes *différence*, a totality of women's characteristics defined positively against masculine norms, and imagines a specifically feminist language, a *parler femme*. Hélène Cixous celebrates women's sexual capabilities, including motherhood, and calls for an *écriture féminine* through which women will bring their bodily energies and previously unimagined

¹⁰Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn, "Feminist Scholarship and the Social Construction of Women," *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn (London: Methuen, 1985) 25.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 26.

unconscious into view.¹²

One major task of feminist criticism is to dismantle phallogentrism, which is the structuring of man as the central reference point of thought, and of the phallus as the symbol of sociocultural authority. And that task has been made possible by the deconstructive philosophy of Derrida, whose writing constitutes a powerful attack on the mystique of the center in conceptual systems. Three types of centering come under damaging scrutiny in Derridian analysis: "phonocentrism" in linguistics, "logocentrism" in philosophy, and "phallogentrism" in psychoanalysis. According to Derrida, "the 'center,' as a concept in classical systems of thought, is merely a construct which is brought into existence by the privileging of some signifiers at the expense of others, and for reasons which turn out to be in the interest of those who do the privileging."¹³ People desire a center because it guarantees "being as presence." Western thought has developed innumerable terms which operate as centering principles: being, essence, substance, truth, form, beginning, end, man, God, and so on. This desire for center is called "logocentrism" in Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1976). A strategy to decentre logocentrism is to reverse the values placed on each component in the binary terms which constitute it. "Writing" would thus become privileged at the expense of "speech," "absence" at the expense of "presence," and so on, although the aim is not the establishing of a new "center" but a free play of terms. Somewhere along the line the pair "male-female" would get written as "female-male," thus deprivileging the order condoned by an androcentric society which, in psychoanalytic terms, is

¹²Ann Rosalind Jones, "Inscribing Femininity: French Theories of the Feminine," *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn (London: Methuen, 1985) 80.

¹³K. K. Ruthven, *Feminist Literary Studies: An Introduction* (Cambridge, London: Cambridge UP, 1984) 51.

"phallogocentric"¹⁴ Hélène Cixous is most directly aware of this line of thought in Derrida. In her "Sorties," she uses the Derridian methodology of reversing and displacing hierarchized oppositions. As one critic observes:

French philosopher Jacques Derrida's general project of a subversive questioning of the Western philosophical tradition and its metaphysics has opened up new areas of study that no longer take for granted such basics as the definition of "Man" as a rational being, in control of everything.¹⁵

Lacan's theories have much influence on Kristeva's thinking. The starting-point of Kristeva's psychoanalytic theory is Lacan's distinction between the "imaginary" and the "symbolic." In the "imaginary," the child experiences unity with its mother, and the price to be paid for the acquisition of language in the "symbolic" is repression of desire for that lost unity with the mother, exile from the "imaginary." Kristeva elucidates her critique by introducing a distinction between the "semiotic" and the "symbolic," in which the former is related to Freud's primary and the latter to his secondary processes. Kristeva's distinction between "semiotic" and "symbolic" corresponds to Lacan's between the "imaginary" and the "symbolic." The interaction between these two terms then constitutes the signifying process. The semiotic refers to the prelinguistic disposition of instinctual drives as they affect language and its practice. It precedes the symbolic, with which it is related in dialectical conflict. According to Kristeva, the symbolic is a domain of position and judgment. It comes into being later than the semiotic, at the time of the mirror stage. It is "language as nomination, sign, and syntax." And "it involves the thetic phase, the identification of the subject and its

¹⁴Ibid., 53.

¹⁵Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction* (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1988) 18.

distinction from objects, and the establishment of a sign system."¹⁶

Significantly, Kristeva's semiotic involves the pre-Oedipal primary processes. The endless flow of pulsions is gathered together in the "chora," a term Kristeva borrowed from Plato's *Timaeus*. Kristeva appropriates and redefines this Platonic concept and concludes that the "chora" is neither a sign nor a position. This pre-verbal "chora" is anterior to symbolic signification, denotation, syntax, the word, and even the syllable. It functions in discourse as a supplementary register to that of the sign and meaning. It constitutes the heterogeneous, disruptive dimension of language. The advantage of Kristeva's thinking for women is that it places the semiotic and the symbolic not in an order of supercession (such that the first has to be abandoned before the second can be attained) but in an order of interaction. Interplay between the semiotic and the symbolic constitutes the subject in language, not as a fixity but as a subject-in-process. This implies that the "chora" can never be destroyed, no matter how much it is repressed.

Kristeva's important distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic has established the very foundation for many other polarities. Her work has often taken as its central concept a polarity between "closed" rational systems and "open" disruptive systems. The semiotic throws into confusion all tight divisions between masculine and feminine and proceeds to deconstruct all the scrupulous binary oppositions by which societies such as ours survive.¹⁷ According to Kristeva, the "semiotic" may be associated with the female body, and the "symbolic" is linked with the Law of the Father which censors and represses in order that discourse may come into being. Woman is the silence of the "unconscious" which precedes discourse. "She is the 'Other,' which stands

¹⁶Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1980) 136, 19.

¹⁷Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983) 189.

outside and threatens to disrupt the conscious (rational) order of speech."¹⁸ What is ordered and rationally accepted is continually being threatened by the "heterogeneous" and the "irrational." On the other hand, since the pre-Oedipal phase is undifferentiated sexually, the semiotic is not unequivocally feminine. Although the semiotic is in Kristeva's words "connoted" as maternal and co-extensive with the pre-Oedipal, to take it for a specificity of women's writing would mean a gross misunderstanding of Kristeva's theory. Obviously, some dominant forms of avant-garde writing are "feminine" despite the fact that they have been produced by men. Kristeva relates the use of sound in poetry to primary sexual impulses. In his poetry, Mallarmé, "by subverting the laws of syntax, subverts the Law of the Father, thus identifying with the mother through his recovery of the 'maternal' semiotic flux."¹⁹ Avant-garde literature demonstrates how the primary processes invade the rational ordering of language and threaten to disrupt the unified subjectivity of the "speaker" and the reader.

The psychoanalytic theories about instinctive drives have especially attracted feminist critics who have attempted to articulate the subversive and apparently formless resistance of some women writers and critics to male-dominated literary values. Given that Freud's text clearly communicates a vision of woman as deficient man, feminist resistance to psychoanalysis is understandable. Psychoanalysis can neither distinguish between patriarchy and civilization nor see female sexuality in positive or autonomous terms. And yet both in France and in America, the usefulness of psychoanalytic inquiry to feminist inquiry has become more and more apparent. "Feminist psychoanalysis" basically evolves out of two currents of neo-Freudian theorizing: that of the object relations analysts in England and America and that of the Lacanians in France. Whereas American feminists locate the core of patriarchal power in inter-personal relations and

¹⁸Raman Selden, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* (Kentucky: the UP of Kentucky, 1985) 144.

¹⁹Ibid.

would radically reconstruct the family, French feminists explore how patriarchal power functions on the symbolic level and would deconstruct the sentence. In other words, French feminist theory investigates the ways that "the feminine" has been defined, represented, or repressed in the symbolic systems of language, metaphysics, psychoanalysis, and art.

Feminist criticism exposes the prejudices at work in our appreciation of cultural artifacts, and shows how the linguistic medium promotes and transmits the values woven through the fabric of our society. Whereas the egalitarian argument in feminist criticism demands equal representation in literature of women's and men's experience of life, post-structuralist feminism denounces representation itself as already a patriarchal paradigm.

Chinese Feminist Consciousness

Karen Offen insists that in order to understand fully the historical range and possibilities of feminism, "we must locate the origins and growth of these ideas within a variety of cultural traditions, rather than postulating a hegemonic model for their development on the experience of any single national or sociolinguistic tradition—be it Anglo-American, or French . . . or any other."²⁰ In other words, feminism must be inclusive rather than exclusive, progressive rather than static; it must be "revised" by expanding our investigative horizons.

Obviously, contemporary feminism rose mainly out of concerns of Western bourgeois women, and only in recent years have we heard voices of black women, lesbians, and women in the Third World expressing feminist views. Although feminist literary criticism has been thriving in Western countries in the last decades, it has not, in fact, rallied under its banner a significant number of supporters in many Third World countries. Such reality makes people, both in the West and China, wonder if there is, for

²⁰Karen Offen, "Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach," *Signs* 14.1 (Autumn 1988): 151.

example, a conscious feminist movement in China. One critic defines feminism as "the expression of a consciousness that nowadays penetrates into all spheres of life including male-dominated institutions, organizations, and parties. . . . Where women start raising questions instead of obeying, fighting instead of accepting."²¹ If we follow this definition of the term, feminism does without doubt exist in China. This assertion is enforced by Karen Offen's definition of feminists. According to her, feminists are people who recognize the validity of women's own interpretations of their lived experience and needs, exhibit consciousness of, discomfort at, or even anger over institutionalized injustice (or inequity) toward women as a group by men in a given society, and advocate the elimination of that injustice by problematizing and challenging the coercive power, force, or authority that supports male prerogative in that particular culture.²²

In China, "[a] history of the many struggles of the women's movement . . . has revealed to women the magnitude of the problem, both the depth and tenacity of the economic and ideological foundations of women's oppression in society, and the sensitivity that surrounds such a struggle."²³ The ancient Chinese concept of *yin-yang*²⁴ originally symbolized the interaction of dynamic principles in the universe. Eventually their associations changed. *Yin* became equated with passivity, darkness, degeneration, and femaleness, while *yang* was associated with activity, creativity, light, and maleness. This philosophy, expanded

²¹Anna Gerstlacher, Ruth Keen, Wolfgang Kubin, Margit Miosga, and Jenny Schon, eds., *Women and Literature in China* (Bochum: Studienverlag Brockmeyer, 1985) 237-238.

²²Karen Offen, "Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach," *Signs* 14.1 (Autumn 1988): 152.

²³Elisabeth Croll, *Feminism and Socialism in China* (London: Routledge, 1978) 332.

²⁴All transcriptions of Chinese are in *pinyin*.

by Confucius in the 5th century BC, formed the very foundation for the intensely patriarchal culture of traditional China. In that culture, Chinese women were subject to the Three Obediences (to fathers, husbands, and sons) and to the Four Virtues (to be humble, silent, clean and adorned to please the husband, and hard-working).²⁵

Political and social movements provided the context for the development of women's movements in China. The late nineteenth century witnessed the beginning of the emancipation of Chinese women. Threatened by Western invasion, the ruling class wooed female resources to increase productivity and strengthen national defense. Under these circumstances, women were, for the first time in Chinese history, given equal educational opportunities and, with their increasing participation in political movements, women's status began to improve. Women played an important role in the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty and the birth of the Republic. Yet after the 1911 Revolution the ruling party refused to make provision for women's suffrage and gender equality in the Constitution of the Republic. A women's suffrage movement and continued protests from women's groups failed to produce any significant change.

Women's movements in China regained momentum during the May Fourth Movement. Starting as a patriotic movement of Chinese intellectuals in reaction to domestic turmoil and the threat of Japanese militarism, "the May Fourth Movement was actually a combined intellectual and sociopolitical movement to achieve national independence, the emancipation of the individual, and a just society by the modernization of China."²⁶ The May Fourth Movement of 1919 then grew into the New Cultural Movement, which was an attempt to reform China. The intellectuals

²⁵For detailed analysis of Chinese women's problems, see "Appendix III: On *The Injustice Done to Tou Ngo*" and "Appendix IV: The Female History in the Chinese Erotic Fiction."

²⁶Chow Tse-tsung, *The May Fourth Movement* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1960) 358-359.