

A Clash Between Two Worlds Of Women: One Woman's Escape From Bondage To Liberty In Su Tong's "Another Life For Women"

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Abstract:

One Of Su Tong's Specialities Is Writing About The Lives Of Women. In The Novel "Another Life For Women", Su Tong Describes Different Types Of Struggles And Limitations That Women Face In The Chinese Society. Furthermore, Through The Protagonists, He Highlights Women's Weaknesses And Vulnerability In A Patriarchal Society And Conveys The Message That Women During That Period Were Doomed To An Inescapable Tragic Fate Which, On Rare Occasions, Could Only Be Evaded After Constant Struggle With Their Male Or Female Superiors And, On A Wider Scale, With The Social System Established By Feudal Society.

Keywords: *Su Tong; Another Life For Women; Women's Struggles; Overcoming Fear; Women Escaping*

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I. Introduction

The novel "Another Life for Women" is a medium-length novel written by one of China's outstanding twentieth century writers – Su Tong. This novel is centred on aspects of the lives of five unique yet interconnected women, two sisters and three shop assistants, who coexist separately in two parts of the same place. The aforementioned sisters are the Jian sisters – Jian Shaozhen and Jian Shaofen – who live in seclusion on the second floor of a two-storey building that they inherited from their parents, and where they spend their days doing embroidery indoors which is also their means of income. The other three women are shop assistants – Gu Yaxian, Su Meixian and Hang Suyu – who work in the Pickling Shop on the ground floor of the same building, directly below the sisters' place of abode, separated by a board which is the ceiling for the shop assistants and the floor for the Jane sisters. This board structure separates the quiet secluded life led by the Jian sisters and the noisy and sometimes chaotic events that take place in the Pickling Shop below which is also a representative of the wider society. According to Sollars and Jennings (2008), Su Tong tends to capture the "harsh reality that besets many Chinese women, especially those who reside in rural provinces where traditional rituals and customs still permeate all life."¹ This paper seeks to analyse the fears of the protagonist Jian Shaofen and the struggles that she experiences while seeking to make a transition from a world of bondage to a world of liberty, which leads to a major conflict that arises between Jian Shaozhen and Gu Yaxian who are the leading representative figures of each of the two worlds presented in the novel.

II. The Two Worlds

The Lonely World of the Jian Sisters

In writing about Chinese women, Li (2011) asserts that "Su Tong creates diverse images of women such as wives and concubine of a polygamous household, spinsters in 'Embroidery' [also known as 'Another Life for Women'] and prostitutes in 'Blush.'"² In these novels, the reader can identify the loneliness and pain that women suffer, which Su Tong portrays in a way this is believed to be influenced by "the American female writer Carson McCullers (1917-1967)."² In "Another Life for Women", loneliness is highlighted in the home of the Jian sisters where they live in isolation from the outside world by maintaining minimum contact and only go out when necessary. Jian Shaofen is the younger of the two sisters who live above the Pickling Shop. In this home, she lives a life of solitude as dictated by her older sister, Jian Shaozhen. The parents of the two sisters died while Jian Shaofen was still a young child, and so Jian Shaozhen has always played the parental role in Jian Shaofen's life. As a result, Shaofen naturally reveres her older sister who has cared for and protected her since the death of their parents. However, Shaozhen, being the authority figure in the household, had long decided to maintain and abide by certain traits and practices upheld by their parents which include the sisters engaging in minimum interaction

with the outside world and avoiding men. The Jian sisters grew up extremely close and this strong endearment between the two is evidenced by them sleeping together on the same bed, under the same quilt. However, they stopped sleeping under the same quilt when Shaofen was 16 years old because had a dream one night that a stone was pressing on her chest, but when she woke up, she realized that it was Shaozhen's hand that was pressing on her breasts. Since then, each sister slept with her own quilt, but Shaozhen would sleep on the outer part of the bed which is symbolic of her protecting Shaofen who tends to be fearful but, interestingly, this scene also presents Shaozhen as the first and main obstacle that Shaofen will have to overcome to break free from the life of solitude and may have been the beginning of the eventual separation between the two.

In her life of solitude, one of the main struggles that Shaofen had was to live a life that was designed for her and has always been strongly influenced by her older sister. She undoubtedly admires and respects her sister, and she is evidently appreciative of the role that she has played in her life growing up. However, she realizes that she is no longer a child but a mature woman who needs to experience more of what life and the world have to offer instead of living in bondage. In the novel, the reader notices this desire for freedom when Shaofen sits by the window, looking out at the wedding car that passes by in the rain, and stands to see the bride. While in confinement, a window may be seen as a doorway or an open link to the outside world where there are opportunities for progress, exploration, and knowledge. It also symbolizes a bright future as the window allows one to witness from a distance what they are not able to experience unless they come out from the confines of the building. Additionally, windows symbolize a channel of hope in the sense that when a window is open, it allows natural light to enter a place that would be dark had it been closed, and this is indicative of the light that is needed to penetrate the lives of the Jian sister for them to be able to live a more fulfilling life. However, while Shaofen longingly gazes through the window at the wedding procession, she is interrupted by Shaozhen who believes that the newlyweds are unlucky to be getting married on a rainy day and later orders Shaofen to close the window, which is a similar reaction to Shaofen enjoying the freshness of the recently borne peaches on the tree. This act portrays Shaozhen as an obstacle that stands between Shaofen and her deep desire to get married, and further implies that Shaozhen is indirectly expressing her disapproval of Shaofen getting married and enjoying life outside of her domain. Shaofen immediately closes the window at Shaozhen's command which suggests that she fears her older sister and suppresses her own desires to accommodate her sister's desires because she does not wish to offend her, hence retreating into a dark and gloomy place both physically and emotionally.

Moreover, on the aspect of marriage, neighbours would often visit the Jian sisters to encourage them to get married, especially because they were getting old. These efforts tend to be futile as these conversations only stir up and demonstrate Shaozhen's hatred towards men and the idea of marriage because she believes that men are only interested in their property that they inherited from their parents. This ideology presents Shaozhen as a woman who firmly believes in maintaining traditions even if requires not changing with the times and leading a stagnant life. For Shaozhen, marriage is not a constitution of the world she has created for Shaofen and herself, and therefore sees it as an outside concept that must be rejected, which is ironic because her parents – the persons whose values she claims to uphold – were also married. Shaofen's deep desire to get married and Shaozhen's utter contempt towards marriage foreshadow that it will take marriage to separate the two sisters and break Shaofen free from the secluded life in the world created and controlled by her domineering sister.

The Lively World of the Three Female Shop Assistants

The other world presented in the novel is the world of the three female shop assistants in the Pickling Shop which reflects the lives of typical women in the "outside" world. These dominant females, namely Hang Suyu, Su Meixian and Gu Yaxian, all possess strong unique characteristics, and their relationship is described by the narrator as "tenuous and volatile"³. Su Meixian has been working in the shop since age 17 and the narrator mentions that she has been working there the longest. She tends to complain to the other two women about the vicissitudes of life and, at times, even complain about the other two female assistants. As the novel progresses, the reader realizes that Su Meixian thrives on gossiping and takes pleasure in spreading rumours without giving too much detail and will make the greatest possible effort to acquire substantial evidence to support her claims. Hang Suyu is presented with a lively personality as seen in her provocative arguments with the other women and her comical interaction with Sun Hanzhou, the manager of the Pickling Shop. As a married woman, such public display of whimsical interaction with a man intimates that Hang Suyu is a daring and fearless woman. She also plays the role of an extremely aggressive woman who is potentially violent which is possibly due to the unwavering support of her violent husband. Gu Yaxian is portrayed as a self-serving woman who tries to maintain a positive relationship with everyone including those whom she loathes. Even though she appears to have had a good relationship with Su Meixian, when she realized that money was missing, she did not hesitate to hold Su Meixian as one of the suspects and investigated her. She has no allegiance to either of the other two assistants, and so when they fought in the shop, Gu Yaxian was quick to go to the head office to complain about both women. However, her contempt towards Hang Suyu is exposed when she secretly suggests that they transfer Hang Suyu to another location. Gu Yaxian is tactical and cunning and, unlike Hang Suyu and Su Meixian who will engage in

direct confrontation with each other, Gu Yaxian tends to use indirect methods to achieve her goals and deal with problematic people in her life.

The “world” in which these three female shop assistants thrive is in stark contrast to that of the Jian sisters. The Pickling Shop is an open place where people from all walks of life enter and leave at will, while the home of the Jian sisters is restricted. The narrator describes the door to enter their home as a low door that is specifically designed for them, one through which no man has ever entered to emphasise their seclusion and rejection of outside influences. Regarding interaction with men, the sisters do not allow men to enter their home, let alone to engage in any form of socialization with them, while in the Pickling Shop, the three women interact with male customers and their male superiors regularly. The Jian sisters' home is normally a quiet and peaceful environment where daily activities are well structured so much that Gu Yaxian, a member of the adjacent world is able to determine what the sisters are doing based on what time of day it is. The Pickling Shop, however, is typically noisy and bustling with commercial and social activities, frolicking, quarrelling and even fighting at times. Interestingly, the activities of each world do not go unnoticed by the members of the other world. When the sisters are performing their daily chores, the shop assistants can hear their every movement as well as the movements of the objects they are using. Similarly, the sisters are able to distinguish between the regular discourse between customers and the shop assistants and arguments as well as fights that take place in the Pickling Shop. The narrator's descriptions of these two places throughout the novel may cause the reader to occasionally forget that these two places exist at the same address, on the same building. However, the Pickling Shop below the home of the Jian sisters, which may be symbolic of the way in which Jian Shaozhen views the shop assistants as women of a lower class than herself. However, the Pickling Shop being at the bottom indicates that it is the foundation of the sisters' home and are unable to get rid of it without destroying their own home, thus highlighting the importance of the outside world to the world that Jian Shaozhen has created for her sister and herself.

By producing a vivid description of the two worlds that exist in the novel, the writer also highlights the extent of the difficulties that Jian Shaofen will have to overcome in each of both worlds in order to live the life that she desires, in that, she needs to overcome her fear of abandoning and disenchanting her older sister who is resilient in her decision to remain in solitude as well as her fear of the unknown and elements of the outside world such as men, crowd and physical contact among others.

III. Overcoming Fear & Breaking Barriers

Jian Shaofen has spent all her life under the protective wings of her sister who keeps her safe by shielding her from the outside world. As a result, despite their differences in perspectives, they share a strong bond that cannot be easily broken. Jian Shaofen respects her older sister and her approach to life, but she believes that the time has long passed for her to depart from the life of a fearful, inexperienced little girl who needs the protection of her older sister. Therefore, the most logical and appropriate means to achieve this goal is that Jian Shaofen gets married. However, Jian Shaozhen's antipathy towards marriage makes it difficult for Jian Shaofen to pursue this dream without offending or breaking her sister's heart. This difficulty is further highlighted in the altercation between the sisters when they opened the window that they never normally open and Jian Shaofen saw two peaches on the tree in the backyard. Jian Shaofen enthusiastically calls her sister to admire these fresh fruits, but she gets agitated and cuts them off the tree instead which leads to a minor argument between the two. This made Jian Shaofen sad, as she resigned to crying in the darkness with the window half close. It may seem as if Jian Shaozhen has once again made an advancement in crushing Jian Shaofen's dreams, but her actions also weakened the emotional connection that Jian Shaofen has with her which will lead to their eventual separation. Women portrayed in avant-garde novels are normally characterized by the struggles they have to endure to achieve their goals, and according to Leung (2016), women, “especially young women wanting to improve their lives, have to overcome many obstacles or make painful sacrifices”⁴ in order to reach their ultimate goal, which is what Jian Shaofen eventually does.

One of Jian Shaofen's fear is that of leaving her sister alone which is ironic because, even though they are both physically living in seclusion, Jian Shaofen has not mentally confined herself to the world her sister has created, so in this regard, Jian Shaozhen is already alone in her world. However, when Jian Shaozhen got sick, Jian Shaofen became afraid upon looking at her sister in her state of illness which made her more empathetic towards her, but her emotions quickly changed when, while Jian Shaozhen was sick, she accused Jian Shaofen of spending extra time with someone outside when she went to get medicine. The clock confirms this absurd accusation, but also acts as a constant reminder that time has already run out on Jian Shaozhen as she is old and is getting sicker and sicker, while Jian Shaofen needs take advantage of the time that she has left to establish a life of her own, independent of her sister. The sisters subsequently end up developing a more strained relationship because Jian Shaozhen is of the opinion that Jian Shaofen believes rumours from other people instead of believing what she says. This undoubtedly leads to a loud quarrelling between the sisters which reaches the ears of the women in the Pickling Shop who listen in disbelief. The ruckus between the two sisters, which is an element of the outside world, indicates that there is a disturbance of the natural order of life in the home of the Jian sisters,

and has also created an opening for more outside influence to strengthen Jian Shaofen's resolve to overcome her fear of leaving her sister alone in that isolated world.

Whenever the sisters have an argument, they tend to avoid each other for a while before making up, so Gu Yaxian, a representation of external influence, does not hesitate to take advantage of this situation. Gu Yaxian, who seems to frequently visit the sisters, acts as the link between Jian Shaofen and the outside world and further becomes the bridge on which she crosses over. Gu Yaxian is a meddling, inquisitive and persistent woman who always has a secret motive behind her actions. The reader may observe Jian Shaofen watching the clothes and silk material that are hung on the line because she is afraid that someone from the Pickling Shop will put their hands through the window and steal her expensive silk. This suspicion becomes a reality in Gu Yaxian using the time when the sisters are not on good terms with each other (the existing window) to strike a conversation with Jian Shaofen with the intention of "stealing" her (the expensive silk) away. Her approach is very subtle, and it all starts with Gu Yaxian complementing Jian Shaofen's embroidery and asking her to embroider two pillowcases for her son's wedding, thus creating another window for Jian Shaofen. This act demonstrates Gu Yaxian's tactical and patient approach to achieving a goal.

It is important to note that Jian Shaofen has not always been locked up in the home, but despite her fear of the unknown in the outside world, she is the one who ventures outside occasionally. In the first half of the novel, whenever Jian Shaofen goes outside, it is always at the command of her sister to run some form of errand which makes her socially awkward, fearful and unable to function normally in the society. Jian Shaofen is beautiful and so when she walks on the road, men stare at her which makes her fearful and surprised and causes her to walk with the eyes of a scared little deer. When she goes to the Pickling Shop, she takes all her bottles at once to minimize her interaction with the three shop assistants because she does not like speaking with them, but more importantly, she does not know how to engage in a conversation with them because of her lack of interaction with people. Nevertheless, in the second half of the novel, Jian Shaofen begins to go out on her own terms despite her older sister's apparent disapproval, which is a major step in breaking barriers and overcoming her fears, but she is afraid of mingling with a crowd. She was invited to Gu Yaxian's son's wedding reception and reluctantly agreed to attend, but on the day of the wedding, she got up early in the morning indicating that she was anxious and possibly excited about the event. When she looked through her window, she saw a swallow awkwardly and flurriedly flying out of its nest which Jian Shaofen associated with herself and described it as a portrait of her own life. This image undeniably represents Jian Shaofen being liberated and describes the way in which she is setting herself free from the bondage of a life of seclusion. The awkwardness portrayed by the swallow is further reflected in Jian Shaofen being constantly frightened by the crowd at the wedding, feeling insecure and uncomfortable especially because she does not know how to socialize, doesn't know where to sit and with whom to speak. This kind of reaction contrasts with the freshness and comfort she felt while doing her embroidery outside her home which is a foreshadow of the feelings she should experience, but she cannot feel such freshness and comfort until she has completely abandoned her distorted mentality and self-fabricated preconceptions of the outside world, which is a stronghold established by years of living in seclusion. Notwithstanding, despite the imminent struggles that Jian Shaofen faces, she persists in making strides to overcome them with Gu Yaxian as the active instigator creating opportunities for socialization and encouraging her to take control of her own life.

Another immense fear that Jian Shaofen must overcome is the fear of men, which she admits while talking to Gu Yaxian. She says that she has not been reclusive only because of her sister, but it was mainly because she has always been afraid of men since she was a child. As a child growing up, Jian Shaofen has had little to no contact or interaction with males outside of her home which means that she has never had a bad experience with men, neither has any man directly nor indirectly hurt her, but she harbours this unjustified fear of men which is currently another obstacle that she needs to overcome. Jian Shaofen's first interaction with a male was at the wedding reception where Gu Yaxian took her by the hand and forcefully put her to sit beside Mr. Zhang who was a high school teacher and a widower. After a moment of silence, Mr. Zhang attempted to initiate a conversation with Jian Shaofen to which she did not respond immediately. But, after Mr. Zhang made the statement about practicing good hygiene being beneficial, she suddenly felt a connection with him as she realised that he was a genuine man with clean intentions. She even noticed his liberation shoes which were popular, simple, cheap yet comfortable, and this made her smile as she also deduced that he was just an ordinary man in society who meant her no harm.

Gu Yaxian later covertly arranged another date for Jian Shaofen and Mr. Zhang to meet up at the theatre to watch Shaoxing opera together. After meeting Mr. Zhang at the theatre, Jian Shaofen became reluctant to accommodate him forthrightly as she was experiencing an internal battle of whether she should spend the evening with him. At one point during the show, a voice inside her commanded her to leave but her body could not obey this command, which conveys her gradual victories over the struggles that keep besetting her from pursuing her dream of getting married and living a normal life in the wider society. Consequently, she spent the evening with Mr. Zhang who only treated her with respect and exercised patience while interacting with her. He made her feel comfortable and so, after giving her solicited feedback to Gu Yaxian, unlike the first two meetings, Jian Shaofen

voluntarily agreed to meet with Mr. Zhang again. This decision outraged her older sister, Jian Shaozhen, who quarreled with her because she was moving quickly in the direction of marriage. Jian Shaozhen realised that if she should lose her sister to the outside world, then she would be left alone in solitude for the rest of her life. Furthermore, the thought of remaining in an isolated world with no one to order around and no one to “protect” must have angered Jian Shaozhen as she started to forcefully antagonize and drive away Jian Shaofen before she was fully ready to leave.

At the appointed time, Jian Shaofen gets married secretly with Gu Yaxian as the bride's maid, portraying Gu Yaxian as the ultimate support of Jian Shaofen's transition from a world of reclusion and confinement into a world of liberty and association with the good, the bad and all other elements in between. During the banquet, Jian Shaofen went into the bathroom and cried which could be for one of several reasons including: a certain level of remorse felt for abandoning her sister; the fact that her husband's family has been cold towards her; that she had no relative present at the wedding to support her; the fact that she has reached menopause early and would not be able to give her husband a child; or an overwhelming feeling of accomplishment now that she has finally gotten married and has set in motion a new life in the open world. Naturally, Jian Shaozhen got frustrated by her younger sister getting married. So, she no longer welcomed Jian Shaofen in her own home, especially with her husband, and even cursed them and threw away whatever fruits they brought for her. In the eyes of Jian Shaozhen, Jian Shaofen was now officially a member of the outside world, and she blamed Gu Yaxian as the reason for the loss of her sister and continuously threatened to cut out her tongue. Jian Shaozhen's frustration gradually got worse until, due to her inability to physically harm Gu Yaxian, she embroidered the face of Gu Yaxian then used a pair of scissors to cut an irreparable hole on the mouth section. According to Yang (1999), this scene represents a “historical portrait where women are the main characters”⁵ bearing the burden that is unconsciously placed on them while executing the task of castrating other women. After performing this last act of violence against Gu Yaxian, Jian Shaozhen then committed suicide by using the embroidery needles to burst her artery and bled to death, thus bringing her life of misery and loneliness to an end.

IV. Conclusion

In the novel “Another Life for Women”, the author establishes two worlds in which women are the dominant figures: An isolated world in the home of the Jian sisters which is representative of the maintaining of traditional teachings, lack of flexibility, restrictions and the repulsion of outside influence; and the open world of Su Meixian, Gu Yaxian and Hang Suyu in the Pickling Shop and the wider society where they operate independently of any specific standard of living while striving for their own personal gains. The author then highlights the fears of Jian Shaofen, the younger of the two sisters, that have been instilled in her subconsciousness due to her influenced perception of and lack of exposure to the outside world. However, she challenges her three major fears: the fear confronting and separating from her older sister, the fear of purposely exploring the outside world, and the unjustifiable fear of men. These fears that have been established as significant obstacles between Jian Shaofen and her dream of being free from seclusion prove to be surmountable because she has the will, determination and a propellant in the person of Gu Yaxian. Jian Shaofen has spent half of a lifetime in a lonely place following the rules established by her parents that were being enforced by her older sister, but has also struggled internally because, unlike Jian Shaozhen, she never chose to conform to this lifestyle and endured it for the sake of her older sister. Nevertheless, she is finally liberated with great assistance from Gu Yaxian whose position as a friend or foe was never elucidated, but she loses her sister in the process which is an indication of complete freedom and victory for Jian Shaofen, and a complete destruction of the fabricated world of seclusion. She is now at liberty to curse and act aggressively like the three female shop assistants and leads a typical life with her husband because she has finally transitioned into the open world where there is no fear nor restriction.

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