

Feminism in the Context of Popular Fiction: Liao Hui-ing and Popular Women's Novels

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The purpose of this paper is to study Liao Hui-ing's 廖輝英 novels in the context of popular literature so as to see how women's popular novels negotiate a political space of writing and how they situate themselves in relation to hegemonic and resistant discourses. I want to argue that contemporary women's novels in Taiwan are not, as some prominent male critics have described, "light, soft" escape literature (Lü). As some scholars of popular women's literature have argued, to pose an untroubled link between romance fiction and ideological manipulation or escapism is to over-simplify the thorny issue about the place of popular culture in institutional space (Modleski, Light). As we shall see, women's popular novels are better understood as a site of contradictions. The fierceness of the ideological struggle in the texts points to the contradictions that women experience in a fast changing society where they are constantly confronted with conflicting value systems. To study women's popular novels means to be engaged with the political meanings of representation and with questions about popular culture's relationship to various institutionalized discourses.

It is in the light of these critical interests that works by Liao Hui-ing are chosen for study. Since the publication of "Seeds in the Wind 油麻菜籽" in 1982, Liao Hui-ing has become one of the most popular women writers in Taiwan. While most of the women writers who embarked on their writing career in the early 1980s have long ceased producing fictional works or have begun to show obvious signs of waning writing power, Liao continues to occupy a prominent place in the literary market in Taiwan. Her recent works, e.g., *The Eyes of Time* 歲月的眼睛 (June 1990), *Saying good-bye in Fall* 在秋天道別 (October 1990), and *Cotton Flowers and the Red Azalea* 木棉花與滿山紅 (February 1991) have all achieved an overwhelming commercial success and went through several reprintings over a surprisingly short period of time.

The popularity of these novels suggests how closely the issues they address to are related to women's lives today. All three works mentioned above show a professed interest in the woman question. They explore the condition and position of women in Taiwan's contemporary society--a question that has long engaged Liao. Beginning with the novella "No Turning Back 不歸路" (1983), Liao has shown a consistent interest in the problem of the commodification of women in Taiwanese society. Many of her novels portray how the women characters are exploited by their men. The financial power of the heroines often turns out to be their only means to make their men stay with them. In the novella "No Turning Back" that establishes Liao as a writer specialized in the treatment of extra-marital relationships, the heroine is a homely woman who is almost past marriageable age. Despaired of the gloomy prospect of her husband-hunting project,

she strikes up a sexual relationship with a married man who is ready to get rid of her when the first excitement over the extra-marital relationship is over. However, the relationship continues as the hero's business goes wrong and he turns to the heroine for financial aid. In a more recent novel, *The Eyes of Time*, the naive heroine receives protective tenderness from her boss only to learn that she is being used as an instrument of propagation and will be relentlessly deserted when she is no longer of use. She is finally left alone after she has born him a child and has been forced to turn it over to the man's childless wife. The heroine's impoverished situation simply makes it impossible for her to provide a good nurturing environment for the baby. In *Saying Good bye in Fall*, a sequel to *The Eyes of Time*, the same heroine, now a mature woman, supports a man who turns out to be unworthy of her love and constantly abuses what he has received from her. In all three novels, women are exploited as a sort of commodity. This pattern appears so often in Liao's novels that it almost becomes a trade mark of her writing. By making the exploitation of women a recurrent motif of her works, Liao seems to imply that it is a common aspect of women's life in Taiwan.

It is noteworthy that in most of Liao's novels, the exploited women are not traditional housewives confined to the domestic field. Instead, they are "new women," economically independent and, more often than not, stand outside the sanctioned social script of marriage. In all three works mentioned above, none of the heroines is tied to her man by a conventional marriage vow. They are the disruptive outsiders in traditional scripts; they are women who are often portrayed as morally depraved in traditional love stories. The sympathetic representation of these women who fail to comply with the rules of marriage institution and their stories of exploitation bring up pointed questions about contemporary women's position in a changing society and, by implication, invite a radical re-vision of the moral standard that supports the sanctioned traditional social script.

Thus, Liao's stories are no mere conventional stories of love. They depart from traditional romances in several aspects. Most obvious of all is the absence of the traditional glorification of love. In Liao's fictional world, sexual relationship between men and women is often shown to be entangled with material interests. In many of her novels, men and women stay together not because they love each other but because it is expedient to do so. They are disillusioned people of the modern world who are too sophisticated to make a fetish of love. Women in this love scenario are not the worshipped goodesses of love, but commodities/properties in the economy of exchange. With their rejection of the traditional romantic notion of love and strong critique of the exploitation of women, the novels by Liao profess to be feminist novels. They are vigorously engaged with the problems of sexual politics and try to re-script women's stories from an anti-androcentric point of view. And it is in this intervention between the traditional status of women as powerless, passive victims in the economy of exchange controlled by men and the feminist consciousness of women as desiring and thinking subjects that Liao's novels appear most powerful. They speak to a newly emergent class of working women who find themselves confronted with difficult questions about women's positions in a world of conflict-

ing value systems.

However, as the exploitation of the heroines appears to be a persistent, even obsessive, issue in Liao's modern stories of sexual relationship between men and women, we cannot help asking why so many women in Liao's fictional world should suffer the same fate of exploitation? As mentioned above, most of Liao's women characters are economically independent. They are not traditional, dependent housewives whose terms of survival can only be defined through their relationship to a supporting husband. But if these women characters are economically independent, their economic independence provides ironically the very conditions of their exploitation. Traditionally women are subjugated in men's economy of exchange because it is the very condition of their survival. But why is it that these modern working women still fail to resist the encroachment of that economy? Moreover, what seems most striking about these women is that they are not victims who are ignorant about their exploited status or have no power to resist it. Rather, it seems that they are complicit in the whole scheme about women's exploitation. To put it in another way, it seems that the exploitability of these women becomes for them a quite effective way to bargain with their men and to make the tie between them harder to sever.

Liao Hui-ing seems to be aware of this puzzling problem herself when she has the heroine of *The Eyes of Time* voice the question about women's complicity in her fate of exploitation. In this dramatic scene, Pi-chuang 碧莊 finds that her mother is trying to play down the possibility of her continuing her school work. The chief reason is that her stepfather probably would raise objections when he learns of this plan. Pi-chuang's long repressed indignation is finally exploded: "Mother, I may be rude, but what I am going to say is nothing but truth. This man is good for nothing. What on earth do you want of him? Just to have a man to sleep with at night?" (9) Ironically, Pi-chung later steps in her mother's shoes when she voluntarily supports a man who only abuses her love and money. If the daughter's pointed question implies a refutation of the centrality of men in women's lives, the re-enactment of the mother's plot in the daughter's life simply invalidates that refutation.

From "No Turning Back" to *Saying Good-bye in Fall*, Liao Hui-ing continues to tell stories of women who take up a man for no particular reason other than the hope that their relationship with a man would render meaningful their life in a mechanic, capitalist society. If Liao's novels pose a strong critique of this exploitation scenario and thus offer to re-examine women's status in men's economy of exchange from an anti-androcentric perspective, eventually they fall back to the consolidation of the base of the traditional phallogocentric culture. An implicit, unquestioned belief in the centrality of men in women's lives and the power of men to create *the* meaning of life for women pervades the writing of Liao.

This belief is already there in the celebrated short story "Seeds in the Wind" that set off Liao's writing career in the early 1980s. In the story, the mother tries to make her little daughter understand why her brother always has two eggs for breakfast while

she has only one:

Why always this complaint? Girls are just like vegetable seeds. They settle down wherever the wind sends them. An unmarried woman can never be said to have a good life. I am treating you and your brother in a fair way. Poor as we are, you still continue your school work as you have always wished. Other girls under similar circumstances would have already gone to work in a factory. Your brother will bear the name of our family and pass it on to the next generation; how can you compare yourself with him? It is not even sure yet what name you will take on later!(29)

The words of the mother silence the girl. She therefore learns never to complain about what she used to think was an unfair treatment about her brother and herself. She accepts her fate as a woman--a human being born with an inherent lack of self-sufficiency. In this traditional view, woman is construed as lack. She needs a man as the reference. This explains why women characters seem so easily, and even voluntarily, prone to exploitation when they could have avoided it. As a consequence of this concept of woman as lack, women continue to be objectified and objectify themselves as commodities. Woman depicted as lack and as a desire desiring to be desired by man remains entrapped in the myth of the Other. She cannot be defined in herself but always in relative to man (de Beauvoir).

From the conception of woman as lack and a desire seeking to be desired by man, there is only a short step to the traditional reduction of woman to her sexuality. As the objective of a woman is to find a proper man so that she may define herself through him, a discourse about woman is always saturated with her sexuality. Consequently, all stories of women are told in terms of their sexual relationship to men. This pattern underlies Liao's women's novels. Liao's stories of women can be classified as women's *bildungsromans* in the sense that they are concerned most of all with the spiritual progress of the heroine from a state of illusion to a state of maturity. At the end of the stories, the heroine are shown to be disillusioned with the myth of love and take up the courage to face a future without bright promises. Yun Erh 芸兒 in *No Turning Back* learns a most instructive lesson from her relationship with a married man who only uses her as a means to satisfy his sexual and financial needs. Deeply disappointed, Yun Erh finally makes up her mind to sever the tie with the man and stands on her own feet. Pi Chuang in *The Eyes of Time* is turned into a mature, independent woman after suffering the catastrophe of her first sexual encounter. In *Saying Good-bye in Fall*, Pi Chuang, through the relationship with a man who proves unworthy of her love, is taught again the expensive lesson of trying to maintain a serious relationship with an irresponsible man. In all these novels, the heroines become mature persons through sexual experience. In other words, the stories of women are nothing but the histories of their sexuality.

In the eyes of many feminists, the open discussion of women's sexuality and the

concern with their sexual desire convey a strong political message. Traditionally, women's literature is silent about women's sexuality in observance with the rules of propriety as prescribed by patriarchal society. Many feminists have pointed out that men and women have different access to language, and the institutional control of language by men often forces women into silence (Cameron, Kaplan, 1990). The most urgent task of the feminist campaign, therefore, is to break free from the patriarchal restrictions of women's speech. A woman writer's open discussion of women's sexuality, in this light, is a rebellion against the patriarchal oppression of women. The preoccupation of many French feminist theorists with women's sexual morphology in their discussion of the concept of *l'écriture féminine* could be understood in this context (Irigaray, Cixous).

However, other feminists have objected to this emphasis of women's sexuality in women's writing. Cora Kaplan argues that the over-emphasis on the importance of sexuality in women's life runs the risk of effacing the differences between women. Some feminists, e.g., Ann Rosalind Jones and Rosalind Coward, remain highly suspicious about the effectiveness of the empowerment of women through a liberation of the talk about their sex. They argue that the tendency to define women in terms of their sexuality has the danger of reproducing the woman/sex myth that has always served as the underpinning of the oppression of women. Rosalind Coward argues in an article about the political meanings of sex in women's novels that women "again defined through their sexuality, are the sex to be interrogated and understood" (1989, p.45). In her view, the open discussion of women's sexuality in popular romance means a shift rather than a liberation in the treatment of sexuality. The over-emphasis on the sexual personhood of women may simply continue the patriarchal practice of reducing women to sexual objects and thus reinforces the traditional objectification of women in patriarchal society.

The controversy about the role of sexuality in the presentation of women may yield some clue to the intricate ideological implications of Liao's works. The popularity of the novels depends on their capacity to answer the needs of women. On the one hand, these novels need to negotiate with the trend of feminism which is gaining increasing attention as the socio-economic revolution over the past years has radically changed women's life in Taiwan. The exposure to Western feminist ideas has taught many women to resist men's exploitation of them on various levels of social life. On the other hand, the strains of a fast-paced living style in a depersonalized capitalist society calls working women's attention to their emotional needs (Rabine). The popularity of Liao's novels is achieved through a successful bargain with progressive, feminist ideas and the more traditional emotional makeup of women. The indictment of male characters' exploitation of the heroines indicates the "modernity" of the novels and makes them appear more "in trend" than traditional romance purged of the concerns with sex and money. Nevertheless, these novels, to ensure their reception by readers with various degrees of feminist consciousness, should not appear too progressive to be accepted by their readers. In these modern stories of (and for) women, the hetero-sexual theme, with all its traditional ideological implications, is interwoven with a certain degree of feminist consciousness to answer the

complicated psychological needs of their readers.

It is this subtle double dealing with conflicting ideologies that characterizes the nature of Liao's popular fiction. As a place of contradictory political meanings, the novels by Liao articulate the contradictions in modern women's lives--contradictions that both women writers and women readers experience as they try to respond to the feminist current in a world still deeply rooted in patriarchal paradigms. On the other hand, the intriguing ideological implications of these novels direct our attention to the complicated relationship between women's popular fiction and feminist political agenda, and between popular literature and academic institution. The study of Liao's popular fiction brings us face to face with important issues that have direct bearing on our job as critics, teachers, and students engaged with problems of literary criticism. In studying Liao's popular women's novels, we are confronted with questions about power and canonization, about the positionality of popular fiction in the feminist struggle against the patriarchal discourse, about the relationship between women and what Teresa de Lauretis, drawing on Foucault's elaboration on the relationship between power, sexuality, and discourse, calls the "technology of sex," and about the violence of representation. These questions are by no means open to easy solutions.

The post-modern era is, as Linda Hutcheon says, characterized by a keen awareness of discourse as "an instrument and effect of power"(185). In Taiwan where the survival of a scholar in the academic world is largely determined by his/her familiarity with trendy Western literary terms, few critics would refute Foucault's notion of discourse as something informed by power investment and dismiss Annette Kolodny's question about the gendered dimension of literary canons. Nevertheless, it does not help much when one tries to combat the denigration of women's popular novels in Taiwan. A woman trying to negotiate a space for popular women's fiction in the institutionalized discourse of the academic world is apt to experience what Edward Said describes as the life of the alienated other. Long accepted biases of academic elitism, stereotypes associated with popular fiction, and the almost unanimous consensus about the status of women's popular fiction as trash literature easily turns the attempt into a quixotic endeavor. The pejorative terms in which women's popular fiction is spoken of in Taiwan (Lu, Tsai) raise some serious questions about the canonicity of this specific type of writing. John Guillory points out that the process of canon-formation is subject to institutional control. The canonicity of a work depends largely on how the work is interpreted and judged by established institutionalized critical criteria. Questions about the evaluation of women's popular fiction therefore lead inevitably to questions about our aesthetic criteria.

In her celebrated essay "Women and Fiction," Virginia Woolf wonders whether the differences between men and women may not be reflected in their writings:

It is probable, however, that both in life and in art the values of a woman are not the values of a man. Thus, when a woman comes to write a novel, she will find that she is perpetually wishing to alter the established values--to

make serious what appears insignificant to a man, and trivial what is to him important. And for that, of course, she will be criticized; for the critic of the opposite sex will be genuinely puzzled and surprised by an attempt to alter the current scale of values, and will see in it not merely a difference of view, but a view that is weak, or trivial, or sentimental, because it differs from his own (49).

Kolodny, likewise, argues that our writing and interpretative strategies are not free from gender biases. It is extremely likely that the traditional devaluation of women's writing is informed by a whole set of gender-marked critical methods. Questions about the possibilities of recuperating women's popular fiction into the sphere of academic critical discourse not only invite a revision of our inherited literary criteria but also our syllabus, for, as Guillory says, the "problem of the canon is a problem of syllabus and curriculum, the institutional forms by which works are preserved as *great works*" (240).

Similar concerns may also be raised to a grander scale to encompass popular fiction as a whole. Feminists have become increasingly aware that, if the nature of feminism as a political project is to be maintained, we have to ask ourselves "where and how [we] can be politically engaged as academic feminists" (Friedman, 470). If feminist literary criticism needs to take into consideration issues about the place of our critical works in the arena of cultural production and social change and if in studying literary works we are working within the network of intersected cultural scripts, then popular fiction as a cultural script participating rigorously in the process of social change should not be unthinkingly dismissed out of the feminist political agenda. How should we judge the performance of popular fiction? Are there proper reading strategies that we may use to evaluate the texts? How should we situate popular literature in the arena of struggle between hegemonic and resistant discourses?

Finally, we need to attend to the problems of representation. The ideology of gender involved in the representation of women should be subject to close scrutiny. How do we deal with what Teresa de Lauretis calls "the violence of rhetoric" that inscribes inherited notions of gender into discourses of representation? How does women's popular fiction intervene between the traditional representation of women and the feminist revisions of the represented woman? What are the possible political meanings of this intervention and their effects on the readers? Closely associated with these questions is the difficult question of defining feminist writing. While it is generally agreed that the emphasis on women's experience does not necessarily make a novel feminist, the question remains open as to what the definable characteristics of a feminist work are.

What is implied in these questions is an urgent call for a revision of our literary criteria, our assumptions about the canonicity of texts, our genre categories, and the long existing hierarchy of institutionalized discourses in the academic world. The awareness of the necessity for these revisions, as I imagine, would affect not only the way we study literary texts but also our perspective on social change. In that and the possible social

change that may be brought about through a wide spread of that consciousness lies the possibility of a rich reward for feminist endeavors.

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