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The Many Faces of Women in Selected Works by Asian Female Writers

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to look at the portrayal of women in some works by selected Asian female writers, in Particular from Hong Kong and Japan. Selected works by Xu Xi and Agnes Lam from Hong Kong and Hitomi Kanehara and Banana Yoshimoto from Japan are referred to. The study examines the representation of women in search of their identities, accomplishments, confusions and cultural dislocation within the paradigm of feminism theoretical framework. The study focuses on identifying how women are put into images by female writers, as the voice between different genders will appear to be diametrically opposed. The study yields insights on the discordance of behavior between the traditional and modern women in Asia setting.

Keyword: Xu Xi, Hitomi Kanehara, Banana Yoshimoto, Agnes Lam

1. Introduction

Writings by Hong Kong and Japanese writers are scarce to be found printed in English. Most of them are written in Chinese and Japanese. Through various searches, the works by authors such as Xu Xi and Agnes Lam (representing Hong Kong) and Hitomi Kanehara and Banana Yoshimoto (representing Japan) are uncovered to further develop the research on the issues that are highlighted in the selected works by the writers. The works by Xu Xi and Agnes Lam underline the thoughts and dilemma of Hong Kong women while Hitomi Kanehara and Banana Yoshimoto's focal points are centred to the plight and confusions of certain Japanese women characters in their writings. The works that are studied are *Chinese Walls* by Xu Xi, Agnes Lam's *Woman to Woman and Other Poems*, Hitomi Kanehara's *Snakes and Earrings* and Banana Yoshimoto's *Lizard*. This paper will include the feminist theory by Julia Kristeva on the political demands of women in terms of globalizing the problems of women in various parts, under the label of universalism.

History of women in Hong Kong and Japan

In Hong Kong, women in the early years of the British ruling were not exposed to professional subjects but only limited to skills involving cookery and sewing, which were likely to contribute to homemaking. The formal education that later was opened to women had helped them to receive the same status quo as men. The statistic from Women's Commission: Women and Men in Hong Kong Key Statistic (2005) in terms of education mentions:

The increase in the proportion of female population aged 15 and over having attended secondary education and above was greater than that recorded among the male population. Both women and men of school ages had broadly similar school attendance rate.

The statement shows that women started to excel in educational field compared to men after the formal education was introduced and offered to females in Hong Kong. The report also stated that in as early as 1921, a female student first made her way to university.

It is interesting to note that before females were allowed to pursue their formal education, a system called *mui-tsai* that refers to the case of a girl adopted or sold for servitude existed in the society of Hong Kong. Once it was abolished, the females were no longer confined to a certain situation, and that helped them to gain education formally as men did.

In Japan, the case was almost similar when it came to women. In the early twentieth centuries, the concept of women's liberation became a major motivating force within the era's nationalist, reform, and revolution movements. For the first time, male nationalists initiated the discussion by arguing that an improvement in the status of women was essential to their country's acceptance by other technologically advanced nations. However, they were conservative nationalists and traditionalists who disagreed to that argument. It is a belief in that country that women's education should be focusing on producing "good wives and mothers" as a concept. The Japanese law did not grant its women full equality until in 1946 with its post-World War II constitution that granted women equal rights in politics and family life.

Problem Statement of the study

It is acknowledged that women write in different ways than writings produced by men, in terms of writing style and many others. This paper highlights what concerns women writers from Hong Kong and Japan in their writings. It is also to investigate how they perceive lives as women trapped or living in the given geographical location, particularly Asia. As Asian countries are bound to certain traditional customs that are seemed to liberate women living in their space, it is interesting to study whether the women write in accordance to the way they are perceived to act or vice versa.

Methodology and theoretical framework

As this paper is of qualitative nature, library research is essential. Secondary sources related to some writers are also important in this study. Another method used is by carrying out interviews with some writers in the highlight. The theoretical framework used in this research is feminism. This is because feminism is best described to indicate a movement that came into existence as a result of gender bias. Susan James (2000:576) typifies feminism as follows:

Feminism is grounded on the belief that women are oppressed or disadvantaged by comparison with men, and that their oppression is in some way illegitimate or unjustified. Under the umbrella of this general characterization there are, however, many interpretations of women and their oppression, so that it is a mistake to think of feminism as a single philosophical doctrine, or as implying an agreed political program.

Women were not equally treated before the advent of feminism. They were not even granted maternity leave to signify reverence to their gender as a symbol of respect for them being the child givers. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (1999) elaborate that the movement made its success in raising the issues of the workplace rights for women, such as to be granted with maternity leave and equal pay. Judith Butler (1992) adds by affirming that the movement does

not only focus on the issues mentioned, but it also fights against misogyny and other forms of discrimination against women.

Although feminism varies according to certain strands, the existence of this theory is for the same cause that is to fight for women's rights in many different lights. The manifestation of its many forms of disciplines includes feminist geography, feminist history and feminist literary criticism.

Xu Xi and the *Chinese Walls*

In this writing, Xu Xi portrays the traditional culture of a Chinese family which dreams of being modern but at the same time preserve its patriarchal pattern of living. In traditional Chinese culture, it is said that there are three devotions to be given by Chinese women. Firstly, devotion to father before marriage, secondly to husband after marriage, and thirdly to son during widowhood. (1986:53). It shows that women's role change interchangeably according to their status in society. Xu Xi's *Chinese Walls* portrays women as traditional through the role of the mother and modern and retaliation through Ai Lin.

Xu Xi repeatedly puts into the focal point of the role of the "mother" in *Chinese Walls*. The mother is the entity of a traditional Chinese culture. She is described as submissive and never question her husband for having a concubine, as she is aware that in traditional Chinese culture as explained by Lee (1986:86), a man is allowed to have a concubine with the wife's consent (or not). Here is the depiction of a woman who is filial to her husband as that is what her traditional culture teaches her.

Although it seems that Ai Lin's mother is very particular in her children's education, she is still bound by her Chinese tradition that is to make sure that her daughter becomes up-to-date with proper education so that she would get a husband who will be able to sustain her daughter better than the average men in her society. She emphasizes on education to Ai Lin because by having better education, perhaps she would have better chance of living her life in a nobler way, and she gets to choose her husband from the better status recognition. She keeps on pushing Ai Lin to learn and speak English, as it has become a classy language that is responsible to chart someone's life to a better state.

It is interesting to see how Xu Xi modeled Ai Lin as a modern woman. Being oversea educated, and exposed to the culture of the west where she could put her culture aside as nobody would mind for her behavior outside her own society, she breaks the taboos of her culture by having premarital sex with her boyfriend. When she was younger, Ai Lin had incestuous affair with her brother, which is only made to known long after the death of her brother. The character of Ai Lin is shown to be feral and sinful.

It can be seen that Xu Xi wants the readers to observe "acculturation", which Richard Graham (1997) makes it clear that when people from different background live in the dominating culture practiced by the majority, they will be acculturated immediately.

Agnes Lam and the victorious womenfolk

Gary S. Becker in *The Economics and Discrimination* (1957) says that women's status in economy varies according to their earning sector, their occupational attainment, relative wage level and the time spent working at home which, as economic theory suggests, reduces the time they can spend in paid employment.

From the statement, it is evident that home production is a very important element of women's economic activity and an important aspect of women's relative economic position. By having

the power to earn their own wage, women can participate in the economic growth actively. The study by Standing (1978); Heer (1963); Boserup (1970) found that apart from letting women have more independence, increasing levels of female employment tend to result in women having greater influence on making decisions for the family. Thus, female labor participation is a very important aspect of women's relative economic status. The earned wage also helps women to expand their buying horizon, from the local products to worldly renowned brands.

Whether it's a Qi Baishi or da Vinci

A Prada bag or a Shenzhen dress,

A bowl of beancurd or a novel,

The logic for riches is the same.

The poem by Agnes Lam, 'the wealth of nation' emphasizes that it is the people who set the standard between 'a Qi Baishi' (local product) and 'da Vinci'... 'Prada bag or a Shenzhen dress' (local product). Therefore, as economic boosters, the key to economic growth is in the hands of the people who belong to a particular nation. In the world today, the branded items acquire practice for their owners as these become the symbols of the rich and famous. Hence, women's freedom in purchasing the branded item is a symbol of economic strength they possess. Therefore, this poem is a good example to demonstrate women's dominance in the market.

Writing as a woman gives authentic license for Agnes Lam to write about other women she encounters. In 'Woman to Woman', she highlights the issues faced by women from different faces of life in specific, rating their lives from multifarious backgrounds be it in education, lifestyle or working environment. This provides evidence to support the fact that women in Hong Kong work in many different sectors, even in the fields where the majority of workers are men. The hectic lives of women are described in this poem. Agnes' 'Woman to Woman' shows a strong sensitivity between women and the roles they play in the society, as we can see below:

...woman to woman

What can be said

In the corridor

As the cleaner pass

Or over the phone

Between classes?

Yes-that was interesting

Wasn't it?

The workshop-

And how was the poetry

Competition you judged?

I saw you on TV last night-

Oh that-more exciting

Than **the conference,**

I must say-

There was this man
 Who just kept asking questions-
 Okay-talk to you later-i have to go-
 Meeting **my publisher-**

(*Woman to Woman*, 1997:55)

From the poem, it is clear that it centers on women's reaction to the global world. It reflects women's will power as it is the fundamental key towards being regarded as equal to men. Agnes Lam writes this poem as she sees women becoming more self-reliant in today's world. Audre lorde (1990: 286) supports Lam's work in her essay, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women redefining Difference" that mentions:

As a tool of social control, women have been encouraged to recognize only one area of human difference as legitimate, those differences which exist between women and men. And we have learned to deal across those differences with the urgency of all oppressed subordinates. All of us had to learn to live or work or coexist with men, from our fathers on. We have recognized and negotiated these difference s, even when this recognition only continued the old dominant/subordinate mode of human relationship; where the oppressed must recognize the master's difference in order to survive.

From "Woman to Woman", it is evident that women's achievements have been widely distinguished in the modern world. Agnes Lam describes that their achievements have been worldly acknowledged in numerous field. It is also interesting to see that Agnes Lam has also addressed the Hong Kong's handover in her writings. This is an important testimony from a woman writer on how she feels as a woman living in a country like Hong Kong. Being educated overseas, one is likely to assume that Agnes Lam might be distressed as she is living in a country where women have to confront two cultures at once: both the Chinese and the Western.

Experimenting the odds in Hitomi Kanehara's *Snakes and Earrings*

It is interesting to see that in this particular work by Hitomi Kanehara, the author is bold enough to portray the live of the lady character, Lui, as very eager in experimenting new things that not only look utterly weird but also painful in the process of making. It can be assumed that the writer tries to let the world know about the main issue that the young generation of Japanese deals with nowadays. With the advent of technology especially in Japan where it grows rapidly, the writer wants others to know that the culture value has also developed precipitously.

In this text, the character of Japanese women is revealed as to become impressionists, as they tend to try new things without considering the aftermath of those they involved themselves in. Here, Lui is so anticipated to have the "forked tongue" like her boyfriend has. The process of making the "forked tongue" or "body modification" as they address it, is very painful and could let to excessive bleeding if it is not done by the professionals. The process of having the forked tongue is described here:

...the next moment there was a clamping sound, and shivers much greater than those of an orgasm shot through my entire body. Goose bumps shot up my arms, and my body went into a slight spasm. My stomach tightened and for some reason so did my crotch, where I felt an ecstatic, tingling sensation. The piercing gun snapped open, releasing the stud...with watery

eyes I stuck out my numb tongue...my tongue was burning and I found it difficult even to speak...

Although the process is excruciating, the objective of getting the tongue pierced is carried on. This shows the importance of being an impressionist is against all pain the world can bear.

Japanese women are also shown to be very confused with the choices they made. Although Lui is together with Ama, her boyfriend, she still sleeps with other guys she barely knows. For instance, with Shiba –san, who is responsible to have her tongue studded. Kanehara displays the female image of Lui as daring and rebellious by molding the character as such.

Incomprehensible women in Banana Yoshimoto's *Lizard*

Banana Yoshimoto positions females as incomprehensible in her book of prose, *Lizard*. In “Newlywed”, the representation of the wife is projected to be fastidious in daily transaction. The husband is wearied emotionally, which in return causes him to feel mentally burdened. The husband is shown to avoid arriving home early because he feels burned out with his routine. The wife is the joy killer for him as he would picture everything to be free and happy until the moment the wife comes into the picture.

All the living beings there suddenly became objects of my affection. Someday when I die, and only my soul exists, and my spirit comes home on a summer evening during the Bon festival, that's probably what the world will look like to me.

And then Atsuko appears, walking slowly toward the station in the summer heat. She has her hair pulled back in a tight bun, even though I've told her that makes her look dowdy... (15)

It can also be seen that the husband disagrees in many occasions about the wife's doings, and shows that he feels unoccupied only during the absence of the wife's image physically and mentally. “Newlywed” also signifies men's insensitivity towards women, especially to recognize the fact that many women are meticulous when it comes to dealing with things around them it is interesting to note that the husband becomes impatient upon commenting on the wife's particularity in selecting things, as it is shown here:

Come on, Atsuko. They're all the same. Just pick one. You look so serious! Shampoo is not something worth wasting time on....

The excerpt indicates that a woman is incomprehensible in many aspects, especially by the opposite sex.

A woman is also highlighted as a solace seeker in Yoshimoto's “Lizard”. Lizard is characterized as a woman seeking comfort in a man who happens to be the only friend she has. She seeks for comfort in the man by “pressing her face into his chest, pushing her way into his body”. (21)

She becomes an introvert due to an incident that happened to her when she was a child, and she believes that she has been given the power to heal people and curse them. Because of her difference, she withdraws herself from the society. It is amazing to see that although she heals people at her healing center, she never speaks to them unless necessary. (33)

Her bedside manner was nothing to speak of, and she had few words for her patients. I suppose that was why people who weren't seriously ill stopped coming after a visit or two...

Just like “Newlywed”, “Lizard” highlights the level of incomprehensiveness of the image of a woman. Indeed, the character of Lizard is put into the image as to be atypical to the normal behavior of a female.

Conclusion

The writers have shown some images to represent the female figures in their works. It can be assumed that the images could have been created to picture the images of the real women in their society, or how they are perceived in their culture in the eyes of the others. To recapitulate, Hong Kong and Japanese women are depicted as those who try to conceal their own skin from being criticized, as well as “the other” gender that does completely different errand compared to men.

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