



A Study On Women's Characters In Lu Xun's Stories

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the portrayal of women in the stories of Lu Xun, one of China's most influential modern writers. Through a detailed analysis of key texts, we explore the complexities of female characters and their roles within the societal and cultural contexts of early 20th-century China. Lu Xun's women often embody the struggles and constraints imposed by a patriarchal society, revealing deep insights into their emotional and psychological landscapes. By employing feminist literary theory, this study highlights how Lu Xun critiques traditional gender roles and the socio-political environment that shapes the lives of his female characters. The paper argues that these portrayals not only reflect the hardships faced by women during Lu Xun's time but also serve as a commentary on broader themes of oppression, identity, and resistance. Ultimately, this analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of Lu Xun's literary legacy and the nuanced representation of women in his work, suggesting that his stories remain relevant in contemporary discussions about gender and society.

Keywords : Lu Xun, Women's Representation, Feminist Literary Theory, Patriarchy, Gender Roles

Introduction

Lu Xun, a prominent figure in modern Chinese literature, is often regarded as the father of contemporary Chinese fiction. His works, written during the early 20th century, provide a critical examination of Chinese society, culture, and politics during a time of profound change. Among the various themes present in Lu Xun's writings, the representation of women stands out as a particularly significant area of inquiry. Through his stories, Lu Xun explores the complexities of women's lives in a patriarchal society, revealing their struggles, aspirations, and inherent agency. This introduction aims to set the stage for a comprehensive study of women's characters in Lu Xun's narratives, outlining the historical context, thematic concerns, and critical approaches that will guide the analysis.

The early 20th century in China was marked by upheaval and transformation, particularly following the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911. This period, characterized by the struggle for modernization and reform, witnessed a growing discourse on gender roles and women's rights. The New Culture Movement, which emerged in the 1910s, called for a reevaluation of traditional Confucian values, advocating for individualism and gender equality (Huang, 1994). Writers and intellectuals began to challenge the entrenched norms that limited women's roles in society, giving rise to new representations in literature. Lu Xun, who was deeply influenced by these socio-political changes, incorporated the experiences of women into his narratives, often using them as vehicles to critique the prevailing patriarchal system.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Western feminist ideas were introduced to China. Regret for the Past poetically and sadly monologue about his memories and confessions of Zijun. And in the form of notes from Juansheng's first-person perspective. It is a representative love-themed short story created by Lu Xun.. Lu Xun integrated feminism and personal femininity into his creation. It is of great value for exploring the self-awareness of Chinese women, that is, female consciousness, during the May Fourth period and modern times. The study of feminism in Regret for the Past is significant for women in establishing a healthy view of women and life in the new era.

However, there are also limitations and shortcomings in the cognition of feminism because of its male narrative perspective. Studying the embodiment of feminism in Regret for the Past is not only of literary value but also of guiding significance for women in establishing healthy values in the new era. This article will further deepen the understanding of the progress and limitations of feminism in Lu Xun's book Regret for the Past based on reference and summary of existing research results and combined with the author's understanding of Regret for the Past and feminism.

In Lu Xun's stories, women are not mere background figures; they are complex characters whose lives reflect the broader societal issues of the time. His portrayals range from tragic to resilient, highlighting the multifaceted nature of their existence. For instance, in stories like "The Diary of a Madman" and "The True Story of Ah Q," women embody the constraints of a male-dominated society while simultaneously exhibiting moments of defiance and individuality. This duality offers a rich terrain for analysis, as it reveals Lu Xun's ambivalence toward traditional gender roles and his sensitivity to women's suffering (Wang, 2010).

Moreover, Lu Xun's narrative style often juxtaposes the internal struggles of women with external societal pressures. By employing techniques such as stream-of-consciousness and unreliable narration, he immerses readers in the psychological landscapes of his female characters. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of their emotional experiences and the societal forces that shape them.

In pre-modern society, Chinese women were tragically confined to a fate of subjugation. Denied public presence and subjected to arranged marriages by their parents, they existed merely as extensions of men, seemingly living solely for their husbands.

The novel "Regret for the Past" vividly portrays the awakening of women, represented by Zijun, during the spirit of the May 4th Movement. Zijun emerges as a new woman who liberates herself from feudalism and embraces the freedom to choose her marriage. Inspired by the ideals of the May 4th Movement, she breaks free from the shackles of her feudal family and bravely engages with Juansheng. They discuss topics ranging from feudal families to gender equality and Western writers such as Tagore and Shelley. At the same time, Juansheng told her about the new idea of "breaking old habits and calling for equality between men and women". These conversations broaden her horizons and inspire her spirit of rebellion.

Lu Xun was very sensitive to the issue of gender. In his essay "On Photography and the Like" (Lun zhaoxiang zhilei), written in 1924, Lu Xun talked about female impersonation in disgust. The confusion of gender was unacceptable in the writer's eyes, since it marked the decline of the Chinese national culture from the masculine and robust ideal following the Western model. As David Der-wei Wang puts it, Lu Xun "shares with contemporary intelligentsia a yearning for a strong, virile Chinese figure, as opposed to China's old emaciated, feminine image" (2003, 134). In his relentless repudiation of traditional Chinese culture and Chinese National Character, Lu Xun had inadvertently positioned himself under the Western gaze, a gaze that associated China and Chineseness with a passive and weak femininity. Shu-mei Shih points out that in Lu Xun stories, "'woman' is represented as the receptacle of tradition in need of the male modern's enlightenment, an allegory of old China's (female) need for modernity and modernization (male)" (204). As Lu Xun vehemently criticized women's oppression in traditional Chinese society with his pen, his own portrayal of the female gender was oftentimes saturated with tragic hues, creating dismal female characters such as Xianglin's Wife in "New Year's Sacrifice" (Zhufu, 1924), Zijun in "Regrets for the Past" (Shangshi, 1925), and Shansi's Wife in "Tomorrow" (Mingtian, 1920). It seems that the writer was determined to use women as a symbol of victimhood to advance cultural and social revolutions.

It is due to this reason that critics of Lu Xun tend to ignore a more sophisticatedly gendered reading of Lu Xun's writings despite the writer's hypersensitivity to gender. Early scholarly monographs on Lu Xun, such as Leo Ou-fan Lee's *Voices from the Iron House* (1986), Qian Liqun's *The Exploration of Heart* (Xinling de tanxun, 1988), Wang Hui's *Combating Despair* (Fankang juewang, 1990), and Wang Xiaoming's *Biography of Lu Xun* (Lu Xun zhuan, 1993), unexceptionally evaded an in-depth discussion on Lu Xun's views of gender and its literary representations.

Leo Lee, however, published an article titled "Lu Xun and the Consciousness of Modern Art" (Lu Xun yu xiandai yishu yishi) in *Lu Xun yanjiu yuekan* (Lu Xun Research Monthly) in 1986. In this article, Lee focuses on an interesting but controversial topic: Lu Xun's attraction, instead of aversion, to women. Lee calls readers' attention to the fact that there were three woodcarvings in the bedroom of Lu Xun's Shanghai home: one from the Soviet Union and two from German, all of which featuring women; in particular, two of the woodcarvings feature nude women. Lee suggests that the three woodcarvings reveal the discrepancies and contradictions between Lu Xun's private and public selves. Following Lu Xun's connoisseurship in Western modernist art, Lee has excavated the writer's aesthetic and somewhat decadent private predilection. In order to substantiate Lu Xun's unique favoritism for nude female bodies, Lee cites Lu Xun's story "Mending Heaven" (Butian, 1922) as an example. ¹ The story reconstructs the ancient myth of the goddess Nüwa with modern psychoanalytical insights. According to Lee's reading, the reason that Lu Xun selected Nüwa, instead of Pangu, the male creator in Chinese mythology, as the protagonist of this creation story, is that "the figure of Nüwa embodies more 'Eros' as compared to the male creator from an aesthetic point of view (1987, 248). If this is true, then Lu Xun probably had also accepted the growing viewpoint that associated women (rather than men) with sexual desires.

Written in November 1922, "Mending Heaven" is arguably the first of Lu Xun's stories with a female protagonist; it is also the first time that Lu Xun empowered the feminine in the light of psychoanalysis, a Western body of knowledge that he acquired through the translation by Japanese scholars. Lu Xun was particularly interested in the disruptive power of the unconscious.

Contemplating how to defy patriarchal norms and attain personal autonomy and marriage freedom, Zijun embodies the essence of the new woman. She thought about how to rebel against the patriarchy and how to gain personality and freedom of marriage. These ideas are a brave challenge to the patriarchal family and the real awakening of new women. Zijun refuses to be a mere slave or victim of the feudal family and marriage

system. She firmly asserted, "I am my own, and none of them interfered in my rights". At this time, Zijun emerges as a forerunner who advocates for gender equality and women's rights, embracing the enlightenment of new ideas with courage and strength.

The romantic relationship between Zijun and Juansheng is also a form of rebellion against traditional values, such as "the will of parents and the proposal of the matchmaker." They decided to get married without anyone's consent. In people's eyes at that time, it corrupted public morality and damaged feudal ethics. Despite facing strong opposition and societal pressure, Zijun remained undeterred in her pursuit of independence. She did not hesitate to break the feudal cage, even if it meant breaking her relationship with her family.

Lu Xun's literature was more of a medium for promoting social change rather than serving as a political vehicle or an aesthetic game. In addition to that, in his short stories, female characters play a very significant part.

In some of Lu Xun's stories, he used the figure of the girl student to expose the conservative male characters' hypocrisy (e.g., "Soap" ["Feizao," 1924] and "Master Gao" ["Gao lao fuzi," 1925]), thus turning the new woman into a device of satire rather than presenting a well-rounded picture of her subjectivity. Although "A Happy Family" ("Xingfu de jiating," 1924), like "Regret for the Past," also depicts the new woman and is also told from the perspective of a male modern intellectual, the modes of these two stories remain completely different. Whereas the death of romance is unequivocally and dramatically confirmed by the death of the heroine in "Regret for the Past," in "A Happy Family" it is the everyday unhappiness that gradually erodes the ideal picture of romantic love. "A Happy Family" features a third-person, synchronic narration. The narrative tone of the story is ironic, as "complete objectivity and suppression of all explicit moral judgments" (Frye 40) is scrupulously preserved in order to distance the reader from the object of the author's ridicule. The hero's "power of action" (Frye 33) is tested against ordinary life event through a juxtaposition of quotidian details and his exaggerated vexation and futile efforts to cope, and is subsequently exposed as woefully inadequate. In such a narrative mode, the sense of the absurd rather than that of the tragic comes through more clearly. In contrast, "Regret for the Past" adopts an I-narrator and a retrospective temporal arrangement. The narrator is also represented as more psychologically complex and more lyrical in his expression of sorrow than the hero in "A Happy Family." These narrative features help to reduce the distance between the character and the reader, and to establish a narrative contract of identification rather than alienation.

Nature of characterization

Working in the genre of the short story, Lu Xun usually makes no more than brief sketches of his female characters. These women in the third person, usually through the narrator or another male character, and they range from being the focus of the story to supporting characters hovering in the background, or mere literary function, serving as mouthpieces to communicate as realistically as possible those details which are somehow hidden from the narrator or other characters. The amount of detail that Lu Xun fits into his sketches also varies. Where women are the central characters in the story they are not necessarily also described explicitly. It is often left up to the reader to infer a sense of personality from the circumstances and events the character is entangled in. Where the women are not the central characters they are often left as outlines, perhaps just a name or a short description.

Although Amy Tan's characters, like Lu Xun's, are contained within a series of short stories, the stories that combine to form the novel *The Joy Luck Club* are interlinked and interdependent. Characterisation is almost the entire purpose of this novel. Society and place are just backdrop to the personal drama of the individual lives of four ex-patriot Chinese mothers and their Chinese-American daughters. With the exception of Suyuan Woo, each woman's story is told by herself, in the first person. The similarity of the general shape of their lives and the manner of storytelling means that the four older women and the four younger women tend to collapse into one older woman and one younger woman to the first-time reader. Amy Tan's characters are also reflective and introspective – they question their situation, identity and relationships with other characters, unlike the characters in Lu Xun's stories, whose inner thoughts the reader is not privy to at all.

In a broad sense, the women in *Selected Stories* are a passive, unreflective lot, victims of traditional society, swept along by events without questioning their lot. The women of *The Joy Luck Club* are much more active, introspective and in charge of their destiny. Unlike Lu Xun's characters *The Joy Luck Club* women are a homogeneous group with respect to their social position and background. In *Selected Stories* the characters may be much less detailed, but they come from a far wider range of backgrounds than do Amy Tan's women. However their social position does not necessarily dictate the type of character Lu Xun creates for them.

Selected Stories

Although Lyell, in his analysis of Lu Xun's fictional work, lumps all women characters together in the one category, differentiating only between the men (whom he classifies as either intellectuals, service people or peasants), there do appear to be several distinct types of women in Lu Xun's short stories. There are nosy neighbours, tragic women and unbroken women. There are also women who are not really characterised at all, but appear as sort of conceptual placeholders – the conventions of realism demand that they exist, but not that they differentiate themselves from a stereotype. Some of the characters are predominantly literary devices whose sole purpose appears to be transmitting vital story details.

Hsiang Lin's Wife ("New Year's Sacrifice"), Fourth Shan's Wife ("Tomorrow") and Ah Shun ("In the Wine-Shop") are all examples of tragic women. Hsiang Lin's Wife and Fourth Shan's Wife are central characters in

their respective stories. With the exception of Fourth Shan's Wife, whose son dies, each woman dies in during the course of the story – Ah Shun succumbs to tuberculosis, while Hsiang Lin's Wife dies “of poverty”. All of these women are presented as virtuous, their selfless dedication to hard work benefiting others more than themselves. Neither Hsiang Lin's Wife nor Ah Shun are presented to the reader directly and often the circumstances they find themselves in are further detached from the reader by being told through another character in the story, whose speech is passed on to the reader through the narrator.

In Lu Xun's view, feudal traditional morality and backward ethics put Chinese women in the position of men's private property for a long time, and no woman has the right to be independent of men. He points out that China's national inferiority also exists in women. It is like “the abused daughter-in-law has become a mother-in-law and still abuses the daughter-in-law”. Lu Xun fought against the traditional ideas of feudal society throughout his life. He advocated for the emancipation of the Chinese people's minds and women's liberation from the shackles of traditional thoughts. His aspiration was for Chinese women to break free from the shackles of societal norms and attain true confidence and independence.

Lu Xun deeply felt the persecution of the Chinese people by feudal etiquette and also clearly understood that the national inferiority of the Chinese people urgently needed to be eliminated. He advocated equality between men and women and sympathized with women living in the traditional feudal etiquette. He believed in women's right to pursue love and that they should not be bound by “chastity” in traditional morality. They should pursue their rights and no longer be an accessory to men.

The Limitations of Feminism in Lu Xun's Works

Regret for the Past is the only short fiction in Lu Xun's life works. Since its publication, critics have valued it for its unique form, narrative perspective, and content ambiguity. However, the voice of female criticism has been notably scarce. Thus, interpreting *Regret for the Past* from a female perspective is significantly meaningful. Although it showcases progressive intellectuals of the May Fourth period, their innovation succumbs to the constraints of entrenched old ideologies.

At the novel's beginning, Zijun emerges as a character of firmness and courage, willing to resist her family, including breaking off with her uncle, to pursue love with Juansheng. In this period, she embraces new ideas and lives together due to shared interests.

Yet, this progressive attitude is ultimately limited. Although Zijun accepts these ideas, which are more advanced ideas at that time, she remains unable to break free from old ideas. After they live together, the initial spark of love gradually extinguishes. Zijun's actions reveal a departure from the noble image Juansheng had of her; to live, she has to meddle around her neighbors and handle housework like feeding chickens and dogs and cooking. When Juansheng loses his job and their life has no material guarantee, Zijun never considers looking for a job to support this family. This also indicates that feminism during the May Fourth period, although it has made some breakthroughs, is still not thorough.

The male protagonist, Juansheng, finds that Zijun has become increasingly ordinary and has gradually lost love for her, and he tells her so. Unable to bear the fact that Juansheng no longer loved her, Zijun died in despair, and her father took her. This indicates that, during the 1920s, although feminism had made breakthroughs in China, it still had limitations. For example, the female protagonist always puts herself in a subordinate position to men. She persists in the idea that the female should care for her husband and housework. This indicates that there is still a need to break free from the shackles of thought regarding feminism. Zijun is depicted as an enlightened figure, “a fleeing Nora,” and Juansheng's wife. Besides, the character of Zijun shows an obvious sense of emptiness. The character is constructed by Juansheng, reflecting the aphasia situation of a female in a patriarchal society and the oppression and harm inflicted on women by patriarchal society.

Because of gender issues, this work inevitably presents the issue of a male perspective. Some researchers have conducted studies on this issue. For example, while criticizing the harm caused to women by patriarchal society, Lu Xun also explores the way out for female liberation, showing both progressive aspects transcending the times and the limitations of his thoughts. Studying this issue helps us to have a true and comprehensive understanding of Lu Xun. Looking at the entire text of *Regret for the Past*, the limitations of the perspective are indeed shaped by the historical and social background. From a feminist perspective, narrating women's stories from a male perspective leads to a certain degree of subjectivity in the narrative.

From a narrative perspective, the character of Zijun, which we know, is also written from a man's perspective. Throughout the text, there are very few objective descriptions of Zijun's character, and almost all of her images are reflected in Juansheng's perspective. While remembering the man perspective, many actions of Zijun from the male perspective are disliked by Juansheng, a new enlightened intellectual accustomed to male dominance. For example, when Juansheng proposed to Zijun and knelt on one knee, he felt a sense of disgust and aversion. This is because, in his intrinsic thinking, women are still in a subordinate position, and kneeling to someone of lower status goes against his instinct, making him unwilling to recall it.

Critical Approaches

To analyze the representation of women in Lu Xun's stories, this study employs feminist literary theory, which provides a framework for understanding the complexities of gender dynamics in literature. Feminist criticism allows for an examination of how women are portrayed, the roles they inhabit, and the implications of these representations for contemporary readers. Scholars such as C. T. Hsia (1961) and Rey Chow (1993) have

contributed significantly to the discourse surrounding Lu Xun's work, arguing that his treatment of female characters reflects both a critique of societal norms and an exploration of individual agency.

Additionally, this study will consider intersectional perspectives, recognizing that women's experiences in Lu Xun's narratives are shaped not only by gender but also by class, ethnicity, and social status. By incorporating intersectionality, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of how various factors interplay to influence the lives of Lu Xun's female characters.

However, limitations always coexist with progress. Zijun failed to completely free herself from patriarchy. Her words, "I belong to myself," did not result from feminism but from her blind worship of her lover, Juansheng. Meanwhile, Lu Xun's examination of feminism also had some limitations due to its male thoughts and narrative perspective. He believes female tragedies were bred from backward social and economic systems. However, in reality, females' economic independence does not directly affect the success or failure of marriage. Institutional reforms can only lead to the pseudo development of feminism. Females cannot win respect and understanding without the elimination of sexual stereotypes, social discrimination, and criticism of females. Therefore, dialectical research on feminism in *Regret for the Past* contributes to females' uniqueness and independence, which is valuable and meaningful in constructing a harmonious society.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to provide a comprehensive analysis of women's characters in Lu Xun's stories, illuminating the ways in which these representations engage with broader themes of gender, power, and resistance. By closely examining specific texts, this research aims to contribute to the ongoing conversation about Lu Xun's literary legacy and its relevance to contemporary discussions on gender and society. Furthermore, it seeks to highlight the significance of women's voices in his narratives, emphasizing their agency in a context often dominated by male perspectives.

As a prominent leader of the New Culture Movement, Lu Xun dared to encourage and support females from a male perspective. He revealed the true life of Chinese women like Zijun and explicitly pointed out that it was females' loss of dignity, lack of income sources, and oppression in feudal society that caused their dependence on males. Lu Xun strongly called on women to empower themselves, free their personalities, and awaken their feminist consciousness to become independent individuals. Through the love tragedy of Juansheng and Zijun, Lu Xun criticized men who acted like Juansheng in real society and hoped to eradicate patriarchy in a male-dominated society.

In summary, the exploration of women's characters in Lu Xun's stories offers a rich field for scholarly inquiry, reflecting the complexities of gender dynamics in early 20th-century China. By situating Lu Xun within the historical and cultural context of his time, this study aims to uncover the multifaceted portrayals of women in his work, using feminist and intersectional approaches to analyze their significance. Through this examination, we can gain deeper insights into Lu Xun's critique of patriarchy and his nuanced understanding of women's lives, ultimately enriching our appreciation of his literary contributions.

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