

Shackles for Females by Age: Experienced the Ups and Downs of the Women in Old Shanghai through the Book Named *Song of Everlasting Regret*

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Abstract:

Prosperous yet downcast times had a significant impact on the females in old Shanghai, especially the females in the 1930s to 1940s. The research aims to discuss how females in old Shanghai seek self-struggle and redemption with the representative of a character called Wang Qiyang during the background of varieties shackles of the age, in the book *Song of Everlasting Regret* written by Wang Anyi. The whole research has three parts: The bondage of the time for women, which shows the tragedy women experienced in the press of feudal culture; The awareness of self-growing for the female in old Shanghai in the daily living environment, which expresses the process of females who work harder to make a self-redemption, and the disenchantment of the women under the secularization prejudice and constraints in the old Shanghai time, which demonstrate patterns of the aging shackle and the rebellion from women. The study reveals the different kinds of shackles that females face like the restriction of freedom, deprivation of power, oppression of patriarchy and the discrimination of gender. It also further discusses the self-struggle and redemption of women while reproducing the ups and downs epic of females in old Shanghai.

Keywords: Wang Anyi, *Song of Everlasting Regret*, Women in Shanghai.

1. Introduction

Wang Anyi is the master of writing stories in old Shanghai. Her renowned book *Song of Everlasting Regret*, which is honoured as the modern Shanghai epic, won the Modern Literature Prize. The book

seems the magnum opus of her long literature piece. The main content is about the protagonist Wang Qiyao's lifespan legacy that just like a dream. It abandons the arrangement of giant era background, but takes the consistent narrate technique to illustrate the detail in the trivial daily life. Through the change of

the times and the interchange of sea and land interweave with personal sorrow density, this book gives an instrumental performance of a gorgeous joy in the ostentatious city [1]. The words and sentences in the *Song of Everlasting Regret* like the mote in bustling life, bringing coldness and continuous regret to people. The scroll pictures describe the bustling dreamland in old Shanghai. The noise is a metropolis infested with foreign adventurers breaking trifles in alleyways and men and matter seems like unendurable ordinary. By way of careful glued by Wang Anyi, this helps people detect the female Characters in the colours under the old Shanghai.

With the constant awakening of female awareness, today's academia mainly uses ego and dependence as the research direction for Wang Anyi's novels. Such as *Talking about the female awareness in Song of Everlasting Regret* and *Talking about the female awareness in Wang Anyi's novel since the 21st century* [2,3]. However, the woman characters written by Wang Anyi, gain more pressure because of the constraint of the era. In the concept of femininity worldly tropism and gender stand fast on the path about self-struggle and redemption, especially the prosperous and desolate old Shanghai in the book, for Wang Qiyao, the last four-decade drift along and made the era isolated. On one hand, she was the daughter fostered by old Shanghai, who would become the dodder flowers, which depends on the patriarchal society approximately. On the other hand, when the metropolis infested with foreign adventurers in old Shanghai truly becomes the past, they still can't prevent themselves from cherishing the memory of the lingering charm. In the tip of the brow and the eye ground at that time, a woman like Wang Qiyao, it's just as the catkin drifts away in the wind and falls in the wind of the era, as the wind has passed, the prestige has been hidden then.

Wang Anyi was the first literature-promising young person influenced deeply by revolutionary thought in the new era. Some books that she had written before certainly sprouted of the femininity thoughts already. Though it hadn't matured female awareness yet, in the times of the reform and opening up policy, the book she created, imitates Eileen Chang's style of writing in old Shanghai through the description of past and present life in Shanghai, demonstrating the epitome of the female under the old Shanghai era. The essence is a kind of disenchantment for Shanghai, which is the bustling city going on the batter.

Fetters from different eras shackle the freedom of females. The oppression from Patriarchy and prejudice even more increased the self-awareness of females. This means the significance of personal life growth makes the struggle to sober and sink into vice degradation depravity etc safe.

2. The Restriction of Females by The Era

2.1 Female's Self-deprivation Self under the Patriarchal Social System

The classic *Song of Everlasting Regret* reveals that the restriction of the era is a concept that covers a wide range.

Researchers summarize the female character's influence in several modern novels, such as *Love in a Fallen City* by Eileen Chang and love triangle episodes by Wang Anyi, as two points.

Patriarchy, known as patriarchal culture or patriarchal culture, is an institutional concept constructed by social culture. This creates a universal concept of "male identity", which means that whatever matters males execute is proper and natural. Feminism has long recognized the strict gender hierarchy between males and females, which reveals the existence of an invisible system of intellectual authority. The underlying logic is to place females and males into an oversimplified "binary opposition" type of unequal relationship, which objectifies and marginalises females, making them others [4]. That leads females to face the subconscious pursuit of so-called male identity in society, family, and marriage, which further leads to the exile and dilution of self-awareness. The change enormously limits females' personal choice and freedom.

In the classic *Song of Everlasting Regret*, Wang Qiyao, as the daughter of a Shanghai alleyway, represents a great number of daughters of the boudoir in real alleyway life. The enviable and lamentable story of forty years' lifetime which is full of frustrations begins with the story that Wang Qiyao, a small and elegant woman with unique charm, was chosen accidentally as "Miss Shanghai" for her beauty. From then on, the trajectory of life has changed dramatically. Pigeons from the chaotic world, from the roof of the waves, flying to the sky, through clouds and fog. "Wang Qiyao was a white silk originally, gradually wrote the words, and the words were connected into a sentence, which became history".

The selection of Miss Shanghai based on beauty itself reflects the excessive emphasis on female appearance to please males in society at that time. Whether it is the materialization of females or the so-called appreciation, in essence, it is a gaze of males on females.

2.2 The Restriction by Feudal Ideology and the Traditional Concept of Marriage under the Background of Social Tradition.

Despite the background of *Song of Everlasting Regret* in Shanghai, which was at the forefront of opening

up in modern times, its citizens are still influenced by the remnants of feudal society, especially the marriage system, and females have no right in marriage. Their marriage is also regarded as an important means of economic transaction and family fate change. With the example of generations of mothers, females who have been in such a family and social background for a long time will easily have a strong dependence on males. As Wang Qiyao looked at his mother's cushion box when she was in the boudoir, she looked forward to her dowry, lamenting the man's nature while looking forward to marriage, which in itself can reflect the problem.

As for Wang Qiyao, in the 1940s, after she became Miss Shanghai, she became Mr. Li's paramour. Since then, she has lived in Alice's apartment. However, her materialistic life left her spiritually lonely and constrained. In the 1950s, after the liberation of Shanghai, she returned to ordinary life, but she was criticized and rejected by people around her because of her experience. These all reflect the views and constraints of public opinion and moral ethics on female marriage under the traditional social background, which strengthens female's collective unconscious self-discipline and supervision.

In the traditional division of gender roles, females are often confined to family roles, lacking independent opportunities and rights, and social expectations and prejudice against females also constitute a constraint on women's freedom. Due to the limited space for daily activities, although with the progress of society and the renewal of ideas, the social status of females has gradually improved and the gender equality movement has achieved remarkable results. Especially under the influence of the May 4th New Culture Movement, more and more females began to yearn for the arrival of beautiful love. However, due to the stubbornness of feudal forces, female liberation seems to be struggling, and women's pursuit of freedom in life is still unavoidably disappointing, and the result of shouting female's freedom of marriage and independent consciousness is not as expected.

3. Female Self-consciousness in the Daily Living Environment of Old Shanghai Beach

Under the prosperity of old Shanghai, the metropolis infested with foreign adventurers in old Shanghai, women's lives are often filled with daily trifles. However, these seemingly ordinary daily lives contain female's unique survival wisdom and fighting spirit, vividly showing the germination and development of women's self-awareness. The calmness of every move in Wang Qiyao's life ema-

nates poetic beauty. Different from the traditional image of women being passive and weak, Wang Qiyao demonstrates resilience and independence in her daily life. Facing the choice between love and marriage, she was not bound by the expectations of society, but bravely chose her path. It is this persistence and pursuit of self-worth that vividly reflects the awakening of female self-awareness. Simultaneously, Wang Qiyao also showed his unique pursuit and comprehension of beauty. From her teenage years, she was lazy in the hustle and bustle of the world, but she paid attention to her appearance and grooming, as well as her inner fulfilment and growth. This pursuit of beauty not only made her stand out in the hustle and bustle of the old Shanghai beach, but over time, she also developed a peaceful mindset.

Wang Qiyao is clever, but this kind of cleverness is not applicable to that era. She has experienced many times' changes, constantly struggling and resisting difficulties, showing the indomitable female vitality in her forty years of life. Constantly struggling and resisting in the predicament, showing the indomitable female vitality. It is not only in the process of pursuing love and marriage that she does not regard love and marriage as the whole of life but pays more attention to the realization of self-worth and spiritual independence. She refused Kang Mingxun's weakness and escape, bid farewell to Mr. Li's kindness, shouldered the burden of life alone, and moved on. This is the resilience of Shanghai women and an important embodiment of the germination of women's self-awareness.

This process is also called the female gaze. This concept was first put forward by John Berger to read and analyze the significance of Western painting from a gender perspective [4]. With the development of Laura Mulvey, more and more scholars pay attention to the female gaze. Firstly, the female gaze is a means for female to determine their subjectivity and express themselves. Through this means, females can face-to-face themselves to the maximum extent and look at their situation and development with complete flesh and blood, thus gain individual independence and autonomy in the process. Secondly, females under the gaze are independent individuals who have their own free will and are not dependent on anyone. They have the initiative and the right to choose. At the same time, they are complex, multifaceted and real, and they are no longer a single type of female image under the gaze of men. Thirdly, under the power mechanism, the gaze does not put females and males in a "black and white" situation but rather treats them with an inclusive attitude, which is non-hegemonic [4]. This fully proves the "self" that women germinate under the oppression of social times.

Women like Wang Qiyao knows how to be measured, how

to balance and retreat in myriads of things, living their ordinary and trivial lives with exquisite and poetic qualities, which embodies the Shanghai spirit of being pragmatic and pursuing exquisiteness. It is because of the beauty shining through her daily life, filled with infinite love for it, that she can still face difficulties smiling and without complaining, and cope with the changes of the world with ease. That's the tough and pragmatic female nature of the citizens in the bustling city, and it's this tenacious life consciousness that further promotes women's self-struggle, the pursuit of freedom and beauty, and resistance to independence.

4. Disenchantment: Revealing the Prejudice and Stipulation of Secularization of Females in the Old Shanghai Era

4.1 The Same Shanghai Beach, Variations of Different Times

In the exploration of Wang Anyi's *Song of Everlasting Regret*, the influence of the times on women's fate has been deeply described. Wang Anyi reveals with unique strokes the various challenges and difficulties faced by women in a specific historical context. From the portrayal of Chang Ai-ling's works and the Shanghai era in which *Song of Everlasting Regret* was written. It can be seen that the living space of women in Shanghai in the 1940s, the differences between time and space of women in the novel were created by the real entry,

In Chang Ai-ling's writing style, females are often placed under the background of a turbulent era, such as Shanghai-occupied areas in the troubled and desolate forties. With this background, Chang Ai-ling's creation has a sense of desolation from the beginning, and the females in her novels show more tragic characteristics. Their love and marriage life are often in a passive position and become subservient to males. For example, Bai Liusu in *Love in a Fallen City*, although she finally got a real marriage and family, still can't get rid of the shackles of male power [5]. Also, there is the white rose in *Red Rose and White Rose*. Although she has social status and identity, her happiness and security are completely dependent on men. These attachments not only reflected the role orientation of females in society at that time but also revealed the passive position of females in emotion and marriage. While Red Rose tried to get rid of this bondage and pursued a life of self-determination, she could not escape the repression of her parents and society in the end. Through these female images, Chang Ai-ling profoundly criticized the deprivation and restriction of fe-

males' freedom of choice in the old era.

Although Wang Anyi describes Shanghai, as expressing the true feelings of women with her unique feelings and experiences, and has a distinct female consciousness. Females are no longer weak and attached to images in traditional literature, but become individuals with independent thoughts, complex emotions and strong vitality. The Wang Qiyao in *Song of Everlasting Regret* has experienced many changes in her life, from the glorious moment when she was chosen as «Miss Shanghai», to the secret years when she became a member of the Nationalist Party officer's paramours, and then to the dullness and struggle of returning to ordinary life after liberation. The image of Wang Qiyao not only shows the ups and downs of women's fate in the torrent of the times but also reflects her persistence and pursuit of self-worth in her daily life. Through the role of Wang Qiyao, Wang Anyi conveys the tenacity and courage women display when facing difficulties, as well as their efforts and sacrifices in the pursuit of freedom and equality. The development track of female consciousness is fully demonstrated, as well as all kinds of hardships and growth experienced by females in the process of constantly discovering themselves, perfecting themselves and realizing themselves. Female characters in Wang Anyi's novels dare to challenge the patriarchal society, striving for their right to speak, showing the dignity and value of women in the new era [6].

Above all, what Wang Anyi wants to express is completely different from Chang Ai-ling's Shanghai writing, although it is under the same background as the Shanghai Times. Through the tragic images of females, Chang Ai-ling profoundly revealed the bondage and destruction of feudal ethics to females, and the difficult course of females' self-identification between tradition and modernity. On the other hand, Wang Anyi's novels focus more on the awakening and struggle of females in the new era, showcasing the social progress and the promotion of female status in the process of female's constant pursuit of freedom, equality and happiness, and the awakening and growth of female's self-awareness.

Since the May 4th Movement, the liberation of literary thought has promoted the economic and social development of the country, which is also the starting point of women's literature in China. Being an era of "human discovery", female liberation and human liberation were put forward on an equal footing. Hence, in Shanghai, which was in the occupied area in the mid-1940s, it became a universal topic that men and women love each other and the details of life itself.

Chang Ai-ling's view of the world is void, and she regards secular life as the lifeline of the nonsense world. Wang Anyi is more immersed in concrete real life, her love for

daily life is not out of fear and nothingness, but out of respect for life and persistent search for the meaning of life. Daily life in Wang Anyi's works is real, and it is a real interest in going into the society. With meticulous brushwork, she described and laid out the details of concrete and trivial secular life, and excavated the substantial and simple aesthetic feeling and dense and long meaning of daily life. Through the writing of daily life in the alley in *Song of Everlasting Regret*, tries to explore the poetic, human and human beauty contained in daily life. Rather than saying that Wang Anyi is full of love for secular daily life, it is more accurate to say what she truly loves is the wisdom and vitality of ordinary people hidden behind secular life.

4.2 What Female Consciousness Reveals Is "Sex" Itself

In feudal society, female's social status was extremely low, and they were forbidden from participating in social activities such as politics and education. It leads to females being unable to develop their potential, and even the opportunity to pursue personal value and self-realization is deprived due to the influence of family pressure, marriage bondage and power deprivation. Over time, females lose themselves in society and are taught to obey and cling to male power. The pursuit of social recognition and the satisfaction of family expectations throughout one's life, losing the opportunity to develop self-awareness and realize the value of life

The female problem is the real problem to be solved in the study of gender relations. Following the feudal consciousness and moral ethics of more than two thousand years, females in China have always been in a state of aphasia, and they have never reflected their real situation in gender relations. It is only when females have the right to speak that the relationship between the two sexes can be improved. Thus, the rise and development of women's literature is also a history of the continuous evolution of gender relations [7]. Sexuality is a repressed part of women, which is a part of their natural consciousness and also a manifestation of their nature when they perceive the world. Wang Anyi gave a new viewpoint on female sexual consciousness. She believes that "If you don't write about sex, you can't entirely express it. If you don't write about sex, you can't write about the humanity core." Anyhow, sex can't be avoided. Both Wang Anyi and Zhang Ailing just dig it out from the streets of Shanghai's urban life. Only when space has meaning can natural and instinctive sexual desire have the opportunity to be expressed in an environment where modern civilization is sparsely influenced by moral norms, and the relationship

between spirit and flesh is so harmonious [7].

Eileen Chang belongs to Shanghai in the last century. She is not only the writer of the material world in Shanghai, but also the reappearing of the era of war, decay and decadence. She writes about the relationships between old feudal families and new city life, which is simple and presumptuous. Wang Anyi disenchanted the old Shanghai era, she criticized it with the classic *Song of Everlasting Regret*. During her more than 20 years of creation, she has always responded with the spirit of the times all alone. Along with the deepening of China's female consciousness, Wang Anyi quickly grew into a writer with humanistic feelings. She kept rational consideration on gender issues and led the direction of Chinese gender writing in contemporary female literature. This changing track of Wang Anyi's gender writing is not only the result of the requirement of the era of gender harmony but also the anti-promotion of gender writing and the ideal of gender harmony. Judging from *Song of Everlasting Regret*, if the founding of New China in 1949 is taken as a dividing line, great changes have taken place in both the life phenomena and mental attitude of the characters in the novel and Wang Anyi's writing narrative. It is also a great progress in female consciousness, which is embodied in Wang Qiyao. As a woman who witnessed the old Shanghai era, she still kept the brave pursuit of herself after experiencing many difficulties, which shows that generate, female with self-awareness, and it also proves from the side that 49 years ago, China was shackled and oppressed by women in the 1920s and 1930s.

5. Conclusion

Wang Anyi's *Song of Everlasting Regret* is a modern Shanghai epic., also an urban literature article, the description from an alleyway foreign-style house and street scene in the book. Not only had the prosperity of the metropolis infested with foreign adventurers in Shanghai but also imprisoned in the attic. A song about Shanghai's past and present life, Wang Anyi's disenchantment goes on the Batter and Bustling Shanghai written by Eileen Chang and demonstrate the epitome of females up and down under the background of the old Shanghai.

Looking back at history, females were constrained by the shackles of the era for a long time. Wang Anyi focused on female awareness and destiny under the background of old Shanghai, through her sharp observation, revealing female struggle and awakening in the new era. Illustrating the firm and tenacious female appearance in the process of seeking freedom and autonomous awareness, merely their destiny, thought and behaviour were shackled by the era. Whether the concept of thinking that females are inferior

to men in traditional society, or the problem of gender discrimination in modern society, both make females seeking freedom, equality and happiness path full of thorns and challenges.

In the melancholy and beautiful narrative of the book *Song of Everlasting Regret*, people can find how vividly female characters struggle and drift alone in the flood of the era. Whatever Wang Qiyao's pathos life or other females helplessly resist, it deeply reflects the variety of fetters that era bring to bear on females. The pressure from clan and society left females to face the dilemma of the bondage of marriage, deprivation of power and loss of ego, they all expected to become an understanding wife and loving mothers, which can win honour for the family. But people always ignore their personal choices and happiness, even though there are some females who try to pursuit freedom, society's role position for females will still limit the space of development, making them dot and carry on the path to pursuit of self-worth. What's more, the self-constraint in the privacy of female thought was a hidden yet equally deadly shackle under the long feudalism ideology. Female gradually lose their ability to think and decisions making independently. They get used to attaching to others, bailment their happiness on somebody else. This kind of situation is incisively and vividly embodied in the female characters written by Eileen Chang.

After analysing this classical literature *Song of Everlasting Regret* thoroughly, it's not difficult for people to find that the book was not only a masterpiece of description delicate emotion and complete human native, but also a historical record which deeply reflect how the era put multiple shackles on females. This research careful inspects

female characters' fate trajectory. Revealing the bondage of marriage, the provision of power description of gender and the limitation of self-cognition females faced under the background of the feudal age. Thereby, further discussion of the influence of these fetters of the era on individual growth and social status of females. Through the tragedy of the book and history in Old Shanghai written by Wang Anyi, people can glimpse the profound shackles females suffered in the era-long history and see a floating epic of females pursuing themselves in old Shanghai.

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