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**CHANGING NUANCES OF GENDER IN CHINESE LITERATURE
OF REFORM ERA: LOVE AND SEXUALITY
IN WANG ANYI'S WORKS**

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Abstract

Dismissing the conventional view that Chinese Women's writings are/were unable to transcend personal experiences or were always obsessed with love and emotions, the paper looks at how Wang Anyi's narratives, amongst many other women writers, utilizes personal space and emotional experiences of love or sexuality to express and interrogate deeper political, social and philosophical interventions in history. Wang's radical use of personal experiences intertwined with history and her recurrent theme of exploring the 'fate of women' has attempted to reconstitute and re-negotiate the personal-public discourse (relation) on gender. She represents an independent agency that is quite different from the officially sponsored activism of Mao period. The paper also calls for the need to value the diversity of feminist introduction in women's personal narratives, including that of Wang's, as that is indicative of the emergence of an indigenous brand of Feminism in China.

Keywords: Gender, Women's writings, Woman's literature, Woman's consciousness, Wang Anyi

The twentieth-century Chinese literature, having witnessed and reflected major events of history, has transcended time and explored plurality of genres. Chinese literature has had a rich background from antiquity to modern times, but it is the twentieth-century literature that is most vibrant and varied in its experience and quality. Throughout this time, various uprisings, campaigns and revolutions have impacted the Chinese people and have had a bearing on its literary production as well. Therefore, the twentieth century is perceived as an extremely eventful and fruitful time for literary and artistic growth.

Starting from the middle of the nineteenth century to the turn of twentieth century, the two Opium Wars and the corrupt Qing government brought China to a state of domestic turmoil and face to face with foreign aggression, where people lived in despair. China was plunged into poverty and underdevelopment which only added to the woes of the Chinese people; as the intellectuals became aware of these problems, the old culture and value systems were questioned to seek answers for China's morbidity. The New Culture Movement (新文化运动 *xin wenhua yundong*) of 1917 was primarily the Chinese version of renaissance where people sought to build a new

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culture as they felt disillusioned with Traditional Chinese culture. However, it was the May Fourth Movement (五四运动 *wusi yundong*) in 1919, a political movement, that brought common people of China led by intellectuals into the mainstream of Chinese nationalist struggle to free China of imperialist forces, and also paved the way for a “literary revolution” (文学革命 *wenxue geming*) for the first time in the history of Chinese literature. All the above mentioned social, cultural and political challenges that the Chinese society faced started to manifest themselves in the creative process of Chinese literature. It was also in the wake of May Fourth Movement that a discourse on women’s liberation started. With education and employment opportunities, women began to emerge as an important social force in Chinese society. Mirroring this development, there began to emerge a body of literary works that reflected the lives of Chinese women and women were able to tell their own stories.

I. Historical Background and Socio-Cultural Backdrop

Representation of Gender in Early Twentieth Century: On the Threshold of Change

Women’s writings, earlier fragmented, took a definite shape in 20th century China and the differences can rest on the premise that in case of China, since antiquity, women’s lives were fundamentally different from men’s, the two sexes literally existed in two different worlds and women were not allowed certain freedom that was a given for men. Considering that in their past, women were denied education and as a result, they did not compose anything or hold any important official position amongst the literati-scholar class in ancient China, the women’s literature of 20th century China has been remarkable and diverse.

With new radicalism brought forth by the May Fourth Movement, women’s writings emerged as a new genre where women writers like Ding Ling (丁玲) that wrote about relations between the sexes, family and other domestic matters. Ding Ling, with her unique expression of female subjectivity, paved the way for a revolutionary and far more direct access into the female world with her *Miss Sophie’s Diary* (莎菲女士的日, *shafei nüshi de riji*, 1928). The chaos of personality, anguish, sexuality or desire, identity and emotional complexity of the central female character makes *Sophie* a strong independent woman, fearing no judgement for her desire for a man whom she eventually rejects. The story has often been compared to *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert and is also considered Ding Ling’s outburst of ‘non-accommodation of such independent women in Chinese society’.¹

There were other women writers of same era such as Ling Shuhua (凌叔华) who delved into private lives by accessing private emotions of women and brought their world to focus. For instance, she accessed the female protagonist’s private emotions in *Embroidered Pillow* (绣枕, *xiuzhen*, 1928) to establish the hard lives of women and that, women have to sacrifice individual

¹ For more details, please see Ding Ling’s Wikipedia page, Kuhlman, Erika A. *A to Z of Women in World History*, (New York: Facts on File, 2002), p.362 and also Dai Qing, *Wang Shiwei and “Wild Lillies” : Rectification and Purges in the CCP, 1942-1944, Part I*, (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1994), p.18.

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identity and personal space for gaining respect in society. In other words, amongst other virtues, women sacrificing for their families etc are worthy of respect in society. Saddled with traditional morality and straitjacketed roles, women were expected to make sacrifices as sacrifice was seen innate to their nature, as if it was a natural attribute only awarded to women.

Ding Ling's another famous work, an essay, *Thoughts of March 8* (三八节有感 *sanbajie you gan*, 1942) published in a newspaper by the Communist Party of China (CPC) questioned the double standards of male Party workers, such as male cadres making fun of women cadres working in public sphere, remaining unmarried or misusing divorce provisions by men to get rid of their old wives.² She pointed out that State Socialist Feminism, while bringing women into public sphere of labour and politics, was not enough; as it resulted into women undertaking double burden of work and home. Ding Ling, in her works, has constantly posed questions of 'commitment of the Party' in changing general attitudes towards Chinese women.

Zhang Ailing (张爱玲) was another woman writer, who having received western education from an early age has been writing since the age of 12; she became a prominent writer of Shanghai and produced works like *Love in a Fallen City* (倾城之恋, *qingcheng zhi lian*, 1943) and *The Golden Cangue* (金锁记, *jin sou ji*, 1943) that became best sellers in Shanghai. Her reputation soon waned by 1945 owing to political turmoil and after her husband was declared a traitor for collaborating with the Japanese. Assuming her career is over in Shanghai, she moved to Hong Kong and subsequently to United States in 1955.

While Zhang is popular abroad, she is remembered for her literary legacy in mainland China wherein she displayed a rare literary maturity beyond her years. For instance, her characterization from *Love in a Fallen City* or *The Golden Cangue* had impressions of dysfunctional families, broken marriages and 'hysterical' women. Her works, like *The Golden Cangue*, have taken on social ills like foot binding, exploitation under familial hierarchy, social status of women, moral degeneration and power struggles between women family members. Another hallmark of Zhang Ailing's works was construction of a Wartime narratives where sentiments and physical space of a city is often weaved together with concerns of revolution and national salvation; that is to say the alternative narrative of war torn Hong Kong in *Love in a Fallen City* also nestled delicate emotions of love that surmounts the grand narrative of national salvation.

Works of Zhang Ailing and Ding Ling were the exceptions of these times and were criticized harshly for their bourgeoisie sentimentalism and not conforming to the literary standards of Socialist Realism. It was not the fault of the writers but merely a revolutionary understanding of Marxism as most writers were intellectually influenced and inspired by Marxism, wherein the

² This work remains one of the most influential and thus, also most controversial work of Ding Ling. This work was an outcome of Ding's observation of the men and women comrades' relationships in the Yan'an circles when she joined the communists in Yan'an during the civil war in 1930s. Later under the leadership of Chairman Mao, she faced harsh criticism for such daunting depiction of reality, and she was labelled a reactionary to have painted fellow men comrades in bad light.

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role of literature is assigned with a responsibility of faithful portrayal of social conditions. These writers viewed Marxism and its implementation in the light of their creative discipline, thereby pushing the boundaries of creative space for intellectual autonomy. The leadership felt the need to disregard such views and bring the writers and intellectuals to the same ground for conformity to literary standards. It was for the same reason that Chairman Mao Zedong convened literary meetings in May 1942 where his famous “Talks on Literature and Art” outlined the Communist Party of China’s official policy on literature and art for the years to come.

Outside the Framework: Non-existent Category of Gender

Delivered by Mao Zedong, in two parts, the Yan’an Talks raised and analysed some vital issues related to the domain of Literature and Art, specifically dealing with the objective and role of literature, its relationship with politics and so on. The talks also laid out a framework for literary and art criticism where Mao sought a balance of revolutionary political content and the highest perfection of artistic form, as the criteria. At the same time, he warned against some works, not conforming to literary standards, which can be reactionary in their content with a certain artistic quality to be poisonous to the masses, and therefore it becomes necessary to reject them.

Having outlined all major issues, Chairman Mao declared some serious defects “such as idealism, dogmatism, empty illusions, empty talk, contempt for practice and aloofness from the masses” which were gripping the literary and art circles, he felt the urgency to launch a struggle of proletarian ideology so that “every comrade may become sound and our entire ranks may become truly united and consolidated ideologically and organizationally”.³ Following the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the Yan’an Talks became the guiding principle while dealing with issues in the realm of literature and art; it is well-established that the Talks became the foundation of literary policy for decades to come.

From 1950 until the end of 1970 was somewhat an interrupted phase as literary creativity was hindered due to the tense environment borne out of the then ongoing socio-political movements and committed literature was predestined to silence even the weakest yearning among women to write. This period just had a few exceptions like the work of Zong Pu’s (宗璞) *Mungo Bean* (红豆, *hongdou*, 1957), Yang Mo’s (杨沫) *Song of Youth* (青春之歌, *qingchun zhi ge*, 1958) and *Lily* (百合花, *bai he hua*, 1958) by Ru Zhijuan; the immense choir of the Revolutionary “we” had engulfed the voices of women. This phase saw the decline of subjectivity of ‘I’ to give way to the plurality of ‘we’.

³ The Yan’an talks identified four kinds of people, i.e. workers, peasants, soldiers and petty bourgeoisie, for which the literature and art should be produced. Chairman Mao also highlighted that any opposition to this relationship between literature and politics, would result in the dualism of “politics-Marxist, art-bourgeois”. For more on this debate, please see Mao-Zedong, “Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art”, as in *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1977 edition), vol.3, pp.82-95.

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Notable exception of these times was *Lilies* (百合花, *bai he hua*, 1958) by Shanghai writer Ru Zhijuan (茹志鹃).⁴ In 1958 the work was criticized for its bourgeois sentimentality. *Lilies* revolves around a quilt with embroidered lilies on it, gift from the wife's family, that belongs to a couple; the quilt is eventually used to cover the dead body of a soldier who is a stranger to them yet got emotionally linked to the owner through the quilt. The story is simple and moving; it leaves the reader with values like compassion and sacrifice. Even though Ru Zhijuan supported the Communist party and the revolution, it was believed that her works dealt with 'trivial' everyday lives of people and emotions, and not on more important national issues.

Chinese Literature in Reform Era: Rediscovering Gender

The literature during the Cultural Revolution followed a mass line of writing that was officially endorsed, and thus, expressions of love, sexual desire, sensitivity or feminine identity remained largely immersed under these official narratives, of revolutionary cause, by the Party-state. It was only after the Open-Door policy in 1978 that facilitated the influx of modern Western thought, and some policy changes introduced by the Eleventh Party Congress that the Chinese literature started to once again dwell on the issues of gender, amongst other issues hindering Chinese society. This phase of reform and opening up, after the end of cultural revolution, is termed New Era (新时期 *xin shiqi*) and literature of this time is called New Era literature (新时期文学 *xin shiqi wenxue*).

The outward looking government led by Deng Xiaoping laid foundation for a new economic development strategy in its Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in 1978; it had set economic reform and modernization as its two topmost priorities. The reform and open-door policy had greatly improved the living standards of ordinary Chinese people; inflow of foreign investment and technology into China as well as policy of individual incentive boosted economic growth rapidly, but gradually resulted in huge gap between the rich and the poor as it created regional disparity within China. As a result, the social relations started to witness immense changes breeding alienation, gender inequality and other regressive phenomena. All these changes and issues emerging in Chinese society of the time found reflection in literature too⁵; subsequently, literature became increasingly concerned with humanitarian and social issues and witnessed a gradual distancing from politics in 1980s. Overall, all aspects of Chinese culture saw a churning throwing up diverse and nuanced productions.

Many writers of this time actively engaged into addressing various issues and welcomed 'individualism' in literary choices such as characterization, subjectivity of perception, and so on.

⁴ Ru Zhijuan is also the mother of Shanghai writer Wang Anyi, whom Wang Anyi considers a literary giant and owes her literary sensitivity to her. Quoting Wang Anyi from a personal interview with me conducted in December 2015. English translation by the scholar.

⁵ Literature witnessed unprecedented diversity in its content and themes, as there were many writers who, under the policy of 'Emancipation of Mind' (解放思想 *jiefang sixiang*), started to delve into areas and issues that were considered forbidden in Mao's China.

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Change in social relations, registered itself in many ways, evident among them was the shift in understanding of gender relations, which again found echo in an emerging body of women's writings. Women writers experimented with unconventional styles and explored subject matters like women's emancipation, traditional social conditioning, choice between love and marriage or marriage and profession, female sexuality and sexual morality with a gendered sensitivity etc.

In a bid to portray women's emancipation, women writers started dwelling on diverse themes relevant to women's lives and their place in Chinese society. This new body of women's writings in the New Era explored women's personal lives such as their desires in life, passion, identity of 'self' and some also created space in the discourse on desire. Prominent writers like Zhang jie (张洁), Zhang Kangkang (张抗抗), Wang Anyi (王安忆), Tie Ning (铁凝), Zhang Xinxin (张辛欣) etc constituted the women's writings of this period and depicted a variety of issues facing Chinese women in Post-Mao China.

II. Journey of Wang Anyi: Gender through the Mirror of Love and Sexuality

Life and Representative Works

In Reform era China, Wang Anyi is a towering literary figure with works spanning across two decades. Wang Anyi's literary career started from her cultured family, both her parents were writers, and she read classical poetry as a child. Her life was thrown in chaos in 1969, when her father was criticized of being a rightist; as a result, her education was interrupted, and she was sent to the countryside as part of 'sent-down youth'.⁶ She eventually found a position in Xuzhou Song and Dance Cultural Troupe and joined them as a cellist in 1973 to survive the hard life of communes.

Upon her return to Shanghai in 1978 to work for a literary magazine *Children's Era* (儿童时代 *ertong shidai*) as an editor, she began writing again. She subsequently joined the Chinese Writers Association (中国作家协会 *zhongguo zuojia xiehui*) in 1980. The works she produced at this time were stories that were inspired from her individual experiences in the countryside. These works, i.e. Wang Anyi's earlier works of 1980s, were not politics-oriented works professed (acknowledged) by the Party-state and were, therefore, symbolic of her focus on 'individual' rather than the 'collective' of the Mao's period. Writing to her was opening up to a world of freedom, as

⁶ The term *zhiqing* refers to educated youth, particularly urban educated youth that were sent down to the countryside for labour from the beginning of the 1950s to the end of the Cultural Revolution, as part of "Up to the mountain and Down to the Countryside movement" (上山下乡运动) during the Cultural Revolution. Sent down youth, rusticated youth, educated youth or sometimes even demoted youth (下放青年) are all different terms used to refer to *zhiqing*. As a part of the 'sent-down youth' that were supposed to learn from the peasants, Wang Anyi was sent to famine-stricken Wuhe county, near Huai river in Anhui province.

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she explains, “in 1980s there was an opening up of thought, we all started writing under these circumstances... Writing, to us, was freedom”.⁷

Wang Anyi’s works are spread across genres like personal writings (自我书写 *ziwo shuxie*), *zhiqing* literature (知青文学 *zhiqing wenxue*)⁸, life experiences intertwined with history (人生体验 *rensheng tiyan*), Roots-seeking literature (寻根文学 *xungen wenxue*) and sexual themes (性题材 *xing ticaì*) etc.

Her oldest technique has been to intertwine personal memoirs with long historical narratives. In that, Wang Anyi delved into psychological scars and explored contradictions in Chinese society through ‘class’ representation in her earlier works, which is evident from *Life in a Small Courtyard* (小院琐记, *xiaoyuan suoji*, 1982), *The Destination* (本次列车重点, *benci lieche zhongdian*, 1981) and *Lapse of Time* (流逝, *liu shi*, 1982). Of which, *Lapse of Time* navigates the readers through the rise and fall of capitalist families during and after the Cultural Revolution, and their lives when they were attacked as ‘former bourgeois’. The story bears resemblance to Wang’s background and her life, as she was from well-off family and her family was attacked for being rightist.

Mid 1980s marks a time where Wang Anyi’s shift towards exploration of sexual themes came to the fore. She became more prominent, and somewhat controversial, with three novels on love, popularly known as ‘Love Trilogy’. Wang Anyi attracted some controversy due to the explicit sexual content in these novels. Exploring issues of social taboo among which sexual love was one, Wang wrote her first novel in the love trilogy titled *Love in a Small Town* (小城之恋, *xiaocheng zhi lian*, 1986) that describes story of an unmarried and confident single mother. Wang, a keen observer of psychosexual impulses of people, takes a protagonist who is adolescent. She is emotionally and physically stronger than her lover and later in life chose to be a single mother. Though some critics were irate by its explicit content, the novel’s real innovation was not its sexual exploration, but in Wang’s personal exploration into human nature and human sexuality where she acknowledged that sexual love can also be a very powerful force in life.

⁷ Referring to an important policy measure of Deng government in Post-Mao period, Emancipation of Mind (解放思想), Wang is talking about the time in history where writers were allowed to choose their criterion for writing and the Party will not meddle unnecessarily in their artistic work. This was a phase where the ideological restrictions were loosened. The quote is taken from an article in-part based on Wang Anyi’s personal interview, by author Charlotte Middlehurst which can be accessed online from Time Out Shanghai’s website: http://www.timeoutshanghai.com/features/Books_Film-Book_features/1440/Interview-Wang-Anyi-.html (accessed on July 17, 2020)

⁸ The term *zhiqing literature* refers to literature produced by *zhiqing* writers, i.e. former ‘sent-down youth’ upon their return to the cities. In a nutshell, *zhiqing* literature analysed the aesthetic, psychological and cultural repercussions of sent down movement, particularly the way these writers, as cultural agents, constructed their identity and seized their traumatic past in the countryside to critically evaluate their present lives in post-Mao period. For detailed understanding on *zhiqing* writers and literature, see Wang Yanjie, The “Sent-Down” Vision: Poetics and Politics of *Zhiqing* Literature in Post-Mao China, PhD dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2011.

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Her second work in the trilogy was *Love on a Barren Mountain* (黄山之恋, *huangshan zhi lian*, 1986), It's a story that ends in a suicide pact between two lovers who are having an extramarital affair. It's a story where she took basic facts of this tragic tale of extra-marital love and develops them into a tale of universal power. She provides rare psychological insights into the psychology of the two sexes; and reveals the ways in which a society can repress your right to choose (love) freely and when the power of love can turn destructive.

Love in Brocade Valley, the third in the love trilogy also known as *Brocade Valley* (锦绣谷之恋, *jinciugu zhi lian*, 1987) is a story of a young woman who is bored with her husband, gains a new sense of identity through a fleeting extra-marital affair. This has been considered her first work with modernist technique, where the narrator starts with "I want to tell a story, a story about a woman" and the intervenes frequently with the story. The novel bears some resemblance to *Madame Bovary*, except that in this work, the protagonist is more self-aware. *Love in the Brocade Valley* was one of the most controversial stories, as the female protagonist, with her individuality in expressions, sexuality or sexual awareness, comes back to her real life with no repercussions whatsoever; which was viewed as her getting away with adultery.

In the narrative tradition of modern Chinese literature, it either sublimates love and sexuality, or put it in the abyss of sin. Whereas, in Wang Anyi's narratives, sexual love is a mixture of all these elements while it is presented in the private lives of the people as a private sentiment. Sexual love let them feel the release and let them save themselves from the ocean of desire. Her writings constituted a rupture by breaking the social, moral taboos and the orthodox ethical discourse. More importantly, her writings added an alternative ethical dimension to beauty of sexual love and beauty of life and has continuously explored the conflict and repression of sexual desire in society and its culture.

After the 'Love Trilogy', Wang further explored the issues of sexuality in *A Century on the Hillock* (岗上的世纪, *gangshang de shiji*, 1989). This work dwells on sexual love but, like the 'Love Trilogy', it doesn't end and lives on in a tragedy. Wang Anyi puts a man (Yang Xuguo) and a woman (Li Xiaoqin) in a setting where they are consumed by pure sexual desire and separated from the whole world. Despite the odds, the woman is sent down to countryside to work in a farm and the man is her production manager who is married, they consciously go along the road of desire. Wang Anyi presents beauty of the body only for the woman character, the man is a source of utter disgust. When Li Xiaoqin looks at Yang Xuguo's body, the body in her vision is ugly and the novels' objective description of Li Xiaoqin's body was full of youthful vitality, full of poetry and beauty. Wang Anyi gifts the possession of the beauty of body and beauty of sex to women. The story reveals that the sexual impulses of a man or a woman not just fights with the society's taboos or restrictions, but also fights with their own reasoning. Her women characters have sexual impulses as an innate character of them, a far cry from the traditional view of women that limits women's urges to motherly, benevolent, peaceful nature and only assigns the strong sexual desires of men. *A Century on the Hillock* is a secret sexual story of a man and a woman in the rural setting that presents the contradiction between the politics and humanity. There are several junctures that

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brings the issues of humanity and politics in conflict, face to face; more importantly it showcases the transcendence of human physical desire over laws of morality and laws of the society.

Wang Anyi won Fifth Mao Dun Literature Award, the highest and most prestigious literary award in China for her exceptional work *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* (长恨歌, *chang henge*, 1995) which is a novel that shot Wang Anyi to international fame. Starting with a quote from the poem of the same name *Chang henge* written by Bai Juyi, a Tang dynasty poet, the story revolves around Wang's protagonist Wang Qiyao, a former beauty pageant winner and an unusually pretty Shanghai woman, who is easily dazzled by style, wealth and pleasure and slow in recognizing the worth of loyalty and kindness. The story takes us through an overall span of forty years of her life in Shanghai.

Wang Anyi compares her protagonist with all distinguished beautiful women in the past that were considered to have brought disaster to the men who loved them. Much like the beautiful Yang Guifei, who also had a tragic love story described in the Bai Juyi's poem, Wang Qiyao also has her beauty as her capital and beauty alone determines her fate. Wang Qiyao is eventually strangled to death by two men, hoping to find an old treasure of gold left behind by her previous lover, a KMT official. While The novel explores different facets of Wang Qiyao's life and presents Shanghai as the beautiful backdrop, it also takes into account the fate of women in the violent patriarchal history.

Wang Anyi's approach to Gender and Feminist Consciousness

Even though she often weaves long historical narratives, but Wang Anyi maintains her recurrent concern for women's lives and their fate in Chinese society. Almost all of her works are focused on women, i.e. their consciousness, identity or hardships of daily life, but Wang Anyi refuses to be viewed as a feminist writer (the terms used to denote feminism in Chinese are *nüquanzhuyi* 女权主义 or *nüxingzhuyi* 女性主义). Her disapproval with this tag of 'feminist writer' comes in the form that she does not want to be seen embodying or associating herself with the Western Feminism simply because she feels the Western Feminism separates the two gender further.⁹ Wang Anyi's feminism is of the kind where men and women compliment and support each other.

Also significant is, that earlier there was a discourse on desire written by the male writers, of male sexual experiences, where women were merely a part of their sexual experiences; that is to say they were a passive participant in the male discourse on desire and were rendered as an object of male privacy. It is to the credit of Wang Anyi's imagination and sensitivity that 'Desire'

⁹ Quoting Wang Anyi from her personal interview with me in December 2015. A similar view was expressed by Prof Lin Danya of Xiamen University in her personal interview with me as well, that *nüquanzhuyi* and *nüxingzhuyi* are the terms that are used in China to connote Feminism. The former reminds them of the Western Feminism since it stresses on women's rights and takes an opposite stance to that of the male. Also consult, Wang Zheng, "Three interviews: Wang Anyi, Zhu Lin, Dai Qing" in *Gender Politics in Modern China: Writing and Feminism*, Ed. Tani E. Barlow (Duke University Press, 1993), pp. 164-165 for the same understanding.

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was re-written from the perspective of a woman and sexuality was presented as a natural trait all humans possess, irrespective of their gender.

In her literary creativity, Wang Anyi sets out a discourse on desire from a woman's perspective wherein, unlike the 'desire' written by the male writers where a woman is the object of male privacy, the women characters crafted by her are aware and open about their bodies and their sexual desire. Secondly, her stories present women's depictions of their personal lives, that is women's literature by women for women, which includes issues of sexuality, identity and other personal experiences of life in Chinese society, seen from a woman's perspective. It is through this perspective, subjective to Chinese women, one is able to see subtle and nuanced feminist consciousness of Wang Anyi. Dai Jinhua, while speaking on women writers of 1990s, points out that all women writers writes on themes of gender identity and gender awareness. As she elaborates in her essay "Adventures and Breakthroughs: Female Writings in the 1990s" (奇遇与突围:九十年代女性写作 *jiyü yü tuwei:jiushi niandai nüxing xiezuó*) that these women writers do not repose any hope in men, neither do they have any such desire to be saved by male heroes. The protagonist of their works does not need men's praise of being "progressive" or do not want to be part of "men's drama". Instead, they are depressed and haunted by the ghosts of despair.¹⁰ The departure from the traditional school of thought of women being protected by men 'heroes' is evident in many women writers. It is clear in Wang Anyi's crafting of not only female characters, but also of male characters.

In *Love on the Barren Mountain* when the affair is exposed, and the man is relieved of his work duties, demoted to a sanitation worker in a theatre and was forced to face the leader and his wife. All these setback fails to pull the lovers apart; the extramarital affair keeps blooming and they later escapes to a barren mountain. The man does not have the courage to divorce his wife or to run away, the woman also does not want to give up on her love, so the lovers decide to die together on the barren mountain. In this work, Wang Anyi crafts male protagonist with a lot of careful consideration. In fact, it is this male character, along with male characters in *Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, that has been examined a lot vis-à-vis her female characters in these stories; the male characters are shown to have subverted the stalwart strong positioning of men in Chinese society. Her men characters are cowardly, selfish, morally corrupt and fighting shy of their familial responsibilities; not only they don't assume their family or social responsibilities, but also persistently leave their families and lovers feeling disappointed. Women, who have been shown to be traditionally protected by men, are depicted tough and brave; they not only replace men as the backbone of the family in her works but also shoulder every responsibility by themselves.

The weak, selfish and irresponsible male images in her account are a far cry from the male images in the traditional Chinese culture. For example, when the male protagonist in *Love in the Barren Mountain* finds the woman whom he has strong dependence on and marries her, he completely depends on her care and support. Since he himself is delicate and sensitive, he cannot

¹⁰ Refer to Dai Jinhua's 1996 essay, "Adventures and Breakthroughs: Female Writings in the 1990s" (奇遇与突围:九十年代女性写作); here cited from Tam, Kwok-kan, Yip, Terry Siu-han., *Gender, Discourse and the Self in Literature: Issues in the Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong*, (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2010), p.43.

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become the pillar of the family. Having found such a woman as his companion, also did not restrain him from the temptation of the girl from the Jingu lane (金谷巷女孩 *jinguxiang nühai*) and eventually cheats on his wife. In the extra-marital affair too, he is very passive; he couldn't leave his wife and child, he also couldn't leave the girl from the Jingu lane. Unable to abandon either of them and struggling with contradictions, he goes ahead to commit suicide with the girl from the Jingu lane; once again a very passive follow-up scene as the narration is very calm and there is nothing majestic about their suicide.

The deeper connotation about her male and female characters is that when Wang brings vivid flamboyant female images in contrast to much bleak male images, she is of course studying or pursuing the common development/ progress of men and women in society, but she is also focusing on her own recognition of the value of women, be it from the point of view of significant roles they play in families or the lack of attention, opportunities and status she is given in the society. The female images portrayed by Wang Anyi demonstrates the independent consciousness of women and seems like the existence of male characters, in the weak and irresponsible avatars, is more to highlight the importance of women.

Reading Wang Anyi: Love and Sexuality as Mirrors of Subjectivity

It could thus perhaps be established that with the loosening of the political control and influence of western modernist literature in post-Mao period, Chinese literature made deeper explorations into human nature. Chinese writers of 1980s, like Wang Anyi, moved away from the Socialist realist school from collective writing (集体写作 *jiti xiezuò*) and subscribed to the more humanitarian themes to individual writing (个体写作 *geti xiezuò*), to bid farewell to an unidimensional reflection of social reality and welcome more of individual experience and subjective insight, of which feminist consciousness was one.

Prior to this, 'gender' was subsumed under the over-arching concerns of 'class' as the concerns of women's emancipation later were linked to and merged with national salvation. Since then national salvation became an overwhelming concern and women's liberation came joined with the liberation of the nation; this sentiment continued to rule over women's issues throughout the 1950s, 60s and 70s under the construction of national identity.

The gender equality professed during the Mao period, theoretically gave women some relief, but it desexualized them and stripped them of any feminine dignity and beauty, as women were encouraged to work, and even look, like men. While they were expected to work like men, Chinese women also faced a double jeopardy: of losing their feminine grace and dealing with two workloads of work and home. Therefore, the women's movement once again took shape in the post-Mao period, of which Chinese women writers were a large part. As prof. Li Xiaojiang says that "...from the late 1970s to the mid 1980s, [Chinese] women's literature centers on the subject

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of women's awakening"¹¹; it is important to note, that in the same period, there were literary works already discussing love by other women writers like Zhang Kang Kang and Zhang Jie. Zhang Kangkang's *Right to Love* (爱的权利 *ai de quanli*, 1979) and Zhang Jie's *Love Must not be Forgotten* (爱是不能忘记的 *ai shi bu neng wangjide*, 1979) both got published the same year and these stories, that dwelt on love, tacitly asked questions like do women have the right to love? This was a time, after a long period of silence, that women writers were speaking of their fundamental rights and implying that every person has a right to love, it is not a right reserved only for the bourgeoisie, as professed during the Mao period.

Yet at the same time, addressing 'desires of life' (生命欲望 *shengming yuwan*), of which love is one, Wang Anyi tries to normalize the entire narrative of love and sexuality in her 'Love trilogy' as a natural course of life. For example, speaking of the protagonist of *Love in the Brocade Valley*, Wang Anyi says that it is only love where our human nature really plays out. It is the only here many mysteries of human nature can find explanation;¹² the protagonist was seeking her own romance in life and the bubble of 'extra-marital affair' that she lived in eventually fizzles out.

In comparison to this discussion on love, both Zhang Kangkang and Zhang Jie despite of having written about love, did not generate as much controversy as Wang Anyi later did with her 'Love trilogy'. The simple fact being, that both Zhang Kangkang and Zhang Jie brought love into the mainstream Chinese literature but had steered clear of any sort of controversy by evading the site of the body. Since their story did not involve any sexual love or the right to it, their works, to a certain degree, were similar to anti-body position of the Party.

Wang Anyi, on the other hand, has explored themes of love beyond the spiritual liaisons as professed by the above two women writers and she was the first women writer to have touched upon sexuality, sexual impulses or even adultery. Though it is important to mention that Wang Anyi has written of spiritual liaisons too, but they were in the format of stories like *Brothers* (弟兄们 *dixiongmen*) and *Sacred Alter* (神圣的祭坛 *shensheng de jitan*); in both the works written in 1989, she portrays unflinchingly and platonic love between men and women, and even among women as well.

Zhang Jie's *The Ark* (方舟 *fangzhou*) is also a story about three women friends; *Brothers*, often compared to *The Ark*, with somewhat similar plot, tells the story of three women friends relying on the friendship and mutual assistance amongst themselves to try to free themselves from

¹¹ Li Xiaojiang (李小江), "Resistance to Tradition" (背负着传统的反抗 *beifu zhe chuantong de fankang*), Zhejiang xuebao (浙江学报 *Zhejiang Literary Quarterly*), no. 3, 1996, pp.118-121. This quote of Li Xiaojiang is from p. 118 in the original work in *Zhejiang Literary Quarterly*, here it is cited from PhD thesis of Yan Qigang, *A Comparative Study of Contemporary Canadian and Chinese Women Writers*, University of Alberta, 1997, p.111

¹² See Wang Anyi Chen Sihe's 王安忆、陈思和, "两个69届初中生的即兴对话", 《上海文学》, 1989. This interview touches upon a lot of questions on Wang's creativity, also on the then popular and controversial 'sexual literature'(性文学). English translation by the scholar.

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the control of the male-centered society. But Wang Anyi does not leave a ‘bright ending’ behind for their struggles, either during or towards the end of the story. She ruthlessly lets them collapse under the instinct of motherhood and wifely obligations.

Such idiosyncrasies make one consider, when one writes from a women’s point of view, how does the world look? What is her world outlook and how does she express it? How does a woman see another one?

Wang Anyi’s writings offers us some answers to these questions. Her works, with its own diversity and peculiarity, constitutes a different approach into the human state or the state of human life. Her works tells us, Women’s literature does not necessarily give us an autobiographical account or narrate experiences that are their own. They also tell us that the feminine voice of ‘I’ should be a mark of her subjective writing. The verbal expression of female experience in literature is accessible primarily to women, who use a language men do not understand, considering that their life experiences are more or less same.

For example, Wang Anyi brings issues of family, class, sexuality etc to journal a woman’s life journey. She takes the readers through the trivial and subtle details of a woman’s life, sometimes also gives a sociological and psychological presentation of the effects of political change on several generations of her family. It is easier for a Chinese woman to see that she is holding up critical mirrors to the disparities that controls Chinese women’s lives.

Similarly, regardless of whether it is at the level of sexual desires of humans or at the level of morality, Wang’s ‘Love Trilogy’ and *A Century on the Hillock* were a huge rebellion against the mainstream literary ethics and traditional social morality. It lays an in-depth understanding for sentiments and subjective desire, the ‘sexuality’ that was earlier concealed and demonized, was now presented as the most natural and most basic desire of life here. Wang said in an interview:

如果写人不写其性，是不能全面表现人的，也不能写到人的核心，如果你真是一个严肃的、有深度的作家，性这个问题是无法逃避的。¹³

If a writer writes about humans, but does not write about sexuality, then it cannot fully express human beings, it also cannot express or describe the core of the human beings. If one is a serious and in-depth writer, the question of sexuality cannot be avoided.

Wang calls for acceptance of basic human nature and desires; through her works, she acknowledges the two basic necessities that dictates the lives of people is: Economic and emotional. It is usually the union of hunger and desire, or economic necessities that drives men and women towards each other.

At the same time, Wang Anyi also reserves a special sympathy for ‘fate of women’ which reflects in her women characters’ lives as well, all of whom are non-traditional and assertive of their rights; but her strength and assertiveness is revealed in the problems they face. ‘Fate of

¹³ Ibid. Wang Anyi Chen Sihe, 1989, p. 79. English translation by the scholar.

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women' was first explored by Wang Anyi in the 'Love trilogy' and she has continued to imply the oppression of women by male history (男性历史对女性的压迫 *nanxing lishi dui nüxing de yapo*). Wang's works also highlight how history has been unkind to women, especially when depicting the fate of women in the violent patriarchal history¹⁴, such as her women character Wang Qiyao from *Song of Everlasting Sorrow*. Wang Qiyao was oblivion to the politics and remained unknown, but the politics of the times didn't leave her; it in fact could invade her life anytime and disrupt her daily life. She cautiously avoided the powerful violence in this male history, but the historical power created by men will eventually invade her life.

III. Summing Up

Using love and sexuality as mirrors, Wang Anyi's works, negotiating through the new social climate of 1980s China, has portrayed multiple threads of Chinese social reality. Some of the most prominent ones can be summarized as follows:

- A) Wang Anyi does not deliberately express her feminine consciousness in her works. Yet, her attention to the ever-changing socio-political reality, in which historical "grand narrative" on women, points out that her feminine consciousness is hidden in this vast history, and it only emerges from the gaps and corners. This changing reality expresses the struggle between men and women in the instinct of desire and social power. Her works are also an inquiry into what powerful control our natural attributes and desires have on our human destiny (i.e. fate).
- B) Wang Anyi's humanism includes small ordinary people who spend ordinary lives. She writes of their struggles; and they struggle between the combined forces of society, encounters, limited rationality, and their powerful instincts. Each one experience history differently; the powerful violent history that Wang Anyi talks about in her works also tempts women and disrupts their daily lives, and she submits that women cannot avoid this swelling history.
- C) Wang Anyi rejects the 'sex politics' (性政治 *xing zhengzhi*), a theme which was written about in the post-Cultural Revolution times, through some of her works that appeared in the late 1980s. While she normalized sex as a natural need, she also became a critic of 'sex politics' and some of her works unraveled the commonplace trade between (political) power and sex.
- D) Women are not only entitled to but also have a right to ultimate sexual satisfaction and happiness, a clear departure from the traditional discourse where women portrayed passive and a tool for the male satisfaction. She criticized the irrational absurdity of the Cultural

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Revolution and the harm it did to the human nature. Outside the sexual physiological need, she also shows subtle hints of other human needs, sometimes present in the garb of desire, i.e. sense of belonging, sense of security, self-realization and need for respect and love etc.

- E) She portrays patriarchal history as violent, and women as its worst victims. Women anyway need to exert a lot to live tiniest of their dreams while bearing the tremendous social pressure.

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