

Self-Othering and Subjectivity Crisis: Three Archetypal Paths of the Second-Generation Nora in Eileen Chang's Novels

Yujing Ma *

College of Liberal Arts, Journalism and Communication, Ocean University of China, Qingdao
266100, China

Eugenie607@163.com

*Corresponding author

Abstract

This study applies Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist framework of the "Other" to deconstruct the paradoxical subjectivity formation in Eileen Chang's female protagonists, delineating three constitutive patterns: Commodified Subjectivity (Ge Weilong, Bai Liusu): strategic embodiment of colonial-era erotic capital that ultimately reinforces their own commodification; Ethical Concession (Feng Biluo, Gu Manzhen): gradual internalization of patriarchal norms that systematically neutralizes resistance; Traumatic Reproduction (Cao Qiqiao): pathological reenactment of oppression through maternally transmitted violence. Chang's theoretical breakthrough manifests in her exposition of voluntary self-othering, wherein female characters consciously engage in self-delusion and auto-objectification. This dissection of female complicity and psychological vulnerabilities not only constitutes a creative development of Beauvoir's theory of the "Other" but also offers crucial insights for contemporary feminism, serving as a critical warning against the trap of "quasi-masculine liberation".

Keywords

Eileen Chang (Zhang Ailing), Simone de Beauvoir, Theory of the Other, Second-Generation Nora, Self-Othering.

1. Introduction

Henrik Ibsen, the Norwegian playwright, holds a pivotal position in modern Chinese literary history. His play *A Doll's House* introduced Chinese youth to Ibsen's ideas, while he became a gateway for understanding Western thought. In the play, Nora Helmer's departure symbolizes the pursuit of personal freedom. During the May Fourth Movement, Hu Shi promoted Ibsenism in *New Youth*, calling it a "manifesto of the literary revolution." [1] However, Chinese society misinterpreted "individual liberation" as merely "women's liberation," reducing Nora to a "New Woman" archetype fighting for gender equality. [2] This sparked the "Nora Fever" (In literary circles, creators produced works emulating *A Doll's House*, crafting derivative "Nora figures") inspiring works like Hu Shi's *Lifelong Event* and Ouyang Yuqian's *The Shrew*, as well as real-life departures from oppressive families. Yet, many women faced hardship after leaving. Lu Xun's lecture *What Happens After Nora Leaves Home?* and his novel *Regret for the Past* highlighted these struggles. Female writers like Xiao Hong and Ding Ling further exposed the consequences of unchecked emancipation, advocating for systemic change.

Diverging from early "Nora dramas," Eileen Chang's fiction transcends narratives of women merely migrating from "patriarchy" to "matrimonial power." Instead, she centers the multidimensional impediments to female autonomy—economic precarity, ideological constraints, and psychological barriers—that render genuine "departure" and independent personhood elusive. Chang's protagonists epitomize "second-generation Noras": First-

generation Noras: Inspired by *A Doll's House* and derivative works, they departed only to face abandonment. Second-generation Noras: Witnessing the plight of their predecessors, they desire emancipation yet comprehend its perils. Through their psychological trajectories—whether they depart or remain—Chang unveils the exacerbated physical and psychic trauma wrought by awakened female consciousness lacking institutional support.

2. Theoretical Framework and Concept Definition

2.1. Beauvoir's Theory of the Other

Simone de Beauvoir, one of the most influential thinkers in 20th-century France, profoundly shaped the paradigm of gender studies through her feminist theories. In her seminal work *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir's "Other" theory constructs a comprehensive critical chain from the deprivation of subjectivity to cultural internalization. This theoretical framework encompasses three progressive dimensions: First, the philosophical foundation of subjectivity deprivation—where men establish themselves as absolute "subjects," negating women's ontological status at the ontological level and reducing them to mere reflections of dominant power. Second, the complicit role of historical mechanisms through the interplay of religion, law, and economic systems in weaving a web of oppression. Finally, patriarchal societies achieve the "othering" of women through internalization mechanisms, often manifested as women unconsciously replicating patriarchal logic through emotional conditioning and moral indoctrination, resulting in "voluntary submission."

Beauvoir's theory underwent unique transformations in semi-colonial and semi-feudal Chinese society. On one hand, there emerged the paradox of modernity rooted in economic dependence. The "Nora movement" in semi-colonial China ostensibly advocated female independence, yet paradoxically trapped displaced women between old and new power systems—constantly losing traditional family protection while remaining economically dependent due to occupational gender segregation. On the other hand, cultural conditioning imposed dual constraints. China during the semi-colonial and semi-feudal period exhibited distinctive cultural characteristics. During this era, traditional Confucian ethical values deeply intertwined with colonial modernity discourse, shaping the "New Woman" as a contradictory figure who must both shoulder modern enlightenment responsibilities while maintaining traditional gender roles. The cruelty of this structural oppression lay in its paradoxical nature: when women attempted to break free from their "other" status, the old order had already collapsed yet the new one remained unestablished, rendering the "Nora-like" women who fled victims of this historical transition.

2.2. Local Adaptation of Nora in the Chinese Context

The "Nora Fever" during May Fourth was Chinese intellectuals' symbolic reading of *A Doll's House*, later deconstructed by Eileen Chang (1920-1995). Growing up in Shanghai's foreign concessions post-Nora fever, she witnessed cultural clashes: her mother fled feudal marriage, while she endured her father's polygamous household. At Hong Kong University (1939-1941), colonial modernity shaped her critique of May Fourth ideals. Her writing unveils women torn between rebellion and tradition, exposing the limits of enlightenment discourse through characters trapped in existential dilemmas.

Eileen Chang dismantles the "Nora's Escape" myth through three critiques of May Fourth enlightenment ideals. First, in *The Golden Cangue*, she exposes economic independence's paradox—Cao Qiqiao's capitalist autonomy deepens patriarchal control, revealing "independence" without systemic support as oppression. Second, she critiques spatial liberation, showing new women who escape families remain trapped in marriage markets. Finally, she deconstructs female subjectivity—Ge Weilong's "voluntary" submission in

Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier exposes internalized male expectations. While May Fourth narratives glorify escape and rationality, Chang uncovers post-liberation desolation and desire-power entanglements. Her disenchantment doesn't deny emancipation but demands society confront its complexities, securing her legacy as a feminist pioneer.

2.3. Conceptual Definition: The Second-Generation Nora

"Second-Generation Nora" symbolizes the cross-cultural adaptation of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* in China. Influenced by modernist ideals, they seek intellectual freedom but face material and social constraints, embodying "cognitive aspiration vs. embodied confinement." Unlike the first generation's physical escapes, they struggle with awakening consciousness and institutional limitations during the Republican era, unable to reconcile ideals with reality. Their core contradiction lies in the rupture between self-awareness and existential conditions.

Drawing from her own life, Eileen Chang portrays three alienated types of second-generation Nora characters: Objectified Nora - Colonized by economics over emotions; Compromised Nora - Trapped by social duties and motherhood; Distorted Nora (like Cao Qiqiao) - Becoming tools of patriarchal oppression despite awakening. These figures embody the rupture between consciousness and confinement in Republican China.

2.4. Theoretical Framework and Analytical Approach

Eileen Chang's "second-generation Nora" embodies an inescapable dilemma in modern Chinese literature, reflecting conflicts between Confucian ethics and globalized patriarchal oppression. Using Beauvoir's "Other" theory, this paper analyzes the dilemma of Eileen Chang's "second-generation Nora": Economically, they lack independence, trapped in "golden shackles" of materialism. Morally, societal norms confine them to roles as "virtuous wives," facing backlash for defiance. Psychologically, prolonged Otherization fractures their identities, leaving them unable to reconcile tradition with modernity. Textual analysis of Chang's quintessential novels will dissect the "escape dilemma" faced by awakened "second-generation Noras," elucidating their implications for the evolution of modern Chinese literature across era

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Approach

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, integrating textual analysis, historical contextualization, and typological generalization to conduct a multidimensional interpretation of female characters in Eileen Chang's novels. Through theory-guided case studies, it reveals the cultural logic and sociostructural determinants underlying the "dilemmas of female emancipation."

3.2. Textual Materials and Sample Selection

Adhering to three criteria—thematic relevance, chronological coverage, and typological representativeness—five representative works from Chang's oeuvre were selected: *The Golden Cangue*, *Love in a Fallen City*, *Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier*, *Jasmine Tea*, and *Half a Lifelong Romance*. These works span the early, middle, and late phases of Chang's writing career, encompassing themes of marital love stories, family epics, and urban culture, all closely tied to the "Nora's Escape" motif. Moreover, these five works present a complete spectrum of female characters—including socialites (Ge Weilong), the psychologically distorted (Cao Qiqiao), and compromising figures (Gu Manzhen)—making them crucial for studying the dilemmas of "second-generation Nora" escapades.

3.3. Analytical Approaches and Theoretical Framework

This study applies Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminist theory to analyze Eileen Chang's novels through three approaches: First, examining body commodification and colonial economic mechanisms in *Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier* and *Love in a Fallen City*; Second, exploring moral coercion and motherhood dilemmas in *Jasmine Tea* and *Half a Lifelong Romance*; Third, analyzing patriarchal internalization and intergenerational trauma in *The Golden Cangue* using close reading and historical contextualization. The research develops a "objectification-compromise-distortion" framework, ultimately uncovering the failure of women's awakening through case studies.

4. Case Studies

4.1. The "Objectified" Other: Ge Weilong and Bai Liusu

Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's theory of the "Other," women in patriarchal societies, lacking economic independence, are susceptible to objectification, becoming entities that serve male desires. Within the group Eileen Chang termed the "second-generation Noras," Ge Weilong and Bai Liusu exemplify the typical "objectified" Other. Though possessing independent consciousness, they choose to exchange their bodies and emotions in response to harsh realities (particularly economic constraints), actively self-objectifying themselves and thus eroding their subjectivity.

In **Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier**, Ge Weilong is commodified by Mrs. Liang and Qiao Qi as tools for material sustenance. Despite knowing she is a "newcomer to the Chang San Tangzi," she indulges in lavish lifestyles while rationalizing her exploitation with the phrase "What does it matter if you love me?" Similarly, Bai Liusu resists arranged marriages in **Love in a Fallen City** but ultimately uses marriage as a means for social mobility. Her family commodifies her, Fan Liuyuan treats her as an object of "Oriental sentiment," and she herself actively invests her value in men. Even after war disrupts social order, her dependency persists, leading her to identify with the "Other" role [6]. Therefore, the formation of the "objectified" Other stems not only from patriarchal structures but is also amplified by specific historical conditions (such as wartime chaos) within the Chinese context. These conditions accelerate women's material dependency and the deconstruction of their subjectivity, revealing the localized evolution of the theory of the "Other" within modern Chinese circumstances.

4.2. The "Compromising" Other: Feng Biluo and Gu Manzhen.

The "compromising" other represents another significant category of female characters in Eileen Chang's novels. Unlike the passive acceptance of "objectified" women, these compromising women often possess awakened consciousness but ultimately negate themselves through internalized patriarchal ethics. Simone de Beauvoir noted that women become "the Other" not only as a result of external oppression but also through the internalization of social norms. Feng Biluo epitomizes this archetype. In **Jasmine Tea**, she initially enjoys the possibility of free love and happiness but abandons her lover under family authority to accept an arranged marriage, symbolically resisting institutional norms through "living widowhood." Her compromise is not merely submission to external ethical order but also an acknowledgment of internal filial piety logic. As revealed by her "spiritual disability," her "escape" was already psychologically restrained [19].

Similarly, Gu Manzhen in **Half a Lifelong Romance** also embodies the "compromising" other. However, unlike Feng Biluo, Gu is a victim of the motherhood myth in patriarchal society. Despite relative financial independence, she ultimately enters the patriarchal disciplinary system by "marrying the rapist for her child." Convincing herself with the rationale that "a child cannot be without a father" [20], she willingly becomes a "Mother Goddess" -style tool,

ultimately sinking into the spiritual quagmire of love's disappearance and self-identity collapse. Her experience reflects the Chinese context's dilemma where "financial independence equals freedom" for women.

Thus, Feng Biluo and Gu Manzhen collectively form the dual facets of Eileen Chang's "compromising" other. This reveals the spiritual roots of the "second-generation Nora" 's struggle to break free, which stems not only from material constraints but also from cultural conditioning and internalized ethics. Their tragedy demonstrates that oppression and resistance often fail in Chinese women's experiences, while the "othering" of women primarily arises from the combined effects of deep-seated institutional structures and moral frameworks.

4.3. The "Distorted" Other: Cao Qiqiao

The "distorted" other represents an extreme variant of the "second-generation Nora". This category first manifests through anomalous resistance patterns. As Simone de Beauvoir noted in *The Second Sex*, when women are solidified into "the Other", they often seek illusory subjectivity by conforming to patriarchal value systems. This mechanism of "victim-turned-victor" constitutes the psychological hallmark of the "distorted" other. Concurrently, these women perpetuate oppressive structures through maternal roles, inflicting intergenerational violence on their offspring.

In Eileen Chang's narrative, Cao Qiqiao epitomizes this distorted other. She achieves class transcendence at the cost of her body yet remains unaccepted by her husband's family. Her personality gradually deteriorates into an extreme obsession with wealth. During property disputes, she skillfully exploits the patriarchal logic of "eldest son inheritance", not resisting male dominance but becoming its unwitting spokesperson. Her "resistance" essentially represents an endorsement and continuation of oppressive mechanisms. More critically, Cao Qiqiao transfers this oppressive paradigm to her children, imposing extreme control. She forces foot-binding on her daughter, interferes with her studies, sabotages romantic relationships, and even uses opium to numb her daughter Chang'an's fragile psyche during her most vulnerable period [23]. Her obsessive control over son Changbai ultimately leads to his daughter-in-law's depressive death [24]. This twisted utilization of familial bonds exemplifies Beauvoir's reproductive logic of the "Other". Furthermore, her obsession with gold—manifesting even in her final moments through touching a gold bracelet and staring at a golden hook on the canopy—symbolizes how her "objectified identity" has become an intrinsic existential entity. In patriarchal society, she wields the "golden lock" as a symbol of power to control others' destinies. Her twisted resistance essentially imitates and replicates oppressive mechanisms. Ultimately, Cao Qiqiao's alienation trajectory reveals an alternative possibility after "Nora's escape"—when lacking spiritual guidance, women's autonomy may become a tool of oppression itself. Rather than breaking free from the cage like Nora, she risks becoming a Nora embodying the very cage itself.

5. Comparative Analysis

Ge Weilong and Bai Liusu embody the "objectified" other—materializing bodies and marriages as capital. Their self-commercialization under wartime patriarchal and capitalist oppression mirrors Beauvoir's claim that economic dependence fuels female othering, balancing awakening with survival.

The "Compromised" Other is represented by Feng Biluo and Gu Manzhen. Though possessing self-awareness, they remain trapped in Confucian moral constraints and familial ethics, often sacrificing emotions for family responsibilities or children to gain security and superficial harmony. Gu Manzhen, despite financial independence, remains ensnared in "othering", revealing how economic independence doesn't guarantee personal freedom in Chinese

contexts. This highlights Eileen Chang's localized critique and supplementation to Beauvoir's theory.

Finally, the "Distorted" Other is embodied by Cao Qiqiao in "The Golden Cangue". Having internalized patriarchal logic through prolonged oppression, they project power onto others, creating a vicious cycle of "oppression-internalization-transfer". Cao Qiqiao attempts power retaliation through controlling parent-child relationships, yet her resistance remains confined within patriarchal logic, ultimately leading to mutual destruction between self and others.

6. Conclusion and Implications

This study applies Beauvoir's "Other" theory to analyze three female archetypes in Eileen Chang's novels: First, "Objectified" others like Ge Weilong and Bai Liusu, who sacrifice autonomy under capitalism-patriarchy; Second, "Compromised" others like Feng Biluo and Gu Manzhen, trapped by Confucian ethics; Third "Distorted" others like Cao Qiqiao, perpetuating patriarchal violence through internalization. The cases reveal systemic barriers to female subjectivity in colonial modernity.

Through a realist lens, Chang's novels depict women's liberation struggles while deconstructing subjectivity through bleak poetics. In *The Golden Cangue*, she shatters the "matrilineal myth," revealing how maternal roles become tools of patriarchal violence that perpetuate intergenerational trauma. She also examines gender politics within materialism, focusing on female alienation in colonial cities and capital-patriarchal collusion mechanisms. Building on this foundation, Chang delves into women's ideological vulnerabilities, exposing the internal logic of "objectified," "compromised," and "distorted" others to show how women internalize oppression through self-comforting and self-annihilating processes. This "self-othering" explains the failure of the "second-generation Nora" and highlights Chang's core feminist insight: liberation mimicking masculinity risks new oppression. This insight underscores the significance of her novels in modern Chinese feminist literature, explaining why her feminist discourse has maintained vibrant vitality and dangerous relevance to contemporary issues.

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