

## Gendered Reflection of Motherhood Violence

### -- An Intertextual Analysis of *Cold Night* and *Rose Gate*

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#### Abstract

Wang Mu in Ba Jin's 1940s novel *Cold Night* and Si Yiwen in Tie Ning's 1980s work *Rose Gate* serve as emblematic portrayals of mothers in contemporary Chinese literature, creating a reflective dialogue that encompasses four decades of literary history. Wang Mu is depicted as a nurturing mother adhering to conventional ethical standards, while Si Yiwen is characterized as a malevolent mother who transgresses the limits of human morality. Despite exhibiting moral polarity, both characters experience the oppression of parenting under patriarchy. The author's work elucidates the estrangement of gender power within motherhood while enhancing critical discourse on literature and advancing the field of motherhood studies.

#### Keywords

Cold Night; Rose Gate; motherhood violence; patriarchy.

#### 1. Introduction

In the context of social transition in modern China, motherhood has evolved beyond the private sphere of the home, emerging as a nexus of various societal paradoxes. Feminist researcher Adrienne Rich differentiates between motherhood and mothering, highlighting that motherhood serves as both a conduit of gender power and an aspect of familial ethics[1]. Current academic research has yielded substantial findings in the domain of literary motherhood: at the macro level, it elucidates the relationship between literary creation and the practice of social motherhood; at the micro level, it examines the dual oppression of feudalism and patriarchy through the character of Wang Mu in *Cold Night*, and demonstrates the interplay between the cycle of intergenerational violence and maternal resistance through the character of Si Yiwen in *Rose Gate*.

Nonetheless, current research predominantly focuses on the analysis of a singular text and lacks comparative examination of motherhood practices across multiple texts; it also does not delve deeply enough to uncover the interrelation between "motherhood worship" and "madwoman criticism" within the framework of patriarchal dominance. This study juxtaposes *Cold Night* with *Rose Gate* and, through an intertextual analysis of the characters Wang Mu and Si Yiwen, contends that neither Wang Mu, who unwittingly adheres to patriarchal authority, nor Si Yiwen, who resists it, successfully escapes the confines of patriarchal dominance, thereby highlighting the intricacies and inadequacies of maternal emancipation in contemporary society.

## 2. Violent Transmission of Motherhood Under Intergenerational Oppression

The coercive influence that motherhood exerts as a power enforcer in intergenerational relationships is known as motherhood violence. It is often concealed beneath nurturing love and manifests through the control of children's body politic and the manipulation of domestic space. Body politics is the process by which power shapes the subject through control and dominance over the body; spatial rights is a method of power that Foucault exposed, in which the control of location and the environment of daily life limits individual behavior[2]. Men have traditionally occupied a dominant position in patriarchal society, while women have been marginalized and relegated to the Other. The body is thus represented as an object to be examined and utilized by males, and women's subjectivity is suppressed. Both *Cold Night* and *Rose Gate*'s depictions of mothers effectively illustrate how, under the shadow of patriarchy, women become agents of authority who oppress their offspring.

### 2.1. Wang Mu of Cold Night - The Spirit of the "Female Father"

The character of Wang Mu can be interpreted as a "female father," representing a woman who assumes the role of a patriarchal figure, with her spectral influence perpetuated within the family structure. Beauvoir's notion of the Other serves as a foundation for examining Wang Mu's behavior. In a patriarchal framework, women are designated as the secondary Other, while men occupy the role of subjects within the family and society[3],[5]. Upon becoming widowed, she receives financial support from her son and psychologically adopts traditional patriarchal norms, resulting in her experience of "double otherness[5]." She is perceived as the female other by the patriarchal, while simultaneously holding superiority over the younger women in the household. In her role as an elder and mother, Wang Mu assumes a predominant function akin to that of her father, so "fulfilling her mother's responsibilities on behalf of her father."

Wang Mu's dominance over the family is evident in the minutiae of the home realm. Wang Mu exerts such control over her domestic environment that she assumes full responsibility for household management, scarcely permitting her daughter-in-law, Zeng Shusheng, to pose inquiries. This arrangement appears to enable the elders to nurture the younger generation; yet, it ultimately serves as a foundation for Wang Mu to disparage Zeng Shusheng, stating, "In any case, it is preferable to be an old mother than to be a 'vase[5][6].'" Simultaneously, Wang Mu monopolizes familial matters under the guise of motherhood, restructuring the dynamics of family authority such that the daughter-in-law is rendered incapable of exercising agency and must acquiesce to the directives of the elders. This spatially limited control not only preserves Wang Mu's authority but also implicitly perpetuates the patriarchal order; that is, a woman might serve as an agent of patriarchal power to subjugate another woman. Increased regulation is seen in the intrusion into the lives and bodies of her children and grandchildren. Wang Mu, possessing a profound urge to dominate Wang Wenxuan, becomes enraged upon learning that her son is engaging with his wife outside their residence and thereafter urges him to forsake her. She determined that her daughter-in-law was "unqualified" and revoked her status as a wife on the basis that the marriage had not been formally completed[5][7]. Wang Mu assumed control over her grandson's upbringing, estranging his birth mother, Zeng Shusheng, resulting in his growing indifference and alienation towards her[5][5]. This practice effectively deprives the daughter-in-law of her maternal role. Wang Mu's complete dominion over space and corporeality confers upon her a seemingly unequivocal triumph within the family. This triumph incurs the devastation of the family: Zeng Shusheng's departure, Wang Wenxuan's demise, and the fragmentation of familial bonds.

The oppression imposed by Wang Mu illustrates that once the "ghost" of patriarchy dominates women, they become instruments of oppression against others, perpetuating the cycle of intergenerational subjugation as subsequent generations of women are relegated to the status of the failed Other, hence facilitating women's oppression by women[3]. This is a significant way by which the patriarchal system is sustained. This is a significant mechanism for the continuation of patriarchy. Zeng Shusheng is sent to the periphery as a consequence of her family's failure under persecution, resulting in the loss of her subjectivity and voice, compelling her to flee in order to resist it. Nonetheless, Zeng Shusheng's leaving is not a genuine triumph but is accompanied by feelings of guilt for forsaking his family[6]. This intricate psychology reflects the pernicious impact of intergenerational violence in motherhood: The daughter-in-law endures moral coercion despite successfully defying her mother's control. *Cold Night* illustrates how the "female father" mother sustains patriarchal discipline by regulating the domestic sphere and exerting control over others' bodies, so engendering a submissive and guilt-laden female subject.

## 2.2. Si Yiwen of Rose Gate - Generational Contamination of "Filth."

The maternal violence portrayed by Si Yiwen contrasts with that of Wang Mu, as Si Yiwen embodies a "wicked mother" marked by selfishness, despotism and weakness. Kristeva asserts that when women assume the position of motherhood, they are frequently regarded as sacred embodiments of selflessness and devotion; nevertheless, upon disclosing their human frailties or defiance, these aspects are branded and deemed "abjection," necessitating eradication[8][9]. In *Rose Gate*, Si Yiwen is a socially restrained and "tainted" woman; she defies the archetype of an ideal wife and mother, instead becoming infamous for her "wickedness," representing the suppressed dark aspects of motherhood marginalized by patriarchal narratives. The stigma of shame and filth affixed to her body not only contaminates her existence but also adversely affects her offspring, particularly her granddaughter Su Mei, via intergenerational transmission. As grandparent and grandchild, the relationship between Si Yiwen and Su Mei exemplifies Kristeva's assertion that a daughter must psychologically repudiate her mother to assert her identity, however, the mother's internalization results in profound shame and entanglement. Su Mei typically reacts with action when Si Yiwen unfoundedly accuses her. Nevertheless, as she perceives her grandmother's affection, her heart swiftly melts, engendering trepidation and estranged love. The novel states that when Si Yiwen purchased a cup of hot milk for the little Su Mei, she perceived it as "Granny had brought back a little something from that small courtyard, an unknown kindness, I suppose[10]." The body politic is expressed as a dual response of mind and body; the grandmother's generosity evokes empathy in Su Mei's body, subsequently regulating her mentality. Si Yiwen employs "affection" to reestablish her granddaughter's psychological control. This ostensibly feeble love, which is, in reality, domineering, compels Su Mei to consistently acquiesce to her grandmother's authority and relinquish her right to self-expression. Besides emotional abduction, Si Yiwen's intrusion into Su Mei's life also exemplifies the exercise of spatial authority. Si Yiwen would examine Su Mei's little cabinet and utilize the "secrets within" to compel Su Mei to acquiesce[10]. Simultaneously, Si Yiwen discloses the excrement of Su Mei and Su Wei to the public, transforming Su Mei into an object of public scrutiny[10]. These events demonstrate that Si Yiwen consistently influences Su Mei's life, analyzing and shaping the experiences of her subordinates. As Su Mei advocates for her independence, she receives her grandmother's assessment of her standing as an elder in return. It is evident that through the dual disciplines of space and body, Si Yiwen transforms maternal authority into a mechanism for the ongoing subjugation of her grandchildren. This form of oppression constitutes a specific type of "intergenerational pollution"; when the mother cannot endure the weight of sanctified motherhood dictated by patriarchal authority, love devolves into violence, and this warped emotion and perception impose a significant psychological

burden on subsequent generations. Su Mei matures under the shadow of her grandmother, unable to relate to her conduct and incapable of shedding the stigma she has inherited—this exemplifies the manifestation of an inferiority complex. Kristeva asserts that the encounter with the inferior object provokes a profound rejection response and an identity crisis in the subject[8]. Su Mei's ambivalence towards her grandmother, who elicits both disgust and pity, mirrors an individual's disposition towards an inferior object: she desires to discard it, yet cannot entirely sever the connection.

### 3. The Motherhood Writing Divide in Gendered Narratives

In literary works, motherhood is frequently depicted as a contradictory character: perpetually subservient to a lower status, and a holy figure of devotion and sacrifice. "The ease with which women are despised on the one hand, and mothers are honored on the other, is excessively deceptive," as Beauvoir noted, describing the disparity between the myth of the "Madonna" and the actual circumstances facing women. Motherhood is associated with an aura that strengthens women's identity as the Other in patriarchal societies[3]. However, the position of motherhood frequently comes with an unimaginable aspect of violence: it is not unusual for moms to oppress, manipulate, and even harm their family members[8]. Female writers tend to expose the bloodshed and ugliness in it and turn it into the true darkness of human nature, deconstructing the image of the Virgin Mother packaged in the patriarchal system. Male writers, on the other hand, frequently sublimate this type of motherhood violence through the sublimation of ethical aesthetics and give it the legitimacy of sacrifice and love. The image of the "Madonna" that patriarchy has constructed is undermined by the female writers' tendency to expose the violence and ugliness and to trivialize it as the actual darkness of humanity.

#### 3.1. Wang Mu of Cold Night - Sublimation of the Sublime in Male Writing

Wang Mu, embodying the archetype of a traditional mother, has authoritarian tendencies and an intense affection for her children, manifesting her aggression and tyranny towards her adult offspring in all facets of her life. Nonetheless, the narrative of *Cold Night* does not depict Wang Mu as a villain; rather, Ba Jin's tragic elevation of this maternal figure renders Wang Mu's violence somewhat "rationalized" as an excessive expression of maternal love.

The novel highlights Wang Mu's struggles in several instances: she became a widow at an early age and single-handedly raised her son; she functioned as an "aged domestic servant," managing the home tirelessly, and even sold her sole gold ring to treat her son's ailment during a period of financial distress[5]. The characteristics of this oppressive mother, veiled in the facade of maternal affection, compel readers to be moved by her profound love for her son; nonetheless, Wang Mu's maternal aggression is concealed inside the guise of "for your own good" associated with maternal love. In the discord between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, Wang Mu's possessiveness is nearly pathological, perceiving her son as her "private property" and her daughter-in-law as an invader into her emotional domain. Nevertheless, the work refrains from moral judgment of her, instead illustrating her comprehension of her mother through Wang Wenxuan: "Even if my mother is in error, I cannot assert her wrongdoing, fearing I might disappoint her[5]." Through Wang Wenxuan, he conveys his comprehension of his mother: "Even if she is mistaken, I do not dare to assert her error, fearing I might disappoint her." Wang Wenxuan perceives his mother as the ultimate benefactor, warranting tolerance for her shortcomings. Ultimately, Wang Mu suffers the loss of her sole son. The novel aims to evoke moral sympathy in the reader; despite any disagreement with Wang Mu's actions, it is conveyed that she acts for her son's benefit, is unwittingly fixated on antiquated ideals, and that her tragic fate elicits further compassion, as Wang Mu is "punished by destiny" for her son's loss, which somewhat mitigates the malevolence of her prior portrayal. This somewhat mitigates the

malevolent aspect of her prior persona. Thus, Wang Mu's aggression is elevated to a tragedy marked by profound mother affection and sacrifice, obscuring her individual culpability.

Through the aforementioned treatment, *Cold Night* aesthetically metamorphoses the oppression exerted by an authoritarian mother-in-law onto her daughter-in-law into a tragedy depicting the disintegration of a feudal family. This tragedy lacks a definitive antagonist: Wang Mu is constrained by her era and disposition, her son exhibits cowardice, and her daughter-in-law embodies contemporary notions of "disobedience." The discord among all parties ultimately culminates in an irrevocable conclusion. This writing method tacitly allows the perpetrator to attain the tragic violence inherent in the "sublime" portrayal of motherhood. Ba Jin venerates the dedication of Wang Mu, whose anguish is exalted as an ostensibly "natural" fate that is beyond scrutiny and can only be mourned. This treatment prompts the reader to recall the image of a destitute yet noble mother, rather than considering how the patriarchal system influenced the characterization of a "bad mother" and precipitated familial tragedy[11]. Consequently, the depiction of motherhood's brutality in *Cold Night* does not genuinely address the core of patriarchy's oppression of women but is rather "purified," a hallmark of conventional male narratives.

### 3.2. Si Yiwen of Rose Gate - The Vulgarized Exorcism of Women's Writing

In contrast to Ba Jin, Tie Ning audaciously subverts the conventional archetype of a nurturing and kind mother. As a mother and grandmother, Si Yiwen endeavors to shape the next generation of women in her image, striving to mold Su Mei into "a woman like herself[12]." In the story, Si Yiwen intentionally leads Su Mei to uncover the affair between Zhuxi and Daqi, culminating in the disintegration of her beliefs at an early age[10]. This sharply contrasts with the implicit portrayal of violence in *Cold Night*, where the women's tale of *Rose Gate* deliberately excludes maternal violence from any redemptive context, opting instead to present it starkly, compelling the reader to confront its brutality. In Tie Ning's narrative, the mother transcends the role of a moral victim, instead becoming a perpetrator who vehemently confronts the prevailing societal conditions, embodying "human ugliness." The inversion of this image significantly influences the male-constructed myth of motherhood that has persisted for an extended period.

It is particularly significant because Tie Ning has dismantled the illusion of mother glorification through her "humble" writing. Si Yiwen's portrayal significantly diverges from conventional maternal archetypes, embodying a blend of intricate motivations including narcissism, possessiveness, deceit, and a trace of authenticity, thereby dismantling the singular "mother of God" stereotype and urging readers to reevaluate the maternal image from a fresh perspective. As both an aggressor and a victim of a patriarchal society, the violence she perpetrates arises not just from her character's "animalistic" tendencies but also mirrors the harsh realities of the patriarchal system in which she exists. Indeed, patriarchal culture employs women to exert control over other women, yet Su Mei's experience plainly illustrates this intergenerational reproduction mechanism. The crimes perpetrated by Si Yiwen reveal to the little girl that a mother's love is not invariably sacred and can occasionally serve as a justification for oppression and suffering[13]. At the end of the novel, Si Yiwen finds herself solitary at the twilight of her existence, whereas Su Mei has matured into a composed young woman who will "persist in vocalizing the narratives of women's lives" and transmit the authentic accounts of women throughout generations. By acknowledging and challenging the perceived "inferiority" of their mothers' generation, the new generation of women liberates themselves from entrenched myths and asserts their own subjective viewpoints and right to articulate them[14]. When the brutality of motherhood exemplified by Si Yiwen is no longer romanticized and concealed, the facade of "purity" imposed on mothers by patriarchal culture is dismantled. A mother, tainted by blood and plagued by animosity, occupies her position. This inversion, while



unsettling, allows the reader to reassess the reality of motherhood, revealing that moms are fallible individuals susceptible to corruption by authority and capable of committing acts of violence. Readers may no longer romanticize mothers as the epitome of morality but rather acknowledge the presence of an "unholy" aspect in the maternal image. *Rose Gate* offers a desacralized paradigm of female writing around maternal abuse, enabling moms to descend from the pedestal, confront their own shadows, and reclaim the authentic essence of motherhood in a "humble" manner.

#### 4. The Dilemma of Motherhood Violence in The Context of A Total Debacle

These two works by Tie Ning and Ba Jin represent a series of harsh gender paradoxes: female writing exposes the cruelty and absurdity of the patriarchal system without providing a way to restore a new order, while male writing upholds the legitimacy of the system by sacrificing motherhood and removing violence from the ethical symbolic system. Motherhood can oscillate between the extremes of "the Other" and "subjectivity," but it never fully releases women's social rights as autonomous subjects. This contrast highlights the ingenuity of patriarchy's continuation, which permits and even depends on mothers to play a certain powerful role within the family. Women's social rights as autonomous individuals are never truly granted. The gender divide has thus fallen apart, with mothers unintentionally supporting patriarchal power rather than naturally opposing it.

##### 4.1. Patriarchal Parasitism

The patriarchal system is extremely parasitic; it frequently exists inside familial bonds and uses women's roles to bolster its authority. Stated differently, maternal violence serves as a "transit point" for the patriarchal power structure to be passed down to the following generation. This is especially clear in *Cold Night* by Ba Jin.

Wang Mu's aggression is a parasitic expression of the patriarchal system rather than the result of a single person's cruelty. According to Beauvoir, the customary role of motherhood frequently confines women to the home and makes them effectively enslaved[3]. Wang Mu is forced to tie her worth to motherhood in a patriarchal society after losing her spouse when she was young. When society grants her authority only in the name of "motherly love," she utilizes this authority to exert control over her son's life. One could argue that patriarchy keeps women in the role of mother and provides them with a flimsy sense of authority inside the home, which benefits patriarchal goals. The rigid rules of filial devotion and the perpetuation of the male bloodline in patriarchal society are reinforced by Wang Mu's strict control over her son, which seems to indicate that she is the one who says what she wants at home. Her resistance to Zeng Shusheng's promotion stems specifically from her incapacity to acknowledge that her daughter-in-law is wealthier than her son and her belief that a woman must be completely obedient to her husband and his family. This illustrates how Wang's mother's patriarchal beliefs are so ingrained in her that she would continue to support male authority even if there are no males around. Maternal violence thus serves as a conduit for patriarchal authority; mothers appropriate oppression from the patriarchal system and impose it on their offspring in order to guarantee the patriarchal order's survival in the following generation.

But there is a negative aspect to this power transfer via mothers. Motherhood is parasitized by patriarchy, which uses female authority to strengthen its hold while consuming wholesome family bonds. *Cold Night's* ending illustrates how a mother who adopts a patriarchal role damages her children and loses her emotional anchors. Withering attachment and intergenerational strife are the costs of patriarchy, which hardly manages to keep control of the family through maternal violence. One could argue that maternal violence plants the seeds for family disintegration while upholding the validity of patriarchal authority and intergenerational reproduction.

## 4.2. The paradox of resistance

Assume Wang Mu stands in for the person who upholds patriarchal authority. If that is the case, Si Yiwen and Su Mei in *Rose Gate* show another dimension: when the younger generation attempts to break free from the constraints of patriarchal power and resist the violence of motherhood, patriarchal power ultimately destroys their efforts. Here, maternal violence primarily occurs between the grandchildren and the grandparents. Si Yiwen developed a set of "aggressive self-defense" techniques to establish herself in society during the tumultuous times, which resulted in Si Yiwen displaying a despotic side within the family as well. One could argue that Si Yiwen has perpetuated the "maternal violence" against her grandchild by assimilating the patriarchal violence of society into the family.

Su Mei is not an innocent victim, in contrast to Wang Wenxuan, who is passive. Su Mei and her younger sister flee Si Yiwen's control when Su Mei is fourteen years old[10]. A new generation of women's resistance against the violence of parenthood is symbolized by this departure. Although Su Mei's exile frees her from her grandmother's direct authority, it does not free her from the more obvious patriarchal system; she still has to deal with a violent and gender-biased society. Su Mei has just transitioned from the "small patriarchy" of her family to the "big patriarchy" of society; her opposition is insufficient to overthrow the ingrained gender power structure. At the same time, Su Mei finds it difficult to break the behavioral habits and psychological impact her grandma left behind. Because it leaves its mark on those who oppose it, patriarchy can smother attempts at transgression. *Rose Gate's* ending implies that Su Mei is ready to embark on her journey as a woman, but will it be a fresh life or a recurrence of her previous transgressions? The novel doesn't provide a definitive response. Su Mei's personality has been shaped by the brutality and traumas she endured as a child, indicating that patriarchal influence has permeated her subject formation process. The patriarchal system has long absorbed the discipline of women, even though her opposition removes the conflict between her and her grandma.

From a wider angle, patriarchy deftly uses the division among women to soften the intensity of gender hostility, which is another reason why women's resistance has often failed. A scenario where women who ought to be on the same side in terms of gender turn against one another at the urging of patriarchal conventions is depicted in both *Cold Night* and *Rose Gate*. The fight between Si Yiwen and Su Mei, as well as the clash between Wang Mu and Zeng Shusheng, changed the focus of the conflict from male hegemony to internal female conflict. This split benefits patriarchy because it allows the male-dominated society to rest on its laurels and maintain the status quo while women fight against one another. Because of this, patriarchy can readily "swallow" any attempt at female resistance that goes too far, not by repressing it directly, but by creating and taking advantage of internal female division, which makes resistance invisible.

## 5. Conclusion

According to the aforementioned analysis, maternal violence is a tangible example of the patriarchal system's infiltration within the family rather than a moral failing of the individual. Si Yiwen and Wang Mu both unwittingly adopt the persona of patriarchal agents. Through the "sublimation" of male narratives and the "expunging" of female narratives, the two pieces illustrate the intricacy of violence in motherhood and expose the problem with the motherhood system. Mothers reflect the rifts in the practice of motherhood in the current generation, being both the targets and the implementers of discipline. They are also entangled with love and violence, power and suffering. Motherhood's true freedom is a long way off in the struggle between women's awakening and structural oppression.

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