

“Libidinal Predicament” of Women in Li Bihua’s Novels: The Struggle Between Desire and Social Discipline

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Abstract

Li Bihua is a highly influential writer in Chinese-language literature, whose female characters are often ensnared in libidinal predicaments. Grounded in Freud's theory of libido and expanded through Jung's interpretation of libido as a general life force, this paper examines works such as *Rouge*, *Green Snake*, and *Dumplings* to analyze the multifaceted expressions of female libido under traditional repression, alienation and distortion, resolute resistance, and obsessive affection. By deconstructing the disciplinary cage formed by the hierarchical shackles of feudal ethics, the stigmatizing narratives of tradition, and the historical closed loop of fatalistic reincarnation, the study reveals the complex dynamics of women's libidinal expressions manifested in psychological fragmentation, extreme behavior, and struggles for subjectivity. It further articulates a critique of the alienation of female life energy under patriarchal discipline, offering a literary mirror for the deconstruction of gendered power structures.

Keywords

Li Bihua's Novels; Female Images; Libido.

1. Introduction to the Problem

Hong Kong writer Li Bihua stands out in contemporary Chinese literature for her uniquely enigmatic and sensually charged literary style. The female figures she portrays—from Ruhua in *Rouge*, the sisters White Snake and Green Snake in *Green Snake*, to Juxian in *Farewell My Concubine* and Ai Jingjing in *Dumplings*—all tread a fine line between desire and repression. These female characters reflect not only emotional entanglements but also the literary embodiment of the complex tension between libido and social discipline as theorized in Freudian psychoanalysis. Freud posited that “libido, like hunger, is a force—a drive: in this case, a sexual drive, whereas in hunger it is the nutritional drive—that propels the organism toward its goal”[1]. While this theory offers a framework for understanding the existential predicaments of women in Li Bihua's works, it is important to acknowledge its limitations—namely, its reduction of libido to a primarily sexual instinct, overlooking the intricate interplay of biological, social, and individual motivations. Jung later expanded the concept of libido into a more generalized life force, manifesting not only in growth and reproduction but also in a range of other human activities. These theoretical developments offer a more nuanced analytical dimension for this paper.

2. Types of Female Libidinal Expression in Li Bihua's Novels

The portrayal of female libido in Li Bihua's novels does not follow a singular or static pattern; rather, it evolves along diverse trajectories shaped by the tension between societal discipline and individual will to life. These trajectories reflect varying strategies adopted by women in confronting existential predicaments, while also revealing the complex modulations of libido as it moves through repression, distortion, eruption, and steadfast attachment.

2.1. Traditional Repression Type

In *Chaozhou Alley*, Li Bihua crafts the character of Chen Liuqing as a quintessential example of how female libido, when severely repressed within the confines of traditional ethical norms, finds release through extreme and distorted means. Outwardly, she conforms strictly to the moral expectations of womanhood, managing the family goose shop with meticulous care and embodying the ideal of the “virtuous wife and good mother”—“My mother believed that her life was destined to remain in Chaozhou Alley, becoming the leader among the geese”[2]. However, beneath this veneer of submission lies a profound rupture between her apparent compliance and the surging vitality within. Although she harbors emotional needs toward her husband, these are ruthlessly suppressed by his emotional indifference. When he questions her legitimacy—“Do you have the right? You’re not even legally registered”—and implies expelling her and their daughter, her long-restrained libido finally bursts forth. She meticulously plots a scheme of revenge and self-liberation: smearing menstrual blood onto her husband’s martial arts blade, thereby causing his qi to collapse and compelling him to “cut her down,” after which she dismembers his body and submerges it into the marinade vat. The violence lurking beneath the image of the “dutiful wife and mother” is in fact a manifestation of a long-suppressed and distorted libido seeking rupture and release. This vividly exposes the brutal repression of female life energy in patriarchal tradition and the retaliatory force it inevitably provokes.

2.2. Alienated and Distorted Type

The character of Ai Jingjing in *Dumplings* epitomizes the alienation of female libido under patriarchal society. Her material security, social status, and even her sense of existential value are entirely dependent on the affection of her husband, Li Shijie. As a result, rather than challenging the legitimacy of this system, she actively embeds herself within it. Her libido—originally meant to be a vital force driving self-growth and creative life—becomes twisted into a pathological obsession with “eternal youth,” a pursuit dictated by the standards of the male gaze. This obsessive quest becomes her only socially recognized capital for survival. With a chilling narrative tone, Li Bihua traces the complete alienation of Jingjing’s desire: from her initial visceral “disgust” and instinctual fear upon discovery, to the desperate yearning cultivated under the manipulation of Aunt Mei, and eventually to a stage of frenzied dependence where she becomes impatient for faster results. This is not merely an adaptation to a grotesque form of nourishment—it signifies the total collapse of her internal value system. Each step she takes toward “self-salvation” is simultaneously a step deeper into self-destruction, ultimately leading her to fall into a dehumanizing abyss. This manifestation of libido is utterly divorced from the freedom, creativity, and joy of life instincts. Instead, it has been fully alienated by patriarchal structures into a cruel tool of self-exploitation, directed not outwardly, but against her own being.

2.3. Radical Resistance Type

This category of female libido expression centers on a conscious and decisive transgression of disciplinary boundaries, rejecting the passive roles imposed by patriarchal society. In *Green Snake*, the character Green Snake sees through the hypocritical and heartless nature of Xu Xian: he wavers between her and her sister White Snake, watching passively as they clash over him, and ultimately reveals his cowardice and selfishness by fleeing when Bai Suzhen is ruthlessly suppressed by Fahai. Green Snake’s resolute act of killing Xu Xian with a trident tears apart the patriarchal narrative template of the “devoted woman and unfaithful man,” declaring a zero-tolerance stance toward emotional betrayal. In *The Past and Present Life of Pan Jinlian*, Shan Yulian reincarnates as the bearer of Pan Jinlian’s immense grievances—those of suppression, stigmatization, and brutal murder. She refuses to drink the River of Forgetfulness to erase her hatred, instead consciously preserving the memory of her past life: “I will rely on my own strength to track down every man who wronged me and make him pay”[3]. Her libido is

transformed from repressed erotic desire into a directed force of destructive energy and vengeance. These women no longer remain entrapped within the conventional roles of “victim” or “fallen woman.” Instead, with radical and unyielding resolve, they condense their vital energy into a sharp spearhead that strikes directly at the heart of patriarchal disciplinary mechanisms. In doing so, they exhibit the awakening of female subjectivity and the fierce edge of resistance.

2.4. Obsessive and Devoted Type

In Li Bihua’s grotesquely enchanting literary universe, the most haunting and self-destructive manifestations of libido are those rooted in obsessive love—passions that transcend the boundaries of life and death and defy all worldly costs. These female characters anchor their surging libidinal energy entirely onto a specific lover, with unwavering fixation. Such is the case with Ruhua, the famed courtesan in *Rouge*, who becomes the tragic embodiment of ultimate devotion. Her burning love for the decadent aristocrat Twelfth Young Master drives her to attempt a double suicide, hoping that death might eternalize a love rejected by the norms of the living world. After waiting in the underworld for seven long years in vain, she sacrifices years of her next life’s lifespan in a desperate search for her unfaithful lover. The rigid structures of social class and moral codes in life had crushed any chance of fulfillment, and in death, her undying attachment becomes an even heavier shackle—one that imprisons her in perpetual vigil over a broken promise. A similar libidinal force erupts with fierce immediacy in *Tempting the Monk*, where Princess Hong’e channels her profound love for Shi Yansheng into a moment of heroic self-sacrifice. Confronted with imminent death, she instinctively shields her beloved with her own body, turning her annihilation into a final act of protection and an ultimate affirmation of her emotional truth. In both cases, libido is no longer a creative or generative life force, but a devastatingly intense fixation that collapses into self-effacement—yet simultaneously becomes a declaration of agency through love’s irrevocable intensity.

3. The Cage of Discipline: Social Suppression of Female Libido

The diverse expressions of female libido in Li Bihua’s works are consistently overshadowed by the mechanisms of social discipline. Her narratives profoundly expose how patriarchal society constructs a tightly woven disciplinary system through institutionalized ethics, cultural narratives, and fatalistic ideologies, thereby confining women’s vital energy within an invisible cage. These intersecting mechanisms of control form a multilayered apparatus that collectively imposes powerful restraints on female libidinal expression.

3.1. The Cannibalistic Nature of Feudal Ethics

In *Rouge*, the love between Ruhua and the Twelfth Young Master originates from a natural libidinal flow, yet it is forcibly severed by the Matriarch, who upholds traditional notions of social hierarchy: “In the feudal era, the patriarchs of respectable families prided themselves on three generations of moral integrity. While concubinage was tolerated, brothel women were never permitted into the household”[4]. Feudal ethics, with their rigid hierarchy of “noble versus base,” fundamentally deny Ruhua’s dignity as a woman from the pleasure quarters.

Similarly, in *The Past and Present Life of Pan Jinlian*, Shan Yulian—reincarnated from Pan Jinlian—is perpetually haunted by the label of “the most promiscuous woman in history,” whether in the Song dynasty or the modern age. The patriarchal stigma imposed on her distorts any legitimate expression of her libido: every emotional impulse or desire is subjected to moral scrutiny in advance, with instinctive expression recast as original sin, and the vitality of the individual suffocated beneath the crushing weight of social vilification.

In *Green Snake*, Bai Suzhen’s voluntary submission to “human womanly virtue” demonstrates the feudal ethical system’s power to domesticate even non-human beings. After a thousand

years of cultivation to attain human form, she still chooses to adhere to idealized norms of femininity: proclaiming earthly values such as monogamy, stealing celestial herbs, casting spells to aid Xu Xian's pharmacy, and even tolerating his affair with Green Snake—all in pursuit of the "virtuous wife" archetype. This illustrates the immense internalizing force of patriarchal Confucian ethics: even supernatural beings must, willingly or not, conform to its discipline in order to be socially accepted. Natural desire is thus already subsumed within the ideological framework of feudal morality.

3.2. The Distortion of Female Desire in Traditional Narratives

Li Bihua's writing incisively reveals how patriarchal societies systematically construct, stigmatize, and ultimately distort female libidinal expression through deeply rooted cultural narratives—including folklore, historical records, literary classics, and public discourse. This aligns with Otto Kernberg's theory that "libido is not driven purely by instinct, but shaped by sociocultural and psychological factors"[5]. In *The Past and Present Life of Pan Jinlian*, the entrenched "seductress" narrative constructed by canonical texts such as *Water Margin* and *The Plum in the Golden Vase* preconditions the libidinal identity of Shan Yulian, the reincarnation of Pan Jinlian. Even though her emotional pursuits are driven by sincere love, they are still misread by society as evidence of her "unchangeable nature," ultimately leading to destruction. Moreover, traditional narratives tend to confine women within binary role templates: the "virtuous wife and devoted mother" demands the suppression of personal desire in service of family and male interests, while figures such as the "temptress" or "whore" are used to stigmatize women whose libido overflows these confines. Li Bihua's characters often struggle within this polarized system: Bai Suzhen in *Green Snake* attempts to abide by the "human rules" of monogamy but is met with betrayal; Ai Jingjing in *Dumplings* descends into self-objectification to satisfy male aesthetic norms, eventually being demonized. These binaries crudely simplify and distort women's complex and diverse libidinal needs, forcing them to seek expression within an oppressive framework that frequently results in tragedy or alienation.

3.3. The historical cycle of fatalism

The persistent fatalism in Li Bihua's works constitutes a metaphysical form of social discipline—one that locks female life energy into a cyclical pattern of repression and depletion through the closed loop of historical reincarnation. In *The Past and Present Life of Pan Jinlian*, the humiliation and patriarchal violence endured by Pan Jinlian in a previous life, along with her yearning for freedom and desire, are transmuted into a current of resistance in the bloodline of her reincarnation, Shan Yulian. This transhistorical libido, which ought to fuel a break from destiny, is instead absorbed back into the disciplinary mechanism of karmic return: every act of resistance she mounts is met with even harsher suppression, culminating in inevitable tragedy. Here, libido becomes a sacrificial offering to fate—the stronger its presence, the closer it is drawn toward destruction.

In *Green Snake*, Bai Suzhen's libidinal devotion is also marked by fatalistic repetition. Her deep love for Xu Xian ends in betrayal and millennia-long imprisonment beneath the Leifeng Pagoda. Yet this prolonged confinement does not yield enlightenment; upon regaining her freedom, she impulsively returns to the same man. In *The Terra-Cotta Warrior*, Dong'er's libidinal expression remains fixated across lifetimes on Meng Tianfang. This energy of love, which ought to signify the blossoming of life, is instead transformed—within the script of fate—into fuel for self-destruction: in the first life, she dies for him; in the second, she suffers because of him. When they meet again in her third incarnation, Meng Tianfang insists he does not want her to die for him again—yet cannot resist the pull.

This unresolved tension gestures toward the unyielding nature of fatalistic structures and the deep sense of individual powerlessness in the face of predetermined narrative scripts.

4. The Arena of Struggle: Conflict between Libido and Social Discipline

In Li Bihua's works, the natural impulses of libido and the coercive constraints of social discipline collide with particular intensity in her female characters. This collision is not merely a one-sided process of suppression or rebellion, but manifests as a complex game of negotiation and resistance. It unfolds as psychological fragmentation, is externalized through extreme behavioral choices, and—most critically—suggests the possibility of transformation through the deconstruction of gendered power structures.

4.1. Psychological Dilemma of Self-Splitting

One of the most profound sources of anguish for female characters in Li Bihua's works arises from the internalized conflict between libidinal impulses and societal norms, resulting in a fractured sense of self. In *Farewell My Concubine*, Juxian, after shedding the glamour of the brothel to become a respectable wife, remains haunted by the shame of her past identity. Her attempts to protect her family are undermined by her infertility, which diminishes her perceived worth. Ultimately, confronted with her husband's cowardly betrayal, she chooses to end her life by hanging, a desperate attempt to resolve her internal disintegration. Juxian's tragedy affirms Freud's theory that "the unconscious is a distinct mental domain with its own desires, modes of expression, and psychic mechanisms"[6]. Her libido, at the level of the id, yearns for love and security, but the superego has internalized patriarchal demands for female chastity—this split ultimately collapses the self. In *Green Snake*, Bai Suzhen is caught between the forces of "demonic nature" and "human virtue." On one hand, the celestial order represented by Fahai stigmatizes her origins and natural desires, demanding emotional and sexual abstinence. On the other hand, the human world she seeks to integrate into demands that she fulfill the role of a traditional woman—obedient wife and nurturing mother—while suppressing any trace of her supernatural power. Her tragedy reveals the logic of patriarchal discipline: if a woman follows her instinctual libido, she is vilified as a "demon" and punished with annihilation; if she submits to discipline, she is forced to erase the foundation of her own existence. This binary opposition functions by denying the possibility of plural female subjectivity, thereby reinforcing the authority of patriarchal power through psychological fragmentation and identity erasure.

4.2. Revenge and Self-Destruction: Behavioral Extremes from Repression to Outburst

When psychological repression reaches a critical threshold, female characters in Li Bihua's narratives often veer toward revenge or self-destruction, forming tragic outlets for libidinal discharge. Prolonged obstruction of libido can activate the aggressive drive embedded in the unconscious, leading to harm directed either outwardly or inwardly. Outward aggression results in the destruction of others; inward aggression leads to self-annihilation[7]. *Green Snake's* act of killing Xu Xian is a paradigmatic instance of outward aggression—having seen through his hypocrisy and selfishness, especially his cowardly retreat as Bai Suzhen faced divine punishment, she ultimately chooses to violently terminate this disingenuous romantic entanglement. *Chen Liuqing's* revenge is even more absolute: after enduring long-term betrayal and humiliation from her husband, her repressed libido erupts under the pressure of existential threat. She achieves a twisted form of self-salvation by killing and dismembering him—an extreme yet symbolically liberating act. *Ai Jingjing* in *Dumplings* exemplifies the trajectory of self-destruction. Fully aware of the moral and physical cost of consuming aborted fetuses, she still engages in this self-destructive behavior, yielding to the patriarchal fixation on eternal youth and bodily perfection. Juxian's fate offers another form of inwardly directed aggression: a reformed courtesan, she spends her life seeking security and love from Duan Xiaolou, only to be caught in the emotional entanglements with Cheng Dieyi, the social stigma of her past, and

Duan's eventual betrayal under societal pressure. When her final illusions and sense of dignity are shattered by Duan's hand, her psychological foundation collapses. In utter despair, she turns her aggression inward and ends her life—an ultimate act of libidinal implosion that tragically testifies to her unmet emotional and existential needs.

4.3. The Struggle for Subjectivity: Deconstructing Gendered Power

Through the release of libido, female characters in Li Bihua's narratives initiate a deconstruction of gendered power structures. In *Chaozhou Alley*, Chen Liuqing, after prolonged repression of her libido, rebels against the male-dominated hierarchy of traditional marriage. Following her husband's death, she dismembers his body and places the remains in the marinade vat—an extreme yet symbolic act that dismantles the patriarchal structure of "the husband as the head of the wife." His corporeal form, as the embodiment of authority, is physically dissolved. The knife, once a symbol of masculine violence, is repurposed as a medium of female revenge; the marinade vat, once the economic backbone of the family and male-controlled domain, becomes a tomb for the oppressor's remains. After his death, she runs the goose shop even more successfully, demonstrating through action that women can survive and thrive independently, free from male dominance.

In *Green Snake*, the motivations of Green Snake and White Snake undergo a fundamental shift. Their pursuit of Xu Xian is not driven by the conventional narrative of repaying a debt, but by an autonomous expression of desire evoked by his physical appearance—an unfiltered manifestation of libido as primal life force. They boldly pursue their object of desire, thus breaking free from the passive roles traditionally assigned to women. When Xiaoqing realizes Xu Xian's cowardice and hypocrisy—his betrayal of genuine emotion—she refuses to be a disposable pawn in the game of love. Her act of killing Xu Xian defies the traditional literary trope of the betrayed woman who either self-destructs like Du Shiniang drowning herself or patiently waits like Wang Baochuan in her cold cave for eighteen years. Instead, it proclaims the awakening of female subjectivity and an active stance against emotional subjugation.

5. Conclusion

The libidinal predicaments portrayed in Li Bihua's works offer complex and paradoxical literary cases for feminist theory. Her critical lens is not limited to male individuals in reality but more profoundly targets the repressive forces of traditional cultural ideologies and the internalized constraints they produce within women themselves. In her narratives, she celebrates the radical defiance of characters like Green Snake while also empathizing with the traditional perseverance embodied by White Snake. She exposes the structural oppression of patriarchal society without reserve, yet also soberly critiques women's own tendencies toward psychological dependency. This narrative stance—one that transcends binary oppositions—imbues her work with rich interpretive potential and renders it a crucial text for understanding the spiritual predicaments of women.

In the context of new challenges confronting global feminism today, Li Bihua's representation of the libidinal dilemma continues to carry potent warning. Her work reminds us that genuine gender liberation cannot be achieved through institutional reforms alone; it also requires the deconstruction of disciplinary mechanisms deeply internalized within the psyche. It is not only external rights that must be pursued, but also the long-suppressed, distorted, and stigmatized instincts of life that must be emancipated. This literary excavation of the deep structures of the female psyche provides a highly valuable reference point for contemporary feminist theory, urging us to reconsider the path toward gender equality across both institutional and spiritual dimensions.

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