

## Her Marriage Dilemma

### —A Comparative & Feminist Study on Post and Beam and The Beautiful

#### River Beach

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*Abstract: As two extraordinary contemporary female writers who cherish female daily experiences, both Alice Munro and Li Chi attach equally great importance to female real-life situations in their writings. This thesis makes a comparative and feminist study on the two writer's two short stories - Munro's Post and Beam and Chi Li's The Beautiful River Beach. By analyzing the similar marriage dilemmas of the two heroines in the two patriarchal societies, their symbolic attempts to "escape" and the results of their actions, the author further explores the writers' similar yet distinct feminine consciousness shown in their works.*

*Keywords: Post and Beam, The Beautiful River Beach, a comparative and feminist study*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Eiling Chang, the renowned modern Chinese female writer once wrote: "How pathetic women are! Though women's status appears to be relatively superior or inferior in different countries, actually women are always inferior (to men)." [1] So it is. The inferior position of women in the patriarchal society is universal throughout human history, therefore female literary images depicted as the weaker and "second" sex at all times and all over the world abound, e.g., female characters from the deserted wife in The Book of Odes to the numerous miserable female characters in "A Dream of Red Mansions" in Chinese literature, and those from the Ancient Greek Medea to Hardy's Tess in Tess of the Durbervilles to Ibsen's Nora in The Doll's House in Western literature. Female writing in contemporary literature is noticeable, too. Alice Munro (1931 - ), the 2013 Canadian Nobel Prize Laureate and who is hailed as "Chekov of our time", has, in her 14 anthologies of short stories, narrated the tragedy-implying daily life of ordinary Canadian women, and those of Li Chi (1957 - ), the famous Chinese female writer who is renowned by her style of so-called "neo-realism", has also focused her attention on ordinary people, especially on ordinary women's real-life situations. Though of different styles, their writings are worthy of comparative interpretation, as they have attached equally great importance to female day-to-day experiences in their works, and displayed their similar feminine consciousness by conveying women's similar needs and hopes in the patriarchal

society. Having hereby cited their two short stories - Munro's *Post and Beam* and Li Chi's *The Beautiful River Beach*, the author seeks to make a comparative and feminist study on the two works and to demonstrate the necessity and significance of contemporary feminist literary criticism.

Each of the stories describes the frustrations that an ordinary young wife and mother feels in her marriage. *Post and Beam*, included in Munro's anthology *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Oveship, Marriage* published in 2001, is a story with multiple themes, in which Munro looks back to the 1950s, the days of her own youth, and presents to the reader the unfulfilling married life of Lorna, a young middle-class housewife in Vancouver, and her unsuccessful extramarital adventure, while *The Beautiful River Beach*, written in the 1990s, narrates the frustrating marriage of Lixue Li, a young female intellectual in Wuhan, the capital city of China's Hubei Province, and the episode of her subtle extramarital experience. Both works have meticulously yet artfully portrayed the protagonists' situations in a closely realistic style, and they both reveal the harm that male chauvinism does to women in domestic life. The following is a comparative study of the two short stories, focusing on the heroine's dissatisfactions, the heroine's symbolic "escape" and its significance, and the writer's feminine consciousness expressed in the story.

## 2. THE HEROINE'S DISSATISFACTIONS

According to Marxist Feminism, the unwaged labor is the economic cause of the subordinate status of women to men in capitalist society. As a wife, each of the heroines in the two stories has to bear most of the unwaged housework in their household, whether they work or don't work outside, and their husbands both take it for granted. In the 1950s on which Munro's attention is focused, being a housewife was the most common career for a Canadian woman, as society didn't believe a woman could pursue anything serious, and their husband would not help with the housework. There is a passage whereby Munro describes the young husbands of that time in *What Is Remembered*, another story included in the same anthology: "Young husbands were stern, in those days. . . ., home again at suppertime to take a critical glance at the evening meal and to shake out the newspaper, hold it up between themselves and the muddle of the kitchen, the ailments and emotions, the babies. What a lot they had to learn, so quickly. How to kowtow to bosses and how to manage wives. How to be authoritative about mortgages, retaining walls, lawn grass, drains, politics, as well as about the jobs they had to maintain their families for the next quarter of a century."<sup>[2]222</sup> That is to say, the housewives then were actually "subordinates" to their husband in all affairs of the household, as they couldn't, like their husband, earn a visible "living" for it. In *Post and Beam*, when Brendon, the college teacher, was "on the lookout for a wife"<sup>[2]207</sup>, a few years ago, he wanted "... a young girl. Not a colleague, or a student, perhaps not even the sort of girl whose parents could send her to college. Unspoiled. Intelligent, but unspoiled."<sup>[2]207</sup> He wanted absolute superiority over his future wife, both financially and psychologically, and the 18-year-old girl Lorna met all his

requirements. Now, a few years after marriage, Brendan has managed to exert his authority over his wife in almost all aspects of their life, as he thinks it's his responsibility to "keep his household in order"<sup>[2]215</sup>. Apparently his male chauvinism met with little resistance from Lorna. But when he tries to manipulate her by defying her feeling to her folks and accusing her of loving them more than him, Lorna can bear it no more, and quarrels with him, though in vain. This gradually becomes the main cause of their disharmony. Young and inexperienced Lorna is frustrated with Brendan's male dominance and she has mixed feelings toward him: "She would say she loved him, and mean it to a certain extent, and she wanted to be loved by him, but there was a little hum of hate running along beside her love, nearly all the time."<sup>[2]212</sup> In China, the situation is a little different. Contemporary Chinese women's status appears to be superior than that of their Canadian counterparts, in that they have obtained equal right to work overnight, following the former Soviet Union's pattern. There is even a very popular slogan in mass media to welcome this historical progress: Women hold up half the sky. However, the rise of women's participation rate in the labor force market has not been accompanied by the decrease of their time spent on housework. The fact that the traditional patriarchal ideology that "men playing the key role in the society while women handling the family chores" still prevails in Chinese society has put many Chinese women under the double load of breadwinning and homemaking, which virtually results in their status being still inferior to that of men. This is exactly Lixue LI's situation in *The Beautiful Beach*: Although she is well-educated and has a research job that brings her a sense of self-fulfillment, besides her work she has to bear the tiring responsibilities of homemaking, while Haitian, her husband, only needs to relax himself after work by playing chess, watching TV, etc.: "All the content of her life is to be a wife, mother and daughter-in-law; she has to go to and from work hurriedly; she has to run to and from the food market every day, putting on her apron on arriving home, and serve her husband, her son, her parents-in-law and all the other people in her life with an everlasting smile on her face .... At the end of every day she is really exhausted."<sup>[3]294</sup> Even taking their little son to and from the kindergarten every day is considered to be her own duty and have nothing to do with the boy's father. Thus in this household, the unpaid-for housework is so unevenly and unfairly distributed between the husband and the wife, no wonder Lixue feels tired and distressed. Being a virtuous woman, Lixue doesn't complain, but she hopes her husband Haitian can be more understanding and willing to listen to her when she wants to share her feelings with him. But when she tries to talk about the beautiful river beach with him, hoping that he may propose to go to the beach with her, Haitian ignores her wish at all: "Hearing that, Haitian stretched his back, saying, 'Toot toot toot toot, toot toot toot toot, it makes me sleepy to look at your lips moving'"<sup>[3]291</sup>; when she tries again and tells Haitian that she wants to have a heart-to-heart talk with him, he defies her request once again: "Come on, don't bother me, I can read your mind."<sup>[3]304</sup> Haitian's persistent negligence of her needs and dignity leaves Lixue in "an inexplicable feeling of dull pain and despair"<sup>[3]305</sup>. It can be seen that despite their different financial status in the household, both heroines are dissatisfied and

frustrated with their marriage as they have to do most of the uncompensated housework and are victims of their husband's invisible male chauvinism.

### 3. THE HEROINES' SYMBOLIC "ESCAPE" AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

Ecofeminism which emerged in the 1970s claims that there is a connection between women and nature that comes from their shared history of oppression by the patriarchal society. Besides, it argues that similar to nature, women are born with the ability to breed and feed offspring, and, on the contrary to the rigid hierarchy and monotony of the patriarchal society, women tend to lay more emphasis on equality of all beings and on diversity, just as all organisms in nature live together in harmony with all their differences. The aim of Ecofeminism is to subvert the hierarchy. Seen in the light of Ecofeminism, Post and Beam and *The Beautiful Beach* show the similar purpose of the two writers: to subvert the patriarchal hierarchy and to establish independent feminine consciousness. Instead of being the mere object of the gaze of the male gender and existing only for their needs, Lorna and Lixue Li have their own feelings, desires and dreams although they are more or less under the oppression of their husbands' male chauvinism. Munro wrote, "...It was the women, then, who could slip back during the daytime hours, and always allowing for the stunning responsibility that had been landed on them, in the matter of the children- into a kind of second adolescence."<sup>[2]222</sup> Being a sensitive woman and a loving, conscientious mother, Lorna has her own secret desires and aspirations, which are blindly ignored by Brendan, who tries to manipulate and control her in an authoritative way while considering her as "a wild flower"<sup>[2]207</sup> just as if she was one of his possessions. Dissatisfied with her marriage, Lorna begins her secret rebellion or "escape" – she develops a subtle relationship with Lionel, a former student of Brendan's, which gives her a sense of freedom from her stifling marriage. Though the romance goes nowhere, she realizes a truth inside her: she is not contented with her present "happy life" in the preeminent modern-style house of "Post and Beam", which she had originally hoped that she could lead with her husband, and that she thirsts for some change: "It was not until now, not until this moment, that she had seen so clearly that she was counting on something happening, something that would change her life. She had accepted her marriage as one big change, but not as the last one."<sup>[2]218</sup> Her feminine consciousness awakens: instead of being content with being an unfulfilling housewife and her husband's vassal, she longs for the freedom of her soul. Similar to Lorna, besides being a conscientious researcher and a virtuous wife, Lixue Li is also an intelligent and sensitive woman who aspires for a poetic life beyond its practical sense. "The vast river beach moved her and attracted her deeply and mysteriously. ... She had thought that the monotonous routine of going to and from work and serving her husband, her son and her parents-in-law every day had exhausted her, but at this moment, she felt that she was still young and full of enthusiasm."<sup>[3]291</sup> When her wish to have a heart-to-heart talk with Haitian was repeatedly and lightly rejected, Lixue Li decides to go to the river beach alone, hoping that the beautiful natural scenery will give her a moment of relaxation from the frustrating

atmosphere in her marriage. Unexpectedly, she also begins her emotional adventure when she encounters Ruyue Zhao, her evening college classmate, at the beach. However, being a virtuous wife, Lixue wouldn't get herself entangled in an extramarital relationship, and still hopes to regain Haitian's appreciation for her. Unfortunately, Haitian totally depreciates her "love for illusory things" <sup>[3]318</sup>. What's more, when she explains to Haitian candidly her relationship with Ruyue in the hope of getting his forgiveness, he storms at her and even threatens her: "But for Chengcheng(their son's name), I would ask you to get out of my way. Remember: it is your son that saves you, and you'd better behave yourself from now on, or I'll tell your boss everything . OK?" <sup>[3]329-330</sup> It isn't until now that Lixue sees the cruel truth in front of her: In her barefaced husband's eyes she is definitely not an equal individual to himself but just some "other" being that can be disposed of at will. In both stories, the heroines' sensitiveness and romanticism, their maternity and tolerance, which are depicted in sharp contrast to the monotony and coldness of their male counterparts' pragmatism and patriarchy, are highly appreciated by the writers.

#### **4. COMPROMISE VS. CONFRONTATION – THE WRITERS' FEMININE CONSCIOUSNESS**

The two writers express their similar yet distinct feminine consciousness respectively in the two episodes of their heroines' lives. Under Munro's pen, Lorna's subtle relationship with Lionel gives her some hope for freedom from her suffocating life, where she is dissatisfied with her husband's patriarchy and her own role of being an unworthy housewife in the male-dominated society. However, Lionel's flinching, which brings an end to their romance, makes her realize painfully the irreconcilable contradiction between her aspirations for a freer life and her responsibilities as a wife and mother. At the end of her story, Munro, as if intentionally, leaves a meaningful remark: "It was a long time ago that this happened.... When she was twenty-four years old, and new to bargaining." <sup>[2]218</sup> Is the author implying that Lorna, in her later life, will encounter other temptations to escape, and will have to make a bargain with life in the dilemma of her freedom and her other equally precious needs for a woman – e.g. her children, her respectable middle-class life, and marriage? Munro once said in an interview: "Some people still think that women will find their way out in life. Before, the way was to get married. In recent years, leaving their husbands has become the way. ... I don't have such a way out. To me, such a way is ridiculous. My way is merely living one day at a time and living day to day... I like this opinion. We live our life and live on, without knowing what has happened and what will happen. We had thought that we'd sorted out everything, yet they've just turned out different from what we thought they would be. Not a single thought is eternal." <sup>[4]</sup>The reason that Munro claims that she is not a feminist lies in her belief that, compared with the male gender who can move freely from their family to society and vice versa, the patriarchal society has set up more rules for women, which makes them unable to live as freely as their male counterparts; hence, ideal feminine ethics would inevitably go against the

mainstream patriarchal convention. As far as Munro's own life is concerned, she has had an experience of being a housewife for 23 years, able to write only in between her household chores. Longing for some kind of ideal gender ethics based on equality and harmoniousness between the two sexes, while identifying with women's femininity at the same time, the author, as well as her heroine, is faced with an inexplicable dilemma of choosing between self-liberation or self-sacrifice under the unfair patriarchal circumstances. In the end, Lorna compromises her dreams of self-fulfillment for more predictable "happiness": "So, nothing now but what she or anybody could sensibly foresee. That was to be her happiness, that was what she had bargained for. Nothing secret, or strange."<sup>[2]218</sup> Obviously, her heroine's struggle for and compromise of freedom reflects Munro's own contradictory feminine ethics. Similar to Munro, Li Chi also acknowledges the traditional gender ethics as well as women's traditional role in their households, and like Munro, she also identifies with women's femininity, as she writes: "Men are not women. Women are not men. This is a simple, basic and essential truth, which nobody would admit not understanding. Yet many don't indeed." However, she also feels keenly the inequalities between the two sexes in the patriarchal society. In a long article dedicated to her daughter, Li Chi writes: "The reason why I wished my upcoming baby to be a boy was that I thought life for a woman was too hard. ... Up till now, the society of China is still one for men, and I couldn't help but want a boy."<sup>[5]267</sup> Though Chinese women have easily gained the equal right to work with their male counterparts, which is indeed a great advantage over Western women, who had to fought for hundreds of years until they finally won part of it, the deep-rooted prejudice of male chauvinism, which has existed in China for thousands of years, is yet for them to overcome. Nevertheless, in comparison with the introspection of Munro's heroine, Li Chi's heroine, who has grown up in an environment where the concept of "men and women being equal" has taken root since 1949, is not afraid of her husband anymore, hence conflict between husband and wife in the patriarchal society becomes inevitable: As an image with both the virtues of a traditional Chinese wife and the contemporary consciousness of gender equality, Lixue Li aspires for mutual understanding and respect between her husband and her, but Haitian's extremely chauvinistic attitude toward her awakens her completely and she is totally disappointed with her marriage. In despair, she decides not to be a "virtuous wife" any more, which results in her confrontation with her husband. However, confrontation with men does not lead to women's happiness, and in the end, "Lixue looks much older, and more sober. ... but soon she immerses herself into her work."<sup>[3]333</sup> Lixue's dilemma also reflects Li Chi's disappointment with the male-dominated society. So, without providing a "happy ending" for their heroines, Munro and Li Chi have shown similar contradictory feminine consciousness in their stories. While Munro focuses more on the depiction of the oppressed heroine's secret inner world and her self-presentation, Li Chi, who believes that Chinese women can "hold up half the heaven", pays more attention on the outside conflicts between the two genders, and takes a more aggressive stance on gender relations.

## 5. CONCLUSION

“If the hearts of women who constitute half of the human population are kept in captivity, the human race will not be able to develop itself normally.”<sup>[6]</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, the founder of Feminism, pointed out more than 200 years ago. Likewise, in *Post and Beam* and *The Beautiful River Beach* respectively, Alice Munro and Li Chi, with their unique sensitivity as female writers and boldness in revealing the truth of life, have expressed their similar expectations for a better society in terms of gender relationships, thus bringing a similar aesthetic experience to the reader.

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