

The Grandmother/ Mother/Daughter Triad *A Feminist Matrilineal Reading of Jung Chang's Wild Swans*

I have felt the age-old triangle of mother father and child, with the "T" at its eternal core, elongate and flatten out into the elegantly strong triad of grandmother mother daughter, with the "T" moving back and forth flowing in either or both directions as needed. (Lorde, 1990: 7)

In the prologue of her book *Zami*, Audre Lorde marks the advent of a new triangular structure of the so-called feminist family romances.¹ The new pattern is manifest in women's textual construction of grandmother, mother, and daughter in their exploration of femininity (maternity) and creativity. Illuminated by Lorde's groundbreaking statement, this paper seeks to offer a textual analysis of matrilineal narrative in Jung Chang's *Wild Swans* (1992). Drawing on the concept of a genogram as utilized in Howe's research (1990), this study aims to introduce first the use of "mother biography assignment" as a parallel to its literary counterpart, matrilineal narrative. The study will then continue with a close and critical examination of Chang's text by illustrating in detail the complexities as involved with literary representations of matrilineal narrative.

Thinking about the grandmother/mother/daughter triad in relation to the writing of matrilineal narratives, one important aspect that is worth noting is women writers' engagement with the use of what Karen G. Howe terms a "genogram." A genogram, according to Howe, is the clinical parallel of "the mother biography assignment" she adopts for her course on Psychology of Women. The genogram is widely used in family systems therapy, whose approach is targeted at a multi-generational level and provides a participant with "more objective views of one's parents and grandparents," and thus enables her or him "to know the personal history and stories of the older generations"

(1990: 34). In particular, this use of the genogram is applied to healing the mother-daughter relationship in therapy (34-35). In terms of literary representations of a genogram, contemporary writers of matrilineal narratives have concurrently either written “one story about matrilineage that situates individual mothers in wider contexts and understands them as having other lives, beyond the maternal function” (Hansen, 1997: 124) or allocated in their fictional and autobiographical writings one writing figure as a (grand)daughter biographer who writes about the stories of her grandmother and mother.

Drawing a parallel between “mother biography assignment” and “genogram,” Howe describes and analyses how she utilises the two methods to mend the mother-daughter relationship. In an excerpt quoted by Howe from one of her students’ mother biography assignments, Howe highlights the multigenerational context her student is able to see through:

I never knew my maternal grandparents and am ashamed of my former lack of interest in them. As a result, it was difficult imagining my mother as a daughter. I also recognize the importance of my mother’s role as grandmother in helping my children see me as a daughter. She often tells them what I was like as a little girl and the funny things that happened to me. (1990:36-37)

The significance of writing a mother biography assignment or genogram is that it allows daughters to see their mothers in a social context: “not only knowing the mother’s story, but seeing it in the context of the family and the patriarchal society is the key to the power of the mother biographies and the genogram” (37). Viewing the mother’s life in context inevitably creates a feeling of empathy in the daughter as one of the participants said: “I felt as if I knew my Mom but didn’t really know her. She would tell me how she felt at a certain point in her life and I would try to remember that time and place my self back there and relate to how she was feeling all over again” (36). Indisputably, the most important technique involved with writing a genogram reverberates with Lowinsky’s description of women’s distinct narrative pattern as “the mother-daughter looping” when they are telling stories from their motherlines (1992: 21-22).²

As a literary example of genogram, Chang sets the stories of three generations of women, those of her grandmother, mother, and herself, against the background of a political maelstrom—the Warlord period, Japanese occupation, the Nationalist corruption, fanatical communism, and Cultural Revolution—in recent Chinese history. Spanning the period from 1909 (the year when Chang’s grandmother was born) to 1978 (when Chang left for England), Chang weaves her *Wild Swans* into a saga of both family and national history. In addition, the name “wild swans” implies their female identities as Chang’s grandmother, mother, her older sister, and herself all have, as part of their names, the character of “hong,” which carries the connotation of a “swan”

in Chinese. Thus, the title and the outline of the book demonstrate Chang's purpose in constructing her own matrilineal narrative.

At the time when Chang launches the writing of her book, her grandmother has already died. As an intellectual herself and being better educated than her mother and grandmother, Chang definitely has the privilege to write. Even though the idea of writing the book is initiated by her mother, Chang has apparently conducted in-depth research into her book as she indicates in the epilogue that she made a research journey back to China in spring 1989 (1992: 506-507). Thus, it is rather intriguing to ponder over the question of whether *Wild Swans* is purely based on truth or fiction or an amalgam of several contributing factors such as oral history, social and political history, and her own research and fiction. Despite this, Chang's elaboration on her family's life narratives in both extensive and intensive detail demonstrates her attempt to represent, to a certain degree, the "truthfulness" of each individual life she is narrating.

One effective means she uses to achieve this effect of truthfulness is by juxtaposing and contextualising their personal lives within the political and historical milieu or upheaval. Casting her matrilineal narrative in both historical and social contexts, she is able to go back to the past when her grandmother and mother were located in different times and places. Chang's lively or near-to-life narration of the incidents happening in the lives of both her grandmother and mother engenders a truthful re-presentation of the subjectivities of her female ancestors. That is, a reader is presented with the most approximate closeness to or encounter with Chang's grandmother and mother back in their times. Although their life stories are written in an objective and third-person narrative, it is Chang's detailed descriptions of them that equip the reader with the subjective experiences of her female ancestors. Fundamentally, Chang's elaborate way of narrating life stories assists in recovering the subjectivities of her female predecessors. One such instance can be found in Chang's riveting but excruciating portrayal of how her grandmother's feet were bound at the age of two:

My grandmother's feet had been bound when she was two years old. Her mother, who herself had bound feet, first wound a piece of white cloth about twenty feet long around her feet, bending all the toes except the big toe inward and under the sole. Then she placed a large stone on top to crush the arch. My grandmother screamed in agony and begged her to stop. Her mother had to stick a cloth into her mouth to gag her. My grandmother passed out repeatedly from the pain. (24)

When first reading Chang's uncensored and revealing disclosure of the whole process of binding her grandmother's feet, one can be overwhelmed by a sense of uncanny terror. As is common to women either predating or contemporaneous to the generation of Chang's grandmother, Chang's grand-

mother's experience of bound feet can be said to be "truthful" or "representative" at least in certain significant ways. More notably, the divulgence of her grandmother's extreme agony and helpless pleading with her own mother to stop the binding brings the grandmother's subjectivity to the surface. Even though the whole episode is not articulated in the first-person narrative of the grandmother, the dramatic effect of the narration exudes the writer's and the reader's "intersubjective attunement" with the grandmother.

Indeed, a number of things emerge as Chang refers back to her matrilineage. What Chang learns from her grandmother and mother is the perseverance, capacity, and strength they have earned from their enduring suffering throughout their lives. Although constantly succumbing to her fate and circumstance, Chang's grandmother takes a major leap by arranging to flee with Chang's mother from the imprisonment of her concubinage and from the prospect of being manipulated as a slave to General Xue's wife upon the death of General Xue. It is by this outrageous and courageous escape from her demeaning life that Chang's grandmother brings a new life to her daughter and also the generations to come. In an analogous fashion, Chang strives to "take wing" at the end of the book by winning a scholarship to study in the West, commencing her new life after the inhuman ravages of Mao's Cultural Revolution. In retrospect, what Chang has in common with her mother is their talent and incredible determination that make them outshine their counterparts. Chang's mother is subject to numerous trials that serve as testament to her unshakeable faith in communism. Chang, apparently following her mother's footsteps, also endures various ordeals of being a red guard and then working as a peasant, a barefoot doctor, a steelworker, and an electrician during the Cultural Revolution in China. These three generations of women or the "Wild Swans" as named by Chang outlive their male counterparts because their perseverance and strength allow them to be the ultimate survivors.

Inspired by the notion of "progress" in Cosslett's reading of Forster's *Hidden Lives* (2000: 149-150),³ I would also like to spotlight that Chang's *Wild Swans* can be interpreted in this respect. Despite the recurrence of a similar pattern and trajectory in the formation of life among these three generations of women, there is also simultaneously a moving forward or a progress in Chang's matrilineal narrative. Being located in their different times and contexts, the life of a daughter repeatedly departs from and revises the life their mother is leading. Chang's grandmother, having her feet bound, being a concubine of a General and later a proper wife of a doctor yet under insurmountable obstacles and circumstances, cannot possibly lead the life her daughter, Chang's mother, is privileged to own by her own choice and knowledge as an educated and devout communist officer. Chang's mother, however, is trapped in her firm belief in and stout loyalty to Chinese communism and its party so that she, unlike her daughter, Jung Chang, who "take[s] wing" to fly to the West, cannot triumphantly escape from her later wasted and betrayed life under Red China.

This means, as the time advances along with the blooming of new generations, a mother's footsteps are followed by her daughter but performed with a deeper and different imprint each time.

Contemplating this narrative of "progress" in relation to the matrilineal ambivalence as exhibited often in a three-generational triad,⁴ there is, as we can see, hardly any overt or explicit display of either resentment or ambivalence between mothers and daughters in Chang's *Wild Swans*. One discernible instance of dissension and conflict between mother and daughter occurs only when Chang's mother deviates from her mother's path of life, when Chang's grandmother wants to subsume her daughter to an arranged marriage, as symptomatic of a woman's life during Chang's grandmother's time. Partly due to Chang's mother's rebellious but independent character and partly because of the introduction of communism and women's equal rights into China during Chang's mother's time, Chang's mother reacts unexpectedly by running away from home and opting into being enrolled in a teacher's college with a guarantee of a prospective teaching profession which can sustain a self-reliant life for Chang's mother but also a wasted and downgrading position with regard to her talent. Although Chang's mother eventually consents to go home more often upon Chang's grandmother's incessant pleading (83-84), Chang's mother's self-awakening and awareness are already indicative of the likely progression of this matrilineal narrative. Yet, the paucity of ambivalence existing between mother and daughter in *Wild Swans*, with the exception of this episode of conflict discussed here, could be mainly the result of the overriding importance of identification and strength between mother and daughter in order to be an ally to one another in their life-long struggle against the overpowering impact of patriarchal dictates and political and social turmoil and chaos.

In comparison with the delineation of the mother-daughter relationship—the strong mother-daughter identification in *Wild Swans*—the daughter's ambivalence towards her father becomes more conspicuous. For instance, Chang's father is portrayed, on the one hand, as a man of complete integrity who sticks to his communist belief and principle even at the risk of his life. He is perceived, on the other hand, as a husband and a father who will sacrifice his family's needs for the benefit of his communist party. In the early years of her parents' marriage, Chang expresses several times her empathy with her mother's suffering, including her mother's miscarriage, caused by her father's indifference to her mother's needs. During Chang's mother's several unfair trials by the Chinese communist party, Chang's father does not evince any of his sympathy for his wife but instructs her to remain loyal and honest to their party. Once, Chang's father even sends her grandmother back to Jinzhou from which her grandmother is later forced to take a long march across China in order to take good care of Chang's mother who is giving birth to a child. Chang's father's incorruptibility is shown later when Chang's last hope of entering the university relies heavily on her father's assistance but is dashed by her father's unwillingness to help:

On the hospital grounds we sat on the edge of a low stone bridge to rest. My father looked in torment. Eventually he said, "Would you forgive me? I really find it very difficult to do this.... For a second I felt a surge of resentment, and wanted to cry out at him that there was no fairer alternative. I wanted to tell him how much I had dreamed of going to the university, and that I deserved it—for my hard work, for my exam results, and because I had been elected. But I knew my father knew all this. And it was he who had given me my thirst for knowledge. Still, he had his principles, and because I loved him I had to accept him as he was, and understand his dilemma of being a moral man living in a land which was a moral void. I held back my tears and said, "Of course." We trudged back home in silence. (456-457)

This extract typifies how Chang's attitude towards her father is mixed together with feelings of resentment and consent. Chang's ambivalence towards her father is able to be understood and even reconciled by her love for him even though Chang tries hard to appease and surpass her anger and despair. Yet, it is also notable that Chang, who shows less sympathy with her father, is inclined to describe her father as a tragic hero in her book whose character inexorably leads to his downfall in the end. Despite her father's inadequacy in fulfilling his daughter's need, Chang still enters the university thanks to her mother's resourcefulness (457).

Chang's ambivalence or resentment against her father, as divulged in the process of writing her father's relationship with her mother and grandmother, heightens and gives prominence to the importance of the mother-daughter bonding in their three-generational triad of grandmother, mother, and daughter. The persistence of a sense of strong female networking and cohesion between mother and daughter can be found in several instances in the text. One such remarkable example happens in the incident of Chang's grandmother's death. After her grandmother dies, Chang shoulders a major responsibility by blaming herself for not taking good care of her grandmother while she is terribly ill. As a kind of self-punishment, she even takes her vow of not establishing any relationship with boys in the future:

I blamed myself for not looking after my grandmother as well as I might have. She was in the hospital at the time when I had come to know Bing and Wen. My friendships with them had cushioned and insulated me, and had blunted my awareness of her suffering. I told myself it was despicable to have had any happy feelings at all, by the side of what I now realized was my grandmother's deathbed. I resolved never to have a boyfriend again. Only by self-denial, I thought, could I expiate some of my guilt. (409)

Chang perceives her ultimate separation from her grandmother as though

it were an enactment of the Demeter-Persephone separation by male intrusion. For Chang, compensating for the loss of her grandmother means a separation from men. This strong grandmother-granddaughter bond between Chang and her grandmother can be seen in their interactions with each other. Chang's grandmother has always been both physically and emotionally present in their family. While Chang's mother is forced to separate off from her children because of the infliction of several political trials on her, Chang's grandmother is there to function as a substitute or surrogate mother. In addition, Chang's filial duty to her grandmother reflects what Edelman says about the reliving and reproducing of the mother-daughter relation in a grandmother-granddaughter one if there is a close and connected relationship between grandmother and granddaughter (1999: 202-215). Chang's remorse in reaction to her grandmother's death is a result of what she has cultivated from her mother's loving and devoted relationship with her grandmother. Thus, by implementing the act of repenting and writing in response to her grandmother's death, Chang is able to reestablish her maternal connection in her mother's absence.

Another episode, which delineates the mother-daughter struggle between separation and connection though it is enacted by the outside force of social and political disruption, happens when Chang goes to visit her mother in the camp after their long separation. After staying with her mother for ten days and heading for her next destination to her father's camp, Chang and her mother experience an anguished separation. While both of them are waiting for the truck to pick Chang up to take her to her father's camp, Chang's mother, who wants to give her daughter a taste of the New Year's breakfast, runs back to her camp to fetch a bowl of round dumplings, tang-yuan. Unfortunately, her mother does not manage to arrive earlier than the truck. When Chang is anxiously waiting for her mother's arrival, she is astonished to see her mother carrying the bowl, striving to maintain her balance in fear of spilling the soup out of the bowl while approaching Chang at a steady speed from a distance. As Chang knows the truck won't wait any further, she gets on the truck without waiting for her mother to arrive. The bowl Chang's mother is holding then falls to the ground upon her mother's seeing that the truck will soon be taking her daughter away. Yet, Chang's mother continues walking to the spot where they have been waiting for the truck previously to make sure Chang has left safely. Chang rehearses hearing her mother narrate the story thus:

Years later, she told me the bowl had fallen from her hand when she saw me climbing onto the truck. But she still ran to the spot where we had been sitting, just to make sure I had really gone, although it could not have been anyone else getting onto the truck. There was not a single person around in that vast yellowness. For the next few days she walked around the camp as though in a trance, feeling blank and lost. (434-435)

Although the physical separation between mother and daughter is inevitable, their emotional connection cannot be severed by outside forces. As round dumplings symbolise “family reunion” in terms of Chinese culture and tradition, the mother’s insistence on running to the spot where she and her daughter have been sitting *together* even after the bowl of round dumplings she is carrying is gone indicates the mother’s longing for the mother-daughter reconnection.

In *Wild Swans*, Chang describes vividly the torments and sufferings her family has all been through until she “take[s] wing” to fly away from her motherland, China, and separates from her family. Nonetheless, her mother’s visit, which materialises the mother-daughter reunion in London, enables Chang to see through her past in a new light. Instead of suppressing this painful memory of her family history under the incessant destruction of Mao’s sovereignty, Chang begins to recognise that “the past was no longer too painful to recall because I had found love and fulfillment and therefore tranquility” (506). More significantly, what Chang has gained from looking back at her matrilineage is the scripting of the mother-daughter connection in resistance to the totalising estrangement and devastation of family enforced by Chinese patriarchal doctrines and apparatus. Her construction of matrilineal narrative has not only materialised Lorde’s delineation of grandmother/mother/daughter triad but also developed the writing of a genogram in a more complex and creative form.

This paper is extracted from my unpublished PhD thesis, entitled “Mother S/he Wrote: A Poetics of Matrilineal Narratives in Contemporary Wo/men’s Writing,” which I have completed recently.

¹In tandem with the recuperation of motherhood in a series of feminist writings since the 1970s, particularly the revisionary psychoanalytic paradigms of object-relations theory, Marianne Hirsch in her book *The Mother-Daughter Plot* recognises a shift from the centrality of the paternal, as formulated in the classic Freudian model, to that of the maternal in her vigorous study of selected women’s texts published in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This modification from patrilineage to matrilineage, as Hirsch envisions it, serves as an alternative to reformulate traditional Freudian family romances whose androcentric and ethnocentric framework has failed to account for the dynamics of other discourses. Thus, Hirsch proposes the emergence of the mother-daughter plot in post-modernist women’s texts to counter the paternal plot as previously constructed in a number of women’s texts in the nineteenth century. In contrast to female family romances whose narratives are centred on fictional heroines’ denigration of mother figures and their subsequent embrace of male (father) figures, feminist family romances render the male position as secondary, mainly because of psychoanalytic feminists’ preoccupation with a pre-Oedipal mother-child bond. According to this psychoanalytic feminist revi-

sion, the relative obscurity of male figures becomes the corollary of feminist family romances. In an attempt to make clear her notion of the feminist family romance as deviating from the Freudian paradigm, Hirsch continues to reinforce that “the feminist family romance of the 1970s is based on the separation not from parents or the past, but from patriarchy and from men in favor of female alliances” (1989: 54-58; 125-40). Connecting Lorde’s grandmother/mother/daughter triad with Hirsch’s feminist family romances, I seek to term matrilineal narratives “new feminist family romances.”

²Linking her notion of motherline with story-telling, Lowinsky (1992) uses a term “looping” to describe women’s pattern of telling stories from their motherline as they refer to themselves as mothers and daughters and traverse this journey to different times and locations.

Looping ties together life stages, roles, and generations. It disregards linear time. It involves a cyclical view of life, it finds meaning in patterns that repeat. We measure our lives in our mother’s terms, and in our daughter’s terms... You re-experience your past in your children and anticipate your future in your parents, while at the same time your children constellate the future and your parents the past. (22)

According to Lowinsky, we see our past and future in our daughters and mothers while simultaneously in ourselves as mothers and daughters, we revise and reincarnate our mothers’ past but also envision and shed light on our daughters’ future. In short, Lowinsky defines “looping” thus: “Looping is an associative process by which we pass through our own experience to understand that of another” (21-22).

³Margaret Forster’s *Hidden Lives* is another good example of contemporary women’s writing of matrilineal narratives. Forster’s book is based on the life stories of her grandmother, mother, and herself. But her book can also be seen as oral and social history in which the life narratives of her grandmother and mother chronicle the changes of working-class women’s lives in Carlisle, England across generations. See Forster (1996). For a full discussion of Forster’s text, see Cosslett (2000).

⁴The existence of ambivalence between mother and daughter is a recurring theme in most matrilineal narratives. As illustrated often in contemporary women’s writing of matrilineal narratives, this feeling of ambivalence is mainly caused by the misunderstanding between mother and daughter. However, an important feature of matrilineal narratives is the working out of mother-daughter conflict and ambivalence that reconnects them together. See Maglin (1980) and Cosslett (1996).

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