

Exploring the Formation of Eileen Chang's "Dramatic" Writing through Situational Allusion and Psychological Projection in the Heart Sutra

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Abstract. The Heart Sutra is a representative work of Eileen Chang's dramatic writing. The article enriches the novel's perception through the dramatic form, and carries metaphorical hints through the novel's genre. In this fusion of the explicit words and metaphors, the setting of the scenario creates the dramatic conflicts and suspense, and the dialogues among the characters reflect their psychological actions. This paper analyzes the dramatic performance of The Heart Sutra through textual analysis, in order to interpret the human nature behind the character shaping. Then tracing back to the time and social background of Chang's writing, so as to observe the appearance of the people of the times during the period of transformation between the old and the new ideas. This study analyzes the modern fiction 'The Heart Sutra' from a contemporary perspective, interpreting the human distortion in it as a symptom of the peculiar conflict of the vanguard character during the period of change. The study discusses the microcosm of Eileen Chang's original family inside the fiction, which also provides a context of her insights of the times. As a result, the article emphasizes the re-creation value of literary appreciation through the subjective and objective viewpoints to appreciate the text of The Heart Sutra in an all-round way.

Keywords: The Heart Sutra, Dramatic Fiction, Psychological Projection, Eileen Chang.

1. Introduction

The Heart Sutra was written before the end of 1943, when Eileen Chang said she was making her own play. There is about 70% of the novel consists of characters' dialogues, which shows rich, dramatized scene-setting with language and action working together to propel the plot [1]. Dramatic perspective provides a new dimension of analysis for Eileen Chang's works. *The Heart Sutra* expresses a microcosm and deep insight into the differences of human nature by dramatic writing. However, the existing studies overlook the complex psychological projections in the text when carrying out the discussion around the themes of "affection for father" and "incest".

Scholar Wang Di interprets *The Heart Sutra* from the perspective of ethical drama, focuses on the dramatic literary environment in which Eileen lived in. The study analyzes the dramatic shaping of the characters' language and actions, which gives inspiration for the dramatic interpretation of these genres [2]. In contrast, more scholars analyze the mental trajectory of the protagonist from Freudian, Jungian and other psychological studies, and seldom elaborate on the ingenious setting of the interlocking continuum in the text [3].

This paper analyzes the insinuating role of scene creation and the psychological projection of interactions between characters in *The Heart Sutra* by adopting the method of textual analysis. Study combines the concepts of psychology and drama to explore the creation of dramatic writing through characters' language and scene descriptions, which assist in the construction of the plot and its outlining of human nature. Based on the analysis of characterization and dramatic conflicts, the author further explores the "self-projection" in Eileen Chang's writing.

2. Dramatic Allusion of Situations

Dramatic always discussed with three elements: setting, character and plot, as for Chang's *The Heart Sutra*, which is full of interlinks among setting descriptions, character dialogues and plots. The

dramatic insinuation can be analyzed through the comparison of the previous situation and the consequences. As an important textual carrier, the text makes the dramatic presentation possible, and the discussion of the novel's "dramatic" will also focus on it. The following section analyzes the novel's dramatic writing from three insinuating relationships.

2.1. Projection of Imagery onto the Conflict Plot

In the text of *The Heart Sutra*, there are several special settings of imagery. When an object is given a concept or meaning, its "image" is not only confined to objective existence, the scene, with its explicit and implicit symbolic meanings, is all auxiliary to the characters or the plot. According to the law of "Classical unites" of drama, the creation of drama has consistency among time, place and plot, so that there are multi-dimensional contacts in the interpretation of symbolism in this harmonious whole [4]. The following will examine the insinuating role of this imagery in relation to the characters and the plot.

The first imagery is the 'monologue stairs'. When Xiaohan sends Lingqing away at night, they have to go downstairs in the dark because the elevator isn't working and neither are the lights. On this staircase which is unusually long in the dark, Xiaohan and Lingqing begin their "confession" about Gong Hailian and like all people do on it. As the plot develops, Lingqing finally lives with Xiaohan's father (who is married), but on the 'confession stairs' she states about the human who can be her husband: "Of course, the word 'human' stands for unmarried people of a certain class and age". So as Xiaohan, who binds her father to her with misplaced love but denies on the stairs that she wouldn't selfishly dominate someone she cannot marry. Xiaohan repeatedly uses the emotions of those around her to test her father Fengyi, and even displays her insanity upon learning that he has someone. Her anger is not motivated by consideration for her family, but by her selfishness.

From this point of view, there are points on the staircase that seem to contradict the truth, and this sense of dramatic conflict is initiated by the symbolism of the imagery. The subtlety of the imagery here is that their conversation serves as a reflection of their true psyche, which creates another "confession": Lingqing is jealous of Xiaohan. In the darkness, where it is almost impossible to distinguish them, Lingqing says, "Who else could be like you, with such a beautiful family?" Refer to the previous text where Lingqing feels that the future she has will invite cynicism from her family: "They hate me, though they don't know it." It is easy to see Lingqing's comparison mentality, and it may explain the reason why she chooses to stay with Xiaohan's father in part.

The second imagery is the canopy on a rainy night. Mrs. Xu stops Xiaohan from going to Lingqing's house. It is difficult to call for another rickshaw cause of the rainy night, so they have to ride together. Eileen Chang devoted more space to the scene of this part, which describes the canopy as follows: "Outside the oilcloth was a surging white, while inside was oppressive darkness." In this narrow space, Xiaohan just feels hate and disgust, though they are clinging to each other, and blaming Mrs. Xu for her bystanding and failures as a mother. However, for the tragedy that has now occurred, Mrs. Xu just says: "I never knew it... I might feel a little, but I couldn't believe it." "Now I realize you meant it." Xiaohan is tormented by her affection for her father, and the only thing that ultimately accommodates and restrains her is the dark and heavy canopy of her mother's love. The distance of intimacy contrasts sharply with the remoteness of their hearts. Mrs. Xu's "belated" love is just like the dark world held up by an oilcloth under the rainstorm, she thinks she has done her best to be tolerant and loving, but it is just a suffocating space that can only accommodate her and Xiaohan to hide in the darkness and repress their own selves.

2.2. Projection of Plot onto the Character Destiny

The difference between the drama of a novel and the drama itself is that the former is supported by words as a narrative, and the metaphors or hints within the text can be traced by the readers as they go back and forth. There exist some hints about the fate of the characters in *The Heart Sutra*, and the entanglement of plot and fate adds literary drama to the novel. The Russian critic Belinsky once said, "Dramatic elements should, as a matter of course, penetrate into the narrative elements and

increase the value of the work of art [5].” The fusion of novel and dramatic narrative builds an invisible stage for the author where the micro and macro coexist, and all the implicit and explicit are performed on it.

In the first scene of the story, Xiaohan sits high on the roof with five girls clustered under her. The original text describes her relationship with the environment twice: she is sitting on the railing, as if she is the only one there; there is nothing else but heaven and Shanghai and Xiaohan, no, heaven and Xiaohan and Shanghai, cause Xiaohan is sitting in a position between heaven and Shanghai. Some scholars have paid attention to this suggestive depiction, and interpreted “heaven and earth” as a reference to parents from the perspective of traditional Chinese cultural structure, implying Xiaohan’s abnormal love is “between” her parents [6]. This perspective lets more insinuations of characters’ fate come to the surface with the later plot development. Xiaohan has always stood in opposition to her mother, treating her like “others”. In addition to interpreting this harmful relationship from the perspective of Freud’s “sexual instinct”, Xiaohan regards her mother’s inaction as a sign of cowardice [7]. However, she devotes herself to her father, choosing to stay in this love affair with him. At the same time, her father Xu Fengyi, to whom she has devoted herself, chooses to abandon her in this love.

Chang not only sets hints about an individual’s fate, she also insinuates the fate entanglements between characters through the plot. In one of the plots in which Lingqing and Xiaohan perform together, the two of them play under the gaze of Xiaohan’s father, the original text as follows: “As Lingqing played and sang, Xiaohan, who found the light too dim, can not stop bending down to identify the words printed on the sheet music. Her hair rubbing against Lingqing’s hair.” This situation alludes to the overlapping, entanglement, and friction between their destinies, meanwhile, Xu’s father sits behind them, which makes the scene look like seated in the auditorium below the stage. His irrelevant remark, “You two look a bit alike,” draws the two girls looking at each other in the mirror, and paves the groundwork for the ensuing migration of emotions. His desire begins with the gaze, and it is surely the male power that dominates the twist of female destiny.

2.3. Projection of Scene onto the Character Psychology

In the discussion of the dramatic of *The Heart Sutra*, scholar Wang Di cites a description full of dramatic elements, “Through the glass, Fengyi’s hand pressed on Xiaohan’s arm. The round arm of ivory yellow, the robe was made of gorgeous floral muslin, with a red base like lacquer, on which were imprinted the green-headed, white-faced children. Countless children wriggling in the crevices of his fingers.” The insinuation of the character’s psychology is really evocative in this plot, which is worth reading in detail. Before this segment, both characterization and plot setting emphasize Xiaohan’s love for her father Xu Fengyi, and Xu Fengyi’s inner fluctuations are not directly revealed until this part. Fengyi and Xiaohan stay separately inside and outside the house with a piece of glass between them. This scene implies Xiaohan yearns for an open and spontaneous state of mind, while Fengyi is trapped within the rules constructed by ethics. The child wriggling in Fengyi’s fingers symbolizes an itchy carnal desire, while the contrast of the child’s face makes Fengyi suffer from the moral torture of his own ego. It is also here that the contradiction of incestuous love is catalyzed to the extreme in Fengyi’s heart. Fengyi’s desire is visible but inaccessible, like they are doomed to be blocked by the glass wall of social ethics.

3. Situational Allusion

As the introduction discussed, the extensive dialogues are one of the main features of *The Heart Sutra*, which is also the basis of the drama’s characterization. From the point of view of the relationship between “watching” and “acting” in drama, *The Heart Sutra* is an interpretation on the stage, and the readers are the audience under the stage. The speaker and the listener are also performing their own roles in an invisible way in the world of the novel. Goffman compares society to a stage with the theory of dramaturgy, in which people manage their desired impressions in the

eyes of others through conscious or unconscious performances during their interaction [8]. In other words, the psychology of a character can be viewed through the analysis of the character's active performance behaviors. Eileen Chang shaped the vivid three members of Xu's family by setting their dialogues, which show their mental interaction.

3.1. Xu Fengyi: Selfishness and Self-mockery

As the central character of this dislocated relationship, Xu Fengyi's words and actions throughout the story are always between ambiguity and evasion. On the one hand, he acquiesces to and even enjoys Xiaohan's intimacy. On the other hand, he tries to remove his own sense of guilt with ethical responsibility.

Xu Fengyi accepts Xiaohan's love without avoiding suspicion, even if he knows that Xiao Han has already grown into a mature woman. As the original text says, "Fengyi took her hand and dragged her to his side, said with a smile, 'You don't need to put on a childish face to me all the time, it's tiring.'" He treats Xiaohan as a mature woman but not his daughter or a child.

In the face of Xiaohan's blazing love, the unethical consciousness inside Fengyi's mind led his words to be full of embellishments and evasions. Firstly, on Xiaohan's birthday, he once again brings up the old story: "... When you were born, the fortune teller said that your destinies are incompatible with your mother's. We had originally planned to have you adopted by your third aunt, but your mother could not bear to part with you." Fengyi blames everything on the arrangement of fate and Mrs. Xu's disobedience. Even more ironic is that Xu Fengyi and Mrs. Xu all have expressed they didn't know how this love started, which shows their selfish and self-serving. Furthermore, Fengyi deliberately distances the relationship with Xiaohan by their age difference in front of outsiders. He still wants to claim a normal father-daughter relationship in the presence of outsiders, which can glimpse of his selfishness in the contradiction between his social identity and his inner.

From Fengyi's point of view, he is also contradictory and helpless as he wants to get rid of his family but is unwilling to let go. The unfortunate family with an unloved person haunts Fengyi. He tentatively asks Xiaohan if she is suffering because of himself, and after getting a negative answer from her, he laughs at himself and says, "Well, at least one of us is happy!" Fengyi has to heal himself in this way with the double entanglement of lovelessness and abnormal love. The tragedy of lovelessness with his wife is slightly "spiritually comforted" by Xiaohan, but this incestuous love makes him suffer from the guilt of affection as a father. Xiaohan is stuck between the family Fengyi wants to get rid of and the passionate love he longs for, and Fengyi seems to have made his decision to leave her many times but he failed. The original text states that: "If you don't go away, I'll do. I'll take your mother to leave." However, it is difficult to take his unloved wife away from Xiaohan. His wandering and hesitating are full of self-mockery and sadness.

In the end, Fengyi left home compromised by choosing Lingqing, who resembled Xiaohan. The final words about him is: Fengyi moves her head to the sofa, stands up, wipes the wrinkles on his hakama, lifts his purse, and walks out. Fengyi completely disengaged himself from this bad relationship like wiping away the wrinkles and marks casually that Xiaohan had left on him. This is the optimal solution for Fengyi, who has caused his family to fall apart and his daughter to suffer.

3.2. Xu Xiaohan: Self-deception and Arrogant

Growing up in a wealthy but unloved family, Xiaohan's desire to be loved is intertwined with her desire to control. When the girls get together in the opening scene, Xiaohan's harsh scolding to Milan is a simple padding of her image. In the text, Xiaohan grabs Milan and says: "It's you who did it! Are you tired of living? ...Fortunately, you did not dirty my clothes, otherwise, watch out for your hide!" It is easy to remind of Wang Xifeng in the "Dream of the Red Chamber". Xiaohan is a spoiled rich young lady in front of her friends, while echoing to her psychological of concealment when facing the embarrassment. There is also a subtle projective relationship between Lingqing and Xiaohan, both of whom are mirrors of each other. When Xiao Han learns that Feng Yi is living with lingqing, she speaks out of anger and reveals her true feelings, "What a tactful person she is! I've known her for

years, I know her, don't you think she's a naive girl.” But the fact is that Xiaohan takes advantage of her friends and making all kinds of arrangements to prove her father's love. Thus, the way she sees others is precisely a reflection of herself.

Before Xiaohan pretends to ignore the truth that her father is with Lingqing, her self-deception is already traceable. There is a description of Xiaohan's psychobabble in the text: 'Poor man! He's really a bit unhappy today cause Gong Haili! All those unpleasant words he said later were undoubtedly invoked by Gong Haili! "Xiaohan decides to adopt a high-pressure approach to matchmaking between Gong Haili and Duan Lingqing, in order to avoid her father doubting her love.' Philosopher and playwright Sartre has defined self-deception as: used to cover up some unpleasant truths in life [9]. Xiaohan does not want to imagine that her father has someone, so the establishment of a self-protection mechanism allows her to convince herself only by self-deception. Nevertheless, Xu Fengyi deceives himself with the fate to escape the moral and social lashings, Mrs. Xu deceives herself with Xiaohan's "childlike" nature to ignore the family's chronic problems, then Xiaohan's self-deception has a completely opposite direction. She looks directly at her own love and drives her behavior with her spontaneous heart, so that her self-deception grows to satisfy her inner emotional needs. The so-called "modernist" ideas of Xiaohan, as Mrs. Xu referred to them, may well be a manifestation of choosing to respect one's own feelings rather than falling into a sense of shame when confronted with the contradictions between the id and the ego.

3.3. Mrs. Xu: Self-restrained and Self-pitying

Mrs. Xu, the epitome of feudal education, who almost invisible in Xu's family. Mrs. Xu's words and deeds are more concentrated in the latter part of the text. Her presence in the family is as indifferent as the peach-gray fine-checked silk shirt, according to the description in the earlier part of the text. Mrs. Xu is indifferent to the behaviors of Xiaohan and her father, it is only after several conversations with Xiaohan that her personality is gradually fleshed out.

Mrs. Xu sighed, "That's nothing? I've endured things much worse than this for years... Every family has its own difficulties." The long time living in a loveless home makes Mrs. Xu no longer willing to dwell on Fengyi's absurdity. In the face of Xiaohan's protests, Mrs. Xu ordered, "As a young girl, you should stay out of these matters! What do you really understand anyway?" In response to Xiaohan's intervention, Mrs. Xu added, "Whether I know or not is none of your business. I don't care, and it's not up to you to interfere." Mrs. Xu's preaching not only reflects her cognitive limitations, but also can reflect the same feudalistic ideological education she received in her early life. Mrs. Xu's definition of "family" and her tolerance and forbearance towards lovelessness can also prove it. All of the above is a colorful depiction of the ignorance and sadness of women's self-repression in a patriarchal society.

The dominance of Mrs. Xu's words becomes apparent at the end of the novel, she seems to have become a firm backing for Xiaohan. However, the mother who will "arrange everything" for her can just provide Xiaohan the "form of motherly love". Xiaohan said: "You, you don't be so nice to me! I can't stand it! I can't stand it!" Xiaohan not only hard to resist the shame of facing up to the incest love, but also difficult to tolerate this kind of motherly love. As a mother, Mrs. Xu accepts everything without words, while waiting to clean up the mess. She plays in her consciousness of what a mother should be like in the numbness of self-consciousness, but just does not know how to love. Eileen Chang once said: "In fact, some feelings are, if you dramatize it, there is only drama left, especially for the motherly love [10]." Mrs. Xu's motherly love has led to the occurrence of the incest love, but can also contain the scars brought by it. The dramatic transition highlights Mrs. Xu's "dramatic motherly love" under her ignorance.

4. Contextual Origins of Dramatic Conflict

The intermingling exploration of modern Chinese drama and Western European drama provides theatrical references to Eileen Chang's novels. The preceding analysis of the text from a dramatic perspective will help further trace the imprints of the era and family on the author's perception.

4.1. The Era of Chinese-Western Confluences

The political and economic aggression of imperialism since the middle of the nineteenth century has flooded China with Western concepts, and Shanghai was in the midst of a turmoil historical period where the old meets the new. About two years before Eileen Chang wrote *The Heart Sutra*, she had just returned to Shanghai from Hong Kong with her schoolmate Yanying. Stability and unity no longer existed in her hometown, which had already become a Japanese war zone. A complex and ever-changing literary discourse space is born of the times.

In this time of alternation between the old and the new, war and chaos, Eileen Chang said to her friend: "The exchange of all kinds of monstrous products of the old and new cultures may turn out to be unhealthy, but there is a kind of strange wisdom here [11]". Eileen Chang tasted the legend derived from the ordinary people in the chaotic times, so that this work with the set of feudal and open, numb and vivid, common sense and rebellious in one can attract readers to empathy with the flow of Chinese and foreign ideas led to the aberration of consciousness. From a macroscopic view of the literary world, Zhou Zuoren, in 1942, talked about the war let literary and art workers to reduce their speeches and activities and turned to the field of literature and art in search of spiritual solace in "China's Ideological Problems" [12]. Not only *The Heart Sutra*, *Sealed Off* is also the confession of their sensitive heart in the turbulent times.

Whether it is the macro-narrative of writers like Mao Dun or the meticulous depiction of domestic life by Eiling Chang, both are filled with the ideological transformation of modern consciousness. Chang's tendency to write about "human beings" and "human nature" led her work towards the same pursuit of "modernity" in drama during the period of democratic revolution. The dramatic conflicts, the psychological contradictions of the characters, and the collision between feudalism and the "modernist" ideas portray the special faces of the people in the context of the times, and even the psychological behaviors and discourse projections of the characters also exist in contemporary society. The progress and innovations of the times have opened up dramatic possibilities in the social and human conditions, and the interpretation of dramatic works of fiction is also a reflection of the times in miniature.

4.2. The Fractured Family

The vivid portrayal of the complex and entangled aspects of human nature in the *The Heart Sutra* is both influenced by the contemporary atmosphere and reflects the author's personal life experiences. The absence of mother, the father who could not feed back to the family though, was tangible, and the daughter's perversity and Electra complex can all be seen as the epitome of Eileen Chang's childhood [13]. She was born into an aristocratic family with material advantages, but she experienced the decline in her father's generation. Eiling's mother, with progressive ideas, abandoned the family at an early stage. Eiling's father was extravagant and violent, but was no lack of praise for her talent. Such a family forced her into precocious maturity out of loneliness, while also preserving a childlike longing for love. Xiaohan is like the vessel through which she conveys the melancholy of her childhood.

The Heart Sutra is both a drama of Xu's family and a stage for Eileen Chang's self-performance. According to Wang Guowei's understanding of drama and novel, dramatic novel is a combination of "narrative" and "speech", and this "speech" is the writer's "words" on behalf of the characters [14]. Xiaohan, who is "stuck between heaven and earth" is Eileen's character. The family that created her finally let her go, the fate of the choice will also throw her into the gap of loneliness. The novel alludes

to the sorrow of various characters caught in the torrent of the times, ultimately concluding with a desolate ending.

5. Conclusion

The combination of dramatic narrative method and novel genre brings into play their complementary literary value. Readers not only empathize with the characters to achieve the effect of “get into character”, but also have a macro view of the whole situation. Dramatic novels are intertwined with the author's “explicit words” and “metaphors”, and the relationship between the characters and the author's endorsement gives dramatic works multiple perspectives for in-depth analysis.

The reflection on human nature and the times in literary works makes them more valuable to appreciate. The unchosen original family and the times Chang lived in often become the core topics of her compositions. Under the symbiotic and mutually reinforcing relationship with traditional ideas, the vanguard nature of new ideas may manifest as a kind of deformity from the perspective of tradition. The conflict between the abnormal and the norm is precisely the manifestation of seeking exceptions and change within the framework of the “unchangeable.”

The study of the essence of phenomena in *The Heart Sutra* reflects the contemporary perspective on modernity. By analyzing the commonalities of human nature through psychology, *The Heart Sutra* can be read from the cause and effect of the contradictory characters' psychology, and the different relationships bring a multi-faceted view of the characters. Thus, “literary appreciation” has also become a projection of the research community's vision, and the development and innovation of literature has realized the re-creation of works from various dimensions.

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