

A Study of Sam's Gender Identity in *How Much of These Hills is Gold* from the Perspective of Judith Butler's Gender Theory

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Abstract: Chinese American writer C Pam Zhang has caught the public's attention with her debut novel, *How Much of These Hills is Gold*. Employing Judith Butler's gender theory, this paper explores Sam's ambivalent gender identity. It reveals gender identity discrimination that both immigrant Chinese women and American-born Chinese women endure dual patriarchal discipline imposed by Chinese male immigrants and white settlers in the American West during the post-Gold Rush period. By denouncing the historical malady that gender identity is constructed by dual-patriarchal oppression, this paper accentuates Zhang's deconstruction of categorical and rigid gender identities, thereby advocating for the construction of a fluid gender identity.

Keywords: C Pam Zhang; *How Much of These Hills is Gold*; Judith Butler; Gender identity

1. Introduction

C Pam Zhang (1990-), an emerging star among Chinese American writers, rises to prominence with *How Much of These Hills is Gold* (2020). The novel was a finalist for the 2020 Lambda Literary Award and was longlisted for the 2020 Booker Prize. Despite possessing a relatively shorter writing career and having published a few works, Zhang eschews the tedious retelling of white forefathers' journeys of discovery and conquest of great new lands; instead, it reveals an untold yet indispensable homage to the history of American immigrants ^[1].

Set against the backdrop of the post-Gold Rush era in the American West, *How Much of These Hills is Gold* narrates the story that abandoned by their mother and following their father's decease, two American-born Chinese sisters, Lucy and Sam, embark on a difficult journey in search of a home and a means of survival. Existing research mainly delves into its themes, including colonialism, Chinese exclusion, historical narratives, the sense of belonging, and the cultural identity of Sam and her family. However, none of them explore the characters' gender identities. As the plot progresses, Sam, with her increasingly ambiguous gender identity, is the only one who elicits the puzzlement of whether she is a woman or a man among all the female or male characters.

Judith Butler (1956-), a renowned American philosopher and gender theorist, has made substantial contributions to gender studies and has had a profound impact on queer theory, philosophical feminism, and cultural theory since the late 20th century ^[2]. Drawing on Butler's gender theory, this paper concentrates on Sam's physiological features, gender temperament, gender expression, and social role. It unfolds how Zhang portrays Sam and unveils the mystery of Sam's ambivalent gender identity and its underlying causes. The paper not only aims to critique the way immigrant Chinese women and American-born Chinese women are constrained by gender identities constructed within patriarchal discourses but also demonstrates Zhang's attitude toward constructing a fluid gender identity. Additionally, this paper endeavors to draw attention to C Pam Zhang and her works, providing a new perspective on gender identity for the study of *How Much of These Hills is Gold*.

2. Sam's ambivalent gender identity: dual patriarchal discipline

Internalizing male-imposed discipline deeply, Sam's mother endeavors to cultivate Sam into a traditional Chinese woman. Sam's mother and sister, Lucy, have a passion for beautiful dresses and sleek, long hair, to please men. Their mother is dedicated to nurturing Lucy and Sam's femininity by sewing

gorgeous dresses for them, which receives people's admiration in the coal mining area. She imparts to them the "wisdom" that an attractive appearance is a woman's most potent weapon. For instance, her mother often obtains more bones than others by flirting with the butcher shop owner, and the opportunity for Lucy to study with an American white teacher Leigh.

All these repetitive feminine practices, which embody their gender identity, are both expected and reinforced by patriarchal discourse. This phenomenon aligns with Judith Butler's concept of "gender performativity". As Butler elucidates, "not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration" ^{[3]kv}. Gender performativity is an imitative behavior that persists over time, as exemplified by Lucy and Sam's emulation of their mother's femininity. Although their mother and Lucy are aware of being oppressed by patriarchal discourse, they still internalize it and utilize their bodies as a means to ensure their survival. Meanwhile, this gender performativity further solidifies their gender identity and gender discrimination.

Nevertheless, Sam disdains the cultivation of femininity. In this novel, all women, such as teacher Leigh's white female friends and Lucy's white friend Anna, except Sam, exhibit conspicuous femininity. Although Lucy is jealous of Sam, who inherits her mother's beauty and is more attractive than her ^{[4]63}, Sam still holds the cultivation of femininity in contempt. She declines feminization by dressing like a man. "Ba's old clothes and Ba's borrowed swagger. But even when Sam resisted Ma's manners, insisted on working and riding out of town with Ba, Lucy figured those for the old games of dress-up" ^{[4]7}. Swaggering with her father on their way to dig coal, Sam showcases her clothes to the townspeople. Besides wearing his father's clothes, Sam loathes women's domestic work, taking a perverse pride in loose stitches and half-burnt food ^{[4]37}. While her sister Lucy is eager to dress up as a lady, Sam relishes the ebullient hours spent with her father prospecting for coal and gold. Sam deliberately modulates her sweet and mellifluous voice into a deep and husky tone to disguise her feminine charm.

In this context, Sam's gender expression is reshaped by the oppression of domestic patriarchal discourse. In other words, Sam's performance of masculinity is induced by hegemonic masculinity. Sam's masculine attire, according to Butler's gender theory, is interpreted as "drag", which refers to a man wearing a woman's dress or a woman dressing as a man ^{[3]209}. An individual's dress is inconsistent with his or her gender identity. Sam rejects her mother's attempts to feminize her by choosing to engage in "drag". Sam deliberately strives to alter her gender identity presentation to cater to her father's yearning for a son. Given a masculine name, in contrast to her sister's feminine name, Sam is expected to be a boy. Initially, Chinese women were forbidden from participating in coal mining and were confined to their houses, raising children. Sam's mother stays in their ramshackle shed to attend to Sam and Lucy as she internalizes the patriarchal belief that women are born to be housewives. Given such circumstances, Chinese women and their daughters in quarries serve as men's accessories and child-bearing machines. Through "drag", Sam can dig coal and mine with her father to earn money. Sam's masculinity performativity fulfills her father's aspiration for a son; as a result, she gains her father's favor and is spared from his domestic violence. Conversely, Lucy, in an inferior position within the traditional Chinese family, is often physically abused by her father for being a girl and is unremittingly committed to feminine performativity.

Beyond avoiding domestic patriarchal violence, Sam's masculinity performativity emerges as a survival strategy within the interstices of white men's hegemony. Chinese miners' wives are lured to the West by letters from their miner husbands, who omitted the realities of coal dust. They succumbed to diseases or delivering a son, while their widowers remarried sturdy women ^{[4]26}. In the mid-19th century, a labor shortage emerged across colonialist countries after the emancipation of black slaves. The United States identified China as a repository of exploitable labor, catalyzing the transpacific "coolie" trade from the middle 19th century to the early 20th century. These male labors called "coolies", were tormented by prolonged celibacy. To placate them, a certain proportion of Chinese women were sold to the American West and coerced into sexual slavery to serve the "coolies" ^[5]. Sam's mother epitomizes a victim of this conspiracy, deceived to disinter gold in the western United States ^{[4]102}. Therefore, immigrant Chinese women endure gender identity discrimination from both domestic and American patriarchal discourse. In such circumstances, for Sam, adopting masculine performativity becomes not merely advantageous but essential for survival, sharply contrasting with her mother's female identity to survive.

Sam intentionally conceals her female characteristics and suppresses her femininity, while her attempts to alter her gender identity through masculine performativity are coerced and manipulated by the dual patriarchal depress. In this regard, Sam's gender performativity fails to resist gender identity discrimination but rather is a survival strategy. Even as Sam enacts masculine performativity, there remains a little-girl essence hidden beneath her male-style clothes. Thus, before the separation from Lucy,

Sam's gender consciousness is ambivalent and contradictory.

3. Deconstructing female gender identity: Sam's lesbian orientation

When Sam arrives in Sweetwater town to bid farewell to Lucy, departing for China, the sisters dine at a local restaurant where Sam's masculine appearance catches the eye of a female cook. Lucy observes that Sam's captivating features draw admiring glances from women ^{[4]124}, foreshadowing Sam's same-sex attraction through her interaction with the female cook. After their meal, they encounter Anna and Charles. The four youths gather together for conversation, with delicate tension simmering between Sam and Anna. "Sam's telling another tall tale. Anna laughs so hard she chokes, and Sam thumps her" ^{[4]136}. Sam's solicitous gesture towards Anna contrasts sharply with her usual impudent demeanor, her abnormal tenderness signaling interest in Anna. After Lucy and Charles' unpleasant conversation, she returns to the room to seek Anna, eliciting a pivotal scene: "Two bodies twist against the wall. Anna whimpers as if in pain, her right hand still holding that lizard skull. Sam grips Anna's other arm as Charles grips Lucy's. A flush down Anna's arm, and her chest, and her throat—all the way to her lips, under Sam's lips" ^{[4]138}. Astounded by this erotic scene, Lucy purposely interrupts them. Though Sam does not blush like Anna, she grins. For Lucy, same-sex desire transgresses social norms. In her perception, only heterosexual relationships exist as legitimate and are socially sanctioned. However, Sam's nonchalant reaction, no shame, no awkwardness, hints that Sam is a lesbian.

The narrative unfolds in "Part IV: XX67", a reference to 1867 inferred from the contextual detail that Chinese laborers were lured to the United States to construct the Transcontinental Railroad. Although homosexuality lacked societal acceptance in 1867, its existence is undeniable. When queried about Sam's portrayal, C Pam Zhang responded: "It's important to remember that transgender people and queer people have been around for a long time. They have been erased from most of recorded history. In that sense, imagining Sam's existence wasn't hard at all" ^[6]. In the early 21st century, Zhang's lesbian character Sam serves not merely to supplement historical narratives but also to reflect on the modern transgender condition marked by ongoing struggles against stereotypes and bigotry. Zhang underscores the importance of giving Sam that level of humanity and respect ^[6]. The historical and contemporary exclusion of lesbians stems from the institutionalization of heterosexuality supported by gender identity and patriarchal discourse.

Zhang's positive attitude toward lesbians reflects her intent to deconstruct fixed gender identities, aligned with Judith Butler's queer theory. The discussion of queer is an essential component of Butler's gender theory, as gender identity emerges through intersecting feminism and queer theoretical developments. Queer originally denotes strangeness or abnormality, later evolving into an offensive word when used by someone who is not homosexual ^[7], implying societal prejudice. By the late 1980s, this word was reclaimed in gender studies to express the cultural and political positions of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and non-normative sexual minorities. As a queer subject, Sam challenges the normative gender identity and sexual orientation.

Monique Wittig (1935-2003), one of the pioneers of queer theory research, leaves a profound impact on Butler's theoretical framework ^[8]. Butler critiques the normalization of heterosexuality as the "proper" sexual reference, arguing that compulsory heterosexuality reinforces binary gender classifications and fixed gender identities. As Butler asserts, "If queer theory is understood, by definition, to oppose all identity claims and the unwanted legislation of identity, including stable sex assignment" ^[9]. If homosexuality were fully accepted, the hierarchical gender binary would collapse, dismantling both gender classification and fixed identities. When Lucy questions Sam about her decision to bathe at the whorehouse, Sam claims that Renata, a woman working there, treats her with dignity, a stark contrast to Renata's disdain for men who objectify women's bodies to seek amusement. "Now she thinks of what Sam said on the trail: the difference between being looked at and seen" ^{[4]147}. Whereas women in the brothel and Sam herself, once violated by a mountain man, are merely "looked at" as sexual objects, Sam's lesbian practices enable women to be "seen" as equals, transcending a gender identity of a sexual tool in heterosexuality.

By resisting her gender identity disciplined by the patriarchal discourse, Sam actively rejects becoming a sexual commodity under the male gaze. Her homosexual orientation challenges the yoke of heterosexuality, thereby dismantling the fixed gender identity. Sam's refusal of Elske's offer to work as a prostitute to earn money and her homosexuality represent a dual defiance: rejecting the patriarchal commodification of female identity while deconstructing gender binaries.

4. Constructing a fluid gender identity: Sam's self-redemption

Although Sam's previous male gender performativity and "drag" serve as survival strategies under her father's and white Americans' gender discrimination, she persists in her gender performativity even after her father's death and her departure from the mining town she once inhabited. Yet this stage of Sam's gender performativity, to some extent, is differentiated from mere imitation of fixed gender identity, marking her active rejection of the shadow of patriarchal oppression.

Sam deconstructs the gender distinction through exaggerated masculine performativity. In "Plum", the second section of the first part, the two sisters seek a proper burial site for their deceased father, whose body has desiccated in the high temperature. Her father's dried penis, resembling a plum dropping from the trunk. At the same time, Lucy discovers Sam's secret that she "recreates" her gender identity by makeshift phallic objects, such as half of a carrot or a piece of stone. This title transforms "plum" from a literal fruit reference into a metaphor for male genitalia and the rigid gender identity it symbolizes. Zhang concludes the section with a rhetorical question: "What makes a man a man?"^{[4]25}. Sam's gender performativity of creating a penis powerfully responds to it. Sam discerns unfair treatment that she encounters in that her sex is different from her father's and other men's due to a penis, a critical organ to be identified by a man.

A fundamental distinction exists between "sex" and "gender". The former refers to biological attributes, including chromosomes, genitalia, gonads, and hormonal states, which categorize individuals as male or female. In contrast, the latter "has psychological or cultural connotations. If the proper terms for sex are 'male' and 'female', the corresponding terms for gender are 'masculine' and 'feminine'"^[10]. Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) also contends that a woman's sex is innate, while her gender is socially constructed^[11]. Judith Butler denies that women's sex is inborn, however, by arguing that feminism assumes sex as biologically fixed while treating gender as socially determined^{[12]6-7}. Butler rejects this precondition, asserting that both sex and gender are constructed by patriarchal discourse^{[12]12}.

"Interpellation" is adopted by Butler to support her argument. In Butler's theoretical context, it refers to the judgment of an infant's sex according to reproductive organs before or at birth^{[3]7}. An infant with a penis is interpellated as male. If there were no patriarchal discourse, an infant with a penis might be identified as female. Interpellation lays the foundation for the subsequent formation of gender identity, yet it is perceived as a natural boundary-setting mechanism that perpetuates gender identity^{[3]7-8}. In light of the proposition of gender performativity and interpellation, Butler further delves into her gender theory by deconstructing the sex-gender distinction, disclosing that both are coined by patriarchal discourse. Sam's deliberate creation of a male's phallic prosthesis illustrates that organs proving a person's sex can be artificial; thereby, the classification of sex and gender generated by patriarchal society is decomposed, and the different gender identities are also deconstructed.

Beyond constructing a phallic prosthesis, Sam also continues her "drag" by donning Western cowboy attire and makeup that Indian men prepare for tribal fights^{[4]1}. It sows a seed to adventure as a cowboy in the vast American West and encounters with rhinoceros in the Indian myth. "When I'm a cowboy, Sam says. When I'm an adventurer. More recently: When I'm a famous outlaw. When I'm grown. Young enough to think desire alone shapes the world"^{[4]3}. Lucy's abandonment of Sam marks a turning point, compelling Sam to embrace a new life without practicing her gender identity.

Sam's "drag", in another aspect, exposes the vulnerability of fixed gender identities. Deviating from traditional male identity, she is an androgynous person. Not only does Sam survive in the wasteland, but she also disinters gold, a subversive act challenging patriarchal prohibitions against female prospectors and undermining the restrictions of gender identity. "Drag" reveals the fragility of gender "reality" to counter the violence performed by gender identity^{[12]xxiv}, evidenced by Sam's voluntary adoption of male "drag" during her wandering in the West. To elaborate further, Sam's "drag" can transform her into a man, a piece of convincing evidence that gender is formed through perpetual "drag" and "gender is a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real"^{[12]230}. "Drag" elucidates that gender identity is not as fixed as it is generally assumed to be.

Juxtaposed with Lucy's obedience to feminine performativity, Sam's wandering in the American West embodies a rebellion against her gender identity, eliciting her sister Lucy's admiration and edifying her to forgo her feminine performativity. After the burial of their deceased father, Lucy settles in Sweetwater town, where allured by the vain life of upper-class white women, she befriends Anna, a gold miner's daughter dwelling in opulent houses and leading a princess-like life. Unaware of feminine performativity, exhausting herself for years until Sam's visit, Lucy forsakes current feminine practices. When her long hair is cut by Sam, Lucy comes to grips with the misleading mantra that her mother imparts to her and

Sam—beauty is women’s weapon—turning against her and Sam. Meanwhile, Lucy comprehends Sam’s short hair as neither a man’s cut nor a woman’s but an androgynous one that allows an individual to grow to be anything ^[4]¹³⁹. In other words, in both self-conception and others’ perceptions, Sam defies categorical gender identity. Sam constructs and possesses a fluid identity.

Unlike her childhood’s forced gender performativity and “drag”, Sam’s voluntary gender performativity and “drag” after her father’s death uncover her practice of a fluid identity. Her established fluid gender identity represents Zhang’s critique of the patriarchal discourse that persecutes women and the deconstruction of the binary of gender identity.

5. Conclusion

Recreating the significant history of Chinese immigrants in the American West during the Post-Gold Rush, C Pam Zhang reveals the harsh survival conditions faced by immigrant Chinese women and American-born Chinese women while elucidating that their identity is constructed and fossilized by Chinese and American patriarchal discourse. Through the depiction of an astrology character, Sam and her gender performativity, Zhang questions the binary distinctions and classificatory criteria of gender identities. Sam’s evolving cognitive understanding of gender identity deconstructs its fixed notions, constructing a fluid identity that transcends a certain gender identity. Functioning as the incarnation of Zhang, Sam illustrates the author’s subversive and avant-garde perspective on gender identity.

Acknowledgment

I owe my gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Jiang, whose meticulous guidance and endless patience have been pivotal in shaping every word of this paper.

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