

# An Explanation for Women Images in *The Concubine's Children* Based on the Other

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**Abstract:** Women's image of "the other" originated from the shackles of the patriarchal society, and their subordinate status was established accordingly. Chinese Canadian Denise Chong, the author of *The Concubine's Children*, wrote the fate of three generations of China in Canada and created many women's images with distinctive personalities. These women all living in the patriarchal society, so they have all suffered different degrees and different aspects of the oppression in the patriarchal system. Gradually, they lost their own independent personality, and completed the transformation of "the other" image. Denise Chong reveals the poisoning and persecution of women by the patriarchal system through the description of the plight of these female characters.

**Keywords:** *The Concubine's Children*; women images; the other

## 1. Introduction

After the Second World War, the concerns of feminism have once again attracted widespread attention. French writer Simone de Beauvoir in her famous work *The Second Sex* said: "One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one." She believes that in the traditional sense, western society is a patriarchal society, that all the so-called definitions of "human beings" are defined by men. Because women are not men, they become "the others". Everything about women must be dominated by dominant men. Therefore, in a patriarchal society, women are just a subsidiary of men who should not and cannot have their own ideas, status, and rights. In fact, women are not born inferior, but they take the characteristics of "the second sex" from historical development and social environment. These pressures force them to accept "the other" status and follow unfair social rules. In the novel *The Concubine's Children*, Denise Chong portrays three generations of Chinese female images. Through the analysis of these characters, it is clear to be seen the subordinate status of women in the patriarchal society, the influence of family on women, and the specific manifestation of women's vulnerable position in "the other" image.

Through the detailed description of these women's lives, the author depicts a large prison built by a patriarchal society, which firmly traps women in the position of "the other". In the process of socialization, patriarchal society constantly applies different strategies to women, enveloping their whole life in the other activity environment. Therefore, women will fall into a state of contradiction, anxiety and bewilderment, because they hope to become the subject and pursue their own freedom, but all they find is that they cannot master everything in the world. They are controlled by the world.

## 2. Subordination of Women

Since ancient times and from the east to the west, women have been in the shackles in the patriarchal society. The so-called "male power", actually refers to men's dominant privileges in society. On the one hand, the birth and development of a patriarchal society cannot be separated from productive labor. So, Men, as the main source of the labor force, naturally become the supporter of social wealth and family income. On the other hand, women played a relatively minor role in the organization. They are gradually deprived of the right to choose social production and labor. Some of them even voluntarily give up this part of the right, which directly leads to women becoming vulnerable groups in society and family. They always live in a subordinate position, and unable to realize their personal value.

### 2.1. Role Orientation

The construction of women in patriarchal society is actually hidden in social norms, including formal and informal ones. These norms treat men and women differently to make women in a subsidiary position.

The different physiological structure of men and women directly promotes the differentiation of their social division of labor. Men are often considered to be able to create productive value. They have been educated as an independent individual with a strong sense of superiority since childhood. While women's education from childhood is often limited to a small part of the world, and some of them can't even receive an education. In these women's world, men are everything, and all the value of their lives is to please men and have a son to carry on his family name.

As the hero of the novel, Chan Sam is a typical male image in the patriarchal society. "Chan Sam's hold on substance began to slip while his responsibilities grew. He was a husband---at sixteen he had taken his mother's choice for his wife---and the father of a daughter." The fundamental reason why he chose to stay away from his hometown was to support his family and become famous. However, as one of the heroines of the novel, who is the "Concubine" in the title of *the Concubine's Children*, May-ying has no right or dream of new life in her early life: "Diminutive feet, the ultimate sexual allure, would have elevated May-ying into a social class where women were artful objects. When hard times struck, as they surely would, and the family was without rice, her mother might have hoped to sell her daughter as a child-bride, to have some say over her future husband."

Although in the traditional sense, the "normal family" always means the idea of "men managing external affairs women internal", but this role model changes in the mid-term of the relationship between Chan Sam and May-ying. In fact, May-ying is the one who really builds the Chan Sam's house. Chan Sam has no money when he builds the house half way, so he could only keep asking May-ying for help: "She showed them what the letter said: 'See if you can raise the money and send it to me.'" Finally, for the sake of money, May-ying does something she doesn't want to do. In fact, in this period, May-ying's role is the "male" role in this family, but she still has to hand the money she earns to Chan Sam, because her role requires her to please and obey "symbolic man" ---Sam. The comparison of the social roles of Chan Sam and May-ying reflects the differences between men and women in the division of labor and social class.

## 2.2. Social Shaping

As a woman grows up, it is her family that has the deepest influence on her. Family is a bondage that women cannot get rid of. The influence of the family on women is mainly reflected in three types of families: the original family, the married family, and the husband's family. Due to the low status of women, they are only the accessories of men. Their personality shaping completely depends on men's preferences. Only keeping with men's aesthetic standards and satisfying men's requirements, women can have the meaning of survival. In such a system, mothers should be selfless, wives should be gentle and virtuous, and daughters should be smart and filial. These definitions of "good women" are imposed on many women, which virtually drives them to develop in these respects.

Huangbo and May-ying are such tragic female characters in the novel. As Chan Sam's wife, Huangbo has been at home all her life without any complaints. Although she can't spend the most time with her husband, she does not say any unkind words to Chan Sam. She obeys Chan Sam's will all the time and does not dare to have any objection. Huangbo shows her modest the most when Chan Sam returned to his hometown to build houses: "As her husband's reputation grew, Huangbo's nature was to retreat more into the role of the model Chinese wife, ever more humble, yielding, diligent. She observed the house-building with her customary reserve and posed no questions about what she saw as her husband's business...for as a woman, she too saw everything accumulated in marriage as the property of the husband." "No man or woman who first came upon May-ying could help but stare fixedly at this tiny figure of a girl, who stood no higher than the average person's chin. Her delicate features, the bright round eyes, and the much-admired heart-shaped mouth, were set in pale skin that had retained its translucence because Auntie's chores had kept her out of the fields and out of the baking sun." Through the attention from the other to her and the description of beauty in the traditional sense of China, May-ying's beauty seemed to leap off the page. However, this beauty cannot grasp her own destiny. Her master "Auntie" raises her to seventeen, then sells her to Chan Sam. When she first arrived in Canada, she always tries to become a "qualified" wife. She works hard to pay back the money for her husband, tries to carry on the family line, and obeys her husband unconditionally. Even if May-ying gradually accepts her fate, she is still eager to have a man to rely on. Chow Guen's appearance gives her hope, but he is not a responsible man. Many men come and go around May-ying, but they are either dominating her fate or forcing her to make choices.

The tragedy has been passed down to May-ying's daughters. Her eldest daughter, Ping, and her second daughter, Nan, both return to China at a young age. They are deeply influenced by traditional patriarchy.

Ping gets married early. Although her man is unfaithful, her status in the family is still very low. She has to do all housework and suffer in silence. Nan is even more pitiful. After being insulted, her illness was delayed because of her family's hesitation about whether to pay for medical treatment or not. At last, she loses her life at a young age. Hing, as May-ying's third daughter, although has received a formal education, her thoughts are still quite rigid. She can't say no to her parents' unreasonable demands even when she grows as an adult. Generally speaking, they are only the accessories of men, so they have no social status. They are proud of their so-called "careers", and keep their own integrity, trying to portray themselves as "a good daughter and a good mother". But actually, the important reason for these women's tragic fate is precisely the "goal" of their life.

### **3. The Influence of Family on Women**

In 1975, Beauvoir talked about her understanding of family in an interview named "Why I'm a Feminist". She was unmarried all her life, but she kept a close relationship with like-minded friend Sartre, and she believes that relationship is successful. She holds the view that the next trend of Feminism should be "to reject the enslavement of women as mothers in family life". In fact, the traditional status of women in the family is the main reason why women become slaves of family life. The image of "the other" of women is particularly prominent in the family, and this oppression will directly distort women's personality and limitation of their personal career.

#### **3.1. Distortion of Disposition**

Women are "the second sex", and subordinate to "the first sex". So, it is destined that their growth environment will bring great restrictions to their personal development. The independence of female individuals will gradually fade away in family life. They need to rely on their father, husband and son, then gradually become the accessories of these men, which makes them lose their personal character and degenerate into a tool that can only serve and please. If not, they will go to the other extreme---because they are deeply disappointed in the construction of their families, they want to seek their personal values again. May-ying is a typical example of the former developing into the latter. At first, she burns incense day and night to pray for a son. "A son would confirm her usefulness to the family in the eyes of Chan Sam and the At-home Wife." Her meekness and sincerity do not exchange for anything she wants, so she becomes very extreme in the later stage. She drinks and gambles a lot, then resolutely leaves Chan Sam and plays around. It can be said that the family misfortune in the patriarchal society is an important factor causing May-ying's personality distortion.

The famous psychologist Alfred Adler once said: "lucky people are cured by childhood all their life, while the unfortunate people heals childhood all their life." Obviously, Hing, as May-ying's youngest daughter, does not have a good childhood. Because of her unfortunate childhood, Hing has deep contradictions in her later family construction. When she is a child, Hing's image of "the other" is a clever and sensible daughter; when she grows up, her image of "the other" becomes a mother of her own family. However, time did not make up for her inner regret. The lack of father and mother's love left her in a state of extreme lack of love so that she is still shrouded in the shadow of childhood after becoming a mother. Her second daughter, Denise Chong, recalled that: "Another time, I forget what I had or hadn't done, I remember only that Mother grabbed the closest thing, the hollow extension to the vacuum cleaner. I was fourteen or fifteen, too old to be spanked. My sister yelled at her to stop. I began to hyperventilate. Mother froze upon her own words: 'I used to cry like that. My mom used to strike me for no reason.'"

Women's personal growth in the family, especially personality cultivation, is closely related to the identity of "the other". They are required, ordered, instructed, described, suppressed by invisible forces, so that they gradually become numb and distorted, then finally go to tragedy.

#### **3.2. Limitations of Career**

The economic foundation determines the superstructure. For women, only self-reliance can make them stronger. Therefore, an independent career is one of the important factors for women to get out of "the other" status. On the one hand, women have always accepted the social thought that "life is to suffer." They are asked to give up their rights all the time. If there is a contradiction between personal pursuit and family life, they should give up their work and return to the family at any time to be a good wife and a good mother. On the other hand, they also try to realize their personal value through their career. Therefore, in the process of breaking away from the shackles of "the other", women need to constantly

balance family and career, and in most cases, they have to make sacrifices for their family. Women cannot ignore the inherent attributes of women in the process of realizing their existence, which is an inevitable obstacle for women to become self-sufficient. For women, the body is a physiological fact that cannot be changed. It can be said that the body as a situation has certain restrictions on women, and it is an important factor affecting women's destiny. In the novel, women's self-development is all affected by the body, which is an obstacle to women's self-transcendence.

As mentioned above, Hing's image of "the other" is a clever and sensible daughter, so she recognized her identity from her childhood. In the face of repeated scolding and suffering in her life, Hing studies hard and wants to change her fate with knowledge: "What is there to live for?" Hing thought to herself. The answer, as always, was school." However, Hing, who has achieved outstanding results, has to give up her beloved dream of university because of dropping out of her good friends, the broken family, and the mixed society. She becomes a psychiatric nurse in a hurry because this job can bring economic benefits quickly. After the wedding, her image of "the other" has gradually changed into wife and mother. For her, it seems to be logical to resign and return to the family. Hing's talent for learning is extremely high, and her personal efforts are also great, but in the end, she has to sacrifice her career for her family. The novel uses her married life to show the body's troubles to women. Women's innate fertility has become a barrier for women, which makes women have to delay or give up opportunities for self-realization. What's more, as a woman, she has a very small range of careers to choose from. It can be seen from the novel that Hing's identity as a Chinese and a female has always limited her access to the wider world. She is unable to receive higher education, so she can only work as a trained nurse. At last, she becomes the "good wife" of her husband at home and gradually quits the workplace. In fact, Hing fails to realize the life value she yearned for.

#### **4. Concrete Manifestation of the Weakness of Women's Image of "the Other"**

Men enjoy privileges in a patriarchal society. On the contrary, women have to pay the corresponding price for this unequal treatment. In secular logic, if women do something in male-dominated fields, they will be considered as "women who don't behave well". Sometimes they even need to suffer from moral criticism and severe punishment of the law. Women in a subordinate position are often used to the oppression of traditional social morality, and they just endure the double standards of morality in silence. What's worse, women's personal rights and interests in society cannot be guaranteed. In family relations, it seems common for husbands to hurt their wives and mothers to curse their daughters. After entering school and society, the female always cannot have equal education and have to endure their boss' discriminates. The more attached women are, the more obvious the weakness of the subordinate status of "the other" is.

##### **4.1. Double Moral Standards**

Psychologist Christian von Ehrenfels believes that the current social sexual morality does not advocate any sexual behavior that disobeys monogamy. But in fact, there are many differences in the physiological composition between men and women, so it seems more reasonable for men to "cheat". This unfairness also directly leads to the double moral standard in the patriarchal society. However, once a society accepts such double moral standards, this society will be far away from "truth, honesty and humanity".

However, the fact is that the patriarchal society, which is firmly dominated by males, holds the dominant power of sexual morality. The ancient idea that "having many concubines" is the dream of a lot of men. Women cannot speak for themselves under this restriction of social morality. As Chan Sam's "Concubine", May-ying has to obey his arrangements unconditionally at home and abroad; as her only husband, Chan Sam should always "take care" of May-ying---from spying her and stopping her any possible thoughts of moral cheating in time. Later, May-ying decides to leave home and lives with other men, which not only makes Chan Sam feels shameful: "To him, it was a loss of face; she was still his concubine and not free to act without his consent." but also causes gossip in Chinatown. Besides, some social activities seem to be exclusive to men. After leaving Chan Sam, May-ying has done many traditional male activities, such as drinking, gambling and wearing suits. She appears in the casinos in her well-tailored clothes, declaring to the world that "When May-ying was seen dressed in this way in the gambling dens and around Chinatown, it was as though she was making the statement that she was taking her rightful place in a man's world; that a woman who made her own living, who didn't depend on a man for support, should be respected. Perhaps more than anything, her masculine dress was a

statement that a woman could do as she pleased with her life.” May-ying, who suffers from a strange environment, a far-fetched marriage, an old husband, and a dead child, finally becomes perverse and ruthless. Under the double moral standard dominated by a patriarchal society, women have no choice but to obey their identities given by men.

#### **4.2. The Plunder of Rights and Interests**

In the era of farming, men profit from their physiological advantages. After owning surplus property, in order to leave private property to “their own blood”, the marriage system was born. It can be said that the origin of the marriage system is to protect men’s private property. Until the feudal society, women did not have the freedom of reproductive rights, and their right of inheritance was always under men.

Although Chan Sam and Huangbo haven't seen each other for many years, he still wants Huangbo to give birth to a boy or a girl. Of course, it is better to be a boy. “She was nearing forty, and if a child was not born on this visit, by the time of his next, she would most certainly be too old. One purpose of her husband’s trip home was to father a child; hopefully she could give him a son.” As Chan Sam's “Concubine”, May-ying’s living meaning is also to give birth to a boy for Chan’s family. Her eldest daughter, Ping, gives birth to three children in five years in order to keep her husband’s heart. Under this kind of oppression, women have gradually lost their right to freedom of birth and became “procreation tools”. What’s worse, they have also accepted this kind of unfair treatment as time goes on, and even respected this idea of fertility. In terms of the right of succession, the status of women is far lower than that of men. There is an old Chinese saying: “A married out daughter is like spilled water.” It means that the married daughter is no longer belongs to her parents’ family but her husband’s family and her whole life are only related to her husband’s family. When Hing comes back to China to visit her relatives, Ping complains to her in private: ““Because I am a woman, I have no say and I can’t speak out,” she said.”

Women are still in a weak position in the acquisition of legitimate rights and interests in contemporary society not only in gaining the right of birth and inheritance but many basic human rights. As long as unequal male chauvinism still exists, women’s rights of health, dignity, property, and other basic human rights will always be unequal. In order to survive, women can only rely on men. So, their image of “the other” becomes more and more obvious, thus forming a vicious circle.

#### **5. Conclusions**

*The Concubine’s Children*, which was written by Denise Chong, focuses on the plight of women living under the oppression of the patriarchal system against the background of the separation of three generations of the family at the beginning of the last century. All female characters---the beautiful concubine May-ying, gentle and humble wife Huangbo, lively eldest daughter Ping, silent second daughter Nan, and clever and sensible third daughter Hing, endure rough fate. Their suffering is not only influenced by the times but also constrained by the patriarchal society. These women have no independent personality and appear in the image of “the other” from life to death. Denise Chong reveals the persecution of women by describing the plight of women in different periods and countries. The situation of many women in this novel is just a miniature of the living conditions of millions of women in a patriarchal society. Under the influence of strong male supremacy, social and family environment have a great impact on the establishment of women’s “the other” status. Men’s absolute privilege makes them dictators in sexual relations, and women have to give in to men. Influenced by social reality, women have generally lost their consciousness of autonomy. They are willing to be “the other” to avoid the contradictions and pressures in their independent existence. However, the long-term absence of female consciousness has made the social order of “men are superior to women” intensified, which is also the main reason for the tragic fate of women in a male-dominated society.

The existing situation does have a great obstacle to the process of women’s pursuit of freedom and self-realization, but it does not mean that women have no responsibility, nor does it mean that women can only gladly accept all this and accept their own fate of otherness. Women should polish their eyes and correctly understand their situation. At the same time, every woman should not forget her own power. Only when every woman learns to construct her own subjectivity and maintain her own consciousness of subjectivity can she truly liberate the female group. So in contemporary society, women should strive to resist this unequal treatment, that is, they should no longer rely on men, live with an independent personality, and get rid of the image of “the other” ---which is the only way for women to get real happiness.

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