

On the Awakening and Struggle of Female Consciousness in "Thunderstorm"

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Abstract. With the continuous progress and development of the times, the awakening of female consciousness and the struggles of women from all social strata have continued to advance. Increasing attention is being directed toward the awakening of women, and a growing number of literary and artistic works have begun to focus on this theme, portraying diverse, multidimensional, and richly nuanced female characters. This paper provides an in-depth analysis of three distinct female characters in *Thunderstorm*, exploring the awakening and resistance of female consciousness reflected in the work against the backdrop of its story and historical context. The differences in age, life experiences, personality, and cognition among these three women determine the varying degrees and forms of their awakening. By examining these three female characters, this study investigates the differences in the awakening of female consciousness across social classes and age groups under the historical conditions of the time. The awakening and resistance of female consciousness in *Thunderstorm* are complex manifestations that span multiple perspectives, levels, and social classes, rather than being concentrated in a single individual or event. Through a comprehensive analysis and study of the awakening and resistance of female consciousness in *Thunderstorm*, this paper aims to inspire reflections on the development of contemporary female consciousness and contribute to the exploration of solutions to the challenges faced by modern women.

Keywords: *Thunderstorm*, female characters, female consciousness, resistance

1. Introduction

Literature and artistic works have always served as a forefront for expressing the characteristics and ideologies of their respective eras. Numerous literary works, both domestic and international, have continually engaged with the themes of female consciousness and awakening. *Thunderstorm*, a play by Chinese dramatist Cao Yu, is likewise a masterpiece focused on female awakening. Cao Yu has long been regarded as a master of tragedy. Through the profound portrayal of the tragic experiences and nuanced emotional transformations of three female characters under the same historical backdrop in *Thunderstorm*, he articulates the awakening of female consciousness and the resistance against social injustice and adversity among women of different social classes and age groups within that era.

Historically, academic research on *Thunderstorm* has predominantly focused on its tragic elements and artistic techniques. For instance, Cheng Zhizhong, in "The Dramatic Conflict and Structural Art of *Thunderstorm*," analyzed the play's creative and artistic methods through the arrangement of its dramatic conflicts [1]. Zou Hong, in "The Nightmare of 'Home'—A Psychological Analysis of Cao Yu's Playwriting," examined Cao Yu's psychological state during artistic creation by studying the artistic and creative techniques in *Thunderstorm* [2]. Even when attention is given to female consciousness and awakening, it tends to be concentrated solely on the character of Fanyi. For example, Liao Yangming's "A New Interpretation of Female Characters in Cao Yu's *Thunderstorm*" focused exclusively on analyzing Fanyi's character [3]. Similarly, Mr. Qian Gurong's "Discussions on Characters in *Thunderstorm*" only analyzed Zhou Puyuan and Fanyi [4]. Admittedly, Fanyi is indeed the most thoroughly awakened, distinct, and fiercely resistant female character in the entire play. However, the awakening and resistance of other female characters in the work should not be overlooked. The consciousness awakening and resistance of all female characters collectively form a comprehensive representation of female consciousness in the play. The three distinct female characters reflect and demonstrate the process and development of female consciousness awakening from different perspectives and to varying degrees. By analyzing these three female characters, a more comprehensive, multidimensional, and layered representation of female consciousness can be obtained, allowing us to more clearly appreciate the hardships and struggles behind female awakening in such a challenging social context.

First, a comprehensive analysis of the story's background, the era's context, and the societal dilemmas depicted in *Thunderstorm* will be conducted. This will be followed by an examination of the complex character relationships and conflicts within the play. Finally, by studying the three distinct female characters—Fanyi, Shiping, and Sifeng—this paper aims to summarize and uncover the awakening and resistance of women from different backgrounds, social classes, and age groups within the historical context of the time. Through multifaceted, multi-layered, and multi-dimensional comparisons of these three characters' personal ideologies, personalities, life struggles, causes of tragedy, and consciousness awakening, this study seeks to thoroughly analyze and excavate the female awakening, consciousness, and resistance embodied in *Thunderstorm*. The research aims to derive new insights and inspirations, hoping to contribute to addressing contemporary and future female dilemmas.

2. The historical and creative context of *Thunderstorm*

Thunderstorm was written in 1933, a period of rapid and intense transformation in Chinese society. Although feudal society had been formally overthrown, feudalistic ideologies remained deeply entrenched. Compounding this, Japan's escalating aggression against China plunged the nation and its people into profound turmoil. With internal strife and external threats, the awakening and development of public consciousness became especially critical. Across society and cultural circles, anti-Japanese national salvation movements gained momentum, inspiring countless writers and playwrights to create works focused on awakening consciousness and preserving national identity. It was within this severe and challenging historical environment that *Thunderstorm* was created—a work whose themes of awakening and inner strength carry profound significance.

Set against the backdrop of China around 1925, *Thunderstorm* portrays a nation entrenched in the deep-seated contradictions of a semi-colonial society. During this period, feudalism, capitalism, bureaucratic capitalism, and the working class coexisted in China. The nascent working class was brutally oppressed by bureaucratic capitalism, while newly emerging ideas and cultures clashed intensely with traditional ethics and feudal mentality. In *Thunderstorm*, the Zhou family, led by

Zhou Puyuan, represents bureaucratic capitalism and feudal ethics, embodying the persecution of human nature by feudal values and the exploitation of the working class by bureaucratic capitalists. In contrast, the Lu family, headed by Lu Dahai, symbolizes the oppressed working class and the masses suffering under feudal ethical constraints. Through the tragic narratives of these two families, the play exposes and critiques the decay of feudal families and the darkness of society, echoing the social atmosphere of the anti-Japanese national salvation movement of the time. Moreover, it drives and appeals for ideological liberation and consciousness awakening by depicting the female characters' awakening and resistance against feudal and ethical oppression. Cao Yu was born into a declining feudal bureaucratic family. His father's opium addiction created a stifling and oppressive household atmosphere, which closely resembled the environment of the Zhou mansion in *Thunderstorm*. During this time, Western playwright Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* was introduced to China. Its realist techniques and portrayal of awakening under oppression profoundly influenced Cao Yu's literary creation. Coupled with the tumultuous social conditions and the rising tide of anti-Japanese salvation ideology, these factors culminated in Cao Yu's masterpiece, *Thunderstorm*. In the Postscript to the Selected Works of Cao Yu, he wrote: "Thunderstorm was my first groan, or perhaps a cry. [5]" In the preface to *Thunderstorm*, he further explained: "Writing *Thunderstorm* was an urgent need of emotion, as if a torrent of passionate feelings was pushing me forward. [6]" Thus, *Thunderstorm* is not merely an emotional outlet for Cao Yu but also a call for and expression of consciousness and ideological awakening.

3. A brief introduction and analysis of character relationships in *Thunderstorm*

The intricate character relationships in *Thunderstorm* serve as the vehicle for the formation and eruption of conflicts. Each character is closely interconnected, and each experiences their own personal tragedy within the same historical context. Though they come from different social classes and age groups, and possess different ideologies and personalities, they all meet a tragic fate in this decaying era.

The main characters in *Thunderstorm* include Zhou Puyuan, the master of the Zhou mansion, a capitalist with strong feudal tendencies. He is the father of Zhou Chong and Zhou Ping, the husband of Fanyi, and the former lover of Shiping. He represents the main source of feudal oppression in the play. Lu Gui, a servant in the Zhou mansion. He is the father of Sifeng and the husband of Shiping. Cunning and opportunistic, he bullies the weak and fears the strong, becoming one of the sources of oppression for Sifeng and Shiping. Zhou Ping, the eldest young master of the Zhou family. He is a crucial node in the play's entangled conflicts. The son of Zhou Puyuan and Shiping, he becomes involved in a distorted relationship with his stepmother Fanyi and, unaware of their blood relation, pursues and falls in love with his half-sister Sifeng. He yearns to resist but is ultimately cowardly. Zhou Chong, the second young master of the Zhou family. The son of Zhou Puyuan and Fanyi, he symbolizes innocence and idealism in the play. Like Zhou Ping, he is also infatuated with Sifeng. Lu Dahai, a coal miner. He is the son abandoned by Zhou Puyuan and grew up wandering with his mother Shiping. As the representative of the working class in the play, he fears no authority and dares to resist, yet he also exhibits certain feudal traditional traits. Fanyi, Zhou Puyuan's wife and Zhou Chong's mother. An educated upper-class woman, she boldly breaks ethical norms by falling in love with her stepson Zhou Ping. Unlike the hypocrisy of capitalists, she is passionate and decisive in love and hatred, yet highly emotional and possessive. Shiping, the birth mother of Sifeng and Zhou Ping, and the wife of Lu Gui. She is Zhou Puyuan's former lover and represents the typical image of a laboring woman in old China—kind, upright, and enduring, yet subjected to

humiliation and oppression. Sifeng, the daughter of Shiping and Lu Gui. Innocent, kind-hearted, and full of vitality, she yearns for love but unknowingly falls for her half-brother Zhou Ping.

4. Analysis of female characters and research on the awakening of female consciousness in *Thunderstorm*

4.1. Fanyi

Fanyi is a woman consistently constrained by feudal ethics. Despite being an educated member of the upper class, she cannot escape this oppression, illustrating that the suppression of women by feudal norms was not limited by social status—even privileged, educated women were not exempt. Zhou Puyuan's attempt to control Fanyi's mind and soul through forcing her to take medicine exemplifies this dynamic: though they share the same social class, she still suffers oppression from the dominator.

In 1848, Marx stated in *The Communist Manifesto*: “The free development of each is the condition for the free development of all. [7]” This assertion underscores the necessity of female awakening and women's liberation. Marx also emphasized that the essence of women's liberation lies in overcoming class oppression [7]. The fact that Fanyi, despite belonging to the same social class as Zhou Puyuan, still endures oppression rooted in feudal traditional ethics reflects the deeply entrenched gender inequality of the time—a form of class inequality between men and women shaped by centuries of social history. This further reinforces Zhou Puyuan's role as the dominator within the Zhou household. This aligns with the core argument of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*: the concept of “the Other.” According to Beauvoir, women have long been positioned as “the Other” in social structures, while men occupy the role of “the Self. [8]” In the relationship between Fanyi and Zhou Puyuan, although Fanyi holds a high social status, she is still treated as “the Other,” a reality vividly reflected in her acts of resistance. In the social context of early 20th-century China, it was widely assumed that women should be dependent on men—a perception unchanged by differences in social status.

Thus, the first peak of Fanyi's awakening and resistance occurs when she refuses to take the medicine forced upon her by Zhou Puyuan. Although this rebellion ends in defeat, it clearly demonstrates her awakening consciousness. What the oppressor demands is absolute obedience, so the clearest sign of resistance is the refusal to comply. This is evident in the four major conflicts between Fanyi and Zhou Puyuan:

Act I: Zhou Puyuan forces Fanyi to take medicine. This marks the first stage of her awakening and resistance. She clearly voices her opposition and, though she ultimately yields and drinks the medicine in anger, this represents a significant beginning.

Act II: Zhou Puyuan repeatedly sends servants to urge Fanyi to see the doctor, but she refuses to comply. Even when he personally intervenes and attempts to impose his authority, she remains unyielding, claiming not to know “Dr.Ke.” Her resistance becomes more pronounced and determined as the plot develops.

Early Act IV: Having just returned from the Lu family, Fanyi encounters Zhou Puyuan, who is lost in thought gazing at a photo of Shiping. Pale and drenched from the rain, Fanyi ignores Zhou's questions and commands, snatches the photo from him, and confronts him loudly. Her resistance has clearly escalated from passive defiance to active attack.

End of Act IV: Fanyi assumes the role of a judge, publicly tearing off Zhou Puyuan's hypocritical mask.

It is evident that throughout the play, both the manner and intensity of Fanyi's resistance intensify. This reflects not only the continuous development of her awakened consciousness but also the strengthening of her spirit of resistance—a process unfolding within deepening despair. As scholar Qian Gurong noted: “The increase in Fanyi's strength is not because she becomes more confident in struggle, but because she believes she has less and less to lose. [4]”

Fanyi declares: “A desperate woman is capable of anything.” This may appear as hysteria under feudal oppression, but it is, more profoundly, an awakening and rebellion of female consciousness born from immense suffering—a tragic and indignant struggle. Her firm cry to Zhou Ping: “I do not regret it; I have never regretted anything I've done,” expresses the resolve of an awakened individual who refuses to repent, highlighting her determination to resist Zhou Puyuan and feudal ethical oppression. However, it is important to note that Fanyi is herself a member of the landowning bourgeois class. She repeatedly refers to Sifeng as a “lower-class person.” What she opposes is specifically male oppression and feudal tradition as directed against herself. As Qian Gurong observed: “What Fanyi resists are the constraints placed on her individually; she does not have higher demands or broader ideological motives. [4]” Thus, although Fanyi's awakening is fervent and her resistance resolute, it remains limited. Her consciousness does not rise to a societal or collective level—it remains confined to the personal.

In summary, Fanyi's awakening and resistance are the most intense and determined in the play. Her journey is one of gradual evolution, culminating in burst under pressure. Yet her awakening is also flawed and her resistance partial. She does not elevate her struggle to a broader social or class level, remaining focused only on her individual plight. Nevertheless, Fanyi stands as a powerful representative of female consciousness and resistance in *Thunderstorm*, and her story continues to inspire the awakening and resistance of women in later generations.

4.2. Sifeng

Throughout her life, Sifeng lives under the oppression of a patriarchal society, with most of her choices dictated by men. The three most significant men in her life all consciously or unconsciously attempt to control her thoughts and destiny. In Act I of the play, her father, Lu Gui, arranges for her to work as a maid in the Zhou mansion. Superficially, he finds her a job, but in essence, he covets her earnings to pay off his gambling debts. After learning of her relationship with the young master Zhou Ping, he repeatedly encourages her to maintain this ambiguous connection. While claiming that “only your father truly cares about you,” Lu Gui shows no genuine concern for Sifeng's happiness—to him, she is merely a tool to gain favor with the Zhou family. Fully aware of the scandal between Fanyi and Zhou Ping, he still pushes Sifeng toward Zhou Ping, motivated entirely by self-interest. His so-called “paternal love” is illusory at best. The fact that Sifeng is passed from one man to another foreshadows her tragic fate.

Simone de Beauvoir states in *The Second Sex*: “Genuine love must be founded on mutual recognition of two liberties. [8]” However, Zhou Ping merely uses Sifeng as an emotional crutch and an excuse to escape his stepmother, Fanyi. Although he professes to love her, he is unwilling to take her with him when he plans to flee. Sifeng's brother, Lu Dahai, though representing the working class in the play, still looks down on his sister for serving the Zhou family. In his conversations with Zhou Chong, he repeatedly emphasizes that Sifeng is “destined to be poor” and should not indulge in illusions about a better future. He believes she should marry a poor man and devote herself to family duties. Clearly, even as a member of the working class, Lu Dahai internalizes the patriarchal notion that a girl from a poor family has no right to education, self-improvement, or pursuing her own future. Beauvoir famously asserts: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. [9]” She

argues that women are constructed as “the Other” socioeconomically and culturally, and that patriarchy confines women to domestic roles through institutional structures and ideologies, stripping them of subjectivity [10]. This is vividly reflected in Sifeng’s experience. Beauvoir further explains that men define women as “the Other”, imposing identities upon them that deprive women of independent essence and reduce them to appendages of men—objectified, marginalized, and rendered the “Second Sex. [11, 12]” Thus, even her educated, working-class brother imposes a limiting identity on Sifeng, confining her to the fate of a “poor man’s daughter.” Amid such pervasive male oppression, Sifeng’s awakening of female consciousness remains incomplete. This is evident in her relationship with Zhou Ping. Her bold involvement with him defies feudal ethics and represents a budding awareness of her desires and autonomy. By crossing class boundaries to pursue love, she mirrors her mother Shiping’s experience—both fell in love with a young master from an upper-class family and became pregnant. However, Sifeng is unaware that this seemingly hopeful beginning will likely lead to the same tragic end. Shiping, unable to reveal her own story, can only insist that Sifeng leave the Zhou household, leaving her daughter without proper guidance. Young, innocent, and trusting, Sifeng seeks salvation not through self-reliance but through dependence on others. She entrusts her entire life to Zhou Ping, declaring that she “gave her heart to him first,” “sees only him,” and believes “he will never deceive her.” She pins all her hopes on love as a means to change her fate. Unlike Fanyi and Shiping, who have been abandoned by men and understand the unreliability of others, Sifeng—naïve and inexperienced—still believes in romantic salvation. Shiping, abandoned by Zhou Puyuan in her youth and forced to attempt suicide with her child, could no longer trust love. Fanyi also tried to hold onto Zhou Ping, only to face his disgust and rejection. Sifeng, however, grows up immersed in corrosive traditional ethics. Her poverty, limited experience, and gentle yet timid nature prevent her from resisting as courageously as Fanyi or seeing through societal hypocrisy as clearly as Shiping. Though her tragedy originates in love, like her mother’s, it differs in outcome: Shiping survives her misfortunes with tenacity, while Sifeng, too young and psychologically burdened, collapses under multiple pressures—her father’s exploitation and ghost stories, anxiety over her relationship with Zhou Ping, panic in the face of Zhou Chong’s pursuit, and the mental anguish of being forced by her mother to swear an oath in the thunderstorm [13]. When she discovers that Zhou Ping is her half-brother, her last hope shatters, and she flees in despair, ultimately meeting her death in a tragic accident.

In summary, Sifeng’s death is undoubtedly the most lamentable. Had she chosen self-reliance over dependence, like Fanyi or Shiping, her ending might have been different. Young and full of potential, she was the most hopeful of the three, yet she lacked experience, knowledge, and courage. Her timidity contrasts with Fanyi’s passion, and her vulnerability underscores Shiping’s resilience. Sifeng’s female consciousness never fully or firmly awakens. Conditioned by societal oppression, she internalizes her identity as “a poor girl” and “inferior,” unable to resist feudal ethics completely. As a result, her awakening remains incomplete, and her resistance ultimately insufficient.

4.3. Shiping

Shiping embodies the typical image of a laboring woman in traditional Chinese society: resilient, kind-hearted, clear-minded yet vulnerable. Her tragedy was largely orchestrated by Zhou Puyuan. As Simone de Beauvoir writes in *The Second Sex*: “When two categories of people come together, each seeks to impose its will upon the other. If one category holds certain privileges, it will dominate the other and subject it to its control. [14]” As the master of the Zhou mansion, Zhou Puyuan naturally imposes his will on everyone within it—especially Shiping, with whom he had an early intimate relationship. He designs and treats her according to his own desires, interests, and whims. As a

young maid in the Zhou household, Shiping was seduced by the young master Zhou Puyuan. They cohabited and had children together. However, when Zhou needed to marry a wealthy woman for social advancement, he heartlessly abandoned her, driving her to attempt suicide by throwing herself into a river on Lunar New Year's Eve while holding their second-born child. After her supposed death, Zhou Puyuan refashioned her memory into that of a "deceased first wife," a "noble young lady," and a "virtuous mother"—all to serve his own image. Though he appears to cherish her memory, when Shiping reappears years later, he fears blackmail and attempts to buy her off with money. As a dominator and privileged figure, Zhou acts solely in his own interest. Shiping is assigned roles based on his needs: a faithful servant when he requires care, an object of desire when he seeks gratification, a disposable item when a profitable marriage arises, and a moral, devoted first wife when he needs to uphold his image in front of his family. Who Shiping truly is does not matter to Zhou—only what he needs her to represent.

From a low-ranking maid to a youthful object of desire, then an abandoned woman, and finally a virtuous deceased wife—these contradictory identities are united only by Zhou Puyuan's will and convenience [15]. Shiping's image and fate are arbitrarily shaped by male power and authority. As scholar Zhang Kaiyan argues: "In this world, women's true history is concealed and erased. Men fabricate the image and history of the women they are involved with according to their own needs. [15]" It is through such repeated exploitation that Shiping's female consciousness gradually awakens. Zhou Puyuan's betrayal makes her see clearly the status, situation, and future of lower-class women in the eyes of upper-class men. This is why she consistently opposes Sifeng's involvement with Zhou Ping and Zhou Chong. After her suicide attempt, Shiping leaves and travels north, cultivating a rare sense of self-respect and magnanimity amid hardship [15]. Having once entrusted her life to someone else only to be abandoned, she learns that salvation must come from oneself. Her despair toward men forces her to rely on herself in desperate situations. When she reappears at the Zhou mansion, she carries herself with dignity, independence, and composure—this is Shiping as herself. She understands the source of her tragedy and strives to resist feudal ethics and male oppression. Thus, she refuses to let Lu Gui send Sifeng to work as a maid. Upon learning that Sifeng is already employed at the Zhou mansion, she resolutely demands that her daughter leave with her for Jinan. When faced with Zhou Puyuan again, an awakened Shiping can no longer accept the fabricated identity of "the virtuous and well-mannered young lady" he created to beautify his own past. She mercilessly exposes his hypocrisy: "She wasn't a young lady. She was the daughter of Mother Mei, a servant in the Wuxi Zhou mansion. Her name was Shiping." At this moment, her female consciousness is fully awakened—she refuses to let her identity be manipulated and rejects this fictional history. She firmly declines Zhou's compensation of 4,000 dollars, unwilling to let him insult her soul again. However, although Shiping's consciousness has awakened, her resistance remains limited. Unlike Fanyi, she lacks the courage and determination to confront Zhou Puyuan and feudal traditions directly. The most she can do is take her daughter and flee. She desires to resist but is powerless to do so. Her tragedy reflects the pain and helplessness of women at the bottom of society.

In summary, after being abandoned by Zhou Puyuan, Shiping sees through the nature of men; through years of hardship and displacement, she comes to understand the injustices of society. Her female consciousness awakens gradually throughout this process. When she returns to the Zhou mansion, she attempts to resist Zhou Puyuan but ultimately finds herself powerless and can only escape. While her awakening is firm, societal oppression and her own inherent kindness prevent her from rebelling decisively.

5. Conclusion

As the pinnacle of female consciousness awakening in *Thunderstorm*, Fanyi demonstrates the most thorough awakening and the fiercest resistance. Her rebellion erupts gradually under oppression and is carried out with resolute courage. However, her awakening is not without flaws, and her resistance remains limited—it does not extend to a broader social or class level, staying confined to the personal sphere. Sifeng also exhibits signs of awakening, bravely pursuing her love for the young master Zhou Ping. Yet, due to her limited life experience and the ideological constraints of feudal ethics and male oppression, she seeks to entrust her life to another. Upon discovering the truth, she suffers a mental collapse and meets a tragic end. Her death is deeply lamentable, stemming primarily from feudal and class oppression, though her incomplete awakening and naivety also contribute to this outcome. After being abandoned by Zhou Puyuan, Shiping sees through the nature of men, and through years of hardship, she gains insight into the injustices of society. Her female consciousness awakens gradually in this process. When she returns to the Zhou mansion, she attempts to resist Zhou Puyuan but finds herself powerless, ultimately choosing escape. While her awakening is firm, societal oppression and her innate kindness prevent her from rebelling decisively.

In summary, Fanyi, Sifeng, and Shiping all experience the awakening of female consciousness and engage in acts of resistance. However, the extent of their awakening and the intensity of their rebellion vary due to differences in class, age, and personality. These three characters represent the diverse states of female consciousness awakening and resistance among women of different ages, circumstances, and social classes.

By examining and summarizing the causes and processes of female consciousness awakening and resistance in *Thunderstorm*, this study analyzes and reveals the limitations and shortcomings in their struggles. It supplements academic research on the awakening of female consciousness in Sifeng and Shiping, aiming to encourage further scholarly attention to and exploration of all characters in *Thunderstorm*. It is hoped that the study of female consciousness awakening and resistance in *Thunderstorm* will contribute to addressing contemporary female dilemmas and advancing the development of feminism.

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