

A Study of Feminist Narratology in Modern Chinese Literature

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Abstract. Since the modern era, the advancement of women's literature has brought increasing scholarly attention to feminist narratology, which has also demonstrated trends of localized innovation. Focusing on the theoretical framework of feminist narratology, this paper examines gender consciousness and gender subjectivity in modern Chinese literary texts. Through close readings of works by Ding Ling, Chen Ran, and Li Juan, it explores women's self-identity in the context of emancipation, female friendship, and the reflection of the authors' self-awareness and self-recognition. Furthermore, by comparing how Fang Fang and Yu Hua approach similar themes, the study summarizes narrative differences between male and female writers. The paper also discusses the relationship between feminist narrative and gender politics—including issues such as women's economic rights, the constraints of feudal ideology, and the influence of consumerism on women's narratives—thereby tracing the evolution and cultural significance of feminist narratology in modern and contemporary Chinese literature.

Keywords: Feminism, Narratology, Gender Politics

1. Introduction

Feminist narratology is an interdisciplinary field that merges feminist theory with classical narratology. Its primary focus lies in examining gender politics within literary narratives—specifically, how narrative forms encode gender ideologies, and how gender shapes the selection and interpretation of narrative strategies. First introduced in the 1980s by American scholars Susan S. Lanser and Robyn Warhol, feminist narratology integrates the analytical rigor of classical narratology with the socio-political engagement of feminist literary criticism. This synthesis avoids the formalist limitations of classical narratology, which often neglects social context, while counterbalancing the overly subjective tendencies of earlier feminist critique. Its central objective is to uncover the social and gendered meanings embedded in narrative forms. Following the 2002 Chinese translation of Lanser's *The Fictions of Authority*, the theory formally entered Chinese academic discourse. Since the early 21st century, feminist narratology has gradually gained traction in China, though it remains a relatively marginal area within modern and contemporary literary studies [1].

Currently, research methods in feminist narratology in China are rich and diverse. One commonly used strategy is interpretation based on gender binary categories, which deconstructs patriarchal

consciousness by uncovering the assertion and concealment of female subjectivity from a female perspective and analyzing the obscuration and distortion of female consciousness from a male perspective. For example, in September 2010, Feng Hua and Liang Fuming published *Resistance and Escape: On the Female Consciousness in Lin Bai's "A Person's War"* in *Novel Review*, employing this strategy to reveal female subjectivity and deconstruct male-centered consciousness. In recent years, interdisciplinary approaches have also emerged, such as combining cognitive narratology to explore gendered cognitive frameworks or using digital humanities techniques to quantify gendered narrative patterns in literary history.

Moreover, theoretical research has been continuously deepening. Chinese scholars, while drawing on Western feminist narratology, have developed localized reflections and innovations. Scholars also pay attention to the applicability of feminist narratology in different cultural contexts and how the theory can more effectively reveal gender issues in Chinese literature and culture. However, there are some limitations in domestic research. For instance, the selection of texts in feminist narratology studies is predominantly foreign, accounting for approximately two-thirds of the total; studies on Chinese modern and contemporary literature are relatively few and often focus on writers such as Xiao Hong and Zhang Ailing, resulting in limited research breadth.

2. The evolution of feminist narrative perspectives

2.1. Feminist narration in modern literature: the case of Ding Ling

Miss Sophia's Diary is an early representative work of Ding Ling, written in 1928. This short story in the diary format unfolds from Sophia's first-person perspective, depicting the emotional states and psychological experiences of the twenty-year-old Sophia as she faces two men. The diary form, characterized by intimacy and directness, reflects a distinct self-narrative voice and an unrestrained self-consciousness, granting Sophia, the narrator, exclusive authority in the narrative [2]. This breaks with traditional literary representations of the female body as an object—no longer reduced to an aesthetic symbol or moral carrier under the male gaze—but allows Sophia, in the first person, to assert sovereignty over her own body. Her conscious bodily awareness fundamentally overturns the limitations of female writing before and around the May Fourth period.

In traditional patriarchal culture, women's perception of their own bodies was denied—bodily sensations such as pain, itchiness, hunger, cold, or fatigue were either attributed to women's innate fragility or subordinated to family roles, leaving women's subtle bodily awareness largely ignored. In Sophia's diary, the body ceases to be a silent object and becomes a vivid subject; her observation and recording of her body are filled with unprecedented self-focus. She meticulously depicts physiological responses: "I coughed again, my throat itched unbearably; I coughed on purpose, coughing so hard it felt like my intestines would come out," and "my head hurt as if it would explode, blood in my nose flowing into my mouth." These descriptions are not meant to evoke a Lin Daiyu-style fragile beauty, but rather to present the body's reality directly. Such attention to bodily perception marks the beginning of bodily self-consciousness: one must first "see" one's body to "control" it.

Sophia's feelings for Ling Jishi are closely intertwined with bodily desire, and she does not conceal this desire. "I truly hate and love him; I love that pretty face, love his gestures, love his smile, especially love his eyes that seem to entice... I think, I want to kiss his lips, I want to kiss his chest," and "I recall all the impressions he left on me, and I cannot help thinking of his lips, his neck." These passages show no hesitation or self-reproach; they are not passive compliance under a male gaze. Sophia is the active initiator of desire. She acknowledges her attraction to Ling Jishi's

appearance and physical charisma and admits her bodily desire to “kiss him” and “be close to him.” This is at the core of bodily self-consciousness: the female body is not merely a survival instrument, but the subject of desire, entitled to experience and express it.

In the novel *The Sun Shines over the Sanggan River*, Ding Ling’s depiction of female emancipation progresses further, reaching a stage of spiritual awakening that breaks free from feudal dependencies. The women in the novel are initially bound by the dual shackles of patriarchal and marital authority, their value defined as “daughter, wife, mother” rather than as independent “persons.” Hei Ni exemplifies this condition. As the niece of the landlord Qian Wengui, she is fostered in her uncle’s household, enduring his control while facing the peculiar gaze of villagers due to her association with the landlord. Even romantic relationships depend on her uncle’s approval—her relationship with Cheng Ren remains repressed and passive due to class differences and her uncle’s intervention. However, the tide of land reform disrupts this fate; when she witnesses villagers uniting to fight landlords and divide land, and sees women who were once similarly oppressed speak up, she realizes she is not merely an appendage of her uncle. For the first time, she takes control of her emotions and life—this struggle for autonomous choice marks the beginning of women’s progression from spiritual dependency to personal independence.

Freedom and liberation are historically situated concepts whose benchmarks are instrumentalized through the attainment of equal economic and political rights, and the dignity associated with participating in public life [3]. This conception frames emancipation not as a series of monumental feats, but as the incremental enhancement of women’s status within the family and the vindication of their human rights. Crucially, women’s liberation is portrayed not as an isolated struggle but as inextricable from societal transformation—a process wherein women’s agency is affirmed through participation in the public sphere, which in turn enables mastery over personal life choices. This sophisticated feminist narrative offers one of the most profound interpretations of emancipation in *The Sun Shines over the Sanggan River*.

2.2. Feminist narration in contemporary literature

Women’s self-identity is often constrained by dependent roles in intimate relationships, such as daughter or wife. In the novel *Private Life*, Chen Ran deconstructs core intimate relationships, allowing the protagonist Ni Aoyao to completely free herself from the predicament of defining her self through others. Using a female psychoanalytic perspective countering the male gaze, Chen Ran reveals the truth of women’s psychological growth [4].

The “private” in *Private Life* refers fundamentally to absolute privatization in the spiritual domain. Ni Aoyao continually constructs a mental space isolated from others to resist the dissolution of her self. She rejects the “disciplinary care” of family—whether her father’s authoritarian control or her mother’s expectations that she follow the trajectory of a “normal woman”—and from adolescence chooses silence, solitude, and reading to enclose herself, thereby refusing to let her family dictate who she should become. In the novel, the father represents traditional patriarchal control over women, demanding absolute obedience. Ni Aoyao’s resistance essentially rejects being defined as “the father’s daughter”; she is no longer an appendage within the patriarchal system but an individual with independent will. In love, Ni Aoyao’s relationship with Lao Yu shatters the romanticized notion that “love saves women.” She does not compromise her self for emotional needs; rather, through this relationship, she gains clearer awareness that a woman’s happiness need not depend on men, and self-completeness does not require fulfillment through love. These relationships serve as the best proof of Ni Aoyao’s self-identity. When she no longer requires any

intimate relationship to validate her worth, her self-recognition becomes fully independent, realizing the core assertion: “I am myself, regardless of others.”

If *Private Life* explores self-identity through women’s interactions with others, Li Juan, in her essay *The Distant Sunflower Field*, anchors self-identity in women’s concrete actions against the pressures of survival, emphasizing capability and value creation—not passive endurance, but active engagement with nature.

The narrative of sunflower cultivation positions women not as ancillary helpers but as central figures engaged in the most vital and strenuous labor. This praxis—which includes digging irrigation channels, carrying water pipes, and saving seeds in storms—equates their contribution with men’s, while their superior skill in precision tasks such as tube repair and seed selection further distinguishes their role. This physical praxis effectively deconstructs patriarchal assumptions of female “fragility,” reconstructing in its place an aesthetic of resilient labor [5]. Furthermore, the “struggle” with nature is portrayed not as sheer confrontation but as a dialectical “negotiation” based on perceptive engagement. Through monitoring subtle environmental cues and expressing concern for fragile life, the women embody a synthesis of strength and sensitivity. This allows them to assert value based not solely on productive labor but on a unique capacity to preserve life, thereby constituting an irreplaceable selfhood and a form of self-recognition grounded in both action and care.

Beyond self-identity, female friendship is another significant theme in contemporary literature. Lin Bai’s *A Person’s War* similarly uses a first-person narrative to depict individual emotions, experiences, imagination, consciousness, and subconscious [6], rendering female friendships both authentic and moving. In Lin Bai’s portrayal, female friendships are not grounded in traditional mutual assistance but in spiritual resonance, forming delicate yet profound connections through shared solitude and self-exploration.

In the relationship between the protagonists Lin Domi and Nan Dan, they do not rely on everyday companionship but can accurately perceive each other’s “hidden sides”—for example, Domi’s private struggles with her body and desire, or Nan Dan’s existential confusion. Their communication does not avoid sensitive or intimate topics; this tacit understanding, “knowing each other’s unspoken words,” transcends ordinary friendship and affirms women’s shared challenges. The female friendships depicted in the novel are measured rather than overly binding. For instance, Domi shares struggles in growth—academic, emotional, and otherwise—with female friends but never seeks to transform or “rescue” them. Even when their paths diverge, the relationship does not become a burden but remains a warm imprint on their respective journeys of self-discovery, preserving respect for each other’s independence.

3. Feminist narration and cultural reflection

3.1. Narrative differences between male and female writers

Fang Fang’s novel *Scenery* and Yu Hua’s *The Seventh Day* both employ narratives of the deceased and address similar social themes, yet they differ significantly in narrative approach. Female writers tend to start from the individual, delving deeply into interpersonal emotions, whereas male writers often lean toward grand narratives that critique society and its rules. In *Scenery*, Fang Fang does not directly depict the macro-level issue of poverty in the slums; instead, she focuses on the detailed relationships of a nine-member family in a shack in Henan. The narrative lacks an overt authorial perspective and instead uses Yaozi, “the silent witness,” to draw readers into life inside the shack—she does not condemn the father’s violence, but portrays his helplessness: bullied at the construction

site by day, he can only vent his frustrations at home by night; she does not criticize the sisters for marrying for money, but illustrates the reality that “if they don’t marry, they will be trapped in the shack forever”; she does not glorify the mother’s numbness, but depicts her despair as she watches her children suffer, unable to protect them.

The author assumes the position of an empathizer, not evaluating characters from moral or rational heights, but crouching beside them to confront hardship together—allowing readers to see that these individuals are not pitiable members of the lower class, but ordinary people with joys, sorrows, struggles, and compromises. The weight of suffering does not stem from social problems alone, but from ordinary people facing one life challenge after another. In contrast, Yu Hua, in *The Seventh Day*, uses Yang Fei, “the freely roaming wanderer,” to draw readers into a panoramic perspective. He does not dwell on how Yang Fei resolves guilt toward his foster father, nor deeply explore Shu Mei’s psychological struggle before her suicide; his stance is that of a critic, questioning the system that generates suffering—letting readers see that the source of hardship lies not in individuals, but in social rules. The intensity of suffering arises not from personal struggle, but from how the broader environment gradually drives people to the brink.

Additionally, male and female writers differ in emphasis when depicting female growth, leading to different reading experiences. Female writers center women’s selfhood as the absolute subject, exploring authentic experiences in private and internalized spaces. These works often use a first-person perspective to convey the individual’s emotions, sensations, experiences, imagination, consciousness, and subconscious, creating a sense of distance or estrangement from others and a strong exclusivity [6]. For example, in *A Person’s War*, Lin Bai does not equate female growth with “family devotion” or “compromising for love,” but writes about women breaking disciplinary constraints—acknowledging bodily desire, resisting the notion of “must marry,” and emphasizing that growth is measured by fulfillment of self-needs rather than others’ expectations.

By contrast, Shen Congwen, in *Border Town*, portrays the female character Cuicui as a microcosm, embedding her personal fate within the rise and decline of Xiangxi regional culture and the disappearance of traditional lifestyles. The novel contains few extended passages of Cuicui’s inner thoughts; the author maintains a largely observer perspective. Cuicui’s final solitary waiting for Nuosong’s return is not only a narrative gap in her personal love story but also symbolizes the position of traditional Xiangxi under the onslaught of modern civilization—both individual melancholy and an attempt to preserve a vanishing cultural form. Cuicui’s innocence subtly contrasts with the selfishness and calculation of urban society at the time, reflecting Shen Congwen’s concern over the loss of valued ideals during social transformation.

In summary, female writers focus more on the growth of women themselves, while male writers tend to link female development to broader narratives, expressing societal critique.

3.2. Feminist narration and gender politics

In the struggle for women’s rights and personal liberation, economic independence is undoubtedly paramount. A century ago, Lu Xun expressed this viewpoint in his novel *Wounded*, emphasizing that women’s personal emancipation must be grounded in financial independence; freedom without economic support is ultimately illusory. Initially, Zi Jun declared, “I am myself; no one has the right to interfere with me,” bravely pursuing freedom in love and marriage, achieving preliminary spiritual liberation. However, after marriage, she relied entirely on Juan Sheng’s meager income and withdrew from social production. Consequently, as economic hardship generated conflicts and Juan Sheng’s affection waned, she lost both her material and spiritual anchors, ultimately leading to her demise. This illustrates that without economic independence, women’s personal autonomy and

emotional freedom are like castles in the air, and personal liberation remains only a fleeting illusion. Hong Kong writer Yi Shu, in her novel *My Past Life*, continues the thematic line of *Wounded*, using the same names for the protagonists, and similarly emphasizes the inseparable link between women's personal liberation and economic independence: the fundamental predicament of women arises from material scarcity and spiritual isolation [7]. After graduating from university, Luo Zijun married Dr. Shi Juan Sheng and became a full-time housewife, living entirely on her husband's income. When Shi proposed divorce due to an affair, she instantly lost her home and financial support. Luo Zijun then attempted to reintegrate into society by seeking employment, eventually adapting to professional life and regaining confidence and dignity. In this process, she recognized her own value and capabilities, no longer relying on others for happiness, achieving a transition from dependence to self-reliance—an important marker of personal awakening.

For thousands of years, feudal ideology in China severely constrained women, distorting and alienating their self-consciousness. In *The Golden Cangue*, Cao Qiqiao is married into the wealthy Jiang family through an arranged marriage designed to benefit her family, and her husband is disabled with osteochondritis. This loveless, dignity-deprived marriage essentially commodifies female happiness for familial gain. Her sense of self-worth is entirely denied, leaving her security reliant on material possessions. After her husband and mother-in-law pass away, Cao Qiqiao gains the one form of "power" permitted within the feudal system—money. Yet, her long-suppressed self-consciousness transforms into an extreme desire for control over wealth. She even interferes with her children's marriages and lives, doubling the suffering she endured onto the next generation, becoming complicit in the very feudal codes she once resented. Eileen Chang, centering on Cao Qiqiao's life, exposes how feudal society, with money and ritual at its core, utterly distorts women's self-consciousness, transforming it into a tool for harming themselves and others.

Similarly, Tian Xiao'e in *White Deer Plain* never truly awakens her self-consciousness; it remains confined to instinctual desires and basic survival needs. Under the dual pressures of feudal ethics and patriarchal oppression, she is ultimately alienated into the "fallen woman" trope, embodying the tragedy of women in her era. Whether represented by family patriarch Lu San or clan authority Bai Jiaxuan, she is defined as a "corrupting influence." Her attempts to gain acceptance within the clan reveal latent compliance with feudal order—she never seeks to break the system, only to secure a place within it—yet she is ultimately completely rejected by the clan, fully alienated from a living, vibrant woman into a symbol of the feudal clan's enforcement of order. Her suffering and resistance are entirely erased, and her self-worth entirely nullified.

Entering the new century, under the influence of the commodity economy, consumerism gradually reshapes the lifestyles of some women. They struggle against the torrent of contemporary society, confronting tedious and arduous realities, and enduring dual economic and spiritual pressures [8]. In Liu Liu's novel *Dwelling Narrowness*, Haizao exemplifies a woman caught between consumerism and the pressures of reality. Her life trajectory fully depicts the process from a naïve idealist to a material-dependent individual. Confronted with the financial aid, housing, and career conveniences offered by Song Siming, she moves from initial resistance and guilt to acceptance and reliance. She equates his material contributions with security and a way out of her predicament, overlooking that this exchange essentially trades youth and dignity for short-term material satisfaction. Later, Haizao no longer plans an independent life, and after Song Siming's fall, she completely loses control over her life, becoming a victim of consumerism and power games. The essence of her tragedy is that consumerism ultimately devours her capacity for independent existence.

4. Conclusion

Feminist narration is an indispensable presence in literary history, yet it has clearly not received the attention it deserves. Feminist analysis can illuminate the political and ideological motivations behind various radical narrative strategies, while unconventional narrative theory draws attention to the most groundbreaking narrative constructions created by women. As Richardson argued, “Feminist analysis can identify the political and ideological motivations of various radical narrative strategies, and unnatural narrative theory can draw needed attention to the most radical narrative constructions created by women.”[9].

Since entering Chinese academia, feminist narratology has developed along parallel lines of localized innovation and interdisciplinary integration. It avoids the formalist shortcomings of classical narratology, which often neglects social context, while compensating for the subjectivity inherent in traditional feminist criticism, offering literary studies a more pluralistic perspective. Each act of feminist writing provides irreplaceable individual experiences and women’s reflections; the existence of women’s texts is itself a prerequisite for women’s reading and criticism [4]. This paper, by tracing the development, theoretical applications, and textual practices of feminist narratology in China, has examined the evolutionary logic and cultural value of feminist narration in modern and contemporary literature, aiming to provide some reference for future exploration.

As Presser argued, “Feminist research begins with women’s own perspectives and experiences. Insofar as women’s perspectives and experiences are subordinated in scientific inquiries and the larger culture, feminist researchers seek to eliminate hierarchies of knowledge construction.”[10]. Looking ahead, the study of feminist narration in modern and contemporary Chinese literature should pursue two key objectives: expanding the textual corpus to incorporate under-represented contemporary writers, and strengthening the grounding of feminist narratological theory within specific Chinese cultural contexts. Such efforts will lead to the development of interpretive frameworks that capture the distinctiveness of the Chinese experience, thereby allowing feminist narratology to contribute more centrally to a nuanced understanding of modern and contemporary Chinese literature.

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