



Breaking through the Female "Fortress Besieged": An Analysis of Su Wenwan's Subjectivity Crisis in *Fortress Besieged*, Based on Woolf's Economic Criticism of *A Room of One's Own*

Junqing Zhou

The University of Melbourne, Grattan Street, Parkville, Victoria 3010, Australia

claudiazhou99@gmail.com

Abstract. Through a comparative lens, this paper explores how two literary works - Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own" and Qian Zhongshu's "Fortress Besieged" - illuminate the complex relationship between women's independence and societal constraints. By examining Woolf's imagined "Shakespeare's sister" alongside the character of Su Wenwan, the study reveals striking parallels in how talented women were historically denied their creative and personal freedom. Despite their different cultural backgrounds, both characters embody the broader struggle of women against patriarchal systems that limited their access to education, economic independence, and artistic expression. The research particularly focuses on Woolf's groundbreaking argument that women's creativity is inseparable from their financial autonomy, while also investigating how male authors' portrayal of female characters often failed to capture authentic female experiences. This comparative analysis offers fresh insights into the historical suppression of women's voices in literature and society.

Keywords: Comparative literature, Modernism, Chinese literature, Literary studies, Gender studies, Cross-cultural analysis, Feminist literature

1 Introduction

In the area of literary research, the awakening of women's self-awareness and subjectivity is an important topic with considerable exploration potential. In her seminal book "A Room of One's Own," from the late 1920s, Virginia Woolf elaborated on the aspects of "women, fiction, and economic conditions," making it clear that fiction is an essential way for women to write and express who they are on the inside. She underlined that women need financial support and spiritual freedom in order to produce timeless masterpieces like Shakespeare^[1]. In her book, Woolf mentioned the female characters who shined like lights in the works of male authors from various eras, including Anna Karenina, Madame Bovary, the Duchess of Malfi, Lady Macbeth, Clytemnestra, and Desdemona. But in fact, women are "locked up in the house and beaten up casually," as Professor Trevilian described it, which shows that these dazzling images only existed

in texts created by men^[1]. Throughout history, the public's and readers' understanding and expectations of women have been significantly impacted by the disconnect between literary portrayal and reality. In "Woolf's Feminism and Feminism's Woolf," Laura Marcus pointed out that Woolf fabricates the tragic figure of Shakespeare's sister, pursued her playwright dream but ultimately committed suicide due to pregnancy, thereby presenting a feminist "silent" mode, the burial and suppression of talent, and the absence and silence of female subjects in literary history^[2]. The feminist awakening symbolised by Woolf in the twentieth century, which is the primary focus of this study, is dedicated to breaking and correcting the distortion that occurs in many literary works, as well as diving further into the subjectivity embodied in female images.

In Chinese literature of a similar period, Qian Zhongshu's "Fortress Besieged" depicts a series of unique female characters: Miss Bao, who dresses provocatively and boldly, Su Wenwan, who is knowledgeable and self-respecting, Tang Xiaofu, who is pure, innocent, and bright, and Sun Roujia, who is enterprising, intelligent, and pragmatic. Among them, Su Wenwan's image is particularly complex. As a female intellectual who received higher education abroad during the Republic of China period, she possessed significant knowledge, an attractive appearance, and superior family status, all of which contributed to her strong sense of self-awareness. However, in spite of her wonderful settings, she was unable to break free from the multiple constraints imposed by societal norms, family class, and male perspective. This study will therefore compare and analyse Woolf's "Shakespeare's Sister" with Su Wenwan in "Fortress Besieged" in order to demonstrate how Qian Zhongshu's portrayal of "Fortress Besieged" symbolises both the marriage system and the social structure that restricts women's independent consciousness. Although Su Wenwan came from the upper class, as a victim of the patriarchal system, her fate bears a fundamental similarity to Shakespeare's sister, and neither has achieved a complete formation of subjectivity. In "A Room of One's Own," Virginia Woolf highlights some female characters in male writers' works, ranging from Cleopatra, Lady Macbeth, and Desdemona in Shakespeare's works to Madame Bovary in Flaubert's works, and finally Madame Galmont in Proust's. Although these characters have distinct and diverse personalities, ranging from ladies with all the lovely qualities to incredibly hideous images, all of these traits are products of a male perspective, and they cannot truly reflect and depict the real situation of women at that time. They resemble pictures and carvings of 'imagined' women. These imagined female characters seem to hold a high position and possess corresponding power, whereas in reality, women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were still confined and beaten by men. This shows that the freedom to live as autonomous, free-will beings is denied to women^[1]. In stark contrast to these literary portrayals, women are excessively objectified in real life, like slaves, obeying the fate set for them by the male. The alienation of them in a patriarchal society makes them seem insignificant while they struggle for survival and marriage. They may appear glamorous on the surface, but they are actually property or objects owned by males. The contradiction between literature and reality precisely reflects that the female characters portrayed by male writers are based on insufficient and inaccurate experiences, which are restricted to a limited male perspective and endowed with masculine qualities, lacking authentic female experiences and voices.

According to Woolf, in reality, women are seen as property by men, alienated in life and marriage, and deprived of freedom and choice, owing to the fact that women have historically been unable to have independent property rights. This implies that they are unable to build independent living spaces for themselves by laying the necessary foundations and must submit to men's demands in return for basic living circumstances. Woolf, a trailblazer in feminist theory, was the first to methodically explain the basic importance of economic freedom for women's creativity, seeing it as a necessary element for women to become independent and fully subjective. She stressed that women can't follow their aspirations unless they have their own source of income and are able to live on their own.^[1] Economic independence not only gives women the freedom and choice to have a room that is exclusively theirs, but more significantly, it allows them to separate from male gaze, male bias, and injustice in a patriarchal society. They can also be free from dependence and obedience to men, which allows them to express themselves more authentically and generate creative power.^[3] Women's creativity has also been severely constrained by institutional gender inequity and social structural issues. Woolf noted that women face many obstacles in the realm of creation, including societal expectations and restrictions on them, unequal educational chances, and limited financial means.^[1] In addition to reflecting the unequal allocation of social resources, women's access to education is frequently restricted, and they are not afforded the same opportunities and resources as males. This underscores gender resistance and the systematic denial of women's development. Woolf's fictional character of Shakespeare's sister in "A Room of One's Own" eloquently illustrates this inequality: despite possessing the same creative talent as Shakespeare, she is denied access to education because of social and familial injustice and is limited to reading books that her brother has left at home. Shakespeare's sister was trapped at home sewing socks and taking care of cooking utensils, while Shakespeare was learning Latin and acquiring knowledge in grammar school.^[1] As Woolf famously observed, "Women born with poetic talent are unfortunate, and their hearts will be filled with torment." The social placing of female characters severely restricts their creative space and freedom of expression.^[1] This bias resulting from male discourse authority has compelled many female writers to use male pen names in order to obtain creative space because of the society perception that women's public appearances are immoral. The creative experiences of individuals like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* being mistaken for her husband Percy Shelley's work, George Sand (Amantine Lucile Aurore Dupin), and George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans) are a perfect example of this phenomenon.^[4] In the long river of history, countless women with creative talents have been tormented in the process of breaking through obstacles and suppressing their talents and have had to hide under masculine pen names, many of whom have even become almost insane as a result.

2 The Dilemma of Female Creation and Independence: Woolf's Critique of Patriarchal Society

In "A Room of One's Own," Virginia Woolf delves into the social reality differences faced by men and women in the same era, as well as the economic and identity difficulties faced by women, through the symbolic fictional character of Shakespeare's sister. The 'Shakespeare's sister' in the story, like her brother, is incredibly gifted and passionate about drama. However, their life trajectories were completely different: Shakespeare was able to pursue education, break free from the constraints of societal norms of marriage, pursue ideals, and ultimately gain social recognition; in contrast, his younger sister was confined to household chores and was violently beaten by her father for resisting marriage. After escaping the confinement of the family, she had to trade her body for resources, and she ultimately chose to end her life on a cold winter night.^[1] This strong contrast highlights the strict restrictions on women in society at that time. This gendered social structure not only buried women's creativity but also led to a long-term lack of women's voices and expressions in literature and even throughout human civilization.^[5] In this narrative, the male's coveting and objectification of the female body is particularly prominent. Theatre manager Nick Green sees the theatrical ideals of 'Shakespeare's sister' as a joke and trades the resources and performance chances obtained through his status and abilities for Shakespeare's sister's body. This phenomenon of the commodification of female bodies is also echoed in 'Fortress Besieged'. "Su Wenwan is the most ideal girlfriend with intelligence, high status, good manners, and outstanding appearance," Fang Hongjian concluded in his psychological evaluation of Su Wenwan. "While assessing Miss Bao as a 'lover,' implying that Miss Bao has provided body value"^[6] These precisely reflect the objectification of women under the gaze of men. Women during that period were often in a disadvantaged position, and their bodies were seen as exchangeable commodities. This phenomenon not only exists in literary representation but also is a true portrayal of the dilemma of female subjectivity in real society. Su Wenwan, one of the most notable contradictions in "Fortress Besieged," a character with a rich and complex personality, exhibits a particularly prominent contradiction: she displays a soft and gentle side in front of the opposite sex but also possesses a strong sense of self-esteem and vanity. As a 'noble lady' cultivated by a feudal family in the 1930s, Su Wenwan, although having a doctoral degree from overseas and appearing independent, failed to break through the male-dominated social framework. This is reflected in her critical attitude towards Miss Bao's words and actions, as well as her behaviour of lowering her mate selection standards as she gets older, reflecting her subconscious internalisation of patriarchal social thinking.

3 Modern Women Trapped in Patriarchy: Su Wenwan's Self-predicament and Identity Anxiety

The tragedy of Su Wenwan lies in the fact that although she has gained a certain degree of feminine independence through education, she has never been able to break free from

the deep-rooted social constraints in her upbringing environment. Her efforts and attempts to pursue subjectivity are evident in both her resistance to the arranged marriage and her proactive approach to extending goodwill to the other party, Fang Hongjian. However, these behaviours are still deeply influenced by the male gaze. For her, due to the societal ideology filled with masculinity, her affluent family background and doctoral degree did not serve as a means of emancipation but rather as an obstacle on the path of pursuing love. This has a subtle parallel with 'Shakespeare's sister': whether the latter lacks educational opportunities or the former receives higher education, they are ultimately unable to escape the restrictions of patriarchy. The reasons for this quandary are multifaceted: firstly, even throughout the era of widespread higher education, women's social position was generally lower than that of men; secondly, the effect of traditional family education is deeply ingrained. This is shown in Su's parents' involvement in her marriage, as well as the instillation of values such as "official's wife" and "dutiful wife and loving mother" in Su Wenwan's mind, leading her to regard these as ideal life objectives. Su Wenwan's deep-rooted ideological indoctrination caused her to develop an unconscious reliance on masculine speech, enabling her to adopt a passive attitude in the search for love, violating her subjectivity dictates. By analysing Su Wenwan's emotional world, we can gain insight into her subjectivity's limitations. Emotional expression, as a crucial facet of female subjectivity, emphasises Su Wenwan's lack of independence and autonomy in her quest and expectation of romantic love, her infatuation with her Fang Hongjian, and her various words and actions during the pursuit process. Su Wenwan's relationship with Hongjian exhibited pathological characteristics of infatuation. Since their first encounter on the returning ship, she has been constantly trying to attract Fang Hongjian's attention, even resorting to destructive means to intervene in Fang Hongjian's relationships with other women. This excessive jealousy and possessiveness are reflected in multiple scenes: she repeatedly reminds Fang Hongjian about the existence of Miss Bao's fiancé, Mr. Li; exposes Fang Hongjian's past relationships to Tang Xiaofu; and satirises and incites Sun Roujia and Fang Hongjian to argue. Su Wenwan's apparent aggressiveness and hostility expose her sense of inferiority and inner emptiness towards her own social identity. The paradox between this dominant approach and the passive attitude precisely reflects the common dilemma faced by women at that time—the difficulty of getting rid of objectified attributes in the male-dominated value evaluation system. Su Wenwan's excessive interpretation and overreaction to Fang Hongjian's words and actions highlight this point, as she misread Fang Hongjian's jokes as jealousy: 'You are someone who loves to be jealous, jealous of irrelevant things'^[6]. This pathological infatuation and excessive expectations not only reflect her misunderstanding of romantic love but also contribute to her gradually losing herself in the pursuit process, unable to construct a healthy subjectivity.

Su Wenwan, a typical 'dependent' lady, has a great desire for male acceptance in the quest for love. She frequently employed strategic measures, such as deliberately changing the way she called Fang Hongjian in the face of Zhao Xinmei^[6] or hinting to Fang Hongjian that Zhao Xinmei was sleeping poorly because he missed her^[6]. These behaviours reflect her attempt to gain a sense of self-worth by stimulating competition among men. On the one hand, Su Wenwan showcases her talent and beauty to capture the attention of the opposite sex, while on the other hand, she unconsciously caters to male

preferences. This contradictory personality trait of dominance and attachment precisely reflects the deep dilemma of female individuals under the patriarchal framework. Qian Zhongshu's portrayal of Su Wenwan's image can be seen as a critique of the social milieu and a satire on the male gaze. In such a social structure, even Su Wenwan, who comes from a rich and powerful family background, finds it difficult to break through gender barriers, let alone ordinary women like Shakespeare's sister, who are confined to their families. In the process of pursuing independent consciousness, these women often have to resort to extreme or self-suppressing methods in exchange for limited freedom space. Although female characters such as Su Wenwan ultimately failed to construct a completely independent consciousness, there is a strong internal tension behind their self-deficiency. The material conditions, social status, and discourse power women obtain through their dependence on men can be viewed to some extent as strategic resources gained through compromise. The struggle behind this attachment indicates the budding of female subjectivity, which is a potential struggle to break through gender bias and social constraints.

4 From Shakespeare's Sister to Su Wenwan: The Dual Predicament of Female Body and Subjectivity

Through the analysis and understanding of "A Room of One's Own" and "Fortress Besieged," Woolf's fictional Shakespeare's sister and Qian Zhongshu's Su Wenwan have similar sorrowful situations in the setting of the eras. Despite significant differences in social background and status between these two women, they ultimately did not achieve the construction of independent consciousness and subjectivity under the impacts of the male gaze, judgement, and norms. Shakespeare's sister and Su Wenwan both experienced an awakening of self-awareness, with a strong sense of independence. Faced with the oppression of patriarchy, they struggled and attempted to escape but were ultimately unable to be successful in getting out of the constraints of a patriarchal society. Their lives ended tragically. Shakespeare's sister had an aptitude for drama, and Su Wenwan also received a good education. Both women with certain knowledge gradually developed a sense of subjectivity, seeking to form subjectivity and self-independence by resisting the socially established marriage system and freely pursuing ideals or love. In this process, based on the reality of male-dominated thinking in society at that time and the constant devaluation of women's self-worth by most men to demonstrate their superiority^[1], Shakespeare's sister had to sacrifice her body for opportunities and resources to achieve her ideals and ultimately committed suicide due to the inability to accept reality, including her pregnancy;^[7] Su Wenwan continuously catered to men's needs and preferences in the pursuit of love, using her beautiful appearance, so-called talent, and other conditions to exchange for men's pursuit and love. She was blinded by men's demands and gradually lost herself, just as Simone de Beauvoir quoted George Bernard Shaw's saying in "The Second Sex": "It is easier to put people in chains than to remove them if the chains bring prestige."^[8] Their social background was male-dominated, and these two female characters were to some extent a microcosm of most

women in society at that time.^[6] The male gaze and prejudice that pervade society hijack and bind women, making them powerless to struggle and resist in such a society due to the unequal distribution of resources and rights, and even making women willing to give up their self-awareness for some vested interests.

The identity of women in society seems to be mostly as an accessory or possession of men. For example, in "Fortress Besieged," Zhao Xinmei's fortune-telling revealed that he was destined to become an official, whilst Su Wenwan's fortune-telling told that she was the official's wife. Then, Zhao Xinmei directly believed that Su Wenwan would become his wife in the future, which would benefit his fortune and ensure his official success. In addition, Su Wenwan's original intention of pursuing a doctorate also involved the desire to use her scholarship to seek a better marriage. It seems that only by obtaining such a marriage can she gain recognition and respect for her identity and value from others. Miss Su was heavily influenced by masculine chauvinism as she developed her self-consciousness. These also repeatedly demonstrate that men wield the majority of discursive authority in society, while women hold a low standing. Even women with sufficient material resources, such as Su Wenwan, still have to seek respect and recognition via catering and pleasing.

Both literary masterpieces contain many examples of women trading their bodies for resources and opportunities. Apart from Shakespeare's sister, Miss Bao in "Fortress Besieged" is willing to marry Mr. Li, who is twenty years older than her, half bald, dark, and fat, precisely because Mr. Li, as a doctor, can supply Miss Bao with adequate material conditions to meet her demands. This demonstrates how both men and women objectify the female body, believing that it can be exploited as an exchange resource and condition for seeking benefits. This leads to a reflection saying something like, "Is the formation of women's objectification concept also a type of resistance against male dominance, as well as the emergence of a sense of subjectivity?" In such an oppressive social environment, women are unable to develop true independence and self-awareness.^[9] Therefore, women have to compromise in a male-dominated society and reluctantly create subjects by objectifying themselves and conforming to men. This abnormal, unhealthy, and contradictory approach is obviously incorrect. So, in such a social setting, what is the appropriate way for women to form a complete sense of subjectivity? This requires women to have both material and spiritual independence, as well as creativity.

5 Conclusion

This study delves into the subjectivity dilemma of women in similar eras in the East and West through an in-depth analysis of Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own" and Qian Zhongshu's "Fortress Besieged." Research reveals that in both works, women confront multiple restraints from society, family, and men. Both Woolf's portrayal of Shakespeare's Sister and Qian Zhongshu's representation of Su Wenwan possess a certain level of self-awareness and independence, but in reality, they are unable to truly break free from the shackles of a patriarchal society. Specifically, the limitations of the social environment on women, the influence of family education on women, and the

objectification of the male gaze on women have all contributed to deficiencies in female subjectivity.^[10] This is fully reflected in Shakespeare's sister's tragic ending, in which she eventually abandons her physical body; this is also reflected in Su Wenwan's emotional world, where her pathological infatuation, attachment, and sense of pleasing towards Fang Hongjian all demonstrate her self-deficiency in the pursuit of love. Through comparative research on these two female characters, it was found that, despite living in different eras and cultural backgrounds, they were all like the microcosm of women in society at that time, revealing the common difficulties and issues women confront. This dilemma is reflected in both the material and spiritual dimensions. At that period, most women were severely restricted in their pursuit of money and control over wealth on a material level; on a spiritual level, they were not permitted to receive education or form independent consciousness. To address this dilemma, the research emphasises the importance of women achieving both material and spiritual independence.^[11] Only until women attain economic independence and have the freedom to think freely can they genuinely liberate themselves, freely express their spiritual world, speak out their thoughts, and develop autonomous awareness and subjectivity.

In summary, through the analysis of these two works, this study reveals the dilemma of female subjectivity in similar eras in the East and the West. And it also proposes that the dual independence of material and spiritual aspects is required for women to achieve freedom and create complete subjectivity. This has crucial implications for us to re-examine the status of women in modern society and to promote the formation of complete subjectivity and the realisation of freedom for women. It should be pointed out that this study only focuses on some female roles in these two works, and contemporary feminist research still needs further attention and discussion space to delve deeper into exploring the issues of female subjectivity and independent consciousness.

References

1. Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. Translated by Zhou Yingqi, Tianjin People's Publishing House, 2019.
2. Sellers, Susan. *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*. 2nd ed., Cambridge University Press, 2010.
3. Leubner, Ben. "The Virginia Woolf Society." *Virginia Woolf Miscellany*, no. 101, 2023, pp. 76–75. Print.
4. Fernald, Anne E. *Virginia Woolf: Feminism and the Reader*. 1st ed., Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
5. Besnault, Anne. *Virginia Woolf's Unwritten Histories: Conversations with the Nineteenth Century*. 1st ed., New York, NY: Routledge, 2022. Print.
6. Qian, Zhongshu. *Wei Cheng (Fortress Besieged)*. 2nd ed., People's Literature Publishing House, 2017.
7. Toth, Naomi. "Reincarnating Shakespeare's Sister: Virginia Woolf and the 'Uncircumscribed Spirit' of Fiction." *E-rea: Revue d'études anglophones*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2011.
8. Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Zheng Kelu, Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 1998.
9. Reus, Anne. *Virginia Woolf and Nineteenth-Century Women Writers: Victorian Legacies and Literary Afterlives*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022. Print.

10. Montashery, Iraj. "Virginia Woolf and the Exploration of the Third Gender." *International Journal of Comparative Literature and Translation Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2013, pp. 1–x.
11. Latham, Monica, Caroline Marie, and Anne-Laure Rigeade, eds. *Recycling Virginia Woolf in Contemporary Art and Literature*. 1st ed., New York, NY: Routledge, 2022. Print.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

