

# Gender Relations in Kjell Askildsen's *A Lovely Place* From the Perspective of Chinese Yin-Yang Theory

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*A Lovely Place* (2019) is a collection of the Norwegian writer Kjell Askildsen's short stories that is translated from German into Chinese by Yang Zhizi. It contains 18 short stories, whose male characters are mainly analyzed by researchers. The paper argues that female characters are playing an indispensable role in compensating the males' life stories and enlightening their worldviews according to Chinese Yin-Yang theory. The females can be classified into the following three groups in terms of their important relations to the males. Firstly, the female is the male's companion in a certain part of the latter's life. Secondly, the female facilitates the male's intellectual growth either spontaneously or purposefully. Thirdly, the female struggles for independence to set an example for the male. The female characters in *A Lovely Place* present such femininity as beauty, energy, nostalgia, sentimentality, motherhood, etc., stimulate the males to reflect on their own identities and fulfill their masculinity, and function as the genuine protagonists in the collection as far as the gender relations are concerned.

**Keywords:** Kjell Askildsen, *A Lovely Place*, gender relations, Scandinavian literature, Chinese Yin-Yang theory

## Introduction

A winner of the Swedish Academy's Nordic Prize, the Brage Prize and twice of the Critics' Prize, Kjell Askildsen (1929-) is one of the great Norwegian writers of the post-war era and an inescapable reference in contemporary Scandinavian literature.<sup>1</sup> He is recognized as one of the greatest Norwegian writers of the 20th century, and among the greatest short-story authors of all time. However, so far, researchers have paid less attention to Kjell Askildsen's female characters than his male characters, and even less attention to the gender relations represented in the collections. *Norwegian Literature Abroad* (October 1991) claims that "a recurring theme in Kjell Askildsen's short stories is the loneliness and vulnerability of man"<sup>2</sup>. And Becky McMullan, the English editor of *Short Stories* by Kjell Askildsen believes that "A Great Deserted Landscape" is a story about a brother, about a husband, a possible murderer, an incestuously minded creep, a self-centered jerk.

While we do not deny that male characters are occupying a larger proportion of the short stories by Askildsen, we argue that female characters are playing an indispensable role in compensating the males' life stories and enlightening their worldviews. The paper focuses on *A Lovely Place* (2019), the Chinese collection of Askildsen's short stories, using traditional Chinese philosophical thought to interpret the gender relations

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<sup>1</sup> <https://osloliteraryagency.no/author/kjell-askildsen/>, retrieved on November, 6, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> <https://norla.no/en/books/582-a-great-deserted-landscape>, retrieved on November, 6, 2020.

represented in the book. *A Lovely Place* (2019) is the collection of Kjell Askildsen's short stories translated from German into Chinese by Yang Zhizi. It includes 18 short stories, a brief biography of Kjell Askildsen by Geir Berdahl, the director of Oslo October Press, and a review by Hinrich Schmidt-Henkel, the German translator.

### **Basic Ideas of Chinese Yin-Yang Theory**

Yin and Yang are ancient Chinese philosophical concepts used to demonstrate how opposite elements are interdependent or interconnected in the natural world and how they influence each other in their relationship. *Zhou Yi*, or *Book of Changes*, an ancient divination book, contains the Yin-Yang theory.

It not merely holds the core position in the academic field of traditional Chinese scholarship, but also is considered as the origin of "the Great Way." It is the book that forms the philosophical basis of the traditional Chinese culture. (Zhang, 2016, p. 10)

The Yin-Yang theory is a traditional Chinese dialectical thought, which considers nature, the origin of society, and the development of social law as the unity of Yin and Yang, and constructs a systematic framework of interpretation about the universe, nature, and human society (Dang, 2017). Three important ideas are quoted from this book that are useful to our interpretation of the short stories by Askildsen.

#### **Yin and Yang**

Many natural dualities are thought to be the physical manifestations of Yin and Yang concepts, for instance: male and female, day and night, hot and cold, life and death. The idea of the Yin and Yang in ancient time originates from substantial objects in nature, and develops into a highly abstract philosophical discourse. Woman/female is Yin, and man/male is Yang, so they form a pair of elements in nature, just like the other pairs of day and night, hot and cold, heaven and earth, and so on.

#### **The Relations Between Yin and Yang**

Yin and Yang are both opposite and complementary. The change of Yin and Yang is the most important principle that runs through the whole *Zhou Yi* (Zhang, 2016, p. 12). Various kinds of changes and transformations can be traced back to the interactions of Yin and Yang (Zhang, 2016, p. 18). The dichotomy in the universe and in the human world embodies the essence of the dialectics. It is the law of unity of the opposites.

#### **The Ideal of Central Balance and Harmony**

The Yin-Yang theory includes the awareness of early human aesthetic activities and a literary concept named "Central Balance and Harmony". This is the ideal state of the natural world and human society. When the Yin matches the Yang, things will be in the right position and auspicious. The harmonious interaction between Yin and Yang is highly important in that it is extremely critical to seek central balance and achieve harmony (Zhang, 2016, p. 19).

The pair of Yin and Yang concepts exists in the origins of many branches of Chinese classical science and philosophy. The theory of Yin-Yang is frequently used in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) to explain the relationship within the human body system (Xue & Cheng, 2020). This paper uses the Yin-Yang theory to explain the gender relations, in an attempt to interpret Askildsen's short stories from a unique Chinese perspective.

### **Analysis of Gender Relations in Askildsen's Short Stories**

Each of the 18 short stories has at least one important female character. This paper analyses 21 female characters, three from "Thomas F's Last Notation to Society", two from "The Grasshopper", one from each of the 16 others. They can be classified into the following three groups according to the female characters' relations to the male characters.

Type A: The female characters are the male characters' companions in a certain part of the latter's life.

Type B: The female characters facilitate the male characters' intellectual growth either spontaneously or purposefully.

Type C: The female characters set an example for the male characters by struggling for central balance and harmony.

Among the 21 female characters in the short stories, there are 13 in Type A: The narrator in "I Am Not Like This, I Am Not Like This"; the girl in "Car Langer"; the wife, daughter Maria, Madam M in "Thomas F's Last Notations to Society"; Sonja in "A Great Deserted Place"; Mother in "The Nail in the Cherry Tree"; the sister in "My Sister's Face"; Beate in "The Dogs of Thessaloniki"; wife of the narrator in "A Sudden Liberating Thought"; Maria in "The Grasshopper"; Marion in "The Invisible"; woman in "The Meeting". There are five in Type B: Vera in "Mardong's Night", Elizabeth in "Elizabeth"; Vera in "The Grasshopper"; Lucy in "The Joker"; Eli in "Martin Hansen's Outing". There are three in Type C: Ingrid Langeback in "Ingrid Langeback", Nina in "Everything Like Before", the woman in "A Lovely Place". Next examples are given from each type to illustrate the gender relations in detail.

#### **Type A: The Female as the Male's Companion**

A majority of female characters in *A Lovely Place* belong to Type A, who are an indispensable partner in men's life, and make no obviously dramatic impact on the male characters. The paper focuses on the sister in "My Sister's Face", and Marion in "The Invisible".

The sister (her name is not mentioned in the story) and brother Otto like each other since they were children. Currently the sister is married to Oskar, she still misses Otto very much and requires him to call her via phone or visit her home. Otto used to have a girlfriend, but he remains single. Since he prefers "women who don't make any demands of me/him, but who give, take and go," which criterion only his sister can meet; he does not visit other women any longer, including Marion, his former girlfriend. He keeps his memory of his sister. The sister used to be his best companion in his childhood, and she still is his best female friend till nowadays.

Marion in "The Invisible" or "The Unseen" is Bernhard L.'s companion. He comes back home for his father's burial ceremony. But he is not feeling sad at all for his father's death. He simply returns home so see his sister. When he learns that his sister Marion is going to be married, he thinks the burial happens just at the right time. He takes a good look at Marion's room, peeps from the top-floor room at her standing on the ground, weeds and waters her vegetables. He needs her to be his companion. At the end of the story, when she stands close to him (Askildsen, 2019, p. 144), he feels warm in his heart, so much so that he does not want to leave for the bedroom in the late night.

#### **Type B: The Female as the Male's Intellectual Facilitator**

How complementary are the two genders in the stories? Females are not static companions of males, but they enlighten the man to gain a new understanding of life. Sometimes those events happen purposefully, and sometimes unintentionally.

Vera Dadalave is the neighbor of Malden Jr., the son of Malden Sr. When Malden Jr. is not at home, and his father comes to visit him, Vera is very kind to Malden Sr., offering him drinks at her own home. She is sensitive enough to find the father is disappointed when the son goes out again after meeting his father for just a few minutes, and assures him that the son will come back soon. She is sentimental and mild, so her eyes are filled with tears when she sees the father and the son face each other. When the son complains about the father, disclosing his hatred to father, she tries every means to calm him down, and tells him to be kind to father, even telling a lie when necessary. The son is not mature, not satisfied with his parents and his former neighbor. He is happy when he learns that the hateful neighbor is dead. But Vera is the one to teach him to be affectionate; she helps Malden Jr. to realize his fault finally.

Of course Vera is not a perfect person. When Malden Jr. tells her that his father and mother are not affectionate to each other, and that father sits in the rain 300 meters away from home, he asks her what might be the reason, but she gives no answer. When Malden Jr. says that life is meaningless, and anyone may hurt other people, she only responds that this might not be the whole truth of life. But what is the whole truth of life, she does not explain further. At last when Malden asks her what to do with life, she gives no answer, and she cries. But her tears show her tender heart, which is what Malden needs, with which he can be nice to life, nice to father, nice to the world. This is what Vera teaches him about. Vera is his teacher both in his ordinary life, and in his spiritual life, and she teaches him intentionally.

The example female who teaches a male unintentionally is Elizabeth in "Elizabeth", Daniel's wife. She is the sister-in-law of Frank. Frank visits his brother and lives at their home for a night. Frank is not an obedient boy. He reads a book entitled *The Anarchist*, which tells the story of Esch seducing Frau Hentjen, and he is absorbed in the story, imagining Elizabeth might be seduced by him. Then Frank visits his mother. From their talks, we know that Frank is not faithful to Christianity. But his nature is good, for he loves planting vegetables. That is also Elizabeth's hobby. When the rainstorm comes, and the beans fall down, he ties up the pea stalks, which his brother Daniel cannot do. Because of his unrequited love for Elizabeth, he protects the vegetables. At the end of the story, Frank reads the note from his brother, knowing that Elizabeth is unlikely to accept his love. He is determined to leave them, but the short experience of being with Elizabeth tells him to be kind to other people, and he grows mature from then on.

### **Type C: The Female as the Male's Role-Model**

The third type of female struggles for independence to set an example for the male. They have strong motivation to change the man's life pattern, for example, Ingrid Langeback in "Ingrid Langeback". Ingrid is indeed a very complicated female character. The story can be divided into two parts. In the first part of the story, she seeks independence by looking out of the window to look at the man who is looking at her. The looking-out behavior symbolizes her independent aspiration for love. She looks for a job in the bakery, intending to earn the money, and to avoid loneliness. She hopes to find her identity in the crowd. But it is tragic that her husband Tolbyorn does not like her idea of employment in the bakery, intending to abandon the family. In the second part of the story, Ingrid does not forget her seeking for economic income and affectionate feelings, but she changes her behavior pattern somehow. She makes up her mind to be both a housewife and an employee. In the meantime, she pays more attention to her husband's responses. She still wants to be on good terms with her husband, and takes good care of him when he is drunken. When her husband is staying at home, without being drunken, she feels assured. When she finds her husband crying in the forest, her heart aches too.

According to the Yin-Yang theory, the basic Chinese traditional family principle is the harmony, with which the family is happy, without which the family is unhappy. It is a pity that Ingrid's independence/identity seeking process has not gained the husband's understanding, the husband leaves home finally, and they are separated. Ingrid is a good example in seeking independence and seeking affection. If only her husband could follow the suit, if he could be as considerate as she, he might not leave home, and their home could be as harmonious as before.

Another example of Type C female is Nina in "Everything Like Before". This is an unusual story. In the beginning of the story, the male character, Karl, is gloomy as he lacks the ability to be a strong man in life. His love for Nina is also weak and timid. So he is drinking to kill the time. In the middle part of the story are Karl's memories. In the first half of the memory, Karl feels he and Nina are affectionate to each other, and they used to be a happy couple; in the second half of the flashback, he is imagining about Nina's betrayal, but he does not have the courage to correct her misbehavior, simply following her behind. In our understanding, Nina never turns against him. Nevertheless, Nina's existence invokes Karl's love for life. In the third part of the story, Nina tells Karl to speak out his mind. Karl realizes that he must do as Nina instructs. So he does, and they love each other as much as before. Nina's instruction successfully helps Karl to regain his ability to love and be a strong person like before.

### Conclusion

Just as the Chinese Yin-Yang theory shows, the male characters and female characters are born to be interdependent upon each other. In each of the short stories in *A Lovely Place*, the man and woman cannot go without the other, whether the woman is the wife, the sister, mother, or lover of the man. While Type A female characters make no obviously dramatic impact on the life of the male characters, Types B and C female characters both influence males' life in a significant way. The difference between Type B and C is that B female does not instruct the male actively, but the male only learns from B female by himself, while C female is the instructor of the male, although sometimes successfully, in other times in vain.

There are more Type A female characters than B and C ones, which means more female characters are just companions of male characters. Central balance and harmony are not satisfactorily achieved by means of dialogues between the two genders. The insufficiency of Yin-Yang dialogues results in the characters' loneliness and isolation. This is the common problem in gender relations represented in Kjell Askildsen's *A Lovely Place*. Only when the Yin, the female characters, and the Yang, the male characters, are on good terms and communicate smoothly, can the life be harmonious and exhilarating.

Fortunately, there are three female characters who try to change and complement the males' lives actively, and five female characters who intentionally or unintentionally influence the male characters. This is the enlightening point in the short stories. In this sense, the female characters in *A Lovely Place* present such femininity as beauty, energy, nostalgia, sentimentality, motherhood, and so on. They stimulate the males to reflect on their own identities and fulfill their muscularity, and function as the genuine protagonists in the collection as far as the gender relations are concerned.

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