

# Drifting Catkins in a Chaotic World—A Discussion on the Enlightenment of Love Amidst the Interweaving of Sorrow and Joy in *Love in a Fallen City*

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In the novel *Love in a Fallen City*, Bai Liusu and Fan Liuyuan realize the enlightenment of love in the situation of conflicting values and creation. It is an important turning point for the change of their self-consciousness and social cognition.

*Keywords:* clash of values, destiny, view of marriage, enlightenment

*Love in a Fallen City* is one of the rare novels by Eileen Chang that concludes with a happy ending, meticulously depicting the inner life of the Chinese citizen class, particularly the anxieties of Shanghai citizens in the bustling and cosmopolitan city concerning love, marriage and individual identity (Wang, 2017, pp. 96-116). In this novel, the hero and heroine painstakingly undergo a hard-won initiation of love.

## I. Conflict between Traditional Ethics and Modern Civilization

In a world marked by fear and turmoil, where traditional ethics and modern civilization are inextricably intertwined, change occurs at a pace that is both slow and swift. The White Mansion, symbolizing a fading era, functions like an old clock, ticking away with a laborious and slow cadence.

### **Moths to the Flame—Bai Liusu's Path to Self-Redemption**

Divorced and living alone for many years, Bai Liusu was a complete idler in the eyes of her siblings, her dowry having been squandered by them over the years and no longer having any value. Therefore, even though she is in her own home, she is still living a life that is similar to that of a parasite. In the beginning of the novel, we can taste this kind of meaning: when the doorbell rings, master Bai, the Bai family's uncle, two aunts, several elder cousins, and numerous children appear one after another. This manifests a grand and intricate web of familial relationships, which is mirrored in the structural and interpretive perception of Bai Liusu's existence within the confines of a metaphorical crisscrossed bracket, a space so constrained that it barely allows for the accommodation of her knees. (Xu, 2004, pp. 88-93).

If the White Mansion is likened to an impregnable fortress, situated on elevated terrain, it is likely to contain a few worn copies of the Confucian classics, as well as some volumes of "The Analects" and "The Doctrine of the

Mean". The residents, ensconced within its walls, are custodians of these texts, adhering to their teachings with a sense of duty. Despite any internal reluctance, they are ensnared by the collective consciousness shaped by these cultural traditions, becoming both victims and enforcers of a stifling status quo, leading to a life devoid of hope. Faced with a binary choice—to submit or to flee—Bai Liusu exemplifies the progressive spirit of a modern woman. She confronts feudal ethics with legal action, endures the scorn and derision of her peers, and with the determination of a moth drawn to flame, she manages to extricate herself from the constraints of her ancestral home, venturing on a path that challenges societal norms.

But these courageous adventures of Bai Liusu were not spontaneous; they were compelled by the hardships of her life. With her family in disarray and her relatives primarily interested in personal gain, she found herself without support within her own home. The urge to flee was a natural response to her situation, yet her departure was facilitated by a man, indicating that her escape was not a complete act of self-determination.

### **Contractual Entanglements: The Love Game of Fan Liuyuan and Bai Liusu**

Fan Liuyuan and Bai Liusu hail from disparate backgrounds. Educated in England, Fan Liuyuan faced a solitary existence following his father's demise, enduring numerous vicissitudes in securing his rightful inheritance. Upon encountering Bai Liusu, their divergent desires are immediately apparent. Fan Liuyuan, beset by loneliness and a sense of disorientation, frequently adopts a frivolous demeanor, yet yearns for genuine affection. Conversely, Bai Liusu, struggling to sustain her livelihood, maintains her composure and prudence, seeking not merely stability but also a formal commitment from Fan Liuyuan.

When Fan Liuyuan read the poem to Bai Liusu, a long dash appeared after the phrase "Together in life and death" in the text—as if he wanted people to pay special attention to it. Then Fan Liuyuan leisurely uttered the phrase "with you I am delighted". This is not a translation mistake by Fan Liuyuan, but a conscious rewriting by the author, and in fact, a reflection of Fan Liuyuan's state of mind at that time. In a chaotic world, due to the political and economic depression and the decline of traditional values, people are prone to feel nothingness, just like the willow catkins in a gale, continuously floating. His sad argument about marriage is not an intentional and cunning evasion of marriage and responsibility, but a reality in his cognitive system.

One party is engaged in courtship while the other is focused on proposing, highlighting a divergence in their underlying values. Yet, they are also strikingly similar, each reluctant to be the first to reveal their true feelings, which turns their relationship into a complex game of strategy and courage. Indeed, even Bai Liusu harbors an innate desire for love and aspires for a relationship founded on genuine affection rather than mere contractual obligations. She seeks a marriage based on mutual respect and has genuine feelings for Fan Liuyuan. However, her constant state of uncertainty and the need to remain vigilant at all times cast a shadow over the fleeting romantic moments in the narrative, overshadowed by deeper apprehensions.

According to Freud's theory of personality structure, Bai Liusu has liberated herself from the constraints of her superego, where traditional morals such as rituals and ethics no longer represent an inviolable supreme authority. This liberation allows her to recognize her own situation more clearly and to pursue autonomy in marriage and love, marking a partial awakening of her self-consciousness. However, she must also use her ego to manage the impulses and desires that arise within it. The lack of harmony between her ego and id leads to moments of discord, such as when she and Fan Liuyuan engage in playful banter. In these moments, the absence

of emotional barriers between them causes her to feel suddenly offended, as the playful interaction is perceived by Bai Liusu as overly intimate and a transgression of boundaries. Bai Liusu's thought process is inevitably influenced by the old morals and the cultural psychology inherent in the old system. Despite this, her ego compels her to seek independence. This internal conflict is evident in her actions: first she "stopped, shook the sand from her short skirt, and looked back" on the stone path, then she went back to her room and "looked out of the window with binoculars", wanting to talk, wanting to leave, but still wanting to stay (Zhang, 1997, p. 38). During this time, Bai Liusu's heart is a battleground of contradictions and turmoil.

## II. The Making of the World: Chance and Necessity of Destiny

In that era, war was arguably more eerily silent than any outbreak of pestilence. Once it occurred, there was no alternative for those who sought survival but to continue their struggle, pressing forward despite the odds. The abruptness of the war is a metaphor for the abruptness of fate, and it serves as a revelation for the love game between Fan Liuyuan and Bai Liusu, like an elixir of enlightenment that awakens them (Wang, 2010). In these turbulent times, how many people, how many things, they lived and died, they existed and disappeared; how many sorrows and hates are too numerous to count, and in just a split second, it's all over.

War temporarily destroys the towers of value that are constructed by the reality of fame, prestige, status and power. People always feel great and special when they are conquering and trampling, but only then do they realize that they are just so small.

At this time, Bai Liusu is only an ordinary woman in heaven and earth, she "thought of Liu Yuan, I do not know whether his ship has sailed out of the harbor, whether it has been sunk. But when she thought of him she felt a little small, as if she was a world away" (Zhang, 1997, p. 52). Yet Van Lewara was not dead after all, and was coming toward her lodgings. "She caught his hand and clung to his arm like a chestnut to a child, and the man flung himself forward, knocking his head against the concrete wall in the doorway. Yanag ihara used his other hand to hold her head, and said sharply, "Are you in shock? Don't worry, don't worry" (Zhang, 1997, p. 52). By this moment, what was once assumed had somehow become reality—everything was over, everything had burned, blown up, collapsed, and who could say they didn't have a little bit of true love? They made a confession to each other through a flirtatious tone: "Blow you up and my story should be over. Blow me up, and your story is still long!" Yanag ihara laughed, 'Are you going to keep the festival for me?' Both of them were a little nervous, for no reason, laughing in unison', their mindset transformed while experiencing the war, understanding each other's former purposes and calculations" (Zhang, 1997, p. 52). The war's King's Landing fulfills this love that has always drifted. In the midst of their dependence on each other, they develop experiences and feelings that they have never had before, about life and about love. This is completely different from the conceptualized and theorized love of Zijun and Juan Sheng in *Regret for the Past*. Their understanding of it does not remain at the level of western imported archetypes, but grows out of daily life in a practical way. The ego of Juan Sheng overpowers the ego during this period and modifies and depicts a new ego on the basis of the original. It is only after this that the two are considered to have achieved a harmonious unity.

Deliberate pursuit often finds what is sought elusive; yet, when least expected, fortune may arrive. Bai Liusu's romance is closely intertwined with destiny. The uncertainties are many: without meeting Fan Liuyuan, a man who could satisfy her desires, what life would have awaited Bai Liusu? Would the war have been the catalyst

for their marriage? If they had separated, where would their paths have led? These remain unanswerable questions. Not all events can be explained by coincidence; behind these are many inevitabilities. What is the cause, and what is the effect? In a chaotic world, they are the fortunate couple by chance.

### III. The Enlightenment of Love: A Lifetime is Fleeting, an Instant is Eternal

Fan Liuyuan is rich in material possessions, and although he often feels lonely and bitter, he is also practically paralyzed by a sense of emptiness and uncertainty about what is fundamentally valuable in life. Bai Liusu, on the other hand, is just the opposite, yet on a different path. She has been living under the roof of others and has been subjected to countless cynicisms and ridicule. Her life has become unsustainable, and she is forced to prioritize the material reality that she can see and touch. In fact, neither Fan Liuyuan nor Bai Liusu had ever been truly in love before. Fan Liuyuan was a flirt, but never really loved anyone; Bai Liusu followed the arrangements of her family, but also experienced a loveless marriage. In the realm of love, they both remain on the threshold of love, still unacquainted with its true nature. The war, however, provides a resolution, culminating in their marriage.

Whether it is the characters within the story or the critics who later disparaged their relationship, many place too much emphasis on the concept of 'eternity.' Love holds enduring value, but to become paralyzed by an uncontrollable future or to assume a desolate end due to various uncertainties is excessively pessimistic, is it not? In the face of the most sincere emotions, a moment can be eternal. The cycle of human life and death is a vast issue. Yet, the commitment two people once made to grow old together is, in truth, love itself. What truly matters is not the perpetuity of marriage, but the awakening and transformation of one's consciousness. This enlightenment of love in the novel can be seen as a beginning. It lifts the scattered flurries in a chaotic world more powerfully, allowing the two to grasp something more tangible in life, thereby dissipating to some extent the negativity, emptiness, and confusion they experience when facing the world.

The open-ended structure of the novel *Love in a Fallen City* by Eileen Chang inherently suggests a multitude of possibilities, inviting endless interpretations. As Bai Liusu and Fan Liuyuan progress towards marriage, disparities persist, notably in their social standings, with Bai Liusu's stability contingent upon Fan Liuyuan's support. Their thoughts and actions are not entirely aligned, reflecting a lack of complete harmony. Within the narrative, Bai Liusu's discontent is subtly revealed through Fan Liuyuan's observations: "Her face, now resting against the wall, has transformed—her red lips, glistening eyes, a visage imbued with life and contemplation" (Zhang, 1997, p. 65). This outward change belies an inward deficiency, at least as perceived by Fan Liuyuan at that moment. However, the author posits that their decision to publicly announce their marriage must have been rooted in genuine affection and a degree of mutual understanding. The narrative does not elaborate on the post-marital developments, but for the sake of speculation, the author tentatively assumes a negative outcome: the dissolution of their relationship and the termination of their marriage. Yet, such an experience may prompt a reevaluation of their attitudes towards future life choices, moving beyond mere vanity or pretension. For Bai Liusu, while further disillusionment and decline are possible, there is also the prospect of a genuine breakthrough—escaping the feudalistic constraints that have traditionally confined women, which would signify a true awakening of self-awareness.

#### IV. Conclusion

In *Love in a Fallen City*, Eileen Chang continues her usual bleak and anti-climactic writing characteristics, making the story seem to be always shrouded in a kind of soft and blurred light and shadow, which provides a fertile soil for more diversified interpretations. From the perspective of “Love Enlightenment”, the individual characters in the chaotic world break through many obstacles in the intertwining of multiple contradictions, and take a big step towards “truth” by breaking away from the state of chaos and obscurity with the help of both accidental and inevitable factors. The novel possesses a greater positive significance beyond what is commonly noted in the majority of reviews.

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