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Beyond Empowerment and Containment: The Paradoxical Construction of Rebellious Femininity in Cao Xueqin and Stendhal

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This study examines the paradoxical construction of rebellious female subjectivity in two canonical works of world literature—Cao Xueqin's *A Dream of Red Mansions* (1791) and Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* (1830). Through a comparative feminist analysis of Lin Daiyu and Madame de Rênal, this paper investigates how male authors in distinct cultural contexts simultaneously empower and constrain their female characters. Drawing on feminist literary criticism, the analysis reveals that while both authors grant their heroines unprecedented psychological depth and rebellious consciousness, they ultimately re-contain these figures within patriarchal narrative economies through strategies of internal contradiction, tragic predestination, and romantic mediation. This dual mechanism of "empowerment" and "containment" exposes the inherent contradictions of male-authored female subjectivity. The cross-cultural comparison further illuminates how divergent aesthetic traditions—Chinese lyrical symbolism versus French psychological realism—shape but do not fundamentally alter this paradoxical dynamic.

Keywords: Lin Daiyu, Madame de Rênal, feminist literary criticism, comparative literature, male authorship, female subjectivity

Introduction

The relationship between gender and literary creation has long occupied a central position in feminist critical discourse. As the seventeenth-century feminist philosopher Poulain de la Barre famously asserted, "All that men write about women should be suspect, for they are both judge and party" (cited in Beauvoir, 1949/2011, p. 27). This suspicion becomes particularly acute when examining literary representations of "rebellious" women crafted by male authors, for such representations inevitably negotiate the tension between empathetic identification and

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gender-based othering.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries witnessed the emergence of what might be termed "masculine feminism"—the phenomenon of progressive male writers attempting to imagine and articulate female subjectivity. Among these writers, Cao Xueqin (1715–1763) and Stendhal (1783–1842) stand as preeminent figures. Despite the vast cultural distances separating eighteenth-century China from post-Revolutionary France, both authors produced works that center on complex, psychologically nuanced female characters who challenge the patriarchal norms of their societies. *A Dream of Red Mansions* and *The Red and the Black* share a profound engagement with questions of gender, power, and individual rebellion.

This study undertakes a comparative feminist analysis of two iconic female characters: Lin Daiyu, the ethereal, poetry-writing heroine of Cao Xueqin's masterpiece, and Madame de Rênal, the passionate, guilt-ridden lover of Julien Sorel in Stendhal's novel. Both characters embody forms of feminine rebellion that have captivated readers across centuries. Yet both remain haunted by the conditions of their creation: they are the products of male imagination, male desire, and male narrative authority. The central question guiding this inquiry is deceptively simple yet theoretically complex: How do male authors construct rebellious female subjectivity, and what are the limits of such construction? Drawing on feminist literary criticism and narratological analysis, this paper argues that Cao Xueqin and Stendhal engage in a dual movement of "empowerment" and "containment." They grant their heroines unprecedented psychological depth and rebellious agency while simultaneously deploying narrative strategies that re-inscribe patriarchal norms. This paradoxical dynamic reveals not merely individual authorial limitations but the structural constraints that shape male-mediated representations of femininity.

Theoretical Framework: Feminist Literary Criticism and the Question of Male Authorship

Foundational Concepts: From Beauvoir to Feminist Narratology

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) provides the starting point with its foundational insight that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir, 1949/2011, p. 283). This constructivist understanding of gender—that femininity is a social and cultural formation—has profound implications for literary analysis. Beauvoir's analysis of Stendhal is particularly relevant: "Stendhal never limits himself to describing his heroines in relation to their lovers; he gives them a destiny of their own. He attempts something rarer… he projects himself into his female characters" (Beauvoir, 1949/2011, p. 279). Yet even as she praises Stendhal's imaginative identification with women, Beauvoir notes the limits: the female characters ultimately serve the narrative of male development.

Anglo-American feminist criticism, particularly Elaine Showalter's "gynocriticism," offers additional analytical tools (1977). More recent developments in feminist narratology, particularly the work of Susan Lanser (1992) and Robyn Warhol (1989), provide frameworks for analyzing how narrative structures encode gender ideologies. Lanser's concept of "narrative authority" examines how textual strategies construct or undermine the authority of female voices. These narratological approaches are particularly valuable for analyzing the subtle mechanisms through which male authors simultaneously empower and contain their female characters.

Psychoanalytic Feminism and the Male Gaze

Psychoanalytic feminism, particularly the work of Julia Kristeva (1982) and Luce Irigaray (1985), offers additional insights. Laura Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze" (1975), though developed in film theory, has been productively applied to literary analysis. In literary contexts, this concept extends to the ways narrative perspective, descriptive attention, and focalization construct female characters as objects of male observation and desire. These approaches are particularly relevant to analyzing the "body politics" of female representation—how male authors describe, aestheticize, and discipline female bodies.

Cross-Cultural Feminist Criticism

Scholars such as Rey Chow (1991) and Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989) have critiqued the tendency of Western feminism to impose its categories on non-Western cultures. This study adopts a dialogic approach that attends to cultural specificities while recognizing common patterns of patriarchal domination across cultures. Ann Waltner's influential essay "On Not Becoming a Heroine: Lin Dai-yu and Cui Ying-ying" (1989) demonstrates the potential of feminist approaches to illuminate Chinese literary texts without reducing them to Western categories.

Comparative Foundations: Authors, Texts, and Historical Contexts

Cao Xueqin and Stendhal inhabited vastly different worlds, yet their biographies reveal intriguing parallels. Both experienced dramatic reversals of fortune that shaped their literary sensibilities. Cao Xueqin was born into a wealthy family that served the Qing emperors; the family's fortunes collapsed amid political purges, forcing Cao into poverty. Stendhal experienced the tumultuous transformations of post-Revolutionary France. Both authors wrote against the backdrop of societies in transition, where new possibilities—including new possibilities for women—were emerging.

A Dream of Red Mansions traces the decline of the Jia clan, focusing on the tragic love story of Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu within the enclosed world of the Grand View Garden. *The Red and the Black* follows the ambitious Julien Sorel as he navigates the hypocrisies of Restoration society, with his relationships with Madame de Rênal and Mathilde de La Mole. Despite their apparent differences, both novels are deeply concerned with the relationship between individual desire and social constraint, and both grant significant narrative attention and psychological depth to their female characters.

The Progressive Moment: Male Authors and Female Subjectivity

Cao Xueqin's Feminist Imaginary

A Dream of Red Mansions represents a remarkable achievement in the representation of female subjectivity. The novel's opening frames it as a work dedicated to commemorating the women of the author's youth: "I resolved to make known to all the world the fact that… in comparison with these certain females whom I have known, I am utterly inferior to them" (Cao, 1791/1999, 1:20). This declaration signals a significant departure from traditional Chinese fiction's treatment of women.

The novel's most radical gesture is its creation of a "female utopia"—the Grand View Garden. Within its walls, women can pursue poetry, form friendships, and develop their talents. Lin Daiyu embodies the novel's progressive vision most fully. She is the most talented poet among the Garden's residents, the most sensitive to beauty, and the most uncompromising in her refusal to conform. Cao Xueqin grants Daiyu interiority unprecedented in Chinese fiction. Through poetry, interior monologue, and psychologically nuanced narration,

readers gain access to her inner world—her fears, desires, and moments of transcendent joy.

Stendhal's Female Characters: Passion and Autonomy

Stendhal's treatment of female characters has long attracted feminist attention. First, Stendhal grants his female characters complex inner lives that are not reducible to their relationships with men. Madame de Rênal's psychological trajectory—from ignorant innocence through passionate awakening to guilty despair—is rendered with extraordinary subtlety. Second, Stendhal represents female desire as legitimate and powerful. Madame de Rênal's passion for Julien is portrayed as a genuine awakening of her capacity for love. Third, Stendhal creates in Mathilde de La Mole a portrait of female ambition and intellectual aspiration.

The Progressive Achievement: Psychological Depth and Rebellious Consciousness

What unites Cao Xueqin and Stendhal is their shared commitment to representing female subjectivity as complex, contradictory, and significant. Both authors move beyond stereotypical representations. Their female characters are psychologically plausible individuals whose inner lives matter. Both authors grant their female characters forms of consciousness that transcend their social roles, represent female rebellion as meaningful, and create narrative space for female voice and perspective.

The Limits of Empathy: Narrative Strategies of Containment

The Contradictory Self: Internalizing Patriarchal Constraints

For all their progressive achievements, both authors ultimately contain the rebellious potential of their female characters. One crucial strategy is the construction of internally divided heroines whose own psychological conflicts limit their capacity for sustained rebellion.

Lin Daiyu embodies this contradiction most fully. For all her poetic sensitivity and rebellious spirit, she remains deeply marked by patriarchal values. Her horror at "improper" behavior reveals the extent to which she has internalized Confucian norms of female propriety. As one scholar notes, "conservativeness, reserve and chastity as women's duty occupy an unshakable dominant position in her mind" (Ren, 2020, p. 43). This internal division produces the pattern of approach and avoidance that characterizes her relationship with Baoyu.

Madame de Rênal exhibits a similar pattern. Her passion for Julien repeatedly collides with her religious scruples, producing a cycle of transgression and repentance. The climax occurs when her youngest child falls seriously ill; she interprets this as divine punishment and resolves to confess. This internal conflict ensures that her rebellion remains circumscribed, never developing into sustained resistance to patriarchal authority.

Tragic Predestination: Narrative Authority and Inevitable Defeat

A second containment strategy involves the manipulation of narrative structure to prefigure and naturalize tragic outcomes. *A Dream of Red Mansions* carries this strategy to extraordinary lengths. The novel's mythological framework—the debt of tears owed by the Crimson Pearl Flower—predestines Daiyu's fate from the outset. Her tears, her illness, her early death fulfill a cosmic contract. This predestination is reinforced through poetry, dream prophecies, and symbolic names. The narrative effect is paradoxical: Daiyu's tragedy acquires mythic resonance, but this framing also drains her rebellion of political meaning.

The Red and the Black employs different but equally powerful techniques. The moral ambiguity of Madame de Rênal's position creates readerly expectations of punishment. When the denouement arrives, it feels simultaneously shocking and inevitable. Stendhal's ironic commentary creates a sense of detached observation that distances readers from the characters' struggles.

The Romantic Frame: Love as Liberation and Constraint

Perhaps the most powerful containment strategy is the framing of female rebellion within narratives of romantic love. For both Daiyu and Madame de Rênal, rebellion is catalyzed by love and remains bounded by it. Their agency is exercised primarily in the service of love; their fates are determined by love's success or failure. This framing grants female desire legitimacy but subordinates female subjectivity to male mediation. The novels cannot imagine female existence outside the romantic frame. As one critic notes, "all the efforts made by women still directly serve the male-centered culture; both are still martyrs of thousands of years of male culture" (Wang, 2009, p. 29).

Aestheticizing Female Suffering: The Body as Text

A final containment strategy operates through the aestheticization of female bodies and suffering. Lin Daiyu's iconic "sick beauty" represents this dynamic most clearly. Her ethereal fragility, her pallor, her frequent illnesses are described in ways that invite readerly sympathy. The famous first description constructs a femininity defined by vulnerability. This aestheticization makes Daiyu compelling but disarms her rebellion. A body marked by illness cannot sustain effective resistance. Madame de Rênal's representation follows different but analogous patterns. Stendhal emphasizes her natural grace and "maternal" qualities, positioning her within patriarchal ideals of femininity. Even her passion is represented as an extension of maternal feeling. Given Stendhal's biography—having lost his mother at an early age—Madame de Rênal becomes not only a character but also an object of male psychological need.

Discussion: The Paradox of Male-Mediated Female Subjectivity

Comparative Reflections: Culture, Aesthetics, and Gender

The comparison between Lin Daiyu and Madame de Rênal reveals both striking parallels and significant divergences in the construction of male-mediated female subjectivity. The parallels suggest common patterns in patriarchal representation that transcend cultural boundaries: the internalization of constraint, the framing of female rebellion within romantic narratives, the aestheticization of female suffering. These patterns appear to be structural features of male-authored fiction, rooted in the gender positions of authors and the patriarchal organization of literary production. Yet the divergences are equally significant and illuminate the role of cultural and aesthetic traditions in shaping literary representations of gender. Cao Xueqin's representation of Daiyu draws on Chinese lyrical traditions that privilege indirection, symbolism, and emotional interiority. Daiyu's rebellion is expressed through poetry, through aesthetic judgment, through the cultivation of a refined sensibility. Her suffering is rendered beautiful, her death a poetic consummation.

Stendhal's representation of Madame de Rênal, by contrast, emerges from French traditions of psychological realism and social analysis. Her rebellion is expressed through action, through transgression, through explicit confrontation with social norms. Her suffering is rendered psychologically, through the detailed exploration of guilt, fear, and desire. The novel's analytic mode invites readers to understand rather than merely contemplate her fate. These differences matter for feminist analysis. They suggest that the possibilities for representing female rebellion vary across cultural and aesthetic contexts. They also caution against universalizing claims based on Western examples alone. Yet they do not fundamentally alter the paradoxical dynamic identified here: the simultaneous empowerment and containment of female characters by male authors.

The Gaze, the Voice, and the Body: Theorizing Male-Mediated Femininity

The analysis above suggests several theoretical conclusions about the nature of male-mediated female subjectivity. First, such subjectivity is fundamentally paradoxical: it both affirms and denies female agency, both explores and limits female experience. This paradox is not merely accidental but structural, rooted in the contradictions of male authors' positions as sympathizers with and beneficiaries of patriarchal systems.

Second, the containment of female rebellion operates through multiple, overlapping mechanisms that together constitute a "narrative economy" of gender. Internal contradiction, tragic predestination, romantic framing, aestheticization—these strategies work together to ensure that female transgression remains bounded, that its revolutionary potential is neutralized. This economy operates below the level of authorial intention, embedded in narrative structures and conventions.

Third, the male gaze—understood broadly as the organization of narrative perspective around male looking and desiring—plays a crucial role in this economy. Both novels position readers to see female characters through male eyes: Baoyu's adoring yet ultimately helpless gaze, Julien's calculating yet susceptible gaze. This focalization through male consciousness shapes how we understand female characters, filtering their experience through male perception.

Fourth, female voice, even when granted narrative space, remains circumscribed by male narrative authority. Daiyu's poems, Madame de Rênal's letters—these expressions of female subjectivity are embedded within narratives controlled by male authors. The final authority over meaning, over interpretation, over the significance of female experience rests with the male narrative voice.

Beyond the Paradox: Implications for Feminist Literary Practice

What are the implications of this analysis for feminist literary practice? For male writers seeking to create progressive female characters, the analysis suggests the need for sustained self-reflexivity about gender position. The problem is not merely that male authors are "biased" but that they occupy structural positions within patriarchal systems that shape perception and representation. Overcoming these limitations requires not good intentions alone but critical awareness of how gender operates in narrative.

For feminist writers and critics, the analysis underscores the importance of continuing to create and analyze women-authored representations of female experience. The paradox of male-mediated female subjectivity—its simultaneous empowerment and containment—suggests that women's voices, women's perspectives, women's narrative authority remain essential to full literary representation of female life. Yet the analysis also suggests possibilities for dialogue and exchange. Male-authored representations of women, however limited, can provide resources for feminist critique and inspiration. The progressive achievements of Cao Xueqin and Stendhal—their psychological depth, their sympathetic exploration of female experience—remain valuable, even as we recognize their limitations. Feminist criticism operates not through pure rejection but through dialectical engagement with existing traditions.

Summary: The Duality of Male-Mediated Female Subjectivity

This comparative study has traced the paradoxical construction of rebellious female subjectivity in two canonical works of male-authored fiction. Both Cao Xueqin and Stendhal created female characters of unprecedented psychological depth and rebellious consciousness. Yet both also contained the rebellious potential they unleashed through strategies of internal contradiction, tragic predestination, romantic framing, and

aestheticization. This dual movement of empowerment and containment reveals the structural contradictions of male-mediated female subjectivity. The cross-cultural comparison illuminates both the persistence of these patterns across cultural boundaries and their inflection by specific traditions. The implications extend beyond literary criticism to questions of contemporary feminist practice, offering resources for understanding how gender operates in the narratives that shape our imaginations and our worlds.

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