

Psychoanalysis of “Lust, Caution” in the Context of Femme Fatale and Fetishism

Jie Xu*

Department of East Asian Studies, University of Chicago, Chicago IL 60637, USA

*Corresponding author: Jie Xu, jiex@uchicago.edu

Copyright: © 2022 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: This paper focuses on the women’s agency under the Hong Kong movie’s spectrum by using Eileen Chang’s “Lust, Caution” as an example, reassuring the importance of a father figure in a woman’s childhood. The paper first introduces Chang’s female fatale’s figure and puts forward the reason it can be a classic figure. This paper ends with the conclusion of the women’s agency, focusing on human desires and temptations as well as the dilution of ideological opposition.

Keywords: Lust; Caution; Femme fatale and fetishism

Online publication: December 29, 2022

1. Introduction

The novella “Lust, Caution” by Eileen Chang is a spy thriller that transpires during the period of war with layers of not only political, but also psychoanalytical context, embedded in the text. The present paper aims at a psychoanalysis of the central character of “Lust, Caution” [1-3], Chia-Chih, from the perspective of femme fatale and fetishism, since the figure of a femme fatale can be found in the cultures and mythologies of various nations [4-7]. “Lust, Caution” by Chang is a psychological thriller that demonstrates how issues with parents predetermine the choices and roles people tend to choose in their adulthood.

2. Controversial nature of the femme fatale role of Chia-Chih and her relationships with men

The concept of femme fatale is usually rather vivid and strong. A femme fatale is often depicted as the central character with considerable negative or even destructing connotation, power, and capacity to influence other people’s decisions and lives [4,8-10]. In the case of Chia-Chih, her embodiment as a femme fatale is a questionable and controversial matter. To be more precise, Chia-Chih is a femme fatale as far as she remains a spy for the group of accomplices who plan to assassinate the traitor and a female who exploits her sexual power in the name of revolution [11-14]. However, the role Chia-Chih played in this story was considerably distorted.

The first distortion was rooted in Chia-Chih’s family story. As a result of her father’s abandonment, the girl felt a lack of love, care, and thus confidence, leading her to subconscious search for “compensation” [15-17]. It was unsurprising that Chia-Chih found a new family, a group of patriotic college students, since they embodied what she desired but were devoid of unity, support, and dedication, along with significant ideals and values. In this new family, Chia-Chih’s overexcitement was evident for she was a star in the patriotic history plays at her university. She requested her comrades to stay on to celebrate with her for her performance. Her dependence on her new family led her on to a journey of becoming a “secret actress,” a spy, but obscured her role of being a femme fatale.

The new family Chia-Chih found was vulnerable. While she agreed to be a seductive woman in order to assassinate Mr. Yee, her comrades gossiped about her, and she even gave up her virginity to a man who had been inside a brothel. After their first assassination plan failed, Chia-Chih became an outcast within her comrades. Her unpleasant experience of not getting along well with her new family shaped her determination to be a femme fatale.

Apart from that, there was Kuang Yumin, who should be specifically highlighted among all patriotic students in the group. He embodied a father figure for young Chia-Chih^[18]. More precisely, this boy was passionate and devoted to the ideas of patriotism, and there was a stark contrast with her father who was irresponsible and did not show any love for her. At first sight, Kuang Yumin seemed to be a perfect substitute for Chia-Chih's father, thus explaining her secret admiration for this man. Chia-Chih was on the verge of contrast and dramatic opposition in her core relationships with men. She perceived one particular aspect of a personality or man's behavior as symbol of true love and responded with ultimate devotion, faithfulness, and sincere love. Since Chia-Chih had an unresolved conflict with her father, she was not capable of building healthy, sincere, and adequate relationships with men.

Moreover, being a femme fatale in the plan of assassination reflects not only Chia-Chih's longing for a united family, but also her secret admiration for Kuang. In such a way, the girl demonstrated her devotion and love for Kuang by making everything possible to deserve his love. There was no place for self-actualization in the given scenario as far as her ultimate purpose was love since actualization in this context can only be made possible via reciprocal feelings. While Chia-Chih focused on love and unity, Kuang's abandonment before the start of the mission and the night of her defloration revealed his non-ideal father figure to the girl, becoming an agent of the second betrayal. It is possible that her decision to sacrifice herself in the end was partially rooted in the recurrent betrayals Chia-Chih faced in her life. From this perspective, Chia-Chih can be hardly defined as a femme fatale in wartime context.

Third, the start of her role of a seductress coincides not only with Kuang's betrayal, but also with the next stage of her, striving for emotional compensation and finding a correspondent object – Mr. Yee. Having faced two betrayals from men, Chia-Chih was rather emotional and vulnerable. The girl continued playing her role, and since their mission took time and effort, Chia-Chih reconsidered. This paradigm shift in her consciousness, which allowed her to grasp the holistic scale of her personal tragedy, was initially catalyzed by the abandonment of her father. The next stage of the change involved similarities Mr. Yee had with the girl's father. She recognized the same manners and attitudes, his capacity of betraying his own country, *etc.*

Finally, having established the connection of her memories she had of her father and this man along with the perception of him as a human being, and not a villain, Chia-Chih seemed to have received the final sign – a symbol of Mr. Yee's love that was embodied in his promise to buy Chia-Chih a diamond ring. The given symbol is multidimensional, embracing areas such as vanity, the stereotyped perception of love, the power of money and influence, and the power of action for the name of love. Naturally, Chia-Chih's lust for this man grew. All these factors led to Chia-Chih's decision to sacrifice her own life for the sake of this man whom she thought loved her. In such a way, the girl granted the man who finally gave her, at least for a moment, the compensation of love and care she longed for so desperately all her life.

3. Diamond ring as an object of Chia-Chih's fetishism

The ideas of fetishism were first raised by Freud. Foucault argued that sex is the form in which it is manifested in fetishism to serve as the guiding thread for analyzing all the other deviations.

The diamond ring Mr. Yee promised to buy for Chia-Chih represented the fetishism the girl was influenced by. The given fetish, multiplied by lust, and her traumatized psychic led to the resolution of Chia-Chih's need for a father figure. The internal dialogue Mendelsohn^[19] referred to in his work provoked

the decision to save Mr. Yee after his alleged manifestation of love. The interpretation of fetish as a symbol of love led to sacrifice, which, on the one hand, served as a resolution of her Electra complex. On the other hand, Chia-Chih prevented her own betrayal by a person who allegedly loved her. This might be an implicit motivation for her decision, yet her feelings for the father figure and reception of love are the central reasons for Chia-Chih's sacrifice. Delving deeper into the matter of fetishism and the role of Mr. Yee's promise, it becomes evident that Chia-Chih was in a dramatic need for some value, the major priority in her life. Deficit of the most natural and unconditional love had led the girl to a psychological necessity of belonging to someone or something in that unconditional and faithful manner. Therefore, Chia-Chih adopted a priority of political intrigue and joined a group of patriots to become a part of something big, important, and influential.

Being a major agent in the mission endowed Chia-Chih with all that she lacked: attention, power, and alleged control of situations. Basically, being a femme fatale was initially a fetish for Chia-Chih since she felt that she belonged to a family. During her affair with Mr. Yee, this fetish was undermined as far as the girl experienced a new and different kind of belonging. This belonging was mutually exhaustive, challenging, and excessively emotional, which reminded Chia-Chih of her relationship with her father. Yet, the final point of the resolution of her Oedipus complex occurred when the author Eileen Chang enacted the fetish, which appeared to be even stronger than being a femme fatale and completing the mission alongside her family, namely the diamond ring. The diamond ring, as a clue, runs from the beginning to the end of "Lust, Cautions." It first appeared when Chia-Chih and several upper-class wives gathered to play Mahjong, and at that time, Chia-Chih was the only one who did not have a diamond ring. When Mr. Yee offered Chia-Chih a six-carat pink diamond ring, Chia-Chih felt that she had privileges compared to other women and had gained reconciliation with men, including her father, Kuang Yumin, and Mr. Yee. This fetish linked Chia-Chih's lust, positive impressions, and some portion of sympathy and mercy for Mr. Yee; power and greed; along with a distorted perception of true love and vanity into one solid argument and decision to save Mr. Yee.

4. Conclusion

Chia-Chih adopted a femme fatale persona in order to align herself with the plan of Kuang Yumin, the person whom she loved secretly. However, from Kuang's perspective, Chia-Chih was not femme fatale; instead, she was more like an instrument in his revolutionary mission. More importantly, Chia-Chih did not feel herself a femme fatale when she was with Mr. Yee although it was in fact a honey trap for Mr. Yee. Chia-Chih was not a femme fatale even in the end of the story when she sacrifices herself, her accomplices, and their ultimate idea for the sake of her desperate need for love. It was impossible for Chia-Chih to be a femme fatale as far as her serious complex triggered by her father's abandonment was not resolved. This complex ultimately narrowed her vision to a single target, that is, the compensation for love and care. Rather than being a femme fatale, Chia-Chih desired to be a seductive actress and found a stage to perform as compensation for being abandoned.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Chang E, 2016, *Lust, Caution* [Lovell J, Trans.], Penguin, London.
- [2] Thompson Z, 2016, *Beyond Symbolic Rape: The Insidious Trauma of Conquest in Marguerite Duras's The Lover and Eileen Chang's "Lust, Caution"*. *Feminist Formations*, 28(3): 1–26.

- [3] Lim D, 2007, Love as an Illusion: Beautiful to See, Impossible to Hold, *The New York Times*, August 26, 2007.
- [4] Doane MA, 1991, *Femme Fatales*, Routledge, London, 1–2.
- [5] Ellmann M, 2014, *Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism*, Routledge, London.
- [6] Kruger SF, 2000, Fetishism, 1927, 1614, 1461, in *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 193–208.
- [7] Foucault M, Hurley RJ, 1990, *The History of Sexuality*, Vintage, New York.
- [8] Wang X, 2010, Making a Historical Fable: The Narrative Strategy of Lust, Caution and Its Social Repercussions. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 19(65): 573–590.
- [9] Wilonsky R, 2009, The Spy Who Shagged Yee, *City Pages*, rchived from April 20, 2009.
- [10] Yao S, 2017, Female Desire: Defiant Text and Intercultural Context in Works by D.H. Lawrence and Eileen Chang. *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, 71(2): 195–212.
- [11] Hanson P, 2008, The Arc of National Confidence and the Birth of Film Noir, 1929–1941. *Journal of American Studies*, 2008, 42(3): 387–414.
- [12] Kamiyama M, 2008, Steamy Shanghai Period Flick’s Feisty Performers Show Plenty of Lust, Not Much Caution, *Mainichi Shimbun*, archived from the original on February 23, 2008.
- [13] Leng R, 2014, Eileen Chang’s Feminine Chinese Modernity: Dysfunctional Marriages, Hysterical Women, and the Primordial Eugenic Threat. *Journal of Chinese Studies*, 2014: 13–34.
- [14] Vine S, 2005, *Literature in Psychoanalysis: A Reader*, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire.
- [15] Jung CG, (eds) 1978, *Man and His Symbols*, Doubleday, New York, 187.
- [16] Praz M, 1933, Chapter IV, 199: La Belle Dame sans Merci (The Beautiful Lady Without Mercy), in *The Romantic Agony*, Oxford University Press, London/New York.
- [17] Spurling L, 1997, *Sigmund Freud: Critical Assessments*, Routledge, London.
- [18] Scott J, 2005, *Electra After Freud*, Cornell University Press, New York, 66.
- [19] Mendelsohn RM, 1987, The Resolution of the Oedipal Conflict, in *The Synthesis of Self*, Springer, Boston, 225–263.

Publisher’s note

Bio-Byword Scientific Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.