

Exploring Feminist Consciousness Through Music in Eileen Chang's Postcolonial Narratives

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ABSTRACT

The characters, stories, and various issues related to female consciousness discussed in literary texts can serve as a conduit for readers to understand the complex of gender, culture, and identity in postcolonial contexts. This article explores how Chinese-American author Eileen Chang portrays the realization of female consciousness in women from post-colonial Hong Kong and Shanghai through music. Drawing upon the theories of Lucy Green and Marcia J. Citron, this study conducts a critical content analysis of two of Chang's works *Aloeswood Incense* (1944) and *Love in a Fallen City* (1943). It examines specific dialogues and discourses related to themes of music, gender, and cultural identity. In this context, the main character Weilong in one story transforms her engagement with music and education, showcasing her journey towards self-realization and empowerment, while the protagonist Liusu in the other narrative is depicted as navigating through societal expectations and personal aspirations, with music playing a significant role in her self-empowerment. The research findings suggest Chang's works reflect the expectations and limitations of society towards women, while also revealing the crucial role of music in shaping and expressing female identity. This article can serve as a means for readers to learn about how women's roles and identities in relation to music were shaped and how cultural background can help create similar outcomes.

Keywords: Eileen Chang; music; feminism consciousness; post-colonial literature

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INTRODUCTION

Eileen Chang (1920-1995) was a prominent Chinese writer born and raised in Shanghai, a city that experienced significant foreign influence, particularly during the period of the International Settlement and the British Concession (1845-1943). Her formative years in Shanghai, a cosmopolitan hub blending Eastern and Western cultures, profoundly shaped her literary consciousness. In 1939, at the age of 19, Chang moved to Hong Kong to attend the University of Hong Kong. During this time, Hong Kong was under British colonial rule, which began in 1841 and lasted until 1997. The colonial constructs of both Shanghai and Hong Kong, cities where traditional Chinese culture mingled and clashed with Western influences, especially those of British Victorian origin, left an impact on Chang (Carroll, 2006). Her works vividly reflect this cultural amalgamation, portraying Shanghai and Hong Kong as melting pots. This cultural fusion and colonial influence was particularly evident in the aspect of art and social customs, notably in the domain of music which almost became a marker of social status and sophistication. Among the upper and middle classes, it was customary to host tea and dance parties, serving as platforms for social networking and cultural exchange. Women, particularly those from affluent backgrounds, were often encouraged to learn Western musical instruments not merely as a hobby, but as a means to exhibit their societal standing and cultural knowledge (Burnet et al., 2023). However, the social expectation was not for them to excel as professional musicians but to be perceived as cultured ladies with an appreciation for the arts (Scott, 1994). This trend was a reflection of the period's societal expectations of women, influencing their self-perception and identity.

This social framework, with the propulsion of music, class, and gender roles, is crucial in understanding the construction of female identity. The fusion of dominant Victorian male-centric ideologies and traditional Chinese patriarchal views created a blended context in which music served as a proper instrument of gendered socialization. Music also played a key role in the socialization of gender roles, with women's participation and performance in social events like tea and dance parties subtly moulding their self-awareness and societal roles. Music transcended its role as mere artistic expression; it became a critical medium through which women's identities were shaped and defined (Whiteley, 2013). Therefore, music becomes a way for the dominant ideology to consolidate and expand subtly in order to achieve the goal of maintaining political order and strengthening cultural cohesion.

This study analyzes the process of music constructing female consciousness depicted in novels with the same cultural background from the perspective of female consciousness, in order to reveal the universality of this construction. Chang's two novels, *Aloeswood Incense* (1944) and *Love in a Fallen City* (1943) were written when Chang studied in consolidated Hong Kong and live in Shanghai under British Concession. *Aloeswood Incense* tells the story of Weilong, a woman who gained self-worth through music education as a student studying in Hong Kong with nothing. *Love in a Fallen City* tells the story of Shanghai woman Liu, who went from being a divorced woman despised by her family to pursuing happiness through music. While differing in themes and narrative development, both novels poignantly illustrate the predicaments of women set against a complex social backdrop. These works were selected for analysis due to their vivid portrayal of the societal milieu of Hong Kong and Shanghai, and how within these contexts, music played a role in the transformation of female characters. Chang's other notable works, such as *The Golden Cangue* and *Red Rose, White Rose*, also delve deeply into themes of love, family, and societal relations. However, the emphasis on musical scenes is more pronounced in the chosen novels.

LITERATURE REVIEW

REVIEW OF FEMINISM AND MUSIC OF CHANG

A few scholars have noticed female identity and autonomy in Chang's novels. Jessica Tsui (2010) conducts a meticulous comparison of *The Golden Cangue*, *The Rouge of the North* and examines Eileen Chang's exploration of the female body in her novels and self-translations, offering portrayals of women's roles and identities in 20th-century China. Similarly, Chen and Zhang (2019) discussed Chang's usage of native feminist poetics in her translation. His research demonstrates that the feminist perspectives of translators are prominently reflected in the translation work of Chang. Chang's feminist ideology of resistance to the patriarchal system is clearly revealed to readers through her use of supplementary writing (Chen, 2016). their prescribed roles and to express their true selves, no matter how unconventional or unexpected. Chang's feminist perspective of challenging the patriarchal establishment is made evident to readers through her supplementary writing (Zeng, 2019). Chang has never explicitly identified herself as a radical feminist writer, however, her feminist leanings are evident in her literary works and translations. The writings of Chang frequently revolve around music as a novel topic.

Research has been conducted on the musical elements in her novels, with academics attempting to decipher the underlying messages Chang is trying to express through her musical motifs. Some of the research has paid particular attention to how music can be used to investigate feminist and gender topics. One of the earliest studies on the use of music in Chang's work was conducted by Wang in 1996. This study focused on the ways in which Chang uses music to comment on the traditional expectations of gender roles in Chinese society. In particular, Wang noted the recurrent motif of female singers who are forced to sing traditional Chinese songs and the implications this had for female empowerment. Zhang (2014) also focused on the use of music as a tool of empowerment for female characters. Zhang argued that music can be used to express and explore the complexities of female identity, and that Chang's use of music to highlight these issues is both powerful and subversive.

Although extensive research has been carried out on music in Chang's writings, no study exists that digs up how music triggers woman characters' female consciousness. The gap in the literature that this study seeks to fill is to examine the ways in which music serves as a catalyst for the development of female consciousness in Chang's female characters. Specifically, this study aims to explore the relationship between music and the female experience in Chang's works, and to investigate how music shapes the female characters' understanding of themselves, their relationships, and their place in society.

REVIEW OF MUSIC AND FEMINIST WRITING

Key studies have shed light on various aspects of the relationship between music and feminist writing, offering a multi-dimensional understanding of how music was used to express and shape the female experience. Delia da Sousa Correa (2003) delves into the Victorian era's musical influence on female compassion, particularly in the context of George Eliot's life. She examines how Eliot's gender influenced her musical education and creativity within the constraints of Victorian norms. Building on the theme of music in the Victorian era, Sarah McCleave (2017) explores Eliot's novel *The Mill on the Floss*, focusing on how Eliot uses music to navigate themes of permanence, transience, religion, and British culture. McCleave's study extends the

understanding of music's role beyond mere cultural backdrop to a tool for deeper narrative exploration.

Furthering the discussion on Victorian literature, Frazier (2006) shifts focus to how female authors used music as a pedagogical tool to empower women, adopting a separate but equal philosophy in gendered musical education. This reveals the benefits of such approaches in shaping young women's behavior and resistance in a modern context. In most recent study, Weliver (2016) thoroughly examines the societal implications these portrayals had on perceptions of women, music, and gender roles during that era. Later, Rowbothan's study (2015) on popular music and women's subjectivity brings a critical lens to the role of music in contemporary society, arguing against the traditional focus on physicality over subjectivity in music, thus challenging and redefining girl stereotypes in the modern era.

REVIEW OF THEORY

Feminism's journey, marked by various waves, reflects an evolving understanding of gender equality and women's rights. The first wave, primarily concerned with legal inequalities, laid the groundwork for subsequent feminist discourses. Simone de Beauvoir, in her seminal work *The Second Sex* (1949), explored the societal construction of women's oppression, highlighting the need for greater autonomy and freedom. The second wave, expanding into issues like sexuality and reproductive rights, was significantly influenced by works like Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which critiqued the idealization of domesticity. The third wave of feminism, as noted by Rebecca Walker in her works, further diversified the scope of feminist concerns, challenging the definitions and boundaries of gender and sexuality. Each phase of feminism brought forth new perspectives on women's autonomy and their roles in society.

Traditionally, the involvement of women in music, especially in Western societies, was often limited to performance roles, seen as an extension of their societal expectations to entertain and please. As highlighted in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, the ability of women to play instruments like the piano was viewed as a desirable attribute to attract potential suitors, reinforcing their roles as performers for male appreciation rather than as autonomous artists (Liu, 2016). However, feminist scholars have reinterpreted this narrative, viewing women's engagement with music as a form of autonomy and self-expression. For instance, Lucy Green in her work *Music, Gender, Education* (1997) explores how music education can serve as a platform for women to express their individuality and challenge gender norms. Green argues that the act of making music allows women to assert their agency and subvert traditional gender expectations.

The portrayal of women as mere entertainers in a patriarchal society is a critical area of analysis in feminist literature. Scholars such as Suzanne Cusick in *Feminist Theory, Music Theory, and the Mind/Body Problem* (1994) examine how societal constructs often limit women's roles in music to that of passive performers. However, Cusick and others argue that women have used music as a medium to express their individuality and resist patriarchal norms. In contrast, some contemporary feminist theorists, like Marcia J. Citron (1993), have emphasized the progressive aspects of women's involvement in music. Citron argues that participation in music, even within patriarchal frameworks, provided women with opportunities for creative expression and public visibility, which were otherwise limited in a male-dominated society.

The learning and performance of music by women present a complex narrative. While traditionally seen as conforming to patriarchal values, feminist scholarship has shed light on the ways in which music has been used by women as a tool for autonomy, expression, and resistance.

This understanding of women's roles in music underscores the intensity between social expectations and the individual.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts the perspectives of Lucy Green and Marcia J. Citron, which emphasize the role of music in female education and empowerment as crucial components in the construction of female consciousness. Green's approach, which views music education as a medium for expressing individuality and challenging gender norms, and Citron's perspective on women's participation in music as a means for creative expression and public visibility, provide the theoretical underpinnings for this analysis.

The research will employ a critical content analysis method, focusing on how music contributes to female education and empowerment in the novels *Aloeswood Incense* and *Love in a Fallen City*. This analysis will scrutinize the main characters and the narrative structure, using thematic analysis techniques to identify key processes related to the portrayal of music and its influence on the protagonists' lives and decisions.

The primary data sources for this study are two short stories with similar themes: *Aloeswood Incense* and *Love in a Fallen City*. The first, *Aloeswood Incense*, was published in 1943, while the second, *Love in a Fallen City*, shares a similar timeline and thematic context. These narratives by Eileen Chang provide rich textual material for analyzing the interplay of music, female education, and empowerment in a historically significant period. *Aloeswood Incense* counts the story of Ge Weilong, a young girl who moves from Shanghai to study in colonial Hong Kong and gradually descends into moral decline. It paints a vivid picture of the decadence of Hong Kong's high society during the colonial era, portraying Ge Weilong's submissive stance in love, all this begins when she claims that she is good at piano. And *Love in a Fallen City* tells the story of Liusu Bai, a daughter from a traditional family, and Fan Liuyuan, a modern gentleman who studied abroad, whose relationship evolves from an initial encounter at a dance to a marriage shaped by the fall of Hong Kong during the war. In the story, the dance is where Bai's life has changed.

In examining *Aloeswood Incense* and *Love in a Fallen City*, we will utilize a combination of narrative and discourse analysis to dissect the stories' portrayal of music in the context of female empowerment and education. The next step involves interpreting the data based on the descriptions and actions of the main characters in the novels. This will involve a close reading of the texts to extract and analyze instances where music plays a significant role in character development. The interpretation will aim to draw connections between the fictional representation of music and the broader theoretical concepts of female empowerment and consciousness in literature.

FINDINGS

This study delineates the construction of female consciousness experienced by the main characters in *Aloeswood Incense* and *Love in a Fallen City*. Following a careful analysis adhering to the guiding principles in the analytical structure, it becomes evident that in both stories, the protagonists encounter the dilemma of women and realize the construction of self-consciousness in the postcolonial region.

The narratives of Weilong and Liusu in these respective stories highlight the transformative journey of their female consciousness. Their experiences offer a poignant commentary on the

societal pressures and internal conflicts faced by women during this historical period. This study reveals that despite the challenges they face, both characters exhibit resilience and a growing awareness of their own autonomy, influenced in part by their engagement with music and education. This progression underscores the importance of personal growth and self-realization in the context of female empowerment.

MUSIC AND WOMEN'S EDUCATION

This study reveals that music helps to shape feminist consciousness via women's education in Chang's *Aloeswood Incense*. Chang was a firm believer in the importance of education for women, and often spoke of the need for them to adhere to strong principles. She was an advocate for the empowerment of women, and felt that education was the key to this. In almost every novel written by Chang, she introduces female characters who have been educated in some way. Miss Ge Weilong is one of the most representative female protagonists in literature. She is a strong and determined woman who faces numerous obstacles in pursuit of her dreams. Through her character, readers are able to gain insight into the struggles and triumphs of women in a patriarchal society. Miss Ge Weilong's story is an inspiring example of how perseverance and courage can lead to success.

At the beginning of the story, Weilong is standing in the hallway of a large villa in the middle of the mountain. After being invited to the living room by the owner, the first thing that comes up to her eyes is a piano. The piano and the surrounding furnishings attract enough attraction for the musical rendering from the beginning, guiding the reader to explore the hidden meaning of the piano. Mrs Liang suddenly changed the subject and pulled the reader's view back to the piano: "**Can you play the piano?**" Although Weilong did not have a piano at home, she knew something about it because her teacher had handed it over when she was in school. Weilong "**took lessons for a few years**", but she is "**not very good**" (Chang, 41). The enlightened gentry class usually sent their daughters to local schools or hired tutors. In most girls' schools, music was one of the basic courses, but the content taught in the schools was more superficial; ordinary peasant or feudal families, on the other hand, had difficulty in getting their daughters to receive systematic music education due to economic reasons and the shackles of feudal rituals. A good musical education was very important for women at that time, as it was a symbol of the upper class. However, this musical education was limited for girls. As Mrs Liang told Weilong, "**We don't need a concert pianist**. Work up a few popular tunes, some songs that everyone likes; the only thing you have to do is play the accompaniment. All the young English ladies can do this." (41). Music education certainly gives women the key to the upper class, but it stops there. Women do not have the right or the reason to learn virtuosity, a lack that is seen as an important factor in constituting femininity. Historically, musical participation has been differentiated along gender lines. Hong Kong was heavily influenced by British culture (Hong Kong was always a British colony for 100 years before Chang lived) and as Mrs Liang said, "**...here in Hong Kong we follow the English ways** (41)." So in the Western culture that permeated Hong Kong, women's participation in music education was not equal to that of men.

With her piano skills, Weilong won the admiration of her aunt, who is thus willing to plan for Weilong to squeeze into high society. Mrs Liang often held garden parties in her mansion. This kind of event in Hong Kong is a "legacy of the British in the 19th century" (60), after the ladies had tea, they would invite several young ladies to play piano music. In the garden party held by Mrs Liang, Weilong inevitably played this role. Mrs Liang "**held more and more garden parties**",

and Weilong “**played the piano and sang more and more**”. The purpose of music education at this time is not to cultivate a sound and perfect personality. In a world in which limited occupations were open to women, skill in music and art expanded women’s options and, for some, made independence possible (Margaret, 2013). In this sense, the musical culture of the 20th century exercised the dominant role of the “ideological state apparatus of education” (Lerner 176), psychologically trying to shape women as passive objects of execution in a covert way.

During Weilong’s performance at the ball, she met George, who was known as a notorious playboy. Initially, she felt somewhat “**inferior**” in George’s presence. However, as it turned out, George lacked ambition and the ability to earn money. He intended to rely on Weilong to **support himself**. Weilong, having received a Western education and being knowledgeable in music, became a socialite, earning her keep by attending to wealthy individuals. By the end of the story, Weilong had “**taken on the role of a provider for her family**” (97). Her transformation from a penniless student to a figure in high society is the result of the awakening of her female consciousness.

Music education equips students with the necessary tools and insights to understand the complexities of music, including theory, composition, and performance. By instilling self-confidence and encouraging creative problem-solving, music education nurtures skills that are crucial for success in any field, reinforcing the significance of feminism in education and the role of music as a means of empowering women. Chang’s work thus makes an invaluable contribution to the discourse surrounding the intersection of music education and feminism, highlighting the need for educational excellence as a means of fostering growth and empowerment among women.

MUSIC AND WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT

Music does not always affect women only in the field of education, it also show importance in women’s empowerment. Women of the British aristocrats and gentlemen in the Victorian period had a more privileged and luxurious life, which was mainly reflected in clothing and social life. For aristocratic and gentleman families, preparing a social introduction ball for a daughter has similarities to preparing for a battle (Liu, 2016). The purpose of the “battle” is to find a well-matched husband, and the battlefield would be the dance hall. Because only on this occasion, young ladies have the opportunity to formally talk to men.

Mr Liuyuan refused to communicate with Baoluo for her “**not knowing how to dance at all**” (Chang, 93), rather, he turned to Liusu for dance three times. It is required for people to be customary to music and rhythm. Therefore, the perception of music is an important part of social dances because it requires them to know the steps and rhythms of the dance. It was an occasion for women to showcase their talents and for men to check the results of women’s musical studies. There were so many restaurants in Shanghai, but Mr Liuyuan chose one that provided a place for dancing, so it was determined in her mind that it was essential for women to be able to dance.

Before Liusu participated in the introduction ball for the first time, she was ridiculed by her families who think that Liusu was ashamed as a divorced woman (243), Liusu was “**shock with fury; her lower jaw quivered so hard that it seemd ready to dropped off** (243)”. Although the whole family were preparing the date for Baoluo and Liu Yuan, they also helped her find a blind date. But everyone took it as a joke (254), and Liusu had a taste of being neglected. After being favored by Liuyuan at the ball and invited to several dances, Liusu who returned home was humiliated by her family again without any suspense.

You've got a heart smeared with pig fat! If you think that by ruining your sister's chances you are going to get lucky, you'd better forget it! He's turned down so many ladies, do you think he'd want a soiled flower like you?

(p. 272)

However, this time Liusu was not as angry as before, but “**perfectly calm**” (p. 272). The matter of dance party was not intentional, but no matter what, it made the people in the Bai Mansion look at Liu Su with “**admiration**” (p. 273). Obtaining the priority right to choose a spouse through the ball allows Liusu to gain a perception of self-consciousness. In the second ball, in order to courtship, she let go of her reserve and took the initiative to show her favor to Fan Liuyuan; at the age of 30, her youth was running out. She understands that Liuyuan, who is in the upper class, knowledgeable, wealthy and has Western learning experience, she must actively fight to win his love, her anxiety and helplessness will disappear, and her survival will be guaranteed. She was very clear about her goal, and she approached Liuyuan again and again with the attitude of earning a living with love.

In the course of the second dance, for the sake of courtship, Liusu dropped his reserve and showed intimacy to Liuyuan. She knew that for Liuyuan, who was upper-class, knowledgeable, rich, and with Western education, she had to flatter him to win his love. Her anxiety and helplessness to disappear, and her survival to be assured. She knew what she was aiming for, and she approached Liuyuan again and again with an attitude of making a living out of love. Though Liusu could tell that Mr Liuyuan was unreliable and flirted with women, she could only save herself through him. So at a later dance with Liuyuan, she was able to handle Liuyuan's invitation with aplomb, and they flirted and pulled each other closer. In such a turbulent world, Liusu is a brave and knowledgeable woman.

Eventually, Liusu “bravely gets together with Liuyuan” (p. 293). She transcended class barriers in China through aristocratic musical acts. Her fight points to the need for all men and women, rich and poor, to achieve the highest in the female field. Through the ball, the Liusu proved her worth as a woman.

DISCUSSION

Chang's two novels explore the female identities regulated by music in the Shanghai region of Hong Kong and Shanghai during the 20th century. These works reflect the ideals of women during this period, depicting the struggles they faced and the strength they found within themselves. Through the stories of the characters, Chang conveys how music can shape identity, and how society's expectations of women can be both oppressive and empowering. The 20th century saw music become an integral part of the social fabric of Hong Kong and Shanghai. It had a profound influence on the worldview of the people living in these two cities, and in particular, the thinking of women. Music was used to express emotions and ideas, and often served as a means of communication between people. It was also used to bring people together and to create a sense of community. Music was a powerful tool for expression, helping to shape and define the identities of the people living in Hong Kong and Shanghai. This is why it is no surprise that music was so deeply embedded in the culture of the two cities, and it is undeniable that it had a significant impact on the thinking of women in the region.

Women have the potential to gain immense power from music education and activities, which can then be applied to their everyday lives. This power will offer them an insight into their own personal experiences and help them to understand their existential predicament. Music can be

used as a form of expression, allowing women to articulate their emotions and feelings in a creative way. As such, it can be seen as an invaluable asset in helping to bring about positive change in the lives of women. The analysis of Chang reveals that her female protagonists are not portrayed as idealized figures but as realistically flawed individuals. By presenting the women in her novels in this way, Chang is able to create a more authentic and believable representation of womanhood. Chang's works demonstrate her skill as an imaginative female novelist, and her ability to craft complex and believable characters that challenge traditional gender stereotypes.

Chang's use of music in her work not only adds depth to the themes of relationships, finance, and personal growth, but also serves as a tool for self-empowerment for women. Through her literary work, Chang encourages women to explore the complexities of life and to seek out new opportunities for growth and self-actualization. Music plays an important role in this process, as it can evoke strong emotions and serve as a source of inspiration and motivation. As a woman, it is a fact that no matter what era one lives in, there will always be limitations and expectations that are placed upon them. Women will constantly face barriers that they must strive to overcome in order to achieve their goals and reach their full potential. This has been true throughout history and will remain the case until a time when equality is truly achieved. It is up to us to strive for a better future, where these barriers are removed and women are given the same opportunities as men.

CONCLUSION

This study is an extension of the study of Chang's two novels *Aloeswood Incense* and *Love in a Fallen City*. The research results indicate that *Love in a Fallen City* depicts the female dilemma faced by Liusu and demonstrates how music promotes the construction of female consciousness through empowerment, eventually leading to happiness. On the other hand, *Aloeswood Incense* presents Wei Long's personality traits, demonstrating how music shapes and influences female consciousness through educational media, ultimately helping Wei Long move towards self-reliance. The story of Wei Long illustrates the important role of music education in providing women with intellectual and personal growth pathways, which is crucial for the development of their self-awareness and autonomy.

Therefore, *Aloeswood Incense* and *Love in a Fallen City* are both literary works that reflect the complex relationship between music, education, empowerment, and the formation of female consciousness. In addition, the author's own postcolonial background enriches the reading of these two short stories, providing insights into culture, history, and gender complex. In this regard, careful reading of these two narratives can allow readers to gain a deeper understanding of the multifaceted intersection between music and gender, identity, and cultural changes. These novels not only reflect the social conditions of the time, but also comment on themes such as women's empowerment and the transformative impact of music on women's lives.

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