

Dwelling and Escaping: “Worldliness” and “Aloofness” in East Asian Feminist Writing-A Comparative Reading of *Memories of Matsuko* and *The Vegetarian*

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Abstract: Drawing on an analytical framework of “worldliness” and “aloofness” within the “oppression-resistance” binary narrative, this article examines two works of East Asian feminist writing—*Memories of Matsuko* and *The Vegetarian*—to delineate two survival paradigms that female characters adopt under the multiple power structures of family, state, and market: the “worldly faction”, epitomized by Kawajiri Matsuko, and the “otherworldly faction”, represented by Kim Yeong-hye. By comparing the sharply divergent coping mechanisms through which the two protagonists respond to women’s existential pressures, this article elucidates how East Asian gender power structures regulate women’s survival strategies and exposes the emancipatory limits of one-dimensional individual strategies. Building on this, the article recasts the “worldliness”–“otherworldliness” dyad embedded in Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist traditions as an indigenous analytical tool for feminist literary criticism, thereby opening a culturally grounded and dialectically integrative theoretical pathway for understanding East Asian gender power structures.

Keywords: Feminist Theory; East Asian Women's Literature; Gendered Survival Strategies; Power-Discourse Analysis

1. Introduction

Since the twentieth century, East Asian women's writing has been shaped by the influence of Western feminism while remaining deeply embedded in indigenous historical and cultural contexts, giving rise to a distinctive tension. Japanese scholar Chizuko Ueno argues in *Patriarchy and Capitalism* that the dual oppression of patriarchy and capitalism remains the core predicament of East Asian women’s existence, and that the structural division

between the production of things and the reproduction of human beings constitutes the root cause of women’s subordination.[1]

Memories of Matsuko (2003) and *The Vegetarian* (2007), as paradigmatic texts of twenty-first-century East Asian feminist writing, respond to the existential predicament under patriarchy through two heterogeneous mechanisms—“relational attachment” and “productive withdrawal,” respectively—thus foregrounding a stark polarity between “worldliness” and “aloofness (otherworldly detachment).” “Worldliness” and “aloofness,” as a dialectical pairing rooted in the Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist traditions, were employed in ancient China to elaborate the “way of the junzi in conducting oneself in society,” illuminating the dialectic between the individual and society, engagement and transcendence, as well as the psychological strategies of adjustment in the pursuit of goals. This article argues that, in the specific context of East Asian feminist writing, the transformative deployment of the “worldliness–aloofness” framework represents not merely a matter of individual psychological inclination, but a systematic interpretation of the coping psychology and behavioral patterns spontaneously developed by women confronting the predicament of subjective dissolution. By transforming the indigenous cultural concept of “worldliness–aloofness” into a theoretical instrument for feminist literary criticism, this article opens an interpretive pathway for understanding East Asian gender power structures that diverges from Western binary categories. Through a cross-national comparison of Japanese and Korean texts, it explicates the shared structural features of East Asian women’s predicament and the particularities specific to each national context, thereby providing an empirical foundation for the maturation of East Asian feminist methodology at the intersection of literature and sociology.

2. Method

This article integrates close reading, narrative analysis, comparative analysis, and interdisciplinary methods to construct a tripartite analytical framework of “text–theory–context,” through which it undertakes a systematic comparative examination of the two primary texts, *Memories of Matsuko* and *The Vegetarian*.

2.1 Research Methods

Close reading and narrative analysis: a layered dissection of the narrative structures, symbolic systems, character discourses, and psychological depictions in the two representative works.

Comparative method: situating the two works within the shared context of East Asian feminist writing, this article undertakes a cross-national comparison along four dimensions-theme, character, narrative strategy, and cultural background.

Interdisciplinary method: building on literary studies, this article draws on theoretical resources from philosophy, sociology, psychology, and gender studies-including Foucauldian power theory, ecofeminism, psychoanalysis, and East Asian feminism-to construct an interdisciplinary, integrated analytical framework.

2.2 Theoretical Elaboration

2.2.1 The “oppression–resistance” binary narrative as problematic framework and critical impetus

The “oppression–resistance” binary narrative is a classic analytical framework rooted in Western feminism that positions patriarchy and women at opposite poles of power-structure struggle; within this framework, the theories of “worldliness” and “aloofness” can be understood as “survival strategies under oppressive structures.” Furthermore, the concept of “resistance” renders the resistant character of both strategies identifiable: each embodies women’s agency under structural predicaments, yet their divergent paths converging toward the same tragic fate lay bare the insurmountable cycle of oppression that existing power structures have set in place for women. The “oppression–resistance” framework’s exposure of the “productivity of power” provides theoretical grounding for understanding how the strategies of “worldliness” and “aloofness” are simultaneously circumscribed and co-opted by

power structures.

2.2.2 East Asian feminism: methodology and regional perspective

East Asian feminism is not simply a transplantation of Western feminism into the East Asian context; rather, it is an indigenized theoretical formation rooted in the region’s specific historical and cultural contexts and responsive to the distinct lived experiences of East Asian women. According to the core proposition of “constructing a methodological East Asian feminism” advanced by the Japanese scholar Kitagawa Toko, a “methodologized” feminism is characterized by the “principle of connectivity” and insists on understanding women’s oppression as a structural and systemic social problem. Feminism should be understood as an intellectual method of analysis that approaches issues from a “women’s perspective,” situating seemingly isolated phenomena within their structural interconnections so as to reveal the socially constructed nature of discrimination and oppression.[2]

2.2.3 Foucault’s gender theory applied: power analysis and body politics

Foucault’s theorization of gender provides a basis for dissecting the micro-mechanisms of power and the politics of the body. In the domain of gender, “gender” itself is a product of the “power-knowledge” apparatus-medical discourse “discovers” the physiological differences between men and women, psychological discourse “constructs” the classificatory systems of masculinity and femininity, and knowledge in turn becomes an instrument of power that disciplines individuals and upholds the gender order. Body politics demonstrates that modern society exercises meticulous regulation over women’s bodies through normalizing technologies,[5]traditional patriarchal gender norms, far from being dissolved by modernity, have instead become intermeshed with the logic of the capitalist labor market, producing a dual discipline over women. From the perspective of Foucault’s later “aesthetics of existence,” both Matsuko’s extreme pursuit of a self-definition grounded in “femininity” to gain male approval and Yeong-hye’s attempt to dissolve her given subjectivity and re-sculpt the self can be understood as radicalized forms of “technologies of the self,” through which individuals may reshape their subjectivity through self-practice.

3. Discussion

3.1 Dwelling and Escape: Specific Forms and Operational Mechanisms of Women's Survival Strategies

3.1.1 The uninhabitable “relationship”: other-directed fantasies and self-loss
Patriarchy treats the expression of love as a surrender of power, so that-whether on a rational or an emotional level- “silence” has to some degree become the most common communicative language in East Asian parent-child relationships. Children, as the recipients of power, caught between a craving for recognition and the experience of banishment, develop psychological wounds that can never fully heal. “Entering” is the keyword that runs through Matsuko’s entire life: entering an intimate relationship, entering a family, entering the role frameworks that society prescribes for women. Yet this strategy ultimately reveals itself as the paradox of the uninhabitable-the more she enters and conforms, the more estranged and lost she becomes.

Matsuko’s “survival strategy” manifests concretely in three interlocking dimensions. First, she instrumentalizes socially sanctioned “femininity” as a tool to secure male approval. Second, she sustains relational stability through asymmetrical emotional investment. Third, she uses “entering relationships” as a means of escaping loneliness. In Matsuko’s conception, “being loved” is equated with “existing.” More than the loss of self and freedom, Matsuko fears the aimlessness and nothingness that accompany the state of solitude. Behind this “addiction to relationships” lies an unbearable intolerance of the single state and a deep-seated dread of confronting alone the predicament of self-dissolution.

In terms of its operational mechanism, Matsuko’s “survival strategy” is the product of the interwoven effects of multiple structural forces and individual psychological trauma. At the individual psychological level, when the family fails to provide emotional belonging, Matsuko turns to society in search of a substitute “home.” She repeatedly seeks surrogates for the father figure within different “social units,” only to be wounded again and again by the structural violence of patriarchal society. Her fixation on “entering relationships” ultimately becomes a vulnerability, causing her to be harmed by “intimate relationships” both consciously and unconsciously, and accelerating the

disintegration of these relationships and the tragic fate of being abandoned. At the level of social discipline, Foucault’s power theory points out that the key to the operation of power in modern society lies not in top-down violent repression, but in the establishment of a classificatory system of the “normal” and the “abnormal” through scientific discourses such as medicine, psychology, and pedagogy, thereby producing “docile bodies.”[5] “Femininity” defines women’s social identity-namely, submissiveness, gentleness, domesticity, emotionality, being emotion-centered, and prioritizing the needs of others. Matsuko’s “survival strategy” mirrors this internalization of discipline, enacting “femininity” as a “survival strategy”. A Foucauldian analysis reveals that this very “initiative” is itself circumscribed by power structures; when women mistake the products of discipline for their essential selves, “agency” is effectively reduced to an enabler of power’s self-perpetuation, and rigidified gender consciousness locks individuals firmly into the positions preordained for them by patriarchy, thereby forfeiting any possibility of constructing an autonomous subjectivity.[4]

The psychology of “worldliness” is summarized in terms of two core elements: a “striving spirit” and “concern with outcomes.”[6] Matsuko’s “survival” strategy consistently involves intense outward-directed effort and the pursuit of an ultimate state of dwelling. Yet the very system of social norms she seeks to integrate into is itself premised on female subordination; rather than offering genuine dwelling, it becomes a propulsive force that plunges women deeper into the vortex of alienation.

3.1.2 The unreachable “plant”: productive escape and regressive repair under power-discourse

If Matsuko’s behavioral pattern represents an obsessive “entry into relationships,” then Yeong-hye’s behavioral strategy displays a radical “withdrawal from relationships”-a systematic exit from social production and the symbolic order so as to reach a realm of existence beyond the reach of disciplinary power. Yeong-hye’s “survival strategy” traces a distinct regressive trajectory: from family, to society, to life itself-each step drawing her further from the normative networks of human society, stripping away the socially assigned functions acquired after birth, until finally casting off even the innate elements that constitute the human,

becoming completely a “plant.” However, owing to the moral constraints that have not yet been extinguished in others, Yeong-hye’s regressive path ultimately cannot reach complete fruition; her personal alienation is regarded by others as a “transgression of established conventions,” and, amidst the agony of a ruptured subjectivity, she sinks ever deeper into the boundless pathological web of power-discourse.

Derrida’s concept of “carno-phallogocentrism” reveals the hierarchical binary opposition in the Western cultural tradition between “man/human/carnivore” and “woman/nature/consumed.” The feminist writing in *The Vegetarian* proceeds from women’s bodily experiences and engages with the law of the jungle and the hierarchy of contempt embedded in the food chain to resist the “carno-phallogocentric” order.[7] Understood from this perspective, Yeong-hye’s vegetarianism constitutes a symbolic challenge to “carno-phallogocentrism.” Amidst the relentless spread of extreme violence and terror among human beings, Yeong-hye refuses to remain complicit as a “carnivore” or to stay trapped within the power chain of “predator” and “prey.” By the third part of the narrative, Yeong-hye’s regressive trajectory has extended from the refusal of meat to the refusal of speech and movement, progressively and systematically stripping away the basic forms of social interaction. In silence, she severs the possibility of symbolic exchange with others, taking the fantasy of becoming a plant as the endpoint of her regressive path and regarding the “attainment of the plant form” as the final stage of her “survival strategy”—that is, a mode of coexisting with order in a de-subjectified, de-socialized, and de-historicized manner. In contrast to Matsuko’s “dwelling,” “escape” serves as the enduring anchor of Yeong-hye’s “survival strategy.”

At the level of power-discourse, the operation of Yeong-hye’s behavioral pattern can be understood through the mechanism of the construction of “madness” as revealed by Foucault. Yeong-hye’s vegetarianism is regarded as an “unassimilable transgression”—it exists for no recognized reason, and this “purposeless pure refusal” removes it from the conventional discursive framework of understanding, ultimately leading to its pathologization as “anorexia” by family and medical authorities.[8] Foucault argues that “madness” is not a natural

biological fact but a power construct through which the rational order secures its own legitimacy by systematically excluding the “Other”; the “power-knowledge” apparatus treats behaviors that cannot be interpreted within existing discursive systems as resistive acts that destabilize order, and directly transforms them into individual pathological problems. This explains why Yeong-hye’s survival mechanism is swiftly labeled with the medical tag of “anorexia” and subjected to correction. When the “prey” rebels, its self-injurious nature reveals the structural predicament of the weak-within the “carno-phallogocentric” gender power structure, women, as the disadvantaged party, possess only their bodies as their first and last territory, the sole private property over which they can exercise arbitrary control. Yeong-hye’s “survival strategy” can therefore only be enacted through self-injurious behaviors such as vegetarianism, wrist-cutting, and fasting, by which she expresses her discontent with reality and her desperate resistance.[9]

Ecofeminist theory argues that patriarchy’s oppression of “woman” and “nature” is isomorphic, with both relegated to the subordinate position in hierarchical binary oppositions and treated as the Other of “man/reason/culture.” Han Kang deploys an inverted imagination to resist the jungle logic of might makes right: Yeong-hye relinquishes the superior position of the “human” and willingly descends into the status of “plant,”[7] this constitutes not merely an escape from patriarchal society, but also a utopian imagination of a non-hierarchical, non-violent mode of existence: the plant form can shed the constraints of socially assigned duties and return to a pure, bare-minimum mode of existence defined solely by “living for the sake of living.” But Yeong-hye is ultimately trapped in a double bind: the human consciousness of both herself and others prevents her from truly reaching the plane of the “plant,” while her rejection of the essence of “humanity” makes it unbearable for her to continue existing as a human.[8] From an ecofeminist perspective, as long as the individual remains situated within human society, a complete escape into the “natural” can hardly be truly realized.

Analyzed from the perspective of psychological mechanisms, Yeong-hye’s regressive strategy is intimately bound up with the compulsive repetition of childhood trauma and dissociative

defense. As a child, Yeong-hye witnessed how her father brutally killed and cooked a dog that had misbehaved; to a significant degree, the traumatic memory led her to employ the refusal of meat as a symbol of rejecting “violence” and as a flight from the origin of fear and guilt associated with that memory. The fantasy of “becoming a plant” can in turn be regarded as a dissociative mechanism of self-protection.

3.1.3 Absent presence: the “other” narrative in feminist writing

Both works jointly construct a narrative paradox of “absent presence”: the female protagonist is at once the absolute center of the text and a marginal existence within the order of discursive power. Beyond heightening the narrative tension of these literary works, the “other” narrative strategy also forges, on a narratological plane, a profound metaphor for women’s discursive predicament in patriarchal society.

Memories of Matsuko employs a complex frame narrative structure: an outer layer follows an investigator’s fluid, present-day timeline as he retrospectively examines the life of an “aunt” forgotten by her family, while an inner layer pieces together the image of the “despised woman”—a figure entirely mediated through the Other—by drawing on multiple perspectives, including Matsuko’s diaries, others’ recollections, and imaginative scene reconstructions. *The Vegetarian* employs a more tightly woven narrative structure, deploying a triple perspective to present the full trajectory of Yeong-hye’s “transgression.” Through a polyphonic narrative network formed by her husband, brother-in-law, and sister, it unearths the dramatic upheavals of her life and her deep-seated psychological afflictions; Yeong-hye’s actions and inner world become visible only after being refracted through the lens of the “Other.” This “Other” narrative strategy is itself an aesthetic reenactment of the patriarchal discursive order. Both works place the female protagonist under the polyphonic gaze of the “Other,” using fragmented perspectives to reveal society’s dissonance in its unidimensional construction of female identity. The pluralized individual cannot be fully subsumed within existing discursive frameworks, and the protagonist’s subjectivity perpetually overflows the frames of male discourse that seek to capture it. Foucault points out that power operates not only through institutional discipline but also through a sustained, asymmetrical “gaze” that normalizes

the subject.[10] Using the “Panopticon” as a metaphor, it reveals the process by which the watched, knowing themselves to be perpetually under the gaze of others, gradually internalize disciplinary norms. The narrative structure of a literary work thus resembles a narratological “prison”: Matsuko adjusts herself under her father’s expectations, her lovers’ judgments, and society’s scrutiny; Yeong-hye dissociates herself amidst her husband’s indifference, her brother-in-law’s desire, and her sister’s anxiety. Stepping outside the dimension of the works themselves, the audience is also placed in the position of the “watcher,” jointly completing the disciplinary “gaze” imposed upon the subject.

3.2 The Predicament of “Converging Paths”: The Collapse of the Subject Under a “Resilient” Gender Power Structure

3.2.1 The family and household as the primary site of power operations

Foucault points out in *Discipline and Punish* that the family is the “primary workshop” for the operation of disciplinary power—a site where hierarchical surveillance, normalizing judgment, and examination procedures infiltrate the individual’s body and consciousness in the most everyday and intimate manner, producing docile subjects who conform to social norms.[10] Foucault’s body theory reveals that history unfolds upon the body, and that knowledge and power continuously shape it. The body is neither an independent biological entity nor an object opposed to consciousness, but a field where power operates ceaselessly.[5] Introducing this theoretical perspective into the study of feminist writing reveals that the “family” is precisely the earliest and most fundamental disciplinary space in which patriarchy acts upon the female subject. Here, gender norms are not imposed in the form of external prohibitions but are internalized through everyday discourses such as “love,” “care,” and “family upbringing.”

Within the family field, the “paternal generation” establishes the boundaries of discipline and the violent substratum of punishment as figures of authority. In both works, the father figures, through differing disciplinary strategies, aim toward a shared disciplinary goal at both the gender and ethical levels: to make children, through the process of being imperceptibly influenced while growing up, consciously form a self-identity that internalizes patriarchal norms. Matsuko’s father is typical of “cold-type

discipline”: within the patriarchal structure, he systematically distributes emotional resources, and through the “cold violence” discipline of emotional neglect and preferential differentiation, he produces Matsuko’s “people-pleasing personality.”[11] Yeong-hye’s father, by contrast, presents the countenance of “violence-type discipline,” relying more on sensorily provocative physical abuse and the killing of animals to instill in her a deep-seated fear of violence. At the same time, the participation of female characters in this disciplinary process in *The Vegetarian* reveals, from another dimension, the predicament of women within the family field. Yeong-hye’s mother and sister, as the “silent majority” in the family, are caught between patriarchal norms and “Yeong-hye’s awakening”-unable to “hold on” with a clear conscience, yet unable to “let go” with cruel resolve. Their silence and endurance are the marks of female relatives’ participation in the family disciplinary apparatus, making them disciplinary accomplices within the execution link of the power network [3].

Extending from textual analysis to the level of social reality, the assertion that the family functions as the primary site of gender power operations retains powerful explanatory force in contemporary East Asian society. As the primary site of gender discipline, the family is also a core nexus of the “social structure”; it not only produces women’s early internalization of gender norms, but also continuously supplies the capitalist market with “already docile” female labor and “unpaid” reproducers. In this sense, the family tragedies of Matsuko and Yeong-hye transcend isolated literary phenomena, presenting the condensed and refracted everyday experiences of women in East Asian society.

3.2.2 Family-state isomorphism: the structural constraints of state and market

Confucian culture regards the “family” as a microcosm of the “state,” and the “state” as an extension of the “family”-the monarch is the “sovereign father” of his subjects, the father is the “king” of the family, and both share the same hierarchical logic of power. This isomorphic relationship enables the patriarchal order within the family not only to reproduce itself in the private sphere but also to gain legitimation in the public sphere through state laws, moral instruction, and social norms. The structural predicament of East Asian women originates not only from patriarchal violence within the family

but also from systemic influences at the state and societal levels-such as the differential legal provisions for men’s and women’s rights, the differential educational cultivation of gender roles, and the differential absorption of men and women by the labor market-all of which are continuations of “family-state isomorphism” in modern society.

In modern times, although formal gender equality has been established, the law’s neglect of the value of domestic labor and the non-socialization of the costs of reproduction have effectively perpetuated women’s dependency on the family. Meanwhile, through “ideological state apparatuses” such as national education, mass media, and literary and artistic works, social ideology continuously produces and reproduces the gender-normative template of the “virtuous wife and good mother,” making it the dominant model of female role performance. Notably, in the context of modernity, the dissemination of themes of women’s awakening, in the process of deconstructing rigid gender attributes, has often strategically fixated on the image of the “virtuous wife and good mother” as a critical target, thereby foregrounding the multiple possibilities and subjective power of the liberation of femininity. The state’s strategies of population governance have also brought women’s bodies within the purview of state management. Whether in Japan’s postwar policies that encouraged childbirth to replenish the labor force or in South Korea’s promotion of the “education mother” during its economic development period, women’s reproductive labor has been treated as a strategic resource for national development rather than as an autonomous bodily right. Both Matsuko and Yeong-hye, through their personal experiences, reveal the helplessness and bewilderment of having to submit to the gendered power structure. Confronted with the unequal allocation of gender resources by society, they either choose to “identify with the prescribed role,” maintaining a semblance of stability through dependent relationships, or to “withdraw from production,” becoming alienated individuals in society who are then labeled with a pathologizing tag. Under the shadow of this historical legacy, the tragedies of both Matsuko and Yeong-hye converge upon a single structural fact: “family-state isomorphism” continues to operate in the course of East Asian modernity, persistently constructing the predicament of

women's social existence through new forms and with new forces [14].

"Family-state isomorphism" provides the macro-institutional framework for women's predicament, while the labor market supplies its micro-economic foundation. In *Memories of Matsuko*, after Matsuko loses her teaching position due to the "loss of chastity," society offers her virtually no alternative options; within a gender-segregated labor market, once a woman deviates from the "normal" track, she faces an enormous risk of plunging into the underclass. The *Vegetarian* reveals, from another angle, the "M-shaped" employment trajectory characteristic of East Asian women. In-hye, the elder sister, takes up running a cosmetics shop again after raising her child; the unstable cycle of quitting work to raise children either before or after marriage and then seeking re-employment afterwards turns women into "permanent temporary workers" and produces severe occupational gender stratification.[9] Extending from the two works to the level of social reality, the gender power network jointly constructed by "family-state isomorphism" and market logic continues to display considerable "resilience" in contemporary East Asian societies, revealing three major predicaments confronting East Asian women under "compressed modernity": self-injurious rebellion within the family, "added value" and the fragmented self, workplace sexual harassment, and the pseudo-sexual spectacle of consumption.[9]

The "converging paths" of the two women constitute not merely a personal tragedy, but a structural tragedy produced under the combined constraints of the family-state-market nexus. Within this structural bind, the path of "worldliness" traps women in the gender-segregated labor market and the objectifying logic of consumerism, while the path of "aloofness" entails the forfeiture of all social protection and discursive resources, reducing the individual to a pathologized condition.

3.3 The "Worldliness-Aloofness" Strategy: Toward an Indigenous Methodology for East Asian Feminist Literary Criticism

3.3.1 Cultural roots of worldliness and aloofness in east asian feminist writing

"Worldliness" and "aloofness," as core propositions of the Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist traditions, are introduced into the

domain of East Asian feminist writing as a contemporary transformation of these traditional cultural themes. Within the structural predicament of dual oppression by patriarchy and capitalism, East Asian feminist writing rewrites the cultural connotations of "worldliness" and "aloofness" through literary imagination, turning them into an interpretive theory for the specific "oppression-resistance" pathway.

In the field of psychology, "worldliness-aloofness" is defined as a "success motivation system," and it is significantly correlated with variables such as subjective well-being, employment pressure, and core self-evaluation.[6] This provides an operational basis for treating "worldliness-aloofness" as a psychological disposition. Within sociology, this concept can enter into dialogue with Foucault's "aesthetics of existence" and "technologies of the self." The methodological stance of East Asian feminism-the "principle of connectivity" and the "women's perspective"-offers guidance for transforming the concept of "worldliness-aloofness." Proceeding from the concrete lived experiences of East Asian women, it activates indigenous conceptual resources within traditional culture. The "women's perspective" is the "perspective of the oppressed"; it serves both as a critique of the orthodox perspective of "modernist thinking" and as a tangible capacity for perception-a capacity that renders feminism a "mature method" capable of invoking and analyzing a wide range of social phenomena.[2]

Under the theoretical lens of "worldliness-aloofness," women are repositioned from passive recipients to active seekers exploring survival strategies under oppression, capturing the dimension of female characters' agency within their environment. Deeply rooted in East Asian cultural contexts, the concepts of "worldliness" and "aloofness" engage in mutual contestation and absorption, forming a complementary dynamic. In the domain of interpreting feminist writing, these two concepts are not mutually exclusive opposites but rather exhibit an interrelated and mutually transformative dynamic process. This dialectical relationship enables the analytical framework to move beyond the simplistic binary of "oppression-resistance," revealing the complexity and contradictions inherent in women's survival strategies.

3.3.2 Overview of the worldliness strategy

Matsuko's "worldliness," however, is not simple passive submission but a strategy she actively chooses; she constantly seeks optimal solutions within the rules of the patriarchal game, and this pattern of continuous adjustment and experimentation corresponds to the core feature of the "worldliness" strategy-seeking possibilities for change within existing structures. Yet her "survival" strategy also contains a structural flaw: her psychological mechanism treats "entering relationships" and gaining approval as the sole source of self-worth, without recognizing that this form of value validation is itself built upon women's subordinate position. The more she strives to conform to patriarchal gender expectations, the more she is locked into the very position prescribed for her. In the deep paradox of the "worldliness" strategy, the harder women endeavor to integrate into social norms, the more unpaid labor they are compelled to assume.

Looking more broadly across the field of East Asian women's literature, the survival strategy of "worldliness" assumes several typical forms. Using marriage as a stepping-stone, Bai Liusu and Ge Weilong-characters created by Eileen Chang-choose to secure material support and social status through marriage, regarding it as one of the few legitimate avenues for women to attain economic security and social recognition in patriarchal society. Treating the workplace as a battleground, Kim Jiyoung in *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* confronts structural barriers such as sexual harassment, unequal pay, and promotion ceilings, while also enduring additional psychological strain from the domestic duties of the "second shift," embodying the dual predicament imposed upon contemporary women by workplace and family identities.[12] Using the body as capital and as a means of exchange to secure economic income and emotional attachment, Matsuko-even as she sinks into the sex industry-never abandons her "worldliness" efforts, attaining professional dignity by becoming the establishment's top hostess and validating her self-worth through emotional entanglements with men, thereby countering objectification with objectification. From Japan's Matsuko to Korea's Kim Jiyoung, and extending to analogous female figures across world literature, these women all seek to secure survival resources and identity recognition by integrating themselves into

networks of social relations. Different historical contexts and cultural traditions endow "worldliness" with varying concrete forms; the "worldliness" framework not only reveals the universal structure of East Asian women's predicament but also respects the specificities of each country's historical context, exhibiting a genealogical profile marked by both commonalities and particularities. Viewing "worldliness" as a "survival strategy" illuminates the behavioral logic of female figures like Matsuko while exposing how patriarchy and capitalism sustain their own reproduction by co-opting women's agency, thereby turning the "survival strategy" itself into a mechanism of power. Within the analytical framework of "worldliness," women's agency is neither romanticized as "free choice" nor dismissed as "false consciousness"; rather, it reveals how agency is circumscribed by power structures. In the East Asian society of "family-state isomorphism," "worldliness" signifies not merely an individual's entry into society, but, more fundamentally, entry into an intricate network woven from patriarchy, capitalism, and cultural tradition.

3.3.3 Overview of the aloofness strategy

The "aloofness" strategy, marked by bodily regression, psychic desubjectification, and the radical simplification of existence, constitutes an alternative "survival path" distinct from "worldliness." Far from being simply a passive withdrawal from the world, this "survival strategy" can be understood as a form of resistance against disciplinary power carried out through extreme means. The political force of Yeong-hye's strategy of "becoming a plant so as to escape social production" lies in its stripping disciplinary power of its target: medical discourse and treatment, familial norms and constraints-none can act upon a tree.[8] But the central dilemma of the "aloofness" strategy is that it trades the possibility of escape at the cost of self-injury, which frequently sinks the subject deeper into the predicament of subjective dissolution.

The strategy of "aloofness" can be understood within the genealogy of "progressive withdrawal mediated by the body" in East Asian literature. The protagonist of Han Kang's another novel *Greek Lessons* exhibits a similar survival strategy of "silence as resistance." The novel tells the story of a woman who, having lost her mother, her child, and her family, ultimately

loses the ability to speak. Her “aphasia” is not merely a physiological phenomenon but also serves as a representation of her rejection of the patriarchal linguistic order. Language is a prison, exercising a deep and invisible control over thought; the heroine of *Greek Lessons* attempts, through the study of “the most ancient language,” to explore the possibility of equality in gender relations.[7] This logic of “silence as resistance” is identical in character to Yeong-hye’s silent manifestations: when language itself serves as a vehicle of power, silence becomes the most radical form of resistance—both a refusal of patriarchal discourse and a consequence of traumatic memories that cannot be symbolically integrated. Furthermore, within the “aloofness strategy,” “madness” also serves as a protective feature. Lu Xun’s “Benediction” depicts Xianglin’s Wife, who, after a series of devastating blows—losing her husband, her child, and being plundered of her family property—ultimately enters a spiritually numb, “hollow” state, pinning her hopes on an intangible and imperceptible afterlife. On the surface, Xianglin’s Wife’s “madness” manifests as a mental breakdown, but at a deeper level of thought, it represents a complete severance of social relations. Those around her remain deaf to her suffering, and her “compulsive muttering” becomes a dying struggle against social forgetting. Her final yearning before death is to transmute the miseries of this life into indulgences for the next, staking everything on an unreachable “afterlife” to escape an unbearable social reality. Xianglin’s Wife’s “fixation on the afterlife” and Yeong-hye’s “plant fantasy” share the same representational character, signifying the individual’s dissociation from and escape from reality, and treating the most deeply desired object in the subconscious as an outlet for spiritual redemption.

From a traditional perspective, women like Yeong-hye are often regarded as “patients,” “madwomen,” or “passive escapist.” Within the analytical framework of “aloofness,” however, “refusal” itself can constitute a form of resistance, and Foucault’s concept of “technologies of the self” enables feminism to reconceptualize agency—agency that can manifest not only as an active “doing” but also as a passive “refusing to do.”[4] Within Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist traditions, “aloofness” is not simply “escaping the world” but also encompasses the Daoist spiritual realm of “free

and easy wandering” and the Buddhist ultimate liberation of nirvana, rendering it a survival choice with profound philosophical legitimacy. The concept of “aloofness” possesses dialectical analytical depth: it not only explains “why to withdraw” but also reveals “the limits of withdrawal.” Exposing these limits helps illuminate why women choose “withdrawal” as a form of resistance, and prompts reflection on the very possibility of “withdrawal” itself. In the East Asian society of “family-state isomorphism,” where the threefold nexus of family, market, and state is interwoven, no one-dimensional “withdrawal” can achieve genuine escape. Within layered and nested disciplinary domains, patriarchy sustains its own reproduction by co-opting women’s resistance. Even if Yeong-hye breaks free from the constraints of the “family level,” she is re-contained at the next level constituted by society and the market. Although this differs from the lucid entrapment produced by the “worldliness” strategy, the converging paths of “worldliness” and “aloofness” alike display the tragic manifestations of East Asian women’s predicament.

3.4 The Road to Liberation in Women's Predicament

The “worldliness–aloofness” analytical framework represents a constructive attempt to understand women’s predicament and to propose survival strategies. Moving beyond the analytical level of individual strategies, and premised on a correct understanding of the predicament of feminist writing in literature, how can contemporary theoretical resources open up new paths for women’s liberation in social reality and identify a genuine space of liberation?

Engels’ theory of “twofold production,” put forward in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, indicates, from the perspective of women’s liberation, a structural pathway out of the “worldliness–aloofness” predicament. This theory holds that the only path to women’s liberation lies in women’s return to public labor, specifically through developing modern large-scale industry, transforming domestic labor into a public undertaking, and affirming the economic value generated by housework.[13] The emancipatory significance of this pathway lies in its quest for an equilibrium between “survival strategies” within

the “worldliness–aloofness” framework by transforming the family structure itself: through large-scale socialized production, domestic labor is shifted from the private sphere into the public sphere, enabling men and women to participate in social production on an equal footing and to share family responsibilities. In addressing the issue of modern women’s liberation, socialist feminism further situates women’s oppression within the dual analytical framework of “capitalism” and “patriarchy,” insisting that genuine women’s liberation must transcend individual “strategic adjustment” and be grounded in the transformation of social institutions. In the contemporary East Asian social reality, the pattern of interrupted employment and re-entry through part-time work renders women’s employment opportunities, working conditions, and wage levels far from optimistic,[9] a sound legal system should be established to provide institutional safeguards for domestic workers, combined with the maternity insurance system to resolve their concerns; both forms of productive labor should be valued, and economic value should be assigned to domestic labor.

Scientific gender consciousness points to a path for women’s liberation at the ideological level, advocating the construction of non-dominating gender relations. When solutions to gender issues remain confined within the traditional male-centered system of gender ideology, the need for society-wide establishment of new gender value criteria and for benign interaction between the two gender groups cannot receive adequate attention. The simple appeal to “gender equality,” due to the indeterminacy of its measurement standards, cannot genuinely guide the further development of gender liberation. Scientific gender consciousness requires the recognition of gender difference and opposition: men and women are mutually dependent and mutually defining existences, and this absolute difference demands that the resolution of gender contradiction must comprehensively consider the contradictory yet unified, holistic existence of both gender groups. Second, gender value judgments must be rectified: a binding safeguard system should protect the value of women’s physiological existence, while simultaneously demanding “men’s return to the family” in order to maintain the unity of gender relations within the family and the overall stability of the family at the level of individual existence. Through the

construction of scientific gender consciousness, society can be brought to acknowledge the objective reality of gender difference and to dismantle the reified gender consciousness whose core is a relationship of subordination.[15]

The hallmark of a mature feminism lies in its movement from “movement” to “method,” and from the “isolated individual” to a “convivial world,”[2] only by correctly understanding the predicament of women’s writing in literature and undertaking reforms from the depths of social structures can the possibility of a genuine space of liberation for women in contemporary society truly be opened up.

4. Conclusion

This article argues that the “worldliness–aloofness” analytical framework furnishes the study of East Asian feminist writing with an indigenous methodology that combines cultural rootedness with critical depth. Two sets of “survival strategies,” driven by opposite behavioral logics, are jointly constrained by the threefold power network of family, state, and market; their convergent tragic quality exposes the limitations of one-dimensional individual strategies. The existential predicament of East Asian women must transcend a narrative confined to the individual level and be understood as a product of structural forces. By integrating qualitative textual analysis with quantitative verification grounded in socio-historical data, the “worldliness–aloofness” framework can achieve generalizable analytical efficacy, and future research may further explore the potential for constructing alternative emancipatory imaginaries-such as “conviviality” and “solidarity”-in literary texts. A correct understanding of women’s predicament in literature depends on a paradigm shift from “social pathology” to “social structural theory.” The value of literary scholarship lies precisely in rendering the invisible structures visible, thereby supplying cognitive resources and emotional impetus for emancipatory practices in the real world.

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