

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

“I’ve been pinned down in bed, selling what’s between my legs, while that little tramp Yuxiu would land a good job. She’d be in better shape than me. But that thought did not last. Isn’t what I’m doing the best way to win back some dignity for my family? It’s worth it”

(Bi Feiyu, 2010, trans. Goldblatt & Lin, p. 121).

This quotation shows how Yumi sees her own sacrifice in marriage, sexuality, and pregnancy by comparing it to her younger sister, Yuxiu, who can rely on her beauty to get a good job more easily. For a moment, Yumi feels jealous and frustrated because she has to *"sell what's between her legs"* while Yuxiu's path seems easier. Yumi, the oldest sister, responds to this situation by getting married, seemingly as part of her effort to help restore her family's standing.

This moment is significant because Yumi is aware of the unfairness of what she has to go through compared to her sister, yet she still chooses to accept her role and even justifies it to herself as something meaningful. This reflects how deeply patriarchal values have shaped the way Yumi thinks: instead of resisting her condition, she finds a way to make her sacrifice feel honorable, which shows how patriarchy does not only control women’s bodies but also their way of thinking about their own worth.

There exists an irony in the female body. The irony lies in the nature of ownership of the body, which belongs entirely to the woman but is always labelled and defined by other sources. Due to the constant interpretation and judging of the body of women, it leads to the fact that there is no expression of their voice regarding their body. This is why the female body takes on a different meaning, one that makes it something that can be exchanged or even sold. When a woman has nothing else to rely on except her own body, using her body is no longer just about submission — it becomes a way for her to survive. The female body is often discussed as a controversial topic in social, cultural, and political contexts. It is not

only seen as a physical body, but also as something onto which society places its expectations, desires, and power. What makes the female body so visible in this discussion is the fact that it carries fertility, physical form, and beauty standards that society itself has created, such as skin texture and body shape.

Over time, the female body becomes something that is contested by forces beyond women's control, and this contestation does not happen in a vacuum — it is shaped by long-standing patriarchal structures, originating in Confucian social philosophy and persisting, in modified form, through the Maoist era, that assign women a subordinate position regardless of their individual choices. Even so, women who do not have enough financial means to survive, raise their children, find a job, improve their social status, or gain attention are still willing to use their bodies to achieve these goals. The female body is constantly watched, controlled, and judged based on the changing standards of femininity. In patriarchal societies, especially in rural China during the 1970s as depicted in Bi Feiyu's *Three Sisters*, women rarely have full ownership over their own bodies, since the body is seen as a source of honor, a key tool for economic survival, and, ultimately, a commodity to be exchanged.

In this context, a woman's beauty or labor is often treated not as something that belongs only to her, but as something that can be used to improve social status, protect family honor, or ensure survival amid poverty. This shift — from the body being something a woman feels and owns for herself, to the body becoming something that can be traded — is what is called commodification.

This study draws on Karl Marx's theory of use value and exchange value to explain how this shift occurs: a commodity is something that satisfies a human need (use value) but also carries a value realized only through exchange with something else (exchange value), and the value of a commodified object comes from its ability to satisfy human needs or to add value to another object that has no use value in the market. The study also draws on (Benedicta, 2011) distinction between subjecthood and objecthood to explain who controls that shift in each woman's case — whether she actively directs her own commodification, as a subject, or whether it is carried out upon her by outside forces, as an object. Together, these two frameworks form

the operational lens through which this study analyzes the commodification of the female body in the novel.

Three Sisters is a novel by the Chinese author Bi Feiyu that focuses on the Wang family, whose father, Wang Lianfang, is a local Communist Party official. The family's social standing is damaged by two things: first, the pressure to have a son, which is only fulfilled with the birth of their eighth child, and second, the father's extramarital affair, which further damages the family's reputation. To restore their family honor, the burden eventually falls on the three daughters. Yumi, the oldest sister, deals with this by getting married — not for her own happiness, but to restore her family's dignity and improve their social standing. Yuxiu, the most beautiful of the sisters, comes to recognize her beauty as a form of social capital that she can deliberately use to gain advantages — attention, opportunity, and status — but this same beauty later exposes her to danger when she is sexually assaulted by a group of strangers. Lastly, Yuyang, who is seen as the least attractive sister, becomes a victim of sexual assault by her own teacher, a man who had no right to treat her that way.

Each sister's experience illustrates a different position within the same underlying structure: Yumi and Yuxiu actively direct the commodification of their own bodies in pursuit of family honor or personal advantage, while Yuyang's commodification is imposed upon her almost entirely by outside forces. Taken together, their stories show how patriarchal control in 1970s rural China operated both through women's own internalized compliance and through direct exploitation by those in power over them.

Bi Feiyu is a well-known Chinese writer and screenwriter. He was born in 1964 in Xinghua, Jiangsu Province, and has worked as a journalist, poet, and novelist. He has received several literary awards, including the Lu Xun Literary Prize. Some of his well-known works include the screenplay for the film Shanghai Triad and the novel The Moon Opera, which was longlisted for the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize. Three Sisters, the novel that won Bi Feiyu the Man Asian Literary Prize in 2010, can be seen both as a portrayal of Chinese family and village

life during the Cultural Revolution and as a critique of it, particularly through its focus on the emotional struggles and the lives of women in China (News, 2011).

This novel is important for this research because, as the title suggests, it effectively portrays the power relations between the female characters in the story. In addition, there is still a lack of academic research on this novel, so this study aims to help fill that gap.

1.2 Statement of the Problems

1. How is the female body represented as a commodity in Three Sisters, as seen through the transformation of its use value into exchange value?
2. How does the commodification of the three sisters' bodies reflect the patriarchal structure of 1970s rural China?

1.3 Purpose of the Study

1. To examine how the female body is represented as a commodity in Three Sisters, focusing on the transformation of its use value into exchange value.
2. To investigate how the commodification of the three sisters' bodies reflects the patriarchal structure of 1970s rural China.

1.4 Significance of the Study

The current study offers several contributions to Literary Studies and Gender Studies. In terms of Literary Studies, this study contributes to the existing research on modern Chinese literature by being one of the first academic studies to discuss Bi Feiyu's novel Three Sisters, especially within the field of English Literature. In terms of Gender Studies, this study is significant because it shows how marginalized women's struggle for survival, the difficult choices they have to make, and the poverty and gender discrimination they face are portrayed in the novel. In practice, the results of this study can be used as a reference for further research on gender issues in Chinese literature, and can also contribute to literature-based discussions on patriarchy and women's marginalization, such as in literature classes or gender studies seminars.

1.5 Methodology

In this *skripsi*, qualitative research is used to explore the commodification of the female body in Bi Feiyu's novel *Three Sisters*. Descriptive qualitative research is research in which data is collected by examining different aspects of the data as a whole, within its natural setting (Gay, 1996, as cited in Desmawati, 2018). The data in this study consists of dialogues and narrative sentences directly involving the three main characters — Yumi, Yuxiu, and Yuyang — taken from Bi Feiyu's novel *Three Sisters* (2010), translated by Howard Goldblatt and Sylvia Li-chun Lin. The data are then analyzed using Karl Marx's theory of commodification, particularly the concepts of use value and exchange value, alongside Benedicta (2011) distinction between subjecthood and objecthood, to examine how commodification operates differently across the three characters.

1.6 Scope and Limitation of the Study

This *skripsi* analyzes about commodification on the female body during 1970 in rural China, represented by the three main characters: Yumi, Yuxiu, and Yuyang, the three main characters, with Marxism theory in the novel *Three Sisters* (2010), written by Bi Feiyu and translated from Chinese into English by Howard Goldblatt and Sylvia Li-chun Lin.

1.7 Status of the Study

Yet, no study has specifically analyzed the commodification of the female body in Bi Feiyu's *Three Sisters* through a Marxist feminist lens. However, several related studies have been identified that partially address the themes explored in this research. According to Qian (2024), conducts an interesting comparative analysis between Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and Bi Feiyu's Yumi, focusing on both authors' views on social injustice, poverty, and discrimination against women in rural settings. Although these studies discuss both gender and social oppression, none of them apply a Marxist feminist approach.

As for the commodification of the female body, there have been various studies that have examined this issue in different settings. For example, Laforme-Csordas (2021), highlights the role of Instagram in the commodification of women's bodies within a capitalist system, where algorithms negatively affect women's identities and wellbeing. Another scholar, Xaba (2019), questions the idea of freedom within a patriarchal and capitalist setting, arguing that although the concept of liberation in feminist discourse may seem empowering, it can actually lead women to objectify themselves and, in turn, commodify their own bodies. Similarly, Wani (2016), looks at how advertising commodifies women through the objectification of women in media images, with serious effects on how society perceives gender. However, although these three studies provide a useful framework for understanding the issue, they focus on commodification within modern-day media and advertising, while ignoring how the commodification of women happens within literature, especially in the context of 1970s China.

This research, however, focuses specifically on the three female protagonists of the novel Yumi, Yuxiu, and Yuyang — and analyzes each of them individually. More specifically, this study examines how each sister views and uses her own body, the different ways commodity fetishism applies to each sister, and the process through which each sister's body changes from having use value (its biological and social function) into having exchange value, within the patriarchal context of 1970s rural China. This specific approach, based on Karl Marx's theory of commodification and focused on each protagonist individually, has not been used in any of the studies mentioned above.

1.8 Organization of the Study

This study is organized into four chapters. Chapter I, the Introduction, presents the research background, statement of the problem, purpose, significance, scope, limitations, and methodology of the study. Chapter II, the Review of Related Literature, reviews relevant literature and theoretical frameworks, particularly feminist theory, patriarchal structures, and commodification, as reflected in literary works set within rural Chinese society.

Chapter III, Findings and Discussion, forms the core of the thesis, analyzing the commodification of the female body in *Three Sisters* through the experiences of Yumi, Yuxiu, and Yuyang as sites of exchange, exploitation, and survival within the patriarchal structures of 1970s rural China. Chapter IV, Conclusion and Suggestion, summarizes the key findings, draws conclusions on the commodification of the female body in the novel, and offers recommendations for future research.

