

## DECODING MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIP IN YING CHEN'S L'INGRATITUDE

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### ABSTRACT

*Ying Chen, a Chinese migrant writer in Quebec, has portrayed various themes of migrant writing such as exile, cultural rupture, struggle and problems of migrants, filial relationships, etc. in her texts. In this view, this paper aims to reflect the mother-daughter relationship through her novel L'Ingratitude (1995). This novel reveals the mother-daughter relationship from two different psychological aspects. Primarily, the visualization of mother as her own image in her daughter's upbringing in the social-cultural dimensions and secondarily, the daughter's own existence in the quest of her identity under the oppressed and dominating social phenomena. The psychoanalysis and social learning theories facilitate the understanding of the themes and approaches of South Asian migrant writers in Quebec. This paper will explore the mother-daughter relationship in the novel of migrant writer, Ying Chen.*

**Keywords:** Alienation, Identity, Memory, Mother-Daughter relationship

In Quebec, the twentieth century is well recognized for empowering women not only politically and economically but also in the domain of arts and culture. This period witnesses the diverse forms of literature. Migrant literature is one of the various forms of literature during 20th century, emerged due to constant migration from the last five decades. Several waves of migrants entered in this territory, who mainly came from different parts of Europe, Asia, Africa, etc. In Quebec, the constant arrival of migrants diversified their cultural origins and this cultural plurality changed the composition of Canadian society. This enormous growth in immigration has changed the various themes of the literature and the emergence of new kinds of themes such as exile, memory, the feeling of otherness, uprooting, culture, strangeness, and identity become the major part of migrant literature of twentieth century. Since the last three decades of the twentieth century, women's role in society, motherhood, and filial relationship play an important role in female writing. The contribution of many female theorists and writers such as Adrienne Rich, Nancy Chodorow, Nancy Friday, Cathy Davidson, Marianne Hirsch, etc, is primarily enhanced the understanding of filial relationship and motherhood in the novels of migrant writers. The fictional form of writing always known to create a room where the silence and hidden truth can be described and explored by the different readers. In Quebec, real or symbolic

matricide and Infanticide keep a significant place in women's writing and portray it as an important theme of the 20th century such as Françoise Loranger's Mathieu(1949), Anne Hébert's Le torrent(1950), Marie-Claire Biais' La belle bête(1959) and Diane Giguère's Le temps des jeux (1961). These novels do not represent the evil picture of the mother but see her as a victim of society who always struggles for her survival, and controlled and pressurized by society. She is a woman whose life is disgraceful and humiliated by a man or by an intolerant patriarchal society. She can only express her anger upon the one who is less powerful than her that is ultimately her child, particularly, a girl child. After that, Aline Chamberland's La fissure (1985) and Ying Chen's "L'Ingratitude"(1995) raise the question on the mother-daughter connection and violence in their relationship.

Ying Chen's L'Ingratitude (1995) creates an amazing glimpse for its readers. Ying Chen has a significant place among the South-Asian writers who portrayed the socio-cultural aspects through her writings where language, past and contemporary history, and the geographical and political dimensions play a significant role. Ying Chen, born in China in 1961 in Shanghai. She graduated in literature and specialized in French at the University of Shanghai. In 1989, she moved to Montreal to continue her higher studies in French. Her first novel "La Mémoire de l'eau" (1992) published in the French language. Her third novel,

L'Ingratitude,(1995 ) praised by both critics and readers. This novel was nominated for le prix Femina and for le prix du gouverneur général, and won le prix Paris-Québec et le prix des lectrices de Elle. Ying Chen's L'Ingratitude depicts a story of rigid and complex relationship between mother and daughter. The relation leads Yan-Zi, the protagonist of the novel, to commit suicide in order to break the cord between her and her mother. The narrator threads the memories of the past in the present situation. The story is narrated by the soul of Yan-Zi, who had died at the beginning of the story.

The soul of Yan-Zi moves around her dead body and waits for her cremation. She observes reactions of her mother on her dead body. Yan-Zi remembers the past events of her life and put them in the sequences that forced her to death. She remembers her relationship with her father, and her over-possessive and dominating mother. Yan-Zi blames her mother for the suicide and wants to punish her for her dominating character. She wants to see her mother as helpless mother.

The major theme of the novel is the narration of the character of the mother who regulates her daughter's life and makes it harsh and oppressive that leads her daughter towards suicide. The daughter's decision to kill herself is to flee from the ties of her mother. She wants her mother to feel guilty and shameful due to the offence of suicide committed by her. As Xiongya Gao has explained in her article on Confucius doctrine for women role in the Chinese society that "The Three Obedience require women to obey the father before the marriage, obey the husband after marriage, and obey the first son after the death of husband. The Four Virtues are (sexual) morality, proper speech, modest manner, and diligent work" (Gao 2003). The novel represents the bond between the mother-daughter relationship and shows the failure of their relationship in the social periphery. It focuses on the psychological aspects of the relationship between mother and daughter. The quest for freedom and identity has dominated the relationship of mother and daughter. Chen's narrative structures build a space for the daughter's perspective and the mother has been portrayed as a subject. The mother figure in the

novel is a woman whose femininity is damaged in the past. She is a victim of society who loves her daughter and connects her destiny with her daughter. She wants to take care of her daughter while imposing the boundaries for her daughter's better fortune. In L'Ingratitude, indeed, mother and daughter relation is strongly connected with each-other. The famous psychoanalyst and literary theorist Marianne Hirsch describes feminist narrative as follows:

"[they] are based on the heroines' refusal of conventional heterosexual romance and marriage plots and, furthermore, on their disidentification from conventional constructions of femininity. Mothers - the ones who are not singular, who did succumb to convention in as much as they are mothers - thereby become the targets of this process of disidentification and the primary negative models for the daughter" (Hirsch 1989).

Hirsch's model represents the mother as a person who possess enormous power to control the daughter's life, and for her daughter, mother is an evil and threatening figure who wishes to regulate daughter's fortune.

The novel "L'Ingratitude" explores the life of its female protagonist whose existence is influenced and dominated by her over possessive and over caring mother. The theme of the novel helps us to investigate the notions of violence and control that is very useful to understand the psychology of an authoritarian mother and her rebellious daughter. According to Yan- Zi, her mother is the woman who has converted her life intolerable and suffocated. Françoise Couchard demonstrates that the fertile imagination surrounding the bad mother arises from the daily experience of many unfortunate people. The extreme rigidity in the behaviour of mother varies for son and daughter. Her behaviour is more rigid for daughters in comparison to sons. As sons are considered to the extension of patriarchal society.(Couchard 1991)

Ying Chen's L'Ingratitude includes all elements of motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship. The story encourages to analyse the psychology of the action and reaction of the mother-daughter relationship in "L'Ingratitude". that insisted the mother for having dominating behaviour for her daughter's

upbringing, and finally the daughter's reaction towards the mal-treatment. In the beginning of the Novel, the protagonist, Yan-Zi says that "They treat me like a criminal" (Chen 1995:3). The protagonist Yan Zi is already dead (by committing suicide). She says that "My death is a disgrace beyond measure because I condemned myself to it. I carried out my own sentence" (Chen 1995:3). Yan-Zi wanted to punish her mother by committing suicide for not supporting her and for her dominating behaviour. The suicide is the way that can damage her family lineage and prestige that her mother wanted to preserve. She knows that committing suicide in Chinese society is treated as a sin that can dishonour the prestige of her family.

Nancy Chodorow gave the psychoanalytic explanation on mother daughter relationship in her book *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* : "As long as women mother, we can expect that a girl's pre oedipal period will be longer than that of a boy and that women, more than men, will be more open to and preoccupied with those very relational issues that go into mothering-feelings of primary identification, lack of separateness or differentiation, ego and body-ego boundary issues and primary love not under the sway of the reality principle" (Chodorow 1999).

The mother figure in *L'Ingratitude* is obsessed who controls the actions of her daughter. Nothing is important for her except one relation (with daughter). In the Novel both mother and daughter (Yan-Zi and her mother) seems like inseparable couple whose identities are interconnected and they both are tied with an invisible bond (as daughter is an extension of mother). Moreover, Yan- Zi has said "Our relationship has no spark. We were like an old couple for whom everything had become lip, predictable, rotten. We need an abrupt separation, a vigorous uprooting to rediscover each other, even if only to abandon each other forever" (Chen 1995:6). She narrated further in the novel about her perception towards her mother and says "She had dreamed of a marvellous future for the two of us. In her dream, there would be a place for Father, whom we had to accept out of charity, and another of my future husband, who was

necessary for the continuation of our family. I would be her chosen one" (Chen 1995:97).

Although, the protagonist criticises the dominant behaviour of her mother, she also has an affection towards her mother. As Yan-Zi said in the text: "If I would have preferred to die in the private warmth of the maternal body" (Chen 1995:19). It also projects the psychology of the child development where in her inner instinct, she is still in the preoedipus stage. Caroline Eliacheif and Nathalie Heinich mentioned in their work "*Mères-filles, une relation à trois*", about the mother-daughter relationship and says that ce couple monstrueux formé par une vieille mère qui ne veut pas que sa fille grandisse et une vieille fille qui ne parvient pas à se dérober à l'emprise de sa mère" (Eliacheif & Heinich 2010).

Such kind of mental state demonstrates the weakness and impuissance of the father who is failed to deliver love and affection to her daughter. It also depicts an overprotective mother figure who does not want to see her daughter as an adult. She wants to pull out everyone from her daughter's life that can take away or separate Yan-Zi from her. Yan-Zi expresses her mother's love as

"It [a love] could alter my memory, make me forget my origins, abandon my mother and devote myself to a young stranger who had done nothing for me, it naturally implied ingratitude" (Chen 1995:43).

Her mother always recalls her daughter that she is the part of her and her identity is connected to her. She wants her daughter to remember that individually her daughter is nothing. She tells her daughter constantly about the pain that she had during her birth. She reminds to Yan-Zi that "You cannot get away from me, I'm the one who formed you, your body and your spirit, with my flesh and my blood!" (Chen 1995:15-16). Lori Saint-Martin reveals in her article "*Infanticide, Suicide, Matricide, and Mother-Daughter Love*", about the "ownership of the body and mind," here further legitimized by the traditional concept of filial piety (Maria Ng 202) is even stronger in Yan-Zi's mother, who insists, over and over, that a daughter is always a part of her mother, with no identity of her own" (Martin 2001). Here, the visualisation of the physical and psychological boundaries

seems disappeared between mother and daughter. Consequently, the mother realises her adult daughter as a part of her own body.

Such behaviour of mother is associated with her pride and honour that she desires to get through her daughter. Thus, she wants to protect her daughter from the outsiders especially male because daughter's one wrong act can ruin the prestige and family name. Yan-Zi's mother is worried about her own social reputation. She wants to secure the purity and chastity of her daughter in order to retain her reputation. She creates a dominating and fearful environment around Yan-Zi to prevent the invasion of a man before her daughter's marriage. Caroline Eliacheif and Nathalie Heinich further asserts that, "un inceste qui ne passe pas par des gestes accomplis sur un corps, mais par une confusion symbolique des places" (Eliacheif & Heinich 2010).

Such oppressive and dominating climate around Yan-Zi seeded the feeling of revenge to her mother and she took the revenge by falling in sexual activity with her friend(Bi). Yan-Zi expresses her feeling "The deed was done. My body had been torn apart. Mother had hatched a body that was no longer worth anything" (Chen 1995:88). She had sexual relation with Bi but this action also failed to keep her away from the memory of her mother. Ying Chen elaborates the inner feeling of a daughter. When Yan-Zi said: "I thought it was great. But I didn't say that, except for the memory of a sharp pain, I had completely forgotten the taste of that adventure and that, as I had abandoned myself to the arms of a stranger. I had been thinking only of her(mother)" (Chen 1995:96-97).

Yan-Zi has violated the Chinese norms meant specially for the girls. The sexual act of Yan-Zi represents the Social and Traditional formation of the Chinese periphery. In Chinese tradition, sex before marriage considered a taboo that can destroy the family status and their lineage.

Nancy Chodorow explains that "at some level mothers and daughters tend to remain emotionally bound up with each other in what might be called a semisymbiotic relationship, in which neither ever quite sees herself or the other as a separate person" (Chodorow 1999).

Yan-Zi demonstrates her inseparable ties with her mother. It also justifies that her mother was

always present in her thoughts. The omnipresence of her mother reveals the unbreakable ties between mother and daughter. It also illustrates that Yan-Zi can never achieve the individuality and has not achieved after her death. Silvie Bernier points out in her work "Ying Chen : S'exiler de soi" about the mother's psychology where she cannot differentiate between herself and her daughter : "La proximité de la mère et de la fille vivant sous un même toit compromet l'étanchéité des personnalités. La frontière est incertaine, l'identité de l'une n'a de signification qu'en fonction de l'existence de l'autre" (Bernier 1999).

The psychological bonding between mother and daughter remains constant from generation to generation. Thus, the development of the Children of current generation designs the psychic of the mothers of next generation and make them abusive, dominating and oppressive. Nancy Chodorow's semisymbiotic explanation of mother-daughter relationship portrays the psychological interconnection in-between these two bodies. Chodorow remarks that "In relation to their mother, however (and similarly, the mother in relation to her daughters), they experience themselves as overly attached, unindividuated, and without boundaries" (Chodorow 1999).

If one feels pain, the second one will automatically suffer. Therefore, Yan-Zi says "I had wanted to strike her very hard- oh, how she deserves it! – but it hurt me even before it hurt her. I was racked with pain. I bowed under the blows by which I would destroy mother upon destroying myself" (Chen 1995:139).

Ying Chen portrays the concept of two bodies as a single entity that set up the same kind of suffering for both mother and daughter. Thus, the suicide of Yan-Zi could be considered as a planning to torture her parents, not physically but psychologically. It is already stated that suicide is a taboo in Chinese society and Yan-Zi's suicide will convict them for not rooting the Chinese values in the daughter by her mother. The failure of children will cause the failure of parents in the society. Yan-Zi has also stated in the novel that "I was going to kill them by killing myself" (Chen 1995:95). Lori Saint-Martin explained the connection between the suicide and matricide in

L'Ingratitude that "mother and daughter are so closely bound up that the distinction between one body and the other, between matricide and infanticide, nearly disappears" (Chen 1995:60). One of the main reason of Yan-Zi's reaction towards her mother is to secure her own space in the social dimension. Initially, she has been obedient to her mother and acquire her love and affection but later she found that her mother to be over-protective and dominant. Yan-Zi states that "I had lived as my mother's child. I had to die differently. I would end my days my way. When I was no longer anything. I would be me" (Chen 1995:20). Therefore, she become rebellious, and at the end, she decides to end her life by committing suicide in order to take the revenge. Chodorow points out the reciprocity of identity in the mother-daughter relationship and emphasizes the difficulties faced by the girls for seeking their individualisation. She says that "it seems likely that from their children's earliest childhood, mother and women tend to identify more with the daughters and to help them to differentiate less, and that process of separation and individualisation are made more difficult for girls" (Chodorow 1999).

Although, Yan-Zi wants to liberate herself from her mother but at the same time she wishes to destroy her mother and to give her the feeling of guilt and regret. Yan-Zi said that "To collect my body and clean the traces of my blood – my blood, which was her blood too. I wanted to see the look of horror on her face. I wanted to see her trembling. My final image of this world would be of a mother crumbling" (Chen 1995:59). She also shows her desire for her mother: "I was burning with the desire to see mother suffer at the sight of my corpse. Suffer to the point of vomiting up her own blood. An inconsolable pain. Life would be slipping through her fingers and her descendant would be escaping her" (Chen 1995:12). In the Chinese patriarchal society, woman doesn't have an important place but within the boundaries of house their role is quite significant (as a mother). They are the mediator between patriarchy and future generation. Their social worth is based on the upbringing of their children according to the Chinese customs and traditional norms. Therefore, the social image of Yan-Zi's mother is defined by her daughter.

Her mother is nothing without her child (daughter) and her existence in the society is null.

Yan-Zi feels like a prisoner who is trapped in a cage prepared by her mother. She is restricted by her mother not only physically but also mentally. The narrator gives the reference of some selected places where she finds herself more often in the text such as her own house, the Bonheur restaurant, her office, her bedroom, and a place that is in between living and dead world. She points out the dominant behaviour of her mother that controls her life: "We were always together. We ate at the same table, went to the same movies and the same stores. She liked to advise me on which cloths to buy and I couldn't seem to make decision without her" (Chen 1995:137).

Her Final decision to escape from the cage of her mother is suicide that engraves her sentiments for her mother and consequences of such authoritarian ties imposed by her mother. Yan-Zi says that her suicide is not the end of her life, it is also the death of her mother because they both have the same blood and flash as her mother mentioned her: "I would expire at her feet, before her eyes. She had planned my arrival; now she must witness my retreat. It would be up to her to complete the work she'd begun: To collect my body and clean the traces of my blood – my blood, which was her blood too. I wanted to see the look of horror on her face. I wanted to see her trembling. My final image of this world would be of a mother" (Chen 1995:59).

The mother's ideology also played an important role in the novel. Yan-Zi's rebellious behaviour is the denial of the customs and moral principles of Chinese society imposed by her mother in Chinese society. Her mother knows that the new generation can easily be fascinated by the other cultures. They give more values to the other culture. The mother wants to protect her daughter from this outer western influences. She wants her daughter to follow the moral code of the society where the instinct of family duties and self-sacrifice are at the priority of the Chinese culture. According to the mother, love with a stranger is very dangerous, As Yan-Zi said "It [a love] could alter my memory, make me forget my origins, abandon my mother and devote myself to a

young stranger who had done nothing for me, it naturally implied” (Chen 1995:43). This Ingratitude make oneself selfish that lead the isolation because you are no longer the part of family. Yan-Zi's mother said that “No one is ever alone. You're always someone's son or daughter. Someone's husband or wife. Someone's mother or father. Someone's neighbour or countryman. You always belong to something. We're social animals. Other people are our oxygen” (Chen 1995:132). Helene Deutsch affirmed that all phases of a daughter's development throughout her life are affected by her attachment to her mother (Wisdom 1990). As we have seen in the text that the mother controls the body of Yan-Zi. Therefore, Yan-Zi wants the possession of her own body and power to take decisions with her own consent. Yan-Zi's first step towards revolt to take her body back from her mother is to end of chastity and purity by losing her virginity. Yan-Zi's said after indulging in the sexual act: “The deed was done. My body had been torn apart. Mother had hatched a body that was no longer worth anything. This body, now impure, would mix more easily with the musk” (Chen 1995:88).

Chodorow says that “Mothers feel ambivalent toward their daughters, and react to their daughters' ambivalence toward them. They desire both to keep daughters close and to push them into adulthood. This ambivalence in turn creates more anxiety in their daughters and provokes attempts by these daughters to break away” (Chodorow 1999).

Yan-Zi's reaction towards her mother's ideology had changed due to the dominant and possessive nature of her mother. The protagonist said that her mother wants to swallow her: “I sometimes had the impression that she wanted to swallow me whole, remake me in her body and give birth to me all over again, with a physique, a personality, and a mind more to her” (Chen 1995:17).

Silvie Bernier explores the motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship in her article "Ying Chen: S'Exiler de Soi". Bernier says that Ying Chen “déploie un vocabulaire anthropophage pour décrire une relation selon laquelle mère et fille se vampirisent et se nourrissent de leur chair, jusqu'à cette scène des funérailles de Yan-Zi où la fumée du corps

incinéré pénètre la salle de réception, recouvre la table des convives et se mêle au repas” (Bernier 1999).

Yan-Zi was not even satisfied with her suicide because she doesn't attain feeling of conqueror who finally owned the control of her body. She still thinks about her mother. The way of suicide that she adopted for escaping from her mother seems to have failed in the novel. Yan-Zi's accident was unable to accomplish her wish to destroy the glory of her mother. Although, she wanted to end her life by swallowing the pills but unfortunately she crushed down by a truck. Yan-Zi said that: “Not only did I live badly, I think, I died badly. By crushing my body, that stupid truck completely transformed the appearance of things. Mother has an easier time handling an accident than a suicide” (Chen 1995:148). Yan-Zi says that her mother knew the cause of her daughter's suicide but her mother reframed the whole scenario in order to retain the glory and prestige of her family. As a result, no-one knew about the real reason behind Yan-Zi's death. It remains a secret between Yan-Zi and her mother, and it will remain undiscovered for others. Yan-Zi's mother turned the suicide into the accident. Such narrative helps her mother to retain her reputation in the Chinese society. Yan-Zi's thought to get freedom from the cage of her mother is not fruitified at the end of the story. Finally, she admitted that she doesn't own her body as being alive or dead.

According to Chodorow, social relations are internalized by the psyche by a kind of direct correspondence. When we love, we are forced to give up what we love, either because it is socially or ethically inappropriate or because it renounces us, then we face the loss by identifying with the object that we are.

Further in the text, Yan-Zi expresses her final emotion as “I was finally beginning to understand that my life didn't fully belong to me” (Chen 1995:,20). Yan-Zi follows the customs and tradition of the society but as she becomes an adult she revolts against the imposed social boundations on individuals. being in a vacuum, after her death, she cries like an orphan child who lost her parents, especially, her mother: “The cry of an infant: Mother!” (Chen 1995:154).

### Conclusion

The above analysis explores the unbreakable relation between mother and daughter. According to Yan-Zi's mother, we all are connected to each other and human being is social animal whose actions are regulated by the society. Mother is the vehicle to transmit the cultural conventions to the next mother (daughter) in order to regulate the society smoothly. However, Yan-Zi tries to deny the cultural values and tries to go away from her mother but it seems impossible in the plot of the story. Despite of Yan-Zi's desire to escape from her mother, she thinks about her mother's future and her destiny. Her soul was in a vacuum but in such stage also, Yan-Zi gives

preference to her mother. In spite of worrying about her own permanent exile from the physical world, she was worried about her mother's fate. Yan-Zi prefers absolute migration as she wants to get rid of roots. As per the theorists such as Marianne Hirsh, Nancy Chodorow, Francois Couchard, it has been found that the relation between mother and daughter is inseparable whereas they are physically apart. They both are the reflection of each other whose identities are interconnected. At the end, the ties of the mother-daughter relationship can be specified by the Chinese proverb "A son is a son until he gets a wife, a daughter is a daughter all of her life."

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