

Original Article

Critical Analysis of Women's Consciousness in Zhang Jie's Works: A Study of Her Representative Works

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Abstract - This is an attempt to analyze women's consciousness in Zhang Jie's work critically. The paper will do an in-depth study of Zhang Jie's representative works, using the comparative analytical method, which compares Zhang Jie's images of women with that found in the literary works of earlier periods to reflect the evolving nature of women's consciousness in her works.

Keywords - Women's consciousness, Zhang jie, Gender, Love must not be forgotten, The ark, Emerald.

1. Introduction

Women's consciousness and its reflection in literature, especially in the works of women writers, constitute an important dimension of social change in China. An exploration of women's writing in any given phase will likely reveal the nature of change that society is undergoing regarding its gender relations and the reshaping of women's consciousness.

At the turn of the 20th century, when concepts of Modernization and Modernity were expressed in terms of individual freedom and democracy, on the literary front, poetry which had been the dominant genre, was replaced by realist fiction, serving as the instrument of social and political change in China. Works of some women writers of the early 20th century recognized the cultural bias and focused precisely on issues that put women only in the context of female virtue.

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the political position of the party-state was that Chinese women had been liberated as the new system ensured economic independence and gender equality in major areas like employment, marriage, inheritance and so on. This was the predominant view that got reflected in literature. Apart from one or two, most women writers, in their choice of themes and crafting of women characters, preferred not to concentrate on gender inequality. The exceptions were criticized severely for their lack of socialist enthusiasm and did not write much till the new wave of change came after 1976. Thus, it can be said that till the end of the Cultural Revolution, issues of women or women writing from a gendered perspective were not considered important; if at all, some women writers only created women

characters belonging to the working class and full of revolutionary zeal.

The post-mao period they have witnessed much individual initiative in literary production through the 1980s. Women writers once again started to explore various issues and themes such as female friendships, the choice between marriage and career, sexuality and sexual love etc. They denounced the fairy tale of gender equality.

Zhang Jie first came to fame with her novella *Love Must Not Be Forgotten* in 1979. In her subsequent works, she broke through the conventional portrayal of love and marriage and opened new vistas by focusing on new concerns of women in changing Chinese society. Her literary journey from the late 1970s to the late 1990s had been arduous; she not only focused on male-female relationship and examined the expectations that people in China have of love and marriage but had also written several stories that explore the status of women in Chinese society. Zhang Jie is widely acknowledged for her direct and unwavering criticism of women's life, which has been oppressed by social customs for ages. However, what is more, important is that she has underlined the fact that many such practices and mindsets have endured through the socialist period as well.

Her body of works produced over the 1980s and 1990s reveal a certain momentum in her creativity; a momentum that is not only limited to the choice of themes but is also evident in the crafting of characters, skill and sophistication of techniques and, ofcourse, in the complexity of human emotions reflected. Both from a literary and social perspective, this momentum is important; it is necessary to



understand and study some of her works that symbolize the different phases of her artistic journey.

Love Must Not Be Forgotten, being the first literary work of its time to portray love in an extra-marital context, is a natural choice. The two later works, *The Ark and Emerald*, have focused on the unequal power relation between a man and a woman in love and marriage. While the *Emerald* raises the issue of women bearing injustice in love, *The Ark* dwells on the different kinds of discriminatory treatment and sexual harassment meted out to women both in social and professional interactions. Apart from the comparative analytical method, several other criteria have been used in the study, such as the response of central women characters to issues like love, marriage and profession, response and criticism generated by the works or how different facets of gender inequality have been reflected in Zhang Jie's works.

2. Love Must Not Be Forgotten

Zhang Jie broke new ground in *Love Must Not Be Forgotten* by sympathetically depicting love between a woman and a married man. Written in the late 1970s, *Love Must Not Be Forgotten* is a love story of Zhong Yu and a married man. Shanshan, the daughter of Zhong Yu, learns about her mother's affair when she reads Zhong Yu's diary after her death. Shanshan is deeply moved by her mother's lifelong devotion to that man and hopes to find true love, just the way her mother did.

Love's sacrificing nature was portrayed in her first work as a third person's life was involved, and therefore, the man could not marry Zhong Yu. As Zhang Jie expresses the man's love for Zhong Yu, she writes: "I've read that last story of yours. Frankly speaking, there is something not quite right about it. You should not have condemned the heroine... There's nothing wrong with falling in love as long as you don't spoil someone else's life... In fact, the hero might have loved her too. Only for the sake of a third person's happiness, they had to renounce their love..." (Zhang, 1987:7)

Given the historical period in which the story's flashback is located, Zhong Yu attained a level of devotion towards her love by being a modest woman of her time with qualities like soft, loving, understanding, silently supportive and very significant, who feel content in giving. Both the man and woman adhered to their 'political correctness' and, based on their mutual resolution to live a righteous life, never ever considered the option of proclaiming their love.

Zhang Jie depicts the social expectation in terms of the morality of modern Chinese society that a girl should marry upon reaching a certain age. She reflects this expectation that often forces people into loveless marriages. As Shanshan thinks: "Although living in the seventies of the twentieth century, people still consider marriage the way they did

millennia ago, as a means of continuing the race, a form of barter or a business transaction in which love and marriage can be separated. Since this is the common practice, why shouldn't we follow suit?" (Zhang, 1987:2) This thought process laments that marriage, being merely a social expectation, side-lines love as a pre-requisite for marriage and is clearly 'a product of traditional role-modelling of women, still deep-rooted in Chinese consciousness' (Mitra, 2008:36)

Love Must Not Be Forgotten the most controversial and intriguing story among all her works. Apart from raising the issue of extra-marital love, Zhang Jie also tells the story of Shanshan, who is almost being pushed into an arranged marriage. She recalled her mother saying, "If you are not sure what you want, don't rush into marriage", which defied the traditional thinking still prevalent after decades of socialist transformation. It is a story that reveals the degree to which a woman's emotions and actions must be controlled to conform to society's norms.

The novel holds close to the private world of women and the public world of society, and it is a symbol of the paradoxical and problematic relationship that can exist between two individuals. As Shanshan says in the end: "If everyone could wait, instead of rushing into marriage, how many tragedies could be averted! To live single is not such a fearful disaster. I believe it may be a sign of a step forward in culture, education, and the quality of life". (Zhang, 1987: 14-15)

Zhang Jie's portrayal of a woman who emphasizes the importance of love in life aroused the wrath of the conservatives of the literary establishment. She was under tremendous political pressure for committing such an offence. Zhang Jie was accused (among other things) of 'petty bourgeois tendencies' (Roberts, 1989:801), depicting immorality and lacking the revolutionary radiance in *Love Must Not Be Forgotten*.

Love Must Not Be Forgotten an extremely moving narrative of love where Shanshan, the daughter, could only learn about her mother's lifelong devotion to a man once her mother was dead. Zhong Yu's diary bridges the communication gap about the conversations the mother and daughter never had. Shanshan learns that for twenty years, one man occupied her mother's heart, and Chekov's collection of stories gifted by him was her only memento of love. Since Zhong Yu could never unite with her lover, her diary often served as a substitute for him, in which she would write about her private emotions.

Shanshan, a different generation from her mother's, does not feel the need to marry someone without loving him. The protest against the well-entrenched social practices is evident from her character and thought process: "...Because, if you

chose not to marry, your behavior is considered a direct challenge to these ideas. You will be called neurotic, accused of having guilty secrets or having made political mistakes. You may be regarded as an eccentric who looks down on ordinary people, not respecting age-old customs- a heretic".(Zhang,1987:14) Thoughts like these reflect that Shanshan perceived 'people' to be accountable for these tragedies and that perhaps 'people' should take responsibility for the old ideas handed down from the past to the next generation.

3. The Ark

The Ark is a tale of three divorced/separated women who live in the same apartment. Out of the three, two of the women were divorced. Liu Quan revolted against sexual abuse by her own husband, and Cao Jinghua was divorced because she had an abortion. The third one, Liang Qian's divorce, was turned down as her husband wanted to use her father's influence. All three friends happen to exist in the same circumstances in which they are single, one way or the other, and the story examines the social implications of separation and divorce. Zhang Jie highlighted a growing concern in urban areas by focusing on divorced women. From figures released by the Chinese Government, it is known that the rate of divorce in urban China has been increasing over the last few decades, with a greater number of cases being initiated by women. The reason for each divorce is different in the story, but all three women face similar social fates.

On the fate of women, Zhang begins the story by saying: "You will especially be unfortunate because you were born a woman".(Zhang, 1987:125) She portrays women's disaffection with conventional values and behaviour; she further asserts that women must fight on two fronts, one shared with men and one uniquely of their own. The author calls the women's house 'the widow's club'. As Cao Jinghua, one of the three women, thinks to her herself: "Their apartment was like a widow's club. She found it curious over time that she met more and more women like them. Sometimes might do some serious research on why the divorce rate among women of their age was so high- not just dismisses the phenomenon as a result of bourgeois ideology". (Zhang, 1987:129)

Despite her special concern for women's fate, Zhang firmly believes in the principle of a Socialist society and shows all her characters striving to contribute their energy and talent towards it. Cao Jinghua as a Marxist literary critic, Liu Quan as an interpreter and Liang Qian as a film director, all her characters are oppressed and attacked both on personal and professional fronts because they are women. It was quite natural that *The Ark* was considered to lack enthusiasm. It was criticized for promoting characters based on western feminism, as the story is far from the traditional ideal of self-sacrificing Chinese women.

Apart from their salaried work, these women also had to do every bit of work by themselves in their own living space. Be it the scene of Cao Jinghua lifting the coal and carrying it up and down the staircase twenty times or be it the description of Liang Qian's physical appearance; Zhang Jie has crafted her protagonists to be not feminine in their outer beauty. As Zhang expresses through Liang Qian: "What happened to her youth? She had passed it by so quickly, with barely a moment to enjoy its beauties, to love or be loved- of course - she wanted to remain young and beautiful forever, but how could she find the hours needed? In any case, if she chose to follow a career, then she had to be prepared to sacrifice womanly pleasures; that was an irreconcilable truth". (Zhang, 1987:139) This reflects that no matter how badly these women needed a partner to share their responsibilities just like the way husband and wife do, they were left with no choice but to live a de-feminized mechanical life and survive in physical conditions not suited to dainty feminine women. Zhang Jie expresses a similar sentiment when she writes about Cao Jinghua's hardships during the Cultural Revolution: "Having to live in those forests had been a cruel fate for any women as frail as Jinghua. The temperature in that small wooden hut would fall to minus 20 degrees in the winter, cold enough for her to feel frozen stiff as an iron rod". (Zhang, 1987:128). Cao Jinghua, a Marxist philosopher and woman of political convictions, one point compares carpentry that she did in the forest, saying: "carpentry work was much easier and more beneficial than writing those articles which were always receiving criticism". (Zhang, 1987:162) Zhang Jie talks about a man, whom Cao Jinghua calls 'knife-face', who praises her: "Comrade Cao Jinghua, your elaboration of Marxism is a superb contribution to our overall understanding". (Zhang, 1987:162) It is amply demonstrated that it was no mean achievement that despite criticism, Cao Jinghua was highly praised for her intellect work even by those people who did not get along well with her.

Rosemary A. Roberts, while comparing and analyzing Zhang Jie's and Zhang Xinxin's works, says: "Zhang Jie considered various aspects of women's problems and came up with a solution: women torn by conflicting role demands should abandon the search for love and marriage and find fulfilment through their dedication to a career".(Roberts, 1989:801) This is further borne out by Cao Jinghua's case. Although Cao Jinghua suffered in the past for her intellectual convictions, she still identifies with her work as a philosopher.

In her personal life, Cao Jinghua had to take care of her sister and her father; her marriage hit a rough patch when she had an abortion so that she could continue working. This led to abuse at her husband's hands, as her husband says: "Why did you have to go and have an abortion? So that you can make money to send to that father and sister of yours? You killed my child! Why in hell did I marry you in the first

place? Well, now I am going to get a divorce". (Zhang, 1987:127-28) Cao Jinghua married him because she thought her husband would help her support her family, but eventually, things went very differently. She was let down like many wives are let down by their husbands; her relationship with her husband is described in the story as: "Uncanny, how she remembered distinctively every blow he had landed on her face, every insult he had shouted at her...She could never forget the powerful odor of garlic he always carried around him. But odd to say, she could not recall how he had looked, though she had slept on his heated brick kang and eaten at his table for six or seven years. If she was to come face to face with him now, Jinghua doubted whether she would recognize him. Everything, the suffering, the humiliation had all turned into memory, but his face had grown cloudy and obscure". (Zhang, 1987:128-29) In these words, Cao Jinghua comes across as a strong and courageous woman who is not willing to suffer anymore; she speaks her mind, and not many people like her for voicing her opinion.

Zhang Jie also portrays her growing sense of consciousness and awareness of women's rights in *The Ark*. Her women protagonists not only walk out on marriage but also fight through a daily battle of sexes while seeking a dignified existence and pursuing a career. She also emphasized through Cao Jinghua's character that women can have their own independent intellectual life without any assistance from men. As one of her protagonists, Liang Qian, says: "Nothing is more important than my work and our rights as women. I've had to sacrifice a great deal to gain these rights, and plenty of women are still struggling for them. Women's liberation is not only a matter of economic and political rights but includes the recognition, by women themselves as well as by all of society, that we have our own value and significance. Women are people, not merely objects of sex, wives and mothers". (Zhang, 1987:211-12)

Zhang Jie's women characters in *The Ark* reveal not only are women generally not presented in positions of power, but those few who are, are presented as negative characters. Rosemary a. Roberts, who has written on Zhang Jie extensively, opines: "A survey of male and female roles in the works of Zhang Jie presents a society in which almost all political and economic power positions are occupied by males. Zhang Jie's numerous high-ranking cadres, bureau chiefs, department heads and their myriad deputies are all male".(Roberts,1989:802) This could either indicate Zhang's literary technique depicting the existing gender bias in Chinese society that still continues to view women in a subordinate position (Mitra,2008:38) or this is how she perceives the Chinese social reality.

Rosemary A. Roberts further says: "Women are depicted occupying only middle or lower status positions, typically restricted to occupations related to education, caring for people, the arts and services. Thus, we find women as

teachers, university students, doctors, nurses, writers, journalists, housemaids, bus conductresses, shop assistants, etc. There are also a large number of women who have no profession at all and exist only as wives, daughters or sisters of male characters. Although this role assignment reflects the reality of a male-dominated society, presenting the few women cadres as negative characters reinforces the general attitude that women are incapable of competently holding office, thus simply perpetuating common prejudices".(Roberts, 1989:803)

Zhang Jie depicts the social dynamics of gender relations in all its complexities. Liu Quan's character is crafted as a frail, insecure, docile woman who lacks self-confidence. She allows people to upset or bully her, and her low level of confidence has a definite connection to her bitter experience of divorce. Liu Quan's husband treated her like a sex object, never providing her with emotional or financial support. As she recollects: "He would come home drunk and foul-tempered and force her to make love. He was rude and loud and treated her as if he had bought her merely for her body and was determined to get his money's worth...Every night of their marriage had been a terrifying, inescapable trial, and as the dusk began to thicken, a cold shudder passed through her body, as if she were suffering from a fever". (Zhang, 1987:183)

Although Liu Quan's character is portrayed as a woman with enormous capabilities but also uncertain and insecure, it is perhaps possibly because of her past experiences of sexual abuse that Liu Quan, an otherwise very capable woman, is efficient in her job, earning praise from the American delegates whom she worked for as a translator, yet does not have the confidence to approach Mr. Xie who had the power to confirm her appointment in the Ministry.

Zhang Jie came from a rather conservative background compared to the more radical atmosphere prevalent during the Cultural Revolution years. It is well known that after the Cultural Revolution and during the early years of reform, the influence of liberal western culture came as a fresh breath of air to the youth in general. Zhang Jie's characters were thus designed to take advantage of this social change; they displayed powerful and valid protest against the abuse of women in marriages; her protagonists such as Cao Jinghua and Liu Quan chose divorce as an apparently justified response that can be traced to a sense of moral superiority, a response that was very rare even in socialist China. (Zhang, 1987:183)

Another important aspect of Zhang Jie's work is that her characters, made of different shades, needed to reflect the dilemma faced by women of that time. If her women characters are independent professionally, they also longed to be loved by a man in the time they spend with themselves. Cao Jinghua, an independent intellectual, felt helpless in her

need for a man. As Zhang Jie writes about her thoughts: "She could not move any further, and so she stopped struggling. Who could help her up onto her bed? How she needed someone with a strong pair of arms, but she knew that no such person was likely to appear. As she lay helpless on the floor, she was acutely aware that she would never again know what it was to be loved by a man but would live alone the rest of her life. Why was it like this?" (Zhang, 1987:170-71) Yet, Cao Jinghua is shown with masculine undertones (雄性化), which appear to be somewhat 'Superwoman' kind of character. Characters like her, socially, are not considered a part of the collective women as they could not conform to the behavioral pattern attributed to women in society and were considered a threat to the institution of marriage and family.

Liang Qian, the third woman separated from her husband, is the most well-placed out of all three of them. Liang Qian never used her father's influence to further her own career, even though her father was an influential senior Party member and a Minister. Like Cao Jinghua, she is also a forthright woman, direct and honest in manner and speech. She has high regard for her father but is also bothered by her father's high status. As Zhang describes: "If her father had not had such a high status, no one would ever have been able to say that all her achievements were purely due to him. When would she be allowed to be herself? When would society begin to recognize her own struggles?" (Zhang, 1987:146) What bothers her more is that her husband, Bai Fushan, always tries to take advantage of her father's position. Zhang Jie describes this uncomfortable relationship between the two in these words: "He (Bai Fushan) could never understand why Liang Qian always kept him at such a distance. Even if there were no love left in their relationship, couldn't they try to at least be like good business partners, continuing to help one another in a various way? If only she could get her father to do a few favours for him, then she would no longer struggle in this way, and he would see to it that life was made more comfortable for her". (Zhang, 1987:143) It is clear from this description that just as Liang Qian has lost interest in him, he has lost interest in her. However, unlike her, her husband has no problem living with this lie in their relationship. Though Liang Qian is portrayed as a tough woman who takes no nonsense, like the other two characters in the story, she would also want to rest and be cared for for life. But at the same time, she is aware that it cannot be possible; therefore, she must pursue her career.

4. Emerald

Emerald is a story of two young, educated women who devoted their lives to a handsome docile man. The protagonist, Zeng Ling'er, who is a strong-willed woman, takes the blame for her lover Zuo Wei's petty crime during the Cultural Revolution; she endures infamy and torture and also secretly bears him an illegitimate son, Taotao. The

second woman, Lu Beihe, married Zuo Wei and nourished his political career. The story is an exposé of the sacrifices made by Chinese women in contemporary times and the emotional trauma they suffered in the process. On the one hand, the work received an enthusiastic readership; on the other, the official literary establishment criticized the work for its depiction of alleged sensationalism and moral degeneracy; in spite of this, Zhang's *Emerald* won the award for best novella of 1983-1984.

Zeng Ling'er love was unconditional and beyond the expectations of a normal man-woman relationship. When during a conversation between Beihe and Zeng Ling'er, Beihe says: "...for many years, we fought for the same man's love, bravely sacrificed everything for him. But in the end, we discovered it was not worth it". To this, Zeng ling'er replies: "Don't talk like that. If you love, you do not describe it as a sacrifice." (Zhang, 1987:64). Zeng Ling'er love was her life, and only a woman possibly can have endless love like hers.

As Wang Fei compares Zeng Ling'er to Virgin Mary, studying her love as giving out unconditional love 'without expecting anything in return', total commitment, a high degree of ecstasy, a fearless sacrifice, a brave defense, generous kindness, great tolerance, and enduring patience. "As if she had received the guidance of religious sentiment from the Virgin Mary, Zeng Linger's endless love made her exhibit exceptional strengths of personality". (Wang, 1989)

Towards the end of the story, when Zeng Ling'er wants to console the newlywed bride who lost her husband, she thinks to herself: "She would tell her, as well as her dead husband, that there were many other things in this world worth loving; she would tell the bride that her love had been reciprocated, that she had already experienced the most profound love, the kind that is reciprocated, and that even one day of that love can be enough. So many people lived their whole lives without ever experiencing that." (Zhang, 1987:69) In this work, Zhang Jie's depiction of love is at par with madness, where her characters reach the extremes of passion and just be happy in experiencing the true love they feel; not many people get the chance to experience it.

As Rosemary A. Roberts discusses the women in positions of power, she says, "Lu Beihe in *Emerald*, also by Zhang Jie, uses her position as Deputy-head of an institute and Deputy Secretary of the Party Committee to arrange a 'cushy' job for her incompetent husband. Thus, women in authority are portrayed as either incompetent, corrupt or simply a joke." (Roberts, 1989:803) However, perhaps from another point of view, it reveals the helplessness of love; Lu Beihe loves her husband Zuo Wei deeply, and despite being in a responsible position of authority, she cannot help but promote her husband, who is not the best in his profession.

In the final analysis, it is important to mention that in spite of deep passionate love, Zeng Ling'er is not a weak character. Zeng Ling'er is crafted as a responsible member of society with a strong sense of professional commitment. Zhang wrote about Zeng Ling'er when she joined the same office as that of Zuo wei: "She realized that somehow she has transcended yet another plane of human existence. She would be able to work with Zuo Wei. Moreover, it was not out of love or hatred for him nor out of pity for Beihe. It was for this society to do something that had some meaning." (Zhang, 1987:69) In other words, her personal situation never stood in the way of the sincerity and responsibility she feels towards the socialist construction of society.

5. Conclusion

Visible from her works, Zhang Jie seems to have a special concern for women's fate and portrays women's disaffection with conventional values and behaviour. She further asserts that women must fight on two fronts, one shared with men and one uniquely of their own. Zhang also places faith in the principles of socialist society and shows all her characters striving to contribute their energy and talent towards it; all her women protagonists lay stress on their professional commitments, irrespective of their dissatisfaction in their personal lives.

One can discern a transformation in Zhang Jie's creative perspective as a writer and in her theoretical stand as a woman from *Love Must Not Be Forgotten* to *The Ark* to *Emerald*. In fact, this very transformation tells the story of the journey that the women writers have undertaken in this period. While in *Love Must Not Be Forgotten*, one of the central women characters is constructed in the way men would like to see women, the women protagonists of *The Ark* perceive life as a constant battle with the other sex for dignity, rights and other existential matters. (Mitra, 2008:33) Her strong-willed protagonists are not the 'ideal' woman, a far cry from the traditional image of gentle and loving wives and mothers, and have problems trying to achieve a balanced relationship with their children, as they have professional commitments. The problem of divorced mothers, where the child also suffers in conflict between the parents, is also highlighted in her works. All the strong women characters from Zhang Jie's stories were criticized for going against nature; as a scholar explains, "These women characters, essentially described as lonely, intellectual women, are to be pitied not emulated. They are not necessarily representative of womanhood; rather they are 'masculinized' women". (Thakur, 1997:99)

The issue of sexual advances and harassment at the workplace was reflected best through Liu Quan's character from *The Ark*, as her boss constantly forced her into awkward situations. Her biggest fear was to be sent off on a business trip with him. The plight of divorced women who

sometimes feel psychologically crippled for various reasons was reflected in this story; in Liu Quan's case, it was her lack of self-confidence and insecurity because of which she had to put up with such unwelcome behavior of her boss. Such women are forced to turn to anyone who is willing to help without compromising their dignity. However, they do not lose all their spirit and sense of achievement completely. *The Ark* can be seen as a work demonstrating female solidarity and bonding.

Zhang's works expose the myth of family harmony and gender equality, as she brings to the fore the discrimination women face in spite of being considered equal in official discourse. Interestingly, she also demonstrates how being beautiful can become the biggest nuisance for a woman, as one is constantly perceived as a sex object that men crave. Her characters are often pondering what a cursed beauty can be as it brings out the worst in men; Liu Quan, who is shown confronting sexism at the workplace, refuses to let anyone take advantage of her and is shown differently than ordinary women in the narrative who use flattery and coyness to get favours.

Zhang Jie introduces us to the inner world of divorced or separated women and reveals the stigma and double standards women have to put up with. Unlike traditional morality, Motherhood is also not shown as the ultimate fulfilment for women. In fact, she depicts that if women cannot devote time to children, they should not have them, particularly single/divorced women. Her stories do not present this dilemma in a negative light or as a judgment on those women as bad mothers but rather as a real conflict and ordeal that many career women in China will have to go through.

On professional ethics and integrity, her characters like Liang Qian of *The Ark*, Zhong Yu of *Love Must Not Be Forgotten*, and Zeng Ling'er of *Emerald* are shown as rather principled women, refusing to use either their feminine charm or influential contacts in the family to promote their own career. Besides the humiliation all protagonists suffered, their struggle for survival show that their professional expertise and competence were ignored in view of their personal lives.

While exploring the social implications of divorce/separation, Zhang Jie carefully crafted Director Jia's character, someone readers could relate to. Director Jia assumed herself to be the guardian of social morality and, thus, kept an eye on these three helpless women. She represents the conventional ideology of Chinese society that it is entirely a woman's fault if she is divorced, and since single women like Liu Quan seek shelter separate from their husbands, they should not be allowed to divorce in the first place; she feels that such women are easy game. Apart from this, the story reflects the Chinese reality that

single/divorced/separated mothers had to go through for the sake of their children; that all single/divorced/separated mothers need to pursue their respective careers, Liu Quan finds it difficult to constantly keep a tab on the court case for custody of her child, Mengmeng, fighting legal battles are expensive etc. Whereas Liang Qian, another single mother, would feel guilty about buying an unsuitable present for her son, Chengcheng, but when she spends time with her son, they have nothing to say to each other. Zhang shows the contradictions women face between their maternal feelings and their professional commitments.

Like many critics say that most of Zhang Jie's works are a reflection of her own life, and her characters are a 'depiction of what the writer knows about herself' (*zuojia de ziwu biaoqian*). Zhang Jie's human touch in her works perhaps comes from her own bitter experiences in the past. Zhang's crafting of Zeng Ling'er draws a commonality between her characters and her own life. Zeng Ling'er's single parenthood towards Taotao reflects her own upbringing with her mother and the upbringing of her daughter Tang Di. It is said that "She (Zhang Jie) never betrayed or slandered other people during the Cultural

Revolution because she loved the humanism in classical literature";(Zhang,1987:1); it is her 'human' touch that brings out a unique appeal in all her stories.

Like many post-mao literary works, Zhang Jie's works are also characterized as ones where the author is returning to a focus on issues of self-realization. Even when Zhang recommends divorce as a possible solution in an abusive marriage and challenges traditional morality that makes women accept mistreatment as their fate, she portrays that it is practical to divorce if the partners are incompatible without attributing blame to anyone. Zhang has tried to understand the institutional and psychological constraints and explored the emotional and spiritual dilemmas that have complex roots in the past. She also possibly reflects that if a woman wants equality between the sexes, she should pursue her individual development and grow professionally. It is evident that this fulfilment of 'self' is manifested as the search for individual identity and space. This search for 'self' is not necessarily and exclusively a part of women's consciousness alone but of all human beings, irrespective of gender.

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