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Constructing and Contesting the "New Woman": Gendered Discourses in the May Fourth Era

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Abstract. Set against the intellectual and cultural transformation of early twentieth-century China, this paper investigates how the image of the "New Woman" was constructed and contested during the May Fourth era. It focuses on the tension between male-dominated discourse and women's self-expression, drawing on New Youth, The Ladies' Journal, and literary works by Lu Xun, Ding Ling, and Lu Yin. The study finds that while male intellectuals often represented women as symbols of national progress and moral reform, female writers reinterpreted modern womanhood through emotional, bodily, and experiential narratives that reflected individual consciousness and agency. This interaction between male and female perspectives revealed the contradictions within the enlightenment ideals of the period. It demonstrated how women's writing transformed abstract discourses of emancipation into lived, self-aware experiences. The research highlights the complex dynamics of gender and modernity in shaping early Chinese feminist consciousness.

Keywords: New Woman, May Fourth, Gender Discourse

1. Introduction

At critical junctures in modern Chinese history, the New Culture Movement functioned not only as an intellectual and cultural awakening but also as a revolution in gender discourse. The "New Woman" became one of its most distinctive symbols, embodying aspirations for social modernity, national rejuvenation, and personal emancipation. In journals and literary works, women's identities and roles were continually debated and reshaped.

The "New Woman" has since been recognized as a site of ideological tension rather than a stable symbol of liberation. Scholars such as Wang Zheng, Zhang Suling, and Chan revealed how male intellectuals constructed this figure within nationalist and modernizing agendas, often instrumentalizing women as emblems of progress. Later feminist research, including Dooling and Wang Lingzhen, shifted focus to women's self-representation and agency. Their studies show how writers like Ding Ling, Lu Yin, and Bing Xin infused emotion, bodily experience, and desire into modern narratives, challenging the male-centered discourse of progress.

This paper examines how male discourse and female perspectives interacted in shaping the "New Woman". Drawing on New Youth, The Ladies' Journal, and works by Lu Xun, Ding Ling, and Lu Yin, it argues that while male portrayals often standardized women as ideological symbols, female authors rendered them as individual, experiential subjects. The interplay between these voices

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reveals both the limitations of male-defined narratives and the significance of female writing as a form of participation and resistance in constructing modern womanhood.

2. Male intellectual visions: the ideological construction of the "New Woman"

Within the context of the May Fourth New Culture Movement, male intellectuals actively engaged in shaping the “New Woman”. They formed the core of its construction. They crafted numerous editorials in periodicals and female characters in novels. For instance, Chen Duxiu explicitly stated in New Youth, “To achieve the rejuvenation of China, we must begin with the emancipation of women” [1]. This discourse placed women at the heart of national and social progress, elevating women's liberation to a national public issue for the first time. In terms of concrete image-building, education was regarded as the fundamental prerequisite for the New Woman. The Ladies’ Journal repeatedly emphasized the importance of female education, arguing that without it, families would become more rigid and society more backward [2]. Hu Shi, drawing on Ibsen’s Nora in A Doll’s House, celebrated her departure as a symbol of modern freedom, calling for Chinese women who dared to defy traditional ethics and pursue free love [3]. Furthermore, both New Youth and The Ladies’ Journal frequently discussed women’s careers and social participation, advocating that new women should step beyond the household to engage in education, nursing, or social work, thereby achieving economic independence and societal value. These assertions were undoubtedly groundbreaking within their historical context, as they first envisioned women as modern citizens capable of receiving education, pursuing love, engaging in careers, and participating in society.

Thus, the “New Woman” depicted by male intellectuals during the May Fourth era represented an idealized figure embodying education, free love, professional independence, and moral responsibility. Although this image largely stemmed from their own enlightenment ideals and societal visions, it reveals the multiple motivations underlying them. These motivations not only reflected the progressive nature of these intellectuals' thinking but also revealed their limitations regarding women's issues. In the consciousness of many intellectuals, the emergence of the New Woman served to fulfil the demands of nationalism.

As exemplified by Chen Duxiu’s aforementioned viewpoint, while ostensibly championing women's advancement, the underlying logic posited that women’s liberation was not an end in itself. However, a means to achieve “the rejuvenation of China”. An article in New Youth in 1919 further emphasized, “To save society, one must first save the family; to save the family, one must first save women” [1]. This statement positioned women as a prerequisite for saving society, mere cogs within the machinery of the entire nation. Within the gender discourse of May Fourth, women's liberation was liberation for the nation, not liberation for themselves. Wang Zheng remarked that within the Confucian tradition of self-restraint and restoration of ritual propriety, being oneself or expressing one's individuality was deemed irrational; the individual was expected to submit to the state or the family [4]. Within this logic, women were burdened with national responsibilities yet deprived of a sense of individual existence. Women's issues were thus treated as collective, national problems to be resolved. This also revealed the inherent contradiction within the individualism championed by the New Culture Movement, which was fundamentally grounded in collectivism. Whether framed as women’s issues or personal concerns, they were essentially products of collectivist and nationalist imperatives. This contradiction ensured that the feminism advocated could never be fully realized, for its starting point lay not with women themselves, but with the nation and the state.

Similarly, male intellectuals regarded women as symbols through which China's modernity could be demonstrated. In his essay Ibsenism, Hu Shi extolled Nora's departure, viewing her as a symbol of individual awakening and modernity. However, when Hu Shi introduced Nora into the Chinese

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context, he emphasized that “China needs Nora-like women to prove its modernization” [3]. Here, women cease to be independent persons and instead become evidence of modern civilization, serving as indicators of whether the nation has entered the ranks of civilization. A 1915 article in The Ladies' Journal, the liberation of women and the problems of occupation, similarly stated, “Without women's education, families become rigid and society regresses” [5]. The logic posited was that the significance of women’s education lay in societal progress, not women's self-development. Wang Zheng observes that this pursuit of modernity was, in fact, a process in which male intellectuals used women to validate China's modern identity [4]. This move once again relegated women to the status of the "other".

Elite males further affirmed their identity and sense of superiority through liberating women. Frequently encountered in New Youth, statements such as “We men must lead the way for women” essentially positioned women as passive recipients [6]. Male intellectuals thus assume the role of liberators, further cementing their hegemonic position within the discursive field. Chan observes that the “New Women” of the May Fourth era were often products of male ideology, with men shaping women to project their own enlightened stance [7]. This spokesperson’s posture reveals a deep-seated contradiction: even within the context of liberation, women failed to genuinely seize discursive power. They were fashioned into a group in need of guidance, and this very guidance served to reinforce the sense of superiority among male elites.

Moreover, the actual beneficiaries of women’s liberation extended beyond certain women to include many young men. Free love, marriage reform, and challenges to patriarchal oppression within the old family system were not solely issues confronting young women. Many men advocated free love primarily to free themselves from the constraints of the traditional family structure and pursue personal happiness; whether women could truly achieve independence was not their primary concern. Lu Yin sarcastically remarked in her commentary that male intellectuals advocate free love merely to secure marriage with women of their choice [8]. This observation incisively exposes the instrumental nature of free love within male discourse: women are viewed as conduits for male emotional liberation rather than individuals possessing their own desires and agency.

Discussions of women within male discourse exhibit inherent limitations. Women are repeatedly othered within this male-dominated narrative. The image of the New Woman remains hollow and unrealistic, serving instead as a tool for national salvation, a symbol of modernity, an object of elite superiority, and an appendage to free love. Nevertheless, the historical contributions made by male intellectuals cannot be overlooked. Precisely because male intellectuals persistently emphasized women’s education, marital reform, and social participation, these issues entered the public sphere for the first time, becoming focal points of nationwide debate. Articles in publications such as The Ladies’ Journal and New Youth during the 1910s and 1920s enabled thousands of readers to realize for the first time that “women’s liberation” was not merely a private matter but a necessary condition for national and social progress. This process objectively opened up the space for public discourse, creating possibilities for female writers to express themselves. The limitations of male discourse coexisted with its contributions. While it did not truly make women subjects, it did create the conditions for the emergence of female subjectivity. This remains a pioneering and significant historical advancement in the history of women's issues.

3. Female perspectives and subjectivity: rearticulating the "New Woman" from within

However, within the public sphere of women’s issues, pioneered by male scholars, it is not solely their discourse that exists; there are also contributions from female scholars. When female writers

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took to the literary stage, they reshaped this image with their own pens. No longer mere subjects to be written about, they responded, corrected, and even resisted the imaginings of male discourse with their own voices. Rather than refuting men, they supplemented the narratives written by men. By reintroducing abstract concepts like “freedom” and “independence” into the concrete realities of women's lives, the “New Woman” was endowed for the first time with a complex visage and a soul fraught with contradictions.

Within this endeavor, the creative work of Ding Ling and Lu Yin holds pioneering significance. Ding Ling's The Diary of Miss Sophie stands as one of the most subversive texts within the May Fourth literary sphere. Presented in diary form, it offers the psychological monologue of an educated modern woman. She yearns for love and pursues freedom, yet constantly oscillates between loneliness and rootlessness. Sophie inherits Enlightenment slogans like “free love” and individual independence, while personally experiencing the predicament of these ideals finding no place in reality. Having left her family, she discovers society’s judgment of women remains shackled by dual standards of morality and gender. Though she refuses dependence on men, economic constraints and limitations of status persist. Ding Ling does not guide Sophie towards a triumphant or enlightened conclusion; instead, she traps her in a cycle of anxiety and self-doubt [9]. This very hesitation lays bare the blind spots of male discourse. The proclaimed universal ideals of freedom never truly considered women’s position within the social structure. Sophie became a posture of protest; her self-narrative refused male representation and rejected any predetermined conclusion. Feuerwerker contends that Ding Ling's writing replaces the neatness of grand narratives with fragmentation and intimacy, dismantling authoritative discourses through subtle self-expression [10]. Unlike Lu Xun’s male perspective on female independence in What Happens After Nora Leaves, Ding Ling allows women to articulate “the emptiness and rootlessness beyond the household door”. This testimonial narrative from within transforms the “New Woman” from a mere mirror reflecting modernity into a subject capable of perceiving and articulating her own experience.

Compared to Ding Ling, Lu Yin's resistance carries a more palpable immediacy of lived experience. Her novels contain scarcely any fiery manifestos, yet through depictions of emotion and daily life, they reveal the deep contradictions underlying the discourse of women's liberation. In Old Friends by the Sea, the heroine who dared to pursue love and freedom is ultimately crushed by the weight of reality. Love did not bring equality; instead, it exposed her to a dual predicament of economic and moral constraints [11]. Lu Yin wrote not merely of a romantic tragedy, but of the failure of Enlightenment ideals within the social structure. Her touch is gentle and restrained, yet it renders the May Fourth slogan of “free love” hollow and powerless. Liu Yixin observes that Lu Yin's fiction "drags female awakening back into the mire of survival", revealing to readers the irreconcilable rift between individual aspirations and societal constraints. Whereas male writers examined women's destinies through a rational lens, Lu Yin focused more intently on the emotional and physical dimensions. The women in her writing are not symbols but concrete, suffering lives.

Bing Xin, who engaged in the dialogue alongside Lu Yin and Ding Ling, participated differently. She did not directly reject the male discourse but rather gently rewrote it from within. In works such as The Superhuman, Bing Xin emphasized the power of love and the moral value of motherhood [12]. Her female characters did not confront society, but established themselves through care, compassion, and spiritual independence. Contemporary male critics often dismissed this approach as retreat or depoliticization, yet it effectively broadened the definition of the "New Woman". Wang Dewei observes that Bingxin elevated women's moral sentiments to a position of agency, endowing softness with strength [13]. Her work reminds us that female liberation need not be achieved solely through fierce confrontation; it can also emerge by redefining emotional and ethical relationships to

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establish an alternative value system. Whereas Ding Ling and Lu Yin exposed the brutality of social oppression, Bing Xin revealed the resilience of the female psyche. Together, these three writers constituted the earliest diverse responses within women's writing, both rebelling against certain aspects of male discourse and reshaping the female image.

However, these endeavors by female writers did not entirely transform the prevailing structure of female discourse at the time. Though their voices broke through the silence, they remained relegated to the margins. The mainstream literary sphere remained firmly under male control, and the critical apparatus often regarded female writing with a dismissive bias. The Diary of Miss Sophie provoked intense debate, yet was simultaneously dismissed by some critics as neurotic and individualistic confessions, while Lu Yin's works were deemed sentimental and trivial. Such assessments reflected male-dominated literary standards: rationality, social concern and historical mission were regarded as noble, while emotion, intimacy and bodily experience were deemed inferior or immature. Dooling observes that this structural bias systematically diminished the impact of women's literature [14]. Even when it exposed gender inequalities, it was often reduced to emotive writing, marginalized from the core of modern literary history.

Deeper constraints resided within the writing itself. Though female authors broke free from male-dominated modes of representation, they struggled to fully escape the realist framework that dominated the May Fourth era in narrative form. Realism emphasizes rationality, verisimilitude, and social critique, a tradition implicitly centered on male experience. For female writers entering the public sphere, realism was not a conscious choice but an obligatory pathway into the literary field. The orthodox standards of May Fourth's new literature were set by male intellectuals, with rationality and social concern serving as the yardstick for measuring literary value. Women aspiring to be recognized as modern writers had to voice themselves within this narrative logic. Consequently, their realism formally perpetuated the patterns of male experience, even when its content shifted towards female lives and emotions. Ding Ling's Sophie, though narrated in the first person, remains isolated within an individual's spiritual predicament; similarly, Lu Yin's female characters oscillate between emotional and economic powerlessness. Their narratives expose oppression yet frequently conclude in tragedy, presenting female experience as isolated and fragile.

Concurrently, female writing exhibited another limitation at the ideological level. While they could express individual consciousness through the "I" perspective, they had yet to forge a more cohesive female collective. The number of female writers remains limited, with their works predominantly appearing in male-dominated journals, lacking stable publishing channels and reader communities. Ideologically, internal divergences persist: some orient themselves towards politics and rebellion, while others focus on emotion and motherhood, making it difficult to forge a unified theoretical language. Wang Zheng observes that this generation of writers began with personal experience but failed to coalesce into a systematic discourse [4]. Consequently, their writing often remains fragmented, confessions, individual acts of resistance, and reflection rather than an organized collective voice. This fragmented expression left women's literature during the May Fourth era still in a state of isolated awakening, unable to develop into a complete female discourse system.

Though their discursive construction remained limited and failed to overturn the old discourse entirely, they succeeded in creating fissures within it. Their works transformed the "New Woman" from a uniform slogan into a multifaceted entity possessing emotions, contradictions, and a sense of agency. As Dooling observes, in the history of modern Chinese literature, the true revolution in women's writing lay not in proposing new theories, but in breaking historical silence with individual voices [14].

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4. Conclusion

This paper has explored how the image of the "New Woman" was constructed, debated, and reinterpreted during the May Fourth era. Through an examination of New Youth, The Ladies' Journal, and the writings of Lu Xun, Ding Ling, and Lu Yin, it has been shown that male intellectuals often connected women's emancipation with the goals of national rejuvenation and moral reform, turning women into symbols of modern progress. Female writers, by contrast, redefined this figure through more personal and introspective portrayals that revealed the contradictions between idealized liberation and lived experience. Their narratives introduced emotion, desire, and self-reflection into the language of reform, giving the "New Woman" a dimension of individual subjectivity absent from earlier discourse.

The study suggests that the "New Woman" was not a singular or completed construct but an evolving site of negotiation between ideology and experience, collective ideals and private realities. While limited by its focus on a small number of writers and publications, this research highlights how gendered discourse functioned as a space where cultural modernity was imagined, contested, and internalized. The May Fourth era thus marked a formative stage in China's modern history when discussions of women's roles began to link intellectual thought with emotional experience, laying an early foundation for later feminist consciousness and redefinitions of modern identity.

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