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Transvestite Patriarchy in *Silver Sister*

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ABSTRACT

This article explores misogyny perpetrated by women represented in the novel, a fictional biography, Silver Sister by Chinese Australian author Lillian Ng. It demonstrates that misogyny is not only perpetuated by men, but also by women who internalise patriarchal ideology and carry out misogynistic practices. These women are what Ueno calls "transvestite patriarchy". They exploit and oppress other women who are in disadvantaged positions. These women collude with men to maintain the patriarchal system that perpetrates and perpetuates misogyny from the past to the present.

KEYWORDS: *fictional biography; misogyny; "transvestite patriarchy"; Silver Sister*

INTRODUCTION

The Oxford English Dictionary (1989, 877), *Collins English Dictionary* (1995, 877) and *Collins Australian Dictionary & Thesaurus* (2004, 761) all define misogyny as "hatred of women". These dictionaries do not indicate whether the perpetrator is male or female, but Adam Jukes' study focuses solely on misogyny perpetrated by men (1993). In *The Troublesome Helpmate: A History of Misogyny in Literature*Katharine M. Rogers interprets misogyny as "hostility to women"; "denigration" of women; "fear of maternal power"; "fear of female dominance which has haunted men, even in strongly patriarchal societies"; "reviling women"; "fear and dislike of women"; "attacks on women" (x-xi). Manifested in literature, misogyny might be expressed overtly but more often "appears in a disguised form": it is "not only direct expressions of hatred, fear, or contempt of womankind, but such indirect expressions as misogynistic speeches by dramatic characters who are definitely speaking for the author and condemnations of one woman or type of woman which spread, implicitly, to the whole sex" (xi-xiii). Rogers' description suggests that misogyny is practiced entirely by men, whose target is all woman kind. While these scholarships all target men as perpetrators of misogyny, my study will show that misogyny is perpetrated by women as well, as the novel, *Silver Sister*, demonstrates in its portrayal of a mother's abnegation and killing of her daughters, a mother-in-law's oppression of a daughter-in-law, a mistress' exploitation and objectification of her slave girls, and a wife's hatred of her husband's lover, as well as women's self-abnegation and self-objectification. The mother, mother-in-law and wife all belong to what Chuziko Ueno terms "transvestite patriarchy"— women who carry out patriarchal practices to oppress and exploit other women in a position subordinate to themselves:

> "Transvestite patriarchy" might be…male dominance hiding behind the skirts of the "Mothers." It is a form of male dominance which keeps its female agents, the "Mothers," between itself and its victims, so that these "Mothers" can absorb the resentment of their sons and the aggression of their daughters. Sine it is able to deflect hostility from itself to its female agents, "transvestite patriarchy" is more difficult to identify and overcome than more direct versions of male dominance. (See Ueno 1996: 15)

Here Ueno uses this term to describe Japanese women who accept a low self-evaluation and who internalise misogyny, thereby oppressing their daughters and acting as agents of patriarchy themselves. Her interpretation of transvestite patriarchy is confined to the mother's power over the daughter. I will extend Ueno's "transvestite patriarchy" in my study in that it not only refers to mothers who carry out misogynous practices and inculcate misogynous ideology into their daughters. "Transvestite patriarchy" in my study also includes the mother-in-law who performs patriarchal practices to daughter-in-law, and the mistress who does the same to girl slaves, as will be demonstrated in my analysis of misogyny in *Silver Sister*.

According to Ueno, the mother inculcates self-detestation in the daughter's consciousness through distaste for the latter's femininity. The mother is indeed the first source of a daughter's misogyny, but she is not the only one. As I will explain in relation to the text *Silver Sister*, there are other factors as well, such as other people, and the misogynistic

culture she is exposed to and inculcated into, including women who are suffering from misogynistic practices. The father and the husband are not the only men who control her life. There are other social forces that control women.

SILVER SISTER

Silver Sister is Lillian Ng's first novel. In spite of its declared genre of novel, it might be better described as a fictional biography. Narrated in the first person by a character based on a real person known to the author, it takes the form of an autobiography. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson define the fictional autobiography as having the effect of "an autobiographical text with the expectation that the protagonist is a person living in the experiential world, not a fictional character, and that the narrative will be a transparent, truthful view of that world" (2010, 259-260). This is what the author told the interviewer Ouyang Yu about her relationshipwith her nanny, who becomes the protagonist and narrator in her text:

> …My daughter was born in England. And then my husband left me. That's how I got Nanny. She looked after my daughter. Then I was going to America. And then I had a job offer in Australia, so I came here to try it out…
>
> (The nanny was from China, was she?)
>
> From China, but we met her in Singapore. When I was in difficulty in England, I wrote to my friend to help her come to England to help me. And she gave me the inspiration for my first book, Silver Sister. (Ouyang 112)

Based on this real figure, the novel is presented as if it were a straight autobiography. By making the protagonist the narrator of her own life, the author "gives ownership and validation to the individual, reclamation of agency, particularly to those who have been marginalised through gender, class and race" (Green 52). In this text, Ng uses this strategy to represent the life story of a humble and obscure country woman, together with what she has seen and heard. In effect, Ng's role is that of ghost writer for her nanny, whose story might otherwise have remained unknown, because she is illiterate. The author becomes the mouthpiece not only for Silver Sister, but for other women who have no voice and whose suffering remains unrecorded.

The novel is narrated from Silver Sister's perspective as a woman of around eighty, in Australia, reminiscing about past events that mainly take place in south-east Asia and in China. This creates a contrast between the misery of Chinese women and the happy life enjoyed by Australian women, and between the poor life of Chinese people and the rich Australians. Silver Sister is not merely telling her life story, but interpreting what has happened to her and to other women in her story. As Sidonie Smith et al. write, "…remembering involves a reinterpretation of the past in the present. The process is not a passive one of mere retrieval from a memory bank. Rather, the remembering subject actively creates the meaning of the past in the act of remembering" (22). The narrator, an obscure and illiterate Chinese woman from the countryside, is empowered by the author to voice her suffering as well as that of other women. In a sense Silver Sister and Ng produce the text collaboratively for us to read and reinterpret. Ng is the listener, the editor and the author of Silver Sister's life story, who retells it to us readers. As to what the author selects to represent, she is "subjective and idiosyncratic", to use Smith and Watson's words (6). Ng places women and the misogyny they have experienced in the foreground. As readers and critics, we interpret and make judgments, and while the author doesn't insert her personal evaluations obtrusively into the text, readers are nevertheless "silently" guided in their interpretation.

In the novel, Silver Sister's roles are manifold. Her most important roles are as victim and witness of misogyny. In the first part, she is a sufferer of misogyny. She experiences oppression and exploitation in her family. The relationship between father and daughters, brother and sisters is not that of parent and children and of siblings, but exploitative, suppressive and oppressive. The daughters or sisters are their father and brothers' servants. They must serve the latter tea, rice, water etc. when they are home (Ng 8). They cook meals for the males and wash their clothes (22). They are bullied by the male members of the family. They are also the men's target for venting their bad mood and temper. They are called names such as "good-for-nothing slaves" (8). In the other parts, Silver Sister's role is mainly that of witness of misogyny and an aid to those who suffer from it. She has seen many other women suffering. When she serves Little Peacock Lien in Hong Kong, Silver Sister witnesses Lien being objectified as a plaything by her lover, Mr Xi, and her later disfigurement by Xi's wife Rose. When she is in Singapore, she sees Dawn's neglect and then abandonment by her husband. Finally, she witnesses the desertion of Dawn's daughter by her lover, leaving her as an unmarried mother. Silver Sister is spectator and audience, observing and listening to the miseries of the slave girls, especially Gold, and her sworn sisters, such as Ah Yin's exploitation by her boss Mr. Wu in Australia. The boss is murdered by someone who cannot bear his exploitation of employers. His family and the innocent Ah Yin are implicated and wounded, which results in the latter's pathetic death. Silver Sister also acts as helper to numerous women in her life; she attends to Tai Tai's reeking bound feet, she looks after the hospitalised Little Peacock Lien who is a victim of Xi and his wife, she helps Dawn who is a victim of a wanton and irresponsible husband, and assists Kim and her baby daughter.

The novel reads like Silver Sister's memoir, narrated in her eighties but going back all the way to her childhood. As a "comb-up", Silver Sister detaches herself from married women's misogynistic experience. She fails to realise that

misogyny goes beyond marriage. Social norms and customs also play their part in misogyny, for example, fear of women's menstruation and the consideration of women as something dirty. Since Silver Sister becomes a "comb-up", she speaks, thinks, and acts as an outsider rather than an insider of the misogynous system. Her upbringing in a misogynistic social and familial environment makes her ignorant of the fact that she is despised as a woman and as a servant. The requirement that she wash thoroughly, the proscription of entering the House of Tang through the front gate, and her segregation are all marks of misogynistic customs that reflect the fear of and contempt for women related to their menstruation. The feeling that woman's sexual functions are impure is both world-wide and persistent, in literature, in myth, in primitive and civilised societies (Millett 47).

TRANSVESTITE PATRIARCHY IN *SILVER SISTER*

Ng presents misogynous practices in this novel in two forms: those that are performed by men on women and those that are performed by women on other women, that is, male misogyny and female misogyny. I argue that misogyny, both male and female, is deeply rooted in historical, political, psychological and cultural conditions, and it is dynamic, as time and place change. Female misogyny is not manifested merely in women's self-hatred; it might be expressed in antagonism, hostility, malice, and persecution among women themselves, at least in Chinese culture as reflected in *Silver Sister* and other literary works. In this article I will focus on female misogyny and the role of transvestite patriarchy in its perpetuation. I will analyse the hostile relationship between mother and daughter, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, wife and slave girls, wife and mistress.

Transvestite patriarchy is first represented by the mother in the treatment of her daughters.

The mother colludes with the father to objectify daughters as commodities. Girls are family property and can be sold. In times of difficulty, girls rather than boys are sold to relieve poverty and ensure survival. When Silver Sister's family is threatened with famine, two girls are sold to a brothel and another two are sold to a rich family as slaves or concubines (Ng 14). They are treated as a burden on their family, "a liability", "a losing concern" (6), something unwanted to be given away to others. After they are looted by KMT soldiers, the family of Wong becomes even poorer and another two girls are given away to passers-by (22). Silver Sister's two sworn sisters, Ah Yin and Ah Fong, have been abandoned by their parents at the nunnery (41). Silver Sister's mother's harsh treatment of her daughters echoes her father's attitudes. Her father's scorn for daughters definitely influences the mother's treatment of the girls in the family. The egregious result of this is infanticide: "female babies were secretly smothered with rags or drowned by dipping their heads in a shallow basin of water even before their first cry" (6).

The roots of these misogynistic practices are complex. First and foremost are historical and cultural factors—the establishment of the patriarchy at the beginning of the West Zhou period (c. 11th century-771 B. C.), marked by the formulation of Zhou Li (the ritual of Zhou) (Luo 035). With the establishment of patriarchy, the dominant position of the man in the family is decreed, accompanied by the differentiation between male and female, the superiority of men and inferiority of women (037). Thus in Silver Sister's family, the Wongs, the wife has no say in the matter of the men's mistreatment of girls. Under patriarchy, only males can carry on the family line and inherit family power and property (037), which results in the preference for sons over daughters. This is why in Silver Sister's family, it is always her sisters who are sold or given away, not the sons.

Another reason for female infanticide and abandonment of daughters is the social custom of dowry on marriage. Recorded in the *Rite of Li* (280), this custom becomes more and more prevalent in the middle and late Ming Dynasty, followed by the Qing dynasty. The expense of a dowry is so exorbitant that even middle and upper class families find it difficult to manage. It is impossible for ordinary families. The amount of the dowry affects the bride's position and treatment in the in-law's family, including the relationship between the bride and bridegroom. The more dowry her family provides, the higher position she will achieve in her husband's family (280-281). For a poor family like the Wongs, even the bringing up of girls is a big problem, let alone the provision of dowry in their future marriages. The patriarchal family is patrilocal: after the daughter is married, she becomes a member of her husband's family. These factors combine: the ideology of male superiority and female inferiority, the marrying away of daughters, the burden of dowry, the poverty of the family, all come together to produce commodification, infanticide or abandonment of daughters. This is demonstrated in the fate of the four blood sisters in Part Two of the novel—Gold, Jade, Pearl and Ruby. When their father dies, their family is in debt and they are sold to Tai Tai as part of her dowry. Although they are from a middle-class family and well educated (Ng 70), they can still be sacrificed when their family is in economic straits.

The second representative of transvestite patriarchy is the mother-in-law in her treatment of the daughter-in-law.

In Part Two of *Silver Sister*, the mother-in-law, Ancient Mistress, was a victim of patriarchal society herself—she came to the House of Tang as a child-bride at the age of ten (76). The child bride practice was prevalent in old China, especially in the Qing Dynasty, when it existed in over half of the counties in China (Luo 281). It was most popular in southern provinces such as Fujian, Guangdong, Jiangxi and Sichuan. To avoid the huge expense of their sons' marriage, many families adopt a child bride as young as five or even less. The novel *Silver Sister* doesn't describe Ancient Mistress' life as a child bride, but this practice itself is misogynous. Now that she has become a mother-in-law, she stands on the side

of patriarchy to maintain its norms and traditions—to carry out the practice of polygamy on behalf of the House of Tang so that they can increase their chances of producing a male heir to carry on the family line. Though the more common word 'polygamy' is used here, it should actually be "polygyny", in that it is only men who were allowed to have more than one spouse in old China before the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Among these spouses, only one is wife, the others are all concubines. This is a misogynistic marriage system which objectifies women as sexual or procreative tools, as I will explain in the following.

In *Silver Sister*, though Tai Tai is not required to serve Ancient Mistress, that is, her mother-in-law, as the daughters-in-law do in *The Diggers from China* (Gittins 25) and *East Wind: West Wind* (Buck 40-42), she is required to follow Ancient Mistress' command and help produce a male heir for the House of Tang. The authority of the mother-in-law and the obedience of the daughter-in-law again reflect the power structure. The mother-in-law in pre-socialist China was the "patriarch's female deputy in the Chinese family". She was "the immediate, unchallengeable supervisor of her daughter-in-law's work and life". She was "the one to whom the new bride owed most of her direct service and obedience. Thus the enmity between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law was 'intrinsic'' (Stacey 54). This enmity has lasted till modern times. In modern Chinese society, the relationship between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law is fraught with jealousy and competition as these women vie for the affection and loyalty of the man who is the son to one and husband to the other (Shih 11). In *Swallowing Clouds* (1997), another novel by Lillian Ng, the mother-in-law, Zhu's mother, and the daughter-in-law, Kar Leng, are hostile toward each other, vying for Zhu's loyalty and devotion. Their hostility is also caused by the problem of a male heir. Like traditional Chinese mothers-in-law, the old lady wants to have a grandson, as Ancient Mistress does in *Silver Sister*.

The third form of transvestite patriarchy is represented by the wife in her treatment of the slave girls and her husband's other women.

Under pressure from Ancient Mistress' to obtain a concubine for Master, Tai Tai tries to prevent this from happening. She has anticipated it and has already taken measures to avoid it. To cope with the problem of a male heir and to prevent her husband from frequenting the brothel and taking a concubine, Tai Tai encourages him to have sex with her slave girls. This is another form of polygamy in the old China where slave girls were also components of the polygamous structure and they are the lowest stratum—the descending hierarchy is wife, concubine, slave girls. Slave girls like Gold in *Silver Sister* are turned into "two-legged wombs", to use a phrase from *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood 136). Thus Ancient Mistress and Tai Tai play a double role: they are both victim and victimiser.

In the feudal period, the caste of slave girls, like that of prostitutes, actors and actresses, is the lowest. They have no freedom and their body is subject to their master or mistress (Luo 091). They are chattels. Tai Tai has four slave girls and three of them, Gold, Pearl and Ruby, become sexual objects. Jade is spared because she hasn't started menstruation and is unable to conceive (Ng 69). The four slave girls enter the House of Tang as part of Tai Tai's dowry, and under the command of both Master and Tai Tai. They are terribly exploited. These girls work for the House of Tang without pay as servants, and they have to provide sexual services to the Master. They are often abused by both master and mistress. They are voiceless in the novel. Even the other servants like Silver Sister keep a distance from them. Silver Sister only hears their cry when they are abused by their mistress. These innocent girls become the scapegoats of their mistress' bad mood and hot temper when she is angry with her husband. The one who is exploited most is Gold. She is not only silent, but also invisible in the novel. It is through the gossip among the servants that Silver Sister learns of Gold's existence. Gold is confined in a nunnery, waiting for the birth of her child. According to a conversation between Tai Tai and Ancient Mistress, she is confined there to avoid a miscarriage, because Master is often drunk and wants to bed her (78). According to Ho Ma, however, Silver Sister knows that Gold is prettier and younger than Tai Tai, so she is likely to be favoured by Master and become Master's concubine if she gives birth to a boy. This is the real reason for her seclusion in the nunnery. In feudal China, a slave girl's social status can be raised and her name might be listed in the pedigree on condition that she has a child with the master of the family (Luo 091). The likelihood of Gold becoming a concubine is great as she is predicted to give birth to a boy. From what happens next, Ho Ma's judgment is right—Gold is segregated from the House of Tang because of Tai Tai's jealousy and she will not be back if her baby is male. Three months later, Gold does give birth to a boy. That very night, Tai Tai dispatches Tang Ma to the nunnery to bring the baby to the House of Tang (Ng 83), leaving Gold in the nunnery. Gold is triply exploited: by the master who occupies her body, by the mistress who uses her as a surrogate to produce a male heir on her behalf so that Ancient Mistress won't get a concubine for the master, and by the House of Tang whose lineage is maintained with Gold's son. While the whole household is celebrating the birth of the baby, Gold, the biological mother, is excluded. She is deprived of freedom, motherhood, and even the right to take her own life. She is represented in Ng's novel as a tragic victim of the patriarchal system and of the hierarchy of the polygamous system.

Besides slave girls, another victim of a wife's malice and persecution is the husband's "kept woman". Unlike Canton, where a man may have concubines and can also sleep with slave girls with the wife's full knowledge, Hong Kong is ruled by the British government (1842-1997) and polygamy is unlawful during the period of Silver Sister's residence there. However, Ng reveals how the restriction of the law doesn't

stop a man from practicing polygamy in another form: having a kept woman, or mistress, without the wife's knowledge. In the novel Little Peacock Lien is such a woman, kept by Xi, who not only occupies her body, but restricts her freedom. Ng demonstrates how Little Peacock Lien is a victim of this illegal relationship, betrayed and deserted by Xi. She is also a victim of the wife, Rose. She is humiliated, abused, and bullied by Rose who seeks her out and condemns her as a "husband snatcher". She calls Little Peacock Lien a lot of bad names—"vile fox", "witch", "stinker" and "husband snatcher" —and threatens her—"Just wait and see" (157-159). This foreshadows Little Peacock Lien's disfigurement by Rose. In the end Lien's appearance, fame and career in Hong Kong are all ruined. She has to leave Hong Kong for USA. Rose takes the upper hand due to her lawful status.

Wives' dominance over slave girls, concubines or kept women in modern society is due to their position in a Chinese family. Confucianism values an orderly society where the younger must respect the elder and the inferior must honour the superior. The wife is the mistress of the family and concubines as well as slave girls must follow her admonishment, instruction and arrangements (Luo 091). In the traditional Chinese family, the first wife was respected, even if she had no son. Chinese scholars Xiaonan Deng et al. provide the example of Empress Dowager Cixi and Empress Dowager Ci'an to prove this. Although Cixi gave birth to Tongzhi who later became emperor, Ci'an was Emperor Xianfeng's first wife, so Ci'an commanded more respect than Cixi (9). In modern Chinese society, the wife's ascendency over the kept woman comes both from her rightful position in the family and her lawful position in society.

As *Silver Sister* has revealed, Chinese women's social position in old China was low, but some women, like the mother-in-law and the wife, did have some power in the family to dominate other women in a subordinate position. These women internalised patriarchal ideas and practices and act as men's accomplices in the persecution of other women or girls. Ng seems to suggest that the women who are likely to engage in female misogyny tend to be those in social ascendancy, such as Ancient Mistress and Tai Tai. They are victims of the old patriarchal system, but when they change their position to turn against other women, either to help maintain patriarchal norms, or to defend their own interest, they become victimisers.

Ancient Mistress and Tai Tai are not the only women who play a role in maintaining the patriarchal system. In *Silver Sister*, Little Peacock Lien, the absent and nameless mistress of Peng, and Kim all collude in the system by willingly accepting their roles as mistresses. When they play the role of victimisers, women do not challenge the patriarchal system or the men, but rather engage in internecine strifes. *Silver Sister* points to the patriarchal system as the root of misogyny and men's frivolity, irresponsibility and inconstancy as the cause of enmity and confrontation between women.

CONCLUSION

Using the genre of fictional biography, Lillian Ng in *Silver Sister* offers a picture of Chinese women's suffering in China as well as in other parts of Southeast Asia in the pre-socialist period, and also in Australia (in the case of Kim) in the 1980s. Ng plays with two different genres: fiction and autobiography. One reason is for the author to protect her nanny "because she is very shy and she is still alive" (Ouyang 112), in the author's own words. Ng has heard what Silver Sister said, but she is telling the story in her own words, pretending it is the words of Silver Sister, to make the story more convincing.

Women's life stories are primary sources for knowledge of women's lives, and life history research is a feminist method for gaining a broader and deeper understanding of women's consciousness, historically and in the present (Geiger, 334-351). This fictionalised autobiography by Lillian Ng provides a good example for the study of Chinese women's suffering under misogyny, covering about half of the twentieth century, from the perspective of a marginalised woman who has a vague and tentative feminist consciousness in her sensitivity to women's suffering and in her sympathy with and support of women. Ng seems to suggest that women's sympathy and sisterhood might be effective to combat misogyny, as shown in Silver Sister's assistance to Little Peacock Lien, Dawn, and Kim.

This article has discussed the traditional misogynous practices represented in *Silver Sister* in China during the transitional period from a late imperial country to a republican one: the maltreatment of daughters, the tragic fate of slave girls who are part of the polygamous system. It has also analysed polygamy in an alternative form—to have a kept woman or a mistress under capitalist government in Hong Kong, Singapore and Australia. Immersed in patriarchal ideology, mothers are complicit in the selling, abandonment, or even killing of daughters. Wives also internalise misogynous practices and ideology. When they are in privileged position, they are prone to persecute, exploit or suppress other women below them, either to maintain the patriarchal system or to defend their own interest. In a word, under the patriarchal system, women often work together with men to maintain this system to work against women, as Flood et al. explain in their definition of misogyny:"Though most common in men, misogyny also exists in and is practised by women against other women or even themselves. Misogyny functions as an ideology or belief system that has accompanied patriarchal, or male-dominated, societies for thousands of years and continues to place women in subordinate positions with limited access to power and decision-making" (443).

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