

Deconstruction of the Myth of Woman——A Comparative Study of Female Images in The Modern Context in Jia Pingwa's *The Country Wife* and Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily* from the Perspective of Existential Feminism

Qionglin Liu* and Yu Sun

School of Foreign Studies, Northwestern Polytechnical University, Xi'an, China
Email: jolin@mail.nwpu.edu.cn (Q.L); sunyu@nwpu.edu.cn (Y.S.)

*Corresponding author

Manuscript received November 28, 2025; accepted March 20, 2026; published May 28, 2026

Abstract—William Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily* and Jia Pingwa's *The Country Wife* both depict the transformation of women from passive acceptance of patriarchal oppression to forms of active resistance, revealing each writer's attempt to dismantle the male-constructed "myth of women". While this study draws on Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminism to examine how Emily and Darky move from "immanence" to gestures of "transcendence", it also extends beyond a unidirectional application of Western theory. By placing Beauvoir's concepts in dialogue with a Chinese case situated in the context of Reform-era social transitions, this paper demonstrates how Chinese cultural thought—particularly notions of relational subjectivity and gradualist transformation—offers a critical counterpoint to Beauvoir's Western binary framework of Subject/Other. Thus, the comparative analysis not only illuminates the different cultural and ideological foundations behind Faulkner's and Jia's deconstruction of gender essentialism but also shows how the Chinese text enriches and complicates the theoretical implications of existential feminism.

Keywords—existential feminism, the other, immanence, transcendence, being-for-itself

I. INTRODUCTION

Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, famously proposes the concept of the "myth of women," referring to the ideological construction that reduces women to polarized figures such as obedient "angels" or deviant "monsters." In William Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily* and Jia Pingwa's *The Country Wife*, both writers respond to this myth by portraying the lived struggles of women in patriarchal societies. Emily and Darky initially inhabit the imposed position of "the Other," but gradually awaken to their own agency. Their trajectories, however, unfold within distinct cultural, social, and philosophical frameworks.

While Beauvoir's existentialist feminism provides a powerful vocabulary for analyzing their awakening—from immanence toward transcendence—this paper does not simply apply Western theory to two literary texts. Rather, it argues that the Chinese case offers a cultural and philosophical counterpoint to Beauvoir's framework. Jia Pingwa's narrative is deeply rooted in Chinese notions of relational subjectivity, gradual transformation, and ethical coexistence, which subtly challenge Beauvoir's binary model of Subject vs. Other. Through comparison, the paper shows how the Chinese text not only exemplifies but also *reflects back* on the Western theory it engages with.

Although abundant research exists on both *A Rose for Emily* and *The Country Wife*, previous studies have tended to emphasize women's oppression or the angel/monster dichotomy without systematically examining women's agency or the culturally distinct pathways through which subjectivity emerges. Existing scholarship seldom considers how the Chinese case may contribute to, complicate, or revise Western feminist theory.

This paper addresses this gap by situating the transformation of female images within Beauvoir's existential feminist framework while simultaneously using Jia Pingwa's text to interrogate and extend that framework. Drawing on the concepts of "the Other," "free choice," "immanence," "transcendence," and "being-for-itself," this study analyzes how Emily and Darky negotiate patriarchal constraints and pursue subjective becoming. It further argues that the two writers' distinct cultural backgrounds—one shaped by the American South's collapsing aristocratic values, the other by Reform-era China's reconstructing social order—result in divergent strategies for deconstructing gender essentialism.

Through this cross-cultural comparison, the paper reveals the ideological disparities underlying Western and Chinese approaches to female subjectivity and demonstrates how the Chinese case offers an alternative model of gender transformation that enriches the theoretical insights of existential feminism.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW THE PLIGHT OF THE OTHER: ANGELS IN A CAGE

In traditional literary texts, women are often portrayed through polarized stereotypes as either angels or monsters, perpetuating the "myth of women" constructed by male writers. This patriarchal culture employs the idealized ending of the angelic woman and the tragic fate of the monster woman as narrative templates, shaping stories about women's roles and perpetuating myths regarding their value [1]. The idealized and sanctified image of the "angel" embodies the ideal image of women in the patriarchal male aesthetic. It outlines a set of values for women, instructing them to prioritize physical beauty and spiritual purity, conforming to the needs of men and sacrificing their own desires. "It is precisely this sacrifice which dooms her both to death and to heaven [2, p. 53]". This expectation ultimately leads to their demise and entrance into heaven. As Beauvoir argues in *The*

Second Sex: “We can see now that the myth is in large part explained by its usefulness to man.....Surely most of the myths had roots in the spontaneous attitude of man towards his own existence and towards the world around him [3, p. 266]”. The myth of women as angels or monsters is a lie created by men in order to portray women as the absolute other. The stereotypes of women in traditional narratives are not inherent or intrinsic, but stem from the male-centered discourse that disciplines and oppresses women.

The status of women as “the Other” is not an immutable condition but rather a socially constructed one. The patriarchal society, through the process of limiting women’s roles and identifying them as the “Other,” effectively relegates them to a position of secondary status. In the introduction part of *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir famously states that “He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other [3, p. 16]”. Beauvoir applies Hegel’s master-slave dialectic to the structural oppression of women in patriarchal society, emphasizing their marginalization as “the Other” within this system. To coerce women into acquiescing to their subordinate status as “the Other,” the patriarchal society manipulates and controls various academic and ideological fields, severing the necessary path for women to seek their own selves and shaping distorted emotional patterns in them [3, p. 94]. The status of women as “the Other” is reduced to an “immanent” plight through value exhortations and other means.

In Faulkner’s writing, Emily is initially portrayed as an ‘angel’ who submits to patriarchal discipline and is relegated to the role of the Other. As a southern gentlewoman, her plight of being the Other stems from her father’s control on behalf of the patriarchy at the family level and the southern “ladyhood” on behalf of the traditional aristocratic values at the social level.

At the familial level, Emily is confined to a patriarchal household, a societal structure that was predominant in southern America during that era. In this setup, the father or husband occupied the position of absolute authority, serving as the head of the family. Traditionally, a white male patriarch was expected to reign supreme in a southern household, with women expected to accommodate the needs and desires of men. Emily’s isolation and subsequent loss of individuality can be traced back to her father’s domineering behavior. He regards her as his personal possession and drives away all her potential suitors, effectively taking control of her life and limiting her in the realm of family to lose subjectivity and freedom. As a result, Emily’s agency is diminished within the confines of the family unit. “Her father a spraddled silhouette in the foreground, his back to her and clutching a horsewhip, the two of them framed by the backflung front door. [4, pp. 10–11]”. In this portrait of Emily and her father, the father is portrayed as a powerful tyrant, while Emily is depicted as a dependent upon her father. The horsewhip, ostensibly meant to protect Emily, ironically also serves to restrict her, denying her agency and making her forever shadowed by the patriarchal figure, as a victim of the system that relegates southern women to the status of “the Other”.

At the social level, Emily adheres to the traditional southern aristocratic “ladyhood”. Southern “ladyhood” promotes the values of modesty, patience, gentleness, and

selflessness as feminine virtues, cultivating women to become subordinate and obedient. The femininity defined by “ladyhood” is inherently biased towards male needs and prejudices, perpetuating an “angelic” myth of women. This myth encourages women to regulate themselves according to these gendered expectations, making them internalize this value admonition, making it a part of their self-consciousness thus making them fall into the “immanence” that cannot be easily transcend. After her father’s death, the townspeople acted as spokespersons for him and even the patriarchy, exerting control over Emily and lecturing her on her values in the patriarchal value. Other women in town condemn Emily for pursuing love, viewing it as morally corrupt and unbecoming of a southern gentlewoman. They believe that Emily has corrupted, transforming from a “a real lady” into one who forgets “noblesse oblige”. According to their expectations, Emily, as a gentlewoman, should be obedient, stoic, and selfless, but she is so active and initiative, even to the extent of falling in love with “a day laborer”. This is thought to go against the southern ladyhood and subvert the traditional gender roles. Emily’s proactive behavior is criticized and degraded as inappropriate, to be the so-called “poor Emily”. Other women in town internalized the idea that their needs should be subordinated to those of men, which led to the suppression of their own consciousness and self-expression, leaving them unable to shape their own identities and subjectivity. As a result, women were relegated to the position of the Other in the patriarchal society.

Whether during her father’s life or after his death, Emily loses her independence on both the family and the social level and is forced to follow the patriarchal disciplines and adhere to the southern aristocratic tradition of the ladyhood of “gentlewomen”. The femininity prescribed by the “myth of woman” is internalized into self-consciousness and reduced to the position of the Other, making women caught in the plight of immanence. The requirement of ladyhood of gentlewomen and the angelic myth of women are value precepts fabricated by men under patriarchy to suppress women’s individuality. Through the control of ideology, women are made passive objects who accept prescribed femininity and traditional values instead of being independent decision-makers like men. This prevents them from transcending the plight.

At the start of the novel, Darcy is portrayed as the traditional image of an “angel,” which is innocent, kind, dedicated, and tolerant. This meets the patriarchal ideal of the perfect woman, giving Darcy an aura of holiness, just like an angel. At this point, Darcy has not yet developed a female consciousness and is unaware of the patriarchal oppression she faces. Her namelessness and silence reveal her position of being the Other.

The plight of Darcy is reflected in her naming style. She is the angel without her own name. The name serves as a symbolic system for reference. In literature, names often carry aesthetic value and artistic function. Throughout the long history of patriarchy, the naming of women has been in charge of men. In ancient China, fathers officially named their babies 3 months after birth. The surname is traditionally passed down from the father in a patriarchal system. Both male and female took their father’s name. Men were given their own personal names while not all women had their own

names. Darky's importance is self-evident as the protagonist of the novel. She is, however, referred to throughout the text only by her surname "Darky", while other male characters are given names such as "small husband", "Mu Du" and "Lai Shun". The namelessness of Darky is a reflection of the reality of women's position in literature. In the sociological field of identity, the concepts of category and role reveal the relationship between individuals living in society. The naming of Darky in the novel constructs an anonymous and subordinate world for women, where men are in the center and the dominant, while women are in the subordinate and the dominated, becoming angels. The man is portrayed as the subject and the woman as the absolute Other.

Darky's silence in the face of patriarchal oppression reflects her marginalized position as the Other. Patriarchal power confines women to the private sphere, devalues their self-worth, and enforces the angelic image as a role model of the ideal woman, leaving women voiceless and silent in the face of this value admonition. Darky's presence is silent. In her husband's eyes, she is objectified as a silent sex object. The husband says, "You are my land [5, p. 46]", claiming the right to plow any way he pleased. She can only bear it silently and dares to softly choke and sigh only after her husband falls asleep. He calls her "Miserable wretch [5, p. 52]". Black can only stand in a daze for a while without contradicting her husband and even refrains from crying. When she found out that her husband was having an affair, she had the intention to go to the school where he worked. However, as soon as she arrived at the school gate, she softened and once again chose to remain silent. For her father families of her husband, she is considered a "servant" and is expected to remain silent. They "pull long faces at Darky and chide her for being ugly, dark, and fat. [5, p. 47]". She remains silent and is made to feel inferior and insignificant and behave increasingly submissively. Darky is expected to fulfill the role of a silent wife and daughter-in-law but not herself. Women become silent wives and mothers devotees of the family, losing their voice and subjectivity and falling into a nameless, silent and dependent existence.

Darky's namelessness and silence reveal her status as the Other. In a society dominated by patriarchal discourse, men control language, creating symbols and manipulating the entire semantic system to exert power over women's economy, politics, and culture in sexual terms. A dictionary can be seen as a code of the male perspective [6]. Women become silent wives, mothers' devotees of the family, losing their voice and subjectivity and falling into a nameless, silent and dependent existence.

The analysis and comparison above show that Faulkner and Jia Pingwa both portray Emily and Darky as 'angels' disciplined by patriarchal society at the beginning of the novel's plot development. These female characters are socialized to conform to an idealized 'angel' image in the eyes of men, which can cause them to sacrifice their own subjectivity and self-awareness, resulting in a subordinate status as the Other. Faulkner shows the traditional family model and the ladyhood of gentlewomen in southern America, while Jia Pingwa presents this with the namelessness and silence of women. Faulkner and Jia Pingwa present similar female plights under different cultural backgrounds in different ways, which are complementary to each other.

III. THE AWAKENING SELF: TRANSCENDENCE OF IMMANENCE

There is no definite essence of a woman's existence and no innate characteristic of femininity. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir uses the term "immanence" to analyze the passive, repressed and stagnant state of women's existence. Beauvoir argues that women's immanence is a major contributing factor to the oppression they endure. Immanence does not apply only to women, and it is not unchangeable. Immanence is a product of history and describes a situation of endless repetition of work that has no impact on history. Immanence refers to the closed, passive, and inactive existence that women are often forced into under the patriarchal system. Women are often discouraged from the pursuit of certain goals and there are barriers to the achievement of those goals. They are deprived of any possibility and hope, and their transcendence is always curbed and gradually dominated by immanence. Immanence is often associated with femininity, while transcendence is often associated with masculinity. It's important to note, though, that immanence and transcendence are not exclusive to one gender or the Other and are variable over time. The postmodernist Judith Butler argues that gender is a social construction rather than a natural one. According to Butler's theory of gender performativity, "gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time [7]". Gender characteristics are not inherent, but rather fluid and diverse. In this sense, immanence of woman can also be transcended. To achieve gender equality, it is necessary for women to reject the notion that men are associated with transcendental and rationality, while women are inseparable from immanence and materiality. Women should strive to move beyond their current state of passive existence, and work towards a new way of being.

For Emily in the awakening stage, the significant change of the brief absence of patriarchal power due to the death of her father and her own pursuit of love and happiness are important opportunities for her awakening. According to existential feminism, both men and women are ambiguous beings with immanence and transcendence. "In fact every existent is at once simultaneously immanence and transcendence." [3, p. 261]. Patriarchy's rejection to provide women with equal opportunities has resulted in women being confined to immanence, which is not an inherent quality of women. It is possible for women to transcend immanence when given the space to do so.

The death of her father briefly freed her from patriarchal control. A sense of self began to germinate in her mind. After refusing to bury him and insisting for three days, she fell ill for a long time. This illness marked Emily's transformation, awakening, and renewal. When she reappeared, "her hair was cut short, making her look like a girl [4, pp. 10–11]". Emily cuts her hair short that carries the requirement of gentlewomen, symbolizing her rejection of her past identity as the Other. In *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millett argues that patriarchy is a social institution and that current gender relations support it. "Sexual politics" is the process by which the dominant gender attempts to assert its authority over the subordinate gender [8]. With the death of her father, Emily's authoritative patron, controller, and oppressor is removed, and the temporary absence of patriarchal power allows Emily

to transcend. Furthermore, Emily's affection for Homer stirs up her awakening. She remains determined in her love, unconcerned about Homer's social status as a "Yankee" and "day laborer", which does not match her own and she never concerns about the gossip of the townspeople. She leaves her home, shedding her past southern "gentlewomen" demeanor and her reserved character. Emily boldly pursuing love and happiness. She rides confidently through town in a carriage with her lover and visits a jewelry store to order toiletries and a complete wardrobe for her lover. Meanwhile, the other women in town scoff at Emily's passion for life because they are unable to overcome their internalized sense of "otherness" and the male-dominated social discourse. As a result, they alienate themselves and become spokespersons and accomplices of the patriarchy. Emily strives for happiness despite the patriarchal society's expectation of women to be angelic, passive, and submissive. Her pursuit encourages her to break free from societal norms and transcend her internal struggles.

The death of Emily's father frees her from patriarchal power and allows her to transcend her interiority. As she strives to find happiness, she becomes inspired to act and to assert herself. It is noteworthy, however, that Faulkner limits Emily's awakening to a specific domain: Emily does not explicitly recognize herself as a transcendent being like men, nor does she establish herself as a subject as men do. Emily does not completely step out of the private sphere. Her search for subjectivity is not aimed at establishing herself as an independent individual, but rather at finding a reliable companion for her domestic life in the private sphere. Women can discover themselves and overcome passivity by awakening to their own potential. The "myth of the woman" will disappear only when women assert themselves as independent subjects, insisting that they are just as transcendent as men. It is important to note that Emily's awakening is limited, as she does not fully break free from traditional ideas regarding women's immanence.

For Darcy, the end of her first marriage alleviates some of the patriarchal oppression, frees her from the perception that men are transcendent and women are immanent, and inspired her to an escalating quest for a better life with the establishment of a purpose for herself. In traditional texts, women are often portrayed as believing in the superiority of men, which is not a mere illusion but has a socio-economic basis according to Beauvoir. Women are often depicted as being stuck in their immanence, always convinced of the superiority of men, incapable of awakening. Initially, Darcy believes in the transcendence of men, but after a major change in her life, she abandons this belief. Following her divorce, she lives independently, even under difficult conditions, and "gathers her pride and refuses to accept a single thing from her former husband [5, p. 59]". She tends her own fields every day and living off her own labor. Before her divorce, "she used to think that without a man, a woman was like a vine that had no sturdy tree to lean on or a kite without a string [5, p. 60]" after the divorce, she realizes that "a woman was also human and could live vigorously on her own [5, p. 60]". Her self-awareness was finally awakened, and her efforts and struggles are no longer to cater to patriarchal needs, but for her own survival and development.

Under this premise, Darcy sets goals and pursue happiness.

According to existential feminism, women in patriarchal societies are not encouraged to establish and pursue their own goals in life, and are therefore trapped in immanence. The establishment and pursuit of specific goals in life stimulates women's transcendence. In Darcy's pursuit of a better life, she gradually becomes as proactive as men in her actions. After deciding to remarry, Darcy overcomes the feeling of "otherness" and takes an active role in the family's economic activities and major decisions, becoming the decision-maker of the family. After earning the capital for her business, Darcy insists on using the money to open a noodle shop. She diligently runs the business, relying on her own labor to achieve increasingly better material conditions. In contrast to the silence of her first marriage, Darcy makes her own voice as a female. Ruth Irigaray, a third-wave feminist and heir to Beauvoir, argues that women should speak in their own voices, 'decentering' the phallogocentric discourse and creating a discourse of their own. After her divorce, Darcy gains independence through her own labor and makes her own voice, transcending immanence in action, thus realizing the construction of subjectivity.

The end of Darcy's first marriage not only freed her from patriarchal oppression, but also inspired her to reject traditional gender roles in favor of self-empowerment and a better life. She refused to be a mere appendage to men and instead supported herself through diligent labor, gradually recognizing the inherent value of women. She not only became more proactive in her actions but also overcame her silence and established a voice for women, achieving the construction of her subjectivity.

In comparison, it is clear that Faulkner and Jia Pingwa employ a similar strategy in expressing the awakening stage of Emily and Darcy. Both Faulkner and Jia Pingwa situate their characters in dynamic environments, allowing the protagonists to confront evolving and conflicting situations that highlight their choices. Only when faced with change and crisis can the potential energy and possibilities of life be fully explored, and the will and dignity of humanity can be fully revealed. [9, p. 71]. Emily and Darcy undergo significant life changes, including the departure of the patriarchal authority and the breakdown of their marriage, which compel them to confront an existential crisis. In the context of existentialism, the essence of a woman is not innate but is formed through life experiences and determined by the way they live. The essence of woman can be updated with changes in space and time, allowing for the possibility of transcending the immanence to achieve a higher state of being. It is noteworthy that Faulkner and Jia Pingwa show certain differences in the expression of women's awakening. In the novel, Darcy positions herself as the main subject, asserting her transcendence to men and taking proactive steps towards socialized labor, ultimately establishing a female discourse. However, Emily does not fully challenge the traditional understanding of women's immanence and always remains in the private sphere and keeps silent.

IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION. THE EXISTENCE OF SELF-DETERMINATION: THE LIBERATED WOMEN

A well-presented results section coupled with a convincing discussion will definitely prove the novelty and importance of your study. It should provide a concise and precise

description of the experimental results, their interpretation, as well as the experimental conclusions that can be drawn.

The way for women to overcome their status as “the Other” and move towards independence and freedom is to shape themselves according to their own will with the freedom of choice and proactive actions. In his work *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre divides existence into two forms: “being-in-itself” and “being-for-itself” [10]. The former refers to an individual’s unconscious existence on a material level, while the latter manifests when an individual shapes their authentic self-according to their own desires and intentions. The subjective initiative of individual self-awareness is crucial to individual freedom, and true freedom lies in “being-for-itself”. Drawing on Sartre’s discussion of these two forms of existence, Beauvoir argues that women under traditional patriarchy often mold themselves according to male perspectives and demands, thereby losing the possibility of shaping themselves based on their own self-awareness and falling into a state of “being-in-itself”, deprived of subjective freedom. However, the existence of women as “being-in-itself” is unique. Their existence lacks a fixed essence and possesses the potential for free choice and proactive action. To achieve fundamental freedom, women must strive to establish themselves as “being-for-itself”. They should reflect on the purposes and motivations of their actions, shape themselves according to their own will, and thus escape the state of “being-in-itself” prescribed by traditional patriarchy, ultimately moving towards true freedom and liberation.

Furthermore, Beauvoir emphasizes the importance of attaining economic independence and freeing oneself from emotional dependence on love as essential prerequisites for women’s pursuit of freedom. She argues that an independent economic status is the basis for women to establish their own agency. Women should possess an independent economic status, pursue their own goals, and strive to transcend themselves within society without relying on men. Women should possess an independent economic status, pursue their own goals, and strive to transcend themselves within society without relying on men. Women can thus free themselves from the constraints of traditional roles and gender stereotypes, engage more fully in social and public affairs, and dismantle the singular value system confined to the private sphere. Additionally, Beauvoir stresses the significance of spiritual independence, stating that women must detach themselves from emotional dependency on love to achieve liberation. The act of love for woman is still considered a service she renders to man, which therefore makes him seem her master [3, p. 527]. It is only when women emancipate themselves from dependency, both economically and emotionally, that they can truly establish themselves as subjects and exist as beings-for-themselves.

Both Faulkner and Jia Pingwa depict Emily and Darcy as undergoing significant life changes during their awakening stage, which leads to the awakening of female consciousness. Despite these similarities, Emily and Darcy ultimately take different paths. This reflects the different strategies that Faulkner and Jia Pingwa use to deconstruct the “myth of woman”.

Emily’s failure to fully emancipate herself from male dependency, both economically and emotionally, left her unable to make free choices according to her own will.

Economically, Emily exhibited a conservative attitude as a member of the Southern aristocracy. She inherited her family’s fortune and clung to the old traditions of the South, isolating herself from the outside world for ten years, with the front door closed. Trapped within the confines of the private sphere, she was unable to participate in socialized productive activities. The activities within the private sphere were repetitive, internal, and closed, denying Emily the opportunity to create value and achieve economic independence, effectively halting her quest for self-discovery. Emotionally, Emily became overly dependent on love, and the betrayal of her lover quickly shattered her hopes of pursuing happiness. In her desperation, Emily turns into an extreme and perverted figure and decides to retaliate in the most radical and decisive way. She poisons her lover with rat poison and arsenic when he attempts to leave her and spends decades sleeping beside his corpse. Emily’s transition from an initial “angel” to a “monster” represented her tragic revenge and rebellion against patriarchal society. The conclusion of her rebellion was marked by the death of her lover, the other party in the struggle of gender relations, and her revengeful actions and “monster” image served as a subversion of male-centered phallogentrism.

In the final chapters of the novel, Darcy completes her transformation from an “angel” to a “monster.” Her monster “monstrous” nature lies in her departure and deviation from the traditional female values under patriarchy. The establishment of Darcy’s subjectivity becomes increasingly clear in her pursuit of personal happiness, thus freeing herself from traditional gender value orientations and enabling her to freely establish her own goals, make independent choices, and stride towards self-directed existence. Rather than choosing to play the role of a passive, compliant, and self-unaware “angel,” she opts to become a “monster” who subverts traditional female values, liberates herself, and dares to pursue her own goals. Economically, Darcy actively participates in productive activities and creates self-worth. She takes an active role in managing a small shop and achieves economic independence through her own diligence and intelligence. Even when her husband falls on hard times, she independently chooses to take out money to repay his debts. “When I got divorced, they laughed at me. Today, if I relieve his distress, they should sneer at his family, not at me! [5, p. 85]”. Darcy’s subjectivity has been firmly established, and she has successfully discarded the shackles of the “otherness” mindset, empowering herself as a subject capable of making free choices. Emotionally, she does not rely on love and has a clear understanding of her own emotional needs. The emotional numbness of her husband, Mu Du, leaves her emotional needs unsatisfied. After awakening her self-consciousness, Darcy is destined to no longer tolerate male behavior without limits as she did in her first marriage. Her needs are constantly brushed off by Mu Du with remarks such as, “We’re a seasoned couple and no longer young [5, p. 88]”. Darcy no longer remains silent at this point, asking Mu Du, “Can’t you talk about anything else? [5, p. 83]” and actively expressing her emotional needs to her husband. When she realizes that her husband will not change, she chooses to abandon their affluent but boring marital life. “Humans want not only respect but also love. [5, p. 81]”. She opts to elope with Lai Shun, breaking the shackles of

traditional morality. This is essentially her pursuit of personal happiness and self-worth.

Darkey continuously transcends her inherent limitations. Even when faced with an uncertain future and numerous obstacles, she perseveres in her difficult struggle to achieve freedom. As described in the novel's end, Darkey declares, "Run, run until you are sweating all over. Otherwise, the chilly air will sink into your bones! [5, p. 89]". Although she may not know "how far this path still extends, or what awaits her at the end - whether it be bitterness or sweetness, sorrow or joy," the journey itself is a process of breaking shackles and making free choices. Through her choices and actions, she strides towards transcendence and achieves self-directed existence. Through Darkey, Jia Pingwa liberates women from the long-held shackles imposed by patriarchal society, completing her transformation from an "angel" to a "monster" and from the "other" to the "subject." Darkey's economic independence and emotional agency empower her to make autonomous choices, shattering the "myth of women" constructed by patriarchal society and dismantling the traditional evaluation system for female.

In comparison, it is revealed that Faulkner and Jia Pingwa exhibit significant differences in their approaches to deconstructing "the myth of women" reflecting the different attitudes of Chinese and Western writers toward gender issues and their different ways of responding to the crisis of human survival during social transformation. On one hand, Faulkner and Jia Pingwa's gender perspectives are rooted in different ideological systems. Faulkner's thinking as an American writer is based on the binary opposition tradition of Western philosophy and religious thought. He takes a radical and subversive approach, eliminating one side of the traditional gender binary opposition. On the other hand, Jia Pingwa, a Chinese writer, takes a more moderate and gradual approach to deconstruction, influenced by traditional Chinese culture and philosophy, particularly the concept of yin-yang complementarity and harmonious coexistence.

Within the context of traditional Chinese culture, gender relations are viewed as a pursuit of harmony and balance rather than solely a battle. Therefore, when challenging traditional female values, Jia Pingwa tends to discard them rather than completely overturning traditional gender concepts. Jia Pingwa's gender ideology, which originates from China, resonates with the criticisms and developments of French feminist Luce Irigaray towards Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism. Irigaray argues that Beauvoir's views on the Other and the subject simply reiterate the patriarchal narrative, relying on hierarchical relationships and binary oppositions. When women define themselves as the subject, they inevitably define the other side as the other. Irigaray proposes a new type of gender relationship that explores how individuals can coexist and respect each other, emphasizing human subjectivity. She builds a bridge between the subjects of both sexes. "Your development, my development, our development.... I am your bridge, but this bridge is not mine or belonging to me. [11, pp. 29-30]". This shares commonality with Jia Pingwa's approach to deconstructing the "myth of women," emphasizing subjectivity and harmonious coexistence. To some extent, the gender issues and concepts reflected in Jia Pingwa's works provide a Chinese perspective for Western

feminist criticism.

On the other hand, Faulkner and Jia Pingwa differ in their attitudes towards the existential survival crisis faced by humans during social transformation. In the 20th century, the traditional value system of the Southern United States was harshly impacted by the industrial civilization of the North, leading to complex inner conflicts and spiritual crises among Southerners. Faulkner noted that the breakdown of the traditional Southern value system left Southerners without a clear sense of direction, leading to a widespread spiritual crisis. Through the tragic story of Emily, who suppresses her pain, Faulkner reveals the essence of existence for Southerners and humanity as a whole. Emily, a typical Southern aristocrat, embodies Faulkner's concerns about the clash of old and new values and his skeptical rejection of Southern society. Jia Pingwa focuses on the social transformations that occurred in Chinese society before and after the reform and opening up. These transformations included large-scale migration of rural populations to cities, which resulted in issues such as the widening gap between rich and poor and identity crises that challenged people's spiritual worlds. The dissolution of traditional civilization and the reconstruction of modern civilization caused tremendous social upheaval. Jia Pingwa analyzes the predicament of human existence and cultural confusion, placing his characters in awkward situations amidst social transformation. However, compared to Faulkner, Jia Pingwa's attitude is slightly more optimistic. He does not view the survival predicament as "gray and negative" but rather encourages his characters to "react, break through, and transcend" their "awkward existence" in desperate situations [12, p. 231]. Jia Pingwa places Darkey in a situation where she must conform to traditional gender roles, but also allows her to resist and ultimately transcend these prescribed roles. This exploration provides a means for spiritual survival amidst social change.

V. CONCLUSION

From an existentialist feminist perspective, the transformation of Emily and Darkey represents the awakening of women's self-consciousness and the establishment of subjectivity. They transform from their original passive and obedient "angels" to an active and rebellious "monster". The transformation reflects women's struggle to overcome the predicament of being labeled as the "other" and their transcendence of the established notion of "immanence". The similarity in the predicament of the two female characters reveals that the "myth of women" is fabricated by men. Through the control of ideology such as value admonition, it forces women into the predicament of "otherness" and "immanence". Through the awakening of female characters, the two writers reveal that the notion of women's immanence is fictional and not unique to women and demonstrate that women have the potential to go beyond societal expectations and construct their own subjectivity. The differing performances of Emily and Darkey after their awakening highlight the path towards women's emancipation. Women can only make free choices and achieve true freedom when they pursue economic and spiritual independence outside of the private sphere and actively participate in society. This process is similar to the deconstruction of the "myth of

women” in traditional male discourse, as discussed by Faulkner and Jia Pingwa. The difference in deconstruction between the two writers originates from their gender concepts rooted in different ideological systems and their attitudes towards the crisis of human existence during the period of social transformation. Additionally, it is evident that through comparison Jia Pingwa’s works provide a Chinese perspective on gender issues and concepts. This cross-cultural perspective enriches the theoretical connotation of feminist criticism and offers a new way of thinking about gender issues on a global scale.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author gratefully acknowledges the anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments and detailed suggestions that significantly enhanced the clarity and rigor of this work. Special thanks are also extended to Professor Sun Yu, whose guidance and encouragement were instrumental in the completion of this study. Any remaining errors are the author’s own.

REFERENCES

- [1] Y. Liu, *Gender*, Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching & Research Press, 2019, p. 12.
- [2] S. M. Gilbert and S. Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979, p. 53.
- [3] S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley. London: Lowe and Brydone, 1956, p. 266, 16, 94, 261, 527.
- [4] W. Faulkner, *A Rose for Emily*. New York: Random House, 1958, pp. 10–11.
- [5] J. Pingwa, *The Country Wife*, Beijing: China Intercontinental Press, 2011, p.46, 52, 47, 59, 60, 60, 85, 88, 83, 81, 89,
- [6] S. Q. Zhao, “The desire and anxiety of contemporary women’s discursive power,” *Journal of Hunan Normal University (Social Sciences)*, no. 2, pp. 78–82, 2001.
- [7] J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York: Routledge, 1990, p. 22.
- [8] K. Millett, *Sexual Politics*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.
- [9] C. L. Li, “Existentialist philosophy in William Faulkner’s works,” *Journal of Shandong Normal University (Humanities and Social Sciences)*, no. 4, p. 71, 2004.
- [10] J. P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, London: Taylor & Francis, 2022.
- [11] L. Irigaray, *To Be Two*, Shanghai: SDX Joint Publishing, 2003, pp. 29–30
- [12] J. Pingwa, “Forty Years Old,” in *Collected Works of Jia Pingwa*, vol. 14. Xi’an: Shaanxi People’s Literature Press, 2008, p. 231.

Copyright © 2026 by the authors. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited ([CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)).