

Rust and neon: a study on the obscuration and unveiling of female images in Lu Nei's Following Trilogy

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Abstract. Lu Nei is a highly influential figure in contemporary Chinese literature, and his Following Trilogy has garnered considerable attention for its vivid portrayal of youth and coming-of-age experiences. Dominated by a male narrative perspective, the trilogy often reduces female characters to subordinate roles in male development or to objects of emotional projection, thereby creating a condition of “narrative obscuration.” However, such obscuration is not mere neglect but rather reflects a complex interplay of cultural and gendered power structures. By exploring the process of unveiling these female representations, this study seeks to expose the gender consciousness, socio-cultural contexts, and authorial intentions underlying the texts. This inquiry not only deepens the understanding of Lu Nei's literary oeuvre but also offers a new interpretive framework and critical perspective for gender representation in contemporary literature.

Keywords: Lu Nei, following trilogy, female representation, narrative obscuration, unveiling

1. Introduction

The protagonist of Lu Nei's Following Trilogy—Young Babylon, The Journey of Following Her, and Where the Angel Falls—is consistently Lu Xiaolu. Although each novel portrays a distinct episode in Lu Xiaolu's life, the various iterations of this character share remarkably similar experiences, often set in factories or technical schools, with overlapping trajectories in education, daily life, and work. Since the publication of Young Babylon, Lu Nei's narratives centered on the “factory youth Lu Xiaolu” have gradually become iconic representations of urban life and youth coming-of-age in 1990s China.

In addition to the various versions of “Lu Xiaolu,” Lu Nei also portrays a broad range of richly drawn female characters throughout the Following Trilogy—including Bai Lan in Young Babylon, Yu Xiaoqi and Ouyang Hui in The Journey of Following Her, and Lin Baozhu and Dai Dai in Where the Angel Falls. These women, each shaped by their era, embody lofty ideals and a strong sense of personal values. To varying degrees, they influence the lives and personal growth of the male protagonists. As Li Ting observes in *A Study of Lu Nei's Medium and Long Novels from the “Post-70s” Generation*, literature has no shortage of female figures who appear as goddess-like beings, guiding spiritually disoriented male protagonists: “To the boys who encounter them, they often combine maternal tenderness, feminine allure, mischievous charm, and the mysterious seductiveness of the opposite sex. These captivating goddesses become the key through which boys broaden their understanding of both the world and the self. It is in the process of interacting with or pining after these goddesses that they ultimately grow into men.” [1] Some of these women guide the protagonist's personal development, while others serve as the awakening of romantic consciousness. Brave, rational, and free-spirited, they embody a unique aesthetic significance within the trilogy.

Existing scholarship on Lu Nei's Following Trilogy has largely centered on themes of male maturation, the aesthetics of industrial ruin, and nostalgic narrative, while offering relatively little systematic exploration of the trilogy's prominent female figures. This narrow focus risks obscuring the complex gendered power relations embedded within the texts. Under the prevailing analytical framework of “enlightenment–frustration–disillusionment,” scholars have primarily positioned Lu Xiaolu as the core subject of analysis, emphasizing his existential struggles within the factory system. In Young Babylon, Lu Xiaolu's “castration anxiety” has often been interpreted as a spiritual metaphor for the restructuring of state-owned enterprises, whereas the distinctive and vividly portrayed character Bai Lan is typically reduced to a functional role as an “enlightening agent.” Throughout the narrative, she remains confined to the male protagonist's metaphorical telescope—an object of gaze—while her autonomous decision to leave the factory is frequently interpreted as the symbolic “exit of the enlightener.” An intriguing shared feature of the trilogy is the collective absence of mother figures. In the Following series, father figures or other male family members typically occupy more central roles, while the substantive absence of mothers creates narrative spaces filled with

uncertainty and ambiguity. This absence reflects a certain rupture and reconfiguration of the familial structure amid social transformation in modern China—one that profoundly shapes the characters' psychological development and life trajectories. Nevertheless, this theme of “collective maternal absence” remains largely neglected in current academic discourse.

Based on this, the present study draws upon Lu Nei's distinctive literary style to examine the historical context in which the *Following Trilogy* was written, and to closely analyze the individual characteristics and era-specific features of its female figures. In doing so, it aims to offer a new interpretive framework and critical perspective for understanding the representation of “female factory workers” in literary works set in the 1990s.

2. The iron curtain's rupture in the 1990s and the stylistic shaping of Lu Nei's writing

Lu Nei once remarked, “There's a line in a Chinese novel that says: only madmen and Nietzsche like to talk about the times. It's not necessarily a good thing to be overly obsessed with narrating the era. Perhaps we ought to discuss it in a lighter way. The generation of writers before mine experienced many historical events—or to use a colloquial term, 'suffering.' It's a simple word, but it expresses a great deal. But for my generation and the ones to come, over the next twenty years or so, these historical events will likely become fewer. What we might have to narrate is the ordinariness of daily life.” [2] The sociocultural climate and intellectual spirit of the 1980s and 1990s left a profound imprint on Lu Nei's literary output. The sense of confusion and hope brought about by societal transformation, along with the intellectual reflection and exploration spurred by cultural pluralism, are all reflected in his works. Lu Nei employs humor and absurdity to convey the surrealism of the era, and draws upon nostalgia and youth narratives to memorialize that distinctive period. Through a fusion of realism and lyricism, he portrays both the harshness and beauty of everyday life, endowing his writing with a vivid sense of the times.

In terms of content, the *Following* series appears to function as a kind of chronicle of the 1990s, with each year meticulously rendered. As a coming-of-age narrative, it follows the protagonist Lu Xiaolu's eventual attempt to reconcile himself with the world beyond his own self. However, by designating “pursuit” as the central theme of the novels, Lu Nei in fact constructs a counter-bildungsroman—one that challenges the conventional trajectory of linear personal growth.

2.1. The iron curtain's rupture: from the myth of enlightenment to the ruins of the market—a shift in creative focus

Cheng Guangwei, in “The 1980s as a Method,” observes that “the enlighteners of the 1980s often fell into the trap of self-mythologizing, while the realities of the 1990s tore away this romantic veil.” [3] Within the discourse of 1980s enlightenment, women were frequently assigned the roles of “spiritual mentors” or “embodiments of ideals.” The female factory physician Bai Lan in *Young Babylon* continues this tradition. She is cast as an “older female enlightener,” who strives to guide Lu Xiaolu out of his confusion through her wisdom and effort, yet ultimately becomes trapped in the quagmire of reality. This instrumentalized portrayal not only diminishes Bai Lan's subjectivity and autonomy but also implies the impotence of enlightenment narratives when confronted with harsh social realities. It is evident that Lu Nei keenly captures the pulse of the transitional era at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, skillfully integrating the unique and complex stylistic traits of this period into the *Following* series. Through delicate and vivid narrative, he portrays the gradual decline of 1980s idealistic narratives under the onslaught of 1990s social transformation, revealing the profound shift in which enlightenment discourse progressively loses its voice within the context of lived reality.

From the perspective of market transformation and the disruption of gender order, women generally experienced a shift from being “unit workers” to becoming “market orphans.” The female workers in Lu Nei's novels endure the painful restructuring of state-owned enterprises, descending from the “iron girls” of the socialist era to marginalized groups within the market economy. This rupture of identity reflects the complexity of gender politics in the 1990s—following factory reforms, women, in order to secure their livelihoods, increasingly resorted to commodifying their bodies as capital within the social survival system. The objectifying portrayal of salon workers vividly illustrates one aspect of the painful transition under state-owned enterprise reform in the *Following* series. Lu Xiaolu's evolving attitude toward these salon workers—from curiosity to contempt—mirrors society's broader discriminatory stance toward this group. Lu Nei's writing not only depicts the working conditions and hardships faced by salon workers but also, through a male perspective, exposes the objectification and social marginalization they endure. This portrayal highlights the era's trauma for female workers during the enterprise restructuring—their identity shift signifies not only a change in occupation but also a decline in social status and the onset of objectification.

2.2. Stylistic shaping: gender narratives and historical reconstruction through a nostalgic lens

The portrayal of female characters in Lu Nei's *Following Trilogy* also reflects a reconstruction of personalized writing and collective memory. The trilogy is suffused with nostalgia, using the protagonist Lu Xiaolu's coming-of-age experience as the narrative thread to depict the youth of the late 20th century—from the 1980s and 1990s through the early 21st century. Detailed descriptions of factory life, campus life, and other settings evoke collective recollections of that era. At the same time, a youth

narrative runs throughout, portraying the confusion, struggle, and exploration characteristic of young people's maturation, imbuing the works with a strong sense of youthfulness. This nostalgic hue and delicate depiction of youthful years represent Lu Nei's personalized writing of the memories he witnessed during his own growth, as well as their collective manifestation. This reconstruction of personal memory and narrative approach aligns closely with the cultural memory theory of Jan and Aleida Assmann. Their theory focuses on the construction and functioning mechanisms of cultural and communicative memory. The Assmanns argue that cultural memory is a collective memory constructed by social groups through selective narration and symbolic practices, characterized by transmission and stability, typically spanning three generations. In contrast, communicative memory emphasizes the active selection and reconstruction of memories by individuals or groups within specific contexts to serve contemporary social, political, or cultural needs [4]. Through the personalized narrative style outlined above, Lu Nei not only recreates the era's atmosphere but also reveals the overlooked individual emotions and experiences behind the history, thus bearing the collective memory of the "Daicheng City" era of the 1990s.

The nostalgic mode of consumption in writing functions, in effect, as an illusory reconciliation of memory. In the Following Trilogy, Lu Nei transforms the social trauma of phenomena such as the wave of layoffs into romanticized elements of nostalgia by poeticizing factory life and casting a sentimental filter over the experience of youth. This nostalgic consumption masks the harsh truths of history, creating a false sense of reconciliation that leads readers to overlook the suffering of women and the systemic inequalities of the era. As described in *Young Babylon*, the saccharine air of the saccharin factory conceals the lethal toxicity of hydrogen sulfide. Through sensory rhetoric, Lu Nei aesthetically refines factory memory, a strategy that aligns with Jan Assmann's critique of "nostalgia as analgesic"—where the sweetness of memory serves as a palliative, generating a false reconciliation through a kind of cosmetic surgery of the past, veiled beneath a sugary filter.

In fact, Lu Nei's writing functions much like a "literary seismograph," capturing the spiritual aftershocks of the social transformation in the 1980s and 1990s while simultaneously exposing narrative fissures shaped by generational limitations. Lu Nei once remarked that the cruelty of literature lies not in the imperative to write about everything, but in the reality that many things are not worth writing about. Therefore, when the Following Trilogy renders laid-off female workers as sacrificial figures on the altar of male nostalgia, it becomes all the more essential to return to the historical scene—to recover the gendered truths crushed beneath the wheels of history, at the very juncture of rust and neon. This may be precisely what Cheng Guangwei refers to in his notion of "returning to history through literature": not an indulgence in the aesthetics of ruins, but a search for the possibilities of reconstruction within the cracks.

3. The pain of the other: the manifestation and illusion of salvation of female figures in the following trilogy

3.1. The enlightener: intellectual ideal projection and spiritual illusion

In *Young Babylon*, Bai Lan serves as the protagonist Lu Xiaolu's idealized first love goddess. As the factory clinic's physician, Bai Lan embodies the demeanor of an intellectual, standing in stark contrast to the rough factory environment around her. She is gentle, rational, and carries a sense of detachment, becoming the object of Lu Xiaolu's adolescent sexual awakening and spiritual yearning. Bai Lan plays an extraordinarily important role as an enlightener and guide in Lu Xiaolu's life. She symbolizes his idealized vision of a beautiful love but maintains an emotional distance that suggests the unattainability of such love. Bai Lan's eventual departure from the factory symbolizes the growing divide between the intellectual class and the working class during the 1990s state-owned enterprise reforms, as well as the individual's attempt to break free from the institutional system. In this sense, Bai Lan acts as a catalyst for Lu Xiaolu's maturation, prompting him to begin contemplating his selfhood and future; however, her leaving also marks the onset of his youthful disillusionment.

In Lu Nei's *The Journey of Following Her*, the character Ouyang Hui as an enlightener both continues the tradition of female figures guiding the male protagonist's spiritual growth in the Following Trilogy and, through her unique literary temperament and fate, profoundly reflects the cultural contradictions of the 1990s social transformation. Ouyang Hui's role as an enlightener is first established through her literary talent and poetry. Lu Xiaolu is captivated by an essay Ouyang Hui posts on a bulletin board, and this "worship of words" marks the beginning of his first emotional stirrings. Her poems are privately treasured and repeatedly recited by Lu Xiaolu, becoming a crucial medium through which he interprets the world. This literary enlightenment parallels Bai Lan's guidance of Lu Xiaolu in reading *Harvest in Young Babylon*, but it is more intimate and emotionally projected. In the novel's climax, Ouyang Hui's poem "Dear, Don't Fix My Coffin in the North" becomes a spiritual support for Yang Yi during his escape. The imagery in the poem—"I want to go south in winter"—echoes the character's desire to flee Daicheng City and poetically alleviates the harsh reality, demonstrating literature's transcendent salvific power. Her poetry thus serves not only as a display of personal talent but also as a spiritual beacon during the male character's period of youthful confusion. Lu Xiaolu's unrequited love for her essentially represents an admiration for a literary, abstracted female image rather than a genuine emotional relationship. Although Ouyang Hui leads Lu Xiaolu's emotional awakening, her subjectivity remains obscured by the male perspective. Her relationship with Yang Yi ends with the "false pregnancy" incident, with her physical

trauma and psychological humiliation reduced to a footnote in the breakdown of male friendship. Her ultimate admission to Nanjing University and escape from Daicheng City is romanticized as a “graceful departure,” but in reality, it exposes her instrumentalization within the male growth narrative.

3.2. The rebel: embodied resistance in street culture and gender dilemma

In *The Journey of Following Her*, Lu Nei vividly portrays a quintessential rebellious figure through the female character Zeng Yuan. With her distinctive personality, behaviors, and value system, she embodies a form of rebellion that clashes with conventional social roles yet remains authentically tangible within the narrative.

Zeng Yuan’s rebellion carries a dimension of capital deconstruction. As a “second-generation wealthy heiress wielding a watermelon knife,” she transforms her family’s wealth into a form of rebellious capital: chauffeuring gangs in luxury cars, spending lavishly in nightclubs, and even sponsoring underground boxing matches. This extravagance is not mere material waste but a mocking subversion of the wealth ethics inherited from her parents’ generation. In the novel, the detail of her deliberately throwing her father’s luxury watch into a cesspool symbolizes a thorough repudiation of bourgeois values. Her violent act of threatening debt collectors with a watermelon knife, unlike Huang Ying’s violence, functions primarily as a violent deconstruction of class identity, attempting to tear open a fissure within the prison built by money.

Zeng Yuan is constructed by Lu Nei as a rebel symbolizing bodily politics and the transgression of spatial boundaries. The body becomes the battlefield for resisting disciplinary control. Although she comes from a wealthy family, she defies the conventional image of a meek and reserved girl typical of that era. Instead, she is spirited and bold. In confrontations, she fearlessly stands up to others and even resorts to physical altercations, defending her rights or expressing dissatisfaction in ways that challenge traditional norms of female fragility. She uses the power of her body to resist external pressures, thereby opposing the conventional regulation of female bodies and turning her body into a weapon for asserting self-rights and individual expression. Despite her privileged background, Zeng Yuan does not lead the stable life expected under the protection of wealth; instead, she must face life’s upheavals and begin to navigate the uncertainties of broader society. She mingles with Lu Xiaolu and others, engaging in their adventures and rebellious acts, moving from the secure space of affluence into the precarious and dangerous margins of society—a spatial transgression that marks her boundary crossing.

This form of rebellion essentially represents an explicit expression of intergenerational trauma and is characteristic of the social transformation period of the 1990s—the absurd behaviors reflect the spiritual emptiness experienced by the children of the emerging bourgeoisie.

3.3. The dreamer: escapees and disillusioned figures amid urbanization

In *The Journey of Following Her*, Yu Xiaoqi’s pursuit of her dreams begins with a firm belief in the transformative power of knowledge. As the daughter of a Chinese language teacher, she enrolls in a graphic design technical school and plans to study comics in Shanghai. This choice is subversive within the context of 1990s Daicheng City—while her peers indulge in billiard halls and dance clubs, she wields the paintbrush as a tool to break through class barriers. In the novel, she secretly copies scenes from *Dragon Ball* in the dormitory, transforming artistic creation into a ritual of resistance against mundane life. This dedication to the spiritual realm makes her the “first girl to draw human anatomy” in Lu Xiaolu’s eyes, and the distorted human forms in her drawings metaphorically rebel against the rigid educational system. Yu Xiaoqi’s dream pursuit reflects the cultural enlightenment dilemma of the 1990s—in the story, her manga is confiscated and burned by the factory security department, symbolizing the commercial tide’s engulfment of artistic ideals. Her persistence in manga art sharply conflicts with Daicheng City’s industrialization process.

In summary, Yu Xiaoqi’s brush symbolizes the will to freedom. The “broken-winged angel” she repeatedly depicts in her comics serves both as a metaphor for her own predicament and as an expression of her yearning for liberty. At the novel’s conclusion, the sketch she leaves for Lu Xiaolu depicts an angel’s wings faintly visible through the factory chimneys’ smoke, symbolizing the perpetual struggle between spiritual freedom and material reality. Her story demonstrates that the true pursuit of dreams is not a quest for worldly success but an enduring striving for spiritual liberation. Amid the haze of Daicheng City, these figures are both the forsaken children of their era and the prophets of the spirit, eternally frozen in their journey to find angels.

However, Lu Nei’s portrayal of these female figures fundamentally serves the coming-of-age narrative of Lu Xiaolu as a “failed hero.” They function either as enlighteners who facilitate the male protagonist’s awakening or as objects of desire that fill his spiritual void, their identities disciplined and instrumentalized as tools for male self-redemption. Within the grand narratives of the 1990s—such as state-owned enterprise reform and mass layoffs—the economic independence of female characters is simplified to individual choices like “running an internet café” or “working as clerks,” thereby obscuring the structural oppression imposed on women by systemic transformation. In the trilogy, the novels’ endings often employ lyrical tones to romanticize the departure of female characters, effectively neutralizing their real-life hardships through idealization and exposing the male narrator’s unconscious perpetuation of gendered power dynamics.

4. The unreachable her: narrative obscuration of female figures in the following trilogy

A systematic analysis of the female figures in the Following Trilogy reveals their emergent trajectories and redemptive appearances within the era's socio-emotional context. These female characters either serve as reflective mirrors for the male protagonist's growth or stand as exemplars of survival under structural oppression. Although their portrayals exhibit vivid textual tension, they remain constrained by established narrative paradigms. Beneath the apparent richness of these surface narratives lies a profound limitation in the writing. From the vantage point of the male gaze, female figures are subjected to multiple layers of obscuration: their bodies are objectified, their voices silenced, and their destinies romanticized—ultimately relegating them to mere appendages of male memory.

4.1. The discipline and disappearance of the corporeal signifier

Within the power dynamics of gender narratives, the body functions not only as a biological entity but also as a symbol laden with socio-cultural codes. In Lu Nei's Following Trilogy, the corporeal representation of female characters superficially constructs vivid portraits yet simultaneously conceals deep mechanisms of narrative obscuration. Lacan's mirror stage theory reveals that the subject's self-recognition is often established through the gaze of the Other [5]; within a patriarchal cultural context, the female body becomes the primary object of the male gaze. In *Young Babylon*, Bai Lan's body is continuously enveloped by male gazes. From Lu Xiaolu's first noticing the faint curves beneath her white coat to the factory workers' teasing and fantasizing about her physical features, Bai Lan's body is alienated from her subjectivity and transformed into a signifier of desire. This mechanism of gazing objectifies the female body, stripping it of its integrity and autonomy as a subject. Bai Lan's dual identity as both a factory physician and an intellectual is overlaid upon her body; her white coat symbolizes reason and wisdom, while the spatial setting of the clinic further isolates the privacy of her body, positioning her as a "guide" in Lu Xiaolu's spiritual maturation. The novel offers almost no direct description of her appearance or bodily details; instead, her image is constructed through her actions—encouraging Lu Xiaolu to read, urging him to attend night school, and critiquing the factory system. This professional identity obscures the female body by transforming it into a spiritual symbol that transcends physicality, serving the narrative needs of male growth.

4.2. Narrative dilemma under the male gaze

Within the narrative system of the Following Trilogy, the discursive hegemony constructed by the male perspective profoundly shapes the narrative space of female characters, resulting in their subjectivity being continuously marginalized in the text. This narrative obscuration is not an incidental textual oversight but is rooted in the deep logic of traditional gender power structures. Zhang Li, in *Before Emerging from the Surface of History*, discusses the "blindness and insight" in contemporary literature's female writing, addressing the gendered weakening of female subjectivity. Zhang argues that "male writers often simplify women into 'functional symbols' such as mothers, prostitutes, or enlighteners, suspending their subjective experiences as narrative voids." [6] As a male author, Lu Nei's creation is inevitably constrained by the male viewpoint. His portrayal of female characters often originates from male perspectives and needs, focusing more on women's attractiveness to men and the roles they play in men's lives, while relatively neglecting the depiction of women's inner worlds, emotional needs, and self-development.

4.3. The devouring force of grand historical narratives

The essence of historical obscuration lies in the struggle for discursive power. In literary works, this may manifest as an author's unconscious limitation of perspective or as a deliberate critical strategy. Within the Following Trilogy, the portrayal of female characters is influenced by traditional gender norms and often falls into certain stereotypes. For example, Yu Xiaoqi and Zeng Yuan are frequently positioned as the active pursuers and givers in their relationships with male characters, their emotions and behaviors depicted in a direct and passionate manner. This expressive style to some extent caters to male expectations of women's "passionate fervor." Other female characters in the works often exhibit dependency in emotional dimensions. Female factory workers, for instance, tend to center their lives around marriage and family, with their emotional needs primarily fulfilled through male partners. When confronting emotional or life challenges, these women frequently lack independent problem-solving abilities and instead rely on male attitudes and decisions. Such narrative setups reinforce stereotypical gender notions of women as emotionally fragile and in need of male protection and dominance, thereby consigning female characters to a homogenized predicament within the emotional narrative.

From the obscured experiences of these women, it is evident that Lu Nei's Following Trilogy undeniably reveals the structural dilemmas male authors face when addressing gender issues—nostalgic narratives reduce female suffering to a syrupy lyricism, while avant-garde techniques forge it into an aesthetic weapon. This obscuration is not entirely born of malice but rather emerges from generational limitations and narrative inertia. By exposing the presence of such obscuration, the question

arises: “Whose history is being silenced?” As Walter Benjamin famously stated, the only things that can be redeemed from the fragments of history are “the memories of the oppressed.” [7] Critiquing historical obscuration is precisely an effort to salvage the submerged truth from the cracks within the text. To truly achieve “unveiling,” it may be necessary, as Assmann suggests, to let “stored memory” pierce through the iron curtain of “functional memory.”

5. Historical unveiling and narrative restoration of factory women at the turn of the century

Lu Nei's *Following Trilogy*, as a series of novels centered on youth, portrays female classmates and female coworkers who are confident, courageous, and rational. As enlighteners, they play an indelible role in the male protagonist's path to maturity, guiding Lu Xiaolu to expand beyond his narrow life into broader and richer horizons. However, the brilliance of these female characters is by no means limited to being mere adjuncts to the male protagonist; thus, their departures and exits are inevitable. To them, the male protagonist is but a segment of their life journey. In fact, they consistently yearn to walk their own path independently—economically, emotionally, and even in terms of personal identity. These factory women are able to realize their own value through their efforts, navigating through the haze of confusing realities, and continually pursuing the worlds they long to inhabit.

5.1. The “double disenchantment” of female subjectivity

Women have historically experienced a “double disenchantment” within the socio-historical context. Dai Jinhua points out that modern women face a “Mulan-like predicament,” where societal norms are largely established by men, and women must disguise themselves as men to participate in social life. Behind this phenomenon lies twofold disenchantment experienced by women. On one hand, women are disenchanted within the patriarchal social norms that define them as appendages to men, strictly confining their roles from family to professional spheres within predetermined frameworks. On the other hand, when women attempt to break free from traditional constraints and pursue equality and liberation, they face disenchantment from the external world regarding feminine traits. Entering male-dominated social domains often requires women to shed qualities deemed “feminine,” such as gentleness and sensitivity, to conform to masculine competitive rules and modes of conduct. This implies that women's original gender characteristics are regarded as impediments to social advancement and are thus negated either by themselves or by society [8]. In the era depicted in the *Following Trilogy*, women were simultaneously constrained by traditional views and reexamined through a male gaze shaped by new ideological currents. Take Bai Lan as an example: she exists within a factory environment dominated by men, where male attention centers more on her appearance and emotional entanglements with Lu Xiaolu. From the male perspective, Bai Lan may simply function as an emotional symbol within Lu Xiaolu's youthful growth. However, from the standpoint of female subjectivity, Bai Lan possesses a unique developmental background. She likely comes from a family with certain cultural literacy and has received relatively good education, which makes her feel out of place in the factory. She yearns to change her destiny through knowledge and leave the factory by attending university. Yet, within the narrative of *Young Babylon*, Bai Lan remains Lu Xiaolu's spiritual guide, never granted an independent narrative voice. Through the portrayal of Bai Lan, it is clear that her goals are resolute and ambitions lofty, which predestines her not to be trapped in Daicheng City. Her job as a factory physician is only a transitional phase; she secures economic independence and a stable life, preparing steadily for graduate school. One year, she chooses to take the postgraduate exam, resigns, and leaves Daicheng City, leaving her father's books to Lu Xiaolu, and departs with grace. When Lu Xiaolu recalls Bai Lan in 1996, he learns she is traveling, studying, and going abroad—wandering ceaselessly in the vast world, relentlessly pursuing self-actualization through continual leaps. Therefore, to “unveil” female groups, it is necessary to face the complex emotions and motivations concealed in historical contexts, liberating female characters such as Bai Lan from the simplified male gaze. This precisely aligns with the “politics of memory,” which critiques nostalgic narratives' gendered concealment of women.

5.2. The “struggle for rights” over bodily autonomy

The *Following Trilogy* also contains sporadic expressions of female characters' attempts to break free from bodily constraints. When women strive to participate in technical training or seek to escape low-level physical labor positions, or when they cease to be passively submissive in emotional relationships and instead actively assert their own wishes, these behaviors essentially reflect a pursuit of bodily autonomy. This transformation echoes He Guimei's theory of the body's transition from disciplinary control to self-governance. Women begin to regard their bodies as vital carriers for claiming individual rights and achieving self-realization. He Guimei's “Theory of the Body's Political Transformation” posits that in traditional society, the body was regulated by feudal rites and hierarchical orders, with women's bodies subjected to even more stringent control—such as foot-binding as a means of subjugation. Since modern times, the body has become an important site for individual liberation and the construction of the nation-state, shifting from repression toward autonomy [9]. Applying this theoretical framework to

historically unveil the female characters in the Following Trilogy allows for the revelation of traces of traditional bodily discipline and uncovers the implicit writing of the body-power relationship.

Taking Yu Xiaoqi from *The Journey of Following Her* as an example, the male perspective tends to focus more on her physical allure and romantic entanglements. However, from the standpoint of female subjectivity, Yu Xiaoqi grows up in an unstable and turbulent environment, where familial instability forces her to confront life's hardships prematurely. Her choice to become a dancer is a compelled decision under the pressure of survival. In that era, women's bodies were often objectified and commodified, and Yu Xiaoqi's body, through the male gaze, becomes a symbol of desire. Yet from her own life trajectory, she attempts to obtain the means of survival and alter her fate through what may appear as a degrading path. Although her ending is tinged with tragedy, it fundamentally reveals the struggles of women under a depoliticized gender politics environment.

From Lu Nei's *Following Trilogy*, it is evident that the female characters he portrays maintain rationality and resilience when confronting the hardships of life. Pain and sorrow are not endings but rather a preparation for a fresh start. Bai Lan in *Young Babylon*, Ouyang Hui and Yu Xiaoqi in *The Journey of Following Her*, and Lin Baozhu in *Where Do Angels Fall* all come from different family backgrounds and life circumstances, yet they share a common spiritual predicament of confusion, helplessness, loneliness, and isolation. Although they are tossed about by the turbulent currents of their era, they do not give up on the search for renewal. Through their own strength, they find a sense of existential value.

5.3. Deconstruction and reconstruction: narrative innovation paths for female characters

Due to the constraints of traditional gender narrative models, female characters in texts often struggle to present a complete and multidimensional image. In fact, in literary creation, the male perspective frequently produces a form of narrative obscurity regarding female figures. In the portrayal of female factory workers and similar characters, male authors, limited by their own perspectives, often fail to fully and deeply reveal women's authentic struggles and subjective consciousness within specific historical contexts. However, it is still possible to identify certain paths of "unveiling" from this very "obscurity." On one hand, it requires a thorough excavation of historical details—not only focusing on major social transformations but also emphasizing women's lived experiences in concrete life scenes. By carefully depicting factory environments, family life, and social relationships, the true historical dilemmas faced by women can be restored, enabling readers to empathize. On the other hand, it is crucial to highlight female subjectivity, attending to women's inner thoughts, aspirations, and struggles, thereby breaking the stereotypical images of passivity and subordination imposed by the male gaze. This approach showcases women as independent individuals with complex emotions and diverse choices amid the tides of their era. Only through such efforts can the authentic destinies of female factory workers and other women in specific historical periods be faithfully restored, achieving a genuine "unveiling" of female images.

6. Conclusion

The study of male perspectives in shaping female images in Lu Nei's *Following Trilogy* can help establish an interpretive paradigm that emphasizes the intersection of gendered viewpoints. When analyzing works from similar historical periods, it is necessary to attend to how the author's gender perspective influences character portrayal and plot development. For instance, in other male-dominated narratives, one can explore whether female characters are similarly depicted in a partial manner shaped by male desire and cognition, as observed in the *Following Trilogy*, where men often construct female images through the lens of their own desires and understandings. Using the *Following Trilogy* as a case study, scholars can more deeply excavate the intrinsic connection between historical context and gender representation in contemporaneous works. The profound social transformations of that era significantly affected gender concepts. By analyzing women's survival status and choices amid societal change within these texts, one can discern how historical forces have left imprints on gender construction. Furthermore, examining the marginalization of female characters within the narrative structures of the *Following Trilogy* offers an analytic framework for interpreting similar works. Paying attention to female characters' positions within the main storylines and plot progression helps assess whether they occupy subordinate roles. These new interpretive paradigms can to some extent assist readers in moving beyond the entrenched binary of "male-enlightener/female-enlightened" perspectives, enabling alternative viewpoints outside classic textual interpretations. Ultimately, this fosters the establishment of an observation dimension centered on women's economic participation and agency.

From the perspective of the value of interpretive viewpoints, this study begins by addressing the insufficient portrayal of female inner worlds under the male gaze in the *Following Trilogy*. When examining similar contemporaneous works, greater emphasis should be placed on uncovering the authentic inner thoughts of female characters. Due to the limitations of the male perspective, many works depict women's inner experiences superficially. By focusing on this issue, scholars can re-examine female characters in the texts and attempt to infer their possible complex emotions and thoughts through textual gaps, thereby restoring the neglected dimension of female interiority and achieving a more comprehensive understanding of female images in the works. Simultaneously, research into how Lu Nei's works are influenced by traditional gender concepts can provide a critical

lens for examining similar literature shaped by conventional gender norms. Given that the independence of female characters in the Following Trilogy is frequently overlooked, attention to contemporaneous texts should prioritize exploring female autonomy and value. Even within male-dominated narratives, moments and latent consciousness of women's pursuit of independence can be excavated. By focusing on female self-awareness amid adversity and their quest for self-worth, this approach offers new angles to understand the spiritual world of women and the expression of female values in literature of that era, thereby expanding the depth and breadth of interpretive insights into these works.

In summary, this study partially unveils the obscured women's history folded within the Following Trilogy while simultaneously forging a theoretical toolkit to pierce the "nostalgic shell" of 1990s literature—a three-dimensional coordinate system anchored in material details, centered on the politics of the body, and ultimately oriented toward institutional critique.

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