

Escape Paths in the Works of Contemporary East Asian Female Writers

Jing Chen

School of Liberal Education, Liaoning University of International Business and Economics, China

Abstract: *In contemporary East Asian female writers' works, "escape" emerges as a core strategy for women confronting existential dilemmas, manifesting as a dialectical triad: physical breakout, implicit resistance and subjective reconstruction. Physical breakout refers to women's decisive rupture from domestic and social spaces; implicit resistance centers on everyday tactics of defiance within institutional crevices; and subjective reconstruction reveals escape as a vital means of self-reinvention. These escape paths not only mirror the shared ethical shackles and bodily discipline imposed on East Asian women under Confucian patriarchy but also highlight distinct regional symptoms of East Asia. By dissecting the complexity of escape paths in contemporary East Asian female literature, this article unveils the symbiotic relationship between women's breakout, resistance, and awakening, mapping the intellectual landscape of East Asian female writers.*

Keywords: East Asian women's literature; Physical breakout; Implicit resistance; Subjective reconstruction.

1. INTRODUCTION

East Asia is not only a tangible geographical space but also a unique political-cultural arena. Long characterized by pervasive authoritarian or quasi-authoritarian political structures and a robust cultural affinity centered on Confucianism, East Asian societies share normative expectations regarding female traits and behaviors. Confucian-defined familial ethics morally justify the erosion of women's subjectivity, becoming heavy shackles that constrain female individuality. Entering the 21st century, East Asia's traditional gender structure faces unprecedented multidimensional shocks. The deepening globalization process and the expansion of information technology have profoundly transformed social communication patterns and ideological flows. Against this backdrop, the widespread dissemination of feminist theory and the sustained momentum of related social movements constitute key forces dismantling entrenched gender orders. "Escape", as a recurring theme in contemporary East Asian women's literature, is not an impulsive emotional outburst but a core strategy for individuals seeking survival space and subjective expression amid historical pressures and cultural constraints. Focusing on representative texts by Chinese, Japanese, and Korean female writers active in East Asia's literary scene in the 21st century, this article analyzes the multifaceted dimensions of "escape" narratives, revealing escape as a crucial means for East Asian women's subjective reconstruction—simultaneously a choice of breakout and a blueprint for rebuilding.

2. PHYSICAL SPATIAL MOBILITY AND THE INITIAL PATH OF IDENTITY TRANSGRESSION

Under the enduring influence of Confucian traditions, East Asian women have long been confined to the immanence of the domestic sphere. While the family historically offered women shelter and security, it simultaneously imposed strict constraints on their thoughts and behaviors, becoming a crucial space for their physical and psychological discipline. Social reforms have failed to completely overturn the patriarchal cultural context, as the idealized image of women as "virtuous wives and good mothers" persists in the foundational consciousness of many. The family, as a manifestation of collective unconsciousness, becomes a microcosmic site of gendered oppression. Given the overt and direct nature of familial suppression and control over women, physical separation from the family emerges as the primary escape route for East Asian women confronting survival dilemmas.

Female physical escape manifests in multiple forms: a "social evaporation" involving complete severance from the family; limited detachment achieved through legal safeguards; and preventive avoidance through rejecting marriage. For example, in the Chinese writer Lu Min's novel *Rushing to the Moon*, the protagonist Xiao Liu, unable to endure her numb middle-class married life, stages a car accident to disappear and obliterate her role as a wife. In the Japanese writer Mariko Yamauchi's novel *She is Noble*, the protagonist Hanako, recognizing that aristocratic marriage is merely transactional, decisively abandons her privileged life and divorces her husband

through mutual agreement. In the Korean writer Cho Nam-joos short story *To Hyun-nam*, the protagonist pens a parting manifesto that doubles as an autobiographical narrative, refusing her boyfriend's attempts to further confine her through marriage and family. Regardless of its degree, physical mobility constitutes an active "identity transgression", whereby women defy the traditional spaces and roles prescribed by patriarchal society, seeking possibilities for survival and autonomy in the "external" world.

Escape from marital and natal families is often intertwined. Xiao Liu's flight in *Rushing to the Moon* not only breaks her marital shackles but also mirrors her father's earlier disappearance, serving to heal the trauma of her natal family. Xiao Liu's mother blamed her husband's absence on a hereditary disease, forcing young Xiao Liu to take medication for a supposed "disappearance syndrome". The mother, both a victim under patriarchy and a persecutor seeking intergenerational compensation through her daughter's suffering, embodies what Ueno Chizuko describes as maternal misogyny: "Mothers, while cursing their own lives, impose the same existence upon their daughters, evoking their daughters' hatred." (Chizuko Ueno, *Misogyny*, Tokyo: Asahi, 2018, P158.) Tortured by patriarchal and marital oppression, Xiao Liu's mother develops a need to control her daughter, perpetuating gendered constraints through discipline. In turn Xiao Liu flees to resist her mother's covert suffocation. In *She is Noble*, Hanako's divorce from aristocracy results in her natal family branding her a disgrace; her refusal to play the obedient daughter is a renunciation of familial discipline. Though *To Hyun-nam* lacks explicit description of the natal family, deeper analysis reveals that the boyfriend "Kang Hyun-nam" functionally replaces the father figure, controlling the protagonist's entire life under the guise of love, positioning himself as a guide while substituting paternal authority with a romantic facade. Thus, physical escape for women signifies not only the termination of relationships but also the severance of intergenerational oppression and a reckoning with deep-seated patriarchal logic.

Under patriarchy's pervasive shadow, women remain constrained by the family as a space of power, their emotions, feelings, and desires either overlooked or interpreted through rigid stereotypes, while their bodies and labor are doubly exploited. In the narratives of contemporary East Asian female writers, women resort to radical escape strategies upon suddenly realizing of their "otherized" existence after prolonged endurance. However, physical displacement inevitably entails social identity reconstruction and destabilization. Leaving "home" means confronting society as an independent individual, often facing emotional isolation, economic hardship, lack of external support, and social exclusion. Such radical "transgression" is perilous and uncertain, rooted in East Asia's specific socio-cultural structure: escape merely replaces the domestic space with an equally homogenized social space. Mere physical relocation cannot alter deep-seated structural oppression, compelling women to adopt more covert resistance strategies.

3. INSTITUTIONAL INTERSTICES AND COVERT RESISTANCE STRATEGIES IN DAILY LIFE

Women's escape from the "family" carries profound symbolic significance as a rupture from patriarchal and marital authority, yet its physical enactment under structural oppression entails foreseeable costs. When constrained by economic dependence, cultural stigma, or social pressures—or when seemingly successful physical displacement leads to new structural dilemmas—female characters pivot toward a more covert dimension of resistance: exploiting fissures within social institutions and everyday life. This non-physical, subterranean escape path epitomizes women's survival wisdom amid unyielding gendered power structures. Through nuanced depictions of implicit resistance, East Asian female writers reveal that gender struggle transcends grand narratives of victory; the assertion of micro-wills in daily life proves equally potent.

Facing East Asia's pervasive gendered labor divisions and workplace barriers, economic autonomy becomes a core battleground for covert resistance. The plight of housewives inspires many Japanese female writers, with Akutagawa Prize winner Mitsuyo Kakuta offering particularly incisive portrayals. In Kakuta's *The Paper Moon*, protagonist Rika endures humiliation through her husband's "itemized financial control", relegating her to a psychologically subjugated position. To escape economic dependence, Rika reenters the workforce. Post-marriage career reentry remains arduous for Japanese and Korean women, as illustrated in Korea's phenomenon novel *Kim Jiyong, Born 1982*: despite her higher education, the protagonist, overwhelmed by childcare duties, can only seek precarious part-time work—a modest claim to economic agency as she seeks self-worth. Chinese women fare relatively better: in Fu Xiuying's *Elsewhere*, protagonist Zhai Xiaoli, abused by her in-laws, achieves Beijing residency and financial independence through writing, ultimately reversing marital roles to become the primary breadwinner. Her economic breakthrough leverages an escape from domestic confinement into spiritual empowerment.

While economic autonomy provides material footing for covert resistance, female solidarity weaves networks of practical aid, emotional support, and knowledge exchange. Within atomized modern life, amid the dual siege of patriarchy and capitalism, mutual understanding and support among women prove vital. In Chinese writer Sheng Keyi's *Northern Girls: Life Goes On*, rural migrant workers Qian Xiaohong and Li Sijiang forge a survival alliance. In Kakuta's *Women on the Other Shore*, housewife Sayoko, recognizing her self-loss, returns to work and receives crucial support from Kyo—an independent woman with her own trauma—culminating in mutual redemption. This “sisterhood” transcends age and hierarchy, mobilizing collective energy against societal pressures.

Korean writer Kim Iseol's short story *Menopause* features a protagonist unburdened by traditional motherhood; her apology to girls harmed by her son signifies sisterhood surpassing blood ties—a testament to awakened communal consciousness among women under patriarchy.

Whereas economic independence and solidarity networks represent constructive resistance, some female characters resort to destructive strategies: weaponizing bodily aberration or psychic withdrawal as final recourse. This tragic paradox surfaces starkly in Korean literature. In *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, Jiyoung's “possessed” muteness manifests both as escape from gendered power structures and a pathological silent scream. Nobel laureate Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* depicts violence inflicted through familial and social discipline; protagonist Yeong-hye's rebellion—from meat refusal to vegetative metamorphosis—embodies self-annihilating defiance against domestic ethics and social norms, fantasizing an escape from human gender order. Such pathological “escape” emerges as a tragic last resort, a psychic insurrection when conventional resistance fails.

4. AS A CRUCIAL MEANS OF SELF-RECONSTRUCTION AND SUBJECTIVITY FORMATION

In the works of East Asian female writers, “escape” — whether manifested as radical physical departure or covert daily maneuvering — fundamentally constitutes a profound spiritual revolution of self-recognition and reconstruction. Women's escape stems from a painful awakening to their “otherized” existence, where oppressive realities compel them to confront their destinies and scrutinize the identity shackles implanted by patriarchal culture.

Physical escape liberates women from roles defined by blood or marriage by removing them from oppressive living spaces. This spatial displacement creates a valuable “defamiliarizing distance,” enabling women to deepen their self-awareness and recognize possibilities long suppressed within the familial sphere. Crucially, new environments often offer relatively relaxed gender norms, fostering self-reconstruction and subjectivity formation. Conversely, implicit escape strategies, while not entirely abandoning the original domestic space, empower women through micro-level agency in the interstices of daily life, showcasing the unique survival wisdom of East Asian women. As American political scientist James C. Scott reveals in *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*: “(Forms of class struggle) They require little or no coordination or planning; they make use of implicit understandings and informal networks; they often represent a form of individual selfhelp; they typically avoid any direct, symbolic confrontation with authority.” (James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985, P2.) Women's implicit resistance similarly functions as a “weapon of the weak”, demonstrating agency in actively reclaiming subjectivity amid structural oppression while persistently and discreetly contesting living space and discursive power.

The key to transforming escape into subjectivity lies in intellectual awakening and economic empowerment: the former constructs cognitive frameworks to recognize gender oppression and assert selfhood, while the latter provides material foundations for self-reinvention. Contemporary Japanese female writers distinguish their “escape” narratives through nuanced portrayals of class oppression. Women across social strata — aristocrats, middle-class housewives, and impoverished individuals — confront bodily commodification, making “escape” an inevitable act of defiance within rigidly hierarchical societies. Contemporary Korean female writers boldly articulate body politics while interrogating the intergenerational transmission of female suffering; their works frequently ignite public discourse as sociocultural touchstones. Contemporary Chinese female writers contextualize escape within post-reform urbanization, framing cities as new emancipatory spaces and workplaces as gendered battlegrounds, where education and economic empowerment catalyze individual liberation. Collectively, these literary explorations not only reflect East Asian women's survival struggles but also inject intellectual momentum into gender equality movements through discursive construction and collective resonance.

By repeatedly depicting escape, East Asian female writers illustrate its potential as a catalyst for breaking internal constraints and rebuilding subjectivity. Yet, amid enduring patriarchal structures — intensified by East Asia's traditional burdens and cultural pressures — the quest for subjectivity can hardly yield permanent resolutions. Physical escape may lead to new predicaments, while implicit resistance rarely dismantles macro-level power structures. True subjectivity reconstruction demands transcending singular escape paths. Consequently, in contemporary East Asian literature, female characters navigate dynamically adjusted and multifaceted escape trajectories tailored to evolving narrative contexts.

5. CONCLUSION

This article centers on “female escape” as a core theme in East Asian women's writing, dissecting its dual pathways: physical spatial departure and implicit resistance in daily life. Physical escape signifies women's active rupture from oppressive spaces like family and marriage; implicit resistance embodies their wisdom in carving autonomous spheres within existing structures. Studying “escape” narratives within the East Asian context holds unique scholarly significance for understanding the region's shared female dilemmas, resistance tactics, and spiritual journeys. Chinese, Japanese, and Korean female writers create intertextual resonances across historical-cultural backgrounds, weaving an intellectual network of female defiance that collectively proclaims escape not as an endpoint but as a necessary path toward subjectivity formation.

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