



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Commodification of Women in Ha Jin's *Waiting*: A Feminist Critique**

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**ABSTRACT**

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This study aims to create an awareness against the unlawful act of the society. It depends on the conviction that women in various cultural backgrounds are dealt with heavy hands by men. The females have long been the target of commodification and discrimination in various cultural contexts. Similarly, multiple cultural and economic factors are involved in the suppression of women in China where they have long been denied their essential rights and the freedom of opinion. The work under study offers Charlotte Perkins Gilman's feminist critique of the patriarchal culture in China in Ha Jin's *Waiting* in which he recounts the story of two Chinese women who suffered for eighteen years because of a man whose service rules prohibited him to divorce his wife to marry another woman. The findings of this textual analysis recommend that women should not be steered by men to behave and respond stereotypically in the society.

**Introduction**

Ha Jin, a Chinese American writer, explores the tensions among individuals and families, current and old norms, rights and duties in his works. His distinctive protagonist is neither a dominant player in revolution nor an expert in the field. Frequently in Jin's novels, Chinese people realize that they have been deceived by the state. His works *War Trash* and *The Crazy* probe the theme of human betrayal most emotionally and minutely. His male key characters often find themselves in precarious states to act within a moral vacuum. Ha Jin's work under study, *Waiting*, shows how the Chinese women suffer because of the rigid cultural norms and how the male members use these norms and laws for their benefits and favors.

Various dimensions of critical issues were raised at the time of publication of *Waiting*. Many critics declare it as a political book and few are of the view that it is a sentimental story. Ha Jin himself claimed in an interview with Asia Society on November 17, 2000 that *Waiting* is not a clearly political book and the suffering of political upheaval occurs offstage and outside the walls of the placid army hospital where Lin and Manna are posted. Undoubtedly, Jin clearly attributes part of the blame for their troubles on traditional Chinese culture and social practices but the political atmosphere to preserve Chinese communism in accordance with the vision of Mao Zedong, Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and founder of the People's Republic of China (PRC) is also responsible colossally for their miserable life. Hence, it has been effectively perused as a political story that sensationalizes innumerable demonstrations of self-impediment and self-restriction because of Mao's confounded and furious time.

This study shows that the main female characters of *Waiting* have no right to speak in the matter of their own marriages and family life. Shuyu an old-fashioned lady from the village, and Lin Kong, an army doctor at Muji hospital, get married just because of the pressure of their parents; even the society declares the marriage matchless. Their marriage is a loveless knot which is arranged against their will. The laws of Chinese Military prohibit Lin Kong to have relations with Manna Wu, Lin's beloved and a co-worker at the hospital, before he divorces Shuyu. Shuyu was treated as a puppet in the hands of her family as both the important decisions of her life – marriage and divorce – were taken by the male members of her family against her assent. Lin admits that “he had never loved a woman enthusiastically and that he had continuously been the loved one” (1999, p. 164). Due to Lin's affections towards Manna Wu, he starts thinking of re-marriage but because of the laws and divorce issue he was unable to build the relation with Manna. The only thing that prohibits Lin from consummation of his love with Manna Wu in spite of the strong bond between both of them is his reputation at work because of which he will not get promotion while Manna Wu is seen suppressing her desire for Lin. Another incident which belittles Manna Wu is her rape by Geng Yang, a colleague and Comrade from Third Border Division and the Chinese culture forces her not to speak against her ravisher. She was forced to keep quiet in this matter while Yang was considered as an innocent fellow by the other male members and he was not punished by the society.

Ha Jin's *Waiting* not only projects the rigid social system of the 'Cultural Revolution' times, but also its harms on the ordinary people's lives with its fixed cultural norms. These norms can be seen in the relationship of Lin with his parents who force him to marry Shuyu so that she can take up the domestic duties and take care of his family during his absence. The dual personality and sexual characteristics of Lin Kong eminently show the systematic defects of cultural character of Chinese men. Lin is embarrassed by his life partner and denies to take her to Muji City because of her “old-fashioned bound feet, servility, and ignorance” (p. 199). He does not treat her as his wife during annual trips to his home village and regrets the obedience to tradition that led him to marry her in the first place. Instead, he slowly becomes

attached to Manna. Legal restrictions forbid him from divorcing Shuyu without her consent or he has to wait for eighteen years to get separated from his wife. Moreover, army regulations retain Manna from having an affair or even showing affection to Lin because of his marital status. The political climate of the Cultural Revolution makes Lin extremely careful to show his affection towards Manna even though Manna becomes increasingly frustrated with his passivity. When Manna initiates a rendezvous, he turns it down, warning, "Don't lose your head, Manna. Think about this: just a moment's pleasure will ruin our lives for good" (p. 58). They must wait with repressed feelings for eighteen years until Lin can divorce without Shuyu's agreement according to the law. The judge condemns Lin's request for divorce as an act far short of the standard of a model revolutionary soldier, asking, "Tell me, do you have a conscience or not? Do you deserve your green uniform and the red star on your cap?" (p. 12)

Feminism has made significant claims regarding the emancipation of women and the multiple tasks performed by them in the society. Patriarchal society mistreats women in every sphere of life whether it is financial, political, communal or intellectual. Women are defined by male standards and potentials. The term "women's deliverance" refers to a significant public or monetary development with the target of establishing corresponding advantages and corresponding privileges. It is defined as a struggle for the empowerment of women. It challenges the concept of marginalized women and the consideration of male experience as the universal experience.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a feminist theorist, battles against the androcentric culture. She perceived that womanhood was the undeveloped bit of humankind. It is the culture that specifies the role of women and the language used to represent them in the society. The terms used to define a woman are invariably negative. In *Women and Economics* (1998), she claims that men overpower women, that motherhood should not prevent a woman from working outside the home, and that housekeeping, cooking, and child care should be professionalized. "The perfect lady", Gilman conveyed, was not just doled out a social movement that checked her in her home, in any case she was likewise expected to like it, to be euphoric and gay, grinning and satisfying" (in Degler, 1956, p. 27).

### **Literature Review**

Keeping in view the key strains of the study, this portion deals with a thorough review of the related Chinese critical writings in the areas of feminism and how various writers see female body in their works. It also consists of the review of cultural feminism which includes the socio-economic issues of females in the Chinese culture.

Ya-Chen Chen (2011), in "The Many Dimensions on Chinese Feminism", has mentioned that Chinese women liberation has turned out to be similar to the Western woman's rights approach. China's Open Door policy of trade with foreign countries in 1978 was also made under the expansive financial and ideological impact of the West. Catalina Bronstein (2005) has remarked that Western viewpoint and the social

approach is to some extent similar to the Chinese approach towards the female body and sexuality which require to be addressed. She, among numerous others, gave her bits of knowledge towards extending and building up the stance on matters identifying with the woman body, sex, and sexual orientation. Sexism is the artificial ascription of roles, behavior and even personalities to people on the basis of their sex alone. This does not simply create differences but also inequalities and it seems impossible to imagine living in a non-sexist society. Tsu (2010) also stated that remote groups have entered the Chinese market, bringing a variety of Western thought systems to China, including women's liberation, and so expanding the relationship between Westerners and Chinese. Jankowiakis (2002) is of the view that men's potentials are considered superior to women's capabilities as the social orders are men-centric and molded for the most part "through men and their welfares, their ideas of masculinity" (p. 378).

According to Lezhou Su and Derek Hird (2021), *Waiting* is a critically acclaimed novel for which Ha Jin won the National Book Award in 1999. It covers the period from the early 1960s to the early 1980s, encompassing the Cultural Revolution under the Communist rule and the early reform era. It's most well-known fundamental issue is the repression of emotional life, and thus humanity, in Mao's authoritarian environment. This article proposes a fresh interpretation of the novel, emphasizing the work's use of masculinities as a primary subject and plot driver. *Waiting* uncovers the conditions underpinning male intellectuals' prevalent social and psychological immobility, as well as the predatory class of nouveau riche entrepreneurs' contrasting empowerment.

Hewitt (2010) has opined that Ha Jin is a pioneer and specialist of the everlasting characters who go through the exploration procedure from the past encounters to the future ventures. In *Waiting* we can see the androcentric views of Ha Jin. We find his stress over the suffering of Lin Kong parallel to the sufferings of Shuyu and Manna because of the rules.

Hood (2004) in "Creating Female Identity" has opined that *Waiting* is not about the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), yet about the general population, the internal life and the change and how the transformation influences the passionate life of people. As his numerous different fictions illustrate, "*Waiting... tells about the Complexity of Human Emotions [and Personality] Ignoring Simple Dogma. It tells about the different depictions of manliness and gentility in Chinese culture"* (p. 57). Moreover, this work dissects the socially doled out obligations and characters of the two genders and how females are introduced as smothered and subservient.

Zhang (2021), has argued that Ha Jin's *Waiting* is not a story of passionate romance, although it focused on love. Ha Jin kept the tone curiously calm and straight as he traced the eighteen years of love affair between Lin and Manna. Over that span of time, he asked the difficult questions: What is love? Why do we get married? And why do we get divorced? The answers were sometimes revealed to us through Lin Kong's conscience, but the novel worked best when it made us to seek the answers

ourselves in the events of the story. The characters of this work walks a tightrope composed above despair: "How we're each sequestered in our own suffering!" (p. 304). He came to the point that we human beings do all these things to fulfil the basic human needs.

Patricia Vertinsky (2001) has remarked that Charlotte Perkins Gilman's writing is significant for the bold utopian futures she imagined as "She advocated women's economic independence and believed that women's maternal instincts, once liberated from the confines of the nuclear household, could transform the world" (p. 12). The theory presented in this work points out that human evolution shaped the socio-economic relations between the sexes and Gilman argued that the sexual domination and oppression of women by the strongest males, which originated in the prehistoric age as a necessary evolutionary preservation strategy, was no longer socially necessary or productive. She argued that the sex-relation was also an economic relation, referring to this as "the sexuo-economic" relation and was built on inequality.

### **Material and Methods**

This research is done on Ha Jin's *Waiting* in qualitative manner. The readers are informed that it is the the culture that specifies the role of women and the language used to represent them in the society. The terms used to define a woman is invariably negative. "Animal images like bitch, Vick son, cats, tiger and wolf are used to define the females. These are not only the words but has a cultural baggage behind them. The multitude to convert the name of a woman into the name of animal, means to associate the characteristics of animal to the women" (*Feminism and Cultural Studies*, 2015). Women that are given the name of an animal deemed to be like that animal. Gilman fights that female must change their social singularities. At a beginning period, she indicates that individuals are the principal species where the female needs to depend upon the men for presence. This necessity anticipates that ladies should fulfill their commitment through private organizations, or "sex-capacities". Gilman battles that the ladies "work longer and harder than most men, and not exclusively in maternal obligations" (p. 20). Further, Gilman communicates that the female activities are composed by men. In Gilman's view these sexual contrasts have coordinated to an odd dispersal of power and have been more painful for females.

Gilman grasps a progressively dedicated and psychologic view, with a more weight on 'sex jobs', seeing 'sexism' as engrained in current structures of male and female execution. She accentuated on establishments like marriage, family, prostitution and heterosexuality as all current to disperse the 'Sex-job framework'. As an expansion of radical women's liberation, she requested for the fundamental human rights for ladies, for example, proliferation decision, labor, fetus removal, conception prevention, in short she settles on their decisions without confinements and pressures from men, specialists, authoritative or religious specialists. Gilman reminded women that it is their human nature to be strong, healthy and sexually active. The progress of women's physical strength, however, relied upon her freedom to be dynamic but and hundreds of years of financial reliance on men had constrained her liberty. Gilman

proclaimed that physical confinements of women were unnatural attributes assigned to women but they were not part of women's temperament.

### **Analysis of Ha Jin's *Waiting***

The researchers have analyzed Ha Jin's *Waiting* under the various thematic concerns of female sufferings, manliness, wedlock and female concerns etc. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's views in *Women and Economics* (1998) are perfectly applicable to Ha Jin's *Waiting*. She is of the view that for the purpose of livelihood and shelter women are bound by the rules set by the culture as well as the working place. In the novel, both females not only suffer because of their culture but also because of the laws set at the working place by male members. In *Waiting*, Ha Jin writes about the sufferings of females because of their physical appearance and the Chinese Military laws. The main rule that keeps Lin Kong and Manna Wu from marrying is the rule set by the previous chief of the hospital Commissar Wang in 1958. It is just a hospital rule and not even formerly legislated by any group outside the hospital. This rule is set by the hospital committee because of which not only Manna Wu suffers but also Shuyu who suffers the more. She is not only suffering because of her husband's disloyalty but also because of her parent's decision, at the time of her wedding, and her brother's decision at the time of getting divorce. Even after the divorce between Lin and Shuyu, Lin Kong's second wife Manna, and ex-wife Shuyu, both continue bearing the harsh attitude of the society. The society always identifies women not by their intellectual qualities and abilities but with the role of being a wife, mother, daughter, and housekeeper. A stereotypical identity of women has been established because of these particular set roles. All the three main female characters, Manna Wu, Shuyu, and Hua are the perfect example of women who are dependent on their husbands or fathers for their livelihood and shelter. While discussing about Manna's heart condition at hospital one of Lin's colleagues said to him: "But you must not be too emotional. Cheer up a little---she depends on you" (p. 283).

Gilman states that a female's subordinate relationship with the man has desensitized the female sex. She ascribes that females are required to control their sexual desire as well as their social requirements under the pressure of social pundits. They have to act according to their husband's requirements and the social or cultural requirements. Stereotypical jobs are associated with females of the society within the borders and across the borders. Men consider females as secondary beings, as not being totally human or fit for thinking, being inferior and more fragile than men. Male dominant society never let women to be monetarily independent. They need to manage their frame of mind only for their job and safe house. Further, she expresses that the female activities are mapped by men which have been more destructive for females.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman states that the cultural and sexual division of male and female has allocated specific roles to women known as gendered roles. All positive terms are associated with the male and negative connotations to the females. Gilman focuses on how our culture and society characterizes the duties of females.

This sexual difference is seen with no special case by all the women of our world, independent of their creed, race, color, religion and class. There is a wide range of perspectives on male centered society. In the novel, we find that the male protagonist Lin Kong wants to control the life of both women attached to him, Manna Wu and Shuyu. He is unable to decide what to do and where he can find the real comfort and happiness. The character of Lin Kong is shown ambivalent to some extent. When he visits his wife and daughter in village, he realizes he is doing unfair with both of them and at the same time he does not love her. "In my heart I felt for Shuyu, who had never lived an easy day since our marriage, but I don't love her and unwilling to spend the rest of life with her. I want a marriage based on love" (p. 82). He loves Manna but he tries to convince Manna to think about his cousin, Liang Meng. "Look, you don't have to decide now. Think about him. If you want to meet him again, let me know" (p. 120).

Charlotte Perkins Gilman demands equal rights for women whether these are economic or sexual. She is of the view that females in society abide by the cultural norms associated with the female gender. The female desire for sex is considered a shameful act that they try to hide from the opposite sex. Women are not allowed to fulfill their sexual desires openly as men do. They are just supposed to act according to their partner's demand or requirement. In the story, Lin Kong and other male characters use the Maoist culture to control the female characters. Their social and sexual desires are controlled by their male counterparts. On one side Manna Wu is controlled by her lover Lin Kong and Chinese culture on the other side we see Geng Yang, a Comrade from Third Border Division, uses her to fulfill his sexual desires. Manna tells about this incident to Haiyan, one of Manna Wu's friends at Muji Hospital, "I\_\_I was raped. I was raped by Geng Yang, He lured me into his room and raped me" (p. 186). Manna Wu and Shuyu both are directed to control their sexual desires. Many times, Manna Wu's desire to have physical relations with Lin Kong to secure the future of their relationship is rejected by Lin Kong because of his social reputation and promise to Ran Su, Vice Director of hospital's Political Department. "Promise me then that you and Manna Wu will have no abnormal relationship unless you have divorced your wife and married" (Manna Wu); on which Lin promises him that "I shall keep the relationship normal. Manna Wu and I will remain just comrades" (p. 64). By "abnormal" Ran Su meant "sexual". In *Waiting* many times, we see Shuyu and Manna Wu both are forced to repress their sexual desires. Shuyu, Lin Kong's wife, is also facing the same situation. She is controlled by her husband in many ways such as she has to look after his parents-in-law and their daughter Hua. She never demands anything from her husband. Their relationship is just in papers. She has no place in her husband's heart. Once she asks Lin Kong "After Hua was born you never let me share your bed. I wouldn't complain, but these days I'm thinking of giving you a son" (p. 99) but her offer is rejected by him because he has developed feelings for Manna Wu. In both cases, female desires are controlled by the male characters. Shuyu was courteous, generously helping Lin's family, and as per Chinese men's standard of a good housewife, she perfectly fits into that title. Notwithstanding, for her husband, an army doctor Lin, she was thoughtless, unschooled, and unmannered woman.

Charlotte demands equal rights for the male and females in the matter of their marriages and their social requirements. She is against the cultural restrictions on females. She stresses on the equal freedom of females to choose their life partners and getting education to become independent in their future. Getting education and becoming economically independent is the only possible way for them to get their rights and to never allow others to control their lives. She is of the view that the females must have the rights in the matters of marriage, child birth, divorce and doing jobs outside the home. Shuyu's parents never asked her about the decision of her marriage so she had to accept the new relationship for her parent's sake. Manna got Lin's attention since she was a foil to Shuyu. Manna Wu started to admire Lin even more after a military instructional course to such an extent that she wished to spend more time in private with Lin. As time passed and relationship proceeded, Lin realized that he was getting more affectionate and attached to Manna. He began to give re-marriage a thought but according to the rule set by Commissar Wang, an officer can get divorce after eighteen years of marriage without consent of the partner "...it was only after eighteen years' separation that an officer could end his marriage without his wife's consent" (p.14) and during this time an officer was not allowed to have relationship with another female. Manna couldn't get engaged before the divorce between Lin Kong and Shuyu Liu. Manna used to ask Lin during this time "Look at me, Lin. Am I not becoming an old woman?" (p. 23). She waited for eighteen years to marry Lin Kong as she was not free but confined by the restrictions of the society and army.

According to Charlotte Perkins Gilman, animal metaphors like bitch, vixen, cats, tiger and wolf are utilized to characterize the females. These metaphorical representations have a cultural background in which the multitudes change the names of women into the names of animals with the intention to relate the attributes of animals to the women. The words that describe Manna Wu and Shuyu are opposite to Lin Kong. In Ha Jin's *Waiting* female abilities or qualities are described as: "At thirty she resembles a wolf; at forty a tiger. An old house cleaner must be a wolf just as a tiger, so just a youthful lion ought to draw in her in fight" (1999, p. 139). Lin is described as a man with typical masculine qualities of a Chinese man (subtle, cultured, pleasing, passive, and friable). His understanding gained him quite a few compliments from people all around the community, "People cherished him, calling him Scholar or Bookworm" (p. 97). On the other hand, his wife Shuyu's looks are described as she is: "a bit weak but looked older than her actual age. Her arms and legs were thin that made clothes look loose on her as they did not fit her properly... She had a thin face and her mouth was dented, be that as it may, her contracted eyes were not as bad looking as that of the tadpoles". (p. 48)

Everything considered, Lin's appearance outlines the image of a fragile and insistently insufficient male who could not keep his wife and beloved happy in comparison with the macho masculinity of the male characters in a Western setting.



In the novel, we find contradictory traits in the portrayals of the two leading female characters from the perspective of the male protagonist. In the beginning we find the comparison in the sense of physical appearance when Lin's parents marry him to Shuyu. He did not feel any attraction towards her because of her physical appearance which represent Old China: "she looked so old, as though in her forties, her face wrinkled and her hands rough. In addition, her feet were just four inches in length" (p. 12). On the other hand, we find Lin attracted towards Manna Wu, who works as a junior assistant in the military hospital. At her early forties she did not seem old to him "you are not old dear... Perceived from back, you could easily take her for a lady of thirty" (p. 23). He himself starts comparing both the females when "He contacted her hand and felt it was warm and smooth, with no callus. How unique her palm was from Shuyu's" (p. 44).

During the twenty years of married life of Lin and Shuyu, they had sexual relation only once and their daughter Hua was born. At the time of their divorce when judge inquired about their relation Shuyu affirmed that they had no sexual relation after their marriage except once: "'Both of you have not dozed together for a long time?' asked the judge. She shook her head. 'Indeed, or no?' 'No.'" (p.15). When Lin visits Shuyu to convince her to get divorce she asked him to share the bed that shocked Lin because he never found her bold enough to talk like this. In contrast to this we see Manna Wu's desire for sex. Even before their marriage she wants to sleep with him just to get a proof that he loves her and had no sexual relation with his wife anymore. She took the keys of her friend's sister's apartment to spend some private time with Lin but he refused and asked her to return the keys as it was against the laws. After getting married he found that Manna has the lust for sex that never ends. He finds Manna turned out a passionate lover and always complaining about his old age because of which he was unable to sexually satisfy her. "I wonder how you could have made a baby with Shuyu. In just three minutes?" (p. 191).

In this study, we can see how the relationship varies between the spouses. The relationship of Manna Wu and Shuyu with Lin Kong is contradicting to some extent but both love him. Manna waits for eighteen years to marry Lin. One can find many reasons behind this love and wait. In spite of her many other matches, she finds herself helpless and decides to wait for Lin patiently. But Shuyu keeps waiting for the suitable time when she would get some place in her husband's heart. After marriage between Lin and Manna, we find that their relationship lacks trust. She is shown insecure in case of Lin from the first day of their relation even after marriage. The day after their marriage she said: "I wish you were deadened in bed, so you'd remain with me constantly" (p. 206). At the end of the novel Manna changed into a totally different lady. She becomes soft hearted towards Shuyu and Hua. After her babies' illness and recovery, she feels some love for Hua and buy some gifts for her. Lin observes that she is becoming more polite day by day because of her falling health and she also asks Lin to visit Shuyu to see her.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman added that women's role assigned by the culture is just to serve their family. The male members of the family use them for their financial

as well as social benefits. Male members performing the roles of father, brother, husband and son use them according to their requirements. Shuyu's brother Bensheng utilizes his sister to get cash from his brother-in-law by Shuyu's marriage. He lends some money from Lin and without taking a look at the cash, Bensheng puts it into his jeans pocket and says that "I'll pay it back to Shuyu, okay?" (p. 89). Shuyu served Lin's family well as a reliable life assistant. Bensheng told the Judge in one of hearing of Lin and Shuyu's divorce case "She has lived with Kongs for more than twenty years, serving them like a dumb beast of burden. She looked after his parents when they were on their sick bed" (p. 19) but no reward is given to her of her dedication and affection but she gets divorce from Lin. Even in the end, Lin seems to be confused about his relation with his new wife Manna and Shuyu ex-wife.

## Conclusion

This research traces the various manifestations of the female suppression in Ha Jin's *Waiting*. This qualitative research focuses upon the place of women in the Chinese culture. Ha Jin in his work under study writes about the male supremacy in the Chinese society that can be observed in the character of Lin Kong who ignores the rights of both female characters Shuyu and Manna Wu. Ha Jin weaves in his comprehensive story the portrayal of the central characters and the devastating conditions that they end up in. For the protagonist Lin Kong, the only duty for a wife is to serve his parents and after their death there is no longer need to bind himself to this unwanted relation.

Socialist China, during the period of the story, demonstrates how its local people should act according to the laws. Ha Jin depicts this control both considerably and intensely in *Waiting*. Lin Kong acts throughout the story as though he was an important person under Chairman Mao's impact and control. He is frustratingly committed to a political condition that obstructs essentially the greater part of his principal needs. Resultantly, neither he could divorce Shuyu before eighteen years nor he could marry Manna before the stipulated time period and even the divorce and the second marriage with Manna, he is not happy and hankers after his first wife.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman raised voice against the exploitation of women by the male members of their family and society. They treat them as their property. Females are not given their rights such as marriage of their own choice, divorce, childbirth and getting education to become economically independent. This study showed that the main female characters of *Waiting* have no right to speak in the matter of their marriage. Shuyu is treated as a puppet in the hands of her parents before marriage and her husband and brother after her marriage. She was not asked in the matter of her marriage with Lin. Her divorce case was also proceeded by his brother Bensheng as expected to get money from Lin. At the point when he discovered Lin didn't do as he expected, he was so offended as to criticize Lin as "a baffled worm!" (p. 230). In short, the study of *Waiting* has highlighted the multiple ways of female suppression in the patriarchal Chinese culture because of their biological structures

and physical appearances whereas male characters were shown strong and independent in their decisions.

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