

RURAL MIGRANT WOMEN IN SHENG KEYI'S *NORTHERN GIRLS*: MARGINALITY, INEQUALITY AND TRANSGRESSION

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ABSTRACT

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Sheng Keyi (b. 1973) is a prominent post-Mao woman writer of rural origin. Having migrated from a village in Hunan province, she has personally experienced rural-to-urban migration, marginalised status and inequality. Drawing on her background, she adopts an unconventional narrative style to portray rural migrant women in the city of Shenzhen—women who endure intersecting forms of oppression shaped by gender, class, and the rural–urban divide. This paper seeks to fill a research gap in studies of Chinese migrant literature by examining Sheng Keyi's novel *Northern Girls* from a poststructuralist feminist perspective. It analyses the representation of rural migrant women, female subjectivity and acts of transgression in the novel. Moreover, it explores how the author articulates her own critical voice to challenge patriarchal norms, urban social hierarchies, and dominant discourses that marginalise, dismiss, and devalue rural migrant women. This paper argues that *Northern Girls* subverts prevailing stereotypes that reduce rural migrant women to either obedient factory workers or sex workers, instead foregrounding the complexity of female subjectivity through the protagonist's acts of resistance. Sheng Keyi's narrative exposes the suffering, exploitation, and injustice faced by these women. By addressing themes of subjectivity, marginality, inequality, and transgression, this paper contributes to both the feminist study of contemporary Chinese women's writing and the broader understanding of Chinese cultural dynamics, gender relations, and the social realities of marginalised populations in post-Mao China.

Keywords: Rural migrant women; marginality; inequality; transgression; Sheng Keyi

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

China's rise in the global market and the expansion of its urban economy following economic reforms in the late twentieth century led to a rise in demand for rural migrant labour. These workers were employed to do unskilled labour that urbanites were uninterested in performing due to poor working conditions, physical exhaustion, low earning and low status. In this context of rapid market globalisation in China, hundreds of millions of rural people migrated to the large, newly industrialised cities to become labourers. In other words, rural people moved into urban centers as part of vast waves of migration, with expectations of great freedom, better employment opportunities and a better quality of life than that experienced by the rural poor.

The majority of rural migrant workers in China are considered “unofficial” migrants, forming what is commonly referred to as the “floating population” (Jacka, 2006, p. 5). These terms describe individuals who

relocate—either temporarily or permanently—from their place of origin without obtaining a corresponding transfer of their official household registration, or *hukou*. Under China's household registration system, all citizens are classified by their place of residence and designated as either agricultural or non-agricultural household members. Transferring one's *hukou* status from agricultural to non-agricultural, or from a rural area to an urban center—or even between urban areas of differing administrative levels—is exceedingly difficult, thereby reinforcing structural barriers to social mobility and urban integration. This system is unique in China and maintains the urban-rural divide within Chinese society. To live in the city legally, rural migrants need to have three things: legal documentation (like temporary residence permits), stable employment and residence. Rural migrants, or so-called *sanwu renyuan* (three-without personnel), who are destitute (extremely poor) without these three things, become officials' primary targets of detention and repatriation (Jacka, 2006, p. 97), as obtaining legal documentation like temporary residence permits is difficult and requires navigating a long series of bureaucratic hurdles, migrant workers without temporary residence permits find ways to survive in the cities while encountering inequalities and exploitation in their marginality.

Beyond their status as rural-to-urban migrants and the household registration system, migrant workers are often excluded as “outsiders” because they are frequently perceived as “low quality” (or low *suzhi*) individuals in terms of education, intelligence, morality, character, ability, language (often speaking dialect or Mandarin with dialectal accents), and work-related skills. They are perceived as having low intellectual capacities (Schaffer & Song, 2017, p. 676). Mainstream discourses and social policies of exclusion position them at the margins of modernity, reinforcing their status as a marginalised group in urban cities. Migrant workers often face social inequalities, labour exploitation and rural-urban disparities. Unlike their male counterparts, rural migrant women encounter the additional burden of sexualised, gender-based discrimination, perpetuated by both urban elite standards and capitalist patriarchal norms. In other words, rural migrant women are othered by their gender, their place of origin, and their supposed “low quality” (or low *suzhi*).

The terms used to describe rural migrant women reveal insights into the place of these women in different Chinese contexts. The majority of rural migrant women in China are young, single, and engaged in wage labour. They are commonly referred to as *wailaimei*—literally “younger sisters from outside”—or *dagongmei*, meaning “working (younger) sisters” or “working girls,” terms that reflect both their gender and their socio-economic status as rural labour migrants (Jacka, 2006, p. 9).¹ The typical *dagongmei* contrasts with the minority of rural migrant women who are older, married and have children. Another term that is used generally for rural migrant women is *bei mei*, meaning “northern girls”. The term *bei mei* “is often used metonymically to refer to *dagongmei* more generally, but exactly who gets to be labelled a northern girl depends on who is using the term and, more importantly, where they are using it”, often related to the sex industry (Sun, 2014a, pp. 223–224). In Hong Kong, a *bei mei* is a migrant female worker from mainland China, often engaged as a sex worker or prostitute, while in Guangdong province, a *bei mei* is a woman who comes from north of Guangdong to work in the city. In cities such as Shenzhen, one of the southern-most cities in China and the first of the Special Economic Zones to attract migrant workers from multiple locations north of the city, a *bei mei* is a migrant female worker from anywhere north of Shenzhen, and the term often takes on “derogatory and salacious connotations associated with prostitution” (Schaffer & Song, 2014, p. 62). However, *bei mei* does not always refer to workers engaging in prostitution. In Sheng Keyi's novel *Bei mei* (Northern Girls, 2004, Eng. ed. 2012), the main female characters are referred to as *bei mei* and work in diverse capacities as shampoo girls (working in hair salons), waitresses, kitchen cleaners, factory workers, hotel room attendants and hospital receptionists rather than as prostitutes (Sheng, 2004).² Accordingly, this paper will use the term *bei mei* without connoting sex work, to refer to migrant female workers from locations north of Shenzhen, who are young, single, waged workers.

Sheng Keyi is a prominent woman writer among the *qilinghou* or “post-1970” generation. Born in the 1970s, this generation distances itself from the historical past (like the Cultural Revolution, 1966–1976) and primarily writes about post-Mao China (after 1976), including the downsides of modernity. Sheng Keyi specifically writes about marginalised voices, as she believes “no life deserves to be forgotten and that is what I believe is the value of my writing” (Sheng, 2011). Sheng Keyi is herself a rural migrant from a village in Hunan province who moved to the city of Shenzhen in 1994, and who now lives in Beijing. She personally experienced rural-to-urban migration, marginalised status and inequality, and her experiences were rich sources for her writing about rural migrant women, particularly in her first novel's *Northern Girls* (Sheng, 2012a, pp. 319–320). Unlike women writers like Wang Anyi, Tie Ning and Lin Bai, intellectuals of urban origins who portray rural women as sympathetic subjects while maintaining strong distinctions between themselves and rural workers

¹ The word *mei* means younger sister, referring an inferior status within Chinese family structures.

² According to Schaffer and Kay, Sheng Keyi avoids having her central characters work as prostitutes or hostesses in karaoke bars related to the sex industry, thus circumvents “possible government intervention, given the CCP prohibitions against prostitution”. This avoidance in the novel *Northern Girls* “may have been a necessary and considered decision on the part of the author.” (Schaffer & Song, 2014, pp. 67–68.)

in their writing (Swanpitak, 2025), Sheng Keyi is of subaltern and rural origins, presents herself as a peasant and bases her unconventional narratives about rural migrants on her own experience (Schaffer & Song, 2017, p. 670). Since 2002, she has published several short story collections and novels, and is most famous for her novels such as *Northern Girls* (2004), *Death Fugue* (2013), *Wild Fruit* (2015), *Paradise* (2016) and *The Womb* (2019). Some of her works have been translated into English and other foreign languages, including Russian, Czech, Swedish, Italian, Turkish, French, Spanish, German, Japanese and Korean. Sheng Keyi has been the recipient of several prestigious literary awards, including the Chinese People's Literature Prize, the Chinese Literature Media Award, and the Yu Dafu Prize for Fiction. In addition, the English translation of *Northern Girls* was longlisted for the Man Asian Literary Prize in 2012. Sheng Keyi's literary interests include marginal characters, rural migrant women, the silenced, social and gender inequalities.

This paper will explore representations of rural migrant women in Sheng Keyi's novel *Northern Girls* from a poststructuralist feminist perspective. By examining the author's narrative and writing strategies, it analyses how the female characters (rural migrant women) become victims in a male-centred and urban society, respond to social and gender inequalities, construct their subjectivity and resist dominant norms with their transgressive acts. This paper argues that Sheng Keyi's writing challenges patriarchal norms and dominant discourses that marginalise, exclude, exploit, dismiss and devalue rural migrant women. Her work also differs from other works by people of a similar demographic to her, because their self-narrative writing of rural migrant women in a mainstream press expresses their struggles and difficulties but "almost never portrayed the women as helpless victims" and does not provide "real critique of the discourses and structures that undergirded their exploitation", reinforcing their marginalised position (Jacka, 2006, p. 70).

Furthermore, Sheng Keyi's work resists official narratives that depict rural migrant women as individuals who easily succumb to the lure of quick money and engage in sex work instead of pursuing so-called 'respectable' employment. These women are often portrayed as uneducated, morally suspect, and lacking in civility—figures in need of self-improvement and development (Sun, 2014b, p. 173). In doing so, her writing offers a critical response to these reductive and stigmatising representations, foregrounding the complexity, agency, and lived realities of rural migrant women.

This research not only offers insights into the work of Sheng Keyi concerning portrayals of rural migrant women, but also contributes to a better understanding of contemporary Chinese culture in relation to rural-to-urban migration, feminism, patriarchy, marginality, inequality and transgression. The research seeks to fill a gap in studies of Chinese literature by employing poststructuralist feminist theories about female subjectivity, positivity of differences, transgression, constitutive outside, exclusion and identity formation to analyse and interpret Chinese women's migrant literature. It goes beyond general literary studies and provides interdisciplinary perspectives in the areas of literary, gender and cultural studies. The paper's focus on representations of rural migrant women, female subjectivity and sexuality in Sheng Keyi's novel *Northern Girls* not only reveals rural women's interactions with traditional and capitalist patriarchal cultures, urban privilege and dominant discourses, but also demonstrates the author's construction of alternative modes of subjectivity and of narratives of transgression in contemporary China.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the turn of the 21st century, scholars have increasingly focused on the representation of Chinese rural female migrants in post-Mao women's writing. This section reviews existing scholarship and identifies the gap that this study aims to address. A central concern of this paper—shared by much of the previous research—is how women writers engage with the emergence of the market economy, persistent social inequality, patriarchal cultures, and dominant gender discourses through their portrayals of female migrant characters. Existing studies largely emphasise the negative impact of capitalist market and patriarchal cultures on the lives and identities of rural migrant women. In her monograph *Shedu zhi zhou: xinshiqi Zhongguo nüxing xiezuoyu nüxing wenhua* (Ferryboats: Women's Writing and Women's Culture in the New Age of China), Dai Jinhua mainly investigates the literary works of women writers published in the 1980s, including their treatment of the themes of gender identity and feminism against dominant masculinist discourses in the context of contemporary China and capitalist globalisation (Dai, 2007). Dai also highlights the drawbacks of the capitalist market on women, including rural migrant women in the cities through her discussion of women's writing in the 1990s. Although Dai's study does not engage in theoretical analysis or focus specifically on the detailed experiences and identity negotiations of rural migrant women, it nonetheless highlights the broader connection between representations of female subjectivity, sexuality, and the lived experiences of rural migrant women in urban environments.

In their monograph *Women Writers in Postsocialist China*, Kay Schaffer and Xianlin Song further Dai's research on the post-Mao "personalised writing" (or life narratives) of women writers, with a focus on the

influence of the capitalist market on the literary works of the 1990s and early 2000s—an era marked by economic and cultural globalisation. This work offers an extensive examination of modernist constructions of autonomous selfhood, as well as representations of female sexuality and subjectivity, through diverse themes such as women's experiences in urban slums, homosexuality, the traumatic aftermath of the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre, and youth involvement in urban drug subcultures (Schaffer & Song, 2014). They also focus on rural women's lives in the fiction of Lin Bai, Sheng Keyi and Xinran. Specifically, they analyse representations of rural migrant women and their survival in the city of Shenzhen in Sheng Keyi's novel *Northern Girls* and argue that the author exposes women's problems from her own experiences of marginalisation, with a critique of the perils of modernity and the underside of the economic reforms. My approach in this paper aims to complement Dai's and Schaffer and Song's feminist approaches by delving into an in-depth analysis of *Northern Girls* through a poststructuralist feminist analysis of marginality, inequality and transgression.

Another important contribution to the literature is Wanning Sun's ethnographic research on the intersection between the media and cultural practices of rural migrant workers in her monograph *Subaltern China: Rural Migrants, Media, and Cultural Practices*. Sun employs an ethnographic approach and the concept of subalternity to analyse the cultural politics of rural migrant workers' self-presentation through different types of mainstream and alternative cultural practices such as news reporting, urban cinema, documentary film, photography, *dagong* (or migrant-worker) poetry and literature. In her research, Sun aims to discuss how rural migrant workers are represented in the mainstream media, how they respond to urban elite representations of them, and what they do in order to make their own voices heard (Sun, 2014a). Sun's book makes an insightful contribution to the field of migrant labour studies, subaltern studies as well as media and cultural studies. Sun generally does not focus on rural migrant women in particular, however, she includes an analysis of rural migrant women and *dagong* literature, including Sheng Keyi's *Northern Girls*, in one part of her book. In this respect, although Sun pays attention to the survival of disadvantaged rural migrant women under the influence of capitalist market, she fails to bring a detailed gender analysis to the discussion on media, cultural practices and subalternity. To undertake a detailed analysis of Sheng Keyi's fiction, this paper adopts a different methodological approach, one that is more aligned with feminist frameworks suited to examining women's transgressive narratives about rural migrant female workers.

Also worthy of mention is Yijia Dong's article (2024) which explores how the female subaltern subject is discursively reconstructed through literary translation of Sheng Keyi's *Northern Girls*. Dong analyses translation strategies on the issues of gender stereotypes, misogyny, power relations, female agency, feminism and modernity. In addition, several recent Chinese-language studies—such as those by Li Zhen (2018), He Jiang (2021), Jiang Nan (2021), and Xie Yali (2022)—offer close readings of *Northern Girls*, with a focus on representations of the female body, the lived experiences and suffering of migrant women workers, and, in some cases, comparative analyses with Sheng Keyi's other works or the writings of other women writers. However, these studies are generally brief, lack sustained theoretical engagement, and are not situated within specific analytical frameworks.

Other literature worth noting explores women's writing on rural migrant women with a particular focus on domestic workers (*baomu*). For example, Xi Liu's article studies Zhang Kankang's novel *Zhima*, focusing on the suffering of rural migrant women on domestic chores, discrimination and exploitation when they work as domestic maids for urban families. Liu argues that this literary text is weak in terms of its feminist standpoint and thus affirms "the post-socialist discourses of modernity, which are distinguished by their promotion and celebration of urbanisation and free market" (Liu, 2012, p. 511). Hui Faye Xiao's book chapter focuses more on grassroots feminism in *baomu* writing through the study of Fan Yusu's autobiographical account of a *baomu*. Xiao points out that Fan's writings, showing *baomu*'s experiences of class-based bias on a daily basis and gender-specific life situations, attempt to challenge postsocialist patriarchy, give a voice to a silent group of *baomu*, and build up organic connections through literary practices among *baomu* scattered in urban bourgeois families (Xiao, 2021). Although this research does not focus on domestic worker narratives, these studies are important contributions to the exploration of gender and feminist issues in Chinese migrant literature in detail, particularly representations of rural migrant women.

This paper builds upon existing scholarship on Chinese rural migrant women within the fields of literary, gender, and cultural studies. It addresses a research gap by offering a focused analysis of female subjectivity, sexuality, marginality, inequality, and transgression in Sheng Keyi's *Northern Girls*, employing a poststructuralist feminist lens. It discusses not only the exclusion and inequality that rural migrant women experience, but also their transgressive acts, demonstrating the author's resistance to dominant discourses, hegemonic identities and formations in post-Mao fiction.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Poststructuralism is a theoretical movement that critiques the structuralist search for universal patterns and its tendency to define meaning and identity through fixed relational systems (Colebrook, 2007). Instead, poststructuralism emphasises the instability of meaning and the contextual nature of knowledge. Poststructuralist feminist theories, in particular, focus on issues of women, sexuality, and the exploration of alternative forms of subjectivity. They affirm the value of difference while rejecting hierarchical binaries and the dominance of hegemonic gender norms. This research finds that Rosi Braidotti's notions of nomadic subjects, female subjectivity, differences and transgression, along with Judith Butler's concepts of constitutive outside, exclusion and identity formation, are useful to conceptualise a lens for literary analysis of the case study—Sheng Keyi's fiction *Northern Girls*.

According to Braidotti (1994), the concept of “nomadic subjects” is informed by the lived experiences of individuals or cultures that are literally or metaphorically nomadic, advocating for movement across fixed categories and hierarchical structures while maintaining relational continuity—“blurring boundaries without burning bridges” (pp. 4–5). In feminist theory, nomadic subjectivity enables a departure from phallogocentric dogmatism, revitalising thought by restoring its freedom, vitality, and creative potential. This nomadic framework opens up new possibilities for life and thought, particularly for women and feminists, including rural migrant women, whose identities often transcend static classifications. In embracing the multiplicity of possible differences, Braidotti advocates for the affirmation of sexual difference in a non-hierarchical manner. She rejects the disembodiment and desexualisation of the subject, instead emphasising the importance of embodied subjectivity and the construction of positive differences. Braidotti's feminist defence of sexual difference seeks to establish alternative models of female subjectivity that support women's transformation and values (1994, pp. 281–282). This approach leads her to redefine the female subject and to challenge dominant, unified models of subjectivity particularly those structured by male-centered paradigms and essentialist notions of female identity.

In redefining female subjectivity through a poststructuralist feminist lens, Braidotti argues that the category “woman” should be understood as a site of multiple, complex, and potentially contradictory experiences shaped by intersecting variables such as class, race, age, lifestyle, sexual orientation, and more. She identifies three levels of difference: the difference between men and women, the differences among women, and the differences within each individual woman (Braidotti, 1994, p. 156). At the first level, she emphasises sexual difference as embodied and experienced by women. At the second level, she addresses the multiplicity of female subjectivities shaped by cultural and social identities, including diverse locations, practices, and lived experiences. Finally, at the third level, Braidotti considers the multilayered structure of the embodied self, shaped through memory and recollection. She argues that examining these forms of subjectivity requires attention not only to gender and sexual difference but also to the intersections of race, class, age, sexual orientation, and lifestyle, which she identifies as key axes of identity (Braidotti, 1994, p. 156). This perspective calls for a redefinition of female subjectivity as constituted through the confrontation with multiple, intersecting differences. In this view, female subjectivity is not fixed but dynamic, multifaceted, complex, and at times contradictory by demanding diverse feminist representations and meanings. Drawing on Braidotti's three-level framework, this paper explores relationships, interactions, and differences not only between men and women, but also among women from different temporal and spatial contexts, as well as the internal differences within each woman, as revealed through memory and lived experience.

The feminist concept of female transgression is closely linked to the affirmative notion of sexual difference and the recognition of multiple differences, both of which contribute to the construction of alternative models of female subjectivity and the articulation of women's values. Central to this framework is the process of women's “becoming-subject”³ speaking with subjective female voices and engaging in acts of transgression. This paper adopts this perspective to explore the transgressive rural migrant women in Sheng Keyi's fiction, who challenge, resist, or disregard patriarchal constraints and the normative standards of the urban elite. It analyses these women's subjective experiences and transgressive behaviors, including expressions of sexual freedom, self-confidence, self-sufficiency, and personal development. By applying a poststructuralist feminist reading that is non-hegemonic and inclusive, this study investigates how female subjectivity among rural migrant women is constructed as a site of resistance to dominant identities, gender norms, and entrenched stereotypes in Sheng Keyi's literary representations.

³ The terms “becoming-subject” or “becoming-woman” are Deleuze's terms. According to Braidotti (1994), “The Deleuzian becoming is the affirmation of the positivity of difference, meant as a multiple and constant process of transformation. Both teleological order and fixed identities are relinquished in favor of a flux of multiple becoming” (p. 111). See also Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) book *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (p. 242).

In addition to the theme of female transgression, this paper also looks at rural migrant women's difficulties and tragedies portrayed in Sheng Keyi's fiction. In my use of the poststructuralist feminist approach, while the first theme explores rural migrant women's subjectivity, transgressive acts and resistance to patriarchal and hegemonic discourses, the second theme examines rural migrant women's struggles, difficulties and tragedies in their lives, concerning urban social hierarchies, marginality, exclusion, and social and gender inequality in the society. For the second theme, it follows Butler's notions of constitutive outside, exclusion and identity formation from a poststructuralist perspective. According to Butler, the construction of the subject through the force of exclusion, producing a constitutive outside to the subject—differentiating between what is included and what is excluded (Butler, 1993, p. 3). Therefore, the “outside” is not an absolute, ontological space that exists independently or in opposition to the boundaries of discourse; rather, it is a constitutive “outside,” shaped and constructed by discourse itself. Butler (1993) argues that the “outside” is necessary for defining and reinforcing the “inside”—the domain of what is socially acceptable and normative (p. 8).

In Butler's framework of identity formation, identities—such as gender and social identities—are constructed through performative practices, repetition, and processes of exclusion (Butler, 1990). Butler argues that as more specific identities are articulated within the context of dominant social groups, each assertion of identity inevitably entails a reckoning with the exclusions that perpetuate hegemonic power structures. These exclusions, which are inherent to the formation of any identity, serve to reinforce power differentials by delineating who or what is considered outside the normative boundaries (Butler, 1993, p. 118). Butler (1993) highlights that gender and social norms function by marking some identities as intelligible and legitimate while marking others as unintelligible, deviant or excluded from social and cultural recognition (p. xi). For example, within a phallogocentric and logocentric framework, the feminine is domesticated and rendered unintelligible, with claims to self-constitution that exclude its representation. The female is portrayed as unrepresentable and unintelligible, positioning it as the 'constitutive outside' of male-centred society (Butler, 1993, p. 39). Also, rural migrants, a marginal and excluded group in the urban society, are constructed as the “constitutive outside” of urban social standards. In the case of rural migrant women, their identities are constructed as “others” through performative practices, exclusion, or the formation of a constitutive outside. In urban society, they are often marginalised, excluded and exploited, primarily due to their gender and rural origins, facing gender inequality and social discrimination due to their perceived lower status as rural migrants of the working class. These intersecting exclusions position them as “outsiders” and relegate them to secondary status within society. As a result, rural migrant women face overlapping forms of marginalisation shaped by gender, class, and the rural–urban divide. Due to their marginality and exclusion, these women frequently experience social and gender inequality. At the same time, however, their exclusion helps maintain urban social privilege and gender hierarchies, and to reinforce the dominant norms of urban identity.

Following a poststructuralist approach, the next section of this paper analyses how rural migrant women are constructed as “outsiders” in *Northern Girls* through the notions of constitutive outside, exclusion and identity formation. It proposes that identities create both the center and the margin, creating boundaries between people in the society, and positioning the marginal (like rural migrant women) as “outside” or “other” to reinforce the dominant urban identity and patriarchal norms. The application of both Braidotti's and Butler's poststructuralist feminist notions illustrates the dominance of Sheng Keyi's feminist themes in which she not only reveals female victimisation by systemic gender and social inequality but also challenges hegemonic structures, dominant discourses and patriarchal norms, as well as established literary conventions.

4. ANALYSIS OF SHENG KEYI'S *NORTHERN GIRLS*

This section analyses rural migrant women's difficulties, struggles, survival, tragic fates and transgressive acts in the text from a poststructuralist feminist perspective. Specifically, it examines the issues of marginality, inequality, female subjectivity, transgression and feminism, showing rural migrant women's attempt to challenge gender norms and to survive in the urban city.

4.1 Struggles and survival in the urban city

The story depicts the life of the protagonist Qian Xiaohong, who is a young rural woman, being naturally endowed with large breasts, from a village in Hunan province who decides to migrate to the city of Shenzhen with her friend Li Sijiang in search of employment and new life opportunities. Before travelling to Shenzhen at the age of sixteen, Xiaohong abandons her village at the age of fourteen and finds jobs in a smaller city in Hunan province, working in a county guesthouse, a nightclub and a hair salon, respectively. The main reason that she initially leaves home is the family scandal in which she is sexually assaulted by her brother-in-law. Her sister finds out and tells the whole neighbourhood, who come to support her over Xiaohong. According

to the norms of traditional patriarchal culture, a “good” woman should keep her virginity until marriage, so Xiaohong is condemned for the assault and needs to disappear from her village. By contrast, her brother-in-law, the initiator of the affair, is not socially punished. This story demonstrates the gendered social sanctions which fall on women who fail to follow traditional gender expectations in society. In this sense, apart from motivation of employment, Sheng Keyi also suggests that young rural women migrate to the city to free themselves from the patriarchal familial oppression of the village.

However, in reality, rural-to-urban migration does not free rural migrant women from patriarchal oppression, as they become a marginalised group in the city. According to Butler, a marginalised group is positioned as a constitutive outside to the subject, in order to reinforce social acceptance of the “insiders” and perpetuate dominant norms (Butler, 1993, p. xi). The marginality and discrimination that *bei mei* in the story suffer due to their rurality is compounded by their inferior gender status. In other words, they become the “constitutive outside” of both male-centred society and urban social standards. They are marginalised, excluded and exploited due to their gender, class, the rural-urban divide.

Xiaohong and Sijiang meet a series of difficulties in the city of Shenzhen. Firstly, they struggle to find ways to gain temporary residence permits that will enable them to stay in the city legally. As they migrate to Shenzhen with few resources other than their sexualised bodies, the easiest way to obtain the permits is that a rural migrant woman trades her virginity to a man who has the authority to issue temporary residence permits. As Sijiang is a virgin, she suffers sexual harassment from men who bring her to the mayor and also has to offer her virginity to him in exchange for money and temporary residence permits for herself and Xiaohong. Although Sijiang dismisses the significance of this sacrifice, telling Xiaohong “What’s virginity anyway? I don’t feel I’ve lost anything at all”, both Sijiang and Xiaohong are filled with regret (Sheng, 2012b, p. 48). In this scene, the author demonstrates that Sijiang is disadvantaged and devalued by the capitalist patriarchal culture that commodifies women’s bodies and sexualities. She becomes a victim in the male-centred society.

Secondly, after obtaining the permits, Xiaohong and Sijiang struggle to find accommodation and find jobs, while meeting male violence and facing the assumption that they, as rural migrant women with “low *suzhi*”, are prostitutes or sex workers. As they have a small amount of money, they rent a small room in a dormitory with three other women for ten *yuan* per night. At night, their three roommates suggest that they could find a job at their workplace, a karaoke bar based in a hotel nightclub. Xiaohong and Sijiang dress up and follow the three women to the bar with expectation of becoming singers and gaining money via tips for their singing. Instead, the club patrons assume that Xiaohong and Sijiang are prostitutes like their roommates. They invite the women to go out for a late-night snack and drink, however they expect transactional sex. After accepting the invitation to a snack, Xiaohong and Sijiang find themselves subjected to rape and attempted murder if they resist the sexual violation. This episode of *Northern Girls* reveals the extent of male violence against the female bodies of rural migrant women, many of whom do not know the way they are represented in the dominant discourse. They are disrespected, devalued, victimised and violated, and the male violence is the functional essence of misogyny, enforcing women’s subordination to patriarchal norms and expectations (Manne, 2017).

Thirdly, Xiaohong and Sijiang take on numerous labour jobs, while encountering sexual harassment and insults. As they have low levels of formal education, they start their first jobs as shampoo girls (mainly washing customers’ hair) in a salon, soon moving to live in this salon’s accommodation. Male customers are attracted to this salon partly because it offers massage services, including, for an additional fee, genital massage. These customers often assume that the shampoo girls are willing to engage in sexual relations with them. As a result, the women are frequently subjected to sexual harassment and assault. Xiaohong is kissed by a young man who works as a project supervisor (outside the salon), who initially appears to be interested in a non-transactional relationship with her, but subsequently avoids meeting her and shows no intention of pursuing a serious relationship. Sijiang is deceived by a police officer named Bud Kun. She engages in sexual relations with him, becomes pregnant and is coerced into having an abortion, before being abandoned by him without any explanation. These men look down on rural migrant women working in jobs considered to be “unskilled” and show no interest in forming serious, long-term relationships with them. Instead, they approach these women primarily to satisfy their own sexual desires. Sheng Keyi gives voice to this kind of sexual harassment particular to rural migrant women.

Furthermore, at the workplaces, Xiaohong is subjected to verbal insults and dismissed on unreasonable grounds. Despite her diligence and the recognition she receives from the owner for her strong work ethic, the owner’s wife becomes suspicious of an alleged attraction between her husband and Xiaohong. Believing that Xiaohong is willing to become her husband’s mistress, the owner’s wife takes retaliatory action that results in Xiaohong’s unjust dismissal. She defames Xiaohong, contacts the police to have her arrested, and ultimately terminates her employment. Justifying her actions, she declares, “I’m running a legitimate business here. When people see you picked up from The 007 Salon and hauled in, it damages our reputation,” before

making her intentions explicit: "Ah Hong, it seems The 007 Salon won't be able to keep you" (Sheng, 2012b, p. 91). As a result, Xiaohong is forced to seek new work and eventually becomes a worker in a toy factory. However, due to the poor working conditions and ongoing conflict with a strict female line manager—who accuses Xiaohong of laziness and feigning illness after finding her resting in the toilet, claiming to have diarrhea—she resigns after only twenty days. Despite her time working at the factory, she receives no compensation for the twenty days of labour, as factory policy stipulates that wages are only paid after six months of continuous employment. Both her dismissal from the salon and the exploitative treatment at the factory underscore the social injustices commonly faced by female migrant workers in urban environments. It is difficult for women like Xiaohong to find decent employment, fair working conditions, or respectful colleagues in an environment shaped by entrenched biases against rural female migrants. They are often marginalised, disrespected and exploited, primarily due to their gender and rural origins, with assumptions of the low-quality individuals.

The narrative illustrates how the rural migrant women face classed and gendered harassment and injustice not only in jobs presented as unskilled—shampoo girl and factory worker—but also at jobs more proximate to higher classes or managerial work—as receptionist and waitress. After resigning from the factory, Xiaohong gets a new position as a front desk attendant at Qianshan Hotel, while Sijiang comes to work as a waitress at the hotel's café. Xiaohong later works as a hospital receptionist at women's hospital, but she still meets sexual harassment and social injustice. Sheng Keyi often highlights that Xiaohong's large breasts are the subject of unwanted attention in her roles as receptionist and secretary, often singled out as leading men to assume that she is a sex worker. After resigning from the hotel in pursuit of career advancement, Xiaohong becomes a diligent hospital receptionist and is considered for a professional promotion. However, she is unexpectedly demoted to a position in the hospital kitchen—tasked with washing vegetables and dishes and serving food—due to the dissatisfaction of the newly appointed chairman, Dr. Lei Yigang, a 35-year-old top surgeon, and the disapproval of the young male publicity manager, Mr. Xia Jifeng, both of whom judge Xiaohong based on her status as a rural woman. Xiaohong does not engage in any sexual relationship with Dr. Lei in exchange for career advancement. In contrast, Mr. Xia is promoted to the role of Publicity Director, largely as a result of his flattery and alignment with Dr. Lei's preferences. This suggests the author undermined dominant narratives about *bei mei* using flattery or sexual favours for professional advancement by showing that it is not Xiaohong but Mr. Xia who uses flattery to achieve a promotion. Although Xiaohong feels disturbed and disheartened by this decision, she is powerless to challenge it and is forced to accept the unfair outcome in order to survive in the city. Resigned to her fate, she states, "I'll do whatever's assigned to me" (Sheng, 2012b, p. 276). This situation reflects both social and gender inequalities, exposing the injustices rooted in gender and class biases within professional hierarchies. Her experience illustrates how structural inequalities leave marginalised individuals, particularly rural migrant women, with little choice but to endure exploitative conditions in order to maintain basic economic security. This shows that Xiaohong's identity is positioned at the margins of urban society, reflecting Butler's concept of identity formation within normative structures that marginalise or subordinate those who do not conform to dominant norms related to gender, class, the rural-urban divide. The creation of boundaries separating center and margin between people in the society, with the marginalised rural migrant women as "outside" reinforces the dominant urban identity and patriarchal norms.

4.2 Transgressive acts

In *Northern Girls*, as well as focusing on rural migrant women's struggles and difficulties with a critique on the issues of marginality and inequality, Sheng Keyi depicts their transgressive acts to reveal her response to traditional and capitalist patriarchal cultures and the dominant discourses that marginalise, dismiss or devalue the status of both women and rural-migrant workers. Sheng Keyi's writing also resists the male-dominated literary world in which male writers deploy a discourse of male sexual liberation while often treating women as objects of male desire and privacy. Rural migrant women's transgressive acts include displaying sexual desire and gratification, refusing to involve in a sex-money exchange, as well as behaving with self-confidence, self-sufficiency and self-improvement.

The novel highlights Xiaohong's sexuality and transgression through her affairs with men. Although she is often disrespected, devalued and victimised in these relationships—none of these men truly love her—Xiaohong resists the role of the traditional female victim or passive sex object. Instead, she asserts her sexual agency by embracing her sexual freedom, fulfilling her desires, and at times initiating her own affairs. For example, while working at the Qianshan Hotel, Xiaohong has one night stand with Jimmy Chan, a handsome young gangster attending a wedding banquet at the hotel. She joins Jimmy Chan at a different hotel for sex, while demonstrates her lack of desire to trade money for sexual intercourse. Their sexual intercourse satisfies both Xiaohong and Jimmy Chan's sexual desire, notably giving Xiaohong pleasure and self-fulfilment. Xiaohong talks about this sexual intercourse with no shame as she is forced to account for her night to police officers due to a robbery at the hotel on the night of the sexual encounter, saying, "we did it for a long time and he really

took me to the top" (Sheng, 2012b, p. 157). In this self-confident expression of her subjective voice, Xiaohong demonstrates a transgressive female subjectivity, challenging foundational gender norms about traditional femininity.

Xiaohong's sexual transgression is even more prominent in her relationship with a policeman, Liao Zhenghu. She has sexual intercourses with him on several occasions. Xiaohong does not feel disadvantaged in this relationship; instead, it gives her sexual gratification and self-fulfillment. In her affair with Liao Zhenghu, Xiaohong affirms her desiring body and fulfils her desire. She often takes the sexual initiative and is always the one on top. Liao Zhenghu asks Xiaohong: "Are you going to hate me if I don't marry you?" (Sheng, 2012b, p. 230) and "Don't you feel like you're losing out?" (Sheng, 2012b, p. 231). She answers:

Prostitutes and rape victims lose out in the sex act. I'm not a prostitute. You're not my customer and you didn't rape me. I don't see how you can say I lost out, especially not if I enjoyed it as much as you did. (Sheng, 2012b, p. 231)

In this exchange, Xiaohong articulates her feminist opinions, and her transgressive expression of sexuality affirms female desire and her agency in challenging dominant gender norms. The story underscores her recognition of female desire and the embodied female subject, both of which play a crucial role in the construction of her female subjectivity. Although Liao Zhenghu ultimately rejects marriage with Xiaohong due to her rural origins and chooses to marry an urban woman instead, she remains composed and graciously wishes him a happy married life. The end of their relationship highlights, on one hand, the sexual double standards, social prejudices, and discrimination imposed upon her as a rural migrant woman. On the other hand, it affirms her autonomy and the freedom to live outside the constraints of traditional Confucian ideals, such as the expectations of being a "good wife" and "good mother".

The story also resists capitalist patriarchal culture through the protagonist's affairs with other men, as she never accepts payment for sex, and thus does not involve commodification of her female body through a sex-money exchange. While she pursues her freedom to have sex with men to whom she is attracted, Jimmy Chan, Mr. Pan (the hotel manager), Mr. Xia Jifeng (the hospital's publicity manager) and Bigfoot (a young stockbroker), Xiaohong consistently demonstrates her lack of desire to exchange sex for money or any other advantage. For instance, when she works as a hotel room attendant, a fifty-year-old government official offers her money for sex after she brings the beer to his room on his request. She refuses his request for sex with a brave feminist reaction by taking off all his clothes and says in a deep voice: "Uncle, I'm a virgin. I'm just curious about your body. I took off your clothes. It's not too much trouble, would you mind putting them back on now? This fifty *yuan* is a tip for your trouble" (Sheng, 2012b, p. 200). Xiaohong tosses toward him the fifty *yuan* note that he had given her earlier and runs out of the room. Furthermore, when Bigfoot wants to develop a relationship with her, something Xiaohong does not desire, she asserts: "You'll really lose out. I'm no virgin myself. I've been with lots and lots of guys, and I don't have half a million to show for it" (Sheng, 2012b, p. 270). Here she positions herself in contrast to Bigfoot's ex-girlfriend, a sex worker who has earned half a million *yuan*, and with whom he ended his relationship due to her career in sex work. Xiaohong ends the relationship on her own terms, saying "Please don't come here looking for me anymore." and "I don't force myself to do anything" (Sheng, 2012b, p. 308). By refusing these men's efforts to transgress the boundaries around her professional and sexual relationships with them, Xiaohong highlights that those men cannot treat her as their sex object or plaything without considering her feeling and affection. Her transgressive acts challenge misogynistic conceptions of the female body and self-embedded in dominant gender norms. Through these acts, she constructs and affirms a female subjectivity that is multiple, fluid, complex, and explicitly feminist. The multilayered structures of this subjectivity blur boundaries of gender binaries rooted in patriarchal ideology and go beyond normative assumptions surrounding rural migrant women in particular.

Beyond her sexual transgressions, Xiaohong cultivates self-confidence, self-sufficiency, and personal growth through self-education and her lived experiences in the city. Her progression from an unskilled member of the lower class to a more skilled and socially mobile individual underscores her affirmation of female subjectivity and sexuality, as well as her evolving and multifaceted identity. Xiaohong pays attention to education as she thinks that it can change her destiny and help her improve her employment opportunities. So, she starts to read an encyclopaedia given to her by Zhu Dacheng, a helpful and respectful police officer. Zhu Dacheng would like to help Xiaohong and suggests her that "If you want to improve your working opportunities and if you want to live a little more comfortably in Shenzhen, you've got to study hard. And not just the *Ci Hai* (the encyclopaedia)" (Sheng, 2012b, p. 129). While she is working at the hotel, Xiaohong decides to take a self-directed study course with Sijiang, which only requires an exam twice a year in order to gain a nationally-recognised diploma. Xiaohong chooses to study in humanities, while Sijiang chooses to study in finance. They pay their own tuition fees and register to start the courses immediately. Furthermore, Xiaohong strives to improve her physical appearance in order to differentiate herself from the stereotyped physical features of

rural migrant women. She makes herself good-looking through changes to her hair and clothing and learns to speak without dialect. These changes—spanning her appearance, accent, skills, and prospects—bolster her self-confidence and reinforce her sense of identity. This newfound self-assurance fosters her feelings of self-sufficiency and self-worth. Xiaohong's financial independence heightens her awareness of her abilities and her sense of selfhood, from which she constructs self-respect and esteem. Her self-confidence and self-sufficiency enable her to transform herself, as a result in getting a better job at the hospital.

Xiaohong's transgressive acts also are shown through her feminist collective resistance and feminist thought on divorce and singlehood. As Xiaohong becomes more astute and resourceful, she participates in a successful conspiracy organised by a group of underpaid hotel room attendants to forge the hotel manager's signature and fraudulently obtain wages over several months. While this act is unlawful, it serves as a form of collective resistance by working-class women against exploitative labour conditions. This subversive act can be interpreted as a feminist response to the structural injustices of the hotel's wage system and, more broadly, to the systemic inequalities embedded in the urban labour economy. In addition, when Xiaohong works at the hospital, she exhibits protective behaviour in the hospital by assisting numerous vulnerable women. For example, she attempts to save a despairing rural migrant woman from suicide, and also provides food and shelter to an impoverished fifteen-year-old pregnant girl who is suffering from a sexually transmitted infection due to sexual slavery. Moreover, Xiaohong encourages her colleague, Wu Ying, to confront her circumstances and consider divorcing her unfaithful husband. She urges Wu Ying to reclaim her self-worth, stating:

I can't stand this! You've lost your confidence, Wu Ying. You're only twenty-five, but you talk like you're an old woman whose sense of romance has long ago dried up. Honestly, I think you should leave him. He should take half the responsibility for raising Sparky and each of you should go out and look for your own happiness. There's no reason for a woman to be locked away in an empty house. (Sheng, 2012b, p. 170)

Inspired by Xiaohong's advice, Wu Ying eventually divorces her husband and chooses to live a fulfilling single life, independently raising and caring for her son.

Xiaohong's acts of transgression illustrate the fluidity, multiplicity, and complexity of female subjectivity and identity, shaped by various levels of lived experience and personal development. Her narrative reflects both the differences among rural migrant women and the internal diversity within each individual, thereby challenging the notion of a unified, fixed identity imposed by patriarchal gender norms and urban social standards. The diversity of rural migrant women's experiences underscores the alignment between feminism and poststructuralism, particularly in their shared opposition to universalist values and emphasis on discursive plurality and multiple identities. Xiaohong's transgression, as depicted in the novel, exemplifies Sheng Keyi's feminist literary intervention and her resistance to dominant stereotypes of rural migrant women.

4.3 Tragic fates

The novel reveals tragic fates of many rural migrant women who attempt to survive or settle down with the loved ones in the city but ultimately meet frustrations and exploitation. The most tragic figure in the novel is Li Sijiang. After experiencing a series of traumatic events during her first year in Shenzhen—including exchanging her virginity for money and temporary residence permits with the mayor, being raped, becoming pregnant and subsequently abandoned by her irresponsible married lover, and undergoing an abortion—Sijiang continues to face misfortunes and the exploitation of her female body in the subsequent years of her life in this city. She has a new relationship with a rural migrant man, named Specs, her new boyfriend. It seems that everything goes well as he loves her and wants to marry her. Unfortunately, Sijiang, who longs for marriage and motherhood, is forcibly abducted by corrupt family planning officials and taken to a women's hospital, where she is brutally sterilised at the age of nineteen. This operation is carried out to fulfill a government-imposed sterilisation quota targeting women accused of violating the One-Child Policy. In order to substitute for a woman with three daughters who had evaded enforcement, the officials seize Sijiang and falsify her identity to correspond with that of the missing woman. The brutal forced sterilisation of Sijiang renders her permanently unable to carry children and significantly diminishes her prospects for marriage. Despite the severity of this violation, the incident is largely ignored—neither the responsible officials nor Dr. Lei, who performed the procedure, face any consequences. Although her boyfriend initially supports her pursuit of compensation, he ultimately absconds with the entire sum of the compensation (60,000 *yuan*) and abandons her, justifying his actions by citing her inability to have children. Overwhelmed by despair, isolation, and disappointment, Sijiang attempts suicide. Fortunately, Xiaohong intervenes in time and advises her to return to her rural hometown. Their dialogue reveals the depth of Sijiang's trauma and the broader social apathy she faces:

'Sijiang, why didn't you call the police?'
 'I called 110. They said, "Your domestic problems are not our business."
 'But you can't let Specs get away with this.'
 'Honghong, without him, I wouldn't have got the sixty thousand in compensation anyway. It's not losing the money that I mind. I just don't like being played for a fool.'
 'Aiyah. People in this world, they've either got designs on others or they're the victims of other people's designs. Either they scheme or they're the victims of others' schemes. You've always been too trusting.'
 'I wanted to kill him.'
 'You wanted to kill him. Then why did you end up cutting your own veins? Idiot...Sijiang, I'm really sorry. I should never have asked you to come to Shenzhen.'
 'Honghong, what're you talking about? Look at yourself. They're (Xiaohong's breasts)...what is it they've grown into?'
 'I don't know. Before long, I won't be able to stand up. Bloody hell! Hey Sijiang, look...if you want to go back home, you should go. Although there's nothing much there to go back for.' (Sheng, 2012b, pp. 316-317)

Ultimately, Sijiang departs for her hometown, devastated and in tears—her spirit nearly broken by the injustices she has endured in the city. Sijiang's experience illustrates the intersection of gender inequality, reproductive injustice, and state-sanctioned violence under the guise of population control. As a rural migrant woman, she is doubly marginalised—first by her socioeconomic status and then by systemic gendered policies that treat women's bodies as instruments of state policy. Sheng Keyi critiques this state policy that exerts control over women's bodies and disregards their rights by incorporating a tragic subplot involving the protagonist's friend, whose aspiration for a better life through love, marriage, and motherhood, is ultimately thwarted (Sheng, 2015).

Other migrant women similarly experience the exploitation of their bodies and are subjected to male violence. One such example is Zhang Weimei, a former colleague of Xiaohong at the hotel, who steals money from a guest in order to purchase temporary residence permits for herself and her boyfriend. As a result of this act, she is forced into hiding and unable to secure legitimate employment. In a desperate effort to survive in the city, Zhang Weimei turns to commercial surrogacy, agreeing to carry the child of a wealthy couple in exchange for payment—12,000 *yuan* if she gives birth to a boy, and 8,000 *yuan* for a girl. Her involvement in this form of body commodification underscores the limited options available to economically marginalised women and reflects the broader systemic conditions that render their bodies sites of exploitation in a patriarchal and profit-driven urban environment. Another example is Julia Wilde, a young migrant woman from Chengdu, who is also a former colleague of Xiaohong at the hotel, who had worked in service industries before and is presumed to be engaged in prostitution. She suffers a tragic fate as she becomes a victim of rape and murder by Dr. Lei. This case reveals the pervasive nature of male violence inflicted upon the female body. The novel portrays the tragic fate of women—especially rural migrant women—who are rendered voiceless and marginalised through intersecting structures of gender, class, and the rural-urban divide. The depiction of female victimisation exposes both traditional and capitalist patriarchal ideologies that devalue women and reduce them to objects.

Xiaohong's fate is also marked by tragedy, as she faces persistent hardships both in the city and in her rural hometown. In the urban context, she is repeatedly forced to leave her jobs—often without receiving pay—while enduring male violence, sexual harassment, social contempt, and professional demotion. These experiences underscore her marginalisation as a rural migrant woman within the exploitative structures of the urban labour market. Xiaohong is positioned as an "outsider" or a constitutive other in relation to both patriarchal norms and the urban social hierarchies. Furthermore, Xiaohong also becomes an "outsider" in the male-centered rural society upon her return to the village. Her family members—including her father, elder sister, and brother-in-law—as well as her neighbors, assume she has been working as a sex worker in the city, using this assumption to explain her ability to afford gifts for them. Her mobility and the association of urban life, together with the exploitative, hypermasculine culture of bodily commodification, lead to her being disrespected, devalued and maliciously gossiped in her hometown. Frustrated by their judgment, Xiaohong exclaims, "On my mother's grave, I might as well go back to Shenzhen and 'sell,' if that's what you all think" (Sheng, 2012b, pp. 187-188). Her words reflect the pain of being misjudged in a community that seems to care only money and sex. Disillusioned by their narrow views and lack of understanding, she feels no desire to return to her roots. In an emotional effort to reclaim her dignity and clarify her lived experiences, Xiaohong writes a letter to her father. Through this letter, she details the harsh realities of life as a rural migrant woman navigating urban precarity:

Everyone has badly misunderstood me, as if anyone who goes to Shenzhen can't possibly lead a proper life there. Others love wild speculation, and it's fine if they don't believe me. But my family thinks the

same and that hurts. ... None of you have been to Shenzhen and you only go on hearsay. You hear bad reports but what you don't understand is how hard it is to make a living there. In the factories, it costs half a *kuai* to eat a simple meal of instant noodles or boxed rice. It's always endless overtime, working ten hours a day just so the monthly salary is sufficient. Even then, it's only three or four hundred *yuan*. Eight or nine people squeeze into one room and all year long you've only got cold water to wash up in. The beds are narrow and people often fall out of the top bunk at night. Some have been injured. Even crippled! But the factory doesn't take responsibility. No manufacturer is ever sympathetic to the plight of their employees. All they want is to see the workers live and labour like money-making machines. ... I worked there for a few weeks then went to a hotel as a front desk attendant. It's a lot better than factory work. ... Dad, even if some people do *that* [working as a sex worker] for a living, I really pity them. It's not as if they like doing it, they have a really rough life. Maybe it was just pushed on them. I know a few girls who have gone over from our home province who are very pretty and very nice too. One girl went and, in order to earn money to help her mother get some medical treatment, she went down that route and became one of those girls. Who are we to despise her? (Sheng, 2012b, pp. 193–194)

Through the use of an autobiographical, epistolary form, Sheng Keyi provides Xiaohong with an unmediated and authentic voice that directly challenges dominant stereotypes of rural migrant women. Rather than portraying them as passive victims or morally compromised figures, the narrative foregrounds their resilience, dignity, and the structural injustices they confront. Rural migrant women like Xiaohong are caught between the traditional expectations of village life and the exploitative demands of urban capitalism. As a result, they experience a form of double marginalisation, fully accepted by neither world.

Sheng Keyi introduces the symbol of Xiaohong's large breasts from the very first page of the novel, using this physical feature to critique both traditional and capitalist patriarchal cultures. Her naturally prominent bosom becomes a site of multiple, conflicting projections: in the village, it is associated with shame and blame, leading to her being forced to have sex with her brother-in-law; in the city, it is sexualised and commodified, linked to her desires and relationships with men. Symbolically, her breasts and affairs mark her as a transgressive figure in the eyes of traditional gender norms, which view female sexuality as something to be controlled or hidden. Simultaneously, within the framework of capitalist patriarchy, her body is read as an asset to be exploited—fueling assumptions that she either sells her body for profit or seeks empowerment through sexual freedom. Thus, Xiaohong's body becomes a contested space through which the novel explores the entanglement of gender, power, and socio-economic structures. Xiaohong's relationships with the men in her life ultimately fail to reach any form of satisfactory conclusion. By the end of the novel, her breasts which have been a recurring symbolic motif become enlarged, swelling to the size of rice bags. This physical transformation functions as a powerful metaphor for the cumulative burden carried by rural migrant women like Xiaohong. As she endures multiple layers of oppression—marginalisation, inequality, patriarchy, misogyny, and hierarchical social structures—her swelling breasts embody the weight of these intersecting forces. What initially symbolises female sexual autonomy and desire gradually evolves into a source of exploitation, objectification, and ultimately, physical and symbolic burden. In other words, her breasts shift in meaning: from representing the pursuit of sexual freedom and pleasure, to attracting male attention and abuse, and finally, to becoming a literal burden that impedes her mobility and independence in the city. Despite this overwhelming weight, Xiaohong does not surrender. In the novel's final moments, she embodies persistence and quiet resistance:

Gritting her teeth, she bent her head and, hauling those two great sandbags [breasts] up, she stood. She trudged out of the ring of feet surrounding her and pushed her away down from the pedestrian bridge. Then she faded into the crowds on the street. (Sheng, 2012b, p. 318)

This concluding scene symbolises the enduring resilience of rural migrant women as they navigate the alienation, precarity, and exploitation of urban life. It affirms that, despite systemic injustice and personal hardship, life persists and so does the will to survive.

5. CONCLUSION

In *Northern Girls*, Sheng Keyi portrays the harsh realities of contemporary society, and the immense challenges faced by rural migrant women striving to survive in urban environments. Positioned at the lowest rung of the social hierarchy, these women represent the working class and the marginalised population of the city. They confront discrimination as well as class, social and gender inequalities in every aspect of their lives. They are persistently vulnerable to violence, exploitation, and deception, often targeted by predatory men and excluded from both legal protections and social recognition. Sheng Keyi exposes the structural injustices and gendered inequalities embedded in both rural traditions and urban modernity. In the afterword of the novel,

Sheng Keyi emphasises the suffering and marginalisation of rural migrant women while preventing the reader from accusing her of exaggeration,

A vulnerable group of marginalised people, they are almost never brought to the public's attention. This often-neglected segment of society demonstrates an instinctive ability to survive, and this, I thought, was something worth treasuring. They make up a large proportion of the population and do much of the nation's dirty work, quietly enduring insult and injury. The hardships they encounter are actually more shocking than anything I've recorded, reaching well beyond the scope of what is represented in my novel. (Sheng, 2012a, pp. 319–320)

In her work, Sheng Keyi affirms that, “I’ll carry on writing what I please. I will not self-censor. I will not avoid things” (Phillips, 2015). For her, “the fun of writing is about being true to myself and my feelings. I don’t need to please anyone or anything” (Phillips, 2015). In *Northern Girls*, Sheng Keyi offers a poignant portrayal of the lives of disadvantaged rural migrant women, revealing the profound suffering inflicted on both their bodies and souls. Her narrative gives voice to rural migrant women’s concerns and serves as a powerful critique of the social injustice, gender inequality, and moral decay that these women confront in contemporary society—reflected in her own words: “I am truly disappointed with present society” (Perlez, 2014). Her literary techniques reflect poststructuralist feminist perspectives, emphasising the multiplicity and fluidity of female subjectivity, the positive notion of differences, and women’s transgressive acts, together with the concepts of constitutive outside, exclusion and identity formation. Sheng Keyi’s work not only advances representations of rural migrant women in post-Mao migrant literature but also contributes to the development of Chinese feminist writing. Moreover, it deepens our understanding of contemporary Chinese culture, gender relations, and the lived realities of marginalised groups in Chinese society.

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