

On the Duality of Women's Silence in Meng Ke

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Abstract:

The famous Chinese writer Ding Ling's short story *Meng Ke* centers on urban intellectual women in the 1930s and, through multiple narrative strategies, reveals the dual nature of female "silence" under the disciplining forces of various power structures—both as a product of patriarchal oppression and as a site for potential resistance. Building on previous feminist and socio-historical critiques of *Meng Ke*, this paper adopts Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary power and feminist narratology as analytical frameworks. Through close textual analysis and comparative study, it explores the complex representations and narrative strategies of female silence in *Meng Ke*, as well as its significance in literary history. Furthermore, it extends the discussion to contemporary women's writing, examining how Ding Ling's narrative experiment has been both inherited and transformed.

Keywords: Meng Ke, feminism, dual nature of silence

1. Introduction

The personalized writing of authors during the post-May Fourth period represents a significant cultural phenomenon in twentieth-century Chinese modern literature. However, the female-authored narratives of feminine silence within this context have received comparatively limited scholarly attention. With the localization of feminist theories in China, academia has begun to reassess the avant-garde value of Ding Ling's *Meng Ke*, though existing research remains largely focused on its dimension of social critique. Insufficient attention has been paid to the dialectical nature of silence as represented in the narrative form, which provides a point of entry for this study.

Current scholarship on *Meng Ke* primarily falls into four categories. First, some scholars situate *Meng Ke* within Ding Ling's early creative phase, exploring its significance in her transition from "personalized writing" to "social engagement." Second, feminist critiques focus on the awakening of female self-consciousness, the conflict between individual desire and social oppression, and the challenges women face in their careers and lives. Third, socio-historical criticism and political discourse analyses have become increasingly prominent. In recent years, mainstream

scholars have interpreted *Meng Ke*'s decline not merely as a personal tragedy but as a microcosm of female fate within the semi-colonial social structure, highlighting its intrinsic connection to the tradition of "people's literature." Fourth, interdisciplinary studies have expanded the scope of research, integrating perspectives from psychology and political science to examine themes such as spatial metaphors, the politics of the female body and the gaze, and the projection of narcissism.

This study employs a combined methodology of close reading and feminist critique, using Foucault's theory of disciplinary power, feminist narratology, and socio-historical criticism to systematically analyze the dual representation of female silence in *Meng Ke*.

The academic value of this paper lies in two dimensions. Theoretically, it introduces the concept of "the dual nature of silence," expanding beyond the linear narrative of "oppression versus liberation" to reveal the complex condition of women within the interstices of social discourse. Practically, the analysis of silence as a narrative strategy not only deepens our understanding of Ding Ling's literary contributions but also offers a historical reference for the evolution

of silent strategies in contemporary women's writing. The dialogue, which traverses space and time, constitutes a constructive exploration of the development of feminist literary criticism in China.

2. The Dilemma of being unable to express themselves: Representations of Silence below Power and Discipline

In the novel, female silence outwardly shows how the patriarchal discipline would constrain female subjectivity. In "Discipline and Punish" [1], Foucault describes the "mechanism of exclusion" that works by power in discourse, silencing voices by making them "unspeakable." In the novel, this mechanism manifests in the systematic removal of women's voices by men's social discourses. Women become silenced across sectors in education, in school visits, and in their homes, and are silenced around their social and professional interactions as silence becomes their collective fate.

2.1 Women's Loss of Words in Different Settings

2.1.1 School Scene: Gender Oppression under Academic Authority

Meng Ke focuses on gender oppression in the school setting right at its beginning. When Meng Ke witnesses a male teacher humiliating a female model, she attempts to speak up for her, but despite her indignation, she ultimately remains silent. She says, "Hey! It's worth nothing! No, I do not care about anything! You can stop crying now because I'm about to escort you out." Yet, when questioned by her friend Yunzhen, she "remains silent" [2]. This episode reveals how the male gaze and intellectual authority under the guise of "modern education" jointly constitute the discipline of women's bodies and the suppression of women's discourse. Meng Ke's eventual decision to withdraw from school can be viewed as an act of exclusion against nonconforming women within a male-centric academic space.

2.1.2 Family Setting: Dual Forces of Patriarchal Ethics and Economic Dependence

Within the family, Meng Ke is in a subordinate position due to both economic dependence and patriarchal familial ethics, which stripped her of her right to speak, compelling her to remain silent. Although there is warmth in the father-daughter relationship, Meng Ke cannot escape her father's influence. The text notes her purpose for coming to Shanghai as: "to study and to restore the family's reputation" [2]. Later, when her father expresses hope that she will marry Zuwu from her aunt's family and return home, Meng Ke, recalling Zuwu's vulgar demeanor and the traditional expectations imposed on daughters-in-law, chooses not to confront her father directly. Instead, she responds evasively, writing: "I'm still in school and don't wish to discuss such matters..." [2]. Her silence and indirectness reflect the suppression of single women's voices within

the family structure. At her aunt's home, Meng Ke is even more cautious, masking her discomfort with a polite smile to maintain her position as a dependent guest. Whether in her own family or her aunt's, Meng Ke's silence is not only tied to economic dependency but also to the patriarchal control over her speech.

2.1.3 Social Setting: The Male Gaze in Love and the Workplace

In the realm of romantic interaction, Meng Ke is both passive and objectified under the male gaze, as shown through her interactions with her cousins Xiaosong and Danming. The narrative includes extensive passages from the men's perspectives, such as:

"Her cousin sat on a low stool watching Meng Ke dress. Her round calves showed under her short black silk slip, the fine white flesh visible through sheer stockings. His gaze fixed intently on her legs, as though seeing something more. When she put on her robe, he regretted urging her to dress too quickly—it concealed the curves at her waist. He couldn't help but think women's robes should be tighter-fitting." [2]

However, Meng Ke's perspective on these men is scarcely expressed, indicating an intentional authorial depiction of her muteness. When Danming pursues her with suggestive intent, she neither directly rejects him nor exposes his superficial nature with words. Her silence illustrates the forced muteness of women in unequal gender relations.

In the professional realm, Meng Ke becomes a full object of the gaze, reduced to a plaything on screen with no voice of her own. When male directors and managers from the Round Moon Theatre critique her appearance "as if discussing a business deal," she remains silent: "She did not cry out or throw a tantrum, but endured her humiliation in silence. The shame numbed her; she no longer knew how to speak or move" [2]. This instance of muteness reflects the complete erosion of subjectivity and discursive power in a male-dominated work environment.

2.2 Muteness across Different Female Identities

2.2.1 Unmarried Women: The Illusion of Freedom and Social Constraints

As a young single woman, Meng Ke's silence is not only a result of patriarchal discipline but also closely related to her identity, age, and economic status. In Meng Ke, unmarried women are placed in a contradictory situation of being both seemingly "free" and inherently constrained. Although they are not directly restricted by their husbands, these women appear to have a broader range of choices than those in traditional marriages. However, in reality, their bodies and speech are still controlled by a male-dominated society, and they eventually fall into a silence that cannot be spoken. Previous analyses of school, family, and professional settings have already explained this in detail. Overall, Meng Ke's silence as a young single woman is caused by the combined effects of multiple power structures, including the feudal family, romantic

relationship culture, and the workplace environment. Although she has a certain degree of freedom, she remains constrained by social norms and cannot truly take control of her right to speak. This kind of muteness is not only an individual experience but also a microcosm of the discourse predicament faced by young unmarried women in the entire society.

2.2.2 Married Women: Marital Shackles and the Dis-solution of Identity

In *Meng Ke*, married women under the old-style marriage system are placed in a more severe predicament of discourse. Meng Ke's sister-in-law exhibits a kind of psychological repression similar to that of Fan Yi from "*Thunderstorm*" (*Lei Yu*): educated and admiring talent, she is forced into marriage with a crude man she does not love. Trapped in a suffocating union, her yearning for expression is met with incomprehension, and only through Meng Ke's narrative perspective do readers hear her bold thoughts: "Marriage is no different from prostitution, only it is cheaper and wholesale" [2]. Meng Ke's mother is an even more symbolic figure; she appears only through a brief mention of her death, her life narrative completely erased from family history. This "absent silence" exemplifies the total erasure of women's voices in traditional marriages: not only is the mother denied the right to speak, but even her existence is reduced to nothingness.

3. The Strategy of Silence: Acts of Resistance Within and Beyond the Text

It is worth noting that female silence is essentially a passive manifestation under the discipline of power; however, the author transforms this silence into a tool of resistance in the dynamic game of gender politics through textual expression. In other words, women's silence does not always signify submission—it can also be a conscious strategy, an alternative form of expression within a restricted discursive system. In the novel, this kind of silence is not only embodied in Meng Ke's individual behaviors but also strengthens the narrative strategy of the text.

3.1 Silence as Resistance: Meng Ke's Individual Resistance

As it can be deduced in the novel, the character Mengke's silence, which represents the most central characteristic of her personality, is definitely not a passive reaction to oppression, but a sophisticated act of resistance. Her patriarchy is ever resentful, as is her male-dominated profession. In this way, she absorbs her own stalwart resistance, even to crushing silence. Here, silence functions on two levels: as a defensive response to self-destructive confrontation, and as silent resistance to systemic social inequities.

In Showalter's book "*A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*", she stands for the idea that women have created their literature based on themselves, pointing out the significance of women seeking their own ways of voice and expression in a literature dominated by men. Issues of female voice, presence, and

representation in a male tradition [3]. Mengke's silence represents this search for self-expression: in the face of her family's marriage arrangement, she counters with ambiguity and erosion instead of frontal defiance; in her love relationship, she turns her back on Danming's entanglement with silence, and responds to Xiaosong's frivolous hypocrisy, instead of publicly denouncing their behavior; in the work arena, instead of loudly protesting when the director and the manager objectify her, she adapts to this numbness and forbearance. Although Meng Ke's silence appears to be a sign of weakness, it also serves as a hidden form of resistance—she does not actively yield but uses silence to preserve her limited autonomy, refusing to fully conform to the roles imposed on women by patriarchal discourse.

3.2 Textual Strategies

If Meng Ke's silence in the narrative reflects personal resistance, then the textual strategies of the novel further reinforce this silence, transforming it into a literary act of defiance. Through fragmented inner monologue, symbolic narrative gaps at the ending, and the metaphorical use of illness, the author constructs a "counter-discursive" mode of expression at the narrative level, turning female silence into a challenge to dominant male discourse.

3.2.1 Fragmented Inner Monologue

According to *The History That Emerges from the Surface*, women attempting to enter a male-dominated discursive system have two options: "Either she borrows his tone, adopts his concepts, stands in his position, and speaks in the symbols and forms he deems legitimate—that is, she enters discourse as a male equivalent; or she speaks through silence, through abnormal language, through gaps, blanks, and irregular patterns within the discursive system." [4] The novel adopts the latter approach: the author substitutes Meng Ke's direct speech with extensive psychological description, which often appears fragmented and disjointed rather than coherent and complete. Some inner thoughts are sketched briefly, such as when Zhang Shoucheng asks Meng Ke to lift her hair in the Yuanyue Theater, the author captures her emotional state in a single sentence: "At that moment, she was heartbroken—no, she cried as if under coercion." [2]

Others are presented using montage techniques. For instance, when Meng Ke first arrives at her aunt's home, we read:

"Meng Ke was left alone in the room specially prepared for her, standing by the window with a wavering heart, vaguely recalling everything that had just happened. The living room, the carpet, the slender cheongsam, red lips... all danced before her eyes. She tried to break this train of thought by leaning on the windowsill, craning her neck to look at the lawn outside: the sunlight had moved to a corner of the garden, and a row of glass windows on the red building next door reflected a blinding golden light. The sound of car horns kept drifting in from afar. She turned back to see her two leather suitcases lying in disarray on

a low stool, silently, pitifully gaping open and staring at her. She unknowingly collapsed into a chair, covering her face with her hands, her anxious heart drifting toward the uncertain future.”[2]

This narrative approach forms an anti-narrative strategy: the female voice is not absent but exists in the text in a fragmented and elusive manner. Such fragmented writing challenges traditional narrative logic, ensuring that female experience is no longer controlled by linear, coherent male discourse, but retains its complexity and multiplicity through dispersed expression.

3.2.2 The Symbolic Meaning of the Open Ending

The novel *Meng Ke* ends without a clear resolution, abruptly halting in an unfinished state. This open ending is a structural silence in itself, symbolizing the uncertainty and openness of female fate. The final paragraph reads:

“At present, in a certain kind of newspaper and magazine, quite a few self-proclaimed Shanghai literary giants, dramatists, directors, and critics, along with their pitiful lackeys who shout on their behalf, are using phrases like ‘national beauty and heavenly fragrance’ and ‘beauty that shames the moon and flowers’ to praise the ever-patient Lin Lang—hailed as an unprecedentedly radiant film star making her first screen appearance—in hopes of fulfilling their various desires through her, or simply to derive a shallow pleasure from such desires.”[2]

Has Meng Ke ultimately attained freedom? Will her silence and endurance lead to her downfall or real change? The text offers no direct answer. Instead, it leaves the question to the reader, allowing silence itself to become a means of provoking thought. This kind of ending breaks traditional narrative causality, refusing to provide a clear “female destiny,” and thereby questions both female growth and societal norms.

3.2.3 The Metaphorical Function of Bodily Writing

In the novel, Meng Ke’s physical condition closely mirrors her psychological plight—her fatigue, dizziness, and bodily discomfort are symbolic expressions of her state of mind. After successfully auditioning for the Yuanyue Theater, she “felt her limbs go limp”; during her first filming, she “fainted in fright.”[2] When women are unable to voice their pain, the body often becomes their sole medium of expression. These physical reactions function as metaphors and substitute forms of writing, reflecting real-world repression while implying that the body becomes the only way to “speak” pain when verbal expression is inaccessible. This illness writing not only intensifies Meng Ke’s silence but also visualizes her suffering and resistance to a certain extent.

4. The Paradox of Silence and Resistance: Narrative Constraints and Contemporary Implications

4.1 The Duality of Silence

In *Meng Ke*, female silence embodies a complex duality

and internal paradox: it is both a product of oppression and a strategy of resistance. Through the character of Meng Ke, Ding Ling portrays silence as a tension between the suppression of female subjectivity under patriarchy and a form of veiled resistance. In various social settings, silence is not simply passive submission. Sometimes, it reflects helplessness; other times, it serves as a subtle way to resist injustice. For example, in her family and at school, Meng Ke often remains silent because patriarchal power puts her at a disadvantage both economically and emotionally. This kind of silence seems forced and unavoidable. However, it can also be seen as a strategic retreat or an indirect form of resistance when direct speech is not possible. When her father arranges a marriage for her, Meng Ke does not openly rebel, but she tries to protect her autonomy through avoidance and silence. In romantic relationships, when facing Danming’s harassment, she refuses him by staying silent instead of confronting him directly. This kind of selective silence not only avoids conflict but also helps her preserve a limited sense of self within an oppressive system.

However, this silence carries an internal paradox. It represents both a loss of voice and a conscious act of resistance, and these two meanings are often inseparable. This paradox reflects the dilemma faced by women in the process of modern transformation. They strive for self-expression but remain bound by deep-rooted social norms. As a result, they struggle to break the cycle of silence. Silence becomes an ambiguous state—it neither fully expresses their voices nor entirely erases their resistance to patriarchy. This complexity mirrors the narrative challenges faced by Chinese women.

4.2 The Limitations of Textual Experimentation

From the perspective of historical constraints on female narratives, Ding Ling’s writing was deeply influenced by the social context of her time. In literary works of the 1930s, women still lacked genuine avenues for subjective expression. As Sun Liling points out in *A Unique Female Portrait: On the Feminization of Ding Ling’s Early Fiction*, “Ding Ling’s early works show pervasive female repression, including psychological and emotional suppression [5].” Meng Ke attempts narration from a female perspective, and in Meng Ke’s silence and endurance, a certain sense of resistance is implied. Yet, due to the limitations of time, such resistance fails to fundamentally shake the foundations of patriarchy. This shows that although Ding Ling sought to grant women new forms of expression in *Meng Ke*, her narrative approach remained constrained by her era, and thus the articulation of female subjectivity was to some extent diminished.

From the standpoint of reader reception, Ding Ling employs a narrative style that relies heavily on ellipses and psychological descriptions to depict women’s inner worlds. However, this technique can lead to misinterpretation during the reading process. The “unfinished” nature of such narration may cause readers to interpret Meng

Ke's silence as a compromise rather than resistance. This ambiguity increases the text's complexity and makes it difficult for readers to discern the underlying feminist consciousness. Furthermore, in the literary context of the time, such portrayals of female silence were often misread as lacking a "true spirit of struggle," which reflects a misunderstanding of silence as a strategic tool. This indicates the difficulties the text faces in conveying feminist awareness. Additionally, under the influence of leftist literature's emphasis on political and populist themes, Ding Ling's later works shifted from an individual-centered consciousness to collective discourse, thereby weakening the experimental nature of the female voice [6].

4.3 Contemporary Significance: Insights for Modern Women's Writing

From Ding Ling's *Meng Ke* to contemporary feminist writing, we can trace a path of exploration from "silence" to "voice." Contemporary female authors have inherited Ding Ling's formal experimentation while also making breakthroughs in narrative strategies. Lin Bai, for instance, adopts a similar approach grounded in individual experience but rejects the intrusion of the male gaze found in *Meng Ke*. [7] In *A War of One's Own*, she employs first-person female narration, allowing women's experiences to be presented outside the framework of male discourse. Through bodily writing and the portrayal of daily life, she brings forth female subjectivity. Her fiction focuses on women's psychological development in family and society and illustrates how women gradually find their voice within silence.

Meanwhile, Can Xue's novels employ absurd and surreal narrative techniques to enable women to seek selfhood within the blurred boundaries of dream and reality. In her work *The Aging Floating Cloud*, female characters carry out internal monologues through silence, challenging traditional linear narrative structures and turning female experience into a decentered form of expression. This approach not only continues Ding Ling's experimental legacy but also expands the boundaries of female narrative expression.

5. Conclusion

Through unique textual forms, Ding Ling constructs the dual nature of female silence in *Meng Ke*. This duality reveals the existential dilemmas of educated women caught between "tradition and modernity" in 1930s China. At the same time, silence as a strategy of "retreating to advance" provides methodological inspiration for future writers. Thus, silence is not an endpoint but a dynamic medium in the political struggle of gender, whose significance must be reactivated through dialogue between history and the

present.

This study explores the dual nature of female silence in *Meng Ke* from the perspectives of feminist narratology and socio-historical criticism, but certain limitations remain. The paper focuses mainly on the central figure of *Meng Ke*, offering relatively limited analysis of other female characters and their strategies of silence. Future research could broaden the scope of character studies. Additionally, the textual analysis centers on the narrative function of silence, with less attention paid to reader reception and literary dissemination. Future work could incorporate approaches from reception aesthetics or literary sociology to examine how readers across different historical periods interpret the theme of female silence in *Meng Ke*.

By portraying the survival dilemmas of urban women in the 1930s through the dual nature of silence, Ding Ling's *Meng Ke* continues to inspire contemporary feminist writing. Future research could further explore the evolution of female silence strategies—from Ding Ling's "silence as resistance" to the more diverse expressions of subjectivity found in modern women's writing. A comparative analysis between *Meng Ke* and works by other female writers of the same era would also offer a more comprehensive understanding of the multiple pathways of expression in modern women's literature, enriching the field's development.

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