VOICELESS RESISTANCE: GENDER, COLONIALISM, AND THE LIMITS OF AGENCY IN XU XI'S *HONG KONG ROSE*

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Abstract: This paper argues that although Xu Xi advocates for a unique Hong Kong identity that resists assimilation into both Chinese nationalism and Western colonial narratives, her portrayal of Rose, the protagonist in *Hong Kong Rose*, ultimately fails to fully reject Orientalist representations. While the novel acknowledges Rose's dual oppression under Western and Confucian patriarchal structures, it does not grant her sufficient narrative agency to transcend them. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Gayatri Spivak's concept of the subaltern, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of Western feminism, this study demonstrates that Rose's struggle for autonomy remains constrained by cultural expectations and colonial discourse. Her attempts to assert independence, such as engaging in extramarital intimacy or choosing emigration, are presented as emotionally conflicted and morally compromised rather than as acts of empowerment. Ultimately, the novel aestheticizes Rose's endurance and positions it as a form of quiet virtue, rather than constructing a fully emancipated subjectivity. Despite its intention to critique patriarchal and colonial oppression from an insider's perspective, *Hong Kong Rose* risks reproducing the very Orientalist tropes it seeks to dismantle.

Keywords: gender, colonialism, Chinese nationalism, Western colonial narratives, Hong Kong Rose.

In *Hong Kong Rose*, the female protagonist Rose Kho is presented as a kind of floating existence. Xu Xi introduces a network of relationships that shape Rose Kho's emotional and social confinement under colonial and patriarchal forces. Rose, a Hong Kong–born Chinese woman, marries Paul Kho, a wealthy South African Chinese solicitor who enjoys social prestige but conceals his homosexuality. Within this marriage, Rose is forced to maintain a façade of

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respectability and remain in a sexless relationship to preserve the family's image. Her in-laws, Paul Sr. and Marion, embody the authority of Confucian patriarchy as they dictate how Rose should behave. Paul Sr.'s intrusive gaze and physical advances shows that Rose experiences the gendered violence hidden beneath the surface of moral discipline. When Rose later meets Elliot, Paul's lover, she experiences a temporary emotional warmth and physical intimacy that contrasts with her empty marriage. However, Elliot cannot offer long-term commitment because he already has a wife and daughter to care for. Since Rose cannot find happiness in Hong Kong and feels constrained by colonial hierarchies, gendered expectations of obedience, and emotional repression, she longs to leave and begin a new chapter of her life in the United States by working for her employer, Gordie. She eventually Xu Xi shows that Rose Kho fails to stay in the United States and faces deportation because Gordie, the man she works for, is caught running illegal arms. This failure is more than a legal issue; it underscores Rose's inability to fully belong to either the West or the East. It reveals that she must return to Hong Kong, where she endures an unfulfilling marriage with her gay husband—the very situation she once sought to escape.

Throughout the story, Rose never develops a genuine sense of belonging to any place, remaining caught between two worlds that both reject her in different ways. She does not feel American, but she also feels out of place in Hong Kong: "Gordie laughs when I say I never intended to live in America, that I didn't want to leave Hong Kong—he thinks I've always been American at heart"[1]. While her boss misreads her as someone who always has an American heart, Rose quietly disagrees with him by implying that she does not remain in the United States after graduation but instead returns to Hong Kong to marry her boyfriend, Paul. However, after discovering her husband's affair and being unable to divorce him due to Marion's insistence on maintaining social decency, Rose views working in the United States as a legitimate reason to escape her suffocating marriage. In this context, her relocation to the United States is not a matter of personal choice but a decision forced by circumstance. After realizing that leaving Hong Kong could relieve the pain caused by the pressure from her parents and in-laws to remain in the marriage, Rose begins to engage in an internal psychological dialogue: "Maybe that's why I work for him"[2]. By saying this line, Rose reveals that she is not aligned with American

[1] Xu Xi, *Hong Kong Rose*, Hong Kong, Chameleon Press, 2005, p. 1.
[2] *Ibid*.

culture. She leaves the United States not out of cultural rejection but because of the marital problems she experiences. Here lies the central conflict: Rose's movements between Hong Kong and the United States are not expressions of freedom or belonging, but consequences of circumstances beyond her control. Therefore, Rose sees herself as a person caught in between: she is rejected by the system in the United States, yet Hong Kong no longer feels like a secure home for her. She does not fully belong in either place.

This essay argues that although *Hong Kong Rose* attempts to depict the complex realities of a Hong Kong woman under colonial rule, Xu Xi ultimately fails to provide Rose with sufficient narrative agency to challenge the Orientalist stereotype of the passive, obedient Asian woman. Rose endures multiple layers of oppression: she is trapped in a loveless marriage to a closeted gay husband, controlled by her father-in-law who dictates her reproductive choices, and shaped by her own internalization of Confucian ideals that demand emotional restraint and submission. While she seeks intimacy through an extramarital affair and contemplates leaving Hong Kong for the United States, these gestures of resistance are consistently undermined by hesitation, guilt, and a need to frame her actions within socially acceptable norms. As a result, Rose remains a character whose suffering is aestheticized rather than subverted, reinforcing rather than dismantling the Orientalist framework she appears to resist.

Living the Contradiction: Rose and the Paradox of Hong Kong Identity

The complexity of Hong Kong identity lies not in fixed national allegiance but in its fractured, hybrid nature, which is formed through historical contradiction, cultural ambivalence, and negotiated survival. As Mathews argues, Hongkongers began to define themselves in the late 20t[h] century not through inherited traditions but within "a tiny fissure"[3] between British and Chinese hegemonies, carving out a new identity "as not British, not Chinese, but Hongkongese"[4]. This fissure allowed for the emergence of a distinct cultural subjectivity shaped by multiple, often conflicting influences. Mathews explains that *Hèunggóngyàhn* is best understood as "Chineseness plus"[5]: for some, this

[3] Gordon Mathews, "Hèunggóngyàhn: On the Past, Present, and Future of Hong Kong Identity", *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 29(3), 1997, p. 10.
[4] *Ibid*.
[5] *Idem*, p. 9.

means Chineseness plus "affluence, cosmopolitanism, capitalism"[6]; for others, it is Chineseness plus "English, colonial education, colonialism" or "democracy, human rights, the rule of law"[7]. These formulations are not merely descriptive: They are emotionally charged responses to colonial education and postcolonial anxiety. For instance, one interviewee claims, "all the bad traits in my personality are from my Chinese side," while another laments the loss of "our original culture" due to colonial schooling, saying, "we have no home"[8] This ambivalence toward both Chinese nationalism and Western influence defines the emotional terrain of Hong Kong identity. Even fundamental historical facts such as the Opium War are taught differently in English- and Chinese-language textbooks, leading Mathews to describe the result as a kind of "schizophrenia of recent Hong Kong identity"[9]. Thus, Hong Kong identity is not merely a cultural label but a lived contradiction—a constant negotiation between inherited tradition, colonial modernity, and global pressures. This unstable foundation is precisely what gives the identity its specificity and emotional intensity. Rather than being a national essence, *Hèunggóngyàhn* is a strategy of survival—one that, as will be argued, is deeply reflected in the character of Rose in *Hong Kong Rose*.

Building on Mathews's conception of *Hèunggóngyàhn* as an identity forged in contradiction, Rose's fragmented subjectivity in *Hong Kong Rose* can be read as a personal embodiment of this cultural fissure—her emotional ambivalence and constrained agency mirroring the broader struggle of Hongkongers to define themselves between Chinese tradition and Western modernity. Her final return to the place that represses her may initially position Rose as a flawed character who fails to reclaim feminist autonomy. However, this perceived failure is exactly what allows her to claim a uniquely Hong Kong identity: One shaped by contradiction, cultural fragmentation, and survival between incompatible systems of power. Trapped in a sexless marriage with Paul, a closeted gay man, and forced by her in-laws to uphold the illusion of marital harmony, Rose reflects the tension between Confucian ideals of female obedience and the emotional repression demanded by colonial respectability. Her reluctant return to the United States, a country that once promised freedom but instead became another site of marginalization, mirrors the way Hong Kong itself is caught between two hegemonic forces: British colonialism and Chinese nationalism.

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[6] *Ibid*.
[7] *Ibid*.
[8] *Ibid*.
[9] *Idem*, p. 7.

As Gordon Mathews argues, the people of Hong Kong developed a local identity in the fissure between Chinese and British ideologies of legitimacy, where they were "not offered an alternative sense of identity by either side"[10]. Like Hongkongers who grew up confused by conflicting narratives in British and Chinese textbooks, for example, seeing the Opium War described both as a "trade dispute" and an act of national humiliation, Rose is shaped by contradictory ideologies: Western feminism urges her to assert autonomy, while Chinese tradition demands loyalty and silence. Mathews highlights that Hong Kong identity is defined by this uncertainty and complexity: "Who we are in Hong Kong is still very much in question. But it's our question"[11]. Rose does not resolve these tensions-she lives them. Her return is not passive surrender, but a conscious engagement with emotional and historical entanglements that cannot be cleanly resolved. Like the Hongkongers Mathews describes who were unsure what to write under "nationality,"British, Chinese, or simply "Hong Kong," Rose navigates her identity through negotiation rather than clarity. Her silence, indecision, and emotional endurance are not signs of weakness; they are evidence of her internalization of a postcolonial condition where no single narrative of liberation fits. In embracing this ambiguity, Rose claims a distinctly Hèunggóngyàhn identity: not British, not Chinese, not American, but formed in the margins of all three.

This kind of identity caught between cultures is something Rose lives with every day. Her way of speaking, the name she uses, and how others see her all reflect the complex space she occupies as someone shaped by both Chinese traditions and Western influences. The signs of Rose's Westernization seem to be obvious in Westerners' eyes because she speaks English and adopts a Westernized name, "Rose," in Hong Kong. However, "the practice of anglicizing Chinese names"[12], which refers to the act of modifying the sounds of Chinese names or choosing entirely new English ones, was a common and practical convention in colonial Hong Kong's work communication. While Rose's cultural identity may be mistaken as evidence of Rose's embrace of a Western identity, this reading is partially understandable, as Hong Kong used to be a British colony. Shaped by its colonial legacy, Hong Kong's local society is still built upon Chinese culture but has had Western values, systems, and institutions imposed on it:

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[10] Mathews G., *op. cit.*, p. 7.

[11] *Idem*, p. 12.

[12] Michael H. Bond, Ambrose Y.C. King, "Coping with the threat of westernization in Hong Kong", *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, Vol. IX, no. 4, 1985, p. 355.

> As a colony, it routinely confronted, and continues to confront, the local Chinese with the whole panoply of an alien reality. The economic component of this reality is described as laissez-faire capitalism and is supported by an attendant legal system based on British common law. There are, however, more insidious tentacles to this octopus.[13]

Living in this hybrid colonial space, Rose, as many Hongkongers, must learn to speak and move fluently within both cultural systems. Her use of English and adoption of an anglicized name are not signs of internalized Western superiority but strategies for professional survival in a colonial society shaped by British values. This strategic adaptation mirrors what Mathews describes as Hongkongers' pragmatic negotiation with conflicting identities: neither fully embracing Britishness nor reverting to a pure Chinese nationalism. Rose may appear to have assimilated, but she simultaneously claims her local identity when she corrects her boss by calling herself a "Hong Kong yan "[14] when Colin Kenton, her boss, asks whether she can speak Cantonese. subtly asserting that she is neither simply Chinese nor merely Westernized. This assertion complicates the Western misreading of her identity and aligns with Xu Xi's critique of Orientalist depictions of Hong Kong in literature:

> My earliest encounter with Hong Kong writing was almost entirely fiction by Western residents and visitors for whom English was their native tongue... Their perspective was frequently that of an outside observer—often romanticized or Orientalized—with little, if any, of what could be described as a local aesthetic or sensibility.[15]

Xu Xi implies that Western residents and visitors has a transient, detached relationship to Hong Kong, yet the dominance of non-local voices shapes the literary image of Hong Kong. The problem is that these outsiders do not write from within the lived experience of Hong Kong people. Instead, they offer narratives that are romanticized or Orientalized, which are filtered through exotic fantasies or simplistic cultural assumptions. Xu argues that such representations

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[13] *Idem*, p. 355.
[14] Xu Xi, *op. cit.*, p. 107.
[15] Xu Xi, Ho Louise, "From and of the City of Hong Kong", in *City Voices: Hong Kong Writing in English 1945 to the Present*, Xu Xi and Mike Ingham (eds.), Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press, 2003, p. 19.

reduce local characters like Rose into exotic figures rather than multidimensional subjects. Through this lens, Rose's identity should not be interpreted through binaries of East and West. Rather, her fluid subjectivity reflects Mathews's claim that Hèunggóngyàhn identity is "forged not out of allegiance to one side or another, but out of the contradictions themselves". Rose lives with these contradictions, but the problematic representation of this female protagonist she does not resolve them while emotionally suffering from it. Her emotional sufferings from both the West and the Chinese Confucian rules suggests that she has limited agency to live a life that she wants in either system.

Theoretical Framework: Orientalism and Orientalized Female

Edward W. Said's concept of *Orientalism* exposes the deeply political nature of representation in colonial and post-colonial discourse. In his seminal work *Orientalism*, Said critiques how the West has historically constructed the East, or "Orient," not as a cultural equal, but as a distorted mirror through which the West defines itself. He argues that "the Oriental was linked thus to elements in Western society (delinquents, the insane, women, the poor)... seen through, analyzed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or confined"[16]. This framing reduces the Oriental to an object of control and fantasy, stripping them of agency and voice. In literature, this manifests through characters and settings that serve to reinforce the West's self-image as rational, civilized, and superior. Such narratives depict non-Western subjects not as complex individuals, but as "repositories of all those characteristics deemed non-Western"[17], thereby creating and reinforcing a binary between the self and the "Other." Said further emphasizes that this process is not limited to overt domination, but survives through subtle cultural practices, including literary texts, which help justify imperialism by aestheticizing domination. The act of reading, then, becomes inherently political. Said proposes a method of *contrapuntal reading*, which involves reading texts "with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which... the dominating discourse acts"[18]. Literature, in this view, becomes a battleground of competing narratives, those that uphold

[16] Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, New York, Vintage Books, 1994, p. 207.
[17] *Idem*, p. 59.
[18] *Idem*, p. 100.

imperial power and those that resist it through reclaiming silenced voices and distorted identities. Representation is therefore never neutral; it is a form of discursive power that shapes how the East is seen, governed, and remembered, both in colonial archives and in modern cultural productions.

Therefore, the representation of women in colonial time Hong Kong still reinforces Orientalized stereotype because it only describes the oppression imposed on the women while providing limited agency for her to choose her life. She does not lack intelligence or moral strength, but she internalizes the oppressive ideologies that confine her. Edward Said's concept of Orientalism offers a critical framework for understanding Rose Kho's identity and inner conflict in Xu Xi's *Hong Kong Rose*. In *Orientalism*, Said argues that Western representations of the East were not objective or neutral, but deeply political and ideological. They served to construct the Orient as Europe's cultural opposite-irrational, emotional, and inferior-so that the West could define itself as rational, moral, and civilized. Said observes that "the Oriental was linked thus to elements in Western society (delinquents, the insane, women, the poor) having in common an identity best described as lamentably alien. Orientals were rarely seen or looked at: "hey were seen through, analysed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or confined"[19]. This statement reveals how the "Oriental" subject was denied full humanity, reduced to a passive object of Western discourse rather than an autonomous being. Rose embodies the effects of this system of representation. Although she lives within a British colony that celebrates Western modernity, she remains confined by both the colonial gaze and Confucian patriarchy. Like the Orientals in Said's analysis, Rose is "seen through" by others rather than seen as herself. To her Western employers such as Gordie and Colin, she represents the assimilated, efficient Hong Kong woman who has absorbed Western manners but not their full respect. Gordie laughs when Rose says she does not want to live in America, assuming that her presence there is motivated by a secret desire to become Westernized. This misreading illustrates what Said calls the "discursive power" of imperialism, which "administers, studies, and reconstructs"[20] non-European subjects into legible forms of the Western imagination. Rose becomes the colonial "Other" who must be explained and categorized, not understood as an individual with complex motives.

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[19] Edward W. Said, *op. cit*.

[20] *Idem*, p. 222.

Her flaw lies in her complicity with the very structures that silence her voice. Instead of openly confronting her husband Paul's homosexuality or her father-in-law's sexual harassment, Rose remains submissive, convincing herself that obedience and respectability are virtues. Rose interprets male authority as fate rather than oppression: I felt like a hundred ancient imperials were commanding me to heed their words, to meet my destiny[21]. This moment reveals her psychological surrender to patriarchal power. Her inability to resist or even name her own victimization exposes what Edward Said describes in Orientalism as the colonial subject's "lamentably alien" position—being seen "not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or confined"[22]. Like the Oriental figures in Said's critique, Rose becomes an object defined by others' desires: the dutiful daughter-in-law, the respectable wife, and later, the guilty adulteress. Although she seeks brief liberation through her affair with Elliot, her dependence on male validation persists, since Elliot, too, cannot love her freely because of his wife and daughter. Rose's flaw is therefore not merely personal weakness but a form of learned submission, shaped by both Confucian patriarchy and colonial discourse. Xu Xi deliberately crafts this imperfection to reveal how the colonized woman internalizes the voices that dominate her, illustrating Said's claim that imperial power operates not only through territorial control but through the "discursive power that administers, studies, and reconstructs" the colonized self[23]. Through Rose's moral hesitation and emotional passivity, Xu Xi critiques the psychological legacy of colonial and patriarchal domination that renders women unable to imagine true autonomy. However, she still fails to make Rose a representation that breaks the Orientalist script.

Reinforcing the Orientalist Gaze: The Limits of Rose's Agency

Schirato expands on Edward Said's concept of Orientalism by emphasizing that it is not merely a set of prejudiced ideas or cultural attitudes, but a "corporate institution" that systematically legitimizes Western power and authority[24]. He explains that this institution operates through a network of

[21] Xu Xi, *op. cit.*, p.109.
[22] Edward W. Said, *op. cit.*, p. 207.
[23] Edward W. Said, *op. cit*.
[24] Tony Schirato, "The Narrative of Orientalism", *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, vol. XXII, 1994, p. 43.

"academics, scientists, journalists, novelists, bureaucrats... produce the texts and the knowledge that explains the Orient/Oriental"[25]. In other words, Orientalism functions as a discourse of control, in which knowledge about the East is not produced neutrally but constructed to maintain Western dominance. Through such discursive practices, the West defines itself as rational, civilized, and authoritative, while positioning the East as irrational, emotional, and subordinate. Schirato further notes that this process grants the West an "informed, authoritative" voice that enables it to justify "violent non-discursive practices" [26]. These practices extend beyond physical domination to include the shaping of cultural and intellectual hierarchies that privilege Western perspectives as objective and universal. Consequently, Orientalism becomes a self-reinforcing system in which representations of the East—produced and circulated by Western institutions—are accepted as truth. Even cultural expressions that appear neutral or apolitical participate in this structure, since, as Schirato observes, "it is impossible to maintain any essential distinction between supposedly apolitical culture and colonial domination"[27]. This framework reveals how power operates not only through political control but through language, representation, and interpretation, ensuring that the West continues to speak *for* and *about* the East while silencing the voices that originate from within it.

Xu Xi's *Hong Kong Rose* reveals how the author's portrayal of women, despite its feminist intention, still reinforces Orientalized stereotypes that depict Chinese women as victims of both patriarchy and colonial oppression with limited agency to define their own lives. Rose's story appears to critique traditional gender hierarchies, yet the narrative repeatedly confines her within familiar images of obedience, sacrifice, and emotional restraint. Rose faces dual subjugation—by British colonial structures that question her cultural belonging and by Confucian codes that dictate her moral duty. She is constantly asked where she is from and whether she considers herself Chinese because her English is too fluent and native, a question that places her identity under the colonial gaze. Her struggle to respond illustrates the typical Orientalist dilemma: the Chinese woman who must translate herself to be understood by the West but can never truly belong to it.

At the same time, her life is governed by the *Three Obediences and Four Virtues (San Cong Si De)*, which institutionalize female submission:

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[25] *Ibid*.
[26] *Ibid*.
[27] *Idem*, p. 45.

> During the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.–219 C.E), typical feminine virtues namely obedience and loyalty were developed into something like "feminine ethics," as Lin puts it. The most famous, or infamous, of these codes are the Three Obediences and Four Virtues (San Cong Si De). The Three Obediences require women to obey the father before the marriage, obey the husband after marriage, and obey the first son after the death of husband. The Four Virtues are (sexual) morality, proper speech, modest manner, and diligent work. Pan Zhao, daughter of a famous literati and a loyal disciple of Confucius, was a great exponent of the Three Obediences and Four Virtues. In her book entitled Precepts for Women (Nuijie), she exalted the submission and self-effacement of women before the authority of father and husband.[28]

Xu Xi uses this historical framework to show how Rose's femininity is shaped by inherited ideals of moral womanhood, yet the representation remains bound to the same patriarchal and Orientalist logic it seeks to expose. Rose embodies the submissive woman who preserves harmony at the cost of selfhood in the patriarchal system. Confined within this system, a woman must obey her father before marriage, her husband after marriage, and her son if widowed. She is also expected to uphold sexual morality, speak modestly, behave humbly, and engage in diligent domestic labor. Even when she discovers her husband Paul's homosexuality, she remains in a loveless marriage, believing that her worth as a woman depends on maintaining the appearance of respectability. Her self-sacrifice is portrayed as quiet strength. This portrayal echoes the Orientalized trope of the noble yet powerless Asian woman whose virtue lies in endurance rather than resistance. These ideals glorify submission and self-effacement as feminine virtues.

Rose's relationship with her father-in-law, Paul Sr., further reinforces this image. One of the three Obediences requires women to obey her father as a maiden[29], but Rose's experience shows that Chinese women needs to submit to father-like figure, such as their father-in-law, even after marriage. Paul Sr.'s authority represents both Confucian patriarchy and colonial paternalism: an older male figure who dictates moral order and domestic control. Although Rose and her husband Paul start a life together, it is Paul Sr., her father-in-law,

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[28] Xiongya Gao, "Women Existing for Men: Confucianism and Social Injustice against Women in China", *Race, Gender & Class*, vol. X, no. 3, 2003, p. 116.

[29] Chenjie Zeng, "The Story of Ti Ying: The Conflicts between Traditional Ethics and Its Development in Chinese Culture", *Academia Letters*, 2021, p. 2.

who exercises control over their domestic arrangements. For example, Paul Sr. lectures Rose about how their new home should be arranged[30], including what kind of room they should live in. Rose personally feels more used to a more chaotic environment at home because she is raised in such a household. Without seeking Rose's opinion, Paul demands Rose to live in a quiet and organized space after marriage. Paul's power to shape Rose's behavior and thoughts makes him a symbol of the force of Confucian patriarchy. Rose accepts his interference in her life without protest. She positions herself as inferior to men and defines her identity in relation to gendered expectations, saying he made her feel "feminine, ladylike, without taking away any of [her] accomplishments as an educated" woman[31]. This moment encapsulates the tension between her education and her internalized subservience: Even as a modern woman, she finds validation in male approval. Her description of Paul Sr.'s gaze underscores her psychological submission:

> He looked hard at me. It was disconcerting. Paul Sr. had the kind of eyes that reflected the annals of history. I felt like a hundred ancient imperials were commanding me to heed their words, to meet my destiny.[32]

Here, Rose equates male power with destiny itself, transforming oppression into inevitability. Xu Xi's language aestheticizes this submission, making it seem fated and even poetic. This portrayal—of a woman ruled by history and male authority—reproduces the Orientalist image that Edward Said (1978) critiques: the Eastern woman as "lamentably alien," viewed not as an individual but as a cultural symbol of passivity. Through such depictions, Rose's suffering becomes emblematic rather than transformative. Although Xu Xi intends to critique the patriarchal system, her narrative ultimately positions Rose within the same moral and emotional confinement that defines Orientalized femininity. Rose endures rather than resists, adapts rather than transforms. Her silence, restraint, and tragic obedience reaffirm the colonial fantasy of the submissive Asian woman—demonstrating that Xu Xi's novel, while self-aware, never fully escapes the Orientalist framework it seeks to dismantle.

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[30] Xu Xi, *op. cit.*, p.108.
[31] *Ibid*.
[32] *Idem*, p. 109.

Between Voice and Silence: The Representation of the Subaltern Woman in Xu Xi's Hong Kong Rose

Xu Xi offers an insider's perspective in her novel *Hong Kong Rose*, portraying the personal desires of Hong Kong women for love and the profound constraints imposed on them by patriarchal oppression. In response to the adoption of Western practices in Hong Kong, that even if Hong Kong locals adopt Western practices such as speaking English or using English names, Hong Kong people do not abandon their Chinese roots. The misreading of Asian characters in literature aligns with what Xu Xi points out: earlier representations of Hong Kong often lacked a "local aesthetic or sensibility"[33] because most of the Westerners were not part of Hong Kong life. This absence is significant because it shows that stories like Rose's cannot be fully understood through a Western framework. Emphasizing this absence, Xu Xi encourages readers to question the authority of those who speak about Hong Kong without being of it. In this light, Rose should be read not as a symbol of cultural betrayal or mimicry of colonizers. In her view, adopting Western norms is a form of local adaptation under colonial rule rather than cultural betrayal. In "From and of the City of Hong Kong," Xu Xi confirms that her ethnicity and cultural identity are Chinese, but she asks the rhetorical question: "But by writing in English, wasn't I also part of this 'mongrel' margin?"[34] This rhetorical question implies that Hong Kong writers are at the "mongrel margin" since they do not have a clear identity, as it is neither fully aligned with China nor the West. "Mongrel" also signals that this identity is not pure or Western but fractured by necessity and colonial circumstance. To refute the argument that Hong Kong people abandon their Chinese cultural roots, Xu Xi explains that growing up, she spoke in "Cantolish, Eng-ese, and English"[35]. Similarly, her parents, who are Southeast Asian immigrants, spoke Javanese and Mandarin and acquired English "purely for survival in their borrowed land"[36].These examples suggest that speaking English is practical for communication and social mobility in colonial Hong Kong. Thus, adopting Western practices like speaking English does not reflect voluntary assimilation but rather the constraints of the political and educational system under colonial rule.

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[33] *Ibid*.
[34] *Idem*, p. 19.
[35] *Ibid*.
[36] *Ibid*.

However, the irony lies in the fact that Xu Xi ultimately fails to offer an empowering representation of Hong Kong women, as Rose remains unable to challenge her subaltern status.In her family, she is mostly experiencing gender constraints within a traditional family and gradually begins to satisfy her own desire for love and freedom. The evidence above shows that Rose remains in a subaltern position despite marrying a wealthy Chinese–South African solicitor. Her status is both marginalized and desperate because the Confucian society does not protect women from the structural forces of gender oppression even when they have a good social position. Rose's position in Hong Kong Rose exemplifies what Gayatri Spivak calls the "double effacement"[37] of the subaltern woman, who is not only silenced by colonial discourse but also further marginalized by the patriarchal structures of gender. As Spivak argues, "the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant"[38], and in such systems, "the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow"[39]. Rose's life is outwardly secure through marriage to a wealthy Chinese–South African solicitor, but she undergoes emotional silencing and has constrained agency. She is silent when confronted by Paul's lover, and later she does not dispute with Paul when he hopes that she bears a child with another man to maintain the illusion of a traditional family[40], reflect how her subjectivity is constructed through others' desires. Spivak's point that "there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself"[41], which is manifested in Rose's speech and agency that are continuously mediated and contained by patriarchal expectations. She does not voice opposition, but learn to internalize these humiliations, suggesting that she remains trapped in a structure that denies her the capacity for autonomous articulation. Thus, while she exists within a modern, urban, colonial space, Rose's gendered subalternity calls into question whether she can ever truly "speak" in the Spivakian sense—on her own terms, as a fully self-determined subject.

Although Rose comes from a middle-class background and is literate, educated, and fluent in English, her emotional and political silence within the patriarchal system aligns with Spivak's concept of the subaltern: not as a literal absence

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[37] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, 2nd ed., Bill Ashcroft et al. (eds.), London, Routledge, 2006., p. 32.
[38] *Ibid*.
[39] *Ibid*.
[40] Xu Xi, *op. cit.*, p. 289.
[41] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

of speech, but as a structural impossibility of being heard. Spivak famously asserts that "the subaltern cannot speak,"[42] meaning that the subaltern's voice is always mediated and reinterpreted through dominant discourses that determine what counts as knowledge, truth, or value. For Spivak, even when the subaltern "utters," the act of speech itself is absorbed and re-coded by the listener, who belongs to the dominant structure of interpretation: "the utterance itself... would have to be interpreted in the way in which we historically interpret anything"[43]. This observation reveals how the subaltern is not silenced by lack of speech, but by the absence of a listening framework that can recognize their speech as meaningful. In the context of Hong Kong, this structural condition parallels the city's postcolonial predicament. As a place caught "between coloniality and postcoloniality," Hong Kong's voice, like that of the subaltern, is doubly displaced: its colonial history has been written by Britain, while its cultural future is claimed by China. The epistemic violence Spivak identifies, the process by which dominant powers erase or overwrite indigenous forms of knowing, applies equally to Hong Kong's hybrid cultural identity, where local narratives are often subordinated to Western or nationalist frameworks. Within this dynamic, Rose becomes emblematic of the Hong Kong subject who speaks but is not heard. Her decisions to conform, to leave, or to love are interpreted through patriarchal or colonial codes that render her intelligible only as victim or transgressor. Spivak warns that when representation has not withered away, even attempts to "speak for" the oppressed risk re-inscribing them within existing hierarchies of knowledge[44]. Similarly, Hong Kong's women writers struggle to articulate autonomy within discourses that continually translate their experience into familiar binaries of East and West, submission and rebellion. Thus, Rose's muted agency reflects not only her gendered position but also Hong Kong's subaltern condition: a site of simultaneous visibility and erasure, where speech exists, but its meaning is perpetually misappropriated.

Her marriage to Paul exemplifies her subaltern status as she must endure Paul's emotional distance and a sexless relationship. Marion, Paul's mother, becomes devastated and cries out loud when telling Rose that Paul is homosexual[45]. Even though she always knows Paul's sexual orientation, she still aims to fulfill the rigid expectations of the Confucian patriarchal family system. Marion insists

[42] *Idem*, p. 104.
[43] *Ibid*.
[44] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *op. cit*.
[45] *Idem*, p. 116.

that Rose should remain in the marriage and have children regardless[46]. This denial reflects not a lack of awareness but an unwillingness to accept a reality that threatens the family's public image and internal structure:

> Same-sex marriage threatens the patriarchal family ideal because it de-naturalizes the place of gender differences and roles, so its legalization has the potential to transform marriage in ways that also benefit heterosexual women. Historically, the patriarchal family in China and the other East Asian societies influenced by Confucianism have been thetarget of many critiques.[47]

As Tan explains, same-sex marriage "threatens the patriarchal family ideal because it de-naturalizes the place of gender differences and roles"[48]. In this framework, homosexuality threatens the ideological foundations of the family itself, which makes Marion's mental breakdown more understandable. Her breakdown represents the collapse of a worldview in which the traditional family must consist of men and women. She cannot reconcile Paul's identity with the expectations placed on him as a Chinese son: to marry a woman, father children, and uphold the family name. This ideology also explains why Marion clings to the fantasy of a "perfectly normal life"[49] through Rose's cooperation even after knowing her son is homosexual. She attempts to convince Rose and Paul to maintain a conventional marriage to make sure they still hold the Confucian values. Marion's attitude reveals that same-sex desire challenges the rigidly structured, heteronormative system promoted by Confucianism, which is unacceptable for Marion.

The story does not center on the struggles of gay men in Hong Kong; instead, it exposes how the burden of their concealed desires and social nonconformity is transferred onto women. All the pressure falls on Rose's shoulders when she knows that her husband violates the Confucian expectation. Paul's parents ask Rose to stay in the family to continue living a normal life with Paul. Also, Paul lacks the courage to come out to the public, so he begs Rose to continue performing the duty of a good wife and forgive that he has another

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[46] *Idem*, p. 108.
[47] Sor-hoon Tan, "Confucian Family Ideal and Same-Sex Marriage: A Feminist Confucian Perspective", *Hypatia*, Vol. 39, Issue 1, 2024, p. 160.
[48] *Ibid*.
[49] *Idem*, p. 116.

life[50]. Because of this expectation, Rose suffers quietly, unable to receive love or intimacy in return. Since homosexuality is rejected in Confucianism, she knows that she cannot tell her parents the truth about her marriage[51]. Sacrificing her emotional well-being for having a "normal" life, Rose has internalized the cultural expectation that a woman must endure hardship silently to protect the family's image and stability. Her mother-in-law, Marion, reinforces this when she explains, "But he's also always cared much for you. There's nothing to stop you from having children and leading a perfectly normal life"[52]. Marion's words imply that personal happiness does not matter if Rose stays in the marriage. In Marion's opinion, Rose's individual suffering is irrelevant if the external appearance of a "normal" family can be maintained. In this context, Rose is expected not only to accept Paul's sexual disinterest but also to perform the role of a loyal wife and future mother. Although Rose feels painful, she decides to suppress her pain to maintain harmony expected by Confucian values. She reflects:

> Once more, the power Paul Sr. exuded encased me. It was safe here, in this world, with these people who could live dual lives. They were asking me to be part of it. Marion had given me more than I ever expected; she loved and approved of me, unconditionally.[53]

What she says suggests that she wants to find safety in her submission to the current situation. When she says Marion "loved and approved of me, unconditionally,"[54] she is left with no choice but to leave a life where she is expected to perform a wife's role for the sake of familial unity. this approval comes not from Rose being her authentic self, but from her willingness to conform to protect the family. In this way, the novel shows that Rose's silence and compliance result from a cultural system that prizes obedience, sacrifice, and appearances over emotional honesty and fulfillment.

Left with no choice in this Confucian family, she begins to rationalize her emotionally unfulfilling marriage by convincing herself that she should prioritize collective stability over individual emotion:

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[50] *Idem*, p.137.
[51] *Idem*, p. 117.
[52] *Ibid*.
[53] *Ibid*.
[54] *Ibid*.

> What more perfect husband could I want? What more acceptance did I need? Was this any worse than the family I came from, with Regina and her suicides? We were part of the mongrel caste who belonged together, who found a sheltered haven in our tiny city where the proper face was all that counted. In this time and space, it was a home that embraced us all.[55]

Her rhetorical questions in the passage are more like a defense mechanism to persuade herself to accept the loveless and sexless marriage with Paul. Rather than expressing dissatisfaction, Rose reframes acceptance and public approval as viable alternatives to personal happiness. This internal rationalization reflects the deeply embedded power of Confucian family values: "Ordinary people... were fully empowered to act in family roles,"[56] and thus internalized those roles as natural and inevitable[57]. In this context, Rose does not perceive her sacrifice as submission, but as a way to find emotional comfort within a patriarchal family structure that grants women limited agency. She clearly knows that she is part of the "mongrel caste"[58]. Yet, Rose finds solace in the shared commitment to maintaining order in society. Being asked whether she minds sharing her husband with another man, Rose explicitly claims that she has no choice[59]. Her decision to bear with this untenable situation suggests that she cares about the family's stability. Ebrey emphasizes that the strength of Confucianism lies in its fusion of emotional, political, and social structures, where "family as a political, economic, and religious unit"[60] sustains conformity over time. Rose's final assertion that "it was a home that embraced us all"[61] is endurance rather than a declaration of freedom. This endurance further reveals that Confucian patriarchy suppresses women's autonomy and freedom to express their thoughts and emotions.

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[55] *Ibid*.
[56] Patricia Ebrey, "The Chinese Family and the Spread of Confucian Values", in *The East Asian Region: Confucian Heritage and Its Modern Adaptation*, (ed.) Gilbert Rozman, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1991, p. 48.
[57] *Ibid*.
[58] Xu Xi, *op. cit.*, p. 117.
[59] *Idem*, p. 183.
[60] Patricia Ebrey, *op. cit.*, p. 48.
[61] Xu Xi, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

Resisting within Constraints: The Limited Agency of Rose under Confucian and Colonial Structures

A feminist understanding of autonomy emphasizes more than just the ability to make independent choices—it requires the capacity to reflect on one's deeper values, desires, and commitments, and to live in accordance with them, even in the face of opposition:

> Autonomy, to reiterate, involves reflecting on one's deeper wants, values, and commitments, reaffirming them, and behaving and living in accordance with them even in the face of at least minimal resistance from others.[62]

In Rose's case, such autonomy is systematically denied. Confined by the traditional Chinese family structure, she carries the emotional burden and social blame for reproductive failure. Rose reflects:

> I was pregnant once, I wanted to yell at my parents, Paul's parents, everyone. It had to be Paul, possibly a low sperm counts or some readily understandable explanation. He wouldn't even entertain the thought, not given his tendency. So no one would ever be sure, but the blame could fall on me, the woman, the way it did in all Chinese life. And who could argue with that[63]?

Rose's reflection on her abortion suggests that women have no power to claim their body autonomy in Chinese familial and cultural structures. She feels frustrated with her situation and hopes to seek help from her parents, Paul's parents, and everyone around her, but she realizes that her pain would be dismissed within the gendered logic of the Confucian society. While Paul avoids scrutiny even if he is gay and possibly infertile, Rose anticipates that society will blame her: "the blame could fall on me, the woman, the way it did in all Chinese life"[64]. The unfair treatment faced by Rose critiques that gendered expectations enforced within traditional Chinese culture make women suffer and difficult to demand justice. Women are expected to silently bear the burden of reproductive failure, while men remain shielded by patriarchal privilege. Rose's use of "the

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[62] Marilyn Friedman, "Autonomy, Social Disruption, and Women", in *Autonomy, Gender, Politics*, *Studies in Feminist Philosophy*, New York, Oxford Academic, 2003, p. 99.
[63] Xu Xi, *op. cit.*, p. 139.
[64] Xu Xi, *op. cit*.

way it did in all Chinese life" suggests that this is not a singular injustice but part of a long-standing cultural pattern in which women's bodies are sites of familial expectation, duty, and control. Her experience underscores the deeply embedded patriarchal norms that equate womanhood with biological and social sacrifice, and that expect women to endure silence, shame, and blame to uphold the illusion of familial harmony.

While Rose may appear to reject the life imposed on her, her retreat is shaped more by quiet resignation than radical resistance. Her departure does not signal a decisive break from patriarchal oppression but a negotiated move still marked by fear, habit, and emotional compromise. In this way, Rose embodies what Homi Bhabha terms "colonial mimicry"[65]: a strategy of partial alignment with Western norms as a form of survival, not liberation. The colonized imitates the colonizers' manners as a means of survival or to appropriate power for their own purposes, which aligns with Chandra Talpade Mohanty's warning against the tendency in Western feminist discourse to idealize Western values and simplify non-Western women's experiences. Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critiques Western feminism's tendency to homogenize non-Western women's experiences:

> An analysis of "sexual difference" in the form of a cross-culturally singular, monolithic notion of patriarchy... leads to the construction of a similarly reductive and homogeneous notion of what I call the "Third World Difference"—that stable, a historical something that apparently oppresses most if not all the women in these countries[66].

As Mohanty warns, reading all acts of non-conformity as signs of liberation risks reproducing a monolithic notion of patriarchy and the third world difference, which is a reductive lens that erases the complexity of women's lives. Rose's journey, therefore, should not be framed as a triumph of Western individualism or feminist freedom. However, her agency is still limited. Her choices are constrained, reactive, and often masked in socially acceptable forms. She resists, but within limits. Xu Xi presents a character caught in the tension between selfhood and sacrifice, autonomy and obedience. Rose's path reveals

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[65] Homi K. Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse", in *The Location of Culture*, London, Routledge, 1994, p. 85–92.

[66] Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses", *boundary 2*, vol. XII, no. 3, 1984, p. 335.

how women's pursuit of agency is often filtered through the very structures they seek to escape—patriarchy, colonial modernity, and familial duty. Her autonomy is not absent, but incomplete, which is negotiated within systems that demand silence, compromise, and restraint.

Rose's subsequent attempts to reclaim agency through an extramarital relationship and eventual plans to leave Hong Kong which appear to be autonomous choices that are superficial. She actively seeks empowerment and autonomy through her extramarital relationship with Elliot. Unlike her sexless and emotionally constrained marriage with Paul, her relationship with Elliot enables her to experience intimacy on her own terms. As she reflects, "Once he knew I would continue to see him again, he was in less of a hurry to arrange each meeting, although each time we made love, I knew he reached deeper inside me"[67]. However, her love fantasy is soon shattered. As Rose gets to know Elliot, she realizes that Elliot cannot be fully committed to their relationship because he is also constrained by family matters, such as taking care of his daughter. This physical expression of closeness is, therefore, more of her hope of intimacy, which cannot be fulfilled. Similarly, Rose's decision to leave Hong Kong for the United States seems courageous, especially given her father's disapproval. Yet, her justification reveals her lingering entrapment in Confucian norms. She does not frame her departure as a bold pursuit of self-liberation but instead couches it in familial obligation to care for her sister Regina, reinforcing the expectation that she must remain composed and dutiful. This perception both comforts and constrains her. Rose internalizes these traits, defining herself through emotional restraint rather than assertive action. Even her decision to divorce Paul is not fully embraced:

> The absurdity of our marriage was farcical, but I still couldn't help feeling devoted to him. I had thought a great deal about divorce, but it seemed drastic and frightening. The best thing about Paul was that we didn't really have to talk about a lot of what he called "the administrative details" of marriage.[68]

She recognizes how empty and performative her marriage has become, yet she remains emotionally bound to its structure. The thought of divorce pops into her mind, but she feels it is "drastic and frightening,"[69] which suggests that

[67] Xu Xi, *op. cit.*, p. 149.
[68] Xu Xi, *op. cit*.
[69] *Idem*, p. 297.

she has internalized fear of disruption outweighs her pursuit of self-fulfillment. Moreover, she tries to convince herself that her marriage is not that unacceptable after all. By mentioning that the "best thing" about Paul is that they just need to pretend to a good couple, Rose believes that emotional avoidance and silence have become comforts rather than constraints. Thus, Rose's departure is not a decisive break from patriarchal oppression but a quiet, negotiated retreat, a move shaped as much by compromise as by resistance.

Conclusions

Hong Kong Rose exposes the emotional and social struggles faced by Hong Kong women, yet Xu Xi ultimately fails to offer a liberating representation for her protagonist. Although the novel vividly captures Rose's suffering under Confucian patriarchy and colonial modernity, it stops short of granting her genuine agency or an alternative vision of freedom. Rose remains emotionally restrained and hesitant, unable to make decisive choices about her life or challenge the systems that confine her. Her identity continues to be shaped by obedience, guilt, and dependence on male authority—whether that of her husband, her father-in-law, or her lover. While Xu Xi successfully portrays the authenticity of a Hong Kong woman's inner conflict—torn between Chinese familial duty and Western notions of individuality—the narrative reinforces rather than transcends her constrained identity. Rose's resistance is quiet and internal, often expressed through endurance rather than transformation. Her inability to find a way out mirrors Hong Kong's own fractured condition as a postcolonial society caught between empires, struggling to define itself yet bound by inherited structures of power. Thus, although *Hong Kong Rose* invites readers to critique the oppressive systems that shape women's lives, it ultimately reproduces the very limitations it seeks to expose. By leaving Rose lost, hesitant, and emotionally subdued, Xu Xi provides not an emancipated vision of womanhood, but a poignant portrayal of how the search for autonomy can collapse under the weight of cultural and colonial constraints.

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