

# Love and Power as the Substitutes for *Objet Petit a* in Han Suyin's *The Enchantress*

**Hu Xiaoling**

Department of English, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication  
University Putra Malaysia, 43400, Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia  
School of Foreign Languages, Neijiang Normal University  
641100, Neijiang, Sichuan, China  
Email: gs58991@student.upm.edu.my / huxiaoling77@163.com

**Arbaayah Ali Termizi**

Department of English, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication  
University Putra Malaysia, 43400, Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia  
Email: arbaayah@upm.edu.my

**Abstract** Han's *The Enchantress* has been widely viewed as a romantic-historical fantasy, partly due to their complicated psyches of the exotically depicted protagonist in the novel. In addition, the protagonists' complex psyches exert a significant impact on their self-development. However, to date, the extent to which the protagonists' psyches are responsible for their action and subjectivity has not been investigated. Hence, this article concentrates on examining the protagonists' desires through a psychoanalytic lens proposed by Jacques Lacan. Lacanian concept of *objet petit a* is utilised to study the protagonists' constant search for the lost object of desire. Hypothetically the present study argues that through a psychoanalytic lens, *The Enchantress* is neither a romantic-historical fairy tale that enthralls numerous readers, nor a demonstration of the possibility of the cultural exchange between the East and the West. Instead, it is a psychological drama of *objet petit a*. Hence, I aim to identify the substitutes for *objet petit a* and expound how protagonists' psyches affect their selfhood and narrative progression in the novel. In short, the psychoanalytic approach proves to be an effective method to examine the mother-child relationship in Han's literary writing and enriches the academic study on Han Suyin.

**Keywords** love; power; *objet petit a*; Han Suyin; *The Enchantress*

**Author** **Hu Xiaoling** is a Ph.D. student at Department of English, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, University Putra Malaysia; a teacher at School of Foreign Languages, Neijiang Normal University. Her main research interests include English literature. **Arbaayah Ali Termizi** (Corresponding Author) is Associate Professor and PhD supervisor at Department of English, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, University Putra Malaysia. Her main research interests include Shakespeare Studies, Theatre Adaptation and interdisciplinary Literary Research.

### Introduction

Han Suyin's *The Enchantress* (1985) tells an exotic story of the eighteenth century and revolves around the lives of twin brother and sister Colin and Bea Duriez from their home country Switzerland to China, then to Thailand. In the story, science, fact, passion and magic are closely intertwined in different settings. Although the novel is widely viewed as a fantasy, the author's skilful portrayal of the protagonists' complicated psyches should be given due attention. When Colin and Bea are little, their parents are killed by a witch-burning mob. The twins' frequent reference to and recall of their parents' sudden death indicates its huge impact on their psyche and subjectivity. However, the protagonists' psyche and subjectivity are overlooked in the existing studies of the novel.

This study therefore aims to fill the gap by looking at the protagonists' constant quest for love and power from a psychoanalytical perspective. To this end, Jacques Lacan's concept of *objet petit a* is employed in relation to his three orders of the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real to analyse the protagonists' psyche and desires which greatly affect their action and subjectivity. Lacan holds *objet petit a* is the lost object of desire, which will never be attainable (qtd. in Dor 187). Although it is impossible to attain the lost object of desire, the subject spends his whole life to pursue it through different substitutes. In the process of recapturing the fantasy of the lost object of desire, the subject becomes a desiring subject and develops his selfhood. Hence, the concept of *objet petit a* from Lacanian framework is relevant to the discussion of the protagonists' action and subjectivity in the novel.

More specifically, it is discussed that Colin is in search of love as the substitute for his repressed desire for the primal union with his mother and twin sister, while Bea desperately seeks for power and strength as the displacement of her lost union with her mother. The twins' persistent search for their *objet petit a* is found to pervade the whole story and promote the development of the story in the novel.

## Literature Review

*The Enchantress* has been widely reviewed since its first publication in 1985. *Los Angeles Times* reviews the novel as “an exotic, imaginative tale of the 18<sup>th</sup> century” and the author “successfully mixes history and poetry in an elaborate, magical adventure story” (qtd. in Han *Enchantress*)<sup>1</sup>. Although the review clearly states the novel is an intoxicating blend of fantasy and history, many other reviews put more emphasis on the historical elements displayed in the novel. A review from *Pittsburg Press* focuses on Chinese history and it claims “only an author who knows China and has completed an immense amount of research could write a novel with the sweep and grandeur of the enchantress ... Studied with lavish scenes of wealthy mansions and Oriental court life” (qtd. in Han *Enchantress*). On the other hand, the review made by *The Washington Post* extends the Chinese history to the European history in the eighteenth century. It writes:

“The Enchantress” touches on many interesting subjects, especially the 18th-century fascination with all things mechanical, and deals with other topics: the worldwide impact of the Jesuits; the perilous condition of Jews in Europe; trade and cultural exchange between the Occident and the Orient; Asian palace life, including the many esoteric methods of torture and execution. (Levine)

It cannot be denied that the historical elements in the novel make readers explore the authentic exotic worlds. However, it is Han’s embedment of fantasy that makes the novel particularly distinctive from her other novels, which are usually based on history. Ling finds Han extends further in the direction of fantasy than her previous fiction (418). Han’s focus in the novel could be “the fusion of the West’s scientific rationalism and the East’s natural mysticism into a single utopian vision” (Austin 22). Hence, the novel has been often regarded as a romantic-historical fantasy.

Based on the available literature on the novel, it is interesting to note that though the novel is regarded as “the breathtaking new bestseller” (qtd. in Han *Enchantress*), it does not receive a well-deserved attention in academic study. This mainly results from the generally accepted view that all Han’s works are “on a basic level concerned with the question of East/West relations” (Wang 5). Such a view restricts the study on Han Suyin to her best demonstrations of East/West relations, namely her autobiographies, at the same time her novels are regarded as

---

<sup>1</sup> The reviews are cited from the introduction page of the novel: *The Enchantress*, New York: Bantam Books, 1985.

the extension of her autobiography (Wang 316).

After scrutinizing the above reviews and study on the novel, I find what is conspicuously absent in the scholarship is the research into the characters' psychic world. The focus on the protagonists' psyche enriches the reading of the protagonists' action and subjectivity which are closely connected with the narrative of the novel and illustrates the ideas we may not have seen so deeply without psychoanalysis. Through a psychoanalytic lens, *The Enchantress* is neither a romantic-historical fairy tale that enthralls numerous readers, nor a demonstration of the possibility of the cultural exchange between the East and the West, but a psychological drama of *objet petit a*. The twins' persistent search for love and power turns out to be their pursuit of *objet petit a*, the lost object of desire in early childhood. The startling magical communication between the twins can be understood as their unconscious mind in the light of psychoanalysis.

By analyzing Han's *The Enchantress* from a psychoanalytical perspective, the study challenges the prevalent view on the novel that it is a fairy tale mixed with history and essentially related to the cultural exchange between the East and West. It also contributes to the academic study on Han Suyin, whose writing has been scarcely researched in an academic manner (Wang 1). The existing literature reveals that since the twenty-first century, most academic researches on Han Suyin's writing are conducted from the perspective of post-colonialism (Lee, 2014, Chin, 2021, Tickell, 2021), identity (Zhao, 2016, Qiao, 2020) and feminism (Du, 2012). However, psychoanalysis is seldom employed to examine Han's writing. Hence, the study enriches the academic study on Han Suyin.

### Lacan's Theory of Desire: *Objet Petit a*

The concept of *objet petit a* is central to Jacques Lacan's theory of desire. According to Lacan, *objet petit a*<sup>1</sup> is "the object of desire and the object that is the cause of desire—the lost object" (qtd. in Dor 187). Lacan explains *objet petit a* as follows:

This serves as a symbol of the lack, that is to say of the phallus, not as such, but in so far as it is lacking. It must, therefore, be an object that is, firstly, separable and, secondly, that has some relation to the lack. (*Seminar, Book XI* 103)

---

1 The letter "a" refers to "autre," which means other. Small other is different from the radically "Other," because a person's relationship to *objet petit a*, the lost object of desire is quite individual and private, only impacting that person, instead of others (qtd. in Tyson 28).

Lacan's explanation illustrates "separable" and "lack" are two significant factors in relation to *objet petit a*. In other words, *objet petit a* signifies the lack inherent in human beings, whose incompleteness produce the desire for fulfilment. In this relation, the desire for fulfilment appears when the subject enters the Symbolic Order. The subject's entrance into the symbolized reality implies the use of language, and the use of language indicates an absence, a kind of lack, because the subject does not need words as stand-ins for things if he feels he is still inseparable from those things. Once the subject feels the loss, he is trying to search for that feeling of complete fulfilment through different substitutes such as love, power, money, and knowledge. To better understand what the lack is and how the lack emerges, it is necessary to have a brief review of Lacan's three orders of the human psyche—the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic.

The Real, for Lacan, is closer to the unconscious in relation to selfhood, prior to the Imaginary and the Symbolic (Hadi and Asl, "The real" 149). The Real is inaccessible to thought, because speaking out the desire marks the subject's entrance into the conscious experience. This means the Real does not belong to the social world. Desire originates in the emergence of the subject from the Real of infantile experience (Kirshner 83). Therefore, the yearning for total satisfaction of desire in this stage is rather strong. Such total satisfaction in the Real is termed as *jouissance* by Lacan. However, *jouissance* cannot be accessible to human existence, since bringing back a lost link to the unsymbolized Real is an impossible fantasy. In other words, *jouissance* is beyond the pleasure and reality principles.

The Imaginary is a stage that follows after the subject breaks the unconscious period. In the early months, the child cannot distinguish itself from its surroundings because it has no idea of self. However, the mirror stage appears when the child is around six or eight months. The child, during this stage, can recognize the whole image of itself in the mirror and develop a sense of self as a whole. Thus, the mirror stage is an early stage in the child's identity development (Hadi and Asl, "The Objectifying" 66), and is also a period of "transformation" (Lacan, *Ecrits* 1). According to Lacan, the mirror stage initiates the Imaginary Order (qtd. in Tyson 27). The Imaginary Order is a world of images and wholeness. The child in this order experiences through images instead of words, and it still feels no loss because of its imaginary satisfying union with its mother. It fancies it controls the surroundings and its mother. It feels it entirely relies on the mother for all vital needs and the mother can satisfy these needs. Hence, the child still has a preverbal fantasy union with its mother in the Imaginary.

When the child starts to acquire language, it enters the Symbolic Order.

According to Lacan, the child's language acquisition means many significant things (qtd. in Tyson 28). One important thing is that language can assist the child in shaping his or her identity, since it is an essential system of meaning-making. The first meanings include rules and regulations that the child must obey. The first rule is the law of the father. The law of the father makes the child realize the realm of the Other. The child's entry into the Symbolic Order thus indicates it must be separated from others, and the most challenging separation is the separation from the intimate union with its mother the child experienced in the Imaginary Order. This separation constitutes the child's initial experience of loss and initial repression of desire for the union with its mother in its unconsciousness. However, the initial repression of desire haunts the child whole life, because the child has to live under the authority, the law of the father. Also, the subject will spend his life unconsciously recapturing that lost feeling of union in the Symbolic realm. Acquiring more power, achieving more fame and fortune, finding an ideal mate or whatever the symbolized language tells the subject he should want, but he will never be able to regain that feeling of completeness with the world that disappeared from conscious experience.

The three orders of human psyche reveal that the lack, which originates in the unconscious, but is mediated in the Symbolic Order, refers to *objet petit a*. Because it is impossible to restore the lack in the unconscious, the subject substitutes the existing symbolic objects for the lost object of desire to recapture the fantasy of complete satisfaction. This implies desire is a significant aspect of human existence, provided it is kept in the symbolic reality. Additionally, desire is also closely related to selfhood development. In this respect, once the desire is voiced out, the subject enters the Symbolic realm and develops selfhood built by his quests and desires. In Han Suyin's *The Enchantress*, Colin and Bea both recognize their own desires and spend their whole life searching for them. However, in the process of searching for their desires, Colin lives with his desire under the law of the father and develops as a desiring subject, while Bea is finally lost in the Imaginary realm, identifying herself with an image of the other instead of herself.

### **Displacements of the Lack in *The Enchantress*: Love as the Substitute for *Objet Petit a***

In *The Enchantress*, the early death of Colin and Bea's parents has made a tremendous impact on them. As Colin acknowledges, the fire that burnt their parents makes him and his sister different (Han, *Enchantress* 277). The mother's running after the father into the fire forces the twins to end their fantasy union with the mother and accept that it is the father that the mother desires. Therefore, they have to abandon the position as object of the other's desire, but assume the position of

desiring subjects to recapture that feeling of the lost union by choosing substitute objects of desire. In essence, the fire makes the twins realize the significant role of their mother in forming their selfhood.

Colin's love for Apricot reveals his repressed desire for the fantasy union with his mother. Apricot is a housemaid in the Fang family, for whom Colin works, and is assigned to take care of Colin's daily life. Whenever he makes love to Apricot, he suddenly recalls his mother running after his father into the fire, and due to this image, he cannot enjoy sexual pleasure. Apricot on the other hand, superstitiously believes that Colin's sexual dysfunction is caused by Bea, a fox spirit. Though Apricot's intuition is somewhat true, the present study contends that Colin's sexual inability is partly ascribed to Bea (this view will be discussed later), but might have originated from his desire for union with his mother. According to Lacan, the process of becoming a "self" and entering the Symbolic Order is the function of the father. In the Imaginary Order, the child fancies itself as the mother's desire, since the mother satisfies all its vital needs. The mother's desire is mediation for the child, but this mediation "is given precisely by the father's position in the symbolic order" (*Seminar, Book V* 184). The father appears as "a possible object of the mother's desire" (Dor 103). The father, therefore, intervenes in the mother-child relationship as a depriver of the mother. That is to say, the father is supposed by the child to be a rival in its relation to the mother. So, the child's desire is inevitably encountered with the law of the father through the mother. This suggests the subject have to follow the law of the father, when he satisfies his desire. In other words, the law of the father requires the child to take a substitute object for the lost object of desire in the symbolized reality. His mother's running after his father into the fire clearly tells Colin that the desire of his mother is not himself, but his father. Colin's sudden recollection of the scene indicates his unconscious intolerability to the fact that his mother no longer belongs to him. Besides, it also implies that Apricot is not the suitable substitute object for his repressed desire for the mother, since Colin's love affair with Apricot is more likely to be viewed as his "urgent thrust of manhood" (Han, *Enchantress* 180).

Compared with Apricot, Jit is a much more suitable substitute for Colin's lost object of desire. Jit, a daughter of a small official in Ayuthia, has Chinese blood in her, as well as Thai. She is a gentle beauty who resembles Colin's mother. When Colin first sees Jit, his mind is "wiped clean of everything else." Colin also affirms no one else but Jit alone is beautiful. Colin's love for Jit even motivates him to overcome his inborn lameness to accept the boxing challenge from Prince Chiprasong and win the boxing match in front of his most loved girl. When Jit

is trapped in the court by Prince Chiprasong, Colin is driven mad and can hardly endure life without Jit. The following excerpt reveals the unique significance of Jit attached to Colin:

Jit, my shield against fear, against guilt. Through her, I became whole. And this is the greatest boon, that a man, infinitesimal speak in the great universe, comes to acknowledge his own self and is content. ( Han, *Enchantress* 305)

When the fantasy union with the lost object of desire starts to slip into enactment, anxiety will appear (Kirshner 91). Colin's acceptance of Jit as his shield against fear and guilt indicates Jit is a substitute for his lost object of desire since she can make Colin gain his unitary selfhood and satisfaction in the Symbolic realm. However, Colin's sense of being whole through Jit is only a fleeting displacement of completeness because Jit is merely "Bea's gift" given to Colin. After Jit dies from giving birth, Colin creates an android in the shape of Jit and pleads with Bea for making a soul-keeper for Jit to bring her back. Jit is Colin's desire for his primal lost object, but the object of desire is lost once again. The android resembling Jit is just another substitute of Colin's *objet petit a*. However, Bea's refusal to make a soul-keeper for Jit forces Colin to accept that "Jit had been Bea's gift to me. I would never be free of Bea," and "in the end, we shall only have each other, however many others come between us" (Han, *Enchantress* 350). Hence, Colin's acknowledgement of his inseparable connection with Bea reveals Bea is also Colin's primal lost object.

Bea, Colin's twin sister, has a special union with Colin from infancy to adulthood. They belong to one part from the womb. According to Colin, his lameness is caused by Bea, when they were in their mother's womb. Bea held Colin so tight that the midwife could not separate her hand from Colin's foot. So, Colin's foot "had kept the imprint of her grip upon it" (Han, *Enchantress* 186). The imprint on Colin's foot implies Bea's permanent association with Colin. At an early age, Colin always thinks he will marry Bea "as father married mother" (Han, *Enchantress* 6). Although Pastor Burandel tells him it is a great sin to do it, he still believes that it is acceptable in the other world. The other world for Colin is the magical world that only belongs to him and Bea, which is like the womb. He can be "fettered to her forever" and enjoy "love and tenderness and beauty" there (Han, *Enchantress* 189). The magical world is analogous to Colin's unconscious world. Colin can return to the preverbal wholeness and satisfaction by re-joining with his sister in the world. Colin's intense longing for Bea explains why Colin's inability to make love with Apricot is partly attributed to Bea. Apricot can only meet Colin's

biological need, but Bea is fancied to bring Colin preverbal completeness.

Colin's wish to marry Bea like his father's marriage with his mother means the voicing out of his desire. In this regard, voicing out his desire marks the permanent missing of his original Lack (Hadi and Asl, "The real" 150) and also his entrance into the Symbolic realm. However, Colin's desire for his sister has to be repressed consciously and displaced by other objects in the Symbolized reality.

The girl whom Colin meets in the flower boat could be viewed as a substitute for Bea. When Colin is courting her in the flower boat, he feels satisfied:

As our bodies entwined, as the tide of lust rose in me, so that I felt—true or not— that every inch of her was palpably my own, I had the sensation that this was Bea, my sister, whom I was thus engaging. Bea in my arms. (Han, *Enchantress* 201)

His intimate partnership with the girl brings him back the feeling of union with Bea. However, when he accomplishes what he needs to do and becomes separated from the girl, he suddenly feels "Alien, alone, joyless." Though he enjoys the sexual pleasures with the girl, he never returns to her again. He knows that he must "live with the knowledge of this yearning and refuse it" (Han, *Enchantress* 204). Undoubtedly, "this yearning" is Colin's persistent desire for Bea, for the lost fantasy to achieve total satisfaction. Colin realizes such a yearning makes him guilty under the governance of pleasure and reality principles, so he never comes to the girl again.

In conclusion, Colin spends his whole life unconsciously pursuing his lost object of desire, his intimate union with his mother and twin sister. His fancy for the reunion with his twin sister is morally forbidden and pointed out by the pastor. So, he endeavours to repress such a desire, although he can regain a temporal satisfaction of the lost feeling with Bea from a girl in the flower boat. Nevertheless, his fancy for his mother is substituted by his love for Jit. The mysterious relationship between Colin, Bea and their mother is clearly voiced out in Bea's words:

Between my brother and me is a bond we must both maintain and resist. We have to shut our minds away from each other, since now we both have lovers; and we shall have to live with this interdiction all our lives. Perhaps others do, who bury deep within themselves their lust and hunger for a sister, a mother, to be more than sister or mother. (Han, *Enchantress* 267)

### **Displacements of the Lack in *The Enchantress*: Power as the Substitute for *Objet Petit a***

Though they are twins, Bea is quite different from Colin. For Colin and Bea, the parents' death means the eternal loss of the union with the mother. Colin realizes that his mother's running after his father into the fire represents the father is his mother's desire instead of himself. But the parents' death has a different mental impact on Bea. Lacan's argument that the psychological problem is often associated with the failure of the paternal function (Kirshner 88) provides a proper explication to Bea's psyche. For Lacan, the phallus symbolizes the dominance possessed by the father. It is a metaphor for patriarchal power. Since the phallus is the sign of the Symbolic Order, it also indicates the loss (qtd. in Tyson 31). The loss, for a girl, means not only the lost position as object of the mother's desire, but also the position of not having the phallus. She, therefore, possibly identifies with the mother, noting her inferiority like the mother. And she also knows where she can get the phallus, that is, the father, who has it (Dor 108). As to Bea, her parents' death not only ends her intimate union with her mother, but also interferes in her identification with her mother and desire for the "phallus" from her father. Her mother's love for her father exerts a significant impact on Bea. Bea learns that her mother turns blind to the magical world for fear of hurting her father, and her mother's desire for her father takes away her mother's power. Therefore, Bea attributes her mother's death to her mother's love for her father, and she cannot identify with her mother's role as a wife. Additionally, Bea's passion for the father is unconsciously lost because of the mother's death. Thus, her desire to search for a lover as a father substitute to obtain the "phallus" is never motivated when she enters the Symbolic world. Instead, Bea desires to seize power on her own, in other words, to possess the phallus by herself, to maintain her fulfilled union with her mother. Colin also points out the different influences of their parents' death on them. He says, "The fire that burnt our parents has not charred my soul, as it has charred yours. I have no Gift to protect from love" (Han, *Enchantress* 277). Therefore, possessing the "phallus," the power and strength like a man can bring Bea back to total satisfaction with her mother. Such a fancy is deeply rooted in Bea's unconsciousness after her mother's death.

The parents' death in the witch-hunting mob also teaches Bea the importance of possessing power. Bea's mother is marginalized because she is treated as a witch practicing the ancient magic of her people, the Celts. Because of his marriage with a "wrong" woman, Bea's father has also been marginalized by his family, "one of the twelve families in Neuchatel who decide everything" (Han, *Enchantress* 87). He is

deprived of his large inheritance. Bea's parents' state of being marginalized means powerless, causing their death in the mob. Hence, the loss of power for Bea causes her loss of parents and homelessness.

Besides, Bea's half-brother Valentin is another threat to her love for mother. Bea hates him from an early age and tells Colin that "he is other" (Han, *Enchantress* 2). Bea believes that Valentin causes her mother's suffering since he is the son of a rapist. Bea's mother was dragged for penance at the chapel due to her sin of being raped and with a child. She was forced to leave her hometown. However, a new place does not make her life much better. When she worked in the factory, other women did not speak to her because of her fatherless child. More terribly, Bea's mother was treated as a depraved woman, a whore to be publicly whipped and put into jail. Hence, Valentin reminds Bea of the inferior status of women. The mother's relationships with the father and Valentin teach Bea that love means inferiority, and a woman needs to be strong as a man. Therefore, Bea is desperate for power and for proving her strength as men. Only when she possesses power and strength like a man, can she recapture the primal unity with her mother.

Bea is desperately in quest of the power and proving her same strength as men to make decisions, change the world and build an empire, even at the cost of her life. She renounces the conventional role of a woman as a wife and mother, the inferior and the marginalized. Patriarchy encourages women to contribute their value to their husbands and children. However, Bea realizes her soul and life cannot be subordinate to love husband and children (Han, *Enchantress* 250). She is firmly under the belief that no one can dominate her, "Udorn does not own me. I own myself" (Han, *Enchantress* 268). Thus, Bea's decision to keep a lover after her marriage with Prince Udorn suggests Bea's persistent longing to prove her power as men. Bea is not shackled by the traditional belief on women. Therefore, she does not think she is "wicked, immortal" as Abdul Reza claims based on the patriarchal criteria. She does not want to be the secondary, which she terms "a clever android" (Han, *Enchantress* 249). She thinks taking a lover is only a way of pleasing herself as a man pleases himself with women. That is, she wants to do what men usually do. Hence, keeping a lover for Bea relates not to love, but to the freedom to decide the life she really wants.

Bea even fights as a warrior like a man, when Ayuthia is invaded by Burmese armies. She follows Taksin to fight for and save Ayuthia. Bea's frantic quest for the power and for proving her strength as men can be perfectly demonstrated by her own statement:

It is men who decide how much or how little education and liberty a woman will have. But I want to decide for myself. I want the same power, because my strength is the same...

Ability to decide, Colin; to choose, why, even to change the world, as men do. To be listened to, as a man. (Han, *Enchantress* 250)

Bea's desire for power is also clearly revealed through her choice of her lovers, including the Chinese Emperor Tsienlung, Prince Udorn, Lord Abdul Reza and King Taksin, all of whom represent power. When she sojourns in China, Bea wants to conquer the Chinese Emperor Tsienlung (Han, *Enchantress* 206). She confirms she will have the power to give all Colin wants, if she succeeds (Han, *Enchantress* 186). Although she marries Prince Udorn, she still seduces Lord Abdul Reza to be her lover. Lord Abdul Reza is a prince, a merchant, and a diplomat, and he is capable of helping Bea and Colin successfully flee to China, and later to Thailand. Besides the power owned by him, Abdul Reza also reminds Bea of the Chinese Emperor Tsienlung. Conquering Abdul Reza for Bea thus compensates for her failure to conquer the Chinese Emperor to some degree.

Bea marries Prince Udorn not for love, but for power. She tells Colin, "Love is dangerous for woman. I must not lose myself, as did Mother" (Han, *Enchantress* 237). However, Prince Udorn is not her end to seek power. Reaching the desired object only results in the emergence of another strong desire in the process of satisfying the loss (Hadi and Asl, "The real" 151). Bea's final target of searching for power is King Taksin. King Taksin is "a man of strength, of vision, and ambition" and can "change men, bring down kingdoms and empires or build them" (Han, *Enchantress* 313). Bea firmly believes that he is the real king to save Ayuthia. For Bea, King Taksin substitutes her lost object of desire. However, Taksin never shows concern to Bea, because Taksin's glance never turns her way. When Bea pleads with Taksin to follow him to defend Ayuthia, Taksin "continued to look away, stolid like a great block of stone, immovable" (Han, *Enchantress* 319). Although Bea is eventually allowed to follow him in battles, Bea finds "he will not look at me. Never, does his glance turn my way" (Han, *Enchantress* 344).

Bea is once under the gaze of Uncle Theodore, Lord Abdul Reza, and numerous noble men in Ayuthia. Nonetheless Bea cannot conquer Taksin like other men. When Bea places her hand on Uncle Theodore's arm and lets her hair fall towards his face, Uncle Theodore "gazed fondly at her, then blushed" (Han, *Enchantress* 103). When Bea is in pale blue-green silk, Lord Abdul Reza looks fixedly at Bea in the same way as Uncle Theodore does. The gaze from Uncle Theodore and Lord

Abdul Reza at Bea reflects their sexual desire for a woman. According to Hadi and Asl, the gaze can be a tool to achieve self-actualization because individuals grow once the self realizes it is not where it wants to be (“The Objectifying” 63). So, the gaze from men makes Bea realize such a gaze is not what she wants. Bea notices her great power over men as a woman, but she wants to be “somewhat different” (Han, *Enchantress* 250). She wants to be a desired “phallus” as men. Traditionally, the gaze is the privilege of the man, whereas the woman is relegated to the passive spectacle (Asl and Abdullah 127). Bea subverts the conventional dichotomy of a male subject and a passive female object. She actively makes full use of her role as a female object to conquer men. Therefore, Bea’s look at Abdul Reza is a sign of power over him (Han, *Enchantress* 132). Bea also longs for the gaze of King Taksin. However, Bea’s yearning for such a gaze reveals her desperation to be the desire of the supreme power rather than a sexual desire. Bea asserts her power as a man by conquering the most powerful men.

King Taksin’s indifference to Bea means her failure to restore the union with the power, driving her mad and lifeless. After King Taksin is killed, she even creates an android resembling him. The android becomes the most suitable substitute for Bea’s desire for power and strength. She finally lives on the android King and fancies she becomes the object of the King’s desire and recaptures the feeling of the union with the power. However, such a recapture lies outside of human existence. Bea becomes unable to function as a member in society and totally immerses in the Imaginary Order. Her achievement in getting *jouissance* goes beyond the conventional enjoyment, because *jouissance* “is coupled with death drive” (Teymouri et al. 115), and “operates without regard for the welfare of the individual, for his or her meaning or symbolic identity” (Kirshner 85).

It is worthy of pointing out that whether it is Colin’s frantic search for love or Bea’s desperation for power, it closely relates to the role of mother. To some extent, Han’s detailed narrative about the mysterious relationship between the twins and their mother in the novel is attributed to her sensitivity to her relationship with her mother. Her autobiography, *The Crippled Tree* (1965) tells us she does not have a good relationship with her mother since her infancy. The death of Han’s second brother Sea Orchid made her mother unprepared for her birth. Her mother refused to feed her after the delivery, indulged in alcoholism, and even cursed at her death. Such an unloving mother-daughter relationship lasted their whole life. It is noteworthy that the mother-child relationship in Han’s novels is neither expected to be a loving one. Anne in *The Mountain is Young* (1958) was sent to Missionary School in Shanghai, China, and later to Britain.

She never lived with her mother and knew little about her mother, though her mother financially supported her. In *Till Morning Comes* (1982), there is always “a wall of glass” between Stephanie and her mother (Han 144). In *The Enchantress*, the mother was a caring parent, but died when the protagonists were young. Han also tells us in her autobiography that she could be neither her mother’s “Loved One,” nor “feminine and domesticated” like other European girls, because she felt abandoned by her mother and had to thrive by herself (Kuek and Fan 210). Hence, it can be easily found that in some sense, Han’s depiction of the mother-child relationship in her literary writing can illustrate the role of the mother in the formation of the child’s subjectivity.

### Conclusion

*The Enchantress* is usually read as a fairy tale. However, psychological elements are integral to characterization and narrative in the story and Han foregrounds the play of mother-child relationship in her protagonists’ psyche. If we are so used to the taken-for-granted view about the novel, we may scarcely notice the inner world of the protagonists. The article offers a new method of reading *The Enchantress* through Lacan’s concept of *objet petit a*. *The Enchantress*, under a psychoanalytic lens, can be read as uncovering Colin’s and Bea’s constant search for love and power, the substitutes for *objet petit a*. The abrupt death of the twins’ parents exerts an overwhelming influence on their psyche. Colin’s fantasy that he is the desire of his mother is ruined by his mother’s running after his father into the fire. His repressed desire for his mother unconsciously drives him to find a perfect mate to recapture the union with his mother. For Bea, the parents’ death tells that her mother’s death is indebted to her love for her father, in other words, love means loss of power. Therefore, Bea is thirsty for power. To possess power means to regain the primal happy union with her mother. *The Enchantress* is consequently structured by the protagonists’ persistent search for *objet petit a*. The psychoanalytic dimension of the story helps drive the narrative. In such a context, the novel takes a different meaning. It could be viewed as a psychological drama instead of a fantasy. A Lacanian framework is helpful in elucidating the characters’ behaviours and subjectivity. Additionally, the article indicates that Han’s literary works are not merely centred on East/West relationships, but also could be good texts for psychoanalysis due to her sensitivity to the mother-child relationship. In this sense, the psychological analysis of the protagonists in Han’s literary writing would enrich the academic research on Han.

## Works Cited

- Asl, Moussa Pourya, and Nurl Farhana Low Abdullah. "Practices of (Neoliberal) Governmentality: Racial and Gendered Gaze in Jhumpa Lahiri's Fiction." *3L: The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2017, pp.123-140. doi:10.17576/3L-2017-2302-10
- Austin, Jacqueline. "Review of *The Enchantress* by Han Suyin." *The New York Times Book Review*, February 1985, p. 22.
- Chin, Grace V.S. "Malayan Chinese Women in a Time of War: Gender, Narration, and Subversion in Han Suyin's *And the Rain My Drink*." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol.57, no. 2, 2021, pp.269-281.
- Dor, Joel. *Introduction to the Reading of Lacan: The Unconscious Structured Like a Language*. New York: Other Press, 1998.
- Du Chan. *The Research of Han Suyin's A Many-splendoured Thing from Feminist Perspective*. Master thesis, Shanxi Normal University, 2012.
- Hadi, Nurfarah Hadira Abdul, and Moussa Pourya Asl. "The Objectifying Gaze: A Lacanian Reading of Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Refugees*." *GEMA Online Journal of Language Studies*, vol.21, no.1, 2021, pp.62-75. doi:10.17576/gema-2021-2101-04
- Hadi, Nurfarah Hadira Abdul, and Moussa Pourya Asl. "The Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic: A Lacanian Reading of Ramita Navai's *City of Lies*." *GEMA Online Journal of Language Studies*, vol.22, no.1. 2022, pp.145-158. doi:10.17576/gema-2022-2201-08
- Han Suyin. *Till Morning Comes*. New York: Bantam, 1982.
- . *The Enchantress*. New York: Bantam, 1985.
- Kirshner, Lewis A. "Rethinking Desire: the *Objet Petit a* in Lacan Theory." *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, vol.53, no.1, 2005, pp.83-102. doi: 10.1177/00030651050530010901
- Kuek, Florence, and Fan Pik Wah. "Rosalie or not Rosalie: Han Suyin's Ethical Identity and Ethical Choices in the *Crippled Tree* Series." *Forum for World Literature Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2014, pp. 200-217.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Ecrits: A Selection*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York and London: Routledge, 2001.
- . *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998.
- . *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book V: Formations of the Unconscious*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller and translated by Russell Grigg. Malden: Polity Press, 2017.
- Lee, Fiona. "Epistemological Checkpoint: Reading Fiction as a Translation of History." *Postcolonial Text*, vol.9, no.1, 2014, pp.1-21.
- Levine, Faiga. "Han Suyin's Minor Asia." *The Washington Post*, 15 February 1985, Available

at: <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1985/02/15/han-suyins-minor-asia/633347c8-f3e7-4f04-9e42-265a1fca751b/>> (accessed on December 17, 2021).

- Ling, Amy. "Writers with a Cause: Sui Sin Far and Han Suyin." *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol.9, no.4, 1986, pp.411-419.
- Qiao Shujing. *Identity Display and Transformation: A Socio-cultural Analysis of Suyin Han's Autobiography, A Many-splendoured Thing*. PhD dissertation, The University of Sidney, 2020.
- Termouri, Tohid, Zahra, Jannessari Ladani, and Pyeaam, Abbasi. "Four Discourses and Sinthomatique Writing in Saul Bellow's *Herzog*: a Lacanian approach." *3L: The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, vol.24, no.3, 2018, pp.111-124.
- Tickell, Alex. "Han Suyin's Cold War Fiction: Life-writing, Intimacy, and Decolonization." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol.57, no. 2, 2021, pp. 241-254.
- Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today: a User-friendly Guide*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Wang Xuding. *Of Bridge Construction: A Critical Study of Han Suyin's Historical and Autobiographical Writing*. PhD dissertation, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1996.
- Zhao Yuhan. *Intercultural Study on Cultural Identity from the Perspective of Cultural Hybridity— an Analysis on Han Suyin's A Many-splendoured Thing*. Master thesis, East China University of Science and Technology, 2016.