



## FEMALE PROTAGONIST'S SELF-SEARCH IN THE NOVEL OF SHANGHAI BABY

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### ABSTRACT

This research intends to explore the female protagonist's self-search. Textual analysis is mostly employed here along with the psyche's theory of Sigmund Freud. Coco encounters her identity crisis throughout the story. She struggles with so many crises in her life: having sexual problems, lacking self-awareness, losing self-esteem and self-worth, being torn between the Chinese old tradition and the arrival of Western culture. Her self-search process, however, occurs without her realization. First, she turns to masturbation to release her sexual repression. Second, she becomes the materialist and is obsessed with consumer culture. Third, she retreats into her dreams. Fourth, she has the affair with the German man named Mark. Fifth, she visits the psychologist. Sixth, tries to express herself through her writing. Some of her self-search process, however, does not happen respectively but they are the ongoing procedures that overlap with some other self-identification. Apparently, Coco always lets her "id" overcome her "ego" which often leads to too much chaos in her life. The inability to control her mind especially her sexual instinct brings her the sense of shame and guilt which leads her to lose self-esteem and self-worth. Although she attempts various ways to find her identity, it seems like it is a failure since she still asks the same question of who she is at the end of the story. Nevertheless, among her self-search's process, expressing herself through writing is the best way of all other methods during her journey of self-searching. Yet, her ultimate goal of becoming

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a famous writer does not come true yet. She is finished her first novel but still does not know its destiny.

**Keywords:** self-search, self-identity, Chinese patriarchal society, Shanghai Baby.

## INTRODUCTION

Chinese women had been oppressed by men for over 4,000 years since they were under the male dominant world. Moreover, they seemed to passively accept their fate (Tan, 1993, p. 3). They, thus, hardly have their own space to express themselves. Fortunately, in the late 1990s, women's lives started to get better: joining more in the society; having more education; and working outside their home. Some women were financially independent because they could earn their own money. They had a lot more opportunity than those women from their parents' and grandparents' generations (ChinaOnline, 2001 cited in Pei, 2007, p. 11). Women in this period, hence, tended to have more affluent lifestyle and are confident to express their own desire (Pei, 2007, p. 11). Yet, women's sense of self is still hardly acceptable in Chinese patriarchal society. Chinese women, however, attempted to raise her voice through writing. One of the interesting and notorious novels that raised the topic of women's liberation is *Shanghai Baby*. It was written in 1999 by Wei Hui. It illustrates women's ambition, perspectives, desire particularly the self-search of the major character.

The female protagonist, Coco or Nikki, loses the sense of self or encounters identity crisis throughout the entire story. This research, therefore, intends to explore her identity crisis and her ways of searching for her identity. This story is told through the protagonist herself. The audience, therefore, will be able to know all of her thoughts and feelings which lead to the display of her confusions and chaos in her life. The essence of having one's identity is to know who one is, what one is doing, what one wants and what one wants to be. Unfortunately, she does not seem to know who she is, what she is doing or what she really wants in life except the desire to become a famous writer.

Self is referred to the entire "individual—his or her personal identity, being and experience". According to the American Psychological Association, self is



composed of “all characteristic attributes, conscious and unconscious, mental and physical” (Vanden Bos, 2007 cited in McCormick, 2009, p. 2) Another term for self is “ego” particularly to “the conscious sense of self” (McCormick, 2009, p. 2) To scrutinize the female character’s mind thoroughly, the theory of psyche is also examined.

According to Freud (Snowden, 2017, pp. 71-73), he introduces that human’s psyche consists of two parts: the conscious mind and the unconscious one. The first one is where one can recognize his/her own thoughts, action and behavior. This area of mind focuses on the rational thinking, “reality and civilized behavior” whereas the latter is the place in one’s mind where he/she suppresses his/her terrible thoughts, behavior or pasts. Freud (Green & LeBiham, 1996, pp. 147-148), develops his theory of the unconscious by dividing human’s mind into three parts which cannot be individually separated: id, ego and superego. The id is the unreachable dark area in one’s mind that contains the instinctive drive. It does not know the values, good side nor dark side. However, there is a part called ego which acts as a self that relates one to the external world. The ego is where the consciousness comes from. It presents the reasonable thoughts and actions. As a result, the superego works as the self-observer or the censorship that tells one what is right or wrong. As a result, this psyche’s theory of Freud is included in the interpretation of Coco’s search of self.

## OBJECTIVES

This examination explores the search for self of the female protagonist, Coco, in the novel of *Shanghai Baby*. The purpose is to investigate her identity crisis and the ways she attempts to solve her identity crisis.

## HYPOTHESIS

The assumption is to see whether the female protagonist, Coco, who has the identity crisis throughout the story, is able to find her sense of self or her identity at last.



## LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

The analysis concentrates only on one character which is the female major character of the story, Coco. Furthermore, the issue of her self-searching is the main topic to be targeted.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The entire novel is read carefully especially focusing on the protagonist's search of self. The study examines the female protagonist's identity crisis and her process of searching for herself throughout the whole novel. The examination is mostly investigated by the textual analysis. The related theory of psyche is, however, analyzed as well to make the exploration of the central character's self complete.

## RESULTS

### Coco's Identity Crisis

#### 1. Having Sexual Problems

Coco hardly has the real sexual pleasure in her sexual journey. Although Coco sees sex as the basic needs, she confronts so many difficulties for her sexual experiences. Her sexual experiences reveal her pleasure and displeasure throughout her sexual journey. Her sexual journey can be divided into four phases: sex with her boyfriend in university, sex with her new boyfriend while working, sex with her impotent boyfriend and the affair with the German man named Mark.

For the first phrase, Coco is treated as the sexual object. Her boyfriend emphasizes women's submissiveness through his mental and physical oppression to Coco. Mentally, he imagines about seeing her being raped. Voyeurism here includes violence. Although it is only his fantasy, it shows that he does not respect her as a human or a woman. He perceives her as the article. Apart from his mental oppression, his physical abuse is even worse. According to Coco's narration, he does not concern about her feeling or her desire. He only concentrates on his own desire. He does not care whether she would gain sexual pleasure from having sexual intercourse with him. His ill treatment to her is even reinforced more when he tries all various positions he learns from the pornography. Coco feels



worse for being treated like that. The protagonist, however, does not let herself be the sex slave for too long. She finally frees herself by breaking up with him.

In the second phase, she learns the real pleasure for having sexual intercourse with her second boyfriend, Ye Qian. He also teaches her to experience the orgasm for the first time. He even tells her that she is one of the few lucky girls who has ever engaged in the orgasm: “In the end, he made me believe that I’m luckier than many women. The statistics say some seventy percent of Chinese women have some sort of problem with sex, and ten percent have never had an orgasm” (Wei, 2001, p. 69). Ye Qian is not a selfish man who concerns only his own sexual satisfaction. He treats Coco as human being. She feels special and respected. Yet, her relationship with her second boyfriend does not last long. It is, however, the good start for her to know the true sexual satisfaction that woman should gain from having sexual intercourse.

For the third phase, she is devastated because she discovers that her boyfriend is impotent. It is in this phase that Coco encounters the real hardship in her sex life. She loves him but cannot make love to him. Although they do have the foreplays as the way to show their affection, it is not enough for Coco. It makes her feels depressed because she cannot have the true intimacy with him. This problem is gradually rooted in Coco’s mind which makes her cannot fully have the happiness with Tian Tian. On the contrary, Tian Tian also tremendously hurts from his problem although he has never clearly showed about it. She suffers from sexual repression.

The last phase is having the affair with Mark. This time she is treated as the sex slave again. What makes this time different from her relationship with her first boyfriend is that she seems to be willing to follow the sex games that Mark rules. She is attracted to him at first and eager to have sexual intercourse with him. It is probably because Mark is attractive Western man. It is too hard to resist him since she has not gained sexual pleasure for a while. Yet, according to her description of her sexual performance with Mark, she is nothing far from sexual object again. But this time is different from her first boyfriend’s enslavement because Mark is a good looking man and can make her reach the orgasm. Furthermore, it seems like she uncovers without





her realization that she is a masochist. Although she feels guilty and disgusts herself while having sex with Mark, she seems to surrender to it several times.

Coco lets her “id” overcome her “ego” most of the time which leads to her chaos in life. She allows her sexual drive that has been repressed since her impotent boyfriend cannot give her the real sexual pleasure and orgasm run wild.

## 2. Lacking Self-Awareness

The lack of Coco’s consciousness keeps recurring throughout the story. The lack of self-awareness leads Coco to nowhere since she is still asking who she is from the beginning of the story: “What sort of person am I?” (Wei, 2001, p. 17) and then again at the end: “Who am I, indeed? Who am I?” (Wei, 2001, p. 263). Additionally, she often states that she does not understand herself: “...I sat on a sofa, my hand cradling my head, asking myself if I really understood myself as a woman. Was I really attractive? Wasn’t I a bit hypocritical, snobbish, and fuzzy-minded, too?” (Wei, 2001, p. 105). Although she has a dream of becoming the famous writer, she does not know where to start. She stops writing for a while and becoming a waitress instead. The lack of self-awareness is, thus, the crucial issue for the protagonist because she seems to be confused throughout the story. She does not seem to know what she is doing. She often lacks the consciousness several times and lets her unconscious or her dark side controls her. According to Sigmund Freud (Snowden, 2017, p. xii), he believes that a person’s behavior and motivation causes from the unconscious mind including “memories, dreams, suppressed feelings and urges and biological drives and instincts”. For Coco, all of these factors are lying in her unconscious mind. She dreams several times. Each of her dreams is related to the things foreshadowing her future or the things she has been worried. Her sexual tension from her impotent boyfriends is her feelings that have been suppressed for a while. Her “biological drives and instincts” lead her to express herself and has done the immoral acts. The lack of self-awareness reinforces again when she states that she and her colleague, Spider, are in the wrong place: “There we were, a formerly promising journalist and a computer hit man with a reputation, both working in a café. It’s hard to deny life’s little ironies. Wrong place, wrong roles, but united in our commitment to life’s young dream. And yet, our bodies were already tarnished and our minds beyond help” (Wei, 2001, p. 9). As seen above, Coco’s “ego” is too weak to rule over her “id” which leads to the devastation in her life.



### 3. Losing Self-Esteem and Self-Worth

Coco loses self-esteem and self-worth throughout the entire story. She often feels ashamed of herself. Superficially, she is confident and determined woman who seems to believe in what she does. In fact, her “ego” always succumbs to her “id” which often leads her life to destruction. Losing self-esteem and self-worth makes her do not believe in herself. At first, she does not have faith in herself that she can be a famous writer although it is her highest aim. Furthermore, letting “id” run wild also makes Coco disgust and disrespect herself for not having the conscience. Her overconfidence often leads her to the wrong decision. For example, she tells her parents who disapprove in some of her misbehavior especially the idea of moving in with her boyfriend, Tian Tian that she knows what she is doing. Ironically, she does not really know what she is doing in her life which leads her to chaos.

### 4. Being Torn between the Chinese Old Tradition and the new Western Culture

Coco is torn between the Chinese old tradition and the new Western culture. Her parents are people from early twentieth century but she is a woman in the late twentieth century. As a result, there are so many changes happening with these two different generations. Her parents are still conservative whereas she is rebellious: her parents cannot accept the idea of staying with man before marriage or wearing the revealing clothes (Wei, 2001, p. 18). On the contrary, she has done both things her parents dislike. She, however, still finds the value in the old Chinese tradition. For example, she admires the neighborhood that live happily although they do not have much money nor live the luxurious lifestyle. Besides, she cherishes Western culture by absorbing the consumer culture and philosophical thoughts from it. Apparently, consuming too many Western commodities and gaining the concept of beauty image from the advertisement cannot make her find her real self. On the contrary, it gives her the feeling of emptiness.

## Coco's Self Search

### 1. Masturbation to Release Sexual Tension

Coco expresses herself through masturbation several times in the novel. Masturbation is one way to release sexual tension and gains oneself the sexual



pleasure. This sex act excludes men from women's realm so that they will not be treated as sexual object and they do not need men to fulfill their sexual satisfaction. In fact, she perceives masturbation as the way for the temporary sexual release. For her, there is nothing compare to sexual penetration. She feels ashamed and guilty every time after she finishes masturbating. She never feels completely self-contented. Ridiculously, she seems to be a confident and independent woman. By contrast, she depends her happiness on men. She is out of her conscience by letting her sexual instinct lead her way. She cannot solve the problem of her impotent boyfriend by just masturbating. She dares herself to self-destruction by allowing herself to commit bad deeds and hurt both herself and her boyfriend. As a result, masturbation for her does not give her the genuine sexual satisfaction.

## **2. Material Possession and Consumer Culture's Slave**

Coco identifies herself with the materials she possesses and indulges in the beauty image created from the advertising. She is the example of the Chinese young generation who lives in the late 1990s where there was the arrival of the new Western culture. With the Chinese open door policy, it made the economy in China rapidly grow. As a result, the consumer culture is the significant part in Chinese youth at that time. Like any other young Shanghaiese, Coco is the victim of materialism and consumerism. She identifies herself with the brand name clothes and makeup to gain the sense of belonging in the society. To have the sense of being accepted in the consumer society, she has to look good and be complimented by others. She, therefore, uses those materials that are the products from the West to make herself exist in the city of Shanghai. Those Western products, however, cannot fulfill her emptiness. Evidently, she is a materialist since the beginning of the story which is the same time that she encounters her self-identity crisis. She does not realize that she has the identity crisis problem. She is obsessed with her own image and body.

Although Coco lives in the prosperous city like Shanghai and become the materialist like others, she is confused and still feels the emptiness and insecure living in the city like this: "...all these signs of material prosperity are aphrodisiacs the city uses to intoxicate itself. They have nothing to do with us, the people who live among them. A car accident or a disease can kill us, but the city's prosperous,





invincible silhouette is like a planet, in perpetual motion, eternal. When I thought about that, I felt as insignificant as an ant on the ground” (Wei, 2001, p. 15). Consequently, the hedonistic lifestyle cannot lead her to find the sense of self.

### **3. Retreating in Her Dreams**

Coco often retreats into her dreams to dream of what she cannot have in her real life. She even says that she was “a dream-loving child” (Wei, 2001, p. 66). She states that “What makes me feel most liberated about my life now is that I can sleep just as long as I please” (Wei, 2001, p. 66). It demonstrates here that she is very happy to be in her dreams because there is neither right nor wrong in her fantasy. She, thus, feels unconstrained from any rules, social values and morals. She has five different dreams throughout the story: the Octopus dream, the sunflower and the boxes dreams, the train dream, the river dream and the earthquake dream. All of her dreams reveal the sexual suppression, her worry about her boyfriend, her depression and anxiety about life. Ironically, her dreams do not rescue her from her present turmoil. She cannot truly escape from reality and fantasize anything she wants since her disturbance still haunts her in her dreams.

### **4. Having the Affair with the German Man Named Mark**

Her relationship with Mark is quite complicated and ironic. Coco seems to be the independent woman who wants to liberate herself from patriarchy. By contrast, she lets herself be Mark’s sex slave and allows him to use her body despite her feeling remorse. Although Coco releases her sexual tension by having the affair with Mark and receives the physical pleasure from him, she obtains the psychological torture from her misbehavior. She exactly knows that what she is doing is wrong but it seems like she cannot control herself. She cannot repress her sexual drive. She cannot be truly happy whenever she thinks that she cheats on Tian Tian. She tells herself that she will not commit this kind of bad deed again after her first time with Mark: “This was the first and last time, I told myself disingenuously” (Wei, 2001, p. 64) She is not able of doing it at all. She succumbs to Mark’s sexual appeal and his attractiveness. She even breaks the promise with herself. This method of self-expression is, hence, not the right way to find her identity. Her sexual relationship with him is often described in the male/active and female/passive action.



Mark is always illustrated as the powerful man who is ready for his victim at anytime such as “a hunter confronting his longed-for-prey” (Wei, 2001, p. 61). As a result, Coco experiences both sexual pleasure and emotional torture from this affair. It means that she still cannot find the true sexual satisfaction in her life.

### **5. Visiting the Psychologist**

Coco visits her friend, David Wu, who is a psychologist for several times. The essence of her visiting here is to share her stories. Besides writing, telling and sharing stories through conversation is another form of expressing oneself. She can release her tension by telling her secret and mischief to him. She can get the different points of view from him as well. Furthermore, she can get some good advice from him. Nevertheless, this activity cannot really make her discover her true self since she still suffers from the chaos in her life and cannot find the way out.

### **6. Writing as the Way to Express One's Self**

Writing is the crucial way for Coco to express herself. Her ultimate goal is to be a famous writer. Her aim, however, cannot be achieved easily. She has undergone the hardship during her writing journey. She lacks inspiration at first. She stops writing for awhile and becomes the waitress instead. Nevertheless, she feels ashamed that she has not written for a period of time: “Well, it's been a while since I wrote anything, and actually...I can't really call myself a writer. I felt a bit ashamed: Just wanting to be a writer is not enough” (Wei, 2001, p. 11). Nevertheless, she still cannot find the motivation to urge her to write again. Yet, her writing career is not considered a complete failure because her collection of short stories is already published. Unfortunately, it does not gain much of popularity. Even though her first publication is not too successful, she gains attention from her male audience. Her attention from her male audience is beyond the expectation. Moreover, her male audience focuses on the sexuality rather than admiring her writing ability: “...Male readers sent me letters enclosing erotic photos” (Wei, 2001, p. 2). This group of audience do not meet Coco's highest goal.

She have been wishing to write about “the really exciting thrillers: evil omen, conspiracy, dagger, lust, poison, madness, and moonlight” (Wei, 2001, p. 3). It seems like she only succeeds writing about lust. Otherwise, male audience



will not give her this much attention. She resumes her writing when Tian Tian boosts her to concentrate on writing again. Here, love and affection from him tends to be the important motivation for her. She tells herself to commence writing again after moving in with him: Let's go home. Now must be the time to cut to the heart of things. Start writing; set off on this journey of writing using your dreams and your love. Use flawless prose to complete beautiful novels, one after the other..." (Wei, 2001, p. 22) Her idea about writing starts to flow. She can think of the title and the kind of content she wants: "My ideal literary work would have profound intellectual content and a best-selling, sexy cover" (Wei, 2001, pp. 24-25). She knows what she wants to put into her book. She wants to write about Shanghai and what it is like. She also gets the respond from Tian Tian by reading what she had written to him.

## DISCUSS AND SUGGESTION

Coco's most abhorrent crisis is when she cannot control her instinct and sexual drive which leads her to have the affair with the Western man, Mark. This disgraceful behavior destroys her self-esteem and self-worth the most since she cannot respect herself anymore. She cannot keep her promise for not having sex with Mark again. Mark also ruins woman's dignity and liberation by being the controller of their sexual activities. Coco narrates their relationship as a "game" instead of two people making love. This guilt is deeply rooted in her entire life. Her relationship with her boyfriend is fragile and cannot be healed. This unaccepted situation also leads him to be adrift. Apparently, her life is in chaos. As the consequence, Coco liberates herself from the old Chinese tradition in some extent but she cannot set herself free from her id or her dark side. Her consciousness cannot be regained which means she cannot discover her sense of self.

Obviously, Phallocentrism seems to be partly destroyed. Here Chinese male character, Tian Tian which is the representative of Chinese patriarchy is totally ruined since he is impotent. The impotency is like being castrated which brings a shame to the man himself. The female major character, Coco, is supposed to be able to set free from male dominant world. Yet, she is still trapped with the phallocentrism



from the Western man named Mark. She, therefore, still lives in the shadow of male superiority. Nonetheless, she struggles to gain her true self.

For the next research about this novel, the protagonist's self-search should be compared between two media: the original novel and the adapted movie in the same title directed by Berengar Pfahl, the German film director. The comparison in the same topic will show whether the presentation of the protagonist's self-identification in the two media are the same or different.

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