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**MUTED SOULS: THE POLITICS OF LIVING IN SELECTED
 STORIES OF YIYUN LI**

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Abstract:

*The subtraction of the self at the hands of political ideologies is not an unconventional trope in modern narratives. Twentieth century, particularly, witnessed the roping in of literature as an ideological tool to disseminate political propaganda much to the chagrin of creative artists in China. The sweeping revolutions of the past century effected an entire generation of people whose very lives were defined by the political ideology of the state. Modern Chinese writers have tried to distance themselves from the diktats of the government by exploring themes and techniques hitherto prohibited. However, one cannot wish away the continuing influence the power structures have on literature; its production, reception, and appreciation. Yiyun Li is a Chinese- American writer who has contributed to the growing popularity of Chinese Literature worldwide. Five of her short stories have been chosen for analysis in this paper as it attempts to explore the prismatic experience of living in modern China vis-à-vis the inherent political structures; an experience which will be familiar to everyone, everywhere. The stories selected for the study are “Kindness”, “A Man Like Him”, “House Fire”, “Sweeping Past” from *Gold Boy, Emerald Girl* and “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers” from the collection of the same name.*

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The subtraction of the self at the hands of political ideologies is not an unconventional trope in modern narratives. Yiyun Li's fiction is a testament to the understated yet lingering presence of the political in the personal space. A promising Chinese émigré, Yiyun Li's short story collection *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* (2005) was a runaway success prompting a film adaptation of the same name. Her debut novel *The Vagrants* (2009), with the Cultural Revolution as its background, sparked many reflections on Chinese political history. Her second collection of short stories *Gold Boy, Emerald Girl* (2010) is a collection of nine stories where history, politics and folklore enmesh the human condition. Her recent works include *Kinder Than Solitude* (2013), *The Story of Gilgamesh* (2014), and the autobiographical *Dear Friend, from My Life I Write to You in Your Life* (2017). In her muted yet articulate writing, Yiyun Li creates a portrait of a time and place that is simultaneously haunting and melancholic. This paper attempts to explore the prismatic experience of living in modern China vis-à-vis the inherent political structures; an experience which will be familiar to everyone, everywhere. The stories selected for the study are “Kindness”, “A Man Like Him”, “House Fire”, “Sweeping Past” from *Gold Boy, Emerald Girl* and “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers” from the collection of the same name.

The political resonance that pervades all levels of Chinese society colour the stories a monochromic gray. The characters constantly find themselves facing situations which have more to do with the authority of the dominant political ideology than their own inconsequential fortunes. The protagonist of “Kindness”, Moyan, is a 41 year old unmarried and orphaned women living in a dingy apartment in Beijing. Her extreme passivity and withdrawal from the world are her self-imposed mechanisms for survival. Having never been close to her indifferent parents, Moyan rejects all overtures of closeness, be it from her teacher Professor Shan or from her superior Lieutenant Wei. Moyan remembers

the Professor who had tried to befriend her and had introduced her to the works of Dickens and Hardy. However, her love for English Literature is viewed with suspicion and she is drafted as a young recruit of the People's Liberation Army during the Cultural Revolution. Her tenure in the Army leaves a lasting impression on Moyan whose present is intricately influenced by her past. She remembers a young fellow recruit's plaintive rendering of a classic "The Last Rose" and how it was received by the young girls in deafening silence. All emotional upsurges were drowned in the silence that followed the song. Trained to keep her emotions and feelings under the wraps, Moyan defends her lifelong unwillingness to form connections and lasting relationships. Moyan's immediate concern is the invasion of private realtors in the space starved Beijing. As her only kinship is with her apartment, she is extremely wary about its future.

"A Man Like Him" encapsulates the paranoia of an age which was dominated by suspicion of one's neighbours, colleagues and family. "My mother used to say that people in this country were very good at inventing crimes, but, better still, we were good at inventing punishments to go with them" are the words of the protagonist of this story. Teacher Fei, a drawing teacher is branded a pedophile after a student complains against him for gazing at another girl student. His career is ruined as his file has a black mark. The sole reason he is retained at his job is that he could paint Chairman Mao's face beautifully; his other accomplishments like his expertise in Mural paintings sidelined. It is the case of history repeating itself as his own father was demoted from his post as a University Professor to a toilet cleaner for being a capitalist roader. His father kills himself after being re-instated at the University. Fei, a lifelong bachelor, lives with his ancient mother whose favorite phrase is "I have nothing to say about this world". She had cleaned toilets with her husband and had gone through the ignominy of her son's indiscretion. Her reticence helps her lead a rationed life with her now retired and alone son. Teacher Fei finds kinship with a man who is being wrongly accused of extra marital relationship by his own daughter in the very public cyberspace. In a culture steeped in filial piety, the daughter's open condemnation of the father is viewed askance by Teacher Fei. He ritualistically reads the young woman's blog titled 'A Declaration of War on Unfaithful Husbands' and is aghast at the support she has garnered. He tracks the aggrieved father, meets him and offers his emotional support. It's nothing much but Teacher Fei feels the need to converse with and console the father, a man like him and like his father. The story throws open discussions on questions of morality with its references to extra marital relationships, adultery and chat-room love, etc.

Morality takes the centre stage in "House Fire" a story of six retired women who run a detective agency specializing in extra marital affairs. Their clients are usually desperate housewives trying to avenge their husbands for their infidelity. Getting a divorce was easy as the old belief, "Breaking up a marriage was more sinful than destroying seven temples" held no locus stand anymore. The women worked on the principle of cleansing society and fighting against deteriorating morals and called themselves "saviours of burning houses". The six are flummoxed by their first male client, a young man who suspects his father of sleeping with his wife. To add to his misery, he suspects his son to be his half-brother. Confronted by the strange tale, the women are painfully reminded of the imperfections in their own families. Mrs. Lu is plagued by the memory of the girl whom she had reported to the authorities for having been with a boy in her hostel room. The girl was promptly expelled but managed to sneak into her hostel only to jump off the building. "The thud, ten years later, still made Mrs Lu shiver at night". Mrs. Mo, whose husband had purportedly died in an accident, is confronted with the truth of the matter. She remembers how the road accident was in fact a cover for a planned suicide. It was her discovery of his affair of two decades with another man that pushed him to his death. Mrs Mo buries the secret deep inside her to protect her daughter and her husband's name. Homosexuality was a criminal offense in China and viewed as a mental aberration. The political strictures in place do not tolerate or even acknowledge homosexuality and punishments can be severe if reported.

"Sweeping Past" is a lyrical, finely etched narrative with a strong emotional impact. It is the story of Ailin, an ageing grandmother, narrating the history of a photograph to her 14 year old granddaughter

Ying It was a picture of Ailin and her two “sworn sisters” taken almost fifty years ago. The three young girls, Ailin, Lan and Mei, had challenged the authority's denouncement of acts of bonding as a “noxious feudal legacy” and entered a sisterhood pact pledging that they “sworn sisters from now on, would stick through thick and thin till the day they were to leave the earthly world together”. They decide to seal and celebrate this pact by taking a photograph together. The only photographer in town was happy for the excited girls and adds a line from an ancient poem alluding to their sisterhood in the final print of the photograph. Ailin narrates with nonchalance how the photographer was brutally beaten to death by the Red Guards for possessing German made cameras; a tell-tale sign of being a capitalist spy. The remarkable stoicism of the characters is informed by the violence they have grown with. Ailin had to live through the trauma of breaking up with her closest friends. When Lan and Mei had their babies, it was Ailin who had suggested that they should get the children married to each other. Lan's young daughter is raped and murdered by Mei's son and the friendship turns bitter. Ailin is blamed by both parties for the tragedy that befell them and the three of them part ways never to meet again. It is the photograph that brings back the painful memories of the past to Ailin. However, Ying is more appreciative of the aesthetic value of the photograph. She gets a poster sized photo- shopped print to take it back with her. She sees the cultural value of the picture of three young Chinese girls adorning her parent's restaurant in Lisbon. Ailin, on the other hand, is “saddened by the fact that her granddaughter had less space and time to dream than Ailin herself had had at this age”. She is one among the many characters that populate Yiyun Li's stories who is lonely and forgotten. The story reveals worlds strange and familiar, cultures both traditional and modern to create a mesmerizing and vibrant landscape of life.

One needs a thousand years of good prayers to be a father and a daughter- such goes a Chinese adage on the importance of relationships. “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers” explores the delicate relationship between an ageing father and his divorced daughter. A retired rocket scientist is on a visit to an American Mid-western town where his daughter works as a librarian. He imagines his daughter to be emotionally distraught after the divorce and forces her to let him visit her in America. However, he discovers that the daughter has grown increasingly taciturn and doesn't communicate much with him. He makes an acquaintance with an Iranian lady in the park and they begin to talk to each other despite the language problem. She is the only person he can speak with as his daughter becomes aloof by the day. Mr. Shi wants to tell 'Madam', the Iranian lady, how much he misses “the days when his daughter was small and life was hopeful”. He confronts his daughter and demands that she talk to him more and include him in her life. She retaliates that he had never been a good talker himself as he and his wife never talked much. He is shocked when she reveals that it was her adulterous relationship with a Romanian that had wrecked her marriage. Mr. Shi is also taken aback when the daughter reveals that she and her long- dead mother had known that he wasn't a rocket-scientist any more. Mr. Shi confesses to Madam that he isn't really a rocket scientist and goes on to narrate his experience. He had trained to become a rocket scientist and had been one for the first three years of his thirty-eight year career. His association with his card puncher, Yilan, was the reason he was demoted. They started talking to one another about their lives, never about their respective jobs during the office lunch breaks. They were never in love and even their fingers hadn't touched. Talking was an addiction for them, it was like riding with an “unreined horse”. However, talking between a married man and an unmarried woman was not accepted by the authorities and this alliance was immediately reported. In spite of his repeated pleas of innocence, the card puncher was sent down to a provincial town and he was given the option to publicly confess and gave a self-criticism. He refused to do so and had to accept the lowest position at the Institute. He goes back to his family as the silent preoccupied rocket-scientist never revealing the truth. The calculated cruelties of an authoritarian regime have dire repercussions on the lives of many. The casualness by which many careers are ruined subverts dreams of a happy existence.

Yiyun Li's has tenderly depicted the broken lives of her protagonists. The economy of words and

their lyrical quality give a melancholic subtlety to the narratives. Her stunning honesty lends wry humour to the characters desperately attempting to reorient themselves to life. It is the ambiguity of situations and characters that render power to her prose.

Works Referred:

1. Li, Yiyun. *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers*. New York: Random House, 2005. Print.
2. ---. *Gold Boy, Emerald Girl*. New York: Random House, 2010. Print.