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# A Cultural Analysis of Female Enslavement and Resistance in A Dream of Red Mansions

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## Abstract

This paper presents an analysis of the issues of female enslavement and female resistance in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, taking into consideration the role of Confucian gender ideology in the lives of women within both elite and domestic circles of Qing Dynasty China. The review examines the interplay between gender and class oppression through a literary analysis of Lin Daiyu, an aristocratic woman, and Qingwen, a servant girl. Lin Daiyu fights against social pressure through poetry and emotional resistance, whereas Qingwen fights against enslavement through open defiance and personal suffering. The resistance of both characters costs them dearly, revealing the novel's criticism of patriarchal systems. The poetic rebelliousness of Lin Daiyu and the uncompromising integrity of Qingwen within the framework of Qing Dynasty China lead to critical reflections on issues concerning women of diverse social classes. Their opposition represents a moving criticism of Confucian gender relations and serves as a testament to the multifaceted relationship between

power and identity in China. Through the use of thematic analysis, character examination, and a historical approach, this review demonstrates how literary texts can provide a tool for social critique. The research can benefit feminist literary studies in that it demonstrates the complexity of female agency within systems of oppression and humanizes the struggles of women in ancient Chinese society. This work is weakened by its limited scope, which captures only two characters, Lin Daiyu and Qingwen; thus, they may not represent the full scope of female experience in the novel. Moreover, the application of purely literary methods of analysis without the inclusion of historical or sociological methodologies limits the scope of contextual understanding. These shortcomings imply that more inclusive and interdisciplinary research will be required in the future.

**Keywords:** *A Dream of Red Mansions*, female enslavement, Confucianism, Qing Dynasty, feminist literary studies

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*A Dream of Red Mansions*, or *The Story of the Stone*, written by Cao Xueqin in the eighteenth century, is one of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature. As [1] observed, this monumental work masterfully details the dysfunctions of an aristocratic family while providing a vast panoramic view of feudal Qing Dynasty society. The novel is particularly important because of its broad scope and its powerful portrayal of women within such a male-dominated society. In addition, [2] noted that, when placed in the context of the steep class system of the novel, women are depicted as submissive and powerless, a condition that stems from the Confucian regulation of female behavior that the novel portrays. All the female characters in the novel, from aristocratic women to maids, are oppressed in different ways, yet their oppression is interdependent. Consequently, [3] concluded that Jia Baoyu, the main character, was born into the wealthy Jia family with numerous female relatives and maids whose relationships can best be understood in the context of Confucian hierarchy and subordination. This particular issue is one of the subtle forms of female enslavement that is evident in *A Dream of Red Mansions*. Upper-class women, such as Lin Daiyu and Xue Baochai, experience social constraints that limit their autonomy in marriage, education, and personal freedom.

Meanwhile, servant girls such as Qingwen and Xiren navigate a more overt form of enslavement, as they are bound not only by gender roles but also by their status as maids in the Jia household. These servant women are expected to be obedient, hardworking, and self-sacrificing, often enduring mistreatment from both their masters and higher-ranking maids [4]. Despite their subordinate positions, many of these women find subtle and overt ways to resist oppression, whether through emotional defiance, intellectual engagement, or acts of quiet resistance. Resistance among the female characters in the novel takes various forms [5]. Lin Daiyu, for example, resists societal expectations through her melancholic and poetic disposition, rejecting the materialism and pragmatism that define the lives of women like Xue Baochai. Servant girls such as Qingwen display courage and defiance, refusing to conform entirely to the demands placed upon them [6]. While these acts of resistance are more personal and less collective, they still demonstrate the novel's complexity in depicting the power of female characters within a patriarchal society. By identifying these elements in the novel, one is able to understand more fully the position of women in Qing Dynasty China and also how literature encapsulates criticism of society and culture.

This background naturally leads to the objectives of the present research, which aim to examine how the lives of women in Qing Dynasty China, both noble and servant, were shaped by Confucian values and patriarchal structures. Through the tension between submission and resistance, the study aims to demonstrate the broader cultural patterns embodied in the representation of female characters within the novel. The choice of *A Dream of Red Mansions* as a cultural text is influenced by the fact that it remains unrivaled in terms of gender analysis of eighteenth-century Chinese society. As part of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature, it provided a new literary landscape that had not previously been seen, in which women, despite their diminished place in history, are placed in the spotlight and portrayed with emotional sensitivity and moral agency.

More specifically, this study seeks to investigate how Confucian ethics, family hierarchy, and traditional gender roles shaped the lives of noblewomen and servant girls in *A Dream of Red Mansions*. It also aims to analyze how deeply ingrained social norms, such as filial piety, virtue, and arranged marriage, dictated women's roles and opportunities for autonomy. In addition, the study examines how women navigate oppression through poetry, emotional defiance, and personal agency, reflecting the complex interplay between submission and resistance in traditional Chinese culture.

Accordingly, the study is guided by several central questions. It asks how Confucian ethics, family hierarchy, and traditional gender roles shape the lives of noblewomen and servant girls in *A Dream of Red Mansions*. It further asks in what ways women in the novel navigate oppression through poetry, emotional defiance, and personal agency, and how this reflects the balance between submission and resistance in traditional Chinese culture. Finally, it asks how deeply ingrained social norms, such as filial piety, virtue, and arranged marriage, dictate women's roles and limit or enable their autonomy in *A Dream of Red Mansions*.

This study is significant because it highlights the complexities of female enslavement and resistance in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, offering a cultural and literary perspective on gender roles in Qing Dynasty China. By analyzing the struggles and resilience of women in the novel, this research contributes to feminist literary studies and historical discussions of Confucian gender ideology. Additionally, it enhances understanding of how literature serves as a medium for social critique.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This review provides a critical literary study of the novel *A Dream of Red Mansions*, focusing on the role of women as slaves and their actions against such subjugation in light of Confucianism, social hierarchy, and gender roles. By focusing on two main female characters and their attitudes toward the patriarchal norms of society, the review reveals the critical view of the novel concerning female oppression and the struggle of women in society. To give the reader detailed insight into the lives of two selected female characters, Lin Daiyu and Qingwen are used as the central subjects of this review

analysis, as they belong to different social classes, namely aristocratic women and servant girls, respectively. In the present review, by analyzing the text and comparing the characters' experiences of oppression and their forms of subversion, the intersectionality of gender and class in the novel is discussed. Methods of literary analysis are given in Table 1.

**Table 1.** *Methods of literary analysis*

Method	Focus
Character Analysis	Examines Lin Daiyu's and Qingwen's roles, struggles, and resistance.
Thematic Analysis	Explores Confucian gender roles, marriage constraints, and female agency.
Symbolism & Motif Analysis	Analyzes poetry, health, speech, nature imagery, and foreshadowing.
Dialogue & Narrative Analysis	Studies how speech and tone reflect defiance and oppression.
Historical Contextualization	Connects the novel's depiction of women to Qing Dynasty realities.

Several literary analysis methods are employed to examine the novel's depiction of female enslavement and resistance. Character analysis focuses primarily on Lin Daiyu and Qingwen, their behavior, and their interactions with other members of the Jia household. By comparing and contrasting their hardships, actions, and outcomes, their plight and the nature of female enslavement and resistance in the novel are determined. Particular attention is paid to how they resist, whether through feelings, poetry, or defiance of authority.

Thematic analysis identifies major themes including Confucian gender ideology, marriage constraints, social hierarchy, and the emergence of female agency. In addition, the plight of Lin Daiyu and Qingwen in terms of submission and resistance provides further grounds for discussing the position of women in the Qing Dynasty.

Symbolism and motif analysis are also used in this review. Lin Daiyu's poetry and sickly appearance, along with Qingwen's unladylike attitude and untimely death, are viewed as symbols of rebellion. The themes of aspiration and misogyny, manifested in motifs of nature, dream-like reality, and foreshadowing in the novel, are discussed to reveal how the narrative undermines the conventional representation of women.

Dialogue and narrative structure analysis further support the review. The study analyzes how Lin Daiyu's and Qingwen's dialogues reflect their personalities and defiance. The narrative's tone and structure in describing female characters are examined to assess how their struggles are framed within the novel's moral and philosophical framework.

Historical and cultural contextualization is also central to the review. It explains how the social and cultural conditions reflected in *A Dream of Red Mansions* relate to eighteenth-century China, including the role of Confucianism in defining women. The representation of women in this novel is then compared to historical facts about women in Qing Dynasty China.

The review selects Lin Daiyu and Qingwen as case studies because they represent two distinct yet interwoven aspects of female enslavement and resistance. Lin Daiyu, as a noblewoman, faces emotional and intellectual constraints and resists through poetry, melancholic introspection, and emotional defiance. Qingwen, as a servant girl, experiences class-based oppression and violence more directly and fights back by speaking out, being brave, and refusing to accept the submissive role expected of a servant. Through a comparison of these characters, the review gives readers some understanding of how women of different social statuses experience and resist oppression and how gender and class intersect in *A Dream of Red Mansions*.

Literary analysis combined with a case-study approach is useful when dealing with *A Dream of Red Mansions* as a critique of the gender and class system of Qing Dynasty China. This approach allows a more detailed look at how women suffer in the novel and how they resist oppression. From the review analysis and the literature contextualized in this review, it can be seen that literature offers both a reflection and an embodiment of anti-oppressive responses to practices including female slavery.

This methodological choice aligns with accepted feminist literary critical practice, which typically comes to terms with the hidden authority of power, gender, and ideology within canonical texts through character-driven and thematic criticism. Moreover, historical contextualization is a strategy employed that concurs with the approach prescribed by cultural studies theories, which emphasize the need to place literature within its socio-political context to increase the depth of interpretation [7]. The character-based case-study approach enables an intensive reading of a text while disclosing the wider cultural textures, especially in texts such as *A Dream of Red Mansions*, where individual accounts are projections of broader constraints existing in society.

Nevertheless, the study methodology has its challenges. First, this literary analysis is analytical in itself, and it can be subjective, particularly in evaluating symbolic or emotional resistance. Second, the use of only two characters, though permitting depth, reduces the representational range of the study and marginalizes other important female voices within the novel. Finally, the absence of cross-reference with original historical sources limits the possibility of explicit correlations between fictional representations and the actual experiences of women during the Qing Dynasty. These weaknesses underline the importance of restraint in generalizing the results and indicate the possibilities for interdisciplinary development in further studies.

### 3. ANALYSIS

#### 3.1. INTRODUCTION TO THE NOVEL AND CULTURAL FRAMEWORK

*A Dream of Red Mansions* is a profound cultural work that demonstrates the operation of gendered oppression in Qing Dynasty China through emotionally and socially multilayered female characters. Instead of simply mirroring the Confucian social order, the novel critiques it by showing the ways in which both noblewomen and servant girls negotiate, and occasionally resist, their prescribed positions. This paper argues that Lin Daiyu and Qingwen present two contrasting but related expressions of resistance, one poetically anchored in self-reflection and psychological liberty, the other linguistically grounded in protest and personal integrity. Such characterizations are not only used to present suffering but also to highlight the systematic oppression of female agency based on class distinctions. Both their similar and contrasting tragic destinies reflect the price of resistance in a patriarchal society, providing significant insight into the relationships among gender, power, and Confucian values within the Chinese tradition.

#### 3.2. LIN DAIYU: A NOBLEWOMAN'S RESISTANCE THROUGH EMOTION AND POETRY

As a result, Lin Daiyu is seen as an outsider in the Jia household, a guest rather than a central member of the family. Lin Daiyu, as a noblewoman in the declining Jia family, is expected to embody the Confucian ideals of modesty, obedience, and filial piety. However, S. Zhang [8] specified that, despite her aristocratic background, her position within the family is far from secure. She lacks both financial stability and strong parental backing, as her father is deceased, and her mother, Lady Jia's daughter, has also passed away. Figure 1 shows the sketch of Lin Daiyu, who was a leading character in the novel.



Figure 1. *Lin Daiyu Character* Source: [9]

While other noblewomen in the Jia household conform to Confucian gender norms to ensure their survival, Lin Daiyu stands apart by refusing to suppress her emotions and desires. Moreover, [10] highlighted that, unlike Xue Baochai, who is wealthy, practical, and compliant with societal expectations, Lin Daiyu is sensitive, emotionally expressive, and unwilling to compromise her individuality in order to secure favour within the family.

Unlike Xue Baochai, who focuses on practicality and compliance, Lin Daiyu's poetry is deeply personal, often filled with imagery of fleeting beauty, withering flowers, and fading youth, all metaphors for the impermanence of female existence in a patriarchal society. One of the most profound ways in which Lin Daiyu resists societal expectations is through poetry. In Qing Dynasty China, poetry was considered a refined art form, often dominated by male scholars and aristocrats. However, for noblewomen, poetry served as a rare and subtle means of self-expression, allowing them to communicate emotions, desires, and frustrations that could not be openly expressed in a highly restrictive society [11]. Lin Daiyu's poetry is marked by melancholy, longing, and introspection, reflecting her inner turmoil and her discontent with the constraints placed on her as a woman [12].

In traditional Confucian society, women were expected to exhibit emotional restraint and self-sacrifice in order to maintain harmony within the family. Figure 2 provides a depiction of how women are treated in traditional Confucian society.

Instead of passively enduring hardship, Lin Daiyu externalizes her suffering, making her pain visible to those around her. However, her emotional vulnerability also isolates her. Because she refuses to conform to the stoic and controlled demeanour expected of noblewomen, she is often seen as difficult or overly sensitive. According to Ye [14], silence, patience, and endurance were considered virtues, while open displays of emotion were seen as signs of weakness or defiance. Lin Daiyu subverts these expectations by unapologetically expressing her emotions, making her stand out among

the women in the Jia household. Unlike Xue Baochai, who suppresses her feelings in order to maintain a composed and respectable image, Lin Daiyu openly cries, becomes jealous, and expresses her dissatisfaction with the world around her. Additionally, [15] notes that her emotional honesty is a form of resistance, as it directly challenges the Confucian ideal that women should accept their fate without complaint.



**Figure 2.** *Depiction of traditional Confucian society* Source: [13]

The world is portrayed as one of conformity, but neither Ling nor Lin Daiyu can fit into that world; as such, Lin Daiyu cuts herself off from society, emotionally and physically, dooming herself to die at a young age. One of the most common motifs in the novel is Lin Daiyu's fragile health.

There is often a connection between her physical frailty and her emotional suffering, which makes the fight for independence easier to understand in women [16]. In Qing Dynasty literature, women depicted as fragile and sickly are the epitome of purity and elegance, but Lin Daiyu's frailty also implies a psychological price for defiance [17]. It reflects the gradual wearing down caused by struggling against a bureaucratic society that stifles the spirit and rejects complexity. Her deterioration throughout the novel is not only a symbol of the protagonist's misfortune but also a critique of society's treatment of women who refuse to conform to gender expectations [18].

By insisting on love over duty, Lin Daiyu challenges the Confucian belief that marriage should be dictated by family interests rather than individual choice. Her refusal to accept a loveless, pragmatic marriage is a direct defiance of the societal norms that reduce women to pawns in family alliances. Lin Daiyu openly defies the traditional world's principles and audaciously refuses to marry for anything but personal affection, which can be considered one of her forms of resistance.

Meng and Dai [19] noted that, while Xue Baochai has a more pragmatic attitude toward marriage as a social obligation, Lin Daiyu values romantic love. One distinguishing factor, however, is that her love for Jia Baoyu is not motivated by material gain but rather by genuine affection and shared intelligence. Lin Daiyu is a model of disobedience toward the traditional feminine roles and expectations that echoed Confucian ideology in Qing Dynasty China, as seen in her rebellious disregard for the practice of marriage as an arranged and socially beneficial institution. This deviation from what could be regarded as normal throws into doubt the negotiations and cultural values of romantic love against pragmatic marriage arrangements during that period. Lin Daiyu, [20] again explains, is nevertheless not protected by this idealism because the Jia family prefers the marriage of Baoyu with Xue Baochai due to Lin Daiyu's poor financial and health condition.

Xue Baochai and Lin Daiyu represent two contrasting approaches to survival within the same oppressive system.

- Xue Baochai submits to societal expectations, securing her place within the Jia family through compliance, pragmatism, and adherence to Confucian ideals [11].
- Lin Daiyu resists, refusing to compromise her emotions, intellect, or personal beliefs for the sake of social acceptance [21].

While Xue Baochai's submission ensures her social stability and survival, Lin Daiyu's defiance leads to her isolation and eventual downfall. This contrast serves as a critique of a system that punishes women for seeking autonomy and rewards those who conform, even at the cost of their happiness.

### 3.3. QINGWEN: A SERVANT GIRL'S DEFIANCE AGAINST OPPRESSION

Servant women in feudal China occupied the lowest position in the rigid social hierarchy, facing oppression based on both gender and class. Unlike noblewomen, whose struggles were tied to marriage and familial expectations, servant girls endured constant labour, mistreatment, and absolute dependence on their masters. Without legal rights or personal

autonomy, they were considered expendable and had little control over their own lives. Qingwen, despite her subordinate position as a maid in the Jia household, refuses to conform to the passive and submissive role expected of her [22]. She does not adopt the strategy of obedience and flattery, which many other maids use to gain favour and secure their positions. Instead, she asserts her dignity and integrity, standing apart from her peers.

While other servant girls use flattery to navigate the household's power dynamics, Qingwen insists on honesty, even at great personal cost. She does not hesitate to confront unfair treatment, openly speaking her mind regardless of the consequences. Her ability to voice her discontent without fear of retribution demonstrates an unusual form of resistance for a servant girl. Unlike most maids, who carefully manage their behaviour to avoid punishment, Qingwen is known for her sharp tongue and strong-willed personality.

In this context, [23] clarified that she does not hesitate to challenge those who treat her unfairly, making her one of the most outspoken female characters in the novel. Her defiance is primarily expressed through her words, as she refuses to suppress her thoughts even when it would be safer to do so. The impudent character of Qingwen, together with her decision not to remain loyal to the patriarchal expectations of servanthood, serves to exemplify Qing Dynasty culture of the time. Her defiance in standing up against unfair treatment exposes society's prejudices toward lower-class women, as well as the struggle between obedience and assertiveness in a Confucian-infused society. Furthermore, [24] assessed that her lack of submissiveness sets her apart in a household where lower-ranking women are expected to be obedient and humble.

Even as she faces unjust expulsion, Qingwen retains control over how she responds, refusing to let the system completely break her spirit. One of Qingwen's defining characteristics is her refusal to submit to injustice, even when it threatens her survival. While many servants accept unfair treatment to maintain their positions, Qingwen refuses to compromise her self-respect. She does not plead for mercy or attempt to manipulate her circumstances in order to secure her place in the household.

Instead, she maintains her dignity, standing firm in the face of adversity [25]. This resistance is particularly evident when she is falsely accused of misconduct and expelled from the Jia household. Many servant girls in her situation would have humbled themselves, hoping to regain their place through submission. Qingwen, however, refuses to beg for forgiveness or lower herself before those who wrongfully judge her. Her silent yet firm defiance in the face of injustice illustrates her strength of character. Her unwillingness to submit highlights the novel's broader critique of the rigid class system that punishes those who do not conform [26].

Qingwen's resistance ultimately comes at a devastating price. When she is falsely accused and expelled from the household, she quickly falls ill and dies in poverty. Her tragic end reflects the harsh reality faced by women who refuse to conform to their assigned roles.

Considering this, [27] highlighted that because she refuses to play the role of an obedient, docile servant, she becomes a target for those in power. Unlike noblewomen, who at least have the protection of their family names, servant girls are completely vulnerable to the whims of their masters. Furthermore, [28] clarified that Qingwen's dismissal highlights how easily lower-class women could be discarded once they were deemed troublesome or unnecessary. Her death is not just a personal tragedy but also a condemnation of the system that allowed servant girls to be treated as disposable. The contrast between Qingwen's fate and that of other maids, such as Xiren, who carefully navigates the household's expectations, emphasizes the dangers of defiance. Qingwen's independence and bold personality set her apart, but they also make her a threat to the established order.

Qingwen's story highlights the extreme imbalance of power between servants and their masters. Despite the oppression female characters such as Lin Daiyu and Xue Baochai suffer in matters of marriage and family, they remain socially privileged and have some measure of power. Servant girls are often at the mercy of their employers, who can fire them or treat them poorly without hesitation [29]. In contrast, servant girls are trapped in a society where they have few rights and are easily replaceable. This lack of security implies that dissatisfaction with any power situation can be punishable by social death. This story depicts how the class system was effective in regulating the lives of the lower classes, including Qingwen [30]. It also speaks about the attitudes that existed in society regarding female servants, who are depicted more as mere objects than as human beings.

However, while Xiren's compliance ensures her place in the household, it also comes at a cost, since she must suppress her desires and autonomy to maintain her position. The contrast between Qingwen and Xiren further illustrates the difficult choices faced by women in enslavement.

Zeng et al. [31] analysed that Xiren, another maid in the Jia household, adopts a very different strategy to ensure her survival. Unlike Qingwen, she understands that obedience and strategic compliance are necessary to maintain stability. By carefully managing her behavior and aligning herself with influential figures in the household, Xiren secures a degree of protection that Qingwen never achieves. Moreover, Zheng & Fan [32] assessed that Qingwen's refusal to compromise her integrity ultimately leads to her downfall, while Xiren's adaptability allows her to survive. This contrast highlights the cruel reality that lower-class women had to make difficult choices in order to survive. Submission often guaranteed security, while defiance frequently led to suffering.

### 3.4. COMPARISON OF LIN DAIYU AND QINGWEN: DIFFERENT PATHS, SHARED STRUGGLES

Though Lin Daiyu and Qingwen belong to vastly different social classes, both experience oppression rooted in Confucian gender ideology. Their struggles illustrate how women, regardless of status, were confined by strict societal expectations. Lin Daiyu, as a noblewoman, faces emotional and ideological enslavement.

Her value is tied to her virtue, obedience, and ability to marry well, leaving her with little control over her fate [33]. She is expected to suppress her emotions, conform to family expectations, and accept a marriage arranged for political and economic gain rather than personal happiness. In contrast, Qingwen, as a servant girl, experiences physical and economic enslavement. She is bound to the Jia household by her status, expected to serve without question, and entirely dependent on the goodwill of her masters [34]. Unlike Lin Daiyu, she does not have the protection of noble birth and can be dismissed at any moment. Despite their differing circumstances, both women are ultimately powerless within the rigid cultural hierarchy that governs their lives.

Qingwen, on the other hand, resists through verbal confrontation and a refusal to submit to injustice. She challenges authority figures openly, refusing to humble herself before those in power. Unlike Lin Daiyu's quiet, poetic resistance, Qingwen's resistance is direct and confrontational, making her an easy target for punishment. Though both Lin Daiyu and Qingwen oppose social convention, they are very different in their approach. The resistance Lin Daiyu engages in is also inward-looking and creative, based on poetry and emotional challenge. She is not a proponent of the pragmatic approach of women like Xue Baochai and, on the contrary, she uses poetry to express her internal struggle and frustration with social norms. Her failure to suppress her true feelings and submit to an arranged marriage is also a refutation of the Confucian ideal in which duty to others is valued more than personal joy. The differences between the characters are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** *Difference between characters*

Aspect	Lin Daiyu (Noblewoman)	Qingwen (Servant Girl)
Type of Enslavement	Emotional and ideological	Physical and class-based
Form of Resistance	Poetry, emotional defiance	Outspokenness, personal integrity
Ultimate Fate	Death due to heartbreak and isolation	Death due to mistreatment and dismissal
Comparison with Compliant Women	Xue Baochai (submission leads to survival)	Xiren (obedience ensures stability)

Both female characters struggle to find agency within their limited positions of power, and their tragic endings show the cruelty of a society that punishes female independence.

## 4. SUMMARY

The examination of Lin Daiyu and Qingwen in a broader sense reveals how these female figures challenged the subordination of women to male power that was characteristic of traditional Chinese culture. Despite the differences between the two women in terms of social rank, both female figures are immersed in an oppressive system that does not spare anyone who attempts to rebel and assert individuality. By illustrating these problems, *A Dream of Red Mansions* challenges the patriarchal dimension of Confucian culture that denies women emancipation. In this sense, the novel becomes a critique of anti-feminist structures, arguing that even women of relatively privileged status did not possess an emancipated right to determine their own destiny.

## 5. DISCUSSION

This review reveals that female characters such as Lin Daiyu and Qingwen in *A Dream of Red Mansions* subvert gendered oppression in various ways, from the emotional level to the intellectual level. This can be situated within a broader historical paradigm in which women of all classes have sought to manoeuvre around the constraints imposed by male-dominated societies. Lewis [35] has argued that in many historical cultures, poetry was a way for women to express themselves and resist oppression without direct confrontation. Geddes [36] stated that, for noblewomen, poetry became a platform through which they were able to articulate feelings that could not be expressed openly in society because of gender roles. In the same way, emotional defiance, exemplified by Lin Daiyu, functioned as an act of resistance against societal expectations that women should be meek and compliant. This is consistent with the current literature in feminist literary criticism, which argues that women often used apparently harmless but subversive strategies to assert their identities and challenge cultural norms.

Further, the review reveals that servant women, like Qingwen, suffered from a direct form of enslavement that entailed physically demanding work and reflected the realities of both gendered and class-based subjugation. Even though servant women in different historical and cultural periods were expected to be obedient and submissive, some of them did the opposite through strong speech, dramatic actions, and unshakable self-esteem [37, 38]. For instance, Qingwen demonstrates

how subordinated women from the lower classes, who were also more vulnerable to punishment, could still resist authority by trying to preserve their dignity. This work shows that women in such oppressive structures had to negotiate modes of resistance that challenged the systems surrounding them. [39] opines that in most patriarchal societies women have often been vocal and non-conformist, and their refusal to submit became one of the only ways in which they could stubbornly defend themselves and their integrity against oppressive systems that were determined to “steal their voice.”

This work also explains the painful consequences of defiance in patriarchal societies, where women who refused to submit to physical or emotional abuse often suffered stigmatization, punishment, or even death. Consequently, gender overlapped with class, indicating that women were oppressed not only in the public sphere but also in the private sphere, so resistance was an inherently risky undertaking. In this regard, [40] notes that the stories of Lin Daiyu and Qingwen reveal how women from noble and servant backgrounds alike are trapped within the tension between conformity and rebellion, and that rebellion almost invariably leads to punishment. In many pre-modern societies, women who dared to deviate from the prescribed pattern were rejected, punished, or sometimes killed, revealing the structural power relations that governed women’s lives [41]. This is in line with the historical understanding that any woman who transgressed the expected boundaries of womanhood was punished, thus offering a clear indictment of the patriarchal societies these women inhabited.

Furthermore, this review also shows how gender and class intersect to deny women their freedoms, while these same women still resist their subjugation in different ways. [42] pointed out that, as a noblewoman, Lin Daiyu is capable of emotional and intellectual resistance, although her actions remain confined to some extent by her class and family background. [43], however, pointed out that servant women like Qingwen suffered more direct and physical forms of oppression because of their low status, but they also offered a form of resistance connected to both class and gender oppression. This distinction indicates how women in different social positions faced similar oppressive structures but learned to fight them in ways shaped by their class position. In line with this, [44] posited that such class-based differences in resistance are features of broader patterns in social organization whereby female subordinates from lower-class origins had limited opportunities, yet they were still able to present civil disobedience in the form of vocal confrontation or defiance against male expectations in demeanor [1, 22]. All of these forms of resistance therefore reveal the nuanced as well as multifaceted experiences of women in patriarchal societies and the different ways in which women from different classes struggle against oppression.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This paper explored *A Dream of Red Mansions*’s depiction of female enslavement and resistance through the lives of two seemingly opposite female characters: Lin Daiyu, a noble lady, and Qingwen, a servant girl. This analysis has demonstrated that the emotional sensitivity and poetic style of Lin Daiyu constitute both a delicate and effective critique of the emotional suppression demanded by the Confucian ideal. Conversely, Qingwen uses verbal resistance and uncompromising personal integrity to question the passive demeanor required of lower-class women. Both characters exhibit agency, though in different ways, and both eventually meet tragic fates, showing the consequences of resisting rigid gender hierarchies. Importantly, the criticism of the Confucian gender code presented in the novel is not limited to the individual lives of Lin Daiyu and Qingwen. Through their stories, the narrative reveals the structuring of female suppression as a cross-class phenomenon, with Confucian ideals institutionalizing the virtues of obedience, silence, and self-sacrifice as the norms of femininity. The novel employs these characters not only as a means to elicit sympathy but also to critique the moral and societal codes that legitimize gender-based oppression. By doing so, *A Dream of Red Mansions* presents a mature cultural critique of Qing Dynasty patriarchy by showing how individual traumas are rooted in structural inequality. Through a fusion of emotional realism and acute social commentary, the novel rises above its own period, although firmly rooted in it, and operates as an effective means through which literature can explore the social nature of ideology and the ways women negotiate identity and agency within that ideology. This analysis is of value to feminist literary studies because it demonstrates the layered and intersectional nature of the oppression women endured, as well as the power of literature in exposing and subverting cultural discourses.

## 7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this review, several recommendations can be made for further study and literary analysis. First, future research should examine additional female characters, such as Xue Baochai and Xiren, in order to explore how other women navigate patriarchal constraints. While this study focused on Lin Daiyu and Qingwen, analyzing characters who conform, such as Baochai and Xiren, alongside those who resist can offer a fuller picture of how different strategies lead to different outcomes. This aligns with the contrast already drawn in this review between resistance and submission.

Second, given that the novel critiques Confucian values through its portrayal of emotional repression, marriage politics, and class-based servitude, future work should investigate how *A Dream of Red Mansions* compares with other Qing-era

or premodern Chinese texts. Such a comparative approach would clarify whether Cao Xueqin's critique was singular or reflective of a wider literary dissent.

Third, although this review focused on literary analysis, the use of sociological and historical accounts might add greater context in analyzing the extent to which the novel conveys the lived experience of women in the Qing Dynasty. This would assist in grounding literary symbols such as the illness of Lin Daiyu or the banishment of Qingwen in material realities.

Fourth, future scholars might consider the application of frameworks such as intersectionality and performativity in interpreting the simultaneous structuring of oppression through both gender and class. For example, the gendered and classed resistance of Qingwen could be re-examined, and the approaches of scholars such as Judith Butler or Kimberlé Crenshaw might contribute to a deeper analysis of these interrelated dynamics.

Finally, *A Dream of Red Mansions* provides useful historical dimensions on gender constructions and their consequences. It could be incorporated into global literature or gender studies courses, where critical discussions of how narratives encode and resist patriarchal norms could be encouraged. In this way, the novel could serve as a valuable pedagogical resource in feminist cultural studies.

## 8. LIMITATIONS

A limitation of this review is its concentration on only two female characters, Lin Daiyu and Qingwen, which does not comprehensively represent the experiences of women across *A Dream of Red Mansions*. Furthermore, the study is based largely on textual exegesis rather than on extensive historical records to establish its validity. The article also fails to examine the male perspective on gender roles, which might add further context to the theme of female slavery and oppression presented in the novel.

## 9. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As a future direction for study, it would be valuable to investigate how male characters either affirm or disrupt gender norms within the novel. In addition, comparative analysis with other Chinese or feminist texts might help illuminate cross-cultural constructions of female subordination. Finally, cross-disciplinary studies that combine literary reading with historical and social analysis would add insight into the lives and experiences of women in Qing Dynasty China, providing a broader picture of gender and class issues.

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