

# “Feminism Passed Her By”: A Feminist Critique on Penelope Lively’s *Moon Tiger* and *The Photograph*

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## Abstract

Penelope Lively is a female British novelist whose novel *Moon Tiger* won the Booker Prize in 1987. Scholar Mary Moran argued that *Moon Tiger* is “a feminist history”. Challenging this argument, this article analyzes the characterization and plot in *Moon Tiger* and *The Photograph*, arguing that the two novels do not show enough feminist consciousness, but convey the support for male hegemony and misogyny complex instead.

**Keywords:** Penelope Lively, feminist criticism, *Moon Tiger*, *The Photograph*

## 1. Introduction

In 1987, the Booker Prize was given to Penelope Lively’s *Moon Tiger*, a novel telling the life-long story of a woman named Claudia, a war correspondent during World War II. By recalling her memories, Claudia tries to tell a “history” of her own life. Scholar Moran claims that *Moon Tiger* is a “feminist history of the world”, for Lively displaces the God with her female protagonist Claudia by rejecting patriarchal conventions and developing feminist novel tradition (Moran, 1990, p. 89). Sixteen years after *Moon Tiger*’s publication, Penelope Lively published *The Photograph*. Like the former, this novel also focuses on the life and choice of female characters, discussing plenty of feminine issues.

However, the characterization in both *Moon Tiger* and *The Photograph* shows Lively’s discrimination of gender temperament and gender prejudice, presenting a tendency to value masculinity over femininity. Some plots around women in both novels also convey the author’s misogyny complex. Therefore, this article challenges Moran’s assertion that *Moon Tiger* is a feminist work. Based on textual analysis, it analyzes the characterization, the plot, and Lively’s ideas about female issues and feminism in *Moon Tiger* and *The Photograph* to prove that Lively does not show enough feminist consciousness, but also conveys support for male hegemony and misogyny complex. Though *Moon Tiger* and *The Photograph* show an apparent consciousness of female experience and a tendency to resist patriarchy, a relatively indifferent attitude towards feminism is revealed in both novels. Accordingly, it is inappropriate to call her work “a feminist history”.

## 2. Literature Review

Mary Hurley Moran is one of the first scholars studying Lively’s novels. Moran (1990) examines Lively’s *Moon Tiger* from a feminist perspective. This scholar argues that *Moon Tiger* is a “feminist history of the world”, which leads the trend of applying feminist criticism to Lively’s novels. Moran’s argument is developed by Kathleen Williams Renk, who connects *Moon Tiger* with British female novelist Ruth Praver Jhabvala’s *Heat and Dust* and argues that these two novels show a common feature of “imperial feminism” (Renk, 2012, p. 218). Renk also points out that previous scholars ignored imperialism’s influence on the development of feminism in Lively’s novels.

Based on Renk’s argument, Liang Xiaohui challenges Moran’s idea that *Moon Tiger* is a feminist novel. Liang explored *Moon Tiger*’s covert narrative progression and silence in narration, arguing that *Moon Tiger* is “a pseudo-feminist novel” because it shows contempt for the third world and high praise for male hegemony, which goes opposite to feminism (Liang, 2021, p. 103). Aside from male hegemony in the novel’s narrative, *Moon Tiger* shows its pseudo-feminism in other places. For instance, the characterization in *Moon Tiger* offers an acceptance and appliance of gender temperament and shows a preference for masculinity over femininity. Moran’s argument about *Moon Tiger*, consequently, is proved not convincing.

Other scholars recognize Lively's emphasis on the theme of female aging. Maricel Oró-Piqueras (2016), from some perspectives of gerontology, points out that Lively's novels have a recurrent concern about the complexities of female aging. Piqueras also compares *Moon Tiger* to Angela Carter's *Wise Children*, analyzing "how the fictional narratives of two older female protagonists who have lived throughout the twentieth century contribute to the demythologizing of limiting stereotypes and beliefs attached to female aging and, as an extension, old age" (Piqueras, 2017, p. 146).

Though the studies mentioned above relate to feminist criticism of Penelope Lively's novels, this paper tries to offer an in-depth comparative analysis of *Moon Tiger* and *The Photograph*, pointing out the unjustified gender description and hidden misogyny complex in both novels. Encouraged by Liang's study, which argues that *Moon Tiger* shows a hegemonic tendency in the narration, this paper has a further feminist critique on Lively's *Moon Tiger* and *The Photograph*, judging from the gender bias of the characterization, the misogynic description in the plot, and the writer's ambiguous attitude toward feminism, which goes opposite to the feminist proposition.

### 3. Masculinity over Femininity: Unfair Attitude in Characterization

In *Moon Tiger* and *The Photograph*, Lively seems to promote gender equality by praising how brave and robust the female protagonists are. The bold, strong, and clever female protagonists seemly challenge the gender stereotype and the gender binary opposition. However, hidden underneath such "heroines" is Lively's heavy gender discrimination that prefers masculinity over femininity, revealed by an unfair attitude toward male and female characters.

Male characters that Lively depicted are often charming, powerful, and positive. Gordon in *Moon Tiger* is a scholar who is "a successful man, shrewd, respected and handsome" (Lively, 2006, p. 24). And Claudia's lover Jasper is "a clever successful entrepreneur" who is also "good-looking, persuasive, potent, energetic, and selfish" (Lively, 2006, p. 9). The words and tone used by Lively to portray these male characters clearly showed admiration. Even Jasper's personality of being "selfish" is not commented on with criticism, but with a positive tone. Lively emphasizes the good qualities of male characters and hardly mentions their weaknesses. By doing so, in these two novels, Lively endows her male characters with bravery, wisdom, and power to make them flawless.

Some praises for female characters could also be seen in *Moon Tiger* and *The Photograph*. Claudia, the heroine of *Moon Tiger*, is charming, clever, and rebellious. In *The Photograph*, Elaine is a bright and successful businesswoman, and Kath is also impressive, beautiful, and attractive. However, by these praises, the novels do not portray how attractive these characters are but imply that they are different from other girls. This could be investigated in Claudia's boasting. According to Claudia, she stands out because she is "a sore thumb amid the Violets and Mauds and Norahs and Beatrices", which implies that she is excellent because of her difference compared to other girls (Lively, 2006, p. 8). In her words, Claudia shows a belittlement toward these girls who are called Violet, Maud, Norah, and Beatrice. What makes Claudia proud is not her identity as a woman but her difference from most women. Instead, Claudia regards herself in the same group as men. Claudia flatters herself for she has "chameleon qualities" like Gordon and Jasper, two men she admires. At the same time, in Claudia's eyes, other women, like her sister-in-law Sylvia, are "poor", old-fashioned, and short-sighted (Lively, 2006, p. 32).

Sylvia is a vivid example of "other women" in Lively's novels. In describing female characters like Sylvia, Lively's wording is often derogatory. Claudia comments that Sylvia is "a good old-fashioned girl" (Lively, 2006, p. 23). However, in Claudia's perspective, Sylvia is "stupid as hell", and "doesn't cause much trouble" (Lively, 2006, pp. 22, 23). The sarcastic and dismissive disparages Sylvia's "good girl" image. Comparing this with the indifferent tone describing Jasper's selfishness, Lively seems to hold a double standard for man and woman: Jasper's selfishness is not a bad quality, but Sylvia's goodness is somehow a lousy feature. Therefore, Sylvia and other "old-fashioned" girls become the villains in Lively's novels, standing on the opposite side of Lively's preferred characters, men like Gordon and women like Claudia.

What's more, Lively hardly recommends women's appearance in *Moon Tiger* but praises some male characters' appearance: Jasper is good-looking, and Gordon's maleness attracts Claudia. Moreover, Lively uses the word "handsome" to portray Claudia's physical attraction, further implying the author's intention to make Claudia a woman with some masculine traits that make her different from other women (Lively, 2006, p. 193). The refusal to use "beautiful" as a positive word for the female protagonist shows Lively's hidden disgust against some feminine terms, presenting Lively's double-standard attitude toward men and women. In a comment, Lively classifies good qualities into masculinity, praising her male characters and female characters who show masculine traits, and belittles femininity with an ironic and dismissive tone.

In *Moon Tiger* and *The Photograph*, it is evident that Lively brings much positive personal emotion to the portrayal of female characters like Claudia to demonstrate their difference from other women. Though the author rejects the traditional female life paradigm and explores the possibility of women as individuals breaking through the patriarchy and pursuing power, it does not mean Lively's work is "feminist". Recognizing that masculinity and femininity are given unequal values in a patriarchal society, Lively does not resist these gender concepts. Instead, Lively uses this gender discrimination by dividing her characters into three categories: men, women who enter the masculine world, and other women. Furthermore, she unfairly categorizes the first two into a superior group, while putting the latter into the inferior one, showing an intention to separate women apart, instead of speaking up for all women as a unified community. The categorization shows that Lively supports the opposite binary in gender structure, presenting the preference for masculinity over femininity, which contradicts the feminist proposition.

#### 4. Competitions and Otherization: Misogyny Complex in the Plot

In *Moon Tiger* and *The Photograph*, Lively's misogyny complex is presented by the plots in which the support for male hegemony, depicting of female competition, and otherization of women are revealed. "Misogyny for women is self-loathing, but it is possible for women not to experience misogyny as self-loathing, by treating themselves as 'exceptions' among women and 'otherizing' women other than themselves, to transfer misogyny" (Ueno, 2015, p. 197). Lively's writing confirms Ueno's argument, showing misogyny complex. In *Moon Tiger* and *The Photograph*, the female protagonists firstly become the "exceptions" among women by joining the male competition, then stigmatize female's relationships in female competition, and finally otherize other female characters by infantilizing and marginalizing them.

##### 4.1 Building Male Hegemony in Male Competition

The relationship between Claudia and her brother Gordon is complicated in *Moon Tiger*. Instead of sibling love, their relationship is filled with admiration, envy, and competition. Unfolded by Claudia's memory, the whole novel restores the critical events between Claudia and Gordon one by one, connecting the past events between little sister and elder brother. The rivalry between Claudia and Gordon permeates every aspect of Claudia's upbringing. As a child, she competes with Gordon in climbing, reading, and arguing. Growing up, Claudia displays her sexual attraction, trying to grab attention from their home tutor. Claudia and Gordon were not close to their parents. For Claudia, Gordon is the only person she is close to during her growth. Gordon's role as a big brother has a strong influence on Claudia. Gordon is always more robust and intelligent and knows more than his younger sister, Claudia. As a role that is powerful, attractive, and hard to beat, Gordon is an image representing a patriarch in Claudia's life.

Claudia's complicated relationship with Gordon reveals her paradoxical attitude toward patriarchy, and her envy of Gordon shows her admiration for masculinity. Although Claudia realizes the bondage of patriarchy on women and rejects the paradigm of family life imposed on women, she is deeply attracted by the male hegemony in the patriarchal system. Claudia, while competing with Gordon, always follows him into the male competition field. Eventually, Claudia rejects the femininity and women's spheres, develops her masculinity, and achieves in men's spheres. Liang argues that this exaltation of authority runs counter to feminism and presents an "obvious textual paradox" (Liang, 2021, p. 103). While competing with Gordon and other men, Claudia "finished being incorporated by men" (Liang, 2021, p. 108), proving Lively's support for male hegemony.

##### 4.2 Stigmatizing Sisterhood in Female Competition

Misogyny complex is often related to stigmatizing femininity and things regarded as belonging to women. For example, sisterhood, which should be a positive and supportive relationship among women, has suffered a bad reputation for a long time. For example, a popular internet slang in China, "Su Liao Jie Mei Hua", refers to the sisterhood that turns out to be a frenemy. This slang is frequently misused and has prevailed on the Chinese Internet for several years, presenting how often sisterhood is stigmatized. In Lively's *The Photograph*, sisterhood is heavily stigmatized, too.

The sisterhood between Elaine and Kath is well depicted in *The Photograph*. When Kath was born, Elaine was six years old, and since then, Elaine has not liked her little sister and treats Kath as a burden "forced" into Elaine's life. When Kath grows into a beautiful young girl, who grabs more attention from their mother, Elaine's relationship with Kath turns into a complicated rivalry. They are like "the tortoise and the hare" and "Elaine was strange where Kath was concerned" (Lively, 2003, pp. 105, 80). Kath, who has an affair with Elaine's husband Nick, also commits her envy for Elaine. In short, the complex sisterhood between Elaine and Keith lies in their mutual envy and jealousy, which is a typical female competition.

Female competition is also reflected in the relationship between Claudia and her sister-in-law Sylvia in *Moon Tiger*. Claudia compares herself to Sylvia in many ways, constantly belittling Sylvia with considerable malice. For example, Claudia's hair "is clipped short and carelessly combed but contrives to look (of course) smart", while "Sylvia's own, skillfully set and highlighted every month, still ash-blonde and is currently taking wicked punishment from the howling gale of freeway wind" (Lively, 2006, p. 33). Claudia often shows such malice toward Sylvia and other female characters. In her eyes, they are weak, fool, and stuffy. Through the competition with other women, Claudia seems to prove her power and wisdom but conveys her belittlement of other women. Whether the relationship between Elaine and Kath, or between Claudia and Sylvia, the frequent depiction of female competition shows that Lively still accepts the prejudice of women and sisterhood, making her female characters compete secretly for male desire. In the plot of female competition, Lively fails to support women but worsens women's lousy reputation of envy and jealousy, stigmatizing sisterhood.

#### 4.3 Otherizing Women by Infantilization and Marginalization

Otherization of women means treating them as "objects" and ignoring their subjectivity, which conveys a potent misogyny complex. Infantilization and marginalization are two manifestations of otherizing women, the former refers to submitting women's power and knowledge by treating them like children, and the latter means treating women as an insignificant or peripheral group. In Lively's *Moon Tiger* and *The Photograph*, infantilization is presented in some specific discourses. In *Moon Tiger*, when Sylvia tries interrupting the conversation and attracting Gordon and Claudia's attention, Claudia regards Sylvia as "like a child" (Lively, 2003, p. 35). Claudia sees Sylvia in a similar way to her daughter, Lisa. She treats them with less love and more contempt. Claudia regards Sylvia as boring and distracting, just like how she thinks of Lisa, who is "a disappointment" to Claudia (Lively, 2006, p. 51). Lisa is slow-witted and does not share the intelligence and power of Claudia and Jasper. Or rather, Claudia is disappointed because she doesn't see much of a "masculinity" that she appreciates in her daughter's characteristics.

In *The Photograph*, Elaine shares a similar attitude towards children as Claudia. Elaine claims that children often talk about love and show their attachment to adults by repeatedly asking, "Do you love me?" (Lively, 2003, p. 176). Kath and Polly, Elaine's daughter, had both asked Elaine this question. But Elaine is always impatient with their love, replying, "Don't be silly" (Lively, 2003, p. 176). Lively unintentionally puts Lisa and Sylvia in the same group, accusing them of being needy and childish, and belittling their wisdom and power.

Therefore, in *Moon Tiger* and *The Photograph*, Lively shows her tendency to infantilize women through the heroine's relationships with other women. Infantilization is a common characteristic of hegemonism. Hegemons regard themselves as strong and wise figures and view others as ignorant, poor, and immature. Lively's behavior of infantilizing women reveals her acceptance and utilization of hegemony, joining the superior team of men and transferring misogyny onto other women.

In addition to infantilization, Lively also portrays the marginalization of women to otherize them further. In *Moon Tiger*, Claudia argues that children "are not like us", for they "are being apart: impenetrable, unapproachable" (Lively, 2003, p. 42). This opinion of Claudia could be considered as how Claudia treats other women. Claudia regards other women as unreasonable "others" and tries to separate them from her. In *Moon Tiger*, when Claudia and her brother Gordon are talking eloquently, Sylvia often interrupts on unimportant matters, and they tend to "ignore her", so Sylvia often finds herself bored, "abandoned and neglected" (Lively, 2003, p. 49). Claudia and her brother's disregard for Sylvia is characteristic of marginalization, otherization, and alienation of women. In their opinion, Sylvia is a bored, overwhelmed, and unreasonable representation of women. They ignore Sylvia's ideas, laugh at her life, and deny her value, showing their intention to marginalize Sylvia.

By depicting male competition, Lively affirms the male hegemony and makes her heroines join the male camp, frequently describing female competition and stigmatizing sisterhood. Finally, through the infantilization and otherization of women, Lively shows a stronger hegemony and disgust for women. In shaping relationships among characters, Lively tries to separate the heroines from ordinary women, delineates the image of "elite women", and makes the heroines stand in the same camp of the male hegemony. However, women like Claudia can't be genuinely accepted by patriarchal society and still need to compete for male attention through female competition. Lively does not empower women but suppresses the power of women by othering women. As Ueno argues, "By creating 'exceptions' to privilege, the mechanism of discrimination against the weak remains intact" (Ueno, 2015, p. 198). Under the premise of accepting male hegemony, it is impossible to realize true feminism, and Lively's works cannot become true feminist works.

## 5. Penelope Lively's Ambiguous Understanding Toward Feminism

To judge whether *Moon Tiger* and *The Photograph* are feminist works, one needs to uncover Lively's intention. In both novels, Lively mentions feminism:

"If feminism had been around then I'd have taken it up, I suppose; it would have needed me. As it was, I never felt its absence; being a woman seemed to me. "a valuable extra asset. My gender was never an impediment. And I must also reflect, now, that it perhaps saved my life. If I had been a man I might well have died in the war." (Lively, 2006, p. 14)

"Feminism passed her by. Women's rights meant nothing to her because she had them anyway. Nothing had ever been denied to her because she was a woman. Being a woman enabled her to sail through life, setting her course, following mood and fancy." (Lively, 2003, p. 12)

Similar feminist arguments in the two works reveal that Lively does not think for the female group and does not take the initiative to speak up for women. She argues that a woman can survive a patriarchal society, be an "exception", and even be given preferential treatment. But Lively ignores the nature of the inferior position of female groups under the patriarchal system and does not realize that women could not join the male hegemony. From Lively's point of view, she is not trying to associate *Moon Tiger* and *The Photograph* with feminism. Feminism passed her by.

Lively does, however, show some awareness and resistance to patriarchal issues. Realizing the injustice of the patriarchal system to women, Lively makes the heroines reject the female identity and life paradigm endowed by the patriarchy and gain a place in the world of men. Creating characters such as Claudia, Keith, and Elaine can indeed reveal the heights and achievements that individual women can achieve in a male-dominated society. Lively also mentions twice in *Moon Tiger* that Claudia is treated as a "witch" to show that the patriarchy does not accept Claudia as a rebel. However, "a woman writer must examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of 'angel' and 'monster' which male authors have generated for her", and "all women writers must kill the angel's necessary opposite and double, the 'monster' in the house, whose Medusa-face also kills female creativity" (Gubar & Gilbert, 2020, p. 17). Lively does not go beyond the writing tradition left by male writers but creates seemingly rebellious creations in the male writing tradition. Such writing should not be called "feminist" works.

Although this article is a feminist critique of Lively's novels, there is no denying that her novels help create charming and powerful female characters, encouraging readers to empower themselves. Lively's prolific career and outstanding achievements prove that a woman could be substantial, intelligent, and successful. However, the current research on the writer is somewhat limited, and Lively deserves much more attention. Moreover, the few studies on Lively, which still define her works as being "feminist", do not capture the core of Lively's thoughts and help little in popularizing this underrated writer's works. A proper definition of "feminism" and a clear boundary between "female writing" and "feminist writing" is crucial for people to understand and go deep into feminist knowledge and research. Therefore, this article intends not to criticize the writer personally, but to provide a new perspective of *Moon Tiger* and *The Photograph* to help people better understand Lively's attitude and understanding about feminism.

## 6. Conclusion

Along with the writer's attitude toward feminism, the characterization and the plot of *Moon Tiger* and *The Photograph* reveal that Penelope Lively accepts the gender binary opposition, praises masculinity and men's sphere, belittles femininity and women's sphere, and presents a misogyny complex by objectifying women. Moran's claim that *Moon Tiger* is a feminist work stands unjustified. Although *Moon Tiger* and *The Photograph* present dissatisfaction and resistance to patriarchal shackles, both novels not only fail to show a clear feminist consciousness, but also deepen the stigmatization of women and femininity.

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