

# Study on Identity Construction in Eileen Chang's "Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier" from the Perspective of Homi K. Bhabha's Postcolonial Theory

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**Abstract:** This paper delves into Eileen Chang's novella "Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier" through the lens of Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theory. Set in colonial Hong Kong, the story of Ge Weilong vividly portrays the complex identity issues under the colonial context. The hybridity of Hong Kong's culture, as depicted in the novel through spatial descriptions, character identities, and lifestyle elements, reflects the profound influence of colonialism. Ge Weilong, the protagonist, experiences an identity construction failure. This is mainly attributed to the identity anxiety caused by cultural hybridity, the lack of self-identity and subjectivity, and the constraints and oppression of the colonial social environment. Bhabha's concepts of "Third Space" and "Hybridity" offer theoretical support for analyzing Ge Weilong's identity dilemma. Her tragic fate not only represents an individual's misfortune but also mirrors the difficulties and helplessness of individuals in exploring identity in the specific era of colonial and semi-colonial intertwining and the collision of Eastern and Western cultures.

**Keywords:** Postcolonial Theory, Homi K. Bhabha, Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier, Eileen Chang.

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## 1. Introduction

Eileen Chang, an outstanding writer who stands out uniquely in the history of Chinese literature, lived during the turn of the century. With her pen, she profoundly portrayed the subtle fluctuations of individual emotions and the vicissitudes of characters' fates against the backdrop of a turbulent era, giving her works profound historical significance (Yang, 2016). As an iconic figure in the field of modern literature, Eileen Chang's literary works continue to inspire extensive discussion and research in academic community. Her novels, characterized by a mournful and desolate emotional tone that is deeply stamped with her personal style, have had a profound impact on the creations of numerous subsequent writers through her distinctive narrative techniques, which employ imagery and exquisite linguistic artistry.

Eileen Chang's masterpiece novella, "Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier," traces the psychological journey of a student girl Ge Weilong who succumbs to moral decline after seeking refuge with her estranged aunt. The narrative begins with the protagonist's family relocating to Hong Kong, which was then a British colony, in order to escape the war-torn streets of Shanghai. As the war's ferocity diminished, the family planned to return to Shanghai, timing their departure to coincide with the Ge's impending graduation. Determined not to let her educational pursuits be sidelined, Ge resolutely concealed the truth from her father and reached out to her aunt, Madam Liang, whom she hadn't contacted for a considerable time, in the hope of obtaining financial assistance to finish her studies.

Madam Liang, who had defiantly married an older man in her youth and subsequently severed ties with her family, shared no genuine aunt-niece bond with Ge. The financial support she promised was, in fact, a meticulously orchestrated exploitation aimed at leveraging Ge's youthful beauty to attract the attention of more men. Despite being fully aware of her aunt's lifestyle and the gossip circulating in society, Ge

remained convinced that if she behaved properly and focused on her studies, she would eventually encounter someone who truly understood and accepted her choices. Upon her initial arrival at her aunt's mansion, Ge was deeply captivated by the luxurious villas and dazzling attire, which stood in stark contrast to her previous modest life. In Ge's eyes, every piece of jewelry worn by her aunt shimmered with alluring brilliance, making her aunt resemble a "miniature Empress Dowager Cixi." As time went on, Ge gradually succumbed to this luxurious lifestyle, while Madam Liang revealed her true intentions, beginning to mold Ge into a pawn to attract promising young men (Tong, 2021).

At a garden party hosted by her aunt, Ge encountered the playboy Gorge Qiao and developed a deep infatuation for him. Despite Qiao's frank admission that he could not fall in love with Ge, she was already deeply ensnared and unable to extricate herself. Ultimately, under the meticulous plotting of Madam Liang, the two entered into marriage, and Ge thereby completely became a tool for her aunt and husband to accumulate wealth.

Distinguished by its intricate detail, vivid imagery, and keen psychological insight, Eileen Chang's novel can be carefully studied on various themes, among which the issue of identity involved in the novel attracts many scholars' attention. Nevertheless, studies that combine the theme of identity with Homi Bhabha's hybridity theory are not abundant. This thesis may provide a relatively new angle to further study the novel. In this way, readers can gain a new understanding of Eileen Chang and the novella.

## 2. Homi K. Bhabha's Postcolonial Theory

Homi K. Bhabha, a British scholar of Indian origin, is a renowned contemporary postcolonial theorist. Postcolonial theory posits that the end of colonialism does not automatically herald true liberation and equality. Colonialism's influence persists in postcolonial societies, continuously shaping the identity and power structures of

individuals and groups. This theory aims to uncover the far-reaching impact of colonial history on the cultural and social forms of postcolonial countries.

Bhabha's theory of the "Third Space" is a fundamental concept in postcolonial theory. Presented in his influential work *The Location of Culture* (1994), it challenges fixed ideas about cultural identity and emphasizes the dynamic and transformative nature of cultural interactions. The Third Space is not a physical place but a metaphorical and discursive realm. Here, new meanings are constantly being negotiated, contested, and constructed.

The core elements of Bhabha's theory include hybridity, ambivalence, mimicry. Hybridity within the Third Space refers to the merging of cultural elements from different traditions. This challenges the idea of cultural purity and highlights the fluid and dynamic nature of cultural expression. Ambivalence underscores the inherent instability and complexity of the Third Space. Mimicry shows how the colonized can adopt aspects of the colonizer's culture but with a subversive twist, introducing difference and resistance. In Third Space, cultural identity is not static or single-faceted but is in a constant state of flux and hybridization. It is a liminal zone where cultures converge, clash, and negotiate their identities, and it serves as a site for the emergence of new identities and meanings.

In such Third place, the construction of identity become even more important. Homi K. Bhabha's identity theory is an integral part of his postcolonial theory. He defines "identity" as an inter-subjective, performative act that blurs the lines between the public and the private, and the psychological and the social. Identity is not something bestowed upon consciousness but rather the way the self "enters consciousness" through the symbolic "Other", such as language, social institutions, and the unconscious. In Bhabha's view, identity is constantly changing and exists among a series of contradictory positions. Thus, when dealing with identity issues, we are engaged in continuous interrogation, and the process of identification is a response to various aspects related to meaning, desire, culture, and politics (Bhabha, 1990).

A successfully constructed Third Space offers the colonized a means to express cultural differences and serves as a field for negotiating survival-related matters, with hybridity being its key feature. Conversely, a failed Third Space occurs when cultural hybrids make inappropriate choices among different cultures (Wang, 2024). This makes it hard for the subject to achieve proper identity recognition, often resulting in tragedy.

Homi K. Bhabha's post-colonialism theory offer strong theoretical support for analyzing the identity anxiety and cultural identity crisis that Ge experiences in "Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier." Through this theoretical framework, Ge's identity dilemma is revealed as a challenging quest for self-positioning and a sense of belonging in the gap between different cultures. Her experiences vividly demonstrate the profound impact that the success or failure of constructing the Third Space can have on an individual's fate (Gao, 2023).

### 3. Identity Crisis in the Third space

#### 3.1. Cultural Hybridity in Hong Kong

In her novels, Eileen Chang often demonstrated the unique hybrid identity of Hong Kong, a British colony, with

meticulous descriptions. Through depicting the jumbled display of Chinese and Western objects, the arrangement of various items and the details of life within the space, she naturally sketched out the influence of Western civilization on Hong Kong, while also showing Hong Kong's retention of Chinese culture and ideas. Hong Kong, which had been remolded politically and culturally by British colonizers, was significantly different from the inland areas of China. Under colonial rule, Hong Kong gradually adopted Western values and social systems and was also influenced by British culture. The infiltration of Western civilization made Hong Kong present a hybrid state in terms of its identity at that time. It was precisely this heterogeneity that enabled the two styles to meet and collide wonderfully in the same space. In her novels, Eileen Chang vividly presented the existence of this heterogeneity through spatial descriptions.

For example, when Ge first visited her aunt's house, she was greeted by a scene like this: "From the veranda, glass doors opened onto a living room. The furniture and the arrangement were basically Western, touched up with some unexceptionable Chinese bric-a-brac. An ivory bodhisattva stood on the mantel of the fireplace, along with snuff bottles made of emerald-green iade; a small screen with a bamboo motif curved around the sofa, These Oriental touches had been put there, it was clear, for the benefit of for-eigners, The English come from so far to see China-one has to give them something of China to see. But this was China as Westerners imagine it: exquisite illogical, very entertaining." In this novel, the house design ingeniously blends Chinese and Western elements, with Western architectural frameworks meticulously adorned with Chinese decorations. This unique mix not only reflects the complex identity interplay of Hong Kong as a colony but also profoundly reveals the unique landscape of cultural collision and fusion. Eileen Chang skillfully employs spatial layout to meticulously depict the subtle dynamic relationship of "gazing" and being gazed at among the characters, in which colonists play the role of observers, while the colony finds itself unconsciously in the position of being observed. Particularly noteworthy is the use of the word "appreciate" in this context, subtly revealing the deep-seated superiority and prejudice of Western colonists. They regard themselves as the undisputed "subjects" with a near-contemptuous attitude, while viewing the East merely as the "Other" to be appreciated (Zhu, 2025). This psychological inequality and estrangement is profoundly and meticulously portrayed through the novel's spatial narrative.

At the beginning of the story, Ge Weilong's attire is also described: "She wore the special uniform of Nanyang Secondary School: a dark blue starched cotton tunic that reached to her knees, over narrow trousers all in the late Qing style, Decking out coeds in the manner of Boxer-era courtesans that was only one of the ways that the Hong Kong of the day tried to please European and American tourists. But Weilong, like any girl, sought to be stylish, and she wore a small knitted vest on top of the tunic, Under that little vest, the tunic stretched down a long way-the effect, in the end, was unclassifiable." Ge's attire resembles the architectural art that blends Chinese and Western elements, skillfully merging Western fashion with Eastern charm (Zhou, 2024). Her elaborate dressing as a socialite essentially catered to the Western world's idealized imagination of the East, where they sketched out the supposed appearance of Chinese female students based on their subjective fantasies about China. Ge's image and dressing style not only demonstrated the profound

influence of Western culture but also served as a vivid display of traditional Chinese culture, making her a living cultural intersection. Her attire transcended the realm of personal aesthetics and became a profound cultural identity and declaration. Through the image of Ge, we can glimpse how Chinese and Western cultures collided fiercely yet coexisted harmoniously in the unique geographical and historical context of Hong Kong. Her image reflects people's complex emotions and explorations regarding identity and cultural expression, serving as a vivid interpretation of the blurring boundaries between tradition and modernity, locality and internationalism, as well as a profound reflection on how individuals seek self-positioning and a sense of belonging in a multicultural environment.

In the novel, Madame Liang meticulously planned an innovative garden party to captivate the favor of Lu Zhaolin. The layout of the garden party was ingenious: "Madame Liang's garden party was garishly swathed in local color 'Good luck' paper lanterns had been planted on five-foot poles all around the lawn. when they were lit at dusk, they glimmered vaguely in the background-a perfect prop for a Hollywood production of *Secrets of the Qing Palace*." However, "beach umbrellas were stuck at various angles among the lanterns, an incongruously Western touch." This mixture inevitably evoked a subtle sense of incongruity, yet aptly reflected the complexity and hybridity of colonial culture. Such a scene arrangement not only catered to the cultural preferences of the colonists but also subtly fulfilled their imagination and expectations of colonial exoticism. Hong Kong, labeled with the tag of "oriental characteristics," is not culturally Eastern in the traditional sense. As a British colony, it bears the weight of history and the blend of cultures, yet still struggles to escape the fate of being perceived as the "Other" in the Western gaze. Through the detailed depiction of this garden party, we catch a glimpse of the ambiguity and struggle of cultural identity against the colonial backdrop, as well as the unique charm and complex emotions exhibited in the collision and fusion of Eastern and Western cultures (Li, 2021).

In the final portion of the novel, the environmental depiction when Ge and Gorge Qiao stroll through the New Year market also reflects the mixed identities of the colonial people. "a place teeming with people and lanterns and dazzling goods-blue ceramic double-handled flowerpots, rolls and rolls of scallion-green velvet brushed with gold,cellophane bags of Balinese Shrimp Crisps, Buddha-bead bracelets with their big amber-colored durian cakes from the tropics red tassels, light yellow sachets, little crosses made of dark silver, coolie hats-and stretching out beyond these lights and people and market goods." The Spring Festival is a traditional Chinese holiday, and the colonial people continue to celebrate it according to tradition. Among the diverse array of items, there are both those with Chinese characteristics and many with Western influences. China's long-standing traditional culture has been deeply ingrained in the veins of the Hong Kong people, shaping their unique life philosophy and values midst the colonial environment.

### **3.2. The Hybridity of Characters' identity**

Western civilization invaded China through war, and Hong Kong, as an Eastern city, was pulled into a delicate position between the two extremes after becoming a colony. Although China and the West represent opposing forces, in Hong Kong, their cultures did not engage in fierce confrontation but

instead formed a juxtaposition: while Western culture was being implanted, Chinese culture was also holding its ground, presenting readers with the appearance of Hong Kong during the colonial period. People living in such an environment had to pay a huge price for pursuing capitalist material life, while their memories of traditional Chinese life deviated from reality and were difficult to restore (Zhao, 2014). In this era, people constantly felt threatened in confusion

#### **3.2.1. Madame Liang**

Madame Liang, as the lady of the mansion, deliberately integrated elements of both Chinese and Western cultures in the arrangement of her living environment, which profoundly reflected the complexity and hybridity of her identity. In Hong Kong, a region deeply influenced by Western culture, Madame Liang had distanced herself from the social backdrop of old China yet failed to fully integrate into Western society, thereby exhibiting a marginalized social status and a profound sense of loneliness. In such a social environment, Madame Liang meticulously crafted a small world of her own through her beauty and strategy. However, her actions and thoughts deviated from traditional Chinese ethical values; she married a wealthy elderly man for prosperity and wealth and severed ties with her birth family, actions that were not recognized within the traditional Chinese value system (Zhao, 2018). Consequently, Madame Liang could neither gain acceptance from traditional Chinese values nor obtain full recognition in Western society. She could only cater to Western aesthetics and imagination by creating a living environment intertwined with Chinese and Western cultures, satisfying Western fantasies about the East, which further exemplified her lonely and marginalized social state.

To some extent, Madame Liang's behavior exemplifies a tendency towards self-colonization, where under the influence of Western cultural hegemony, she unconsciously adopts Western standards and develops a self-deprecating mindset (Pan, 2021). Although the novel does not directly depict Madame Liang's specific attitudes towards Westerners, we can observe from the decoration style of her home and her daily lifestyle that individuals like her tend to embrace Westernization wholesale, imitating Westerners' lifestyles and modes of thinking.

#### **3.2.2. Ge Weilong**

The protagonist of the novel, Ge Weilong, was born and raised in a traditional Chinese family, possessing traditional Chinese cultural values and ways of thinking. This ordinary Shanghai girl, clinging to the naive yet confident belief that if I behave properly and stand tall, I won't let others' gossip deter me from pursuing my studies, sought refuge with her aunt. It's reasonable to describe Ge as "falling consciously." From the outset, she knew that the rumors outside were not baseless, and after witnessing Madame Liang's behavior, she still chose to stay at Madame Liang's mansion. Ge concealed the true living conditions of her aunt from her mother, thus consciously stepping into that quagmire. Ultimately, Ge couldn't resist the temptation of these beautiful clothes and began trying them on one by one. However, amidst this "consciousness," wasn't there also a hint of confusion? When she first saw the conditions at Madame Liang's mansion, she had already anticipated that she might get deeply involved, but she still harbored fantasies, believing she could treat her aunt with respect and that she would eventually meet her Mr. Right, using these as reassurances to convince herself to stay. As Ge gradually learned more about Gorge Qiao's

background and usual behavior, she thought she wouldn't be so foolish, yet she was still deeply entangled. From the moment Ge stepped into Madame Liang's mansion, she had already plunged into the abyss. Her actions were unacceptable to her father, but her self-righteousness was despised by Madame Liang. She was lonely, marginalized, and her identity was mixed. Her father couldn't understand her, and neither could Madame Liang (Ma, 2020).

The exploitation of Western colonists was not limited to social wealth and freedom; it also stripped nations of their uniqueness, leading the colonized to lose their direction intellectually and morally. When Western civilization entered colonies through violent means, it also brought advanced material conditions and rich spiritual civilizations, which inevitably led the colonized to develop an attachment to the colonists' culture (Li, 2021). Ge's journey from her initial arrival at Madame Liang's mansion to her ultimate and complete corruption was filled with inner conflicts and struggles. However, she ultimately failed to resist the temptation and abandoned the idea of leaving, ultimately stemming from her dependence on life at Madame Liang's mansion. This process is a manifestation of capitalist culture constantly corrupting the colonized, causing them to gradually lose their voice until they become mere vassals of whites. Ge's fate ends up as a tool for Gorge Qiao and her aunt, losing her sense of self and enduring endless pain in a state of consciousness (Hu, 2024).

### 3.2.3. Gorge Qiao

From Zhou Jijie's account, Gorge Qiao and she face an awkward situation in Hong Kong as "mixed-race individuals." They have been influenced by Western education and have significant spiritual differences from traditional Chinese culture. They are neither purely Western nor fully Eastern in blood, and this identity makes it difficult for them to be fully accepted in Western societies with deep-rooted racial concepts. The remarks of Madame Liang further reveal Gorge Qiao's difficult circumstances: his father obtained a knighthood by fawning on the British, while his mother was a Portuguese woman who worked in Macao casinos. As a result, Gorge Qiao cannot be fully accepted by Westerners nor truly integrate into Eastern society. His identity and status are caught in the gap between the colonized and the colonists, filled with contradictions and struggles.

Zhou Jijie's words profoundly reveal the prejudice of white racialism: "I'm mixed-blood myself and I've been through it all. These mixed-blood boys are the ones we're most likely to marry. We can't marry a Chinese—we've got foreign-style educations, so we don't fit in with the pure Chinese types. We can't marry a foreigner, either—have you seen any whites here who aren't deeply influenced by race concepts? Even if one of them wanted to marry one of us, there'd be too much social pressure against it. Anyone who marries an Oriental loses his career." From Zhou Jijie's remarks, we can sense the contempt harbored deep within the hearts of whites towards these mixed-race individuals. People like Zhou Jijie and Gorge Qiao, who possess some Western blood, find it difficult to be accepted by pure Westerners, let alone those who fully belong to Eastern society and live in Hong Kong.

Gorge Qiao is despised by the colonists and exhibits an arrogant attitude towards the colonized. This confusion and conflict in identity places him in deep turmoil and loneliness. Faced with the awkward situation of his life, he feels helpless and confused, and can only seek his place in society through the pursuit of material possessions. However, this emptiness

does not dissipate with material satisfaction; instead, it makes him feel even more lost and confused. Gorge Qiao chooses to face life with a negative attitude, viewing it as a game and attempting to fill his inner emptiness through the pursuit of material pleasures. Yet, this approach ultimately fails to address his true inner needs, and he continues to wander in a state of loss and confusion.

## 4. Ge's Attempts to Pursue Identity in the Third Space

The following will deeply analyze Ge Weilong's multiple struggles in the process of pursuing identity, from the emergence and expansion of inner desires, to hesitation and indecision, and finally to complete surrender. It will gradually reveal the arduous journey of her identity reconstruction and negotiation in the complex Third Space. At the same time, the reasons for the failure of her identity construction will also be explored, including the influence of the environment (the Third Space) and the drive of her own desires, so as to comprehensively interpret the deep-seated logic behind her tragic fate.

### 4.1. Ge's Several Struggles to Pursue Identity

#### 4.1.1. Stage One: The Emergence of Inner Desires

When seeing the scene at Madame Liang's house and facing the choice of whether to accept her aunt's financial support, Ge was actually engaged in the reconstruction and negotiation of her self-identity within the Third Space filled with hybridity and power struggles.

When Ge first visited her aunt, whom she had never met before, she was scolded and ridiculed by her. Feeling wronged, she thought to herself, "But now it looks as if all their talk is true! Here I am wading into muddy waters, and for a girl there's no way to get clean again, not even if she throws herself into the Yellow River. I should give up, and try to think of something else. But I've put up with so much already—and now it's all for nothing!" She realized that her aunt's house was not a place for decent girls, which reflected society's stereotypes about women and family backgrounds. However, after weighing the pros and cons, she decided to seek her aunt's help as planned, which demonstrated an individual's compromise and choice when faced with social norms and real-life dilemmas (Xie, 2007).

Ge Weilong's psychological activities were filled with longing for her aunt's luxurious lifestyle and worry about possible criticism. She tried to alleviate her inner conflict and unease through self-comfort and self-deception. This self-deceptive inner monologue was actually a process of her seeking self-identity and a sense of belonging within the Third Space. Ge wanted to maintain her purity and integrity, yet she could not resist the material temptations and opportunities offered by her aunt. This inner struggle and conflict were manifestations of her reconstructing and negotiating her self-identity within the Third Space (He, 2021). Ultimately, Ge chose to deceive her parents and calmly entered this chaotic world.

#### 4.1.2. Stage Two: The Expansion of Inner Desires

Although Ge was fully aware of her aunt's bad reputation, she still chose to stay, attempting to maintain her purity and independence within the realm of the "Other." However, when she saw the variety of exquisite gowns in the wardrobe, her deepest desires were aroused, initiating a negotiation and reconstruction of her self-identity within this Third Space

(Wang, 2023).

On the first night of staying at her aunt's, Ge was captivated by the diverse array of gowns in the wardrobe. She locked the door and tried them on one by one in secret, finding each one seemingly perfect for her, as if tailored specifically for her. "What use would a schoolgirl have for all this? Weilong hurriedly stripped off the dinner dress she'd been trying on and threw it onto the bed, Her knees grew weak and she sat down on the bed, heat surging across her face. 'Isn't this just how a bordello buys girls?' she whispered to herself." She was different from girls here, which was her only source of pride. Yet in reality, she saw no difference between herself and those girls, which insulted her dignity and was unacceptable to her inner self. But after a brief moment of anger, her heart began to wrestle again: should she accept her aunt's arrangement? Her complex emotions were soon soothed by the sight of the magnificent attire before her. This inner struggle and conflict embodied her ongoing attempts at identity reconstruction within the Third Space. She tried to maintain her uniqueness and pride, but the real-life temptations and dilemmas forced her to confront her inner desires and compromises.

Ultimately, Ge was eroded by her innermost desires. She was constantly struggling to reconstruct and negotiate her self-identity within the Third Space, becoming a lonely individual seeking self-identity and survival space in a complex environment (Zhao, 2020).

#### **4.1.3. Stage Three: Hesitation and Indecision**

Ge gradually fell into the trap set by Madame Liang, who take her to various banquet events and use her to curry favor with wealthy and influential men. Situ Xie was the target person selected by Madame Liang. After one banquet, Weilong, her aunt, and Situ Xie shared a ride in the same car. For no apparent reason, Situ Xie gifted Weilong an expensive diamond bracelet. She understood that such a valuable bracelet was not given freely and was aware of what accepting it implied. However, under the persuasion of her aunt and Situ Xie, Weilong ceased her refusal. This exemplified the inequality in power relations. Although Ge was aware of this inequality, she chose to compromise under the temptation of wealth and honor. Yet, her inner struggle and dissatisfaction could also be seen as a faint resistance. Although this resistance was not enough to completely change her situation, Ge gradually accepted these symbols and representations of "foreign" culture in this environment.

When Situ Xie put the bracelet on Ge, she was resistant and fearful. Her aunt, who received a similar gift, was different; her calmness and sophistication formed a stark contrast with Ge. Ge might be a reflection of her aunt in her younger years; she did not want to become like her aunt. This complexity of identity resonates with Homi Bhabha's theory of "ambivalence of mimicry," which refers to the potential ambiguity and contradiction in identity that individuals may experience during the process of mimicry (Zhou, 2024).

Ge thought about leaving but found herself addicted to this lifestyle. This reflects the power of habit and dependence on the current situation. This dependence embodies Homi Bhabha's concept of "colonial identity," which refers to the gradual formation of dependence and identification with the colonizer's culture in a colonial environment. Although Ge understood that her values did not align with this lifestyle, she found it difficult to let go of this dependence (Wang, 2023).

Ge did not want to lead her aunt's life, yet she could not abandon the wealth and honor before her eyes. Knowing that this contradicted her values, she was still addicted to the life

of the upper class. The best solution she could think of was to marry, which could both preserve her reputation and maintain her current wealth and honor. Therefore, she placed her bets on Gorge Qiao, a young, handsome, and wealthy man. This was both her plan for the future and an attempt to find a way out of her current predicament. However, whether this attempt would succeed and whether she could ultimately break free from the shackles of colonial identity were unknowns. This confirms the dilemma and uncertainty faced by individuals when confronted with cultural hybridity and the complexity of identity.

#### **4.1.4. Stage Four: Complete Surrender**

The relationship between Ge Weilong and Gorge Qiao, as well as her choices and struggles within this relationship, profoundly embody the core concepts of "mimicry and difference" and "hybridity" in Homi Bhabha's postcolonial theory. As a female character from the "margins," Ge Weilong attempts to find her place within the "center" or "mainstream" society represented by Gorge Qiao and his aunt. However, this process is not one of simple assimilation or replication, but rather one filled with contradictions and struggles. In her interactions with Gorge Qiao, despite knowing full well that love in such a world is merely a passing fancy, Ge chooses to believe and becomes deeply ensnared. This choice is not only a mimicry of mainstream social values but also a pursuit and adherence to her innermost pure emotions. Yet, when she discovers Gorge Qiao's betrayal, her inner contradictions and struggles reach a climax. She attempts to flee from this world filled with hypocrisy and deceit, but ultimately chooses to stay due to various reasons.

Ge's choices and struggles actually reflect her efforts to find and uphold her own "difference" while mimicking mainstream society. Although she chooses to stay, her heart is filled with endless desolation and loneliness. Finally, Ge Weilong's response when sailors mistakenly thought she were a prostitute: "How could there not be any difference between us? They don't have a choice; I do it willingly!" This statement pushes her inner struggles and choices to a climax. Although she has the opportunity to escape this world of hypocrisy and deceit, she chooses to stay.

## **4.2. The Reasons for Ge Weilong's Failed identity Construction**

### **4.2.1. Influenced by the Environment (Third Space)**

The external environment exerts a subtle and profound influence on individuals, and in this novel, it becomes a crucial factor in shaping Ge Weilong's choices. Despite her constant struggle to remain conscious, Ge ultimately cannot fully escape the profound impact of the broader social environment and her aunt's influence.

At that time, Hong Kong, a place deeply influenced by Western culture yet retaining traditional values, provided a complex and ever-changing backdrop for Ge Weilong. Although she received education in modern schools, her deep-seated traditional beliefs remained firmly entrenched. Women of that era faced low social status and a tumultuous fate, often shackled by the chains of marriage and dependent on men, viewing marriage as the foundation for their survival. Even in relatively open Hong Kong, women's living space remained narrow, lacking diverse career options, with marriage seen as the best outlet (Lou, 2023). Therefore, after experiencing a series of setbacks, Ge ultimately believed that marrying Gorge Qiao was the most practical solution, which not only satisfied her emotional and material needs but also

soothed her inner unrest.

Furthermore, Madame Liang, as a seasoned figure who had weathered many storms, had long surpassed Ge Weilong's initial imagination. She keenly perceived her niece's inner desires and unwillingness, appearing cold and heartless on the surface but actually employing various tactics to lure Ge step by step into the abyss, making her gradually accustomed and ultimately submissive to her arrangements (Zhang, 2022). Madame Liang disregarded family ties and Ge's inner feelings, using her niece to curry favor with money and power, even sacrificing Ge Weilong's happiness to please Situ Xie. After Ge lost her virginity to Gorge Qiao, Madame Liang hypocritically persuaded her to accept reality. The social environment in which Ge found herself and the social circle introduced by her aunt both played significant roles in pushing her towards corruption.

This process echoes the concept of "mimicry and identification" in Homi Bhabha's postcolonial theory. In Hong Kong, a place where Eastern and Western cultures converge, Ge faced a dilemma of identity. While she wanted to maintain her independence, she had to yield to the pressures of reality, ultimately choosing compromise and identification (Zhang, 2024). Madame Liang, as a symbol of Western culture and power structures, subjected Ge to "cultural colonization," making her gradually accept this unequal power relationship and seek her place within it. This process embodies the struggles and dilemmas faced by individuals in the complexity of cultural hybridization and identity in postcolonial theory.

#### 4.2.2. Driven by Own Desires

Firstly, the desires within Ge are significant driving forces behind her identity transformation. Her longing for the noble life of the upper class and her pursuit of material pleasures make it difficult for her to resist the temptation of identity change. Driven by these desires, she gradually abandons her original identity and pursues a new one that aligns more with her inner desires. However, this new identity is not built upon her true self-awareness and value pursuits but rather on a blind pursuit of external material enjoyment, rendering it inherently fragile and unsustainable.

Secondly, Ge experiences confusion and helplessness when confronting identity recognition. She was originally an outstanding student with positive thinking, but after stepping into Madame Liang's mansion, she begins to waver in her convictions. Her recognition of her new identity is not based on true self-awareness but is more influenced by external environmental factors and shaped by the discourse of others. This confusion regarding identity recognition leaves her lacking sufficient self-reflection and critical thinking when facing identity transformation, making it difficult for her to establish an identity that truly aligns with her inner needs (He, 2022).

## 5. Conclusion

The narrative in "Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier" unfolds in Hong Kong, which was then a British colony. Positioned as a "third - world" space between colonizers and non-colonized regions, Hong Kong inherently has a hybrid spatial identity. This spatial hybridity mirrors the hybridity of the characters' identities, which in turn complicates their fates. The cultural impact of colonizers on colonies is far - reaching. In the case of Hong Kong, Britain is the colonizer; for Ge Weilong, Madame Liang assumes the role of a colonizer

figure. Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of "Hybridity" and "Third Space" offer a fresh perspective for Ge Weilong's self-reflection. These theories highlight the pivotal role of cultural hybridity in identity formation, suggesting that Ge must possess a keen sense of self-awareness and fully capitalize on her hybrid cultural identity to construct her identity successfully (Liu, 2024).

However, Ge Weilong faces numerous obstacles in this process. Lacking sufficient self awareness and cultural consciousness, she fails to effectively utilize her hybrid identity to navigate the Third Space. Instead, she drifts and struggles within the hybrid cultural environment, ultimately resulting in the failure of her identity construction. This tragedy is not merely an individual misfortune; it poignantly reflects the challenges and helplessness of individual identity exploration in that particular era. The social environment of that time was complex, marked by the intermingling of colonial and semi-colonial influences and the intense clash between Eastern and Western cultures (Yu, 2023).

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