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# Cross-media Integration of Literature and Dance

**Abstract:** Creative artists can achieve cross-media integration of literature and dance. *Blood Carmen*, the novel by Hong Kong writer Huang Biyun, combines the rhythm and beat of literature with that of flamenco dance into a unified whole, tapping out a unique artistic work. First, the form of dance is blended into the form of language in order to create a unified, dynamic narrative. Second, literary style is blended with the style of dance. Third, the author, through her portrayal of the dancers' lives, expertly evokes aspects of the unspeakable pain life often brings. Huang Biyun's own soul resonates with flamenco, and from this deep, personal experience she has given us new possibilities for the cross-media narrative.

**Keywords:** *Blood Carmen*; convergence culture; dancing in literature

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## 1 Introduction

How can we achieve cross-media integration of literature and dance? One possible scenario is for dance to borrow from literature. There have been such experiments in Hong Kong since the 1980s, one of which was the dance drama *Wu Wen (The Literature of Dancing)*. Mei Zhuoyan, the dancer, impressed the audience with her role as the heroine "Cui Cui" in the novel *Bian Cheng (The Border Town)*. Leung Ping-kwan mentioned (2005: 119) that the last scene of the drama was an adaptation from his poem *Shi You (Journey of a Poet)*, which features dancers walking through the snow-covered land with modern Russian music in the background. Lu Weili, a dance critic, studied over 30 dance dramas produced in Hong Kong; among them are Li Haining's interpretation of the classic *Jiu Ge (Nine Songs)* by Qu Yuan in 1991, then another adaptation from Calvino's novel *Invisible Cities* into dance drama *The Invisible Cities* in 1995. Mei Zhuoyan's *Hua Zang (Funeral of Flowers)* in 2001, which is inspired by *A Dream of Red Mansions*, is also a good example. Still another pioneering experiment is the dance *Er Xing Huan Ying (Shadow-boxing of Two Figures)*, in which dance is

a tool to Zen and a wheelchair is the stage for “writing with the feet”. This dance portrays a dialectic understanding of dreams and reality through dramatic reading of Chinese classic poetry and the Can Can dance, separated by a folding screen. The unique aesthetic value is reflected in the combination of the modern and the traditional, the east and the west.<sup>1</sup>

Another possible method of integration is for literature to absorb the essential elements of dance into its narratives and in so doing stimulate new areas of the reader’s imagination. Hong Kong writer Huang Biyun combines the rhythm of literature with that of dance into a unified whole, tapping out a unique artistic form. Huang, a dancer herself, performed the solo dance *Narrative of a Woman* in 1986 and published the book *Yang Mei Nv Zi* (*Pride of a Woman*) in 1987, both constituting her stunning debut in the artistic world. Almost ten of her literary works were published before she took to learning Flamenco in Seville, Spain, after the final appearance in Hong Kong theatre production of *Mei Xing Zhe* (*Walking in Enchantment*) in 2000. *Wu Ai Ji* (*Loveless*) and *Xue Ka Men* (*Blood Carmen*, Figure 1) were published after her time in Spain. She resumed her training in Spain, though, after the publication in 2003 of *Hou Zhi Min Zhi* (*Post-Colonialism*).

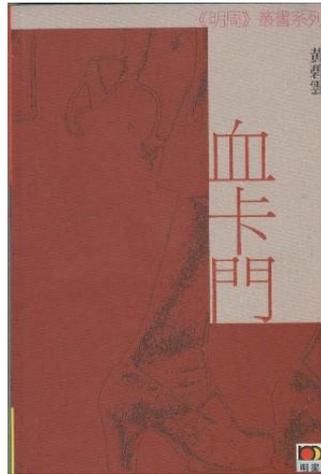


Figure 1: The front cover of the novel

<sup>1</sup> See Lu (2010).

*Blood Carmen* (2002) is a 14-chapter saga similar in structure to her previous work, *Lie Nv Tu (Legends of Virtuous Women)*. Both are collections of female legends and the materials echo one another to create a resonating effect. The first four chapters tell the stories of many flamenco dancers. The next four chapters tell stories of dancers by describing such symbols of dance as the dance music, a red dancing shoe, blood green and bright yellow dance dresses. Chapters 9 to 12 describe body language expressed with the face, the hands, the feet, and the back. The final two chapters, “Blood Wedding” (Bodas de sangra) and “Carmen” turn the classic love tragedy dance into the story about a certain man, “K”, thus setting the traditional dance drama into a real life tragedy and achieving intercontextuality. This paper takes three perspectives to analyze the fusion of literary narratives with elements of dance in *Blood Carmen*.

## 2 Fusion of Body Language and Literary Language

Having been submerged in the essential elements of dance, Huang Biyun gives in *Blood Carmen* the innovative presentation of dance moves and tempos in her narratives. She seeks in her work the style of flamenco and creates a stage for the dance of words.

### 2.1 Integration of the Beauty of Dance and Poetic Language

Dance presents stretches of space and the flow of time. It is poetry and painting in one. Time, power, and space are what keeps dance alive. Flamenco is melodic like poetry and so are the words in *Blood Carmen*. Here are the words describing Camellia’s feeling about Antonio’s dance, “like a giant soaring bird. The mountains show a great divide and gusts of wind come through. A waterfall in the storm. A baby breaks away from the womb. The most passionate affection. The sweetest sugarcane wine aged 50 years would not taste as sweet as his dance” (2002: 56). Even homely girls do not seem mediocre when they dance. “A turn, a jete, a kick...like the notes that wouldn’t leave the strings of the violin, like the tango on an accordion, and the prayers in the cathedral at midnight” (84).



**Figure 2:** A turn, a jete, a kick

These poetic words match perfectly with the beauty of dance. In a flamenco dance one hears guitarists playing, singers clapping, and the dancer dancing, all in souls achieving perfect interaction and resonance. Such is the growing affection between the dancer Lotus and singer Ernesto in the novel, with no need for verbal communication. “She dances to seduce, like cherries of June, like quietness in the scorching sun”. “His singing is mild when her dance is slow, violent when it is fast, frivolous when it is sensual” (19). When she sees him again, “it is already the season of orange blossoms. Mandarin ducks swim on the river. The day gets brighter” (20). In the end, when she breaks up with him for his promiscuity, “Lotus tiptoes as cunningly as a fox”. “She raises her hands, and there is the flamenco dance” (24). The romance in the novel resonates with the singing and dancing and acquires the qualities of poetry and music.

## 2.2 Resonance of Dance Beats and Verse Style

Flamenco, without accompaniment, is melodious in itself. The dancer’s feet move like percussion, her body, in rhythms. Here a billowing of the skirts, a turn, or a stamping of the feet. Most movements are resolute, with occasional slow ones. Similar to these are the narrations in *Blood Carmen*. They are like sketches and dancing figures, at times showing themselves in gentleness, other times definite and resolute. The sentences are mainly short and abrupt, consisting of only several characters. There are abundant lines in verse, with words of implication and intensity, which are more than meets the eye. Description of dance tempos is frequent in the book. “Soleá and alegrías in flamenco are both 12-beat. Waiting for her entrance, the dancer freezes herself, her chest protruding and her face looking upwards. She is so focused that it is hard to tell whether she is happy or sad. The 12<sup>th</sup> meter begins now!” (2002: 3).

“Dum! Dum-dum-dum! Dum-dee-dum-dee-dum! The stamps and heartbeats of Chieiko when she sees her sweetheart Shan Shu holding hands with Wei Yang” (8). “—|o —| o —| o —| o —| ” (8), this is how the feet stamp and how they tap. The verse pattern echoes with the beats of the dance, which is most evident in the 11 poems from the last two chapters, “Blood Wedding” and “Carmen”, then again in the very brief lines about “hands and feet” from chapter 10 and 11. The lines in verse titled “Hands” (130) talk about “hands of a quiet woman: rough, worn, yet powerful. They descend from above her head, seemingly to compress the air, which is as thick as water in the imagination of the dancer. Or the hands may rise, like a dolphin hitting the sky”. Then there is the part titled “Feet” (134):

[T]he Enchanting Walker wonders how much longer do you have to travel before returning to where you started. She very often seeks the womb that has gone rotten, once rampant with maggots and fire. The Enchanting Walker says she wants to take and reject, but is always followed by them. Words, she says. How I hate China, how I hate the ideas of nations, regions, sexes, ideologies, identities, transformations and histories. How I hate life! And how difficult it is to die in the right time.

The poetic language beats in tune with the body language of the dance, embodying the exaltation, the distress, the excitement and exhaustion, the love and hate of the heart. The heavy words are interwoven with the mercurial dance movements.

### 2.3 Synchronization of Dance Movements and Free Narratives

Movements are what define a dance. The four key elements of dance movements are choreography, dynamics, tempo, and motive. Ballet dance is characterized by openness, tension and straightness, whereas Chinese classic dance is characterized by smoothness, curviness, and withdrawal. Flamenco dance, different from either, is highly dynamic. The movements of the body express the dancer’s emotions such as joy, exaltation, sadness, and melancholy. The highly free expressiveness of flamenco fits right into the dreams of Huang Biyun. At the time she was in a desperate search for a breakthrough from traditional narratives. Upon first reading, the narratives in *Blood Carmen* may strike readers as broken and fragmented, but this is a deliberate act on the part of the writer, who really integrated the tempos of dance into the novel. The dynamics of flamenco help forge the uniquely unconventional narratives, making words as dynamic as dance and the emotions they carry as streaming as rivers.

### 2.3.1 Changeable and Shifting Narrative

*Blood Carmen* is mainly structured according to the individual reflections of different dancers on life instead of the plots. In the first chapter, the writer begins with Barbara teaching Lola to dance, then moves to Lola's slow learning, leading to her recollection of the simplistic philosophy that her father, a psychiatric nurse, has preached after seeing so many cases of mental disorder. Then there's the story of Fernando, who finally gave up on the idea of suicide because he figured out that "life is too much of a joke for something as serious as suicide", or simply because he was overdosed. After this the narration shifts back to Barbara's teaching, when Lola associates the slow dance to the slow death of her impatient grandma upon her deathbed. The narratives in the book are changeable and shifting, defying linear logic. Everything seems like fragments of memories, altogether reproducing the disillusionment of the dancers. Just like dancers accumulating strength through slow motions and leaps, so are the words gathering grief through wordless blanks.

### 2.3.2 Fragmented and Interwoven Stories

*Blood Carmen* presents the dancers' stories in a jigsaw puzzle way. There are separate chapters devoted to individual stories as well as ones scattered with fragments. The texts are therefore intricately interwoven with each other. For instance, the story of dancer Lourdes is told in a separate chapter, but the name also appears elsewhere in the line "My name is Lola, not Lourdes"; and again when Anna thinks that "even a dancer as good as Lourdes can only give performances in small theatres and sleazy bars"; in the chapter "As Green As You Like It", "I" got to know a lot of flamenco dancers in Seville by working in a dancing dress shop. In this way dancers including Lola and Lourdes are presented one after another in quick sketches. These flamenco dancers appear to be irrelevant, but they all belong to the same group of "soul dancers", seeking soul asylum from flamenco.

### 2.3.3 Varied Narrators

The book presents the revelations and lives of the dancers in third person or omniscient narration, while telling the non-dancers' stories in first person. Sometimes the two cross over. The first chapter about dancer Lola begins by exploring the secrets in her heart in omniscient narration and ends with first

person narration: “I have never seen Lola again. She didn’t come to class anymore. Perhaps her dancing days are over”. Apparently the persons are mixed up here. But it should be noted that references to “I” in the book denote not only the narrator and a dancer, also the one connecting all the dots. The use of first person in this chapter indicates that even the storyteller “I” cannot access Lola’s inner world anymore. Indeed, however close to everyone the narrator is to their creations, “one’s body is familiar to oneself only, never really coming close to others”. Words of wisdom are scattered throughout the book, culminating in truth about life. The words of Huang Biyun defy the conventions of narratives and seem to be always reaching beyond the ordinary to achieve as much as the beauty of dancing.

#### 2.3.4 Interlacing Monologues

This is seen mostly in chapter 5 “Soleá, Soleá”, where two monologues are arranged together, the speakers not specified. This deliberate obstacle poses a challenge to readers. Eventually they figure out that these are interlacing monologues of two women, Mei and the Japanese woman Chieiko, both voiced by “I”. The two heart-felt monologues are largely independent of each other, with occasional connections, but overall questions with no answers or vice versa. Mei has been in a 10-year homosexual relationship with Ning Jing. The latter then cheated on Mei with other men and left Mei devastated. Not even the affection of Ming, Ning Jing’s lover, could ease her pain. She sees no other way to heal the wound but to travel to a strange land, where she met Chieiko, a woman deprived of love for her ugliness. Compared to the suffering of Chieiko, Mei made peace with her own fate. The two women, deliberately unidentified by the writer, are spiritually one.

As far as the dynamic narrative form is concerned, *Blood Carmen* resembles very much a flamenco dance. Huang’s narratives seek order in disorder to present deeper messages and greater emotional depth, at the same time engaging readers in the tension jointly created by body and verbal languages.

### 3 Interaction of Literary Style and Dance Style

The early style of Huang Biyuan’s novels was violent and bloody, closely resembling that of Baudelaire. “Les Fleurs Du Mal” of the city and of humanity was her favorite subject matter. Her favorite scenarios feature blood, madness,

violence, and death. Her early works were marked with wild imaginings of death and violence and stunning presentations of vileness. More recent works of Huang, however, are more obscured and withholding, comparable to the flamenco dance, which is outwardly passionate but inwardly inhibited. The language in *Blood Carmen* is cold and emotionless in appearance but focused and engaging in essence. Both dance and words are paradoxical in their violence and disillusionment, reality and illusion, motions and stillness, wildness and inhibition.

Flamenco dance is kinetic. It is powerful and dynamic. The dance movements are centrifuged and radiant like the rays of a star. The dancer's limbs are fully stretched as if separating from the torso. The flesh and soul of the dancer swell as the dancer performs the movements by stretching. The free and passionate leaps symbolize the thirst for heaven and search for a new horizon. Japanese dance, on the other hand, is essentially steady. This can be seen from three movements. The first is known as "taking corner", when the dancer circles the stage. The second is "folding feet", when the dancer walks without taking the feet off the ground. Still the third one is "backflash" or stamping, when the dancer steps to keep rhythm, a movement symbolizing love for the earth. "Eastern dances feature centrifuged movements. The dancers wrap their bodies with their arms. Every movement is towards the centre and focusing on one point" (Huang 2002: 646). Flamenco dancers, however, make a point to avoid these floppy movements and slow tempo music, as they would diminish the dramatic beauty. Dancers pause, of course, but only to store up energy in order to move even more forcefully.

These characteristics of flamenco are reflected in *Blood Carmen*. The paradoxical narratives serve to lead readers to an epiphany. While dancing the dancer's elbow may rise, but the shoulder must at the same time descend. The torso may rise, but the feet must remain on the ground. The upper body may be still, but the feet must scurry. The fight between different parts of the body produces tension and makes it beautiful. A flamenco dance appears gorgeous, but the dancer must learn to appreciate the inner fight, for the fight is the way to achieve true harmony of dancing.

The first half of *Blood Carmen* is written at a slow pace, telling of the depression of regular women. The first one is Lola, who seems indifferent towards everything, not in any hurry or delay, peacefully passing through life. Then there's Lourdes, whose endurance through a hard life builds up her passion. Her love for Ernesto is calm and tender, but passionate and dignified. She suffers the most because she cannot tolerate the women around her lover, or the fact that he is bound to leave. This sufferance is the soul of the flamenco dance. The third woman, Anna, was suddenly attacked by a loss of meaning as

she forgot her destination while waiting for a bus. Her life was thus on hold, waiting to take a crucial turn. The rhythm of flamenco is mercurial, so is the mood of the dancer. The overacted kinesic language and different facial expressions are really interpretations of the emotions of the dancer. The same thing can be said about the language in the book, which is just as mercurial to explore the inner worlds of the characters with strength and power.

The second half of *Blood Carmen* gives more intense accounts adapted from *Carmen* and *Bodas de Sangre* and is focused on legendary love stories. Of these the story “The Red Dancing Shoe” is as complex as a detective story, revealing the secret of a red dance shoe found in “My grandpa’s shop”. “I” asked “mother” and the cobbler and his son, and got a name, Mary Luisa. Later at a ball, “I” noticed an elderly woman swiftly avoiding me. Then Carmen told “me” that the woman had been a flamenco dancer. Her lover cheated on her with someone else, which led to a huge fight between the two. The woman in fury was caught in an accident and lost a leg. As it turned out, her cheating boyfriend was none other than “My grandpa”. Another story is titled “As Green As You Like It”. In it a Basque woman by the name of Ursula was trained to be a terrorist and is wanted by the police. Like every other unhappy woman who finds joy in impulsive shopping, the tough-minded woman bought a flamenco dress the color of burning green. In the end she was penetrated by bullets and died in green blood. These unyielding women are incarnations of flamenco’s *Carmen*.

*Carmen*, *Bodas de sangre*, and *El Amor Brujo* are considered three masterpieces of flamenco. The image of Carmen has long been the symbol of the persistent struggle against one’s fate. Carmen’s dancing and singing are acts of defiance against outrageous laws, military rules, imprisonment, and other misfortunes. Carlos Saura’s 1983 film *Carmen* tells the story of real life dancers overlapped with the dance drama *Carmen*, creating a form of narrative that magnifies the theme of the dance drama to fit real life. The line between drama and reality is blurred. Passionate flamenco rhythm accompanies dramatic conflicts, a combination extremely entertaining and appealing to the general viewers.

Huang Biyun, however, rewrote the classics and replaced all the original heroines with a man named K. In her “Blood Wedding”, Bi, the bride, bled on her wedding and a bastard child was born at the altar. A few years later the child died before Bina divorced her husband and changed her name to Nora and remarried. It was K who got Bina pregnant and abandoned her afterwards. K then married others, and had three children. He cannot remember the faces of many women he has been with, nor would he like to know anything about his children because apparently, they are the women’s problems. There is a hole in

K's heart, bound to open sometime. Later K passed by a church and fainted while a wedding was on. Before he died, K remembered another man Ah Liang, with whom he had gone swimming in Deep Water Bay, and for whom, upon death, he had helped to trim the nails.

More stories about K are in the chapter "Carmen". "There are two women in K's life --- Carmen and Carmen. One is as bitter as honey, the other is as sweet as gall". Now the readers learn that Carmen is the name for both a mother and her daughter, both of whom are lovers of K. Mother Carmen would make bloody steak for all, calling it the memory of a matador who died with guts hanging out of his belly. K used to be picked on and hurt by girls. His classmate from primary school by the name of Leocadio would laugh at him. "One day you'll die because of them", he'd say. But the truth is Leocadio eventually escaped with a large sum of legacy that K is heir to. K was shot by a burglar while seeking prostitution. Many recollections came to K before he died: his sister in Hong Kong called to tell him, crying all the while, that she just gave birth to a baby. She cried because she realized that somehow she had to be responsible for someone else's pain. A witch wrote to him. The ghost of K, as the witch wrote, dances with the ghost of writing, and has intercourse. As if seduced by the devil, K lived his life in sin and misery. The posture he died in bears a remarkable resemblance to the flamenco dance. The story of K gives us the idea that behind every Carmen, there are men like K who inflict pain. And the spirit of flamenco is not only a salvation for Carmen-like women, but also a funeral for K-like men.

Dance is mobile sculpture. The dynamics of flamenco must come from the dancer's surging force, vigorous passion, and swift steps. On close observation one notices the dancer's wry eyebrows and sullen and stern face. With daunting looks and disdainful moves, the dancer interprets the themes of power display, evasion, and struggling. From the peacock hand to the wiggly waist, from tapping of the feet to spinning of the body, every movement is the expression of passion and power, and a force so suddenly lashed out after a slow and steady accumulation of inner feelings. The dancer is forceful when moving, yet at times tender. Wrapped in voile-like fabric of sharp contrast of black and red, she gives rein to the bitterness and pain inside by swirling the enormous skirt and stomping hard on the ground. While doing so, she becomes the shadow of her feet and her skirt, a metaphor for the shadow of death in the passionate pursuit of life. The tension between softness and violence is heightened in the dance, as if one were seeking a moment of ecstasy and glory upon perishing, something in the same spirit as the Carnival.

It takes force to be moving and just as much to be still. A dimension is thus created. It is easy to lose control in a stricken world. The challenge is to keep control. "It is not hard to gain speed, but to slow down. To accept slow death

and gentle entrance is the real ordain” (Huang 2002: 9). “The greatest difficulty in flamenco is to keep it slow. It is not easy slowly raising the hands, bending the body and stretching it open. The body aches when doing all these slowly, for slow movements are the most intense” (36). Secrets are formed out of the unspeakable and perceptions come from loneliness. Loneliness, bitterness, and isolation are slowly experienced. Symbolic dance is considered the highest form of dance and those given to it is like living a sculpture. Rudolf Arnheim (1974: 407) provided the term “kinesthetic amoeba” to describe “dynamic body figures without any contour lines”. The heart of the dancer should be one with the surroundings and with the dance. Different from Huang’s earlier works, whose narrative styles are rampant and poignant, *Blood Carmen* appears to be more withheld and inhibited, exerting touching effects with implying, estranging, and hesitant language so as to create from calmness more room for reflection. The contrast between tension and tenderness is born out of her usual style of “gentleness and violence”. In so doing, Huang has made a breakthrough in the cross-media narration of literature and dance. The interaction between dancing and writing is vivid not only in the unconventional choice of subject matter and subtle delivery of materials, but also in the fusion of literary narratives and kinesic narratives in terms of structure and style.

## 4 Pain and Suffering of a Writer and a Dancer

Why dance? Why exile herself from words? Obviously, words alone are not as good an outlet for Huang Biyun to say what’s on her mind. It is through dancing, flamenco, that she finds a way to sooth the beast inside her. “Sweating and sore feet are as real as rain, words, by contrast, are just illusion” (2002: 2) One recalls a Russian dancer’s answer to the question “what does your dance mean?”: “If I could let you know with simple words, do you think I’d still be dancing this much?”<sup>2</sup>

Both a dancer and a writer, Huang Biyun is well aware of the complementary effects of kinesic expression and verbal communication and the paradox of attraction and repelling between the two. “I try to feel the movements with my body and extend my perceptions as far as possible. I know how hard closeness is to get because I have been there. And I feel the difficulty precisely because I have tried searching for it” (2002: 2). Dance is a physical art,

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<sup>2</sup> Lu and Xiong (2007: 126).

and as French thinker Cixous (1976: 875) observed, women need to write with their physical selves to find language exclusive to them. What Huang does, is to use both dance and literature to set herself free and speak to the world. Cassirer (1985: 189) put it best when he said that artists set themselves free through pain and humiliation and transform immense brutality and atrocity into the proudest freedom in our hearts inaccessible any other way.

So what pain has Huang Biyun been through in her life? Huang was born into a single family in 1961 and grew up in Hong Kong in its peaceful times. Her early life, however, was not as peaceful. Domestic violence, in the form of a cruel and unpredictable father, haunted her for a long time, so much so that she claims to still have nightmares in which her father threatens to beat her to death. To overcome fear, she keeps reminding herself that even back from the grave now, the old man would be well over 80 and with a durian she could have put him back where he belongs. This sensitive and rebellious girl spent a brief period in Jing Mei Women's High School in Taiwan and finished her undergraduate studies in the Journalism Department of Chinese University of Hong Kong. After graduation she worked for six years as a reporter, paying multiple visits to Vietnam, Northern Thailand, Bangladesh, and Laos, where she experienced wars and their victims and developed a better idea of the pain and suffering in the human world. In 1995 she graduated from the Criminology Institute in Department of Sociology of Hong Kong University, later earned a law diploma from HKU in 1998 and became a certified lawyer in 2003. As if life was not full enough, she was also a student majoring in French at the University of Paris 1 Pantheon-Sorbonne, an assistant to a legislator, and owner of a fashion shop. She started to learn dancing in Spain shortly after leaving her job at a law firm in London. To make up for the inadequacies of flamenco, she also took to learning modern dance and ballet. In short, rich career experiences, diversified artistic interests, and extensive world travelling forged her talent in cross-media and inter-disciplinary endeavors.

But why flamenco of all dance forms? Ballet and the waltz may be for those born into privilege, but flamenco is the dance form for survivors of life's ordeals. In the words of Leila, "this is it". As she approaching middle age, Huang Biyun discovered the connection flamenco has with her soul. The moment of that revelation must have sent shivers down her spine. As a Spanish dance form, flamenco originated in Andalusia where East meets West, as a cry for the deprived and miserable life of the gypsies. Modern flamenco is completed with the essence of the tango from Argentina and the Gypsy Romani from Hungary. A flamenco dancer is cold and indifferent, but also tender and suggestive, enough to stir up all the emotions one can perceive and push one to the limit. The

dancer walks on the edge of life and death, just like a matador, and presents to the viewers passion, struggle, and the cry for life.

The art of dancing is Huang Biyun's addiction. To her, dancing is both the supreme form of beauty reproduction from which she finds ultimate relief, and a quest into the depths of the monstrous world for a reason for all the suffering. She learned from dancing that true happiness hardly lies in the vitality of life, but in the inevitable disillusionment. *Blood Carmen* ends with the eleventh poem, "I was abandoned that year and came to South America...I felt like doing a dance...if my soul is still with me, what's left of it must collide. I cannot explain how I made the decision. But for a woman like me, past her prime time, perishing is something not to be afforded..." (193–196). Disillusionment and dance, writing and dancing, memory and oblivion, they cannot live with each other, nor can they live without each other. In the end everything vanishes to nothingness. Huang cannot stop dancing to her dreams, like the girl from a fairy tale who, upon wearing the red dancing shoes, has to keep dancing to exhaustion. Her raised head conveys dignity, confidence, and that she will not go without a fight. Softness and violence, fighting each other yet staying close, like water and fire, are Huang's life. Thus is the world of Huang Biyun, comprehensible only to the minds that have suffered as much.

Flamenco is a passageway not only to Huang's relief from pain, but also to her perception of others' suffering. Huang is not the only woman suffering from unspeakable bitterness and distress of the soul. Women's suffering has always been brushed off in traditional literature. Huang tried to do justice to women by telling their own pains. In the novel *Lola* frequently experiences emptiness, which matches the part when she found her fallen teeth in the dancing room and the big cavities. She was often mistaken for someone named Lourdes. She was not very intelligent, failing three times to gain university admission. Her parents, on different shifts at work, were hardly ever around. Their love, if any, was never on duty. Girls with cavities cannot even die hard. *Lola* finally gave up dancing. Lourdes, on the other hand, is an expert in pain. She had menstrual pain as early as age 14. When learning flamenco she had sore feet. Her hands were wet and bled from clapping. Everything of any profundity always has something to do with pain. Pain is as unexplainable as dance, and as physical as dance, too. Only those acquainted with pain can excel at flamenco. The German woman Leila tried to understand time with reason and inhibition. She has been so independent and intense since childhood that her single mother would take her to see a psychiatrist. The doctor then suggested that she take to artistic work as a cure, which brought her to the dancing world. She believes herself to be her own master and therefore turned down the lesbian, Georgia, but suffered loneliness and regret when Georgia found someone else, Anna,

another German woman so tall that she can “raise her arm to touch the sky and lower her head to see the entire human race” (Huang 2002: 39). Her younger brother, a cross-dresser, learned the suffering of being a woman the hard way – by being sexually assaulted. He then stopped dressing in woman’s clothes and went off to a military school to be a soldier. Anna, on the other hand, lives the life of a regular man. She went to college in the United States before moving to London and becoming a researcher. She has three relationships with three men all named Michael. At one point she lost direction and realized that she needed a gesture, which took her to Spain and to flamenco. Her height, however, restricted her from developing the bouncing charm of a little girl. She then went off to Finland, where her height was not an issue and her self-pity disappeared forever. Another name, Camellia, the name of a flower, is considered a queen of flamenco. Camellia was born into a dancing family, but oddly illiterate. She had been obsessed with Antonio’s dancing but eventually became his reject. The richest man in Florence pursued her and failed, thus the legend of dance over money. Later when her adaptation of *Carmen* was ill received, she resorted to marihuana for relief. *Bodas de Sangre* was her last appearance on the grand stage. Camellia’s later life involved a country singer who lost his voice due to laryngocarcinoma. An attachment developed between the singer without his voice and the dancer without her dance. Soon a tumor struck her and she went back alone to her birthplace, waiting for the glorious end of her life.

The complete expression through dancing and the profound self-examination of the soul go together in the novel. The tone of *Blood Carmen* is grieving dark rather than intensified red. Sadness is in every word. The deepest grief is transformed by the writer into hope for the women. “What people forget, the hopeful women pick up on their shoulders. They bear the loss of all hopes and tramp on the earth. Thus is the enchanting walking” (2002: 120). Huang Biyun constructs also the image of a soul collector, who collects the shadows of trees, rivers, bridges, and passers-by. The souls, however, are not a beer’s worth. The only shadows that he cannot collect are those of dancers, for every dancing figure is in such quick motion. These shadows are angry, quiet, exalting, rejoicing, seducing, lingering, confused, suffering, restless, and changing. “The beauty and passion last but a few minutes. The dancing stage is even more unreal than shadows. It is the shadow of a shadow of a shadow, so overlapped that it becomes darkness” (138). How can a collector handle such souls?

Flamenco dance interprets life in a wild, focused, and powerful way. The novel does so in a radical, veiled, and fragmented fashion. *Blood Carmen* is a portrait of dance, a perception of the pace of life, and an account of the unspeakable pain of living. Presented in the book are the love and suffering, emotionally and physically, of the women dancers, their confusion of living on

the edge of bewilderment and disillusionment, as well as their search for the meaning of existence and the point of life. There is a bloody hole in all of these women, dancing queen or otherwise. Something is missing from all of their lives and they can find nowhere to shelter their souls. It seems accidentally inevitable, then, that flamenco speaks to all of them. Anyone can be a flamenco dancer, and the best of them are the mix of masculinity and femininity. In Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami's films, the tastes of mulberry and cherry can save the souls of suicidal men. Flamenco in *Blood Carmen*, instilling power in the troubled women, seems to work the same charm. The boiling blood and anger are given an outlet and women find relief and freedom from their shackles. Huang Biyun's brilliant work has established flamenco dance as the exotic cure for independent women everywhere.

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## Bionote

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