

The Incomplete Revolt of Female Characters in Cross-Cultural Literature

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Abstract:

This article uses a feminist lens to analyze Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and Tang Xianzu's *The Peony Pavilion* to examine the historical constraints for female elevation. Comparative analysis reveals that, in both Chinese and Western literature, social and cultural systems sustain female subjugation and undermine their autonomy. It demonstrates how Confucian thoughts and patriarchal systems offered solid backing to male dominance and female submissiveness. The paper evidenced this through the narrative and societal norms that interpreted gender roles. It argues that the tradition of marginalizing women from literary discourse is subjected to the power-based structure that establishes limits in their contribution. The research advocates that a study reinterpreting the roles of women and rights for women within society critically evaluate the portrayals of women in literature. This work is both an academic inquiry and a call for societal change. From comparative analysis, the differences between female characters from different cultures can be observed.

Keywords: Romeo and Juliet, Peony Pavilion, Feminism, Literature Review, Sociology, Patriarchy

1. Introduction

Tang Xianzu lived in the late Ming Dynasty. In 1598, he wrote *The Peony Pavilion*, standing against the background of social revolution and an ideological tug of war. Tang himself was against the feudal ethics, indicating how social intercourse, especially on the issue of marriage, could restrain personal will and feelings. For example, Shakespeare, contemporary with the increasing British capitalism and Renaissance, also made his contribution to a period of economic growth and humanism. His early tragedy of 1595, *Romeo and Juliet* emphasized the worthiness of pursuing personal happiness and condemned

the shackles put on personal free love by feudalism. Equally, both dramatists of their period used these works to criticize and explore the oppressive social structures of their times and the tension between individual desires and societal norms. However, looked at from a modern perspective, neither play really attains the type of true gender equality at which modern feminism aims: one where one can transcend structural oppression.

Both Du Liniang and Juliet, as female leading characters, represent the longing for personal freedom. However central to their narrations, these are largely fictions of male-dominant literatures, and the provid-

ed power or agency is within a very limited framework of male authorities in the story worlds [1]. Rooted in different cultural contexts, their stories reflect a struggle against societal expectations and feudal ethics. The approaches to female power in both works are different, but both include explicit or implicit compromises. Du Liniang must compromise with secular norms, while Juliet's story reflects a male-centered view of gender relations. While both playwrights are for human liberation, which is commendable, they both demonstrate limitations in their treatment of women's rights, hence proving that the humanist ideals often failed to bring women up to speed and square with men [2]. In the above, the essay attempts to analyze the non-feminist aspects of representative literary works and, based on such analysis, calls for promoting true feminist thought.

2. Social Restraints and Influence on Women

2.1 The Oppressions of Women in Western Society

2.1.1 Patriarchy in the Elizabethan Era

In *Romeo and Juliet*, the patriarch sacrifices his daughter to consolidate his social interests. Capulet, to strengthen his family's interests, disregards his daughter's wishes and arranges for her to marry Paris, ultimately leading to tragedy [3].

Capulet is a complete egoist, hypocrite, and a typical self-centered individual. When Paris proposes again, he completely ignores his daughter's feelings and arbitrarily exercises the rights of a feudal patriarch, saying: „I am willing to offer my child's love boldly: I think she will completely obey me; I have no doubt.“ However, Juliet refuses to accept her father's idea. As a result, Capulet flies into a rage, believing that this infringes upon his rights as a father and further strengthens his feudal patriarchal tyranny, cursing: “You are damned, you little slut” [4].

No matter how Juliet pleads, Capulet remains unmoved, not giving her any human dignity. Under the patriarchal system, women have no right to pursue their love and ideals. „The true liberation of women lies in restoring the nature of women that has been suppressed and distorted for a long time and in promoting the unique advantages of women in the historical process of humanity. This is manifested as the female spirit of earth worship, the female theory of protecting all things, and the female thinking full of sensibility and warmth.” [5]. However, under such a powerful patriarchy, Juliet is doomed to be a sacrifice. Despite her repeated efforts to resist, secretly getting mar-

ried, and feigning death in the tomb, she ultimately cannot escape the tragedy of fate, becoming an unfortunate but very lovable lamb under patriarchy.

2.1.2 The Authority of the Husband

The concept of „husband's rights“ or „male dominance“ in *Romeo and Juliet* can be understood through the lens of how male characters perceive and shape the female characters. Juliet's divine qualities can be seen as a reflection of the male ideal of femininity [6].

Romeo is known for his numerous monologues, many of which are observations of Juliet. Through Romeo's gaze, Juliet's image becomes „visible.“ In Romeo's eyes, Juliet is depicted as an angel with wings, „like a bright angel, crossing the clouds slowly across the sky,“ and her lips are „so pure and chaste, always tender and shy...“ In Romeo's perspective, Juliet achieves a state of sanctity, transcendence, and perfection. However, Juliet's self-perception in the text is left blank; her contours are redefined under Romeo's gaze, and her life gains meaning through his love. Juliet's noble love governs the moral standards of sexual passion, establishing the criteria for “good love” and “bad love” [7].

As the object of love, Juliet's existence and ultimate desire reinforce the notion that pure women are more worthy of love, enjoying men's pursuit in the praise of being loved. Yet, all of these only trap women in a value system where they exist for men, with no understanding of their desires. In this narrative, a woman's life significance is to measure a man's virtues and the meaning of his existence [8]. Women, as silent „companions,“ are props for men to prove themselves; they need her existence, not for her own sake but for his.

2.2 The Oppression of Women in Eastern Society

2.2.1 Patriarchy in the Ming Dynasty

Since the time of slavery, to consolidate and strengthen the dominant position of men, a series of patriarchal ethical doctrines have gradually formed, which are used not only to regulate society but also to shackle women [9]. As a result, women have steadily become the vassals of men in the education of patriarchal ethics, losing their self-awareness and uniqueness. Du Bao is considered an obstacle on the emotional journey of Liu Mengmei and Du Liniang because Du Bao's character is multifaceted and complex [10].

In the chapter “Instructing the daughter”, he educates his daughter with Confucian classics, stemming from his deeply rooted Confucian thoughts, showing his rigid and stubborn character. The patriarchal society of ancient Chi-

na and the social history of the West are the same; it is a society centered on patriarchal discourse, where the father is the core of a tight network of class relationships [11].

2.2.2 The Limitations of Women's Self-Awareness

Du Liniang's pursuit of love is imbued with a strong sense of illusion and compromise. The freedom in love that Du Liniang seeks is always constrained by the traditional expectations of "the command of parents and the words of the matchmaker." Especially after her resurrection from the dead, she seeks her parents' approval for her marriage. Moreover, Du Liniang has not escaped the notion that "a noble husband brings honor to his wife" [12]. She inscribed her name on a portrait with the words, "In the years to come, to be by the side of a guest of the Moon Palace, not by the plum but by the willow," which indicates her wish that her husband would be a talented scholar who has achieved high honors.

In addressing this topic, it can be generally stated that humanist thinkers, while advocating for women's rights, did not place women on an equal footing with men. "Therefore, when they consider issues concerning women, their thoughts are inevitably influenced, to varying degrees, by the subconscious of the patriarchal collective, overlooking the fact that in their efforts to seek freedom for women, they are still under the suppressive influence of a male-centric consciousness towards women" [13]. When women enter marriage and love, they often revert to the position of the other, thus denying their subject status. This represents a vicious cycle of transformation from the consciousness of "personhood" to the consciousness of "emotion," where after the fulfillment of emotional needs, the consciousness of "emotion" in turn, subverts the consciousness of "personhood." Even with the decline of patriarchal power and the rise of husband's rights, women still cannot break free from the boundaries set by men.

3. The Sacrifice Women Have Been Seeking Independence

3.1 Juliet's Sacrifice

The love between Juliet and Romeo ultimately leads to death. When Romeo sees his beloved dead in the tomb, he continues this earth-shattering love through death. When Juliet, who was supposed to be "asleep," wakes up to find Romeo already lifeless, she also unhesitatingly chooses suicide. Was there another way for Juliet to respond to Romeo's death besides love? When Juliet, who had taken a "fake death" potion, wakes up to the deceased Romeo, her loyalty once again elevates her love to a sublime level, making Juliet's image as a divine goddess more convinc-

ing. Although love takes her life now, it also endows her with a noble life value. Juliet's life's meaning is lost with Romeo's death. Romeo constructs her life's meaning as the "idol" she worships. This poignant love story, even at the end, does not forget to reinforce "fidelity" as a "noble quality" of women. When a woman is faithful to love, morality always crowns her [14].

Juliet's exemplary existence shows that "the ideal of romantic love includes an emphasis on women's fidelity, desire lessness, and self-sacrifice. Whether it is Juliet exposing her body or revealing violence, the fantasies she brings to women are only imaginary. Even if the female protagonist resists the obvious pressures of society, she will eventually be captured by the invisible laws of this society. 'Love,' the most heavily guarded place under patriarchal discourse, always guards some unchanging rules [15]. Juliet seems to have actively 'liberated' herself by pursuing love. Still, it is wrapped in a more sophisticated patriarchal conquest, where women can only gain initiative within the scope of patriarchy.

3.2 Du Liniang's Sacrifice

The traditional feudal ethics of China had a profound impact on Du Liniang. Her longing for love was like Juliet's, yet it was also filled with compromises to feudal etiquette. During her "awakening of consciousness," the Ming Dynasty had already seen the emergence of capitalist ideas. However, feudal rites and Confucian thought were still deeply entrenched in society, with new ideas being suppressed and not dared to be expressed. This is why the feudal Confucian ethics left a deep imprint on Du Liniang's body and mind, even though she had not correctly visited her garden for over a decade. Her melancholy and dissatisfaction after visiting the garden, her silent longing for love and death due to a spring dream, and her idealized love in the imaginary world all confirmed her contradictions and revealed her weaknesses. In "The Peony Pavilion," before Du Liniang's resurrection, Liu Mengmei joined her in resisting the oppression of feudal ethics. In the latter half, after Du Liniang's resurrection, she seemed like a changed person, no longer as carefree as before, demanding "the command of parents and the words of the matchmaker" and encouraging Liu Mengmei to seek fame and fortune to gain her parents' approval [16].

It is evident that marriage matters still could not be decided by oneself. For example, after Du Liniang's resurrection, only by adhering to "the command of parents and the words of the matchmaker," and obtaining her father's consent, could she be rightfully together with her lover Liu Mengmei. In the final act of the play, the emperor decreed that Du Liniang's father be promoted to a higher rank, his

wife be honored as the Lady of Huaiyin County, the top scholar Liu Mengmei be appointed as an Academician of the Hanlin Academy, and his wife Du Liniang be ennobled as the Lady of Yanghe County [17].

Under the harmonious ending, the old concepts and customs of the bridal chamber, the golden list, and the honor of the wife and children cannot be concealed, showing an acknowledgment of feudal ethics and family-centered thoughts [18].

4. Steps Towards Real Independence and Equality for Women

The analysis provided suggests that women's entrapment is a result of being caught in an inherently male-dominated system. According to Tybalt, women are not naturally predisposed to certain roles but are instead shaped by the postnatal environment, which is heavily influenced by male-centric evaluations and values. To break free from the constraints imposed by men and society, it is not enough for women to rely on men; doing so would only perpetuate their dependence and limit their chances of liberation.

For women to achieve true freedom and self-realization, they must construct an individual value system and a spiritual framework that is independent of male influence. Without this, pursuing liberation and freedom is tragic and futile. Women must recognize their current situation and understand the deep-seated reasons behind their subjugation. By doing so, they can build their own identities and gain the discursive power necessary to navigate and transform a world predominantly controlled by men [19]. The final aim of feminism is to liberate women from oppression by men. Therefore, the purpose of this thesis is to make some suggestions on realizing the self-reconstruction of women. Men play a dominant role in social life, while women suffer the tragedy of exile in the secondary status that follows men in society. The prestige of marriage and the value of men is "for most women, they are still in a dominant position" [20]. Therefore, it should eliminate gender discrimination firstly to realize female self-reconstruction. In actual practice, women should have equal positions with men. It includes equal consciousness and fundamental equal rights. Female rights include female discursive power, female discourse subject, and discourse practice. However, the three kinds of power are always included in male discourse and male dominance. Women must establish their discursive power and become discourse subjects in practical activity. Men and women are logically regarded as two indispensable counterparts worldwide [21]. As a result, men and women are supposed

to treat each other as equal partners and share mutual respect to each other. Only in this way, men and women might co-exist perfectly in the long run. In a larger sense, men and women should tightly connect with each other build up a society with good faith, mutual respect, and good understanding. Through comparing Liang Zhu and Romeo and Juliet, we can find that women who lived in a patriarchal society chose different paths of life when they faced oppression from a patriarchal society. The ways in which women chose included resistance or compliance. Despite any type of them, they cannot avoid tragic destiny and are doomed to the disillusionment of dreams, extinction of love, and death of spirit and life. At last, neither of them could achieve their happiness. Through the analysis, we can find that the source of the female tragic destiny in the two works is patriarchy. Despite their bravery or kindness, they still couldn't have discourse power [22].

So, how to avoid the repeated performance of a tragedy? This is one of purposes of writing this thesis. Feminism attacks patriarchy, which destroys and oppresses women. Patriarchy emphasizes the dominance to women. Women are marginalized by patriarchy. Meanwhile, as the impetus of human society, women play an important role in the world. The development of social politics, economy and culture must depend on the creative power of women [23]. Unfortunately, such female creative power is suppressed and plundered by men. Therefore, women should be awakened and establish their self-subjectivity. The freedom and liberation of women are not only social problems, but also problems for women themselves. As the creative subject of practical activity, men do not always admit women. Women should depend on themselves, self-struggle and ceaseless self-improvement. Meanwhile, the edge position of women in society determines the emergence and existence of female problems. Compared with men, women are excluded from the edge of society. Such a center-edged structure of society causes a dependency relationship between men and women. It is a kind of forced dependence [24].

It does not mean that women do not want to be an independent person, or they are willing to stay in the position of relief. Just because of the center-edge structure in which they live, they decide that they have no choice and cannot be independent. Therefore, it is necessary for human beings to break male-centered social patterns thoroughly, and women never live in such a center-edge structure. Instead, it is necessary for human beings to establish the collaboration structure that replaces the former one. And then, each member of society will be in an equal relationship and become a self-contained man. As a result, the female problem will never appear in the world.

5. Conclusion

The conclusion drawn from this study is that the emancipation of women is inextricably linked to the broader societal shift toward gender equality. The feminist perspective offers a powerful lens to view and critique the literary and cultural narratives that have traditionally sidelined women. It is through this critical lens that we can envision and work towards a future where women are no longer confined by the patriarchal paradigms of the past. In reflecting on the significance of this thesis, it is evident that the feminist analysis of “Romeo and Juliet” and “The Peony Pavilion” contributes to the broader discourse on gender equality. It challenges the reader to consider the transformative potential of literature in shaping societal attitudes and cultural values.

Furthermore, it underscores the importance of continued scholarly inquiry into the representation of women in literature to foster a more inclusive and equitable society. In closing, this thesis serves as an academic exploration and a call to action. It beckons a renaissance in our understanding and portrayal of women, urging a reevaluation of the narratives that have shaped our collective consciousness. It is a testament to the enduring quest for gender parity and the indomitable spirit of women striving for recognition, respect, and liberation.

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