

Fate and Resistance: A Cross-Cultural Comparative Study of Du Shiniang and Medea from a Feminist Perspective

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Abstract: In the research field of comparative literature and feminism, tragic female figures have long been a classic research topic in ancient Chinese and Western literature. Medea in *Medea* by Euripides and Du Shiniang in *Du Shiniang Sinks Her Treasure Chest in Anger from Stories to Caution the World* come from different civilizations and ages. Oppressed by patriarchy and destined fate, both heroines resort to extreme resistance and fall into tragic endings[1,2]. Current researches mostly conduct separate researches on the two characters but lack systematic cross-cultural comparison based on fatalistic tragedy and feminist theory. Supported by Aristotle's *Poetics*[3], Wang Guowei's third-type tragedy theory[4] and feminist patriarchal theory[5,6], this paper adopts documentary research, close reading and comparative approach to analyze their tragedies from commonness, discrepancy and cultural origin. It is conducive to improving the research framework of Sino-Western female fatalistic tragedy comparison and deepening the comprehension of gender culture and tragic spirit.

Keywords: Du Shiniang; Medea; Fatalistic Tragedy; Feminism; Cross-Cultural Comparison

1. Introduction

Female tragic images are always the core research focus of comparative literature and tragic theory studies. Restricted by social structure and gender norms of specific times, Medea from ancient Greek tragedy and Du Shiniang from Ming vernacular novel devote all to love, suffer betrayal from male partners and choose extreme resistance leading to self-destruction[1,2]. Most existing literatures attribute their differences to the opposition between collectivism and individualism without in-depth excavation of fatalistic roots[7]. Based on feminism and cross-cultural study, this paper

compares their tragic destinies, explores internal cultural causes and provides reference for contemporary gender research.

2. Literature Review at Home and Abroad

2.1 Domestic Research

Domestic scholars have accumulated abundant studies on ancient Chinese and Western tragic females. Researches on Chinese tragic women focus on suppression from feudal ritual and clan hierarchy, while studies on Western heroines attach importance to individual consciousness and subjective rebellion, among which Zhu Liyuan systematically sorts out the divergence of female rebellion modes between China and the West[7].

From the perspective of abandoned wives' revenge, Mao Ruizhe makes a comparative study of Medea and Du Shiniang but fails to elaborate tragic cultural roots sufficiently[8]. Liu Qinghua and Xu Jingwen also compare their plight and resistance, yet their discussions stay at superficial personality analysis without combining Wang Guowei's tragic theory and feminist criticism[9,10]. Besides, Zhang Jun interprets Du Shiniang from feminist perspective[11], Wang Juan analyzes Du Shiniang's tragedy via the symbolic meaning of treasure box[12], and Long Lin discusses Medea's infanticidal revenge[13]. These papers are limited to single-text analysis, leaving much room for comprehensive comparative research. In general, domestic studies have formed rich accumulations in single-text interpretation and thematic comparison, but there is still a prominent research gap in constructing a systematic cross-cultural comparative framework that integrates fatalistic tragedy theory and feminist criticism, which is exactly the core research entry point of this paper.

2.2 Overseas Research

Early Western researches on Medea are based on ancient Greek tragic theories. After the 20th

century, the proposition of "the Other" from Beauvoir refreshes the academic understanding of Medea's anti-patriarchal image[5]. From the perspective of city-state gender politics, Zeitlin illustrates that Medea's revolt challenges traditional patriarchal order[14]. In recent years, Cooke's new feminist research focuses on female resistance and body politics, offering new ideas for classical text reinterpretation[15].

Foreign studies concerning ancient Chinese females mainly concentrate on Confucian ritual oppression, with scattered researches about Du Shiniang lacking systematic cross-cultural comparison[6]. Western feminist theories are frequently mechanically applied into Chinese literary texts without considering real historical background, which is an obvious defect of Millett's patriarchal criticism theory when localized[6]. Overall, overseas studies have achieved profound results in the interpretation of Medea and the construction of feminist theory, yet they lack systematic comparative dialogue between Chinese and Western female tragic figures under the unified perspective of fatalistic tragedy, which provides the core research space for this study.

3. Shared Features of Ancient Chinese and Western Fatalistic Female Tragedies

According to Wang Guowei's classification in *Comments on A Dream of Red Mansions*, the third-type tragedy originates from natural oppression of daily ethics rather than deliberate evil[4], which perfectly matches the tragic fate of Medea and Du Shiniang. Their ruin results from institutional and cultural constraint instead of personal defects.

As Beauvoir puts forward, women are defined as "the Other" attached to men under patriarchal system[5]. Though a royal descendant of Colchis, Medea abandons homeland for Jason and becomes a dependent foreign wife[2]; as a prostitute under Ming rank law, Du Shiniang is commodified completely and pins all life hopes on Li Jia's redemption promise[1]. Despite different social status, both lose independent personality under patriarchy.

The core of their resistance lies in the pursuit of personal dignity and freedom against instrumentalization by men. Medea's revenge is the defense of self-value after broken love oath[2]; Du Shiniang sinks her treasure and jumps into river to protest being traded arbitrarily[1]. No matter what resistance they

take, they cannot escape doomed destruction caused by rigid patriarchal society, which constitutes the core connotation of fatalistic tragedy.

4. Divergent Manifestations and Cultural Origins of Their Tragedies

4.1 Tragic Origins: Theocratic City-State Ethics vs. Ming Feudal Hierarchy

Divine power and oracle exert subtle influence on Medea's life trajectory, yet Euripides weakens the absolute determinism of fate by highlighting social environment and personal mental change[2,16]. Born with passionate witch blood, Medea's radical character is shaped by both divine identity and city-state exclusion, pushing her to extreme resistance once betrayed[13].

Du Shiniang's misfortune is rooted in Ming feudal ethics and legal hierarchy stipulated in *The Great Ming Code*[17]. Constrained by law forbidding marriage between commoners and humble-born civilians, she cannot change her lowly identity no matter how much fortune she accumulates[17]. Li Jia's betrayal is only the direct inducement; her dream of legitimate marriage is doomed to collapse under institutional pressure[4].

4.2 Rebellious Forms: Outward Violent Vengeance vs. Inward Dignified Self-Destruction

Deprived of legal protection, Medea and Du Shiniang choose totally different ways to fight back. Medea poisons Jason's new family and kills her own children to destroy Jason's inherited property and lineage[2,13]. Based on Rich's theory, patriarchy binds women to compulsory maternity[18], hence Medea's infanticide is the thorough denial of patriarchal stipulation of maternal obligation[18].

Limited by Ming Confucian morality, vicious retaliation will make Du Shiniang labeled as vicious woman, so committing suicide becomes her only feasible choice to maintain dignity[1]. Moreover, Ming legal system severely restricts female property disposal right[19]. Her treasure box symbolizes the hope of economic independence, and sinking the whole treasure is her desperate resistance against the deprivation of women's economic sovereignty[12,19].

4.3 Narrative Endings: Triumphant Revenge

vs. Sacrificial Tragedy

After finishing revenge, Medea leaves by Helios's divine chariot and survives with heroic color[2], complying with Western tragic aesthetic advocating individual fight against fate. On the contrary, Du Shiniang drowns herself completely, and contemporary readers in Ming attribute her misfortune to blind infatuation rather than institutional flaw[1]. Her suicide is praised as chaste martyrdom within traditional ethical frame without shaking feudal patriarchal core[11].

5. Modern Reinterpretation of Medea and Du Shiniang

With the development of gender idea, academic interpretation of the two characters shifts continuously, revealing the universal existence of patriarchal oppression across civilizations[5,6].

5.1 Evolving Interpretation of Medea

Original Greek audience regarded Medea as cruel monster for killing children, while Euripides intended to criticize the hypocrisy of Athenian civilization through this character[16]. Aristotle holds that tragic hero's doom comes from hamartia instead of inherent evil[3], yet modern scholars find Medea's extreme personality is cultivated by long-term patriarchal discrimination and stateless predicament[5]. Driven by feminist thoughts after the 20th century, researchers redefine her infanticide as fierce resistance against being reduced to birthing tool[6,13,18], turning Medea into an iconic symbol of female anti-patriarchal movement[5].

5.2 Evolving Interpretation of Du Shiniang Sinks Her Treasure Chest

Readers in Ming Dynasty ascribed Du Shiniang's tragedy to wrong love choice without noticing institutional oppression[1]. Though Feng Menglong sympathizes with downtrodden prostitutes, his writing still stays within traditional moral boundary[11]. Influenced by anti-feudal trend and Wang Guowei's tragic theory, modern academia points out her tragedy is the inevitable result of feudal rank system[4,17]. Contemporary feminist studies connect her treasure sinking with Ming women's insufficient property right and upgrade her image from chaste martyr to typical victim of feudal patriarchy[12,19].

5.3 Shared Logical Trend of Cross-cultural Interpretive Transformation

The evaluation evolution of the two characters follows identical internal logic. In early patriarchal comments, their tragedies are simplified as personal moral defects[5]; modern researches shift focus to institutional suppression and interpret their fate as structural fatalistic tragedy under gender power restriction[6]. The rise of feminism is the core driving force of such academic transformation, recovering the long-hidden female voice erased by traditional patriarchal discourse[5,6]. Such consistent change proves patriarchal suppression on women is a universal social problem in both ancient Greek and Ming China.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Core Research Findings

From feminist and cross-cultural perspective combined with classic Sino-Western tragic theories[3,4,5], this paper systematically compares the fatalistic tragedies of Du Shiniang and Medea, and draws the following core findings.

First, the two tragic heroines share essential commonalities. Under different cultural backgrounds, both are marginalized "the Other" constructed by patriarchal systems[1,2,5]. They devote their lives to striving for personal dignity and independent autonomy, yet ultimately fall into unavoidable catastrophic ruin due to systemic gender oppression, which constitutes the core attribute of their fatalistic tragedies.

Second, their tragedies show distinct manifestations in three dimensions, with deep-seated cultural and institutional roots. In terms of tragic origin, Medea's misfortune originates from ancient Greek city-state and theocratic culture, while Du Shiniang's suffering is rooted in Chinese secular feudal hierarchy and rigid legal rank system[17]. In terms of resistance mode, Medea adopts outward violent vengeance against her oppressors, whereas Du Shiniang chooses inward self-destruction to safeguard her personal dignity[13,19]. In terms of narrative ending, Medea survives after revenge with the glory of a fate rebel, while Du Shiniang dies completely as a sacrifice of feudal ethics[1,2]. All these differences stem from the divergent operating mechanisms of Chinese and Western patriarchal systems in regulating

divinity, social ethics and female gender norms. Third, the cross-cultural interpretation of the two characters follows a unified evolutionary logic. Along with the progress of feminist ideology, people's judgment of the two heroines has shifted from individual moral condemnation to institutional oppression reflection[5], verifying that patriarchal suppression of women is a universal social problem across ancient Greek and Ming Chinese civilizations.

6.2 Theoretical Significance

This research supplements existing academic achievements by taking fatalistic tragedy as a unified comparative research perspective, and has certain theoretical value and practical reference significance.

From the dimension of feminist theory, the parallel analysis of Medea and Du Shiniang exposes the universal logic of patriarchal gender oppression across Eastern and Western civilizations, providing historical textual evidence for the construction of contemporary female subjectivity and the promotion of gender equality[5,6].

From the dimension of cross-cultural comparative literature, the contrast between the two heroines reveals the fundamental differences between Chinese and Western cultural perceptions of female fate and legitimate forms of female resistance, enriching the research cases of Sino-Western tragic literature and gender culture comparison.

As Beauvoir's classic statement goes, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman"[5]. The tragic experiences of Medea and Du Shiniang still retain realistic reference value for modern women, who can draw spiritual strength from their struggles to break free from gender shackles rather than merely lament their doomed fates.

6.3 Research Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study still has certain limitations. First, this paper only selects two representative female tragic figures for comparative analysis, without expanding the research sample to include more Sino-Western abandoned female characters, which limits the breadth of cross-cultural generalization of the conclusions to a certain extent. Second, the discussion mainly relies on textual analysis and classical literary theories, lacking interdisciplinary empirical support from

sociology, legal history and other disciplines to further verify the institutional mechanism of gender oppression. Third, the study focuses on the textual archetypes of the original works, without involving modern adapted dramas, films and derivative literary works to explore the contemporary re-creation of these two female images.

For subsequent research, scholars can expand the comparative scope by incorporating more tragic female characters from Chinese and Western classical texts to enrich the research sample and improve the generalizability of cross-cultural conclusions. Interdisciplinary research integrating legal history, gender sociology and cultural anthropology can be carried out to further deepen the excavation of the institutional roots of female fatalistic tragedies. In addition, future studies can also explore the remodeling and subversion of the images of Medea and Du Shiniang in modern adaptations, so as to analyze how contemporary gender concepts reshape traditional female tragic archetypes in cross-cultural contexts.

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