

A Comparative Analysis of Female Consciousness through the Avenging Female Figures in Western and Chinese Literature – A Case Study of Medea and He Hongyao

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Abstract. Classical female figures like Medea and He Hongyao are prevalent in Western and Chinese literary tragedies. Despite their distinct literary backgrounds, these avenging women face diverse destinies. This paper focuses on analyzing the fate, outcomes, and the representation of female consciousness and tragic reasons in these two avenging female characters to delve deeper into the differences in female consciousness in Western and Chinese literature.

1.Introduction

Throughout history, women in male-dominated societies often find themselves in challenging circumstances. By examining gender issues as an independent entry point, hidden truths behind the "silent majority" may come to light.^[2] This paper explores the divergent female representations of the Greek mythological figure Medea and Jin Yong's character He Hongyao, both deviating from traditional female images. The goal is to uncover the nuances of female consciousness beneath their tragic destinies.

2.Similar Trajectories from Love to Revenge

In Greek mythology, Medea was originally a young and beautiful princess. Under the arrangement of Cupid's golden arrow and fate, she fell in love at first sight with Jason, who came to the island to search for the golden wool. She helped him steal the golden wool, killed his flesh and blood brothers, betrayed her father and country, abandoned her princess identity, and ultimately became a homeless criminal. Later, Jason moved on to another love, and Medea grew hateful from love. She killed Jason's new lover with a poison robe and also killed her two sons.

Medea, from Greek mythology, and He Hongyao, from Jin Yong's "The Sword Stained with Royal Blood", share a similar fate trajectory, transitioning from love to betrayal and eventually revenge. Both unfortunate women, unable to escape the consequences of love, face tragic ends.

Like Medea, He Hongyao comes from a noble background and is the second expert of the Five Poisons Sect. Later, Xia Xueyi fell in love at first sight and helped him steal treasures from the Five Poisons Cult.

After Xia Xueyi succeeded, he disappeared without a trace. However, He Hongyao accused Xia Xueyi of violating religious rules and was bitten by countless snakes, resulting in her appearance being completely destroyed. After years of searching for Xia Xueyi's whereabouts, she finally found his burial spot and saw him holding another woman's golden hairpin in his mouth. So she wanted to burn everything, but Xia Xueyi had already set a trap, and in the end, He Hongyao was buried in the cave.

3.Different Destinies Fated by Life and Death

The differences in social background and ideological consciousness between the two female characters destined them to have different fates. In the end, Medea and He Hongyao chose different ways of revenge based on the consistent characteristics of Chinese and Western literature, life and death were already predetermined.

Medea faces a powerful society that sees her husband's infidelity as a common occurrence. At the same time, the atmosphere of promoting freedom and individuality advocated in Western society also leaves a certain space for female images to survive and resist. So when Medea learned that Jason had betrayed her, she chose to kill her own son and witnessed the heartless person suffer the pain of losing their child. The best way to make a person suffer is to see them destroyed as treasures. So Medea didn't even let go of her and Jason's children after killing the enemy. Medea is referred to by some scholars as the wicked woman of Europe in this matter, but the so-called wicked woman only does what men can do within the framework of patriarchal society. The final outcome is presented to readers with a mechanical surrendering artistic effect, where Medea rides in a dragon carriage carrying the corpses of her two

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sons, waiting for her to embark on a brand new life. This is a manifestation of Medea's step-by-step detachment of patriarchal thinking from her own background in that era. Her personality, which is not bound by any constraints, has always been advocated as "individualism" in Western society. It can be said that "Greek Mythology" is, in a sense, a reference and leader used by primitive Western society to guide public consciousness.

Unlike Medea's resolute opposition to welcoming new life, He Hongyao's ending conforms to the stereotypical impression of women in Chinese literature. In ancient China, the value of women was mainly reflected in their loyalty to love. As the saying goes, "one lifetime, one couple" is largely for women. In ancient times, it was common for emperors to have three thousand harems, and in history, the only one who truly achieved one life, one life, one pair of people was Emperor Xiaozong Zhu Youjian. When Empress Wu Zetian faced the issue of the harem, she was often criticized for having a chaotic private life. It can be seen that China places much higher demands on women than men in terms of loyalty in love. So even though He Hongyao knew he was unfaithful, he still chose to strive to get closer.

As a master of the Five Poisons Cult, she couldn't understand that it was a trap set by her lover. She wanted to die with her, but all she had to do was breathe in the scent of poison, willingly let her life pass, and ultimately achieve an inseparable ending. Perhaps even at the last moment, she was still deceiving herself.

From the name He Hongyao, it already foreshadows her final ending. "Red medicine" comes from Jiang Kui's "Yangzhou Slow". "The Twenty Four Bridges are still here, with the waves swaying in the heart and the cold moon silent. Remembering the red medicine by the bridge, who is it born for every year?" The Twenty Four Bridges are still there, and the waves in the river below the bridge are vast and the desolate moonlight is silent everywhere. Sighing at the annual red peony by the bridge, do you know who it blooms and thrives for? "Red medicine" is peony, and peony also has a nickname called "Jiangli". In addition, in the feudal society of China, the traditional concept of women's "clear aspirations, clear chastity, and clear love through death" also foreshadowed the outcome of He Hongyao.

4.The Implied Female Consciousness of "Avenging Women" in Different Contexts

Whether in China or Western countries, the fate of women seeking revenge often ends in tragedy. They use their thoughts to compete with reality, attempting to break the lens of the Philese center^[9], but ultimately leave behind a bloody image of a poisonous woman. "The loss of humanity" often becomes the evaluation of women by the world, and revenge, destruction, and subversion have become the ultimate destination for this type of women. Even in such extreme behaviors, female consciousness belonging to both the East and the West

has been injected, resulting in diversity in the final revenge outcomes.

Medea's revenge may be cruel, but it shows us that women can make different choices when oppressed. After experiencing betrayal, she regained consciousness and realized that she was still in a position without a voice. She realized that her tragic fate was caused by the times and society. Therefore, she used violent revenge methods and her divine skills to fight against fate, refusing to become a helpless victim under the tragedy of fate. She interpreted a sobering and rebellious character that was different from many traditional female images. A researcher praises Medea as a woman who has been insulted and harmed, and her strong resistance reflects the awakening of female self-awareness. From the perspective of tragic aesthetics, she uses evil to resist the reality that harms her, creating a beautiful side of this character in the collision of evil and good.

Medea has a strong personal will unique to Western individualism that is not bound by social morality. She opposed the entire patriarchal society with her own strength, even though she knew that her resistance was "killing a thousand enemies and losing eight hundred", she was unwilling to swallow her anger. In the Greek Mythology, one's own value can be reflected by resisting authority, so many researchers believe that the Greek Mythology encourages people to dare to oppose or even confront authority. One reason for opposing authority is to uphold one's own beliefs. Just like Medea's fate, at the beginning she believed in love, She was willing to resist and obstruct her "patriarchal power" for the sake of her love, killing her own flesh and blood brothers and betraying her father and country. Later, she believed in herself, so she used cruel revenge to kill her enemies and also killed her two sons. In a patriarchal society, sons are the continuation of fathers, and she wants to sever such connections. In this regard, Beauvoir wrote in "The Second Sex": "If childbirth is always connected to death, then death is also connected to childbirth. Death that is hated appears like rebirth, so it is also blessed." Children have always been associated with their mothers, but in ancient Greece at that time, it was believed that the father was the one who gave birth. So Medea must sever this connection, remove the marks left by patriarchal beliefs in her life, and her revenge realizes women's rebellion against patriarchal society and a male dominated worldview.

In He Hongyao's poignant love, she sacrificed her body for her lover and betrayed the sect, then was ruthlessly abandoned, and ultimately died tragically in his tomb. In most Chinese literature, women often have tragic endings in love. The outcome of female roles also depends on the spatial framework that allows women to survive and develop, as well as the culture and morality that are appropriate to the social conditions. In traditional Chinese society, there is a saying that goes, "The heart of love is determined by a woman's life and death." Women always play the role of love first. This is also a manifestation of a patriarchal society. "What is love in the world? It teaches people that life and death are intertwined." Most of them are used to describe women. The mourning for the deceased wife in Song Ci

is "ten years of life and death, two vast expanses". Even if one's heart and blood are exhausted, it can still be considered as a matter of life and death. A man mourns his deceased wife and sheds a few tears, which always evokes sorrow. But after losing her loved one, a woman always hopes to make a promise of life and death.

In traditional society, due to the constraints of society and the unequal feudal system, coupled with the lack of career support for women, they were firmly bound to their husbands like canaries. Therefore, "women devoted all their emotions and even their entire lives to the so-called love."^[4] Under such a concept, even if He Hongyao had the idea of revenge, he ultimately chose to be buried with Xia Xueyi due to love, and even to his death, he chose to "endure forever and sometimes, this hatred will last forever.". He Hongyao's revenge remained in her own inner world's resistance against patriarchy. Even though she suffered from the deception and betrayal of her lover, in the social context of that time, she could only examine herself in the end and chose to use her own life to achieve ideological revenge. This revenge method is too pale in the face of reality, just as Chen Xiaoming said, "Does this resistance method mean acceptance of male/female hierarchy?".

5. Causes of Female Tragedy in Western and Chinese Literature Backgrounds

5.1 Physiological Factors

Male and female destinies differ significantly in terms of "the construction of the body."

Firstly, there is a substantial physiological difference between males and females, a factor that greatly influences gender perceptions. As Butler stated in "Gender Trouble," "A girl is not born as a girl but becomes one at birth or before, based on whether she possesses a penis or a vagina. And this difference is arbitrary, gendered body parts are invested with meaning."^[8] From the perspective of reproductive organs, male genitalia are external appendages, usually seen as subordinate to the subject, distinguishing them from others. This establishes a sense of agency in males from birth. In contrast, female reproductive organs are hidden within the body, existing as objects. In the process of sexual intercourse, men play the role of the aggressor, engaging in an attacking role, while women are invaded, playing the role of the receiver. This physiological structure creates a consciousness: women are subordinate to men.

Secondly, the difference in physical strength between men and women also contributes to their unequal social status. Women are often unable to perform many physically demanding and dangerous tasks, leading to an inability to achieve the same output as men in the workforce. From the primitive stages of society, where the womb of women was necessary for the continuation of life, and the high physical strength of men was needed for hunting, the societal division of labor emerged: "men outside, women inside."

The physiological vulnerabilities of women give men a privileged position in society. Men play the role of attackers in physiology, conquerors in love, and leaders in society, while women perpetually exist in a passive relationship. Through these physiological differences, women are consistently placed in a subordinate position.

5.2 Ideological Factors

For most women, even if granted independence, they still tend to choose attachment to love because there exists a difference in ideological consciousness regarding love between men and women.

It is observable that, for women, love is inseparable from loyalty. In China over two thousand years ago, women expressed their unwavering commitment to love by swearing to the heavens: "I desire to know you, may we live a long life without decay. The mountains have no end, the rivers will dry up. Thunder rumbles in winter, rain and snow fall. Heaven and earth unite, and then I dare not part from you."^[5] In the poem "Méng," it is said, "For a gentleman, indulgence is permissible and may be spoken of. For a woman, indulgence is not permissible and may not be spoken of!" Once a man changes his heart, he can abandon a woman without hesitation, but it is challenging for a woman to break free from love. It can be seen that men and women have different attitudes towards love loyalty. "People close a woman in the kitchen or in the boudoir, but they are surprised at her limited vision; people break her wings, but they lament that she can't fly."^[6] Society seems to expect women to be loyal to love, sacrificing themselves for men, fulfilling male desires, but this does not necessarily earn women the respect they deserve. It may lead to being labeled as an "abandoned woman" or a "resentful woman." Society seems to believe that the word "loyalty" is unique to women, while men can be forgiven for their waywardness. In many folk stories, it is a woman's duty to mourn for the deceased and accompany her husband in death, as death is considered her creation. Traditionally, society has assigned women the destiny of dependence on men.^[7]

In western literature, men and women also have great injustice to love. Take Greek mythology as an example. Although Zeus is the God of the universe, it does not affect his emotional madness and neglect. It is summed up in two words: cheating and possession. But women are full of unlimited romance and fantasy to love. Simone de Beauvoir, in "The Second Sex," explicitly stated, "'Love' is one of the roots of a serious misunderstanding that divides men and women: this is a serious misunderstanding." Lord Byron, in "Anna Karenina," said, "Love in a man's life is just a pastime, but it is a woman's life itself." Nietzsche, in "The Gay Science," expressed a similar viewpoint: "The word 'love' means something different for men and women. Women's understanding of love is quite clear: this is not only loyalty, this is the dedication of body and soul, without reservation or consideration for anything else. It is this unconditional commitment that makes their love a

kind of faith, a unique faith they possess." ^[1] For women, love is as important as faith.

5.3 Historical and Cultural Factors

In Greek mythology, the patriarchal society imposes certain ideologies on individuals within the temporal framework through mythological figures.^[3] Male mythological characters are often portrayed as heroes, whether it's the Western Zeus or the Eastern Emperor. The emergence of female myths is primarily due to male fantasies about female images within a specific historical context. Figures like the Snail Girl represent the male desire for women to silently contribute and be virtuous and diligent. The imagery of characters like Meng Jiangnu embodies the male wish for women to remain faithfully devoted. These female myths are constructed from a male-centered perspective, dictating what women should be.

Throughout history, political power has consistently rested in male hands, creating a male-dominated society. Even in the Western context, with figures like Eve, the mother of all living beings, her existence is not autonomous. She is created by taking a rib from Adam, and when Adam says to her, "Bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh," women are once again objectified. In China, despite historical figures like Empress Wu Zetian breaking gender norms by appointing female officials, it did not signify a gradual shift towards gender equality or an improvement in the status of women. Following her era, the rise of Neo-Confucianism during the Song and Ming dynasties further restricted women. Women became entirely subordinate to men, and feudal ethics became the biggest obstacle for women. As Simone de Beauvoir said, even if a country is ruled by a queen, it does not change the overall low social status of women.

"From primitive civilization to today, people have always believed that for women, the marital relationship is a form of 'service.' Men express gratitude to women through gifts or assure to support them, but the service implies giving oneself a master; in this relationship, there is no mutuality." ^[6] Terms like "service" and "master" inherently imply an unequal relationship. In ancient China, the term "concubine" was used to refer to women married outside the main wife, and originally, "concubine" meant a female slave. In primitive societies, women were used as slaves or objects for exchange between tribes. Women have never had an equal status with men.

In conclusion, the causes of female tragedy in both Western and Chinese literature backgrounds stem from a combination of physiological and ideological factors. Physiologically, the differences in reproductive organs and physical strength contribute to the subordinate status of women. Ideologically, societal expectations regarding love, loyalty, and women's role in relationships further reinforce their disadvantaged position.

6.Conclusion

Examining the tragic destinies of Medea and He Hongyao, we can observe differences in female consciousness between Western and Chinese literature. In Chinese literature, due to prolonged constraints from feudal systems, most women still exhibit a passive acceptance of love, even hoping for a perfect and happy ending, even if it means "living and dying together." Therefore, He Hongyao willingly steps into the trap to fulfill her unwavering love for Xia Xueyi. In Western literature, while the status of women is consistently inferior to men, female consciousness is awakening, enabling them to resist male dominance through their efforts. Medea, for instance, can kill her own children for revenge, demonstrating a rebellion against patriarchal society and male moral values. Western values emphasize the individual's struggle for personal interests, a stark contrast to the ethical and moral focus in traditional Chinese culture, highlighting the divergence in female consciousness between the two cultures. However, both in China and Western countries, the existence of vengeful women is often seen as incompatible with the expected traits of femininity. Women are expected to be pure, gentle, and, even with the demons hidden within, forced to become the "other," helpless, and dependent. Despite the rise of female consciousness, the plight of vengeful women remains challenging to change in both Chinese and Western literature.

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