

Through the Lens of Gender Conflict Theory: Female Element in Tibetan Literature and Religion

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ABSTRACT

Buddhism, the most practiced religion in Tibet, has been ideologically restricted to Tibetan women through teachings since ancient times. However, since Tibet's independence in 1951, women's status within Tibetan society has improved. With more educational opportunities, women gradually stepped out of their traditional role as a caretaker in religion and generated new discussion. Literature creation became a means for women to fight against male dominance. This paper will examine how Tibetan female authors employ literature to redefine the meaning of gender and how they use literature and the religion Buddhism to challenge male dominance in the society. Gender conflict theory, one of the philosophical thoughts in gender studies, has its limitation in that it neglects the empowerment of women and how they reshape social power. Therefore, this paper will use examples of Tibetan females to clarify the weakness of this theory. I will argue that Tibetan females choose literature as a tool to challenge traditional religious beliefs on females through literature analysis. Under such influence, women in Tibet today have changed their expectation of simply being a housewife in a closed spatial structure and sought out new roles in the society, indicating the rising up of female's status in Tibet.

Keywords: *Feminism, Literature, Tibet, Female writers, Religion, Gender conflict theory*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the 1980s, Tibetan society was undergoing drastic social changes as the country opened up to the world. With open up, the mindset and viewpoint of Tibetans on morality and the human experience shifted. This time also marked the introduction of Tibetan female literature. In 1981, Isidroma published her novel *The Morning*, the first book written by a Tibetan female. As a Tibetan writer, she successfully combined the Tibetan language with Chinese, revealing a bond between these two cultures. As an excellent writer and her dual identity, Isidroma received praise society-wise and became the voice of all Tibetan women. Following Isidroma, another Tibetan female writer appeared in the field of literature, Wanma Yangchen. Different from Isidroma's novels, Yangchen focused on poetry, with her famous piece, *The Sun and The Stars*. These two authors marked the rise of Tibetan female writers. Later, when western ideas of feminism spread across China, Tibetan females more actively participated in publications of female literature and entered the current peak of creating literature.

The main purpose of this article is to explore how Tibetan female literature contributes to the empowerment of women in Tibet and how Tibetan female authors use literature work to challenge gender norms in the society. The complex situation for Tibetan female literature is the manipulation of religious elements as a tool for women empowerment, such as stronger Goddess characters in the

novels. Tibetan females are challenging male-dominant society through the creation of strong female figures. The conduction of this research required rigorous research methods while gathering primary and secondary data, including books, papers, and review articles on their work. In addition, I did an extensive literature review on gender conflict theory by Foucault and feminist studies to see how Tibetan female literature contributes to theories.

This article will offer an in-depth analysis of how Tibetan females have become so prolific in the literary field and how their literature motivates to change female status in society from a traditional role to possess equal opportunities with men. First, this paper will provide a literature review of gender conflict theory and argue that the gender conflict theory lacks explanations about how women rise up in society and struggle to break male-centered rules. Second, the article will offer background information on women's status and how they achieved education rights in Tibet. Third, the paper will analyze a few examples of Tibetan female literature and conclude with what is reflected by Tibetan females' literature work. Finally, this paper will conclude with a summary of how this literature contributes to both the rising up of Tibetan females and how it contributes to gender conflict theory.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section offers a literature review on Tibetan literature written by females. In addition, I will offer a basic

explanation of gender conflict theory and how it relates to this research. Lastly, I will argue for the importance of this research in contributing to philosophical thoughts on gender studies.

2.1. Gender Conflict Theory

Based on the bio-power theory and conflict theory from *Discipline and Punish* by Michel Foucault, all relationships are created in order to ensure that the higher class dominates the lower class. In the light of Sandra Whitworth and her work *Feminism and International Relations*[1], recent feminist scholars have applied this theory to gender, arguing that all gender relationships are created to make sure that males, or the dominant gender, control females, the subordinate gender. In this article, I will offer unique insights into how this theory applies to gender relations between males and females in Tibet by drawing from and expanding research on gender conflict theory.

Religion constructs gender inequality and gives rise to male dominance in society. According to the primary religion practiced in Tibet, Buddhism, males are always the religious leaders and females are the conformists. The goddess created in the man-centered society aims to make women obedient in following male-centered social rules: females only need to perform domestic work and be loyal to their husbands while males should take charge of higher affairs. The creation of goddesses serves the purpose for males in Tibet to dominate females in a “reasonable” way. Following these ideas, in the traditional Tibetan society, all relationships and religious beliefs are created by males in order to dominate females. Within Tibetan literature, males published their work earlier than females did. Male authors only focused on Tibetan traditional lifestyle, without incorporating female elements into their work. Specific examples include Ciren Luobu, a famous male Tibetan author who mainly focused on writing about his considerations of humanity and morality. Another successful male author is Zhaxi Dawa, who integrated Tibetan legends, social changes, and history in his work, without focusing on how gender has a dramatic impact on these elements.

However, this research highlights how gender conflict theory has weaknesses: it neglects to explain these specific cases where females rise up and start to challenge male dominance within these pre-existing structures of inequality. Tibetan female authors offer strong evidence to this: the first female writer Isidroma published her literature work in 1981. Following her, other females began to write about strong and powerful female figures in society and challenged the traditional gender relationships set by males. These women spoke up against inequality and strove to establish new gender relationships in which females are also powerful and equal to males in society. This circumstance where females are able to rise up and challenge males’ dominant power is what gender conflict theory fails to explain.

In this article, I am examining Tibetan female literature

with a unique theoretical lens that analyzes this literature through a gender conflict theory perspective. Scholarly research on Tibetan literature is limited and focuses on the literary aspects, not the social impact. Apart from this, none of those scholars connected Tibetan literature by females to gender conflict theory. Most of the previous work focused on analyzing female characters and various themes in literature. The unique perspective of my research is that I analyze the social impact of Tibetan literature by females using the lens of gender conflict theory, suggesting that similar analysis should be done to other global literature written by females.

2.2. Women’s Status in Tibet

In this section, I will outline a basic history of women’s status within Tibetan society. This history is essential to understanding how Tibetan females gradually received equal rights in society and how they received certain rights, such as the right to education.

In the sixth century, Tibet established its dynasty and gradually developed its power as a strong nation. Female participation in the public life of Tibetan society can be traced back to The Kingdom of Females in the 6th century which represented the matriarchy in Tibetan areas. This Kingdom allowed women to politically participate, both through voting and through leadership positions, namely the queen. However, such participation was still limited, as reflected by the 6th century onward during which women’s participation both in society and politics was severely restricted. As life was commonly nomadic in this time, women spent more time taking charge of household affairs. Compared with those in agricultural regions, women in nomadic life shouldered more family responsibilities such as milking, preparing dairy products, sewing and knitting clothes. Particularly, women in pastoral regions were expected to participate in a limited range of activities due to their function at home and had very few opportunities to socialize.[2] For Nomadic life, spatial structure is basically closed for women and time is simply a loop, which further limited Tibetan women.

Religion further complicated women’s status. Tibetan people primarily practice Buddhism since 210 A.D and follow “The Ten Good Deeds” which limits women’s activity in society. On the basis of their religious book, women are not allowed to offer advice to males especially when dealing with major issues. However, some of Buddhism’s religious books advocated for equality among men and women, which still granted women rights for participation.[3]

For the women from higher class or noble class, they always possessed educational opportunities and had certain political power. One example of famous Tibetan women in history was Queen Chimaluo (650-765), who put an end to a domestic uprising and ensured the stability of the Tibetan dynasty, which suggested that some Tibetan women did possess ruling power in Tibet. Although some women like Queen Chimaluo politically contributed to the stability of Tibet and the economic prosperity through grazing cattle,

their contribution as a whole was thought to be minimal and females were still considered inferior to males. Compared with their low status and minimal power in public life, Tibetan women had more control at home. In domestic lives, they take charge of most of the household affairs. However, their control is still an indication of male dominance at home that Tibetan males hardly manage family issues, suggesting a gender inequality in the family.[4]

From the 20th century onward, Tibetan women's status greatly improved as a result of pressures from China to respect gender equality. After nearly a hundred years of autonomy, in 1951, Tibet signed an agreement with China, which allowed the Chinese government to control Tibet. Internationally, the agreement of 1951 was referred to as The Peaceful Liberation of Tibet. The Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976 promoted equality between males and females under the slogan, "what men can do, women can also do." [5] Since then, women's status has continued to improve in Tibet. With the policy of Economic Reform and Opening up of the country in 1979, the Tibetan economy has greatly improved.[6] Under this development, women's role in Tibetan society was widened and women were given more opportunities. With the help of advanced nomadic technology brought by economic growth, the pressures placed on women from nomadic life were lessened and their family authority was enhanced. Therefore, women's status in Tibet began to improve, leading to their access to receive education. However, women were still facing obstacles in achieving equality with men since policies and social rules were established by males[7]. Females didn't have much of a voice to express their own ideas in the society.

2.3. History of Education in Tibet

In this section, I will outline the history of education in Tibet. This history is essential to understanding Tibetan female literature because it offers a basic background for how these women became educated, gained access to education and became prolific writers.

In the period of patriarchy, Tibetan females had relatively low social status. In the Ming dynasty (1368- 1644), the majority of Tibetan women were excluded from receiving education. It was not until the Qing dynasty that Tibetan women's education level improved. During the Qing dynasty, foreign missionaries flooded into Tibet, establishing churches and schools. For example, a famous school called Danba School for Boys and Girls, was founded in 1840. This school continues to facilitate young Tibetan girls to receive education locally. To compete with foreign missionaries and further control Tibet, the government of Qing dispatched the grand minister resident of Tibet to found elementary schools and an institution of higher learning in Tibet. These advances granted Tibetan girls easier access to receive an education. In line with the regulations at that time, Tibetan girls could learn knowledge from the institution and later became teachers. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the

new government encouraged more Tibetan females to study politics, science, culture, and technology. According to the official statistics, in 1963, females made up 40 percent of graduates of Lasa school[8], revealing a large increase in Tibetan girls' education level. In 1997, the school attendance rate for Tibetan girls aged 7 to 12 was 71.3%. In 2001, girls made up 48.3% of total students at school.[8] The increase in female's attendance in schools demonstrated that the level and chances for Tibetan females to receive higher education have significantly improved since the 20th century. Such an increase in receiving higher education gave rise to Tibetan females' ability to enter into the realm of literature and their hard-won opportunities to access education spurred an era of literary creation by women.

3. LITERARY ANALYSIS AS METHOD

This study employs literary analysis of several representative Tibetan female literature. The novels analyzed in this paper are excellent works that enjoy high social visibility and academic recognition. My sources includes the first literature book published by female in Tibet and other literary creation recognized by China Federation of Literary and Art Circles. Therefore, the chosen novels could represent most Tibetan literature by females. I am conducting my research through careful analysis of literary work by Tibetan females, published research, official data, Chinese feminists' studies, and Tibetan ethnic studies. Literary analysis requires close reading and critique of the characters and plots. I analyzed female figures' personal development and different stages of their growth and also contrasted different thinking behind each literary work.

Furthermore, I incorporated historical and cultural elements for a more comprehensive analysis of new ideas on females in Tibetan literature. For religious elements, I conducted my research mainly based on published research papers about Tibetan religion and the historical progress of Tibetan religion according to Tibetan religious books. In this way, the religious elements in this research could be valid. Also, in order to provide a basic background of female education and their status in history, I collected official data and published paper from Tibetan historical scholars.

4. TIBETAN LITERATURE WRITTEN BY FEMALES

In this section, I will introduce three specific examples of Tibetan literature written by females, offering a brief history of the authors themselves and a description of their work. This is important for understanding why Tibetan women have become so prolific and how this came about. According to Zhe Wu[9], the main themes of Tibetan literature written by females can be divided into two groups: one group focuses on unique lifestyles in Tibet and

their reflection on the local society; the other focuses on reflections of self-values and explorations towards life values. Expanding on Wu's research, I will similarly divide this literature into these two categories and introduce specific examples of women's literary work in each group. The most famous and influential book concerning Tibetan society is *The Nonsexual God* by Yangchen. This book, *The Nonsexual God*, was the first exploration of female consciousness in Tibetan literature. In this novel, Yangchen wrote about a girl character, Yanggi Dolma. The author incorporated the theme of growing-up and adopted the perspective of a young girl to discuss ten years of turmoil in Tibet. Dolma's character is developed through four stages. In the first stage, Dolma was believed to possess the "bad luck" because of her birth in the snow. She was considered a disaster when her brother died of lung disease. By six years old, Dolma got used to all discrimination against her but still remained sensitive in her heart. Her father's death marked a significant change to Dolma's growth: she started to wonder about death and thought about how society considered her bad luck. It was at the end of the first stage that Dolma first began to think about her fate and her surroundings. In the next stage, Dolma was abandoned by her mother and was tormented by her life, leading her to pursue love and tolerate the pain. In the third stage, Dolma finally experienced the joy of being respected and not being discriminated against. She also continued to delve into her long-lasting confusion: what's her fate and whether she should believe in it or not. In her final stage, Dolma eventually abandoned her awful life and sought for a new one. The tragic story of Dolma reflected women's miserable situation in Tibet: they were considered inferior to men and regarded as bad luck. This book was the first literature work that discussed, and exposed gender inequality within Tibetan society, and social and historical life. Lastly, it highlighted the Tibetan spirit from the perspective of a young girl, resulting in Tibetan people's reflection of women's low status in society.

In the other group about exploring values, one of the famous representing works focusing on women pursuing personal values is *Tribe of The Sun* by Meizhuo. In this novel, Meizhuo mainly focused on revealing the impacts of Tibetan literature on females' development and her sorrow for women's weakness. In her later work, *The Campsite of The Moonlight*, she portrayed a woman character as strong, tough, and possessing courage to chase for love. The contrast between her two novels revealed the progress of women figures in Tibetan literature: from weak to stronger and independent. This also marked the peak of Tibetan literature by females. Meizhuo's literature sparked a major transition point for Tibetan female writers to achieve their maturity in the literary field, and revealed the difference between two generations. Women of first-generation endured hardship from Tibetan society and sought for their proper role as Tibetan women in the progressing society, yet were impeded by the traditional expectations of women carried over by the feudal society. However, women of second generation, as depicted in *The Campsite of The Moonlight*, took the first step in the

pursuit of self-values and challenging feudal belief on Tibetan women's roles in the society. This is in opposition to gender conflict theory as males previously dominated the literary field in Tibet. Rather than being oppressed and unable to dominate the field, females have risen up and are now considered major contributors to the literary field in Tibet. Moreover, they have done so by writing about powerful female figures that represent their lives and the gender equality that they hope all women in Tibet can experience.

In recent time, from 1980s to 1990s, Tibetan literature written by females was continuously trying to get rid of the social rules constructed by the male-dominated society. Female writers were trying to establish their own power and overthrow male dominance both in the literary field and broader Tibetan society. In recent works, Tibetan literature revealed the combination of female self-consciousness and their integration into the modern society. Yingxiu Yan was a famous female author who focused on how Tibetan females adapted themselves into the modern Tibetan society. In her published novel *Paper Plane*, rather than solely limiting her character into one female, she wrote about how all Tibetan females integrate into modern Tibetan society. On one hand, she was writing about current social values and the emotional world of modern people; on the other hand, she was writing about how Tibetan society was integrated into rapidly-changing modern society and how Tibetan people insisted on their traditional search for beauty and love while being crushed by male dominance. Yingxiu's work marked a significant shift and new period in the history of Tibetan literature written by females because she incorporated the conflicts between modern society and traditional Tibetan society from a female perspective into her writings.

5. WOMEN'S LITERATURE AND THEIR STATUS IN TIBET

In this section, I will analyze Tibetan female literature in terms of social impacts. This section is essential to learning about this literature as it offers a reflection on the local society and reveals the authors' influence and power to change society through their writings. Tibetan females uniquely created new goddess in their work to reclaim women's godly power and generated new definition in religion. Based on the contribution made by Tibetan female writers, the gradual progress of literature work not only signaled the rising status of women in society but also exposed their urgent need for women liberation and gender equality.

These literary works written by Tibetan females argue for the liberation of women in Tibetan society. This work has laid the roots for gender equality in the minds of both young Tibetan girls and traditional Tibetan women as this literature has gained national popularity. Specific themes in their literature contributed to essential discussions on achieving social equality. Based on Shujuan Li's theory,[10] the female scholar on Tibetan literature, in the last 50 years,

the specific theme of Tibetan literature can mainly be divided to 2 groups: one focusing on the shackles from Tibetan feudal life and how young Tibetan females stepped out of their traditional role and fought against stereotype. Other focus on how females reclaim their godly role in the society. These two groups are created through authors' combination of the conflicts between Tibetan females and traditional social beliefs on gender in Tibet. Within a field that is dominated by males, females have to find their unique yet acceptable way to speak their voices. The creation of new powerful female religious figures in literary work helps women authors fight against male dominance. Through such combination, literature work by Tibetan females sparked ideas of the liberation of women and their long-existing search for equality and respect within a male-centered society. With more independent female figures created, Tibetan women have new role models to look at. They have gradually formed a new belief that they deserve more equal rights and equal status with men in the society. Literature written by Tibetan females also represented the change that females are competent and impressive writers. They are changing the local literary landscape by highlighting "gender" into their work and ending the period when men controlled the publication of literature. The way they write about literature motivates more Tibetan girls to become passionate about literary creation, and inspires a new generation of female writers in Tibet. In this view, literature work is promoting gender equality in the society, while it is also encouraging and inspiring more young girls and women to write and produce literature. Furthermore, Tibetan female literature contributes to both the evidence of and suggests a need for the improvement of gender conflict theory. It echoes with the foundation of conflicts between gender through pointing out how Tibetan females are limited by male rules in society. Also, it points out the limitation of gender conflict theory since Tibetan females are standing up to fight against male dominance. This paper suggests that more research that applies gender conflict theory needs to be executed so that we can understand the practical uses of the theory, and its limitations. Also, this paper suggests that future research on feminism could be conducted through the lens of literature, history, and religion.

6. CONCLUSION

In general, Tibetan females are using their literature work to challenge males' dominance in the society. With the increase of female authors, their literature became colorful and covered more profound consideration on social inequality. It was their continuous work that challenged male dominance from the literature field: under impacts of strong female figures in literary work, more and more Tibetan girls fought for their right to an education and even started to use their writing as a medium to fight against male dominance in society. Tibetan females are commonly incorporating themes of gender into their writings. Furthermore, Tibetan female literature contributes to both

the evidence of and suggests a need for the improvement of gender conflict theory. It echoes with the foundation of conflicts between gender through pointing out how Tibetan females are limited by male rules in society. Also, it points out the limitation of gender conflict theory since Tibetan females are standing up to fight against male dominance. This paper suggests that more research that applies gender conflict theory needs to be executed so that we can understand the practical uses of the theory, and its limitations. Also, this paper suggests that future research on feminism could be conducted through the lens of literature, history, and religion.

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