

# Beyond Femininity

## —The Female Image in Chingiz Aytmatov's *Jamilia*

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### ABSTRACT

Woman constitutes an important part in the novels of Chingiz Aytmatov. Being an author that focuses on humanism and realism, the female images in Chingiz Aytmatov's works are unique, characterized with passion, honesty and perseverance. Aytmatov did not describe his heroines from a stereotyped male angle, instead, he showed great insight in shaping the female images in his novels. He viewed the women in his novels as independent individuals and paid close attention to their inner world. As a result, the female images in his novels are more real and objective. *Jamilia*, as one of the most well-known novels of Chingiz Aytmatov, tells the love story between a young girl named Jamilia and a lonely veteran Daniyar. The image of the Kyrgyz girl Jamilia is very special, since she is so free-spirited and kind-hearted, not subject to any of the moral standards that a patriarchal society has imposed on women. The most precious thing about Aytmatov is that he had gone beyond the typical male mentality when describing a woman, showing a true respect to women. In the novella *Jamilia*, we could see the ideal female image in the author's heart, as an independent person, instead of an adjunct of men. The author of this thesis will try to analyze how Aytmatov is unique in shaping female images by illustrating examples from his novella *Jamilia*.

**Keywords:** femininity, female images, Chingiz Aytmatov, *Jamilia*, gender equality

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Born in a herder's family in Sheker, Kyrgyzstan on December 12<sup>th</sup>, 1928, Chingiz Aytmatov is the most famous writer in Kyrgyzstan, whose works presented the life and customs of the Kyrgyz people, who traditionally lead a nomadic and pastoral life.

In his novella *Jamilia*, the heroine Jamilia is a vivid female image who has a deep passion for love and freedom. *Jamila* tells the love story between a young married woman Jamila and a lonely veteran Daniyar. Jamila was vigorous, passionate and rebellious. She longed for true love, however her husband was a male chauvinist, who failed to see the preciousness of her and only regarded her as a mere appendage to him, which deeply disappointed Jamila. For example, whenever her husband wrote from the front line, he only asked about Jamila at the end of the letter. In the process of labor, Jamila and "I" (the narrator) got to know Daniyar, a lonely veteran. At first they believed Daniyar was a weirdo who always kept to himself and liked to sleep on the river bank. Later they found Daniyar was an

extraordinary singer with an amazing enthusiasm in his voice. From his singing, Jamila found something resonating with her heart --- a deep love for life. Naturally, the two young people soon fell in love with each other and suffered from the restraint of reality. At last, the two broke all the shackles and eloped for a brand new life.

### 2. THE FEMALE IMAGE IN *JAMILIA*

In *Jamilia*, the author portrayed the heroine from a third-person view:

*Jamilia was quite pretty. Tall and graceful, with straight, coarse hair tied in two tight, heavy plaits. She used to wear her white headscarf at an angle on her brow. It was very becoming and accentuated her dark skin and smooth features. Whenever she laughed, her bluish-black, almond-shaped eyes would light up mischievously, and whenever she sang a saucy village ditty, a knowing twinkle would appear in her beautiful eyes.* [1](Aytmatov 2007:20)

There is no doubt that Jamilia is beautiful, but she is

also charming in other ways. She is not a traditional type of housewife. The author made the character more alive by giving her a personality which is beyond people's stereotype:

*I don't know why, but there was something manly about her; a harshness and, at times, even crudeness. Perhaps it was because from childhood Jamilia had herded horses with her father and, being his only child, she was both son and daughter to him. She worked doggedly, with a man's temperament. She got along alright with the other women, but if anyone treated her unjustly, she would swear like a trooper; it was not unknown for her to grab someone by the hair the odd time.*

*More than once neighbours had been in to complain. 'What kind of a daughter-in-law is that?' they'd say, 'She's only been in your house a moment and already she's pushing her weight around. No respect, no shame.'*

*'Good job too,' my mother would say. 'Our Jamilia calls a spade a spade. That's better than being two-faced and underhand. Your girls act as if butter wouldn't melt in their mouths, but it's rancid butter: all smooth and golden on the outside, but rotten inside.'* [1](Aytmatov 2007:17)

Obviously, Jamilia is popular, liked by men and women, the young and the old alike. The "manly" personality of Jamilia has made an interesting contrast with her beauty. She is open and innocent, unaware of her own beauty. And she works honestly, sparing no efforts. She never uses her beauty to manipulate others to have her way. The mixture of femininity and strength is the source of Jamilia's charm.

Most importantly, she has never given up her love for life. She is always cheerful and seldom complains:

*There was something about Jamilia that bothered her in-laws; she was too high-spirited, just like a little child. At times she would have a fit of giggles for no reason at all, and laugh so noisily and happily. When she got home from work, instead of coming straight indoors, she would race about the yard and leap over the ditch. Or for no reason she would kiss and hug first one mother-in-law, then the other.*

...

*And another thing: she loved to sing, she was always humming some tune, not shy of people hearing. [1] (Aytmatov 2007:19)*

Even though she is constantly disappointed by her arranged marriage and feels lonely deep inside, she can always find joy in life:

*Jamilia went about the rest of the day with a look as black as thunder; she did not utter a word to me and did not smile once. When I drove the cart up, she swung her pitchfork into the hay, hoisted it up and carried it in*

*front of her face, preventing me from seeing the pain she was trying to conceal. She tossed the hay into the cart and swung about abruptly for another load. Soon the cart was full. As I drove off I turned round and saw her leaning dejectedly on the fork handle for a few minutes, lost in thought, before pulling herself together and getting back to work.*

*By the time we had loaded the last cart Jamilia seem to have driven the incident from her mind and she stood for a while looking at the sunset. There, beyond the river, at the very margin of the Kazakh steppe the harvest sun of evening was blazing like the mouth of a burning tandyr. It sank slowly below the horizon, tinting loose clouds with purple hues and casting dwindling rays upon the mauve steppe which was shaded in the hollows with the indigo of early twilight. Jamilia was gazing at the sunset enraptured, as if witnessing a miracle. Her face was aglow with tenderness, her lips parted in a gentle smile, just like a child's.[1] (Aytmatov 2007:24)*

Jamilia has never given up her love for life, even a beautiful sunset on the steppe could easily sweep away her sorrow. She wants to break the shackle of arranged marriage and gain freedom and true love. So the author let her meet Daniyar, her soulmate, and let them elope successfully. This arrangement in plots is quite bold, because this is infidelity from an orthodox point of view. However, the author described it so naturally and beautifully that the readers resonate with the lovers and bless them instead of judging them. For the readers, Jamilia is like a bird too beautiful to be kept in a cage.

### **3. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE IMAGE OF JAMILIA**

As Irigaray put it: "Femininity is a type of role, an image, a value that the male reproduction system imposes on women, Under the mask of femininity, a woman loses herself in the conformity." [2] Chingiz Aytmatov portrayed his heroin, Jamilia, with a deep humanistic care, by seeing her as a person first, regardless of her gender. In a word, he had shaped this ideal female image from an angle that goes beyond femininity. In this part, I will analyze the significance of Jamilia from the following aspects, namely, female body, social roles and traditional feminine virtues.

#### **3.1. Female Body**

Female body has always been a crucial component in constructing femininity in many literary works. As Fiske put it: " 'femininity' is from a discourse that attempts to naturalize gender construction and difference in terms of the status quo and is therefore implicitly patriarchal, whereas "real strong lady" is from a discourse that consciously opposes and exposes both the explicit and implicit patriarchy of 'sexiness' and 'femininity'" [3] (Fiske, 2010). In many traditional

writings, the writers always portrayed their heroins as beautiful and somehow delicate. In *Jamilia*, however, Ch. Aytmatov took a different attitudes towards female body.

Firstly, Jamilia is beautiful in a healthy and even “masculine” way. The writer had described more than once how strong Jamilia was, and how she worked just like a man. The readers of this novella will not for a moment think that Jamilia needs a protector. Though she is considered a “widow”, she never let anyone take advantage of her. She is strong and self-dependent.

Secondly, Jamilia is beautiful yet she is not self-conscious. The author did not deny her beauty. We can see from the reactions from the people around her that she is a beautiful girl. When Daniyar, who later fell in love with Jamilia, felt “ill at ease” when they got really close as they were carrying sacks of grain onto the cart, Jamilia just ignored the young man and exchanged jokes with others. Clearly, she did not care much about the gender difference between she and her friends, and she saw all the people around her as equal persons, instead of dividing them by gender.

Thirdly, Jamilia is never ashamed of her body. She would play games with other young people, being threw into the water, and never felt embarrassed or unnatural. Maybe she knew that people, especially boys would stare at her, but she never considered it as impure, and she was not afraid or shy of showing her own beauty.

### 3.2. Social Roles

Women have to conform to certain social expectations so that they could be recognized as a “good woman”, and “those women who violate the rules and requirements of the patriarchal culture for women, and dare to break the secular stereotypes and pursue their selves are regarded as monsters” [4](Wenhui Si, 2014). Jamilia, as the “widow” of a soldier who had gone missing in the front line, lived with her mother-in-law. In a patriarchal culture, she is expected to be obedient to her mother-in-law and take care of her husband’s siblings. But Jamilia did not conform to these social roles and it seemed that she wasn’t realize that these “roles” exist at all.

Firstly, she treated her mother-in-law as a friend rather than a “mother”. There is no doubt that under traditional circumstances, the relationship between in-laws would be tricky most of the time. But this was not the case for Jamilia, for she got along with her mother-in-law very well and they respected and supported each other. Maybe this is because she never considered herself as a “daughter-in-law” and let this role confined her.

Secondly, she was also good friend with her brother-in-law. She never felt that she had the

responsibility to “take care of” her husband’s younger brother. Instead, she treated him as peers and they developed profound friendship.

### 3.3. Traditional Feminine Virtues

Femininity is a kind of ethical identity in nature, while “the ethical identity is the premise of ethical deeds and ethical norms, and it imposes restrictions on the acting subject, sometimes even mandatory”[5] (Zhenzhao Nie, 2014). This identity has made countless women believe they have to be obedient, fragile and mentally dependent. There is no doubt that Aytmatov had portrayed Jamilia far beyond the ethical identity of women in most patriarchal societies.

The biggest dilemma came when Jamilia and Daniyar fell in love with each other, especially under the context that they knew Jamilia’s husband was still alive. From traditional point of view, it is extremely unethical for a married woman to elope with another man. However, Aytmatov set Jamilia free completely, and let her break all the shackles and leave her husband who did not care about her. This is the biggest proof that Aytmatov had gone beyond femininity when he built this ideal female image. Though married, Jamilia never considered herself as an “appendage” of her husband, and sought for true love despite the fact that it would break the heart of her mother-in-law. She was true to her heart from the beginning to the end.

## 4. CONCLUSION

As Beauvoir put it: “Now woman has always been, if not man’s slave, at least his vassal; the two sexes had never divided the world up equally; and still today, even though her condition is changing, woman is heavily handicapped.”[6](Beauvoir, 1949)

Chingiz Aytmatov had shown great humanistic concern towards women in his novella *Jamilia*, which present the life of a Kyrgyz girl Jamilia from a third-person angle. The significance of this novella is that the author has created a female image that is not subject to any patriarchal values. And above all, the author’s position is not contaminated by a single bit of male chauvinism.

Though we may not call him a “feminist”, he definitely treated women as equal and independent individuals. He allowed his heroin, Jamilia to live and love freely, without conforming to any expectations or moral standards of the patriarchal society. Jamilia is just Jamilia, she did not change herself and abandon her passion for life because of marriage. The ending of *Jamilia* is the triumph of love and gender equality. Hopefully in the future, we could live in a world that where woman and man are considered equally free and independent individuals.

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