Feminism in Modern Manchu Female Literature: Analysis of Female Image in Caisangzi by Ye Guangqin

Chuqiao Wang*

School of Modern Languages and Cultures, Durham University, Durham, UK

*Corresponding author: 20150810196@m.scnu.edu.cn

Abstract. This thesis stems from the perspective of feminism and probes into the family theme novel - *Caisangzi*, by Ye Guangqin, a Manchu female writer. It develops a deep understanding of the female consciousness implied in the novel through close examination of Ye Guangqin's work, Caisangzi, and analysis of the female images in the text. By focusing on the hidden inner world of the author and the characters in the book, Ye Guangqin's concern and thinking about women groups in the modern Manchu cultural context are unfolded. Analysis of the literary works of minority female writers has an profound research significance and has the potential to promote development of feminism among minority groups and the development of local feminism in China. This thesis unveils the awakening degree of female consciousness of the female images in *Caisangzi* from era, nationality and family perspectives, explores differences and causes of female consciousness from the female images in Ye Guangqin's novel. In so-doing, new ideas for studying Chinese minority female literature and Chinese modern feminism are presented.

Key Words: Manchu Female Literature; Ye Guangqin; Caisangzi; Feminism.

1. Introduction

Owing to the western feminist campaign, the feminist literary theory was translated and introduced in China in the early 1980s. Collectivism, national consciousness and social consciousness have always been assigned a predominant position in the Chinese traditional culture. However, with the introduction of western feminist literary theory, people pay attention to personalized female consciousness and female perspective [1]. The development of Chinese native feminism reflects the awakening and growth of women's subjective consciousness, enabling the minority women writers to describe the characteristics of the times, social consciousness and national culture in a subjective perspective, which has changed some established rules in the male dominated literary creation. Under this circumstance, the literature shows unique characteristics of contemporary Chinese minority women writers from perspectives of material selection, character settings, narrative methods, among other parameters. Chinese minority women writers integrate the traditional spirit of women into women identities and shaping of literary images through literary creation. Therefore, the characters in the works of minority women writers reflect the author's feminist ideas and the development and changes of feminism over time and nationally. Researchers believe that literary works of minority women writers is of certain research significance to the development of feminism in ethnic minority groups and the development of Chinese native feminism.

As a contemporary minority female writer who was born in Yehenara family in Beijing, the works of Ye Guangqins concern, reflect on, and display the living conditions of women in the Manchu families from the female perspective, which not only carries the unique narrative characteristics and aesthetic awareness of individual female author, but also presents the social and cultural awareness of the Manchu group in Beijing from the historical background. As the most influential family novel, the *Caisangzi* was written by Ye Guangqin from the 1990s to the early 21st century, based on her own family experience and concerning numerous historical materials. In the perspective of the first person who is the youngest daughter of the Jin Family, the novel narrates the stories of several generations of the Jin Family (Manchu aristocrat), and creates images of Manchu women with distinct personality. This thesis will analyze the independent consciousness, rebellious spirit, social status and female discourse power of the female images in the declining Manchu noble family "Jin Family"

described in *Caisangzi* from the historical background, the national culture and the family system. The overarching aim of the novel is to lead readers to reach a better comprehension of the awakening degree of female consciousness of the female images in the works of Ye Guangqin, and its important influencing factors. This is expected to reveal the development of feminism in Chinese Manchu female literature.

2. Awareness of Female Independence in the Change of Times

From the perspective of Jin Shunming, the youngest daughter of the Jin Family, a declining Manchu noble family, the *Caisangzi*, with Nalan Xingde's poems as the title, tells nine stories, which appear to be disorderly but inherently connected [2]. The leading characters in the story have experienced dramatic changes from the early years of the Republic of China to the 1990s. Thus, women at different times and ages also develop a sense of female independent consciousness that progressively evolves. The female images in the book adopt two different styles in the historical background: the old generation, such as the grand aunts, who was proud of her nobility and nostalgic for the old times, while the young girls have gradually established their sense of female independence and rebellious spirit.

2.1 Criticism and Sympathy of Conservative Minds of Noble Women in Old Times

The Chapter - *Another Night* (Shou Jin Deng Hua You Yi Xiao) focuses on two Manchu noble women in the old age: the grand aunt and the concubine of her husband, who represent the princess consort and the concubine lady of the prince in the old dynasty. Despite the dramatic change in the outside world, their ladyships still lived in the prince palace in isolation, being proud of their nobility and strictly observing the Manchu noble etiquette. It is impressing that I was forbidden by my grand aunt from touching a telephone on the west coffee table, which was connected to the imperial palace and accessible to the emperor. However, even if a child like me was informed that the so-called emperor had been expelled from the Forbidden City, and this telephone would never ring. The telephone connected to the "imperial palace and a large house without electric lights and lit only by candles, symbolizes the noble status and feudal ideology and etiquette rules of the old era and also pave the way for miserable, lonely and gloomy destiny of ‘my’ grand aunt, who expelled her adopted son Baolige with severe feudal code and unkindness.

The concubine lady of the prince palace, another noble woman of the old times, embarked on a new journey of her life. Indulged in the fantasy that her son Baolige may come back, the concubine lady seemed to find her mental support and overcame the York of her sentiment. Although being employed as the Manchu language consultant by the institute of history and literature, the concubine lady owed all blessings to her son’s filial obedience. ‘My’ grand aunt died in despair and solitude due to the departure of her adopted son, while the concubine lady lived as a captive of her imagined filial obedience of her son, indicating the dependence on paternal power, which is interpreted as the limitation of women consciousness. The author expresses her sympathy in the bleak ending of my grand aunt and the concubine lady, together with her helplessness and reflection on the dependence of women in the old times.

2.2 Understanding and Reflection of Independence and Rebellion of Young Girls in Social Reform

2.2.1 Oldest Daughter in Passive Resistance

The Chapter - *Woeful Music* (Shui Fan Yue Fu Qi Liang Qu) tells the story about the tragedy of Jin Shunjin, the eldest daughter of Jin Family, due to a non-match marriage. As the first child of the noble mother who was influenced by the traditions of Manchu family, Jin Shunjin was highly favored at home until the overthrow of imperial power. At that time, she was arranged to marry the third son of the Song Family, which was incompatible with the traditional family culture of the Jin Family. The Jin Family was fond of traditional opera, while the Song Family preferred western musical

instruments. The Jin Family cherished traditional culture and noble family rules, while the Song Family was always engaged in impetuousness due to their manners and ignorance of traditional opera culture. Almost all members of the Jin Family were well educated, knowledgeable and polite. Among the parents-in-law of Jin Shunjin, one was a policeman of Han ethnicity, brutal and unlearned. The other was a dragon lady who always appealed to arms. The tragic tone was set from the very beginning due to the complete incompatibility from all aspects. In the end, the Song family declined which led to its doomed destiny. Jin Shunjin lived a befuddled life. Even if living in poverty, Jin Shunjin always dressed up decently and participated in opera singing twice a day, morning and evening, adhering to the vague feeling between her and Dong Ge, a music master. By indulging in opera, she escaped from her absurd marriage and unhappy life. This showed her negative resistance against the tumultuous changes of the times and tragic fate, and also a helpless manifestation of the awakening female consciousness. Stuck in a vulnerable position in society, the initial independent consciousness of women could not reverse the individual fate which was doomed to be tragedy. Therefore, Jin Shunjin escaped from reality and was obsessed with the opera. She became trapped in real life of tragedy and never stopped striving for spiritual freedom.

2.2.2 Second Daughter's Departure

The second daughter of Jin Family is the leading character of the Chapter - *Boundless Rainfall (Yu Ye Xiao Xiao)*. Her mother was a well-educated lady of Han ethnicity, the concubine of her father. As the most beautiful and beloved daughter in Jin Family, Jin Shunmei insisted on getting married with Shen Ruifang, a businessman and son of an actor. The marriage was strongly disapproved by Jin Family and her own mother, who attached high importance to the family tradition. In contrast with Jin Shunjin, who was obedient and knew nothing about true love, Jin Shunmei accepted modern education and had the consciousness of resistance, representing a lady of the new era. When her family strongly opposed the love between her and Shen Ruifang, she left without hesitation and pursued freedom even at the price of breaking up with Jin Family, the moralist of feudal code of ethics. The author is believed to hold a positive attitude towards the rebellious spirit of Jin Shunmei since she was given a happy ending. Regardless of her resistance and pursuit of freedom, Jin Shunmei was still halfway through the awakening of female consciousness, because she was limited by the development of the times and influenced by the social culture. Engels believed that leaving the family and participating in social work resulted in the real liberation for women [3]. Betty Friedan, American feminist best known for her book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which explores the causes of the frustrations among modern women in traditional roles, also believed that women should break through constraints of traditional concepts and family, and pursue better opportunities in education and career, to achieve economic and social independence [4]. Jin Shunmei, who rebelled against her feudal family for love, joined a smaller family compared with her original feudal family, followed the rules inherited from Jin Family and played the role of a jobless and obedient woman. Thus, she only changed the destiny of personal marriage and life rather than the tragedy that widely exist in the women marriage married women in the man-dominated society [5]. In the book, Jin Shunmei is described as a contradictory combination of "traditional feudal ethics" and "women's rebellious spirit", whom returned to Jin Family after marriage to seek acknowledgement from her mother and older brother, strictly abode by rules of noble family, and forbade her offspring from engaging in commercial affairs. She represents the image of partially awakened female but still restricted by the feudal system under the background of the times.

2.2.3 Third Daughter with Spirit of Self-sacrifice

In the book, Jin Shunyu, the third daughter of Jin Family received less attention. But she still outshined the other 13 children of Jin Family with her unique temperament. Surrounded by people obsessed with opera, Jin Shunyu said, "The Japanese invasion was ignored by those believing in false peace and personal pleasure, making me feel hopeless." [2] These words demonstrate the clear mind, concern of current situation, and an independent consciousness incompatible with this feudal family exhibited by Jin Shunyu. Because of her worry about the country and people, Jin Shunyu joined the

Communist Party and became an agent in Peking. Unfortunately, she was executed by Jin Shunwu, her eldest brother, whom was Kuomintang, for defending her political belief. Rosalind Coward, a British feminist critic, believes that feminism aims to break the shackles on women through political struggle, terminate the constraint of unequal social status of men and women, and finally achieve women's political interests [6]. Bebel, the celebrated activist of international workers campaign also proposed that "Our goal then is, not only to achieve equality of men and women under the present social order, which constitutes the sole aim of the bourgeois woman's movement, but to go far beyond this, and to remove all barriers that make one human being dependent upon another, which includes the dependence of one sex upon the other. This solution of the woman question is identical with the solution of the social question. They who seek a complete solution of the woman question must, therefore, join hands with those who have inscribed upon their banner the solution of the social question in the interest of all mankind – the Socialists." According to Bebel, oppression of women is the product of class society, which will be terminated by the victory of the proletarian revolution [7]. Jin Shunyu's departure was out of her political belief, being differentiated from the second daughter, whose resistance was for freedom of personal marriage. By resisting the whole feudal system, and also the chaotic times, Jin Shunyu was eager to pursue her political ambition through revolution and realize gender equality and freedom of soul via social reform. In the *Caisangzi*, the author does not use any words such as "beautiful" or "meek" to describe Jin Shunyu. Instead, her image becomes clear through descriptions made by her father such as ''what a rebellious girl, can be found anywhere, but nowhere at home''.[2] Jin Shunyu managed to eliminate the stereotype of women at that time. The sex differences are also extremely weakened in the book. This shows that the awakening of female consciousness of Jin Shunyu is far beyond other female characters in the book. Her female consciousness arose from the opportunity of the change of the times, but it broke away from the shackles of the times and evolved into a complete rebellion beyond the times. The female consciousness arises from the reform of the times, and further breaks away from the shackles, evolving into a thorough rebellion beyond the times.

Apart from the typical characters such as Jin Shunjin, Jin Shunmei and Jin Shunyu, the younger generation of the Jin Family more or less resisted the ethical rules of the feudal family. The female consciousness of among women has an inseparable connection with the reform of the times. The grand aunt was proud of her nobility. Jin Shunyu joined the revolution. The fifth daughter, inspired by the people's liberation army, became a Chinese communist party and state cadre. The sixth daughter served as the chairwoman of a pharmaceutical company. The independent consciousness of these female images dramatically varied with the times and social progress. Moreover, the female consciousness was intensified depending on the age and historical background. In Ye Guangqin's works, female independent consciousness originates from, develops and evolves with the reform of the times.

3. Women's Social Status in Manchu Cultural Background

In the traditional Manchu myths, the influential gods worshiped by Manchu people are presented in female images in most cases, such as Princess Duolong, the god of bows and arrows, who is the female leader of Nimacha, and in charge of horse riding, archery and other skills. Other goddess worshiped by Manchu people such as Huomu and Tianmu represent the goddess with great power and good ethics. The good ethics and characteristics of the traditional Manchu women that are worshiped are mainly derived from the worship of the paramount goddess described in Manchu creation myths [8]. Influenced by the highly developed feudal culture and Confucianism advocated by Han ethnicity, Manchu, after passing through Shanhaiguan, created more constraints to the married women compared with men, especially in the noble family, despite the Manchu noble women's rights in education and learning how to ride and shoot [9]. Differentiated from the low position of women in Han ethnic culture, the social status of women living in the modern Manchu culture which has completed the cultural integration is presented with two characteristics which are contradictory: (1),

influenced by the custom that girls were favored by their families of origin, even the married daughter was granted with certain discourse right in her parents' home. (2), the daughter-in-law in Manchu family was inferior to her husband since the Confucianism was incorporated. The husband was released from household affairs, while the wife was expected to bear the family's burden, including looking after her husband and their offspring [9][10]. These contradictory characteristics are revealed in *Caisangzi*.

3.1 The Female Status of Manchus "Daughters" and "Aunts"

In the traditional Manchu customs, married daughters in the family are called "Aunts". When the author mentioned in the story from *Woefu Music* (Shui Fan Yue Fu Qi Liang Qu) about "The Oldest Daughter", she mentioned that her high-pressure personality was like the empress dowager "Cixi". According to the "I", the reason of developing such a personality is that "she is indulged by the family, because girls have high position in Manchu family, and they are above everything"[2]. In addition, other chapters also reflect the high position of girls in Manchu family. For example, once the fifth daughter was married to Wanyan Zhantai, the couple returned from Tianjin and lived in Jin Family's courtyard, without anyone's objection. Shun Quan, the "Seventh Brother", indulges his daughter Qingqing which allowed her wet feet directly put into his quilt. The daughters can always get whatever they want; Whether before or after marriage, the "I" is invited to participate in the negotiation and decision making regarding the problems of the Jin family. The family's descendants respected "I" as "my uncle", because "Manchu people often masculinize older women to show respect [2]. Thus, in "Caisangzi", the Jin family with Manchu cultural background offers "Daughters" and "Aunts" a higher family position, discourse power and freedom choice on specific matters.

3.2 The Female Position of Manchu Daughter in Law

In contrast to "Aunts" who possess higher discourse and decision-making power in the Manchu family, the "daughter-in-law" lacks this position and she is even treated as "servant". In the book, "I"'s father had three wives, one was the mother Guaerjia, who was the Manchu nobility, one was the mother, Zhang, who was from a scholarly family of Han people, and the other was the birth mother of "I", who was from a Manchu civilian family. These three mothers all appeared as "family organizer", "children educator" and "husband servant" respectively. When the fifth brother-in-law Wanyan Zhantai applied the "oil adding method", which brought the Jin family to "Children shortage" situation, it was the sick mother Zhang who said, "We should solve it immediately". "My" mother followed and criticized the old brother-in-law; the third Daughter was sentenced to prison. "My" father did not even visit her, however, "My" mother took "me" to her; The Jin family is getting weak, and hard to survive. However, the father still "wander out", while mothers calculate the living expenses of the family by selling snuff bottles; "I" went to the house of Shunquan, the seventh elder brother, and Li Ying, the seventh sister-in-law, "asked" her husband if to add more dishes... In the book, regardless of whether married to a man with a job, money or social status, all daughters-in-law married into the Manchu families were expected to be responsible for their work and grievances, obey the arrangements, serve husbands, raise children, and maintain the "perfect wives" image. This shows, on the one hand, that the position of the Manchu "daughter-in-law" as the indispensable "worker", "manager" and "servant" to the husband and family, and on the other hand, it shows the view of spouse selection and their psychological expectation for the role of "daughter-in-law" of Manchu men.

From *Caisangzi*, "Daughters" or "Aunts" and "Daughter-in-Law" in the Jin family who had different roles in the Manchu family, the two types of women hold different expectations of traditional national culture, and shows different female images and consciousness. The "daughter-in-law" is considered as a female who should serve the man's family, with qualities such as diligent, capable, gentle, considerate, hardworking, and persistence. However, such expectations are waived when facing the upbringing of the "Daughters" of the Manchu family. Therefore, from the author, the traditional Manchu culture has also played a greater role on developing women's images and

consciousness. Therefore, when studying feminism in minority women's literature, one should consider these varied expressions due to different national cultures.

4. Femininity Thoughts in Families

Indian American scholar Chandra Talpedo Mohanty, a female scholar who immigrated from the third world within the Western feminist academic community, once pointed out that feminist studies cannot ignore the existence of class, race, capital oppression and other issues [11]. In the book "Caisangzi", she shows the full influence of family classism and Manchu noble culture. The women in the story include "my" grand aunt, who was born as the sixth daughter of the noble Prince Rui, and "my" birth mother, who was born in the poor area of Nanyingfang outside Qihua Gate in Beijing, as well as many Han women from different backgrounds who were eventually married into the "Jin family", such as "my" niece Wang Yulan, and the wife of the seventh brother Li Ying. Given the different family origins and nationalities, different power levels owned by these women leads to different consciousness and rights.

4.1 Impact of Family classism to feminist discourse power

'My' legal mother, Guaerjia, was born in a noble family, and hence is described as a bad tempered, uncompromising person. Although the eldest daughter's father-in-law and mother-in-law are both politicians who "always keep guns in their bedroom", when Guaerjia heard that her daughter might be irritated if she is married to politician family, she exclaimed "who dares to irritate my daughter, I dare to smash his home". [2] Although both are Manchu women, "my" birth mother was born as a poor girl in the south barracks. When the family chose "me" to go to spend the New Year alone with my grand aunt and concubine of my grand aunt's husband every year, my mother had nothing to say even though she did not willing "me" to go. She just "sighed and said that it was the tradition for many years that 'Yaya' was taken every New Year from the age of three, what shall I say?".[2] Due to their different family backgrounds, my noble mother Guaerjia, and my birth mother, who came from a poor family, really differ in their discourse and decision-making power. Furthermore, the two daughters of mother Guaerjia, the eldest daughter who have most discourse power, is as arrogant as the empress dowager Cixi and the third daughter has the most rebellious spirit and devotion of revolution. These accounts suggest that the Jin family, its classism has a greater impact on women's thought and rights. Under similar backgrounds, women with higher class have more discourse power and decision-making freedom than civilians. In addition, their superiority will be passed to the next generation, which will affect the development of the independent consciousness.

4.2 The Family Culture 'Out'and 'In'

All women of the declining noble Jin Family fought against the class thought and family rules of the feudalism, which shows "Out" that to put mindset into action. However, the rooted family thought from their hearts and the accompanied family culture through their growth forever influenced their lives, This also shows "In" of the family and culture. In the article, when the second daughter died, "I" saw her son, and he greeted "me" with the skilled Manchu gesture, and mentioned that "his mother told him that whenever he met the elders of the Jin family, he should greet them in line with the rules of their flag"[2]. Although the second daughter (Jin Shunmei) who was against the tradition of the Jin family finally escaped from the family and achieved marriage freedom, for decades, she was not in touch with the Jin Family, and her parents and brothers had no regard for her. However, she still educates children following the rules of the Jin family and she never forgot as a daughter of the Jin family. Although she did not recognize the arranged marriage of feudalism and the strict classism culture which was deeply rooted in her, she has been obeying the family rules for decades throughout her life, and she has attempted to pass the family rules and culture to her children who are already away from the Jin family.

From Ye Guangqin, no matter how much the daughters rebel against feudalism, and how many unequal classism to women existed in the family, the influence of the Jin family could not be separated from the female images and the family's aspirations throughout their lives. From *Caisangzi*, the significant influence of the Manchu noble family classism on women's rights and status, as well as its deep cultural heritage, also shows the author's attachment to the fading culture.

5. Conclusion

From the end of the Qing Dynasty to the establishment of Republic of China and towards the liberation and the Cultural Revolution, *Caisangzi* described the most changeable periods for decades in China. Due to the different era, nationality cultures, classism and family culture, women in the noble families of the Manchu and Qing Dynasties showed varied consciousness and spirit. In the book, the rebellious spirit of women comes from the time transition and represents different personalities along the history. Meanwhile, the female consciousness of their images in *Caisangzi* also differ due to the diverse expectations of the nationality and family cultures in terms of their family roles and classes. The tragic fate of the characters shows the authors reflection and criticism on the feudalism of Manchu and the family classism. However, the author also delivers her deep recognition of the Manchu culture. In *Caisangzi,* the Manchu women struggle against the feudalism constraints of the Jin family, which is their rebellion against the national feudalism. However, the family culture rooted in them from childhood always accompanied them. Therefore, in the study of feminism in minority national literature, the background of the times, national culture, family classism and thoughts should not be ignored.

References

[1] Yu Dongye. Feminism Literature Theory in China.Diss.Lanzhou University, 2003.

[2] Ye Guangqin. Mulberry Picking (Caisangzi). Beijing: Beijing October Literature and Art Publishing House, 2019.

[3] Karl Heinrich Marx, Friedrich Engels. The Compilation and Translation Bureau of the CPC Central Committee. Selected Works of Marx and Engels. Volume IV[Treatise].Peoples Publishing House, 1995.

[4] Betty Friedan. The Feminine Mystique.The North Literature and Art Publishing House,1999.

[5] Wang Ying. Studies on Novels of Ye Guangqin from Female Perspective. Diss. Northwest University, 2019.

[6] Rosalind Coward. Are novels written by women feminist novels. Edited by Zhang Jingyuan: Literary Criticism on Contemporary Female Writing. Beijing:Peking University Press, 1992.

[7] August Bebel. Women and Socialism. The Compilation and Translation Bureau of the CPC Central Committee, 1995.

[8] Yin Jingbo. Heroine Riding a Horse Analysis on Female Images from Perspective of Manchu Goddess. Journal of Social Science of Harbin Normal University, 2019.

[9] Zhang Wei. Life of Manchu Women in Qing Dynasty. Chinese Classics and Culture, 1994.

[10] Li Jing. Culture and Ego Anthropological Interpretation of Characteristics of Manchu Women's Family Status in Qing Dynasty. Journal of Shandong Womens University, 2010, 6.6:14-18.

[11] Chandra Talpade Mohanty. Under Western Eyes Revisited: Feminist Solidarity Through Anticapitalist Struggles, 2003.