

The Country of Women: Third World Feminism in the Legends of Taiwanese Indigenous Peoples

Abstract

The Country of Women: Third World Feminism in the Legends of Taiwanese Indigenous Peoples,” discusses descriptions about women and sexual attitudes in Taiwanese indigenous legends, as well as compares depictions of the country of women in Taiwanese, Chinese, and English literature. Evidently, literary works written by authors in a patriarchal society developed through a “process of civilization” have mostly highlighted the unequal treatment between the two sexes, whereas indigenous peoples treat the individual characteristics of men and women straightforwardly and unbiasedly.

Key words: Third World Feminisms, Taiwanese Literature, English Literature, Chinese Literature, Taiwanese Indigenous peoples, patriarchal society, maternal society.

I. Introduction

Most legends found in indigenous societies are closely related to Nature and human reproduction. Some of the legends are common to all societies. For example, mythology about the flood and the expedition against the sun can be found in stories of Noah’s ark and Houyi shooting the suns, respectively. Therefore, human beings may have a common origin leading to similar legends. However, several legends reveal that indigenous peoples treat humankind, all things on earth, and Nature equally, which differs greatly from the legends found in the so-called mainstream civilized societies. Particularly, their perspectives on sex differ tremendously from that of Han Chinese, and the most interesting part is their myths and

26 legends about the vagina/phallus and the country of women. Moreover, these attitudes towards
27 Nature, the human body, and sex are similar to Native American cultures in various aspects.

28 In a self-proclaimed civilized society, sex is often regarded as evil and thus associated
29 with various taboos according to the various codes of propriety. However, descriptions about
30 sex are common in indigenous legends. Moreover, those descriptions are not exaggerated or
31 intentionally avoided; sex in indigenous legends is presented with an “ordinary” attitude,
32 which current educational institutions, psychologists, and sex education experts have always
33 appealed to us to adopt. This return to the “natural” state after society’s imposing of numerous
34 restrictions is interesting. In fact, the self-limiting attitude of self-proclaimed civilized groups
35 is far less open to the attitude assumed by Taiwanese indigenous peoples who conceptually
36 integrate themselves with Nature and everything on earth.

37 In this chapter, I intend to interpret the presentations and tales about the vagina and
38 phallus in Taiwanese indigenous legends through a Third World feminist point of view,
39 women’s literature that has been explored, compiled and developed by Native Americans, and
40 feminist theories derived from it. Moreover, I investigate Taiwanese indigenous people’s
41 legends about the Country of Women to analyze and reveal their attitudes towards sex and
42 women. In addition, similarities and differences in the gender perspectives in “The County of
43 Women” in *Flowers in the Mirror* and in *Herland* are compared and contrasted to demonstrate
44 different mentalities and lifestyles as well as explore the conceptual contexts of these works
45 from a Third World feminist perspective.¹

46 Limited information presented from a female subjectivity can be found among current
47 information related to Taiwanese indigenous peoples because Han immigrants focused on

¹ The legends about the country of women can be found in numerous countries and regions in all times. Collecting these legends or literary works will be a meaningful project that enables interesting comparison. However, due to the limited length, this chapter has to exclude this attempt temporarily and conduct textual comparison when data are fully collected. Currently, only “The Country of Women” in Chinese literary work *Flowers in the Mirror* and English novel *Herland* are compared in this chapter.

48 assimilating the indigenous peoples after arriving in Taiwan, which naturally resulted in the
49 loss of related historical records about the indigenous peoples. Another two facts may raise
50 further concern. One is that currently, existing indigenous data or legends were mostly
51 compiled during the Japanese rule or by the Han people. Consequently, the ideologies of the
52 compilers are difficult to determine, and could have distorted the original accounts. The other
53 fact is that I will inevitably encounter difficulties using feminist theories to analyze these
54 legends because even the currently available Taiwanese indigenous legends compiled
55 following attention to indigenous studies, are mostly compiled by male indigenous writers.
56 Female indigenous writers' works are scarce, let alone works written with a feminist concern.
57 Accordingly, concerns arise over that several of these legends may have been distorted due to
58 Han- or male-centered thinking, thus leading to biased analytical results.

59 Therefore, this study can only investigate using existent data, yet endeavor to assume an
60 unbiased attitude, and refer to the experiences of Native American women for performing a
61 relatively objective analysis. In addition, unlike the numerous female writers and theorists who
62 have spent much effort compiling Native American literary works, most Taiwanese indigenous
63 women are deprived of basic education opportunities and naturally the chance to become
64 researchers or writers probably because they are still among the disadvantaged. However, I
65 believe that this problem will see great improvement in the future.

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67 II. Analyzing Indigenous Legends of "The Country of Women"

68 As numerous examples have vividly indicated, indigenous legends are often
69 characterized by nature-related topics and simplicity. Therefore, we should review indigenous
70 people's views on the vagina and phallus before analyzing the legends about the country of
71 women.

72 A. Indigenous Legends on the Vagina:

73 The Kabiayang community of the Paiwan people has a legend that a beautiful woman
74 Mao-A-Kai had a toothed vagina; similarly, the Duwen community of the same people has
75 legends about a vagina without an opening and a woman having only the vagina but not a body.
76 All the women in these legends are called Mao-A-Kai. These stories mostly describe how
77 women with an unusual vagina fail to produce children to continue the family line and can even
78 harm their husbands' lives (e.g., toothed vagina). For example, for women with a toothed
79 vagina or vagina without an opening, they must have the teeth removed or cut an opening to
80 bear children.

81 Firstly, according to these legends, we can affirm that indigenous peoples attach
82 importance to fertility and reproduction. The female sexual organ is considered a natural part of
83 human body; indigenous peoples enjoy talking about it and emphasize its functions without
84 regarding it as a shameful existence. Specifically, the vagina is even personified to exist
85 independently from other human parts, acquiring a higher status and stronger power. This
86 phenomenon marks an alternative aspect of vagina worship.²

87 An analysis of these myths indicates that indigenous peoples regard the female sexual
88 organ as both adorable and terrifying. It can give or take life. Men are particularly fearful that
89 the vagina could devour their sexual organ and thus life. These myths share commonalities
90 with the dissuasion against sexual indulgence in the civilized society; men's fear of the vagina
91 is similar to castration anxiety. Accordingly, for people in civilized society, these "problems"
92 must be tackled to generate morally correct actions. Moreover, the protagonist Mao-A-Kai is
93 always presented as a beautiful, desirable woman that induces fights in these stories. Whether
94 this presentation conforms to the stereotype of femme fatale is worth further investigation.

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² Several countries (e.g., Japan) praise and worship the vagina. Typically, they regard the vagina as a deity governing reproduction, fertility and representing sexual desire.

96 B. Indigenous Legends of the Phallus:

97 The two legends introduced in this section are from the Paiwan people as well. One of
98 them is from the Kajilai community, which tells about men with a long penis. This type of
99 legends can be found among the Puyuma people. In addition, the Kulalau people have a legend
100 about a phallus existing without a human body, which can be compared with the legend about a
101 vagina existing without a human body. In the first story, men with an unusually long penis
102 delight in molesting women, thus annoying and disgusting others. However, the descriptions
103 do not mean to blame these men; on the contrary, people who try to do harm to these men's
104 sexual organs are usually punished. Therefore, indigenous people are not critical of men with
105 an abnormally long penis that symbolize strong carnal desires; instead, they treat these men
106 fairly.

107 The independent phallus is similar to the aforementioned vagina worship. Such a form of
108 existence is a type of phallicism and recognizes the independent status and particularity of the
109 phallus. Similar to the legends about the vagina, the personification of the phallus can be
110 interpreted as that the sexual organ is probably the only human organ among all organs that can
111 render some people to lose their rationality or agency, as if the sexual organ exists by itself.
112 Nevertheless, this condition is always rectified in the end; the sexual organ becomes normal
113 again without being regarded as an evil force.

114 Vagina worship and phallicism individually have an established historical background.
115 According to these legends, we can infer that indigenous peoples assume a natural attitude
116 towards sexual organs. They do not transform them into tools of oppression (e.g., phallicism in
117 a patriarchal society) or consider them evil and frightening (e.g., asceticism in ethical systems).
118 This positive and straightforward attitude towards sex is worth emulation.

119 C. The Country of Women:

120 The legends about the country of women can be found in the Amis, Paiwan, Atayal,

121 Bunun, and Tsou peoples. In the country of women in the stories, women get pregnant by
122 letting wind³ into their own vagina. However, women getting pregnant through this method
123 usually delivered unhealthy babies until men appeared and impregnated them, which vastly
124 increased the human population.

125 Similar to the aforementioned legends, the vagina of the women in the country of women
126 is repeatedly mentioned with an emphasis on its fertility (i.e., the ability to mother a child). In
127 addition, these legends highlight that women cannot produce healthy children independently
128 without men. These legends seem to indicate a social structure based on women. In this type of
129 society, men's role is to provide sperm, whereas the overall society is directed by and based on
130 women. In other words, men become the disadvantaged sex that can be killed, or regarded as
131 monsters, or viewed only as a sperm provider to be used by women in turns. The androcentric
132 structure of a patriarchal society is absent, and women are the major decision-makers in these
133 stories. This situation depicted in the stories resembles that of animal lives in Nature, where
134 organisms reproduce their next generation using resources available in the environment.
135 Arguably, these stories can be depicting a matriarchal society where children only recognize
136 their mothers without regard for who their fathers are.

137 Presumably, matriarchal societies similar to that of the Mosuo in Yunnan could have
138 existed among Taiwanese indigenous peoples then. In a matriarchal society, children mainly
139 follow and live with their mothers, whereas the role of fathers is downgraded. The country of
140 women in the indigenous peoples' legends accentuates natural population reproduction.
141 Therefore, the oppression in a patriarchal society does not exist, and nor do people have to fight
142 for equal treatment for women. Accordingly, female subjectivity is recognized in a matriarchal
143 society, and children's surname is not an essential concern. This circumstance varies greatly

³ The association of wind with fertility repeatedly appears in indigenous legends. However, no relevant research data have been found for reference. These legends are probably related to how wind spreads and sows seeds for plants in Nature. This presumption can be further examined in the future.

144 and interestingly from the purpose of “The Country of Women” depicted by Ju-Chen Li in his
145 novel *Flowers in the Mirror* as discussed in the following section.

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147 III. Differences Between the Country of Women in Indigenous Legends and “The Country of 148 Women” in *Flowers in the Mirror*

149 Among various Chinese literary works, *Flowers in the Mirror* by Ju-Chen Li is set in the
150 reign of Empress Wu Zetian in the Tang dynasty, and narrates a series of stories about talented
151 women. *Flowers in the Mirror* has been regarded as a crucial literary work that voices
152 grievances for Chinese women. One of the stories “The Country of Women” has been popular
153 and widely read. Most critics agree that the gender role reversal in the story means to satirize
154 the unfair treatment of women in the Chinese society. This story foregrounds and highlights the
155 harm done to women by having male characters (e.g., Zhi-Yang Lin) experience the pain
156 suffered by traditional women (e.g., putting on make-up, piercing ears, and foot binding).
157 Although critics have disagreed on the question of whether *Flowers in the Mirror* is truly
158 anti-tradition and on the level of its rebellious characteristics (Li, 108–109), they have agreed
159 on the work’s portrayal of a patriarchal society and the immense attention the author devotes to
160 the problems among women.

161 Therefore, the purpose of this work is to satirize and point accusations of physical and
162 psychological harm done to women in the Chinese system of ethics. To achieve this goal, this
163 work uses the structure of a patriarchal society as a basic framework and describes what three
164 men have seen and heard in their journey to the Country of Women to present a gender reversal.
165 As Shih Hu stated, “What Ju-Chen Lin noticed is the problem of women that has been
166 neglected for thousands of years. He was the earliest in China to raise this problem and then
167 discuss it in his novel *Flowers in the Mirror*. His solution to this problem is: men and women
168 should be treated equally, enjoying equal access to education and an equal electoral system”

169 (220). All of women's education designs, participation in politics, and autonomy over their
170 own body described in the book are designed according to an androcentric society. However,
171 imposing a patriarchal structure or the vested interests of men directly on women is not what
172 women really want. Moreover, Ju-Chen Li could have still been restricted by a man's
173 perspective in determining women's needs. This explains why all the talented women in
174 *Flowers in the Mirror* are unmarried young women who do not have to face the dilemma
175 between maternal duties and career. Thus, the author would not have to propose possible
176 solutions to these problems in the book.

177 By contrast, the stories about the country of women are derived from matriarchal societies
178 that presumably existed before the formation of patriarchal societies. These stories reveal the
179 process of developing a mutually independent to a cooperative relationship between the two
180 sexes. This model seems to fulfil feminist ideals more satisfactorily. It does not presume men's
181 superiority over women; neither does it involve antagonistic ideologies. This acquired value
182 respects nature and excludes hierarchy while acknowledging the innate biological differences
183 between men and women, and emphasizing that maintaining a symbiotic and mutually
184 reciprocal attitude is the healthy approach to addressing gender differences and is worthy of
185 emulation.

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187 IV. Differences Between the Country of Women in Indigenous Legends and *Herland*

188 In the Western literary work *Herland*, we can clearly see how the author Charlotte Perkins
189 Gilman attempts to present gender differences through a female utopia. Although the author is
190 a woman, she ingeniously sets three men (i.e., Terry, Jeff, and Vandyck) as protagonists to seek
191 the legendary country of women and embark on a journey that transforms their thinking and
192 perspective. After witnessing the peaceful, tranquil, and secluded life in the country of women,
193 the three male protagonists compare it with the real world dominated by men, recognize their

194 own inferiority, and feel ashamed of themselves. Toward the end, the poet Jeff decides to stay
195 with Celis his girlfriend in the country of women. Terry, the only protagonist who cannot
196 accept the new ideas and cannot change his chauvinist ideas, fails to adapt to the country of
197 women. He commits arson, becomes imprisoned, and desires to flee. The third protagonist
198 Vandyck is forced to return to his hometown with his girlfriend Ellador from the country of
199 women, although he worries whether Ellador will be able to adapt to the new environment in
200 the future.

201 In the country of women, the three men witness numerous ways of thinking that differ
202 completely to those in an androcentric society. Different gender inevitably leads to different
203 perspectives. For example, in contrast to male aggressiveness and the emphasis on masculine
204 conquest, women accentuate maternity and child care; an androcentric society values
205 practicality and utility value, whereas a gynocentric society emphasizes friendship,
206 companionship, and affection. In addition, the novel sharply criticizes the marriage institution
207 in the patriarchal society and questions its meaning of existence. In fact, as stated in its
208 foreword, what this novel aims to do is to “present women’s private sphere, where ordinary
209 housewives’ principles and reflections on homemaking occur, through the country of women.”
210 By scaling up the size of a family where its “internal affairs” are governed by a housewife to
211 that of a country, this novel enables readers to compare the differences between countries ruled
212 by men and families managed by women. The book presents an obvious answer regarding
213 which system is superior.

214 Compared with “The Country of Women” in *Flowers in the Mirror*, *Herland* reveals a
215 possible fact that the equality women pursue may differ greatly from the value and standards in
216 an androcentric society. Compared with an androcentric society, in a state governed by women,
217 the society may be more humane and such a state may more capable of maintaining harmony
218 between humans and between humans and nature. Therefore, the society of *Herland* promotes

219 a matriarchal society that is spiritually closer to the natural state represented by indigenous
220 peoples. The depicted society values motherhood, prioritizes understanding and caring for
221 children, and regards reproducing and educating the next generation as women's calling. This
222 society symbolizes the return to Mother Nature's embrace, and a society without a marriage
223 institution representing patriarchal clans and systems.

224 However, the criticism on men and overemphasis on femininity in *Herland* seem to be
225 extreme. Masculinity is reduced to a worthless trait as though a society can only reach its zenith
226 without men. This mentality is not as open as that of indigenous peoples, who appreciate
227 themselves (e.g., femininity) while recognizing others (e.g., several positive masculine
228 characteristics). Moreover, not every woman can adapt to the lifestyle depicted in the novel.
229 Perhaps this explains why the women in the country want Ellador to see the vast world outside
230 the country and brief them with her observations, prevent themselves from becoming ignorant
231 fools, and refer to other lifestyles as references for improvement. However, to avoid regret,
232 citizens in the country of women should make careful evaluations before allowing other people
233 to influence them. Therefore, Ellador promises them not to disclose the location of the country
234 before the report and evaluation are completed. What is reassuring is that several men are still
235 accepted into the country of women. Their stay foreshadows the possibility of reconciliation
236 and reciprocity between the two sexes.

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238 V. Differences Between the Country of Women in Indigenous Legends and the "Yellow 239 Woman" in Native American Legends

240 The series of stories in Native American legends regarding the "Yellow Woman" describe
241 the legendary deeds of women with special talents. These women remain unmarried and
242 isolated from society. They can communicate with various gods and spirits; moreover, they
243 have multiple exceptional experiences that include several sexual relationships with the other

244 sex. These extraordinary women have experienced almost everything that can occur to a
245 woman and have undertaken challenges required for them to become a competent medium
246 between tribes and nature. Most crucially, they enable tribes to stay harmonious, balanced, and
247 thrive. Therefore, these women embody the bridge between tribes and land/nature. Their color
248 yellow symbolizes women, who play the essential roles of mediating between human beings
249 and nature.

250 In this series of stories, these women typically have to learn to be a medicine woman.
251 Before acquiring crucial capabilities, they must receive strict training and undergo various
252 stages of life, including being a daughter, householder, mother, gatherer, ritualist, teacher, and
253 wise woman to acquire the virtues of these roles. During this process, they have to not only face
254 the various roles that a woman plays throughout her life, but also negotiate with the tangible or
255 intangible forces of Nature to secure a space for peaceful coexistence, as well as direct their
256 tribe members to interact correctly with natural and supernatural forces.

257 A comparison of the aforementioned works indicates that Taiwanese indigenous cultures
258 are similar to Native American cultures in various aspects. Both cultures respect nature and
259 value women, which differs sharply from men's superiority over women in a patriarchal
260 society. Moreover, women are portrayed vividly in most indigenous legends, which
261 unanimously emphasize the central role of women in human society. In addition, sex and
262 maternity are described positively in these legends. However, the recognition of women in
263 the public sphere and their wisdom in Native American legends are not found in any currently
264 existing records of Taiwanese indigenous peoples. Although Taiwanese indigenous peoples
265 have the tradition of witches, this tradition has not been described and recorded in detail.
266 Therefore, we should continue exploring records and documents of the indigenous peoples.

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VI. Conclusion

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Women and sexual attitudes described in Taiwanese indigenous legends and the comparison regarding the country of women portrayed in Chinese and English literature clearly indicate that literary works written by authors in a patriarchal society developed through a “process of civilization” have mostly highlighted the unequal treatment between the two sexes, whereas indigenous peoples treat the individual characteristics of men and women straightforwardly and unbiasedly. “The Country of Women” in *Flowers in the Mirror* stresses providing equal rights for women and men in a patriarchal system without considering the several characteristic differences between men and women, whereas *Herland* overemphasizes femininity and derides men. Both cases are not an ideal condition for true reconciliation. Presumably, the author of “The Country of Women,” living in an established tradition as a man, could not free himself from the habit of androcentric thinking, although he was concerned about women’s problems. By contrast, the author of *Herland*, having accumulated excessive grievances against the androcentric world, seemed to be blinded by antagonism, overcorrecting the real world in her work of fiction.

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Compared with the aforementioned deficient rectification or reconciliation measures, indigenous legends are much more simple and straightforward. The indigenous peoples do not bear the long established burden of a patriarchal society; neither do they have recalcitrant enemies to fight against. Their unadorned legends recount an untroubled lifestyle away from worldly strife. Men and women, humans and nature get along with each other according to the principles of harmony and coexistence. Everything including sex is observed according to the laws of nature. By doing so, women can exercise their full potential while recognizing the importance of men. In my opinion, these are the particularities and strengths of indigenous peoples that deserve emulation for dismantling the patriarchal society.

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