

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

Abstract

“The Country of Women: “Third World Feminisms 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. This paper discusses the differences between Taiwanese legends from other literary works from the perspectives of Third World Feminism.

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

26 tremendously from that of Han Chinese, and the most interesting part is their myths and
27 legends about the vagina/phallus and the country of women. Moreover, these attitudes towards
28 Nature, the human body, and sex are similar to Native American cultures in various aspects.

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

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

47 Limited information presented from a female subjectivity can be found among current

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

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

67

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

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

73 A. Indigenous Legends on the Vagina:

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

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

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

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

97 B. Indigenous Legends of the Phallus:

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

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

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

120 C. The Country of Women:

121 The legends about the country of women can be found in the Amis, Paiwan, Atayal,
122 Bunun, and Tsou peoples [1][2][3]. In the country of women in the stories, women get pregnant
123 by letting wind³ into their own vagina. However, women getting pregnant through this method
124 usually delivered unhealthy babies until men appeared and impregnated them, which vastly
125 increased the human population.

126 Similar to the aforementioned legends, the vagina of the women in the country of women
127 is repeatedly mentioned with an emphasis on its fertility (i.e., the ability to mother a child). In
128 addition, these legends highlight that women cannot produce healthy children independently
129 without men. These legends seem to indicate a social structure based on women [4][5]. In this
130 type of society, men's role is to provide sperm, whereas the overall society is directed by and
131 based on women. In other words, men become the disadvantaged sex that can be killed, or
132 regarded as monsters, or viewed only as a sperm provider to be used by women in turns. The
133 androcentric structure of a patriarchal society is absent, and women are the major
134 decision-makers in these stories. This situation depicted in the stories resembles that of animal
135 lives in Nature, where organisms reproduce their next generation using resources available in
136 the environment. Arguably, these stories can be depicting a matriarchal society where children
137 only recognize their mothers without regard for who their fathers are.

138 Presumably, matriarchal societies similar to that of the Mosuo in Yunnan could have
139 existed among Taiwanese indigenous peoples then. In a matriarchal society, children mainly
140 follow and live with their mothers, whereas the role of fathers is downgraded. The country of
141 women in the indigenous peoples' legends accentuates natural population reproduction [6][7].

142 **Therefore, the oppression in a patriarchal society does not exist, and nor do people have to fight**
143 **for equal treatment for women. Accordingly, female subjectivity is recognized in a matriarchal**

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 society, and children's surname is not an essential concern. This circumstance varies greatly
145 and interestingly from the purpose of "The Country of Women" depicted by Ju-Chen Li in his
146 novel *Flowers in the Mirror* as discussed in the following section.

147

148 III. Differences Between the Country of Women in Indigenous Legends and "The Country of 149 Women" in *Flowers in the Mirror*

150 Among various Chinese literary works, *Flowers in the Mirror* by Ju-Chen Li, completed
151 in the year of 1827 during the Qing dynasty, is set in the reign of Empress Wu Zetian in the
152 Tang dynasty and narrates a series of stories about talented women. *Flowers in the Mirror* has
153 been regarded as a crucial literary work that voices grievances for Chinese women. One of the
154 stories "The Country of Women" has been popular and widely read. Most critics agree that the
155 gender role reversal in the story means to satirize the unfair treatment of women in the Chinese
156 society. This story foregrounds and highlights the harm is done to women by having male
157 characters (e.g., Zhi-Yang Lin) experience the pain suffered by traditional women (e.g., putting
158 on make-up, piercing ears, and foot binding). Although critics have disagreed on the question
159 of whether *Flowers in the Mirror* is truly anti-tradition and on the level of its rebellious
160 characteristics (Li, 108–109), they have agreed on the work's portrayal of a patriarchal society
161 and the immense attention the author devotes to the problems among women.

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

169 should be treated equally, enjoy equal access to education and an equal electoral system” [8]
170 (220). All of the women’s education designs, participation in politics, and autonomy over their
171 own body described in the book are designed according to an androcentric society. However,
172 imposing a patriarchal structure or the vested interests of men directly on women is not what
173 women really want. Moreover, Ju-Chen Li could have still been restricted by a man’s
174 perspective in determining women’s needs. This explains why all the talented women in
175 *Flowers in the Mirror* are unmarried young women who do not have to face the dilemma
176 between maternal duties and career. Thus, the author would not have to propose possible
177 solutions to these problems in the book [9].

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

187

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

189 In the Western literary work *Herland*, we can clearly see how the author Charlotte Perkins
190 Gilman attempts to present gender differences through a female utopia. Although the author is
191 a woman, she ingeniously sets three men (i.e., Terry, Jeff, and Vandyck) as protagonists to seek
192 the legendary country of women and embark on a journey that transforms their thinking and
193 perspective [10]. After witnessing the peaceful, tranquil, and secluded life in the country of

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

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

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

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

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

238

239 V. Differences Between the Country of Women in Indigenous Legends and the Yellow

240 Woman in Native American Legends

241 The series of stories in Native American legends regarding the "Yellow Woman"
242 describes the legendary deeds of women with special talents. These women remain unmarried
243 and isolated from society. They can communicate with various gods and spirits; moreover, they

244 have multiple exceptional experiences that include several sexual relationships with the other
245 sex. These extraordinary women have experienced almost everything that can occur to a
246 woman and has undertaken challenges required for them to become a competent medium
247 between tribes and nature. Most crucially, they enable tribes to stay harmonious, balanced and
248 thrive. Therefore, these women embody the bridge between tribes and land/nature. Their
249 colour yellow symbolizes women, who play the essential roles of mediating between human
250 beings and nature [11].

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

258 A comparison of the aforementioned works indicates that Taiwanese indigenous cultures
259 are similar to Native American cultures in various aspects. Both cultures respect nature and
260 value women, which differs sharply from men's superiority over women in a patriarchal
261 society. Moreover, women are portrayed vividly in most indigenous legends, which
262 unanimously emphasize the central role of women in human society. In addition, sex and
263 maternity are described positively in these legends. However, the recognition of women in the
264 public sphere and their wisdom in Native American legends are not found in any currently
265 existing records of Taiwanese indigenous peoples. Although Taiwanese indigenous peoples
266 have the tradition of witches, this tradition has not been described and recorded in detail.
267 Therefore, we should continue exploring records and documents of the indigenous peoples
268 [12].

269

270

271

VI. Conclusion

272

273

274

275

276

277

278

279

280

281

282

283

284

285

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.

286

287

288

289

290

291

292

293

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

294 peoples that deserve emulation for dismantling the patriarchal society.

295

296

297

298 **References**

- 299 [1] Chen, Chien-Wu, trans. *Mother Tongue Legends of Indigenous Peoples in Taiwan*. Taipei:
300 Taiyuan, 1991.
- 301 [2] Suzuki, Tadasu. *Customs of Taiwanese Aborigines*. Taipei: Taiyuan, 1992.
- 302 [3] Li, Wu-Shiung. *Bunun*. Nantou: Yushan National Park, 1995.
- 303 [4] Pu, Zhong-Cheng. *Oral Literature of Indigenous Peoples in Taiwan*. Taipei: Changmin,
304 1996.
- 305 [5] Siyapen Jipeaya (Zhou, Zong-Jing). *The Amis who Caught Rain Boots*. Taichung:
306 Morningstar, 1992.
- 307 [6] Syaman Ronpongan (Shih, Nu-Lai). *Mythology of the Badai Bay*. Taichung: Morningstar,
308 1992.
- 309 [7] Li, Yu-Xin. "Anti-Tradition and Pro-Tradition: On the Feminist Thoughts in Flowers in the
310 Mirror. *Chung-Wai Literary Monthly* 22.6 (1993): 108–120.
- 311 [8] Shih, Hu. "Flowers in the Mirror that Explores the Problem of Women." From *Primary*
312 *Afflictions and Love*. Ed. Ming-Li Zheng. Taipei: Shita Bookstore, 1989.
- 313 [9] Zhang, Zhou. *Chinese Civilization and Criticism on Lu Xun*. Taipei: Laureate, 1993.
- 314 [10] Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *Herland*. New York: Pantheon, 1979.
- 315 [11] Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Yellow Woman*. New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1993.
- 316 [12] Allen, Paula Gunn. "Kochinnenako in Academe: Three Approaches to Interpreting a
317 Keres Indian Tale." *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian*
318 *Traditions*. Boston: beacon P, 1986.