

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

Hui-Ya Lin^{1*}

¹*Department of Applied English, Ming Chuan University, 5 De Mng Rd., Gui Shan District, Taoyuan County 333, Taiwan, R.O.C.*

Original Research Article

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 of Taiwanese legends from other literary works from the perspectives of Third World Feminisms.

Keywords: Third World Feminisms; Taiwanese literature; English literature; Chinese literature; Taiwanese indigenous peoples; patriarchal society; maternal society.

1. 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 legends about the vagina/phallus and the country

of women. Moreover, these attitudes towards Nature, the human body, and sex are similar to Native American cultures in various aspects.

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

**Corresponding author: E-mail: lisalin2007@gmail.com;*

integrate themselves with Nature and everything on earth.

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

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

¹ *The legends about the country of women can be found in numerous countries and regions at 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.*

results.

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

2. THIRD WORLD FEMINISMS

According to Dr. Su-Lin Yu [3] at National Cheng Kung University, feminists in the Third World have created a space for the development of Third-World feminism. Since the 1980s, Third-World feminists such as Chela Sandoval [1], Trinh T. Minh-ha [2], Spivak [3] and Mohanty [4] have continuously criticized the racial discrimination and class prejudice among women and feminists themselves, providing a standpoint for further development of the feminist theories related to nonwhite women. The diversity and differences in their theories have not only prompted nonwhite women to deconstruct the homogeneous female subject and reject the concept of an overarching feminism but also enabled them to claim differences and assert diverse female identifications. Currently, women in economically developed Asian countries or regions (e.g., Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, and Taiwan) and young women in the United States are facing similar concerns. Occasionally, they even encounter similar challenges and dilemmas. Asian feminists' skepticism regarding a hegemonic feminist discourse is closely related to the disagreement between nonwhite American feminism and the second-wave feminism in several aspects. Despite facing similar dilemmas, young Asian women and nonwhite American women look upon the history of feminism from different perspectives. Although nonwhite American women understand the history of feminism as involving three consecutive waves of transformation from the nineteenth century to the present, few Asian women see it as a linear development. The submission of Asian women has a long history and is deeply rooted in the course of economic, political, and cultural development. In the past decades, Asian historians, sociologists, and feminists have

rediscovered various figures and incidents that used to be missing in the history of women. They found that colonization and nationalism have contributed to a fragmented and discontinuous history of Asian women. In other words, the development of feminism presents a fragmented and nonlinear history rather than a linear and gradual progress. Sometimes we may fail to recognize the importance of discontinuity over continuity in the history of feminist movements in Asia. Therefore, if young Asian women hope to accept a feminist identity, they must identify with their historical heritage first and then make contributions to their own cultural development.

The relationship between Western and Asian women has undergone changes in the early twenty-first century. Young Asian women face a false framework of binary choices if they view Asian women through a perspective of East-West opposition. In fact, Asian and Western women are not homogeneous within themselves. The framework of binary opposition not only fails to acknowledge the differences existing in the discourse of Asian feminism but also neglects the diverse interactions between Asia and the West. In addition, a binary opposition between the West and Asia would discourage young feminists who desire to engage in transnational collaboration. Therefore, we must regard Asian and Western feminism as mutually dependent and reciprocal rather than place them in a binary opposition.

In recent years, Asian feminist scholars have increasingly sought examples from the Third World they live in, to determine the uniqueness of their own ethnic groups, environment, and culture. Moreover, they have been resisting the gaze from the First World in order to reclaim their power of discourse and interpretation and to voice for their people and culture. This monograph consists of four articles that individually analyze literature, films, and indigenous folk legends from a Third-World feminist perspective, comparing different contexts and viewpoints in the First World and the Third World. The present study focuses on the exchanges between feminisms from the First World and the Third World, will facilitate mutual understanding between women from the two worlds and eventually resolve the binary opposition and misunderstanding that originate from parochialism.

3. ANALYZING THE INDIGENOUS LEGENDS OF “THE COUNTRY OF

WOMEN”

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

3.1 Indigenous Legends on the Vagina

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

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

An analysis of these myths indicates that indigenous peoples regard the female sexual organ as both adorable and terrifying. It can give or take life. Men are particularly fearful that the vagina could devour their sexual organ and thus life. These myths share commonalities with the dissuasion against sexual indulgence in the civilized society; men’s fear of the vagina is similar to castration anxiety. Accordingly, for people in civilized society, these “problems” must be tackled to generate morally correct actions. Moreover, the protagonist Mao-A-Kai is always presented as a beautiful, desirable woman that induces fights in these stories.

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.

Whether this presentation conforms to the stereotype of femme fatale is worth further investigation.

3.2 Indigenous Legends of the Phallus

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

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

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

3.3 The Country of Women

The legends about the country of women can be found in the Amis, Paiwan, Atayal, Bunun, and Tsou peoples [5][6][7]. In the country of women in the stories, women get pregnant by letting

wind³ into their own vagina. However, women getting pregnant through this method usually delivered unhealthy babies until men appeared and impregnated them, which vastly increased the human population.

Similar to the aforementioned legends, the vagina of the women in the country of women is repeatedly mentioned with an emphasis on its fertility (i.e., the ability to mother a child). In addition, these legends highlight that women cannot produce healthy children independently without men. These legends seem to indicate a social structure based on women [12][13]. In this type of society, men's role is to provide sperm, whereas the overall society is directed by and based on women. In other words, men become the disadvantaged sex that can be killed, or regarded as monsters, or viewed only as a sperm provider to be used by women in turns. The androcentric structure of a patriarchal society is absent, and women are the major decision-makers in these stories. This situation depicted in the stories resembles that of animal lives in Nature, where organisms reproduce their next generation using resources available in the environment. Arguably, these stories can be depicting a matriarchal society where children only recognize their mothers without regard for who their fathers are.

Presumably, matriarchal societies similar to that of the Mosuo in Yunnan could have existed among Taiwanese indigenous peoples then. In a matriarchal society, children mainly follow and live with their mothers, whereas the role of fathers is downgraded. The country of women in the indigenous peoples' legends accentuates natural population reproduction [14][15].

Therefore, the oppression in a patriarchal society does not exist, and nor do people have to fight for equal treatment for women. Accordingly, female subjectivity is recognized in a matriarchal society, and children's surname is not an essential concern. This circumstance varies greatly and interestingly from the purpose of "The Country of Women" depicted by Ju-Chen Li in his novel *Flowers in the Mirror* as discussed in the following section.

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.*

3.4 Comparison with Chinese “The Country of Women” in *Flowers in the Mirror*

Among various Chinese literary works, *Flowers in the Mirror* by Ju-Chen Li, completed in the year of 1827 during the Qing dynasty, is set in the reign of Empress Wu Zetian in the Tang dynasty and narrates a series of stories about talented women. *Flowers in the Mirror* has been regarded as a crucial literary work that voices grievances for Chinese women. One of the stories “The Country of Women” has been popular and widely read. Most critics agree that the gender role reversal in the story means to satirize the unfair treatment of women in the Chinese society. This story foregrounds and highlights the harm is done to women by having male characters (e.g., Zhi-Yang Lin) experience the pain suffered by traditional women (e.g., putting on make-up, piercing ears, and foot binding). Although critics have disagreed on the question of whether *Flowers in the Mirror* is truly anti-tradition and on the level of its rebellious characteristics (Li, 108–109) [7], they have agreed on the work’s portrayal of a patriarchal society and the immense attention the author devotes to the problems among women.

Therefore, the purpose of this work is to satirize and point accusations of physical and psychological harm done to women in the Chinese system of ethics. To achieve this goal, this work uses the structure of a patriarchal society as a basic framework and describes what three men have seen and heard in their journey to the Country of Women to present a gender reversal. As Shih Hu stated, “What Ju-Chen Lin noticed is the problem of women that has been neglected for thousands of years. He was the earliest in China to raise this problem and then discuss it in his novel *Flowers in the Mirror*. His solution to this problem is: men and women should be treated equally, enjoy equal access to education and an equal electoral system” (220) [12]. All of the women’s education designs, participation in politics, and autonomy over their own body described in the book are designed according to an androcentric society. However, imposing a patriarchal structure or the vested interests of men directly on women is not what women really want. Moreover, Ju-Chen Li could have still been restricted by a man’s perspective in determining women’s needs. This explains why all the talented women in *Flowers in the Mirror* are unmarried young women who do not have to face the dilemma between maternal

duties and career. Thus, the author would not have to propose possible solutions to these problems in the book [13].

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

3.5 Comparison with English Novel *Herland*

In the Western literary work *Herland*, we can clearly see how the author Charlotte Perkins Gilman attempts to present gender differences through a female utopia. Although the author is a woman, she ingeniously sets three men (i.e., Terry, Jeff, and Vandyck) as protagonists to seek the legendary country of women and embark on a journey that transforms their thinking and perspective [14]. After witnessing the peaceful, tranquil, and secluded life in the country of women, the three male protagonists compare it with the real world dominated by men, recognize their own inferiority, and feel ashamed of themselves. Toward the end, the poet Jeff decides to stay with Celis his girlfriend in the country of women. Terry, the only protagonist who cannot accept the new ideas and cannot change his chauvinist ideas, fails to adapt to the country of women. He commits arson, becomes imprisoned, and desires to flee. The third protagonist Vandyck is forced to return to his hometown with his girlfriend Ellador from the country of women, although he worries whether Ellador will be able to adapt to the new environment in the future.

In the country of women, the three men witness numerous ways of thinking that differ completely to those in an androcentric society. Different gender inevitably leads to different perspectives. For example, in contrast to male aggressiveness and the emphasis on masculine conquest, women accentuate maternal and child care; an

androcentric society values practicality and utility value, whereas a gynocentric society emphasizes friendship, companionship, and affection. In addition, the novel sharply criticizes the marriage institution in the patriarchal society and questions its meaning of existence. In fact, as stated in its foreword, what this novel aims to do is to “present women’s private sphere, where ordinary housewives’ principles and reflections on homemaking occur, through the country of women.” By scaling up the size of a family where its “internal affairs” are governed by a housewife to that of a country, this novel enables readers to compare the differences between countries ruled by men and families managed by women. The book presents an obvious answer regarding which system is superior.

Compared with “The Country of Women” in *Flowers in the Mirror*, the novel *Herland* reveals a possible fact that the equality women pursue may differ greatly from the value and standards in an androcentric society. Compared with an androcentric society, in a state governed by women, the society may be more humane and such a state may more capable of maintaining harmony between humans and between humans and nature. Therefore, the society of *Herland* promotes a matriarchal society that is spiritually closer to the natural state represented by indigenous peoples. The depicted society values motherhood, prioritizes understanding and caring for children, and regards reproducing and educating the next generation as women’s calling. This society symbolizes the return to Mother Nature’s embrace and a society without a marriage institution representing patriarchal clans and systems.

However, the criticism of men and overemphasis on femininity in *Herland* seem to be extreme. Masculinity is reduced to a worthless trait as though society can only reach its zenith without men. This mentality is not as open as that of indigenous peoples, who appreciate themselves (e.g., femininity) while recognising others (e.g., several positive masculine characteristics). Moreover, not every woman can adapt to the lifestyle depicted in the novel. Perhaps this explains why the women in the country want Ellador to see the vast world outside the country and brief them with her observations, prevent themselves from becoming ignorant fools, and refer to other lifestyles as references for improvement. However, to avoid regret, citizens in the country of women should make careful evaluations before allowing other people to influence them. Therefore, Ellador promises

them not to disclose the location of the country before the report and evaluation are completed. What is reassuring is that several men are still accepted into the country of women. Their stay foreshadows the possibility of reconciliation and reciprocity between the two sexes.

3.6 Comparison with “Yellow Woman” in Native American Legends

The series of stories in Native American legends regarding the “Yellow Woman” describes the legendary deeds of women with special talents. These women remain unmarried and isolated from society. They can communicate with various gods and spirits; moreover, they have multiple exceptional experiences that include several sexual relationships with the other sex. These extraordinary women have experienced almost everything that can occur to a woman and has undertaken the challenges required for them to become a competent medium between tribes and nature. Most crucially, they enable tribes to stay harmonious, balanced and thrive. Therefore, these women embody the bridge between tribes and land/nature. Their colour yellow symbolizes women, who play the essential roles of mediating between human beings and nature [15].

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

Comparisons with the aforementioned works indicate that Taiwanese indigenous cultures are similar to Native American cultures in various aspects. Both cultures respect nature and value women, which differs sharply from men’s superiority over women in a patriarchal society. Moreover, women are portrayed vividly in most indigenous legends, which unanimously emphasize the central role of women in human society. In addition, sex and maternity are described positively in these legends. However, the recognition of women in the public sphere and their wisdom in Native American legends are not found in any currently existing records of

Taiwanese indigenous peoples. Although Taiwanese indigenous peoples have the tradition of witches, this tradition has not been described and recorded in detail. Therefore, we should continue exploring the records and documents of the indigenous peoples [16]

4. CONCLUSION

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.

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.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

REFERENCES

1. Sandoval, Chela. *Methodology of the Oppressed*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, 241 pp.
2. Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing, Postcoloniality and Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989, 173pp.
3. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Trans. Yen-Bin Chiou and Tsuey-Fen Lee. *Chung-Wai Literary Monthly* 24.6 (1995): 94–123.
4. Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" *boundary 2*, Vol. 12, No. 3, On Humanism and the University I: The Discourse of Humanism. (Spring - Autumn, 1984), pp. 333-358.
5. Chen, Chien-Wu, trans. *Mother Tongue Legends of Indigenous Peoples in Taiwan*. Taipei: Taiyuan, 1991.
6. Suzuki, Tadasu. *Customs of Taiwanese Aborigines*. Taipei: Taiyuan, 1992.
7. Li, Wu-Shiung. *Bunun*. Nantou: Yushan National Park, 1995.
8. Pu, Zhong-Cheng. *Oral Literature of Indigenous Peoples in Taiwan*. Taipei: Changmin, 1996.
9. Siyapen Jipeaya (Zhou, Zong-Jing). *The Amis who Caught Rain Boots*. Taichung: Morningstar, 1992.
10. Syaman Ronpongan (Shih, Nu-Lai). *Mythology of the Badai Bay*. Taichung: Morningstar, 1992.
11. Li, Yu-Xin. "Anti-Tradition and Pro-Tradition: On the Feminist Thoughts in *Flowers in the Mirror*." *Chung-Wai Literary Monthly* 22.6 (1993): 108–120.
12. Shih, Hu. "Flowers in the Mirror that Explores the Problem of Women." From *Primary Afflictions and Love*. Ed. Ming-Li Zheng. Taipei: Shita Bookstore, 1989.
13. Zhang, Zhou. *Chinese Civilization and Criticism on Lu Xun*. Taipei: Laureate, 1993.
14. Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *Herland*. New York: Pantheon, 1979.
15. Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Yellow Woman*. New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1993.
16. Allen, Paula Gunn. "Kochinnenako in Academe: Three Approaches to Interpreting a Keres Indian Tale." *The*

*Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in
American Indian Traditions.* Boston:

beacon P, 1986.