



A Cross Cultural Study on the Theme of Women Salvation in Two Literary Works

YUE Jianying^[a]; ZHAO Yushan^{[a]*}

^[a] School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China.

*Corresponding author.

Received 9 January 2013; accepted 26 February 2013

Abstract

Women salvation is a common depicted theme in literatures about women worldwide. Chinese novel *Ju Yan* and American autobiographical novel *Eat Pray Love* are all centered on the theme of their female characters' salvation under different cultural backgrounds. As a feminist interpretation of these two novels, this paper makes a cross cultural study on the theme of women salvation. Under the influence of gender culture and the different national cultures, the two women characters in the novels have quite distinctive experiences, a deep understanding of which may bring insight into cross cultural perception, thereby promote successful intercultural communication.

Key words: Cross cultural study; Women salvation; *Ju Yan*; *Eat Pray Love*

YUE Jianying, ZHAO Yushan (2013). A Cross Cultural Study on the Theme of Women Salvation in Two Literary Works. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 9(1), 1-4. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/j.ccc.1923670020130901.2656> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.ccc.1923670020130901.2656>

INTRODUCTION

Ju Yan is one of Chinese contemporary writer Xu Zechen's work in 2009. It is about love lost and love regained. It is more of looking for Ju Yan's lost lover-Hu Fangyu than of looking for the lost Ju Yan herself. In the process of searching, Ju Yan completes her self salvation. *Eat Pray Love* is Elizabeth Gilbert's 2006 bestseller, whose subheading is "one woman's search for everything

across Italy, India and Indonesia". It is the author's autobiographical novel. What Gilbert is seeking is also the lost self. By searching for their true selves, they complete their self salvation.

As a feminist interpretation of these two novels, taking the comparative study of American and Chinese writing about women as the subject of the paper, this paper intends to interpret the texts in the theoretical framework of American and Chinese gender cultures and national cultures.

1. REASONS FOR SELF-SALVATION

Ju Yan and Gilbert are two modern women living in different countries and social cultures. For different reasons, they began their journey to self salvation.

1.1 Cohabitation and Marriage

The female protagonist of *Ju Yan* cohabits with her lover Hu Fangyu, who is her college teacher. Ju Yan admired Mr. Hu's talents. This idol worship and Oedipus complex pushes Ju Yan into Hu's hug, who is already married. Thereafter, Hu is everything to Ju Yan. Hu's preference determines Ju Yan's preference. Ju Yan relies so heavily on Hu that she feels no need to be independent. In Ju Yan's mind, Hu was always right. His doctrines were so correct that her minor rejections can not be right. Shortly after Ju Yan moves to live with Hu, she quits her job, as the request of Hu. Ju Yan becomes a stay-at-home wife, whose sole responsibility is to serve for Hu. In Hu's plan, they would have a baby after Hu is promoted to the professor. So for a long time, Hu is the sole bread earner of the family. Ju Yan finds contentment in this life until Hu leaves without leaving any message. Obviously, Hu is a betrayer to their love. However, for Ju Yan this obvious truth is so ruthless that she can not accept it. Thus begins her voyage of looking for Hu in Beijing. Hu Fangyu determines Ju Yan's meaning of existence. When this

being defined and determined life abruptly puts to an end Ju Yan can't find her existence. This is the reason for Ju Yan's self salvation.

As an autobiographical novel, the female character of *Eat Pray Love* is Elizabeth Gilbert. Elizabeth Gilbert is an American author, essayist, short story writer, and biographer. She is best known for her 2006 memoirs, *Eat, Pray and Love*, which has spent 199 weeks on the New York Times Best Seller list, and was also made into a film by the same name in 2010.

The past Gilbert lived in the similar sphere just as Ju Yan, a family bonds by marriage. She and her husband have been together for eight years, married for six. She is so overwhelmed with duty, tired of being the primary bread winner and the housekeeper and the social coordinator and the dog-walker and the wife and the soon-to-be mother. The author does not give out sufficient reasons for wanting a divorce for fear of intrusion into her ex-husband's privacy. Quite different from Ju Yan, Gilbert is a career woman. However, readers can infer from the discourse the fact that she is not happy with the marriage. A bitter divorce and a turbulent love affair later, she emerges battered and bewildered and realizes it is time to pursue her own journey in search of three things she has been missing: pleasure, devotion and balance.

1.2 Passive Childlessness and Voluntary Childlessness

Ju Yan has always longed for being a mother, and a child who can be a close tie to her and her lover. However, her dream for being a mother was postponed by Hu, because a child may be an obstacle to his career development. So Ju Yan has to wait for the right timing. Conversely, Gilbert has dreamed of being a mother of many boys and girls. However, it is not until 30 that she realizes she needs neither a child nor a husband. "I don't want to be married anymore. I don't want to live in this big house. I don't want to have a baby (Gilbert, 10)". This is the outcry for Gilbert's heart.

The passive childlessness of Ju Yan is an indication of Ju Yan's subordinate position to Hu in her family. This patriarchy power distribution is representative of Chinese traditional gender roles.

In American, there is an increase in voluntary childless, which is ascribed to the social changes of recent decades. The rise of feminism challenged the inevitability of the mother role. Women have a greater ability to control fertility, and a large number of women join in paid employment. Moreover, more women have an increasing ideological rejection of the traditional family. A combination of these factors provides the social context for some people's voluntary childlessness. Obviously, Gilbert loves her work more than her baby. As a modern woman, she has an aversion to the traditional gender roles of women mainly served as children bearers.

2. THE JOURNEY TO SELF SALVATION

In search for Hu Fangyu, Ju Yan's meaningful existence, Ju Yan leaves for Beijing, which is Hu's most probable whereabouts. The initial efforts for searching Hu cost all of Ju Yan's savings. The financial difficulty and spiritual depression almost drive Ju Yan crazy. Tang Tuo, a real estate agent, comes to Ju Yan's rescue. Deeply moved by Ju Yan's deep affection for Hu, Tang Tuo serves as protector and friend for Ju Yan. When making a living becomes the top agenda in Beijing, Ju Yan, a family woman, finds her value in work. Her lectures win acclaim from the students and their parents. It is beyond Ju Yan's wildest expectation that she could prove her ability to live independently and gain reassurance and respect from others. It is this positive acclaim from the outside that lays a foundation for Ju Yan's return. Ju Yan's residence changes several times in Beijing. At first, she looks for Hu in the vicinity of Peking university, and then to a cultural company working as a secretary, the part time school, and the rent house with Tang Tuo. This transform of space implies not only the hardship of Ju Yan's living in Beijing but also an important witness of the transformation of Ju Yan from a girl living in love fantasy to a mature, confident modern woman.

Quite different from Ju Yan's passive salvation, Gilbert takes the initiative to divorce her husband, thus begins her one year long self salvation. Her living space has changed from Italy to India and then Indonesia. Three distinctive countries represent her three means of salvation. First of all, Italian delicious food rekindles her love for life. Moreover, Yoga in India endows her with inner peace. In Indonesia, she follows a Guru and strikes a balance between body and heart. Gilbert finds happy, healthy and balanced self through "eat, pray, love". In the journey Gilbert runs away from a traditional women's sphere. Family is a refuge for Ju Yan, a cage for Gilbert. After one year's exploration into Italy, India, and Indonesia (all have the initial of "I"), Gilbert finds her self "I". Broadly speaking, besides being mothers and wives, women should have a more basic pillar: the pure self-an independent self. The role of being wives and mothers are realized by combining with husbands and children. The prerequisite for a combination is an independent self.

3. WOMEN SALVATION AND LOVE

The theme of love and salvation are like twins in literatures about women, the absence of which is quite rare. Love is the reason for salvation. Ju Yan is dumped by her lover, Gilbert takes the initiative to get out of her former family and husband. The process of their salvation is also closely connected with love. With the beginning of another love affair, Ju Yan completes her salvation.

The structured love manifests itself in many ways. First, love is more important to women than to men. Men orient

towards career, while women affection. Love has special cultural significance to women in that the more importance women attached to love, the more likely to be injured in love affairs. The ideology of love as an opiate which keeps women drugged, promotes dependency on men.

The reason for it lies in the fact that Chinese social culture inclines to construct women identity in their relationship with men. As a result, feminine discourse focuses on love affairs with men. Women are overjoyed for gaining men's affection and are depressed for the losing of it. Romance becomes women's last resort. Ju Yan's life becomes tattered because of Hu's leaving, and regains her hope for a new life because of her affection for Tang Tuo. The power relation between the two sexes has become prevalent in Chinese culture and is a reflection of its deep rooted power hierarchy.

Love is not everything in Gilbert's life. Her love in the journey is only a beautiful episode. Her affection for Felipe is representative of modern intimacy, which features the following aspects: first, self development is the top priority. Love is not to find a person to be in love, instead it is to find yourself and love yourself first. In Gilbert's search for pleasure, devotion and balance, she accidentally encounters her new romance. So romance is secondary to the pursuit of self in Gilbert's mind. Second, love is developed gradually to achieve long term contentment. Gilbert and Felipe's affection is not modern fast food. Gilbert is suspicious of her dependence on Felipe, and thinks it is too early for her to accept Felipe's proposal. She believes that commitment to one's lover is important to the long-term maintenance of the relationship. Thirdly, both man and woman have the options to choose, instead of being forced to make love. Gilbert wrote: I am losing days here, disappearing under his sheets, under his hands. I like the feeling of not knowing what the date is (Gilbert, 309). This modern harmonious relationship is built on women's possession of their true self. The healthy sex relationship is to be oneself.

To conclude, love plays important roles in the two women's salvation. Losing her lover leads Ju Yan to the journey of salvation; the absence of love in marriage pushes Gilbert to her journey of salvation. But love carries on different functions in their pursuit for salvation. In the end, Ju Yan came across Hu Fangyu on the street, while telephoning Tang Tuo. At the sight of Hu, Ju Yan expresses no expected excitement and there is even no evidence of shaking voice on the phone. Obviously, Ju Yan has pulled herself out of the past, and is ready to be in a new romance. Therefore, Ju Yan's salvation is about love lost and love regained. It is still a man and a traditional Chinese family that save her. Gilbert, a typical western modern career woman, suffocating in her prior marriage, chose to terminate this life, and begins her journey of self salvation. Ultimately, she discovered "I was not rescued by a prince; I was the administrator of my own rescue (Gilbert, 344)".

4. CROSS CULTURAL INTERPRETATIONS

Hoebel and Frost (1976) define culture as an "integrated system of learned behavior patterns which are characteristic of the members of society and which are not the result biological inheritance. Culture offers people a blueprint for all of life's activities, and is the answer to Ju Yan and Gilberts' different salvation.

4.1 Gender Roles and Gender Ideologies

Ramet (1996) proposes the idea of a gender culture, which reflects "society's understanding of what is possible, proper, and perverse in gender-linked behavior". In other words, each society generates its own standards for gender-linked behavior. Attitudes toward men's and women's roles have been referred to as gender ideologies (Hochschild, 1989). A traditional gender ideology maintains that men's sphere is work and women's sphere is the home. The implicit assumption is that men have greater power than women.

Traditionally, a Chinese woman's sphere is confined to the home, which includes the kitchen, the living room, the bedroom and countless domestic chores. In Germany idiom, women are synonymous to the kitchen, children, and the church. Traditional women take the role of wife and mother as natural and accept women's inferior status to men in the family and society.

Ju Yan is representative of such traditional Chinese women. Her sphere was an imaginative family guaranteed by Hu Fangyu, a divorced man, a kitchen which can cater to Hu's tastes and flavor, a bedroom, where a middle aged man can dominant and control a young lady to dispel his emptiness and loneliness. Chinese used to adopt traditional gender ideology. Women are perceived as bearing primary responsibility for childcare and housework, they are considered incapable of devoting themselves to jobs as fully as men do.

An egalitarian gender ideology maintains that power is distributed equally between men and women and there could be an equal emphasis on home, on work, or on some combination of the two.

American women have more egalitarian gender role conceptions and will therefore be more likely to divorce if their marriages are not satisfying. This can account for Gilbert's divorce.

4.2 Communal Values and Individualistic Values

The core Biblical meaning of 'salvation' has to do with being rescued from danger or death. This paper does not employ the Biblical connotation of 'salvation' because most Chinese do not have religious beliefs. Salvation, in this paper, means preservation or deliverance from destruction, difficulty, or evil. Salvation is also power in life: saved people have the spiritual power developing in them. The two female characters all suffer from their past or present lives. In trying to be rescued from this suffering, they commence their self-salvation. However, they differ

in the reason and approaches to seeking salvation. These differences can be interpreted from different values.

Family togetherness, stability and loyalty are core concepts in collective values, which emphasize the needs, goals and identity of the group. As a contrast, individualistic values encourage people to think in terms of personal happiness and goals and the development of a distinct individual identity. An individualistic orientation gives more weight to the expression of individual preferences and the maximization of individual talents and options.

American national cultural heritage prizes individuality, individual rights, and personal freedom instead of the virtual sacrifice of individual family members' needs for the sake of the larger family. However, Chinese society honor collective values and emphasize women's devotion and sacrifice in the family. Confucianism made men alone the structurally relevant members of the society and relegated women to social dependence.

4.3 Different Conceptions of Self

Cross and Madson(1997) argue that men maintain an independent sense of self that is separate from others; women, by contrast, maintain an independent sense of self, in which others are integrated into the self.

In terms of self conceptions, Chinese society experiences a high degree of gender differentiation. Women tend to be under the dominance of men, thus are more likely to describe themselves in terms of their connection to others. This could account for Ju Yan's loss after Hu Fangyu's missing, and her pursuit of a new romance with Tang Tuo, who could help build her self existence. However, American culture favors feminine

traits more, which means gender role separation is not quite distinctive. That is why Gilbert tends to maintain an independent sense of self that is separate from others.

CONCLUSION

These two literature works are all about women's growth and salvation. As women, Ju Yan and Gilbert are both facing the similar dilemma—the choice between family and career; —the ever changing and transforming gender relationships in love and ultimately the construction of self identities. But under the influence of diverse cultures, their views of self and family values differ from each other. Literatures are one of the most accessible and authentic sources for knowing cultures. An interpretation of this two literary works will sharpen the readers' awareness of cultural differences and improve intercultural communication.

REFERENCES

- Hoebel, E. A., & Frost, E. L. (1976). *Culture and Social Anthropology*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Ramet, S. P. (1996). *Gender Reversals and Gender Cultures*. New York: Pointing-Green.
- Hochschild, A. R. (1989). *The Second Shift*. New York: Avon Books.
- Cross, S. E., & Madson, L. (1997). *Models of the Self: Self-construal's and Gender*. *Psychological Bulletin*, 122, 5-37.
- Elizabeth, Gilbert (2006). *Eat Pray Love*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- XU, Zechen (2009). Ju Yan. In MA Jinhai & Liu Shuqi (Eds.) *Fiction Monthly*, 11, 86-102.