



# A Cross-cultural and Comparative Study on Female Self-consciousness Between Chinese and Western Tragic Women in *Madam Du Sinks Her Treasure Chest in Anger* and *Medea*

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**Abstract:** *Madam Du Sinks Her Treasure Chest in Anger* and *Medea* are typical tragic works with women as the main creation subject in the history of Chinese and Western drama, both of which take the tragic experience of women in the patriarchal society as the theme. Due to the different cultural context and values of the author, there are similarities and differences between the subjects of the tragedy in displaying the female self-consciousness. This paper compares the differences in female self-consciousness between Du Shiniang and Medea, explores the cultural reasons behind their behavior, and finds the cultural differences between China and the West. Through the cross-cultural analysis of the self-consciousness of the two tragic women, not only has certain enlightenment to the development of the self-consciousness of modern Chinese and Western women, but also can better understand the connotation of Chinese and Western tragedy from the cultural perspective, and finally promote the dialogue and exchange of Chinese and Western drama art and culture

**Keywords:** cross-cultural study, *Madam Du Sinks Her Treasure Chest in Anger*, *Medea*, female self-consciousness

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 *Madam Du Sinks Her Treasure Chest in Anger*

*Madam Du Sinks Her Treasure Chest in Anger* Her Treasure Chest in Anger, a typical novel of tragic value, is a short story compiled by popular novelist Feng Menglong in Ming Dynasty. Du Shiniang was unwilling to be the plaything for the nobles so she had been looking for the companion that could rely on for a lifetime in numerous customers of brothel. Du Shiniang felt Li Jia is faithful and sincere and wanted to be with him and leave the brothel. However, Li Jia heard that his father was very angry to know his behaviors so he dared not go home. His money was also fading away. Du Shiniang let Li Jia redeem her from the brothel through clever design. When she looked forward to the happiness in the future, out of consideration for personal interest, Li Jia sold Du Shiniang to a salt merchant Sun Fu in exchange for money. Du Shiniang, sold as a concubine, sank into the river with treasure box after denouncing Li Jia and Sun Fu.

The research target of Chinese tragic women in this essay is Du shiniang, who is a typical Chinese woman. Du Shiniang was a prostitute, but in the feudal patriarchal society, Du Shiniang wanted to try to remove the shackles of fate and pursue her love and freedom. She is brave and intelligent, but she still hasn't got rid of the tragic fate. Finally, she was betrayed by Li Jia. In her anger, she threw the treasure chest into the river and killed herself.

### 1.2 *Medea*

*Medea* is a representative work of Euripides, one of the three ancient Greek tragedy writers. Based on the legend of the ancient Greek myth *Golden Fleece*, it tells a story about a woman who was betrayed by her husband and finally chose to punish her husband by killing her own children. That woman is *Medea*, the princess of Colchis and a witch. One day, she met Jason, a leader of the Argonauts, who came to steal the golden fleece. *Medea* fall in love with him deeply, helped him get the fleece and planned to go to the Greece with him. Her father sent her brother to stop her, but *Medea* killed her brother and departed resolutely. When they came to Corinth, *Medea* gave birth to two children. But lured by money and power, Jason want to marry the princess of Corinth. When the King of Corinth intended to exile *Medea* and her children, *Medea* was totally infuriated and broke out. After she found a place for herself, *Medea* designed to kill the king and princess of Corinth, and then retaliated against Jason by killing their sons.

The research target of Western tragic women in this essay is *Medea*, a typical figure with female resistance consciousness in the history of ancient Greek literature. She is brave, determined, aggressive, full of strength and passion, but at the same time bold and cruel, choosing to kill her son to punish her husband.

### 1.3 Research about the cross-cultural study

The cross-cultural study refers to a method and activity that reveals the similarities and differences of people's social behaviors, psychological characteristics and their development under different social conditions through the comparison of different cultures, so as to provide a basis for understanding the universality of social psychological phenomena. The first true cross-cultural comparison was made by Edward B. Tylor when he compared different accommodations, etiquettes and other social phenomena. In literature, since the 1970s, comparative literature has entered the third stage of its development, during which the study of comparative literature in various countries is unprecedentedly active. China has carried out a variety of academic activities aimed at conducting dialogue, communicating, and understanding the diverse cultures of mankind. Through interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, cross-ethnic and cross-linguistic literature research, the aim is to carry out multi-cultural dialogue with countries and ethnic groups in the world, promote mutual understanding and complementarity, and achieve communication between different cultures, so as to improve a global multi-cultural literature and culture.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Research about *Madam Du Sinks Her Treasure Chest in Anger*

According to the statistics of China National Knowledge Infrastructure, there are many researches on "Du Shiniang" in the academic circle, most of which are comparative studies of Chinese and Western literature. At present, 640 articles can be found with "Du Shiniang" as the keyword. From the perspective of "patriarchal world", Li Pengfei (2019) compared the tragedy of Du Shiniang and Anna Karenina sacrificing love with death in the eastern and western patriarchal world. From the perspective of "warning the people" of Du Shiniang's tragedy, Du Shiniang's love tragedy is an enlightenment to modern women. She strives for liberation and freedom, and her determination and courage to sink into the treasure chest after being betrayed are worth learning from (Zhou Juqin, 2018). Qian Zizhen (2017) analyzed the male characters in Du Shiniang's tragic story. Li Jia and Sun Fu, two people with different identities, have the same obsession and greed for Du Shiniang's beauty. Under the temptation of feudal ethics and money, Du Shiniang has a tragic ending. Zhang Bo (2004) studied the causes of Du Shiniang's tragedy. He believes that women are often materialized in Chinese traditions, which shows men's contempt for women and women's low status. Du Shiniang's tragedy is inevitable.

### 2.2 Research about *Medea*

At present, the research on Medea tragedy is mainly based on the status of ancient Greek women, the awakening of women's self-consciousness and social ethics, among which the awakening of women's self-consciousness and the spirit of resistance are the focus of many studies. Xuan Wenjing (2019) holds that the Medea is a manifest of struggling and fighting against the destiny and pursuing the self-pursuing. Qi Yici (2016) revealed the social factors of Medea's tragedy. Medea reflected the humble status and tragic fate of women in the society at that time. Cui Nan (2016) thinks that Medea is the representative of awakening of female's awareness and the spirits of revenge. Wang Enchao (2013) analyzed Medea's tragic story from the ethical and moral level. Combined with Sartre's Existentialist theory, through the analysis and discussion of the image of Medea, the ancient Greek tragedy Medea, he comes to the conclusion that women should follow the corresponding social morality and bear the responsibility while getting rid of the patriarchal attachment and gaining independence and freedom. Wang Hui (2008) psychologically analyzed Medea's revenge. She believed that Medea's complex emotional and psychological activities reflected her dual personality. In abroad, the scholars paid more attention to Medea's emotional analysis. For example, Sanders Ed (2021) studied Medea's emotions with the background of cognitive psychology philosophy and history etc.

### 2.3 Research about the comparative study of *Madam Du Sinks Her Treasure Chest in Anger* and *Medea*

Although there are many separate research articles on Medea or Du Shiniang, there are few comparative studies on them. Liu Yanni (2017) analyzed the differences between Medea and Du Shiniang from the reasons of revenge. She thought they both resisted in despair. Mao Ruizhe (2016) mainly analyzes the literary images of Medea and Du Shiniang from the perspective of abandoned women's revenge. At the same time, it also compares the core characteristics of different cultures between China and the West. For example, Westerners emphasize the indomitable heroic spirit, which is reflected in Medea's brave resistance. The Chinese do not emphasize the spirit of resistance, so Du Shiniang's Revenge has a cultural background explanation. Du Shiniang and Medea are both representative tragic works in China and the West. At present, there is still a large space for us to make a comparative study, especially from the perspective of the image analysis of tragic women.

## 2.4 Research purpose and significance

*Madam Du Sinks Her Treasure Chest in Anger* and *Medea* are both in the genre of tragic drama, and both about women's struggle, and more significantly they are each at a seminal stage in the history of Chinese and Western drama. *Madam Du Sinks Her Treasure Chest in Anger* is not only representative of Ming dynasty literature, but is also considered to be the true beginning of Chinese drama; *Medea* was at the first peak of Western literature, and ancient Greek drama was the beginning of Western dramatic literature. Due to different backgrounds, these two tragic women in works are different in their self-help consciousness, the way and the ending, but the themes are both about the development of women's self-consciousness in the patriarchal society. The aim of this comparative study is, by exploring the similarities and differences of female self-consciousness, to find out the origin of Chinese and Western culture behind them and sum up the internal relationship between Chinese and Western cultural concepts and value orientation. Its academic significance lies in enriching the comparative study of these two plays, as well as the comparison of Chinese and Western cultures and thoughts. The practical significance is to explore the root of the different women's self-consciousness and behavior of Chinese and Western women, to promote the dialogue and communication between Chinese and Western drama art and culture, and provide reference for the development of women's self-consciousness in modern society.

## 3. Cross-cultural analysis of Chinese and Western Tragic Women in *Madam Du Sinks Her Treasure Chest in Anger* and *Medea*

### 3.1 Similarities in female self-consciousness

#### 3.1.1 The desire of pursuing love and freedom

Du Shiniang's fate in that era can be said to be very tragic. She was sold into a brothel as a child and became a brothel woman. Such a clever, beautiful, self-respecting woman, unfortunately in the position of being insulted and hurt, led what seemed a hellish life. However, she had a strong and noble sense of self and did not allow herself to degenerate in the brothel, so she did not submit to fate. Although her body had been tortured by this cruel fate, her heart was still yearning to become a beautiful, free and real woman. She longed to escape from the prison of a brothel and live a happy family life. She also yearned for love, something a woman in a brothel could not have. In addition, Du Shiniang's female self-consciousness is also reflected in that she has laid a material foundation for her life after freedom, so that she does not depend on men economically. She saved a treasure chest through her efforts, this treasure may let Li Jia's parents can accept her. But if Li Jia's parents do not approve, then money can be the security of their life.

In the old society, women in Du's position had to plan for years and years just to lead a "human" life, and sometimes they did all the scheming and all the efforts, but still failed to achieve their goal. Compared with other women with tragic fate in the same era, Du Shiniang's female self-consciousness pushed her desperately to break free and change her fate.

#### 3.1.2 The courage for love

*Medea* was the daughter of Aetes, king of Colchis in Greek mythology. Compared with Du Shiniang who was miserable, *Medea*, as a princess, had a happy early life. *Medea*'s life was turned upside down by her love affair with Jason. *Medea* had a strong sense of female self in her early stage. In order to pursue love, *Medea* in addition to magic help Jason to obtain the golden fleece, but also resolutely killed and dismembered her brother, betrayed her country, with Jason far away from home. Self-awareness makes *Medea* firmly adhere to her choice of love and treat her relatives and country in a cruel and heartless way. After being betrayed by her husband, she condemned Jason and resisted. For example, then she proposes "try refusing the arrangement, or later petition for divorce". It manifestly shows *Medea*'s rebellion and independence.

Similarly, compared with other women of her time, *Medea* has a strong female self-consciousness. As a princess of a country, the outcome of her marriage is likely to be largely political, marrying someone she doesn't love. But *Medea*'s behavior shows that women should not be subordinate to men and should be free to pursue love.

### 3.2 Differences in immature female self-consciousness

#### 3.2.1 The shackles of traditional ideology

Du Shiniang's female self-consciousness is immature, which is reflected in that her self-consciousness is still fettered by traditional thoughts. At the beginning, her self-consciousness made her strive to break free from the shackles of tragic fate. However, Du Shiniang's self-consciousness is still not out of the feudal society's requirements for women, that is, a woman's perfect life must be married and have children. After she broke free from the cruel environment and gained love and freedom, she chose not to live an independent life when she was rich. Because she also believed that the ultimate destination of a woman was the family, she longed for marriage. This reflects that Du Shiniang's female self-consciousness is

immature and incomplete. But Du Shiniang fell so deeply in love that she seemed to forget her original identity as a brothel woman. She thought she left the brothel and had some property, can obtain the recognition of Li Jia's parents, and Li Jia married, live a happy life. But we know through the analysis, Li Jia's parents are ancient dignitaries with traditional thoughts, it is impossible to accept the brothel girl like Du Shiniang, so Du Shiniang can only be Li Jia's concubine.

Therefore, whether Li Jia finally sold Du Shiniang to Sun Fu or not, her immature female self-consciousness will make her finally unable to escape from the tragic end.

### **3.2.2 Over-reliance on men**

Medea's tragedy can be said to be completely from her immature female self-consciousness, reflected in her excessive dependence on men. First of all, she betrayed her family and her country, and went to another country with Jason without hesitation. At this time, Medea only had Jason to rely on. She used magic to save Jason at sea and help him gain power and wealth in later struggles. Medea gradually immersed herself in happy love and family life. In a foreign land, Medea was treated as an alien, with no one to rely on except her husband. The focus of her life and the source of all her happiness was her husband, and she helped him in every way possible, even if it meant killing people in cold blood, if it helped his political goals. Medea's female self-consciousness was gradually eroded by her dependence on her husband and the warmth of her family. She changed from an independent woman who bravely pursued love into a housewife who was willing to stay at home.

When her husband decides to marry another woman for power, what Medea has relied on collapses, and so does her spirit. As Jason said to Medea, "But you women have such strange ideas, that you think all is well so long as your married life runs smooth; but if some mischance occur to ruffle your love, all that was good and lovely erst you reckon as your foes". Medea went on a rampage of revenge, plunging herself into endless misery.

## **3.3 Differences on tragic ending of women with self-consciousness**

### **3.3.1 Revenge with her own life**

Du Shiniang finally committed suicide by jumping into the river after throwing her treasure chest. When Du Shiniang learned that she was sold, she pretended to promise Li Jia, but when Sun Fu's ship came to pick her up, she chose revenge. In feudal society, women seemed to be men's accessories and could be sold at will. However, Du Shiniang can only commit suicide to make Li Jia and Sun Fu fall the charge of killing people, so as to make them suffer the condemnation of the public and psychological unrest (because at that time, Li Jia selling Du Shiniang to Sun Fu is not a crime).

It can be said that Du Shiniang's death is heroic and noble, because it greatly reflects the awakening of women's self-consciousness in feudal times. Du Shiniang's suicide is not only the maintenance of women's dignity, but also the struggle against the oppression of male power.

### **3.3.2 Revenge with other people's lives**

Compared with Du's suicidal revenge, Medea's revenge is more cruel and thorough. She allowed herself to live, but let everyone she hated die or live forever in pain. It can be said that, as a female, Medea showed the cruelty and ruthlessness of male characteristics in her revenge. Hatred once again aroused Medea's female self-consciousness, awakening Medea from the constant dependence on her husband and family. The poison of a tiger does not feed on its offspring. But Medea killed her two sons to make Jason suffer. She also killed the princess and her father, ending Jason's political ambitions.

We can say that she is a cruel and unqualified mother, but in Medea we see for the first time that the ancient woman did not tolerate her husband's betrayal because she had children, but rather tried not to be bound by children and family. She did not choose to end her life in despair, but let the people she hated suffer, which reflects her spirit of cherishing her life as a woman and striving to fight.

## **3.4 The root causes and differences**

### **3.4.1 Differences of social background**

Western culture emphasizes individualism and maintains individual dignity and value in the pursuit of free love. Medea lived in the time of ancient Greek city-states. Such background determined that Medea could boldly pursue the love and realize her personal ideal. With less psychological burden, her resistance was more direct and serious. While Chinese culture emphasizes ethics and the relationship between people. Du Shiniang lived in the feudal era when Confucianism was popular. Under the influence of feudal ethics, when facing the humiliation of being abandoned, she could only resort to the most traditional way of resistance — suicide to preserve her reputation and resist.

### **3.4.2 Differences of ideology**

The west focuses on the conflict in the spiritual world of the protagonist. In Greece, the true procreator was considered the father, and the mother was considered only the cultivator and protector of the father's seed. While in the late Ming

Dynasty, people paid more attention to revenge itself and its effects. In ancient time, the unique way of revenge was to use public opinion after death to force the government to punish the crime of the enemy in order to revenge. In addition, Chinese culture attaches great importance to collectivity, which is different from the emphasis on individual orientation in western culture.

#### 4. Conclusion

Due to the difference between Chinese agricultural culture and western Marine culture, women have distinct personalities. For example, Medea values personal freedom and dares to resist, while Du Shiniang is bound by the requirements of the feudal society for women. Although their acts of resistance have different tragic patterns and cultural significance, they all profoundly reflect the spiritual character of that era. They all provoke people to think about how to maintain, develop and improve themselves as a woman in a patriarchal society and under the rule of an autocratic system. Today, modern women can make more rational choices. They should clearly define themselves and what kind of person they want to be, so that they can properly explore their own characteristics, truly develop women's self-awareness, and finally realize women's liberation. Unlike ancient times, modern women can choose a moderate and effective way of expression. If the male society could justly evaluate and understand the emancipation of women, there would be fewer tragedies in the world, especially between men and women. Through the analysis of two typical tragic female images in China and the West, this paper makes a comparative study of the female self-consciousness of Medea and Du Shiniang, and excavates the beauty of their awakening of female consciousness. Medea and Du's pursuit of love, freedom, dignity and courage against injustice is worth our appreciation and learning. At the same time, their love tragedy is also a revelation to modern women. In the case that the comparative study of Medea and Du Siniang is not comprehensive enough, our study has made a certain exploration and analysis of the female self-consciousness of these two tragic women. However, there are still some deficiencies in the study of tragic female images in China, such as the lack of analysis of tragic female images from the perspective of literary and artistic effects, and the literariness of the study is not enough. There's a lot of room for research in this area.

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