

Equality But Difference: Interpretation of Zhuang Traditional Gender Culture in the Context of Semiotics

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Abstract: Julia Kristeva is one of the most pioneering thinkers today. Her linguistic semiotics theory absorbs the oriental language thought, interprets the descriptions related to women in religion, art, history and culture, and explores the background of gender culture. Based on Kristeva's point of view, this paper interprets the gender culture of Zhuang in Guangxi, China.

1. Introduction

Semiotics is the study of the process of symbol formation, which includes activities, behaviors or processes involving symbols, and is usually regarded as having important anthropological and sociological dimensions; Julia Kristeva is one of the most pioneering thinkers today. Her linguistic semiotics theory absorbs the oriental language thought, interprets the descriptions related to women in religion, art, history and culture, and explores the background of gender culture. Barbara Creed uses Freud's psychoanalysis, Julia Kristeva's semiotic theory and feminist point of view to interpret the female images and symbolic rituals in the western horror films. The art in the world has certain similarity in human childhood, so, is it possible for Western views as a tool to interpret Eastern culture? Zhuang nationality is the most populous ethnic minority in China, and some branches of Zhuang Nationality in Southwest China still retain the original national culture. The clothing culture of these ethnic groups, their unique understanding of the relationship between men and women, and the special funeral culture all have a certain ecological presentation. However, due to the long history of time, Even the members of this ethnic group are hard to tell the causes of these cultural phenomena. Therefore, how to interpret these cultural phenomena and how these cultural phenomena reflect the interpersonal relationship of this ethnic group, and whether we can use Kristeva's semiotic and feminist point of view to analyze the cultural phenomena of this ethnic group is the main theme of this paper.

2. Interpretation of Gender Culture in Zhuang Nationality's Funeral Custom

Second burial is a popular traditional burial custom among the Zhuang nationality. This kind of burial custom deals with the dead body in a dual way. After death, the body is buried first. Generally, when the skin and flesh are rotten, the coffin is opened and the bones are picked up, washed and dried, and put into a special pottery urn for re burial. In the study of the second burial custom of Black-clothes Zhuang, a branch of Zhuang nationality, Hai Libo put forward: "in the traditional

culture of Black-clothes Zhuang, compared with women, men have more complete and mature souls.”[1] Hélène Cixous put forward that “the sun / moon, culture / nature, active / passive, day / night, father / mother, rational / sense and so on are a series of binary opposition concepts and words, all of which contain a concept of order. In this order, men are actually superior to women, with men in the first place and women in the second. Women become the subordinate and secondary part of this order.” [2]

In Kristeva's research, women's images are often associated with menstruation and other physiological events. Hai Libo found that the Zhuang people came to the conclusion by observing the physiological phenomenon of women's menstruation, “women mainly contribute their blood in the breeding of life, and the blood is preserved in people's muscles, so the flesh and blood of new life are inherited from their mothers; Men contribute their semen during sexual intercourse. Because the semen and human bones are white in appearance, the Zhuang people in black believe that men's semen will turn into new life bones. “ [3]Therefore, in Black-clothes Zhuang's second burial culture, it is believed that the flesh and blood are red, they are come from the mother, which is secondary and can be discarded, the bone is white and comes from father, which is important and needs to be preserved. This attitude towards gender is similar to Kristeva's cognition. Kristeva thinks that women's reproductive function is a weakness, even terrible, from the perspective of patriarchy, because the body with this function means life and death, which makes people feel terrible, so they will also hate this power. Kristeva believes that this view originates from “the history of ancient religion”, and “the rituals related to menstruation and excrement point to the ‘boundary’ between the authority of mother symbol and the law of father symbol.”[4] In the context of Kristeva's theory, women's physiological events make mothers become lowly, and the body is a symbol, a symbol of society. The second burial custom of Zhuang nationality is also a kind of ritual. In the process of second burial, the separation of flesh and bone can be interpreted as the separation of patriarchy and motherhood, and the re burial of bone is a kind of defense of patriarchy.

3. The Interpretation of Gender Culture in the Legends of Zhuang Nationality

3.1 The Pure Beauty of Women in the Legend of Zhuang Nationality

Kristeva has done a lot of research on the understanding of gender order in religious stories. In “Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection”[5], she believes that in Catholicism, the Virgin Mary has negative connotations. During the birth of Jesus, because the baby Jesus symbolizes the master of order. However, the Virgin Mary exposes him to the excrement of the birth and touches the disease and rotten flesh of the virgin body. This scene makes people feel terrible, which is the pollution and blasphemy. In Zhuang mythology, the birth of human is described as follows:

When Menogga (Goddess in charge of fertility) saw that the earth was lifeless, she wanted to create human man. She opened her feet and stood on two mountains. Suddenly, a gust of wind came. She felt that she was in a hurry to urinate, the soil was wet with urine. She dug up the soil with her hands, pinched a lot of clay figurines according to her own appearance, and covered them with grass. After forty-nine days, the mud figurines came to life when they opened the covered grass.[6]

In this legend, Menogga's image is positive, and the cognition of body excrement does not express “disgust” or “fear”, which is just opposite to Kristeva's theory of “ abjection “. There is also such a description in the legend of Menogga:

“Her genitalia is very big, like a big cave. When the wind and rain come, all kinds of animals hide in it.”[7]

This description reflects an inclusive attitude of female. For the formation of this maternal attitude, Kristeva uses the theory of “female genius”. She believes that in the process of pregnancy

and production, motherhood must create a kind of void and regard itself as an empty space in order to allow children to obtain their own language independently. This process is full of love. This kind of “love” is a kind of balanced love and a kind of “love” in which the radical of motherhood is resolved. Therefore, on the one hand, Kristeva's “female genius” theory can explain the plot of the Zhuang legend, but on the other hand, Menogga 's image is different from Kristeva's description of the terrible reproductive scene, in the legend of Menogga, the female reproductive process is beautiful.

3.2 The Terrible side of Women in the Legend of Zhuang Nationality

In the western horror films, all the sub types seem to be corresponding to the lament of religious overtones. For example, cannibalism, blood sucking, physical mutilation, female debauchery and so on. In the legend of Black-clothes Zhuang, there is also a cannibalism story about the origin of mosquitoes:

“How do mosquitoes come from? A couple went to drink other people's wedding wine and left their son to grandmother. In the evening, the old woman ate the child. A man came to the house and asked, “Hey, what are you eating?” The old woman said, “I'm eating soybeans. I've also eaten my grandson. That's not enough. Now I'm going to eat you. “ The man tried to cut her with a knife and the wound would close immediately. Then the old woman said to herself, “you can't kill me like this. If you want to kill me, you have to wipe me with chicken manure, “sure enough, the old woman died and her body was rotten. Her body was thrown to pieces and everywhere. Those which were thrown on top of people become mosquitoes. The pieces that were thrown at people's feet become ants, lice.”[8]

Different from Menogga's positive image, this story depicts the image of a terrible woman. From “cannibalism” to suicide, her behavior is illogical, showing the irrational and frightening side of women. So what is the root of this terror? In Creed's book, she uses Kristeva's concept of “abjection” to explain this source. In Kristeva's view, “abjection” is a strong feeling of aversion to exclusion, like the feeling of vomiting after seeing the corpse, excrement and decay; This kind of feeling is not only a kind of physical reaction, but also a kind of symbolic sense of order, which makes people strongly reject and resist the external threat. This external threat also leads to the internal threat. In his study of the story about origin of mosquitoes, Hai Libo said: “this reflects the imperfect nature of women's soul state. But at the same time, the legend also implies that women have certain physiological advantages, such as the old woman's body showing the vitality that is beyond human ability. “[9] Whether in the western horror movies or in the legends of Zhuang, there are horrible female images, which can be connected with women's reproductive ability. Women's body has reproductive ability, which means that women (uterus) are the carrier of life, but also the destroyer of life, which makes people fear and hate such ability. Because women are more connected with the natural life cycle of life and death, and the subsequent series of events are often unpleasant and uncomfortable. This makes women humble in men's eyes, this is the root of the formation of female terror image.

4. Interpretation of Zhuang Gender Culture in Costume Culture

4.1 Clothing Culture with “Black as Beauty”

Among all the branches of Zhuang nationality, Black-clothes Zhuang is a very distinctive one. The first thing that comes to mind of Black-clothes Zhuang is the female in black, and the female image of Black-clothes Zhuang appears frequently in various visual images.

Black-clothes Zhuang claimed that they advocate black, mentioned the reasons for the formation

of this custom, it is said that “in the past, Zhuang ancestors were invaded by outsiders. There was a leader named Nonglao in Black-clothes Zhuang who was injured in the war. When he found a piece of wild indigo, he smashed the leaves of wild indigo and applied them on the wound. The wound healed quickly. Nonglao thought that wild indigo was “divine grass”, so he ordered his tribe to wear black clothes dyed with indigo from now on.”[10] There is another view that “in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, it was stipulated that all civilians were only allowed to wear black and blue.”[11]

From these two views, the reason why Black-clothes Zhuang wore black cloth was practical first, and then because of the Tusi system[12]. In interviews with many Zhuang women in black, they cannot explain why they like to wear black. regarding black as beauty, it is more like a forced aesthetics under specific natural conditions and historical environment. When talking about the phenomenon of “foot binding” of ancient Chinese women, Kristeva thinks: “this is a kind of public agreement, or the sexual orientation of agricultural civilization, Taoism or aristocracy. This kind of behavior is actually a serious injury to women, and at the same time, it also damages women's ability to work. “[13] Shaping the female image of “foot binding” is more from the male aesthetic control of women, women are more in a passive acceptance position, similarly, in the clothing culture of Zhuang, it also more reflects the male aesthetic will. In the dress culture with “black as the beauty”, it embodies the rules of a patriarchal society, although women play an important role in it, but more is a kind of executor or who abides by the rules.

4.2 Dress Habit of “Wearing Both Skirt and Trousers”

In the west of China, Zhuang people have the custom of wearing both skirt and trousers. Because there are three levels of coat, skirt and trousers, commonly known as “three floors”, Black-clothes Zhuang women think that this way of dressing is because of its practical function, and that it is “convenient to do farm work” or “can hold the picked crops”. When Hai Libo talked about the origin of “wearing both skirt and trousers”, he mentioned an interview with the Black-clothes Zhuang old woman:

“Why do we wear both skirts and trousers in clothes? When we only wear trousers, our buttocks will show up, when bends down the waist of the trousers will show up. It's so ugly. So in addition to wearing pants, you have to wear a skirt to block your buttocks and crotch. At past, expose the curve of the chest and buttocks is not good-looking, must wear skirt, cover buttocks. We had to use things to tie the breast, which should be flat, but now the fabric of our clothes were very stiff, so we didn't need to wear the bra. “[14]

From this interview, it can be seen that such a form of clothing largely covers the characteristics of women's body shape, because women are “ashamed” of revealing their own gender characteristics. Western feminists have always been sensitive to this “shame”. For example, in Andres Serrano's work “train”, women's white, simple and virginal nudity is isolated and exposed, the menstruation symbol by the trace of red beads implies the lingering uneasiness and disgust towards the excrement of her body. According to Hai Libo, this kind of masking of women's physiological characteristics means “men have higher moral purity.” [15] Associate to Kristeva's point of view, as women's breasts, buttocks are related to physiological events such as childbirth, they should be covered up to avoid being despised, which is also a kind of lack of confidence in their female identity.

5. Equality But Difference: the Keynote of Gender Culture of Zhuang Nationality

In some of the examples mentioned above, we can see that there is a concept of “men are superior to women” in the traditional culture of Zhuang nationality. However, in the cultural concept of Zhuang nationality, the relationship between men and women is not just a simple binary

opposition, or the contradiction between paternity and motherhood. In the traditional culture of Zhuang, women are humble but also respected. In many Zhuang myths and legends, the image of women is positive. In the creation of clothing culture, although restricted by natural conditions and secular regulations, Black-clothes Zhuang women still give full play to their creativity. For example, yellow, purple and blue silk threads are added to the cuffs of black clothing, they create bright colored moon bags, reflecting Zhuang women's worship of nature and yearning for a better life. Zhuang women play their creativity in the field they are good at, which makes the relationship between the two sexes achieve a delicate balance. Nowadays, Zhuang women have become the protagonists of cultural inheritance and have more rights to speak.

6. Conclusion

Gender philosophy is an important part of Zhuang culture. Although there is ignorance in it, Zhuang culture embodies its unique wisdom in the balance of gender relations, which also enables this ethnic group to reproduce. In Isabel Armstrong's "Radical Aesthetics" [16] proposed that from the perspective of feminists to think about beauty is crucial. Based on Kristeva's point of view, Creed's interpretation of female in horror films provides us with a way to interpret gender culture. From this perspective, we can study and interpret the Zhuang culture, have richer ideas to think about problems, and explain some phenomena, which can also make the Zhuang culture be more widely concerned, recognized and understood, this is the significance of this paper.

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