

On the Gender Issue in Pema Tseden's Short Novel Balloon

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ABSTRACT. Pema Tseden is a Tibetan novelist and director. In the early days, he has written many short novels, some of which were turned into movies and gained him various international movie prizes. Now he is recognized as one of the Tibetan cultural icons. Balloon is his latest movie, based on which he wrote the short novel-Balloon. Different from his earlier works, he has put more attention on the female characters and gender issue in this novel. The paper intends to study the gender issue in the novel.

KEYWORDS: Pema tseden, Balloon, Female characters

1. Introduction

Pema Tseden has always been a talented movie director and novelist. Most of his movies and novels are to present the authentic Tibetan life. In those metaphorical stories, he has shown us his thoughts about the meaning of life, religion and existence. He is such a learner so that one can always expect to find something new and different in his various works. This time, he has concentrated on the issues of gender and reproduction in his latest short novel- Balloon. The paper will study the novel from the angle of gender issue, trying to reveal the gender problem human beings all share through the specific Tibetan family's story.

2. Pema Tseden and His Novel Balloon

Pema Tseden was born in Guide, Qinghai Province, China in 1969. He majored in Tibetan literature and Tibetan-Chinese translation in university. Before he became a writer and a director, he had worked as a teacher and civil servant. In 1991, he started to write and publish some short novels, both in Tibetan and Chinese. His movie directing began in 2002 with his first short film *The Silent Holy Stones* (‘静静的嘛呢石’), based on which he created his first feature film with the same name in 2005. Within the following years, he's been quite creative, with almost one movie a year, many of which have won him a lot of movie prizes. Meanwhile, he has continued to write short novels. As a matter of fact, most of his movies are adaptations of his short novels and writing is an essential part in his artistic creation.

Balloon is his latest short novel, which was recorded in his latest short story anthology- *Wujin's Teeth*. The novel is based on the film with the same name Pema directed, which has been introduced in many overseas film festivals and waits to be shown in China. The “balloon” in the story is actually the condom. Two Tibetan kids found two condoms in their parents' bedroom, mistaking them as balloons and played with them. When their father found out, he was so embarrassed and stopped them. He broke the two condoms and promised to buy the two brothers two real balloons next time when he's in town. Then the father went to his friend's home to borrow his fertile Xinjiang goat for mating. Later the eldest son in that family came back home from school and seeing the disturbing mating scene. After the big goat mating event in that family, the grandfather in that family suddenly died and the mother of the three boys was pregnant with a baby said to be the grandpa's reincarnation, however, the mother didn't want one more kid since she already had three boys, while her husband was quite angry because that seemed like to kill the grandfather's afterlife. In the end, the mother went to a temple on the mountain to stay for a while with her nun sister. The eldest son went back to school, while the father sold one old goat for the big brother's tuition and bought the younger boys two red balloons, which soon flied into the sky from the two boys' hands. Without a fascinating plot, the story is composed with some regular and seemingly meaningless yet very real scenes in common Tibetan people's family. As Pema Tseden wrote on the first page of *Wujin's Teeth*, he wants to show people his real hometown through all the down-to-earth stories he has been telling. ¹ And this time, Pema decided to go deeper into the female characters and the issues between two genders, to present some universal problems most women face through the Tibetan women's specific cases. The paper intends to

give a thorough study on the gender issues in Balloon.

3. Zhuoga's Pregnancy and the Aftermath

There are two lines of plots in the story:

(1) Two Young Boys Took Their parents' Condoms; → the Mother Was Pregnant; → the Aftermath of the Pregnancy.

(2) The Father Borrowed a Fertile Xinjiang Male Goat; → the Male Goat Mated with the Female Goats; → the Father Returned the Male Goat.

This part intends to analyze the first line of plot and present the hidden gender issues.

(1) Pema Tsenden, *Wujin's Teeth*, Citic Press Group, 2019.

The female protagonist in the novel - Zhuoga, is the male protagonist Dajie's wife,

the mother of three boys. She's a traditional Tibetan woman, who devoted herself completely to the family. She has been having a tranquil life until her two younger sons took two condoms in the bedroom away, which led to her accidental pregnancy. When Zhuoga told her husband she was pregnant, he was quite thrilled, however, Zhuoga told him she wanted an abortion since the family couldn't afford one more kid. Dajie was furious and slapped Zhuoga on her face since one Rinpoche said the unborn baby was the dead grandfather's reincarnation so that an abortion would be like putting an end to the grandfather's afterlife. The conflict between the couple somehow shows the suppression of patriarchy and the female's attempting fight against it.

What's more, when the eldest son heard that the baby his mother was pregnant with must be his grandfather's reincarnation, he tried to persuade the mother to keep the baby because he wanted his grandfather to come back into their family. That made Zhuoga quite shocked and disappointed since it shows the son's coldness to her own well-being. Besides, one of the grandfather's male friend encouraged Dajie to keep the baby, which strengthened the patriarchy pressure on the woman. The men are not the only force to crush Zhuoga - her nun sister, who can be recognized as the representative of religion and tradition- also thought it was a marvelous coincident that the grandfather was reincarnated as Zhuoga's baby and it would be a huge sin if Zhuoga has an abortion. These people around Zhuoga who share the same opinion about her pregnancy can be categorized as the typical Tibetans who hold strong religious belief. The reincarnation is such a huge thing to them and it's a real blessing that the grandpa can actually be reincarnated into the family again, which is the result of the old man's accumulating benevolent wills and deeds when he was alive. Thus, even the thought of having an abortion was intolerable.

Yet there is one different voice, which comes from the female doctor who Zhuoga went to see. When the female doctor Zhoucuo found out Zhuoga was pregnant, her immediate reaction was to suggest Zhuoga to have an abortion since she already has three sons. She told Zhuoga that it's not women's duty to give birth to more babies, and she should choose not to keep the baby so that she can live a better life without too heavy burdens. After hearing Zhoucuo out, Zhuoga was quite worried and struggled since she had to ask for his husband's permission. Here, doctor Zhoucuo appeared as the educated and considerate female companion, as opposed to the traditional and dominant men. Pema has indeed presented Zhuoga's internal struggles and changes quite delicately and subtly.

At the end of the story, Zhuoga decided to stay with her nun sister for a period of time in the mountain temple. After the sister announced the news to the family members, everyone was so silent as if they didn't hear it. Pema doesn't give the readers a definite solution to the problem the woman was facing. The decision of running away from the family for a while can both be seen as a kind of escaping or a declaration of her female independence. And the only help she could gain at the time was from another female - her nun sister. Such an open ending is reflective of the real gender problems people are dealing with every day - sometimes there'll never be a clear way out.

4. The Goats Mating and Its Connotations

As mentioned before, the second plot line of the novel is about Dajie borrowing a male goat, mating the male goat with the female goats and returning the male goat.

Dajie went to his friend's home to borrow a Xinjiang male goat to mate with the female goats they've kept at home. Here Pema used the word “壮硕”(strong) three times. The first one is used to describe the Xinjiang male goats in the friend's home, and the second and third are used for the friend and his son. The word is commonly recognized as a quite masculine one, which conveys the superiority of male power, showing the gender differences and problems are everywhere that no one can ignore them. When Dajie saw his friend's Xinjiang male goats, he was amazed by how

active and fertile they are, so he praised the goats, which made his friend feel fulfilled as if he was being praised.

When Dajie took the male goat home, the wife and he discussed about the upcoming mating and they specifically talked about one old female goat. The female goat was too old to join the mating, and Dajie planned to sell her for the eldest son's tuition. The husband was sure that the female goat was infertile and useless while the wife said she was actually an obedient one, then the husband said the obedience means nothing as long as it can't deliver more baby goats. While they were chatting, the old female goat seemed to be listening to them and interacting with them in her own way, which made Zhuoga thought a lot about herself. From what happened to Zhuoga later, one can see the female goat here is a metaphor, which reflects the men's dominance on women since they view women as labor tools, in which case, once the females lose the fertility, they don't mean too much in the world. Zhuoga surely doesn't feel comfortable with her husband's words, so she stared at her husband, which made him quite embarrassed. Such interactions between the husband and wife shows that though the husband is more dominant, there's still a certain counterbalance between the couple, which makes the wife's situation more complicated and difficult.

Then comes the mating scene. The father, grandfather and the eldest son are in charge of the mating, who took the male goat into the herd of female goats, making all the female goats very horrified. Quite a lot of details are given about how the mating works, which certainly has some metaphorical connotations. One impressive moment is that after one female goat was forced to be mated, she looked at the male goat and the three men with horror and despair, while the three men responded with satisfying smile. Such strong metaphorical expressions do give the story more sense of mystery and depth. In contrast, the females' reactions to the mating scene were quite different. Zhuoga and her sister deliberately avoided the scene and didn't talk about it. They also stopped the two curious brothers from watching it since they are still too young to be recognized as men. How the males and females view and deal with the mating process is also a reflection of the gender structure. After the male goat mated with several female goats, the husband returned the Xinjiang goat to his friend. He praised the male goat's fertility and how well he has done the mating job. Again, the friend enjoyed the compliments so much as if he's being praised, which shows his hurray for the male power.

5. Conclusion

Balloon is Tibetan novelist and director Pema Tseden's latest short novel. Different from his earlier works, this time, he created the movie first, then the short novel. In many of his previous novels, he has mainly focused on the theme of hometown, life and death, Tibetan religion and one's identity realization, etc. In Balloon, taken a traditional Tibetan woman as an example, he tries to reveal the problems most women are facing – the direct and indirect patriarchy suppression women are suffering especially when it concerns the issue of reproduction. By telling the story, he doesn't intend to offer an answer, but to present the problems so that people can reflect on themselves and try to find their own right path. This paper intends to present the gender issue hidden behind the plot and characters, to show a wider prospect of Pema Tseden's novel writing and hopefully to draw more attention on gender issue.

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