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The Female Consciousness of Pursuing Equality in Du Tenth Sinks the Jewelry Box

Du Tenth Sinks the Jewelry Box in Anger is a story about love, dignity, and courage. In this tragedy, the depictions of love, hate, and self-esteem of Du Tenth give her a particular distinctive character that has become one of the most impressive female images conceived by its audiences since the Ming Dynasty. The same story has been adapted for multiple times in plays such as “The Beautiful Courtesan (Weiyao,1957)” in 1957, in movies such as “The Beautiful Courtesan (Menghui,1981)” in 1981 and “Miss Du Shi Niang (Guowei,2003)” in 2003, and in an episode of comedy TV series “My Own Swordsman (Caishen,2006)” produced in 2006. But what are the exact spirits of Du Tenth that make her story so appealing and win her such a phenomenal reputation among its audiences? The answer could be her uncompromising insistence on finding her true love, or her efforts in getting out of the brothel and gaining a recognized social status. But it seems like among all the personal characters of Du Tenth, it is her awakening spirit of pursuing equality, namely her consciousness of pursuing an equal right of loving others and being loved, and her desire of being equally respected as an social individual that gives her the applauses and admirations from her audiences. And her sense of such equality is exactly the driven force for her tragedy.

Du Ten’s consciousness of equality is reflected in her pursuit of having the right of seeking

her loved ones on her own will, and that both men and women should have an equal responsibility for their relationship. The right of choosing one's own lover was almost a privilege only shared among males at her time, and it's even harder for a prostitute to ask for such freedom. As described in "The Oil Peddler Courts the Courtesan (卖油郎独占花魁)" the usual final destination of prostitutes in brothel is always bitter and sad: "Quitting the brothel is an aspiring event, but some girls are bought by serious men, some are bought by dishonest men. Some girls quit the brothel bitterly, some quit happily. Some leave with good luck, some leave because there is no other choice. – Perhaps, there is always more suffering than happiness after they leave the brothel. (从良是个有志气的事。没但有个真从良, 有个假从良。有个苦从良, 有个乐从良。有个趁好的从良, 有个没奈何的从良。有个了从良, 有个不了的从良——从良, 恐怕也是苦多乐少) (Xing Shi Heng Yan, Juan 3)" However, leaving the brothel via being bought by a rich man with good price was not the life goal of Tenth. In fact, she was most eager to find a man who truly loves her and both of them can mutually respect with each other in term of love. When Tenth was finally convinced that Master Li is the one she is looking for, she made a solemn pledge of honest and sincere love with him "Affections as deep as an unfathomed sea. Loyalty as heavy as mountains, but higher. (An Anthology of Chinese Literature, 1996, p.838)" Such pledge is the evidence of Tenth's desire to share the responsibility of their love together with Master Li and she believes that once she and Master Li have confirmed their relationship, both of them should make their best efforts to maintain and take care of their love.

The way Tenth contributes to her relationship with Li Jia is to intelligently persuade her Mama to let her leave in exchange for a small amount of money. Tenth well knew her Mama's

bad temper and her scornful and arrogant attitude to the Li Jia. At the time when the madam became increasingly impatient with Master Li who had almost spent all his money but still come to find Tenth every day, Tenth provoked her Mama by asking "Mama. Do you mean that or are you just kidding? (p.839)" , her Mama believed that Master Li would never collect enough money to buy Tenth out, and finally guaranteed Tenth to let her leave if Li Jia could collect three hundred taels within ten days. Furthermore, Tenth not only saved the time for Li Jia to collect money, she also deliberately prodded her Mama into fulfilling her commitments by pledging "If you don't believe me, we can slap hands and swear on it. If I go back on my words, let me be reborn as a pig or a dog. (p.839)" The conversation between Tenth and her Mama not only presents the resourcefulness of Tenth, but more importantly, it also shows Tenth's independent and positive attacks toward the obstacles to her love relationship with Li Jia. Instead of letting Li Jia alone to find solutions to the difficulties they confronted, Tenth tried to save any chance for her love with Li Jia by negotiating with her Mama. And it was exactly her awareness of her own responsibility in defending her love and her beloved ones that provided the cornerstone of their further relationship. Later, when Li Jia failed to collect a penny for the first seven days, Tenth offered him half the amount of money required by her Mama: "This is my private savings. My love, you may take it. I will take care of half of the three hundred, and you can take care of the other half. (p.842)" Clearly, the split of the burden of collecting the money again well presented Tenth's will to take equal responsibility for their love with Li Jia.

In fact, the belief of Du Tenth and the suggestions from her actions that love is something both men and women have the equal freedom to seek for and both sides should have the same

responsibility for, is not obviously shared with other women in feudal systems where men have absolute supremacy over women. In terms of the right to choose one's lovers, women in feudal societies were usually in the absolutely passive position. For example in "Golden Lotus", females such as Pan Jinlian, Li Ping'er, Pang Chunmei are rather content with their roles of being used only as the tools to provide sexual pleasure for their husband Xi Menqing, a ruffian and wastrel who never honestly loves them (Appreciation of Fine Literature, 2006, p.156-157). In "Water Margins", the beautiful woman Hu San Niang (Hu Third) whose family members were killed, married the killer's relative and considered herself lucky to survive (History of Chinese Literature, p.113). By contrast, Du Tenth did not surrender to follow and obey the common roles of women in feudal systems. She is rather ahead of her time. Her consciousness of the equality in pursuing love and sharing the responsibility of love is in fact transcending the general awareness of female roles in Ming dynasty.

In addition, Du Tenth's desire of equality is also presented in her effort in seeking an equal social status. Although Tenth was a prostitute, she wished she could be respected by males. She hates the hypocrisy and insincerity of men and she wants to marry a guy who truly loves her. However, in a feudal and patriarchal society like Ming Dynasty, "To arrange a match by parents' order and on the matchmaker's word (父母之命,媒妁之言)" is almost a mandatory ethics code that every marrying couple should obey. It means that the marriage between couples should be supported and authorized by their parents. But how could Master Li's father accept the fact that his daughter-in-law would be a humble and inferior whore? Tenth knew that Li Jia's father was a huge challenge for their relationship, but she didn't compromise on her background as a

prostitute. When Li Jia asked “My aged father is in the height of rage. If he learns that I’ve returned home along with a prostitute as my wife, he is sure to make trouble, and I may end up more trouble than help to you. I’ve thought over this again and again, and I still have no perfect plan, (p.842)” Du Tenth then came up with a plan and said “How could the heaven ordained relation of father and son be permanently cut off? But since it is not a good idea to provoke him by a sudden confrontation, it would be better to take up temporary residence in the scenic region of Su-zhou and on your behalf before your reverend father and convince him to relent. Then you can come and take me home with you .(p.842)” Du Tenth’s answer implies that she respected Li Jia’s father and understood Li Jia’s concern about her father rejecting her marriage with him. But she also expected that her father would relent and she would finally be accepted by Li Jia’s family. In other words, Tenth expresses her desire of a respected social status through her expectation that her marriage with Li Jia would be permitted by Li Jia’s father. Although her pursuit of an equally recognized social standing could only be wishful thinking, it strongly suggests her anticipation of being treated fairly by other social members despite her humble background.

Sadly, Du Tenth’s dream of the fairness in love and social standing was finally shattered by Li Jia’s betray on her. “Today’s dressing is for the purpose of ‘welcoming the new and seeing off the old.’ It’s no ordinary occasion’, (p.852)” - Tenth showed a surprising calmness on the day she performed her suicide. She knew that if Li Jia was aware of her jewel box, his dirty deal with Sun Fu would never happen. She also knew that if she showed Li Jia right after Li Jia told her to plan suggested by Sun Fu, Li Jia would immediately reject the deal Sun Fu offered. But again,

Tenth didn't yield to become a toy that could be bought and sold by her once beloved man. The suicide of Tenth was her final defense of her love and dignity, and it was the best way for her to show her rage against the cruel reality that she had been discriminated as a commodity and all her previous efforts of pursuing true love were ruined by Li Jia. As Tenth said to Li Jia in her final word, "Today every person who has ears and eyes can witness that it is not I who have betrayed you, but rather you who have betrayed me! (p.854)", she used to dedicate her most sincere and honest love to Li Jia, who however repaid her with his betrayal.

Overall, the tragic story of Du Tenth Sinks the Jewelry Box contains Tenth's feelings of unbearable hurt and deep sorrow resulted from her failure in finding a fair love and an equal social status. Tenth's unyielding personality in seeking the state of equality combining with her great disappointment of not receiving the equal treatment of earnest love from her husband, and her helplessness on not being treated as a respected individual but a sexual toy made her choose death as her final revenge. Tenth's death was undoubtedly one of the strongest burst of female resistance to the male-dominated feudal system among the Chinese literature. And the demonstrations of her bold, decisive and admirable courage have become the enlightenments and inspiration for her female compatriots to continue pursuing their own true loves and fair roles in the society.

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