

Objectification of Women in Harem Web Novels: An Analysis

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Abstract: *Web novels basically stand for those novels which are published online. There are many genres in webnovels, like martial arts, fiction, fantasy etc that set the tone for further development in this particular form of popular literature in China. It has many different characteristics short chapters, crisp writing etc that eased the onslaught brought about by the internet. This paper mainly deals with the depiction of women in the top three webnovels, of the year 2019. It will be analyzed based on the topic of objectification of females. The paper's main focus will be on the treatment of women in harem novels. Harem, a subgenre of Chinese web novels is where a male or female protagonist is in a polygynous relationship with two or more love interests or sexual partners. A heterosexual male harem is called female harem or seraglios whereas if it is the opposite or a yaoi (male to many males) harem it is called male harem, reverse harem or gyaku harem. Here we take into consideration the top three popular webnovels of the year 2019 and analyze the female characters present in it and their treatment. The top three most popular web novels include; Death March Kara Hajimaru Isekai Kyosoukyoku, Everyone Else is a Returnee, and Against the Gods.*

Keywords: *Harem novels, web novels, objectification, concubinage, trophy/trophies, inert, instrument, autonomy, interchangeable, fungible, violable, ownership, reduction to body, reduction to appearance, silencing, conquer, object of desire.*

I. INTRODUCTION

During the Imperial Era of China we can see how the social paradigm of 'Confucian Ideals' which the Neo-Confucians and the Imperials interpreted as the essence of 'morality, character, social relationship and status quo' were used to suppress or squelch the female population. The original Confucian ideals made a good emphasis on the different moral ethics that one has to follow in one's life, the importance of women in the family, how to have a good relationship with the others etc. But, the Neo-Confucians as well as the Imperials interpreted it in a rather different way. Thus with Confucianism as its root, the patriarchal family system was observed with distinctive roles for the males and females during the time of the Han dynasty and the Tang Dynasty. During the time of the Song Dynasty, the oppressiveness was hitched up a level from the women just having a submissive roles in the families to the commonly observed binding of the foot ceremonies which symbolized the submissive role of the women in a family. These were women who were attracted by the power of the imperials and were quite alright with the lack of authority bestowed upon them. According to the imperial's understanding of the Confucian principles, women were only to be confined within the house and taken care of by the men while the main feminine traits included were the ability of caring for another person, being beautiful etc.

These traits were only meant for the women. The traditional married life also favored the men with special privileges including concubinage, divorce, property rights etc. The New Culture Movement (1916-1920) and the May Fourth Movement (1919) stressed the importance of equality and democracy advocated by the western countries. This was also a landmark of importance for the freedom of the women. It was the People's Republic of China that after its foundation had established the New Marriage Law (1950) that abolished the feudal system of marriage and gave equal importance to women in their marriage. Though laws were established, there was reticence in practice. Here we will be taking and analyzing the top three most popular web novels according to the reputable site, novel up dates which include; Death March Kara Hajimaru Isekai Kyosoukyoku, Everyone Else is a Returnee, and Against the Gods. The women characters along with their treatment in the respective story's plot will be analysed based on theories of feminists like Martha Nussbaum, Rae Langton etc.

II. OBJECTIVE

The treatment of women in the webnovels along with the characteristics of the women portrayed in each.

III. HYPOTHESIS

The Chinese population of 2019 at large still accepts and promotes the old views of patriarchal dominance and women suppression via promoting those webnovels which cater to this.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The objectification of women is a vastly discussed topic. It was Martha Nussbaum that first identified the seven basic features in the treatment of a person mainly women as objects in her work Objectification (1995) to which Rae Langton in Sexual Solipsism: Philosophical Essays on Pornography and Objectification (2009) added three more. Thus the ten basic features are; instrumentality (person as a tool for another's purpose), denial of autonomy (treatment shown as lacking in autonomy and self-determination), inertness (person's treatment shown as lacking in agency and activity), fungibility (person is treated as if he/she is interchangeable with objects), violability (person's treatment lacking in integrity), ownership (a person is owned, sold or bought by another person), denial of subjectivity (person is treated as if he/she has no feelings, opinions or experiences), reduction to body (a person's treatment is based on their body or body parts), reduction to appearance (a person's treatment is based on how they appeal to the five senses), silencing (person is treated as if he/she is incapable of speaking as such). Bartkyin Femininity and Domination (1990) also argue that



women are objectified as being in temporarily focused on their appearance. Immanuel Kant in his work Lectures on Ethics (1963) even compares sexual love to eating a lemon. According to him, the sexually loved person is like a lemon which can be cast aside after it is sucked dry. Thus, he says that prostitutes and concubines especially are men's tools of satisfying their appetite. For Kant, body and the self are inseparable. So, in the case of a polygynous relationship, the woman must submit her whole person to her male partner whereas she is not able to possess the same of her partner as he also has other women. Thus the woman is degraded to an object. Sandra Bartky in *Femininity and Domination* (1990) on the other hand says that due to the patriarchal hegemony the women were educated to believe that they are their body. They are made to see themselves from the eyes of the viewer who is the male. Their personality or opinions do not matter. So, they make sure that they are sensually pleasing to the eyes of the men. Broadly speaking, we can even say

that they objectify themselves to conform to the ideals of the men. There are also disciplinary practices that make certain that women are treated as objects. The first type of such a practice is trying to conform to the body ideal of their time. The second type is to restrain their gestures, actions etc to certain feminine ideals of the time. In the analysis provided later on, the theories are applied based on the particular plot of the stories taken, so not all theories will be applied at the same time to all the web novels.

1. SUMMARY, ANALYSIS AND MAJOR FINDINGS

The three most popular web novels taken are *Death March Kara Hajimaru Isekai Kyosoukyoku*; *Everyone Else is a Returnee*, and *Against the Gods*, according to the statistics provided by the reputed website, novel up dates. These are the results of the statistics:

Name of Webnovel	Total no. of people voted and the average rating	Percentage and number of people who gave 5/5 ratings	Percentage and number of people who gave 4/5 ratings	Percentage and number of people who gave 3/5 ratings	Percentage and number of people who gave 2/5 ratings	Percentage and number of people who gave 1/5 ratings
<i>Death March Kara Hajimaru Isekai Kyosoukyoku</i>	1978, 4.1/5 rating	61%, 1203 votes	14%, 276 votes	8%, 155 votes	5%, 103 votes	12%, 240 votes
<i>Everyone Else is a Returnee</i>	2561, 4.4/5 rating	70%, 1798 votes	12%, 300 votes	7%, 185 votes	5%, 123 votes	6%, 154 votes
<i>Against the Gods</i>	3058, 4.0 votes	59%, 1802 votes	13%, 386 votes	10%, 295 votes	6%, 177 votes	13%, 398 votes

1.1 Summary

In the first novel, *Death March Hajimaru Isekai Kyosoukyoku*, the protagonist, Ichinose Suzuki was shown to be working in the fixing of two MMORPGs; short form for Massively Multiple Online Role Playing Games where a large number of people come together in an online game and interact with each other. He fell asleep worn out after a long week and woke up to find out that he was in a parallel world which mysteriously resembled some of the fantasy worlds of RPGs (Role Playing Games) that he had worked on. He had also become a 15- year old called Satou Pendragon, a nickname that he had used while running beta tests on the RPGs. His character's menu also appeared in his inner eye. But, before he got used to his new identity, he was ambushed by an army of Lizardmen. Panicked, he used the only offensive ability that he had in his character's menu called meteor shower and killed them all. In the webnovel, he had killed a God in the game with the help of this and with the help of which he got a lot of new abilities and powers. With all of these magic in hand, he had set out to explore and uncover the secrets of this new and unfamiliar world along with new relationships with the people that he met. The second webnovel, *Everyone Else is a Returnee*, the protagonist, Yu IlHan is a hopeful college student in earth who felt that he was always left out throughout his life so far. But the heavens played a trick on him yet again as they

transferred the rest of humanity to other worlds when the Earth started to change except for him. There was a new substance on Earth called Mana (like a special air). He had to undergo solitude for many years till the rest of the people came back. The difference between them was that everyone else knew how to use mana while he did not. Soon, the Great Cataclysm happens and he becomes determined to be stronger than the others. *Against the Gods* is the third novel to be considered here. The protagonist, Yunche at first lived in a world called the Azure Cloud Continent. The most dangerous place there, is the Mythical Abode Mountain, Cloud's End Cliff where innumerable number of people had fallen to their deaths. None of them, even those whose powers could pierce the heavens had ever come back or survived. Our protagonist Yun Che was chased to the end of the cliff because of a precious treasure in his possession called the Sky Poison Pearl which was coveted by many. Filled with hatred he jumps off the cliff to suicide with the precious treasure but wakes up in another body in another world with the same name. This is the story of Yun Che who cultivated so as to oppose the workings of 'the heavens and the earth'.



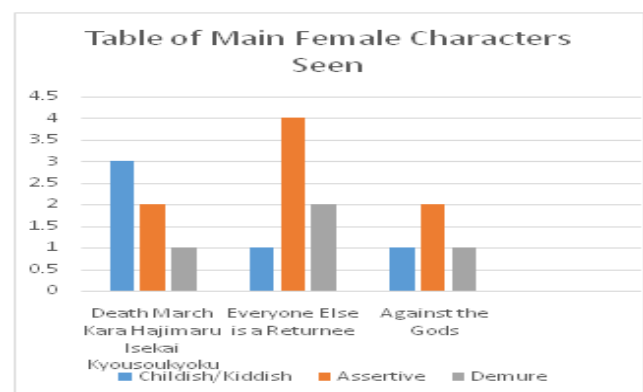
1.2 Analysis

1.2.1 Portrayal of Women

In *Death March Kara Hajimaru*, the protagonist has a lot of women as love interests/slaves, a typical example of a female harem. Here the protagonist Suzuki Ichirou has a harem consisting of six main characters; Arisa, Tama, Liza, Lulu, Pochi and Marie tale Zena. The male here, is the master of the six female slaves. Amongst them, Arisa, Tama are childish type whereas Zena is an assertive, warrior type person. Liza on the other hand is more of the 'my master is the most important' type, but she is very assertive as well. Lulu on the other hand is very demure. Here, though he does not treat them as his slaves most of the time, these girls have to depend upon him for everything. Without him, they will be devoid of the protection and warmth that only a good master can provide. Slaves have no value in this world. All of the women were either bought by him taken pity on by him since their master died. Lulu is even considered to be ugly by the other people but beautiful only in his eyes and thus he bought her as well. From this we can say that *ownership* is a very important concept here. These women were bought or taken by him thus their lives were without much difficulties but if their master was cruel these women would not even have had any way of protecting themselves or even expressing their views. This is a perfect example of silencing. The women are also happy to be his slaves and they also see themselves as commodities here and are resigned to the fact. They do not fight back against the system either. Lulu in particular is considered as ugly by the other people but is considered as very beautiful in the eyes of the protagonist which was one of the main reasons that he bought her. We can see that Lulu has very low self-esteem because of this while Suzuki makes certain to reassure her again and again. Later on we see how Lulu tries to understand Suzuki's preference on how she should dress to be more appealing to him. So, Bartly's view in *Femininity and Domination* (1990) on how women objectify themselves according to the preference of the men is seen here with Lulu. The second book to be considered is *Everyone Else is a Returnee*. Here the main character Yu IiHan has seven wives. Compared to the first novel, there is much more character development in this work. All seven women choose to live with and marry him. While the protagonist claims that Liera or Litty is his favorite wife, he still has many wives and through them many children. He says, "The most special one to me is you" to Liera. He also kills most of the women who doesn't choose him and then later even revives their soul to watch over a particular item. Even their souls are not left at peace. From this we can see the protagonist's tyranny. In the beginning before the protagonist became powerful Liera was the one who taught him and was always by his side. He pledged that he would grow powerful to get her back, but the hypocritical fact is that he also accepted many other women into his life other than Liera despite professing his eternal love for her. Immanuel Kant's view on how the male does not give the whole of himself to his female partner while the female has to give both her body and soul to her male partner is also obvious here, If the female is not a virgin before marriage she is not considered to be eligible for the marriage at all. e explains that, "the woman surrenders her sex completely to the man, but the man does not completely surrender his sex to the woman" (Kant *Lectures on Ethics*, 169). Thus, Liera, the angel was objectified here as well. Heliena is another

one of his wives. In her first life she was against him and he killed her, she was later on revived by him and accepted as his subordinate. Her freedom of choice was also taken away from her when she was revived by Yu IiHan then, she a succubus, became his wife as well. That is how she, a succubus, an object of desire of almost all men was conquered. This is a perfect example of 'denial of autonomy'. It can also be considered as a form of 'violability' as she was first killed and then revived and conquered. Her treatment by the protagonist definitely lacked integrity. Kang MiRae, the God clan member and loner was also conquered by him. She was an object of desire of many men but they could not get close enough to her because she wished to be a loner by choice. Only in his case did she reach out. Thus she became his partner and a conquered object of desire. Erica, the wolfkin was known for her glamorous body. She too became his wife unbelievably. Erica, Phiria, the charming elf and Na YuNa, the beautiful priestess are all ideals of beauty that appealed to the male protagonist and thus they were also conquered. Erta, his final wife was an angel who abdicated her angel status so as to promote him to a God. All of them can be said to be reduced to their 'body' and 'appearance'. The third and the final book to be analyzed is the work, *Against the Gods*. In this, the male protagonist can be said to have married or in a relationship with almost all of the women that he had some interaction with at all. This includes even his 'Little Aunt', Xiao Lingzi. He describes her appearance as 'refined, gorgeous and even with one hell of a body'. She especially has been reduced to her 'appearance' and 'body'. Since this is still an ongoing project, it is yet to be completed and there are probably even more women that he has yet to meet and conquer. His current interests include; Xiao Lingzi (to be conquered), Jasmine (almost conquered), Xia Qingyue (already conquered), Chu Yuechan (to be conquered). Xia Qingyue the only conquered person here has also been described as a 'virtuous, refined lady who has a red birthmark which would disappear if she lost her virginity'. In all of these web novels we can see certain recurring type of female characters; most of them are assertive with heroic or other fighting abilities like Liera, Marentail Zena, Jasmine etc whereas there are also the obedient, attention demanding or carefree type like Lulu, Na YuNa, Xiao Lingzi etc.

1.3 Major Findings



V. CONCLUSION

From the analysis of the three top web novels it can be concluded that the assertive is the most popular one in a harem, after which comes the childish or kid dish females and the last preference is the demure type of female in a webnovel. All of these women no matter what type finally become a piece of object to satiate the male's desire. In the first and most popular web novel, the women are just slaves for the men to keep and look after. While in the second, the women are all objects of desire that the male has conquered whereas in the third all the women that has interacted with has some relationship with him. From this we can see that the women are not treated equally by the men at all. Even if this is the case these novels are still very popular in China according to the statistics given. Thus we come to the conclusion that the Chinese population of 2019 at large still accepts the old patriarchal viewpoints; especially concubinage by promoting these three webnovels to the top.

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