

Read “Princess Bari” from a Gender Perspective



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ABSTRACT: The application of gender theory to analyze Korean literary works is relatively new. This study uses gender theory as a foundation to examine the gender identity of the character Princess Bari in the Korean folk literature work "Princess Bari," exploring her relationships with her father (the King), Siddhartha Gautama (The Buddha), the benevolent elderly couple, her older sisters, Muchangsung, and other social connections. As a result, in each distinct relationship, the princess assumes different roles, and we also observe the evolution of these roles as they develop through various relationships.

1. INTRODUCTION

Simone de Beauvoir coined a famous statement in her book "*The Second Sex*" – one of the pivotal works of the 20th century that laid the theoretical foundation for the women's rights movement. She stated, "One is not born as a woman, but rather becomes, a woman." This idea serves as a precursor for the pursuit of gender equality theory, which delves into the concepts of sex and gender. These two concepts are elucidated in Article 5 of the Vietnamese Gender Equality Law: Sex refers to the biological attributes of males and females, while gender pertains to the characteristics, positions, and roles of males and females in all social relationships. Hence, sex is inherent and unchangeable, whereas gender is malleable due to learning, teaching, and societal expectations. Scholar Mai Huy Bich has noted that employing these two concepts highlights not only their immutable nature but also their potential for change and the hope for transformed gender relationships. This implies that biological changes occur infrequently and slowly, often requiring gradual accumulation over decades, and even centuries. Conversely, in the realm of culture - society, transformations are more feasible¹.

Determining one's gender has an immensely significant impact on that person's life, serving as the fundamental cornerstone of personal identity (how an individual perceives themselves). Identity is shaped by various factors (ethnicity, age, occupation, social class, religion, nationality, etc.), and one of these factors is gender. Gender identity is the way an individual identifies themselves and is recognized by others as either male or female. According to the gender perspective, gender identity is shaped by a multitude of factors, including the individual and the collective, biology and society. Closely intertwined with gender identity are the concepts of masculinity and femininity. People's perceptions of gender identity are formed very early on, to the extent that as we grow up, we perceive them as natural. However, gender is not just about learning to act like a boy or a girl; gender differences are woven into our daily lives. These gender differences are products of culture, not biology. We socially reconstruct gender (doing gender) through countless small actions every day.

In contemporary social sciences, gender has emerged as a central subject of study, alongside class and ethnicity. Gender serves as a pivotal framework, a lens through which to examine all social phenomena. In this research, the author wishes to employ the "gender" lens to illuminate the relationships between Princess Bari and the various characters, essentially exploring the gender relations within a classic Korean literary work named "Princess Bari".

"*Princess Bari*" belongs to the genre of autobiographical epic – a cultural heritage of Korea that has been passed down from ancient times to the present day. Fittingly developed over an extended period and bearing a profound message, it has become the subject of study for numerous South Korean and international scholars. While previous studies have often focused on its structure, genre, Shamanism, filial piety, the heroine figure, etc. they have been lacking in the analysis of the diverse relationships that Princess Bari shares with the characters in the work from a gender perspective. Hence, in this article, the author directs the spotlight toward the encounters and, on a broader scale, the relationships between Princess Bari and the other characters (both male and female) appearing in the narrative, and analyze these relationships through a gender perspective, thereby contributing to a fresh and distinctive angle in the study of this work.

¹ Mai Huy Bich (2009), "Gender Sociology," National University Publisher, Hanoi, p.7.

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2. POSITIONING THE STORY OF "PRINCESS BARI"

Literary works are narratives that delve into human life, encompassing the individual, society, reality, and the challenges that need resolving. Literary works, especially autobiographical epics, primarily focus on the plot where characters seek to understand and define themselves (gender identity) within the societal and real contexts. "*Princess Bari*" serves as a quintessential example of this genre, originating from a society that didn't initially recognize her, she traverses a life full of turmoil and obstacles, striving to mature and gain recognition from those around her. Based on its structure and theme, the researcher selects "*Princess Bari*" as the primary material, examining it through a gender perspective – one of the crucial elements for assessing social phenomena, aiming to analyze relationships within the work, from details to broader aspects.

Alongside "*Je-seok bon-pu-ri*" (Explaining the Origin of The Buddha) and "*Chil-seong pu-ri*" (Explaining the Big Dipper), "*Princess Bari*" is one of the only three widely circulated autobiographical epics throughout the entirety of South Korea. As of now, the total number of 53 variations of this work have been registered and distributed as official texts in South Korea (Kim My Ryeong, 2001:6). Within the scope of this article, the author conducts an intracultural study on the narrative "*Princess Bari*" as translated by Đào Thị Mỹ Khanh in the context of *Korean classical literature*².

"Princess Bari" narrates the tale of a princess – the seventh daughter, abandoned upon birth by King Oku and Queen Cat Dai. Before his wedding, a male magician foretold that if the King married that year, the Queen would give birth to seven princesses; however, if the marriage was delayed until the next year, she would bear three princes instead. Overwhelmed by impatience, King Oku arranged the wedding within the same year. Consequently, the Queen consecutively bore six princesses. Before long, she became pregnant for the seventh time, and yet again, a daughter was born. King Oku believed he had committed a sin, assuming that the Jade Emperor bestowed upon him seven daughters as punishment and He believed he must offer precious gifts to the Dragon King. Thus, he named his seventh daughter "Bari" - meaning "to cast away," and ordered someone to place the newborn in a box and cast her into the sea. Rescued and nurtured by the help of Siddhartha Gautama(The Buddha), Princess Bari was cared for by a benevolent elderly couple. Despite not receiving formal education, she displayed remarkable intelligence, excelling in astronomy and geography, there was nothing she didn't know. She pondered her origins, the identity of her parents, but answers eluded her. Then, when the young girl turned 15, King and Queen both fell seriously ill. In a dream, the King encountered A disciple dressed in blue who informed him that the mineral water from Mount Penglai held the cure to their illness and urged the King to seek Princess Bari. Upon this revelation, King Oku dispatched a search for Princess Bari, leading to a reunion to his daughter. Upon returning to the royal palace, Bari readily volunteered to embark on a journey to locate the life-saving mineral water to save her parents' life, after all 6 princesses refused all at once. To commence her quest, Princess Bari disguised herself as a young man and embarked on a journey to find the mineral water on Mount Penglai. Along her path, she encountered Muchangsung - The guardian of the divine lake. In exchange for the life-saving water, Bari had to perform arduous labor for nine years – three years of sweeping leaves, three years of tending the fire, and three years of drawing water. After these nine years, Muchangsung noted that although Bari appeared as a young man, she exuded the beauty of a woman from behind. He proposed marriage, suggesting that she become his wife and bear him seven sons. Agreeing to the proposal, Bari married Muchangsung and bore him seven sons. Despite living with her husband and children, Bari's worries for her parents' health never wavered. Ultimately, one day, Bari pleaded with Muchangsung to allow her to quickly return to her parents. He provided her with medicines for her parents' ailments and guided her on how to cure them. As they parted ways, Muchangsung made a sudden decision not to let Bari return to the royal palace alone. Thus, the small family of nine set off together for the palace. On their way back to the earthly realm, Bari encountered two coffins—one large and one small—carrying King and Queen to their final resting place. The princess then let her hair down, hid Muchangsung and 7 sons and went to the coffin. She then approached the coffins, using the medicinal water and herbs to revive her parents. As if awakened from a deep slumber, the King and the Queen took a deep breath and rose. Following their recovery, King Oku rewarded those who had played pivotal roles in their restoration. The Deity Mu-jang received blessings from the Mountain God Worship and the Earth God Worship, the elderly couple were granted the honor of guarding the gates of the afterlife, Bari's seven sons ascended to become the ten kings in heaven, and Princess Bari herself became a bodhisattva in the realm of India. After her passing, her soul ascended to the heavens.

3. PRINCESS BARI'S RELATIONSHIP THROUGH GENDER PERSPECTIVE

3.1 In Her Relationship with her father (the King)

The kingdom ruled by King Oku is a society deeply rooted in a male-centered system, with these beliefs entrenched in the minds of the people as well as social customs. Influenced by this ideological framework, King Oku values his offspring only when they are male – those who can inherit the throne. Thus, he yearns for sons, a desire that he doesn't hesitate to express openly, starting from the moment the Queen becomes pregnant. The King couldn't hide his disappointment upon learning that his first child was a daughter, exclaiming, "The Queen gave birth to a princess instead of a prince?" As time went on, his disappointment grew with

² Woo Han Yong, Park In Gee, Chung Byung Heon, Choi Byeong Woo, Yoon Bun Hee (translated by Đào Thị Mỹ Khanh) "*Classical Literature of Korea*," Literature and Arts Publishing House, 2009

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each subsequent birth as Queen Cat Dai gave birth to five more daughters, all contrary to his wishes. This cycle of disappointment escalated into despair when he saw that his seventh child was once again a girl.

Within the context of family lineage, the fact that Bari is a daughter is already a profound disappointment. Moreover, being the seventh daughter makes her situation even more challenging. She is bound to be viewed as worthless and devoid of value in the eyes of her father(the King). From a gender perspective, determining a person's gender involves considering both biological and socio-cultural factors. However, in the realm of King Oku, gender seems to be determined solely by the natural differences in reproductive organs³ - the biological aspect. As a result, the moment each of the six elder princesses and Princess Bari was born, they were automatically labeled as 'female' in terms of gender. This categorization has led to the ultimate outcome: Princess Bari was not welcomed into the world with open arms. the biological aspect. As a result, the moment each of the six elder princesses and Princess Bari was born, they were automatically labeled as 'female' in terms of gender. This categorization has led to the ultimate outcome: Princess Bari was not welcomed into the world with open arms.

Furthermore, the King believed that he had committed a sin, and it was due to this perceived transgression that the Jade Emperor bestowed upon him seven princesses. Consequently, he decided to use his seventh daughter as a precious offering to the Dragon King to atone for his wrongdoing. Thus, Princess Bari was placed in a box and set adrift on the sea as an offering to the Dragon King. In this turn of events, Princess Bari became a sacrificial offering, a means of redemption for the mistakes of her birth-giver. In the male-centered society of King Oku, only men hold value, while women are not esteemed and can easily become sacrificial pawns when necessary. In this situation, let's imagine that Bari had been born as a son instead of a daughter. Undoubtedly, she would not have been treated as a sacrificial offering, spared from abandonment and the fate of being cast adrift in a box upon the sea. This scenario is no different from a death sentence. In this context, the male gender (King Oku) demanded an immense sacrifice from the female gender (Princess Bari), an outrageous sacrifice to the extreme.

3.2 Relationship with Siddhartha Gautama (The Buddha)

The moment Princess Bari drifted upon the waters of the Four Seas coincided with the time when Siddhartha Gautama (The Buddha), descended to the earthly realm to compassionately roam the Four Seas to save humanity. Seeing the seventh princess of the kingdom, the Buddha spoke, "If you were a boy, I could take you as a disciple, but since you are a girl, I cannot accept you." Once again, Princess Bari faced rejection due to the gender label (girl) attributed to her. In this land, the deep-rooted belief in male superiority and female inferiority was so pervasive that even Siddhartha Gautama (The Buddha) declined her.

3.3 Relationship with benevolent elderly couple

Under the suggestion of adopting Bari as their own by Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha), despite their impoverished life "living on the field in spring and dwelling in a cave in winter," the elderly couple still decided to raise Princess Bari. Thus, Princess Bari - bearing the bloodline of King Oku, was nurtured not within the palace but by common people, belonging to the lower class who barely had enough to sustain themselves. Yet, precisely due to these circumstances and the nature of the elderly couple, they held no prejudices or antiquated beliefs regarding gender distinctions. In this way, Princess Bari grew up and matured within an environment that lacked any notions, values, or societal norms related to strict gender differentiations. The place of her upbringing held no notions of male superiority or preference for sons over daughters. It was thanks to the shelter of this relationship that the latent abilities of Princess Bari had the opportunity to be fully expressed and developed.

Guided by the teachings of the benevolent elderly couple, Princess Bari began to harness her extraordinary talents. By the age of seven, *"Despite not receiving formal education, she was remarkably intelligent, knowledgeable in astronomy, geography, master of three skills, there was nothing she did not know"*. The breadth of knowledge possessed by Princess Bari encompassed the entirety of the scientific achievements that ancient society valued. She even had the chance to learn to read and understand classical texts—a privilege reserved only for males of a special social class in that society. The elderly couple refrained from labeling Princess Bari as a "girl," enabling her to receive education. In other words, she underwent a process of gender reformation through million small actions each day, developing her gender identity through the construction of societal gender norms. Had Bari grown up in her father's kingdom, the possibility of her acquiring these educational accomplishments would have been unthinkable. This was because, within the historical reality, women, including princesses, were deprived of the opportunity to learn to read or engage in humanities and sciences. In this gender-neutral space, Princess Bari escaped the confines of gender norms in her father's realm (King

³ In the book "Gender Sociology," Mai Huy Bích summarizes four ways to determine gender as follows: (1) based on natural differences in reproductive organs; (2) based on behavior, on what we do in everyday life; (3) through physical attributes related to sexuality such as menstrual blood, vaginal secretions, semen, and sperm; (4) birth certificates determine someone's gender based on biological evidence of their reproductive organs at birth. Additionally, there are many factors contributing to gender determination: how we dress, hairstyle, our genes (meaning genetic information in cells), body shape, and so on. However, as Woodward asserts, no single factor alone is sufficient to clearly determine whether someone is male or female (Woodward, 2000:51).

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Oku) to become a scholar in humanities, transcending the gender constraints of that culture, thus becoming proficient in classical literature and absorbing the knowledge from ancient texts—an area traditionally associated with masculinity in that cultural context.

3.4 Relationship with Older Sisters

The serious illness of King Oku became an opportunity for Princess Bari to reunite with her parents and older sisters, and to reconnect with her roots. In a daytime dream, an azure-robed person appeared before King Oku and conveyed the vision of a remedy that could heal him and the Queen, guiding them to find Princess Bari - the only one who could aid them. Consequently, Bari returned to the royal palace and was reunited with her family. However, at a crucial moment when the King asked, "*My children, can you go save your parents?*" the reactions and actions of Princess Bari and her older sisters appeared completely contrasting. The six older princesses expressed helplessness: "*... we cannot reach the Great Ming Palace, so how can we go to Western Heaven, Western Region, Father?*" This reaction was entirely different from Princess Bari's response as she stepped forward and stated, "*I was in Mother's womb for 10 months, and I owe you so much, I will go and save you.*" Embarking on the quest to find the healing remedy was a daunting task traditionally undertaken by men. Bari's willingness to undertake this mission demonstrated her actions as a courageous individual, essentially exceeding her gender role. Her gender identity incorporated elements of masculinity.

It is important to emphasize that this masculine nature, demonstrated through Princess Bari's readiness to confront danger, blossomed outside the confines of the palace – in a society devoid of prejudice and gender discrimination. This masculine trait became particularly distinct when comparing her relationship with her six older sisters. The six older princesses, who were "*raised in a room with nine latches, covered with blue and black silk blankets, and sat on a pearl mattress,*" hesitated and refused to go. This behavior stood in stark contrast to the prompt and courageous response of the youngest princess, who endured "*the hardships of cold and heat*". This detail symbolizes the abandonment of Princess Bari at birth, highlighting her distinct behavior. The reactions of the six older princesses who were raised within the palace, manifested weakness, whereas Princess Bari's daring behavior reflected her disregard for her own life. Why does such a difference exist? First, it stems from the different cultural environments they were raised in. The society ruled by King Oku was governed by a patriarchal system, where women were marginalized and powerless. This explains their vulnerable reaction to the King's proposal. Conversely, the environment in which Princess Bari was nurtured was not dominated by a male-centric culture, granting her the freedom to react courageously, without showing vulnerability. Second, the variance arises from differing educations (socialization). In King Oku's realm, gender labels "female" were applied to the six older princesses, and those influenced by this societal construct were educated in accordance with these expectations. They were not taught literacy and were expected to be meek, gentle, timid traits - typical of women. Meanwhile, Princess Bari was educated in literacy and the humanities, allowing her to understand the virtues of filial piety and loyalty. This foundation motivated her to forget herself in order to preserve her filial piety to her parents, which she demonstrated through her bravery and determination.

3.5 Marital Relationship with Muchangsung

Before delving into the analysis of Princess Bari's marital relationship with Muchangsung, it's worth noting the detail of Princess Bari donning male attire while searching for the medicine to save her parents. Let's recall the environment where Bari grew up under the guidance of the benevolent elderly couple. In that nurturing environment, there was no mention of gender-specific clothing, nor any emphasis on gender distinctions, such as only men being allowed to receive an education while women were not. On the contrary, Princess Bari's intellectual capabilities - which were unrecognized in the cultural context of King Oku's kingdom, were extolled with phrases like "proficient in astronomy, adept in geography". However, when embarking on her journey to find the medicine, Princess Bari chose to dress as a man. According to R. Connell's "*Theory of social construction of gender*", attire (clothes, footwear) is an important means of bodily denial, exemplified by women's dresses, high-heeled shoes, and purses (all in a feminine style) for female bodies, and pants (with pockets), ties, and plain leather shoes (all in a masculine style) for male bodies⁴. Here, Princess Bari used clothing to deny her feminine body. Of course, she likely did this not out of a desire to become a man but simply to make her arduous journey to find the medicine more manageable. The way to get medicine is very long, while that society has a male-dominated regime in all fields and women are the weaker sex, which could face countless risks. Surely, numerous challenges and unexpected adversities awaited her on this path, especially if she were to undertake it as a woman. Perhaps this is the very reason why she chose to disguise herself as a man before embarking on the journey and during the nine years of labor she undertook to pay for the costs of the medicine for her parents..

In order to cure the King and the Queen, they needed the medicine from Muchangsung. That's why Princess Bari encountered Muchangsung during her quest for the healing remedy. However, after completing three years of sweeping leaves, followed by another three years of lighting fire, and yet another three years of water fetching – all the laborious tasks required to obtain the medicine from Muchangsung – he revealed to her, "*You appear in male attire, in the front of you, lies the temperament of a monarch, while behind you is the elegance of a woman. Join me as my partner. Be my wife and give birth to seven sons.*" Thus, Princess Bari and Muchangsung lived together and bore seven sons. This detail shows us that Princess Bari was capable of making her own decisions and exhibited her strong femininity traits under the perspective of gender..

⁴ Mai Huy Bích 2009, "Gender Sociology," National University Publisher, Ha Noi, p. 79

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In the context of King Oku's realm, where patriarchal values were deeply ingrained, marriage would certainly be determined by the father without considering the feelings or emotions of the daughter. However, in Western Heaven, Princess Bari not only made decisions about her marriage but also about giving birth to children before Muchangung's proposal. In this detail, Princess Bari transcended physical limitations and overcame even spiritual constraints. This act subverted the patriarchal values of the society she originated from. Of course, this action only succeeded within a gender-neutral space (Western Heaven).

Princess Bari's acceptance of Muchangung's proposal, marrying him, and giving birth to seven sons marked the pinnacle of the negation and distortion of her femininity traits. This event was also seen as the most explicit manifestation of her feminine attributes, which had been inherent since her birth is revealed to the fullest and most clearly. The act of giving birth to female children was a biological trait, present since Princess Bari's birth, and she perceived and internalized it into her body this trait. Muchangung perceived Princess Bari as a woman, and her agreement with his proposal was synonymous with her self-identification as a woman. Thus, Princess Bari's gender identity was established. Furthermore, the feminine trait that was rejected when she was cast adrift at sea was now strongly expressed in her union with Muchangung in Western Heaven, as it played a pivotal role in obtaining the remedy for the King and the Queen. Meanwhile, if we consider the hypothetical scenario where the one searching for the remedy is not a woman (Princess Bari) but a man, it's likely that fulfilling Muchangung's final request would have been much more difficult.

3.6 Other social relationships

Princess Bari encountered Siddhartha Gautama(The Buddha) on her journey and received a flower basket. Along the way, she passed through the realm of hell and witnessed the suffering of sinners there. She shook her flower basket to offer liberation to these sinners. Breaking the realm of hell (“破地獄”) was the first event where her supernatural abilities were clearly manifested. While carrying the medicine to save her parents, Princess Bari also chanted prayers for the souls on the empty boat to help guide them to a peaceful afterlife. Her supernatural abilities were revealed in her interactions with sinners and lost souls. Perhaps it was due to this supernatural power that she declined the rewards offered by King Oku and later became a deity in the Shaman religion. It is likely that her distinct gender identity combined with her extraordinary powers granted her these supernatural abilities⁵. At the end of the story, when Princess Bari returns to the palace, she is a woman but possesses not only deep wisdom but also supernatural power. In contrast, her father's kingdom adheres to a male-dominant society with clear gender distinctions. Precisely for this reason, in order for this society to acknowledge Princess Bari—a notable individual without imposing changes or labels upon—the path to becoming a supernatural entity, akin to a deity in the Shaman religion, becomes the only way to assert Princess Bari's position within that society.

4. CONCLUSION

The character of Princess Bari possesses a biologically inherent female gender. However, through a gendered perspective, her gender identity has continually evolved through interactions with various characters appearing throughout the narrative. This article has undertaken an analysis of Princess Bari's relationships with the surrounding characters. In her relationship with King Oku, Princess Bari experiences extreme gender-based discrimination and treatment due to her gender. Similarly, in her interaction with Siddhartha Gautama(The Buddha), she faces comparable prejudice. Contrarily, her relationship with the benevolent elderly couple grants her escape from discrimination and bias, enabling her educational development to nurture her gender identity. In her interaction with the six elder princesses, we recognize Princess Bari's distinct identity in contrast to her sisters. In her relationship with Muchangung, the princess reveals both her feminine and masculine aspects, confirming her individuality. Additionally, her relationships with others acknowledge her as a supernatural entity

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⁵ In the book "Gender Sociology," Mai Huy Bích examined previous studies by Helliwell (1993) and found that: "In many societies in Southeast Asia, it is often believed that their ambiguous gender identity (male transvestites) has endowed them with supernatural powers." Additionally, Williams (1996) concluded that the intermediary role of the berdache people in some North American, Asia and Pacific indigenous societies goes beyond the gap between male and female; it also encompasses the connection between the physical and the spiritual. (Mai Huy Bích, 2009: 33~36)

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