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The Woman as Outcast:
An Examination of Miaoshan in *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* in Light of Choice,
Risk, and Martyrdom

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The tale of Miaoshan exemplifies that a woman's devotion to religion—or, more specifically, her moral self-cultivation through religion—induces her being cast out of the society she inhabits. This paper seeks to expound on the Christ-like characteristics Miaoshan embodies in the first narrative of *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain*. It additionally discusses the manner in which her father, the emperor, functions as a binary to her character, persecuting her for her choice while enforcing patriarchal standards for a woman. At the time, a woman's desire to devote herself to a religious path not only represented “choice,” but also “threat”—a threat that would disrupt patriarchal framework, which enforced the idealized image of the woman. This image required that she be highly attentive to her appearance for the male eye, and “capable of [producing] a son and heir” for the male ego (55). Therefore, a woman such as Miaoshan emerges as one who transcends the ideal that a society determines; she “chooses” rather than conforms, though at the cost of self-sacrifice, risking her reputation and—particularly in Miaoshan's case—her body.

To comprehend what is at stake in Miaoshan's decision, we must consider an overview of that which ensues between she and her father, the emperor: what her father—with the backing of a few other family members, as well as much of her society—takes issue with is crucial toward her development as a sacrificial figure. For much of the first half of *The Precious Scroll*, Miaoshan and her father are in conflict as, unlike her sisters, she does not desire to marry. Miaoshan instead underscores her intention to devote her life to the further study of Buddhism in order to become what she deems an individual of strong moral fiber. As their conflict heats up during the narrative, what becomes of stake, from the emperor's point of view, is the concept of filial piety. He contends that as Miaoshan refuses to do what is expected of her—by her family, as well as by her society as a whole – and what is believed to be the optimal choice for a woman at the time, she disregards familial order. On a contrary note, Miaoshan, from her stance, simply desires to argue for her right to possess a choice. As her sisters personally opt for marriage, Miaoshan, in her adamancy on the significance of religious piety in one's life, propounds this right. The dialectic between she and the emperor fuels the manner in which she makes a mark in her society as a woman, proposing the modernization of the woman's place in said society.

The *Scroll* first suggests Miaoshan's desire to transcend the worldliness that surrounds her. She believes that worldly accomplishments and luxuries “wane,” but that goodness of character persists into the afterlife (62). She shirks comfort in the present to guarantee herself of it in the future, where the future signifies a place in “High Heaven” rather than in the “Underworld” (63). One perceives the stark contrast in character between Miaoshan and her father prior to the persecution she receives upon her choice. The text describes her as “loftily enlightened and profoundly grounded,” as well as “keeping to a vegetarian diet” (52). The phrase, “vegetarian diet” alludes to the idea that meat is a luxury. Miaoshan's austerity toward

her diet represents one manner in which she is Christ-like; Christ would encourage moderation in consumption, whether in food or in material goods. Additionally, the “palace maids and concubines” ridicule her “devotion to cultivation,” which she performs through Buddhist practices such as “reading the sutras” and engaging in meditation (53). In response, Miaoshan declares that she “has sworn a vow to ferry all sentient beings across the [sea of suffering]” (53). Her statement again portrays her as Christ-like, as it suggests that she aims to maximize compassion toward others. Her “vow” represents a decision that Jesus would venerate, as He encourages benevolence toward those in a miserable state (53).

The fact that those surrounding Miaoshan mock her utmost religious piety showcases the manner in which such a woman was received at the time; the majority would mark her as a social deviant, causing her to be cast out of the society. This consequence insinuates the polarizing relationship between a woman and a propensity toward a religious lifestyle, where the selection of such a lifestyle positively signifies “choice” and the independent will of the woman. However, this choice simultaneously carries a stigma, as it represents a deviation from what is socially approved for women: the conformity to patriarchal expectations—dolling oneself up to attract a suitor for marriage, or – as more frequently displayed in the text – childbearing.

On the contrary, the text portrays her father as highly materialistic from the opening of the narrative. This depiction surfaces through the manner in which he “rules the realm,” as well as in the luxuriousness of his family’s abode (54). The text states that, under the emperor’s rule, “those who had merit were rewarded” (54). This attitude contrasts what Miaoshan believes with regard to “merit,” along with “fame and power”; none, in her eyes, are everlasting (62). Here, she and the emperor oppose one another in that one gives weight to such traits in an individual’s

character, whereas the other believes that there is more to one's character than what he or she can accomplish in the worldly present.

The narrative additionally epitomizes the emperor's overall ostentatious lifestyle. It mentions that he possesses "three thousand seven hundred concubines"; that all in the family, including said concubines, can afford to dine "nine times every day"; and that he lacks "neither gold nor silver nor rare treasures" (54). The emperor's propensity toward extravagant living sharply differs from Miaoshan's proclivity for a simplified lifestyle. This polarization further supports Miaoshan's similitude to Christ; He would not laud the emperor's practice of opulence. The contrast in the lifestyle that each prefers to practice also accounts for the manner in which the emperor responds to Miaoshan's assertion to live by a religion that promotes austerity with respect to material consumption. He is blind to the objective of her choice – greater benevolence in character; rather, he views her action as a shunning of what he has provided her, and therefore takes offense to it. The inability to recognize the positive end result of her decision deepens the rift between the two characters, and stands as one factor that propels Miaoshan's later persecution.

One may inquire what is the other "factor" that drives the emperor's tyranny toward his daughter. This factor alludes to the fact that Miaoshan refuses to "accept [her] lot" as a woman (65). In opposition to Miaoshan's desire to "study the Way" (62), the emperor cites not only what he expects of his daughters at said moment, but also what the society that she inhabits warrants of a woman—that she be "[eventually] wed" (63). The expectation of marriage for a woman at the time demands that she pay attention to her appearance, as evidenced in the portrayal of the emperor's daughters—the text, for instance, mentions their "three-inch embroidered shoes," and likens their overall physiognomy to the "finest jade" (58). This

sexualization of the woman emerges as patriarchal, as she dolls herself up for the male eye. The submission to male dominance through the excessive attention to their appearance signifies the aim to attract a suitor for marriage, enforcing the patriarchal framework that enclosed the society at said time.

The text insinuates an additional patriarchal part that comes with marriage: childbearing, particularly with the ambition of yielding a son. The expectation to beget children proves patriarchal, as it signifies a demand upon the woman's body; one views this mandate, as the emperor bemoans that "not a single [body] is capable of giving me a son and heir," where "body" refers to each of his concubines, as well as his wife (55). As such, Miaoshan's wish to devote herself to religious piety subverts patriarchal framework in two manners. The first pertains to her refusal to marry, which simply dissents a primary criterion of womanhood at the time. The second concerns the antithesis to the sexualization of her body through childbearing—celibacy. The text insinuates that Miaoshan perpetuates her celibate state, for she desires to "become a nun" (62). Some may argue that a celibate state only implies further sexualization of her body, as men may aim to remove this chastity. However, in the context of the text, Miaoshan's celibacy only alludes to the fact that she makes a choice for herself, rather than conforms to what is expected of her.

Miaoshan's insurrection against patriarchal conventions results in her persecution; her father, upon hearing her choice, orders for her to be "stripped" of her clothing, "beat with staffs," and "locked up in the rear garden" (67). This abuse that instantaneously results from her choice showcases that a woman's passion for religious piety is to her detriment. While the proclivity to follow a religious path equates to an act of independence from societal constrictions, it may physically place her at risk, as evidenced through the physical abuse that Miaoshan receives.

The emperor perpetuates his harassment of his daughter, but such results as futile; the fruitlessness of his actions emerges near the end of the narrative, as he orders for the convent that she inhabits to be set on fire. Here, Miaoshan fully subverts that which is imposed upon her through the performance of a supernatural act. She “spits out a mouthful of blood,” which transforms into a rain that extinguishes the fire (94). The miracle that Miaoshan performs results in her being perceived as a freak, for the troops deem her a “wily she-devil” (94); her status as a social outcast is reinforced. However, what proves significant is that though her life is at stake, she does not instigate salvation for herself, but rather for the others who reside in the convent. Miaoshan demands that “these lives,” though not necessarily hers, be saved (94).

The event that Miaoshan initiates not only represents the ability to harness the supernatural—which may come with religious piety—but also the maximization of compassion, which an individual obtains through the moral self-cultivation that a religion demands. This scene therefore supports the notion of Miaoshan as a Christ-like figure; she performs a miracle, and the root of said miracle is benevolence. However, it once again showcases the hazard that a woman’s devotion to a religious lifestyle entails. The scene draws significance, as it is a moment in which Miaoshan places her own life in jeopardy not only for the salvation of others, but also as a means of maintaining her stance that she sets at the beginning of the narrative, where she refuses what is expected of her and rather chooses at her will, asserting her independence from patriarchal conventions. As Miaoshan decides on religious piety early in the text, she yields its outcome at the end of the text: the necessity of self-sacrifice. As she is able to put out the fire, some may argue that self-sacrifice does not ensue. However, it is the *propensity* toward self-sacrifice that matters; when she calls upon the “buddhas of the three worlds” to end the catastrophe, she does so for those in the convent and not merely for herself (93).

On a contrary note, some may contend that in her refusal to marry, Miaoshan forsakes a distinct power that a woman in Chinese society can derive within matrimony; such “power” refers to the opportunity a wife holds to “undermine her husband’s authority” in order to “make her own way,” for—as Emily Ahern cites in “The Power and Pollution of Chinese Women”—a husband’s natal family considers her an “outsider, an intruder.” As Ahern further explains, a married woman may manipulate her husband in a manner that would shift his attention toward the “uterine family” she desires to build, and away from his natal family.¹ In light of Ahern’s piece, some may hence argue that Miaoshan is not able to reap the above power, as she chooses to “[never] give up [her] body to serve a man” (111). One must comprehend that here, the term, “power” indicates the chance to subvert the patriarchal framework of marriage that is enforced by the society that Miaoshan inhabits.

However, Miaoshan derives power outside of matrimony, not merely as she selects her own path for her future, but also as evidenced in the scene in which she allows herself to be mutilated for the sake of her father’s health. In the second part of *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain*, the emperor is punished for his prior order to “burn a convent to the ground,” as well as for his maltreatment of Miaoshan (130): he contracts a disease that “swaths [his body] in suffering” and “shows [it] no mercy” (131). According to the text, the medicine to cure such a disease requires the “arms and eyes of one without anger” (137). As such, Miaoshan, in immortal form, is sought out, as she bears the title, “One Who Contemplates the Cries of the World”; she obligates herself to show mercy to “those who suffer” (133). When Miaoshan allows her mutilation, the text mentions, “Fresh blood spurts in all directions” (140). Ahern notes that an outflow of blood from the body is “regarded as powerful” in that it symbolizes the “strength and

¹ Emily M. Ahern, “The Power and Pollution of Chinese Women,” in *Women in Chinese Society*, edited by Margery Wolf and Roxane Witke (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), 199, 200.

life force” of that who is “slaughtered,” or whose body part(s) is mutilated.² Therefore, though Miaoshan – in her decision not to marry – forsakes a power only attainable within matrimony, she acquires power from a different source. In light of Ahern’s text, Miaoshan becomes powerful through physical self-sacrifice; she transfers vitality to her father through the spill of her blood.

Miaoshan additionally becomes powerful in a separate sense, as she chooses to be merciful toward an individual who previously maltreats her. Miaoshan, in consideration of the emperor’s persecution of her, may have opted for him to receive his “proper punishment”; yet, the text exemplifies that in spite of his actions, Miaoshan still “considers the sufferings of...all” (153). Hence, one can surmise that Miaoshan acquires power outside of matrimonial institution in three manners: she *chooses* her own path for her future, rather than *conforms* to the path that her society expects her to submit to; she approves the mutilation of her body, and her blood is thus spilled, the latter point – in view of Ahern’s piece – symbolizing power; and she maintains her role of the “One Who Contemplates the Cries of the World,” even toward those who may not “deserve” her compassion.

However, some – in pertinence to Miaoshan’s embrace of death – may further assert that Miaoshan seeks death to be “[her] own master” (108)—that she is “concerned with only [her] own pleasures,” and that therefore, she is no different from the individual – her father – that she reviles (153). Some may reference the statement prior to her death, as she states, “Allow me to die” (114). Here, the manner in which Miaoshan comes across may be perceived as unusual; in relation to such a ready embrace of martyrdom, many would pale when compared to her character, as she even “prays” for her death to come (114). Therefore, some may deem her

² Ahern, 197, 198.

intentions—her devotion to religious piety, as well as her aim to display boundless compassion—questionable.

However, Miaoshan specifically states: “Allow me to die, so I will not have to be in conflict with my father, troubling his heart, because it would be my fault if the common people of the whole world would not be at peace” (114). Hence, Miaoshan seeks death in consideration of the distress that her father—as well as those outside the family realm – may endure due to her choice: here, the refusal to accept a social convention. The phrase, “common people of the whole world” emerges as an exaggerated reference to those in her society that expect her to abide by said convention. As such, Miaoshan’s ready embrace of her slaughter only further exemplifies her similarity to a Christ figure; she shows compassion toward those she believes may suffer. Here, such “compassion” takes the form of self-sacrifice.

Some may lastly contend that Miaoshan’s display of “so much filial piety” (150) – in the salvation of her father – signifies a desire to eliminate the image by which others previously perceive her: a “good-for-nothing with no sense of duty” (104). That her return to the practice of filial piety may evidence a delayed response to her society’s lack of acceptance for her refusal to marry would therefore undermine her choice to “swim against the current.” Such rationale may be reasonable in light of the amount of criticism Miaoshan receives prior to her death: those within, as well as outside, the family insist that the “motivations [she has] are evil” and represent “a crime against nature” (107). Miaoshan may thus revert to filial piety to redeem herself not only as a daughter, but also as an individual of the society that she inhabits.

However, it is defensible that the author of *The Precious Scroll* incorporates Miaoshan’s act of filial piety toward her father to justify the existence of religious piety within the narrative. If Miaoshan had refused to display compassion toward the emperor—in light of his prior desire

to “exterminate [her] with cruel punishments, persecuting, and harming [her] without end” (153)—she would have subverted the title bestowed upon her – “One Who Contemplates the Cries of the World” – as well as a significant facet within her devotion to religious piety: here, boundless compassion for those who are in pain. Hence, Miaoshan cannot help but display “so much filial piety”; it is in her nature, both as a mortal and as an immortal (150).

In the context of Miaoshan’s narrative, the relationship between a woman and her propensity toward a lifestyle centered on religious piety proves polarizing. Her choosing such a lifestyle—specifically for the result of becoming a more compassionate individual—stands as an act of liberation; she liberates herself from societal standards determined by a patriarchal framework, and in the process, exercises her free will as an individual. She steps away from the label of “woman.” However, as the woman rebuffs conformity to patriarchal expectations—here, marrying and eventually bearing children—she does so at her detriment. As portrayed by Miaoshan, for a woman to make a choice, rather than consent to what is expected of her—in Miaoshan’s narrative, the choice of a religious lifestyle for self-cultivation—she risks her reputation within the society she inhabits, and possibly, like Miaoshan, her body. Therefore, a woman’s selection of religious piety as the base of her life results in her becoming an outcast in said society, as it possesses two parts that oppose patriarchy. One arrives with the fact that she performs this selection as she recognizes her state as an individual and not merely as a woman, weakening the manner in which a patriarchal society perceives her—as merely a woman. The other part pertains to the fact that the proclivity toward religion rather than the upholding of the standard—marriage—signals a loss of femininity. A woman is to promote her sexuality through the maintenance of her appearance; she is to “be wed” and bear children (63). She is not to be austere in her physiognomy nor remain celibate. As such, while the choice of religious piety is

positive in that it represents an act of free will on the woman's part, it also embodies an adverse relationship between said woman and said choice. To make such a choice necessitates that she be ready to sacrifice not only her reputation, but also, as seen through Miaoshan in the first part of her narrative, her life.

About the author

Lianna Arcelay is a third-year student in the Franklin College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Georgia. She studies Comparative Literature, and is working toward a minor in Spanish. She desires to pursue an MA and a PhD in Comparative Literature; she is also interested in teaching children English in a Hispanophone or Francophone country post-graduation. Lianna has been interested in the field of Ecocriticism, and in works that critique humans' relationship with the nonhuman environment, or natural world. She also possesses a light penchant for existentialist, absurdist, and dystopian literature.

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