

# ***Reflection of the Development of Female Subject Consciousness: Based on the Tendency of Gender Role Division in Danmei Literature***

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**Abstract:** "Danmei" culture is an important part of contemporary youth subculture, among which "original Danmei literature" is a form of online literature that can reflect the level of female subject consciousness. This article starts from the development history of Danmei literature, takes the tendency of the artificial division of gender roles in Danmei works as the theme, and analyzes the classic seme-uke model that appears in Danmei literary works and the further division of gender roles in the ABO worldview. Under the trend of gender role division in Danmei literature, the two protagonists, who are both biological males, are artificially divided into different gender expressions, and even under the ABO worldview, they are divided into sex physiological structural differences, which brings about a gender gap. Danmei literature has returned to the traditional gender power logic, and female subject consciousness has been eliminated to a certain extent, showing the negative side of the development of Danmei literature.

**Keywords:** Danmei literature, feminism, gender roles, ABO worldview

## **1. Introduction**

The "Danmei literature" or "Danmei novels" discussed in this article specifically refer to sub-literary works independently created by Chinese mainland writers, characterized by the fact that the main characters and their partners at the end of the story are all male. This kind of novel, also called the "original Danmei novel" on the Chinese Internet, uses the Internet as the main communication carrier. Danmei literature is an important part of the youth subculture in today's era. Most of its readers are women [1]. It has a certain influence among female groups and is an important cultural reference field for studying the level of female subject consciousness today. There are abundant studies on Danmei literature based on a feminist perspective. However, Danmei literature is a developing popular culture that is complex and diverse. In particular, there are few studies on the ABO worldview setting in which original Danmei literature has gradually emerged in recent years. This article starts from perspective of the context of artificially divided gender roles in Danmei literature and attempts to explore the negative side of the development of female subject consciousness in Danmei literature by analyzing the two gender role division models of the classic division of seme-uke (top-bottom) and the ABO worldview.

## 2. The Development of Danmei Literature

Danmei literature gradually emerged on the Internet under the influence of Japanese Tanbi comics in the late 1990s. Starting from Danmei novels of fan fiction, which means secondary creations based on original works or character prototypes, local original Danmei novels gradually developed. The establishment of "Jinjiang Literature City" in 2003 further promoted original Danmei novels [2]. It should be noted that although Chinese Danmei literature originates from Japanese Tanbi culture, the appearance of the works after its local development has been slightly different from the commonly used "yaoi" and "Shōnen-ai" in the Japanese context, and there are also subtle differences in the "slash fiction" used by English-speaking countries [3]. Therefore, this article uses "Danmei" to refer to such works in China. Like "yaoi" in Japanese, "Danmei" in Chinese generally has two roles: "seme"(top) and "uke"(bottom) [4]. The authors and readers of Danmei literature construct two gender-like character types, "seme" and "uke", with different gender expressions based on fixed positional relationships during sexual relations between men of the same biological sex. Secondly, although both Danmei literature and gay literature use homosexuals as the main characters, Danmei literature creates more male virtual images in fantasy.

The love between men that appears in Danmei literature breaks the binary opposition between male protagonists and female protagonists in traditional love novels. The absence of women fundamentally negates the uneasiness caused by gender stereotypes that may be felt when reading. Female readers who like to read Danmei novels do not mean that they have become homosexuals or have developed sexual and psychological disorders. Most of the readers of Danmei novels are still heterosexual women [1]. Compared with traditional romance novels, Danmei novels that focus on the love relationship between two men are more able to satisfy women's sexual and psychological needs for the opposite sex. At the same time, they are also women's exploration of "safe" love relationships and new love behavior patterns. The writing of Danmei novels was started by women, and the reading was also completed by women. Women have become the subject of aesthetics.

Since the concept of "Tanbi" entered the country, the readership of Danmei literature has continued to expand. The 2018 Danmei-adapted TV series "Guardian" was adapted from the novel of the same name by writer Priest, and the 2019 Danmei-adapted TV series "The Untamed" was adapted from the novel "Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation" by writer Mo Xiang Tongxiu. These two TV series brought Danmei, especially directly related to Danmei literature, into the public eye, bringing in countless new readers. The increase in readers has brought Danmei novels, on the one hand, higher traffic, more creators and works; on the other hand, it has also brought about various chaos, such as labeling and the formulaic nature of works. The popularization and "out of the circle" of Danmei novels have changed the nature of the previous niche exploration of Danmei literature. The commercial literary creation aimed at catering to the public's interests has brought in the public's awareness and deconstructed female writing that has not yet been fully established to a certain extent. The symbolic shell of Danmei and the simplistic cultural core even hide a subtle blow to female subject consciousness. By observing the changes in the setting, content and stereotyping tendencies of Danmei novels in recent years, a glimpse of the crisis factors in the development of female subject consciousness reflected behind the changes can be seen.

## 3. Artificial Division of Gender—the Shadow of the Development of Female Subject Consciousness in Danmei Literature

The differentiation of seme-uke romantic partners in Danmei literary works is manifested in the stereotypical feminization of the uke protagonist, and the rise of ABO worldview works. It should be noted that the data on the works mentioned below are all collected at the end of December 2023.

### 3.1. The Classic Division of Seme-Uke Gender Role Model

A patriarchal society uses masculine and feminine qualities to construct differences in superiority and inferiority between the genders, solidifying distinct social statuses within the gender relational structure [4]. The concept of difference and irreversibility between seme and uke in Danmei literature is deeply rooted in the hearts of the people. In Jinjiang Literature City, using "switch" as a tag and searching for completed works based on the number of collections, the highest-ranked "Pluck the Bright Moon" has a collection of 200,000, while the second-placed "Just the Right Time" has dropped to a collection of 60,000. This ranking has excluded six novels by the popular writer Wu Zhe, who wrote the million-collected work "SAYE".

At the same time, the image of the uke protagonist in Danmei literary works tends to be stereotyped as feminine or to have traditional femininity. In contrast, the seme protagonist is often portrayed as a stereotypical male image or has traditional masculinity. Even in works labeled as "strong pairing", which means both parties are equally proactive or strong in love, sometimes this phenomenon still exists. The most common point is that in terms of career or major choice, uke is more often set to be the occupation or major that women are stereotyped to choose, such as designers and teachers, while the seme is more often set as occupations or majors that are stereotypically chosen by men, such as president and captain. It is also quite common for both parties to have the same career setting, such as CEO and actor, but even in the same career setting, there are often differences. Generally, the seme is still in an advantageous position (for example, the seme side has a larger company or has won the best actor) or more experienced (if both parties are teachers, the seme side joins the job earlier) and plays the role of leader or waiter in the struggle of the uke. At the same time, in terms of power, wealth and status, seme is often still more dominant, while the personality charm of the uke is often displayed in inherent qualities such as wisdom, innocence and justice. For example, in "UAAG Air Crash Investigation Team", uke Fucheng is a very excellent pilot, and seme Zhuohuan is a world-famous aircraft designer with a millionaire. Zhuohuan is also the object of Fucheng's admiration for many years and he is Fucheng's boss. In terms of appearance description, uke's image description is generally different from the aggressive seme and will be described as "comely", "slender" and "beautiful".

In addition, Danmei literary works with financial support relationships are also somewhat popular, such as "Amateurs" by Kong Ju, the author of Chang Pei Literature. Even in some works, uke's image is more delicate and emotional, in need of protection, in a very weak position, and is often described as a "canary" or something similar. Some works also tend to infantilize uke, making uke enter a more vulnerable narrative discourse, commonly described as "burping after drinking milk".

From another perspective, due to cognitive psychological factors, Confucian "orderly" concepts, and other national cultural factors, the word order of polymers in Chinese has formed the principles of importance, positive attitude, and others [5,6], which can often explain whether different components occupying a dominant position, such as "father-mother", "men-women", "high-low", "good-bad", "right-wrong", and "success-failure". When two types of things are mentioned simultaneously, the Chinese components with higher status and higher evaluation are often placed at the beginning of the word [7,8]. This has been inherited and developed in youth subcultures. In many subcultures, the order is meaningful, and those who are more powerful and dominant in the relationship are often placed first. For example, in China, Forth love, which usually involves pegging, is a female-dominated sexual relationship called GB (i.e., "girl-boy", with the word "girl" in front) to distinguish it from BG, which means traditional male-dominated sexual relationships. The same is true for seme and uke. There are even very clear rules in the fandom. The name of seme is placed before uke. Alternatively, they are not called seme and uke but called left and right, forming a specialized terminology.

Under this normal pattern of strong seme and weak uke or strong uke and stronger seme, women still put themselves in uke's perspective. For example, both Danmei and Romance use the words "nianshang" and "nianxia" from the Japanese "toshiue" and "toshishita" to respectively indicate that seme/male is older or younger than uke/female, and seme/male's age is the subject of scrutiny. These words can reflect that the reader's perspective is more in common with uke's perspective, while seme is located at a perspective further away from the reader. The vast majority of works taking uke's as the narrator's perspective can also illustrate the above point. In the uke's perspective, female readers find themselves simultaneously reveling in the non-identifying sense of security and voyeuristic pleasure derived from the male identity of the uke. At the same time, they relish in the security and romantic sensations brought about by the female perspective of the uke, turning women into the aesthetic subject[5]. However, at the same time, female readers are accustomed to the strong-seme-weak-uke or uke-strong-seme-stronger model formed by the stereotyped feminine image of uke. In this case, female subjectivity faces a crisis that is difficult to develop.

The stereotyped female image is not a healthy and diverse female image, but an image formed by women in a weak power position in a patriarchal society. As Beauvoir said, women are not born, but made [9]. Similarly, in Danmei literature, uke, a biological male, is placed in a female situation, turning him into a quasi-female. What female authors and readers still see is a gender role gazed by an absent male without knowing it. Although seme and uke are still both physically male, the many differences between them in Danmei literature show a division of gender roles that is close to reality. This seme-uke gender role division not only means different positions during sexual behavior but also implies a gender power structure in love relationships [10]. The male-male model in Danmei literature, when it over-shapes the stereotyped feminine uke image, is more like a masked reenactment of the binary gender model of traditional patriarchal society. The simple conversion of male and female models is the projection of the female subject's feelings about the actual relationship between the sexes. When reading Danmei literature, the reader's non-female identity is disconnected from women's reality, which makes women feel safer and have room for imagination to obey rather than resist the existing male power logic in reality. The works that covertly revert to traditional male-female models are market-oriented and popular. Their massive imitation and replication have brought about the normalization of concepts in the imaginary utopia of Danmei Literature. These two have diminished the progressive significance of Danmei literature in awakening female subject consciousness and weakened its potential to resist male discourse to a certain extent.

At the same time, the GB model can still reflect female dominance by inverting sex dominance, but in Danmei literature, due to the lack of biological sex differences, it is impossible to deconstruct the images of seme and uke in this way. Originally, Danmei literature was able to embody and awaken women's subjective consciousness due to its lack of biological sex differences, but now it is exactly the opposite. The female perspective is limited to the uke perspective because of the inability to invert sex.

However, at the same time, we still need to see that uke's overly stereotypically feminine image is criticized [11]. The phenomenon of some Danmei readers turning to non-couple works also shows that young women, as the audience of Danmei literature, have a certain level of female subjectivity. Works in which uke is too stereotypically feminine are not absolutely mainstream, but the patriarchal logic of seme being strong and uke being weak or uke being strong and seme being stronger has been adopted by default. The classic model of giving seme and uke traditional masculinity and femininity respectively still needs to be noticed.

### **3.2. Pushed Further to the Extreme-Gender Role Division under the ABO Worldview**

Danmei's works have multiple basic worldviews, one of the most common worldviews is the ABO worldview. In this worldview, men and women are artificially further divided into six sexes: male

Alpha, Beta, Omega, and female Alpha, Beta, Omega. Alpha is at the top of social power and possesses a strong sense of territory and possessiveness. On the other hand, Omega is at the bottom of the social power hierarchy and will go into heat, emitting pheromones that make Alpha lose control and engage in marking and intercourse. Omegas will continue to conceive and give birth to children without the intervention of injected drugs. Beta falls in between the two, forming the middle part of an olive-shaped society, and can be approximately equal to normal men and women in reality [12]. In the ABO worldview, an individual's ability, status, and social role are almost entirely determined by innate physiological factors.

In Danmei literature, the ABO worldview is widely used in writing, with a large number of works and a certain unique color of Danmei: taking Jinjiang Literature City as an example, searching with the tag "ABO", the number of works of Danmei literature is 6303, and the number of romance works is only 1117. At the same time, the number one collection of romance novels with the "ABO" label is 160,000, while the number one collection of Danmei literature is 420,000. Although the ABO worldview was born to facilitate erotic development, it is still common in general works. AO pairings are predominant in works set with the ABO worldview as the background. Hence, the following analysis is all about original Danmei works with AO pairings and no pornographic plots.

On the basis of the classic seme-uke division, the ABO worldview further widens the gap between the two parties in terms of biological sex, and creates a social background setting with biological sex differences in Danmei works, giving the author and readers a reasonable and legal reason to a traditional power relationship in which one party has a gender advantage, and the other party is at a gender disadvantage. Because Omega has special settings of estrus and reproduction, and the stories often contain military elements, the artificial physiological gap between the sexes and the resulting differences in social power relations, division of labor, and social status are greater than reality and other Danmei works. This is in line with the requirements of a patriarchal society to divide good and bad gender expressions to consolidate the unequal social status of the sexes [5]. The fertility setting of Omega breaks the original function of Danmei literature to conceal the fertility anxiety of females and ensure the non-utilitarian nature of love.

In the ABO worldview, where social resources, power, and gender issues are unavoidable, Omegas are often ukes. Their fertile, generally frail, and delicate characteristics are closer to the physical characteristics and stereotypes of women in reality than men. On the basis of the feminization of the uke stereotype of the classic seme-uke division, the ABO worldview makes the uke have feminine physical characteristics at the same time, further widening the gap between the two parties in love, and further emphasizing the traditional realistic gender power logic. However, in terms of psychological characteristics, Uke is often different from the classic Omega image shown in the setting or other supporting characters in the same work. He is more independent, has initiative in sex, and has special features that are different from other Omegas. He can be stronger in abilities or physiological aspects, such as pheromones and mental strength, than the Alpha, who is at the top of the position of power and conforms to the traditional male stereotype. This can be gleaned from the titles of the No. 1 work, "Almighty Mid (E-Sports)" (with Omega uke as the main perspective), and the No. 2 work, "Who Says an Omega Cannot Be Invincible," on the Jinjiang Literature City collection list with the "ABO" tag. Some works will even launch affirmative actions under the ABO worldview. Readers often cannot tolerate uke's frailty and demand that the Omega protagonist have special features that characters of the same gender do not have. Readers also discuss gender issues in a worldview with stronger gender concepts. All these phenomena are projections of female subject consciousness. However, similar to the plot in traditional romance web novels where women disguise themselves as men and enter the military academy, even if uke is stronger than all other members of the opposite sex, in terms of ranking or power position, uke is still below or at the same level as the love partner. O is strong, and A is stronger, which is still a manifestation of the pattern that uke is

strong and seme is stronger. At the same time, almost all ABO worldview works will have plots of estrus and marking, and they are often placed in the introduction of the work to attract readers.

At the same time, almost all ABO worldview works will have plots of estrus and marking, and they are often placed in the introduction of the work to attract readers. For example, seven of the top ten works in Jinjiang Literature City's collection list with an "ABO" tag include such plots in their introductions. Subject to physiological laws, no matter how strong the uke is, how determined his willpower is, or whether he is injected with drugs that delay the estrus period, he will eventually enter estrus, succumb to the physiological pleasure, and then ask the other party to join. It is similar to the logic of traditional strong female protagonists who seem to break away from tradition but eventually return to the traditional settings of women in a patriarchal society [11]. Even though the work spares no effort to show the power of Omega, he eventually succumbs to the innate physiological requirements of sex and needs to rely on Alpha to solve physiological problems that he cannot control himself.

The strong gender consciousness in the ABO worldview runs counter to the features of Danmei's works. The characteristic that distinguishes Danmei literature from other literature is the sex indifference of the protagonists, but now the protagonists are artificially divided into gender differences. For example, in the former case, emotions in Danmei literature often occur naturally. Seme and uke start contacting each other as colleagues, classmates, and friends, and the pattern of gradually developing feelings after getting familiar with each other is enduring and in line with most female readers' expectations of "pure love." Although there is no shortage of similar patterns in romance works, due to social and cultural influences, the character interactions in the works need to be examined in the psychology of "natural pairing between men and women" and "men and women guarding against each other" by the author, the work, and the readers. Therefore, it is difficult for romance novels to realize the true "start with friends" love model like Danmei literature. The uniqueness of Danmei literature is that it allows readers to completely put aside the troubles caused by gender identity and enjoy the thrill of emotion on a relatively equal basis. There has been a long history of dividing men with no physical differences into seme and uke and assigning them certain typical attributes. As mentioned above, the seme-uke model has solidified over the years, and a simple conversion between male and female models has emerged. The ABO world setting further expands the physical gap between lovers and the resulting gap in status, wealth, etc., based on the seme-uke division. The ABO world setting further expands the physical gap between lovers and the resulting gap in status and wealth based on the seme-uke division. The progressive effect of Danmei literature on the discovery of female subject consciousness is reduced in this setting and more reflects the public consciousness that the contemporary female group has not yet broken away from the existing gender power order.

#### 4. Conclusion

Under the trend of popularization of Danmei literature over the years, Danmei literature has gradually been impacted by public consciousness as the number of readers has increased. Even in a novel world with a larger fantasy space, even if it is freed from the constraints of male and female, in Danmei literature where women read and write, love models and fantasies still follow the logic of the real gender power structure and reflect the real situations of men and women. On the one hand, the construction of a more ideal female fantasy utopia in Danmei literature is the creation and review of women as aesthetic subjects. However, the fixed division between seme and uke and the feminization of uke's social role stereotype in the work, as well as the feminization of uke's physical characteristics in the ABO worldview that further divides gender roles, are a manifestation of returning to traditional gender relations and obeying the power logic of patriarchal society. To a certain extent, it eliminates the possibility of Danmei literature arousing and developing female subject consciousness and

resisting male discourse and the original gender order. It needs the attention of Danmei literature creators and readers.

This article further supplements the academic research on the gender role classification in original Danmei literature. However, due to factors such as space and time, this article has not yet conducted an in-depth analysis of the psychological causes and social connections of the gender role division tendency in original Danmei literature. In addition, the female gender anxiety that may be reflected in male fertility under the ABO worldview, may be added in the future.

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