

Female empowerment in communist china



Feminism is the advocacy of equality between men and women socially, politically, and economically. In Dai Sijie's novel, *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, the narrator and his friend, Luo, are set on civilizing a young village girl who they meet during their re-education, known as the Little Seamstress. This novel displays a female protagonist, The Little Seamstress, who is not afraid to take control of her own future and goes against Luo and the narrator's stereotypical beliefs that she is in need of being saved. *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* is a feminist piece of literature because it uses the Little Seamstress to prove that women, no matter what background, are capable of doing many of the same things as men on their own.

At first, this novel may be mistaken as a sexist piece of writing rather than a feminist one because of the way Dai Sijie portrays the Little Seamstress, however it is written through the perspective of the narrator and Luo so it actually reflects the views of most men on women at that time, which the Little Seamstress later disproves. The way the narrator describes her when they first meet gives the impression of an innocent girl who spends her days sewing for the benefit of the men in the village, which hints at a feminine and childlike character. There is a strong emphasis on her appearance and dress, and the narrator notes that even her pink shoes "caught the eye, seeming delicate and sophisticated" (Sijie 21). There is no mention of any personality traits in this first encounter, yet there is an immense amount of detail placed on the more superficial parts of the Little Seamstress, for example her shoes, alluding to the mindset of the boys that she is possession. Without even getting a chance to know her, Luo and the narrator

already objectify her as uncivilised. In contrast, the Little Seamstress recognizes what the boys might think of her and when she tells them she is unable to read, she justifies herself by telling them “ but you needn’t think I’m a fool, because I enjoy talking to people who can read and write” (Sijie 25). She knows what assumptions one might make of her as a village girl, and she quickly counters this by showing her intelligence. Here, there is a feminist undertone because the Little Seamstress vocalizes her wishes to be considered on the same level as a man despite her setbacks. Although she is described in a stereotypical way by the narrator, the Little Seamstress’s actions demonstrate an outspoken woman who has a thirst for knowledge but has just not gotten the opportunity to reach her full potential yet.

As the novel progresses, a significant increase in her confidence is present, and she begins to disregard more and more misogynistic ideas. When talking about her tradition of diving into the lake to fetch Luo’s keys, the Little Seamstress makes it clear that she does it because she wants to do it, not because anybody else is telling her to. She opposes the impression one might get from this situation by saying “ I’m not like a silly dog that keeps running to fetch the stick thrown by it’s master” (Sijie 144). The use of the word “ silly”, which the Little Seamstress negates, implies that she is smarter than that and is aware of what she is doing. Luo is not her master and does not get to control the Little Seamstress’s choices; there is a balance in their relationship. By acknowledging that she is in control of her own life, the Little Seamstress becomes closer to realizing what power she holds as a woman in terms of exploring and discovering new things.

Nearer to end of the book, the Little Seamstress, no longer restricted by the influence of men, recognizes that she can build herself as a strong woman instead of a mere village girl and is ready to see what she can become outside of her mountain. Simple things, such changing her hair, where “ the long pigtail made way for a short bob, which was very becoming and modern-looking” (Sijie 79) impacted her actions. Long hair is generally considered more feminine opposed to short hair, however the Little Seamstress breaks a lot of the standards Chinese men acquired. This change of hair is also a symbol that signifies her overall change as a person after learning feminist ideas through text. Furthermore, one of the largest reasons this book is considered a feminist novel is because of the very last line, which states “[the Little Seamstress] said that she had learnt one thing from Balzac: that a woman’s beauty is treasure beyond price” (Sijie 184). The fact that Sijie chose to make the last line of his book about feminism is another clear indication that Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress is intended to be a feminist piece of literature. As a concluding line, it sums up the entire book and what the true essence of it is about. While there could be a literal meaning to this quote about beauty, it can also be seen as what the Little Seamstress interpreted it as- the inner beauty. She is inspired by the thought of being able to do greater things by herself; an extremely rare notion at that time. Now, the Little Seamstress has an identity which she would never have been exposed to before if it weren’t for these books that helped her feel empowered. In the end, the very thing that the boys used to try and educate the Little Seamstress with to make her their possession is the thing that drove her away and made her take advantage of her womanhood.

Over the course of *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, the Little Seamstress makes great strides in her progression of confidence and knowledge. From the beginning, we can already see signs of her bold nature that had not yet gotten the chance to fully develop because of her lack of knowledge availability. However, when she does eventually realize what she can do as a woman, she takes full advantage of the opportunities laid out in front of her. Through her journey of female empowerment, *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* by Dai Sijie reflects feminist piece of literature.