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“ The Tale of Kieu”: A Study on Karma

Right or wrong is purely cultural, yet there are certain things or actions which are considered either right or wrong universally in all cultures. In “ The Tale of Kieu,” the author Nguyen Du describes a female named Kieu who suffers innumerable tragedies for paying back the sins she committed in her previous life.

“ The Tale of Kieu” narrates the life, trials and tribulations of Thuy Kieu, a beautiful and intelligent young woman, who sacrifices herself to save her family. To save her imprisoned father and brother, she sells herself into a marriage with a middle aged man, a pimp who forces her into prostitution. Having been sold to prostitution, she experiences suffering as part of her life. She has to follow her fate: She is cheated, held in a whorehouse twice as a singer, concubine, and also as servant. However, she is finally rescued from prostitution, and marries Kim Trong, whom she could have married many years ago. In “ The Tale of Kieu,” the author encourages the readers to practice virtues which will eventually be rewarded. But if a person performs evil deeds, he/she will be punished.

The story focuses on the conflict between the Confucian concept of filial piety and female chastity, personal obligations and personal morality. The author, Du, reminds the readers of the reasons for the sufferings of Kieu. When Kieu sees the ghost, it immediately tells her the cause of her suffering. The ghost tells her that she is now paying for the sins she had committed in her previous life. This is called Karma. Unless she goes through all her sins and pays for them, the torture will not come to an end. Even if she dies, she

still has to suffer in her next life. Many countries in the Southeast part of Asia have Buddhism as their major religion. Vietnam is not an exception.

Reincarnation is a major belief in Buddhism. Spirits will never die. They will enter into another body, so also their sins. So Kieu's suffering will not end until she pays for her sins:

This we have learned: with Heaven rests all things.

Heaven appoints each human to a place.

If doomed to roll in dust, we'll roll in dust;

we'll sit on high when destined for high seats.

In talent take no overweening pride,

for talent and disaster form a pair.

Our karma we must carry as our lot--

let's stop decrying Heaven's whims and quirks.

Inside ourselves there lies the root of good:

the heart outweighs all talents on this earth. (" The Tale of Kieu" 167)

In extension, I completely agree with Nguyen Du's concept of Karma. The society in which I have grown up is similar to that of Vietnam, where people have unshakable faith in Karma, which prevents people from doing evils deeds. The Chinese idiom " It's not you do not have to pay, it's just not the time yet" means that if a person commits a sin and thinks that he gets away with it, he is wrong: eventually one day he has to pay for it. This is also true of the virtuous deeds a person does. If a person performs noble deeds, he will eventually be rewarded. This idiom encourages people to be virtuous. The very same idea is emphasized by the author, Nguyen Du, who insists on

Karma. By showing the sufferings of Kieu, Nguyen Du successfully warns the readers against the severe consequences of committing sins.

At the end of the story, Kieu has undergone her punishment completely, and so she is rescued from prostitution. This is the turning point in her life. After having been purged of her sins, she marries Kim Trong, whom she could have married several years ago. At this juncture she starts experiencing the benefits of the good things she had done. During the period of her prostitution, she was definitely suffering from it. However, at the same time, she was also piling up her virtue for herself. As she was suffering, she was also helping others by sacrificing her body.

It is immaterial whether one believes in karma or not; it is just another way to encourage people to practice virtues in the world. No matter what one's religion is, because no religion in the world advocates vices and sins. The wages of sin is death, but this punishment is only for those who do not repent. In this story, Kieu's traumatic experiences are ineffable, but her sufferings purify her. Also her sufferings are an example to those who commit sins in their life. Nemesis is inevitable. Nguyen Du has portrayed the life and suffering of Kieu to convey the universal truth that virtue is rewarded and vice is punished, and also to make people do the right thing so as to make the world a better place to live in.

Works Cited

Du, Nguyen. "The Tale of Kieu." Trans. Huynh Sanh Thong. New Haven: Yale U Press, 1983.