

## *Original Paper*

# Analysis of Female Character Portrayal in Tanbi Novel from the Perspective of Feminism—Taking *A Certain Someone* by Musuli as a Case Study

Zhou Zhou

School of Foreign Language, Beijing Forestry University, China

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### **Abstract**

*This paper analyzes the portrayal of female characters in the Tanbi novel *A Certain Someone* by Musuli from the perspective of feminism. While the novel caters to a predominantly female readership and reflects women's desires, contributing to the advancement of feminism, the study finds that the female characters often lack depth, agency, and independence, serving primarily to advance the plot or highlight the appeal of male characters. This limitation suggests that Tanbi novels have not yet fully broken through traditional gender models, making it difficult for the genre to effectively promote feminism.*

### **Keywords**

*Tanbi novel, feminism, *A Certain Someone**

## **1. Introduction**

### *1.1 Definition of Tanbi and Tanbi Novel*

In contemporary China, the term “Tanbi” is commonly defined as a genre written by female authors, targeting a predominantly female readership and oriented towards female desires (Ning Yi, 2020).

Originating in Japan, Tanbi novels are characterized by their female authorship, their appeal to a female audience, and their focus on male-male love stories (An Yali, 2022). They primarily explore romantic or erotic relationships between males and are widely circulated within the realm of popular culture. As a subset of Internet literature, Tanbi novels are distinguished by their freedom of ideological expression, a vast array of works, the ease of communication between readers and authors, and a large, dispersed network of authors (Zhou Weiwei & Huang Xiaojun, 2022).

### 1.2 Feminism and Tanbi Novel

These characteristics of Tanbi novles have not only facilitated their popularity but have also contributed to the formation of a unique culture. Within this cultural, feminism is increasingly emerging. Li Hao and Wu Yujie (2018) argue that Tanbi literature embodies a distinctive female solidarity, characterized by its primitive, spontaneous, and grassroots feminist elements.

However, Li Xu, He Jingwen and Wan Ruibing (2018) contend that while Tanbi novels have allowed the transition from “male gaze” to “female gaze”. This only represents a limited advancement in feminism. They argue that Tanbi literature essentially caters to contemporary female fantasies of “pure love”, rather than significantly challenging traditional gender norms.

### 1.3 Case Study: *A Certain Someone* by Musuli

*A Certain Someone* is a Chinese Tanbi novel written by Musuli. This novel narrates the romantic story of two males—Jiang Tian and ShengWang. Since its serialization in 2019 on the influential Chinese female-authored literary website Jinjiang Literature City, the novel has garnered over 40 billion views as of July 20, 2024. Additionally, on Weibo, one of China’s most active social media platforms, an interactive discussion community named *A Certain Someone and Musuli* has accumulated 1.8 million followers; on Goodreads, a platform where users can rate, review, and discuss books for book lovers around the world, *A Certain Someone* has achieved a high rating of 4.48 out of 5 from 620 ratings and has received 106 reviews. These indicate its significant popularity among readers.

Current academic research on Tanbi novels mainly focuses on their overall narrative structures, themes, and social influence. However, there has been little research into the portrayal of female characters in Tanbi novels.

This paper will use *A Certain Someone* as a case study to analyze the portrayal of female characters from the perspective of feminism, exploring how these female characters contribute to the story plot and highlight the charm of male characters and whether the depiction portrayal of female characters challenges traditional gender norms or, to some extent, maintains existing gender conventions.

## 2. Female Characters in *A Certain Someone*

*A Certain Someone*’s high school setting means that the female characters mainly include high school students, teachers, and women in familial roles. This chapter will provide a detailed analysis of two main types of female characters in this novel: Jiang Ou and the “girls”. These character analysis will form the basis for discussing the suppression of female agency and the portrayal of gender inequality in Chapter 3 and 4.

Jiang Ou, as a representation of the traditional virtuous wife and mother, experiences intense emotional turmoil due to her ex-husband’s homosexual relationship, leading to a strong aversion to homosexuality. Her character arc revolves around her struggle to come to terms with her ex-husband’s sexuality and its impact on their family, reflecting the societal tensions surrounding homosexuality in a predominantly heteronormative culture. In contrast, the female classmates, referred to as “girls”, function as admirers of

the protagonists, Jiang Tian and Sheng Wang, serving to highlight the protagonists' appeal and desirability. Their roles rarely extend beyond that of passive observers or potential love interests, limiting their character development and agency within the narrative.

### *2.1 Jiang Ou ---Victim of Male Homosexuality*

Jiang Ou, mother of the novel's protagonist Jiang Tian, is not directly described in terms of her appearance. Instead, the author emphasizes her gentle demeanor:

"Jiang Ou stood beside her son, dressed in a simple and understated manner, quite different from what one might expect. Though she was tall among women, she still appeared significantly shorter than Jiang Tian. This contrast made her seem non-threatening and even conveyed a sense of gentle kindness." (Chapter 3).

Jiang Ou fell in love with Jiang Tian's biological father, Ji Huanyu during high school. Despite her affluent background and her parents' opposition, she still married to the impoverished orphan --Ji Huanyu. They divorced due to their incompatible views. After the divorce, Jiang Ou remarried Sheng Wang's father and thus creates an opportunity for the two protagonists to meet each other in this reconstituted family.

Throughout both Jiang Ou's marriage to Ji Huanyu and her later marriage, she consistently embodies the role of the traditional virtuous wife and mother. After remarrying, she greatly cares for Sheng Wang who has no biological relation to her and whose mother is deceased, fostering harmony in this reconstituted family.

However, this harmony is disrupted by Ji Huanyu's homosexual partner: Du Cheng. Du Cheng's revelation of his relationship with Ji Huanyu overwhelms Jiang Ou. This causes her to label homosexual relationships as "disgusting", setting the stage for her strong opposition to Jiang Tian and Sheng Wang's relationship. Only when Jiang Tian and Sheng Wang reunite after a four-year separation does Jiang Ou's resistance to their relationship begin to ease, albeit slowly, as she confronts Jiang Tian's unwavering commitment.

### *2.2 The "girls" --- Admirers of Protagonists*

The author does not provide direct descriptions of the appearances or characteristics of the female classmates surrounding the protagonists. Instead, they are collectively referred to as the "girls", whose behaviors are depicted as:

"Whenever they [the girls around the protagonists] had a chance or an excuse, they would rush to Class A, sometimes bringing along a group of friends, just to catch a glimpse of Jiang Tian." (Chapter 16). "When passing by Jiang Tian, they [the girls around the protagonists] would blush and smile; the same happened when they passed by Sheng Wang." (Chapter 19).

These descriptions vividly convey the typical behavior of infatuated admirers, allowing readers to grasp the female classmates' fascination and admiration for the protagonists without detailed descriptions.

### 3. Suppression of Female Agency

Simone de Beauvoir's book *The Second Sex* explores the issue of female agency from three dimensions: human-nature relationship, society, and ego. Following de Beauvoir, French feminist theorist Luce Irigaray further advanced the theory of female agency. From the perspective of feminism, Irigaray considers women can confirm their own agency through their own experiences.

Applying these theories on female agency as a theoretical framework, it becomes evident that the female characters in *A Certain Someone* are predominantly defined by the needs of male characters and serve to advance the story plot rather than exhibiting their own independent vitality or personal ambitions. They function specifically in two aspects: propelling the narrative forward and highlighting the appeal of the male characters.

#### 3.1 Advancing the Story Plot

Jiang Ou's strong aversion to homosexuality relationships leads her to struggle with accepting the relationship between Sheng Wang and Jiang Tian. She even pleads with Sheng Wang to end his relationship with Jiang Tian:

"...Jiang Ou slowly lifted her eyes to look at him[Sheng Wang], and then her emotions suddenly spiraled out of control : 'Please, I am begging you.'" (Chapter 93).

Jiang Ou's obstruction of Jiang Tian and Sheng Wang's relationship serves as a crucial dramatic conflict that directly facilitates the novel's key plot development—the protagonists' reconciliation after separation. Jiang Ou's role is primarily to advance the narrative, which diminishes her character depth, appearing subsidiary and one-dimensional within the novel.

#### 3.2 Highlighting the Male Characters' Appeal

In the novel, the author extensively depicts the reactions of female classmates—such as "shyness", "blushing", and "whispering"—in response to the protagonists' every move at school. This method of characterization is more vivid and specific than a direct description of the protagonists' appearances and helps readers more readily understand and appreciate their appeal.

For example, when Sheng Wang transfers to a new class, the reactions of the female students are described as :

"One girl's face turned red, and she nudged Li Yu; the three of them huddled together, whispering." (Chapter 16). Here, the author emphasizes Sheng Wang's superior appearance not through direct physical description but by highlighting the girls' blushing reactions.

Additionally, the author deliberately portrays both protagonists as :

"celebrities" on campus—constantly attracting attention: "Handsome guys are always the center of attention, especially when there are two of them. Several groups of girls looked over as they passed, nudging each other and stifling laughs. Two girls, distracted by their teasing friends, nearly bumped into Sheng Wang." (Chapter 9).

Moreover, when depicting Sheng Wang's drunken state, the author writes:

“He [Sheng Wang] didn’t act clumsy like other drunkards. If some girls from the affiliated school had seen him, they might have blushed and praised him as a delight to behold.” (Chapter 17). Here, the author does not directly describe the girls’ reactions but conveys their admiration through a third-party perspective, thereby achieving the purpose of highlighting the protagonists’ charm.

#### 4. Depiction of Gender Inequality

In *A Certain Someone*, the portrayal of female traits reveals a certain degree of prejudice and entrenched viewpoints, reflecting the inherent gender inequalities present in the novel’s character depiction.

##### 4.1 Fate Controlled by Males

In *A Certain Someone*, female characters are either cast as “protectors” of the protagonists’ love, such as the classmates of the protagonists, or as disruptors, like Jiang Ou. The control of female destinies by male characters is particularly evident in Jiang Ou. Not only is her forced into the role of a “homosexual wife”, leading to her strong aversion to homosexuality relationships, but she also suffers a severe psychological and physical shock upon discovering that her son is also homosexual.

Overall, major turning points in Jiang Ou’s life are predominantly shaped by marriage and male homosexuality, severely undermining her independence and vitality: compelled to abandon her career at marriage; receives little encouragement to pursue her own career in her second marriage; shocked to discover an unusual relationship between her husband and a male friend; later finds her son in a homosexual relationship with the son of her second husband.

##### 4.2 Prejudiced Depiction of Female Traits

Beyond the “infatuated” stereotype, the portrayal of the “girls” group in the novel includes several other gender stereotypes.

For instance, “Ma Shi is also one of the girls who blushes at Jiang Tian. She looks across and says, ‘When have you ever seen him with anyone else?’ Qi Jiahao replies, ‘Boys don’t need to stick together like you girls do, even to go to the bathroom.’” (Chapter 29). This line conveys a stereotype that women always need to move in groups, especially in private spaces like restrooms. It implies that women are more dependent or communal in their behaviors, lacking independence. By contrasting this behavior with the typical solitary actions of men, the depiction reinforces gender role stereotypes.

Additionally, “They [the girls around the protagonists] are always going on about dieting.” (Chapter 53). This portrayal suggests that women are excessively concerned with weight and diet, simplifying women’s focus on dieting into a fixed behavioral pattern and implies excessive anxiety about body image, contrasting with the less diet-conscious depiction of men, thereby reinforcing gender stereotypes.

Furthermore, “The number of girls in Class B is large, so under this circumstance [the thing of moving books], they have to ask the boys for help.” (Chapter 78). This statement reflects a stereotype about female physical strength, implying that women are weak and typically require male assistance. It mirrors a societal belief that men should handle physical labor more than women, thus limiting the portrayal of female characters and potentially perpetuating gender discrimination.

These prejudiced depictions—such as the portrayal of female dependency, excessive concern with weight and diet, and inherent views on female physical strength inevitably reinforce stereotypes about women and contribute to the undermining of female agency.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper analyzed the female character portrayal in the Tanbi novel *A Certain Someone*. The analysis reveals certain limitations in the portrayal of female characters in this novel, specifically in terms of the suppression of female agency and the depiction of gender inequality.

While Tanbi novels enjoy significant popularity among female readers and reflect certain emotional needs and fantasies of women, the portrayal of female characters in these works often lacks depth in terms of self-development and independence. The limitations in the depiction of female characters in the influential Tanbi novel *A Certain Someone* highlight the constraints of the genre in advancing feminism and challenging traditional gender norms.

Future research could further explore the evolving trends in the portrayal of female characters in Tanbi novels, with the aim of identifying opportunities for advancing feminist development through this genre of literature. By examining a broader range of Tanbi works and analyzing the changes in female character representation over time, scholars may uncover new insights into how these novels can contribute to the progress of feminism and the subversion of traditional gender roles.

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