

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Every person has a status that they carry when they perform in society. A status can be earned or inherited from other people, such as one's occupation or wealth. Some statuses are considered higher than others (Lindsey, 2016: 2). For example, a person who works as a doctor may be considered by many to have a higher status than a person who works as a driver. However, certain statuses, such as those of men and women, do not fall within the hierarchy, which then creates distinct gender roles. When a person holds a certain status, they are also expected to fulfill certain roles that stem from the norms or culture in which they originated. Gender roles are no exception. A man is expected to work and fulfill the family's needs, while a woman is expected to stay home to nurture the family. As society progresses, some gender roles are undergoing adjustments. Men can be the ones who guard the house while taking care of the family, while women often go out to work elsewhere.

The shift in gender roles is not something that can happen overnight, notably in a society where patriarchy is the dominant aspect. Walby argues that patriarchal society places men in a dominant position, where they are the highest authoritative figure controlling every aspect of society. This dominance led to women eventually being exploited and oppressed by men (1989: 214). When patriarchy is embedded deep

within society's consciousness, even women enable this system themselves, whether they realize it or not. This type of society is presented through Zhao's *Iron Widow*.

Iron Widow follows the main protagonist, a young woman named Wu Zetian who seeks revenge on a man named Yang Guang who murdered her older sister during her enlistment in the military by following her sister's footsteps. Zetian eventually manage to take revenge on Yang Guang by killing him, which earn her the nickname Iron Widow. Since then, Zetian is paired by another operator named Li Shimin, and also receives support from her lover, Gao Yizhi. With the help of the two men, Zetian fights her way against the aliens and the oppressive system of the military and society. Zetian eventually conquers the country and declared herself as the emperor. The military system involves pairing young men and women to pilot giant robots in combat against aliens on the planet. This patriarchal system allows men to emerge as triumphant heroes. At the same time, the women are labeled as concubines for the men and rarely get the same spotlight because of the imbalance of power between the men and women.

Iron Widow is a young adult science fantasy novel published in 2021. This novel is written by Xiran Jay Zhao, a first-generation immigrant from China who immigrated to Canada during their youth. They started writing a book after they graduated from Simon Fraser University with a Bachelor of Science. Zhao's debut novel, *Iron Widow*, later become a *New York Times* best-seller. In 2024, they won the

Astounding Award for Best New Writer. Aside from being an author, Zhao is also a content creator who mainly discusses Chinese history and culture in their social media.

1.2 Research Questions

1. How are gender roles and patriarchy being portrayed in Xiran Jay Zhao's Iron Widow?
2. What is the impact of gender roles and patriarchy to Wu Zetian in Xiran Jay Zhao's Iron Widow?
3. Why is gender roles and patriarchy have an impact to Wu Zetian in Xiran Jay Zhao's Iron Widow?

1.3 Objectives of the Study

1. To explore the custom traditional gender roles and patriarchal society that is present in Xiran Jay Zhao's Iron Widow.
2. To analyze Wu Zetian's tendency toward violence and hostile behavior due to being enforced by traditional gender roles and patriarchal system in Xiran Jay Zhao's Iron Widow.
3. To understand Wu Zetian's determination to fight against the traditional gender roles and patriarchal society in Xiran Jay Zhao's Iron Widow.

1.4 Previous Studies

For this thesis, these are previous studies that analyze similar object of study as this paper in different research fields.

The first research paper is an undergraduate thesis by Sarah Kee, titled *Nasty Woman: An Analysis of Women's Rage in Popular Culture* (2022). This research paper examines the portrayal of women in various media, highlighting their often antagonistic roles. It shows that women became violent and full of animosity due to the lack of aid from their surroundings, and that encouraged them to fight against their oppressors on their own. One of the women that the paper analyzes is the protagonist of *Iron Widow*, Wu Zetian. She is portrayed as a 'wicked woman' because she fights the conventional idea of beauty and femininity, which then turns her rage into a power to destroy the system within, figuratively and literally.

The other research paper is an article by Andrea Fernandez and Phillip Crow-Kain in 2023, titled *The Mathematics of Persona: Deception, Disruption and Transformation in Xiran Jay Zhao's Iron Widow (2021)*. The research paper examines the impact of Wu Zetian's social media persona as a strategy for her to navigate the media's relentless demand for content to be consumed by the masses. This is accomplished by using deceit in her relationship with her balanced match. Then, disruption is used to express their authentic self-expression by adding a third person to the relationship, thereby strengthening the initial power of the match. Then, finally, they transform as their relationship grows more substantial, which becomes a destructive power that can destroy everything in their path.

Another research paper is a Master's thesis by Elina Anna Maria Laiho, titled *Beyond Breaking Binaries: Subverting Genre Conventions in Iron Widow and She Who*

Became the Sun (2024). This paper examines the ways in which *Iron Widow* and *She Who Became the Sun* diverge from the stereotypes associated with the science fiction and young adult novel genres through three major themes that occur in the two novels: the main protagonist, romance, and gender expression.

Another research paper is a Master's thesis by Madelief Herforth, titled *Is the Triangle the Strongest Shape?: A Biopolitical Close Reading of (Consensual Non-) Monogamy in the Science Fiction Book Series Iron Widow* (2025). This paper examines how the heteronormative society of *Iron Widow* forces monogamous relationships through involuntary means, which creates a polyamorous relationship between Wu Zetian, Li Shimin, and Gao Yizhi to challenge the patriarchal norm.

From these four studies, the writer is driven to analyze the gender roles and patriarchal society that are portrayed in *Iron Widow* as the object of the study, since it depicts how stereotypes of gender can be a tool of oppression for women in a society dominated by men.

1.5 Scope of the Study

The scope of the research is to restrict the discussion analysis to the related topic. The scope of this research paper will focus on gender roles and the patriarchal system that the protagonist of the novel, Wu Zetian, had to endure. The intrinsic elements of this paper are the setting, the character and characterization, and the conflict within the story. This thesis also discuss the gender roles and patriarchal norms that are present in the novel. This paper analyzes the ruthless and dangerous patriarchal

system and the societal expectations within the story that Wu Zetian experiences and how she breaks all the rules and expectations, leading to her rise through the high military ranks.

1.6 Writing Organization

This paper consists of the following chapters:

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the background of the study, the research question, the objectives of the study, previous studies, the scope of the study, and the writing organization.

CHAPTER II: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter discusses the theories and methods that is utilize to analyze the paper. The theories that are being addressed include intrinsic and extrinsic elements. Intrinsic elements contain setting, character, and conflict, whereas extrinsic elements include gender roles and patriarchy.

CHAPTER III: DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the analysis of the novel's intrinsic and extrinsic elements using theories previously introduced in Chapter II. This chapter focus on the main character's experience of navigating gender roles and patriarchal society.

CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION

This chapter concludes the discussion and analysis presented in Chapter III.