

Shen Congwen's objectified writing of female characters in romance novels

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Abstract. As a representative of modern Chinese literature, Shen Congwen's works have the brilliance of pure and simple human nature. Shen Congwen's works are mostly written during the "rising period" of China's feminist movement, and through his works, we can glimpse the thinking and consideration of female images and even gender relations by literary representatives at that time. As a representative of an important literary field in an important period of the alternation of old and new ideas, Shen Congwen portrays a female image with a certain modern significance based on the traditional male-centric perspective, showing the harmony of human nature, while revealing the specific form of male ideology ignoring female subjectivity and the specific form of male power to female otherization - objectification. Through Shen Congwen's romance novel's objectification of female characters, readers can have a more comprehensive understanding of the social thought and collective unconsciousness of that period, which provides a certain reference for women to resist the otherization of women by patriarchy and get further obtain gender equality. This paper re-examines Shen Congwen's works from a female perspective, aiming to expose that "male power objectifying women" has become the collective unconsciousness of the whole society and has evolved into an important link in social value standards, and improve society's sensitivity to the hegemonic behavior of "objectification".

Keywords: Shen Congwen, female characters, objectify, Patriarchy.

1. Preface

Love is a complex emotion possessed by human beings, but also an important clue in the history of literature, this article starts with the love novel "Xiao Xiao" by Shen Congwen, an important figure in the history of modern Chinese literature, analyzes the writing of female figures in "A Mother" and "Little Scene Under the Moon", and summarizes the three aspects of objectified writing: "commoditized", "objectify by the spirit" and "purely objectify". Objectification, as a specific form of patriarchy to female otherness, it is essentially exclusive, excluding women from the human group and ignoring the equal rights that women have as human beings and men. In Western literature, Caroline Criado Pérez's *Invisible Women* reveals the social status quo in which women are ignored, and the root cause is that women are objectified and women are not regarded as human beings. It can be found that objectification is an important means for patriarchy to control women, and the objectification of female characters reflected in Shen Congwen's romance novels has reference significance for us to better understand the status of women and women's development today.

2. Commodified women

From ancient times to the present, the issue of human trafficking has been a stumbling block in the process of social development, and unlike the trade in human organs, human trafficking focuses on the value that people who are a traded commodity can create, labor value or the value of reproductive tools. One of the issues of child brides is human trafficking, in which girls are traded as commodities and are objectified as commodities that can circulate in the market.

2.1. Child brides issue

The issue of "child brides" once became a hot topic in the history of modern Chinese literature. From Bingxin's "The Last Rest" to Ye Shengtao's "A Feng" to Shen Congwen's "Xiao Xiao", many

problem novels in modern literary history focus on a dark system in traditional Chinese society, the "child bride" system. Many scholars attribute the phenomenon of "child brides" to children's problems and list novels describing child brides, including "The Last Rest", "A Feng" and "Xiao Xiao", as children's problem novels in the category of problem novels. However, this article argues that the phenomenon of child brides is not only a children's problem but also a women's problem.

Exploring the origin of the problem of child brides, most scholars conclude that the problem of marriage buying and selling is serious, raising children costs a lot of money, and the problem of marriage buying and selling increases the burden of raising children in the family, coupled with a strong sense of clan and lower status of women, etc., some families will think that raising a daughter is like raising a daughter-in-law for someone else's family, so some women's families will give their daughters to other families as daughters-in-law when their daughters were young, and the man's family will adopt other families' daughters, and when the girl becomes an adult, she will officially marry her boy to save the bride price when marrying. This paper argues that the phenomenon of child brides is a female problem because the phenomenon of child brides reflects the object status of women. Women are often given the labels of "wife" and "mother" as if she was born as a wife and mother, and this consciousness limits the development of women and prevents them from existing as independent subject. More importantly, girls are bought and sold or bartered as commodities, first because their gender is female, and secondly because they are children. But for a long time, many people only regarded the issue of child brides as a child issue, ignoring the gender of girls as the decisive factor, which shows that female gender is still "invisible" in this society.

Unlike the depressive and dark style of most child bride novels, Shen Congwen's "Xiao Xiao" is somewhat comedic. When it comes to child brides, people always think of a little girl who was abused, asked to do a lot of hard work, and had conflicts and contradictions with her in-laws, but this is not the case as Shen Congwen wrote, Xiao Xiao's life after marrying is "nothing more than before"^[1], and her little husband, who is more than ten years younger than her, treats her sincerely. There is not only Xiao Xiao in the child brides in "Xiao Xiao", Xiao Xiao's son Niu'er also has a child bride who is a few years older than him, which further illustrates the prevalence of child brides in the past society. Xiao Xiao planned to escape, but was discovered, followed by the "confused affair" between her and Hua Gou, "Xiao Xiao's belly, who was ready to give birth to a son to her younger husband ten years later, had been preemptively planted by another person"^[2], which shows that one of the purposes of Xiao Xiao's in-laws in adopting her as a child bride was to ask her to give birth to children for her little husband. It is not difficult to see that child brides are the embodiment of the value of women as reproductive tools from the perspective of patriarchy, and the universality of the phenomenon of child brides also reflects the universality of the concept of the value of women's fertility tools and also reflects the aberration of the concept of marriage and love in feudal society.

2.2. Exploitation Reflected on the Problem of child brides

Engels believed that love is "a relationship based on people's mutual admiration"^[3], and Marx also emphasized in the Communist Manifesto that "love is the moral basis of future marriage"^[4]. However, it can be seen from the phenomenon of child brides that people often do not care about love itself when facing marriage, on the contrary, people are more concerned about whether they can give birth to sons to "kinship inheritance", and this deformed view of marriage and love is not in line with Marx's and Engels's view of "the comprehensive and free liberation of man". Looking at the story of "Xiao Xiao" from the point of view of Marx and Engels, the child-adopted wife Xiao Xiao and her little husband have always called each other brothers and sisters, and since her little husband was not completely weaned, she was taking care of him, and for a long time, he was "more love and afraid of Xiao Xiao than for his parents." He has a love for Xiao Xiao, but this love is not necessarily loving, and this article believes that his feelings for Xiao Xiao are more inclined to dependence and attachment to maternal love, rather than love generated by admiration for Xiao Xiao. Feminist scholar Chizuko Ueno translated "woman who makes people feel motherly" as "the woman who no matter how much I beat and scold her, she will accept me unconditionally"^[5], which not only sharply reveals

the root cause of the formation of male "maternal complex", but also can be used to explain the feelings of the young husband for Xiao Xiao. Since there is no relationship based on mutual admiration between Xiao Xiao and her young husband, it shows that there is no love between the two of them, that is, their marriage is not based on love, but based on Xiao Xiao's fertility tool value and the value of labor force, and on the different feelings that they get along with day and night. This view of marriage that is not based on love can be seen as patriarchy's re-exploitation and oppression of women. In the patriarchal society, women's lebensraum has been squeezed because men are in an absolutely strong position, women's social value and labor value have been ignored, and the phenomenon of child brides is precisely based on ignoring women's social value and labor value, the exploitation of women's reproductive rights. Before the little husband becomes an adult, Xiao Xiao can be regarded as his nursing mother, taking care of his life and accompanying him to grow up, but her identity is a child bride, she is still a "child" like the little husband, why does Xiao Xiao have to take care of the little husband? Because under the traditional system, women are forced to be asked to act as "caregivers" to take care of family members, Xiao Xiao, as the "caregiver" in her small family with her young husband, must assume the responsibility of taking care of her husband's living. After Xiao Xiao took care of her little husband and grew up, she gave birth to Mao Mao with her little husband, and she had to take care of her son Mao Mao to grow up, and at the same time, she had to continue to be a "caregiver", it is equivalent to saying that in patriarchy, the man's status as "cared for" continues throughout the man's life: he is taken care of by his mother when he was underage, and he is taken care of by his wife when he is married. Correspondingly, as a woman, Xiao Xiao has been taking care of men: caring for her husband after adopting into the man's family and taking care of her children after giving birth. This deformed view of marriage and the phenomenon of marriage buying and selling hurt many women, they are like duckweeds in society, wavering, these women are used as commodities, they are "sold" from their families of origin to their in-laws, they are difficult to have a real sense of belonging to the family. The first stage of "raising" is to use the value of the girl's labor, but the girl is only paid for her basic "food, clothing, and housing", and "travel" has been restricted, that is, the remuneration given by the male family only meets part of the lowest needs in Maslow's theory of needs, and the girl's safety needs cannot be fully guaranteed, because the girl is regarded as an object of private property. So, she faces the possibility of being sold again or being "sunk". The second stage of "daughter-in-law" is to use its fertility value based on the first stage of using its labor value, and women will not reduce the amount of labor because they become "daughters-in-law", on the contrary, she also increases the very arduous and painful labor of "childbearing". Sex and sexual intimacy are different needs of people, sex as a person's physiological needs in Maslow's needs theory belongs to the lowest level of needs, but sexual intimacy is on top of physiological needs and security needs, and friendship, love belongs to the same emotional and belonging needs. Women are the commodities that are bought and sold in marriage, so their needs will not be seen, but at the same time, men cannot get love and sexual intimacy from the buying and selling wife.

"Xiao Xiao" reveals the dark side of society - marriage sales and the phenomenon of child brides, but at the same time, Shen Congwen describes the light - the harmony between Xiao Xiao and her in-laws, which is the biggest difference between "Xiao Xiao" and other novels on child brides, and it is also its comedy color. Shen Congwen exposes the darkness and writes about the world's warmth, providing us with new ideas and methods for dealing with problems. After Hua Gou left, only Xiao Xiao was left to bear the consequences of the mistake, but after all, Xiao Xiao was still young, her thinking was not yet mature, and the huge pressure made her anxious and even desperate, making her often want to end all this torment with death, but her tenacious vitality and perseverance were refuting herself "Why to die?" Xiao Xiao's contradictory ideas are a metaphor for women's difficulties in opposing male control and fighting for equal rights.

3. Spiritually objectified Women

"Xiao Xiao" not only reveals the social problem of child brides but also exposes the marriage problem of extramarital love in front of readers. To have a relationship with Xiao Xiao, Hua Gou "swore to heaven" to live up to her, but he said goodbye two and a half months after they had sex, which is reminiscent of Shen Congwen's other romance novel - "A Mother".

3.1. Women's needs are ignored

The heroine and the guest in "A Mother" fall in love in their daily relationship. Similar to the story of Xiao Xiao and Hua Gou, when the heroine discusses the future with her extramarital lover, the extramarital lover chooses to leave, calling it a "complete solution". Chizuko Ueno concludes that the basic premise of pornography is: a woman is in a state of readiness for sexual intercourse at all times, and does not need to spend time talking and responding on call; At the same time, the woman is also a seducer, and the man is not responsible for the result, i.e., the woman seeks pleasure, and in obedience to the man, she is rewarded^[6]. Pornography is a "projection of men's fantasy", and the images of women portrayed in pornography are not real female images, but images of women that men desire and want. Han Gou and the guests are just like the men in pornography summarized by Chizuko Ueno, and they are not responsible for the outcome of the sexual relationship. Whether it is Xiao Xiao with Hua Gou or the heroine with the guest in "A Mother", their sexual relationship is in the service of sexual desire, and at the same time it is the result of sexual desire, and the result of their sexual relationship is that both women are pregnant, but neither man is responsible for the outcome of the sexual relationship. The underlying logic of the irresponsible approach of the two men is actually to regard the female role as a container of sexual desire, they export sexual desire to the opposite party, women as a container with a "receiving" effect that can only accept the content they output, women's needs are not taken seriously, in essence, it is the spiritual objectification of women.

3.2. Women need to meet men's expectations

The heroine of "A Mother" is beautiful and virtuous, with the gentle and loving love necessary for a mother, this female image is also a "projection of men's fantasy", whereas when a female image cannot meet men's expectations, it will inevitably get male irony, such as Miss Bao who had a one-night stand with Fang Hongjian in "Siege of the City", Su Wenwan who enjoys the pursuit of men, and Sun Roujia, who spends her mind to marry Fang Hongjian, these three female characters are slowly disgusted by Fang Hongjian because they cannot meet the imagination of the male protagonist Fang Hongjian. And the "female students" in "Xiao Xiao" are also like this, female students pursue freedom and independence, do not bend their waists for feudal patriarchy, and are not completely controlled by Patriarchy, which is not in line with the requirements of the patriarchal system for women, so they will be used as material to make fun of Xiao Xiao. The young Xiao Xiao naturally does not understand why everyone uses "female student" to make fun of her, for her, the freedom symbolized by "female student" is what she is willing to pursue, but this is also what the patriarchy is not happy for her to pursue, and the male power is not happy for all women to pursue. Because when women have the will to pursue freedom, men cannot easily use the methods left by their ancestors to control women spiritually for their use.

4. Purely objectified Women

Looking back at China's feudal history, "sexual autocracy" is very important in the entire autocratic system. The feudal moral dogma advocated by the Eastern Han Dynasty Ban Zhao's "Women's Commandments" was absorbed by the patriarchal society, and from this developed the concept of women's morality and chastity that bound the spirit of women. This view of chastity can reflect the exploitation of women in the patriarchal system, in which men's "chastity worship" of women is also internalized by women due to its absolute dominance. "Chastity worship" is essentially an objectification, which is to devalue the status of women again, making them no different from an

object at the mercy of men, a woman's virginity is defined by men, and when men think that a woman is "unclean", women can never achieve perfect self-proof. In addition, under the influence of Confucian feudal tradition, women in China are generally in a state of "disability", even if a woman has talent, because she is a woman, she must be "humble", so she cannot show her talent. With the rise of the May Fourth New Culture Movement, the awakening of "people" consciousness, especially the feminist liberation movement in European and American countries, has spread to China, which has profoundly impacted Chinese women. Especially with the rise of girls' schools, more and more female students accepted advanced ideas, and women began to fight for their rights and oppose male exploitation. The New Culture Movement's complete rejection of traditional culture has also laid the foundation for women to overthrow the traditional shackles of "male protagonist outside, female protagonist inside".

4.1. The "virgin complex" in the patriarchal system

The article "Little Scenery Under the Moon" describes the custom of the ×× ethnic group that "a woman falls in love with the first man, but is only allowed to marry the second man", and ×× people "recognize virgins as an evil thing". In the ×× tribe, if a man and a woman violate their ancient and inhuman rule, then it is the woman who is responsible for the actions of both parties and even pays the price of her life, and the ×× tribe will "tie the woman to her back with a small stone mill, or sink into a pool, or throw her into a hole in the ground", reflecting the male bias of the social value system and the exploitation of women. This regulation of the ×× ethnic group seems to be a rebellion against China's traditional concept of chastity, but it is fundamentally a further development and even radicalization of the concept of chastity, and it is also an expression of the objectification of women in a patriarchal society. Whether it is the feudal traditional definition of female "chastity" or the ×× tribe's definition of a virgin "evil spirit", it is a form of exploitation of vulnerable women by men to meet their needs. So is the moral standard of women in a patriarchal society just "chastity"? Much more than that. Patriarchy requires women to maintain "chastity", which is the deprivation of women's most basic biological needs and rights. Men's rights never require men to maintain the so-called "chastity", men naturally enjoy "sex", while women's right to enjoy "sex" is deprived by patriarchy on the grounds of "chastity", and women have thus become only the object of satisfying male sexual desires, thus becoming absolute "sexual objects". "Chastity" is more like a puppet, an expression of patriarchy objectifying women in a patriarchal society, and making it a universal social consciousness in the form of hegemonic discourse. Returning to the article "Little Scenery Under the Moon", the article mentions that if a woman marries the man she fell in love with for the first time, it is an unfortunate thing for the man, but does not mention that it is an unfortunate thing for the woman, and the woman will face "tied to her back with a small stone mill, or sunk into a pool, or thrown into a hole in the ground" into a responsibility and obligation, then in the matter that both men and women violate tribal customs, the responsibility that men need to bear is abstract "misfortune". In other words, this statement of the ×× people implies that "women violate men's right to 'happiness'". It can be seen from this that the moral standards for women in the patriarchal society are very harsh, and women need to be forced to take responsibility for men's "misfortune".

4.2. The possessiveness of men over women

"Little Scene Under the Moon" was written by Shen Congwen in September 1932, and China's feminist movement has begun, and the absolute control of patriarchy over women gradually failed. Therefore, the exclamation of the hero Nuoyou hoping that the heroine is "stupid" is not pure love for the heroine, which reflects the subconscious of the hero who wants to control the heroine and the desire of patriarchy to control women. "The baby should be stored in the treasury, and you should be stored in the house of the person who loves you" is what Nuoyou said when he proposed to the heroine, and it was also from the heart when the two fell in love. Comparing her beloved to a treasure and wanting to collect her is not a kind of objectification. "Hiding in the house of someone who loves you" may mean becoming one of his family members, or literally "hiding" at home, restricting the

woman's social interaction and increasing the woman's dependence on him. In the patriarchal system and the male-oriented society, women exist as an appendage, and de Beauvoir also mentioned in her "The Second Sex" that "women are not born, but acquired".^[7] Combined with the traditional Chinese concept of marriage and love, most marriages between men and women refer to "men and women all must marry", "marriage" refers to "women take men as their home", women marriage is to return home, that is to say, woman's family of origin does not really belong to her family, women need to integrate into the man's original family, return to the family, this concept of marriage to a certain extent reflects the subordinate status of women, but also reflects the desire of men to control and possess women in the patriarchal society.

5. Epilogue

To sum up, Shen Congwen is a male writer with a "female complex", and many of his works revolve around female characters, such as the aforementioned "Xiao Xiao" and "A Mother", women are not only "seen"^[8], but also the center of the work, showing a certain "female-centered" tendency, which is also the expression of the advanced nature of Shen Congwen's works. Although Shen Congwen's works, such as "The Border Town", "Husband", "Sansan", etc., all focus on describing the true nature of human nature, he "gives artistic descriptions of women's beauty from the aesthetic height of life"^[9], it is undeniable that Shen Congwen is a male writer first, and then a male writer with a "female complex", he is inevitably deeply influenced by patriarchal ideas, even if he tries his best to show the unique charm and life tension of female figures, but he uses "the vision of men observing the opposite sex in a 'male-centered' society"^[10]. His male narrative perspective is deeply influenced by the patriarchal system, so there will inevitably be the objectification of women's writing in his works. It cannot be said that Shen Congwen is objectifying women because of the appearance of objectifying women's writing in his works, but it should be said that Shen Congwen writes about women from the male perspective in a "male-centered" society, because in a "male-centered" society, men are natural viewers, and women are being watched naturally. This kind of "seeing" and "being seen" is the gaze, existentialist scholar Sartre emphasized that the gaze exists in the imagination of the subject, not necessarily the "looking" with practical meaning, in the "male-centered" society, that is, the value system of the patriarchal society, women need to meet the imagination of men, so the gaze of men to women or the gaze of women in a patriarchal society is essentially a hegemony. The gaze is to meet the needs of the subject, so in the male gaze of the male as the subject, the male does not care about the feelings of the woman as the object. In the case of long-term staring, women will internalize men's value judgments and then objectify themselves under the pressure of male hegemony for a long time. Shen Congwen's "Xiao Xiao" consciously dissolved the strict requirements for female "chastity" in the male gaze, but in the subsequent work "Small Scene Under the Moon", the male gaze was reproduced in another form, as mentioned earlier, "objectification is an important means for men to control women", then the gaze is the process of objectification, so anti-gaze is a necessary means of anti-objectification.

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