

“She” at the Corner of a Small Town: A Study of Female Characters in Urban Themes in Ma Jinlian’s Novels

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Abstract. In recent years, the focus of Ma Jinlian’s novel creation has gradually shifted from rural areas to cities. The characters in her works have also gradually shifted from rural Hui ethnic minorities to urban Hui ethnic minorities. This study focuses on the creation of urban Hui ethnic minorities in Ma Jinlian’s works, systematically combs and summarizes the female characters of urban Hui ethnic minorities in her works, and on this basis compares the images of urban Hui female characters and rural Hui female characters in her novels, examines the gender consciousness and development of female consciousness of Hui ethnic minorities in Ma Jinlian’s urban themes, and further studies the reflection and introspection of the image of urban Hui community in Ma Jinlian’s works on the living conditions of urban Hui women in Ningxia today, and explores the realistic value and universal significance of Ma Jinlian’s image of urban women from the perspective of text.

Keywords: Ma Jinlian; Literature of Hui ethnic minorities; Hui female characters.

1. Introduction

Ma Jinlian is a famous female writer in Ningxia. Her novels are often set in Shanzhiwan and its surrounding areas in Xihaigu, Ningxia, western China, and describe the human relationships and worldly affairs of Xihaigu during the changing times. Most of her novels are based on rural women from the lower classes in Xihaigu, truly showing their daily activities and psychological characteristics. She is good at using a delicate and gentle style and a child's perspective to dilute the tragic color of the novel. The poor geographical environment of Xihaigu has led people to form a hard and simple lifestyle, and the integration of ethnicity has led Xihaigu to form a humanistic spirit with a strong regional color. Starting from the female group portraits written by Ma Jinlian, on the one hand, there is a relatively rich space for interpretation, and on the other hand, it is helpful for researchers to understand the author's thinking and reflection on the living conditions of different Hui ethnic minorities in Xihaigu in Ningxia.

“Chinese Western Literature” is in a relatively marginalized position in contemporary Chinese literature, while “Chinese Western female writers’ literature” is on the edge of “Chinese Western literature”. In other words, “the creation of Chinese Western female writers” belongs to the edge of the edge in the contemporary Chinese literary world. Born with the color of “the other” and “heterogeneity”. The scarcity of Ma Jinlian’s identity as a Western female writer makes the writing perspective of her works unique. Ma Jinlian is one of the few writers who describes the ordinary little things of ordinary Hui ethnic minorities in Xihaigu in their daily lives with a warm touch. All the female characters in her works are Hui ethnic minorities. She pays special attention to observing the people and things around her from the subjective perspective of Hui female protagonists. The development process of the protagonist's emotional attitude is portrayed from a meticulous female view.

Whether it is the civil servant Su Xi in *Bone-dissolving Palm*, the teacher Su Xu in *The Listener* or the little girl in *Saimai’s Yard*, the author shows all the absurd, unreasonable but tacitly recognized scenes through their eyes.

Research on Ma Jinlian’s creation is mainly concentrated in China. From the current domestic research situation, her novels are rooted in Xihaigu, Ningxia, in the northwest region, and the regional cultural color is particularly prominent, providing a modern narrative perspective with unique female characteristics for the creative tradition of local novels. Ma Jinlian’s works have brought a novel

creative perspective to the Ningxia literary world and opened up literary vitality. Based on the publication of papers related to Ma Jinlian, the author found that since the first paper was published in 2007, the research on Ma Jinlian's works has increased year by year. The early research development was relatively slow until 2015, when the research on Ma Jinlian's novels reached a peak of 24 papers a year. It has been developing until 2022, with an increase of 19 papers per year, and the research has stabilized. Research on Ma Jinlian's novels mainly focuses on themes such as "Ningxia Novels", "Xihaiqu Literature", "Rural Novels", and "Rural Women".

After comparison, this study found that most of the existing research on Ma Jinlian's novels focused on analyzing the "bottom-level writing", "gender consciousness", "rural narrative" and "death theme" of the rural female images in the works, and made a detailed analysis of the rural female images in Ma Jinlian's works. For example, Ren Shuyuan of Ningxia University published *On the Image of Western Returned Women in Ma Jinlian's Novels* in 2009, which classified Ma Jinlian's rural Hui ethnic minorities into grandmothers, daughters-in-law, and Hui girls. Later researchers also continued this classification standard.

In recent years, the focus of Ma Jinlian's creation has gradually shifted from the countryside to the city. "Urban Hui ethnic minorities" have become a new and important part of Ma Jinlian's character genealogy. Some scholars have paid attention to this trend and made relatively fragmented analyses and evaluations of this change. However, few scholars have systematically sorted out and studied Ma Jinlian's existing image of urban Hui ethnic minorities. Ren Shuyuan of Ningxia University published *Walking Out of the Countryside and Protecting the People-The Genealogy of Female Characters in Ma Jinlian's Novels* in 2021, which made a certain generalization of Ma Jinlian's "urban women" image, which is the most comprehensive summary of Ma Jinlian's urban women in the academic community. This study, based on the achievements of predecessors, conducts a special systematic arrangement and study of the female image in Ma Jinlian's urban-themed novels. Integrating the existing but relatively fragmented research results, through the method of close reading of the text, further investigation and analysis are carried out to compare the development of gender consciousness and female consciousness in Ma Jinlian's early creation and current creation, and then experience the living status, progress and predicament of Ningxia Hui ethnic minorities in the new era.

2. The Guardian of Time: Rural Women in Ma Jinlian's Works

Rural themes are the main part of Ma Jinlian's works, and they are also the content of her works that she has always adhered to. Her unique life and work experiences have made her novel themes always focus on showing the "Hui ethnic minorities scene" and "the fate of the lower class". The "Hui ethnic minorities scene" provides a unique ethnic color and regional background for her creation. At the same time, due to the Hui people's identification with Islam, Ma Jinlian's writing usually implicitly expresses her religious beliefs through "life consciousness". Similar human and natural environments and strong faith cohesion have created a highly homogenized "Hui ethnic minorities scene" in Ma Jinlian's works, where vitality and repression coexist. People living in this scene often have a strong tendency to be stereotyped. The father who ran away, the mother who remarried, and the young girls who will eventually become wives... Ma Jinlian describes the "tender suffering" of the people on this land in detail.

As a female writer, Ma Jinlian pays great attention to the living conditions of Hui ethnic minority women in Xihaiqu. She has used a lot of writing to describe different types of female characters in the Hui ethnic minorities' villages. She has also consciously used the enlightenment awareness of the new literature since the May Fourth Movement to criticize the human weakness of her own ethnic culture in a "narrative" way, thereby showing the tenacity, liveliness, loveliness, and difficulties of women in Xihaiqu. Unlike the grand narratives of contemporary Hui ethnic minorities' male writers, Ma Jinlian has almost never directly expressed sympathy, praise, or criticism for women of her own ethnic group in her texts. On the contrary, she has constructed an "epic of life in Xihaiqu" through the cutting of details and delicate descriptions, with a bit of Yu Hua's coldness in the tender scenes,

and through the atmosphere of the scenes, she has given readers a bit of the roughness and chill of northwestern China, completing the mission of criticism in her works.

Looking back at Ma Jinlian's writing experiences over the past twenty years, the rural Hui ethnic minority women she has created can be roughly classified into the following categories:

2.1. Grandma: The Guardian of the Past

As the oldest female representative in the Xihai region, the grandmothers in Ma Jinlian's works often show the same feudal patriarchal image as the grandfathers in the family. They have inherited the most traditional values and evaluation standards. In terms of production methods, they always adhere to their belief in the land. The grandmother in *Millet (Shuofang)*, No.11, (2007) shows a stubborn seriousness and piety to the land. To a certain extent, the land has become a symbol of life, showing the dependence of Hui elders on the land; in family life, they are both shrewd rulers in the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, but at the same time they are daughters-in-law for many years and eventually become mothers-in-law. The grandmother in *Records from those years in the northwestern kiln dwelling (Shuofang)* usually remained calm about her daughter-in-law's behavior, working and living together, but when it came to dividing the family property, the grandmother pressed her son and daughter-in-law step by step, and finally only gave her son and daughter-in-law very little property, and even went so far as to quarrel with her daughter-in-law. When dividing the property, the grandmother showed an extreme desire to control the relationship between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, but the actual motivation behind it was that the grandmother had several children to raise, so she had to make such a helpless decision. The mother-in-law in *Sui Daughter-in-law (Hui Literature)* was very capable and kind. Seeing that the eldest daughter-in-law often bullied the Sui ("Sui" means "small" in the northwest dialect) daughter-in-law Xuehua, the mother-in-law often secretly gave Xuehua advice. She was always very careful when serving Xuehua during the postpartum confinement. Later, Xuehua learned that it was because the elder daughter-in-law disliked her mother-in-law during her postpartum confinement, so the mother-in-law said: "I am a very lowly mother-in-law." Not only did she have to take on various affairs inside and outside the house, but she also had to endure the difficulties of the elder daughter-in-law. The difficulties of life and the bitterness of their mentality often erode them in ways they cannot express. They accept the bitterness of life with forbearance, and because of the custom of early marriage, they take on the responsibilities of daughters-in-law too early and naturally inherit the obligations of mothers-in-law in old age. The traditional value system and strong patriarchal oppression have led to this part of women not having a clear understanding of their own limited survival and discourse space. Not only that, the tenacious characters they have honed in their miserable lives have indirectly led them to actively explain and eliminate the injustice of their own situation, unconsciously consolidating and maintaining patriarchy.

Grandma's past vigil is also reflected in her persistence in religious rituals. The descriptions of religious rituals in Ma Jinlian's works are almost all concentrated on the middle-aged and elderly groups, especially the elderly group. *A Touch of Sunset (A male-dominated world of Jianghu)* is a confession of a Hui grandmother who accidentally discovered that her body was aging and she could not successfully complete the daily required "wudhu" (a part of daily prayer in Islam). The observation of her own physical aging, the love and hate for her old partner, and the hazy, helpless, and even somewhat ignorant observation of the changes in the family and village. It reflects the "faith crisis" faced by the gathering place of Hui ethnic minorities, and more importantly, it reflects the spiritual crisis of a Hui woman who has lived in the traditional sense all her life. On the edge of death, she vaguely and slowly perceives the collapse of the traditional world, but cannot find a reasonable explanation and destination. It reflects the self-determination and difficulty of speaking of the fate faced by a woman who has lived in tradition all her life. The repressed life has gradually made them lose the motivation and ability to speak. This is the identity crisis commonly faced by the older generation of Hui ethnic minority women in Ma Jinlian's creation.

2.2. Sui Daughter-in-law: The Guardian of the Present-Day

Sui daughter-in-law means young wife. Hui women marry at a relatively early age, and this phenomenon is more prominent in rural areas. According to Luo Yanlian's research on *The Changes in Fertility Culture in Rural Hui Communities in Ningxia*, 18 to 22 years old is the peak period for first marriage in rural Hui communities in Ningxia [1]. They are also the largest group of female characters in Ma Jinlian's novels. Most of them have determined their fate of marrying early or even marrying far away when they were young, and have been instilled with the concept of doing housework since they were very young. Most of these Sui daughters-in-law in rural areas have a low level of education. Although they are not as feudal and conservative as their mothers-in-law, they are also dragged down by the heavy daily life in the countryside, and their days gradually melt into trivialities. Before giving birth, Xuehua in *Sui Daughter-in-law (Hui Literature)* "took apart and washed everything that could be washed. If you don't do it for a month, it must be very dirty. There was a huge pile of things, and it seemed that it would take a whole day to wash. The next day, she swept the kang and removed all the bedding and mats on the kang until the mud was exposed. She swept it carefully with a broom, and found that there was a thick layer of dust, which floated up and made people cough." They faced not only family matters but also the human relationships and worldly affairs. These fragmented days are almost the norm for every Hui daughter-in-law. This kind of life that can be seen at a glance casts a layer of calm depression on this type of work, and under the depression is an undercurrent of catharsis. The catharsis of the Sui daughter-in-law in *Records from those years in the northwestern kiln dwelling (Shuofang)* is to choose to save money to separate the family. Even if the process of separation leads to discord or even a breakdown in the relationship between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law, she must complete the great cause of the family separation. Most of them will not choose to strongly resist to express their dissatisfaction, but will dismantle their anger piecemeal without destroying the original family structure and social norms. For this type of woman, splitting up the family is already a form of rebellion and progress to a great extent.

In addition to the division of the family, Ma Jinlian also paid attention to the "remarriage" behavior of this type of woman. Due to the influence of Islamic teachings, most Hui women are very loyal to their marriages. Therefore, the motivation of the women who remarried in Ma Jinlian's works is often due to the early death of their husbands. Because Hui women are in a lower position in the economic and cultural conditions of their ethnic group, many of their legitimate rights have not been effectively protected for a long time. For example, in labor, they are all workers, but women only have labor obligations but no labor rights. "My" mother in *Father's Snow (A male-dominated world of Jianghu)* "Without a man, my mother is still talkative and cheerful, her nature has not changed at all. Some women talk about this woman, saying that she is very tolerant, amazing, and she can live without a man, why she has never collapsed." Yet when "my" mother officially started working "the team leader pointed to my mother's basket of manure and said it was 56 kilograms. She carried it again, and it was still 56 kilograms. "My" mother turned around and looked at the other women carrying manure. Her face gradually turned green. She did not dare to carry it anymore and pretended to have a stomachache. When it was time to finish work, she only carried it once reluctantly. Several women were already staring at my mother's back with strange eyes." "My" mother is deprived of their right to work under public power, patriarchy and women's self-suppression, so remarriage is inevitable. Remarriage is not only for the mother to seek survival space for herself, but also to retain the right to survive for her children. "Through these women, we see their struggles inside and outside of marriage, the confusion deep in their hearts, the contradiction between ideals and survival, the oppression and love between each other. They bear the gains and losses brought to them by society in their own way [2]."

2.3. Girls and Young Ladies: The Guardian of the Future

Ma Jinlian is good at using children's perspectives to create novels. The children's perspective not only makes Ma Jinlian's narrative freer, but also can play a stronger critical role in some cases. Girls

and young ladies are the carriers of children's perspectives in Ma Jinlian's rural themes. They gradually grow up with their own female elders, and assist them in both internal and external affairs under their guidance. These girls' hearts are empty and beautiful, and their characters are lively and vivid, which is quite similar to the girlish flavor described by Wang Zengqi. The timid Su Fuye in *The Long River* is pale and beautiful, with a bit of Lin Daiyu's spirit. "I" in Senior Brother Ga (*A Male-dominated World of Jianghu*) is generous and lively, and there is also the sweet sorrow of a girl in her heart. The Lan Yanzi in *Forever Farming (Father's Snow)* started to take care of the baby and help with farm work at an early age. The children who grew up under her care inherited her career, generation after generation, forever girls, young ladies, and peasant women. They are simple, pure, and beautiful, and are the representatives of the ideals of Hui ethnic minorities. Generally speaking, they can be summarized as "flat characters". On the one hand, the author projects an ideal of beauty on them, but on the other hand, she calls for the independence of women through their perspective. The "I" in *Senior Brother Ga*, "my" sister, aunt, and "my" mother do not have the right to eat at the table. They only have the obligation to cook and mend shoes and add food to men. The loss of rights leads to the concealment of their feelings, so the three sisters are in a secret love relationship, and no one has the courage to confess. The feeling of surprise, fear, and shame is not only the hesitation brought by love, but also the manifestation of women's lack of self-determination. Although my aunt and sister were finally very satisfied with the man that my grandfather found for them, it still could not change the hegemony of patriarchy in nature.

3. A Record of a Situation: Urban Women in Ma Jinlian's Writings

Around 2018, Ma Jinlian began to try to create characters of Hui women in cities on a large scale. Most of these women have received a certain level of education, are middle-aged, have a decent job, and have been married one or more times. Unlike the rural women who are confused, struggling, and tenacious in the face of survival and life, the urban women do not need to rush for food and clothing, but they are further spiritually worn out at the junction of the city and the countryside.

The cities described by Ma Jinlian are often small northwestern cities in China. Unlike Shanghai female writers such as Wang Anyi and Wei Hui, who choose to let women stride into modern metropolises, Northwestern female writers such as Ma Jinlian, based on personal experience and actual situations, let the women in their works stay in small cities one after another. These small cities are often transformed from rural areas at a rapid pace. Countless women have opened up another way of survival and gained the right to live because of these small cities, but they are also wandering between modern consciousness and rural memories, and are gradually trapped in the transforming small cities. The small city is a besieged city for most urban women described by Ma Jinlian. *Elm Monument (A Male-dominated World of Jianghu)* shows this "besieged city consciousness" with the death of an ancient elm tree. The ancient elm tree records the memory of an era in a rural area, but it faces a survival crisis due to the expansion of real estate. Although the ancient elm tree became a key protected cultural relic under the protection of security guard Lao Dong and others, the developer still accelerated the death of the elm tree by pouring sulfuric acid. Lao Dong, who worked hard for the elm tree, could not accept the truth and crashed into the base of the elm tree, and the ancient elm tree fell down. The villagers in the countryside have a good life in the city, and "Security guard Lao Dong is sincerely happy about this change", but the villagers are also deeply trapped in this small city, and no one dares to protest against the powerful image of the city and the power of modernization. The author points out through the experience of the elm tree that "living a good life" and "tolerance of the old countryside" should not conflict, and true modern civilization should have the ability and courage to tolerate these cultures. She arranged for Lao Dong to secretly tell others that the elm tree is a century-old tree in exchange for the attention of cultural units, and arranged for Lao Dong to crash into the tree and die in a tragic way to call for such an inclusive society to come soon. The female characters in Ma Jinlian's urban themes are deeply influenced by this idea. Women in cities also have the right not to progress. Ma Jinlian is both critical and sympathetic to such rights, so there are almost

no cases of urban women in her works who have completely escaped from the village successfully, but they all have some progressive consciousness and performance. The author's thinking about the fate of women has risen to the level of thinking about the current civilization, and she has written a female epic in modern civilization with a deep and affectionate tone.

Like most urban texts about women in the new era, the women in Ma Jinlian's urban themes "gradually gave up their strong criticism of patriarchal culture and their strong resistance to urban material culture and material spirit [3]." For example, even though Su Su, the protagonist of *The Bus (Bone-dissolving Palm)*, clearly realized that her husband Wang Jianshe's control over her was a kind of "rule", she was still accustomed to living a procedural life within the framework set by her husband, even though she was affected and restricted in her freedom. The dual oppression of patriarchal culture and modern materialistic society is an objective existence in the current living environment of women. Most of the urban women in Ma Jinlian's works vaguely felt the oppression and strange atmosphere in the small town and resisted to a certain extent, but few people found the right direction and had a clear plan for escaping. The logic of resistance in most images did not jump out of the traditional patriarchal discourse system, resulting in urban women not only having to endure similar situations as rural women, but even unconsciously enduring worse conditions. Their pain was more hidden and speechless, and the forms of endurance and resistance were more absurd. Therefore, while Ma Jinlian's urban novels adhere to the realistic orientation, they also add some modernist characteristics and show some subtle stream of consciousness. The characters of urban women gradually transform into a kind of situational thinking in Ma Jinlian's writing.

3.1. One Mountain is Released, Another Mountain is Blocked: After Nora Ran Away

A hundred years ago, Lu Xun discussed whether women who lost their economic rights at that time could obtain real freedom, using the background of Nora, a woman from aristocratic society in *A Doll's House*, who decided to rebel against the constraints of her husband and family after awakening to self-consciousness and ran away. Today, a hundred years later, although economic rights are no longer the main obstacle for Hui women in northwestern cities to run away, marriage has become a contradiction that cannot be ignored. Most of the characters in this category described by Ma Jinlian have good economic income, high educational level, good quality and living environment, a certain amount of say in family affairs, and a strong sense of gender equality. Therefore, their resistance is mostly the most "successful" and the most "failed". In *Bone-dissolving Palm (Bone-dissolving Palm)*, Su Xi passed the civil service exam through her own efforts and has her own family in the city. Therefore, when she received the invitation to the class reunion this time, Su Xi happily chose to attend the banquet. Yet before that, she had to prepare dinner for her husband and son so that she would not feel guilty about going out. She let it slip at the table that the people who were at the party this time were all male classmates from her original class. Seeing her husband's cold expression, this class reunion was declared bankrupt. Going to the appointment rashly would only create a gap in the ordinary days. However, "the living fish flapped its pelvic and tail fins. It didn't want to die like this. It longed to live. It longed. It longed for something it didn't even know what it was. The longing was so strong. But it was secret. It was hidden deep inside and didn't want anyone to see it [4]." From this moment on, Su Xi began to waver in her married life, and finally handed in a divorce agreement to her husband calmly a year later, with the only explanation being "I am a woman." She ended this bound marriage life with her own hands and sought the freedom she longed for again. Is the freedom to complete that unsuccessful class reunion? Or to embark on a new path of "I am a woman"? The author did not give her the answer. However, the author provides a possibility in *Desperate Situation (Bone-Dissolving Palm)*. Su Li in the novel encountered the embarrassing situation of her husband's affair, which is common to many middle-aged women, and it has been more than two years. The work deeply describes Su Li's inner struggle and despair. As an intellectual woman, it is probably more tragic to deal with it rather than to catch the adulterer in bed, so Su Li did not really break the door to catch the adulterer until the end. If it were just to write about Su Li's inner dilemma, it would be fine. Unexpectedly, Ma Jinlian actually designed a man who

sympathized with Su Li and fell in love with him. She even divorced and flashed married because of this man. Of course, life is still not salty or bland, and it eventually returns to the ordinary. There is a reasonable element in the absurdity. One mountain is released and another mountain is blocked. In this work, the author pessimistically hints at the fate of Nora's return after she ran away.

3.2. Helpless Absurdity: The Inexplicable "Lin Daojing"

As one of the literary classics of Chinese literature, *Song of Youth* is most praised for the character of the intellectual woman Lin Daojing. A careful examination of Lin Daojing's growth path shows that progressive men have always been the guides of her growth, from Yu Yongze, who made her sober, to Lu Jiachuan, her ideological mentor, and finally Jiang Hua, her revolutionary partner. Her awakening of self-consciousness is different from Jane Eyre's and has obvious limitations. There is another type of urban woman in Ma Jinlian's works who has a similar situation to Lin Daojing. Although their self-awakening does not involve men, their self-confidence is often interfered with by men. Like Lin Daojing, they are determined to have a simple ideal, but they forget that the "philosophy of love" cannot solve all problems. Su Qian in *A male-dominated world of Jianghu* (*A male-dominated world of Jianghu*) fell in love with Mr. Ma, a "sensory young man", during a blind date and got married quickly. In the early stages of their marriage, Su Qian "vowed not to let herself fall into the vulgarity of middle age too early [5]." However, Mr. Ma's unbridled spending and hardship forced Su Qian to become the type of woman he despised the most. She began to cry, make trouble, and complain more. Mr. Ma believed in the loyalty of the underworld and attached great importance to brotherhood. He simply did not listen to Su Qian's advice. "A man should act with a clear conscience." Hence, he believed his "brother" Xiao Mu and suspected that his wife had cheated on him during her pregnancy. Although it was later explained that it was a misunderstanding, it led to a growing gap between the couple. Therefore, when Mr. Ma was encouraged by his "good brother" to run for mayor of the town, Su Qian knew about it when she was buying meat, and Mr. Ma's campaign was doomed to fail. Yet after a period of depression, Mr. Ma started to play with his "Jianghu philosophy" again, choosing to lend money to his "brother" Xiao Mu to do business, but in fact, he was defrauded. If it were not for Su Qian's obstruction, the amount of fraud would be even greater. The most ridiculous thing is that Mr. Ma did not even know Xiao Mu's identity and contact information, he only knew that he was "Xiao Mu". From the title to the content, the author uses slightly absurd expressions to gradually disintegrate the "righteousness" of men and implicitly criticizes male power. Unexpectedly, the author binds Su Qian and Mr. Ma more closely together through marriage: your brothers are unreliable, and the only reliable one is your wife. The heroine Su Qian only focuses on her husband's "unreliable and childish" behavior, but ignores that her husband is a spouse who cannot bring any benefits to the family and even harms the interests of the family. In the end, she still embraces him with the heart of a mother. In *The Listener* (*Beijing Literature·Wonderful Reading*), Su Xu, a divorced female teacher, started a new blind date journey arranged by her male colleague Cai Zi. The author uses a simple style to express the magical reality. The graduate student who should have an elegant style does not love the lotus that is unstained by the mud, but loves the temptation of flaming red lips; after experiencing the love field, the "supermarket tycoon" does not love lotus or red lips, and the marriage relationship in his eyes is just a relationship of interest.

In *The Listener* (*Beijing Literature·Wonderful Reading*), the most unreasonable and absurd plot in this work is that a stylish teacher cannot let go of his responsibility to his ex-wife and takes care of his disabled ex-wife, but he seems to have the right to pursue love, so his blind date is absurd and reasonable; the divorced civil servant's expectation of Su Xu educating children and taking care of the family seems to be even more understandable, and Su Xu's efforts seem to be taken for granted because of these benefits from the man. The author uses a way that conforms to "social logic" to express the irrationality of this evaluation system. Women face the repeated blows of the magical reality in their dreamy expectations, lower their expectations again and again, and are shattered again and again. It seems that the final marriage of Su Xu and Cai Zi is inevitable, but it is precisely because

of this inevitability that the tragedy is more prominent. The meeting of two divorced people who know each other well is not so much about finding a suitable true love, but in fact, it is better to understand it as the self-pity of two poor people. They were both disappointed in love on blind dates and then reached an unwritten tacit understanding on the road of choosing love. The final marriage between the two is both a relief and a mediocre torture. Some women and men are always silent listeners in the game of love. Unable to find love symbolizes an invisible future. The ending of making do is precisely the most severe punishment for a sober woman.

3.3. Crime and Punishment: Invisible Crime, Countless Punishments

Marriage is a stage in life that all urban women in Ma Jinlian's works must go through. In addition to the two themes of "unable to get out" and "unable to go back", there is another type of urban woman in Ma Jinlian's works. They are different from rural women who struggle to enter the city. On the contrary, most of them are forced to enter the city through remarriage due to changes in their relationships and marriages. The city becomes a place where this type of woman wants to leave but cannot leave. Therefore, they often suffer more speculation and groundless accusations, but they have no space and right to correct their names. To a certain extent, their voicelessness is more serious than that of women in rural themes. *The Corner (Bone-dissolving Palm)* reveals this feature from the perspective of children. "My" father, Da Gezi, lost both legs in a car accident. People in the village said that the woman abandoned us and remarried. Although it was humiliating, "I" had no ability to work, so "I" could only take Da Gezi to the city regularly to ask the woman for a monthly living allowance of 200 yuan. The state of the woman when she saw "me" was basically expressed based on the number of family members in the house. When no one was around, the woman would express her longing for "me" crazily, using all kinds of food to make up for "me"; when the family was taking a nap, the woman would tiptoe to the door to open it for "me", call "me" in, and take the child support; when all the family members were awake, the woman would panic and awkwardly give the money to "me", urging "me" to leave. As a child, "I" did not understand the strong love shown by the woman, but "I" did not seem to hate her either. "I" could not fully understand the causes of the changes in the family structure. "I" could only transfer the hatred brought about by the despair to the appearance of the woman's departure, but the embarrassing reality seemed to challenge the correctness of this conclusion, so "I" could not find a perfect foothold for "my" hatred. "I" had to remind "myself" of the big man's feet to strengthen "my" so-called hatred. Ma Jinlian used a child's perspective to reflect the sad love and responsibility of women. A woman who has paid so much for the survival of her son and ex-husband faces the criticism of the village, the misunderstanding of her children, and the unspoken embarrassment and embarrassment in the new family. The role of mother sometimes brings women the opportunity to survive, the love that will definitely be secularized but extremely noble, and the pain and helplessness that will definitely be vulgarized and eliminated. It is just that the author uses a child's perspective to cover this pain with a layer of gauze. Such women in the city still have not escaped the same situation as rural women. To a certain extent, this situation will even be worse. There is no complaint, no crying, and love cannot solve all problems. Looking at Ma Jinlian's urban-themed works so far, the image of female characters has been greatly developed in this type of subject matter. The author believes that compared with the rural women in Ma Jinlian's works, the complexity and ambiguity in modern cities make the urban women in Ma Jinlian's works more distinctive and more three-dimensional, gradually moving from several "type characters" in rural themes to "group portraits". The increasingly profound life thinking and writing practice have made the author realize that "women are a situation". The silent situation guides Ma Jinlian's creation towards "silent" writing. In Ma Jinlian's rural-themed works, women can more or less vent their personal dissatisfaction and embarrassment through more open and public expressions, but in Ma Jinlian's urban-themed works, women's voices are becoming more and more silent, psychological descriptions in emotional expression gradually replace action and language descriptions, and scene creation replaces the concentrated plot conflicts that are still vaguely visible in rural themes. The image of innocent and beautiful girls is gradually disappearing, replaced by the embarrassment and

boredom of mediocre middle-aged men and women. They are experiencing the sweetness of marriage, the confusion of marriage, the breakdown of marriage, or the reorganization of marriage... These middle-aged women come and go in the predicament of marriage, drifting in the small city of life, unable to find their way back or out. As a Hui female writer from Xihaigu mountainous area, Ma Jinlian's rural-themed works strive to convey to the outside world a true and tender picture of the Hui people and the appearance of Hui women as far as possible. However, in the creation of urban themes, Ma Jinlian almost completely concealed the obvious ethnic color and retained the regional characteristics of the northwest. Selecting daily trivialities as materials, she focused on describing the state of mind and experience of a group of women, using absurd writing to express a helpless situation and embody a sense of displacement. The women in her urban-themed novels are gradually completing "rather than writing the 'culture' of a specific region, it is better to say that they are constructing a universal moral and ethical 'ideal' [6]." The daily lives of these urban women reflect a silent resistance to Islam, and women's independence and autonomy are more strongly expressed through marriage. However, as a female writer who grew up in Islamic religious culture, her works "rarely contain many religious rules and regulations, but more of a religious sentiment that blends seamlessly with secular life and carries a moral education color [7]." However, she always adheres to the core of faith in religion. She keenly captures the preciousness of faith consciousness in religious culture. The urban women in her works often appear helpless in the face of difficulties, or have the ability to resist but cannot shout. This is very different from the rough tenacity shown by the rural women in her works. The difference in emotions and endings reflects the author's call for the return of faith and community. The word "community" was first proposed by German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies. In his book *Community and Society* published in 1887, he said that a community is a social union based on kinship and blood relations. In this social union, emotional and natural will prevail [8]. Individual or personal will is suppressed by emotional and common will. Correspondingly, he believed that the union formed by people's contractual relationship and "rational" will is called "society". A community refers to a homogeneous population with common value orientation, close relationships, mutual assistance, and humane social relations and social interest communities [8]. Although the Hui ethnic community is a social community formed based on religion in a certain region, the close social ties built by religion have given the Hui ethnic community the characteristics of a community as defined by Tönnies. As a writer who hopes to "dig out the luster of these dusts that flash in the moment of disappearance through writing", Ma Jinlian cherishes these delicate and humane communities and beliefs formed under the maintenance of religious communities [9]. However, with the further acceleration of the process of modernization, these beautiful qualities are disappearing at an accelerated rate, and "the simplicity and purity of the older generation, their love of life and their adherence to faith make us who are impetuous today feel ashamed" [10]. Although Ma Jinlian has never shown a tendency to express strong emotions in her works, researchers can still feel a loss of faith in the comparison between her rural women and urban women, and the embarrassing situation aggravates this sense of loss, and they gradually lose their way between the countryside and the city.

4. Be "This One"- The Enlightenment of Urban Hui Women in Ma Jinlian's Novels

The living conditions of Hui women in my country have always been a serious and sensitive topic. Most social science research will choose to avoid sensitive ethnic regions or change the expression in order to be published. Therefore, in general, there are relatively few articles specifically studying the living conditions of Hui women in China, but they still have a certain reference value in terms of quality, which can help researchers understand the general living conditions of urban Hui women.

In terms of gender concepts, Liang Lili's survey results in *Conflicts and Adjustments of Gender Concepts of Hui Women - Based on a Survey of Hui Women in Yinchuan* show that the subjectivity of urban Hui women is constantly increasing. They have a clearer understanding of their own abilities

and social values, their self-awareness and sense of competition are constantly increasing, the family's restrictions on women are constantly weakening, and women are gradually paying attention to being affirmed and recognized in social life. In terms of gender concept division of labor, the traditional gender role division model has been challenged, but there has also been a phenomenon of returning to traditional gender role norms. There are certain contradictions and conflicts in role expectations in marriage, family, and work. 58.5% of the respondents agree with the statement that "it is better to marry well than to work well [11]." Although most women can recognize that the reason for the differences between men and women is not due to physiological reasons, there are still major obstacles to the realization of specific gender equality.

In general, the gender concepts of urban Hui women show multiple complexities, with modern consciousness and traditional concepts intertwined and conflicting with each other. Many women agree with the value of "living on men" and have a strong dependence on men and family. Some women still agree with the view that "men focus on society and women focus on family", showing a return to tradition. Nearly 50% of Hui women hold a relatively conservative view of the social status of men and women [11]. 40% of the surveyed women agreed with the statement that "appearance is more important than the ability for women to find a job" [11]. This deviation in self-cognition and inadequate understanding of women's values will lead to women's lack of confidence in life, thus affecting their all-round development [11].

Therefore, researchers can see the value of "this one" female image in Ma Jinlian's urban themes. Taking marriage as the main theme, Ma Jinlian focused on discussing the confusion and obstacles of these women in family life, sexual expression, and self-awareness. Entering into the inner world of the characters in detail, she empathetically pointed out the unconscious survival dilemma of women in their psychological state. She was happy, sympathetic, and critical of these urban women who entered the modern space. From a higher spiritual realm, she sorted out the self-dilemma and the motivations behind some of the current urban Hui women. With deeper insight, she observed the more universal "women's situation". While maintaining the national background and belief consciousness, the work can also generate more consensus empathy. In this field, Ma Jinlian's writing still has a lot to do.

5. Conclusion

China is a unified multi-ethnic country, and the rich and colorful ethnic literature is an important part of China's literary treasure house that cannot be ignored. Due to different natural and humanistic geographical environments, literary events of different ethnic groups have greatly expanded the boundaries of contemporary literary writing in my country. In recent years, Hui literature and Hui literature writers have gradually gained a certain voice in the contemporary literary world through unremitting efforts. If Zhang Xianliang's creation has made Ningxia literature happen, then Shi Shuqing, Zhang Jinxiang, and others have led Hui literature into the vision of literary history. With the continuous deepening of feminist thought and ethnic policy practice, the writings of Hui female writers such as Ma Jinlian and Ping Yuan have gradually been recognized by people. The survival problem of Hui women is an issue that Hui areas must inevitably face. Islam insists that "there is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah." Therefore, the norms of the Quran for women have long become the norms that women in this area need to abide by. It is undeniable that since the founding of the People's Republic of China, China has made great efforts and achieved great results in promoting gender equality in ethnic areas, but some traditional concepts have been silently hurting some Hui women until now. With the acceleration of industrialization and urbanization, this harm has affected the self-awareness and self-determination of Hui women in a more hidden way. Although writers like Ma Jinlian cannot fully represent feminist writers, they are practicing women's awakening in their own way. Whether it is the plight of women of different ages in the countryside or the siege of middle-aged women in the city, they all write vividly about where

Hui women are today. They may not be able to really point out the path of their own people, but at least they are telling and working hard to make “she” and “them” emerge on the surface of history.

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