

Analysis of Female Love Tragedy in Xiao Hong's March in a Small Town

Jiayi Wu

Department of Language and Culture, Ningde Normal University, Ningde, Fujian, 352100, China
jiumai@ldy.edu.rs

Abstract. In the 20th century, China was in the midst of a great social change, and the old and new cultures collided fiercely. Xiao Hong's March in a Small Town vividly demonstrates the destiny of women in this context, and profoundly reveals the predicament of women's survival under the intertwining of feudal traditions and modern civilization. This paper studies the performance of female love tragedy and its reasons in Xiao Hong's March in a Small Town. It is found that the tragedy of love presents multiple manifestations such as the tragedy of character, social tragedy and the tragedy of fate. The root causes of the tragedy include the bondage of feudal tradition; the conflict between old and new ideas; and the limitation of individual character. Aunt Cui's tragedy is typical, deeply reflecting the plight of women in the intertwining of old and new cultures, and embodying Xiao Hong's profound insight into women's destiny and humanistic concern. Aunt Cui's fate epitomizes the female group in the gap between the old and new cultures. Through this tragedy, Xiao Hong not only shows the loss of female subjectivity in a specific era, but also inquires about the killing of human nature by feudal ethics through her literary writing, and her profound insights into the fate of women are still inspirational to the contemporary society's reflections on gender equality and liberation of ideas.

Keywords: Small town march, tragedy, female destiny.

1. Introduction

In the 20th century, China was in a period of great social change, and the May Fourth New Culture Movement catalyzed and promoted the development of the May Fourth Movement, which played a great influence in many aspects, such as: anti-traditionalism, promotion of individualism, transformation of national character, etc., and was a major event of vital importance at the level of Chinese politics as well as cultural studies. During this period, a group of new-age women emerged, such as Bing Xin, Lu Yin, Ding Ling, etc., whose full-bloodedness ignited the May Fourth Movement and brought fresh blood and vitality [1]. The traditional feudal patriarchal system has a profound influence on society, which permeates all fields of politics, economy and culture, strengthens monarchical autocracy and family authority, suppresses individual freedom and hinders social mobility. Even in the social changes of the early 20th century, its remnants still dominate the ethical order of the countryside and small towns. During the May Fourth New Culture period, many female writers such as Feng Yuanjun, Lu Yin, Bing Xin, Su Xuelin, Chen Hengzhe, Ling Shuhua, and Shi Pingmei paid great attention to the plight of women's realities in the period of the alternation of old and new concepts, and borrowed from the books of women such as mothers to recognize themselves, forming a generation of literary themes [2]. Among them, Xiao Hong dedicated many popular works, such as *Hulan River* writing hometown personnel prose poetry; "life and death" real depiction of the survival of the northern people's predicament; *Ma Bole* ironic portrayal of the chaotic world of "anti-hero" characters of the lowly soul [3]. Her writing on the fate of women profoundly reveals the struggle and destruction of individuals in feudal tradition and modern civilization.

March in a Small Town is like a sad song sung in a low voice, playing the mournful sound of women's love, focusing on a corner of a small town in Northeast China, downplaying the accusation against the old feudal forces, focusing on the characters' words, deeds, behaviors and ideological character, and focusing on the inner development of the characters' own characters to tell Auntie Cui's love story [4]. The tragedy of Auntie Cui stems from the sadness and depression of her personal emotions, and is more rooted in the loss of female subjectivity in the conflict between the old and

new cultures. Aunt Cui's cowardice and stoicism is actually a survival strategy given by the times. Under the constraints of feudal rites and the impact of the changes of the times, Aunt Cui tries to break through the tradition through "reading" and "foot-binding", but she is never able to break free from the shackles of the traditional gender roles. As Xiao Hong's last work, she interpreted the love of an era with her sentimental pen, a beautiful and sorrowful story. The tragedy of Aunt Cui in *March in a Small Town* epitomizes the patriarchal system's deprivation of women's right to marital autonomy, highlighting its long-term confinement of human nature and its stubborn obstruction of modern transformation. At the same time, new ideas and cultures were spreading, tradition and change were intertwined, and women's destinies were also rising and falling in the tides of the times.

This paper will analyze the tragedy of female love in *March in a Small Town* as the core, and through interpreting its love story, the author will deeply understand Xiao Hong's creative intention, as well as the state of existence and the spiritual world of women in that era, and explore the intricate connection between human nature, society and destiny.

2. Overview of the Text of *March in a Small Town*

2.1. Synopsis

March in a Small Town depicts the tragedy of a young girl's love and marriage under the feudal marriage system in the old times. In the strong feudal atmosphere of the small town, the novel shows a family full of new ideas and culture from the first perspective. In this family, Aunt Cui falls in love with her cousin, who is studying at the university in Harbin. This deep-rooted love is not only an innocent outpouring of a young girl's emotions, but also her longing for a new world and a free life. However, her fate is full of ups and downs. When she hears that she is to be promised in marriage by her parents to a rich but old and ugly man from the countryside, she wastes her body and dies in sorrow and pain.

2.2. Analysis of Auntie Cui's Image

Although Aunt Cui is in a small town with deep-rooted feudal traditions, she is eager to study and pursues a free and beautiful life. However, she is unable to escape from the bondage of feudalism and dares not resist the arranged marriage, which is a contradiction interwoven with tradition and modernity. She was born with "very small lips and white teeth", and was introverted and shy, following the norms of feudalism. As an aunt's adopted daughter, she was used to being stoic and submissive, "When Auntie Cui reached out to take a cherry to eat, it was as if the tip of her finger was very pitiful to the cherry, fearing that it would be touched and spoiled as if it were pinched gently." Such as being arranged to be wrapped in feet silently bear, face marriage rituals, passive acceptance of matchmaking, showing the typical state of existence of women in the old times. Auntie Cui is dignified and quiet, gifted and talented, and is good at playing the dazhengqin, xiao and flute. However, even so, she is still unable to control her own destiny, and under the double pressure of love and reality, she ends up in melancholy and tragedy. Aunt Cui's image is intertwined with the warmth of traditional women and the struggle under the impact of the new trend of thinking. Her destruction reveals the devouring of human nature by feudal rites, and sends the author's deep sympathy for the fate of women.

3. Multiple Manifestations of Aunt Cui's Tragedy of Love

3.1. Tragedy of Character

The tragedy of Aunt Tsui's love firstly stems from her introverted, sensitive and shy character. When dealing with her favorite things, Auntie Cui-Cui shows introverted and implicit which is unique to the oriental culture, and this character is consistent with her attitude in love, she never expresses her thoughts easily, but reveals her feelings through implicit words and subtle actions [5]. It is her

shy and withdrawn character that causes her to hesitate to express her emotions when facing her cousin, which ultimately makes the relationship end without a trace. It is written in the book, "The secret of her love was such that she seemed to take it to the grave, and kept it unspoken, as if there was no one under heaven worth listening to her telling." Aunt Jade is reluctant to tell everyone the truth of her heart. This restraint is not only reflected in her emotions, but also mapped in her daily life. Aunt Cui's expression of her love for embroidered shoes is also very subtle, as written in the book, "The next day Aunt Cui asked me to accompany her to the street, not telling me what to buy first, and after entering the store and choosing half a day's worth of other things, only then did she ask for my velvet rope shoes. "From then on, even if Auntie Cui dragged "me" to the street, she was not willing to say directly that she wanted to buy embroidered shoes, and only mentioned embroidered shoes in a roundabout way at the end. "After a few days, I had forgotten about buying pompom shoes, but Auntie Cui dragged me to accompany her to look for pompom shoes, and I realized that Auntie Cui really wanted a pair of pompom shoes." "From then on, I knew her secret, she had long been in love with the velvet rope shoes, but she didn't say it out loud that's all." Her desire for the velvet rope shoes was suppressed by her own stoicism, and eventually, when she mustered the courage to go looking for them, they were no longer available. This repression of her character prevents her from getting her favorite velvet rope shoes and from letting her cousin know her feelings, and she loses her chance to fight for love.

3.2. Social Tragedy

The difference in social status is a great obstacle to Aunt Cui's love. Auntie Cui-Cui came from a lowly background, while her cousin's family was scholarly. This notion of gentrification made Auntie Cui realize that there was an insurmountable gap between herself and her cousin. "There was a young uncle in my clan, about the same age as my brother, who stuttered and had no grace, and who also went to the same school as my brother. Although he came to our house, I am afraid that Aunt Cui had not met him. At that time, the grandmother advocated for Aunt Cui to propose marriage. The grandmother of that clan, on hearing it, refused, saying that it was a widow's child, ill-fated, and also afraid of having no tutelage, not to mention that the father was dead, and the mother was married off, and that a good woman does not marry a second husband, and that the grandmother did not want the daughter of such a family." "This thing Aunt Cui is aware of, and having met my brother to-day, she could not help thinking that he probably looked at her in that way. She felt consciously that her fate would not be good." Even though Cousin and Auntie Cui are presumably in love, the text mentions that Auntie Cui would feel inferior because of her origins, and acted formal and unsure of herself when confronted by relatives from Cousin's family. This deep-rooted notion of gentrification makes her cower in the face of love and ultimately miss out on possible happiness. The concept of "a good woman does not marry her second husband" regards remarriage as a moral stigma. Auntie Cui, as a widow's daughter, is discriminated against and her marriage is labeled as "ill-fated" and "uneducated", and her female value is kidnapped by her birth and family ties. The value of a woman is kidnapped by her birth and family relationship rather than her personal qualities. Aunt Cui's "bad fate" is not a personal cowardice, but a systematic oppression of women by the entire social structure - in the deformed ethical order, individuals are even deprived of the right to be "seen", and tragedy is already doomed. In the deformed ethical order, individuals are deprived of the right to be "seen", and the tragedy is already doomed.

3.3. Tragedy of Fate

Auntie Cui lives in a world where everything is arranged by her elders. Her life trajectory has long been set by the feudal system, where marriage is not autonomous and love can only grow in repression." Aunt Cui was arranged an arranged marriage by her family. Her fiancé was the only son of a rich family who was ugly and short and attended private school in the countryside. She is dissatisfied with her future marriage, but cannot resist her mother's decision." Auntie Cui is unable to choose her own marriage and has to accept the unsatisfactory marriage arranged by her mother. Aunt

Cui's "dissatisfaction" can only be buried in her heart. Traditional filial piety requires her to obey the authority of her elders, and social rules deprive her of the right to express her objections, and she is not even qualified for "negotiation", so she can only passively accept the fate of "being arranged". She can only passively accept the destiny of "being arranged". She can only reveal her desire for pom-pom shoes in a subtle way, which is in fact a subtle projection of her ideal love life, however, fate does not give her the opportunity to realize this yearning. Facing the cold and cruel reality, she consciously chooses to die, "but that's out of the question, the fate of spring is such a short one." The shortness of spring is used as a metaphor for the shortness of Auntie Cui's life, who, in her beautiful youthful years, was tormented by love and fate and went to her death prematurely. This is not only a revolt against feudalism, but also an attack and satire on the insensitive life [6].

4. Multiple Analysis of the Roots of Tragedy

4.1. Binding of Feudal Tradition

In *March in a Small Town*, Aunt Cui is tightly bound by feudal traditions like an invisible but impermeable net, which is a key factor in her tragedy. 20th-century marriages are not based on the love and will of the man and the woman, but are decided by the elders of the family on the basis of secular factors such as social status and interests. After Auntie Chui's engagement, her mother and grandmother focus only on the material aspects of the dowry, but ignore Auntie Chui's emotional needs. When Auntie Cui-Cui is moping, her mother asks with concern, "What's wrong? Did you have a bad time buying the things that accompanied the dowry?" Everything is asked, but the emotional level is not touched upon. This reflects the fact that under feudalism, the elders only emphasized the material form of marriage and neglected the emotional pursuit of their children. Although Aunt Cui has a longing and pursuit of love in her heart, and has a secret love for her cousin, she does not have the right to choose her own marriage. At the same time, the feudal rituals that regulate and solidify women's behavior and speech greatly suppress Aunt Cui's personality and emotions. In the book, it is mentioned that "a widow's child has a bad fate and is afraid of having no family education, not to mention that the father is dead and the mother is married, so a good woman will not marry a second husband". This kind of feudal superstition and identification with traditional thinking haunts Auntie Cui, making her feel that she is inferior and unworthy of her cousin. As a woman, she was required to follow the "three obediences and four virtues", must be dignified, introverted, not wantonly show their inner feelings, will be the love of the cousin was forced to bury deep in the heart, no response to the secret love was ultimately swallowed by despair when Aunt Cui's family elders touched on a series of feudal ethics and morality and other roots of the feudal society, has never been able to get rid of the repression of the forbidden salesman. When the elders of Aunt Cui's family touched upon a series of feudal ideas about the roots of society, such as feudal ethics and morality, they were unable to get rid of the feudal ideas that had suppressed them. Therefore, they will set the marriage for their children, by the feudal family concept of poisoning, and do not care about the inner spiritual life of their children, do not realize that Cui-Aunt's resistance to marriage, and ultimately sent to the marriage of the penal colony, until Cui-Aunt through the road to death [7].

4.2. Clash of Old and New Ideas

The wave of the New Culture Movement brought the dawn of new ideas to the small town. "My family belonged to the enlightened family of "Reform and Reform", and my siblings were all educated in the foreign academy, and were deeply influenced by the new ideas and culture, which made young women like Auntie Cui start to aspire to freedom, love, and knowledge, but it would inevitably have an impact on the old cultural traditions. But it is also bound to have an impact on the old cultural traditions [8]. Auntie Jade envied me for studying in school, loved to spend time with my new family and friends, experienced the new way of life, and began to read and write at the age of 22. She fell in love with her cousin, who was attending university in Harbin. The civilized temperament and new ideas of her cousin were exactly what she longed for, and this relationship symbolized her pursuit of

a new life. She became interested in new cultural products and enjoyed listening to music on the radio as well as reading new novels. This shift in interest gives her life a richer spiritual dimension than the traditional chores and socializing. The book reads, "Aunt Jade listened to many stories, and after some days her brother came to tell them again, and she always listened attentively. The brother's narrations all seemed true to her, and of course all that the brother told was true." Aunt Cui was attentive to her brother's stories about new things outside, including the interactions between male and female classmates, which was a sign of her interest in new things.

However, the feudal culture of the small town is deeply rooted in thousands of years, and old ideas such as arranged marriages still dominate people's lives. In this environment, even though Aunt Cui has new ideas and pursuits, she is powerless to break free from the shackles of old ideas. She does not dare to openly rebel against arranged marriages, nor can she boldly express her love to her cousin, but can only bury her feelings deep in her heart. The new ideas inside her collide fiercely with the powerful old traditions outside her, but she cannot find an outlet to reconcile them. This clash of old and new ideas not only causes Aunt Cui's personal tragedy, but also reveals the hardship and helplessness of the social transformation period, highlighting the suppression of human nature by the feudal traditional thinking and the destruction of the budding of new ideas.

4.3. Limitations of Individual Character

There are limitations in Aunt Cui's personality that are hard to ignore, which become the key driving force of her tragic fate. She has a low self-esteem and is extremely sensitive. When faced with her favorite cousin, she is filled with admiration, but she is self-deprecating and feels that she is not worthy of him. This inferiority complex makes her shy away from love, not daring to show the slightest affection. When Cui had something on her mind, she did not tell even her bosom friend, was extremely deep in her city, and was not good at communicating her inner thoughts with others, so much so that she went to the extreme of self-mutilation and died [9]. In the pursuit of love, her character makes her constantly avoid, constantly retreat, time and again missed the possible happiness, and ultimately can only be in loneliness and pain, towards a tragic end.

Character determines destiny. Aunt Cui's character traits with pessimistic destiny actually reflects the commonality of Chinese women in the lower class under the constraints of the feudal ideology of "three subordinates and four virtues" and "male superiority and female inferiority". Auntie Cui always remembers that she is a woman of the lower class in China. Auntie Cui always remembers that she is the daughter of a widow who got married, and unknowingly, she has internalized the social and external repression into her own self-repression [10].

5. Conclusion

Aunt Cui's tragedy is not an individual case, but the epitome of many women in that era. The tragedy of Aunt Cui's love is like a mirror reflecting the universal predicament of women's destiny in the era of violent collision between old and new cultures, and its tragic connotation is still of profound revelation value in contemporary times. Her story reveals the struggle between women's ideological awakening and reality under the clash of old and new cultures, as well as the oppression of women's bodies and minds by traditional rituals, reflecting the incomplete social change and the difficult and tortuous path of women's liberation at that time. The work is set in a small town in Northeast China in the 1930s, showing the social scene under the collision of old and new cultures. The contrast between the closeness and old-fashionedness of the small town and the penetration of new ideas from the outside world, Aunt Cui's longing for a new life (such as reading and wearing foreign clothes) symbolizes the young generation's yearning for a new life, while her destruction implies the devouring of progressive thinking by the forces of tradition, which is of distinctive critical significance of the times. The women in Xiao Hong's writing, even if they have a sense of resistance, often fail due to the disparity of power. Xiao Hong's profoundness lies in the fact that she not only writes about the death of a woman, but also reveals how an era, through the collusion of culture, system, and public

opinion, makes the "shoots of awakening" wither before they break through the ground. She uses her words to speak out for women, trying to arouse the society's attention to women's destiny, and to give sympathy and support to those women in the darkness.

References

- [1] Wang Wei, Wang Yufeng. A Brief Discussion on the Influence of the May Fourth New Culture Movement on the Creation of Female Writers--Taking Lu Yin as an Example. *Writers' World*. 2022, 28: 51-53.
- [2] Ren Yujang. Mother and Daughter Writing of the New Female Writers of the May 4th - Taking the Works of Feng Yuanjun, Lu Yin and Bing Xin as an Example. *Journal of Anyang Normal College*. 2022, 04: 92-96.
- [3] Cao Shuli. Thematic Implications and Narrative Techniques of Xiao Hong's Short Stories. *Comparative Research on Cultural Innovation* 2024, 8.28: 1-4.
- [4] Lu Yulian. The Free Undertones of Love Tragedy-An Analysis of the Theme of March in a Small Town. *Yangtze River Fiction Appreciation*. 2024, 22: 21-24.
- [5] Liu Linlin. "Aunt Cui's Death" and Xiao Hong's Writing in the Historical Situation--Reexamining the Narrative Problems of March in a Small Town. *Journal of Lingnan Normal College* 2024, 45. 04: 94-101+108.
- [6] Qiu Xingru. On the Enlightenment of Female Consciousness in Xiao Hong's March in a Small Town. *Masterpiece Appreciation*. 2024, 26: 28-30.
- [7] Sun Yating. Analysis of Female Love Tragedy--Taking March in a Small Town as an Example. *Young Literati*. 2019, 06: 47+49.
- [8] Gu Yuhua. An Analysis of the Tragedy of Enlightenment in Xiao Hong's March in a Small Town. *Masterpiece Appreciation*. 2023, 27: 133-135.
- [9] Yang Changjun. An Exploration of the Characteristics and Causes of Aunt Cui's Tragedy in "March in a Small Town"-Another Discussion on Unrequited or Mutual Love. *Journal of Hotan Normal College*, 2010, 29. 06: 106-107.
- [10] Shi Xiaohong. An Elegy of Life-Analysis of Female Consciousness in Xiao Hong's March in a Small Town. *Drama House*. 2022, 15: 196-198.