

# *On the Tragic Fate of Women in Shen Congwen's Xiao Xiao*

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**Abstract:** Shen Congwen's short story Xiao Xiao describes the growth of a naive, kind-hearted girl from western Hunan. Xiao Xiao experiences her childhood when she lacks family love and care, her youth when her female consciousness awakens and she yearns for freedom after marrying a child bride, and her life when she is numb and submissive after her escape is discovered. It reveals the tragic fate of the heroine, Xiao Xiao, and shows the tragic fate of generations of "Xiao Xiao" who are confined to their families.

## 1. Introduction

Xiao Xiao is a work of short fiction by the famous modern writer Shen Congwen. The work illustrates the ancient customs of rural society and the low status of women in the family in the beautiful natural scenery of the western Hunan borderlands, and depicts Xiao Xiao's heartbreaking life experiences with delicate brushwork. The typical female figure of Xiao Xiao symbolises the tragic figure of the young girl in the countryside throughout feudal society. This article will follow the trajectory of Xiao Xiao's life and analyse the tragic fate of the Xiao Xiao's.

## 2. The unbreakable shackles of growing up

"It was common for people in the countryside to blow suona to receive their daughters-in-law come December." Due to the poverty of their families, teenage girls had to be married off early to their husbands' families as child brides, their fate firmly in the hands of others. A brass lock locks up the young women's freedom and their future, which should be full of possibilities. Xiao Xiao, the central female figure in the novel, is unlike other women who, at an uneducated age, are married off as child brides and, in her limited knowledge, enter into marriage and become the daughter-in-law of another family. The family has attracted increasing attention from psychological researchers as an important place for individuals to receive emotional support. The lack of family care at an early age, with only foster care in her relatives' home, led Xiao to develop a rebellious mentality. She did not cry or resist when she was married, but simply submitted to her impending fate. Generations of young rural women have been assimilated into the traditional custom of child brides in the countryside, and in their minds they believe that "getting married - taking care of their young husbands - passing on the family name to their husbands" is a matter of course. The girls who were about to be married cried out in the palanquin, merely in fear of the unknown, without really awakening their sense of rebellion.

Under the backward customs of western Hunan society, Xiao Xiao's fate of becoming a child bride is a shackle from which she cannot break.

After marrying into her husband's family, Xiao Xiao's life trajectory is synchronized with his. She washed clothes, took care of her husband, performed hemp, drank cold water, ate rough rice, pounded pig's straw and pushed the mill, poured yarn and wove cloth ..... Xiao Xiao was able to grow up with the green hills and water in her day-to-day labour, and did not feel any more miserable than before. Living for years in the primitive western Hunan countryside, untouched by "modern civilisation", the Xiaoxiao are ignorant of the tragic situation they find themselves in and live their lives in a state of total ignorance. The traditional stereotype of the rural woman, "everything comes first for the family", has deeply bound generations of rural women, and is a shackle from which they cannot break free as they grow up, making it impossible for them to extricate themselves. "The mother-in-law is like a pair of shears, cutting off Xiao Xiao's chance to grow up." In the feudal patriarchal society, Xiao Xiao and her in-laws are in a relationship of personal dependence, and the established fate of becoming a child bride and the low status of women in the family in traditional Chinese vernacular society suppress the feminine consciousness in Xiao Xiao's heart, which is her tragic fate from which she cannot break free.

### **3. The Awakening of Female Consciousness - Breaking the Chains**

In the early 1920s, China had entered modern society. However, the waves of the May Fourth Movement were only scattered across the western Hunan borderlands, and the rules and concepts of the feudal patriarchal society, both tangible and intangible, held Xiao Xiao's fate in a firm grip. The occasional breeze of new ideas did not allow Xiao Xiao to break through the shackles and gain a new lease of life. The emergence of the "schoolgirls" shifts Xiao Xiao's psychological state, which has been comfortable with the status quo for years, and brings out a sense of rebellion in her heart. Xiao Xiao's desire to escape after finding out she is pregnant leads her to ask Hua Dog to go to the city to live with her. Xiao's awakened feminine consciousness is forced to sleep while the object of her attachment is left to flee alone, without any responsibility. Growing up in the isolated borderlands of western Hunan, Xiao Xiao's rebellion against reality is not deep enough and not strong enough to change her fate, as she is dominated by the traditional male dominance of the countryside.

In the face of this situation, Xiao Xiao did not seek death, which shows Xiao Xiao's resilience and desire for life. Xiao Xiao also makes a series of efforts to abort the foetus in her womb, using a series of methods such as eating incense ash and drinking cold water, but the baby grows up day by day, as if against her. The passing of another schoolgirl, a symbol of "freedom and renewal", gave Xiao hope, and Xiao packed her things and prepared to follow the schoolgirl's path into the city. "This opportunity to become pregnant makes Xiao Xiao determined to follow the path of freedom like the schoolgirls and to have a new life of her own, a second awakening of Xiao Xiao's feminine consciousness. When she first heard about schoolgirls, the unknown nature of becoming a schoolgirl made her fearful and she thought that being a schoolgirl was a bad thing for her. After her grandfather's explanation, Xiao began to yearn for schoolgirls and the seeds were planted in her heart to be with them. Schoolgirls represented, to some extent, the progressive thinking of the entire Chinese nation at the time and were a symbol of freedom. The "schoolgirls" that appear from time to time in her dreams are the seeds of Xiao's new and hazy expectations for a new life. Confined tightly to the family ties of traditional rural society, Xiao's sense of femininity deepens as she yearns for a different state of life: to live freely.

### **4. A cycle of tragic female destiny**

When Xiao Xiao's intention to escape is discovered, she stops struggling and leaves it up to her in-laws to decide whether to live or die. Her mother-in-law intends to remarry Xiao Xiao, and Xiao

Xiao simply waits quietly for the end that others will give her. Her sense of resistance is superficial and once the outside world enters, Xiao Xiao is no longer able to struggle, her life is in a state of obscurity and numbness at the mercy of others. After ten months of pregnancy, Xiao Xiao gives birth to a son with a big head and eyes and a magnificent sound. Having given birth to a son, it was only natural that Xiao Xiao would remain in the family. At the age of twelve, Niu also married a child bride, and the tragic fate of thousands of "Xiao Xiao" continued, marrying a wife, caring for her young husband, passing on the family line, and continuing the social structure of the village. "On the day when the cattle received the bride, Xiao Xiao held her newborn child in front of the house to watch the fun." Xiao Xiao is originally a victim of the rural structure, without a self, existing only because of the need to be a helper to her in-laws and to pass on the family name; her tragic fate is typical of the tragic lives of uneducated rural women. The hilarious scene of a bull receiving a bride, the whimpering of the new bride locked in a palanquin, the grandfather and great-grandfather who are so happy to be busy with the wedding ..... The cries of the new daughter-in-law are all the more heartbreaking in the midst of such passionate undertones. The sense of female rebellion that remains in Xiao Xiao's mind is immediately diluted by the powerful reality.

The beautiful landscape of western Hunan has nurtured generations of Miao descendants, but the tragic fate of the women of the countryside, who have no voice because of their heirs, also continues from generation to generation. The novel opens with a lively scene of Xiao Xiao's marriage and ends with the next generation of "Xiao Xiao" marrying into the family, and the tragic destiny of the women is a sad trajectory of Xiao Xiao's life that is always lamentable. Their lives are at the mercy of passive dominators, unaware that they are at the mercy of others. The arrival of the "schoolgirl" makes Xiao Xiao yearn for a new life of freedom, but her childhood in the countryside, her long-time bondage to traditional morals and rituals, her ignorance of the outside world, and her own insecure sense of individual independence make it impossible for Xiao Xiao to truly become a schoolgirl, which can only become a beautiful dream in her tragic life. Xiao Xiao, the main character of the tragedy, does not sympathise with the tragic fate of the next generation of "Xiao Xiao" after her hazy awakening of her sense of resistance. This cycle is the inheritance and continuation of the feudal system, a hopeless cycle of life.

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