

The Female “Tragic” Consciousness in Bai Xianyong’s Novels: Take Exiled Immortals and A Touch of Green as Examples

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Abstract:

The novels “Exiled Immortal” and “A Touch of Green” are included in Bai Xianyong’s novels *The New Yorker* and *Taipei People*, respectively. In Bai Xianyong’s works, the concern for women is a constant topic, and he transforms himself into a combination of rationality and sensibility, sculpts the contours of the times and society, and captures the image of women in the plot through the language and behavioral details between reality and fiction. The tragic dimension magnifies the existence of women, the ups and downs of fate, the sadness of a foreign land, or the loss of self as a way to think about the dilemma of women’s existence. This paper focuses on female tragedy from a three-dimensional perspective: the causes, the deep narrative techniques, and the tragic endings. The study seeks to deepen the understanding of the delicate sense of female tragedy in the writing of Bai Xianyong.

Keywords: Female characters; tragic consciousness; Exiled Immortal; A Touch of Green.

1. Introduction

In the rapid progress of modern society, it has become particularly important for women’s groups to search for their spiritual core. In half of Mr Bai’s works, he depicts the unique charms of female characters with delicate strokes. The “women” in these novels are always burdened with the author’s reflections on society. Even when they were forced to take on a tragic mission at a special time, the women ended their lives or survived in various ways. The author’s rare and unique perspective on women has sparked the research interest of many scholars and bridged the gap in the literature on the study of women’s consciousness. In addition, as a leading figure in Taiwan’s literary circle, Mr Bai’s unique artistry has had a very far-reaching influence in mainland China and overseas.

The changing complexity of his upbringing has filled his works with a unique blend of Chinese and Western flavors, especially with his works in *The New Yorker* and *Taipei People*, for example. Combining Western existential and nihilistic literary techniques with traditional Chinese delicate writing style, the flow of reality reproduces the „tragedy“ of the small people in the flood of the big time. In addition, female characters dominate the works, portraying typical images from a female point of view, either fluctuating in style or thin and shy, bringing to life millions of flesh and blood „she“ under the tragedy. Therefore, the dissection of the female characters in Mr

Bai’s writing can be viewed in society, and the exploration of the awareness of female tragedy is conducive to the in-depth study of the social status of women and their interrelationships.

Considering the turbulent times and the people’s uncertainty and hibernation, this uncontrollable tragedy creates a particularly “fragile and powerless” female body. Their external vulnerability catalyzes the collapse of their spiritual core, forming a female tragedy with internal and external contradictions and a lack of unity between consciousness and body. Especially in modern society, women’s issues have attracted much attention. To explore women’s possibilities comprehensively, we cannot ignore the study of women’s social dilemmas and disorientation under tragedy. Therefore, the study of the tragic discourse on analyzing women’s spirit, women’s consciousness, survival, and disillusionment is a major trend.

This paper takes Mr Bai Xianyong’s short stories “A Touch of Green” and “The Exiled Immortal” as the main research cases. Based on a modernist perspective, this paper investigates the horizontal correlation between female roles and the sense of tragedy. In addition, in the existing female tragedy thesis, this paper will also start from the typical female roles, in-depth analysis from the external environment, and the whole picture of the role to the tragic core of the deep perspective. In addition, in the existing thesis of female tragedy, this paper will also start from the typical female role and conduct a deep perspective from

the external environment, the whole picture of the role to the core of the tragedy. A more robust analysis of the spirit of women, the nature of female tragedy, and the symbolic narrative of tragedy in *A Touch of Green* and *the Exiled Immortals*.

2. Current Research Status

A Touch of Green was published in August 1966, and in 1971, it was incorporated into a collection of short stories called *Taipei People*, which caused a huge reaction in Hong Kong and Taiwan upon its release. In 2015, a TV adaptation of the same name was released. The overall narrative of the novel favors a straightforward narrative, mainly telling the story of Zhu Qing, a shy and youthful schoolgirl, and Guo Zhen, a young man left behind by the Air Force, who fall in love with each other and get married in the background of the resistance period, and then become shattered after losing their husbands in the civil war and the reliance on them, and gradually degenerate and become a socialite loved by everyone.

„*Exiled Immortal*,“ published in 1965 and included in the 1975 collection of novellas *The New Yorker*, was released in 1989 as *The Last Noblewoman*, an adaptation directed by Xie Jin, to wide critical acclaim. The novel „*Exiled Immortal*“ mainly tells the survival of the „*New Yorkers*“ who left their hometowns to study and live in the United States and depicts the survival predicament and spiritual desolation of the lost and fallen aristocrats under the general environment with „*Li Tong*“ as the main line.

Domestic research on „*Exiled Immortals*“ and „*A Touch of Green*“ has yielded more results. Among the existing studies on „*Exiled Immortal*,“ the dilemma of the group existence of *New Yorkers*, the discrete narrative, and the struggle of the „*Exiled Immortal*“ are the main research issues. Through the meaning of „*Banished Immortal*,“ the character of *Li Tong*’s transformation, his „untamed attitude to fight against fate,“ and the character’s ending of „*Suddenly the Immortal Dies*“ is explored in depth [1]. The author argues the tragic problem of „the strong and the weak fighting against each other“ in the general environment and the will of the characters being crushed by destiny. However, the author’s perspective focuses on the four „female“ aristocrats and the tragedy of women’s survival and loss in a foreign land, which *Li Tong* represents. However, few studies in the literature have analyzed the women in the social groups under the radiation of tragedy and have yet to analyze the issue of awareness and loss of women’s consciousness in depth. Literature studies on *A Touch of Green* focus on narrative content, writing techniques, and female tragedy. Most of it studies the tragedy of „*A Touch of Green*.“ Through the individual case of

Zhu Qing, we can observe the group image of existence in a special era. For example, the shrinking of *Zhu Qing* into a small portrait of an Air Force widow examines the issue of tragedy as an abstract blade that destroys the human spirit and pierces the will of the character’s role. The vertical framework then compares the transformation of identity and spirituality, arguing that „the tragedy of history creates the tragedy of man, and the loss of history ultimately leads to the loss of man’s destiny“ [2]. However, in the literature, the dimension of the tragic consciousness of the „women“ is still poorly developed and comprehensive.

In modern society, the awakening of women’s group consciousness makes them pay more attention to their inner search, so the study and exploration of tragic consciousness can help to promote the functional perfection of the future feminist literary criticism system. The study of tragedy in *A Touch of Green* and *Exiled Immortals* has laid a firm foundation for the study of women’s sense of tragedy in subsequent papers.

Based on a comprehensive examination of research results at home and abroad, existing studies mainly focus on the one-way argument of women or tragedy. In the existing literature, the research on the art form of the work mainly focuses on the tragedy of character roles, the tragedy of existence, and the origin of tragedy in *Mr Bai Xianyong*’s short stories. Regarding gender awareness, the existing studies have been conducted mainly with individual female characters typical of female group portraits. However, in terms of overall literature research perspectives, there are still gaps and shortcomings in studying transversal narratives within the binary oppositional thesis of women and tragedy.

Next, this paper mainly focuses on the causes of women’s tragic consciousness, the narrative of tragedy, the tragic ending, and analogical argumentation to analyze the „tragic“ color in *Bai Xianyong*’s works.

3. Causes of Tragedy: Imbalanced Times and Spiritual Exodus

In the textual context, the author somehow resonates with his works, and *Paik*’s works unconsciously reproduce the experience of „self.“ It was not until later, when I started writing that I realized that childhood memories are decisive for one’s creativity“ [3]. This kind of external environment, the experience of self under the great shock of the current situation, fills in the works and reveals the deep and silent outline of the tragedy. The tragedy was born as a result of the twin forces of „external shock, internal suicidal.” The tragedies of *A Touch of Green* and *Exiled Immortals* are abstract arguments for the imbalance

of the times and the drift of the female will. The author uses a compassionate context to look back and examine the impermanence of the world and the flow of the human heart dependent on the disillusionment of the female body. „The main line of the tragedy of „Zhu Qing“ and „Li Tong“ is participated in and watched by the secondary characters, who go through the process of catalyzing and destroying the spirit and flesh of the times and fight with the tragedy, and are forced to cripple and derive the intertwining outside the tragedy of the main body.

3.1 Volatility of the Situation

„The Exiled Immortal“ is included in *The New Yorker*, and „A Touch of Green“ is included in *Taipei People*. The two pieces do not carry the same theme, but they tacitly represent each other in the same picture of the big time, that is, the turbulent scene of the first half of the 20th century. It can be said that China, in such an era, is always a broken and fragmented image; the homeland is no longer the „spiritual utopia“ that people wish for, and even the fate of the characters has become absurd and unpredictable. In *The Exiled Immortal*, Li Tong’s parents were killed in the war aboard the Pacific Ocean liner, an imbalance in the external environment that directly led to Li Tong’s first step toward his death as an „immortal.“ Hidden in the silent signs is the demise of Li Tong’s female core. Lying in the hospital for more than a month, her family’s defeat has directly disconnected her from society. Li Tong indulged himself in the social flood, sad songs, and carnival, and he was indulgent and rotten again to watch the society. Such an attitude toward life is undoubtedly a reflection of the imbalance in the current situation.

In the same way, Zhu Qing suffers the tragedy of losing her husband soon after her marriage under the fixed „tragedy“ writing field of the domestic war, which also directly contributes to the drastic change of Zhu Qing’s role from a schoolgirl to a socialite, and from youthful shyness to softness. In Mr Paik’s works, the ups and downs of the times always involve the flow of the women’s destinies; in *A Touch of Green*, the women living in the eastern village of Ren’ai place most of their heartstrings on an airplane. Mrs. Zhou has married four times; her husbands are all from the same squad; Mrs. Xu’s husband died and married her brother-in-law; the writing of a few sentences places the women’s existence in a state of imbalance. The airplane shattered, the men shattered, and the women shattered with it. These female characters bear the shock and impact of the family in the endless twists and turns of history, and people under the era are helpless and lost. The female group is forced to become a crippled spiritual chimera. The force of tragedy highlights the sense of loss of women in the bleakness of the world and the imperma-

nence of life.

3.2 The Exodus of the Feminine Spirit

The Exodus is when people move around and lose their stable existence. The Exodus of the Feminine Spirit is an intrinsic characteristic of the spiritual dilemma of divesting oneself of physical existence, symbolizing the awakening of consciousness in tragedy. War is only the beginning of the tragedy for women, and the chain reaction is that women lose their spiritual outlet, and „hope“ becomes an unattainable spiritual need. Li Tong’s spiritual needs in *The Exiled Immortal* seem to be spiritual imagery that the author purposely conceals, unlike the *New Yorker* status of Huang Huifen, Zhang Jiaying, and the other three. The three of them fill the spiritual gap with the life process of women „arranged“ under the Chinese feudal system, falling in love, getting married, having children, and getting entangled in household chores. That is to say that their exits are outwardly open, while Li Tong is inwardly closed and inwardly seeking.

The aftereffects of a spiritual gap that cannot be bridged gradually emerge in Li Tong. She adopts an unruly attitude towards Zhou Daqing and Deng Maochang. She dances a windy cha-cha-cha on the dance floor, „with her eyes downcast, her brow furrowed, and her body swinging eagerly from side to side, as if she were an eyed serpent held in check by a magic flute, dancing uncontrollably and painfully, dancing to the point of disintegration“ [4]. Such a Li Tong is filled with the spirit of an ecstatic drunken god. Under the mask of absurdity is the calmness that comes after the struggle, the momentary rebellion of awakened consciousness, and finally, the chronic destruction that leaves itself silent.

The tragic consciousness exists after the tragedy, and the tragedy of the characters is often fatalistic. The upheaval of the social situation has given rise to the revolt against the tragic fate of women and the emergence of a tragic consciousness. Female tragic consciousness feedback on the female ontology represents the will’s dissolution and the spirit’s wandering. Zhu Qing’s spiritual migration is embodied in two processes: the transition from great sorrow to no sorrow. Zhu Qing, who had just received the news of Guo Jing’s death, said, „He’s good, he’s gone with a bang - I’m dead too, but I’m still conscious“ [5]. Tragedy strikes and shatters her spirit, leaving only a remnant of her soul to piece herself back together in the wreckage. In the second half of Mrs Qin’s perspective, Zhu Qing says, „A woman in a particularly enchanting dress came up, and as soon as she stood up, there was thunderous applause underneath... She stood on the stage, smiling without any shyness“ [5]. Zhu Qing shows a very different, completed metamorphosis without sorrow. In

the silent confrontation with tragedy, the tragic will of the female characters also dissolves and collapses step by step, finally falling into the subordination of tragedy.

4. Deep Narrative Techniques of Tragedy

Bai Xianyong's narrative approach is characterized by the "strong inclusion" of East and West, with the "delicate compassion" of traditional Chinese writing and the "nihilistic" existentialist influence of Western rationality. In the narrative form of "The Exiled Immortal" and "A Touch of Green," the writer expands the narrative capacity with an inward-focused perspective to show the connotation of the characters in a deeper way. Thus, in the presentation of both works, "the character is not just a shell, but it must have its unique spiritual orientation, just like the everyday person. The character's spirit should be greater than the character, on the one hand. On the other hand, the character's spirit should be greater than the reader's. There is reason to think that he should be greater than the reader himself and that he should be an infinitely richer vehicle" [6]. The "vehicle" that the writer wants to present comes from the "compassion" of the author's unique narrative perspective on female tragedy. In constructing virtual scenes and self-simulated perspectives, the most genuine female reaction to the tragedy is restored, and the delicate and pure "virtual senses" are used to feel the mournful murmur of the "female tragedy."

4.1 Same Level of Narrative: Participation of the "I" Consciousness

"Same-story narration" is a concept in classical narratology that refers to narration in which the narrator and the characters are on the same narrative level, where the narrator participates in the storyline, engages with the characters in the story, and has a dialogue and emotional connection, while at the same time narrating to the reader the context [7]. The objective detachment of the position taken by the first point of view narrator in the work is influenced by the same layer of narrative technique. This causes their psychological dimension to fluctuate with the protagonist's experiences or encounters, creating implicit fluctuations in consciousness. Chen Yin and Mrs Qin are typical first-perspective bystanders, and when tragedy acts on the main character, the psychological state of the bystanders invariably represents the reader's emotional changes.

Although Chen Yin meets Li Tong only a handful of times in *The Exiled Immortal*, he witnesses important changes in Li Tong's behavior and personality. Chen Yin's perspective is calmer than the other three female characters. He believes that Li Tong's beauty is „over-estimated“

by the others and that he is the only one who notices Li Tong's abnormality when she is verbally attacked by the other three and when everyone is excited about playing cards. When others do not understand Li Tong, Chen Yin, as an „unusual“ male perspective, can observe the „other side“ of Li Tong that is not perceived by the same sex. In other words, the author gazes at the space with the calmness and attentiveness of an object's perspective. After learning of Li Tong's suicide, "Chen Yin" gagging and silence become the author's alternative compassion for Li Tong's tragedy.

Under the same narrative perspective, the perspective of „A Touch of Green“ favors a „softer“ female perspective. It is not the ideological difference between male and female objects that makes the author choose to narrate from the point of view of „Mrs. Qin“ in the face of the „cruel“ and „fragmented“ environment of the object. To a certain extent, it can avoid weakening readers' psychological demand threshold caused by the „excessive objectivity“ of the male perspective. The tragedy that befalls the protagonist, the „handicap and loss,“ is forcefully displayed. As a spectator of the passing of a woman's soul, Mrs. Qin is not only a witness to the tragedy of Zhu Qing's transformation from a schoolgirl to a love interest but also a witness to the tragedy of the other wives and even a bearer of her tragedy as she silently swallows the bitter fruits of her destiny.

As the narrative progresses, the inwardly focused point of view begins to participate „nearer or farther“ in the fate of the protagonist. Like a viewfinder inwardly ingesting the character's appearance, personality, and particular events. The same story narrative perspective is integral to the strong narrative role in exploring the characters' consciousness and the tragedy's spiritual aspects. Beyond the missed, uninvolved perspectives, as the dialogue between the characters presents vacancies, the hazy, abstract expression also embodies the beauty of white space in the traditional Chinese narrative.

4.2 Analogue Female Position

Bai Xianyong is best at expressing women's survival through compassion, romance, and rebellion, and most of his women embody suffering. Writers dissolve the „external“ creative position and integrate the desire for „desire“ and „spirit“ into the portrayal of women [8]. The birth of tragedy, in general, is attributed to the expansion of desire, and the author does not show the suffering of women in such a way. Instead, they place their souls in the „female-oriented“ shells and simulate themselves, restoring the vulnerability of women in times of society with the most delicate emotions and restoring the real responses of women to all kinds of cramped situations. The writer

does not lay out too much in the analog stance and shows the protagonist's plight in simple words and phrases. The fates of the women in the articles are always twisting and turning: Zhu Qing's struggle to submit to the „four sides of the fence“ situation., Mrs. Qin's half a lifetime of fear, and Li Tong's sad death amid her „beauty,“ etc. Under the whip of fate, „all kinds of resistance and helplessness, with a kind of self „spirit,“ perish at the end, sadly building a bridge of mutual understanding between the writer and the reader.

Unlike the analog female position in „A Touch of Green,“ although the narrative perspective in „The Exiled Immortal“ is „male,“ „I“ is also „Chen Yin,“ to a certain extent, also represents the author's concern for women's point of view. Huang Huifen underestimates the beauty of Li Tong from the perspective of „Chen Yin“, who sees Li Tong as the rising sun at sea level and as extremely beautiful. This male-oriented perspective abstracts from the concept of gender itself and is simply modeled by the author as a positive expression of the female figure. The author makes this analog position „invisible.“ He writes in a cold and stoic tone about the true nature of women's lives under the double siege of patriarchal society and old morality. He explores women's „survival“ and „existence“ [8]. This reductive way of parsing the self and self-imagination deconstructs the essence of female tragedy more deeply. To realize the „psychological identification“ of female readers with the tragic consciousness of women's „spirit and flesh“ in the „analog position.“

5. Tragic Endings: The Death of the Female “Soul” under Predestination

„Fate“ is often combined with tragedy to reflect life's established patterns and destinies, a combination of time and scenarios. Bai Xianyong has his unique way of expressing the proposition of destiny, and he always uses the tragedy of destiny to trace the predicament of women's existence. Fate plays as a shadow hand, and female characters are puppets on controlled strings. Therefore, they cannot break away from the tragedy of their destiny. The birth of tragedy heralds the „destruction“ of the woman, either in flesh and blood or in soul.

Li Tong's tragedy begins with the fall of a Chinese princess, the death of her parents, and the loss of her family's business. The sudden twist of fate causes her to suppress her crippled spirit. Thus, „the need to numb herself to pleasure through alcohol and the alcohol gets stronger and stronger, precisely because she becomes more and more lonely inside, and the threshold of pleasure grows higher and higher with it“ [9]. She also began her banishment from her emotions and her life. The spirit's demise is

cascading and cumulative, and the body's sinking is the physical manifestation of the spirit's demise. In the end, Li Tong chose to commit suicide by jumping into the water in Venice, which resulted in the destruction of her body and soul and also completed her „banishment.“

Li Tong's Venetian „Death of the Flesh“ is compared to Wu Hanhun in „Death in Chicago,“ although it has the same ending as „Suicide in the Lake.“ On the other hand, „ending“ is a tragedy of the character bidding farewell to culture, spiritual disorientation, and emptiness of life, and it is the result of the aberration of the soul. To some extent, Li Tong has something in common with the women in the Grand View Garden presented in Cao Xueqin's work *The Story of the Stone*. They are all witnesses of the times, participants in glory, and bearers of the tragedy of fate, which invisibly participated in the slaughter of women's souls and gave them tragic endings.

According to Ouyang Zi, „Spirit is love, ideal, spirit. Flesh is sexual desire, reality, and flesh. In Bai Xianyong's fictional world, the tension and pulling force between spirit and flesh is extremely strong. The two sides fight with each other, leaving no room for compromise“ [10]. Zhu Qing's entanglement with the Air Force Brigade runs throughout the text. Zhu Qing's attitude towards the deaths of Guo Zhen and Xiao Gu varied greatly. From a „slack-eyed,“ „dead-skinned,“ „eyes dented into two big holes“ to calmly taking care of Gu's aftermath. Zhu Qing has undoubtedly gone through a long spiritual and physical struggle to escape the temporal dilemma and accept his self, whose soul has long since faded away, without sorrow and love. Zhu Qing's ending seems to accept the ineffectiveness of the resistance to tragedy. Yet, the spirit abstracted within the flesh has long since faded, laughing at the afterlife amid life's impermanence, and the dead souls sleep forever. The author deliberately simplifies the process of spiritual and physical entanglement, highlighting the contrast between before and after, where the opposition and conflict between the spirit and the flesh further accentuates the powerlessness of women to break free from their destiny and is full of bitter and tragic power.

If fate has placed its bets, a woman cannot choose where her spirit will go. However, the other three „Chinese princesses“ seem to be living a happy life in a foreign country, marrying, having children, owning their own business, fully supporting their partner's business, and retreating to their own families. Compared to Li Tong's death, „arrogantly sweeping the table full of chips to her“ and „shouting and laughing so much that tears flowed out of her eyes.“ The futility of life makes them use the howl of playing poker to proclaim the victory of their remaining bodies, but their souls have long been lost in their homeland, lost in the bustle of New York. Moreover, Mrs

Zhou and Mrs Xu have been „consigned“ repeatedly. Zhu Qing asked about the reality that they were „still talking and laughing,“ to which the mistress replied, „If you don't laugh, do you want to cry?“ and „If you want to cry, you can't wait until now.“ Two words of cold truth slowly tear the tragedy of the female community apart in blood.

6. Conclusion

By selecting two representative works of Bai Xianyong, this paper explores three aspects of women's tragic causes, tragic narratives, and tragic endings. The portrayal of women in both works is not necessarily the most typical and influential but is full of factual attributions of the writers' deep concern for the female community. There are many female characters in Bai Xianyong's novels, and the depiction of female tragedy has developed its own unique and charming writing style.

The author endows female characters such as Li Tong, Zhu Qing, Huang Huifen, and Mrs Qin with a primitive and natural aura, and the presence of a tragic consciousness prompts them to think about their lives with a gesture of cultural retrospection. Perhaps tragedy is the fruit of fate's argument, but there is a unique vitality in them that readers may be able to perceive and touch. In this regard, the paper illustrates the tragedy of women and the roles derived from the confrontation of consciousness. The study provides a research direction for transmuting the fate of women's groups in the context of social identity and self-identity.

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