

A Study of the Minor Nobodies in *Rickshaw Boy*

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Abstract. Minor characters usually refer to characters in novels with ordinary character settings and no background. This paper takes the specific writing of minor nobodies in *Rickshaw Boy* as the object of study. In terms of character categorization, the gender of minor nobodies is used as a criterion to make a simple distinction, and then the characters' personality traits are analyzed in detail. Through character analysis, it is found that the number of female nobodies is relatively small, and the types of roles are relatively single, and among them, there is more emphasis on the role of disenfranchised women, which shows the tragic situation of women who lost their human rights at that time under the social environment. The role of male nobodies is more complex and three-dimensional, with both writing in individual roles and in group image, and the significance of writing is not confined to the role portrayal and the metaphor behind it, but also plays a role in promoting the development of the plot.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background of the study

Most existing research on the portrayal of minor characters focuses on specific works or particular authors. For example, in Zhang Xu's *The Image of Nobodies in The Scholars*, the nobodies are analyzed in the context of the text, and the significance of the nobodies in the text and even for the society is explored in depth, which has a corroborating effect on the analysis of the artistic value of the work [1]. Ren Huanhua's *Study on the Image of Nobodies in Chen Yan's Novels* believes that Chen Yan's novels inherited the influence of Pushkin, Chekhov and other writers in 19th-century, praising the weak, recording the nobodies, and showing that modern intellectuals have deep thoughts about the society [2].

Lao She's masterpiece, *Rickshaw Boy*, centers on Xiangzi's personal perspective, starting with Xiangzi's dream of going to the city to pull a rickshaw and ending with his broken dream, despair and degradation in the big city, which led to his spiritual death, shows the tragedy of the small people who were powerless to resist and suffered from bullying and humiliation under the giant wave of the society. Among them, Xiangzi, Tigress, Liusiye, Xiaofuzi, a brutal boss of a rickshaw dealership, a reactionary warlord, Detective Sun, Erqiangzi, Mr. Gao and so on are all nobodies, and it is these nobodies that paint a huge picture of social reality. According to the detailed content of the characters in this paper, the

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nobodies in the book are divided into two categories: Xiangzi, Tigress, the two main nobodies and Liu, Xiaofuzi, Detective Sun and others as minor nobodies. By reviewing the literature, a large number of scholars' researches on nobodies mainly focused on Xiangzi, Tigress two main nobodies, while studies on small characters are directly related to this paper, but the research results are few.

1.2 Literature review

The concept of minor nobodies originated from the collection of novels *Belkin* published by the Russian writer Pushkin in 1830, which opened the precedent of portraying nobodies in the history of Russian literature [3, 4]. Unlike China, Russian nobodies mostly depicted minor officials without status at the bottom of the society, and attacked the dark rule of the time with their tragic fate [2].

The portrayal of nobodies in Chinese literary history is even more far-reaching, which can be dated back to the Middle and Late Tang dynasties. The object of writing is more inclined to the mundane life of ordinary people, without the political color of attacking the rule.

Academic research on the image of nobodies in Lao She's *Rickshaw Boy* focuses mainly on Xiangzi, Tigress and other major characters. Through the analysis of the changes in character and mentality, the society's oppression of the working people was revealed. These studies showed that although the peasant class had "entered the city", the thinking mode still retained the conservative and uncivilized characteristics of the rural society [5].

Under the squeeze of society, such a small wish of "buying a rickshaw" was impossible to realize. The struggle of the peasants in the big cities showed the dire living environment of the people in Beijing in the 1920s.

Different from the previous main analysis of Xiangzi and Tigress, this study focuses on analyzing the secondary nobodies of Rickshaw Boy. It analyzes the characters from both female and male perspectives in combination with the text. The study starts with several nobodies who have been written for a relatively long length and have distinctive personalities. It seeks to identify the symbols and representative groups behind the characters and to discover the value and significance of the writing of nobodies.

2 Multiple perspectives on minor nobodies' characterization

2.1 Female nobodies represented by Gao Ma, Xiaofuzi, etc.

In *Rickshaw Boy*, female nobodies are given less attention and are often portrayed as male subordinates, such as a male minor character's wife, a gentleman's maid, or a prostitute. Gao Ma and Xiaofuzi are the female characters with the most detailed descriptions in the entire text.

2.1.1 Gao Ma

Gao Ma represents the traditional image of a female citizen. As a widow and a servant, Gao Ma is shrewd, generous and quick in her actions. Language accounts for most of Lao She's depictions of Gao Ma, such as Gao Ma's voice coming first before she appeared on the stage: "*Xiangzi!*" Gao Ma, the Cao's maid, shouted loudly, "*Xiangzi! Where are you?*" "*What a moment for you! He hid himself here without saying a word; Look, scare me! Mister called you!*" [6] After greeting and seeing Xiangzi's injury, Gao Ma skillfully resolved Xiangzi's embarrassing situation in a few words, making Mrs. Cao see Xiangzi's injury and thus

forgiving Xiangzi's faults. In terms of treating her property, Gao Ma had the foresight to deposit her income into the bank for interest or lend it to others for interest in an environment where no one else is comfortable with lending, and she also genuinely suggested Xiang Zi to manage his finances in this way as well. This advanced perspective beyond the times was not found in any of the other female characters in the book, and her ability to stand on her own to genuinely give Xiang Zi suggestions also reflects her goodness [7]. Gao Ma's way of handling money contrasts sharply with Er Qiangzi's practice of squandering it all and Liu Siye's practice of being a miser, highlighting her wise way of dealing with people in a chaotic world. Therefore, although the whole text does not give any indication of her ending, she could surely live steadily in the ways of the world.

2.1.2 Xiaofuzi

Xiaofuzi, on the other hand, represented the disenfranchised women under the patriarchal system. This group of people grew up under the poison of patriarchal ideology, seeking survival value at the cost of dedication to the family and self-sacrifice, and losing their human rights, and even being treated as commodities and goods for transaction at will. They were often docile and capable, and were the good wives and mothers that traditional men craved. They were often submissive, did not resist, and had to support their fathers, brothers, husbands, sons, and even nephews for the rest of their lives. The women in the compound were typical of this kind of women, and Lao She has a full-page description of these women: "*They only have rags hanging from their bodies, a bowl or half a bowl of porridge in their bellies, or they are six or seven months pregnant... The ugly ones will inherit everything from their mothers; The one who has a look, even himself knows that sooner or later it will be sold by his parents and enjoy it!*" [6]" Disenfranchised women were like livestock kept in captivity, numbly doing laundry and cooking, getting pregnant and giving birth to children, and being trapped under the roof and on the bed for the rest of their lives. Xiaofuzi was a representative character among the women in the compound, whose tragic end could be predicted before she even appeared. When she was sold to an officer, her mother, Erqiangzi's wife, "*with red eyelids, cried for her daughter while she put on her new blue coat*", and her father, Erqiangzi, "*often drank a few compotes of wine, and when he had tears in his eyes after drinking, he was particularly good at finding fault, and the number of times Erqiangzi's wife was beaten had almost doubled...*" [6]". The parents take money from the sale of their daughter to dress themselves in new clothes, the mother does not dare to rebel against her husband, and the father still sits around every day, beating people and drinking, this kind of morbid family relationship caused Xiaofuzi's final death ending. Xiaofuzi was first sold to an army officer. After being abandoned, she returned home to raise her two younger brothers by prostituting herself in the tigress's room. In the face of her father's verbal abuse and demands, she often chose to endure, such as in the midst of being humiliated and isolated by the Tigress, "*She brought her little brother over and knelt down for Tigress.*" [6]" For Little Fuzi's forbearance, Lao She explained, "*The greatest sacrifice is forbearance, and the greatest forbearance is preparation for resistance.*" [6]" The only time Xiaofuzi has self-consciousness in the whole book is when she packs up the aftermath of Tigress's death in childbirth, she first does the household chores for Xiang Zi, and then suggests that Xiang Zi can marry her. However, Xiang Zi refused her request. Coupling with the sudden appearance of Erqiangzi as well as the insults, her only hope was then dashed. In Xiaofuzi's own conception, Xiang Zi, as a profiteer in the patriarchal society, can only save herself from the fire. Under the patriarchal brainwashing, Xiaofuzi can't think of saving herself. In fact, no matter whether it is the officer, Erqiangzi or Xiang Zi, Xiaofuzi can only be a victim in the interest of survival [8]. After Xiaofuzi was sold to the white house, she also chose to die quietly, from the mouth of the "white face pocket": "*But the tongue did not spit out much, the face is not ugly, to the point*

of death, she is still pleasing to the eye! After so many months, there is nothing in the woods at night, and she does not come out to frighten people, how kind! [6] "Xiaofuzi's death was silent and harmless. Her tragedy indicates the disenfranchised women through sexual relations to obtain the right to live, and the inevitable result of being abandoned by the family because of the loss of use value. This kind of tragedy does not just stay in the book Rickshaw boy, in today's society still exists, and is thought-provoking.

2.1.3 Mrs. Xia and the "White Pocket"

The portrayal of Mrs. Xia and "White Face Pocket" showed two ways out for women who had lost their power - to be a concubine and to be a prostitute. Mrs. Xia, as a concubine, was kept in a house, tempting Mr. Xia with her body to take drugs to have sex with her, and conveying her temptation to Xiangzi by stealing a look to spend her time in a flirtatious and lonely way; "White-faced Pocket", who was famous for a pair of white and long breasts, smiled and laughed in a white house, and got by. The depiction of the two women who had lost their human rights in the text was inseparable from "sex". Starting from the perspective of Xiangzi's male gaze, the depiction of the women's own physical characteristics was linked to men's desires and power, and the men, through the "privilege of using functions" in the patriarchal society, treated the women as sexual resources to be allocated and disposed of at will, showing that women in old Chinese society passively become "symbols of male power and desire" under the squeeze of the times [9].

As for the two women themselves, they were empty shells without souls, reduced to sexual resources for the enjoyment of men in a chaotic world, with no ability to survive on their own, and serving men with sex. This type of woman would not realize their disempowering situation until they die, let alone fight against it.

Gao Ma and Xiaofuzi represented the two types of traditional Chinese women: the old, calculating woman and the gentle, traditional wife and mother. Both of them come from the common class, but their destinies are very different. This huge difference highlights the necessity for women to obtain human rights in the first place.

2.2 Male nobodies such as Liusiye, Erqiangzi and Detective Sun

The different attitudes towards the handling of money, Liusiye, Erqiangzi, and Detective Sun showed the huge personality differences of the male minor characters.

Liusiye held onto his money, from a commoner but pretentious, treating the ricksha pullers with disdain, even reluctant to spend more money to order good food at his birthday banquet; Erqiangzi sold his daughter and squandered all money immediately, always drunk and good for nothing, beat his wife so that caused her death, did not care his two sons, and often insulted his daughter who prostituted to support the family with a grudge in his heart; Detective Sun rode roughshod over people, extorting and robbing Xiangzi's money, but also responsible for the family, making money only to support the family. Three different images were set up to show the alienation of society from human nature. Liusiye towards the extreme miser, and ultimately widowed. Erqiangzi killed his wife and sold his daughter, stepped to degeneration. After selling the family's sole breadwinner, Xiaofuzi, he would certainly not be able to support two young sons. His end can be seen. Detective Sun tyrannically abused his power for the warlords, but Ruan Ming who had a higher rank than him had collapsed. Detective Sun could not settle down in the era of unstable situations. The fate of the male nobodies shows the tragedy of the lowest working people in the old Chinese society who cannot change their own destiny [10].

In addition to the analysis of the image of specific male nobodies, *Rickshaw Boy* also contains many depictions of male groups, such as the rickshaw pullers, soldiers, and carriage drivers, which can be categorized as the proletariat in pre-liberation Beijing, and was favored by many writers of left-wing literature. From the perspective of the underclass proletariat, when Lao She wrote group portraits, he usually took the performance of people in a big scene as a clue to start the narrative, explaining the logic of the survival of the underclass people in Beijing, and criticizing the underclass commoners' inferiority of bullying the weak, fearing the strong, and following the crowd blindly [11].

3 Reasons for the tragic formation of nobodies

3.1 Social context and limitations of the times

Beiping in the 1920s maintained a state of semi colonial and semi-feudal rule under the background of warlordism, with class solidification and warlordism, the people's survival was under great pressure and opportunities were limited. The status constrained the peasants in the city to only engage in related labor at the bottom, and it was difficult to survive on a meager income. Once possessing a small portion of wealth, people tended to form two extremes, such as Xiang Zi, who became a degenerate eventually, spent money as soon as he had it, and consumed it with a vengeance Liusiye, who held all the rickshaw firmly in his hands and turned into a downright miser. The alienation of society mutated and alienated human nature. The tragedy in the writing of nobodies reflects the tragedy of the society and era, and the characterization is closely intertwined with the maladies in the social structure.

3.2 The shackle of old China's own national inferiority

The term national character can be traced back to Lu Xun, and Lao She has also portrayed much about national character in this book. For example, Chun Cao represents the image of hardworking and tenacious peasants; Gao Ma represents the image of shrewd and enthusiastic traditional middle-aged women; Xiaofuzi also represents the image of traditional disempowered women. Whether it is Chun Cao, Gao Ma, Xiaofuzi or Sun Detective, their thoughts still retain the feudal tradition of small farmers. Although they entered the city, their thoughts did not progress. The traditional concepts deeply poisoned the grassroots. The real reason of their own tragic experiences was that they were not awakening and uncivilized.

At the same time, this kind of villainous character such as Liusiye and Detective Sun who were dishonest, unkind, and had harmful intentions, amplified the inferiority of human nature, which was also the reason why they themselves headed towards tragedy.

4 The connotation of the image of nobodies and its value

4.1 The in-depth level of Characterization

4.1.1 The plot is interlinked

Nobodies play an indispensable role in developing the plot, and their behaviors, choices and destinies directly affect the main characters and the direction of the whole story. Taking the plot of *Rickshaw Boy* as an example, Detective Sun sold Xiangzi into the barracks and made Xiangzi lose his first rickshaw, which is the first important plot of the whole text. The loss of the first rickshaw briefly deprived Xiangzi of his financial resources, which set the stage

for him to work for Liusiye later. For example, Xiangzi liked to go to Cao's house to pull a cart, and regarded it as an oasis in the desert which could bring him cleanness and quietness. In addition to the fact that Mr. Cao was kinder and more courteous than Mr. Yang and Mr. Xia, it had a great deal to do with the fact that the maid of Cao's house, Mrs. Gao, was very caring and considerate to him [12].

Another example is the death of Xiaofuzi, which made Xiang Zi lose the last straw, and caused his complete degradation and spiritual death, portraying the cannibalism of the society at that time. The fate of nobodies is intertwined with the main character, pushing the main storyline forward slowly.

4.1.2 *Minor character symbol connotation*

Different personalities of nobodies show the diversity of society, and the interactions and conflicts between these characters reflect the characteristics of people getting along with each other under the influence of different cultural backgrounds and values, as well as the complexity of human nature. At the same time, the destinies of the different nobodies show the different yet harmonious lives of different classes in the context of the times. This epitome of the times provides readers with food for thought.

4.2 The value of writing - creative psychology and literary generation

Lao She said, "*Everything in the appearance of the rickshaw pullers must have a life and life-like basis, and I must find this root in order to write a society of laborers* [13]." The precise portrayal of human nature in *Rickshaw Boy* all comes from the real-life small people at the bottom of Beijing. Lao She substitutes the way of behavior and choices of the minor nobodies in an empathetic way, feeling the struggle and sinking of the nobodies, reflecting the solidification of social class, the hardship of the underclass people, and the moral degradation of the national nature at that time.

In terms of literary generation, Lao She's psychological description reaches the acme of perfection, and the narrative is easy to understand and interesting. Writing about nobodies in a popular way is more likely to resonate with the readers. At the same time, Lao She's unique Beijing narrative style and the description of Beijing also have a strong personal charm, completely and vividly showing the regional characteristics of the nobodies.

5 Conclusion

The writing of minor nobodies in *Rickshaw Boy*, as a part of the writing of characterization in the whole text, has made a great contribution to the plot, image-shaping and representative metaphors. In Lao She's writing, whether it is Gao Ma, Xiaofuzi, Liusiye, Erqiangzi or Detective Sun, Mrs. Xia, their life trajectories were condensed in the text, and the trajectories of the development of nobodies' destiny are intertwined and converge to a general characteristics of the era--in the chaotic world with fighting between warlords, the majority of the lower class people could not have a good life, and people lived in the oppression, forced to degenerate, and ultimately to perish.

This paper consists of three parts. Firstly, the minor nobodies are divided into two categories according to gender, and then the representative characters with larger writing spaces are selected. After a specific analysis based on the text, it is found that most of the women in this era were confined to their homes as housewives or maids or prostitutes, and that most of the women were disenfranchised and traded as commodities of sexual resources, and that it was almost impossible for women to find a proper and stable job at that

time, and they eventually degraded themselves and went to death. In this era, men had more rights than women, but they could not escape the oppression of the upper class, barely supporting the family's livelihood with a meager salary. Under great social pressure, many of them had extreme and alienated personalities, and ultimately could not escape from the end of the death. Secondly, carried out based on the background of this era, the research found that the tragedy of the nobodies themselves is the bad result caused by both social and personal factors. Social instability, and class differences are so large that nobodies can not receive education, still retaining most of the traditional ideas of small farmer society; class solidification makes the nobodies often empty, easy to lose the goal of struggle, low ideological and ethical standards; Part of the national character of the nobodies themselves is also one of the factors that lead them to complete defeat. Finally, by analyzing the connotation of nobodies and their value, it can be concluded that minor characters are as important as major characters, and the study of the value of minor characters has an indispensable role in analyzing the text and major characters. The writing of minor nobodies can also show the author's writing habits and creative psychology, which also has a significant contribution to the study of creative psychology and literary generation.

The images of minor nobodies in Rickshaw boy carry the rich spiritual world of Lao She, which not only explains the dark state of Beijing society at the beginning of the twentieth century, but also constructs full images of minor characters and spiritual outlook, and has a complementary and perfect value for the study of the character image in Rickshaw Boy. Therefore, the writing of nobodies in Rickshaw Boy has greater research significance and research space.

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