



An Ecofeminist Interpretation of *The Border Town*

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Abstract. This paper explores the relationship between nature and women, as well as the construction of an ideal society in Shen Congwen's *The Border Town* from an ecofeminist perspective. Shen Congwen's upbringing profoundly shaped his literary focus on nature and women, which is intricately woven into *The Border Town*, resulting in a unique stylistic narrative. The study analyzes the identity between nature and female characters in the novel, revealing the binary oppositions between men and women, nature and civilization, and highlighting the impact of modern civilization on natural humanity. Through poetic depictions of nature and nuanced character relationships, Shen Congwen not only emphasizes the intrinsic connection between nature and women but also critiques the dualistic contradictions of modern society, offering cultural and spiritual foundations for envisioning an ideal society.

Keywords: *The Border Town*; ecofeminism; Shen Congwen; nature and women; binary opposition

1 Introduction

The *Border Town* is one of Shen Congwen's representative works, in which the objective tone of describing the natural and cultural landscapes of Chadong constitutes the narrative context of its subject matter, presenting a beautiful and melodious picture of Xiangxi.[1] This work not only showcases the natural scenery and folk customs of Xiangxi, but also contains profound humanistic care and pursuit of social ideals. The rise of ecofeminism provides a fresh lens for interpreting *The Border Town*. Ecofeminism integrates traditional feminist theory—emphasizing diversity, deconstructing binary oppositions such as man/woman, culture/nature, and reason/emotion—with ecological principles that advocate liberation from oppression and the pursuit of holistic harmony [2]. This paper examines the relationship between nature and women in *The Border Town* and Shen Congwen's literary endeavor to construct an idealized society.

2 The Author's Focus on Nature and Women

Shen Congwen (1902–1988), born Shen Yuehuan in Fenghuang County, Hunan Province, is a pivotal figure in modern Chinese literature. His formative years in the picturesque, culturally rich landscapes of western Hunan deeply influenced his literary preoccupation with nature and women. Immersed in the region's mountains, rivers, and rural life during his childhood, Shen developed an enduring emotional bond with nature.

The natural environment of western Hunan not only furnished Shen with abundant literary material but also shaped his aesthetic and ethical values. The border town in *The Border Town* is nestled by mountains and rivers, and people's lives are closely related to the natural environment. Rivers are not only the background of life, but also the thread of life. People wash clothes, fish, and play by the river, and the river integrates into every corner of local residents' lives. [3] In his works, nature often assumes a sacred role, symbolizing spiritual refuge. Concurrently, Shen's empathy for women stems from his early exposure to the resilient yet marginalized women of Hunan. Their diligence and vulnerability under patriarchy inspired him to imbue female characters with symbolic significance, intertwining their identities with nature to reflect both gentleness and fortitude.

Shen Congwen's writing was deeply influenced by his upbringing, and he incorporated his concern for nature and women into his works, forming a unique literary style. The connection between women and nature has a long and profound historical and cultural origin. [4] As his representative work, *The Border Town* embodies his profound understanding and emotional attachment to nature and women. Through delicate depictions of the natural scenery of Xiangxi and the portrayal of female characters, Shen Congwen conveyed his thoughts on the relationship between nature and humanity, as well as his pursuit of an ideal society.

3 The Identity Between Nature and Women

3.1 Construction of Nature and Female Roles

In *The Border Town*, Shen Congwen constructs a poetic world through vivid descriptions of western Hunan's natural environment. The novel's setting—Chadong Town's clear streams, emerald bamboo forests, towering white pagodas, and seasonal transitions—serves not merely as a backdrop but also mirrors the protagonist Cuicui's persona, forming a cohesive literary imagery.

Cuicui, the central female character, embodies the fusion of nature and femininity. Her name, Cuicui, evokes the verdant hues of bamboo and vitality. Her innocence, simplicity, and agility resonate with the rhythms of nature. Living harmoniously within the landscape, she washes clothes by the stream and wanders through bamboo groves, becoming an extension of the natural world. Shen's portrayal positions Cuicui as "nature's daughter"—a personification of the environment itself.

Cuicui's physical traits further reinforce her symbiosis with nature: "Nurtured by

sun and wind, her skin turned dark; her eyes, accustomed to green hills and clear waters, sparkled like crystal. Nature has nurtured and educated her, and she is innocent and lively, like a little beast everywhere—oblivious to cruelty, free from sorrow or anger” [5]. These descriptions transcend mere aesthetics, underscoring her existential unity with nature.

3.2 Nature and Female Destiny

In *The Border Town*, the natural environment is not only the background, but also an important factor affecting the fate of women. Cuicui's fate is closely linked to the changes in nature, which symbolize the ups and downs of her destiny. The novel repeatedly mentions the seasonal changes of nature, including the vitality of spring, the warmth of summer, the desolation of autumn, and the silence of winter. These changes not only reflect Cuicui's inner world, but also imply the turning point of her destiny.

Cuicui's love story is the core of her destiny. Her love began on the Dragon Boat Festival when she met Nuo Song by the river. The lively scene of the Dragon Boat Festival echoes the vitality of nature, symbolizing the bud of Cuicui's love. However, as the story progresses, the natural environment gradually becomes desolate, and Cuicui's love also encounters setbacks. After her grandfather passed away, Cuicui faced the difficulties of life alone, and the silence and desolation of the natural environment highlighted her inner loneliness and helplessness.

Shen Congwen demonstrated the impermanence and fragility of women's fate through changes in the natural environment. The unpredictability of nature symbolizes the uncertainty of women's fate, while the beauty and cruelty of nature reflect the situation of women in a patriarchal society. Cuicui's fate is closely linked to nature, and her joys, sorrows, and happiness all correspond to the changes in nature. The connection between nature and the fate of women is precisely the identity of nature and women that ecofeminism focuses on.

4 Binary Oppositions in *The Border Town*

4.1 Male-Female Binary Opposition

In *The Border Town*, the presentation of binary opposition between men and women is not simply a gender conflict, but a complex relationship interwoven through the personalities, emotional expressions, and social and cultural backgrounds of the characters. The male world is more constrained by responsibility, courage, and social norms, while women exhibit a purity and passivity nurtured by nature and emotions.

Taking Tianbao and Nuosong as examples, they represent bravery and responsibility in the male world. Tianbao chose the "car road" to seek marriage, following the path of traditional etiquette, reflecting men's sense of responsibility and response to family expectations; Nuo Song, on the other hand, tends to focus on the "road" and expresses emotions through singing, showcasing men's romantic and free pursuits. However, this choice also reflects the contradiction of men - the hesitation between tradition and modernity, family and personal emotions. In the end, Tianbao chose to travel far away

due to the inability to receive Cuicui's love, while Nuo Song left due to family changes and misunderstandings about Cuicui. Under the dual pressure of emotions and responsibilities, the male was forced to leave.

In contrast, as a representative of female images, Cuicui's world is more surrounded by nature and emotions, and her innocence and nature blend together. However, this innocence also made her appear naive and passive when facing love. When the old boatman asked her about Tianbao's marriage, she "never lifted her head, her heart was pounding, and her face was burning badly" [5]. This shyness and silence reflect women's passivity in emotional expression. Her desire for love is not initiated, but expressed through dreams and waiting, such as being lured by singing in her dreams and flying to the cliff to pick tiger ear grass.

4.2 Nature-Civilization Binary Opposition

In *The Border Town*, there is not only a binary opposition between men and women, but also a binary opposition between nature and the development of civilization. Shen Congwen vividly portrayed the binary opposition between nature and civilization through the symbolic contrast between the mill and the ferry. As a symbol of modern civilization, the mill represents wealth, materialism, and worldly success, while the ferry symbolizes nature, purity, and the simplicity of human nature. This opposition is not only reflected on the material level, but also more deeply in the choices and destinies of characters.

The old boatman's envy of the mill reflects his thirst for wealth and potential identification with modern social values. He accompanied Cuicui to watch the Loong Boat race, but showed great interest in the water mill, which implied his longing for material life. However, this yearning is not driven by the pursuit of money itself, but by a desire for a more stable and dignified life. His mentality was universal in the social context of that time, but at the same time, it also formed a sharp contrast with the natural environment and traditional way of life in which he lived.

Unlike the old boatman, the choice of Nuo Song reflects a steadfast commitment to nature and humanity. He would rather choose the ferry than accept the wealth represented by the mill. In Nuo Song's eyes, the purity of love and humanity is far more important than material wealth. His choice is not only to uphold traditional values, but also to defend nature and humanity. The attitude of Nuo Song is precisely the embodiment of the natural humanity of the people of Xiangxi that Shen Congwen praises, representing a pure spiritual realm that has not been polluted by modern civilization.

However, Shunshun's choice is closer to the values of modern society. As a person who makes money wisely and recognized the truth of modern material society earlier, Shunshun deeply understands the importance of wealth and material possessions. He chose to mill and abandon the ferry not only for his own benefit, but also to create a better future for his son. Shunshun's choice reflects the influence of modern society on people, even in the remote border towns of western Hunan, where the values of modern civilization are gradually permeating.

The ending of the novel further reinforces the opposition between nature and civilization. The death of Tian Bao and the departure of Nuo Song indicate that under the

impact of modern society, it has become extremely difficult to uphold natural human nature. The natural way of life represented by the ferry is gradually being replaced by the civilization represented by the mill, and Cuicui's resistance appears powerless. She is unwilling to go to the ship's headquarters, reflecting the spontaneous resistance of rural Chinese individuals to modern society, but this resistance ultimately cannot change the direction of reality.

Through this opposition between nature and civilization, *The Border Town* profoundly reveals the suppression of natural human nature by modern civilization, as well as the eternal conflict that modern human survival brings about. Shen Congwen portrayed this conflict with delicate brushstrokes and expressed his helpless melancholy and compassion for the fate of modern humanity. This opposition is not only one of the core themes of *The Border Town*, but also a profound reflection on modern society by Shen Congwen, reminding us that while pursuing material civilization, we should not ignore the authenticity of nature and human nature.

5 Constructing an Ideal Society: Dismantling Binaries, Envisioning a "Western Hunan" Utopia

Despite the binary opposition in *The Border Town*, Shen Congwen did not completely fall into pessimism. He attempted to construct an idealized society through literary creation - the "Pure Land of Xiangxi". In this ideal society, he downplayed the conflict between men and women, regarded both men and women as a part of nature, emphasized the harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, and through the depiction and imagination of the Xiangxi world, we see a true, good, and beautiful Xiangxi world, allowing people to see the shining star like light in their hopeless lives.[6]

The Xiangxi depicted by Shen Congwen is an unpolluted pure land, in stark contrast to the hypocritical urban civilization. Here, people live a simple life, following the laws of nature and maintaining pure emotions. Although Cuicui and her grandfather's life is simple, it is full of poetry and warmth. Shen Congwen conveyed his pursuit of an ideal society by depicting the natural scenery and folk customs of Xiangxi.

The binary opposition naturalizes the ruling relationship, therefore it is the epistemological foundation of the ruling culture.[7] In an ideal society, the relationship between men and women is no longer binary opposition, but a harmonious whole of mutual respect and interdependence. Shen Congwen demonstrated this vision of downplaying gender conflicts through the character relationships and plot design in *The Border Town*. For example, the familial bond between Cuicui and her grandfather transcends the constraints of traditional gender roles and becomes a pure human love. Grandpa's care for Cuicui is not based on patriarchal control, but on respect and love for life; And Cuicui's dependence on her grandfather is not a weakness of women, but a cherishing of family affection and the inheritance of traditional virtues. This kind of familial relationship based on human nature became an important cornerstone of Shen Congwen's ideal society construction.

At the same time, Shen Congwen's delicate description of folk customs in western Hunan also provided cultural soil for the construction of an ideal society. In *The Border*

Town, the Loong Boat race on the Loong Boat Festival, the moon night duet on the Mid Autumn Festival, and the fireworks and firecrackers on the New Year's Day are not only important parts of people's life in western Hunan, but also symbols of harmonious coexistence between people and nature, and between people. In these folk activities, people of all ages and genders participate together, and gender differences are downplayed. People enjoy the joy of life in the embrace of nature, showcasing a simple and beautiful social atmosphere. Shen Congwen conveyed his longing for an ideal society without gender oppression, cultural alienation, and harmonious coexistence between humans and nature through the depiction of these folk scenes.

The understanding of nature by ecofeminism reveals a new relationship between humans and nature, which is a vibrant and beautiful natural landscape that develops together with humans. [8] Shen Congwen's poetic description of the natural environment in Xiangxi also provides spiritual support for the construction of an ideal society. In *The Border Town*, nature is not only the background, but also the destination of human spirit. The landscape, bamboo forests, white pagodas, and the changing natural scenery of the four seasons in Xiangxi all give the work a peaceful and profound artistic conception. This artistic conception not only highlights the emotions of the characters, but also symbolizes a spiritual home that transcends material civilization. Here, people's pace of life is in harmony with the rhythm of nature, and human emotions blend with the emotions of nature. Shen Congwen conveyed his ideal pursuit of harmonious coexistence between nature and humanity through his delicate depiction of nature.

At the end of *The Border Town*, Shen Congwen left infinite imagination for the construction of an ideal society with an open brush. After experiencing setbacks in love and the separation of family ties, Cuicui still stands firm among the mountains and waters of Xiangxi, waiting for Nuo Song's return. Her persistence is not only a commitment to love, but also a belief in an ideal society. Shen Congwen conveyed a hope for the future through the image of Cuicui: although the real world is full of binary oppositions and conflicts, as long as people have love, reverence for nature, and respect for human nature in their hearts, they can build an ideal society in this pure land of Xiangxi.

6 Conclusion

The *Border Town* is not only a literary classic that showcases the natural scenery and folk customs of Xiangxi, but also an ecological feminist work that contains profound humanistic care and social ideals. Through the analysis in this article, we can see how Shen Congwen constructed the society of Xiangxi within the framework of binary opposition. Although living in a chaotic era, Shen Congwen did not lose his pursuit of "truth, goodness, and beauty", nor did he extinguish his personality. On the contrary, he constructed a perfect world in *The Border Town*. [9] This work embodies the unity of nature and femininity, depicting the landscapes and characters of Xiangxi through delicate brushstrokes, showcasing the harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, as well as between humans. Although *The Border Town* starts with the usual description of scenery and takes readers into the beautiful "Xiangxi World" with nat-

ural scenery, its focus is on the ordinary people in the tea caves of the "border town". [10] Shen Congwen conveyed his longing and pursuit for an ideal society through his portrayal of characters such as Cuicui and Grandpa, as well as his delicate description of Xiangxi folk customs. He also provided a reflection and inspiration for modern humanity: while pursuing material civilization, we should not ignore the authenticity of nature and humanity, but strive to build an ideal society of harmonious coexistence.

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