

# Awakening and Wandering of Modern Consciousness During the May Fourth Period: A Case Study of Ding Ling's *Miss Sofia's Diary* and *Meng Ke*

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**Abstract.** *Miss Sofia's Diary* and *Meng Ke* are both novels by Ding Ling in the late 1920s. The publication of *Miss Sofia's Diary* caused a great sensation in the literary world at that time, which has been praised by some commentators as "a bomb dropped in this dead literature". The heroine Sofia is the representative of ideological emancipation during the May Fourth Period. Meanwhile, *Meng Ke*, Ding Ling's first short story, also reflects the awakening of women's modern consciousness in the times and gradually grasps the "self" discourse. This paper analyzes Ding Ling's modern consciousness and the reasons for women's awakening and wandering during the May Fourth Period, so as to explore the significance of *Miss Sofia's Diary* and *Meng Ke* to the literature of the same period and modern women.

**Keywords:** Modern Consciousness; Awakening; Wandering; Sofia; *Meng Ke*.

## 1. Introduction

The May Fourth Period characterized by great change and transformation has set off a revolutionary upsurge in various fields including literature. The slogans of "freedom" and "equality" advocated at that time were deeply rooted in many people step by step. During this period, women were also encouraged to emancipate their minds. Hence, more women take part in work, and the economic improvement inspires women's idea of sexual equality. Meanwhile, they strive for more rights to education on this basis, which is also manifested in personality liberation, social freedom, marriage autonomy, etc. This literary revolution also affects writers' creative thoughts and styles. According to some scholars, Ding Ling was the last female writer in the May Fourth Period and the first female writer in left-wing literature [3]. As Ding Ling's works before her transformation, *Miss Sofia's Diary* and *Meng Ke* pay attention to expressing female individuals, exploring psychological changes and explaining individual life values, which are of certain critical spirits.

In *Miss Sofia's Diary*, Sofia was bold to pursue happiness, enjoy the unity of spirit and flesh, and break through feudal ethics. Mao Dun contended that "Miss Sofia represents the contradictory psychology of young women liberated after the May Fourth Period in sexual love" [1]. However, in the society at that time, women were attached to men, even if they challenged traditions physically, they were still shackled spiritually. In *Meng Ke*, *Meng Ke* unfettered the predicament and wanted to escape from fate. According to Feng Xuefeng, *Meng Ke* reflects on the anguish of the new intellectual women at that time and the power to pursue forward [2], but *Meng Ke* herself dwelt on the memories of the old days again and again, forbore restraint in the capitalist market, and alienated herself [2], wandering the long way of liberation with contradictory mental states. Therefore, this paper captures Sofia and *Meng Ke* as intellectual women who received modern education to reflect their modern consciousness in the same era. They show their independence and personality, investigate the awakening and wandering of modern consciousness, and inspire the growth of modern women.

## 2. Ding Ling's Background of Creation During the May Fourth Period

### 2.1. Background of the Times

#### 1. Thoughts of "Freedom" and "Equality" Promotes Emancipation

Before the May Fourth Period, due to the obstinate traditional feudal thought, women were always in a low position of being exploited [4]. The May Fourth Period reversed this situation to some extent, which was an unprecedented and profound ideological emancipation.

During the May Fourth Period, the national capitalist economy developed rapidly, disintegrating the feudal backward natural economy [4]. More and more women participated in the labor work and entered the society from the family. When they got economic rights, their economic status was improved, which was the foundation of ideological emancipation. At the same time, the New Culture Movement during the May Fourth Period greatly influenced the ideological enlightenment. Many litterateurs, such as Hu Shi, Lu Xun and Cai Yuanpei, held high "freedom" and "equality" to actively promote national ideological emancipation. Driven by the New Culture Movement, the cultural exchanges between China and the West were getting closer. Various ideological trends such as freedom and democracy in the West have flooded into China, injecting new impetus into China's ideological emancipation [4]. All these inspired the females at that time and promoted their further ideological emancipation.

#### 2. Modern Consciousness Awakening of "Independence" and "Individuality"

Based on ideological emancipation, people are increasingly aware of the existence of independence and individuality, and their ideology tends to be modernized, especially for women. It is the foundation of modern consciousness to regard oneself as "human". How can we realize independence and individuality? In fact, there was an answer as early as then.

The first is economic independence, which can win independence in feeding oneself. The realization of economic independence requires a career, and the sages during the May Fourth Period introduced the premise of obtaining a career. Some advocated that women should receive education, acquire knowledge, improve cognition and realize ideological independence. Some others called for equal employment, challenging the concept that "men are superior to women" and avoiding unequal treatment of women [4]. During this period, gender equality was planted in people. From aspects of marriage and love, it also shows women's independence and individuality. Lu Xun held that freedom and happiness were still our unremitting pursuit of love. After the ideological emancipation of the May Fourth Period, more women advocated "freedom of marriage and love", instead of blindly obeying the arranged marriage of feudal families. They should chase after freedom of love and marriage to get rid of the shackles of feudal thoughts [3]. At that time, women dared to pursue themselves and independence, with their modern consciousness slowly awakening then.

### 2.2. Author Transformation

Throughout Ding Ling's life, her creations can be divided into three periods, including the period from the initial engagement in creation to arrival to Baoan County; the period from Baoan County to the initial founding of the People's Republic of China; and the period after the comeback. Her literary creation has changed in each period [3]. It is the first period, from the initial engagement in creation to arrival to Baoan County, that has undergone a major transformation. The change in this period can be summarized by "transformation" [3].

#### 1. From "Consciousness Awakening" to "Finding a Way Out"

As a novel published by Ding Ling in the late 1920s, *Miss Sofia's Diary* is her early creation. During this period, Ding Ling mainly created pure literature themed at "female". Taking this novel as an example, Sofia, as a young intellectual woman, escaped from feudal families and pursued "free love". Many scholars positioned Sofia as "resisting vulgarity and pursuing light" and "a typical figure with real modern consciousness" [1]. However, she failed to rebel, but cared about secular opinions

paradoxically and yearned for others' understanding. In this period, it is only manifested as women's "consciousness awakening". In *A House in Qingyun Lane*, A Ying, who was born as a prostitute, found it more interesting to do business than get married. Hence, she has not become a commodity to meet sexual needs. Even in such an environment, she firmly held her destiny in her hands [2]. Such women like A Ying not only awaken themselves in consciousness, but also find a way out in action.

## 2. From "Loneliness and Sentiment" to "Bright and Optimism"

Ding Ling's early novels mainly ended with lonely and sentimental tragedy, with her first novel *Meng Ke* as a typical representative. In the novel, MengKe finally stayed in the Full Moon Drama Club and she was degenerated into a commodity for the capitalist in the ending. Although she occasionally had her soul, she failed to completely save herself. In addition to *Meng Ke*, *Zhen Zhen* in *When I Was in Xia Village* written by Ding Ling is also a tragic figure. She was invaded by the Japanese army and social criticism, and constantly struggled in pain. After Ding Ling's transformation, her novels are mainly characterized by revolutionism with "bright and optimism". *Wei Hu (Protection)* is the first novel of her transformation. Under the mode of "revolution+love", Wei Hu, a revolutionary youth, resolutely chose revolution when he was in love and conflict with revolution, and led his lover Lijia to join the revolution. The whole novel is full of a bright and optimistic tone, which has obvious revolutionary features.

## 3. Similarity: Modern Consciousness Awakening of Sofia and Meng Ke

As the novels of the same period, *Miss Sofia's Diary* and *Meng Ke* have many similarities in reflecting the awakening of women's modern consciousness. The two heroines, as young intellectual women, were influenced by the enlightenment thought of the May Fourth Period. They resolutely and bravely walked out of the feudal family and actively integrated into society, which made a certain breakthrough in their inner consciousness.

### 3.1. Individual Consciousness: Independence of Material and Soul

"The awakening of women should be that of human meaning, followed by the awakening of gender meaning." [2] China's traditional feudal society never regarded women as independent individuals, but as accessories of men. After the May Fourth Period, writers manifested people's individual independence with the help of characters in their works. In *Miss Sofia's Diary*, Sofia is the representative of the new era. She escaped from the feudal family and came to live in a metropolis, taking the first step of independence. This is also the case for Meng Ke who went to Shanghai to study from a rural county and pursued her artistic dream. They all freed themselves, fought for their future in the metropolis from their old families, and sought to survive independently.

After Meng Ke came to her aunt's house, she had pure love with her cousin, but later found that she was just the object of the rich playing with love. Recognizing that her aunt's shelter was just the epitome of patriarchy, Meng Ke chose to escape and was never willing to be deemed as the talk of others. What she wanted to be was independence. Meanwhile, Sofia's pursuit of personality independence was to run away from home, and the reason was not for her contradiction with her family, but because she just wanted to be independent and make her own way. Sofia came to Beijing alone and had her cabin in her apartment [7]. According to the ideal design of sociologists, living alone is helpful for people to pursue personal freedom and control their power [7]. Both Meng Ke and Sofia seek the personality independence in their own way.

### 3.2. View of Love: Equal Relationship and Spiritual-Flesh Unity

Under the suppression of feudal culture, women strove to improve their status and pursue equality in relations. Ding Ling, with high modern consciousness, criticizes feudal gender culture, subversively examines men as "the other", and has a brand-new view of both sexes. In the two novels, both Meng Ke and Sofia hope to have equal sexual relations in love.

At the beginning of *Meng Ke*, she described the humble Mr. Red Nose in meticulous language "His eye is an obtuse triangle, tightly squeezed in the swollen eyelids", which is followed by his despicable image by harassing the model. This thought is Meng Ke's enlightenment on equal relations. Then when she turned to fall in love with her cousin, her simplicity was constantly worn away by her cousin, which was always discussed by outsiders. Meng Ke understood that this was not an equal love relationship and she was just a toy for the rich, so she bravely left that place and was no longer infatuated.

Sofia's pursuit of love was the unity of spirit and flesh, mutual understanding, equality, and rebellion against arranged marriage and illiberal love in the old society. At first, she broke up with Ling Jishi. Later, when she met Wei Di who failed to meet Sofia's requirements, she put down her guard and showed him her diary, Wei Di could only reply humbly, "You love him! I don't deserve you!" and couldn't enter her real inner world. Sofia didn't choose to pick up Ling Jishi and Wei Di because of her standard for the "ideal Mr. Right". Since no one could meet her needs, she chose herself and "wasted the rest of my life in a place where no one knows".

Sofia and Meng Ke have similarities in the awakening of modern consciousness. As young intellectual women, they were both pursuing individual independence and equality of gender relations, and enlightening themselves in their own way.

#### **4. Differences: Wandering of Modern Consciousness Between Sofia and Meng Ke**

##### **4.1. Environment: Women in Feudal Family Society**

In the 1920s and 1930s, although ideological emancipation was vigorously promoted, women still lived under male dominance and did not fully grasp the independent right to speak under this background. Hence, there was some resistance to the awakening of modern consciousness. In the two novels, Sofia and Meng Ke both came out of their old families, and the ideas they accepted were not advanced or beneficial. Influenced by these backward ideas, some changes in their ideologies were difficult to subvert in deep consciousness.

Meng Ke moved from a rural family to a city, with her education and ideas different from those of the city. People who from rural areas to cities all want to change their identities and gain dignity. Meng Ke's senior high school classmate "Bing Bing" changed her name to "Yanan", which seemed to improve her temperament and status from the name. Similarly, Meng Ke also wanted to gain a new identity quickly. During her residence at her aunt's house, her cousins were integrated into modern urban life, with their clothes and behaviors attractive to Meng Ke. She envied them and wanted to be a Shanghai urban beauty. She inadvertently compared the appreciation of her cousin with that of Youyang Middle School in her hometown. She held that the praise to her cousin is elegant, while the latter is "excessive" and "rude" [10]. Such behavior reflects her inferiority and vanity in her subconscious, and she didn't have enough sense of identity with herself.

Although Sofia is a woman in the city, she also walks out of her family, and her pursuit of freedom is not out of the control of her family. Sofia did not pursue freedom and gain independence by virtue of her ability, but only ran away physically and left her family. The financial support of her family left her no worries about living necessities, so she wasn't anxious much about self-survival, which made her skeptical about the independence of consciousness and spirit. Thus, Sophia was psychologically dependent. In addition, her family's extreme doting affected her character. Her attitude towards Wei Di, who was not her ideal lover, was vague without direct rejection, initiative or responsibility. She even later ignored, disdained and even played tricks on him [1]. Wei Di's pursuit only satisfies her vanity of being adored, which is only a relief for her boring life ridden by the lung disease. Females who are influenced by family values expose the subconscious defects in their psychology and character, which also affects the awakening of modern consciousness.

## 4.2. Self-Psychology: Wandering of Young Girls

In the eyes of some scholars, the behavior of Sofia and Meng Ke is only the rebellion of young girls, which is not enough to reach the awakening of modern consciousness. It is far-fetched to call it "modern" and "enlightenment" [9]. After all, they are not completely separated from their parents, and still rely on the financial support of their family, instead of becoming truly independent individuals. Therefore, they are wandering in the awakening of modern consciousness.

In many cases, their behavior shows adolescent resistance. Meng Ke fled the countryside for her dream and went to school in the city. However, because of some trivial things, she felt disgusted with school life and left school again. Certain arbitrariness in her studies is clear, but this does not represent the awakening of her modern consciousness. Instead, it is just the resistance to family and society in adolescence, and the relatively immature way of dealing with it. After that, Meng Ke stayed at her friend's house first, and then stayed at her aunt's house for a long time. When she saw that everyone around had cloaks, she wanted to have one herself. Just as her father remitted three hundred yuan after hard agricultural work to Meng Ke, she did not hesitate to buy a mink robe and other clothes to prepare her outfit. According to the purchasing power at that time, her behaviour was very extravagant, which undoubtedly displays her inner comparison and enjoyment essence. These can only be realized by relying on the economic support given by her father, and she has not achieved economic independence, which leads to a certain dependence on material and spiritual terms. Strictly speaking, it does not belong to the awakening of modern consciousness [9].

Compared with Meng Ke, Sofia wandered less with a strong meaning of enlightenment, but she still stayed at the youth rebellion without completely transferring to the awakening of modern consciousness. In *Miss Sofia's Diary*, Sofia is also a girl who came out from her family of origin to study in the city. Compared with Meng Ke, Sofia shows the psychological state of adolescent girls more clearly [9]. Most of her self-reports are "only annoying" and she hated getting cold, so she failed to go out to play. She didn't have anything special to do and refused to drink milk even it was heated again and again. She had to read advertisements in newspapers, but she didn't have the necessary work to finish, and her study tasks were not heavy. At the same time, her family prefers her, but Sofia is favored and arrogant. "It happened that my father, my sister and my friends all cherish me so blindly. I really don't know why. Do they love my arrogance, my temper and my lung disease? Sometimes I am angry and sad about this, but they all tolerate me and love me more." These are just the embodiment of Sofia's psychology as a girl, and most of them do not show modern consciousness. But why does it reflect the enlightenment? In the novel, Sofia said to herself, "I have to judge myself, overcome myself and improve myself." At this time, she turned from outside to inside, paid attention to self-improvement, and had a tendency to awaken modern consciousness.

Compared with "awakening" and "enlightenment", Meng Ke and Sofia show more rebellion of young girls, the physical challenge and the resistance of consciousness. There is a great wandering above awakening, which leads to the awakening of modern consciousness without a qualitative leap.

## 5. Give Significance to the Growth and Development of Contemporary Literature and Modern Women

### 5.1. Influence the Literature of the Same Period

#### 1. Choose the Subject to Express the Theme

Ding Ling's two early novels caused a great sensation in the literary world, which also laid a foundation for her style change and other writers' creations. Sofia's ending is to leave, but no one knows how it is in the end and where is the way out for Sofia-style women. This also puzzled Ding Ling and inspired her reflection on the tragedy of women's enlightenment, which promoted Ding Ling's "left-wing" transition [9]. Novels such as *Mother*, *When I Was in Xia Village* and *Night* all reflect the transition to the "left wing", adding revolutionary factors into the story development and allowing women to transform themselves. In her early works, Ding Ling's materials all have the

spiritual echo relationship between girls and mothers, and she uses "children" to define the protagonists, so that they can rely on their spirits. However, *Meng Ke* and *Miss Sofia's Diary* have the leading role in female literature and influenced other works at the same time. Ding Ling herself consciously united female writers and prospered female literature. For example, deeply influenced by Ding Ling, Xie Bingying used women's liberation and the awakening of modern consciousness as the core of her creation. Her masterpiece *Autobiography of Female Soldiers* publicized women's subjective consciousness and national consciousness, which smashed the chain of arranged marriage and became an active revolutionary [11].

## 2. Female Image Building

In Ding Ling's early novels, the female images she created are all "rebellious women" who pursue the so-called "freedom". In *Meng Ke*, *Miss Sofia's Diary* and *Wei Hu (Protection)*, men's understanding of the "freedom" of new women also takes "wildness" as the key core [9]. It also has a great impact on Xiao Hong's portrayal of female images. The women in *Tales of Hulan River* are women who coexist with the old culture and those full of novelty and beauty. Both women with distinct personalities and self show Xiao Hong's call for the vitality of "true self" [12], which is based on Ding Ling's enlightenment of women's modern consciousness. However, the female images created by Ding Ling have changed and deepened based on Sofia and Meng Ke. For example, the image of Lu Ping in *Night* adds political factors, and *Mother* shows the trend of female masculinity in a very specific and delicate way [9]. Ding Ling bid farewell to the rebellion of youthful sensibility and moved towards the maturity of political rationality, enriching the image of women.

## 5.2. Enlightenment to the Growth of Modern Women

### 1. Individual Independence

Meng Ke and Sofia are the representatives of independent women in the 1920s and 1930s, and they also have some enlightenment for the survival and growth of women today. Compared with the old society, women nowadays are more independent and strive for their right to speak. We can also see that more women stand on the historical stage and are active in public. In all walks of life, modern women demonstrate their strength and step onto a bigger stage through their talents and abilities, including Zhang Guimei, who takes root in teaching and educating people in the countryside; Wang Yaping, the first Chinese woman to walk in space; Hua Chunying, the most beautiful diplomat in China; Yang Qian, the first gold medalist in Tokyo Olympic Games; Tu Youyou, a Chinese pharmacist; Fan Jinshi, the girl from Dunhuang. There are countless women who work hard in their posts.

### 2. Love view

In the two novels, both Meng Ke and Sofia have a clear view of love about freedom in love without being subordinate to men. Nowadays, the same is true for modern women. In the fast-paced life, people of all kinds come and go, and many people can't resist the temptation and degrade themselves at will. With a clear head, more women are serious about love and strive for sexual equality. They refuse to be attached by others but emphasize emotional independence. Modern women can look at feelings more rationally. In addition, most women at present don't do something to gain men's appreciation, but make themselves more comfortable. Love is not gazing at each other, but looking at the same direction together.

## 6. Conclusion

In *Meng Ke* and *Miss Sofia's Diary* created by Ding Ling in the 1920s and 1930s, the two protagonists Meng Ke and Sofia started the first shot at awakening modern consciousness. Meng Ke constantly escaped from the living situation and pursued her freedom, equality and independence. Sofia's pursuit of love ideal is the forerunner of women in the new era. However, the enlightenment of modern consciousness in this period is wandering. Under the general environment, it is still the dominance of

male discourse power, for which women's modern consciousness found it hard to really stand. As adolescent girls, their psychology is wandering to a certain extent. They are not separated from their family, and their thoughts influenced by their family are dependent. Meanwhile, Meng Ke finally stayed in the Full Moon Drama Club, and Sofia left without clear ends. Their plight was isomorphic with Ding Ling's anguish, which reflected the survival difficulty of the literary subject self and laid the foundation for Ding Ling's transformation and revolution. Taking Ding Ling's two novels as examples, this paper analyzes the awakening and wandering of modern consciousness during the May Fourth Period and seeks the enlightenment of modernization.

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