

Study on the Aesthetic Carnival of Mo Yan's Literary Works

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Abstract

Throughout Mo Yan's literary works, one will find that he is always exploring and seeking for newness and change. In the process of self-transcendence, Mo Yan is also deconstructing the conceptual awareness and model characteristics of traditional mainstream literary creation. Mo Yan always insists on writing fiction from the standpoint of the people. Under the aesthetics of "ugly appreciation," Mo Yan's works show a great carnival aesthetic. In this paper, the author selects fragments of Mo Yan's classic writings for analysis and, on this basis, studies the beauty of the carnival embodied in his literary creations from an aesthetic perspective. Firstly, this paper interprets the causes and roots of the birth of aesthetic carnival; secondly, this paper explores the expression of aesthetic carnival in the works and the themes of humanity and survival behind it; finally, this paper summarizes the meaning and value of aesthetic carnival from the viewpoint of philosophy and creation.

Keywords

Aesthetic; Carnival; Humanity; Survival.

1. Introduction

"As a spiritual activity, literary creation should be transcendent in itself. Otherwise, the huge time lag in cultural processes would make our literature a beat behind world literature, always misaligned and not constituting a dialogue." [1] In the process of creation, Mo Yan always insists on exploration and innovation, and he tries to make each work have some kind of breakthrough meaning. Mo Yan's works focus on human nature and the contemplation of the meaning of existence. His works are characterized by wild and unrestrained language, unique and bizarre imagery, and fluid and unrestrained thinking. In particular, his works have a unique grasp and understanding of aesthetics, breaking through and subverting the inherent aesthetic norms. This highlights the strong color of the carnival, which has high aesthetic research value.

2. The Roots of Aesthetic Carnival

The "carnival" is a unique phenomenon in literary creation. Bakhtin Michael, a famous literary scholar and literary theorist believed that "carnival" refers to a phenomenon or state of life that is out of daily life and in a non-daily time and space. In the scope of literary criticism, the permeation and embodiment of carnival activities, rituals, and carnival-like feelings of the world in literature are called "carnivalization." [2]

The subversion of conventions and authority is the main characteristic of the carnival. In his works, Mo Yan is good at subverting the traditional aesthetic rules, and the "duality of laughter" [3] of carnival-style is also reflected in his works. In this paper, the author argues that the roots of the aesthetic carnival nature of Mo Yan's works come from the 1970s, which is reflected in the influence of the flood of the times, the misinterpretation of desires and aesthetic orientations, and the repression of aesthetic emotions.

2.1. The Roots of the Times: Paradigm-Single Literary Creation

In the 1960s and 1970s, which was also a period of relatively slow development in the history of contemporary Chinese literature, the cultural atmosphere of the time affected literary creation to a certain extent. Mo Yan's literary works directly depict or indirectly insinuate the themes of social forms, human nature and survival, the crisis of human nature, and the evil of human nature in this period. Thus, it can be seen that the social and literary ecology of the general environment of the times is an important factor in the aesthetic carnival nature of Mo Yan's literary works.

2.2. The Distortion of Pursuit: Misleading and Dissipating Aesthetic Tendencies

When discussing the nature of beauty, aesthetician Zhu Guangqian said, "Beauty is not natural, but is more or less a value set by man based on his subjectivity. The 'subjective' is the most divergent and elusive criterion. Therefore, the discussion of beauty and the nature of beauty has always been very divergent." [4] In layman's terms, the so-called aesthetic orientation is a standard for judging the beauty and ugliness of things. Aesthetic orientation is different from person to person, subjective and natural, and it is closely related to the individual's real state of existence and survival experience. Different individuals have different aesthetic orientations. Suppose aesthetics and beauty standards tend to be homogenized. In that case, mass aesthetics will become boring and monotonous, and the subjectivity of individual aesthetics will be dissolved. Beauty has been set with rules and formulas, literary creation has become a pile of rhetoric and a superposition of structures, and the aesthetic act has become formal and mechanical. This dismantling of aesthetic subjectivity is crude, blind, and unscientific. It disregards the unified, summative aesthetic model of individuality, which is destined to be impacted until its disintegration from the moment of its creation.

2.3. The Accumulation of Repression: Desire Repression and Aesthetic Fatigue

The tendency of aesthetic homogenization leads to aesthetic fatigue, which pervades literature and cultural works. This tends to cause the occurrence of mass aesthetic fatigue. The most natural materialistic and carnal desires of human beings are dissolved, and the individual is immersed in a communal and consensual aesthetic together with the majority.

In an interview with Southern Weekly reporter Xia Yu, Mo Yan said, "From the environment, I grew up in, the education I received and the reading I did, I could not write like that. My writing at that time was written with this sense of breaking out of confinement." [5] When aesthetic fatigue becomes a dilemma that must be escaped in the development of literature, it also stimulates the desire of literary creators to break through such aesthetic limitations. One of Mo Yan's original intentions is to challenge the confinement of the conventional literary model, and his literary works are full of new thinking.

3. The Performance of Aesthetic Carnival

In Mo Yan's literary works, it is common to depict the subversion of traditional aesthetic rules. For such an aesthetic carnival, it is manifested by the use of ugly imagery, the unbridled language, and the essential revelation of true human nature.

3.1. The Use of Ugly Imagery

In his book of poems *Les Fleurs Du Mal*, Charles Pierre Baudelaire states that "the ultimate goal of art is to create beauty, and beauty should not be bound. But goodness is not the same as beauty; beauty exists equally in ugliness and in evil." [6] When beauty and ugliness can serve as two categories of aesthetics at the same time, beauty usually serves as the dominant aesthetic, while ugliness can precisely serve as a complement to beauty. The ugliness can fill in the

dimensions that beauty cannot reveal, thus achieving a more profound and comprehensive aesthetic realm. However, China has a deep-rooted aesthetic. This aesthetic is more of a one-way aesthetic. Although this aesthetic has changed slightly with the changing of the times, there is no substantial deviation from its core. Therefore, ugliness, as one of the aesthetic categories, is rarely addressed by literary creators. On the one hand, it is because of the low relevance of ugliness to mainstream aesthetics. On the other hand, it is attributed to the difficulty of harnessing ugly imagery. Mo Yan adopts the naturalistic method founded by Zola, which is mainly characterized by physiology, anatomy, and pathology, to copy the ugliness in real life in detail [7]. The frequent use of ugly imagery is a subversion of traditional aesthetics and exploration and experimentation of aesthetics, which has created a unique artistic path of "ugliness as beauty" in the contemporary literary world.

This paper takes the depiction of torture in Mo Yan's "Sandalwood Punishment" as an example. Putting to death by dismembering the body is a punishment that is beyond the norm and acceptable to humans, but Mo Yan devotes an entire chapter to the ugly and brutal scene of torture. "He manipulated the knife as fast as the wind, and he announced the number of knives as violent as hail, those slices of flesh from Qian's body, like beetles flying down in all directions especially his intestines, like a nest of poisonous snakes in a thin leather bag." [8] Generally speaking, beetles and venomous snakes are fearful, repulsive creatures. The human flesh tends to remain relatively static. However, in Mo Yan's writing, the severed flesh of human beings becomes alive and well. The human flesh is like a beetle, the intestines are like a poisonous snake, which is already an unpleasant scene, but his light and casual language is added with a heavy metaphor so that the reader can empathize with it, as if they were there, and be shocked. In turn, the reader has a near-death experience and deepens his understanding of the ugliness and cruelty of human nature.

In another of Mo Yan's works, *Elixir*, there are also many descriptions of ugly imagery: "I heard a "goo" sound. I first saw the white wax oil on both sides of the knife turned out, and then I saw the white with duck egg green intestines slithering out. These intestines are like a group of snakes, like a pile of eels, emitting a hot fishy smell. My old man pulled the intestines out by the handful. He looked irritable, his hands were hard, and his mouth was noisy with curses. Finally, he finished pulling out the intestines, revealing Ma Kuisan's empty abdominal cavity." [9]

In human nature, the two opposites, good and evil, are in fierce conflict here. On the one hand, the father was eager to take the bitter bile of the dead to cure his grandmother's eye disease; on the other hand, he had to be ruthless with the corpses of his own kind. The knife cuts open the human belly, revealing the fat like ash oil, intestines as snakes and eels are fishy. The intestines of the dead are ugly, snakes and eels are ugly, and these can provoke primitive fear in the subconscious. At this time, man has been reduced to a beast, and the selfish desires, ethics, and human nature are hidden under the ugly exterior are becoming more and more intense.

"The aesthetic significance of ugliness is that it reveals the inhuman side of real life. That is, the alienated world is alien, antagonistic, repulsive, and has a negative sense of existence. It specifies that life should not be so. And this means that it affirms the positive meaning of existence, that it should be harmonious, beautiful and endearing." [10] In literature and art, the act of ugly appreciation is actually a unique beauty that negates the ugly itself. It has a unique aesthetic appeal that cannot be replaced by beauty. The purpose of depicting ugliness, exposing ugliness, and expressing ugliness is motivated by the potential requirement and desire to realize the aesthetic ideal. Some commentators consider the ugly imagery in Mo Yan's works as "a partial exhibition of ugliness and horror without restraint and restraint." [11] Although this often causes discomfort to the reader, it is rather a great success of his creation in the author's opinion. Only in this way can he realize the complete transfer of the author's experience to the reader's experience. Only in this way can literary works reach readers more truly and evoke their consideration and reflection of human nature.

3.2. The Unrestrained Nature of Language

For Bakhtin, the language of the carnival square is the "unofficial component" of speech. This language "creates a special group, a group that interacts without formality, a group that is frank and uninhibited in its speech. In fact, the crowds in the squares, especially those at festivals, fairs, and carnivals, are such a group." [12] The language of Carnival Square characterizes Mo Yan's works, and his nearly twenty years of living in the countryside have given him a rich and profound experience of the countryside. Mo Yan is very familiar with some language habits and customs of the countryside. In his works, Mo Yan always presents the most simple and sincere rural style to readers. He uses some colloquialisms, vernaculars, and even swear words in his works, which not only makes the language expressions direct and real, close to the narrative subject but also makes the characters' plots vivid and full. Mo Yan is bold and experimental in the use of language. He shocks the traditional language pattern and establishes a unique narrative mode that is almost indulgent and pervasive.

Liu Taiyang barged in, rolling his eyes, and said, "What's wrong? Not you said you want a fire puller?" "He definitely can't be the one to pull the fire! Liu, deputy director, looks at him. He is thin into a skeleton, and I'm afraid he can not even hold a fucking coal shovel. What did you send him for? Are you using him to make up the numbers!" "I know how you are. You want a girl to pull the fire for you, don't you? Do you want to pick the prettiest girl and let the one with the fuchsia square headscarf pull the fire for you? Don't be so whimsical! Black boy, pull the bellows." [13]

Mo Yan himself is an advocate of the popularization of language. He also actively practices popularized language in his works. The plain and straightforward language not only dissolves the reader's barrier of acceptance but also shows the image of the narrative subject in a straightforward manner with a lot of white descriptions and detailed sketches. His creative language is "unbridled" and can break the barriers of form and elegance. Mo Yan pours out his words freely in a fluent lyricism, telling stories with a "flowing, unrestrained, humorous and flirtatious" tone. His works are gorgeous and colorful, with a succession of pairs of sentences, a staggering of long and short sentences, a large number of elegant and vulgar words, and small use of big words, which makes Mo Yan's works funny and humorous, coupled with large sections of delicate and subtle details laid out, which can give the human heart a muddy and radiating feeling." [14] The narrative language will flow with consciousness, recklessly and wildly, without confinement. This not only ensures the freedom of expression and aesthetics but also brings the work closer to the reader. However, Mo Yan uses vulgar vernacular without abusing it. He is precise in his use of these vulgarities, and he creates them at the right length, expressing them appropriately without drowning the work in vulgarity.

3.3. An Essential Revelation of True Human Nature

For aesthetic transcendence, its concentration is on its highest authenticity. Mo Yan's literary creations not only dare to expose the truth of human nature directly but also the outstanding weaknesses of human nature. Mo Yan has narrated in full what is often difficult for people to talk about, revealing the darkness of human nature that people are often afraid to expose.

The master said that after he had been carrying out torture for decades and killing thousands of people, he realized one truth: all people are two-faced beasts. One side is benevolence and morality, the three cardinal guides and the five constant virtues as specified in the feudal ethical code; the other side is behaving like thieves and prostitutes, bloodthirsty and lustful. Faced with the body of a beautiful woman being cut with a knife, those who came to watch the torture, whether they were decent men or modest women, were excited by the evil fun. The execution of a beautiful woman is the most gruesome and beautiful show on earth. The master said that the people watching this performance are actually more vicious than our execution by knife. [15]

Foucault argues that the administration of classical punishments usually involves a theatrical dimension. The demonstration of the dismemberment of a criminal's body by the authorities in a public place not only inflicts torture and humiliation on the criminal but also terrifies and alerts the watching public. In addition to inducing fear, the blood-soaked dismemberment scenes may also bring unexpected excitement to the audience and even turn the torture chamber into a "farce." [16] The line "the people watching this performance is actually more vicious than our execution by knife." inspire the latent evil in the human nature of the people watching the execution. A ritual to end the lives of the same kind of people becomes a kind of carnival feast. The contradiction of two sides of human nature is filled with cruel reality. Similarly, life and death, the beautiful and the ugly, the spiritual and the physical, the sublime and the humble, contradictory and opposing value categories often appear in fragments of the work. The writer does not presume to discriminate but leaves it to the reader to read and consider, gradually leading the reader to develop a unique understanding in the context of his or her own experience. Mo Yan understands the weaknesses of human nature. He often hints or reveals the most essential, direct, and deepest truths in the unconscious plot of his literary works. This is due to his meticulous analysis of individual behavior, his keen insight into human weaknesses, and his deep thinking about the reality of existence.

4. Value and Significance

4.1. The Search for Creative Faith

If literary creation loses its faith, then it will be reduced to a means of personal profit. Literary creators will be driven by profit at the expense of the depth of literary expression as the cost of kitschy literary creation, catching up with fashion, attracting attention, and pursuing vulgar interests. Literary creators will give up their own spiritual pursuits and beliefs for their own selfish interests. While catering to the public, writers not only lose themselves but also lose their independent personalities as writers.

Mo Yan's literary creations have been moving forward in innovation and exploration. He focuses on the highest aesthetic dimensions, such as humanity and survival, and takes the faith of literary creation as his primary goal. Mo Yan's creative vision is broad. His deep thoughts are based on the times and his concern for survival in the countryside. For literary creation, it should not be all about elegance and height. Literary creation should be more grounded, and writers should create strong communication, high public acceptance, and humanistic literary works. Therefore, literary creators should have a sense of literary responsibility. They should correct their creative values and not make self-interest their priority and not be held hostage by authority.

4.2. Satisfaction of Aesthetic Pleasure

The most fundamental reason for generating aesthetic carnival is a need for aesthetics, satisfying aesthetic experience, and achieving sensory and spiritual pleasure and satisfaction. As for the aesthetic orientation of literary creation, it should be aimed at satisfying the readers' aesthetic pleasure, breaking through the boundaries of elegance and vulgarity, beauty and ugliness, good and evil. Aesthetics should be beyond utilitarianism. Mo Yan's literary works prove that there is no clear boundary between ugliness and beauty in the aesthetic act. The splicing of ugliness and beauty can even produce a wholehearted aesthetic experience. Thus, satisfying aesthetic pleasure is the sole purpose of the aesthetic act. Aesthetic norms can be broken and subverted, so literary creators should be brave enough to innovate and explore on the basis of flexible management to build a more innovative and unique aesthetic paradigm with more value.

5. Concluding Remarks

There is no doubt that Mo Yan's writing is revolutionary. He overturns the traditional aesthetic norms and constantly refreshes the norms of writing with his unrestrained thinking and carnival attitude. The use of ugly imagery, the wild and unrestrained language, and the essential revelation of true human nature make Mo Yan's literary works the most unique and groundbreaking aesthetic carnival. For literary creators, they should be like Mo Yan, breaking through the traditional writing paradigm, searching for the meaning of existence, and making the most genuine call.

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