

**Recenzja rozprawy doktorskiej p. Xiaojin Guo**

pt. *Tenderness and Warmth.*

*A Comparative Study of Olga Tokarczuk's and Mo Yan's Works*

**I. Topic, objectives and structure of the thesis**

The doctoral thesis submitted to me for external review was written at the Doctoral School of Languages and Literatures of the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (Poland), under the supervision of prof. dr. hab. Małgorzata Zduniak. In general, the dissertation offers a comparative analysis of the literary output of two contemporary authors, the Polish writer Olga Tokarczuk and the Chinese novelist Mo Yan. As the main title of the thesis indicates, the semantically interconnected concepts of “tenderness” and “warmth” form the starting point and the common thread in the proposed comparative analysis. Conceptually and theoretically, the author of the dissertation draws inspiration from the field of ecofeminism, an interdisciplinary framework that can be situated at the intersection of ecocriticism and gender studies. As Ms Xiaojin Guo herself points out on p. 44 of the thesis, the different cultural contexts from which Tokarczuk and Mo Yan originate play an important role in the comparative setup of the research: “[...] starting from a comparative study of Tokarczuk's and Mo Yan's tenderness and warmth towards women, animals, plants and things, this study analyzes women and nature's situations and sufferings in different Polish and Chinese cultural backgrounds.” What is more, in addition to focusing on and engaging in cross-cultural analysis, the author also aims to contribute to a greater awareness and understanding of the work of both authors in the two language areas involved (p. 2): “[...] through a comparative approach, this research aims to promote the reading of Tokarczuk in China and among those who are interested in Mo Yan, in the same way, to promote the reading of Mo Yan in Poland and among those who take an interest in Olga Tokarczuk.”

The dissertation consists of eight sections: an introduction, six chapters, and a conclusion. The introduction outlines the general structure and objectives of the thesis. Chapter 1 then provides an introduction to the biography and output of both authors, against the broader cultural and historical background of the two countries involved. Chapter 2, in turn, examines

the existing academic literature relating to the two authors under scrutiny. Chapter 3 focuses on comparative literary and cultural studies as a framework and research method, highlights the interlinked concepts of “tender narration” and “narration of tenderness and warmth” (温情叙事), and, finally, explores the domain of ecofeminism. Throughout Chapter 3, the author discusses both the French and American schools of comparative literary studies and situates her research within the American tradition, combining it with a global and pluralistic view of literary production and circulation in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Chapters 4 to 6, for their part, form the analytical core of the dissertation and focus successively on the portrayal of female characters in the work of Tokarczuk and Mo Yan, the treatment of nature in their works (animals and plants, but also objects), and finally the portrayal of marginalized men in their literary output. The research corpus on which the comparative analysis is based consists of three novels by Olga Tokarczuk and three novels by Mo Yan, namely Tokarczuk’s *Prawiek i inne czasy* (*Primeval and Other Times*, 1996), *Dom dzienny, dom nocny* (*House of Day, House of Night*, 1998) and *Prowadź swój plug przez kości umarłych* (*Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*, 2009) and Mo Yan’s 《红高粱》 (*Red Soghurm*, 1986), 《丰乳肥臀》 (*Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, 1995) and 《生死疲劳》 (*Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 2006). For the analysis itself, the author makes use of the English editions of the six books involved. In the concluding section, the author summarizes the most important findings of the study, with due consideration given to a number of limitations and suggestions for further research.

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## **II. General assessment of the thesis**

Overall, the author of the dissertation has familiarized herself well with the subject of her study. She has thoroughly researched the cultural, sociopolitical, and historical context (with a particular focus on the Polish context, which was new to her) and demonstrates a thorough knowledge of the work of the two authors under investigation. In addition, she has consulted a great deal of secondary literature to frame the proposed research, both in relation to the more general framework of comparative literature, environmental humanities, and ecofeminism, and in relation to the existing body of research (which has grown significantly in recent years) on Tokarczuk and Mo Yan. In the literature review, the author cites both Chinese-language and English-language sources relating to the work of Mo Yan and also provides an overview of the most important Chinese and English-language sources on Tokarczuk (including a special issue of *The Polish Review* from 2021).

More often than not, the author demonstrates a keen predilection for classification and attempts to bring as much order as possible to the “literary realities” she seeks to describe, not only by structuring the dissertation as a whole in a clear manner, but also by incorporating a clear order and argumentation into the various – both analytical and non-analytical – sections (“firstly”, “secondly”, etc.). For example, the literature review offers a clearly structured typology of scholarly publications devoted to Tokarczuk and Mo Yan in recent years and decades. Along similar lines, the author demonstrates a capacity for discernment in the actual analysis as well, for example in the description (in chapter 4) of the various forms of repression suffered by female characters in the work of both authors (physical violence, patriarchal domination, and the double burden of being a woman). What is more, concepts and contexts that are briefly introduced at the beginning of the thesis are later picked up or further elaborated on. So, for instance, the concept of “world literature” is briefly introduced already in chapter 1 (section 1.2.1) and is then given more attention in the methodological chapter (3), which also cites seminal authors from the field of comparative literature (such as David Damrosch).

Throughout the dissertation, the author attempts to place the authors, the works, and the literary and cultural phenomena she studies in a broader context. For example, she situates Tokarczuk’s use of “tenderness” in a wider framework (partly based on the research of Polish literary scholar Tomasz Mizerkiewicz). When it comes to contextualizing and conceptualizing the “interconnectedness of things” and the “agency” of non-human actors that Tokarczuk seeks to shape through the strategy of “tender narration”, Ms Xiaojin Guo makes an interesting reference to Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network theory, a theoretical framework that recurs later in the thesis as well. In addition to the author’s familiarity with ecocriticism and ecofeminism, she also references relevant publications from the field of animal studies, for example with regard to the phenomenon of interspeciesism (in particular Donna Haraway and Peter Singer). With regard to Mo Yan’s work, she refers (in section 3.3.) to the broader movement of “grassroots literature” in China in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution and the specific trend of “tender and warm narration” that can be situated within this movement. She also goes to great lengths to give the term a broader meaning, most notably by connecting this type of narrative not only with human characters, but also with animals, plants, and things. Apart from that, she pays due attention to the impact of traditional Chinese culture – in particular Buddhism and folk tales – on Mo Yan’s work, the key role of writer Pu Songling in Mo Yan’s development as a writer, and the particular role of irony in the latter’s work. With regard to Tokarczuk, finally, Ms

Xiaojin Guo pays due attention to the impact of James Hillmann's concept of personification on Tokarczuk's literary output and the way in which it engages with the non-human world.

The comparative analysis itself is well documented, particularly in chapters 4 and 5, and the argumentation is well substantiated with quotations from the work of both authors. Although the comparative study does not seek to uncover forms of direct influence, the author does look for common sources for particular aspects of their writing (such as magical realism as it took shape in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Latin American literature). The comparative analysis focuses primarily on the similarities and parallels between Tokarczuk's work and that of Mo Yan, but also highlights striking differences (for example, when it comes to both authors' treatment of plants and the phenomenon of 'plant awareness'). In a similar vein, the author convincingly argues that in Mo Yan's case, much more common are instances of symbolic representation of non-human beings (or human projections onto nature), while Tokarczuk pays more attention to the autonomous agency of plants, animals and things. Another noteworthy analytical observation is, for example, the difference in naming male and female characters in Tokarczuk's work (p. 86). In general, the author tends to have an eye for nuance and remains sufficiently aware of the pitfalls of dualistic oppositions (also in the context of ecofeminism). On p. 109 of the dissertation, she makes the following interesting and relevant observation:

*Tokarczuk naturalizes women and feminizes nature in her works, highlighting the vitality of women's integration with nature, not to emphasize the viewpoint that women are inherently closer to nature than men, or not to rebuild the irrefutable myth of motherhood. To advocate the superiority of women is undoubtedly a step into another kind of essentialism, which is contrary to Tokarczuk's original intention of resisting binary oppositions. In Tokarczuk's writing, the depiction of naturalized women is to point out the consistency of the logic of domination that women and nature are subjected to, and the attempt to feminize nature does not consist in equating femininity with the characteristics of nature or making women the sole spokesperson for nature, but to emphasize women's empathetic understanding of nature's spirituality and to give voice to the speechless nature.*

The qualities of the dissertation described above do not detract, however, from the fact that a number of flaws and shortcomings can be identified in the research presented. These relate not only to the positioning and embedding of this comparative study in the broader field of research, but also to the specific methodological and conceptual premises of the research carried out:

**1. Although the author has taken note** of the most important available English- and Chinese-language secondary sources, there are a number of notable gaps in the bibliography. In the author's typological description of the existing Tokarczuk scholarship, she refers to some existing comparatively oriented publications, but oddly enough, she does not refer to a recent edited volume that specifically addresses comparative perspectives in the approach to Olga Tokarczuk's work, namely: Wiśniewska, Lidia, and Jakub Lipski, eds. 2023. *Olga Tokarczuk: Comparative Perspectives* (New York: Routledge). Significantly, the aforementioned book offers multifaceted comparisons between the work of Olga Tokarczuk and, for example, Daniel Kehlmann and Milorad Pavić (within a comparative framework that – like the research conducted by Ms Xiaojin Guo – is not aimed at uncovering influences, but rather at detecting parallels). Another relevant chapter that could have been mentioned – especially given the focus on narrative and narration in the work of Ms Xiaojin Guo – is Marek Stanisław's contribution to the very same volume (entitled "Integrating narratives: The art of storytelling according to Isaac Bashevis Singer and Olga Tokarczuk"). What is more, in view of the prominence of the concept of "world literature" in Ms Xiaojin Guo's dissertation, it is also striking that another important English-language comparative work on Polish literature is missing from the bibliography and the overall discussion, namely: Florczyk, Piotr, and K. A. Wisniewski, eds. 2023. *Polish Literature as World Literature* (London: Bloomsbury Academic; the book has one chapter dealing specifically with Tokarczuk's international reception). This remarkable gap is related to another shortcoming that can be detected in the thesis. Although the author repeatedly refers to the fact that both authors under scrutiny have risen from "peripheral to world literature," the complex dynamics of the international literary field and the various transfers and flows between different language areas and literary traditions are not discussed in detail nor further contextualized. Admittedly, on p. 15, the author refers to one particular chapter in the edited volume *The Making of Chinese-Sinophone Literatures as World Literature*, but here too, there is no reference whatsoever to a highly relevant edited volume that specifically addresses Mo Yan's international position as a Sinophone writer, namely: Duran, Angelica, and Yuhan Huang, eds. 2014. *Mo Yan in Context: Nobel Laureate and Global Storyteller* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press). Given the focus of the analysis on the concept of "tenderness", the absence of the following English-language article in the bibliography is also striking: Michna, Natalia Anna. 2023. "From the Feminist Ethic of Care to Tender Attunement: Olga Tokarczuk's Tenderness as a New Ethical and Aesthetic Imperative" (*Arts* 12 (3): 1-15).

Last but not least, the fact that the author does not speak Polish means that a large part of the research conducted in Poland on Tokarczuk has been left out of consideration. A recent important book on the importance of “tenderness” in Tokarczuk’s writing (against the broader cultural background and with due attention to comparative perspectives) is the following book-length monograph authored by Tomasz Plata: *Czułość nas rozszarpie: Olga Tokarczuk i współczesne przygody nierozumu*. 2024 (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Austeria).

**2. Furthermore, it is striking that the choice of the corpus** of six books is not explicitly motivated anywhere and that the proposed analysis pays barely any attention to the internal evolution that the work of Tokarczuk and Mo Yan has undergone over the decades. To make this shortcoming concrete: since her literary debut in the late eighties, Tokarczuk has published some twenty books (one poetry collection, ten novels, five collections of short stories, three volumes of essays), but there is no explanation anywhere as to why two of her novels from the second half of the nineties were chosen for this comparative analysis, in combination with one later novel (from 2009). This lack of justification is striking because a number of the authors consulted by the author (e.g. Czapliński and Woźniak 2021) do indeed speak of different phases (and shifts in emphasis) in Tokarczuk’s literary production. The same question can be asked about the choice of Mo Yan’s books (although, in his case, a corpus has been chosen that covers a slightly longer period – from the mid-1980s to the mid-2000s).

**3. The thematic focus on the concept of “tenderness”** in the comparative analysis is undoubtedly relevant, but the way in which this is operationalized in the introduction and the actual analysis shows a certain one-sidedness:

**a. The analytical focus is** based on Tokarczuk’s discussion of the “tender narrator” in her Nobel Prize speech and the metaliterary discourse Tokarczuk has created around it (especially in the most recent period of her literary career). This discourse is then transposed to the Chinese literary and cultural context, but in a seemingly somewhat forced way, particularly by claiming that there is an equivalent in the Chinese context under the heading 温情叙事 (which also explains the “warmth” in the title of the dissertation). Along similar lines, the author goes to great lengths to literally link the concept of “tender narrator” from Tokarczuk’s Nobel Prize speech to Mo Yan’s own acceptance speech, for example on p. 15, where she writes: “In Mo Yan’s Nobel Prize acceptance speech ‘Storytellers’, he spends most of his time telling the story of his mother who taught him tenderness and warmth even though in a harsh situation” (my

emphasis). Therefore, instead of using Tokarczuk's specific concept of "tenderness" as the point of departure, it might have been more logical (and less artificial) to base the proposed comparative analysis on a broader and more universal conceptual framework, such as the field of "ecofeminism" as outlined in 3.4. Another possible approach could have been to address the empathetic way in which both Tokarczuk and Mo Yan give literary shape to the "interconnectedness of all things" from a more culture-specific perspective (for example, the fascination with Gnosticism in Tokarczuk's work and Mo Yan's reliance on the Buddhist tradition), which could then pave the way for a more comprehensive discussion of a number of thematic and formal convergences between their respective works. The primacy of Tokarczuk's work – and the metaliterary discourse she has created – in the comparative analysis is also reflected by the fact that in most parts of the actual analysis Tokarczuk's work is first discussed from a certain thematic angle, after which the focus shifts to similar elements in Mo Yan's work.

**b. In Tokarczuk's metaliterary discourse,** the notion of "tenderness" is inextricably linked to the act of "narrating" (see the reference to Tokarczuk's Nobel Prize acceptance speech on p. 47 of the dissertation), but in Ms Xiaojin Guo's approach, the narrative underpinnings and connotations of Tokarczuk's original concept are largely abandoned. Although section 1.2.4 briefly discusses the specific narrative constellation of the six books discussed in the thesis, in the analytical chapters 4, 5, and 6, the narratological dimension barely plays a role anymore. In line with this, the actual focus shifts to a thematic interpretation of the concept of "tenderness" (i.e., the way in which Tokarczuk and Mo Yan portray characters and non-human actors in their work, as well as the interactions between them). For example, on p. 3, the author makes the following observation with regard to Tokarczuk's 2009 mystery novel *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*: "[...] Tokarczuk tenderly portrays the protagonist, Janina Duszejko, an elderly woman living in a remote Polish village." Here, "tenderness" is reduced to a personal quality of the author, rather than the way in which a story has been shaped. On pp. 21-22, the author then attempts to further explain the narrative structure of the book under discussion: "In *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*, Tokarczuk mainly uses a firstperson narrative from the perspective of Janina Duszejko, and she subtly shifts to the views of animals and an omniscient God's view, which discloses a more comprehensive observation of the life of the small Polish village and embodies Tokarczuk's view of treating everything equal." Significantly, however, the author's analysis lacks a clear narratological framework, which would have allowed her to provide a more technical description of how the story is told in the

novel (also paying attention, for instance, to the seminal difference between narration and focalization). With regard to Mo Yan's work, the author equally draws our attention (very briefly) to the importance of different narrative techniques (on p. 18, for example, she writes the following about the novel *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*: "In this novel, the human and the animal perspective can switch freely, observing the changes that Chinese society and history have undergone in the last fifty years, mainly through the eyes of the animals of a donkey, ox, pig, dog and monkey."). This pertinent observation could have formed the basis for a more in-depth investigation into non-human narrative agency in Mo Yan's work, but this aspect of the novel has not been included in the research. More generally, it can be said that Ms Xiaojin Guo's elaborate comparative analysis of "tender narration" focuses much more on thematic aspects (ecocriticism, or the "what") than on more technical and formal aspects (ecopoetics, or the "how"). This also raises the question of why more recent works by Tokarczuk – such as *The Books of Jacob* (2014) and *The Empusium* (2022), which are very interesting from the perspective of so-called "fourth-person narration" – have not been included in the comparative analysis.

**4. The prominent focus on the "what" and the neglect of the "how"** is accompanied by an exaggerated focus on the "why". In section 1.2.2. ("Sources of their Tenderness and Warmth"), the author adds a strong biographical twist to the scope of her research, which is then continued in section 4.2. – in a strongly causally oriented line of argument ("Reasons for their Tenderness and Warmth towards Women"). Even in an era in which the "death of the author" no longer applies as a literary principle, this kind of approach testifies to a much too pronounced "biographism" (or biographical reductionism).

**5. Finally, it is striking that the sixth chapter**, which focuses on the treatment of marginalized male characters in the work of both authors, is much shorter than the preceding chapters (4 and 5), both of which offer a very extensive analysis. As a matter of fact, the author could have considered integrating the whole issue of gender fluidity, which plays a prominent role in Tokarczuk's work, into the analysis of (marginalized) masculinity. This would undoubtedly have revealed a number of additional differences between the two authors under scrutiny. As it stands, the author's conclusion vis-à-vis Mo Yan's writings remains limited to the following remark (on pp. 187-188): "Through portraying the marginalized men who developed a close and cooperative relationship with women and nature, Mo Yan deconstructed the binary opposition between males/females and male (culture)/nature." In line with this, the question



arises as to how the literary output of both authors and the way in which they integrate certain themes into their work (or not) relates to the different sociopolitical contexts in which their work came into being, not the least in terms of censorship (post-communist Poland and the Chinese People's Republic after the Cultural Revolution).

### **III. Specific comments**

Ms Xiaojin Guo has made a considerable effort to master a foreign language which is very different from her mother tongue (English), and these efforts are certainly commendable and deserve recognition and praise. Meanwhile, however, some reservations need to be made about the author's command of academic English. As a matter of fact, there is barely a single page without some kind of English language error (whether orthographic, lexical, syntactic, or grammatical). Self-evidently, it is inevitable that non-native speakers will make mistakes when writing in English. There are, however, sufficient tools available to minimize the number of errors. Having the text proofread by someone with near-native knowledge of English remains a very commendable good practice.

It would take up too much space to point out all the language errors here, so below is a brief overview of the most common mistakes and shortcomings (exclusively based on the very first page of the introduction):

#### *1. omission of words (nouns, articles, verbs, ...)*

"Poland's tumultuous history and geopolitical position prompted its peripheral in the global literature." (my emphasis)

"For Poland, Tokarczuk is the fifth winner of Nobel Prize for Literature in 2018, following Henryk Sienkiewicz in 1905, Władysław Reymont in 1924, Czesław Miłosz in 1980, and Wisława Szymborska in 1996." (my emphasis)

#### *2. incorrect prepositions*

"However, the two writers' winning of Nobel Prize in Literature is a demonstration to their mastery in writing and profound influence on contemporary literature." (my emphasis)

#### *3. stylistic flaws*

"Both of their works rise from peripheral literature to world literature, circulate beyond their own national or linguistic-cultural borders, and get international reception." (my emphasis)

#### 4. *grammatical incongruities*


“[...] so a comparative study of Tokarczuk’s and Mo Yan’s works will help to consolidate the bridge between the two distant countries, and promote a further cultural exchanges and understandings between the two nations.” (my emphasis)

Apart from that, it should be noted that the author very often uses the past tense where the present tense would be much more appropriate. This applies in particular to those parts of the thesis in which the plots of the various books are retold. The writing process of the six novels involved has obviously been completed, but these books and stories can be read again and again, which means that the chain of events they depict can best be summarized in the form of an “eternal now.” The example below is taken from p. 72: “In Tokarczuk’s *Primeval and Other Times*, Ruta’s being raped by five German and Russian soldiers was a tragic and disturbing event that highlighted the brutal realities of war and the vulnerability of individuals, particularly women, within a wartorn society. [...] Through Ruta, Tokarczuk addressed the fact that women’s suffering during times of war was often concealed or downplayed, and she gave voice to those hidden experiences that have been ignored. [...] In this novel, Tokarczuk depicted how the two world wars and communist regime influenced people’s lives in a village.” (my emphasis)

#### 5. **Concluding remarks**

The doctoral thesis submitted to me for external review undoubtedly broadens the boundaries and horizons of our understanding of Olga Tokarczuk’s and Mo Yan’s literary output, not the least through a comparative lens. In her dissertation, Ms Xiaojin Guo rightly assumes that the ecofeminist framework allows to shed interesting new comparative perspectives on the works of the two Nobel Prize laureates. Following this line of thought, the author has carried out a coherently structured research program based on her knowledge of both Chinese and Polish literature and culture. The material presented in the work is interesting and will undoubtedly serve as a basis for further research in the field of comparative (Polish-Chinese) literary and cultural studies. At the same time, I would like to stress that the current form in which the research has been presented leaves plenty of room for improvement, both content-wise (justification of the corpus, methodology, conceptual framework, ...) and in terms of linguistic accuracy (orthography, word choice, syntax, ...). Nevertheless, and regardless of a series of aspects that I consider to be underdeveloped, the work submitted for review demonstrates an appropriate level of scientific substance and testifies to sufficient academic and intellectual

maturity. In view of the above, I conclude that the reviewed dissertation meets the requirements for a doctoral dissertation and I hereby propose that Ms Xiaojin Guo be admitted to the next stage of the doctoral procedure.



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