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

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Abstract

Olga Tokarczuk was the winner of Nobel Prize for Literature in 2018 and Mo Yan received the prize in 2012. Neither Poland nor China is the center of literary world, but Tokarczuk and Mo Yan succeed to make international influence. Both Polish and Chinese literature were considered peripheral compared with the Western literary canon, but their books manage to rise from peripheral literature to world literature that have gained international recognition and are considered to have universal significance beyond their original cultural or linguistic context. The two writers display their commonalities of tenderness and warmth by giving voice to the marginalized women and nature. They depict the oppression and exploitation on marginalized women and nature under patriarchal hierarchal structures, and the wars and political upheavals. Through tender narration, the women are put in the center of their works, their values and significance are recognized, and their female characters are rebellious to fight against oppressive powers; nature is personified or acknowledged having agency to highlight their equal importance with humans in shaping the world. They raise women and nature from the marginalized and neglected position to the center of their works aiming to remind us to pay attention to the survival of women and nature, and to arouse people's awareness of women's existence and the human-nature relationship. However, they are not radically advocating replacing androcentrism with gynocentrism, the two authors also convey their tenderness and warmth to those marginalized men living a miserable and lonely life; despite being isolated or deserted by society, they could find care and comfort from nature and women, and those men also expressed their care and tenderness to women and nature.

The binary oppositions between males/females and male (culture)/nature are deconstructed in their works. Their works manifest the interconnectedness of everything and that a balanced and cooperative relationship among males, females and nature can and should be achieved to make the world a better and harmonious place. This dissertation is not only of certain values in looking at the works of Tokarczuk and Mo Yan through the prism of world literature, but will also constitute a contribution to intercultural literary studies and, consequently, to comparative research.

Key Words: Olga Tokarczuk; Mo Yan; comparative literature; tender and warm narration; ecofeminism

Abstrakt

Olga Tokarczuk została laureatką Literackiej Nagrody Nobla w 2018 roku, a Mo Yan otrzymał ją sześć lat wcześniej. Ani Polska, ani Chiny nie są centrum literackiego świata, ale obojgu pisarzom udało się odnieść międzynarodowy sukces. Chociaż polska i chińska literatura uważane są za peryferyjne w porównaniu z zachodnim kanonem literackim, powieści obojga autorów zdołały przeniknąć z marginalizowanej literatury powstającej na peryferiach do literatury światowej. Dziś traktuje się ją jako tę, która wykracza poza swój oryginalny kontekst kulturowy lub językowy i ma uniwersalne znaczenie. Polska pisarka i chiński pisarz wykorzystują w narracji czułość i ciepło, oddając głos marginalizowanym kobietom i naturze. Przedstawiają ucisk marginalizowanych postaci kobiecych i przyrody w ramach patriarchalnych hierarchii. Dzięki czulej narracji kobiety zajmują centralną pozycję w dziełach obojga pisarzy, przy czym kobiece postacie buntują się i walczą z opresją. Z kolei natura jest personifikowana lub uznawana za sprawczą, aby w ten sposób podkreślić, że na równych prawach bierze ona udział w kształtowaniu świata. Tokarczuk i Mo Yan, pokazując, że kobiety i natura nie zajmują w świecie marginalnych pozycji, kształtują świadomość istnienia i rangi relacji ludzi, szczególnie kobiet, z naturą. Nie opowiadają się przy tym radykalnie za zastąpieniem androcentryzmu gynocentryzmem, obdarzają czułością i ciepłem również marginalizowanych społecznie mężczyzn, np. tych, którzy są nieszczęśliwi i żyją w samotności. Mimo izolacji, w jakiej się znaleźli, mogą bowiem liczyć na opiekę i pocieszenie ze strony natury oraz kobiet.

W rozprawie analizowane są więc sposoby, jakimi polska pisarka i chiński pisarz dekonstruuje opozycje mężczyzna–kobieta i kultura–natura. Ich twórczość zawiera manifestacje wzajemnych powiązań i pokazuje, że zrównoważone i oparte na współpracy relacje między mężczyznami, kobietami i naturą czynią świat lepszym i bardziej harmonijnym miejscem. Niniejsza rozprawa może stanowić wkład w badania jest twórczości Olgi Tokarczuk i Mo Yana w kontekście literatury światowej, ale także w międzykulturowe studia literackie, a co za tym idzie, w badania porównawcze.

Słowa kluczowe: Olga Tokarczuk, Mo Yan, literatura porównawcza, czułość, ciepło, narracja, ekofeminizm

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Introduction

Neither Poland nor China has been considered the center of literary world, as Great Britain, France, Germany and America are, due to historical, economic, political and language factors that shaped the dominance of Western canon and Eurocentrism. Despite its prosperous literary achievements with several Nobel laureates, Poland's tumultuous history and geopolitical position prompted its peripheral in the global literature. China's foreign policy of isolationism made it has long been insulated from the outside world until the end of Qing dynasty and its being involved in wars against foreign invaders as well as civil wars prompted its peripheral position in the global literary world. However, the two writers' winning of Nobel Prize in Literature is a demonstration to their mastery in writing and profound influence on contemporary literature. Both of their works rise from peripheral literature to world literature, circulate beyond their own national or linguistic-cultural borders, and get international reception. Their works explore universal themes of war, political turmoil, complexities of society, countryside life, and ordinary people, especially women's situation, which resonate with readers regardless of their cultural background, 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.

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. However, Mo Yan is the first winner of Nobel Prize for Literature in China, which has significant meaning for China. Because of the West's dominance in terms of politics, economy, and even military power, the most well-known works of major European or Western literatures continue to shape world literature as we know it today. However, in this era of globalization, the power disparity is progressively being addressed, especially with Poland and China's rise in economic, political, and many other areas, and world literature is a fantastic opportunity

to introduce the best of Polish and Chinese literature as well as other non-Western works of literature for international distribution in order for them to be included in the canon of world literature. Undoubtedly, excellent literary translations are the first step in that direction for Polish and Chinese literature, yet in the process of my research, I find that the reception of Mo Yan's works are limited in Poland. Likewise, although I can buy almost all Tokarczuk's novels translated in Chinese, yet Tokarczuk's works are read mainly by researchers in the literary academia in China. Therefore, 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.

Tokarczuk and Mo Yan's commonalities in tenderness and warmth towards women and nature prompted me to explore how they depict their female characters and nature in their works. Instead of depicting heroes and deities as the center of the novel, both Tokarczuk and Mo Yan depict common rural characters, especially the life of rural female characters suffered in war and patriarchal society, as well as the existence of nature, such as animals, plants, rivers and the moon, that has long been put in a marginalized and neglected position, by putting rural female characters and nature in the center of their works. The female characters and nature in both Tokarczuk's and Mo Yan's works rise from the marginalized and neglected positions to the center of literary canons that aim to remind us to pay attention to the survival of women and nature, and reflect on the social attitudes and concepts towards them. Through analyzing how the female characters and nature are depicted by them with tenderness and warmth, this research explores the intricacies of everyday life, arouses people's awareness of women's existence and the human-nature relationships. However, those marginalized men living a miserable and lonely life are also depicted by them with tenderness and warmth, and these men could also develop a closeness with women and nature. Therefore, their works display the interconnectedness of everything and that a balanced and cooperative relationship among males, females and nature can be achieved to make the world a better and harmonious place to live in.

Olga Tokarczuk is celebrated for her intricate and compassionate storytelling,

which often features a tender narration that delves deep into the emotional lives of her characters and nature. Tokarczuk's writing often expresses deep empathy and love for her female characters, highlighting their strengths and vulnerabilities, and explores the complexities of human relationships and the interconnectedness of all things. In *Prawiek i inne czasy* [*Primeval and Other Times*],¹ Tokarczuk creates the mythical village of Primeval, capturing the personal and collective experiences of the inhabitants with deep empathy and sensitivity. Tokarczuk's tender narration is evident in her detailed and compassionate descriptions of people's lives, their joys, and their sorrows. The animals in her works are intelligent and self-aware beings, and the plants and things have their own thoughts, feelings, and social lives that are completely similar to our own. Tokarczuk's *Prowadź swój plug przez kości umarłych* [*Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*]² is also imbued with moments of tenderness, Tokarczuk tenderly portrays the protagonist, Janina Duszejko, an elderly woman living in a remote Polish village. Despite her eccentricities, the narrative treats her with profound respect and compassion, revealing the depth of her connection to animals. Olga Tokarczuk's tender narration is characterized by her deep concern for her female characters, her detailed and poetic descriptions, and her ability to capture the profound connections between humans and nature. She displays her tenderness in *Dom dzienny, dom nocny* [*House of Day, House of Night*]³ by putting the female narrator "I" and the elder woman Marta as a thread connecting all the stories of the whole book, depicting their warm and loving rural life that is often overlooked or dismissed. The animals, plants and things are personified and given voice in this novel to show her love and pity towards everything in the nature.

In Mo Yan's works, he mainly depicts the lives of rural females, describes animals as active actors having agency and shaping associations, and personifies plants and things with human thoughts and emotions. Mo Yan depicts different types of females with unique personalities and characteristics. Some women are representatives of

¹ Olga Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, trans. Antonia Lloyd-Jones (Prague: Twisted Spoon Press, 2010). This is her third novel, published originally in Polish titled *Prawiek i inne czasy* in 1996 and became highly successful.

² Olga Tokarczuk, *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*, trans. Antonia Lloyd-Jones (New York: Riverhead Books, 2018). This novel was published in 2009 in Polish titled *Prowadź swój plug przez kości umarłych*.

³ Olga Tokarczuk, *House of Day, House of Night*, trans. Antonia Lloyd-Jones (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2003). This is her fifth novel published in Polish in 1998 titled *Dom dzienny, dom nocny*.

gentleness and virtue, they quietly sacrifice in the family, pay attention to every detail in life and provide a warm haven for the family. For example, he portrays in 《丰乳肥臀》(*Big Breasts and Wide Hips*)⁴ the resilience and sacrifices of the mother Shangguan Lu with tenderness and empathy. Although she lives in a family full of contradictions and conflicts, her kindness and persistence win her respect and love. While her another female character Dai Fenglian in 《红高粱》(*Red Sorghum*)⁵ shows a resilient and indomitable spirit, who doesn't give up easily in the face of adversity, but chooses to face it bravely, and this spirit becomes a kind of inspiring power. Despite the historical and political backdrop, Ximen Bai and Yingchun in 《生死疲劳》(*Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*)⁶ are depicted as warm-hearted and tenacious women undergoing sufferings and witnessing the historical changes. The sufferings of women are depicted with empathy and compassion, highlighting the human cost of political decisions. Mo Yan's female characters are not only participants in the story, but also witnesses to the changes of the society and the times, and these female figures show the greatness and selflessness of mother's love, which becomes the soul of his works. Mo Yan does not ignore those women who suffer from injustice and hardships in their lives. These women often play the role of victims in the stories, but their encounters also trigger the readers to reflect on the society, and make the readers deeply feel the vulnerability and vitality of women and the injustice of the society. The female figures in Mo Yan's works are colorful and vibrant, and their fates, choices and struggles have become an important part of his works. By portraying these female figures, Mo Yan presents their status and destiny in the society, allowing readers to think more deeply about the status and fate of women. These female characters not only reflect the social background and cultural characteristics of that era, but also represent the author's concern and reflection on women, and their stories become a symbol to remind us to pay attention to the survival of women and reflect on the social attitudes and concepts towards women.

⁴ Mo Yan, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, trans. Howard Goldblatt (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2004). This novel was originally published in Chinese in 1995 titled 《丰乳肥臀》.

⁵ Mo Yan, *Red Sorghum*, trans. Howard Goldblatt (New York: Arrow Books, 2003). This novel was originally published in Chinese in 1986 titled 《红高粱》.

⁶ Mo Yan, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, trans. Howard Goldblatt (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2008). This novel was originally published in Chinese in 2006 titled 《生死疲劳》.

Besides female characters, Mo Yan also describes animals as active participants in society, and personifies plants and things with human thoughts and emotions. The loneliness of his childhood made him turn to nature for emotional solace, and the importance of plants and animals to the survival of mankind in the countryside deepens Mo Yan's feelings towards nature. Due to the ecological problems, the crisis of human spirit further makes Mo Yan recognize the value of nature, so Mo Yan pays attention to nature in his novels, not only depicting a lot of animals with the ability of thinking and consciousness, but also personifying plants and things as humans, highlighting their connection with human lives. For example, the dogs, horses, donkeys, pigs, oxen, and monkeys in Mo Yan's works are depicted having thoughts and emotions; the red sorghums, the moon, the sun, even rivers are personified as humans. Mo Yan's *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* tells the story of a landlord reincarnated as various animals, allowing Mo Yan to explore human and animal perspectives with a mix of humor and tenderness. Mo Yan's writing shows his reverence and tenderness towards nature, which helps to alleviate the conflicts between human beings and nature, and is a path to alleviate the spiritual crisis of modernization.

In addition to the female characters, animals, plants and things, some marginalized lonely men are also tenderly depicted by the two authors to find solace and cure from nature, become close to nature, as well as form a cooperative relationship with women. Although from different cultural backgrounds and different genders, the two authors do illustrate in their novels that males, females and nature are an interconnected whole and a balanced and cooperative relationship among them can be achieved to make the world a better and harmonious place to live in.

Therefore, through analyzing how the female characters, nature and marginalized men are depicted by them from the perspective of ecofeminism as well as tender and warm narration, this dissertation is not only of certain values in interpreting their novels, but will also help to deconstruct anthropocentrism and androcentrism based on binary opposition between males and females, culture and nature. In addition, this research also aims to promote intercultural understandings and constitute a contribution to intercultural literary studies, and consequently, to comparative research.

This dissertation will be divided into six chapters. Introduction is a description of the research content, method, aims and significance of this dissertation. Chapter one is an introduction to Olga Tokarczuk and Mo Yan and their commonalities. Chapter two is a literature review related to this research. Chapter three is an elaboration of the comparative literary method used in this research, ecofeminism, as well as Olga Tokarczuk's tender narration and narration of tenderness and warmth in China and in Mo Yan's Works. Chapter four is a comparison and analysis of Olga Tokarczuk's and Mo Yan's writings on female characters, such as women's sufferings and the reasons for their sufferings, and how are the female characters are depicted in their works with tenderness and warmth to deconstruct androcentrism. Chapter five is a comparison and analysis of Olga Tokarczuk's and Mo Yan's writings on nature, such as explaining the sources and reasons for their love and tenderness towards nature. This chapter is divided into three aspects including their tenderness and warmth towards animals, plants and things to recognize nature's equal rights with humans and deconstruct anthropocentrism. Chapter six is a depiction of Olga Tokarczuk's and Mo Yan's tenderness and warmth towards those marginalized men who live a miserable and isolated life, and cared and comforted by women and nature, and then develop a closeness with them. The essentialist view on ecofeminism and the binary opposition between males and females, culture and nature are deconstructed. Finally comes the conclusion part of this dissertation based on the analysis of their novels, the conclusion will compare and summarize the similarities and differences of their writings, such as how the female characters from different cultures grow and develop, how their descriptions of nature resemble or differ, and the human-nature relationships under different social and cultural background in Poland and China.

Chapter 1 An Introduction to Olga Tokarczuk and Mo Yan and their Commonalities

1.1. An Introduction to Olga Tokarczuk and Mo Yan

Olga Tokarczuk and Mo Yan were almost born in the same period and grew up in the countryside of different cultural backgrounds, Poland and China. Their works are closely connected with their life experiences and their specific cultures. As two celebrated writers winning the Nobel Prize for Literature, they represent the power of literature to transcend cultural and linguistic boundaries, and to be shared and liked by people of different cultural background. The following is an introduction to their life and works.

1.1.1. Life and Works of Olga Tokarczuk

Olga Tokarczuk, born in 1962 in Sulechów, western Poland, is the 2018 Nobel laureate in literature. Her parents are teachers, and her father was also a school librarian, and in that library she found her love for literature. According to her autobiography¹, since her child, she was interested in reading mythology, fairy tales, fables, folk tales, American literature. She was an untroublesome child who looked after herself and she enjoyed the freedom of being alone and lying down in the middle of the day and sitting in a tree when she did not want to play with the other children. Before she ever went to school she used to spend a great deal of time on walks, investigating the enormous park, its ponds, paths, hidden nooks and passages; she also used to go to the nearby village to observe the people, their way of life, the objects they had and their animals. Every year she and her younger sister were sent to their mother's parents for a holiday in the

¹ Olga Tokarczuk, "The Nobel Prize in Literature 2018: Biographical," NobelPrize.org, accessed November 26, 2024, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2018/tokarczuk/biographical/>.

countryside where they had a lovely wooden house, a riverside bathing beach nearby and some huge pine forests. Her grandma would tell her what had happened in the area in the past, when she was a little girl, and earlier than that as well, before she was born, which engendered the writing of her *Primeval and Other Times*. She started studying psychology at the University of Warsaw in 1980 and after graduation she worked as a clinical psychotherapist, but she quitted the job because she realized she was much more neurotic than her clients.² She went to London and worked at several occupations there, and then she returned to Poland and published her poetry collection *Miasta w lustrach* [*Cities in Mirrors*]³ in 1989.⁴ In 1993, she released her first novel, *Podróż ludzi księgi* [*The Journey of the Book-People*], which won the Polish Publisher's Prize.⁵ But her real success came when her third novel, *Prawiek i inne czasy* [*Primeval and Other Times*], was shortlisted for Poland's most prestigious literary award, the Nike. It chronicles three generations of a Polish family from 1914 till the end of the 20th century. It was after this novel that Tokarczuk began to regard writing as her profession.⁶ A very important thing for Tokarczuk was that she bought an old house in Kłodzko Valley where she went deep into nature and started her first literary self-reflection, giving thought to a style of her own and disrupting the linear story-telling. Then her *House of Day, House of Night* came into being in 1998 and influenced all her later work. During the turn of the centuries she had a period of intensive travel and published her constellation novel *Bieguni* [*Flights*] in 2007. Then she spent many years preparing and writing *Księgi Jakubowe* [*The Books of Jacob*]⁷ because the history of Jacob Frank wasn't very well known, so she had to do lots of research.⁸

Tokarczuk's life experience in the countryside and psychological studying background have a huge impact on her ecological theme and depiction of the inner

² Alex Marshall and Alter Alexandra, "Olga Tokarczuk and Peter Handke Awarded Nobel Prizes in Literature," *The New York Times*, October 10, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/10/books/nobel-prize-literature.html>.

³ This is Tokarczuk's debut literary work published in Polish and it has not been translated into English. It marked her entry into the literary world and set the stage for her later success in prose fiction.

⁴ Alicja Zelazko, "Olga Tokarczuk: Biography, Books, & Facts," in *Encyclopædia Britannica*, October 17, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Olga-Tokarczuk>.

⁵ Tokarczuk, "The Nobel Prize in Literature 2018: Biographical."

⁶ Tokarczuk, "The Nobel Prize in Literature 2018: Biographical."

⁷ The book was published in 2014 in Polish and translated into English by Jennifer Croft in 2022. The book won Poland's prestigious Nike Literary Award in 2015.

⁸ Tokarczuk, "The Nobel Prize in Literature 2018: Biographical."

emotions of her characters. Her novels frequently address issues of marginalization, nature, interconnectedness of all things and human existence. Some Polish people have denounced her as anti-Christian, unpatriotic, and an eco-terrorist. She has refuted the accusations, called herself a “true patriot,” and claimed that those who criticize her are xenophobic and harm Poland’s image.⁹ The Swedish Academy honored her for her “narrative imagination that with encyclopedic passion represents the crossing of boundaries as a form of life” while announcing her as the 2018 Nobel winner for Literature.

1.1.2. Life and Works of Mo Yan

The other writer, Guan Moye, whose pen name is Mo Yan meaning “hush” in Chinese, was born to a peasant family in 1956 in Northeast Gaomi Township, Shandong Province, China, where people were leading an impoverished life. He is the youngest child of his family, with two elder brothers and a sister. When thinking back to his childhood, scenes of hunger are engraved in his memory. In the summer of 1967, he was forced to drop out of primary school to work for the production brigade, tending to livestock and cutting grass every day. He recalled that the finest thing that ever occurred to him in his literary career was quitting school, which made him become a child used to solitude and become an integrated whole with nature by traversing the meadow and spending his days with sheep and cattle. His childhood experience helped him develop a reverence for nature and an understanding of the animal world, upon which his fictional world is built upon. He also heard from his great uncle many wonderful stories that subvert history and penetrate reality, that tie together Heaven, Hell, and humankind, and that treat animals, nature, and human beings equally.¹⁰ Due to this idea of treating everything in the nature equally, we can find that in his works women were given equal

⁹ Kailas Vijayrao Karnewar, “The Novels of Olga Tokarczuk: A Study in Myths, History and Culture” (PhD diss., Swami Ramanand Teerth Marathwada University, 2020).

¹⁰ Mo Yan, “Nobel Prize in Literature 2012: Biographical,” NobelPrize.org, accessed November 25, 2024, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2012/yan/biographical>.

importance with men, and the animals, plants and even objects have emotions and human feelings, which forms a commonality with Tokarczuk's ideas and works.

At the age of fifteen he was assigned to record work points for the production brigade in his commune. During this period, he devoted all his spare time to reading the high school textbooks his brother had left at home and other books he borrowed from nearby villages. A “rightist” neighbor who had been sent back to labor in the fields – a college graduate in Chinese literature – poured all sorts of literary knowledge into him, and his writing dream was born. Later his jobs as confidential clerk and librarian in the military unit gave him private space to read, and he was like a fish in water with the thousands of volumes in the library. That was also the time he began to write again. In September 1981, his short story 《春夜雨霏霏》 (*A Rainy Spring Night*)¹¹ was published in the Baoding literary magazine 《莲池》 (*Lotus Pond*)¹². In September 1984, his high exam scores got him into the Literature Department of the Chinese People's Liberation Army Arts Academy. His literary career underwent a significant sea change after he was accepted into the Academy. There, he conducted a methodical study of Chinese and foreign literary history and read numerous translated foreign novels from Faulkner, García Márquez, and other authors who have encouraged him to focus on his native home. His literary kingdom was his hometown Northeast Gaomi Township, and his childhood memories as well as those people living there inspired his writing.¹³ In March 1985, the publication of his novella 《透明的红萝卜》 (*The Transparent Carrot*) caused a sensation. It established his status as a writer and was partially responsible for changing the face of contemporary Chinese literature. In 1986, the five parts that formed his first novel *Red Sorghum* were published serially. This novel was adapted to a film in 1988 by Chinese director Zhang Yimou who brought Mo Yan's work to an international audience and won the Golden Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival. Upon his graduation from the Arts Academy, he was assigned as a writer in

¹¹ His first short story published in Chinese titled 《春夜雨霏霏》，boosted his confidence and set loose his passion for writing.

¹² The support from *Lotus Pond* was a boon for Mo Yan because its editors published five of his stories in a row, and the famous writer Sun Li even wrote a critical piece in praise of the story 《欢乐》 (*Popular Music*).

¹³ Mo, “Nobel Prize in Literature 2012: Biographical.”

the cultural department of a military unit. There he wrote a series of novels set in Northeast Gaomi Township. Anyone who reads 《天堂蒜薹之歌》(*The Garlic Ballads*, 1988) and 《十三步》(*Thirteen Paces*, 1988) today will be amazed by the strength of the criticism and the bravery of his support for the underprivileged and impoverished. He was accepted into a graduate seminar on creative writing that Beijing Normal University and the Lu Xun Literary Academy jointly sponsored in the fall of 1988. While attending classes he wrote 《酒国》(*The Republic of Wine*, 1993) and some other works. These works delve deep into the causes of corruption from a humanistic standpoint.¹⁴ He wrote the controversial novel *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* in 1995, which drew criticism from certain leftists and was perceived to include derogatory depictions of Communist soldiers.¹⁵ In October 1997, he left the army to work for the *Procuratorate Daily*. During his ten years working there, he wrote three novels: 《檀香刑》(*Sandalwood Death*, 2001), 《四十一炮》(*POW!*, 2003) and 《生死疲劳》(*Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 2006). 《蛙》(*Frog*, 2009) is another of his works that centers around the cause and consequences of China's One-Child Policy.

Mo Yan considers himself to be a realist author of historical fiction, but he has little interest in official histories and documented “facts” and often combines historical realities with folklore, bizarre animal imagery, and a variety of creative narrative techniques to produce distinctive and uniquely satisfying literature. His writings are so visceral and have universally appealing themes that they readily transcend national boundaries.¹⁶ Mo Yan is the first Chinese to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature as a writer “who with hallucinatory realism merges folk tales, history and the contemporary.”¹⁷

1.2. Commonalities of Olga Tokarczuk and Mo Yan

¹⁴ Mo, “Nobel Prize in Literature 2012: Biographical.”

¹⁵ Shelley W. Chan, “From Fatherland to Motherland: On Mo Yan’s *Red Sorghum* and *Big Breasts and Full Hips*”, *World Literature Today*, no.3, 74 (Summer 2000): 495–501.

¹⁶ Mo, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, vii-viii. These pages are written by Howard Goldblatt in the introduction part of his translated English version of this novel.

¹⁷ Zhu Xiangqian, 《莫言：诺奖的荣幸》 [*Mo Yan: The Honour of the Nobel Prize*] (Nanchang: Baihuazhou Literary Press, 2012).

Although being writers from two quite distant countries and with their works rooted in different cultures and traditions, Tokarczuk and Mo Yan do have some commonalities in terms of their life experiences, writing themes, writing styles and achievements.

1.2.1. Their Works Rise from Peripheral to World Literature

Regarding the systematic localization and technique of comparative literature, there is currently minimal agreement. However, it is hardly debatable to refer to the study of comparative literature as world literature. The idea of world literature was first articulated in the nineteenth century, and January 31, 1827, to be exact, when German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe told Johann Peter Eckermann, his personal secretary and disciple, that he was reading a translated Chinese novel. Reading this non-Western literary work is especially important for Goethe because it convinced him that “poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere and at all times,” and that “national literature is now rather an unmeaning term; the epoch of world-literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach.”¹⁸ Clearly, Chinese literature in translation held a significant place in Goethe’s concept of *Weltliteratur*. Translation has clearly always had a unique relationship with the concept of world literature; after all, translation is what enables us to read, comprehend, and embrace the literatures of other peoples and cultures, and it is translation that gives us a great deal of knowledge about the outside world.

Hendrik Birus proposed a new reading and understanding of Goethe’s concept of world literature. Birus suggests that Goethe’s words should not be taken at surface value in the modern era and that instead, we should understand his idea of world literature as the simultaneous emergence of world literature, primarily in English translations, and the rapid flourishing of numerous European and non-European literatures as two aspects of the same process, rather than as a replacement for national literature. The comprehension of this dialectic, according to Birus, should be a primary goal of

¹⁸ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, “Conversations with Eckermann on *Weltliteratur* (1827),” in *World Literature in Theory*, ed. David Damrosch (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 19-20.

comparative literature nowadays.¹⁹ According to David Damrosch, “all literary works circulating out into a broader world beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin” are included in the category of world literature.²⁰ It is true that non-Western works must be translated into a major language in order to have wider distribution outside of their original culture and to become recognized as canonical literature. Mo Yan expressed his respect for the translators from various countries who have translated his work, “Without you, there would be no world literature. Your work is a bridge that helps people to understand and respect each other.”²¹ I also want to express my gratitude to Tokarczuk’s English and Chinese translators, without them, the language barriers would prevent me from appreciating Tokarczuk’s fabulous works that help me to have a better understanding of Polish culture and life. It is translation that makes world literature possible.

Olga Tokarczuk was the winner of Nobel Prize for Literature in 2018 and Mo Yan was awarded the prize in 2012. Neither Poland nor China is the center of literary world, as the USA, the UK or France are, due to historical, economic, political and language factors that shaped the dominance of Western canon and Eurocentrism. But Tokarczuk and Mo Yan succeed to make international influence and let their voices be heard around the world. Just as Tokarczuk acknowledges in a telephone interview that her Nobel Prize was the one goes to central Europe, “I am proud that I am with Peter Handke, and both of us are from central Europe. Such a prize will give us a kind of optimism that we have something to say to the world, and that we are still active, and we still have an ability to express ourselves, and we have something profound to tell to the world.”²² Both Tokarczuk’s and Mo Yan’s books rise from peripheral literature to world literature that have gained international recognition and are considered to have universal significance beyond their original cultural or linguistic context. As Yingjin Zhang answers Huggan’s question, why world literature has suddenly become popular in the new millennium, by putting forward that world literature has reemerged as a force challenging the long-standing, narrow Western-centered perspectives of the world. This

¹⁹ Hendrik Birus, “The Goethean Concept of World Literature and Comparative Literature,” *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 2, no. 4 (December 1, 2000), <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1090>.

²⁰ David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003), 200.

²¹ Mo Yan, “Banquet Speech,” NobelPrize.org, accessed November 26, 2024, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2012/yan/speech/>.

²² Olga Tokarczuk, “Nobel Prize in Literature 2018: Interview,” NobelPrize.org, accessed November 26, 2024, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2018/tokarczuk/interview/>. This is a telephone interview with Olga Tokarczuk by Adam Smith, Chief Scientific Officer of Nobel Media, after the announcement of the 2018 Nobel Prize in Literature on 10 October 2019.

has created space for non-Western literature to be recognized as world literature, at least in academic circles.²³

1.2.2. Sources of their Tenderness and Warmth

On the one hand, both Tokarczuk's and Mo Yan's tenderness and warmth are related with their love of nature. Both of them grew up in the countryside and they enjoyed being alone with nature since they were a child. In the kindergarten, when Tokarczuk did not want to play with the other kids, she would sit in a tree or lie down alone in the middle of the day. She used to spend a lot of time exploring the vast park, its ponds, walkways, and secret passageways before she ever started school. She would also visit the surrounding village to examine the local people, their way of life, their objects, and their animals. She and her younger sister were sent to their grandparents' house every year for a vacation in the countryside, where they had a beautiful wooden house, near a riverside bathing beach and some huge pine forests.²⁴ Mo Yan had to quit primary school early by policy and tended livestock and cut grass for the production brigade. He became one with nature by traversing the meadow and spending his days with sheep and cattle, and he developed a respect for nature and an understanding of the animal world. He also heard from his great uncle a lot of amazing stories that subvert history and penetrate reality, that connect Heaven, Hell, and humanity, and that treat animals, nature, and people equally, which had an impact on his writing. Because of this notion that everything in nature should be treated equally, women were given equal weight with men in his works, and that animals, plants, and even things have human emotions. His views and works share similarities with those of Tokarczuk's.

On the other hand, through their respective biography and Nobel Prize speech, I learned that both Olga Tokarczuk and Mo Yan are influenced by their own mothers who have great impact in the shaping their values and their characters in the novels. As a small child, Tokarczuk learned that her mother missed her even before she was born, which has always remained in her memory and given her a store of strength that has lasted her whole life. She ascribed her tender narrative to her mother, "And so a young

²³ Zhang Yingjin, "Locations of China in World Literature and World Cinema," in *The Making of Chinese-Sinophone Literatures as World Literature*, ed. Chiu Kuei-fen and Zhang Yingjin (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2022), 45.

²⁴ Tokarczuk, "The Nobel Prize in Literature 2018: Biographical."

woman who was never religious—my mother—gave me something once known as a soul, thereby furnishing me with the world’s greatest tender narrator.”²⁵ When she was a child, her mother read her fairy tales from which she learned that a teapot could speak out its complaints, then other broken objects picked up its tune, and told truly epic stories of their modest little lives as objects. As a child, she listened to these fairy tales with flushed cheeks and tears in her eyes, because she believed deeply that objects have their own problems and emotions, as well as a sort of social life, entirely comparable to our human one. To Tokarczuk, the spoons, knives, and forks in the drawer form a kind of family, and that the plates in the dresser could communicate with one another. Roads, rivers, landscapes and forests are living things that shape our environment and gave us a sense of belonging. The entire visible and invisible world, including the Sun, Moon, and other celestial bodies are alive.²⁶

Olga Tokarczuk’s tender narration is characterized by her deep empathy for her female characters, her detailed and poetic descriptions, and her ability to capture the profound connections between humans and nature, Tokarczuk’s writing resonates with sensitivity and compassion, creating a profound emotional impact on her readers.

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. For example, he recalled that when he was a child, due to hunger and lacking in strength, he broke his family’s only vacuum bottle while fetching water from the public canteen. Out of fear for being scolded, he hid until evening, but instead of scolding or hitting him, his mother gently rubbed his head and sighed. There’s also another his most painful memory that when his mother and him were caught gleaned wheat in the collective’s field, his mother was unable to run due to her bound feet and slapped by a watchman. Years later, when he wanted to confront the now elderly watchman, she stopped him, saying, “The man who hit me and this man are not the same person.”²⁷ He also recollected that on the Mid-autumn Festival when his family had the rare treat of dumplings—just one small bowl each. As they ate, an elderly beggar came to the door. He offered the man half a bowl of dried sweet potatoes, but the beggar felt offended and protested that it was cruel to give him scraps while they

²⁵ Olga Tokarczuk, “The Tender Narrator,” *Nobelprize.org*, December 7, 2019, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2018/tokarczuk/lecture/>.

²⁶ Tokarczuk, “The Tender Narrator,” 2019.

²⁷ Mo Yan, “Storytellers,” *Nobelprize.org*, December 7, 2012, https://www.nobelprize.org/uploads/2018/06/yan-lecture_en.pdf.

ate dumplings. He refuted angrily that dumplings were a rare luxury for them too. After scolding Mo Yan, his mother gave the beggar her own portion of dumplings. His mother's kindness highly influenced his whole life and his writing. Mo Yan's mother, who was illiterate, respected those who could read. She never refused his request to purchase a book or writing instrument, despite the fact that they were so impoverished that they frequently did not know where they would get their next meal. Hard working by nature, she hated lazy children, but she never criticized him whenever he delayed his work because he was reading. Mo Yan decided to write the book *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* for his mother while he was experiencing overwhelming sadness following her passing. He also revealed that the novel was actually written for all mothers worldwide, keeping with his ambition to make the small Northeast Gaomi Township a microcosm of China, even the entire world.²⁸ Besides his mother, he was also cared and encouraged by another woman in his village every time she met him, she called him by his infant name and said, "You're not stupid, you're a good boy. The people who laugh at you are the stupid ones."²⁹

1.2.3. Commonalities in Writing Themes

Although Tokarczuk and Mo Yan are writers of different genders and from different countries, their works transcend national borders and address universal themes like wars, political upheavals, human desires, women and nature, sufferings and resilience.

On the one hand, both Tokarczuk and Mo Yan give voices to the marginalized women and nature. Unlike many traditional classics that putting heroes and deities in the center of works, they put rural female characters and nature in the center of their works. The rural female characters and nature in their works rise from the marginalized and neglected positions to the center of literary canons and are given voices in a world dominated by men and imbued with wars and conflicts. Nature is frequently personified or given voice in their works. The animals, plants and objects are active players or personifies as having human emotions and feelings in their narratives.

Tokarczuk's works explore marginalized individuals, especially women, and the

²⁸ Mo, "Storytellers," 2012.

²⁹ Mo, "The Nobel Prize in Literature 2012: Biographical."

complex relationship between humans and nature. Her narratives give voice to those women on the fringes of society, while also reflecting her deep concern for the nature. Her portrayal of marginalized women is nuanced, with her female characters often existing outside the boundaries of social norms, defying conventional roles, and embodying resilience in the face of adversity. The laudation given to Olga Tokarczuk praises her “for a narrative imagination that with encyclopedic passion represents the crossing of boundaries as a form of life.”³⁰ She describes the interiors of country estates, convents, and Jewish homes, with clothes, gardening, and menus. In particular, she makes silent women to be living individuals and gives quiet servants their own voices. Her *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* deals with the sustenance of animals and women’s existence, especially the elder women’s. The story takes place in a rural Polish village close to the Czech border, where the local poachers and hunters are experiencing a string of unexplained deaths. Janina Duszejko, the protagonist, is a quirky and withdrawn sixty-year-old retired engineer and part-time schoolteacher who studies astrology, translates poetry by William Blake, and fervently defends animal rights. She thinks that the forest’s animals are taking revenge on the ones who hunted and killed them. Like those animals being hunt, the elder Duszejko was regarded by many male characters with power as a madwoman, despised and ridiculed by them. Through her unorthodox protagonist Duszejko, Tokarczuk challenges social conventions and gives voice to the marginalized women and animals who are treated with injustice and dominance.

Mo Yan frequently portrays women as marginalized figures, caught in the intersection of traditional patriarchal values, economic hardship, and historical upheavals. His female characters are often subjected to physical and emotional abuse, yet they exhibit resilience, inner strength, and resourcefulness in the face of adversity. The Swedish Academy applauds Mo Yan that he is “a poet who tears down stereotypical propaganda posters, elevating the individual from an anonymous human mass.”³¹ Mo

³⁰ See “Nobel Prize in Literature 2018” on <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2018/summary/>.

³¹ From the “Award ceremony speech” made by Per Wästberg, the writer, member of the Swedish Academy, and Chairman of the Nobel Committee, 10 December 2012.

Yan defends small individuals against all injustices, from Japanese occupation to political terror and today production frenzy. *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* is a historical epitome of China through the last years of the Qing Dynasty when the Boxer Rebellion³² was defeated by the troops from eight foreign nations, the Sino-Japanese War, the Chinese Civil War (Mao's Communists and Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists), the Maoist era, and the early years of China's economic reforms. Themes of female resilience, patriarchal oppression, and cycles of violence and survival are central to the novel. Set in Northeastern Gaomi Township, this novel depicts a picture of the poor people in rural China, especially the Chinese women who are struggling in poverty and hardship of life at that time. Because of Mo Yan's creative expression, the book reveals the historical reality of the Japanese invasion, enabling readers from other nations to learn about the subjugation of Chinese women by Japanese soldiers during that era. Mo Yan writes a tragedy about Chinese women that makes us consider the impacts of war and the bravery of women in resisting. The protagonist Shangguan Lu was required to give birth to a boy who was able to inherit the family line after she was married into the Shangguan family when she was seventeen. After giving birth to eight daughters consecutively, Shangguan Lu finally gave birth to a boy named Shangguan Jintong and stopped giving birth. With strong determination and selfless love, Shangguan Lu risks her life to protect her children and grandchildren in the violent and turbulent years. This novel is a complex and vivid portrayal of female sufferings and resilience. Mo Yan's *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* spans China's transformative history from the Land Reform Movement of 1949 to the early twenty-first century. Though filled with the harsh realities of politics and history, this novel conveys a concern for humanity and life through delicate emotional depictions and animal perspectives. 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.

On the other hand, both Tokarczuk and Mo Yan write multigenerational saga in

³² The Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901) was an anti-foreign, anti-colonial, and anti-Christian uprising that took place in China toward the end of the Qing dynasty. It was led by a secret society known as the Yihequan (Righteous and Harmonious Fists), called the “Boxers” by Westerners because they practiced martial arts.

which the generations in a family afflicted by wars, political upheavals and disasters in rural areas. Olga Tokarczuk's *Primeval and Other Times* is a multigenerational saga spans several decades and chronicles the lives of multiple interconnected characters and families in the fictional Polish village of Primeval during the two world wars and the rein of communist regime. It mainly depicts the life of Genowefa's daughter and grandchildren, the three generations of old Boski's family, Cornspike and Ruta. It explores the love, loss, sufferings and survival across generations and families, and examines history's imprint on individuals and families. Mo Yan's *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* is a multigenerational saga that recounts the modern and contemporary history of rural China over five decades from the Land Reform Movement around 1950 to the early twenty-first century to examine the impact of social change and political unrest on people's destiny. It depicts the lives of interconnected characters and families threaded by Ximen Nao, a wealthy landlord, executed during the Communist Land Reform and reincarnated into a series of animals, such as a donkey, an ox, a pig, a dog and a monkey, and finally reincarnates into a human. Every reincarnation functions as a prism through which the life of Ximen Nao's family members and descendants was observed. Each of Ximen Nao's reincarnations represents a different aspect of rural life and human interaction with history. For instance, as a donkey, he experiences the toil of peasant labor; as a pig, he observes human greed and fight for power. His *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* is also a multigenerational saga depicting the lives of multiple generations of the Shangguan family spans much of the wars and political unrest in the 20th century, reflecting the political, social, and cultural transformations of modern China through the sufferings and changes of this family's experiences.

1.2.4. Commonalities in Writing Styles

On the one hand, several works of both Tokarczuk's and Mo Yan's are characterized by nonlinear narration and multiple narrative perspectives. They challenge traditional storytelling structures by weaving multiple timelines, flashbacks, multiple perspectives into an intricate structure. Tokarczuk frequently organizes her writings into brief, independent chapters or short stories that appearing unrelated on the surface, but actually they disclose thematic and narrative connections, such as her

House of Day, House of Night, and Primeval and Other Times. In these novels, events are narrated out of chronological order, and stories depicting different characters and things are composed together. To Tokarczuk, this kind of non-linear narration corresponds with her belief in the interconnectedness of all things. Tokarczuk believes the writer's mind is a synthetic mind that doggedly gathers up all the tiny pieces in an attempt to stick them together again to create a universal whole. She dreams of a new kind of narrator—a “fourth-person” one, who manages to encompass the perspective of each of the characters, who has the capacity to step beyond the horizon of each of them, who sees more and has a wider view, and who is able to ignore time.³³

In Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum* the past, present and future are interwoven together, shifting among the narrator's recollections, the history of his family and his present life. This kind of shifts between the narrator's present-day reflections and the historical events involving his grandparents mirror the chaos and trauma of war and also require readers' intense attention in reading the novel, otherwise the readers may get confused with the time and plots. The narration of *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* also frequently shifts between Shangguan Jintong's present, past memories, and his ancestral stories, illustrating how individuals' lives are impacted by historical events. Reading Mo Yan's novels is like watching a film that often shifts perspectives and timelines, much like a director shooting from different angles to reveal the diverse facets of life. By presenting stories from multiple narrative perspectives, he offers readers a world seen through the eyes of many characters and many different angles. Mo Yan's multiple narrative perspectives are similar to Tokarczuk's, like what she said in her Nobel Prize speech that “this is a point of view, a perspective from where everything can be seen. Seeing everything means recognizing the ultimate fact that all things that exist are mutually connected into a single whole, even if the connections between them are not yet known to us.”³⁴

In *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, Tokarczuk mainly uses a first-person narrative from the perspective of Janina Duszejko, and she subtly shifts to the

³³ Tokarczuk, “The Tender Narrator,” 2019.

³⁴ Tokarczuk, “The Tender Narrator.”

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. In *House of Day, House of Night*, the first-person narrator of the book reflects on life in a small Polish village and third-person omniscient historical narratives of saints and history are weaved together smoothly. The first-person narrator is an unnamed woman who always stay with the protagonist Marta, and she shares everyday experiences, personal reflections and observations about life in the borderland region of Lower Silesia. An omniscient third-person perspective is included to narrate the history of Saint Kummernis, life of Polish ancestors, and present-day life of villagers in the neighborhood. Through blending the actual and the imagined, the past and the present, and the human and the divine, time and boundaries are ignored in this novel. Her *Primeval and Other Times* consists of 84 chapters titled "the time of something or somebody". From different perspectives, it tells the stories of different people, animals, plants and objects in the village Primeval, through which the chaotic and changeable history of twentieth century Poland is reflected. People, animals, plants, objects and everything in the nature are given a perspective to describe their life, embodying Tokarczuk's view of treating everything in the nature equally and through this way, the readers can have a comprehensive observation of how everything in the nature are impacted by this chaotic and war-trodden world. Tokarczuk's use of multiple perspectives is a way of expressing the interconnectedness of all things — people, animals, nature, and the cosmos. By allowing different characters and voices to share their perspectives, she suggests that truth is not singular but relational, emerging from the complex interactions between different beings and forces.

Likewise, Mo Yan's novel *Red Sorghum* begins with a first-person narrator, the grandson of the protagonists, reflecting on the stories of his grandparents. This personal, intimate voice gives the narrative a sense of direct transmission from one generation to the next. However, the novel quickly moves into third-person narration, providing an omniscient view of the events, especially during the brutal Japanese invasion. This shift allows Mo Yan to offer both personal and historical perspectives on the same events, and to combine different concepts of time in the process of telling the story, giving the

narrator great freedom and allowing the reader to gain a wider view of the story. These shifts highlight the interconnectedness of family history with national history, showing how individual lives are shaped by larger political and social forces. The multiplicity of narrative voices also reflects the oral storytelling tradition of rural China, where stories are passed down and reshaped through generations. His *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* employs the narrative technique of shifting perspectives and narrative voice to depict the personal and political upheavals of the time. The novel often shifts between the first-person voice of Shangguan Jintong and a third-person omniscient narration. The third-person narration offers a wider, more detached perspective of the family's hardships, while Jintong's first-person voice is very subjective and full of his own obsessions and fears. The shifting perspectives in this novel also highlight the novel's exploration of gender and power. Shangguan Lu's perspective, though often filtered through Jintong's narration, reflects the marginalization and oppression of women in Chinese society. At the same time, the third-person narration offers a more comprehensive view of the political and social forces that oppress both women and men, especially in the context of war and revolution. Mo Yan's use of multiple perspectives thus serves to expose the deeply embedded structures of power and control that shape his characters' lives.

Mo Yan's *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* is a masterpiece in shifting narrative perspectives, blending the animal and human viewpoints to offer a satirical and poignant exploration of Chinese history. As Ximen Nao is reincarnated into different animals (donkey, ox, pig, dog, monkey) and finally a human child, Lan Qiansui, each reincarnated animal offers a unique perspective on Chinese rural life, the lives of the animals, as well as the humans who interact with them. These shifts allow Mo Yan to critique social and political issues from a variety of angles, together with human's perspectives and third-person perspectives, the animal perspectives provide a fresh, often ironic view of human behavior. The animal narrators also offer a broader philosophical perspective on life, death, and the cycles of existence. Through the constant shifts in perspective, Mo Yan presents a sweeping, multifaceted view of Chinese history, from the Communist Revolution to the Cultural Revolution and

beyond. The multiple narrators allow for a rich exploration of the complexities of history, as seen through the eyes of both humans and animals. This narrative technique reinforces the novel's themes of change, transformation, and the interconnectedness of all living creatures. A kind of third-person omniscient point-of-view narration is also included. This is a character other than the main character or the narrator, but has a similar connection with the author. The narrators of *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* are the main characters, Ximen Nao and Blue Face, but "Mo Yan" also becomes one of the narrators, his identity is a writer, and he plays a kind of complementary role in the novel. Although this "Mo Yan" in the novel is not the writer himself, it is more or less the shadow of the writer himself, which unavoidably make the readers develop associations. As Gao Xingjian said, in order to achieve a greater sense of reality in his works, the writer tries to hide himself behind his characters and attempts to observe them with their eyes.³⁵ In short, behind the multiple changes of narrative perspectives in Mo Yan's novels, there is a greater sense of truth in Mo Yan's novels. Besides, the complexity of the characters and the twists and turns of the storyline are more often presented, and at the same time, Mo Yan's profound and solid writing skills and exuberant creativity are also demonstrated.

On the other hand, both their works blend myths, folk tales, history and reality together. By blending history, myth, folklore, and personal experiences, they explore the tensions between individual and collective experiences, the blurred lines between fact and fiction, and the deeply intertwined nature of the human condition and history. Both Olga Tokarczuk and Mo Yan's novels are characterized by magical realism³⁶ that blends folklore, mythology and reality to depict people's sufferings, resistance and resilience under historical events, blurring the boundaries between the real and the fantastical, challenging conventional notions of reality. Through the magical realist mode of writing, their works reflect the historical and social contexts in which they were produced, providing insights into different time periods, societal norms, and

³⁵ Gao Xingjian, 《现代小说技巧初探》 [*A Primer on Modern Fiction Techniques*] (Guangzhou: Huacheng Publishing House, 1981), 81.

³⁶ Magical realism is a literary genre gained prominence in the mid-20th century, particularly in Latin America where authors sought new ways to express their cultural realities. The most influential work is Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* that blends fantastical elements with everyday reality.

historical events. Liu Meichen made a comparative study of Tokarczuk's *Primeval and Other Times* and Mo Yan's *Frog* from the perspective of magic realism. Liu explores how magical realism has been received in both China and Poland, and analyzes key features of their selected book, highlighting their shared techniques like mythological references, fixed settings, non-linear storytelling, and symbolic motifs. These similarities offer a bridge between Chinese and Polish literary traditions.³⁷

There are some other researchers who analyze Tokarczuk's writings from the perspective of magical realism. For example, Maciej Karasinski discusses thematic parallels in *The Legends of Khasak* and *Primeval and Other Times* and illustrates how the authors make use of the folklore of their respective cultures—Indian and Polish—to construct magical realities.³⁸ Ewa V. Wampuszyc analyzes the magical realist mode of writing in two novels by Olga Tokarczuk: *Primeval and Other Times* and *House of Day, House of Night*. Wampuszyc holds that Tokarczuk's novels incorporate core elements of magical realism, such as disrupting conventional notions of time and space, challenging dominant historical and cultural narratives, exploring alternative ways of knowing, and making literalization of metaphor and imagination.³⁹ In Tokarczuk's works, Cornspike could have sex with a plant and gave birth to a daughter, the elder woman Marta would hibernate in the winter and appear in the spring, the woman Kummernis could grow beards, and the monk Paschalis could become a woman, all these seemingly absurd and incredible things exist in Tokarczuk's works making the reality and the mystery blurred.

Mo Yan said in his biography that his writing was influenced by Gabriel García Márquez, and his novels are characterized by magical realism through blending realistic depictions of rural China with surreal, fantastical elements, making his novels free from the limitations of time and space. In Mo Yan's works, magical realism is often rooted

³⁷ Liu Meichen, "Magic Realism in the Works of Mo Yan and Olga Tokarczuk — A Case Study on *Frog* and *Primeval and Other Times*," Jagiellonian University Repository, July 6, 2022.

³⁸ Maciej Karasinski, "Mapping the Contours of Spiritual Oppression: Thematic Parallels of Magical Reality in O. V. Vijayan's *The Legends of Khasak* and Olga Tokarczuk's *Primeval and Other Times*," *Papers on Language & Literature* 58, no. 2 (Spring 2022): 165-201.

³⁹ Ewa V. Wampuszyc, "Magical Realism in Olga Tokarczuk's *Primeval and Other Times* and *House of Day, House of Night*," *East European Politics and Societies* 28, no. 2 (January 31, 2014): 366–85, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325413519471>.

in traditional Chinese culture, including its myths, legends, and folk tales. These elements merge with modern historical realities, particularly the traumatic events of 20th-century China, such as the Japanese invasion (1931-1945), the Communist Revolution⁴⁰, the Great Leap Forward⁴¹, and the Cultural Revolution⁴². Mo Yan uses magical realism to highlight the surreal and often absurd nature of these events, creating a narrative space where historical trauma and fantastical occurrences coexist. In *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, Mo Yan allows human nature and animal nature to mix completely together, with animals possessing human memory and consciousness while retaining animal nature. The moon in his work can communicate with human beings and understand them. In *Red Sorghum* the red sorghums, dogs, donkeys and mules are described as human being with human emotions and human behaviors. This kind of magical realist writing method of attributing human attributes into animals, plants and objects also exists in Tokarczuk's works. Through magical realism, Tokarczuk and Mo Yan criticize social realities and express his sympathy and tenderness on the common rural people who suffered in the chaotic and traumatic era.

When magical realism and tender narration are united, a distinctive storytelling style that unites the extraordinary with the ordinary while maintaining a tone of warmth, empathy and sensitivity is produced. This combination makes it possible to explore complicated and often painful subjects with a gentleness that shows the characters' humanity and vulnerability. The fantastical elements of magical realism are infused with emotional warmth and sensitivity. Rather than treating the magical or surreal with detachment or wonder, the narrator engages with it gently, focusing on the emotional implications of these fantastical occurrences for the characters. The gentle and poetic storytelling style helps to create a sense of enchantment and emotional depth in the

⁴⁰ The Communist Revolution in China, led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) under Mao Zedong, was a transformative period in Chinese history marked by the formation of the CCP in 1921, Civil War between Kuomintang and CCP and Long March from 1927 to 1937, Second United Front against Japan from 1937 to 1945, and the Resumption of Civil War until the founding of People's Republic of China.

⁴¹ The Great Leap Forward (1958–1962) was an ambitious economic and social campaign launched by Mao Zedong, aiming at rapidly transforming China from an agricultural society into a socialist industrialized nation. The movement sought to increase agricultural and industrial output simultaneously, but it ultimately resulted in widespread famine, economic disruption, and millions of deaths.

⁴² The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) was a sociopolitical movement in China led to the deaths and persecutions of intellectuals and destructions of libraries, literature and historical sites.

narrative. The narration delves deeply into the characters' internal emotions and relationships, bringing a sense of closeness and warmth to the reader. The narrative voice is often closely aligned with the characters, providing emotional depth and understanding, especially towards marginalized or suffering individuals. Magical realism can serve to soften the portrayal of traumatic or difficult realities, offering characters and readers a sense of emotional release or healing. The tender narration, in turn, imbues even the most tragic or painful moments with hope or compassion.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.1. Literature Review on Mo Yan and his Works

As a Nobel Prize laureate, Mo Yan has won himself high recognition as well as critical voices. His works have been evaluated and discussed by many scholars and critics in China and abroad.

Firstly, there are some researches about themes and narrative strategies in Mo's works are discussed. Zhang Hong summarizes the theme of exalting "primordial vitality" and the stylistic features of "carnavalesque narrative" in Mo Yan's novels.¹ Guo Chunlin considers that *Red Sorghum* by Mo Yan and *Twilight* by American female writer Stephanie Meier illustrate certain common cultural themes through the cultural symbolism of the novel's name, the embodiment of the magic realism style, the assertion of self-worth, the influence of family on personality, the complexity of human nature and the eternal theme of love with vivid descriptions derived from life and higher than life.² Fu Jingyu makes a thematic comparison of Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum* and *Frog* and explores human nature embodied in this two novels.³ Xie Huanhuan analyzes the narrative art of the work *Frog* from the two aspects of narrative structure and narrative perspective.⁴ Gu Zhijuan analyzes the narrative form of *Life and Death Wears Me Out* from the new historical perspective.⁵

Secondly, some researches about Mo Yan's works are from the perspective of translation. Chen Jia summarizes that Howard Goldblatt's English translation of Mo Yan's works starts from the translation of the novel's language, and makes full use of the two translation strategies of domestication and foreignization; at the same time, it is based on the aesthetic translation of the novel, and once again deepens the artistic

¹ Zhang Hong, "莫言小说的基本主题与文体特征" ["Basic Themes and Stylistic Features of Mo Yan's Novels"], *Dangdai Zuoqia Pinglun* [Contemporary Writers' Review] 5 (1999): 58-64.

² Guo Chunlin, "论《红高粱家族》与《暮光之城》的共性文化主题" ["On the Common Cultural Themes of *Red Sorghum* and *Twilight*"], *Weifang Xueyuan Xuebao* [Journal of Weifang University] 22 (2022): 55-58.

³ Fu Jingyu, "生命的张扬绚丽与人性的扭曲变异——莫言小说《红高粱家族》与《蛙》主题比较" ["The Flourishing Splendour of Life and the Distorted Mutability of Human Nature: A Thematic Comparison of Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum* and *Frog*"], *Jingu Wenchuang* [Contemporary and Ancient Literary Creation] 19 (2022): 7-9.

⁴ Xie Huanhuan, "论莫言作品中的叙事艺术——以《蛙》为例" ["On the Narrative Art in Mo Yan's Works – Taking *Frogs* as an Example"], *Zuoqia Tiandi* [Writers' Corner], 6 (2023): 4-6.

⁵ Gu Zhijuan, "新历史观叙事形式下的《生死疲劳》创作" ["The Creation of *Life and Death are Wearing me out* in the Narrative Form of the New Historical Perspective"], *Sanjiao Zhou* [The Delta], 23 (2023): 103-105.

and symbolic language of the text.⁶ Yu Xinyu cites the examples of idioms in the English translation of *Life and Death Wears Me Out* by Howard Goldblatt, analyzes his translation strategies, and finds that Howard Goldblatt uses foreignization as the main strategy and domestication as the supplementary strategy in translating idioms, which maximally shows the Chinese cultural characteristics.⁷ Based on the conceptual metaphor perspective, Ma Chenchen examines the translation phenomenon of metaphor and Howard Goldblatt's translation style in *The Wine Republic*.⁸ Wang Peicong and Zhang Liying analyze the translation of Chinese folk culture in *Life and Death Wears Me Out* from the perspective of the application of semantic translation and communicative translation.⁹ Wang Xiao Studies the English Translation of dialect in Mo Yan's *The Red Sorghum* under the Perspective of Cognitive Translation Studies.¹⁰

Thirdly, there are also some comparative studies of Mo Yan and other Chinese writers and foreign writers. Chen Pengfang compares Mo Yan's *Life and Death Wears Me Out* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* in terms of magical realism.¹¹ Guan Shulin and Zhao Xia present a comparative study of the images of women in William Faulkner's *Sound and Fury* and Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum*, analyzing the two writers' expectations of equal social status for men and women.¹² Zhao Suhua briefly compares William Faulkner's *Sound and Fury* and Mo Yan's *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* from the perspective of ecofeminism, holding that both writers both address issues such as environmental degradation, gender conflict, the plight of women, and the survival struggles of humanity in their works, reflecting ecofeminism to varying degrees.¹³ Su

⁶ Chen Jia, “莫言小说的英语翻译策略” [“English Translation strategies for Mo Yan's Novels”], *Mingzuo xinshan* [Masterpiece Appreciation] 11 (2024): 28-30.

⁷ Yu Xinyu, “《生死疲劳》英译本中术语的翻译策略” [“Translation Strategies of Idioms in the English Translation of *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*”], *Yingyu Guangchan* [English Square] 10 (2024): 19-23.

⁸ Ma Chenchen, “概念隐喻下《酒国》葛浩文译本中隐喻的翻译策略研究” [“A Study on the Translation Strategy of Metaphors in Howard Goldblatt's Translation of *The Wine Republic* from the Perspective of Conceptual Metaphor”], *Yingyu Guangchan* [English Square] 20 (2023): 33-36.

⁹ Wang Peicong and Zhang Liying, “语义和交际翻译视角下中国民俗文化翻译探析—以葛浩文《生死疲劳》为例” [“An Analysis of Chinese Folk Culture Translation from the Perspectives of Semantic and Communicative Translation—Taking Howard Goldblatt's Translation of *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* as an Example”], *Yingyu Guangchan* [English Square] 2 (2024): 24-27.

¹⁰ Wang Xiao, “认知翻译学视角下的莫言小说方言英译研究” [“A Study on the English Translation of Dialect in Mo Yan's Novels from the Perspective of Cognitive Translation Studies”], *Haerbin Zhiye Jishu Xueyuan Xuebao* [Journal of Harbin Institute of Vocational Technology] 3 (2023): 154-156.

¹¹ Chen Pengfang, “莫言与莫里森小说中魔幻现实主义比较研究—以《生死疲劳》和《宠儿》为例” [“A Comparative Study of Magical Realism in the Novels of Mo Yan and Morrison —Take *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* and *Beloved* as Examples”], *Wenxue Yishu Zhoukan* [Literature and Art Weekly] 9 (2023): 8-10.

¹² Guan Shulin and Zhao Xia, “福克纳和莫言文学作品中女性形象的比较研究—以《喧哗与骚动》和《红高粱》为例” [“A Comparative Study of Women's Image in Faulkner's and Mo Yan's Literary Works: Taking *Sound and Fury* and *Red Sorghum* as Examples”], *Yingyu Guangchan* [English Square] 2(2023): 73-76.

¹³ Zhao Suhua, “生态女性主义视角下的威廉·福克纳与莫言对比研究—以《喧哗与骚动》和《丰乳肥臀》为例” [“A Comparative Study of William Faulkner's and Mo Yan's Literary Works from the Perspective of

Lian and Xi Zhiying holds that Mo Yan and Bi Feiyu, two contemporary writers, have embodied a strong national cultural mentality and position of consciousness in their creations, opening up multiple horizons to observe the social ecology and exploring the ways of coexistence between Chinese and foreign cultures. They have integrated into the pattern of global cultural development with distinctive national characteristics.¹⁴

Fourthly, some researchers explore the influence of other writers or their works imposed on Mo Yan's creation. Yu Xiaowei holds that Mo Yan's novels absorb and expand the worldly narrative experience of 《金瓶梅》(*The Golden Lotus*), and rewrites it accordingly.¹⁵ From the perspective of literary acceptance, Yan Xingxu believes Leo Tolstoy's thinking on "compassion" has greatly influenced Mo Yan's creation. The exploration of fraternity and forgiveness, suffering and compassion in *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* is an intuitive manifestation of his reference to and absorption of the compassion in *Resurrection*.¹⁶ Wu Mengyu places the concept of Chinese national literature in the context of world literature and reinterprets the influence of Faulkner and Marquez on Mo Yan, revealing the evolution of the dialogue between Western-centered modernity and local exchange, as well as the transformation of monolithic time narratives into pluralistic ones.¹⁷

Fifthly, there are some reception studies of Mo Yan's works. Yu Weicheng and Liang Ying hold that the translation and reception of Mo Yan's works in Poland show a "one-sided" praise, which is closely related to the Polish Sinological institution under the mechanism of "discourse power" construction. Mo Yan's works have also been questioned in Poland, stemming from a major debate on the "standard of truth" between the Chinese academia and literary critics. Sinology in Poland works closely with the Polish publishing industry in the context of commercial globalization to promote the

Ecofeminism: Taking *Sound and Fury* and *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* as Examples"], *Mingzuo Xinshang* [Masterpiece Review], 8 (2022): 51-53.

¹⁴ Su Lian and Xi Zhiying, "坚守与突围—浅析莫言和毕飞宇小说的民族意识" ["Insistence and Breakthrough: Analyzing the National Consciousness of Mo Yan and Bi Feiyu's Novels"], *Zuojia Tiandi* [Writers' World] 31(2023): 10-12.

¹⁵ Yu Xiaowei, "论莫言小说对《金瓶梅》的吸纳与转化" ["On the Absorption and Transformation of *The Golden Lotus* in Mo Yan's Novels"], *Zhongguo Zhengfa Daxue Xuebao* [Journal of China University of Political Science and Law], 3 (2024): 292-304.

¹⁶ Yan Xingxu, "托尔斯泰悲悯情怀对莫言创作的影响—以长篇小说《复活》和《丰乳肥臀》为例" ["The Influence of Tolstoy's Compassion on Mo Yan's Writing: Taking *Resurrection* and *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* as examples"], *Mingzuo Shanxi* [Masterpiece Appreciation], 12 (2024): 77-79.

¹⁷ Wu Mengyu, "边地叙事的流变和多元现代性—《喧哗与骚动》,《百年孤独》和《红高粱家族》的影响关系重构" ["The Transformation of Peripheral Narratives and Multiple Modernities: A Reconstruction of Influential Relationships in *Sound and Fury*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and *The Red Sorghum*"], *International Comparative Literature*, 7, no.1 (2024): 111-123.

development of Mo Yan's works for comparative literary studies.¹⁸ Guo Jiahao and Zou Deyan analyze how the omission of narrative passages in the English translation of Mo Yan's *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* affect its reception. Using questionnaires and interviews, they examine the impact these omissions have on how the target audience perceive the novel.¹⁹ Wu Yang conducts a reception study of Mo Yan's novel *Thirteen Steps* in Spanish-speaking regions by analyzing reviews and critiques from local Spanish critics, and exploring how literary misinterpretations and cultural filtering caused by language translation and cultural transmission have shaped the novel's reception.²⁰

What's more, female characters are also discussed in Mo Yan's works. Wei Shiping analyzes the mother's image of suffering, enduring and fostering in Mo Yan's *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*.²¹ Zhang Yuanyuan explores the image of women in *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* from a humanist perspective.²² Di Cui interprets the unique female images and their character traits in Mo Yan's literary works, and explores the significance of the female images in Mo Yan's literary works in the light of the awakening of women's consciousness.²³ Li Ruiying briefly analyzes Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum* from the perspective of ecofeminism to analyze humanity's abuse of nature, male oppression of women, as well as the alliance between women and nature in resistance to patriarchy.²⁴

In addition to the studies in China, there are also many researches about Mo Yan's works abroad. Melinda Pirazzoli makes a phenomenological interpretation of Ximen Nao's post-human journey towards enlightenment in Mo Yan's *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out* through exploring Ximen Animal's reincarnations. Each reincarnation

¹⁸ Yu Weicheng and Liang Ying, "'话语权'的构建机制—波兰汉学视野下莫言作品的译介与接受研究" ["The Mechanism of Constructing 'Discourse Power': The Study of the Translation and Reception of Mo Yan's Works in the Perspective of Polish Sinology"], *Journal of Shangqiu Normal University* 39, 10 (2023): 51-56.

¹⁹ Guo Jiahao and Zou Deyan, "Reception study: The omission of narrative text in the English translation of Mo Yan's *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*," *Frontiers in Communication*, March 13, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2023.1063490>.

²⁰ Wu Yang, "The Reception of Mo Yan's Novel *Thirteen Steps* (《十三步》) in Spanish-speaking Regions from the Perspective of Variation Theory," *Comparative Literature: East&West* 5, no.2 (2021): 204-16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25723618.2021.2006427>.

²¹ Wei Shiping, "浅谈莫言作品中的母亲艺术形象" ["An Introduction to the Artistic Portrayal of Mothers in Mo Yan's Works"], *Wenhua Xuekan [Cultural Studies Journal]*, 4 (2023): 85-89.

²² Zhang Yuanyuan, "人文主义视域下《丰乳肥臀》中的女性形象探究" ["An Exploration of the Image of Women in *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* from a Humanist Perspective"], *Mingjia Mingzuo [Masterpieces by Famous Authors]*, 10 (2023): 20-22.

²³ Di Cui, "莫言文学作品中女性形象及现实意义" ["Women's Image and Realistic Significance in Mo Yan's Literary Works"], *Qingnian Wenxuejia [Young Literary Man]*, 30 (2022): 73-75.

²⁴ Li Ruiying, "生态女性主义视域下的《红高粱家族》" ["An Ecofeminist View on *Red Sorghum*"], *Jingu Wenchuang [Modern and Ancient Literary Creation]*, 26(2022): 4-6.

is portrayed as a brief “stage of emotional awakening” in which Ximen Animal gains compassion.²⁵ Song Binghui considers that the criticism charging Mo Yan’s works of distorting and condemning the image China to cater to Western stereotypes is merely the result of postcolonial theory misplaced in the Chinese context, signifying Western cultural neo-colonialism.²⁶ Through exploring the novel’s historical and cultural background as well as Mo Yan’s personal background, Qianqian Chen, Joan Qionglin Tan, and Kritika Kultura conclude that the clamorous multispecies soundscape in the red sorghum field can be attributed to the author’s animistic view, the egalitarian spirit of the Gaomi people, and Chinese ancient ecological philosophy.²⁷ Humor in Mo Yan’s book, 《师傅越来越幽默》 (*Shifu, You’ll Do Anything for a Laugh*), is examined by Alexander C. Y. Huang and he notes that Mo Yan uses counter-narratives to depict the history of the People’s Republic of China between 1950 and 2000.²⁸ Shelley W. Chan offers observations on the historiography of novelist Mo Yan in his novels *Red Sorghum* and *Big Breasts and Full Hips* and analyzes the change in the attitude of Mo Yan toward history between the writing of such novels.²⁹ David Der-Wei Wang discusses the portrayal of history and subjectivity in Mo Yan’s works, and how Mo Yan created a sort of unusually divergent historical space.³⁰ M. Thomas Inge suggests things that make novelist Mo Yan a compelling writer in the English-speaking world, such as feature of his first novel *Red Sorghum*, ability of Mo Yan demonstrated in his novel *The Garlic Ballads*, and information on his novel *The Republic Wine*.³¹ Sabina Knight examines the political stances of Chinese author Mo Yan through his literary works.³² He Chengzhou holds that in *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* an ecological thought

²⁵ Melinda Pirazzoli, “Redefining Anthropos and Life. A Phenomenological Reading of Ximen Nao’s Post-Human Journey towards Enlightenment in Mo Yan’s *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 64, no. 2 (November 2021): 324–40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2021.2006596>.

²⁶ Song Binghui, “Mo Yan’s Reception in China and a Reflection on the Postcolonial Discourse”, *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature & Culture: A Web Journal*, 20, no. 7 (December 2018): 1-12.

²⁷ Chen Qianqian, Joan Qionglin Tan, and Kritika Kultura, “The Multispecies Soundscape in Mo Yan’s *Red Sorghum*,” *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature & Culture: A Web Journal* 42 (November 2023): 3–29.

²⁸ Alexander C. Y. Huang, “Mo Yan as Humorist,” *World Literature Today* 83, no. 4 (2009): 32–37, <https://doi.org/10.1353/wlt.2009.0315>.

²⁹ Shelley W. Chan, “From Fatherland to Motherland: On Mo Yan’s *Red Sorghum* & *Big Breasts and Full Hips*,” *World Literature Today* 74, no. 3 (2000): 490–95, <https://doi.org/10.2307/40155815>.

³⁰ David Der-Wei Wang and Michael Berry, “The Literary World of Mo Yan,” *World Literature Today* 74, no. 3 (2000): 480–87, <https://doi.org/10.2307/40155814>.

³¹ M. Thomas Inge, “Mo Yan: Through Western Eyes,” *World Literature Today* 74, no. 3 (2000): 496–501, <https://doi.org/10.2307/40155816>.

³² Sabina Knight, “Mo Yan’s Delicate Balancing Act,” *National Interest* 124 (2013): 69–80.

regarding the coexistence of humans, animals, and nature is revealed through animal narrative. Besides, the eventalization of ecological consciousness and the dis-eventalization of politics coexist and enhance one another.³³ Wang Jinghui begins with the ancient Chinese rudimentary understanding of human nature and moves on to Mo Yan's *Frog*, pointing out that the experience of the female characters in the novel and in modern Chinese society should be examined allegorically, and illustrating a universal issue regarding the complexity of human nature.³⁴ Liu Hongtao discusses the place of Chinese novelist Mo Yan in the Chinese nativist literary tradition, citing modern exemplars of the tradition such as Lu Xun and Shen Congwen, to show how Mo Yan has incorporated aspects of both in his novels including *Red Sorghum*, *Sandalwood Punishment* and *Life and Death Are Wearing Me out*.³⁵ According to M. Thomas Inge, Mo Yan embraces the people, land, customs, myths, history, folklore, and passions of the rural, just like Faulkner and García Márquez did. He depicts characters navigating their fates in the face of irrevocable historical events and calamities throughout twentieth-century China.³⁶ Through analyzing the two authors' support of women's freedom to reproduce, in Mo Yan's *Frog* and Ma Jian's *The Dark Road* which paradoxically replicates the American antiabortion discourse of regret, guilt and atonement, Elizabeth Cullingford believes that the reception of these novels by the transnational antichoice constituency reveals how literary works that spread globally through translation may engender unanticipated ideological conjunctions.³⁷

To summarize, according to the above studies, "tender narration" has been paid attention to by some writers and expressed in their writings because of its unique caring qualities. From the current studies, although some scholars have already paid attention to "tender narration" as a narrative strategy reflecting the writer's qualities, but the number of commentaries on the study of Mo Yan's works on tender narration is

³³ He Chengzhou, "Animal Narrative and the Dis-Eventalization of Politics: An Ecological-Cultural Approach to Mo Yan's *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*," *Comparative Literature Studies* 55, no. 4 (December 2018): 837–50, <https://doi.org/10.5325/complitstudies.55.4.0837>.

³⁴ Wand Jinghui, "Virtue or Vice? Trauma Reflected in Mo Yan's *Frog*," *Interlitteraria* 24, no. 1 (August 2019): 173–89, <https://doi.org/10.12697/il.2019.24.1.13>.

³⁵ Liu Hongtao and Haiyan Lee, "Mo Yan's Fiction and the Chinese Nativist Literary Tradition," *World Literature Today* 83, no. 4 (2009): 30–31, <https://doi.org/10.1353/wlt.2009.0045>.

³⁶ M. Thomas Inge, "A Literary Genealogy: Faulkner, Garcia Marquez, and Mo Yan," *Moravian Journal of Literature & Film* 5, no. 1 (2014): 5–12.

³⁷ Elizabeth Cullingford, "Abortion and the Environment: China's One-Child Policy in Mo Yan's *Frog* and Ma Jian's *The Dark Road*," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society*, 45, no. 3 (2019): 75–99.

extremely scarce, with only a few articles slightly mentioning it. For example, Zi Xile explores Mo Yan's novel creation from the vernacular narrative mainly focusing on the magical and legendary story, the circular loop structure, and the changing and diversified perspectives, showing the charm of Mo Yan's novels from different perspectives, and experiencing the suffering and tenderness under Mo Yan's writing.³⁸ Besides, the researches of his works from ecofeminism are also very rare, only a couple of journal articles briefly analyzing his single work.

2.2. Literature Review on Olga Tokarczuk and her Works

As a Nobel laureate, Olga Tokarczuk has been widely studied in the literary world. Firstly, Many researchers study Tokarczuk's works from the perspective of their English translation. K. Siwek looks into the motivations behind Tokarczuk's translators' collaborations and examines the nature of these relationships as well as their advantages.³⁹ Discussing Tokarczuk's Nobel speech within a larger historical, political, and social framework, the two linguists and translators, James W. Underhill and Adam Głaz, recognize her position on topical issues, her role in contemporary Poland, and the disputes she sparks.⁴⁰ Marcelina Pietryga addresses the topic of explicitation applied as a measure of retaining foreignness in the English translation of *Flights*, in which way either the context that may be lost in English translation is explained, or the problematic Polish words and their English explanation are presented.⁴¹ Urszula Paleczek suggests a feminist interpretation of Tokarczuk's 1998 *House of Day, House of Night* and criticizes the English translation released in 2002 for largely omitting the gendered language and her critiques of Polish patriarchal structures.⁴²

Secondly, Tokarczuk's feminist view is analyzed by researchers. Justyna

³⁸ Zi Xile, “苦难与温情—论莫言小说的乡土叙事” [“Suffering and Tenderness: On the Local Narrative of Mo Yan's Novels”], *Shenmei Yu Wenxue [Aesthetics and Literature]* no.2 (2017): 103-104.

³⁹ Karolina Siwek, “A Flight of Tokarczuk Translators: Remarks on Collaboration and Cooperation,” *Między Oryginałem a Przekładem* 27, no. 2 (52) (June 2021): 117–34, <https://doi.org/10.12797/moap.27.2021.52.06>.

⁴⁰ James W. Underhill and Adam Głaz, “Olga Tokarczuk Is in a Dialogue between James W. Underhill and Adam Głaz on Filtering Olga Tokarczuk's ‘Tender Worldview’ into English during Her Nobel Lecture,” *Między Oryginałem a Przekładem* 27, no. 2 (52) (June 2021): 145–62, <https://doi.org/10.12797/moap.27.2021.52.08>.

⁴¹ Marcelina Pietryga, “The Use of Explicitation to Retain the Foreignness of Olga Tokarczuk's *Flights*,” *Między Oryginałem a Przekładem* 27, no. 2 (52) (June 2021): 101–16, <https://doi.org/10.12797/moap.27.2021.52.05>.

⁴² Urszula Paleczek, “Olga Tokarczuk's *House of Day, House of Night*: Gendered Language in Feminist Translation,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 52, no. 1-2 (March 2010): 47–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00085006.2010.11092636>.

Sempruch presents an analysis of Olga Tokarczuk's *House of Day, House of Night* and looks at the paper in the context of the rise of patriarchy in Poland after communist rule of the country ended and also how Western feminism impacts women's writing in Poland.⁴³ Xia Chaoying explores Tokarczuk's philosophy of time as uniquely expressed by female characters in *Primeval and Other Times*. She considers that Tokarczuk gives female time a timeless significance and echoes the significance of female life with nature, and the primal tremor of life to resist the broken and empty modern society. These two expressions are the fruits of Tokarczuk's reflection on modern society, reflecting the author's deep concern and care for the destiny of mankind and the spiritual world of mankind.⁴⁴ Fu Na deems that in *House of Day, House of Night*, Tokarczuk suppresses and ridicules the image of men and subverts the traditional idea of male-centrism, simultaneously, she highlights the fine qualities of women and affirms the important value of women's identity; and through the application and development of the theory of androgyny, she dissolves the state of gender dichotomy and explores the ideal personality model.⁴⁵

Thirdly, Tokarczuk's ecological view is studied and sometimes, is combined with a feminist perspective. Tang Shengyu observes that the characters in *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* are divided into anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric factions, and the ecological ideas embodied in them remind us that we should abandon anthropocentrism and establish the concept of reverence for life. At the same time, the radical ecological ideas of eco-terrorism and impractical vegetarianism shown in the protagonist, Janina Duszejko, need to be cautioned and discarded.⁴⁶ Using the theoretical frameworks of ecocriticism, ecofeminism, and Monster Studies, Noemi Fregara analyzes the transgressive female characters in Tokarczuk's four novels to

⁴³ Justyna Sempruch, "Patriarchy in Post-1989 Poland and Tokarczuk's Dom Dzienny, Dom Nocny (the Day House, the Night House)," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 10, no. 3 (September 2008): 1-9, <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1375>.

⁴⁴ Xia Chaoying, "论《太古和其他的时间》中女性时间哲学" ["On Women's Time Philosophy of Time in *Primeval and Other Times*]," *Zuojia Tiandi [Writers' World]* 19 (2023): 174-76.

⁴⁵ Fu Na, "论奥尔加·托卡尔丘克的性别书写—以《白天的房子, 夜晚的房子》为例" ["On Olga Tokarczuk's Gender Writing: Taking *House of Day, House of Night* as an example"], *Sichuan Zhiye Jishu Xueyuan Xuebao [Journal of Sichuan Vocational and Technical College]* 32, no. 6 (2022): 158-63.

⁴⁶ Tang Shengyu, "奥尔加·托卡尔丘克《糜骨之壤》中的生态思想研究" ["A Study of Ecological Thought in Olga Tokarczuk's *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*"], *Mingzuo Xinshan [Masterpiece Appreciation]* 36 (2023): 116-18.

challenge anthropocentric and androcentric perspectives and to free all minorities from oppression.⁴⁷ Dong Chan provides an intertextual reading of *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* and Blake's poems quoted in the novel, and finds that the novel has the profound connotations of subversion of tradition, empathy for animals and the marginalized in the society, and the pursuit of integration.⁴⁸ Olga Tokarczuk in her *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* creates a series of characters and exposes the dichotomy between human beings and nature, men and women, the powerful and the disadvantaged in the patriarchal society. Zhang Yi interprets this novel through the theory of eco-feminist literary criticism, to convey the writer's strong eco-feminist ideology, and to reveal the writer's deep thinking about the relationship between human beings and nature as well as society.⁴⁹ Yang Xin and Mai Yongxiong use ecofeminist theory to analyze *Primeval and Other Times* and hold that Tokarczuk ties nature and women together in this novel. Nature and women are both vulnerable "Others" who are seen as alien and deserving of male domination under patriarchy.⁵⁰

Fourthly, some researches give an overall review of Olga Tokarczuk's works. Przemysław Czapliński and Bartosz Woźniak offer a concise overview of Olga Tokarczuk's fictions and assume that desire serves as the central force behind her narratives in guiding her characters' actions and influencing the genre of her writing.⁵¹ Mao Yinhui and Tomasz Mizerkiewicz analyze the effect of Olga Tokarczuk and summarize the Polish literature in 2019.⁵² On the other hand, there are also some analyses of Tokarczuk's individual works. Walentyna Krupowies analyzes specific

⁴⁷ Noemi Fregara, "Ecological, Feminist, and Monstrous Trends against Women and Nature's Oppression in Olga Tokarczuk's Works," *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory* 9, no. 2 (December 2023): 150–66, <https://doi.org/10.24193/mjcest.2023.16.10>.

⁴⁸ Dong Chan, "《糜骨之壤》与威廉·布莱克诗歌的互文性解读" ["An Intertextual Reading of *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* and the Poetry of William Blake"], *Mingzuo Xinshan [Masterpiece Appreciation]* 33 (2023): 133-35.

⁴⁹ Zhang Yi, "托卡尔丘克《糜骨之壤》中的生态女性主义思想解读" ["An Interpretation of Ecofeminist Ideas in Tokarczuk's *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*"], *Mingzuo Xinshan [Masterpiece Appreciation]* 14 (2023): 133-36.

⁵⁰ Yang Xin and Mai Yongxiong, "生态女性主义理论视域下的《太古和其他的时间》研究" ["A Study of *Primeval and Other Times* from the Perspective of Ecofeminist Theory"], *Suihua Xueyuan Xuebao [Journal of Suihua University]* 41, no.3 (2021): 51-54.

⁵¹ Przemysław Czapliński and Bartosz Woźniak, "Concatenations: On the Works of Olga Tokarczuk," *The Polish Review* 66, no. 2 (July 2021): 8–35, <https://doi.org/10.5406/polishreview.66.2.0008>.

⁵² Mao Yinhui and Tomasz Mizerkiewicz, "奥尔加·托卡尔丘克效应—2019年波兰文学综述" ["The Olga Tokarczuk Effect: An overview of 2019 Polish Literature"], *Waiguo Wenxue Dongtai Yanjiu [Study of the Dynamics of Foreign Literature]* 4 (2020): 26-33.

characters in *The Books of Jacob* through the lens of discourse analysis. Her approach draws on the concept that literary characters serve as a “common ground” for a discourse in literature and on extra-literary reality.⁵³ Ewa V. Wampuszyc analyzes the magical realist mode of writing in Tokarczuk’s *Primeval and Other Times* and *House of Day, House of Night*.⁵⁴

Fifthly, there exist some comparisons between Olga Tokarczuk’s works and other writers. A. Łowczanin explores representations of Friday in Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), J.M Coetzee’s novel *Foe* (1986) and Olga Tokarczuk’s short story *Wyspa [The Island]* (2001). The author argues that Friday is portrayed through the lens of the narrators’ storytelling, showing how the narrators’ view of the body influences how Friday is represented, shifting from a figure of practical labor, to a silent reservoir of stories, and eventually to a catalyst for challenging and crossing gender norms.⁵⁵ Maciej Karasinski compares thematic parallels in *The Legends of Khasak* and *Primeval and Other Times* and interprets forms of spiritual oppression presented in these novels, and examines the narration, symbols, making and unmaking of the places the authors call “god’s playground.”⁵⁶

What’s more, tenderness is also studied by some scholars. Tomasz Mizerkiewicz outlines the history and contemporary applications of the concept of “tenderness” in Polish literary criticism.⁵⁷ Krzysztof Brenskott holds that it was precisely the lack of rooting in the history of philosophy, the impossibility of embedding tenderness in a specific religious system, and freedom from ascribed meanings and associations that made Tokarczuk choose tenderness. Interpreting tenderness as empathy and seeing others’ pains in oneself demonstrates how Tokarczuk incorporates elements of Eastern philosophy into her novels.⁵⁸ Jarosław Anders examines Tokarczuk’s approach to

⁵³ Walentyna Krupowicz, “Literary Characters and Interdiscursivity in the Novel ‘the Books of Jacob’ by Olga Tokarczuk,” *World Literature Studies* 13, no. 4 (December 2021): 94–105, <https://doi.org/10.31577/wls.2021.13.4.8>.

⁵⁴ Wampuszyc, “Magical Realism,” 366-85.

⁵⁵ Agnieszka Łowczanin, “‘All Day, All Night the Body Intervenes’: Representation of Friday in Robinson Crusoe by Daniel Defoe, Foe by J. M. Coetzee and ‘Wyspa’ by Olga Tokarczuk,” *NJES: Nordic Journal of English Studies* 23, no. 1 (April 2024): 68–89, <https://doi.org/10.35360/njes.2024.23299>.

⁵⁶ Karasinski, “Mapping the Contours of Spiritual Oppression,” 165-201.

⁵⁷ Tomasz Mizerkiewicz, “Justifying Tenderness – the History and Modernity of a Literary-Critical Concept”, *Forum of Poetics* no. 28-29 (spring-summer 2022): 182-99.

⁵⁸ Krzysztof Brenskott, “Does Not Appear in the Scriptures or the Gospels: On Tenderness, Love, and Their Religious Contexts in the Works of Olga Tokarczuk,” *Teksty Drugie* no. 4 (2022): 262-81.

blending realism, fantasy, and the supernatural, linking these elements to her perspectives on literature, creativity, and the connection between the human mind and the universe, as expressed in her various statements.⁵⁹ In “Tender Transgressions: Olga Tokarczuk’s Exercises in Postsecular Imagination,” Karina Jarzyńska illustrates how Tokarczuk incorporates various religious traditions into her novels, crafting new theological concepts to provide readers with imaginative tools.⁶⁰ Nielipowicz Natalia focuses on the dichotomy of tenderness and anger in *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, analyzing how the interplay between these two intense emotions influences the behaviors they provoke.⁶¹

China is progressively becoming more aware of Tokarczuk’s writings since she was granted the Nobel Prize in Literature. Her works are being promoted by a variety of organizations, including the press, academic circles, news media, and literary circles. However, Chinese research on her works is still in its early stages, and has produced few results so far. That is out of proportion to Tokarczuk’s literary accomplishments. Thus, promoting and expanding the study of Tokarczuk’s writings is extremely important.

To conclude, through a detailed literature review of Mo Yan and Olga Tokarczuk in China and overseas, I find that the researches on their works are increasing after they were granted the Nobel Prize for Literature, and more and more their works have been translated to circulate outside their countries. Some of the current state of researches about them include analyzing the themes, writing styles, character analysis, reception study, influence study or translations of their works; other researches include their feminist views, magical realism in their works or comparing them with other writers. There do exist several articles analyzing Tokarczuk’s ecofeminist view, but most of them simply focus on one work, or not detailed and deep; the analysis of Mo Yan’s works from the perspective of ecofeminism or tender and warm narration is rather scarce and brief. In addition, the researches comparing Mo Yan and Tokarczuk are even

⁵⁹ Jarosław Anders, “Primeval and Other Times by Olga Tokarczuk: The ‘Tender Narrator’ and the Perils of Myth,” *The Polish Review* 66, no.2 (2021): 105-17.

⁶⁰ Karina Jarzyńska, “Tender Transgressions: Olga Tokarczuk’s Exercises in Postsecular Imagination,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, (March 2023), 1–14.

⁶¹ Natalia Nielipowicz, “Between Tenderness and Anger: Oscillation in Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 65, no. 3 (May 2023): 421–36.

more limited, only a couple of them are found, for example, Tao Simin compares Tokarczuk with García Márquez and Mo Yan, exploring the unique narrative strategies based on narratology-related theories in the post-anthropocentric era from story to discourse;⁶² Liu Meichen compares Mo Yan's *Frog* and Tokarczuk's *Primeval and Other Times* from the perspective of magical realism, illustrating the reception of magic realism in Poland and China.⁶³ Therefore, promoting and expanding the study of their works from the perspective of comparative literature is extremely important. Since a comparison of their works from the perspective of ecofeminism as well as tender and warm narration is a research topic has scarcely been touched upon by researchers, that is why I am taking up this particular topic to fill some research gap in the comparison between the two Nobel laureates and constitute a contribution to the comparative research between Chinese and Polish literature, and promote cultural exchanges and understandings between the two nations.

⁶² This Master thesis is cited here due to the scarce of comparative studies of Tokarczuk's and Mo Yan's writings, and I treat it as an example of the academic (not scientific) discourse that Chinese students taking up comparative study of them.

Tao Simin, "Olga Tokarczuk's Magical Realism in the Post-Anthropocentric Era — Compared with Marquez and Mo Yan", (Master thesis, Jiangxi Normal University, 2023).

⁶³ Liu, "Magic Realism in the Works of Mo Yan and Olga Tokarczuk," 2022.

Chapter 3 Theory and Method Applied in this Research

3.1. Comparative Literary Method

Comparative literature is an academic field that studies literature across national boundaries, cultures, languages, and disciplines, exploring connections, influences and shared themes between texts, as well as their cultural and historical contexts. According to Susan Bassnett, it is widely accepted that the term “comparative literature” originated from a series of French anthologies titled *Cours de littérature comparée*, published in 1816 for literature education.¹ René Wellek noted that “comparative literature” as the exploration of relationships between two or more literatures has been interpreted so widely or misinterpreted so much and the term has been changed and developed so fast from the early nineteenth century to today.² In his study of the pioneers, Ulrich Weisstein argues that Jean-Jacques Ampère (1800-1864) and Abel François Villemain (1790-1890) are “the true fathers of systematically conceived comparative literature in France—or anywhere, for the matter.”³ The early comparative literature is known as the French school because of this origin.

Since its beginnings in the nineteenth century, comparative literature has been closely connected with the emergence of nationalism, and national literatures were seen as embodiments of a nation’s identity and values. Goethe illustrated his idea of Weltliteratur in 1827 to his young secretary and disciple Johann Peter Eckermann, who later compiled and published their discussions as “Conversations”. In the following decades, this work was translated into numerous languages, ultimately gaining recognition as a piece of world literature itself and helping to introduce the idea of Weltliteratur to a global audience. Goethe advocated a global perspective that beyond national literature by stating: “we Germans are very likely to fall too easily into this

¹ Susan Bassnett, *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford Ox: Blackwell, 1998), 12.

² René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968), 40.

³ Ulrich Weisstein, *Comparative Literature and Literary Theory. Survey and Introduction*. (Indiana University Press, 1977), 171.

pedantic conceit, when we do not look beyond the narrow circle that surrounds us. I therefore like to look about me in foreign nations, and advise everyone to do the same. National literature is now rather an unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach.”⁴ Goethe advocates for a global literary consciousness transcending national and linguistic boundaries and believes that the exchange of ideas, stories, and literary forms across cultures would foster mutual understanding and universal humanism. Goethe envisioned an era where literary works from all cultures would be read, studied, and appreciated on a global scale. Hugo Meltzl criticizes that every nation, for various seemingly valid reasons, regards itself as superior to all others, and this problematic “national principle” forms the core foundation of modern Europe’s entire spiritual life. So Meltzl believes that all independent literatures, all nations should strive to achieve the ideal of true “world literature” through the means of two most important comparative principles, translation and polyglotism, instead of using violent acts or savage theories which will benefit no one but which occasionally appear even in the prestigious European journals.⁵ While he still acknowledges the nation as the essential foundation of modern literary culture, Posnett presents a compelling argument for the value of comparative study in “The Comparative Method and Literature”, not only as a method of literary analysis but also as a means to challenge narrow nationalism.⁶

The early school in the development of comparative literature is the French School as mentioned above due to the origin of comparative literature. Kristof Kozak concludes that the “early French comparative literature... concentrates on relations (rapports) studied in rather strict historical-positivist manner. In this approach to comparative literature, the utmost significance is attributed to facts, factual evidences, and

⁴ J. W. von Goethe and J. P. Eckermann, “Conversations on World Literature (1827),” in *The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature: From the European Enlightenment to the Global Present*, ed. David Damrosch, Natalie Melas, and Mbongiseni Buthelezi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 23.

⁵ Hugo Meltzl, “Present Tasks of Comparative Literature (1877),” in *The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature: From the European Enlightenment to the Global Present*, ed. David Damrosch, Natalie Melas, and Mbongiseni Buthelezi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 46-47.

⁶ Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett, “The Comparative Method and Literature I (1886)” in *The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature: from the European Enlightenment to the Global Present*, ed. David Damrosch, Natalie Melas, and Mbongiseni Buthelezi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 51.

documents.”⁷ Because of French School’s emphasis on factual evidence and influence between different nation’s literatures, the comparative approach of this school thought to be a historical and positivist one. Due to the surge of nationalism in the 19th century, comparative literature was used to assert cultural superiority, prioritizing certain traditions over others. Thus, the comparative literature of the French School aims to prove that the French culture and literature are influential and superior to that of other nations. Besides, comparisons of this period are characteristic of Eurocentric because they are often limited to major European nations, like France, Britain and Germany, and their shared histories, focusing on comparisons within European literatures and their classical antecedents, with little attention to non-European literatures. To French School, comparative literature is not literary comparison and not the world literature, but a branch of literary history.

After World War II, comparative literature gained prominence in the U.S., scholars such as Erich Auerbach, Leo Spitzer fleeing Europe brought their expertise to American universities. Auerbach’s influential work *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946) became a cornerstone of comparative literary studies. The American school of comparative literature moved beyond influence studies to broader theoretical questions, focusing on themes, genres, and cultural contexts. René Wellek, born in Vienna in 1903 to Czech parents, was one of the leading European scholars who led the study of comparative literature in the United States after World War II. He showed a fierce opposition to the French School and made a great contribution in changing comparative literature from a historical approach to a critical approach. Wellek rejects the French comparatists’ “historical and positivist trends” and their emphasis on the “actual evidences”. His essay “The Crisis of Comparative Literature” (1959) served as a kind of manifesto for what came to be known as the “American School” of comparative literature, which emphasized the importance of literary theory and promoted cosmopolitan humanism over cultural nationalism. In this essay, Wellek contends that a major indication of the unstable condition of comparative literature as

⁷ Kristof Kozak, “Comparative literature in Slovenia” in *Comparative Literature and Comparative Cultural Studies*, ed. S. T. De Zepetnek (USA: Purdue University Press, 2003), 112.

a field is its failure to define a clear subject matter and develop a specific methodology. He critiques the foundational frameworks proposed by Baldensperger, Van Tieghem, Jean-Marie Carré, and Marius-François Guyard, arguing that they did not succeed in this crucial task. Instead, they burdened the discipline with outdated methods rooted in 19th-century factualism, scientism, and historical relativism, which continue to limit its development.⁸ He advocates that we must face the problem of “literariness,” the central issue of aesthetics, the nature of art and literature. Furthermore, he holds that criticism cannot and must not be expelled from literary scholarship.⁹ Besides him, Henry Remak claims that “literary criticism” is essential in literary studies and it must not be evaded in any comparative study. Remak also highlights a new concept of comparative studies that is “interdisciplinary approach” which indicates that literature can also be compared with other disciplines and “areas of knowledge” such as history, psychology, anthropology and religion.¹⁰

According to S. Sumiyadi, the French school is known as influence studies, whereas the American school is referred to as parallel studies or comparative art studies (comparing literature with other arts) and interdisciplinary literary studies (comparing literary works with other disciplines).¹¹ Adli Yaacob and Tami Sue Newberry argue that both the French and American Schools approached world literature by comparing it to their own literary traditions, rather than examining two entirely separate, non-Western literatures. This self-centered perspective went largely unchallenged until scholars from newly independent nations began contributing to the field following the fall of colonialism.¹² The field of comparative cultural studies develops with the arising of post-colonial literary studies and globalization since the late 20th century. This has prompted scholars to ask, “When scholars write about post-colonial literature in

⁸ René Wellek, “The Crisis of Comparative Literature (1959)” in *The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature: from the European Enlightenment to the Global Present*, ed. David Damrosch, Natalie Melas, and Mbongiseni Buthelezi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 162.

⁹ Wellek, “The Crisis of Comparative Literature (1959)”, 169-170.

¹⁰ Riyad Abdurahman Manqoush, “Comparative Literature: Historical and Critical Study of Its Schools, Approaches and Concepts”, *Hadhrumout University Journal of Humanities*, no. 1, 11 (June 2014): 307.

¹¹ Sumiyadi Sumiyadi et al., “A New Direction in the Studies of Comparative Literature”, in *Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Language, Literature, Culture, and Education (ICOLLITE 2023)*, (Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research 832), https://doi.org/10.2991/978-94-6463-376-4_59.

¹² Adli Yaacob and Tami Sue Newberry, “The Scope of Comparative Literary Studies: Review of Schools of Study,” *International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change* 7, no. 3 (January 2019): 12.

comparison to ‘others’, is this not but Comparative Literature in a different name?”¹³ According to Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek and Louise O. Vasvári, attention to other cultures is a core and foundational element of the framework of comparative cultural studies. This principle promotes an intercultural and interdisciplinary dialogue which extends to all Other, marginal, minority, and all that has been and often, still, is considered peripheral, serving as a challenge to all forms of essentialism. Advocates of comparative cultural studies emphasize that this approach does not diminish the importance of traditional literature study including close-text study; instead, it supports the coexistence of both methods. In doing so, the approach allows for a deeper and more comprehensive contextual cultural analysis.¹⁴

In his *What Is World Literature*, David Damrosch particularly paid attention to breaking the Eurocentrism of the past, which intended to replace world literature with Western literature, and he devoted much space to discussing the literary production of ancient Central Asia, Egypt and the Americas.¹⁵ At the same time, interest in non-Western literature and culture is becoming increasingly evident in Western Europe and North America. Therefore, the willingness of both the East and the West to understand each other becomes a favorable factor in which comparative literature can be further developed in our time. Yet transcending Eurocentrism is not a matter of replacing one kind of ethnocentrism with another, or replacing Western classics with Eastern ones. A global and pluralistic vision of comparative literature means looking equally at the literatures of all countries and regions of the world, respecting the differences between cultures, and endeavoring to understand those differences.

As the Chinese scholar Zhang Longxi wrote in his book, the search for de facto contact and connection between different writers and works was a nineteenth century positivist notion that American-school comparative literature abandoned, emphasizing that ideas, imagery or themes in different literary traditions do not necessarily have to be in actual contact or influence each other. In the post-war 1950s and 1960s in Europe

¹³ Yaacob, “The scope of comparative literary studies,” 12.

¹⁴ Steven Tötösy and Louise O. Vasvári, “The Contextual Study of Literature and Culture, Globalization, and Digital Humanities,” in *Companion to Comparative Literature, World Literatures, and Comparative Cultural Studies*, ed. Steven Tötösy and Tutun Mukherjee (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press India, 2013), 16-17.

¹⁵ David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003).

and the United States, this American-school parallel study then replaced the French-school study of influence as the dominant comparative literature.¹⁶ Parallel study is based on the notion of universality of literary works. The common sentiments expressed by authors from different countries are the ground for comparing. Compared to influence study of French school, parallel study has more critical value. Parallel study enlarged the space of comparative literature and connected literature works that develop independently from different cultural backgrounds, including literature from worldwide into its study sphere. As put forward by Zhang Longxi, comparative literature between East and West must not simply apply Western theories and critical methods to Eastern texts, but must be based on basic theoretical issues common to both East and West, which may be expressed differently in the Eastern and Western traditions but must be comparable to each other, and the exploration of these comparisons to deepen our understanding and knowledge of different literary works is comparative literary study. This is what the study of comparative literature should do.¹⁷

Therefore, 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. In this dissertation the parallel study of the American school and comparative cultural studies will be used as a method to identify the similarities and differences of their tenderness and warmth in depicting the marginalized rural women, animals, plants and things in patriarchal and calamitous Polish and Chinese societies. There are many similarities between the two authors, for example, in depicting women and nature's situations and sufferings in a male-dominated world, describing a world where everything is closely connected, as well as changing narrative perspectives from different characters' angle to give readers a more comprehensive and wider view to see more. Yet due to the different social and cultural backgrounds in Poland and China, there also exist some differences in their depicting women and nature. These similarities

¹⁶ Zhang Longxi, 《比较文学研究入门》 [*Introduction to the Study of Comparative Literature*], 成都: 四川人民出版社 (Chengdu: Sichuan People's Press, 2022), 16-17. The quotations are translated by me from Chinese to English.

¹⁷ Zhang, *Introduction to the Study of Comparative Literature*, 41-42.

and differences are what this dissertation aims to explore.

3.2. Olga Tokarczuk's Tender Narration

According to Tomasz Mizerkiewicz, the roots of literary tenderness lie in the aesthetics of Enlightenment-era sentimentalism.¹⁸ Then romanticism broadened the sentimentalist understanding of tenderness, enriching it with greater complexity and multivalence. This transformation is most notably seen in the works of Adam Mickiewicz, whose ballad *Romantyczność* [Romanticism] advocates for the importance of emotion and faith as a counterpoint to scientific reasoning. Although the Polish term *czułość* still retains ties to sentimentalism, Polish Romantic writers reinterpreted it, infusing it with powerful tension of meaning.¹⁹ As Tomasz Mizerkiewicz put forward, contemporary active uses of “tenderness” in Polish literary criticism are rooted in the term’s historical development. These uses encompass a fairly wide range of references, occasionally giving rise to fresh interpretative approaches and reflecting the term’s enduring popularity in both Polish literature and its criticism.²⁰ Besides the inheritance of the concept of tenderness from literary tradition, Tokarczuk also developed her concept of tenderness based on the ideas of the American psychologist James Hillman who focused on mythology, soul, crossing borders, imagination, personifying and animism that shape human experience. She mentioned the influence of Hillman on her in her biography, interview and her volume book *The Tender Narrator*. In her biography, she said, “In this period I plumbed the depths of psychology, including Jung, who kept me company for a long time, Eliade, Neumann and Hillman.”²¹ In her volume *The Tender Narrator*, Tokarczuk referred to James Hillman three times and the most extensive reference was Hillman’s belief in personification.²² She has read some Hillman’s books and recalled her readings of

¹⁸ Mizerkiewicz, “Justifying Tenderness,” 185.

¹⁹ Mizerkiewicz, “Justifying Tenderness,” 186.

²⁰ Mizerkiewicz, “Justifying Tenderness,” 188.

²¹ Tokarczuk, “The Nobel Prize in Literature 2018: Biographical.”

²² Tomasz Mizerkiewicz, “Olga Tokarczuk I Przekraczanie Granic. Lektura Hillmanowska,” *Ruch Literacki*, no. 3 (April 2022): 392. These quoted sentences are translated by me from Polish to English.

Hillman in an interview that “I think I was born a Hillmanian. I came across Hillman in the early 90s, I probably came across one of his books that I started reading and disbelieving what I was reading, I started looking for more books. Finally, I read everything that was available at the time. The more I delved into it, the more I felt that it was a kind of “Yes! Exactly!”²³ She seemed to greatly agree with what Hillman has said in his books.

Tokarczuk’s views on personifying and respect for nature is in accord with Hillman’s concept of personifying and animism. James Hillman holds that the purpose of life is to make psyche of it, to find connection between life and soul (or anima). Personifying is a way of soul-making and it offers another avenue of loving, of imagining things in a personal form so that we can find access to them with our hearts.²⁴ Tokarczuk agrees in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech “The Tender Narrator”²⁵ that tenderness serves her for taking a close look at each thing and person, with the greatest solemnity, and personify them inside herself, personalize them. She views tenderness is the art of personifying, of sharing feelings, and thus endlessly discovering similarities. To tell stories is to bring things to life, to give an existence to all the tiny pieces of the world that are represented by human experiences, the situations people have endured and their memories. Tenderness lends a personifying touch to everything it engages with, allowing these things to speak, to occupy space and time, and to reveal themselves. It is through tenderness that even a teapot finds its voice.

Hillman deems that the act of personifying serves to protect the psyche’s richness and independence from being dominated by any singular force, be it an overwhelming figure of archetypal awe in one’s surroundings or the self-centeredness of one’s own ego. In this view, personifying is the soul’s way of resisting egocentrism.²⁶ Hillman holds a polytheistic view that challenges the dominance of the traditional monotheistic, linear, and rational view. Humans are never the ruler of the world and not the dominator of everything, we must get rid of the idea of egotism and anthropocentrism and treat

²³ Mizerkiewicz, “Olga Tokarczuk I Przekraczanie Granic,” 391.

²⁴ James Hillman, *Re-Visioning Psychology* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1975), 1-14.

²⁵ Tokarczuk, “The Tender Narrator,” <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2018/tokarczuk/lecture/>.

²⁶ Hillman, *Re-visioning Psychology*, 32.

nature with respect. In her Nobel speech, Tokarczuk also expresses that those traits such as greed, disregard for nature, selfishness, lack of imagination, relentless rivalry, and irresponsibility have turned the world into a mere object, to be divided, exploited, and ultimately ruined. Both Hillman and Tokarczuk's ideas coexist with the humanities' current concerns and the revived interest in affectiveness and eco-critical contexts. Their personifying of attributing a living soul to inanimate objects and natural phenomena is their expression of love and pity to everything exists in the nature. According to Tokarczuk's Nobel lecture²⁷, tenderness is the most modest form of love. Tenderness is a profound emotional sensitivity toward another being, its vulnerability, unique nature, and susceptibility to suffering and the effects of time. It recognizes the connections that unite us, the similarities and common ground we possess. It is a perspective that reveals the world as vibrant and alive, intricately connected, mutually supportive, and interdependent. As a child, Tokarczuk was moved by her brief exchange with her mother, someplace in the countryside in western Poland in the late sixties when she asked her mother about that sadness in the photo. Her mother answered that she was sad because Tokarczuk hadn't been born yet, but she already missed her. This brief talk has always remained in Tokarczuk's memory and given her a store of strength that has lasted her whole life. She considers we are living in a world where mutual connections and influences exist, and we're aware of the incredible connections between things that seem to be far apart. Our reality is a mutually coherent, densely connected system of influences. In Tokarczuk's view, the realization of "the butterfly effect" signals the collapse of our unwavering belief in human control, efficiency, and dominance over the world. And that we are nothing but a tiny part of the universe.

Furthermore, in terms of Tokarczuk's tender narration in attributing a living soul to the non-human and insisting the interconnectedness of things, Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory (ANT) is combined to analyze the non-human as actors/ actants having agency, as well as the interconnectedness of human and nature in her novels. Latour considers that ANT does not limit itself to human individual actors but extend the word actor or actant to non-human, non-individual entities.²⁸ Latour criticizes the traditional

²⁷ Tokarczuk, "The Tender Narrator," <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2018/tokarczuk/lecture/>.

²⁸ Bruno Latour, "On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications plus More than a Few Complications," *Soziale*

dichotomy of the separation between culture and nature, as well as subject and object, arguing that all entities—human and non-human—are interconnected in networks.²⁹

According to Latour, the use of ANT for reassembling social connections originates in the need for a new social theory adjusted to science and technology studies. But it started in earnest with three documents published by Michel Callon in 1986, John Law in 1986 and Latour in 1988. It was at this point that non-humans—microbes, scallops, rocks, and ships—presented themselves to social theory in a new way.³⁰ He argues that the precise role granted to non-humans is that they have to be actors and not simply the hapless bearers of symbolic projection.³¹ Latour deems that “modernity is often defined in terms of humanism, either as a way of saluting the birth of ‘man’ or as a way of announcing his death. But this habit itself is modern, because it remains asymmetrical. It overlooks the simultaneous birth of ‘nonhumanity’—things, or objects, or beasts...”³² So instead of seeing nature as separate from us, or as something we study from a distance, ANT is suggesting we are all part of the same web of relationships. It is not about putting humans at the center of everything, but recognizing the agency of all sorts of actors, human and non-human.

Bruno Latour challenges the division between nature and culture in *We Have Never Been Modern*. According to him, our disciplines place a strong emphasis on the distinctions between subject and object as well as culture and nature, but in reality, phenomena frequently blur these boundaries. Latour holds that objects are society’s co-producters and states that “Is not society built literally—not metaphorically—of gods, machines, sciences, arts and styles?”³³ Latour redefines sociology not as the “science of the social,” but as the tracing of associations between heterogeneous elements.³⁴ So ANT is not about finding some external cause, but about understanding how things are connected and how those connections create the effects we see. In the networks all the actors are not just passively moving, they are actively shaping and being shaped. Therefore, instead of seeing nature as separate from us, as something we study from a distance, ANT is suggesting we are all part of the same network of relationships. It helps us see the interconnectedness of things and those often hidden processes that

Welt 47, no. 4 (1996): 370, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40878163>.

²⁹ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 6.

³⁰ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 10.

³¹ Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 10.

³² Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 13.

³³ Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 54.

³⁴ Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 5.

shape our world, and appreciate the complexity around us.

Latour's achievements in ANT have been acclaimed by researchers. Graham Harman describes Latour as a metaphysical thinker and a modern philosopher whose work played a key role in shaping object-oriented philosophy.³⁵ He holds that the most typical feature of Latour's philosophy is the dignity it grants to all sizes and types of actors.³⁶ Jan Harris deems that ANT challenges traditional notions of causality which is a straightforward, linear link between a human cause and its effect, but ANT redefines causality as emerging from a network of interactions among diverse actors—both human and non-human. This perspective disrupts conventional thinking by emphasizing the mutual influence and collaborative formation of outcomes within a network of relationships.³⁷ Rangga Kala Mahaswa considers that Latour's work questions the conventional belief that scientific facts and knowledge result from an objective process detached from social and cultural influences. And one reason Latour's work stands out is his recognition of non-human entities and his critique of Western philosophical dualisms and the shortcomings of modernity, which leads him to embrace a relational perspective that highlights the mutual dependence of humans and non-humans in producing knowledge.³⁸ Elizabeth de Freitas holds that Latour's approach, highlighting the central role of nonhuman entities in the networks that produce knowledge, stands as one of his key contributions to the social sciences. His ideas have significantly influenced contemporary discussions in post-humanism and new materialism, serving as a driving force for new developments in science and technology studies.³⁹

Overall, ANT presents a distinctive view on social relations and the agency of actors/actants in a network, emphasizing an equal consideration of both human and non-human actors in the construction of social phenomena. Connecting Bruno Latour's ANT with tender narration will create a way of rethinking how gender, nature, agency and power operate in our society. Thus, in this research ANT is combined with tender narration to analyze the agency and significance of animals, plants and things in

³⁵ Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne: re.press, 2009), 151.

³⁶ Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 102.

³⁷ Jan Harris, "The Ordering of Things: Organization in Bruno Latour," *The Sociological Review* 53, no. 1_suppl (October 2005): 163–77, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954x.2005.00548.x>.

³⁸ Rangga Kala Mahaswa. "Bruno Latour and Actor-Network-Anthropocene." *Transversal: International Journal for the Historiography of Science* 14 (June 2023): 2. <https://doi.org/10.24117/2526-2270.2023.i14.05>.

³⁹ Elizabeth de Freitas, "Bruno Latour," in *Alternative Theoretical Frameworks for Mathematics Education Research: Theory Meets Data*, ed. Elizabeth de Freitas and Margaret Walshaw (Cham Springer International Publishing, 2016), 121–48.

molding our world. Both tender narration and ANT emphasize the interconnectedness of everything, both human and non-human.

3.3. Narration of Tenderness and Warmth in China and in Mo Yan's Works

In Chinese academia, there is no clear theoretical interpretation of the concept and scope of the tender narration. In Chinese, the word 温情 (warm tenderness) means warm and tender feelings. 温情叙事 (narration of tenderness and warmth) is a term used by researchers to analyze literary works. Tenderness is a unique human emotion, which is warm and tender and gives comfort to the human soul.

Through reviewing the relevant literature, it is found that the term “温情叙事 (narration of tenderness and warmth)” has been used by Chinese scholars more than a decade years ago. Xu Abing observed that since the 1980s in China, with the experimental works of the “Modernist” and “Avant-Garde” movements leading the way, followed by creations under the banners of “New Realism” and “New Historicism,” the harshness of life and the brutality of human nature have received unprecedented attention. For a period of time, depicting scenes of cruelty and indifference in life and portraying the sufferings of the “grassroots” became a fashionable approach. However, he found that another narrative mode he referred to as tender and warm narration persisted with resilience and tenacity.⁴⁰

Firstly, in terms of the definition of the creative mode of “narration of tenderness and warmth”, Xu Abing has suggested that it doesn't try to tear down certain illusions of life, but rather guards certain truths of life; it doesn't excel in harshness or sharpness, but pursues warmth, softness, and tenderness; it intentionally stays away from that kind of manic and violent catharsis, but yearns for the aesthetic effect of subtlety. Here we tentatively call it the narration of tenderness and warmth mode.⁴¹ He defines the concept of narration of tenderness and warmth, and believes that it is not only a narrative mode, but also the expression of warm and tender emotion behind the

⁴⁰ Xu Abing, “力度, 温度, 限度——‘温情叙事’三省” [“Strength, Temperature, Limit: Three Provisions of ‘Tender and Warm Narrative’”] *Wenyi Pinglun [Literary Review]* no. 5 (2008):29. These words are translated by me from Chinese into English.

⁴¹ Xu, “力度, 温度, 限度——‘温情叙事’三省” [“Strength, Temperature, Limit: Three Provisions of ‘Tender and Warm Narrative’”], 29.

narrative. He took the works written by Chi Zijian⁴² and Lu Min⁴³ as examples with tender and warm narration.

Secondly, there are also different discussions on the scope and object of “narration of tenderness and warmth”. Narration of tenderness and warmth is often associated with grassroots narration in China. Niu Xuezhi suggests that writers transform criticizing reality into an exploration of emotions, and then express the emotions through aesthetic means, which is what constitutes tender and warm narration. Tender and warm narration represents a more advanced form of grassroots narration.⁴⁴ Tender and warm narration lies above grassroots narration due to their different attitudes towards suffering, grassroots narration tends to magnify the hardships and pains of life in writing about the difficulties of survival, while tender narration is more concerned about the spiritual core of human beings. Although both of them depict suffering, tender narration is more than about suffering, but also full of compassionate feelings, sad but not hurt. Tender narration does not mean blind fraternity, the writer’s tenderness is not solely pity and sympathy, but will also face up to the ugliness of life and the weakness of human nature. Besides criticism, tender narration reflects the author’s humanitarian concern and a strong sense of social responsibility. Li Zhixiao regards the folk perspective and tender narration as one of the three narrative orientations of new-century grassroots literature. Li considers that tender and warm narration allows readers to see not only the suffering and distortion at the grassroots people, but also the tenderness and warmth, as well as the richness and complexity of human nature.⁴⁵ By analyzing Zhang Ji’s novel 《出家》 (*Becoming a Monk*), Zhou Cong holds that tender and narration focuses on depicting the trivialities of daily life and the mundane matters of everyday existence like firewood,

⁴² Chi Zijian (迟子建), born on February 27, 1964, in Mohe, Heilongjiang Province, is a distinguished Chinese novelist renowned for her vivid portrayals of China's northeastern frontier and its indigenous cultures. Chi began publishing in 1983 and has since produced an extensive body of work, including novels, short stories, and essays. Her writing often delves into themes of nature, memory, and the lives of marginalized communities. Notably, her novel 《额尔古纳河右岸》 (*The Last Quarter of the Moon*) offers an intimate portrayal of the Evenki people, a nomadic reindeer-herding community, and earned her the prestigious Mao Dun Literature Prize in 2008. Chi has also been honored with the Lu Xun Literary Prize three times, recognizing her outstanding contributions to Chinese literature.

⁴³ Lu Min (鲁敏), born in 1973 in Dongtai, Jiangsu Province, is a prominent Chinese fiction writer based in Nanjing. Lu Min has authored several novels and short story collections. Her notable works include 《六人晚餐》 (*Dinner for Six*), 《此情无法投递》 (*This Love Could Not Be Delivered*), 《西天寺》 (*Paradise Temple*), 《暗疾》 (*Hidden Diseases*) and so on. In recognition of her literary contributions, Lu Min was awarded the prestigious Lu Xun Literary Prize in 2009.

⁴⁴ Niu Xuezhi, “乏力的温情叙事—对底层文学及相关作家问题的几点思考” [“Tepid Tender Narratives: Some Thoughts on Grassroots Literature and Related Writers’ Issues”] *Dangdai Wentan* [*Contemporary Literary World*], no. 3 (2008): 39. These words are translated by me from Chinese into English.

⁴⁵ Li Zhixiao, “新世纪底层文学的三种叙事向度” [“Three Narrative Orientations of New-Century Grassroots Literature”] *Wenyi Lilun Yu Piping* [*Literary Theory and Criticism*] 2 (2011): 69-72.

rice, oil, and salt, while portraying the joys and sorrows of ordinary people. Zhou believes the author deliberately narrows the distance between fiction and real life, allowing everyday events to be directly transformed into plot elements. By the time readers finish reading the work, they share protagonist's pains as well as happiness.⁴⁶

Finally, tender and warm narration in China develops primarily along with the emergence of researches about contemporary writers' works from the perspective of their narration of tenderness and warmth. Yan Shanshan and Zhang Dong explore the tender and warm narration in Liang Xiaosheng's novels, holding that Liang's aesthetic choice of tender and warm narration is grounded in reality and is filled with a deep concern for people, accompanied by gentle satire.⁴⁷ Ji Wensi explores the connection between the tender and warm narrative style and realism in Lu Yao's novel 《平凡的世界》 (*Ordinary World*).⁴⁸ Through analyzing Liu Cixin's 《带上她的眼睛》 (*The Eyes of Her*) from the perspective of tender and warm narration, Xu Yingying discloses the problem of gender bias and loss of subjectivity, examines the complex relationship between technology and humanistic care, and calls for greater attention to gender equality and multi-perspectives in science fiction writing.⁴⁹ With more and more researches in analyzing novels from the perspective of tender and warm narration in China, its research scope and meaning have been broadened and enriched. In Chinese context, tender and warm narration is not only a delicate depiction of human relationships and emotions, but also a profound reflection on humanity, morality and social values. By focusing on the ordinary people, tender and warm narration provide readers with the belief in the goodness of human nature, allowing people to find emotional resonance and emotional comfort in a complex and turbulent social context.

Tenderness is a unique human emotion that soothes and warms the human spirit. In contemporary China, with the transformation of the society, the enlightenment ideas held high during the May Fourth Movement⁵⁰ period have been gradually forgotten in

⁴⁶ Zhou Cong, “日常生活化的温情叙事—评张忌的长篇小说《出家》” [“Everyday Tenderness and Warmth in Narration: A Review of Zhang Ji's Novel *Becoming a Monk*”] *Modern Chinese Literature Criticism* 2 (2018): 19-22.

⁴⁷ Yan Shanshan and Zhang Dong, “梁晓声知青小说的温情叙事探究” [“An Exploration of Tender and Warm Narration in Liang Xiaosheng's Zhiqing Novels”] *Journal of Mudanjiang Normal University* 4 (2014): 60-62.

⁴⁸ Ji Wensi, “小说《平凡的世界》的温情叙事风格分析” [“An Analysis of the Tender and Warm Narrative Style in the Novel *Ordinary World*”] *Extracurricular Chinese* 30 (2021): 14-16.

⁴⁹ Xu Yingying, “温情叙事下的性别偏见与主体性失落——读刘慈欣《带上她的眼睛》” [“Gender Bias and Loss of Subjectivity in Tender Narration: A Reading of Liu Cixin's *The Eye of Her*”] *Masterpieces Review* 23 (2024): 75-79.

⁵⁰ The May Fourth Movement (五四运动) was a major cultural and political movement in China that began on May 4, 1919. It was sparked by student protests in Beijing against the Treaty of Versailles, which allowed Japan to take over former German-controlled territories in China, particularly Shandong Province. The movement grew beyond

this materialistic era. In the new economic era, people abandon their beliefs, become spiritually empty, and are troubled by all kinds of interests, stumbling to survive in the cracks of life like walking corpses. When the real life and the spiritual world are both in trouble, tenderness becomes even more precious. Many writers have realized the alienation and distortion of human nature in contemporary society, and have indignantly revealed and criticized the problems of society and the ugliness of human nature. Readers need the fierce criticism of these adamant fury to examine the reality, and they also need the warmth of tenderness to purify their hearts and thus get peace and solace.

The existing researches of Mo Yan's novels generally focus on the themes of "hardships" "violence" "irony", and even "sarcasm", which have a relatively low emotional tone and even critical. While criticizing and exposing all kinds of social tragedies, his writing is also full of care and tenderness for the marginalized people. In Mo Yan's creative process, irony has been a narrative method throughout. In the readers' established impression, the narrative strategy of irony is often contrary to delicate warmth and tenderness. However, Mo Yan's irony is not a kind of condescending looking down, nor is it a cold and indifferent sarcasm and renunciation. He always faces the tragedy of existence and criticizes it, and his irony is equally sharp and pungent, but contains compassion and care in his jokes and curses. This also makes Mo Yan's cold criticism permeated with a hint of warmth and tenderness, thus brewing a richer spiritual content. The purpose of this research is to break away from the established vision of Mo Yan's research and explore the warmth and tenderness hidden under the heavy and critical surface of his novels.

A compassionate warmth and tenderness can be felt in Mo Yan's novels. Since Mo Yan ascended to the literary world, he has paid attention to all aspects of people's livelihood, history, power and survival with his distinctive commoner's position and perspective. He has a far insight into the world of human affairs, depicts the empty and mediocre daily life with objective and calm descriptions, and impresses the readers with hidden warmth and tenderness. The sense of warmth and tenderness in his works is hidden and far-reaching, which has formed a unique style of creativity. Mo Yan has a distinctive stance of common civilians. He stands at the same grassroots level with the common people, and gazes at the sufferings and trials of life from the same perspective,

its initial protest and became a broader push for political, cultural, and intellectual change, especially science and democracy were advocated to challenge traditional Confucian values.

so as to contemplate the significance of the existence of the individuals in the cruel world of wars and struggles, to dig out the value of human beings, and to express the compassionate care for the labouring people in the midst of sufferings. In Mo Yan's works, tender and warm narration is not only his expression of praising and promoting the value of human kindness, but also the narration strategy and method of caring for people's spiritual world. It is worth noting that the tender narration in his works is a moderate warmth input, not a blind and random love, and when caring for the public with warmth, it is not only limited to sympathy, but also more importantly, pointing out the causes of the plight of the people, which is a critique but also an edification and enlightenment.

Through expounding Tokarczuk's tender narration in Polish context and Chinese narration of tenderness and warmth, I find that the connotation of Tokarczuk's tender narration is wider and more comprehensive than that of Chinese academia. Tokarczuk's tender narration is not only concerned about marginalized human beings but also about animals, plants and things. However, in terms of Tokarczuk's and Mo Yan's tenderness and warmth in writing, there are some similarities. For example, both of them give voices to the marginalized, especially the underprivileged women, even animals, plants and things. Tokarczuk emphasizes the healing power of nature on humans and advocates returning to nature and living in harmony with nature. Similarly, Mo Yan develops a love towards nature since his childhood through tending sheep and cattle in the nature. Besides, he was influenced by the traditional Chinese concept of "the unity of nature and mankind", which emphasizes the harmonious relationship between humans and the natural world, suggesting that human existence should align with the rhythms and principles of nature. Under the influence of Chinese cultural concepts and literary traditions, it is not surprising that his works depict nature and seek nature to alleviate spiritual crises. The following chapters will analyze Tokarczuk's and Mo Yan's works in detail and compare their tenderness and warmth in narrating women, nature and men under different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, this research also aims to broaden the scope and meaning of tender and warm narration in China to arouse people's attention and concern not only in marginalized human beings but also in animals, plants and things.

3.4. Ecofeminism

The term “ecofeminism” was first used by French feminist Françoise d’Eaubonne in her 1974 book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort (Feminism or Death)*. The first collection of essays on ecofeminism, *Reclaim the Earth: Women Speak Out for Life on Earth*,⁵¹ appeared in 1983. This collection presents ecofeminism as both a theory and practice, addressing global issues such as anti-nuclear activism, women’s health, land rights, and world hunger. From November 9 to 12 in 1991, a conference named World Women’s Congress for a Healthy Planet was held in Miami, Florida. The participants were theorists and activists concerned about the fate of women and the earth, and the topics reappeared are of concern within ecofeminism. Ecofeminism is a developing interdisciplinary paradigm in literary and cultural studies that has its roots in a variety of critical approaches. Some suggest that the connection between ecological issues and perspectives of gender studies gave rise to ecofeminism.⁵² Some contend that ecofeminism emerged from cultural, liberal, socialist, and poststructural strands within Western feminist thought, which helped shape and influence its core principles.⁵³ According to Molyneux and Steinberg, ecofeminism typically centers on a critique of patriarchal science, highlighting the harm done to nature/environment, and drawing connections between ecological destruction and the oppression of women.⁵⁴ Val Plumwood contends that forms of oppression from both the present and the past have left their traces in western culture as a network of dualisms, and the logical structure of dualism forms a major basis for the connection between forms of oppression.⁵⁵ Aside from the connection between the exploitation of women and nature, Starhawk and many other ecofeminists believe that ecofeminism is “also based on the recognition that these two forms of domination are bound up with class exploitation, racism, colonialism, and neo-colonialism.”⁵⁶ Greta Gaard puts forward that ecofeminism is a theory that

⁵¹ Stephanie Leland and Leonie Caldecott, eds., *Reclaim the Earth* (London: The Women’s Press, 1983).

⁵² Hubert Zapf, “The State of Ecocriticism and the Function of Literature as Cultural Ecology” in *Nature in Literary and Cultural Studies: Transatlantic Conversations on Ecocriticism*, ed. Catrin Gersdorf and Sylvia Mayer (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 52.

⁵³ Ariel Salleh, “Foreword” in *Ecofeminism*, 2nd edition, ed. Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva (London: Zed Books, 2014), ix–xii.

⁵⁴ Maxine Molyneux and Deborah Lynn Steinberg, “Review: Mies and Shiva’s ‘Ecofeminism’: A New Testament?” *Feminist Review*, no. 49 (1995): 86–107. Accessed November 9, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1395330>.

⁵⁵ Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993), 2.

⁵⁶ Sunaina Jain, “Activism and Ecofeminist Literature” in *The Routledge Handbook of Ecofeminism and Literature*, ed. Douglas A. Vakoch (New York: Routledge, 2023), 272.

connects the oppression of marginalized groups with the exploitation of nature. It emerges from feminist activism and integrates insights from ecology, feminism, and socialism. Ecofeminism argues that all forms of oppression—whether based on race, gender, class, or species—stem from the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature, and this ideology is identified as patriarchy, which is built on a self/other divide rooted in a sense of self that is separate, atomistic. True liberation requires addressing both social and environmental injustices together.⁵⁷

Carolyn Merchant outlined a diverse classification of the different approaches within ecofeminism: Aboriginal ecofeminism, developing world ecofeminism, cultural ecofeminism, deep-ecology ecofeminism, liberal ecofeminism, radical ecofeminism, social ecofeminism, socialist ecofeminism, transformative ecofeminism, material ecofeminism, postcolonial ecofeminism, and Romantic ecofeminism, among others.⁵⁸ Janis Birkeland sees ecofeminism as a holistic value system that advocates for fundamental social transformation. She summarizes nine basic precepts of ecofeminism that emphasizing equality, nonviolence, cultural diversity, and nonhierarchical decision-making. Ecofeminism rejects anthropocentrism, instrumentalist values, and patriarchal power structures, instead promoting a biocentric perspective that can comprehend the interconnectedness of all life processes. It calls for a shift away from dominance-based relationships, integrating ethics based on mutual respect into both personal and political spheres. Ultimately, Birkeland argues that true change requires withdrawing power and energy from the Patriarchy rather than playing Patriarchal “games.”⁵⁹

In both Mo Yan’s and Tokarczuk’s works, women and nature are exploited and oppressed by the patriarchal structures based on different cultural context. Their characters’ objections to the socially constructed dualisms of male over female, human over non-human nature is illustrated by their characters in the novels. The similar theme of narration of tenderness and warmth towards the marginalized rural females, animals, plants and things in Tokarczuk’s and Mo Yan’s works intersect with the ideas of ecofeminism that aim to dismantle the oppression imposed on females and nature by patriarchal and hierarchal social systems. The two authors’ narration of tenderness and

⁵⁷ Greta Gaard, “Living Interconnections with Animals and Nature” in *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature*, ed. Greta Gaard (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 1-2.

⁵⁸ Carolyn Merchant, *Earthcare: Women and the Environment* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 207.

⁵⁹ Janis Birkeland, “Ecofeminism: Linking Theory and Practice” in *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature*, ed. Greta Gaard (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 21-22.

warmth towards the females and nature by giving voice to them and recognizing their equal rights with men align with ecofeminist views of rejecting females and nature as resources to be exploited and inferiors to be oppressed. Based on some of Janis Birkeland's basic precepts, this research will explore how the patriarchal structures and practices threaten nature as well as the status and conditions of women in Polish and Chinese cultural background. Despite their tenderness towards women and nature, Tokarczuk and Mo Yan are neither radical feminists advocating replacing male-centrism with female-centrism, nor essentialist ecofeminists who hold that women are inherently closer to nature than men. Therefore, this research will also explore how some of the marginalized men are warmed and comforted by women and nature, and how do those men develop a close relationship with women and nature. As put forward by Lydia Rose, ecofeminism can work to redefine humanistic relationships and resist hegemonic masculinity. Literary works that come from an ecofeminist perspective illustrate ways that the imagination can be used to create eco-friendly, humanistic norms, such as masculinities/femininities without hierarchies.⁶⁰ So from an ecofeminist perspective, their works will help to break the binary opposition between males and females, culture and nature, as well as nature and humans.

⁶⁰ Lydia Rose, "Hegemonic Masculinity and Ecofeminist Literature" in *The Routledge Handbook of Ecofeminism and Literature*, ed. Douglas A. Vakoch (New York: Routledge, 2023), 327.

Chapter 4 Analysis of Olga Tokarczuk's and Mo Yan's Writing of Marginalized Female Characters

4.1. Suffering of Women in Polish and Chinese Cultural Backgrounds

Mo Yan places his female characters in the context of history and the changing times, where natural and man-made disasters such as wars and turmoil, political changes, droughts, floods and famines, as well as epidemics and diseases relentlessly attack them, and in addition to fighting against external irresistible factors, they also have to get rid of the gender dilemmas faced by the female group. Throughout Chinese history, as a vulnerable group in a patriarchal society, women are bound by the cages of marriage and childbearing, and their social and family status is devalued by the traditional view of marriage and family, and their desires as human beings are suppressed. Under the pressure of both internal and external hardships, women struggle hard to survive.

Much like China, Poland is also a war-torn country that has endured partitions, world wars and political upheavals over the course of the history. This shared experience of national trauma has significantly shaped the identities of both countries and the experiences of their people, particularly women. Born in Poland, where the social environment, religious beliefs and national culture are complex and diverse, Tokarczuk's understanding of women is correspondingly complex, diverse and more rational. Women, as an important part of social construction, have long been trapped in the shadow of the system created by males, and under the domination of patriarchal ideology, such as social rules and ethical norms set by men, women are in a passive and disadvantageous position in terms of political, economic, psychological and social power.

4.1.1. Traditional and Masculine Repression on Women

Poland is a country strongly influenced by Roman Catholicism that places men in a dominating and women in a subordinate position. In the Roman Catholic marriage ceremony, the priest advises the bride and groom that, “As Christ is the Head of the Church, so the man is the head of the family.”¹ In Tokarczuk’s *House of Day, House of Night*, when the monk Paschalis asks Celestyn what would it be like if he became a woman, Celestyn replies him in the words of the Areopagite², “we should regard being a woman as a kind of deformity, although this deformity is as part of the natural order”. Celestyn also tells Paschalis that “all the great philosophers and fathers of the Church have said that woman is the source of all evil. It was because of her that Adam committed the original sin, and because of her Our Lord died on the cross. She was created for temptation...Remember that the body of a woman is a sack of dung and each month nature herself reminds us of this by staining her with uncleaned blood.”³ The traditional religious ideas and norms discriminate against women and place them in a rather low position. The traditional Polish family model is usually that men go out to work to earn money to support the family, and women stay at home to attend to the domestic affairs. The state of women’s existence in Poland has a direct influence on Olga Tokarczuk’s writing about women. In her *House of Day, House of Night*, she utilizes the Saint Kummernis’ legend to express women’s defiance against traditional patriarchal expectations and pursuit of independence and freedom. The tragedy of Kummernis is an example of repression on women from the patriarchal society:

Kummernis, also named Wilga, was born imperfect in her father’s eyes for her father longed for a son. She was the sixth daughter in a row. Her mother died giving birth to her. Her father never kept his seat at home warm for long. All year he went hunting, and every spring he set out on lengthy crusades. He was strong in stature, violent and quick to anger. Wilga spent the first years of her life among women: her sisters, foster-mothers and servants. Once her father wanting to call her to him, forgot her name. one winter her father came home from an expedition bringing a new wife with him.⁴

¹ Harriet Bloch, “Changing Domestic Roles among Polish Immigrant Women,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (January 1976): 4.

² He was an Athenian judge at the Areopagus Court in Athens, who lived in the first century. A convert to Christianity, he is venerated as a saint by multiple denominations.

³ Tokarczuk, *House of Day, House of Night*, 77.

⁴ Tokarczuk, *House of Day, House of Night*, 52-53.

In the traditional society, men are expected to fight for his career outside home and women are expected to bear and raise children at home. Wilga's mother has given to six children and dies in giving birth to her, the father does not show any sadness in his wife's death and only feels imperfect because the baby is not a boy. The sisters grow up among women and seldom see their father. What's ridiculous is that the father even forgets his daughter's name, which shows he does not care about his daughter at all. The daughters' marriages are also controlled by their dictatorial father:

And Wilga's body took the same route as her dreams – the little girl grew up and became beautiful, so that who saw her marvelled in silence at this miracle of creation. Therefore many gentlemen and knights impatiently awaited the return of the girl's father, lord and master, each waiting to be the first to make his proposal and to claim her in marriage. A few days later Wilga's beloved stepmother died of a haemorrhage, and her father, without observing the mourning period, gave five of his daughters in marriage to his best knights in a single day. As the only one too young for marriage Wilga was assigned to the convent.⁵

The father in the family is referred to as the lord and master of the daughters, which shows that all the people in the family must obey to the father. As a man of high social status, after his second wife's death, he violates the rules of the mourning period and casually marries his five daughters to his knights without the consent of his daughters. Women's fate is at men's disposal. And Wilga's life is totally destroyed by his dictatorial father, and her beauty is like a shackle to her:

It was then that the most terrible thing happened – her father returned from his latest expedition, and seeing how she had matured and how much more painful her presence to him, he resolved to give her in marriage to his friend from the wars, Wolfram von Pannewitz. So he sent an envoy to the convent with a letter demanding that she be made ready to leave it.⁶

Wilga does not want to marry Wolfram, which irritates her father because he feels offended and humiliated that her daughter should go against his order. So he said to her,

⁵ Tokarczuk, *House of Day, House of Night*, 53-54.

⁶ Tokarczuk, *House of Day, House of Night*, 55.

“In body you belong to the world and you have no other lord and master than me.”⁷

Under a patriarchal society, women are dominated by men and have no freedom.

As a war-torn country, the fight for women’s rights in Poland’s modern history has often been subordinated to the country’s independence movement. In the dominant historical narrative, Polish women did not seek emancipation, but rather the preservation of family, national traditions, language, and culture, while men fought in national uprisings.⁸ In 1918, Poland reestablished its independence, and women acquired active and passive voting rights.⁹ However, women continued to face inequality in various other areas, particularly in marriage and civil law, as well as in access to education and public offices.¹⁰ The legal acknowledgment of gender equality was a development of the post–World War II period under state socialism, which encouraged women’s participation in the workforce.¹¹ However, socialist feminism did not challenge traditional gender roles; instead, it placed the double burden of both household and professional duties on women.¹² While the democratic transition effectively established the basis of a liberal regime, it was accompanied by an agreement between the government and the Catholic Church that restricted reproductive rights and contributed to a re-traditionalization of gender roles, which reinforced a form of sexual contract aimed at confining women to domestic roles.¹³ After 1989, the gender policy was seen as a remnant of communism and state-socialist policies. As a result, the democratic transformation strengthened traditional notions of women as mothers and wives, further marginalized them in public sphere, and fueled the emergence of anti-feminist discourses, hindering progress towards women’s emancipation.¹⁴ As Justyna Sempruch puts forward, “an increasing masculinization of

⁷ Tokarczuk, *House of Day, House of Night*, 56

⁸ Małgorzata Fuszara, “Women’s Movements in Poland”, in *Transitions Environments Translations. Feminism in International Politics*, ed. Joan W. Scott, Cora Kaplan, and Debra Keates (New York: Routledge, 2013), 128-42.

⁹ Małgorzata Fuszara, “Polish Women’s Fight for Suffrage”, in *The Struggle for Female Suffrage in Europe: Voting to Become Citizens*, ed. Blanca Rodríguez Ruiz, and Ruth Rubio-Marin (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 143.

¹⁰ Małgorzata Fuszara, “Will the Abortion Issue Give Birth to Feminism in Poland?”, in *Women’s Issues in Social Policy*, ed. Mavis McLean, and Dulcie Groves (New York: Routledge, 1991).

¹¹ Anna Sledzinska-Simon and Anna Wojcik, “Taking Women’s Rights Seriously: Women’s Struggle for a New ‘Social Contract’ in Poland”, *Union University Law School Review* 15, no. 1 (2024): 24.

¹² Piotr Godzisz, “The Journey and Horizon: Reflecting on the Progress and Prospects of Anti-LGBT Hate Crime Governance in Poland and Beyond”, in *State Responses to Anti-LGBT Violence: Poland in a European Context*, ed. Piotr Godzisz, (London: Springer Nature, 2024), 291-304.

¹³ Sledzinska-Simon and Wojcik, “Taking Women’s Rights Seriously,” 20.

¹⁴ Marta Warat, “Development of Gender Equality Policies in Poland. A Review of Success and Limitations,”

power structures (e.g., the political sphere and “scientific” practices) impacts the management of the social and the most private aspects of women’s lives in post 1989 Poland with the consequence of such matters as abortion is illegal and contraception and divorce are discouraged. There is a return to social policies based on marriage and the family as primary paradigms of women’s identities.”¹⁵ Yi Lijun, a Chinese scholar and translator renowned for her translations of Polish literature into Chinese, summarizes that from Polish literature, we can learn that the status of women in Poland has changed with the development of society, but women still belong to the disadvantaged group, and therefore women’s psychology has always been in a state of repression.¹⁶

In *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*, at Big Foot’s funeral, because of Duszejko’s gender as a woman, she was given orders by men to perform tasks. “One of the men took a handful of flat candles in little metal cups from his pocket and gave them to me with such an overt gesture that I automatically accepted them, but I wasn’t entirely sure what I was meant to do with them.”¹⁷ After a lengthy pause, she realized that she was required to position the candles around the body and light them. Then she was asked to start singing, she was alarmed and asked what to sing and why it was she to sing. A man standing closest to her replied firmly: “Because you’re a woman.” Actually gender has nothing to do with positioning the candles or singing at a funeral, but women are expected by men and hierarchical society to do such things naturally.

In *Primeval and Other Times*, Stasia Boska was dominated by her father who was always dissatisfied and quick tempered. She lived a hard life with her father who would thrash her with something heavy if she was late with his dinner, then she would cry quietly to avoid enraging her father even more. After marrying a postal worker, Papuga, Stasia gave birth to a son; since then, her endearments to him irritated him, and he was annoyed at having to wait so long for his dinner. Finally, her husband disappeared forever from the house, leaving her alone to take care of their son. Stasia’s whole life

(Jagiellonian University in Krakow, 2014).

¹⁵ Sempruch, “Patriarchy in Post-1989 Poland,” 2.

¹⁶ Yi Lijun, “波兰女性文学” [“Polish Women’s Literature”], *International Forum*, no. 1 (1990): 2.

¹⁷ Tokarczuk, *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, 38.

centered around and served three men, her father, her husband and her son. Another character Ruta was usually insulted by Ukleja who called her “floozy, bitch” and flaunted the brassiere he bought for her by tugging at her blouse and exposing it to his pals, and he also lifted her silk skirts to show off her thighs. When Ruta told him to stop this action, he refuted that she and everything she has got on are owned by him. Ruta was like the possession of Ukleja and he would lock her in the house and does not allow her to go outside alone. He hit her in the face when he was not satisfied with the food on Christmas Eve and insulted her as a bitch only knows how to screw. Misia and her daughter Adelka are also characters repressed by the husband and father Paweł. Misia was coaxed by Paweł’s sweet words to marry him. Misia grew up in a better-off family than Paweł, so he regarded marrying Misia as an easy way to climb up. Through his efforts to climb upwards, Paweł finally got a job inspecting the cleanliness in shops, restaurants and bars. This was how he met Ukleja, the owner of a cake shop and several other, who introduced Paweł to the world of secretaries and lawyers, drinking sprees and hunting, willing busty barmaids and alcohol.¹⁸ After getting power, Paweł’s emotion and attitude towards Misia has changed. Although Misia knew he was squeezing and screwing all those barmaids, butcher’s shop girls, and waitresses from the restaurants, she could not do anything to her husband’s betrayal and just swallowed the pains by herself. Paweł’s daughter, Adelka, also suffered from her father’s domination:

One day Adelka pulls out the blue feathers of her father’s friend Widyna’s jay, her father shouts angrily, “What’s this? What have you done? Do you know what you’ve done? You’ve plucked Mr. Widyna’s jay! And he shot it specially.” The guests’ curious heads appeared in the doorway. Her father grabbed Adelka by the arm with an iron grip and steered her into the living room. He pushed her angrily, so that she stopped in front of Widyna. He ordered and complained to her wife, Misia, “Misia, fetch me some peas. We’ll punish her as an example. You have to be tough with children... and keep them on a tight rein.” Misia reluctantly handed him a bag of peas. Paweł scattered the peas in a corner of the room and told his daughter to kneel down on them. Adelka knelt down, and there was a short silence. She could feel everyone looking at her. She thought she was going to die now.¹⁹

¹⁸ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 156-57.

¹⁹ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 169-71.

Both Misia and Adelka were living under the control of Paweł. Paweł punished his daughter and scolded his wife in front of so many guests to show a man's authority on his daughter and wife. He showed no respect for Adelka and punished her severely in front of many guests. In his opinion, his friend Widyna's jay was more important than her daughter's self-esteem. As believed by social expectations that women should be obedient to men, Misia had no courage to protect her daughter or went against her husband's order, instead, she handed a bag of peas to him reluctantly. He scolded that Misia should be tough with children, but he forgot that, as a father, he should also take his responsibility of educating the children. In the house, Misia has been busy with bearing and rearing children (she has given birth to six children), doing the kitchen work and laundry, taking care of all the household affairs. Such a suffocating family contributed to Adelka's stay far away from home when she grew up.

One day when 19-year-old Adelka went back home and told her father, "I just came to tell you that I'm doing fine. I graduated, and I'm working. I have a big daughter already." Her father just answered, "Why didn't you have a son? You've all got girls. Antek has two, Witek has one, the twins have two each, and now you. I remember it all, I keep a rigorous count and I still haven't got a grandson. You've disappointed me."²⁰ This showed that Paweł preferred boys to girls. The problem of preferring a baby boy was especially severe in Chinese traditional ideas, which was clearly demonstrated in Mo Yan's *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*. In the novel Shangguan Lu has given birth to seven daughters consecutively. She had to be pregnant again and again until she gave birth to her son, Shangguan Jintong in her eighth labor. Before her parturition, Shangguan Lu prayed that "Merciful Bodhisattva Guanyin, who succors the downtrodden and the distressed, protect and take pity on me, deliver a son to this family ..." "Lord in Heaven, protect me... Worthy Ancestors, protect me... gods and demons everywhere, protect me, spare me, let me deliver a healthy baby boy... my very own son, come to Mother... Father of Heaven, Mother of Earth, yellow spirits and fox fairies, help me, please ... And so she prayed and pleaded, assaulted by wrenching

²⁰ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 244.

contractions.”²¹ To Shangguan Lu, she desperately needed to have a son to save herself from the beatings of her in-laws, and with a son, she wouldn’t have to keep being pregnant and having children.

China was a large agricultural country with a long history. In terms of economic model, emphasis was placed on the family as the unit of production and life, and a small peasant economy featuring intensive farming. Due to the innate physiological differences between men and women, it has been found that males had the advantage of physical strength, and were better suited to labor outside the home, while females had the favorable condition of giving birth to and nurturing their children, and completing the fine processing such as weaving and handcrafts; therefore, in the traditional family economy, the perception that men and women are engaged in different areas of labor has been solidified. Besides, China has a long tradition of patriarchy, with an emphasis on blood ties, which has led to “China’s being a family-oriented country, and traditional Chinese society is centered on the family and the clan.”²² So in traditional Chinese society, where the family was the basic unit and was linked by blood and marriage, greater emphasis was placed on the collective interests of the patriarchal bloodline, where the individual was subordinate to the family, and women were subordinate to male authority. The traditional Chinese family order was built on the basis of a patriarchal society with male power at its core, and men played the role of head of the family in the process of clan development, holding absolute authority and the right to speak. The head of the family in traditional families was often the grandfather with honorable and higher status, and then passed on by children and grandchildren, with women almost excluded. In addition, Confucian ethics and the promotion of filial piety consolidated the feudal patriarchal system, in which filial piety required children to unconditionally obey their parents’ arrangements, and to comply with their father at home, thus forming a strict hierarchical order of superiority and inferiority to maintain the stability of the traditional family structure. At the marriage

²¹ Mo, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, 4-5.

²² Lei Jieqiong, 《中国婚姻家庭研究》 [*A Study of Marriage and Family in China*], 北京: 社会科学文学出版社 (Beijing: Social Science Literature Press, 1987), 3.

level, the union of the two sexes was not for the pursuit of personal happiness, but rather for the benefit of the family, to maintain the prosperity of the family through marriage, so arranged marriages were created under the rule of patriarchal paternalism. The phenomenon that parents sacrificed the happiness of their children for the prosperity of the family was common at that time. The purpose of marriage was to form a family, and then to continue the family line through the reproduction of heirs, and women had no say in the process from marriage to childbearing, and could only passively accept the ethical requirements of the traditional family, and repressively take on the duties of daughters and wives. After marriage, women were reduced from an independent individual to a male subordinate, and even her original name was branded with her husband's, for example, in *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, Shangguan Lu's original name was Lu Xuan'er, but when she married into the Shangguan family, she could only take her husband's surname Shangguan. In *Red Sorghum*, on her sixteenth birthday, Dai Fenglian was betrothed by her father to Shan Bianlang, the son of Shan Tingxiu, one of Northeast Gaomi Township's richest men, despite rumours that Shan Bianlang had leprosy.²³ Three days after the wedding was the time for a bride to return to her parents' home, Dai Fenglian cried to her father that Shan Bianlan's got leprosy, she would rather die than go back to her husband's house, but her father forced her to go back because her father-in-law promised he's going to give him a big black mule.²⁴ To the father, his daughter was no match for a mule, so he would rather sell her daughter to a leprosy for a black mule.

In the Chinese patriarchal society of male superiority and female inferiority, women were confined in the ritualistic cage of “三从四德(three obediences and four virtues),”²⁵ and were governed by their parents before they get married, and then lived

²³ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 41.

²⁴ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 72-73.

²⁵ “三从四德(three obediences and four virtues)” was traditional Confucian principles that defined the proper behavior of women in ancient Chinese society. These ideals emphasized female subservience and moral conduct, particularly in the context of family and gender roles. Three Obediences: A woman was expected to obey her father before marriage; obey her husband after marriage; obey her son after her husband's death. Four Virtues: Fidelity or morality (upholding proper moral conduct, including loyalty and obedience); Proper speech (speaking appropriately and respectfully, especially in public or to elders/men); Modest manner or demeanor (maintaining a graceful appearance and demeanor); Diligent work (being skilled in domestic tasks like weaving, cooking, and managing the household).

with the husband's families after they got married, and after the death of the husband, women had to obey their sons. In *Red Sorghum*, Yu Zhan'ao was born into a poor family, and he lost his father when he was just a boy, so his mother led a hard life with him. When he was thirteen, his mother began an affair with the abbot Tianqi Monastery. The well-to-do monk often brought rice and noodles over, and he loved and cared about Yu's mother a lot. But by the time he was sixteen, his mother was seeing the monk so frequently that the village was buzzing. Villagers began taunting him by calling him Junior Monk, to which he reacted with a blood-curdling glare. Finally, he murdered the monk and later his mother hanged herself.²⁶ At that time, his widowed mother's love affair with the monk was thought to be unconventional and discussed by other villagers. As a son, he also could not understand his mother's hardships in bringing up him alone and not understand her affections to the monk, and even thought he was obliged to kill the monk to control his mother's remaining life. To a certain extent, he not only killed the monk but also killed his own mother. As a contrast, if a man lost his wife, it was thought normal for a man to remarry, even having several wives and concubines was thought to be normal and reasonable. The ancient society's ethical concept of male superiority and female inferiority imposed great restrictions on women's status and rights. On the one hand, the husband could cheat and have an affair under the influence of the idea of polygamy, on the other hand, the "feudal regime", "clan power" and "husband's rights" severely suppressed women's desires, and formulated the dogmas such as "staying faithful to one's husband the whole life" and "Seven Exits"²⁷ to restrict women's behavior. For example, in *Red Sorghum*, after Yu Zhan'ao married Dai Fenglian, he also had a love affair with Passion, lived together and had a child with her, in spite of Dai Fenglian's objection. Later Dai Fenglian had no choice but to share Yu with Passion. In *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, the landlord Ximen Nao also had three wives until the political movement of land reform around 1950.

²⁶ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 108-12.

²⁷ The Seven Exits were the seven reasons for abandoning a wife by a husband, officially appearing in the Tang Dynasty, but deriving their content from the 《大戴礼记》 (*Da Dai Li Ji*) of the Han Dynasty. A husband can abandon his wife rightly if the wife: is unable to bear children; has an inappropriate relationship with a man other than her husband; fails to be filial to the husband's parents; likes to make a fuss about what is right and wrong, dividing relatives; steals property from the family; shows strong jealousy towards her husband's concubines; suffers from a serious disease.

Besides, women have long been treated as reproduction instrument in China. It was a public belief that among the three major offenses against filial piety, having no heir was the gravest one, so men must marry women (usually more than one) to fulfill their responsibility to reproduce. In the traditional feudal perception of the relationship between men and women, it was advocated that women should obey their husbands wholeheartedly after marriage, and that the greatest value of a wife, as her husband's accessory, was her reproductive function, and that the release of her sexual desires should be based on the prerequisite of reproducing an heir. In *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, because Shangguan Shouxi was sterile, Shangguan Lu could not get pregnant, but her husband and parents-in-law thought it was her problem that she could not give birth to a baby, so they maltreated her by insulting and beating her. Shangguan Lu had no choice but to have sex secretly with other men in order to be pregnant. Fortunately, she got pregnant seven times by having sex with different men; unfortunately, she gave birth to seven daughters in a row. After delivering her seventh daughter, her angry husband flung a hammer at her, hitting her in the head and bleeding. All her seven daughters' names mean wanting a younger brother, for example, Shangguan Laidi (come a younger brother), Shangguan Zhaodi (hail a younger brother), Shangguan Lingdi (bring a younger brother), Shangguan Xiangdi (miss a younger brother), Shangguan Pandi (expect a younger brother), Shangguan Niandi (desire for a younger brother) and Shangguan Qiudi (thirst for a younger brother). In traditional beliefs, only males could continue the family line, so Shangguan Lu was forced to get pregnant the eighth time and finally gave birth to a son, Shangguan Jintong. As her mother-in-law told her, "Without a son, you'll be no better than a slave as long as you live, but with one, you'll be the mistress."²⁸ Whether delivering a son determines the future destiny of a woman. In *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, Ximen Nao's wife Ximen Bai was infertile, so she felt ashamed and sent her maidservant to her husband's bed.

In addition, women were persecuted physically by foot binding. During the Song dynasty, women's status declined, and a widely held view attributes the decline to the resurgence of Confucianism in the form of neo-Confucianism. This revival not only encouraged practices like female seclusion and the cult of widow chastity, but also played a role in the emergence of foot binding.²⁹ In the past, men thought women with three-inch feet, also called three-inch golden lotuses, were beautiful and classy. Under

²⁸ Mo, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, 6.

²⁹ Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *Women and the Family in Chinese History* (London: Routledge, 2005), 10–12.

the rule of patriarchal culture, even though foot binding was a bad habit persecuting women's physical and mental health, people still retained and promoted this kind of deformed aesthetics in order to be favored by men. The belief that foot binding made women more desirable to men was widely used as an explanation for the spread and persistence of foot binding.³⁰ Whether the woman will marry a rich family depended on whether or not they were foot-bound, so women endured great pain to have their feet bound since childhood. Some men were attracted by the smell of the bound feet, and there was also a belief among some men that foot binding would lead to the development of layers of folds in the vagina, making the thighs more voluptuous and the vagina tighter.³¹

Shangguan Lu, Shangguan Laidi, Dai Fenglian, Ximen Bai and many other women in Mo Yan's works have suffered from the persecution of foot binding, in order to meet the male's deformed aesthetic, they were required to be wrapped into a three-foot golden lotus in order to marry into a well-off family. In *Red Sorghum*, the description of Dai Fenglian's foot binding was as follow:

Great-Grandma, the daughter of a landlord who had fallen on hard times, knew the importance of bound feet to a girl, and had begun binding her daughter's feet when she was six years old, tightening the bindings every day. A yard in length, the cloth bindings were wound around all but the big toes until the bones cracked and the toes turned under. The pain was excruciating. My mother also had bound feet, and just seeing them saddened me so much that I felt compelled to shout: 'Down with feudalism! Long live liberated feet!' The results of Grandma's suffering were two three-inch golden lotuses, and by the age of sixteen she had grown into a well-developed beauty. When she walked, swinging her arms freely, her body swayed like a willow in the wind.³²

Foot binding was a product of the "male superiority and female inferiority" hierarchical order strengthened to a certain extent under the feudal rite system. In the society centered on patriarchal culture, male aesthetics dominated the destiny of females, and females were compelled to survive and unconsciously catered to the deformed aesthetics of males. Actually, at first it was Dai Fenglian's bamboo-shoot feet that attracted Shan Tingxiu who decided to let her be his daughter-in-law:

³⁰ Hill Gates, *Footbinding and Women's Labor in Sichuan* (London: Routledge, 2015), 56.

³¹ Armando R. Favazza, *Bodies under Siege: Self-Mutilation, Nonsuicidal Self-Injury, and Body Modification in Culture and Psychiatry* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 117.

³² Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 42.

It was Grandma's tiny feet that had caught the attention of Shan Tingxiu, and it was her tiny feet that had aroused the passions of the sedan bearer Yu Zhan'ao. She was very proud of them. Even a pock-faced witch is assured of marriage if she has tiny bound feet, but no one wants a girl with large unbound feet, even if she has the face of an immortal. Grandma, with her bound feet and lovely face, was one of the true beauties of her time. Throughout our long history, the delicate, pointed tips of women's feet have been viewed as genital organs, in a way, from which men have derived a sort of aesthetic pleasure that sets their sexual juices flowing.³³

Usually, the mother in the family prompted and helped her daughter bind the feet so that when she grew up, she could marry into a rich family. In *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, Laidi had feet which had been partially crippled from the bindings. Lu Xuan'er was required by her aunt, also her adopt-mother, to have her feet bound when she was five years old and told her that a woman without bound feet could not find a husband. Her uncle Big Paw Yu also told her that he married her aunt because of her tiny feet. The process of Lu Xuan'er's feet binding was like this:

First she bent the toes back with bamboo strips and wrapped them tightly, wrenching loud squeals of protest from her niece. Then she wrapped the feet tightly with the alum-treated white cloth, one layer after another. Once that was done, she pounded the toes with her wooden mallet. Mother said the pain was like banging her head against the wall.³⁴

When Lu Xuan'er became sixteen and the possessor of perfect lotus feet, she was like a commodity waiting to be sold. Big Paw Yu viewed his uncommonly beautiful niece as a truly marketable treasure, hung a plaque "Fragrant Lotus Hall" over the front gate to attract a prestigious man to come and marry his niece.

Besides foot binding, it's common for women to be abused by domestic violence. Many women in Tokarczuk's and Mo Yan's works suffer from the domestic violence, such as Shangguan Lu, Dai Fenglian, Ruta, Marek Marek's mother, Stasia Boski. There was an often-said sentence in Mo Yan's works that women are worthless creatures, so you have to beat them, you beat a woman into submission the way you knead dough into noodles.³⁵

Following the founding of the People's Republic of China, women's liberation was

³³ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 94.

³⁴ Mo, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, 49.

³⁵ Mo, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, 68.

emphasized as a central part of the communist agenda from the beginning. In this way, the Chinese revolution also functioned as a revolution for women, and Chinese socialism became closely tied to the advancement of women's rights.³⁶ The Communists led labor union among male workers to organize efforts, while also engaged with nearby peasant communities to address issues concerning women's rights, such as promoting female literacy.³⁷ In order to promote economic development, women became increasingly needed to work in agriculture and industry, they were partially liberated from their household. Despite all the efforts, women in China still bear double burdens from career and family because women are expected to focus more on family affairs than men. Besides, women still face discrimination in finding a job and unequal pay from men.

To conclude, in both Tokarczuk's and Mo Yan's books that women have to bear multiple repressions from many sources. They are restricted physically and mentally by the traditional customs and the masculine authority. First is the physical dominance on female bodies from traditional values. There is physical persecution on women in both cultures. "Binding small feet" was a practice that limited girls' growth inhumanly. Poland's restrict laws on abortion limit females' domination on their own body, which is also a kind of persecution on women's body, demonstrating a form of institutional control over women's reproductive choices. Second, women were restrained by masculine powers. In both cultures, men are superior over women, men are in the place of domination and women are in a subordinate position. Third, with the social and economic development, women in the two countries have embraced more job opportunities, yet meanwhile, they are expected to perform both paid labor and unpaid domestic duties.

4.1.2. Wars and Political Upheavals Impact on Women

Many generations in Poland have been impacted by the trauma of war, especially the destruction and devastation of two world wars, and Tokarczuk's books examine

³⁶ Lin Chun, *The transformation of Chinese socialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 113.

³⁷ Rebecca E. Karl, *Mao Zedong and China in the Twentieth-Century World: A Concise History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 22–23.

how these incidents are remembered and transmitted. The nation saw widespread devastation of its cities and people, as well as violent occupation, the Holocaust, and mass slaughter. In Poland, women endured the atrocities of occupation, which included forced labor, sexual assaults, hunger, and the loss of their homes and family.

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 war-torn society. This traumatic experience profoundly impacted her character and served as a critical turning point in her life. Later when Izydor said "I'd like to be your husband, Ruta. I'd like to make love with you." Ruta looked cold and determined. "I'm never going to do that with someone I love. Only with those I hate." "The world is evil. What sort of God created a world like this? Either He's evil Himself, or He allows evil to happen. Or else He's got it all messed up."³⁸ 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 *Primeval and Other Times*, there are also the descriptions of the sufferings caused by war: "Jeszkotle looked drained of all color. Everything was black, white and grey. There were small groups of men standing in the marketplace, discussing the war – cities destroyed, their citizens' possessions scattered about the streets, people running from bullets, brother searching for brother."³⁹ "The war caused chaos in the world. The forest at Przyjmy burned down, the Cossacks shot the Cherubin's son, there weren't enough men, there was no one to reap the fields, and there was nothing to eat."⁴⁰ In this novel, Tokarczuk depicted how the two world wars and communist regime influenced people's lives in a village. Even the remote villages in Poland cannot evade the impact of war, let alone big cities. She showed to readers the resilience and strength of women to live when faced with wars and adversities. In the fictional village Primeval, Genowefa, Cornspike and Misia were the embodiment of tenacity and the traditional

³⁸ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 161.

³⁹ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 13.

⁴⁰ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 28.

virtues of rural women. After her husband Michał went to war in 1914, Genowefa was left to bear the full responsibility of bearing and caring for their daughter, facing the challenges of survival in wartime and running their mill by managing other male workers. Besides, she had to deal with her emotional turmoil and loneliness that came with the absence of her husband. “Genowefa oversaw the mill while it was still working. She got up at dawn and supervised everything. She checked no one was late for work... Everything was safe, so she went home and made breakfast for the sleeping Misia.”⁴¹ Michał’s absence forced Genowefa to confront the difficulties of being a woman abandoned at a time of war, exposing the ways in which women were frequently compelled to take on the roles of both mother and father, caretaker and worker. The lonely and starving Cornspike was a barefoot girl, gathering ears of corn left over after the harvest, stole potatoes, whoring because people were unwilling to give something for nothing, for free. Genowefa remembered the huge difference of Cornspike before and after the war: “She could see how frail her body was now, and remembered Cornspike from before the war. In those days she was a buxom, beautiful girl. Now she looked at her bare, wounded feet with toenails as tough as animal’s claws.”⁴² The big changes of women’s life after the war were reflections of the cruelty of war, in which people suffered deep wounds physically and mentally. Genowefa found she was pregnant after her husband went to war in 1914, so after Misia’s birth, she lacked a father’s company and love. “The angel had difficulty focusing attention on Misia’s world, which, like the world of other people and animals, was dark and full of suffering, like a murky pond overgrown with duckweed.”⁴³ Misia’s unfortunate life seemed to be doomed since her birth in a chaotic and turbulent world.

During World War II, Poland was the first country invaded by Germany, later the Soviet Union invaded Poland from the east. The Poles endured numerous sufferings in the war and impacted by the aftermath of the war, which were showcased in Tokarczuk’s *House of Day, House of Night*. After the war the border of Poland was

⁴¹ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 28.

⁴² Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 30.

⁴³ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 17.

changed, so some Poles were forced to leave their extensive fields in the east and made their two-month train journey westward to settle down. The war hurt people both physically and psychologically. In this novel, the twin sisters were let out from the prison camp after the war, they were assigned a room in a couple's house; their bodies were covered in scars because the Germans did experiments on them. Due to sufferings in the camp, one of them usually shouted in her sleep, or maybe they both shouted because their voices were indistinguishable.⁴⁴

China also experienced the atrocities of Japanese occupation during World War II, especially during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945). One of the most heinous acts of violence against Chinese citizens was the Nanjing Massacre in 1937, which included widespread rape, killing, and looting. The Japanese military compelled Chinese women to be “comfort women”, resulting in sexual enslavement. Women in China suffered from the psychological, emotional, and physical effects of occupation and conflict. As what was written in *Red Sorghum*, “That massacre on the night of the Mid-Autumn Festival in 1939 decimated our village and turned hundreds of dogs into homeless strays. Japanese soldiers and their Chinese puppet troops had cut a swath through the village and torched the houses before leaving through the northern gate.”⁴⁵ Everything on the Earth was subject to the ravages of war. “It didn't take long for the evil wind of Japanese savagery to blow their way: they fed human hearts to police dogs; they raped sixty-year-old women; they hung rows of human heads from electric poles in town.”⁴⁶

Sexual assaults, hunger and death of women during wars and upheavals were depicted in Mo Yan's novels. In *Red Sorghum*, women were raped and persecuted in the anti-Japanese war. In 1938, six Japanese soldiers gang-raped pregnant Passion and murdered her five-year-old daughter with a bayonet.⁴⁷ “Pocky Cheng discovered his beautiful wife and thirteen-year-old daughter lying in the yard, naked, their intestines spread out around them.”⁴⁸ The savage Japanese soldiers even raped women more than

⁴⁴ Tokarczuk, *House of Day, House of Night*, 253-54.

⁴⁵ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 177-78.

⁴⁶ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 327.

⁴⁷ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 342.

⁴⁸ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 364.

seventy years old, and the pregnant were also raped and killed, even the unborn babies were taken out from women's ripped-off abdomen. Wherever the Japanese went, they slaughtered everyone, no matter they were soldiers or civilians, men or women, old or young.

By showing the plight of the marginalized people, especially women, who suffered from hunger, Mo Yan reflected on the brutality of wars, abuse of political power, and the causes of sexual exploitation and physical violence in the time of starvation, as well as examined the good and evil aspects of human nature under the extreme circumstances, which highlighted Mo Yan's humanitarian ideology of respect for life. Hunger in *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* was accompanied by natural disasters, political movements, wars and other calamities, which make the folk history of Gaomi Township even more tragic. In fact, the disaster of hunger recalled the seventeen years of hard time in Chinese history from the founding of New China to the Cultural Revolution. Due to the arid climate and the mistakes of the public policy, famine swept through the whole Northeast, and the villagers went out to hunt rabbits, fish, shrimps, snakes, frogs and other living things after eating their grain stocks, and finally even ate leaves, wild vegetables and soil, and got infected with oedema disease because of starvation, and everything that could be eaten seemed to have been eaten, grass roots, tree barks and grass from the eaves. People died almost every day in the village, all died of starvation. Shangguan Lu was often so hungry that her face turned blue and her legs were weak, but she also had to endure hunger to prioritize the livelihood of her children. As a mother who struggled with suffering all her life, she burst out with tenacious vitality to fight against hunger and death. Tough by nature, Shangguan Lu led her children to actively seek ways to fill their stomachs, planting radishes, digging up edible wild herbs, begging for food on the streets, going into the city to drink porridge, and even selling their daughters without any choice, hunger couldn't destroy the mother's will. When hunger pushed her to the brink of extinction, Shangguan Lu once thought of committing suicide, but in the end, she thought that if a person was not afraid of death, then the misfortune she suffered at this stage was not worth mentioning at all, so this strong mother took her children to the streets to look for food and tried to survive. Afterwards,

Shangguan Lu used her own stomach to steal food to take home. She fed her children by swallowing peas in her stomach and then stretching her neck to forcefully vomit the peas mixed with blood out of her stomach, while enduring physical discomfort. Shangguan Lu gave her life to nurture her children, and her behavior, which was forced to go against morality and ethics in the famine era, was a choice that all strong, loving and selfless mothers would have made.

Hunger destroyed individual life not only in the physical way, but also by devouring human dignity. Compared with Shangguan Lu, who exchanged her life for food, the behavior of her seventh daughter Shangguan Qiudi (also known as Qiao Qisha), who used her body to survive, asked for food with her animal instincts, and let Pockface Zhang rape her, was an illustration of the disadvantaged position of women in the age of starvation, and the fact that women were put in the position of being humiliated and sexually exploited by the gender power. In the 1960s, when hunger was rampant, Pockface Zhang, as a cook, had the absolute power to distribute food, and his desires swelled with his power. Pockface Zhang, with power and distorted human nature, raped women with impunity, and nearly raped all the women around him. Qiao Qisha was able to maintain her rationality before hunger crushed her, and in the face of Ma Ruilian's absurd idea of requesting to inject sheep's semen into female rabbits, she was able to hold fast to her own principles and professional ethics, refusing to experiment against science. But when the daily food ration of six taels was reduced to one or two taels a day, Qiao Qisha was destroyed by hunger and could no longer resist the temptation of food given by Pockface Zhang. "Pockface Zhang tossed the bun to the ground. Qiao Qisha rushed up and grabbed it, stuffing it into her mouth before she even straightened up... she ate the bun, she allowed him unconditional freedom to proceed as he wished, with no interference."⁴⁹ Qiao Qisha, a person with strong personality and a firm believer in science, when confronted with the food thrown to her by her seducer, she was "like a dog stealing food, she forced herself to tolerate the painful posterior attack as she gobbled down the food, continuing to swallow even when

⁴⁹ Mo, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, 434.

it was gone. The pain in her crotch was nothing compared to the pleasure the food brought.”⁵⁰

To conclude, both Polish and Chinese women have suffered from great pains caused by traditional and masculine repression as well as wars and political upheavals. Following the end of World War II, Poland and China saw significant political changes. Poland became a communist state under Soviet administration after falling under the Soviet power, which resulted in decades of economic suffering, political persecution, and restricted personal liberties. In China, although China won the anti-Japanese war, there was widespread devastation and all aspects of society or infrastructure need to be rebuilt, significant societal unrests coming along with the rebuilding process, especially during the Cultural Revolution and the Great Leap Forward. Women were encouraged to enter the workforce as part of national modernization initiatives in both post-war China and Poland, but they still had to balance between their jobs and household duties. Despite their claims to encourage women’s equality, both regimes upheld conventional gender norms and placed significant political and social pressure on women. Even today, women have to play the predetermined roles imposed on them by society, and they are still faced with the pressure to balance their life and work.

4.2. Reasons for their Tenderness and Warmth towards Women

Tokarczuk’s and Mo Yan’s tenderness and warmth towards women are associated with their growing up circumstances and experiences, the impacts they got from the women around them or the women they read from books, and their thoughts about the state of women’s existence.

4.2.1. Reasons for Tokarczuk’s Tenderness towards Women

Olga Tokarczuk’s novels are usually written in a calm tone about the history and

⁵⁰ Mo, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, 434.

contemporary life of Poland, about the people who live in this great land, and especially about the life of women characters. Her tenderness towards women is closely related to her growing up circumstances, her own reading experiences, and her thoughts about the state of Polish women's existence.

Tokarczuk's growing up circumstance has contributed to her closeness to the marginalized women and her equal treatment of everything in the nature. She was born in Sulechów, in western Poland. When she was nine, her family moved to rural Lower Silesia, a Southern region of Poland. In 1993, feeling depleted after years of living in the city, her family moved from city to a tiny village in Lower Silesia, where she has lived for three decades. Contemporary people seem to be lost in the materialistic world imbued with money, power and selfishness, so "she laments that business people and people high up in the power hierarchy are presented as people to envy and examples to follow. The world's media doesn't line up in front of the house to report on a woman giving birth or someone who lives in the forest and picks berries, but they would for someone like the character of rich and arrogant Ukleja."⁵¹ Therefore, in her works she incorporates history and social phenomena into the forests, into the ordinary rural daily life, into the kitchens, in order to illustrate the ordinary rural women's lives that have long been ignored by society.

Tokarczuk's parents were teachers and their book-lined house filled her head with the possibility of becoming an author. She is an obsessive reader herself and her reading of downplayed and repressed female images in literature is another factor for her tenderness towards women. In depicting her eccentric, mysterious, or transgressive female characters, she hopes that women can get rid of the predetermined roles imposed on women by society. In Rhian Sasseen's correspondence with Tokarczuk through email,⁵² when Tokarczuk was asked how did she approach writing her female characters, she recalls that it was very difficult for her to find a female character in

⁵¹ Justyna Dziedzic, "In Pursuit of Storytelling: A Conversation with Olga Tokarczuk, Nobel Laureate in Literature," *Discourses on Culture* 18, no. 1 (December 2022): 7–10, <https://intapi.sciendo.com/pdf/10.2478/doc-2022-0001>.

⁵² Rhian Sasseen, lives in New York. She has written for *The Believer*, *The Paris Review*, the *Poetry Foundation*, and more. In December, 2020, Rhian Sasseen corresponded with Tokarczuk over email in anticipation of the release of the English translation of the *The Books of Jacob*. They discussed national borders, the Polish hard right, writing about women, and how the internet has changed our approach to literature. Her questions, and Tokarczuk's answers, were translated into Polish and English by Jennifer Croft.

literature that she could relate with as a little girl, a teenager, or a woman. She considers that in literature, women primarily acted out their societal roles as idealized, naive sweethearts, mothers, mistresses, femmes fatales, prostitutes, victims of violence, or women working in the service sector (waitresses, maids, and so on). The status of a complete, individualized, thinking, acting, responsible, moral, or philosophical being was extremely uncommon for female figures. She noted that historically, women's development was seen as "natural," implying that they simply grew into the roles they were expected by society, while men were believed to undergo real challenges in psychological development. She considers this to be a huge misunderstanding. She wishes that every ambitious girl starts her life with an awareness of the challenges ahead and develops a strategy to assert her right to be seen as a full-fledged human being. Anyone born a woman must put in tremendous efforts to break free from the roles society has already assigned to her. Therefore, in Tokarczuk's writings, she gives back to female historical figures their erased presences, recreating their existences down to the last details, as if it were detective work. And she frees them from the curse of simplified labels like "mother," "lover," "housekeeper," and so on.⁵³ It is her empathy and compassion towards women's difficult living status that makes her narrating peripheral women's daily stories with tenderness.

4.2.2. Reasons for Mo Yan's Tenderness and Warmth towards Women

Writers' literary creations are closely related to their unique and rich life experiences and subjective perception of life. Mo Yan admits in his latest book 《不被大风吹倒》 (*Not Blown down by a Gale*) that he is a worshipper of women.⁵⁴ Throughout Mo Yan's portrayal of women, many readers and critics wonder why is it that women in his novels are always good at handling everything, embrace everything and create everything, while the images of men are sick, frail and destructive. Mo Yan

⁵³ Cited from the correspondence between Rhian Sasseen and Tokarczuk over email, <https://yalereview.org/article/olga-tokarczuk-interview> .

⁵⁴ Mo Yan, 《不被大风吹倒》 (*Not Blown down by a Gale*) 北京: 北京日报出版社 (Beijing: Beijing Daily Press, 2024), 9.

answers that “the reason for this may come from the environment he grew up in, where whenever he encountered major problems, major twists and turns in his family life, and faced great dangers, women’s behaviors, that of his mother and grandmother, were always stronger than that of his father and grandfather.”⁵⁵ When Mo Yan encountered a series of changes in his growing up process, he was always cared for and helped by gentle and generous women. In addition, he witnessed many kind-hearted, capable and hardworking women in his hometown who remained tenacious and survived after suffering from the trials and tribulations of life, so his sensitive and delicate heart unconsciously leaned towards women, especially his mother, who made him have a deep attachment to her. In the images of his rebellious female characters, he did not hide his admiration, sympathy and compassion for the characters, Shangguan Lu, Dai Fenglian, Yingchun and other tough and tenacious mother figures are precisely Mo Yan’s memories and praises of his own mother.

At the Nobel Prize for Literature award ceremony, Mo Yan delivered a speech *Storyteller* to talk about the source of inspiration for his own creations, and the source of his creations could not be separated from the creative territory of Gaomi in Shandong Province, and even more so from his mother. The reason why he is so inspired to write and portray all kinds of women with very different personalities is largely due to the place where he lives and the characters around him. His mother is one of the most important figures. His gratitude to his mother is overwhelming, and it is his mother who made Mo Yan what he is today. A mother’s influence on her children is extremely great, not only in her daily life, but also in the way she treats her children and the way she thinks about them.

In Mo Yan’s literary works, Gaomi Township, Shandong Province, where he was born and grew up, has become his creative territory, and most of the prototypes of the characters in his works are taken from his friends and relatives in the northeast township of Gaomi. Mo Yan’s portrayal of these vivid and varied images of women reflects the qualities of Shandong women, but also presents more and more personality traits of

⁵⁵ Mo Yan, 《痛苦, 爱情与艺术》 [*Pain, love and art*] 北京: 作家出版社 (Beijing: Writers Press, 2012), 36.

women in modern society, they are brave, self-confident, free-spirited, bold, and flexible, breaking through the traditional concepts of the bondage. Mo Yan's literary creation has opened up a new realm, where women can be so hearty in the face of need, and even more righteous than men in the face of domestic morality. In Mo Yan's writing, women's consciousness has gained an unprecedented new awakening, which Mo Yan is very fond of.

The greatness of these female figures also lies in the strong power to live in their hearts. He has experienced the poor life and suffered hunger himself, therefore, in his works, he has empathy for the pathetic characters he portrayed, and it is by seeing the misery of women at the bottom of the male-dominated society that he is able to have a high degree of sensitivity to the few women who came to prominence and who did not fit into the society at that time. They are crushed by life again and again, and their dignity is trampled by men again and again, but they can still hold fast to their hearts, which reflects the author's humanistic concern for women. Mo Yan examines their value of existence, measures their social status and destiny, and pays attention to their survival and emotion. Mo Yan gives them a powerful inner world of love, hate, freedom and passion, and at the same time, he utilizes his works to defy male domination. Mo Yan's portrayal and affirmation of women from a male perspective undoubtedly provides a reference for today's better construction of gender equality between men and women.

4.3. Tenderness and Warmth towards Women in their Works

In the works of Olga Tokarczuk and Mo Yan, the tenderness and warmth towards women reflect the two writers' deep understanding and humanistic concern for women's experiences, living status, and destinies in different cultural and historical contexts. Although Tokarczuk's and Mo Yan's works are based on different cultural backgrounds, they showcase an accusation and objection to the oppressions and neglect towards women. For example, both of them put marginalized women in the center of their narration, recognize women's significance and values in their works, portray

women breaking the traditional definition on them and depict women getting involved with nature. The female characters in their works are full of vitality, resilience and dignity. This tender and warm narration not only subverts the downplayed and devalued female images in many classics, but also promotes readers to recognize women's values and pay more attention to the subsistence situation of women, in which way they deconstruct the androcentrism.

4.3.1. Putting Marginalized Women in the Center of their Works

Unlike the classic historical narratives that centered heroes and females are usually absent, Tokarczuk and Mo Yan subvert this tradition and put females at the center of their narratives, recognizing and expressing women's existence and value through depicting their daily life and inner worlds in detail. Although being a male writer himself, Mo Yan's consciousness of women's existence is much ahead of his time, it is rare to see in Chinese male's works that women are shaped as independent characters. Usually the female characters in most Chinese works just appear to promote the development of the plot, or they just appear as a supporting part. However, Mo Yan put them in the center of his novels, and the female images in his works are much different from that of previous works depicting them as fragile and submissive women who need to be rescued by male characters.

Firstly, women are given more detailed descriptions in both Tokarczuk's and Mo Yan's novels. Tokarczuk's novels focus on female characters and their experiences, giving voice to women who are often marginalized in historical narratives that usually emphasize the importance of men in pursuing national independence. Tokarczuk's emphasis on women's lives and experiences is a part of her larger goal of providing voice to people who are marginalized or neglected. Women's experiences play a major role in her novels, forming a counterbalance to the dominant narratives of politics and war. The female characters are vivid and concrete in her novels, although the women belong to different times and engage in different occupations, they all show the excellent qualities in the same way. *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead* centers Janina Duszejko, an elderly woman, living alone, with unconventional beliefs and

behaviors. Her age, gender, and eccentricity make her a marginalized person in the village, and she is often despised as a madwoman by the men around her, particularly the hunters and the local authorities. A woman who is typically silenced or ignored by society is given voice in this novel. Despite being regarded as irrelevant or insane, Duszejko is intelligent, observant, and has a passion for justice. In *Primeval and Other Times*, Tokarczuk mainly depicts the life of rural women in a small village from the start of World War I in 1914 to the early 1990s. The female characters in the novel are mainly the three female generations of Genowefa, Misia and Adelka, Cornspike and her daughter, the elder lady Florentynka and Stasia. These women are mainly housewives, bearing and caring children, doing housework or living alone, but they are also the protectors of homes when men go to the battlefields, at the same time, they display their pursuit of independence, freedom and love. Although *House of Day, House of Night* is a non-linear novel, it develops around the story of the Saint Kummernis, and the life experiences of Marta who only appears in summer and everything is clean and in order in her house. In the novel, dozens of fragmented stories are strung together by the female narrator, I, and the old woman, Marta. In the novel she also depicts many other women's life experiences, such as their family life, interpersonal interactions, and inner activities. The name of each story is usually from ordinary daily life or a cuisine, such as "Cutlers", "Mushrooms", "The pewter plate", "The aloe", "Cutting hair", "Roofs", "Lurid boletus in sour cream", "Stuffed amanitas", and so on. Kummernis is a woman combining physical and spiritual beauty, and other people are purified in mind and spirit simply by standing beside her. She is pure and kind, displaying bravery and perseverance when faced with her father's coercion and the devil's temptation. She has made a great contribution to the rebellion against patriarchy, and become the mental protector of those subject to patriarchal persecution. Even the stepmother in her novel is different from the malicious stereotypes depicted in previous literary works. Kummernis' stepmother is the embodiment of gentleness and beauty, "The little girl loved her stepmother more than anything. She was full of admiration for her beauty, her fine voice and her fair hands that could draw wonderful sounds from musical instruments."⁵⁶ Kryisia is the most elegant girl at the bank, and she is also the head of the credit division. "At home Kryisia was quite important: she earned money and did the shopping, carrying it home in bags her mother had made."⁵⁷ When she meets the

⁵⁶ Tokarczuk, *House of Day, House of Night*, 53.

⁵⁷ Tokarczuk, *House of Day, House of Night*, 30.

man she loves in her dream, she bravely seeks and pursues him. Although the pursuit was fruitless, she does not lose herself and gradually adjusts herself and regains inner peace.

Although being a male writer himself, Mo Yan mainly writes the stories of women from the lower strata of the society who encounter the torments of feudal rituals, wars and political upheavals. He gives deep care to the women who have suffered great disasters in their lives, and extols their spirit of rebellion that dares to break through the constraints of feudalism and does not succumb to their destiny. *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* centers around Shangguan Lu and her eight daughters who endure immense suffering as women in rural China. He illustrates the difficulties and challenges women face under a patriarchal society. The mother, Shangguan Lu, is the central character throughout the whole book. She is subject to the brutal forces of tradition, war, and economic hardship, and her body becomes a battleground for these struggles. Despite having many children, mostly daughters, she remains marginalized within a patriarchal society that values male heirs and views women primarily as bearers of children. *Red Sorghum* puts the narrator's grandmother, Dai Fenglian, in the center of the novel. She is forced to marry a rich leper by her father to get some benefits for her father. Feeling hurt and desperate because of her parents' ruthlessness, she utilizes her beauty and wisdom to survive the violent, male-dominated society. This character exemplifies the marginalization of women, but also their potential to resist domination in a powerful way. She was shot by Japanese invaders on her way to send fisticakes to those men fighting in the battlefield. Although being a woman with bound feet, she displays her foresight and contributes her own efforts in fighting against the Japanese invaders and protecting her village. In *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, Mo Yan also spends a lot of the space to describe women who often play pivotal roles in reflecting the social, cultural and political transformations in 20th-century rural China. Although the protagonist is Ximen Nao who is sentenced to death in Chinese Land Reform and then reincarnates multiple times as various animals before finally reincarnated as a human being, Ximen Nao observes the lives of his descendants and the significant role that women play in the transformation of Chinese society. In this novel, the living experiences of three generations of women are depicted. The first generation, like Ximen Nao's wife, Ximen Bai, and his concubines, Yingchun and Qiuxiang, display their resilience to adapt and survive in changing social circumstances. The next generation of female characters, like Ximen Baofeng, Huang Huzhu, Huang Hezuo and

Pang Kangmei, are women with spirit of independence and personal individuality, daring to pursue what they desire. The female character of the third generation is mainly Pang Fenghuang who dares to love and hate, displaying a spirit of defiance and independence no matter when she is in prosperity or in adversity.

Secondly, to highlight the importance of women, many male characters are usually weakened or downplayed in both Tokarczuk's and Mo Yan's works. Many male characters in Tokarczuk's works have no name or a very casual name, such as "R.", "Whatsisname" and "Marek Marek" in *House of Day, House of Night*, "Big Foot", "Black Coat" and "Moustachio" in *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*, whereas some animals, and even Janina's car, have a better and decent name, such as the snake "Goldie", the Deer "Yong Ladies", the dog "Marysia", Duszejko's dogs "Little Girls", the car "Samurai", and so on. Besides, many of her male characters are rude and violent, such as Marek Marek's father, Kummernis' father, Big Foot, Black Coat and the Police Commander. In contrast, while both the male and female characters' names in Mo Yan's novels are more common and in accordance with the social backgrounds at that time, yet many male characters in Mo Yan's novels are usually depicted weaker physically or mentally than many female characters. Mo Yan uses the contrast between the strength of women and the weakness of men in the novel to criticize the patriarchal system that keeps men in positions of power in spite of their inadequacies. The men in his works are frequently represented as being corrupt, weak, or dependent, whereas the women are strong and resourceful. In his portrait of his male protagonists, Mo Yan sees in them a regression of the human species and a failed patriarchy. In *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, Shangguan Lü, though only a blacksmith's wife, she was much better with a hammer and anvil than her husband could ever hope.⁵⁸ Because her husband and son have no ability to undertake the job of a blacksmith that requires great strength, so she takes over the job of blacksmith in the family. Besides, Shangguan Lu's husband Shangguan Shouxi is unable to make her pregnant, and leads to her having sex secretly with other men in order to avoid being abused by her husband and parents-in-law for not bearing offsprings. What's more, Shangguan Lu's only son,

⁵⁸ Mo, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, 3.

Shangguan Jintong is a man addicted to his mother's breasts even when he becomes an adult, and he is so useless and coward that he needs his niece and nephew to protect him when encountering dangers, and finally he loses the wealth his nephew, Sima Liang, has accumulated for him because of his cowardice and addiction to women's breasts. Shangguan Lu's aunt is also the head of the household, and her uncle Bia Paw Yu is good for gambling and bird-hunting only. The fifty acres of land, along with the two donkeys that worked it, the household tasks, and the hiring of laborers, are all managed by Shangguan Lu's aunt, who is barely five feet tall and never weighs more than ninety pounds. It is a mystery to everyone how such a small person could accomplish so much. Aunt Sun is another heroic woman who practices martial arts and can fight with her bare hands against the Japanese holding a sword.

Thirdly, female characters in Tokarczuk's and Mo Yan's novels usually have more positive and lofty images than male characters. In Tokarczuk's novels, women are more resilient to changes in life and able to live a much more down-to-earth life than men. For example, in *House of Day, House of Night*, after some Poles were evacuated from the east to west of Poland after World War II, the men quickly assembled their alcohol-making apparatus and they began drinking in the early afternoon, while the women made dinner together. With women in the house, it is filled with vitality and warmth. After moving to the west of Poland, "for the first year none of the men in Pietno sowed their fields – they were all looking for treasure left by the Germans. Only the women bothered to plant cabbages and radishes in their gardens."⁵⁹ Women seem to rely on themselves, living in the present and down to earth, while men seem to rely on the outside forces, dreaming to make a fortune in search for the things left by the Germans. Besides, women's kind qualities are embodied in the library ladies in this novel. Whenever Marek Marek's father come home drunk, he would start beating Marek, and all his childhood is in gloom and misery. Later he took to hiding from his father with a book in the village library. Marek likes reading Stachura, the beat poet, so the library ladies bought the collected works especially for him. The library ladies are like a bunch

⁵⁹ Tokarczuk, *House of Day, House of Night*, 244.

of light brightening his miserable life. The father's violence to his son and the library ladies' kindness to a stranger form a stark contrast. What's more, the life of monks in monastery and the life of nuns in convent are contrasted in this novel. Paschalis finds that the kitchen of the convent is clean and cozy, and smelled of honey and cheese. The movements of the nuns are soft, always flowing and beautiful. He becomes reluctant to return to the monastery where everything is angular somehow, awkward and crude, including the older monks. One time when Paschalis gets sick on his way to the convent to deliver meat, he is looked after very well by the nuns. Two older nuns washed him with their heads averted, scrubbing his small body gently just as his mother used to. Although Tokarczuk writes the virtues of women, she is not an extreme feminist and does not advocate the rivalry between men and women, instead, she advocates keeping a balance in the world. She writes hens and cockerels, half of the earth is day, the other half is night, half of world's people are asleep and half are awake, thus keeping the world in balance. Men and women are supposed to be in an equal position to keep a balance.

Likewise, in Mo Yan's works, the women who grew up under the traditional culture of Qilu⁶⁰ not only have the good qualities of being hard-working, simple and down-to-earth, but also have the boldness and uprightness that are unique to the northern ethnic groups, and they live in a family where there is a lack of husbandhood, where the husbands are either weak and mean, or mentally defective, or they just leave the family, and the women become the head of the family. In the marital life where the husband is virtually non-existent, strong and independent women take the initiative to shoulder the heavy burden of supporting the family. They take over the role of the men as the head of the family, break the traditional social prejudice that women should stay at home to raise their children and should not be present in public places. They bravely take over the responsibility of running the business to make the days of their life a success. In *Red Sorghum*, Dai Fenglian becomes the only legitimate heir of the distillery after the death of her husband and father-in-law. She is wise, courageous, witty and

⁶⁰ Qilu is a synonym for Shandong province, and is often used to refer to Shandong's culture, customs and traditions.

calm, in order to stabilize people's hearts and loyalty to her, not to let the large distillery without a leader, she convincingly brings the workers under her control with her generous and decent style of doing things, and let Uncle Arhat, the old long-time worker, be loyal to her willingly. When the magistrate Cao comes to investigate the deaths of Shan Bianlang and Shan Bianlang's father, Dai Fenglian has the bright idea of worshipping the magistrate Cao Mengjiu as her foster father, thus finding a protection for her to take over the distillery in a legitimate way. Since then, Dai Fenglian has managed her family's property with a rationality and boldness that is no less than that of a man's, and she is far-sighted and commercially astute. When it comes the time to buy sorghum, she knows that the harvest season produces a lot of sorghum, and the later the lower the price, so she instructs her workers to wait for others to finish harvesting, and then they start harvesting, so that they take the initiative to negotiate the price. After becoming the sole owner of the distillery, Dai Fenglian brews mellow and sweet sorghum wine with her superior ability and wisdom, and this unique and fragrant wine is known far and wide, winning many favorable comments in Gaomi Township. Dai Fenglian relies on herself all the way and tames the unruly and arrogant Yu Zhan'ao and arranges a job and a place for him to live, which was a huge step forward for women to become the masters of their own house. Another great female image in Mo Yan's novels is women with tenacity and resilience. *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* is a novel dedicated to tenacious and resilient mothers. Shangguan Lu's life has been rough, she uses her body to carry the humiliation and tribulations of life, and uses her breasts to feed her children. Even though her children and grandchildren, who are raised with great pains, are scattered and dead after a series of natural and man-made disasters, this loving and great mother still fights against the tribulations in her own way. Despite all the chaos and destructions of war, Shangguan Lu preserves the survival of the big family.

4.3.2. Recognizing Women's Values and Significance in their Works

Constructing hierarchies and then presenting them as natural has been an insidious

way to justify the oppression of the inferior “other”. Therefore, ecofeminists prioritize dismantling all forms of institutionalized hierarchy as a key strategy in the fight against oppression. Lori Gruen argues that one way ecofeminists have sought to dismantle hierarchies and challenge the logic of domination is by recognizing and honoring the value of the previously inferior “other.”⁶¹ Tokarczuk and Mo Yan create many female images who are caring, courageous, wise and farsighted. Through depicting these women who can not only manage their houses well but also pursue their own values in a world dominated by men, Tokarczuk and Mo Yan recognize their values in taking care of the whole family and their significance in protecting and building the whole nation, thus they deconstruct the patriarchal hierarchy and dualism between men and women.

Firstly, women’s values and significance in performing housework are recognized in their novels. Tokarczuk takes it a responsibility for a writer to write about people from many facets of reality. Mo Yan also writes many works dedicated to the daily life of marginalized rural females. In their novels, women are never absent in history and are recognized for their values. “For Olga Tokarczuk, the most interesting stories always come from the periphery. She quotes Piłsudski who observed long ago that Poland is like a bagel: there is a void in the middle while the periphery is made up of the best pastry. This also applies to topics related to writing; what is currently being discussed, what is in the media, for Olga Tokarczuk, is not writing material.”⁶² So she does not follow the suit to write the currently discussed topics, instead, she explores history and social phenomena from a distinct perspective, from the kitchen, seeking out what is meaningful from that aspect. Kitchen is a place where women are expected to stay by traditional and social norms. Males take it for granted that kitchen works and other house works, are trivial tasks undertaken by women. Yet in Tokarczuk’s works, and also in Mo Yan’s works, they depict women’s work in kitchen to recognize their value and contribution.

⁶¹ Lori Gruen, “Dismantling Oppression: An Analysis of the Connection Between Women and Animals” in *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature*, ed. Greta Gaard (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 80.

⁶² Dziedzic, “In Pursuit of Storytelling,” <https://intapi.sciendo.com/pdf/10.2478/doc-2022-0001>.

In *House of Day, House of Night*, in the chapter “A he and a she”,⁶³ the wife was ill and had to stay in hospital for a few days, so the husband was left alone. He thought a housekeeper would come in handy, ideally an older lady who would make him hare pâté and plateloads of piroshki, light the stove and dust the piano. He promised himself he would arrange it, then he would not have to eat reheated chops and potatoes. Instead of taking care of his sick wife in the hospital, the man only cares about how to satisfy his appetite and finds someone to take care of his life. This story showcases some men’s inability in managing household and highlights women’s value and contribution in the unpaid housework that is dismissed as trivial and unimportant by society. In *Primeval and Other Times*, people in Jeszkotle worship the Virgin Mary of Jeszkotle, whom Florentynka thinks understands animals and people equally, and even know the thoughts of the moon, while God-the-man has more important matters in his head: wars, catastrophes, conquests, and distant journeys... It is the woman who take care of the food – both its preparation and its blessing.⁶⁴ Just like God-the-man, the men in the real world are also busy with wars, catastrophes, conquests, and distant journeys, while the women are busy with food, gently taking care of the family and living a down-to-earth life. In *Primeval and Other Times*, Misia let out the rooms in her house to Miss Popielska and her children to earn some money. When Miss Popielska pitied Misia’s hard life of serving so many dinners and washing so many dishes and all the housework, Misia thought it was her contribution to keep the family. Miss Popielska comforted her, “You shouldn’t think like that, Misia. After all, a woman works in the home, she bears children, she does the housekeeping, you know best of all...”⁶⁵ A woman’s work in the house was affirmed by Miss Popielska, but Misia thought she has not done enough, a woman must also earn a living and bring home money. Misia’s life was difficult and tired because she tried hard to manage the housework as well as bring home money so that she could meet the requirements imposed on women by the society.

In *Red Sorghum*, the women in the village make fistcakes and mung-bean soup

⁶³ Tokarczuk, *House of Day, House of Night*, 260-76.

⁶⁴ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 91-92.

⁶⁵ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 215.

together, then Dai Fenglian and Wang Wenyi's wife send the food to the men who are waiting for the Japanese invaders in the sorghum fields, yet the two women were shot to death by Japanese on their way to sending food. As a woman with small bounded feet, Dai Fenglian goes uneasily with the heavy loads of fistcakes on her shoulders and get drenched with sweat, "the carrying pole dug deeply into her delicate shoulder, leaving a dark-purple bruise that would accompany her as she departed this world and travelled to the kingdom of heaven. The bruise would be the glorious symbol of a heroic figure from the war of resistance."⁶⁶ Although being a woman, she also fights bravely against the enemies in her own way in the sorghum fields. As an old saying goes in China, "Women hold up half the sky." The heroes of China's war-resistant efforts are not only Chinese men, but also Chinese women and children. Wang Wenyi's wife is also a very great woman. When Commander Yu was recruiting troops, she persuaded and helped her husband to be signed up as a guerrilla to fight against the Japanese invaders. When men are fighting in the battlefield, women also support their fight in their own way, which should be recognized and valued in history.

Secondly, both of them recognize women's values and significance in curing men who are wounded physically or emotionally in their works. In *Primeval and Other Times*, Michał came back from the war in the summer of 1919. He was sick, emaciated, dirty and had a tormenting feeling that the world he had set out from no longer existed. Misia's first memory of her father was the sight of the ragged man on the road to the mill. Her father staggered as he walked, and then often cried at night, nestling against her mother's breasts.⁶⁷ Gradually lovely Misia fitted perfectly in the small devastated space in his soul and healed Michał's trauma caused by fighting in the war. Michał was able to start everything anew.⁶⁸ After returning home with emotional wounds suffered in the battlefield, his wife and daughter cured him with their love and company.

In *Red Sorghum*, after having survived the slaughter of his village by Japanese invaders, the autumn in 1939 was one of the most difficult periods for Yu Zhan'ao: his

⁶⁶ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 67.

⁶⁷ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 42.

⁶⁸ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 65.

troops had been wiped out, his beloved wife had been killed, his son had been severely wounded, his home and the land around it had been torched, his body was racked with illness; war had destroyed nearly everything he owned. The woman Liu, with a lame leg, was also one of the several survived people. She comforted Yu Zhan'ao with affectionate gazes at his silver hair. She touched his arm with her large, rough hand and said, "You shouldn't be sitting here thinking like that. Let's go back. As the ancients said, 'Heaven never seals off all the exits.' You should concentrate on getting your health back by eating and drinking and breathing as much and as hard as you can..."⁶⁹ Her words touched him. He looked up at her kind face and tears began to fill his eyes. Late at night, he rested his weary head in the warmth of her bosom as she stroked his bony frame with her large hands. Under the woman Liu's care and support, Yu Zhan'ao recovered both physically and mentally.

Huzhu healed and remolded Jinlong in *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*. After Jinlong's mother accidentally made his handsome Dacron military tunic and army cap badly wrinkled when washing, he was on the verge of a breakdown and did not eat or say anything for two days. With her excellent skills in fabric and sewing, Huzhu restored his tunic to the original shape and made a brand-new army cap that looked authentic. "My brother's recalcitrance softened considerably after he and Huzhu got together. Revolutions reform societies, women remold men."⁷⁰ Here women's influence on men is compared to revolutions' impact on societies. Revolutions often play a major role in promoting social change and reshaping the social structure, and can completely transform society in many ways. "Women remold men" also reflects the influence that women have in gender relations, and that women can often prompt men to change their thinking and lifestyles through their own emotions, perceptions, and behaviors. With his unique perspective and deep insight, Mo Yan shows the important role of women in the family and society as well as their influence on men, allowing readers to see the strong power and influence that women have in gender relations.

In Tokarczuk's and Mo Yan's tender and warm writing, although the physically

⁶⁹ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 236.

⁷⁰ Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 192.

and mentally suffered women cannot get rid of the misfortunes in the context of the times, they bear the humiliation and fight hard, and even become the shelters of men, which breaks the traditional stereotype of women being dependent on men.

Thirdly, women's values and significance in protecting and building the nation are recognized in their works. In *Primeval and Other Times*, when men went to the battle, women were left at home to preserve their homes, care the next generations and wait for their husbands to come back. When Michał came back home for the war with post-traumatic stress disorder, it was his wife and daughter that healed him. To Tokarczuk, the world is divided into two halves: some create, others destroy. As to who is responsible for creating and who is destroying the world, Olga has given her answer, "we all need daughters. If we all started having daughters at once there'd be peace on earth."⁷¹ In *House of Day, House of Night*, Tokarczuk told the story of the founder of Nowa Ruda, Tüntzel, a knife-maker. After the death of his wife and son, Tüntzel lived alone in the valley and forest, he made a trip to his old settlement and visited his family, and told them all he needed were a dog and a new wife. Since the arrival of his new wife and a dog, they had children each year, built a new house, turned the whole hillside into fertile fields. Then the woodcutters also came to build their own cottages nearby and brought women to live in them. The valley had turned into a small settlement which they called "Neurode", meaning "new clearing". Tüntzel was important in founding Nowa Ruda, but without his wife, it could not be possible for him to complete it, so women's significance in building the nation was recognized.

When faced with invasion of China by Japanese invaders, many women in Mo Yan's novels are not afraid to fight back in spite of torture and death. For example, Dai Fenglian and Wang Wenyi's wife were killed by enemies on their way to deliver food to the men in battlefields. When the narrator came back to his hometown to search for more stories about his grandparents. An old woman of ninety-two told him that "the beautiful champion of women, Dai Fenglian, ordered rakes for a barrier, the Jap attack broken ...".⁷² He listened with barely concealed excitement, "for her tale proved that

⁷¹ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 15.

⁷² Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 13.

the strategy of stopping the Jap convoy with rakes had sprung from the mind of my own kin, a member of the weaker sex. No wonder my grandma is fêted as a trailblazer of the anti-Japanese resistance and a national hero.”⁷³ Here Mo Yan affirms the contribution made by women, the weaker sex in the established social traditions, which is a form of irony used by Mo Yan to criticize the discrimination against women, because he extols in this novel that the weaker women can devise wiser schemes. There is another example illustrates that Dai Fenglian is farsighted and patriotic. She prompts Commander Yu’s and Detachment Leader Leng’s troops to leave alone their own interests and collaborate together to fight against the Japanese army first. When Commander Yu and Detachment Leader Leng had a conflict and neither of them wanted to surrender to each other, Dai stood between them, her left hand resting on Leng’s revolver, her right hand on Commander Yu’s Browning pistol, said, “Even if you can’t agree, you mustn’t abandon justice and honour. This isn’t the time or place to fight. Take your fury out on the Japanese.” She then asked her son to take wine and filled three cups, she said, “If you’re honourable men you’ll drink it, then. After that, chickens can go their own way, dogs can go theirs. Well water and river water don’t mix.” She picked up her cup and drank the wine down noisily.⁷⁴ As a woman confined in the house at that time, she displays great foresight and sagacity in persuading the two men to set aside their personal conflicts and aim their guns at the nation’s common enemies. We cannot know how many heroines are absent in the recorded history, yet many writers’ works make them relive.

4.3.3. Women Breaking the Traditional Definition of them

According to Asmae Ourkiya, women were given a set of characteristics, such as docility, submissiveness, nurturing tendencies, and emotional sensitivity, consequently dismissing transgender women, non-binary people assigned female at birth, lesbians and non-heterosexual women, women who have no desire to reproduce, and other

⁷³ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 14.

⁷⁴ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 29.

women who do not fall under the mainstream definition of a woman.⁷⁵ This kind of essentialist definition is constructed by patriarchal system to dominate and exploit women by restricting women's autonomy and potential. Those women who do not conform to the patriarchal definition of them are often subject to criticism or resistance, as they disrupt established power dynamics and societal norms.

Both Tokarczuk and Mo Yan care for and exalt these brave and independent females in their works. Although these females seem to be bound by all kinds of constraints and fetters, they all have an independent character, some of them are spiritually independent, some are independent in personality, some are financially independent, and some have an independent philosophical analysis of the world. Tokarczuk's and Mo Yan's humanistic writing styles depict the image of poor but rebellious women who live under the male-dominated society and are suffering at the bottom of the social ladder, but still full of vitality, as well as reveal the rebellious mentality of the females to rebel against the traditional ethics and dogma in writing their unique and rich life experience.

Tokarczuk utilizes her female characters to criticize a culture that rejects those who don't conform to the social expectations. Women in Tokarczuk's works do not conform to traditional roles of wife, mother, or daughter. In *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, the protagonist, Janina Duszejko, is an elderly woman who lives alone in a remote village and is considered eccentric by her neighbors. She challenges the patriarchal, animal-hunting men in her community, advocating for animal rights and rebelling against their cruel treatment of nature. Instead of being meek and obedient as stipulated by the society on women, Duszejko appears strong and violent, therefore dangerous in the men's eyes. One day she rides in her automobile named "Samurai" in the woods, a nickname connected with images of battle, and witnesses hunters pursuing animals in the forest. She makes a valiant effort to stop them, but the men eventually walk away from her. She fiercely pushes the hunters back since she is so committed to protecting the animals and does not hesitate to contradict them:

⁷⁵ Asmae Ourkiya, "Gender Essentialism and Ecofeminist Literature" in *The Routledge Handbook of Ecofeminism and Literature*, ed. Douglas A. Vakoch (New York: Routledge, 2023), 312.

At that point I felt a surge of Anger, genuine, not to say Divine Anger. It flooded me from inside in a burning hot wave. This energy made me feel great, as if it were lifting me off the ground, a mini Big Bang within the universe of my body. There was fire burning within me, like a neutron star. I sprang forward and pushed the Man in the silly hat so hard that he fell onto the snow, completely taken by surprise. And when Moustachio rushed to his aid, I attacked him too, hitting him on the shoulder with all my might. He groaned with pain. I am not a feeble girl. “Hey, hey, woman, is that the way to behave?” His mouth was twisted in pain as he tried to catch me by the hands.⁷⁶

From a patriarchal perspective, Duszejko’s violent acts and intense emotions both help to depict her as dangerous and menacing. The lines separating what is manly and what is womanly become blurred when Duszejko behaves like an aggressive man instead of conforming to the gender stereotypes that women are fragile and delicate. Her behavior is a kind of rebellion against social conventions rather than just a peculiar personal trait. She rejects human supremacy over animals and refuses to live up to the expectations that are placed on women. What’s more, she acknowledges the superiority of natural forces and she deeply respects and is willing to understand them, that is why she practices astrology, convinced that the future of all human beings is written in the stars. Her idea is a striking revolt against anthropocentrism and androcentrism because it acknowledges the impact of nature while denying men control over women and nature.

In Tokarczuk’s *House of Day, House of Night*, when facing his daughter Kummernis who does not conform to his arrangement of her marriage, the father criticizes his daughter’s going against the traditional social expectations on women:

In what way are you different from other women who, obedient to the will of their fathers and to the will of God, get married and bear children for the glory of God? Why make life in a convent your ideal? For one can live a worthy and saintly life within marriage without being excluded from the opportunity of attaining perfection. Both ways are dear to God. And so why is your mind set on the way that creates so many complications, breaks hearts and destroys families? What is more fitting to our nature than to enter into union with another, beloved person, to love him, to multiply and acquire land, as our Lord has enjoyed?⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Tokarczuk, *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*, 145-46.

⁷⁷ Tokarczuk, *House of Day, House of Night*, 60-61.

Traditionally females are thought to be obedient to their fathers, get married, raise children and take care of the household affairs. Facing Kummernis' rejection of his arranged marriage, the baron was full of anger and resentment that anyone should dare to oppose his will. So he incited Wolfram and together they kidnapped her and locked her up in a windowless room. He even advised Wolfram to take her by force because he thought his daughter had no difference from those harlots, and once she knew the taste of love, she would throw herself into Wolfram's arms. Yet Kummernis would rather be stabbed and crucified by her father than be obedient to her father's arranged marriage. Later Kummernis' story survives and inspires much hope in people's hearts, spreading throughout the country and abroad, which demonstrates that there are many women in the world like Kummernis to fight against the unequal social norms imposed on women and pursue freedom.

In *Primeval and Other Times*, Cornspike is an outcast disapproved by society because she breaks social taboos concerning sexuality and manners: she lives in the woods, walks barefoot, and has loose morals. Although being poor, Cornspike did not feel inferior and brazenly looked everyone straight in the face, even the priest. When having sex with men, Cornspike never wanted to lie on her back in an honest way. She'd say: "Why should I lie underneath you? I'm your equal".⁷⁸ Her transgressive behaviors and strong inner world help her live through all the hardships in her life. Besides, she gets pregnant with an anthropomorphized plant, masterwort, and gives birth to a daughter. Her pregnancy with a plant implies equality among all living creatures and inevitably denies men's superiority over all the living creatures. Besides, her pregnancy without the participation of a man also undermines the domination of men in a patriarchal society.

In Mo Yan's novels, the unequal status of the family and the strictness of dogma and ethics have left women in a state of bitterness in which their desires are suppressed, and the rigid and uninteresting relationship between husband and wife and the

⁷⁸ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 18.

undignified life after marriage have prompted women to raise the banner of rebellion and prepare to escape from the family under the rule of male authority. In his novels, Mo Yan intends to create a strong contrast between a mean and incompetent man and a strong and great woman, so that his intelligent, capable, strong and tolerant women break the family cage of “strong man, weak woman” and release the latent desire within their bodies. Dai Fenglian’s husband suffers from leprosy, Shangguan Lu’s husband is short, timid and infertile, and Shangguan Lu’s father-in-law is also incompetent and relies on his wife to support the family. These men, who should have been responsible for the family, have become physically or mentally emasculated, unable to caress their wives and even deprived of their reproductive functions, which prompts women who are trapped in this situation to seek a way out. In order not to be abandoned by her infertile husband’s family and also as a way to revenge against her brutal husband and mother-in-law, Shangguan Lu gives birth to nine children by having sex with different men. Dai Fenglian would rather die than be touched by her husband who is a leper, and then falls in love with Yu Zhan’ao. These women jump out of the prison of marriage, fall in love with their lovers and give vent to their repressed desires. Loyal to their instinctive desires for life, these women try to escape from their unfortunate marriages by betraying their husbands and breaking the ethical constraints.

Dai Fenglian is dissatisfied with her father’s arranged marriage, and then she unhesitatingly falls in love with Yu Zhan’ao after being saved by him from the bandit, and makes love with him in the sorghum field. After getting a life from the hands of the bandit, she is endowed with more courage. “Grandma ripped the curtain from the front of the carriage and stuffed it behind the seat. As she breathed the free air she studied Yu Zhan’ao’s broad shoulders and narrow waist. He was so near she could have touched the pale, taut skin of his shaved head with her toe.”⁷⁹ Her action of ripping the curtain of the sedan chair means she hopes to break the bondages imposed on her by traditional ethics and bravely face her desires. Three days after her marriage, the bride Dai Fenglian returned to her parents’ house according to the custom, then she did not want

⁷⁹ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 52.

to go back to her husband's home, so she cried and pleaded with her father. In order to obtain a large black mule from her daughter's father-in-law, her father slapped her and forced her to go back. Her father's ruthlessness has further made her realize that she cannot rely on him for the rest of her life, and that she can only rely on herself, so "She swung her leg over the donkey's back and straddled it, unlike most women. Great-Grandma had tried to get her to ride sidesaddle, but Grandma dug in her heels and the donkey started off down the road, its rider sitting proudly on its back, head up and eyes straight ahead."⁸⁰ She refused to ride sidesaddle as expected by social norms for women and rode like a man, head up and eyes straight ahead, which demonstrates that her self-awareness has awoken and the spirit to rebel has started in her heart. "Once she was on her way, Grandma didn't look back, and although Great-Granddad was holding the reins at first, when they were out of the village she took them from him and guided the donkey herself, leaving him to trot along behind her."⁸¹ Dai Fenglian took the reins from her father's hand, she was determined to be the master of her own life from now on. Later when Dai found out that Yu had a love affair with their maid Passion, instead of swallowing the betrayal of her husband silently, she confronted with them face to face and gouged a dozen bloody lines in Passion's face with her nails and slapped Yu's left cheek hard. After Yu took Passion away with him, she did not beg his return as most women would do at that time, and took her son to live with Black Eye, the leader of the Iron Society. Dai believed that Yu could find a lover for himself, so she could also find a man for herself. She boldly challenges the feudal ethical concepts and pursues equal marriage. As the narrator commented, "I believe she could have done anything she desired, for she was a hero of the resistance, a trailblazer for sexual liberation, a model of women's independence."⁸² Dai Fenglian is the embodiment of heroine under Mo Yan's pen. With her heroic spirit, her determination of not being bound by feudal etiquettes and boldness to love and hate, she breaks the traditional definition and anticipation of women, and becomes a typical model for that era.

⁸⁰ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 94.

⁸¹ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 94.

⁸² Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 15.

In *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, Shangguan Lü shoulders the heavy responsibility of the iron workshop with her tall and robust body. The daughter-in-law Shangguan Lu has long been tortured by the inhuman mistreatment of the in-law's family, but she finally stops swallowing her anger and dares to rebuke her husband's atrocities and triumphs in the confrontation with her mother-in-law. While their husbands were short and weak, unable to support a family. The two women have broken away from the old family economy and transformed themselves from submissive wife and daughter-in-law to heads of the family, taking over the role of the male as the breadwinner in the traditional family. Inheriting her mother's brave character, Shangguan Xiangdi used bold and rebellious behaviors to rebel against the atrocities inflicted by her abusers. She put on a red cheongsam full of provocation, and came to the Education Exhibition Hall, shouting obscene words, stripping off her clothes, revealing her scarred breasts, and questioning the group of dehumanized commune cadres headed by Secretary Hu in a stern voice. Although the resistance of Shangguan Xiangdi encountered with insults, beatings and other violence, yet in her eyes there was a kind of power that conquering all men but never be conquered by men, and finally her determined and fearless rebellious initiatives moved the women present in the Education Exhibition Hall, and also started the battle of resistance. As a contrast, the only son in the Shangguan family, Shangguan Jintong, never matures into an independent adult, remaining dependent on his mother and unable to support and protect himself. Yet his sisters can face far greater challenges and display more abilities and survival instincts. The novel counters the expectations placed on men to lead and protect, as Jintong's failures demonstrate the limitations of patriarchal norms that prioritize male heirs and leadership, even when those men are unsuited for such roles.

Under Mo Yan's pen, the vivid and rebellious women are outstanding. They do not hide the desires revealed in their lives, boldly pursue love, dare to love and hate, and have a strong personality. Different from the traditional women who are virtuous, dignified and abide by women's principles stipulated by the traditional patriarchal society, Mo Yan deconstructs the traditional image of women and depicts a group of women with rebellious spirit and deviant behaviors that are deemed to be subversive of

the traditional social order. In his work, Mo Yan discusses what Sima Ku shouted before death that “Women are wonderful things,” and he declares his viewpoint that women are wonderful but they should not be treated as things by stating that “Are women really wonderful things? Maybe they are. Yes, women definitely are wonderful things, but when all is said and done, they aren’t really “things.”⁸³ Women have been objectified for thousands of years in China as instruments to satisfy men and continue the family line, Mo Yan is really progressive and respectable to rectify this false idea in his works.

Mo Yan also writes about woman’s despise and rebellion against traditional oppressive ideology on women by depicting women as animal spirits. The Bird Fairy, Shangguan Lingdi, whose words and actions are connected with the image of a bird. She displays her sexual desire in public and has sex with the Mute in front of lots of people, whose erotic behaviors are considered to be improper even now and the unorthodox attitude of woman are not common in classical Chinese literature, but in the image of a bird, Lingdi’s bold behavior was thought to be acceptable by people in the novel and they even went to her house to worship her. By depicting women as animal spirits, Mo Yan encourages women’s freedom to pursue their desires and they are somewhat released from the restrictions of patriarchy and Confucianism. With the development of economy, Mo Yan has allowed the rebellious women in his writing to continue the fine virtues of hard-working and thrifty of the Chinese people, while at the same time endowing them with the qualities of independence and self-improvement, and encouraging them to break away from the closed family environment and realize the liberation of their economic careers, just like the women of the new era. Women’s challenge to the old economic model is also reflected in their abandonment of the traditional way of “men ploughing and women weaving” in the small-peasant economy. Some women characters take advantage of the economic trends of the times and break away from the land and the family, which were valued by the people in the past. For example, Old Jin in *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, the woman only has one breast, rising

⁸³ Mo, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, 383-84.

from running a cooking oil shop to making a fortune as a scrap collector, has always been a strong woman. Wu Qiuxiang runs a tavern to make money after the carrying out of reform and opening up policy in China.

To conclude, both Tokarczuk and Mo Yan depict how the rebel women, under the coercion of the times, have impacted on traditional ethics and morals. In the process of breaking free from the shackles imposed on them and pursuing freedom, they use their actions to deconstruct the male-centered structure, to rebel against patriarchal authority, and to subvert the patriarchal social order. They adopt a unique tender and warm vision to reveal the reasons why the rebellious women fight against external pressure and their own survival predicament with a tenacious gesture of resistance, sending out humanistic concern for females in the narrative of sufferings.

4.3.4. Tenderness and Warmth Felt by Women in a Difficult Life

Although both Tokarczuk's and Mo Yan's novels are imbued with wars, political upheavals, natural disasters and oppressions on women, yet tenderness and warmth can also be felt by their female characters. These two authors not only expose the problems and ugliness of society, but also impress the readers with hidden warmth and tenderness to purify readers' hearts. For example, both the two authors depict some touching and warm interactions between females, as well as between males and females, which not only illustrates the authors' love, sympathy and compassion towards the female characters suffered in a hard life, but also showcases their opposition to a male/female dualistic view, and their pursuit of a balanced relationship between males and females, instead of a hierarchal one.

In *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*, when Duszejko told Dizzy, Good News and Oddball that it was she that murdered the Commandant, Innerd, President and Father Rustle to revenge for those animals killed by them, they did not feel surprised and told her that they have already known it, then they helped her hide and escaped to Czech. Their tenderness and understanding towards Duszejko were really touching and heart-warming. What touched readers most was when the police were

searching for her, Oddball told the police (because his son was one of the policemen) that he would marry her when she got out of the prison. Duszejko's warmth and tenderness towards animals are touching, meanwhile, Dizzy, Good News and Oddball's warmth and tenderness towards Duszejko were also touching, especially in the moment of life and death.

The interactions between Mrs. Bobol and the German women were touching in *House of Day, House of Night*. When the Poles were arranged to move and settle down in the west, two German women were left behind in the house that the Bobols was assigned. Mrs. Bobol asked them how to get water, although the older German woman growled at the younger German woman to threaten her not to tell, the younger one still showed Mrs. Bobol a lever in the wall by the stove. Later Mrs. Bobol kindly invited the German women to use her stove. Kind Mrs. Bobol also explained and assured the German women that they would not stay in their house too long because it was a temporary evacuation. The readers can feel the kindness of Mrs. Bobol to the German women although the Poles were the victims of the war. Besides, the story between the twins let out from the prison camp and the couple of the house was very moving. The twins were assigned to live with the couple temporarily, the couple knew where they had been and that they were coming back to live a normal life again, so they made them supper with wine and wore long faces, in order not to show any unsuitable smile or laughter. The hostess put on a dark dress, to avoid hurting their feelings by wearing anything too striking or garish. But the twins pretended not to appear traumatized and never stopped joking, and on their dark faces their lipsticks shone red. Both the couple and the twins are kind enough to consider for each other, the couple did not want to show any delight in case they may hurt the pathetic twins' feelings; likewise, the twins did not want to ruin the couple's mood by their tragic experiences and pretended to be happy. The tenderness and warmth they displayed towards each other greatly moved me. What's more, the tenderness and warmth between the narrator "I" and Marta are also impressive. After reading the tragic and miserable story of Ergo Sum's eating the flesh of his partners in the forest during World War II and the mental torture he has experienced since then, it is healing to read the daily interactions between the narrator

and Marta. Marta felt pains caused by rheumatism, the narrator rubbed the horseradish ointment into Marta's hands until it vanished under the skin, where its heat would melt the ice that was attacking her body. The narrator and Marta cut hair for each other. When the narrator had finished, her head was covered in a soft, silvery velour. They both rubbed their hands over it. Marta suddenly burst out laughing, so for fun the narrator put the clippers in her hand and presented her own head. When the narrator tried to throw away the tufts they swept up from the terrace afterwards, Marta took them, rolled them into a dark-and light ball and went to bury it in the flowering borders. They sat down on the steps and stroked each other's sheared heads again.

Misia in *Primeval and Other Times* was born in the period of World War I and without father's presence until she was about four years old, her world was dark, full of suffering, like a murky pond overgrown with duckweed. However, since her father's return in 1919, Misia has started to see the world and greatly loved by her father. Her father did everything he could for Misia. Wherever Michał went, he always thought of Misia, and always missed her. He never raised his voice to her, waited for her on the bridge when she came back home from school, looked over her exercise books and helped with her lessons, taught her Russians and German, guided her little hand across all the letters of the alphabet, sharpened her pencils. When she grew up, he built a very beautiful large house for her. When she was giving birth to her baby, he was always there accompanying her. When Misia was delivering her fourth baby, her husband had gone on a course, her father came to take care of her in her confinement. She is an apple in her father's eye. Although Misia has experienced two World Wars and her husband's betrayal, she was loved by her father and children. When she grew old, her children would often come back to visit her, and looked after her when she was ill, finally she died peacefully with her husband and children around her.

Genowefa found herself pregnant after her husband went to the war in 1914, she had to bear the baby, run their mill by managing the men working for her, and combat her loneliness. She fell in love with Eli, but they had to separate after the return of Michał. After Michał's return, he did not doubt his wife's loyalty and lived a peaceful life. When Primeval was going to be on the front line, they have to leave for the forest,

but Michał said his wife was sick and could not walk, he would stay with his paralyzed wife and take care of their house. Michał didn't give up his paralyzed wife and liked taking care of her. His love to Genowefa in times of danger was really touching. When Primeval was expected to be the front line of war, the villagers went into the forest to hide. The men spent all day making dugouts and chopping wood, the women cooked and lent each other salt for the potatoes. The villagers united and collaborated together, without any verbal agreement, they arranged themselves just as they lived in Primeval. When Cornspike took the raped and sick Ruta to join them, the women gave her hot water, Misia gave her a blanket, and the men cobbled together a home for her in the ground. Tokarczuk describes people's warmth and closeness in times of war.

Florentynka led a miserable life after her husband died, seven out of her nine children died, and the two living children deserted her. She went mad and shook her fist at the moon blaming the moon for persecuting her by seducing her husband and sons. While her life was not easy, she received comfort from Cornspike and Ruta. Cornspike patiently comforted Florentynka with her dream and told her that the moon hoped she could forgive him. Cornspike told Florentynka that the moon knew she did not have a mother and told her to come and ask Florentynka to be her mother. Florentynka forgave the moon and Cornspike became her daughter, Ruta became her granddaughter. Then they often took food to old Florentynka, who was cured by Cornspike's warmth and tenderness.

Dai Fenglian in *Red Sorghum* was forced to marry a leper by her father to gain profits for him. When she was in a state of desperation, Yu Zhan'ao murdered her husband and father-in-law, and saved her out of the terrible marriage. Yu was like a bunch of light kindled her dark and hopeless life. After the death of her husband and father-in-law, she became the owner of the house and had to manage all the male workers in her distillery. As a woman who has never dealt with distillery business, she won the loyalty of Uncle Arhat with her sincerity and belief in him. Since then, Uncle Arhat helped her manage the distillery and protected the house for Dai Fenglian and Yu Zhan'ao until his death.

Shangguan Lu in Mo Yan's *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* suffered great pains, yet

she was also given tenderness and warmth by other people. Immediately after giving birth to her seventh daughter, Shangguan Lu was branded by her husband using a pair of red-hot tongs out of the blacksmith furnace, her uncle Big Paw Yu rushed over to her home with a hunting rifle to avenge for her. Since then, her husband and mother-in-law's arrogance has been deflated, and they began treating her more humanely, and she was subjected to less abuse. She was on the verge of death when her scalded flesh began to fester and smell, she came to the church for consolation where she met the gentle Pastor Malory. As a woman who has never been praised and caressed by a man, Shangguan Lu basked in the approving words and gentle fondling of Malory, who healed her injury and made her taste the sweetness of life. Shangguan Lu was also a source of tenderness and warmth for her children and grandchildren when they encountered difficulties in their life. She was their harbor always helping and protecting them with all her efforts.

4.4. Women with Freedom and Healed by Nature Versus Women Trapped Again

In Tokarczuk's works, some of the rebellious women obtain freedom by stepping out of their home, some are healed by getting close to nature, while the rebellious women in Mo Yan's works are usually trapped again by men or by material pursuit.

4.4.1. Women with Freedom and Healed by Nature in Tokarczuk's Works

Many of Tokarczuk's female characters has found freedom by leaving their homes, by becoming strong in heart, or by getting close to nature and healed by nature. Ruta grew up happily in the forest with her mother, her life was totally changed after being raped by the German and Russian soldiers. Since then, she thought the world was evil and decided that she would only make love with whom she hates. Then she chose to marry the rich man Ukleja because she wanted to leave for the city, to travel, and to have earrings and smart shoes. She lived a hard life with Ukleja who regarded her as an object to show off, insulted and hit her, and deprived her of freedom to go outside alone.

Finally, Ruta walked to the border of Primeval and found in herself the feeling that made it possible to pass through all borders, locks, and gates. She moved up all her courage to leave Primeval and went to Brazil where she had everything she wanted and changed her name to Amanita Muscaris.

Misia grew up healthily under her parents' love, especially her father, who did everything he could for her. She had the most dresses of all the children in the neighborhood. She looked as beautiful as the young ladies from the manor house. Wherever Michał went, he always thought of her, and always missed her. He never raised his voice to her. He even built a very large beautiful house for Misia. However, her life was greatly changed after falling in love with Paweł. She dropped out of school and married him. She continuously gave birth to six children, took care of the children and do all the housework, while Paweł spent all his efforts in his job and promotion. When he had money and power, he loathed Misia and whored and made love with barmaids. Misia once protested, but she soon thought it was her problem because she had been pregnant, fat and swollen, and then in her confinement. She even thought that attending to the children and doing all the housework are not enough, so she let out her rooms to bring home money. She tried hard to meet all the requirements imposed on women by society. Misia changed one day starting from cutting her long grey hair that she refused to cut for ages. In spring she wrote back to the young squire's daughter to say she would never take holiday guests. Even though Paweł tried to protest, she followed her own heart, ignored and wouldn't listen to him. Maybe she was tired of all the housework and the extra work of entertaining the tenants, or maybe she did not want to meet the social requirements on women in taking care of housework and bring home money, she just wanted to live for herself. She protested to Paweł that she did not want to be buried with his father and sister after death, and she wanted to be buried next to her parents. Finally, she died in a peaceful manner and was buried next to her parents' tomb. Although her self-consciousness came late at an old age, Misia managed to protest against Paweł and be herself eventually.

Many female characters in Tokarczuk's works develop a close relationship with nature, from where they received power to heal the wounds caused by the miserable

society. In her works nature is usually a world representing a source of freedom, transformation, and healing, especially for women who are constrained by social expectations. Simone de Beauvoir discusses in her work, *The Second Sex*, the female protagonist's deep connection to nature:

“In the paternal house reign mother, laws, custom, and routine, and she wants to wrest herself from this past; she wants to become a sovereign subject in her own turn: but socially she only accedes to her adult life by becoming woman; she pays for her liberation with an abdication; but in the midst of plants and animals she is a human being; a subject, a freedom, she is freed both from her family and from males. She finds an image of the solitude of her soul in the secrecy of forests and the tangible figure of transcendence in the vast horizons of the plains; she is herself this limitless land, this summit jutting toward the sky.”⁸⁴

She highlights that during a girl's growing up from childhood to adolescence, society imposes patriarchal norms that she is expected to conform to. In contrast to these restrictive expectations, nature becomes a space of freedom, reverence, and emotional refuge for the girl. Unlike boys, girls often form a more intimate and affectionate bond with the wild nature, finding in it a sense of liberation from the male-dominated culture and society.

Duszejko loves animals and in order to avenge for the killed animals and protect more animals, she killed the Commandant, Innerd, President and Father Rustle, all of whom hunted. Janina's deep connection with animals and the natural world allows her to perceive injustices that others overlook, symbolizing how marginalized individuals can offer radical new insights into society's treatment of both women and the environment. After her murder of them was found out by Dizzy, Good News and Oddball, she was understood by them and they helped conceal what she has done. When the police were searching for her, Oddball told his son, one of the policemen, that when she got out of the prison, he would marry her. On her way to escape to the Czech Republic, her Damsel, Venus, was guiding her on the Czech side. In Czech, at first, she was admitted to stay in a bookstore where Honza kindly let her in without asking her

⁸⁴ Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 433.

any questions. A few days later, Boros came to fetch her and brought her the clothes and wigs that Good News have prepared, and she lived at the entomologist's research station on the edge of the Białowieża Forest. She kept in touch with Dizzy by writing to him through Boros, she told Dizzy she still had plenty of time to live in the end of the novel. Her successful escape and the help she got from others imply the existence of justice, as well as imply Tokarczuk's support and tenderness to the old woman's kindness and bravery in protecting animals.

Although Cornspike was insulted and despised by the human society, she did not lose heart and chose to live in the forest. She desired freedom and envied the hare, fish and lizard. In Cornspike's cottage in Wydymacz, she lived with a snake, an owl, and a kite. When she was rejected by people in Primeval, she was like by a snake. The snake would wait for her on every path, wherever she went, following her every move. During the day she let him lie on her bed. She carried him round her neck like a silver chain. Although she couldn't find warmth and comfort from the human world, she could find companionship in the natural world that healed her and helped her to be herself. She didn't have to cater to others' needs and lived an independent life. Cornspike seemed to be integrated into the nature through the depicting of her having sex with the plant masterwort grew in front of her cottage. She could get along well with both animals and plants in the nature. Nature comforted her wounded heart. Even though Cornspike has suffered a lot of hardships and contempt from other people, she successfully survived in the unstable society, found solace from nature, and maintained to be herself.

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.

4.4.2. Women Trapped Again by Men, Sustenance or Desires in Mo Yan's Works

Mo Yan's female characters on the land of Gaomi in Shandong province are often regarded as model of women's self-reliance, personality liberation and rebellion against traditional ethical constraints. However, when looking at the final plight of their existence, I find that these women, who are struggling to escape from the control of males, have been entangled in a male-dominated culture and patriarchal consciousness throughout their lives. They are caught in a paradoxical state of wanting to overthrow the male domination, but unconsciously get close to and subservient to the consciousness of males. Even in Gaomi Township, where the people were simple and the social environment was relatively open, women were still at the bottom of the social ladder and were treated unfairly by their families and society. Although the rebellious women bravely resisted the heavy oppression imposed on them by the male-dominated society, yet their resistance was unsustainable and incomplete. They have made progress in physical emancipation, but have not been able to completely free themselves from the manipulation of male-centered ideology.

In *Red Sorghum*, when Yu knew that Dai moved to live with Black Eye after Yu moved out to live with his lover, Passion, Yu went to find her. Although the angry Yu called her "bitch" and "whore", yet she was still moved by Yu's fight with Black Eye because of her. He touched her so deeply that she followed him home, where they ran the distillery with renewed vitality. In the end, they reached a "tripartite agreement" in which Yu would spend ten days with Dai, then ten days with Passion.⁸⁵ Then Dai was trapped in the difficult relationship with Yu and shared her husband with another woman. There was one time, Dai tried to prevent Yu from going to Passion's house when Yu thought that Passion might be in danger of Japanese invasion of her village, Dai suffered

⁸⁵ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 331.

from Yu's domestic violence badly:

He clenched his fist and hit her squarely in her nose, from which dark blood spurted. She shrieked and crumpled to the floor like a toppled column. As she struggled to her feet, he drove his fist into her neck. The second punch, a real powerhouse, sent her flying into a chest against the wall. "Slut! Filthy bitch!" Granddad lashed out through clenched teeth...he grabbed the date-wood bolt from the door and took aim at Grandma's blood-smeared head as she tried to get to her feet, vital and tenacious as ever. Grandma crawled over to Granddad, wrapping her arms around his knees and rubbing his muscular legs. She raised her gloomy face, soaked with tears and blood, and said, 'Zhan'ao —Zhan'ao — elder brother — dearest eldest brother, kill me, go ahead and kill me! You can't imagine how it hurts to see you go, you'll never know how badly I want you to stay. With all the Japanese out there, I fear you'll never come back.'⁸⁶

Even though Dai was almost beaten to death by Yu, she loved Yu so much that she would rather die than let him go and sacrifice his life to the bullets of Japanese' guns. At that time, Dai has lost her previous pride and self-consciousness, and totally lost herself in her love to Yu. However, Dai's wholehearted love was unrequited by Yu who also loved another woman. Later when Yu knew Passion and his daughter's death, he blamed and snarled at Dai, "Well, you got your wish!" Not daring to defend herself, Dai timidly approached the wagon...⁸⁷ Since Dai's returning home with Yu from Black Eye's house, Dai has not only had to tolerate sharing husband with another woman, but also suffered from domestic violence, hurt physically and emotionally, which was common to women at that time due to the constraints of social circumstances.

Shangguan Lu's husband and in-laws had a preference for boys to girls, so she was insulted and abused by them because she had continuously delivered seven daughters. She gave birth to a baby boy until her eighth pregnancy, so she also treasured the boy very much. When her husband and in-laws were dead and she became the head of the family, she eventually could control her own life. However, she became the same kind of patriarch as her husband and in-laws who preferred boys to girls. She preferred her son so much and ignored her daughters' feelings, which was complained by her daughters and led to her daughters' rebellion against her. Her spoil of her son also led

⁸⁶ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 345-46.

⁸⁷ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 351.

to his addiction to her breasts, even other women's breasts, and her son became a man who could not shoulder any responsibilities in the family and always needed other family members' help and protection even when he became a middle-aged man. Besides, she became a dictator in the house hoping to control her daughters' marriage. When her first daughter Laidi wanted to marry Sha Yueliang whom she did not like because she was gang-raped by Sha Yueliang's subordinates. In order to protect Laidi and separate the pair of lovers, she arranged Laidi's marriage randomly and hastily to a poor mute, and said anyone of the three mute brothers would be agreed by her to marry Laidi. Her way of action was too dictatorial, regardless of Laidi's feelings, which led to Laidi eloped with Sha Yueliang. As a victim of feudal patriarchy, she became another form of patriarchy herself. Luckily, with her other daughters' rebellion, she began to accept her daughters' free love relationships with their lovers and understood the changes of time in choosing a partner, unlike the arranged marriages before. Despite some form of her patriarchy, she was still a great and tender mother who contributed her whole life to supporting the family and protecting her children and grandchildren. After all, the reasons for her preferring son and being dominating in her house are attributed to the tradition of patriarchy and limitation of that era.

Shangguan Laidi was the eldest sister in the family, she took the responsibility of sister and mother to take care of her younger sisters and brother. As a granddaughter, she was despised and beaten by her grandma who preferred boys to girls. These burdens and sufferings made her out of breath, so she was easily moved by Sha Yueliang's kindness of giving fur coats to her and her family members. She was bewildered by Sha Yueliang's care and sugar-coated words, so she rebelled against her mother's will and eloped with him to escape her childhood home. Laidi was brave to break the traditional norms of arranged marriage, but she relied too much on men and led to her tragic ending. In Mo Yan's novels, many girls who suffered in their childhood homes wanted to escape by marrying someone, but totally relying on a man was a bet that had a rare chance to win, so these girls often got out of one plight and fell into another one. Another example was the second sister Zhaodi. After Laidi ran away with Sha Yueliang, the second sister Zhaodi took on the responsibility to lead and take care of her siblings. When she and

her sisters tried to break a hole in the ice to catch fish, Sima Ku and his subordinates passed by and helped them, then she felt a feeling of reverence for Sima Ku and hoped that she could marry him as his concubine. As a girl growing up in poor conditions and lacking her father's love, Zhaodi easily fell captive to Sima Ku's small favors despite that he has already had three wives. After Sima Ku had destroyed the bridge and derailed the Japanese cargo train, she admired him so much and became his faithful follower in displaying his glorious military victory to the gathered crowd in the village. She was totally attracted by him and talked back against her mother who tried persuading her not to be his concubine. Since then, she was totally trapped by her love to Sima Ku and followed him wherever he went, and would die for him. The same as her two elder sisters, Lingdi could not resist the favors given by a man, so she fell in love at first sight with the bird-catching specialist Birdman Han when he gave her two partridges. They met nearly every day at the spot where he had laid the partridges at her feet. At first, the meetings appeared unplanned, but before long they had turned into outdoor trysts, one waiting for the other, no matter how long it took. Since then, Lingdi took home all kinds of birds for her family to eat, and she planned to marry Birdman Han as a way to repay him. However, one day Birdman Han was dragged off by armed men in black uniforms, Lingdi became out of her mind and seemed to become a Bird Fairy with strange words and behaviors. She eventually jumped from a mountain top and died.

Since the founding of New China, the State has established women's legitimate rights and interests at the legal level, including enjoyment of the right to participate in political life and the right to education on an equal footing with men. With the promotion of the principle that "women can hold up half the sky", women have been coming out of the home in droves to build a new society through public labor alongside men. In particular, during the People's Commune Movement and the Cultural Revolution, the State demanded that all people participate in the construction of a new society through collective production, this top-down political call broadened women's field of production and life to a certain extent, and provided a broad stage for them to demonstrate their unique feminine charms and talents. The development trend of the

new era has fueled the advancement of women such as Lu Shengli in *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* and Pang Kangmei in *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* into the political and economic arena, and provided an open and inclusive environment for single-breasted Jin, Geng Lianlian and Huang Qiuxiang to try to start their own businesses, with more and more women breaking away from the old economic model, and striving to move forward to create a better life of their own. However, many of these women became slaves of power or material desires and went on the way of degenerating in morals or committing crimes.

Mo Yan objectively observes the lives of women in his hometown from a male writer's point of view, explores the reasons for women's difficult situation, and reveals the truth of how they went from resisting to being trapped again under the constraints of the male-centered culture. These women's efforts are affirmed by Mo Yan, yet their final tragedies are also sympathized by him. He does not ridicule these women's failure, instead, he praises and advocates their rebellious spirit. As Mo Yan himself said when analyzing the image of Dai Fenglian, "Shandong is the land of Confucius and Mencius, a place where feudalism is deep and broad and has a long history; especially in the time of the grandparents, feudalism was an iron cage for all the lower-class people, especially the lower-class women. In this novel, the grandparents' wild lovemaking was a mortal sin at that time, and the reason why I have rendered this wild lovemaking in an appreciative tone is not that I am advocating this way, but because of my hatred of feudalism. I feel that grandpa and grandma's daytime wild lovemaking in the sorghum field was a revolt and revenge against the feudal system."⁸⁸ Although these women in the novels did not rebel continuously and completely due to the unfavorable social circumstances, yet their rebellious spirit would encourage more women to be self-reliant and break themselves from the traditional definition of women.

⁸⁸ Mo Yan, "《奇死》后的信笔涂鸦" ["Writings after *The Strange Death*"], 昆仑 [*Kunlun*] no. 6 (1986). These sentences are translated by me from Chinese to English.

Chapter 5 Analysis of Olga Tokarczuk's and Mo Yan's Writing of Nature

5.1. Writing Nature in their Works

According to Janis Birkeland, ecofeminism is a value system, social movement, and political analysis that examines the connection between androcentrism (male-centered thinking) and environmental destruction. It highlights how the exploitation of nature parallels the oppression of women and indigenous cultures, emphasizing that patriarchal attitudes drive both forms of domination.¹ Besides exposing the sufferings and oppressions on women in chapter four, Tokarczuk and Mo Yan also depict the sufferings and oppressions on nature caused by androcentrism in patriarchal cultures. This chapter will explore how they depict the sufferings of nature, especially animals' sufferings, caused by male characters in androcentric cultures. Although their depictions of nature are shaped by their different cultural contexts that will be expounded in the following part tracing their sources of writing nature, they do display some similarities in portraying animals and plants having human thoughts and personalities in their books, which shows their tenderness and careful observations of nature in their daily lives and their egalitarian views and respects towards nature. Some of the natural things, such as the Moon, the Sun, land and river, in Mo Yan's works are usually personified, have some symbolic meanings or as projection of human emotions. Whereas the natural things, even the static ordinary objects in Tokarczuk's works have life and emotions.

The two authors also explore the interconnectedness of human life with nature, not only the closeness between females and nature, but also some tender and warm interactions between marginalized males and nature, illustrating their opposition to a dualistic view towards male/female, human/nonhuman, culture/nature and envisioning a world with balance. Their writings affirm the intrinsic values of nature and replace anthropocentrism with the equality of everything in nature. Especially under the current background of having experienced an international three-year long serious epidemic,

¹ Birkeland, "Ecofeminism: Linking Theory and Practice," 18.

their writings are of practical significance in guiding environmental protection, and pointing out the direction for the future development of the relationship between human beings and nature.

Both Tokarczuk and Mo Yan reject the dualistic hierarchy that humans are superior to nature and dominate nature, and they adhere to an interconnected view of everything. Tokarczuk's belief that humans are never the dominant ruler and observer of the world is displayed in her works. She believes that humans' behaviors are being observed and recorded by planets. In *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, she wrote that "we believe we are free, and that God will forgive us. Personally I think otherwise. Finally, transformed into tiny quivering photons, each of our deeds will set off into Outer Space, where the planets will keep watching it like a film until the end of the world."² The evil behaviors of people are recorded by nature and one day it will revenge itself against human beings. This novel makes us aware that humans are never the dominating force in the universe, instead, human activities are inevitably influenced by nature, such as climate and planet motion, which serves as an important reminder of their cosmic insignificance. "All winter nature has been dormant, waiting to assail Mankind's immune system, fragile as filigree. One day it will get rid of us entirely in this way."³ The outbreak of the pandemic in late 2019, which is believed by scientists to be transmitted from animals to humans, can be regarded as a wake-up call from nature to value humanity's relationship with the environment. Human activities such as wildlife hunting, deforestation, and the encroachment of human settlements into animal habitats not only endanger animals but also increase the chance for unknown viruses to spread among humanity. Humans are not free to do anything they want, and their evil acts will be watched and filmed by planets and the final punishment will be the destruction of humanity.

Influenced by traditional Chinese culture, Mo Yan also considers that astronomical phenomena foretell human beings' behaviors and destiny. In his *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, before depicting a miserable blood conflict between the two parties led by Sima Ku and Lu Liren, he would describe the astronomical phenomenon

² Tokarczuk, *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*, 43.

³ Tokarczuk, *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*, 43.

to let readers be prepared for the upcoming disaster: “By then the sky had turned purple and total darkness was on its way. A thin crescent moon sent down enchanting light from the southwest corner of the sky: caught in its embrace, a single star twinkled brightly.”⁴“Jinxin Banyue” (Venus accompanies the Moon) was an ominous foreboding in ancient times, representing that there would be droughts, great shocks or wars. In particular, ancient Chinese emperors would set an official position named the Imperial Board of Astronomy that was good at observing the astronomical phenomena to help the emperor predict the fate of the country by observing the signs of the sky. This echoes with Tokarczuk’s protagonist Duszejko’s idea that human activities are influenced by planet motion and we need to abide by the laws of nature. There is a concept of the unity of heaven and man in traditional Chinese culture, which penetrates deeply into all things and regards them as human compatriots, which carry human feelings and are closely related to human survival. Under the concept of the unity of heaven and man, because man and all things have a common origin of life, they are all compatriots and have the meaning of equality.

5.1.1. Sources of Writing Nature in their Works

Mo Yan’s literary creation of nature was deeply influenced by Chinese traditional culture, his vernacular culture and his growing experiences, as well as the Pu Songling’s 《聊斋志异》 (*Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*)⁵.

The potential influence of traditional Chinese culture on literary works has continued to this day. Buddhism existed in China before the Later Han Dynasty, and through long periods of dissemination and development, Buddhist ideas have deeply influenced Chinese culture and literary concepts. The Buddhist value of “not to kill” is in fact to treat animals and human beings as equal and independent living entities. At the same time, Buddhism’s transmission of meaning to Chinese animal narratives is mainly embodied in the two core concepts of “equality of all living beings” and

⁴ Mo, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, 242.

⁵ 《聊斋志异》 [*Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*] is a novel of 491 anecdotes written by Pu Songling during the Kangxi period of the Qing Dynasty. The content is wide-ranging, mostly about foxes, fairies, ghosts and demons, reflecting the social landscape of 18th century China. The author profoundly depicts fox fairies, ghosts and demons as a way to satirize the times.

“karma”⁶. Besides, according to Chan Kit-sze Amy, the main reason why ecosophy finds a great opportunity in Chinese philosophy and culture is due to the concept of 天人合一 (unity of man and nature), which is an overarching theme shared by Confucianism and Daoism.⁷ One of the representatives of Daoism, Zhuang Zi, emphasizes the “unity of things”, stressing “Humans mingle with birds and beasts, and coexists with all creatures”⁸, and Confucianism advocates the love of all things. All these ideas have had a profound impact on Chinese animal narratives and laid the foundation for Mo Yan’s equal view of “human and animal as one” and his recognition of the animal’s will to live. Sentences like “People and animals aren’t that different”,⁹ “Humans and animals are so much alike”¹⁰ and “As far as I’m concerned, there’s no difference between animals and humans”¹¹ appeared in his *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* and *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*.

Mo Yan’s creation of animal narratives is, to a large extent, influenced by the local vernacular culture and his growing experiences. The transformation of animals into other forms in 《山海经》 (*The Classic of Mountains and Seas*), and the mode of returning favors in 《搜神记》 (*In Search of the Supernatural*) reflect the worship or imagination of animals in the folk people’s thinking. Mo Yan once said that his hometown was rich in stories of animal spirits and monsters, “the poorer and more backward the place, the more stories there are, since my hometown is not far from Pu Songling’s hometown, many ghosts and foxes stories circulating in our mouths are more or less the same as those in *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*.¹² When Mo Yan was a child and listened to the stories told by his grandfathers and other ancestors, he was deeply affected by the legendary stories of animals and monsters such as the master and the white eel spirit, and the master riding a flying donkey to deliver a fox of

⁶ Chen Jiayi, 《中国当代动物学叙事的类型研究》 [*A Typological Study of Contemporary Animal Narratives in China*] 北京: 中国社会科学出版社 (Beijing: Chinese Social Science Press, 2008), 35.

⁷ Chan Kit-sze Amy, “Chinese Literature and Ecofeminism” in *The Routledge Handbook of Ecofeminism and Literature*, ed. Douglas A. Vakoch (New York: Routledge, 2023), 17.

⁸ Zhuang Zi, 《庄子》 [*Zhuang Zi*] 北京: 中国社会科学出版社 (Beijing: Chinese Social Science Press, 2004), 100.

⁹ Mo, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, 39.

¹⁰ Mo, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, 94.

¹¹ Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 223.

¹² Mo Yan, “我的故乡与我的小说” [“My Hometown and My Novels”], *Review of Contemporary Writers*, no. 2 (1993).

a baby fox.¹³ The coexistence between the boldness of the people and the wildness of the animals in the northeast village of Gao Mi has been a valuable asset for Mo Yan's work on animal narratives. Besides, according to Mo Yan's own biography,¹⁴ he dropped out of elementary school in 1967 and spent his days with cattle and sheep and wandering the grassland, he became one with nature. That experience nurtured in him a reverence toward the natural world and engendered an understanding of the animal world. These two in turn comprise a foundation of his fictional world. He also heard from his great uncle some wonderful stories that subvert history and penetrate reality, that tie together Heaven, Hell, and humankind, and that treat animals, nature, and human beings equally.

Mo Yan's most important literary mentor was Pu Songling, whom Mo Yan called "Master Pu", saying that he had the greatest influence on him, and that the source of his literary creativity was not only in Boom Latinoamericano, but also in Pu, and that he has always learnt from him, and paid homage to him.¹⁵ Mo Yan's animal narratives fit so well with the concept of animal narratives in Pu Songling's *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* for the following main reasons: Firstly, the two lived in very close geographical areas, Gao Mi and Zibo belong to the Qi region, and were influenced by the romantic Qi culture as well as by the folklore of ghosts and foxes, which are very similar. Secondly, Mo Yan and Pu Songling's path of literary creation are similar. Mo Yan has always sought to write for the common people, while Pu Songling's writing also combines his personal life with the common people, emphasizing on the description of human nature. Thirdly, Mo Yan deeply shares Pu Songling's attitude towards animal narration and his literary mentality. Pu Songling's *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* is no longer limited to the use of animals to convey certain symbols or to achieve the purpose of fantasy and whimsy. Instead, it integrates animals with human society, showing the living forms and spiritual outlooks of human beings and

¹³ Mo Yan, "我在美国出版的三本书" ["My Three Books Published in America"], *The World of Fiction*, no. 5 (2000).

¹⁴ Mo, "The Nobel Prize in Literature 2012: Biographical."

¹⁵ Mo Yan, 《<我们都是被偷换的孩子>中的文学经验》 [*My Literary Experience in "We Are All Stolen Children"*] 杭州: 浙江文艺出版社 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang Literary Press, 2020), 234-37.

animals in the society of the time, reflecting the true reality, and conveying the deep-seated spiritual problems of the society. Mo Yan, talking about his motivation for his creative work, which is in line with Pu Songling's, said, "the reason why my creative work has become more and more ghostly in recent years is probably because I am tired of the hustle and bustle, the superficiality, the hypocrisy, and the carnality of the city life, and so I have taken refuge in the pure world of my imagination."¹⁶ Both of them share the same desire to use their familiar animal writing to reveal the mental state behind the social phenomenon in order to achieve a certain profound literary purpose. Transformations and magical illusions are precisely meant to highlight the truth. This writing method from the perspective of animals questions and challenges the long-prevalent human centrism, examining, repairing and enriching humanity from a new perspective.

Tokarczuk's writing of nature is also connected with Polish traditions and cultures, and her own life experience. Poland's folklore is packed with stories and mythical creatures, showcasing the culture and values of its people. Polish folklore often personifies nature, reflecting its spiritual and cultural importance. The Wawel Dragon teaching the importance of bravery and wisdom, and the tales of the water nymph encouraging respect for nature and caution towards its unpredictability, are very fascinating creatures from Polish folklore. The water nymph stories highlight the Polish people's respect and awe for the power of nature, and their belief in *Rusalki* (water nymphs) highlights a mystical relationship with natural elements. In Poland, seasonal festivals and celebrations are key parts of the culture, reflecting the country's history and its connection to nature. The events include the Marzanna effigy drowning in spring symbolizing the renewal and the end of winter's hardships, and the *Dożynki* harvest festival in autumn celebrating the culmination of labor and the earth's generosity.¹⁷ These events reflect Poland's deep connection to the cycles of nature and its agrarian heritage. Another trait in Polish culture of nature originated in Romanticism, with its

¹⁶ Mo Yan, 《<感谢那条秋田犬>中好谈鬼怪神魔》 [*Keen on Talking about Ghosts, Monsters and Demons in "Thanks to the Akita Dog"*] 杭州: 浙江文艺出版社 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang Literary Press, 2021), 70.

¹⁷ Julie Tobey, "Exploring Polish Folk Culture, Traditions and Legends," Polish Culture NYC, September 24, 2024, <https://www.polishculture-nyc.org/exploring-polish-folk-culture-traditions-and-legends/>.

emphasis on the beauty, majesty and idyllic qualities of traditional landscapes. Romantic Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz, or the Last Foray in Lithuania: a History of the Nobility in the Years 1811 and 1812 in Twelve Books of Verse*, praises local landscapes, representing for the long-lost home. The romantic view of nature as a symbol of home, sacred fatherland, and idyllic past has a firm ground in the Polish mind.¹⁸

What's more, Tokarczuk's writing of nature is also connected with her own life experience. According to Tokarczuk's biography, when she was a child, she used to spend a great deal of time on walks, investigating the enormous park, its ponds, paths, hidden nooks and passages. She also used to go to the nearby village to observe the people, their way of life, the objects they had and their animals. Every year she and her younger sister were sent to their mother's parents for a holiday in the countryside, where she could get close to nature and hear her grandma telling past stories.¹⁹ Tokarczuk had a profession on psychiatry after graduating from the University of Warsaw, but she gave it up when she found out that she was not suitable for it. Then she moved to a small village with her husband to live a seclusive life, at that time she had two dogs in her cottage. One day the dogs disappeared, she searched everywhere for them, and the local people told her that there were some hunters here who got drunk and killed animals indiscriminately. The dogs were never found, and the incident was haunting in her mind for many years, but she never had the chance to talk about it. After this, she aimed to be an environmentalist and eco-rights activist to claim rights for animals, and she is a vegetarian. She puts her past experiences into her novels and this incident becomes a topic of her *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*.

In addition, Tokarczuk strongly agrees with the ideas of James Hillman, an American psychologist, whose works focus on mythology, soul, crossing borders, imagination, personifying and animism that shape human experience. She has read some Hillman's books and recalled her readings of Hillman in an interview as follow:

¹⁸ Agnieszka D. Hunka, Wouter T. De Groot, and Adam Biela, "Visions of Nature in Eastern Europe: A Polish Example," *Environmental Values* 18, no. 4 (November 2009): 431, <https://doi.org/10.3197/096327109x12532653285777>.

¹⁹ Tokarczuk, "The Nobel Prize in Literature 2018: Biographical."

In retrospect, I think I was born a Hillmanian. I searched for a very long time and somehow instinctively came across Jung, whom today I would call the old master. But at some point, I started to have trouble with Jung. I came across Hillman in the early 90s-I don't remember exactly how, I probably came across one of his books that I started reading and disbelieving what I was reading, I started looking for more books. Finally, I read everything that was available at the time. The more I delved into it, the more I felt that it was a kind of "Yes! Exactly!".²⁰

Tokarczuk referred to James Hillman three times in her volume *The Tender Narrator*, and the most extensive reference was Hillman's belief in personification.²¹ In her Nobel Prize speech, Tokarczuk's ideas of imagination, mythology, personification and animism resonates with that of James Hillman's. According to Hillman, through personifying, the writer attributes a human form or character, or a human attribute of personality to anything impersonal or irrational. Personifying offers another avenue of loving, of imagining things in a personal form so that we can find access to them with our hearts. The purpose of personifying is to save the diversity and autonomy of the psyche from domination by any single power, whether this domination be by a figure of archetypal awe in one's surroundings or by one's own egomania. Personifying is the soul's answer to egocentricity.²² Hillman also has an animistic view that sees soul or spirit as existing in all forms of life. Tokarczuk also believes that human beings and animals are in an equal position, humans are never the dominator of the world, besides humans, animals, plants, even objects are having souls. To Tokarczuk, the art of personifying gives a voice to animals, and through personifying, the author shows his or her tenderness to animals, loving and pitying them. In her Nobel Prize speech "The Tender Narrator", she said that animals were mysterious, wise, self-aware creatures with whom we had always been connected by a spiritual bond and a deep-seated similarity. Therefore, in her works, many of the protagonists give a human name to the animals and treat the animals as daughters or some intimate friends, such as Janina

²⁰ Mizerkiewicz, "Olga Tokarczuk i przekraczanie granic," 391. These quoted sentences are translated from Polish to English.

²¹ Mizerkiewicz, "Olga Tokarczuk i przekraczanie granic," 392.

²² Hillman, *Re-visioning Psychology*, 12-32.

Duszejko in *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*, who treats her two dogs as daughters, and gives human names to those animals around her village cottage. Cornspike in *Primeval and Other Times* lives in the forest with a snake and an owl, and she gives names to them.

5.1.2. Problems Faced by Nature in their Works

This part will mainly analyze the problems faced by animals, plants and things in both Tokarczuk's and Mo Yan's works. Compared with natural disasters, human beings are the biggest threat for the existence of animals, plants and natural things in their books. Although ancient Chinese concepts advocate the unity of human and nature as mentioned above, yet with the economic development in modern China, the nature was sacrificed to pave the way for rapid industrialization, urbanization, and infrastructure expansion. Since the late 20th century, China's goal of economic growth has usually prioritized industrial output and urban development over environmental preservation, which has resulted in substantial ecological degradation. Having realized the deterioration of environment, in recent years, China has been taking measures to promote ecological conservation and a harmonious relationship with nature. The concept of "Green mountains and clear waters are as valuable as mountains of gold and silver" promoted by Chinese government emphasizes when pursuing economic growth, environment should be put in priority.²³ The same is true in Poland that even if the ideas of revering nature and being deeply connected to the cycles of nature are advocated, however, urbanization and industrial growth disrupted traditional ecological practices, bringing about environmental degradation and pollution. During the socialist era, the government prioritized heavy industries, such as coal mining and steel production, often at the expense of natural landscapes. According to a research conducted by Agnieszka D. Hunka and other two scholars in 2009, out of four types of

²³ This concept was put forward in an article published in *Zhejiang Daily* on August 24, 2005 by the Party Secretary of Zhejiang Province, Xi Jinping, now China's President. This concept has been widely accepted and practiced in China's development.

images of relationship between humans and nature in Poland, “mastery over nature”, “stewardship of nature”, “partnership with nature” and “participation in nature”, the most agreed type by Poles was the “stewardship of nature”, followed by the “participation in nature”. Stewardship of nature had its origin in Christian doctrines, appearing to have survived alive and well in Polish minds and hearts. The stewardship type also corresponds with the romantic feelings and concept of nature as home that people care for.²⁴ Tokarczuk’s works try to revolutionize this traditional view of nature that still emphasizes the centrality of human beings and regards human beings as a superior race that should take the main responsibility for protecting nature. The view of nature constructed by Tokarczuk in her works points out that all creatures are equal and everything in nature is interconnected, and that human beings should always have respect and reverence for nature.

This part will analyze the multi-fold problems faced by nature and human-nature relationships in Tokarczuk’s and Mo Yan’s novels. Firstly, for a long time, human beings have regarded themselves as center of the world, dominating everything. Humans deem that everything in the nature is lower and exists there to serve people and satisfy their needs, and humans are the observers and leaders. In an anthropocentric world, nature is judged by its value, that is, its usefulness to human beings. Nature is no longer a free being equal to human beings, but has been reduced to a tool of human beings. In Tokarczuk’s works, the priest was a representative of anthropocentrism, who was “by nature impetuous and touchy about his dignity, so when he saw the Black River of so little substance, so sluggish, so non-descript and vacuous, so elusive and cowardly taking away his meadows, he was filled with rage.”²⁵ Man wants to dominate nature and has constructed a god who dominates everything, so we see pictures and statues of gods in the appearance of human beings, which is an exaltation of man’s power, a kind

²⁴ Hunka, “Visions of Nature in Eastern Europe,” 445-446. The type “mastery over nature” means the attitude of human supremacy on Earth usually associated with Enlightenment and technological optimism, “stewardship of nature”, meaning the nature is seen as a vulnerable system for which we are responsible, and humans stand above nature; however, this position brings both privileges and duties, “partnership with nature” means humans and natures carry much of the same value and share the planet in a relationship of physical and maybe even spiritual exchange, and “participation in nature” means the most ecocentric image, in which a key aspect of being human is to be part of the great system and process of Nature, physically and spiritually.

²⁵ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 46.

of “humanism”, so to speak, and a disdain for everything. Therefore, as the same with the priest, when faced with nature’s power, man became powerless and outraged because their sense of authority shattered and disappeared. Besides, human beings divide beneficial insects and pests, weeds and crops according to whether the animals or plants are beneficial to them or not. Man tends to shamelessly judge the laws of nature from his own point of view, as if the Creator had created everything for the sake of mankind. The priest in *Primeval and Other Times* was an example of this kind of arrogant man who thought “the frogs were shameless and revolting, emitting hideous noises, and the snakes were disgusting, but the priest had a better attitude towards fish because they could be eaten, so they were good, God’s gift.”²⁶ So if the priest eats frogs and snakes, he will not deem them as disgusting because they have values to him. There is no such thing as superiority or inferiority among all the living beings, it is all blamed to human beings’ definition or prejudice that leads to these differences in the treatment of nature. The sacristan, who was responsible for keeping order in the church, was full of indignation when he noticed Florentynka’s dog was rummaging around the baskets full of food to be blessed, he leaped forward to drive away the impudent animal.²⁷ The sacristan used his power to drive away the dog because he thought it was sacrilege, but the Virgin Mary of Jeszkotle did not care about the dog’s eating the food and kept her promise to Florentynka to mind her dog. Those people like the sacristan were trying to dominate or control others in the name of God, in other words, the God was created by them to justify their domination towards others, such as women and nature. Their actions do not represent the mind of God or the Virgin Mary of Jeszkotle, but represent their own thoughts.

In *House of Day, House of Night*, the carpenter bound a young twig with wire to make it grow in a circular shape for the purpose of using it to make picture frames, and if it thickens or lacks symmetry in the process of growing, it is said to be imperfect. In the city, grasses are mowed and greening institutions do not allow them to bloom. People categorize the things in the world according to “usefulness” and “uselessness”

²⁶ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 46.

²⁷ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 93.

to classify living beings as superior or inferior, and even to deprive the so-called “useless” of their right to live, which displays the arbitrariness and arrogance of human beings. As Tokarczuk’s character, Boros, an entomologist, said, “From nature’s point of view no creatures are useful or not useful. That’s just a foolish distinction applied by people.”²⁸ All beings are created equal; it’s time for us to discard the idea of anthropocentrism.

Human beings’ arrogance and centrism in classifying animals and plants into useful and useless was also embodied in Mo Yan’s works. In 1958 China launched a campaign to eradicate the “four evils”, which were flies, mosquitos, rats and sparrows because flies, mosquitos and rats were thought to spread diseases, while rats and sparrows could steal and damage crops. Those four kinds of animals were believed to be useless for humans, so a nationwide campaign was launched to eradicate them for the benefits of humans. This event was depicted in Mo Yan’s novel: “Jintong had fallen in with the sparrow eradication corps, marching under bamboo poles with red strips of cloth and accompanied by the clang of gongs, as they stalked the sparrows in Northeast Gaomi Township from one village to the next, keeping them from finding food or a spot to perch, until they dropped to the streets from exhaustion and hunger.”²⁹ This campaign was turned out to be an ignorant political movement that neglecting the ecological balance and law of nature. In Mo Yan’s *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, the apricot tree was thought to be useless and intended to be cut down because it did not bear any apricot for its owner Huang Tong. He even condemned the tree to be like the landlord Ximen Nao to “have a score to settle with us poor peasants.” However, the real reason for the tree not producing any fruit was that he had not taken good care of it.³⁰ Instead of blaming his ignorance for taking care of the tree, Huang Tong arrogantly blamed the tree for not producing fruit and threatened to take it down one day due to his human-centered superiority. Besides, when Lan Lian’s black donkey Blackie broke his right leg when carrying the County Chief Chen, a farmer said that the crippled

²⁸ Tokarczuk, *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*, 155.

²⁹ Mo, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, 405.

³⁰ Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 27-28.

donkey was useless and suggested selling it to the butchers for some money.³¹ To some people, when an animal loses the value or usefulness to them, they can dispose or kill the animal as they wish, and they have no emotions or attachment to the animal who has accompanied them for a long time. What's more, the oxen were classified into different categories according to whom they belong to:

The commune oxen are tools of production, but an ox belonging to an independent farmer is a tool of reactionary production. If an ox belonging to the People's Commune butted someone, we wouldn't dare kill it, but if an ox belonging to an independent farmer butts someone, I'll pronounce the death sentence without delay!³²

Here the oxen were also classified into "usefulness" and "uselessness" just as the creatures in Tokarczuk's works. At that time of People's Commune Movement in China, the only independent farmer Lan Lian's ox was thought to be useless and reactionary as its owner, and its life was at the mercy of any people belonging to the commune. On the contrary, those oxen belonging to the commune were protected, however, they were protected not out of people's love or tenderness towards them, but because the oxen were tools of production and were useful for people. During the Cultural Revolution period in China, Ximen Jinlong organized a Ximen Village branch of the Golden Monkey Red Guard faction and bought red materials to make armbands, red flags, and red tassels for spears, and used red paint to paint doors, windows, walls, and even the apricot tree.³³ They burnt bad elements people's furniture or cut down pine trees to light a bonfire and hold criticism meetings every night.³⁴ Besides the plants, the animal, Ximen Ox, was put on a nose ring and punished savagely by Ximen Jinlong because it refused to plow the collective land and Jinlong hoped to tame the ox to prove his power and ability, and finally it was beaten to death. After its death, there were some people who wanted to butcher and eat the badly-wounded ox.³⁵ In the part *Pig Frolics*, in order to show the Gaomi Collective Commune's ability in raising fine pigs and to gain

³¹ Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 97-98.

³² Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 128.

³³ Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 163.

³⁴ Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 186.

³⁵ Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 215.

financial support from the higher official government, the Gaomi leaders put forward an absurd suggestion to get the pigs drunk with liquor and gave them a bath and a haircut, and then wrote slogans with red paint on those pigs' bodies. The slogans were "Mate for the revolution" and "Bring benefits to the people", and then they drew plum blossoms and sunflowers with red and yellow paint.³⁶ These pigs were utilized as advertisements for propagandizing Gaomi leaders' achievements in their official career. In the frenzy of Cultural Revolution movement led by people who had become confused and disoriented, not only people, but also the plants and animals were unfortunate to suffer and to be utilized to serve people, at the mercy of human-centered men.

Anthropocentrism was also displayed in Mo Yan's *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*. When Commissar Jiang saw those dead horses killed by his mines, he said:

"all of them fine animals. What a shame you had to stumble into our minefield. When you're eating horsemeat in a little while, who knows, you may be eating your own mounts, even though, as people say, 'mules and horses may be as fine as gentlemen, but they're still only mules and horses.' So go ahead, eat as much as you can, since man is at the top of the food chain."³⁷

As a man of power, Commissar Jiang believed that man was at the top of the food chain and could eat other animals as they like. Human centrism was also reflected in China's "great leap forward" movement and "great steelmaking" movement from 1958 to 1960, during which a national steelmaking campaign in blind pursuit of steel production was launched. A crazy slogan of the campaign was "The productivity of the land is determined by people's boldness." To make steel, every household's iron and steel products were confiscated to be thrown into the furnaces, and "every tree in the village had been cut down to stoke the backyard furnaces; a layer of smoke hung over the fields."³⁸ That campaign was a blind pursuit of economic growth that exaggerated human's power and neglected the natural laws. Another example of anthropocentrism was the hybrid experiments during 1960s led by leaders who did not understand any

³⁶ Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 253-55.

³⁷ Mo, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, 192-93.

³⁸ Mo, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, 405.

biological common sense. Commander Ma “ordered those medical students to let the bull’s sperm envelop the sheep’s egg and that the ram’s sperm merge with the rabbit’s egg. Under her direction, the donkey’s sperm was inserted into the sow and the boar’s seed injected into the donkey’s womb.”³⁹ Commander Ma acted like a creator aiming to create new species, tormenting creatures that were weaker than her. In an era when scientific knowledge lagged far behind, there were such a group of ignorant people who command indiscriminately, and those medical students did not dare to go against the leader’s will even if they knew it was absurd and unscientific. The sperm and egg of different animals will not merge to produce a new species, and this is where the nobility and sanctity of life lies, and the laws of nature cannot be blasphemed.

Secondly, the wars and social unrest waged by humans caused great dangers and damages to nature, not only humans but also many animals were hurt or killed in the wars, plants and natural landscapes were destroyed, and houses were burnt down. War is the destruction of all living creatures in nature. In *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, the fish in the water and horses were bombarded by bombs. “On that early morning, every living creature in Northeast Gaomi Township — humans, horses, donkeys, cows, chickens, dogs, geese, ducks — felt the power of the explosions off to the southwest. Hibernating snakes, thinking it was thunder announcing the Insect Waking season, slithered out of their caves and immediately froze to death.”⁴⁰ After the killing and looting of the village by Japanese, the survived villagers had no food, no farm animals or no seeds left, they went out to search for edible wild herbs, voles, wild jackrabbits, fish, turtles, shrimp, crabs, snakes, and frogs. All across the vast land, the only creatures that survived were poisonous toads and birds on the wing. In order to combat hunger, the villagers had no choice but to usurp everything that can be eaten to help them survive. In *Red Sorghum*, in the anti-Japanese war, Japanese confiscated Chinese farmers’ mules to work for them on the Jiao-Ping highway. Besides, Yu Zhan’ao and his son used a billy goat’s belly to transport cartridges. “They drove a billy goat, nearly dead from the dung building up inside it, to the sorghum field at the western edge of the village.

³⁹ Mo, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, 412.

⁴⁰ Mo, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, 129.

Granddad and Father hurriedly cut open the billy goat's stitched-shut rectum, and after relieving itself of pounds of dung, it dumped several hundred cartridges onto the ground."⁴¹ During the war, to supplement their diet with more nutritious food and keep up their strength and health, Yu Zhan'ao and his son often went dog-hunting. They also used dog skin to make clothes and hats to shield themselves from the coldness. *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* examines how human pain is reflected by animals, as animals suffer alongside humans. The ox, donkey, monkey and pig were portrayed in the novel to illustrate the hard circumstances of rural life as well as to imply that the political and economic upheavals that shaped human civilization also had an influence on animals. During the time of war, "donkeys were used to transport machine guns and ammunition in the thick of battle, and a handsome black donkey like me would not have been able to avoid conscription."⁴² In *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, wild rabbits died in droves during the war, their lives ending not by weapons but from fright.⁴³

In *Primeval and Other Times*, the German soldiers led by Kurt shot at dogs straight between the eyes, making the dogs' bodies flying, as if they were turning somersaults.⁴⁴ In *House of Day, House of Night*, like the Japanese invaders in China, the Soviet soldiers also confiscated people's horses to serve them. "The Soviet soldiers were harnessing thoroughbred horses from the von Goetzen stables to their cannon."⁴⁵ Besides, the horses were treated without mercy, only a tool for men to ride. In the legend of Saint Kummernis, when Kummernis's father came home from afar, his horse dropped down from exhaustion, but he did not even give it a second glance. The horse has taken him home after a long way, but it was not cared by him at all, it was just a transporting tool and its life was nothing for him. While Kummernis was kind to animals. When people took sick animals to her cave, she never refused to cure them, she laid her hands on them and prayed for their health as if they were people. Horses ridden by Japanese soldiers in the war were depicted by Mo Yan as longing for home and hating the war: "The horse hadn't died, either. Its neck was writhing like a python, its eyes

⁴¹ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 172-73.

⁴² Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 54.

⁴³ Mo, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, 320.

⁴⁴ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 118.

⁴⁵ Tokarczuk, *House of Day, House of Night*, 201.

sadly fixed on the sky and sun of the unfamiliar Northeast Gaomi Township.”⁴⁶

Likewise, the plants also underwent tortures and destruction during wars in Tokarczuk’s and Mo Yan’s works. In *Red Sorghum*, the red sorghum fields were shielding place for Chinese soldiers to hide, waiting for the Japanese to invade, so the red sorghum fields also stood as battlefields where a lot of red sorghums were destroyed and many people lost their lives in the field. In *House of Day, House of Night*, an illiterate but wise and mysterious woman Marta saw a world without traces of humanity, no bush, no stream, no day and no night, “the hill was still covered in forest, but when she looked at it closely she could see that it was dead; at some point it had hardened and turned to stone... the forest would come crashing down and turn to dust.”⁴⁷ What Marta saw coincides with the clairvoyant Leo’s foreboding about the Doom’s day. As depicted in this novel, the Doom’s Day will come when the nature is destroyed by human beings, the humanities will disappear together with the nature.

Thirdly, animals’ lives were threatened either due to human beings’ desire for land, food, clothes, shoes or even sex, or due to people’s tiredness in keeping them. In *Primeval and Other Times*, the Russian soldier Ivan Mukta had sex with a goat to satisfy his sexual desires, “he pressed against the goat’s rump and start rhythmically moving his hips.”⁴⁸ The poor goat became the object for Ivan to vent his sexual desires, human beings’ animal instincts were displayed in having sex with an animal. Besides, animals were hunt in their novels. The acquaintances of Paweł’s were keen on hunting, and would arrive home from the forest laden with hares or pheasants. In *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*, Big Foot was a typical image of a predator. He was born in the forest of Kłodzko and made his living by selling the resources of the forest. He treated the forest as his private property, hunted illegally by all means, set fire to the mountains capriciously, and even beat the trunks of the trees with a stick when he was drunk, and bullied nature with angry to satisfy his perverted interest. The forest fed him, but he had no gratitude or reverence for it. Besides Big Foot, the Commandant, Innerd,

⁴⁶ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 180.

⁴⁷ Tokarczuk, *House of Day, House of Night*, 209.

⁴⁸ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 131.

the President of Mushroom Pickers' Society, the priest and dozens of other men were hunters and killers of animals. These hunters satisfied their desire to control life and confirm their own power by willfully killing animals, and especially the priest's sadistic behaviors were cloaked in the guise of guarding the harmony and order of nature. Just because of their absolute power of speech, these hunters revealed their condescending arrogance, and overthrew the notion of the equality of all things. In *Primeval and Other Times*, ever since Florentynka had gone mad, instead of drowning the kittens or puppies, people began to toss them to her house, thus her house became a refuge for those animals.⁴⁹ Florentynka was thought to be a mad old woman by her neighbors, but such a mad woman always treated animals and people with respect, better than those "normal" people who abandoned their kittens or puppies. In *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, the famine started in 1959 in China, after eating all the bark from trees and the edible grass, a gang of people charged into the Ximen estate compound like a pack of starving wolves and killed Lan Lian's donkey for food.⁵⁰ In 1980s China, the human's standard of living was on the rise, and people having grown weary of eating domestic fare, were in the lookout for wild, edible game. The forest was burnt along with the massacre of boars by people's use of flamethrowers. Around 1982 the development ushered in a campaign to "eradicate the wild boar scourge," while in fact the goal was to put wild meat on the people's tables.⁵¹ The boars were massacred and the use of flamethrowers started a fire that consumed all the pine and willow trees on the shoal. And most other creatures on the shoal were burned along with the trees.⁵² Later thanks to such factors as a population explosion, land scarcity, deforestation, and industrial pollution, small game animals had virtually disappeared, and most professional hunters had taken up new trades.⁵³ This also demonstrates that the living of humans, animals and plants are closely connected and linked, thus a respect for each other is needed to preserve the ecological balance and to build a harmonious living environment of all the creatures.

In rural China, the oxen were castrated or put nose rings on them after they become

⁴⁹ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 54.

⁵⁰ Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 105.

⁵¹ Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 365.

⁵² Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 372.

⁵³ Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 372-73.

adult oxen for the purposes of manipulating them. In order to establish his political position and prove his advancement, Ximen Jinlong put a nose ring on the Ximen Ox to control it and make it obey his orders. Xu Bao was a cruel man liked to eat animals' testicles and tried every means to cut Ximen Donkey's gonad in order to prove his ability in castrating animals and to eat the gonad to improve his own virility⁵⁴; and Zhu Jiujiu, a butcher of the commune, cut off one of the horns of Ximen Ox, a liquid called "ox-horn essence" oozed from the stump of the severed horn, and this essence was thought to be a powerful material that could aid for male virility.⁵⁵ In *Red Sorghum*, eating dog's penis is believed to cure impotence of men.⁵⁶ To improve the quality of meat of retired boars, people would castrate them, which is a dangerous operation for grown pigs. Besides, the settlement of human beings occupied animals' habitats and forced animals to leave their homes and make room for human houses, which is illustrated in Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum*:

At one time the site had been a wasteland covered with brambles, underbrush, and reeds, a paradise for foxes and wild rabbits. Then a few huts appeared, and it became a haven for escaped murderers, drunks, gamblers, who built homes, cultivated the land, and turned it into a paradise for humans, forcing out the foxes and wild rabbits, who set up howls of protest on the eve of their departure.⁵⁷

Human beings' intrusion into animals' homes are met with animals' howls of protest, but their protest was invalid and ignored by arrogant humans. In *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, with the development of the economy and material abundance, people's stomach has become unsatisfied with the usual meat like chicken, duck, fish, beef and pork, and they started to be proud of being able to eat those rare national protected animals like alligators, swans and mandarin ducks, because they believed that everyone could eat carp but not much people could eat alligators. Gen Lianlian and Parrot Han prepared a "hundred bird banquet" to entertain the officials and bank managers to bribe them for bank loans. The hundred bird banquet ranges from ostrich to hummingbird. Mallard and blue horse chicken. Red-crested crane and long-tailed turtledove. Bustard and ibis,

⁵⁴ Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 72.

⁵⁵ Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 177.

⁵⁶ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 259.

⁵⁷ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 189-90.

hawfinch and mandarin duck, pelican and lovebird. Yellow roc, thrush, and woodpecker. Swan, cormorant, flamingo...⁵⁸

Fourthly, animals become victims of males venting their angers or displaying their masculinity by subduing creatures weaker than them. When Yu Zhan'ao rode his mule to Passion's house hurriedly, feeling anxious inside, "the mule, whipped mercilessly by the twisted end of the hempen reins, turned to glare at the man on its back, convinced that it was already moving about as fast as it could go."⁵⁹ The mule has tried its best to carry its master, but its efforts were paid by harshly whipped reins. One time, after having a quarrel with Dai Fenglian, Yu Zhan'ao took his fury out on the poor black mule, "he swung the mule around and headed off to town, he heard shouts behind him, but he kept beating the mule wildly without a backward glance. With each blow, the mule bucked, but the more it protested the angrier Granddad became."⁶⁰ In Mo Yan's *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, Xu Bao was a natural-born eunuch, so he had loathing for testes in other male animals and developed a special skill and taste for eating animals' testes because he believed that eating testes can make up for his lack of testis.⁶¹ In *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, Aunt Sun had five grandsons whose parents seemed not to have existed. They always played on the wall and killed animals passed by:

"People got off relatively easy, but not the animals; it made no difference if it was a stray calf or a raccoon, a goose, a duck, a chicken, or a dog, the minute they spotted it, they took out after it, along with their big black dogs, converting the village into their private hunting ground. The year before, they had chased down a Felicity Manor donkey that had broken free of its halter; after killing it; they'd skinned and butchered it out in the open."⁶²

As mutes, they did not dare to hurt people, but they killed animals arbitrarily and brutally. They butchered and skinned the donkey in the open air to show their ability and masculinity. Years later, the eldest mute, Speechless Sun, vented his angers and displayed his masculinity through threatening a woman and beating a donkey. His first act after being promoted to squad leader was to demand that Shangguan Lu hand over him her eldest daughter who was betrothed to him by Shangguan Lu but eloped with

⁵⁸ Mo, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, 498.

⁵⁹ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 343.

⁶⁰ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 347.

⁶¹ Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 336-37.

⁶² Mo, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, 12-13.

Sha Yueliang. He felt humiliated and came to revenge. He blocked the donkey's way, raised the sword in Mother's direction, and twirled it over his head. But her eldest daughter had eloped away, finally the mute swung his arm in the air and brought his fist down in the donkey's head, leading the innocent donkey's front legs buckled and it fell against the millstone. A crooked smile spread across his face.⁶³ The mute had to accept the fact that he was not chosen by Laidi before, but since he was promoted to squad leader, he displayed his masculinity by threatening a woman with a sword and beating an innocent donkey, which was, instead of showing his ability, only an act of cowardice. In *House of Day, House of Night*, when Bobol's dog was slandered by several villagers to have bitten a cow to death, in spite of Bobol's protesting that his dog was tied up, the villagers still asserted that it was his dog killed the cow, as the saying goes, "A repeated slander makes others believe." The poor dog sensed its death, started whining and fell to the ground. Bobol had no choice and "raised a thick piece of wood, swung his arm and whacked it on the head."⁶⁴ As a speechless animal, the poor dog was wronged by humans, at the mercy of people's slanders and beaten to death by its coward owner. Animals were usually thought to be in a lower rank than humans, so when Ergo Sum knelt down and sobbed by the cow's body, the people stared at him in amazement and exchanged derisive looks, and one of them said to him, "Hey, mister, get a grip on yourself. Are you crying for the cow or the dog? Don't you feel sorry for the people?"⁶⁵ To those people, Ergo Sum's crying for an animal was ridiculous and they thought humans should feel sorry for people, instead of for animals.

Fifthly, the things, such as rivers, land, air, buildings and other things, suffer from great pollution and destruction in their works. In Mo Yan's works, during the anti-Japanese war in Northeast Gaomi Township, the Black Water River was polluted by dead bodies and blood: "The water sobbed as it flowed down the riverbed. The heavy, dull rays of sunlight were pulverised by tiny ripples on its surface. Autumn insects hidden in the damp mud beneath the water plants set up a mournful chirping."⁶⁶ The war made the sun, the moon and the stars dim, made the mountains and the land full of holes, made the grass and trees turn into ashes, and made the cities turn into scorched earth. Wherever the bombs and bullets went, there was bound to be devastation, spreading corpses everywhere, filling rivers with blood and letting nature lose its color.

⁶³ Mo, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, 178.

⁶⁴ Tokarczuk, *House of Day, House of Night*, 214.

⁶⁵ Tokarczuk, *House of Day, House of Night*, 214.

⁶⁶ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 98.

Besides, in 1976 in Gaomi, after the Red Death decimated the pig population, the farm personnels secretly loaded the carcasses onto a wagon and hauled them down the river, where they were tossed into the water to float downstream.⁶⁷ The river was polluted and people living in the downstream area had to suffer the negative impacts inflicted by this action. In *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, during the Liberation War between the Communist Party and Nationalist Party, the buildings were leveled to ground, the air was greatly polluted, and trees were burnt, and the sky and earth were turned red by cannons: "...nearly all the buildings in the tiny village had been leveled; even the three-room hut where Lu Liren and members of the county government had lived was now nothing but a pile of rubble...The air was hot and dry; a number of trees with charred limbs appeared to have been struck by lightning."⁶⁸ In the 1980s China, the industrial development caused great environmental contamination, "Jintong saw a tall sheet-metal chimney rising above the Sima family compound, spewing clouds of green smoke. That was the source of the stomach-churning smell in the air...All anyone can see these days is money."⁶⁹ To pursue economic development, the environment was at great expense.

In Tokarczuk's *House of Day, House of Night*, in Krysia's twenty minutes journey on a bus from countryside to the town, the world changed out of all recognition. "The forest became houses, the mountain pastures became town squares, the meadows became streets, and the stream became a river, which was a different color every day, because unfortunately it flowed past the Blachobyte textile mill."⁷⁰ Industrial development has made people's lives better and more convenient, but the neglect of environmental protection made the river contaminated. In *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*, "an old quarry used to take bites out of the Plateau and would surely consume the whole thing eventually in the avid mouths of its diggers. They say there are plans to start it up again, at which point we shall vanish from the face of the Earth, devoured by Machines."⁷¹ The old quarry eroded the place where the protagonist Janina lived, and if the quarry was to be restarted, then people would disappear from the earth, disappearing into the surface of the earth that had been swallowed up by the machines. Nature is being swallowed up by the humans whom she has created, and

⁶⁷ Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 326.

⁶⁸ Mo, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, 314.

⁶⁹ Mo, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, 467.

⁷⁰ Tokarczuk, *House of Day, House of Night*, 29.

⁷¹ Tokarczuk, *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*, 49.

humans are being swallowed up by the machines that they have created.

5.2. Tenderness and Warmth towards Animals in their Works

Lori Gruen suggests that any interpretation of an ecofeminist vision must include a reexamination of our relationship to nonhuman animals. She also suggests that an adequate ecofeminist theory must not only analyze the joint oppression of women and nature, but must specifically address the oppression of the nonhuman animals with whom we share the planet. Neglecting this issue could lead ecofeminism to engage in the kind of exclusionary theorizing that it claims to oppose.⁷² This research also focuses on analyzing Tokarczuk's and Mo Yan's tenderness and warmth towards animals because almost all the works of the two authors have some narrations on animals and each of them has a book mainly focuses on the writing of animals, Tokarczuk's *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead* and Mo Yan's *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*. The former one is about the protagonist's advocating for animals' rights and agency, as well as revenge for animals against those privileged and powerful men; the latter one examines history and society from the combined standpoint of humans and nonhuman animals, such as donkey, ox, pig, dog and monkey, which sees nonhuman animals as inseparably embedded in human history and as active agents in their own right. Besides these two novels, the other four novels analyzed in this dissertation also have descriptions about animals, which demonstrates their love and keen observations of animals in their daily lives. By bringing animals into more central and interconnected roles and disrupting the strict divisions between humans and animals, their works explore the relationships between humans and nonhuman animals and emphasize the urgent need for humans to reevaluate traditional human-centered ideology and redefine their connection to both other animals and the broader natural world.

Influenced by their respective cultures, growing and study experiences, both

⁷² Lori Gruen, "Dismantling Oppression: An Analysis of the Connection Between Women and Animals," 61.

Tokarczuk and Mo Yan treat animals with tenderness and love in their works, believing that animals are equal with people and animals have the same feelings and emotions as people. There are many scenes in their novels depicting animals' loyalty and closeness with people. They recognize animals' rights to live and control their own lives, challenging established hierarchies and promoting a more egalitarian human-nature relationship. They demonstrate an ecofeminist ideology in their novels through the deconstruction of androcentrism and anthropocentrism.

5.2.1. Depicting Animals Having Emotions and Personalities

The animals in Tokarczuk's and Mo Yan's works are not metaphors or accessories that reflect human qualities or emotions. They have their animal communities, their own language of communication, emotions and feelings towards humans and their own species, as well as thoughts. As Latour asserts in his Actor-Network-Theory, agency is not limited to human individual actors but extend to non-human, non-individual entities, recognizing their significance in shaping our world.⁷³ Recognizing the agency of both human and non-human actors encourages a reevaluation of our roles and responsibilities within intricate networks of interaction. This view moves beyond a focus on what we are able to do, urging instead a reflection on what we ought to do. It is about recognizing that our actions have consequences, not just for ourselves, but for all the other actors in the network, thus calls for a more ethical, responsible and sustainable way of relating to the world. By recognizing animals' agency in their works, the two authors challenge the anthropocentric belief that only humans possess the capacity to act meaningfully in the world, and break the dualistic opposition that separating humans from animals.

The animals in Tokarczuk's novels exhibit agency by acting as sentient beings with emotions, personalities and the ability to affect the course of events. In *House of Day*, *House of Night*, Tokarczuk depicted the life of the slug family as a human family

⁷³ Latour, "On Actor-Network Theory," 370.

do: a big, tough brown father, a slightly smaller mother and two children, in the evenings they sat silently at the table, at night the whole family goes to sleep, their bodies sticking to one another. In the morning they went out and brought home rotting strawberries. She described the activities of the master of the slug family. At night the father went to people's homes and ate the wet lettuce in their gardens and the tender young courgetti shoots. He reveled in gnawing holes in them and the rain. But his favorite was the bonfire ash that has turned to mud. He wallows about in it, and goes home dirty, drunk on the damp remains of the fire. His wife silently reproaches him – she was dying of worry.⁷⁴ The slug family lived in the same way as a human family in this novel, they have the emotions of happiness, revelry, reproach and worry.

In *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*, the Big Foot's dog was referred to as "she" by Duszejko and Oddball, and Duszejko would say hello to the dog when passing by. Big Foot's dog was locked by him in the dark and cold shed, and the dog howled. Duszejko could not bear the pathetic howling, when she went to save the dog out of the shed, the dog wagged her tail uncertainly and then looked at Duszejko with moist eyes, joyfully. she took the dog home and spoke to it soothingly, and gave it an account of her every move; the dog watched her questioningly, baffled by such a sudden change of circumstances. The next morning, "the dog was standing by my headrest, insistently staring at me, and pitifully whining, groaning... Then she glanced at me sorrowfully – I can boldly say that she looked me deep in the eyes – and raced off toward Big Foot's house."⁷⁵ The author used words such as "questioningly", "baffled", "sorrowfully" and "pitifully" to describe the emotions and feelings of the dog that are the same with human's emotions. Duszejko used to have two dogs herself, and they would play tricks on each other for fun, just like people do. They taught her quite basic, plain and simple justice, "they kept close watch to make sure everything was divided fairly – food, petting, privileges. Animals have a very strong sense of justice. We have a view of the world, but Animals have a sense of the world".⁷⁶ Duszejko thought the

⁷⁴ Tokarczuk, *House of Day, House of Night*, 143-46.

⁷⁵ Tokarczuk, *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, 32.

⁷⁶ Tokarczuk, *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, 202.

dogs were more human than people in every possible way, more affectionate, wiser, and more joyful. To write such a detailed and personified description of animals is to attribute them with subjectivity and intentionality, thereby challenging traditional hierarchies between humans and non-humans and seeing animals as meaningful agents.

In *Red Sorghum*, when Yu Zhan'ao rode his mule to Passion's house anxiously, "the mule, whipped mercilessly by the twisted end of the hempen reins, turned to glare at the man on its back, convinced that it was already moving about as fast as it could go."⁷⁷ Like a wronged person, the mule glared at Yu expressing its wrath and dissatisfaction with him, the tender author acknowledged the mule's emotions and its rights to express it. Although the author had no power to change the terrible situations of these animals at that time, but he was able to express these animals' thoughts and minds, giving voices to animals to express themselves. Later there was one time when Yu Zhan'ao had a quarrel with Dai Fenglian, he rode on the mule and beat it wildly, "with each blow, the mule bucked, but the more it protested the angrier Granddad became. He was taking his fury out on the poor animal, which bucked and twisted so violently it finally threw its rider into last year's sorghum."⁷⁸ Being beaten cruelly again and again, the mule protested gradually from bucking mildly to violently threw Yu into the sorghum field. Mo Yan vividly depicts the changing process of the mule's mood and protest, reflecting the mule's resistance of being oppressed by men. At first, the beaten mule only glared at Yu, but now it refuses to bear the torment again and resists by throwing Yu down from its back.

The animals in *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* are capable of communicating with humans and with each other. When Lan Lian struck up a conversation with Huahua, his donkey made eye contact with her donkey. "The humans had their speech, we had our own ways to communicate. Ours was based on body odors, body language, and instinct."⁷⁹ The life of Ximen Donkey was not very different from that of a human being. It has experienced birth and death, from the beginning of its anger at being a

⁷⁷ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 343.

⁷⁸ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 347.

⁷⁹ Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 39.

donkey facing all kinds of humiliations and having its self-esteem trampled on, to gradually obeying the donkey's instincts and performing its functions perfectly, earning the affirmation of being a donkey. It has also experienced passionate love, having a beloved partner and two children who died prematurely. Throughout its life, it has pursued wildness and freedom several times; it has fought wolves to death and won unlimited praise; it has fought a dozen men and escaped various chases many times; and it has enjoyed the honor and glory as the county chief's mount. Lan Lian and Yingchun regarded it as one of their family members and did not sell it to butchers when it became crippled and unable to do the farm work. It had the true and deep love of its master and mistress, and it had its own arrogance, self-respect, loveliness, strength, and indomitability as Ximen Donkey. The animals in Mo Yan's novels exhibit agency by actively shaping events, influencing human characters, and participating in the activities beyond mere symbolism or background, thereby challenging traditional hierarchies between humans and non-humans.

5.2.2. Breaking down Anthropocentrism and Recognizing Animals' Rights

Peter Singer defines speciesism by making comparisons between brain-damaged infants, severely retarded humans, and animals, and criticizes that the "sanctity of life" is only the "sanctity of human life."⁸⁰ He points out that speciesism is a bias in favor of one's own species and is considered morally on a par with sexism and racism. To avoid speciesism, what we must do is to bring nonhuman animals within our sphere of moral concern and cease to treat their lives as expendable for whatever trivial purposes we may have.⁸¹ Mo Yan breaks down the species boundaries between humans and animals in his works, placing humans and animals on an equal place. Tokarczuk also blurs the boundaries between humans and animals in her works and expresses her ideas that humans are no different from animals when exposed in extreme conditions of

⁸⁰ Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation: The Definitive Classic of the Animal Movement* (New York: Open Road Integrated Media, 2015), 50.

⁸¹ Singer, 53.

starving and surviving. Out of their survival instinct, humans will give up their civilization, morality and humanity, and began to eat human flesh. In this way humans have no difference from animals, which disrupts people's moral complacency and confronts the deeply ingrained hierarchies between humans and animals. Anthropocentrism was challenged and broken down in both Tokarczuk's and Mo Yan's works.

In *House of Day, House of Night*, in spring of 1943, after one of their companions died, Ergo Sum and other three companions ate his flesh out of hunger:

They leaped from their seats and went out into the snow to look for the body, which had suddenly become extremely valuable and desirable. That's how Ergo felt about it – he needed it, he longed for it, he did not care about the thoughts at the back of his mind – for example there were some Latin verses hanging about in his head...until finally it was Ergo who saw the singed boot and started wildly shrieking with joy, "I've got him! I've got him!" Later one of them went out and fetched some frozen scraps of meat that he threw into the water...⁸²

They consumed the body in about two weeks until it was hard to recognize the source of their supplies any more – it was just a heap of rags, an irregular frozen shape. When exposed to threats of life, Ergo did not care about his thoughts and the Latin verse in his head, all the humanity and civilization can be abandoned when faced with starvation. At first the biologist did not eat the flesh and warned them that they might get an allergy because their immune systems were not adapted to consuming that sort of protein, but later he was so weak and ate the flesh and soup. The biologist only vomited once, then they began to eat the intestines. When attacked by hunger, humans exposed their survival instincts, and all the biological knowledge and human theories disappeared. Ergo's story reminds of Mo Yan's character Birdman Han who was captured by the Japanese in the anti-Japan war and sent to Hokkaido in Japan to work as a laborer, then he fled to hide in the mountains for 15 years before returning to his hometown. In the mountains he lived peacefully with a pack of wolves, ate plants and fruits, and lost his language ability. When drinking water, he was lying on his back by the side of the stream, sticking his head in the water and drinking in the manner of the wild beasts. In

⁸² Tokarczuk, *House of Day, House of Night*, 179-80.

depicting Birdman Han's experience, Mo Yan deconstructed the man/nature binary to a certain extent. He highlighted a certain partnership between man and nature when Birdman Han found from the eyes of the wolf friendliness and ease, then he and the pack of gray wolves reach a kind of tacit understanding of peaceful coexistence, and in his subsequent dealings with the wolves, he even knows their ages, bloodlines, and hobbies clearly. In this portrayal of Birdman Han's life in the wilderness, readers can feel both cruelty and warmth. Mo Yan also let readers see human beings return to the primitive state in their relationship with nature, showing that human beings coexisting and competing with all things in nature as equals, in a partnership of interdependence. Mo Yan's several works often write people as animals, because during the dire and miserable times, only by retaining the animal nature can they survive. Or rather, man himself is an animal, if he cannot be a man, then be oneself as an animal to survive the dark and tragic times. Mo Yan's characters mentioned many times in his works that "Humans and animals are so much alike,"⁸³ "People and dog were the same,"⁸⁴ "People and animals aren't that different."⁸⁵ In Mo Yan's *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, when the people doctor Baofeng was asked to treat a sick pig, Hong Taiyue told her not to feel unworthy of her talent in treating a pig, Baofeng replied, "the thought never occurred to me, as far as I'm concerned, there's no difference between animals and humans."⁸⁶

Mo Yan recognized animals' rights in his works by depicting dogs fighting against men to protect themselves and eating human corpses during the war in *Red Sorghum*. Before the war started, the dogs were tamed and raised to guard the door and protect their owners. However, in times of war, the dogs became homeless and their survival instincts were motivated out of hunger. The corpse of dogs fallen into rivers were eaten by eels, but when the dogs wanted to eat human corpse to survive, they were shot and stopped by humans. Mo Yan personified the dogs who fought like soldiers against those people who stopped them from eating human corpses. The same as people, dogs also

⁸³ Mo, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, 94.

⁸⁴ Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 397.

⁸⁵ Mo, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, 39.

⁸⁶ Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 223.

had their own rights to survive. In a desperate time when people could eat people, people could eat animals, animals could eat animals, there is no reason that dogs could not eat human corpses for survival. Mo Yan acknowledged the dogs' rights to survive in a chaotic world and personified them as brave soldiers fighting bravely and wisely against people:

When the dog pack was at full strength, they were probably six hundred in all, made up primarily of village dogs whose masters lay rotting in the marshland. They were led by our family's three dogs: Red, Green, and Blackie. Months of vagabond lives and feasting on rotting meat had awakened primal memories anaesthetised over aeons of domestication. A hatred of humans — those two-legged creatures that walked erect — seethed in their hearts, and eating human flesh held greater significance than just filling their growling bellies; more important was the vague sensation that they were exacting terrible revenge upon those rulers who had enslaved them and forced them into the demeaning existence of living off scraps.⁸⁷

Here the lives of dogs and humans are closely connected, in a state of eating or being eaten, killing or being killed. The author did not judge dogs from an anthropocentric perspective but recognize dogs' rights and desire to survive. Whether for humans or dogs in times of war, they have to resist enemies and eat food for survival, this kind of survival needs come from their primitive instincts.

In *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, Tokarczuk adopted elements of animism, reflecting her belief in the sanctity of all living beings. The protagonist Janina Duszejko had a deep compassion for animals, opposed fiercely to hunting, and believed that animals had an inherent right to justice. She was an advocate for animal rights and believed that animals are equal with humans and should be treated with respect, care, and protection from human cruelty. She was disgusted towards hunting and the way society disregarding the lives of animals, so she bravely confronted with the local hunters and officials who dismissed her concerns for animals. Through Janina, Tokarczuk critiques anthropocentrism and the exploitation of nature by patriarchal systems, raising questions about the ethics of hunting and human dominion over

⁸⁷ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 219, 224.

animals.

To conclude, in both writers' works, people are arrogant enough to think that they are superior to other animals, but actually, people are very fragile when faced with natural disasters, ailments, environmental pollutions and other threats. In certain situations like extreme weather or outbreak of some viruses or diseases, the ability of humans to survive may be seriously challenged. The outbreak of coronavirus from 2020 to 2023 was a vivid example for survived people to respect and protect nature. Humans, as part of the food chain, also need to recognize the importance of maintaining ecological balance. The impact of human activities on the environment may lead to the decline or extinction of other species, which not only affects the stability of the ecosystem, but may also, in turn, affect the survival and development of human beings. We should also realize that in nature, each species has its own unique value and role, and that there is no such thing as "superior" or "inferior" species.

5.2.3. Bestiality of Human Beings Versus Humanity of Animals

Animals' humanity and humans' bestiality are contrasted in Tokarczuk's and Mo Yan's works to challenge anthropocentric assumptions and deconstruct the human/animal binary. By describing animals as empathetic, intelligent, and loyal while exposing cruelty, instinctual violence, and moral failure in humans, both authors blur the lines between the human and the nonhuman, urging readers to reconsider what it truly means to be "human." They thought animals have their own joys, sorrows and values, sometimes, animals were even more compassionate and righteous than humans. In *Red Sorghum*, the story between Old Geng and the fox was a stark contrast between the kindness and loyalty of animals and the selfishness of human beings. The hunter Old Geng fired his shotgun at the fox who has had trust in him for a year, but when Old Geng was bayoneted eighteen holes by the Japanese soldiers and was dying, the fox that he fired at saved his life by licking his wounds with its cold tongue. In the past year, a trust has been built between Old Geng and the fox, so the fox thought he would not fire at it, and did not hide from Old Geng.

“Something suspiciously like a guilty conscience began to stir in Old Geng. He thought back over the past year and the trust the fox had shown in him: it always knew he was hiding behind the embankment, yet it sauntered across the ice as though putting his conscience to the test. And Old Geng had always passed the test. But now he had betrayed this friendship...”⁸⁸

When Old Geng was bayoneted by Japanese and was about to die, in his semiconscious state he saw the furry red fox emerge from the clump of reeds and circle round him once, then crouch down and gaze sympathetically. He felt the fox rub against his body, and thought it would rip him apart with its razor-sharp teeth. But unexpectedly, the fox saved his life by licking his wounds with its cold tongue. Whether this is a true story or not, here Mo Yan depicted a human betrayed his trust and a fox saved the man who fired his shotgun at it, a quite ironic contrast between human’s cruelty and disloyalty, and animal’s kindness and loyalty. To Old Geng, the most sarcastic thing was that he was saved by the fox and was not bayoneted to death by the Japanese during the war, but starved and frozen to death on his eightieth in 1973 in front of the gate of the commune compound. A stark contrast was formed when the staff of the commune compound were happy to distribute supplies for the New Year, even the dogs in the commune compound are obese, but this old man just froze to death in the snow. No wonder the species’ regression was often mentioned in Mo Yan’s works, “Surrounded by progress, I feel a nagging sense of our species’ regression.”⁸⁹ Progress brought about material wealth, but also led to people’s loss of soul. In *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, Shangguan Lu was often yelled at, beaten and wounded by her mother-in-law and husband because she had been consecutively given birth to girls, her “scalded flesh began to fester and smell. The old mule that had brought her over from her aunt’s house gave her a melancholic look, consoling her, inspiring her, encouraging her.”⁹⁰ Compared with the brutal humans, the mule showed its sympathy and comfort to the poor Shangguan Lu.

Likewise, in Tokarczuk’s *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*, Big Foot’s dog was locked by him in the dark and cold shed, and the dog howled. Duszejko could not bear its howling and saved the dog out of the shed and took it home, soothing it

⁸⁸ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 326.

⁸⁹ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 4.

⁹⁰ Mo, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, 74.

gently and looked after it very well. But the next morning, the dog chose to leave Duszejko's house and went back to its master's house, also its prison, "Then she glanced at me sorrowfully – I can boldly say that she looked me deep in the eyes – and raced off toward Big Foot's house."⁹¹ Although Big Foot treated the dog brutally and cruelly, and Duszejko treated it gently and kindly, the dog still determined to go back to its master's house. Big Foot's brutality towards it and its loyalty towards him formed a stark contrast here. Despite Big Foot was mean to the dog usually, when he was choked to death and lying on the ground, the dog was barking plaintively beside him, so his death was found out by Oddball because of the dog's pathetic barking.

In *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, Mo Yan tries to eliminate the separation between humans and animals through the plot setting of reincarnation, exploring the survival of human beings in the process of development and change in the north-eastern township of Gaomi from several animals' point of view and from the perspective of the human spirit. Ximen Jinlong's brutality towards his adoptive father, Lan Lian, was contrasted with the Ximen Ox's loyalty in this novel. Lan Lian refused to join in the commune and insisted on working alone on his land, enduring the violent behaviors of his adopted son, Ximen Jinlong, and was not understood by his own son Lan Jiefang. He was only supported by Ximen Ox, an ox reincarnated by a landowner who belonged to a different class from him before the reincarnation. Ximen Jinlong abandoned his original surname "Ximen" and adopted his adoptive father's surname "Lan" because he wanted to cut off with his biological father Ximen Nao, who was a landlord denounced and sentenced to death during the Land Reform. But during the Cultural Revolution, in order to vent his dissatisfaction to his adoptive father Lan Lian's refusing to join the People's Commune, Ximen Jinlong ordered people to paint Lan Lian's face and teeth red. In order to embrace the honor of erasing the last independent farmer in Gaomi county to consolidate his authority among the public, he incited his adoptive father, Lan Lian, to hang himself with a rope over the beam. As a contrast, Ximen Ox and Lan Lian became comrades in arms, and even became families beyond the master-

⁹¹ Tokarczuk, *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, 32.

servant relationship between animals and human beings. On the day Lan Lian's son took the ox to join the commune, there were tears in its eyes. Ximen Ox would rather be burnt to death than stand up and pull a plow for the People's Commune, so Ximen Jinlong severely whipped and tortured Ximen Ox for refusing to plough the land. After being cruelly beaten and tormented by Ximen Jinlong and several other men, the loyal Ximen Ox chose to die on his own master's land.⁹² Lan Lian buried the ox in the middle of his land, under a prominent grave mound, known today as Righteous Ox Tomb, one of Northeast Gaomi Township's noted sights. In stark contrast, Ximen Jinlong, as a human being, openly declared that he had drawn a line with his adoptive father, Lan Lian, for the sake of his own future, which showed his selfishness and brutality. The brutal bestiality of human beings was contrasted with the loyal humanity of animals, and the moral and ethical changes of human beings in the course of social development are reflected vividly.

Similarly, in *House of Day, House of Night*, a contrast between human's cruelty and the horse's kindness was formed. When Bobol's dog was beaten to death because the dog was accused of biting a cow to death, Ergo Sum knelt down and sobbed by the cow's body, the people stared at him in amazement and exchanged derisive looks, and one of them said to him, "Hey, mister, get a grip on yourself. Are you crying for the cow or the dog? Don't you feel sorry for the people?" Ergo Sum looked up in the face of the old man, seeking sympathy. Maybe he even thought the man would hug him into his chest and wipe the tears from his face. But the peasant's eyes were like knives.⁹³ However, later when Ergo Sum "drove the cows out to the meadow, and the horse, who nodded his head up and down as if bidding him good-day or saying thank you."⁹⁴ Here a sharp contrast between the apathy of people and the kindness of the horse was formed to support the argument of bestiality of humans and humanity of animals in Tokarczuk's works. In *Primeval and Other Times*, the miserable Florentynka lived alone with her husband drowned in the White River while drunk, seven out of nine children died, and the two children left alive deserted her and disappeared into the world. She only had two cows left which fed her, and also fed her dogs. Her two children deserting her was

⁹² Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 210-15.

⁹³ Tokarczuk, *House of Day, House of Night*, 214.

⁹⁴ Tokarczuk, *House of Day, House of Night*, 216.

contrasted with her two cows feeding her and her dogs.⁹⁵ Florentynka's example illustrates that sometimes the animals that keep you company may be more loyal than a human companion. Perhaps it explains one aspect of the reasons why nowadays many couples choose not to have children or choose to raise their pets as sons or daughters.

Besides, the close relationships between animals are contrasted with the brutal or apathetic attitude between people in Tokarczuk's and Mo Yan's works. In *Red Sorghum*, the close relationships between animals were contrasted with the brutal treatment toward compatriots. When one of Grandma's two mules was lying dead on the ground, its mouth open, a row of long white teeth chewing the earth. The other one sat suffering more than its dead comrade.⁹⁶ As a contrast, in order to save their own life, many Chinese men became traitors and helped the Japanese soldiers torture and kill their Chinese compatriots during the war:

The officer holding the leash shouted something to the crowd, and a crew-cut Chinese interpreted it for them. Two Chinese in black uniforms stripped Uncle Arhat naked and tied him to the rack. The Jap officer waved his arm, and two more black-clad men dragged and pushed Sun Five out of the enclosure. The interpreter spoke: "The commander says to skin him. If you don't do a good job of it, he'll have his dog tear your heart out." Sun Five mumbled an acknowledgement, his eyes blinking furiously. Father saw Sun Five's knife cut the skin above the ear with a sawing motion. Sun Five bent over and sliced off Uncle Arhat's genitals with a single stroke, then put them into the platter held by the Japanese soldier.⁹⁷

In *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, the civil war between different parties in China during the Japanese invasion was contrasted with the united donkeys. Facing the foreign invasion, instead of uniting together to drive away the invaders, those different parties representing different benefits fought against each other for weapons, villages and power. While "the musket band's black donkeys that were corralled in the church yard huddled together in a corner — twenty-eight individual donkeys becoming fourteen pairs: you nibble my rectum while I gently bite you in the flank. Mutual concern, mutual protection, mutual aid."⁹⁸ Through comparison, Mo Yan satirized that under hard and unfavorable situations, the donkeys displayed more unison than men.

⁹⁵ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 53.

⁹⁶ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 36.

⁹⁷ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 37-38.

⁹⁸ Mo, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, 192.

In *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, the intimate brotherhood between the dogs was contrasted with the Ximen Huan's apathetic and cruel attitude to his parents. After Dog Two died, Dog Four "found himself with nothing to do and no mood to try anything new, he either slept the day away in his kennel or wandered through the compound. As a contrast, after the death of Jinlong, Ximen Huan hung out with a bad crowd in town, returning infrequently, and only to get money from his mother. After Ximen Huan used up all of his mother's personal savings, he stopped showing up altogether."⁹⁹ Stasia's son Janek in *Primeval and Other Times* was like Ximen Huan:

Stasia missed her son, who after finishing school had stayed on in Silesia. He rarely came to visit, and had inherited his father's trait of telling Stasia to wait and wait for him. When he came back, he never wanted to stay for long, not for the whole vacation like Pawel's children. He always left after a few days and forgot to take the fruit syrup she had spent all year making for him. But he did take the money his mother earned selling vodka.¹⁰⁰

After her husband's leaving home forever, Stasia worked hard to support her life and Janek's study, but Janek did not understand his mother's love for him and seldom came home. When Stasia died, Janek did not come back until the grave had been filled in and everyone had already gone their ways, then he gave his mother's house to his uncle because the things left in the house "had no value for him, and he did not want the house or anything that came from Primeval."¹⁰¹ Beaten by her father before marriage, discarded by her husband after marriage, and left alone by her son, Stasia's whole life centered around the three men, but finally she lived lonely and died lonely. Also, in Tokarczuk's *House of Day, House of Night*, Whatsisname tells a story of animals' love and loyalty towards each other. After a monster was killed by the villagers, for the next few nights the villagers heard a dismal wailing from the woods on the Czech side of the border. A month later, in the dried-up pond where the male monster once lived, they found the dead body of a female monster, who had come through the woods and meadows and over the state border in search of her beloved, and at the site of his terrible death she herself had died.¹⁰² The closeness and intimacy among animals were contrasted with the cruelty and apathy among people.

In addition, the cruelty of Dai Fenglian's parents forcing her to marry a leper for

⁹⁹ Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 503.

¹⁰⁰ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 222.

¹⁰¹ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 222-23.

¹⁰² Olga Tokarczuk, *House of Day, House of Night*, 141-42.

the purpose of getting benefits is also contrast with the donkey's emotions and humanity in the novel. When Dai Fenglian cried and begged her father not to let her go back to her husband's home, but her father beat her and forced her to go back in order to get a big black mule from her daughter's father-in-law. At this time, "A blanket had been thrown over the back of the family's little donkey, in whose glistening eyes Grandma noticed a spark of human understanding."¹⁰³ Compared with her own parents, the donkey seems to be more understanding and closer to her, and this also showcases that Dai Fenglian treats the donkey very well at home. The donkey's rebellion against my cruel Great-Granddad and its closeness towards benign Dai Fenglian can be seen from this description:

"...and there they were, in Toad Hollow. The donkey kept its nostrils closed tight as it pawed the ground, refusing to go any farther, even when Great-Granddad smacked it on the rump with his sorghum switch. 'Get moving, you bastard! Get going, you rotten donkey bastard!' The switch sang out against the donkey's rump, but instead of moving forward, it backed up. An awful stench assailed Grandma's nostrils. Quickly dismounting and covering her nose with her sleeve, she tugged on the reins to get the donkey moving. It looked up at her, its mouth open, tears filling its eyes. 'Donkey,' she said, 'grit your teeth and walk past it. There's no mountain that can't be scaled and no river that can't be forded.' Moved by her words, it raised its head and brayed, then galloped forward, dragging her along so fast her feet barely touched the ground and her clothes fluttered in the wind like red clouds tumbling in the sky."¹⁰⁴

Even if being beaten by my Great-Granddad, the donkey was not willing to move forward; while being encouraged and moved by my Grandma, the donkey dragged along her gallops forward fast. This example showcased that kind-hearted Dai Fenglian could understand the donkey's emotions, treating it gently and encouraging it, and the donkey could also feel her emotions and encouragement on it. Great-Granddad treats the donkey badly, it refused to conform to his orders, while Grandma treated it gently and kindly, it complied with her requests and summoned the courage to bring her forward. In *Red Sorghum*, there was also a scene about loyal dogs saving their master's life at the risking of losing their own lives. "Yu Zhan'ao getting dressed when he was

¹⁰³ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 94.

¹⁰⁴ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 96.

pushed down onto kang by Little Yan and his men, who tied his hands behind his back and dragged him out into the yard. The dogs rushed up to save him, and the soldiers opened fire. Fur flew, blood was everywhere.”¹⁰⁵ However, after the war started, their three dogs became homeless and were forced to feed on human corpses to survive, along with other dogs, they were bombarded and killed by Douguan, the son of Yu Zhan’ao. Douguan condemned and used many cruel ways to prevent the dogs’ eating of human flesh, but he also ate human flesh indirectly. “The dog meat provided necessary nutrition and internal heat for Douguan who had grown two fists taller. Having fed on human corpses, the dogs were strong and husky; eating a winter’s supply of fatty dog meat was the same as eating a winter’s supply of human flesh.”¹⁰⁶ Through eating dogs who fed on human corpses, Douguan cannibalized his own people, but he did not condemn himself.

Furthermore, the infidelity of Yu Zhan’ao towards Dai Fenglian was contrasted with their two mules’ intimacy after a long time of separation. When Dai went to her mother’s funeral for several days, Yu had a love affair with their maid Passion because of solitude, while “their two mules, separated for so long, began to paw the ground, bob their heads, and bray loudly. When they were led up to the feeding trough, they nudged and nibbled each other intimately.”¹⁰⁷ Human’s unloyalty and animal’s loyal humanity was also contrasted in Mo Yan’s *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*. Lan Jiefang, the Deputy County Chief, never did any housework or cared about his son’s study at school, and betrayed his wife by having a love affair with Pang Chunmiao. In his son’s memory, he always worked overtime and seldom at home. As a contrast, their dog, Little Four, took the responsibility of guarding his son to go to school and go back home, because his filial son did not want his mother to be so tired with working and taking him to school. The dog did much more contribution in the family than Lan Jiefang. After announcing a divorce with his wife, Huang Hezuo, Lan Jiefang rushed out of the house immediately, not caring about his wife’s feelings and safety. On the contrary, their dog was afraid that Hezuo would commit suicide out of sadness, so the dog watched closely at Hezuo’s activities and “was able to relax a bit after being so fidgety”¹⁰⁸ when he

¹⁰⁵ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 162.

¹⁰⁶ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 284-85.

¹⁰⁷ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 295.

¹⁰⁸ Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 417.

made sure Hezuo would not kill herself. When Hezuo felt sad about the divorce, the dog would “looked at her sympathetically, walked up to her and wagged its tail to try to make her feel better.”¹⁰⁹ In this work the dog Little Four seemed to be better and more responsible than Lan Jiefang, the father and husband.

5.2.4. Closeness between Women and Animals

In Tokarczuk’s and Mo Yan’s works, women generally respect and protect animals; besides, usually women and animals are companions with each other. It is crucial to clarify that the closeness between women and animals in their works is not based on the essentialist view that women are inherently or biologically closer to nature due to their reproductive capacities, emotionality, or caregiving roles. Instead, as Karen Warren asserts that the closeness between women and nature is socially and historically constructed within patriarchal systems.¹¹⁰

In Tokarczuk’s works the protagonists’ connection with animals can be seen as a reaction to patriarchal domination and social alienation, not as a biologically determined trait. There are many descriptions about the close and intimate relationships between women and animals in her works. In *Primeval and Other Times*, Florentynka led a lonely and miserable life after her husband died, and seven out of her nine children died, and the two left children deserted her. She had two cows left which fed her and her dogs. She also took good care of the kittens and puppies deserted by their owners. At Florentynka’s hands, the two feeder-cows nourished a whole pack of animal foundlings. Although being a pathetic elder woman herself, she always treated animals with respect, as she did to people. “In the morning she said ‘good day’ to them, and whenever she put down a bowl of milk for them, she never forgot to say ‘bon appetit’.

What’s more, she never called them just ‘dog’ or ‘cat’, because it sounded as if she were talking about objects. She said ‘Mr Dog’ and ‘Mr Cat’, like Mr Malak or Mr

¹⁰⁹ Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 427.

¹¹⁰ Karen Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), 58.

Chlipała.”¹¹¹ To Florentynka, the dog named Billygoat was her cousin and it was very wise, she treated her dogs like her family members. Later when her dogs were bombarded and shot by Russian and German soldiers, Florentynke tried her best to drag away the live dogs, picking up the wounded ones and carrying them to the orchard.¹¹² She would rather sacrifice her own life to save her dogs. After being rejected by the human society, Cornspike lived in a cottage in the forest where she was accompanied by a snake, an owl, and a kite. These creatures never got in each other’s way. She gave the name Goldie to the snake. Goldie fell in love with Cornspike who was gentle and warm to him. Whenever Cornspike picked him up, he felt as if he were changing into something extremely important. She treated him well, and he gave her gifts and happiness, and followed her every move. Another case of preferring animals to rude humans is Cornspike’s daughter, Ruta, who has been insulted frequently by Ukleja, yet “she was even ready to love him, she could treat him like a large, sick animal.”¹¹³ It was really hard for Ruta to love Ukleja, but she could imagine him as a sick animal so that she could love him as she loved a sick animal. In Ruta’s mind, a big sick animal was much better and deserved to be loved than her rude husband Ukleja.

In *House of Day, House of Night*, the elder lady Marta was nice to her dogs. She would stroke the dogs’ backs with her fingers, telling how beautiful they are. She spoke only to the dogs all evening. Marta treated her dogs equally as if they understood each other. Kummernis was a kind-hearted lady dominated by her father in this novel, but she never refused to cure animals when people brought sick animals to her, she laid her hands on them and prayed for their health as if they were people.¹¹⁴

In *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*, Duszejko stands in direct contrast to the predators’ exploitative views because of her deep connection to nature, which is demonstrated by her love of the forest, her interest in astrology, and her observation of animal behaviors. Aside from her strong belief in nature, Duszejko is determined to protect it at all costs. She chooses to punish and kill the hunters in retaliation for their

¹¹¹ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 54.

¹¹² Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 118.

¹¹³ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 173.

¹¹⁴ Tokarczuk, *House of Day, House of Night*, 59.

heinous acts of killing her two dogs and many other animals in the village. Her protection of animals is performing an act of ethical resistance within a patriarchal and exploitative rural environment, rather than simply expressing traditional notions of femininity. Tokarczuk's accusation of human dominance and exploitation of environment in the novel is also a strong reflection of her own ecological concerns.

There are also many descriptions about the close and intimate relationships between women and animals in Mo Yan's novels, not due to any inherent or natural affinity, but rather as a result of emotional connection, mutual understanding, and a shared experience of marginalization shaped by social and cultural contexts. In *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, Yingchun displayed her tenderness and warmth towards her family's donkey (reincarnated by Ximen Nao). Yingchun was tender and kind to animals. She wiped softly the sticky stuff from the new-born donkey as if wiping down her own baby. The donkey's mother died as soon as it was born, Yingchun felt sorry for the little donkey and her eyes were moist with tears; she made sorghum porridge for the little donkey and fed it with a wooden spoon.¹¹⁵ When the little donkey's leg was hurt to bleed by Hong Taiyue, the highest-ranking official in Ximen Village, Yingchun cleaned its injured leg with salt water and wrapped it with a piece of white cloth, which was a warm moment for the donkey.¹¹⁶ When Ximen Donkey tried to leave Ximen estate and pursue his freedom, he was touched by his mistress Yingchun's warmth to him:

Yingchun, displaying considerable courage, walked up to me with a handful of fresh green grass. "Little Blackie," she muttered, "don't be afraid. I won't hurt you. Come home with me..." When she was standing next to me, she rested her left hand on my neck and put the grass in her tight hand up to my mouth, stroking me gentle as she shielded my eyes with her bosom... "Little black donkey," I heard her say, "my little black donkey, I know you've grown up and that you're looking for a mate, a donkey wants to sire its young. I don't blame you for that, it's perfectly normal. Well, you found your mate and you've planted your seed, so now you can come home with me..."¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 17-19.

¹¹⁶ Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 30.

¹¹⁷ Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 62-63.

The donkey fell to his knees, then the other people quickly put his halter on and affixed the reins, adding a rusty-smelling chain in his mouth. He felt painful when someone pulled the chain tight around his lower lip, Yingchun reached out and hit the hand that was tightening the bit. “Let that go,” she said. “Can’t you see he’s injured?”¹¹⁸ Yingchun is a woman full of kindness and tenderness to animals. When it was New Year Festival, Yingchun placed a bowl of dumplings in water to cool them off, and then dumped them into the donkey’s food trough with his regular feed, patted him on the head.¹¹⁹ It was unusual for people to have a meal of dumplings during that time, but their donkey could enjoy dumplings, which not only showed their kindness and warmth to the donkey, but also indicated that they regarded the donkey as one of the family members of them. Yingchun was also tender and kind to their dog. When it was snowing and cold outside, kind-hearted Yingchun carried the four small dogs and their mother into her house and laid them down on the heated *kang*.¹²⁰ Her tenderness to animals is not because of any innate connection, but as a reflection of their shared vulnerability, marginalization, and resistance within patriarchal power structures.

Huang Huzhu was another woman treating animals well in this novel. Huzhu tweaked the pig’s ear with her finger and told Jinglong that pig seemed to be having convulsions. But Jinglong did not care and venomously hoped a few pigs die because the old sow did not have enough teats to feed the small pigs. Huzhu said, “No, they’re all going to live.” She put the pig down and wiped it clean with a soft red cloth. She was so gentle that the pig felt wonderful.¹²¹ When Pig Sixteen, a pig reincarnated by the landlord Ximen Nao, was not willing to drink the pig mother’s milk, Jinglong whacked the pig on the rump, Huzhu complained “Don’t be so rough on him” as she pushed Jinglong away and pulled the pig up to her, where she gently rubbed its belly. Huzhu murmured, “You precious thing, foolish little Piglet Sixteen, your mother’s milk is really good, just taste it. You have to eat to grow up.”¹²² Under Huzhu’s patient guidance and persuasion, Pig Sixteen started to taste its mother’s milk, and found it

¹¹⁸ Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 63.

¹¹⁹ Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 70.

¹²⁰ Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 385.

¹²¹ Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 222.

¹²² Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 227.

delicious and fragrant, and enjoyed it. Besides, Huzhu, Ximen Bai, who fed the pigs corn or millet gruel, was also kind to the pigs. She would mutter to them, “my little darlings,” and “you little dears”. Pig Sixteen thought she was a bighearted woman who treated the little pigs like her own children.¹²³ Women’s gentleness to pigs was also depicted in comparing men’s inability and women’s ability in carrying those wild pigs over to the pens:

In contrast to these useless men, the slow-moving middle-aged women – Yingchun, Qiuxiang, Bai Lian, and Zhao Lan – bent at the waist, stretched out their arms, made gentle sounds with their tongues, and, with friendly smiles, got close to some of the pigs that had been forced into a corner. Despite the filth covering the animals, there were no looks of disgust on the faces of these women, just genuine smiles. The pigs oinked but didn’t run away, so the women reached out, disregarding the filth on their bodies, and scratched their hides. Pigs never pass up a good scratching, and people love to be flattered. The animals’ fighting will evaporated; shutting their eyes blissfully, they swayed a moment or two and then slumped to the ground. The only thing left was for the women to pick up their velvet prisoners and, still scratching them between their legs, carry them over to the pens. Hong Taiyue praised the women and scorned the rough-and-tumble men.¹²⁴

Besides women’s gentleness to animals, animals were also companions to women in Mo Yan’s works. Donna Haraway advocates for a post-anthropocentric approach to animal studies that “instrumental relations” between species be established so that all species may flourish. These relations constitute an instrumental economy in which we are “companion species to one another.”¹²⁵ Within her framework, humans and animals are not separate or superior/inferior but are bound together as “companion species,” co-participants in a shared and interdependent world. Dog Sixteen recalled that Hezuo’s attitude toward it had taken a positive turn after it had snooped out her husband’s lover, Pang Chunmiao; its importance had increased considerably, in her eyes. She often talked to the dog about what was on her mind, like a garbage pail for her throwaway comments and complaints. And the dog was not just her confessor figure, but also a sort of adviser to whom she often asked questions concerning her husband.¹²⁶ After getting married, Hezuo’s life was centered around her husband, son, work and housework, she

¹²³ Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 228.

¹²⁴ Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 238.

¹²⁵ Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 93.

¹²⁶ Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 441.

had no friends to confess to. Thanks to the dog's companionship, she had a confessor figure to complain about her husband's betrayal and to confess her thoughts.

In addition, some female characters could enjoy some kind of freedom from patriarchal oppression by connecting themselves with the image of animals. Chan Kit-sze Amy states that "while it holds true that animals-turn-women diminish animals to an instrument and demonstrate the anthropocentric and androcentric ideology of ancient Chinese literature, women do gain freedom from the patriarchal oppression with the nonhuman status."¹²⁷ In *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, Third Sister, Lingdi, was very sad when her lover Birdman Han was taken to Japan by Japanese, her words and behaviors became strange and similar to that of birds, and she told her family she had become a Bird Fairy and they needed to make an altar for her. In this magical way of writing, Mo Yan depicted Bird Fairy Lingdi's taking the shape of a bird, releasing her repressed sexual desires in public. Normally, this kind of public display of sexual desires by a woman at that time was denounced and punished, but in the shape of a bird, Lingdi not only escaped the punishment but also attracted a lot of visitors to worship her and search for solutions to problems, in which way, she brought incomes for her family to survive at that difficult time. Besides Bird Fairy, there was also Fox Fairy that were revered in his novels. During a time when women were oppressed and positioned low in society, the image of combining a woman with an animal could cloak them with a layer of mystery and make them revered and worshipped. This kind of combination of woman and animal can be traced back to the Chinese creation myth in which Nüwa, the most prominent goddess who had created human beings, was in the image of a woman head and bust, and the lower part was snake tail.

5.3. Tenderness and Warmth towards Plants in their Works

The studies on plants have been rich in recent decades. From an environmental protection point of view, in Chapter 2 "Farm, Fen, and Forest" in *The Death of Nature*, Carolyn Merchant connects the ecological changes, like deforestation, in Western

¹²⁷ Chan, "Chinese Literature and Ecofeminism," 22.

Europe with economic changes during the period of the rise of mercantile capitalism and the nation-state.¹²⁸ Robert Pogue Harrison points out that Western civilization literally cleared its space in the midst of forests in his *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*.¹²⁹ Laura Rival focus on trees in their symbolic use across cultures, especially in society and politics in *The Social Lives of Trees*.¹³⁰ The discussion about plant intelligence started in 2002 with an botanist Anthony Trewavas’s article “Plant Intelligence: Mindless Mastery,” published in *Nature*. In this article, he raised the question of whether plants could be regarded as intelligent.¹³¹ In 2002, Owen Jones and Paul Cloke published *Tree Cultures: The Place of Trees and Trees in their Place*, where they examine trees as a representation of the connection between nature and society. Their work also addresses non-human agency, ethical considerations, and the relationships between trees and their environments.¹³² In his book *What a Plant Knows: A Field Guide to the Senses*, biologist Daniel Chamovitz affirms plant awareness by providing examples of plants sensing colors, smells, touches, changing shape, and even adjusting based on memory.¹³³ In Latour’s Actor-Network-Theory, he proposes that a precise role should be granted to non-humans that they have to be actors, and not simply the hapless bearers of symbolic projection.¹³⁴ Tokarczuk’s view on plants resonate with those ideas that plants are not as symbols or projection of characters’ emotions, but have agency and make a difference in the network of associations. As Latour advocates that “agencies are always presented in an account as doing something, that is, making some difference to a state of affairs, transforming some As into Bs through trials with Cs.”¹³⁵ In Tokarczuk’s works, plants are not passive background elements but sentient beings having thoughts and agency. They not only participate actively in the networks, influencing human lives and events, but also often portrayed as holding wisdom, memory, and vitality.

Mo Yan’s descriptions of plants display some difference from Tokarczuk’s depiction. As analyzed in the previous part that both Tokarczuk and Mo Yan spent a lot

¹²⁸ Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*, (San Francisco: Harper, 1980), 62.

¹²⁹ Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), ix.

¹³⁰ Laura Rival, *The Social Life of Trees* (Routledge, 2021).

¹³¹ Anthony Trewavas, “Plant Intelligence: Mindless Mastery,” *Nature* 415, no. 6874 (February 2002): 841, <https://doi.org/10.1038/415841a>.

¹³² Owen Jones and Paul Cloke, *Tree Cultures: The Place of Trees and Trees in Their Place* (2002; repr., Routledge, 2020).

¹³³ Daniel Chamovitz, *What a Plant Knows: A Field Guide to the Senses* (New York: Scientific American, 2013).

¹³⁴ Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 10.

¹³⁵ Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 52-53.

of time with nature in their childhood, so there are many descriptions about plants in their works. In Mo Yan's novels, Gaomi Northeast Township is a literary region created on the basis of the countryside of Gaomi, Shandong Province, and the abundant plants in the countryside have become the writing subjects of Mo Yan's novels. Usually, the plants were personified by Mo Yan to reflect characters' emotions and thoughts. Unlike Mo Yan's writing of plants, Tokarczuk did not use much metaphor or symbolism on plants. In her writing, plants remain to be themselves, they have no need to own similar experiences with human beings, and they have their own thoughts. Tokarczuk did not stand outside of the plants to depict their thoughts and emotions, but thoroughly entered into the plants to depict them from within, so that the plants spoke their own irreplaceable voices.

This part centers around their tenderness and warmth towards plants by personifying plants or acknowledging their agency, how they treat plants in their works, and the close relationships between women and plants.

5.3.1. Personification and Symbolization of Plants in Mo Yan's Works

In Mo Yan's works, the association between people and plants presented a more closely humanized association, whereby people projected their emotions and imaginations onto the plants, making the plants the embodiment of people. The plants were endowed with human thoughts and behaviors. The personified or humanized plants became more closely associated with humans, and their narratives were intertwined with more emotion and imagination. In *Red Sorghum*, there was a kind of close relationship between people and red sorghums, that is, people were red sorghums, and red sorghums were also the embodiment of people. The difference is that red sorghums struggle with the harsh environment and barren soil in the natural environment, while people struggle with the harsh social environment at that time in the red sorghum bushes. Therefore, people and red sorghum fight for their own freedom and happiness in similar ways. There were a lot of personifications of red sorghums in this novel and they were like background projecting villagers' sufferings. The red sorghum field usually served as battlefield for wars, their stalks "screeched in secret

resentment when the men and equipment bumped against them, sending large, mournful beads of water splashing to the ground.”¹³⁶ Last year’s early-summer sorghum stood spellbound beyond the dike, sombre and melancholy. The outline of the highway shining through the trampled sorghum stretched due north... Sorghum everywhere was crying bitterly.¹³⁷ These words “stood spellbound”, “sombre”, “melancholy” and “crying bitterly” expressed sorghum’s negative emotions towards the brutality of war. “Sorghum stalks wailed in concert, their shattered, severed limbs drooping low or arching high into the air.¹³⁸” The bitter experiences of the red sorghum were also that of Gaomi People. Besides expressing their sadness, the red sorghums also fought against the Japanese:

“Seated atop the sleek warhorse was an awesome young Japanese cavalry-man whose head, encased in a little square cap, barely cleared the tops of the stalks around him. The ears of grain whipped, pushed, and pricked him mercilessly, even mocked him. Father watched him attack the sorghum ears with his sword, lopping some off so cleanly they fell silently, their headless stumps deathly still, while others protested noisily as they hung by threads.”

The red sorghums “whipped”, “pushed”, “pricked” and “mocked” the Japanese to protect their homes being destroyed by them. The red sorghums symbolized the people of this land, who were tenaciously resisting the Japanese just to drive these invaders out of their homes. Sorghums were also resisting the Japanese.

Mushrooms¹³⁹ have appeared many times in Mo Yan’ works. When Shangguan Lu’s family were in trouble, the white mushrooms were depicted to have “sprouted on the ceiling above, which was crumbling and mildewed from rain that had leaked through.” Here the Mushrooms symbolized new life growing out of rot and decay, which also foreboded that the family, even the whole country, would get through the hard times and embrace a new life. In *Red Sorghum*, when Mother was hiding under

¹³⁶ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 7.

¹³⁷ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 35.

¹³⁸ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 69.

¹³⁹ Actually, mushrooms are scientifically fungi and not plants, but considering the three aspects of nature – animals, plants and things – discussed in this chapter, mushrooms are better to be written in the part of plants due to some common traits they have: before the development of modern taxonomy, fungi, including mushrooms, were grouped with plants because they are immobile, grow from the ground, and reproduce via spores, similar to some lower plants like ferns and mosses.

the dry well for several days during the Japanese invasion, she was very hungry and “her eye caught a tiny clump of milky-white mushrooms growing beneath two bricks. Her heart racing with excitement, she slid the bricks away and picked some of the mushrooms.”¹⁴⁰ The mushrooms grown from the cracks meant new life and supported Mother to subsist until she was saved out by Father. Mushrooms grown out of cracks symbolized new life and hope in Mo Yan’s works, where there was mushroom, there was hope.

In addition to personifying plants as people, Mo Yan also compared people to plants in his novels. “As soon as the first rank of horses passed, the others followed close on their heels, sending the standing soldiers spinning and banging into each other, accompanied by a chorus of panicky screams; they looked like plants, rooted in the ground and forced to stand and take a pounding.”¹⁴¹ The plants were used as a metaphor for people who were similar to plants that were too deeply rooted in the ground to escape. Northeast Gaomi people deeply loved and attached to their land, unwilling to abandon their land and escape. They suffered and survived the anti-Japanese war, however, even though they had driven away the Japanese away from their land, what lay ahead of them was not bright future but civil conflicts among different political powers. They could not leave their land but to resign themselves to adversities.

5.3.2. Acknowledging Plants’ Agency in Tokarczuk’s Works

In her Nobel Prize acceptance speech “The Tender Narrator”, Tokarczuk acknowledged that tenderness served her for taking a close look at each thing and person, with the greatest solemnity, and personalizing them inside herself.¹⁴² Firstly, the plants in her works were having thoughts and emotions, “gently and timidly, everything was starting to go green. The weak and tiny nettles grew up to proud and

¹⁴⁰ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 200.

¹⁴¹ Mo, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, 204-5.

¹⁴² Tokarczuk, “The Tender Narrator,” <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2018/tokarczuk/lecture/>.

menacing ones in two months; the daisies with tiny little faces were silently inspecting and casting their stern judgment on everyone who came by; an army of flower folk.”¹⁴³ Under her pen, the tiny nettles had strong vitality and could grow up quickly and become proud and menacing. Instead of being passively observed by people, the daisies actively inspected and judged people passing by, which subverted the dominating and overlooking position of human beings.

Secondly, plants can record images and have their own memories. Although the aloe was transported to Poland travelling a long way, “I’m sure that things, quite casually, whether alive or dead, record images, so the aloe could still have the sunlight of its original home inside it.”¹⁴⁴ The same with people, although being far away from home, those memories created at home would be immortal inside. All the experiences a person has had shaped the person he or she is today. Besides, aloe heals wounds by sucking all the burning heat and pain into itself, so this comforting and tolerant plant heals others’ pains and bears them inside itself. Agaves also had the ability to record images. “Someone has been unable to resist scratching his initials on their green leaves, or the legend ‘I love Eve’. The agave heals these wounds, immortalizing other people’s declarations on its body.”¹⁴⁵ From the perspective of Latour’s ANT, these plants in Tokarczuk’s works own agency and affect the actions and experiences of other human actors by giving them courage, tolerance, comfort and everything in the four seasons in a silent way.

Thirdly, the grass in Tokarczuk’s works fought against people’s unfair treatment. Due to pollen allergy, “R. went out with a scythe and bravely cut the grass right down to the ground. As it fell, its feathery tops brushed against his legs, leaving red marks on his skin that later turned into a fine rash.”¹⁴⁶ R.’s act of cutting down the grass because of pollen allergy alludes to the fact that human beings arbitrarily destroy nature because of their own selfish desires. But the destruction of nature cannot go unpunished, and nature is at “war” with mankind. The frequent occurrence of various natural disasters

¹⁴³ Tokarczuk, *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*, 121.

¹⁴⁴ Tokarczuk, *House of Day, House of Night*, 229.

¹⁴⁵ Tokarczuk, *House of Day, House of Night*, 202.

¹⁴⁶ Tokarczuk, *House of Day, House of Night*, 120.

in recent years is also an act of nature's resistance because it is unable to tolerate human's atrocities. Just like the narrator said, "we are alien here."¹⁴⁷ Humans are "intruders" to nature, and the laws of nature are not subject to outsider intervention or hindrance. When hurt by people, the grass took a revenge against them. Like the narrator concluded that people like us were unable to kill grass with impunity- it puts up a fight against us. Another example of grass's revenge was when "the man with the chainsaw was waving the saw and hacking at birch seedlings, young maples and clumps of grass. There was a sort of over-the-top swagger to his movements, an exaggerated vigor, causing him to get his feet tangled in the grass, and he fell down."¹⁴⁸ Therefore, the damage inflicted by humanity upon nature will ultimately be repaid through nature's own mechanisms, turning the forces of the natural world against humankind. The climate change and extreme weather as well as some emerging infectious diseases are such examples. These human-nature influences correspond with Latour's ANT advocating the interconnectedness of all entities in networks, "the notion of network allows us to think of a global entity – a highly connected one – which remains nevertheless continuously local..."¹⁴⁹ In other words, a network can be global because it connects many actors across wide spaces, but every part of it is still deeply local because each connection and interaction happens in a specific place and context. Thus, the global is not something separate from the local, but made up of many local connections woven together. Each action or relation stays grounded in its specific situation, but through linking with many others, it creates something that looks and functions globally.

Fourthly, as mentioned above, white mushrooms appeared in Mo Yan's works representing new life and hope grown out of rot and decay, while in Tokarczuk's works, the real mushroom kingdom was hidden under the earth, and "only mushrooms that were condemned to death or exiled from the kingdom as a punishment come out onto the earth's surface...The real underground mushroom spawn was immortal."¹⁵⁰ The

¹⁴⁷ Tokarczuk, *House of Day, House of Night*, 120.

¹⁴⁸ Tokarczuk, *House of Day, House of Night*, 211.

¹⁴⁹ Latour, "On Actor-Network Theory," 372.

¹⁵⁰ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 105.

mushrooms grew out of earth meant death in her works because they would perish from the sun, at the hand of man, or trodden by animals. Mo Yan saw strong vitality in those mushrooms grown in cracks while Tokarczuk cared more about the destiny of those mushrooms. Both of them observed and depicted mushrooms with tenderness and warmth, showcasing their care and reverence towards nature.

5.3.3. Plants Being Closely Connected with Women's Life

Plants were connected with female characters' life and destiny in Mo Yan's and Tokarczuk's works. Many Tokarczuk's females were comforted and healed by plants.

Firstly, women obtained strength from plants and united with plants as a whole. In *Red Sorghum*, Mo Yan depicted a lot about vibrant red sorghum grown in Gaomi Northeast Township. Red sorghum's characteristics formed a kind of resonance with Grandma's qualities of being courageous and responsible, daring to love and hate. At the same time, the fate of red sorghum was connected with that of Grandma. The description of the trampling of red sorghum by the Japanese army in the text implied that Grandma would be humiliated by the Japanese army. After the Japanese army swept through the village, red sorghums were crushed and feeble, which was also the portrayal of Grandma's inner anxiety, worry and fear. Like women, the red sorghum field was also the cradle of nurturing life, and at the same time, they were subjected to male oppression and ravage. This connection also determined that the women represented by Grandma united with red sorghum to fight against the feudal society. Grandma's whole life was closely connected with red sorghum. As a representative of nature, red sorghum had become a "holy place" for Grandma's birth, survival, resistance against feudal and patriarchal society, the awakening of female self-consciousness, and the realization of her self-worth. Grandma united with the red sorghum as a whole, and was sheltered by the sorghum field, and at the same time, absorbed spiritual strength from the red sorghum to overcome all injustices and oppressions. After being married to a leper, Grandma felt hopeless, and it was the sex in the red sorghum field that she found hope of life and was saved by Yu Zhan'ao from

the arranged marriage with a leper. With their thick branches and leaves, red sorghums provided a natural shelter for Grandma and Grandpa to release their instincts and show their contempt to secular shackles. As a representative of nature, red sorghum was a shelter for Grandma to survive and awaken her self-consciousness. Only under the shelter of red sorghum could Grandma really get rid of the bondage and confinement of feudalism and realize her passionate union with Grandpa. The reborn Grandma who had been “baptized” under the shelter of the red sorghum was proud, self-confident, and determined. With red sorghum, she brewed the famous and delicious red sorghum wine that made her the brewery owner who was respected by her employees. To a certain extent, the red sorghum field had accomplished Grandma’s personality and life, and Grandma’s love and care for the red sorghum throughout her life had also made Grandma and the red sorghum become mutually dependent. Grandma also died in the red sorghum field through which she was carrying food for the soldiers who were fighting against the Japanese. She died as a glorious and heroic figure from the anti-Japanese war, and she would be sheltered and blessed eternally by the red sorghum. Mo Yan wrote a lot about her death in the red sorghum field:

“She lay face down on the ground, pressed against the wild grass. The aroma of sorghum wine seeped from two exit wounds in her back...Sorghum stalks wailed in concert, their shattered, severed limbs drooping low or arching high into the air...”¹⁵¹ “Even in death her face was as lovely as jade, her parted lips revealing a line of clean teeth inlaid with pearls of sorghum seeds, placed there by the emerald beaks of white doves.”¹⁵²

Her death was depicted as serene and tender. The blood from her wounds was described as sorghum wine, and the sorghums wailed and grieved for her death. The doves put sorghum seeds in her mouth, which implied that Grandma would relive with the sorghum seeds in her mouth and live forever in the field of Gaomi Northeast Township. She united as one with red sorghum. In this novel, Mo Yan wrote and advocated a beautiful ecological picture of mutual tolerance, integration and harmonious

¹⁵¹ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 68-69.

¹⁵² Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 141.

coexistence of human and nature.

In Tokarczuk's works, many female characters also obtained strength from plants or united with plants as a whole. Cornspike lived in forest alone but she did not feel lonely. She slept with the masterwort outside her window and gave birth to her daughter Ruta. The rustling noises of the masterwort made by a breeze alerted Cornspike to raise herself on an elbow and listen closely to the plant living. She communicated with the masterwort when she had fallen asleep. The masterwort was a fair-haired youth and they made love.¹⁵³ These magical descriptions explained that Cornspike lived closely and harmoniously with plants. The image of the masterwort as a young man showcased the idea that women were naturally connected with nature was incorrect, the plant could also be the image of a male, which deconstructed the essentialist ecofeminism. When Cornspike's daughter Ruta was raped by Russian and German soldiers, Cornspike "picked her up and put her in the hole she had dug under the house, and laid her on some burdock leaves. Cornspike mixed herbs with a scent of masterwort."¹⁵⁴ When Ruta was hurt by war and human society, returning to the Mother Nature provided her with protection and healing. Masterwort became not only a comfort for Cornspike herself but also a healing comfort for her daughter Ruta when both of them hurt by human world. Kummernis was another female figure who was forced by her father to marry his friend and fled to a mountain living on mushrooms and forest roots for three years. Leaves served her for bedding, sheltered and fed by nature.

What's more, the tolerant and comforting forest gave women strength and comfort in Tokarczuk's works. The forest was described to be warm and soft in *Primeval and Other Times*, like in the velvet-lined box where Michał's medal was kept. Cornspike was a woman hurt by human society, but healed by nature and totally integrated with nature. When Cornspike was condemned by Mrs. Popielska for bringing confusion and depravity to Primeval and asked her to go away from there. "She felt drawn to the forest. She was having contractions and going to deliver her baby, the leaves of nettles and burdocks served as her bed. The moment she was semi-conscious and on the brink of

¹⁵³ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 64.

¹⁵⁴ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 133.

losing her consciousness, ‘the common buzzing of a large purple fly’ woke her up and she gathered her strength to push her own body.”¹⁵⁵ When human society rejected her, the forest would accommodate her. Nettles and burdocks in the forest served as her bed, the buzzing fly prevented her from losing her consciousness. Tokarczuk’s another female protagonist was also close to nature and healed by nature. Whenever Duszejko felt sad, she would choose to go into the forest where she felt relieved. The forest was like a mother to her, giving her comfort and at the same time letting go of all her heavy burdens. “The forest was like a vast, deep, welcoming refuge in which one could hide. It lulled my mind. Here I didn’t have to conceal the most troublesome of my Ailments – the fact that I weep.”¹⁵⁶ The forest allows her to hide in it comfortably. Here her tears could flow freely and rinse the eyes. The forest gave her strength to forget about her physical ailments for a while and to feel the beauty of life.

Secondly, plants connected with women’s destiny and rebellious spirit in Mo Yan’s works. The locust tree was closely connected with Shangguan Lu’s pleasure and rebellion against Shangguan family’s brutality. She had sex with Pastor Malory under a locust tree, and he was the sole man from whom she felt being praised, caressed gently and treasured in having sex. The tenderness and warmth she received from Malory has cured her sufferings and has become a medicine for her in her future hardships. When she was hard to deliver her babies, she recollected her sex with Malory under a locust tree: “The muttoney smell of a milk goat rose in the air, as did the sometimes pungent, sometimes subtle aroma of locust blossoms. The scene of making love with Pastor Malory beneath the locust tree last year flashed before her eyes with remarkable clarity, but before she gained any pleasure from the recollection, her mother-in-law ran into the room...”¹⁵⁷ The sex with Pastor Malory under the locust tree was the sole time in her life that she felt caressed gently and loved by a man, so in her hard time in delivering a baby, she recollected the beautiful and delightful time with Malory: “In the dense grove of locusts in a remote corner of Sandy Ridge Village, Pastor Malory knelt reverently

¹⁵⁵ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 20-22.

¹⁵⁶ Tokarczuk, *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*, 149.

¹⁵⁷ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 5.

beside Mother, whose injury had begun to heal, and gently rubbed her body with trembling reddened hands. He called her “my lovely mate... my little dove... my perfect woman, my love”, and her body was greatly treasured and praised to be beautiful by Malory. “Basking in the approving words and gentle fondling of Pastor Malory, Shangguan Lu felt as light as goose down floating in the deep blue skies of Northeast Gaomi and in Pastor Malory’s blue eyes, as the subtle perfume of red and white locust blossoms flowed over her like waves.”¹⁵⁸ In Chinese culture, the color of the locust blossoms is light and pure, and it looks crystal clear, like jade. And because it blooms in the spring, so the flower language of it is beautiful, crystal, and uncommon. Therefore, the locust blossoms contain people’s desire for purity, beauty, and love. Besides, people pray to the locust tree to wish for delivering a son.¹⁵⁹ Here the locust tree was closely connected with Shangguan Lu’s happiness and their sex under the tree not only symbolized the purity of their love, but also foreboded that she would give birth to a son, which would be a turning point for her to live a more humane and better life. Her sex with Malory under the locust tree was also a rebellion and vengeance against her brutal mother-in-law and husband who urged her to deliver a baby boy and maltreated her because she had delivered seven daughters.

Thirdly, plants became a medium connecting female characters’ destiny in Mo Yan’s works. The purple velvety pompon was a plant that connected the destiny of third sister, Bird Fairy Lingdi, and first sister, Laidi. After Lingdi committed suicide by jumping off the precipice, Laidi

“plucked a velvety pompon, a stately, gentle purple flower with which she wiped off the blood that had seeped out of Third Sister’s nostrils, then her eyes, and finally her ears. Once she’d cleaned up the blood, she brought the purple flower up to her nose and sniffed it, each inch of it, as she did so, I saw a strange smile spread across her face and a light in her eyes that belonged to a person in a certain realm of intoxication. I had the vague feeling that the Bird Fairy’s transcendent, otherworldly spirit was being transferred to the body of Laidi by way of that purple velvety pompon of a flower.”¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ Mo, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, 75.

¹⁵⁹ 花百科[Flower Encyclopedia], “槐花的花语和文化寓意[Flower Language and Cultural Symbolism of the Locust Blossoms],” Huabaik.com (花百科, November 23, 2016), <https://www.huabaik.com/hyjk/5841.html>.

¹⁶⁰ Mo, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, 225.

The two sisters' destiny seemed to be connected by this velvety pompon. This description not only meant that Laidi also became mad as Lingdi did, but also foreboded and explained Laidi's unexpected and abrupt love relationship with Lingdi's lover, Birdman Han, who was captured to Japan and returned home eighteen years later.

Fourthly, female's time was connected with the time of plants and nature in Tokarczuk's works. "When the flowers fell from the potato plants and little green fruit set up in their place, Genowefa found that she was pregnant. She counted the months on her fingers and came to the first haymaking at the end of May. It must have happened then."¹⁶¹ The time of human's life is also the time of plant's life, so Genowefa used the time of plants to calculate the time of her baby. Calculating human's time in terms of nature's time, as if humans, like the plants, are deeply dependent on nature, and seem to exist in connection with everything else in the world. Another female character Marta only existed in summer and disappeared in winter. If Marta's around, everything's in its place and in perfect order. The mysterious old woman Marta was like the time itself, who could not read or write but could dictate centuries of Nowa Ruda's history and had the magical ability to disappear in winter and come back to life in spring.

5.4. Tenderness and Warmth towards Things in their Works

According to Lydia Rose, other-than-human beings include more than just animals; it includes lakes and mountains as sentient beings whose existence needs to be taken into account in political decisions. Such practice has already been implemented in New Zealand, where the Whanganui River became the first waterway in the world to be granted legal personhood. The river now has two guardians who can represent it in court. This recognition of "other-than-human" entities may be a crucial step in the ecofeminist movement, helping to protect earth beings and challenging the narrow view that prioritizes human life above all other forms of life.¹⁶²

As mentioned previously, Mo Yan's tenderness towards nature was influenced by

¹⁶¹ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 11.

¹⁶² Rose, "Hegemonic Masculinity and Ecofeminist Literature," 327.

the traditional Chinese philosophical concept of “tien ren he yi 天人合一” (unity of man and nature) and his childhood experiences of spending his days with nature, becoming one with nature. Under the concept of the unity of man and nature, man and all things are compatriots and share a common origin of life, implying equality of all beings. Therefore, when people encounter difficulties and confusion in real life, they can seek help from nature. Chinese literature has a tradition of writing idyllic poetry, in which poets return to nature to seek solace for their souls. The things in his works, such as the moon, the sun, water, rivers, land, bridge and rakes, were personified as companions of humans and reflected human’s feelings and emotions. He delved into things and personified them, which reflected human feelings and related to human existence. His many characters regarded things as companions and talked with them to express their inner thoughts and loneliness. In much the same way that Robinson became close friends with a volleyball in *Robinson Crusoe*, humans in solitude could project emotions onto objects and see them as sentient beings. This idea has been reflected in the carving of statues of gods and goddesses by various nations in the world, where human beings regard the statues as gods and goddesses, humanize them, and even endow them with supernatural power. Mo Yan’s personifying things showcased the real spiritual activities of human hearts, expressing human emotions such as loneliness, sadness and despair, rather than religious superstition. His personification of things was full of humanism, rather than a deification of things or a devaluation of humans.

While the things in Tokarczuk’s works, such as hair, house, car, plate and cup, were having life, as living beings having emotions and memories, so the teapot can talk. She believed that things, whether alive or dead, record images. “People think they live more intensely than animals, than plants, and especially than things. Animals sense that they live more intensely than plants and things. Plants dream that they live more intensely than things. But things last, and this lasting is more alive than anything else.”¹⁶³ The life of things was thought to be more difficult than that of people, animals and plants because things last, because they record certain periods of history and culture, and experience changing of times and owners, ups and downs. “Things are beings steeped in another reality, where there is no time or motion. Only their surface can be seen. The rest, hidden elsewhere, defines the significance and meaning of each material

¹⁶³ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 43.

object.”¹⁶⁴ In Tokarczuk’s writing, things transcend time and space, and their significance lies in interactivity with the users. Just as Latour’s ANT states that “if we wish to be a bit more realistic about social ties than ‘reasonable’ sociologists, then we have to accept that the continuity of any course of action will rarely consist of human-to-human connections or of object-object connections, but will probably zigzag from one to the other.”¹⁶⁵ Actions are produced by chains of humans and non-humans interacting together, not just by people alone or objects alone, which means that an object can play just as important a role in shaping events as a human does. The social world is a mixed network of people, objects, technologies, animals, plants, institutions, and so on, constantly connecting and influencing each other. Things cannot move by themselves, but they have to silently load and overlay different emotions and fleeting moments.

5.4.1. Mo Yan’s Personifying Things and Projecting Emotions on Them

Firstly, after the victory in the anti-Japanese war, the setting sun was personified as an exhausted and scarred old man trying to relieve himself: “The sun raced across the sky, seemingly frightened by the din below, and sat on the ground, resting against the trees on the sandy ridge. More relaxed now, it was bright red, blistered, and sweaty; it steamed and panted like an old man, as it observed the crowd on the street...By this time, the sun was exhausted, like an old man about to call it a day and get some sleep.”¹⁶⁶ The setting sun was a metaphor for countless Chinese people who have endured all the sufferings and ordeals of foreign invasion and inner war, scarred and dying, and finally had a chance to breathe.

Secondly, in Mo Yan’s *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, the “snow market” was a festival for women, “the custom was for all women wanting to bear a child in the coming year and those who wanted milk to fill their young, healthy breasts to lift up their blouses and expose their breasts to welcome the outstretched hands of the Snow

¹⁶⁴ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 45.

¹⁶⁵ Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 75.

¹⁶⁶ Mo, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, 202-3.

Prince.”¹⁶⁷ In the time of war, mainly men go to the war and lots of people died, but the war needed people, so women had to run the household, raise offsprings, and give birth to life. Snow, like a quilt covering the earth and foreboding the coming of spring and revival of all things, was a metaphor for women bearing new life and nourishing everything. However, a rule in the snow market was that all the people should remain silent, which implied that women were in a state of having no say in family and society, their voice being not allowed. In this novel Mo Yan glorified women and mothers, and gave voice to them.

Thirdly, in *Red Sorghum*, the land was personified to project people’s inner emotions and served as symbolization. “Father and Uncle Arhat sat quietly, listening with rapt respect to the whispered secrets of the land,”¹⁶⁸ which showed Father and Uncle Arhat’s deep affections for this land. “Groaning clods of dark earth flew in their wake”¹⁶⁹ expressed Granddad and Father’s groaning hearts facing Japanese invasion. The natural landscape, particularly the sorghum fields, served as a symbol of both fertility and destruction. The sorghum fields were place of life, where food was grown, but they were also place of violence, where battles occurred during the Japanese invasion of China. The sorghum fields witnessed both love and death of people living in Gaomi Northeast Township. For Dai Fenglian, the fields were where she asserted her sexuality, but they also become site of war and destruction. Nature, in this context, was not a passive backdrop but an active participant in human suffering and resilience. The sorghums became a potent symbol of resilience and endurance, just as the peasants continued to fight for survival despite overwhelming odds. The color red in the novel had multiple layers of meaning. It represented blood, violence, and passion, but also fertility and vitality. The sorghum fields were where lives were taken, but they were also where food was grown and where love blossomed.

Fourthly, the water and rivers in his novels were personified as humans. “The Black Water River flowed slowly through the swampy lowland, sang in the spreading

¹⁶⁷ Mo, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, 329.

¹⁶⁸ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 8.

¹⁶⁹ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 179-80.

mist, now loud, now soft, now far, now near,”¹⁷⁰ before the war started, the river flew slowly and leisurely, singing along the way. However, after the Japanese invaded, “the water sobbed as it flowed down the riverbed,”¹⁷¹ which not only reflected people’s feelings, but also indicated that the war made everything in the world suffer.

In addition, other things, like the rakes, the bridge were personified in Mo Yan’s novels. “Father presumed that the four linked rakes blocking the road, their teeth pointing skyward, must have reached the limits of their patience.”¹⁷² The rakes losing their patience implied that Father lost his patience in waiting for the coming of Japanese. “Fires were continued to burn on the bridge... The green bridge flooring arched high in the air as it groaned and gasped and moaned. In her mind, the burning bridge was transformed into a giant snake writhing in agony, trying desperately to fly up into the sky with both its head and tail nailed down. The poor bridge, she thought sadly.”¹⁷³ This description not only reflected Laidi’s mournful and hateful emotions towards the invaders, but also expressed her tenderness and warmth towards the pitiful bridge. Personifying things is a way for Mo Yan to continue the traditional Chinese concept of the unity of humans and nature, and to express his tenderness and warmth towards things in nature.

5.4.2. Olga Tokarczuk’s Recognizing Things as Living Beings

Firstly, Tokarczuk expresses in her works that things already exist there, not created by human, just like the laws of the world have already existed there, and all we can do is to discover them and apply them. It is arrogant for humans to assert themselves to be the master of something. “Misia’s coffee grinder came into being because of someone’s hands combining wood, china and brass into a single object. The wood, china and brass made the idea of grinding materialize. No one could say that he invented the grinder, because man is incapable of creating out of nothing – that is a divine

¹⁷⁰ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 5.

¹⁷¹ Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 98.

¹⁷² Mo, *Red Sorghum*, 64.

¹⁷³ Mo, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, 34.

skill.”¹⁷⁴ Besides, Tokarczuk writes that all kinds of things have the capacity to arrest whatever is fleeting and transitory. Misia’s little coffee grinder was the axis of reality to a certain extent, around which everything revolved and developed. The grinder was found by Michał in a foreign country when he was conscripted by the Tsarist Russia, and given to his daughter after the WWI. Before that, the little coffee grinder had witnessed the peace and turmoil of the village, and the coming of the war made it embark on the train with the villagers to leave their hometown:

the grinder was made in some factory workshop, and then ended up at someone’s house, where every morning it ground coffee. Hands held it, warm and alive. Then the impacts of war transferred it from a safe shelf in the kitchen to a box with other objects, into valises and sacks, into train carriages. Like every other things, the grinder absorbed all the world’s confusion: images of trains under fire, ...it absorbed the warmth of human bodies going cold and the despair of abandoning the familiar. Hands touched it, and they all brushed it with an immeasurably quantity of thoughts and emotions. The grinder accepted them, because all kinds of matter have this capacity – to arrest whatever is fleeting and transitory. That evenings when the soldiers stopped for the night he had sniffed its drawer – it smelled of safety, coffee, home.¹⁷⁵

When facing countless lives perishing under the gun fire, sniffing this small grinder gave hope and reassurance to Michał in the midst of war. The little grinder stayed alone, which carried people’s infinite deep feelings and the despair of leaving home in the war-torn era. The grinder had the ability to keep the transitory and fleeting thought. After that, the little coffee grinder ran through Misia’s whole life. In her childhood, it was Misia’s playmate; in her middle age, it accompanied Misia through the impact of the war; in her later years, it witnessed Misia’s obsession with the quality of life. After Misia’s death, her daughter Adelka brought it out of Primeval. As an object that carried memories and emotions, the small coffee grinder continued to be passed down from generation to generation. In the changing times, it had recorded countless moments of happiness and sorrow, from the far east to Primeval and then to an unknown faraway place. She depicted the coffee grinder as the axis of reality, around which everything

¹⁷⁴ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 43-44.

¹⁷⁵ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 44.

revolved and developed. In front of things represented by the small coffee grinder, human life is just fleeting dreams, and human conflicts will eventually turn into a bubble, while things will always exist. “Perhaps coffee grinders are the axis of reality, around which everything turns and unwinds, perhaps they are more important for the world than people. And perhaps Misia’s one single grinder is the pillar of what is called Primeval.”¹⁷⁶ Things are more important than people for the world, which subverts anthropocentrism and makes us view our relationship with nature – keeping balance instead of mastering. Tokarczuk empowers all things, places all things in the position of the subject of the universe, and shows a post-anthropocentric thought.

Secondly, Tokarczuk expresses in her works that things not only have their own emotions and thoughts, but also actively shape humans’ actions. The Black River and the White River in *Primeval* at first flew beside each other, undecided, overawed by their longed-for intimacy, and then they fell into each other and got lost in one another.¹⁷⁷ The author employed words such as “undecided”, “overawed”, and “longed-for intimacy” to show that the two rivers have their own emotions and thoughts. The black and whiter rivers were like males and females in the world, the Black River was in a higher place, and the White one was below the mill, but they ran beside each other and finally merged. Males and females are indispensable to each other, and they work beside each other at home and in society to contribute their efforts. Like the rivers finally merged, they could also live harmoniously together, which is the law of nature. Besides, the Black River was described to be calmer and wiser than the priest in *Primeval and Other Times*. Tokarczuk also ridiculed the priest’s failure of fighting against the law of nature even under the God’s guidance. As Latour proposed that “in addition to ‘determining’ and serving as a ‘backdrop for human action’, things might authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on.”¹⁷⁸ So things have effects on human behavior, often pushing, shaping, or redirecting what humans do. The priest was influenced by the river and raged by his incompetence in controlling it, which shaped a sharp contrast with the Black River’s calmness and endurance. When the river was lined with sand sacks and the river was completely separated from the meadow, “the river no longer tried to tear free of its

¹⁷⁶ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 45.

¹⁷⁷ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 11.

¹⁷⁸ Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 72.

appointed place, and flowed along peaceful and pensive, impenetrable to the human gaze.”¹⁷⁹ The river was silently gathering its force to break through the man-made limitation and finally made it. As a contrast, the priest was irritated again by the river, feeling uncontrollable revulsion, rage and hatred towards it. He comforted himself that “how can I get angry at a river, a common dip in the ground? A river is just a river, nothing more,”¹⁸⁰ but he was no wiser than a common river. “He looked around to make sure no one could see him, then lashed the river, and blamed it to be of mindlessness, blunt obstinacy, impalpability, selfishness and limitless vacuity.”¹⁸¹ Reversely, these descriptions apply better to the priest. The priest’s arrogance and despise towards things made him unable to realize the power of the river and suffered from the river’s influence. Latour’s ANT advocates the “establishment of symmetry between humans and non-humans, which means not to impose a priori or spurious asymmetry among human intentional action and a material world of causal relations.”¹⁸² Thus, we should not assume beforehand that humans are the only ones who act intentionally and meaningfully, while non-humans are just passive things obeying blind causal forces. However, the priest prejudices the river with bias, claiming that only humans matter and rivers are just trivial rivers. His failure to revere nature brings him great trouble.

Thirdly, Tokarczuk considers things have life, and in her works the things like hair, tablecloths, sheets, tableware, house, die, dream and car are living beings and take actions by themselves. Marta believed that a growing hair could gather a person’s thoughts and accumulates them in the form of indistinct particles. Hair went on living and breathing even after being cut off. The white tablecloths and sheets had consciousness to rebel and insist on going yellow, as if they wanted to rid themselves of their unreal color. Marta had a lot of broken things, like single cups, saucers with the pattern worn away, tin mugs with makeshift wire handles, and pots with rusty marks where the enamel has peeled off, which she was unwilling to discard. These old things carry memories of hers or someone else’s, and these memories will sneak into her dreams one night. Unbearable to discard old things was like unbearable to throw away

¹⁷⁹ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 49.

¹⁸⁰ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 50.

¹⁸¹ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 50.

¹⁸² Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 76.

those vast old memories, as if a part of herself was attached to those things, and losing them would also strip away a part of her. Another woman Duszejko developed a friendship with her car Samurai, also her old companion, and they were reliant on each other for many years. Squire Popielski had to throw a one with the eight-sided die to start the Game given to him by the rabbi, but he always threw an eight until the summer of 1939 the stubborn number one finally appeared. It was the die choosing to be thrown to one on the day Poland was attacked by Germany, not controlled by the squire. The Game started and the Germans attacked Poland. Then he had to dream he was a dog to move on to the next square in the Game. Even though he was thinking about dogs when sleeping, yet he could not dream himself as a dog until the day when the Germans turned up at his manor house. It was the dream appeared itself, not controlled by him. He dreamed himself as a dog that day when the invaders came because he would be enslaved by them to supply wood for those enemies. What's more, the houses in her novel were considered to be living creatures that coexist with Man in exemplary symbiosis. After the WWII, the "German houses grew more willing to surrender their contents to their new Polish owners."¹⁸³ Tokarczuk's recognizing the things having life and emotion is her tenderness towards things and an appeal to humans to treasure everything in nature and live harmoniously with them.

¹⁸³ Tokarczuk, *House of Day, House of Night*, 242.

Chapter 6 Depicting Marginalized Men Being Close to Women and Nature

6.1. Deconstructing the Essentialism on Ecofeminism and Creating a Balance among Males, Females, and Nature

The main critique of ecofeminism is the false claim that it promotes essentialism—the idea that women have an innate biological or spiritual connection to nature that men lack. However, ecofeminism rejects essentialism, emphasizing that all life is interconnected and that no group is inherently closer to nature. As Ynestra King have explained, since all life is interconnected, one group of persons cannot be closer to nature.¹ The claim that ecofeminism is essentialist stems from a patriarchal mindset that falsely separates nature from culture. According to Joan Griscom, the question itself is flawed because the idea that one group is inherently closer to nature is a cultural construct, not an objective reality.² To equate man with culture and woman with nature will promote the binary opposition between man and woman, culture and nature, from which men will benefit and gain power and hierarchy. Tokarczuk's and Mo Yan's works form a deconstruction of this essentialist accusations on ecofeminism and validate that men can also be tender and close to nature and nature will in turn help and cure men. They portrayed some marginalized men who were abandoned or isolated by society, yet they found solace and cure from nature and became close to nature. Besides, these men also lived harmoniously with women and formed a cooperative relationship with them. Although from different cultural backgrounds and different genders, the two authors do illustrate in their novels that males, females and nature are an interconnected whole and a balanced relationship among them can be achieved to make the world a better and harmonious place to live in.

Those male characters who are close to nature in Tokarczuk's and Mo Yan's works are evidence against the essentialist idea that women are inherently close to nature;

¹ Ynestra King, "Feminism and the Revolt of Nature," *Heresies* 13 (1981): 12-16.

² Joan L. Griscom, "On Healing the Nature/History Split in Feminist Thought," *Heresies* 13 (1981): 4-9.

besides, Tokarczuk depicts the female guard who displays her indifference and disgust towards Duszejko's complaints on behalf of animals, and Mo Yan also depicts some female characters who are cruel to nature to gain benefits, such as rich and greedy Geng Lianlian, powerful Lu Shengli and influential Pang Kangmei seeking personal benefits at the sacrifice of animals and environmental pollution. Their works demonstrate that women are generally inclined to be close to nature because both of them are in a suppressed position under the patriarchal society and an empathy or emotional resonance is engendered between them. The same is applied to the closeness between those marginalized men and nature or women, however, this does not mean that all the marginalized men are definitely close to nature and women, after all, their works also depict many marginalized men who vent their angers on women and animals and treat them cruelly. As Diana Russell points out that the reality is that men across all social classes exercise and assume power over women within their own class, workplace, political group, or family, often even more so when they lack power in the public sphere. This is reflected in the widespread violence against women in patriarchal societies, which remains consistent across different social classes.³ Therefore, those women and men's tenderness and empathy towards nature are not something determined by gender or class, but associated with ones' growing environment, life experience or more complicated multiple factors need to be explored, but what is clear is that the closeness between women and nature is not inherently or innately born. As Janis Birkeland concludes that "men and women have shown the capacity consciously to choose other values and behavior patterns. We have seen women adopt masculine personal processes to varying extents when they wish to be part of a power structure, and, more optimistically, we have seen some men become caring, gentle, and non-dominating. In short, men can subscribe to ecofeminism, and, in fact, their cooperation is necessary if we are to save the planet."⁴

Although females were put in the center of their works, Tokarczuk and Mo Yan

³ Diana Russell, "Sexism, Violence, and the Nuclear Mentality," in *Exposing Nuclear Phallacies*, ed. Diana Russell (New York: Pergamon Press, 1989), 63-73.

⁴ Birkeland, "Ecofeminism: Linking Theory and Practice," 22-23.

expressed their tenderness and warmth to several marginalized men who were isolated and suppressed by society and got close to nature and women to find solace and cure. These men felt women and nature's care and tenderness towards them and they also displayed their care and tenderness to women and nature. In their depictions, men, women and nature were in a cooperative and balanced relationship, and lived harmoniously, which is what ecofeminism pursues and what the world needs.

6.2. Tokarczuk's Marginalized Men

Tokarczuk depicted some marginalized men who developed close relationship with women and nature, which deconstructed the essentialist view on ecofeminism that women and nature are connected naturally from the start, rather, women and nature's connection was socially constructed by patriarchal system to suppress both women and nature. When put in an unfair or unfavorable situation, some men may also empathize and strike a resonance with women and nature and form friendship or close relationship with them. Such characters as Oddball, Dizzy, Bad Man, Izydor and Marek are examples.

Oddball was a man of few words but treated Duszejko and animals well. Oddball was so kind and tender to Big Foot's left-behind dog that he would never leave the dog Marysia alone for long and was worried about her when he was out, because he thought that she had been traumatized by her experience of Big Foot's shed, so he would not let her traumatize again.⁵ Perhaps the dog's unhappy experience made him remember his own unhappy childhood that he is the son of a Polish man and a German woman who disliked each other each day intensely because the husband bore a hatred to his wife and gave his two children the names that were difficult for his German wife to pronounce, and the name of their daughter meant celebrating the return of the western territories to the motherland. Oddball's mother died after he graduated from secondary school and his father lost his mind completely and stayed underground since then.

⁵ Tokarczuk, *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*, 204.

Unfortunate childhood and a lonely elderly life made him whom he is now, lonely, taciturn but empathetic to the poor animals. As an old man, he is dominated by his son, who is a local prosecutor. When his son scolded him for touching the body, he defended himself weakly and was rendered helpless. His son would talk to him sarcastically and behaved arrogantly in front of Oddball, Dizzy and Duszejko. The animals' survival crisis also metaphorically implies the survival crisis for women, the elderly and the socially disadvantaged, just as the author wrote that "it's animals show the truth about a country, its attitude toward animals. If people behave brutally toward Animals, no form of democracy is ever going to help them, in fact nothing will at all."⁶ Out of respect, love and empathy to Duszejko and animals, both of the two men, Oddball and Dizzy decided to help her run away after they found out that it was she killed the Commandant, Innerd, the President, and Father Rustle to revenge for the killed animals. Oddball even tenderly and lovingly declared in front of his son that he would marry Duszejko when she got out of jail.

The Bad Man in *Primeval and Other Times* was cured by nature. It was said that he was an ordinary peasant and committed a crime, then his conscience gnawed at him and wouldn't allow him a moment's rest. So tormented by its voice that he ran away from himself until he found solace in the woods and became like the animals in the forest. Now in the forest he seemed to get closer to the ground, could see more and better. His as yet weak sense of smell could pick up the odours of the ground better. To the Bad Man, one single forest was better than all the villagers, all the roads and bridges, cities and towers, so he went back into the forest forever.⁷ Later his sexual intercourse with Cornspike indicated that he was wholly accepted and became one with nature. Nature tolerated the Bad Man who has been hated and discarded by the human society. Nature seems to be so tender and tolerant that as long as you choose to get close to it, it will embrace and nourish you.

Izydor was a boy growing up with the hydrocephalus disease and neglected by his father and mother. His father took his sister Misia as the only child and Izydor "didn't

⁶ Tokarczuk, *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*, 101.

⁷ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 26-27.

really count”⁸; his mother thought he is not her child but switched by Cornspike. However, this rejected but kind boy developed a good friendship with Ruta, the daughter of Cornspike and nature. Before their meeting, both of them stayed lonely by themselves, but now Ruta led him to know plants and mushrooms, as well as to explore the forest, and he taught Ruta how to read. He was tender to nature by worriedly reminding Ruta to leave a bit of mushroom’s foot in the ground so that they would grow back again. He was liked and praised to have a good heart by Cornspike, who integrated with nature as a whole in the novel.

Another poor man close to nature is Marek Marek, who was always beaten by his violent alcoholic father and cried in the basement since he was five. Although he was in dire situations himself, he hated his father killing the pigeons and thought they died like things, like objects.⁹ To a certain sense, his empathy towards the pigeons made him see himself in them, being killed by his father in a violent way. He always felt there was a large black stork inside his body guiding him away from alcohol and insobriety, which indicated that he wanted to change himself and fly high, but the bird had fettered legs and eyes filled with terror, and he even thought he was the bird and they suffered together. His traumatic experiences and lacking in guidance during growing up made him fettered and could not fly anymore. He would feel painful for his beloved mare when he found it dead with her newborn foal. In November Whatsisname brought him a black puppy to stop him from grieving for his mare, he felt better with the dog as his companion. But the calm life did not last long, the dog died next month, and he was crazy with alcohol again. The dog was his sole companion and comfort, if he were given more care and less apathy, maybe his life would be different, just as he hoped before his death that Whatsisname would come back and find him.¹⁰ No matter how degraded his life has been, deep down he is a warm-hearted man; when he went to Marta’s house to find wine, he propped the door shut with a wooden stake in case the snow would get into her kitchen.

⁸ Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*, 89.

⁹ Tokarczuk, *House of Day, House of Night*, 17.

¹⁰ Tokarczuk, *House of Day, House of Night*, 23.

Instead of being a radical feminist, Tokarczuk showed her tenderness and warmth to some marginalized men struggling with life. Although those men were isolated or deserted by society, they could find certain solace and comfort from nature.

6.3. Mo Yan's Marginalized Men

Mo Yan portrayed some marginalized men who treated women and nature with tenderness and warmth, and women and nature also helped and cured them.

Shangguan Jintong was a man being cared and protected by women in his whole life, but he was almost the only man who treated women and nature with respect and tenderness in *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*. As a coward man addicted to women's breasts, he was mocked and abused by his classmates, he was cared and protected by his mother, his seven sisters, nieces, Old Jin and Ji Qiongzhi in his whole life. His mother, sisters and nieces took care of his daily life and protected him from being beaten by others. Ji Qiongzhi, who was his teacher, prevented him from being arrested by the investigator who doubted him of rape and murder. Old Jin saved him from his illness using her breast milk and assigned him a job as her assistant after he went out from prison. "Feminine tenderness melted his heart."¹¹ However, this coward and women-dependent man developed a respect to women and kindness to animals. When she was asked by Qiao Qisha why he did not ask about her background, he replied that his teacher taught her that asking a girl about her background is rude.¹² As the only son and the youngest child in the family, although he was spoiled by women in his growing up, he learned to respect and appreciate women. He understood the hardships his mother and sisters had endured to support the family. Besides, he developed a kindness towards animals. He thought his little white milk goat understood his feelings and behaviors, so there was no need to tether it. When he was cold, the goat would lay up against his back and shielded him from the wind. When the goat's breasts were warmed and protected by a piece of cloth and rabbit fur, he saw its eyes were filled with thankful tears and

¹¹ Mo, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, 474.

¹² Mo, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, 421.

nodded to him.¹³ Jintong and the goat understood and appreciated each other, and during the hard times they found warmth from each other. When he killed a rabbit with his sickle, he blurted out in agony, “I killed a rabbit... oh, the poor thing... what have I done? Why did I have to kill it?”¹⁴ In an era of hunger and war, killing a person was like killing an ant, yet Jintong was scared and remorseful of killing a rabbit, he was a rare man who still held purity and kindness at that time. Jintong’s closeness with nature was also demonstrated in his recovering from illness with the help of many kinds of herbal medicine that his mother could find in Northeast Gaomi. In his semi-consciousness, he felt “his brain had shrunk down to a mere sliver, and the medicinal odor squeezed its way into that sliver, as if through a sieve. Ah, that sweet taste is cogongrass, the bitter taste is soul-returning grass, the sour taste is clover, the salty taste is dandelion, the spicy taste is Siberian cocklebur. Sweet, bitter, sour, salty, and spicy, all five tastes, plus purslane, pinellia tuber and Chinese lobelia, mulberry bark, peony skin, and dried peach.”¹⁵ Jintong must have paid much attention and time to nature to know the name and smell of different herbal medicine. He was refreshed and awakened from his coma by the combined odor of herbal medicine, “with its mixture of life and of soil, poured into his brain as if from a powerful faucet, washing away the filth and slowly opening up his mind. He thought about the lush green grass outside, the flower-covered open fields, and cranes that roamed the marshland. A cluster of golden wild chrysanthemums summoned pollen-laden bees to them. He heard the heavy breathing of the land and the sound of seeds dropping to the ground.”¹⁶ Only a man who is in deep love and connection with nature can imagine a beautiful natural scenery with green grass, flower fields, roaming cranes, and chrysanthemums with bees, as well as can hear the breath of land and the sound of seeds. Although having many shortcomings, Jintong is the rare man in the novel who is tender, respectful and close to women and nature.

Mo Yan deconstructed the essentialist idea on ecofeminism through another male character Birdman Han, who seemed to have a close relationship with birds naturally

¹³ Mo, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, 308.

¹⁴ Mo, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, 476.

¹⁵ Mo, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, 472.

¹⁶ Mo, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, 473.

and was able to understand the language of birds, so he was good at shooting birds, which was an admirable skill in the time of unrest and hunger. He was taken to Japan and spent fifteen years feeding on vegetables and fruits, and living peacefully with wolves and bears in the Japanese mountains. He knew exactly the pack of wolves' ages and hobbies, and he also knew the male bear's eating habits. As a man fed by nature for fifteen years, he was an example that nature could nourish Man, and Man could live harmoniously with nature. The most sarcastic thing in this novel was that he could survive in the deep mountains for fifteen years, but died soon after he returned to human society where he was sentenced to prison and died under the wheels of the train when he was trying to break free. He also received warmth from women after he was taken to Japan. When he was worked as a laborer in Japan, he was advised by a Japanese woman, who had grown up in China and had some attachment to China, to escape to the mountains through the toilet. Fifteen years later after he was saved by hunters from the mountains, the hostess of a grocery store gave him a lot of care, and when the hostess put a spoon of warm sweetened water in his mouth, he cried happily. So when he was telling his stories to Chinese villagers, he empathized that women are always soft-hearted and sweet in words. Later when he learned that his sister-in-law, Laidi, was tortured and abused by the Mute, he killed the Mute for the sake of her.

The housekeeper Uncle Arhat in *Red Sorghum* was tender and loyal to his employer Dai Fenglian and helped her manage the distillery well. He was also kind to their two black mules. After he and the two mules were taken away by the Japanese to work for them, Uncle Arhat had a chance to escape and return to his village to let his wounds mend and to go on living, but as he was crossing the bridge, he heard the plaintive braying of a mule on the southern bank. He turned back to save the mules and this decision led to his tragedy of being skinned by the Japanese. To Uncle Arhat, the two mules were not just two animals, but his comrades to whom he had deep emotions.

Lan Lian was a lonely man who was isolated by society because he refused to join the people's commune, but he was tender and kind to his donkey and ox. When the little donkey's leg was hurt to bleed by Hong Taiyue, the highest-ranking official in Ximen Village, Lan Lian was agonized and angry, and fearlessly questioned Hong for injuring

his donkey. After that, Lan Lian wrapped his arms around its head and massaged its ears with his rough hands, while Yingchun cleaned its injured leg with salt water and wrapped it with a piece of white cloth, which was a warm moment for the donkey.¹⁷ Later when Ximen Donkey broke his right leg when carrying the County Chief Chen and tried to commit suicide, its master Lan Lian saved it and brought it home: “A loud cry from Lan Lian stopped him. he had run up the mountain. He was all sweaty, and his knees were spotted with blood. He’d obviously stumbled and fallen on his way up. In a voice distorted by flowing tears, he shouted: ‘Blackie, my old Blackie...’”¹⁸ When a farmer said the crippled donkey was useless, but it could be sold for a decent sum to the butchers, Lan Lian angrily refuted him. After venting against the county chief and that bunch of farmers, Lan Lian took off his jacket and tore it into strips to bind the donkey’s injured leg. Lan Lian and Yingchun spent three whole months making a prosthetic hoof for the donkey, through trial and error, until they finally managed to produce a false hoof that looked pretty much like the real thing. Later Lan Lian bought an ox in the market just because the ox’s eyes are an exact replica of his dead donkey’s eyes.¹⁹ In 1966, when Lan Lian’s ox has grown into an adult ox, people urged him to put a nose ring on it for purposes of work, but he ignored that. Their relationship has gone beyond that of farmer and farm animals; they were intimate friends and comrades-in-arms opposing collectivization. Lan Lian said to the ox, “My ox is like my son, more human than animal. I treat you like a man, not an ox.”²⁰ Since the ox’s one horn was cut down by the Red Guard in the marketplace, Lan Lian “hadn’t uttered a word. He just stared straight ahead, a vacant look on his face, holding the butcher knife in his hand as a threat.”²¹ As an isolated and marginalized man, Lan Lian’s donkey and ox became his only companion and family with whom he communicated and survived doggedly.

Through portraying the marginalized men who developed a close and cooperative relationship with women and nature, Mo Yan deconstructed the binary opposition

¹⁷ Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 30.

¹⁸ Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 97-98.

¹⁹ Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 115.

²⁰ Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 141.

²¹ Mo, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 185.

between males/females and male (culture)/nature.

Conclusion

This research is a comparative study of Tokarczuk's and Mo Yan's works from the perspective of tender and warm narration, as well as ecofeminism. They depict the oppression and exploitation of marginalized women and nature under patriarchal hierarchal structures, and the wars and political upheavals. Women are put in the center of their works, women's values and significance in both household and society are recognized, and their female characters are rebellious to fight against oppressive powers. The nature is personified or acknowledged agency to recognize their equal rights with humans. Women and nature in their works develop a close relationship, they help and comfort each other due to their similar sufferings and oppressions. However, they are not radically advocating replacing androcentrism with gynocentrism, the two authors also convey their tenderness and warmth to some marginalized men living a miserable and lonely life; despite being isolated or deserted by society, they could find care and comfort from nature and women, in turn, those marginalized men also expressed their care and tenderness to women and nature. Through portraying the marginalized men developing a close and cooperative relationship with women and nature, they deconstruct the essentialist view on ecofeminism that women are inherently closer to nature, as well as deconstruct the binary opposition between males/females and male (culture)/nature. Their works manifest the interconnectedness of everything and that a balanced and cooperative relationship among males, females and nature can and should be achieved to make the world a better and harmonious place.

Despite from different cultural backgrounds, the two Nobel Prize winners, Tokarczuk and Mo Yan display their commonalities in tenderness and warmth by giving voice to women and nature. Through narration of tenderness and warmth, both Tokarczuk's and Mo Yan's works raise women and nature from the marginalized and neglected positions to the center of their works that aim to remind us to pay attention to the survival of women and nature, and reflect on the social attitudes towards them. Through analyzing and comparing how women and nature, under sufferings of traditional patriarchal repression and wars and political upheavals, are depicted by them with tenderness and warmth, this research explores the intricacies of everyday life, arouses people's awareness of women's existence and the human-nature relationship. This dissertation is not only of certain values in interpreting the works of Tokarczuk's and Mo Yan's through the prism of world literature, but will also constitute a

contribution to intercultural literary studies and, consequently, to comparative research.

Tokarczuk and Mo Yan displayed some similarities and differences in their works.

Firstly, they share a similarity in the aspect that women and nature are oppressed and suffered under patriarchal society as well as wars and political upheavals. They deconstruct the androcentrism by exposing the problems and suppressions faced by women in their works, positioning women in the center of their works, portraying resilient and tenacious women who overcome different kinds of difficulties to survive, depicting rebellious women bravely breaking the traditional definition on them, and recognizing their values and significance. However, the results of those women in their works are different. In Tokarczuk's works, some of the rebellious women obtain freedom by stepping out of their home, some are healed by getting close to nature, while the rebellious women in Mo Yan's works are usually trapped again by men or by material desires due to the limitations of the times, they only made progress in physical emancipation, but have not been able to completely free themselves from the manipulation of male-centered ideology.

Secondly, influenced by their respective traditional cultures of respecting and revering nature, as well as their growing up experiences of spending a lot of time with nature, both Tokarczuk and Mo Yan are concerned about natural ecology, recognizing the vitality of nature and the rules of nature, and support a balanced and harmonious coexistence between humans and nature. They deconstruct anthropocentrism by personifying nature or acknowledging its agency, and recognizing animals' equal rights to live. They expose the problems faced by nature in their works, and show to readers examples of treating everything in the nature tenderly and getting along harmoniously with nature. Both of them acknowledge the active agency of animals in their novels, and usually their female characters (also several marginalized men) respect and protect animals and develop a close relationship with animals; animals are companions and family members for them, and they help and comfort each other. However, in terms of plants and things, the two authors display some differences. Plants and things are more often personified to express characters' mood and thought in Mo Yan's works, either functioning as projection of emotions or endowed with symbolic meanings, while Tokarczuk expresses in her works that plants and things are living creatures having thoughts and agency. Their differences in depicting plants and things do not imply whose writing is better or worse, but just their distinct approaches towards plants and things in their works. Both of their writings are valuable, contributing to how we

perceive and relate to the world around us, and offering a unique perspective on the intricate connections between humans and nature. Mo Yan's personifying often serves as a way to deepen the emotional resonance of his characters' experiences, and shows the intimate connection between humans and nature. Tokarczuk's acknowledging the active agency of plants and things recognizes that they are actors actively participate in shaping the world around them, highlighting their importance in the networks of social associations.

Thirdly, despite Tokarczuk and Mo Yan express their tenderness to women and nature, they are not radical feminists advocating replacing androcentrism with gynocentrism, instead, they believe that both men and women are indispensable and can live and cooperate side by side equally and harmoniously, which is showcased in chapter six about how some marginalized and alienated men are warmed by women and develop a close relationship with women due to their similar sufferings and emotional resonance. By depicting some marginalized and alienated men finding solace and companionship from nature, they illustrate that men, instead of dominating nature, are possible to develop a close relationship with nature, in which way they deconstruct the essentialist views that women are connected with nature inherently and innately, on the contrary, their closeness is socially and culturally constructed by their similar suppressions they encounter under patriarchal system.

Finally, their works are enlightening during an era when women consciousness is fully awakening, and human-nature relationship is deteriorating. Their works will help to break the binary opposition between males and females, culture and nature, as well as nature and humans. They demonstrate in their works that males and females are indispensable towards each other and they should be in a balanced and cooperative relationship to live better; humans rely on nature to live and continue life on earth, and they are influencing each other's existence, so humans should respect and protect nature on which we are dependent to live and sustain. As *the Routledge Handbook of Ecofeminism and Literature* demonstrates, literary works provide critical resources to help make the transition from oppressive cultures of dichotomized genders into more egalitarian cultural products and practices.¹

To conclude, this research will not only be helpful in filling the research gap of comparing Tokarczuk's and Mo Yan's works from the perspective of tender and warm

¹ Rose, "Hegemonic Masculinity and Ecofeminist Literature," 329.

narration as well as ecofeminism, and in enriching the comparative study between Polish and Chinese literatures and cultures, but also has constructive meanings in creating a balanced and harmonious relationship among males, females and nature. In addition, this comparison helps to enrich the meaning and connotation of tender and warm narration in Chinese academia, from focusing only on people to everything in nature.

In spite of some significance of this research, it has several limitations. First, I cannot speak or read Polish, so I can only read English and Chinese translations of Tokarczuk's works, which may not fully capture the nuances of the author's language. Second, this research mainly relies on English and Chinese materials about Tokarczuk and Polish culture, which may not be sufficient or comprehensive. Third, due to time and space constraints, the scope of selected novels is limited, only three of each author's works are selected, and most of the two authors' works cannot be intensively compared. Further studies may focus more on the two authors' other works. Despite these limitations, this research aims to provide meaningful contributions to the field and serves as a foundation for further research.

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