

A Study of Animal Narration in Mo Yan's Life and Death Fatigue

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Abstract. Mo Yan masterfully employs the distinctive narrative device of animal perspective throughout "Life and Death Fatigue," which endows the novel with a rich tapestry of profound content and distinctive formal qualities. This innovative approach transcends the traditional narrative constraints that confine the narrative voice to human experiences, and instead, it crafts a literary realm that oscillates between the realms of reality and surrealism. By bestowing animals with human-like rationality and insight, while simultaneously preserving their intrinsic animalistic instincts and irrational behaviors, Mo Yan creates a multifaceted narrative that challenges and expands the boundaries of storytelling. This article aims to delve into the intricacies of the animal narrative within the book and to further investigate the metaphorical depth that the author conveys through his portrayal of animals.

Keywords: Mo Yan's; "Life and Death Fatigue"; animal narrative.

1. Introduction

Mo Yan, with his distinctive flair for creative imagination, has long been a prominent figure in Chinese literature. His artistic achievements and innovative narrative techniques have consistently captured the attention of scholars. In his novel "Life and Death Fatigue," Mo Yan takes a bold step by centering his narrative around animals, using them as the primary storytellers to capture the essence of the era's tumultuous changes. This unique approach not only adds depth to the narrative but also offers a fresh perspective on history and reality. By incorporating animal perspectives, Mo Yan vividly represents and deeply analyzes the shifts in society, providing readers with a compelling exploration of the human experience as seen through the eyes of his animal characters.

2. Unique Animalistic Narrative Perspective

The narrative perspective serves as a distinctive lens through which writers can scrutinize the world, profoundly shaping the structure of a text. In Mo Yan's oeuvre, he places a significant emphasis on and vigorously experiments with innovative narrative viewpoints, thereby revealing a unique artistic allure and deep philosophical insights through a multiplicity of vantage points.

In "Life and Death Fatigue", Mo Yan deeply experiences and maps the suffering of the world and the changes of the times from the perspective of animals such as donkeys, cows, pigs, and dogs through the "Six Paths of Reincarnation" played by Ximen Nao. He breaks through the traditional boundary of "human" as the narrative subject, elevates animals to the narrative subject, endows them with human rationality, and combines human and animal language in his works, observing social history with a cold eye. This move reversed the hegemony of human discourse, achieved equal dialogue between humans and animals, and provided a novel way of understanding the world view. As the reincarnation of Ximen Nao, Lan Qiansui's perspective blends the experience of the animal world with the observation of human society, interweaving with the narratives of Lan Jiefang and "Mo Yan", filling historical gaps, enriching narrative levels, and ensuring a comprehensive presentation of history.

Mo Yan's depiction of animals is not only a delicate portrayal of the natural world, but also a profound reflection on human society and humanity. The contrast of loyalty between blue faced individuals and cows highlights the fragility of human nature in the face of interests; The reversal of

status of the Ximen pig after becoming a breeding pig is a sharp satire on the distortion of human nature and the abuse of power. Through these animal perspectives, Mo Yan reveals the absurdity behind civilization and the complexity of human nature, guiding readers to examine reality in absurdity and reflect on themselves in comparison.

3. The Presentation of the Absurd in Animal Narratives

Mo Yan's novels are deeply influenced by Western absurdist thought, and this highly absurd style of creation is actually one of the main cores of magical realism. In "Life and Death Fatigue," he writes about the changes in the Gaomi countryside through the perspectives of the donkey, ox, pig, monkey, and human that Xi Men experiences through the Six Realms of Reincarnation. Reflecting the human world from different animal perspectives allows for the observation of details that are difficult to uncover from a human viewpoint. Mo Yan uses absurdist techniques in his writing with the aim of depicting reality and helping people to understand it more deeply. Magical realism places real elements in a fantastical environment, thereby giving reality a virtual effect and allowing reality and fantasy to coexist. This creates a dual effect where truth and falsehood are indistinguishable, reality and illusion blend, and ugliness coexists with the ridiculous.

3.1. The Absurdity of Animal Characters

After the reincarnation of Ximen Nao into different animals in "Life and Death Fatigue", Mo Yan's description of these animals leaves readers with room for imagination in terms of their character, appearance, and form. Moreover, the animals in this work, as reincarnations of Ximen Nao, possess thinking similar to that of ordinary people, fully demonstrating the strangeness of the animal images in the book. Making these different animal images more humanized enhances the allegorical and symbolic significance of the article.

Mo Yan paints a vivid picture of the Ximen donkey in "Life and Death Fatigue": "I reached the far bank of the river, tracing a sinuous path, navigating through the thickets of red willows, and traversing a sandy ridge. Perched atop a lofty slope, the overwhelming scent of the young female donkey washed over me, rich and potent. My heart raced furiously, thrashing against my ribs, my blood boiling with excitement, too intense for a prolonged bray, only a sharp hiss escaped me." The Ximen donkey, propelled by instinct, yearned for the company of the young female donkey, a desire that Mo Yan humanizes, endowing the donkey with human-like cognition and a yearning for love that transcends mere animalistic urges. This portrayal suggests a convergence of animal and human consciousness, where the dichotomy between animal instinct and human emotion dissolves into a harmonious blend. Furthermore, the Ximen dog is another complex animal character crafted by Mo Yan, embodying wisdom, affection, and self-interest. The narrative describes a scene where "during our trek through the village, we were greeted by many dogs. They exchanged warm salutations with my elder brothers and cast looks of deference in my direction. My canine siblings proudly announced to the others: 'This is our fourth brother, residing in the county town, and he is the president of the County City Dog Association, commanding a pack of over ten thousand dogs!'" By infusing the dogs with human-like intelligence, Mo Yan invites readers to glimpse a society that mirrors our own, yet is alien in its canine form. Through these rich animal narratives, Mo Yan unveils the harsh realities of the human world. The absurdist writing style delivers a powerful psychological punch while also offering profound revelations about the nature of our existence.

3.2. The Absurdity in Animal Narrative Plots

The absurdity embedded within the narrative plot is a central element of bizarre literary works both in China and around the globe. In "Life and Death Fatigue," the absurdity in animal writing is not only evident in the depiction of various animal characters but also in the diverse narrative arcs. Mo Yan skillfully interweaves the distinctive scenes of folk culture with absurd scenarios, offering readers a unique and memorable experience.

Through the eyes of animals in "Life and Death Fatigue," we are granted a glimpse into scenes from the Cultural Revolution, creating indelible impressions. The novel portrays the tumultuous era from the viewpoint of Ximen Niu, who is burdened with responsibilities not meant for him, as if he has become a human surrogate. Forced into labor reform and harnessed by humans to pull a cart, Ximen Niu endures not only physical exhaustion and hunger but also brutal mistreatment. The cow's confusion and anger at human actions paint a picture of a cruel and unjust human world, casting the cow's understanding and perception of humanity in absurd hues, reflecting an absurd portrayal of the Cultural Revolution from an animal's perspective. Furthermore, the novel depicts the frenzy and ignorance of people during the Cultural Revolution from the perspective of the Monkey King. Ximen Hou, the monkey, serves not only as a prop for Ximen Huan and Pang Fenghuang's performances but also as a window into human behavior. From the monkey's viewpoint, we witness the descent of Pang Fenghuang and Ximen Huan from aristocracy to a state of destitution and their struggle for survival at the bottom of society. The monkey also observes Blue Open's complex emotions towards Pang Fenghuang and his internal turmoil in the face of this forbidden love. Ximen Hou is endowed with human traits, and the novel provides bizarre descriptions of his observations and understandings of human behavior, expressing his views on the strangeness of human actions during the Cultural Revolution. These two vignettes illustrate how Mo Yan's animal-centric narration of the Cultural Revolution can subtly guide readers to reflect on the behavior of people during that time. He reveals to us that in extreme political climates, the "evil" within human nature can be infinitely magnified, while kindness and rationality are often overshadowed.

4. Metaphorical Analysis in Animal Narratives

4.1. Metaphor for Human Nature

In "Life and Death Fatigue", although the writing background of the book is focused on the daily lives of farmers in the northeast of Gaomi Township over the past fifty years since the founding of the People's Republic of China, as well as the complex relationship between farmers and the land, animals are always present in all plot points and are an indispensable presence, both witnesses and participants.

Mo Yan eschews the common literary approach of examining the darker aspects or the fleeting moments of beauty and kindness within human nature through the experiences of ordinary people. Instead, he employs the vehicle of animal characters to reflect on humanity, utilizing the technique of magical realism that unites human and animal characteristics to delve into the depths of human nature. Through the six reincarnations of Ximen Nao, Mo Yan blurs the line between humans and animals, illustrating the dynamic interplay between human and animal natures and achieving a synthesis of the two within a tapestry of reality and illusion. In Mo Yan's writing, the boundary between humans and animals is artfully obscured, with animals serving as mirrors that reflect the complexity of human beings.

In "Life and Death Fatigue," the perspective of Ximen Niu offers a stark portrayal of the violence and indifference that marked the Cultural Revolution, while also highlighting the enduring beauty of human nature. The novel demonstrates that human nature encompasses both primal impulses and bravery, as well as kindness and resilience. As the sole plow ox of the Blue Face family, Ximen Niu exhibits remarkable agricultural prowess. Yet, Blue Face's stubborn independence, which clashes with the collectivization efforts of Ximentun, leads to Ximen Niu suffering abuse at the hands of Ximen Jinlong and others. In a particularly fierce conflict, Ximen Jinlong mercilessly tortures Ximen Niu to coerce Blue Face into joining the cooperative, inflicting such cruelty that Ximen Niu is left barely alive. This scene is a profound revelation of the inhumanity and callousness that defined the Cultural Revolution, as well as the innocent victims caught in the crossfire of power struggles.

Throughout its life, Ximen Niu experiences the camaraderie of a close friend in Blue Face and the maternal affection of Yingchun, forging emotional bonds that transcend species and allow readers to perceive the kindness and warmth within human nature. This duality is especially pronounced within

the specific historical context of the novel, where different individuals embody the complex interplay of human and animalistic traits, revealing the rich multifaceted nature of humanity. Through his cross-species narrative strategy, Mo Yan invites us to re-examine the essence of human nature and to understand the inherent contradictions and harmonies that define us.

4.2. Metaphor for the Dark Society

In the vibrant literary universe crafted by Mo Yan, animals emerge as pivotal vessels for his creative themes and the unfolding of his narratives. "Life and Death Fatigue" serves not merely as a tangible embodiment of the cultural ethos within the historical continuum but also as an incisive reflection, deconstruction, and reconstitution of Mo Yan's own historical and cultural legacy, deeply rooted in the soil of reality. Consequently, the narrative of animals within the novel also bears metaphorical overtones and satirical jabs at the darker aspects of society.

Mo Yan employs the narrative of animals to cast a mirror on the harshness of society and to illuminate the often-overlooked suffering inflicted upon them by humans. The life journey of Ximen Lv, in particular, lays bare the societal underbelly that Mo Yan seeks to expose. Ximen Lv, once a valiant county magistrate and the recipient of the highest honors, finds himself forsaken after an injury, a stark illustration of the fickleness of fortune. Yet, it is his original master, Blue Face, who extends brotherly compassion and rescues him from the brink. However, during the ravages of the Great Famine, even Blue Face is powerless against the desperation that turns men into ravenous beasts, and can only stand by as Ximen Lv is brutally killed and his body divided among the starving. Furthermore, the survivor, Pig Sixteen, bears witness to the heartless massacre of wild boars by humans, an act of cruelty paraded as entertainment. Despite such barbarity, Pig Sixteen responds not with rancor but with an act of profound benevolence, bravely plunging into icy waters to rescue children in peril, regardless of the cost. In this stark contrast, the noble end of Pig Sixteen serves to accentuate the profound darkness within human society. Thus, within the animal narratives of "Life and Death Fatigue," Mo Yan not only exposes the shadowy aspects of human nature but also paints an unflinching portrait of societal darkness and brutality. This compels readers to confront and contemplatively reassess that chapter of history with a mixture of horror and introspection.

5. Conclusion

In summary, the narrative is enriched with peculiar characteristics through the distinct perspectives and techniques that animate the animal characters. This approach not only enhances the allure of the work but also underscores its scholarly significance. By employing animal narratives, Mo Yan invites readers to contemplate the duality of human nature—the interplay of good and evil, and the societal darkness and cruelty—through the eyes of these creatures.

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