

Study of Intertextuality in the Narrative of Suffering between the East and the West: From Dostoevsky to Yu Hua

Yingqiao Zhu

Faculty of Humanities, The Education University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China

Abstract: When we study literature from a cross-cultural perspective, the narrative of suffering, as a spiritual medium that carries the shared experience of human life, always persistently questions the essence of life. This article focuses on the intertextual connections in the narratives of Russian literary master Dostoevsky and contemporary Chinese writer Yu Hua, specifically exploring their struggles. Through close reading and comparative analysis of the texts, the article examines the similarities and differences between the two in terms of cultural core, narrative strategies, and philosophical implications. Research has found that Dostoevsky is rooted in the Christian tradition of redemption and uses polyphonic narrative to construct a soul level "interrogative" writing style; Yu Hua, on the other hand, is deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture and, with a calm and observant style, extracts the secularized philosophical core of "existence is meaning". Although the two present differentiated forms of suffering writing due to the differences in historical context and cultural origins, they jointly point to the ultimate exploration of upholding human dignity and the value of existence. This study not only expands new theoretical dimensions for cross-cultural dialogue between Eastern and Western literature, but also provides literary level practical insights for contemporary society to respond to spiritual dilemmas.

Keywords: Narrative of Suffering, Intertextuality, Dostoevsky, Yu Hua, Existentialism.

1. Introduction

Suffering is an eternal theme in literature and a universal human experience that transcends time and space. In the fields of 19th century Russian literature and contemporary Chinese literature, Dostoevsky and Yu Hua respectively pushed the writing of suffering to a dual height of philosophy and art with classic texts such as "Crime and Punishment" and "To Live". The former uses the experience of exile in Siberia to gaze into the abyss of human nature, while the latter captures the ups and downs of individual fate during China's social transformation stage. Although they are separated by a hundred years and belong to the context of Eastern and Western cultures, they form a hidden dialogue in the deep logic of the narrative of suffering. Russian literature has always had a tradition of "metaphysics of suffering", which Dostoevsky inherited and transcended, elevating individual suffering into a religious philosophical speculation on human original sin and redemption [1]. In his works, Raskolnikov's "crime and punishment" is not only a moral dilemma at the individual level, but also a metaphor for the spiritual crisis of the Russian nation. Yu Hua's narrative of suffering has always been rooted in the context of Chinese history, from writing about violence in the avant-garde period to writing about endurance and suffering in "To Live", always revolving around the core proposition of "survival", hiding his thorough understanding of local experience. The hardships of Fu Gui's life are not only a reflection of the individual being passively carried by the tide of the times, but also imply a modern transformation of the Confucian philosophy of "life and death". Why do two writers with vastly different cultural backgrounds form a strong creative resonance with suffering? What are the comparable dimensions of narrative strategies and spiritual core between the two? What kind of reflection can this cross temporal intertextuality provide for

contemporary literature? This article will analyze these issues from the perspectives of cultural genes, narrative strategies, philosophical connotations, and explore the deep connections and differences between the narratives of suffering in the East and the West.

2. Cultural Genes: The Spiritual Roots of Hardship Narratives

2.1. Russian Christian Tradition and "Redeeming" Suffering

Dostoevsky's narrative of suffering is always shrouded in the spiritual halo of Eastern Orthodoxy. In 'The Brothers Karamazov', the teachings of Elder Zosima and Alyosha's philosophy of forgiveness both reflect the religious logic of 'redemption through suffering'. Raskolnikov fell into a mental breakdown after the murder, and ultimately completed his denial of self arrogance and return to faith by being exiled to Siberia for dual physical and spiritual labor. This narrative that regards suffering as a "soul purifier" is essentially a literary expression of the Christian "original sin redemption" model [2]. The collective unconsciousness of Russian intellectuals towards 'suffering', as Belinsky said, 'suffering is the imprint of the times', is elevated in Tolstoy's writings to a universal concern for the fate of humanity.

2.2. Chinese Confucian and Taoist Traditions and the "Enduring Type" of Suffering

Yu Hua's depiction of suffering is infused with the wisdom of traditional Chinese culture. In "To Live", Fu Gui faced the tragedy of his loved ones passing away one after another and chose to silently endure rather than fiercely resist, which is in line with the Confucian philosophy of "harmony between heaven and man" for survival. The Taoist philosophy of "letting nature take its course" is also implicit in Yu Hua's

narrative - the coexistence of Fu Gui and Lao Niu symbolizes the individual's adherence to the instinct of life in the face of impermanent fate. Unlike Tuo Shi's belief in transcending suffering, Yu Hua focuses more on the construction of the meaning of suffering at the secular level: survival itself is the goal, and suffering becomes the touchstone for verifying the resilience of life. This enduring narrative of suffering implies a tribute to the Chinese folk character of resilience and endurance'.

3. Narrative Strategy: Literary Shaping of Suffering

3.1. Dostoevsky: Polyphonic Narrative and Dialectics of the Soul

Bakhtin's theory of "polyphonic novels" is perfectly interpreted in Tolstoy's works. Raskolnikov's "Superman Theory" and Sonia's "Redemption of Suffering" in "Crime and Punishment" form a fierce confrontation, with different voices juxtaposed and clashed in the text, forming a multidimensional speculation on the essence of suffering. Tuo Shi is skilled at using techniques such as inner monologue and dream talk to depict the soul tearing of characters in suffering - such as Raskolnikov's repeated hallucinations after murder, externalizing mental distress into perceptible literary imagery. This interrogation style 'narrative forces readers to confront the complexity of human nature and reject simple moral judgments.

3.2. Yu Hua: A Violent Aesthetics of Calm Observation and Details

Yu Hua's narrative style is known for being "calm to cruel". In 'To Live', every death experienced by Fu Gui (such as Qing's blood donation death, Feng Xia's difficult childbirth death, etc.) is lightly depicted with white lines, but there is a hidden shock in the details: 'Jia Zhen's body slowly extinguished like a lamp'. This restrained language actually reinforces the weight of suffering. Unlike Tuo Shi's "soul carnival", Yu Hua chooses to retreat from the emotions of the narrator and present the daily suffering through "zero degree writing". The violent writing in early works such as "A Kind of Reality", although full of sensory stimulation, always serves to question the essence of survival - violence is an extreme form of suffering and a touchstone of human nature [3].

4. Philosophical Connotation: Constructing the Meaning of Suffering

4.1. Dostoevsky: Seeking Transcendent Meaning in Suffering

Tuo's narrative of suffering always points to the ultimate question of 'why do people live'. In "Notes on the Underground", the "underground person" uses self torture to resist mediocrity, exposes their soul in the dark room, criticizes social hypocrisy and human ugliness, but is deeply trapped in a cycle of pain in self denial. Behind their futile resistance is a persistent exploration of the true essence of life. Raskolnikov in "Crime and Punishment" was driven by the "superman philosophy" and wanted to prove his "superman" qualification and practice so-called "justice" by murdering a loan shark. However, after the murder, he fell into a severe

mental struggle, and the torn between his conscience and the "superman theory" tormented him greatly. Under the influence of Sonia, Raskolnikov reflected on his behavior, saw through the absurdity of the "superman theory", and gradually realized that true strength lies in facing vulnerability and taking responsibility. He chose to surrender himself and accept exile. In the icy and snowy Siberia, the physical and mental suffering made him abandon the "superhuman philosophy" and gradually learn to care for others, ultimately realizing that "love and forgiveness" are the foundation of life. This kind of thinking that takes suffering as the path of faith is essentially a religious response to the existential dilemma. Tuo believed that humans are born with original sin, and suffering is God's trial; Only by confessing and purifying the soul in suffering can one be redeemed and elevated. This is in line with Christian doctrine and also highlights the insignificance of people before suffering and their dependence on faith.

4.2. Yu Hua: Suffering as the Essential Manifestation of Survival

Yu Hua's works do not add a halo beyond reality, only attributing suffering to the reality of existence itself. In 'To Live', Fu Gui's family was defeated, conscripted, and his loved ones passed away one after another, but he was not crushed and silently endured the injustice of fate by relying on his daily strength. Fugui's life lacks divine revelation, divine assistance, lofty ideals, and noble beliefs, relying solely on the spirit of 'living for the sake of survival' to sustain it. Relying on the old cow for farming, one can actually live out the true essence of life. Yu Hua said, 'People live for the sake of living themselves.' This statement highlights the core of his philosophy of suffering: the meaning of existence lies not in external values such as fame and fortune, or the pursuit of faith, but in the continuation of life - living means hope and meaning [4]. This down-to-earth philosophy of survival pays tribute to the resilience of ordinary people in Chinese history and responds to modern challenges. When the traditional value system collapses and faith is lost, "living" becomes the last spiritual reliance, reminding people to cherish their lives, face difficulties, and demonstrate the weight of life.

5. Intertextuality Manifestation: Cross Cultural Resonance of Suffering

5.1. Poetics of the Suffering of Small People

In the grand narrative of literature, the most easily overlooked small characters are the ones who can most touch people's hearts. Dostoevsky and Yu Hua both set their sights on the lower echelons of society, using the bitter fate of these people to shine the light in human nature. In "The Poor," Tuo Shi wrote about a small civil servant named Jewushkin who lived a tight life in a small and rundown place. Even though he was almost out of his own mind, he still wanted to help his orphan daughter Valvala save food money to make ends meet; Even if the landlord pointed at him and scolded him, and his colleagues laughed at him as a "broken rag", he did not lose his dignity as a human being. In his letters to Valvala, every word was saying that he was not useless. In Yu Hua's works, Fu Gui's life is even more difficult. He has fallen from a young master of luxurious clothing and food to a hardworking farmer. War, famine, and people around him have all left one by one, but the hardships have not crushed him. He relies on his own strength to survive, guarding the field ridge and

digging food with an old cow. He always carries kindness and perseverance in his daily life. The same goes for Xu Sanguan in "The Story of Xu Sanguan Selling Blood". In order to ensure that his family can have enough to eat and treat his son's illness, he travels back and forth to sell blood, disregarding the danger; Even though I am too old to straighten my waist, I still want to carry the burden of the family and use the most practical actions to carry the family affection. Tuo Shi and Yu Hua wrote about ordinary people in this way, breaking through the old view that "suffering can make people worse" - even if life is difficult, the resilience and kindness in human nature can overcome the hardships of poverty. These lower class people have endured hardships, but they have relied on their dignity and kindness to live with a spirit richer than anyone else, becoming heroes among ordinary people. This kind of sympathy for ordinary people also hides the same humanitarian heart as two writers: staring at the days of the lower class, speaking for them with words, and letting readers see how much spiritual strength is hidden in the hearts of ordinary people.

5.2. Modern Writing of the Absurdity of Fate

In modern society, the absurdity of fate has long become a core topic in literature. Dostoevsky and Yu Hua, although from different cultural backgrounds, both grasped this essence and wrote about people's struggles and resistance in the face of absurdity through their stories. Raskolnikov in "Crime and Punishment" is hooked by the "superman philosophy" and wants to prove himself "extraordinary" by killing a loan shark. However, he did not become a "superman" and instead fell into a mental quagmire, even morally restless. His behavior is both a challenge to the social order of the time and a rebellion against the irrationality of the world. Fu Gui, depicted by Yu Hua, suffered a fatal turn of luck due to his gambling failures. He experienced being captured as a strong soldier, famine, and the death of his loved ones. The disaster had no warning but he could only bear it. His fate seemed to be invisibly manipulated, full of absurdity and helplessness. However, he persevered and resisted fate by refusing to surrender. In the face of absurdity, the two have different ways of coping: Tolstoy uses religious beliefs to dissolve absurdity, while in "Crime and Punishment", Sonia uses the kindness and faith of the bottom to lead Raskolnikov to abandon the "superhuman philosophy" and surrender to punishment, sublimating in suffering [5]; Yu Hua, on the other hand, confronts the absurd with secular survival. Fu Gui has no divine revelation or external assistance, and survives in hardship on his own. He works alongside the old cow and seeks the meaning of life in daily life. Although they have different ways of coping, both reveal the absurdity of fate and humanity's pursuit of meaning in existence, confirming the cross-cultural value of narrative of suffering - literature can transmit human common emotions across time and space.

6. Reflection on Modernity: The Contemporary Value of Narrative of Suffering

In the current era of material abundance and spiritual anxiety, the narrative of suffering by Dostoevsky and Yu Hua has unique practical significance. The rapid development of technology in modern society has improved material life, and people enjoy unprecedented convenience and comfort. However, material abundance has not brought spiritual

satisfaction, but instead has led many people into anxiety and confusion. Nihilism spreads, people question traditional values and beliefs, and feel that life lacks meaning and purpose; Interpersonal relationships are distant, and in fast-paced life, people lose deep connections with others, leading to inner loneliness and emptiness. Tuo Shi delves deep into the soul, providing modern people with spiritual support to fight against nothingness [6]. In his books, one can always see that even on the darkest days, the soul shines through - the characters in the book endure and think in pain, and only then do their souls truly sink and ascend. This concern for the soul reminds us not to neglect spiritual abundance when pursuing material things. We need to find a power beyond material things to fill the emptiness in our hearts and prevent the erosion of nothingness. Just like Alyosha in 'The Brothers Karamazov', he still holds onto faith and kindness in the face of the hardships of life and the ugliness of human nature. His actions are like pointing the way for readers, letting them know that even the coldest world hides warmth and hope. Yu Hua's portrayal of people's resilience in hardship has become a "spiritual antidote" for treating existential anxiety. The lucky ones in his works never bow down in the face of hardship, always carrying a passion for life and respect for it in their hearts. Their story ultimately boils down to this: no matter how difficult the days are, we can still endure them and cherish every moment of our lives. This kind of praise for survival resilience allows us to find strength and hold onto the belief to survive when we encounter setbacks - when we think of Fugui in despair, we know that this is not difficult for us, and then we can muster up our energy to live well. Their books together tell us that suffering is not just a bad thing, but rather a mirror that can reflect the most genuine appearance of human nature. In an era where technological rationality is rampant and interpersonal relationships are distant, the literary gaze on suffering reminds us to respect life and empathize with others. By reading the works of both, we can gain a deeper understanding of human suffering, feel the pain of others, cultivate reverence for life and sympathy for others, rebuild interpersonal connections in a cold society, make our hearts soft and warm, and not forget to pay attention to the human spiritual world and cherish interpersonal emotions when pursuing material progress, in order to cope with life challenges in a more positive and healthy way.

7. Conclusion

This study takes Dostoevsky and Yu Hua's narrative of suffering as the object, and through careful reading and comparative analysis of the text, reveals the deep intertextuality of the writing of suffering in Eastern and Western literature - although the two have formed "redemption" and "acceptance" narrative paradigms due to cultural genetic differences, they have reached a consensus on safeguarding human dignity and questioning the meaning of existence. Based on the Christian tradition of redemption, Tuo uses polyphonic narrative to conduct soul questioning, turning suffering into a trial of faith; Yu Hua deeply cultivates the wisdom of Chinese Confucianism and Taoism, presenting secular suffering through calm and simple descriptions, and establishing "living" as a spiritual anchor to combat absurdity. This difference stems from the cultural distinction between Eastern Orthodox 'original sin redemption' and Chinese folk's 'tenacious survival', as well as reflecting the characteristics of individual fate in the transformation of contemporary societies in 19th century Russia and China. In terms of

academic value, this study breaks through a single cultural perspective and uses intertextuality theory as a link to provide a new path from "difference comparison" to "meaning dialogue" for the comparison of Eastern and Western literature, filling the gap in attention to "secularism and transcendence" in cross-cultural research on narrative of suffering; In practical terms, both provide spiritual resources for contemporary society to resist nihilism - Tuo Shi excavates the depth of the soul to guide people in seeking transcendent values, Yu Hua's writing awakens people's reverence for life through survival resilience, and jointly confirms the universality of literary "human studies": no matter what cultural context, human struggle and perseverance in the face of suffering are spiritual torches that illuminate the dark night of existence. Future research can expand the dialogue dimensions between the two writers and other regional narratives of suffering, or combine specific historical contexts to deepen the examination of the relationship between suffering narratives and social change, providing richer theoretical and practical references for cross-

cultural literary research.

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