

Mo Yan's Reception in China and a Reflection on the Postcolonial Discourse

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Binghui Song,

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Abstract: In his article "Mo Yan's Reception in China and a Reflection on the Postcolonial Discourse" Binghui Song argue that the controversial style and themes of Mo Yan's works are necessitated by the interconnected yet different contexts of China and the rest of the world, only by means of which Mo Yan can let his voice be heard. As one of the most excellent and unique contemporary Chinese writers, Mo Yan has exerted extensive influence on Chinese readers, and his works have also caused various controversies over the past 30 years. His winning of the Nobel Prize in Literature, rather than ending such controversies, has only intensified the disputes centering around his works. It is this paper's contention that a critique of Mo Yan's work as distortion and condemnation of the image of China catering to the Western stereotypes is but a product of postcolonial theory misplaced in the Chinese context, which represents a Western cultural neo-colonialism, as well as a narrow-minded interpretation veiling the uniqueness of Mo Yan's creativity.

Binghui SONG**Mo Yan's Reception in China and a Reflection on the Postcolonial Discourse**

Mo Yan's winning of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2012 is a significant event for Chinese literature in the global context. As a consequence, the perception of Chinese literature by the outside world and its self-cognition has accordingly undergone a profound change. Gao Xingjian, who wrote mostly in Chinese, became a French citizen in the late 1980s before he won the prize in 2000. With the ambiguous recognition by the Chinese authorities, Gao's winning of the prize is neither direct nor effective enough to end Chinese writers' long-standing Nobel complex.

Mo Yan put an end to this and started a new era. His Nobel Prize has triggered off another round of debates and disputes regarding his works, which is not surprising, given his distinctive style of writing. Ever since the beginning of his career, his works have been heatedly debated and interpreted through a global lens, with regards to their controversial themes and complicated connections to Chinese history and social reality. Like many of his contemporaries, Mo Yan gained his fame as a writer when China opened its doors to the world in the 1980s, the decade when Chinese writers began to become accustomed to the literary influence of world literature as well as being placed in a global context in terms of reception and criticism of their works. By the same token, the 1980s was also a period when Chinese writers began to get used to perceiving the significance of their works in the context of world literature. Thus the domestic criticism had already transcended the context of Chinese literature and culture before Mo Yan won the Nobel Prize.

Criticism of Mo Yan exhibits many common features of contemporary Chinese literary criticism. It also poses all the major questions accompanying Chinese literature's march into "The World Republic of Letters" (a concept borrowed from Casanova's book *The World Republic of Letters*): how do writers balance the demands of domestic and global receptions? When are such demands in apparent opposition, how can writers creatively transcend that binary conceptual framework and engage themselves in dialogues and competitions in this World Republic of Letters? The challenge is for Chinese critics as well. How should they interpret Chinese literature in this particular global context? How should they analyze strategies of various literary discourses within and beyond the Chinese context?

In the award ceremony speech on behalf of the Nobel Committee, Chairman Per Wästberg commented on Mo Yan in a hybrid and highly flexible style. He praised Mo Yan's extraordinary imagination, his satire of history and reality, and his narrative in disguise as myth and fable which serves as a vehicle to express his ethical stance. However, the Chinese critics disagree with Wästberg when he put constant emphasis on the connection between the Mo Yan's fictional worlds and Chinese modern history. No doubt there is such kind of connection, but the question is how to interpret and evaluate this connection. The interpretation varies with the change of cultural context, cultural stance, and the critics' varied conception of literature. The ambiguous and complicated phrasing of Wästberg's award speech allows the critics in China, to interpret, from different angles, the recapitulative title on the official website of Nobel Prize: Mo Yan's "hallucinatory realism merges folk tales, history and the contemporary" (<https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2012/press.html>). This comment can

be regarded as a brief summary of all previous evaluation of Mo Yan's writings, positive or negative. By right, Mo Yan's Nobel Prize winning is a great event that can help terminate China's national "Nobel complex" and bridge Chinese critics' divergent views on his works. Nevertheless, it prolongs or even aggravates those old controversies. This complex situation unveils some theoretical misunderstandings in contemporary Chinese literary criticism.

The harsh criticism of Mo Yan focuses on the various characters, scenes, and details of his novels that stand in stark contrast to the lofty, elegant, and refined promoted by conventional standards. In this respect, another well-known Chinese writer, Liu Xinwu's commentary accurately captures some readers' first impression of Mo Yan's novels. He observes that there are many things in Mo Yan's novels that are prone to be rejected by traditional revolutionary realist writings. Liu contends that Mo Yan does not provide typical characters in typical environments, nor does he present vivid characterizations. For Liu, the worst of all is the lack of positive personal images for readers to respect, emulate, and admire, and most of these novels display the evil nature of humanity, dirty and messy scenes, all sorts of cruelty (cannibalism, skinning and various forms of torture), as well as feces, vomit, and everything that used to be thought as improper or indecent for literary texts (Liu and Zhang, *An Alternative* 15). To these ugly, bloody images of mankind and other creatures, even those who are most appreciative of Mo Yan's talent hold back their applause.

Putting together, negative reception of Mo Yan in China can be roughly sorted into three categories. The vulgar, sensual, bloody, evil, and ugly elements in Mo Yan's novels are called into question and reproached for the repugnant feeling they bring about. To a great degree, such reproach is made by reference to conventional literary experience as well as real-world experience. For example, critics and readers can accept the narration of the brutal history of war in *Red Sorghum*, but they cannot accept the excessive renderings of the cruel, bloody, and filthy scenes, which, for them, are beyond "reasonable" limits. Mo Yan's later novels, including *The Republic of Wine* (1993), *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* (1995), *Sandalwood Punishment* (2001), and *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* (2006), and *Frog* (2009), arouse in many people a sense of uneasiness, disgust, or even anger. The problematic human nature exposes the suspicious relationships between human and animal and the distorted ethical or aesthetic standards by the ugly scenes and details. These elements are simply too much for some people. Such views in line with traditional realism are not only very widespread among ordinary Chinese readers; they have also explicitly or implicitly affected literary critics' judgement of Mo Yan's works. They can't help asking: is the history and reality of China, even if concerning Northeast Gaomi Town only, like what Mo Yan has presented?

What comes next are worries and discontentment uttered from an elitist stance or out of "aesthetic" considerations, particularly regarding the indelicacy of Mo Yan's language, the winding and forking progression of his narration, the alleged vulgarity of his imagery, and his resistance to the aesthetics of the sublime (Wang, *The Failure* 12-18). Such criticism haunts Mo Yan's works right from *Red Sorghum* through *The Red Locust* to all of his later pieces. Critics denounce Mo Yan's "mistakes" (Pan, *Faults* 56-57) of being superficially ornate, artificial, and unrestrained (He and Pan, *The Incontinent* 33-37). Until the beginning of the new century, criticism of this sort has intensified, especially after Mo Yan's winning

of the Nobel Prize. Right in the next spring of 2012, *Critiques on Mo Yan*, a collection of essays questioning Mo Yan's style of writing, was published. This collection includes critiques by more than 40 authors from the late 1980s to 2013 (Li and Cheng, *Critiques*). The harsh criticism among them was uttered by Li Jianjun from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Since his first critical article on Mo Yan (Li, *On Shan* 108-24), Li has published more than ten relevant works, becoming the most prominent voice questioning Mo Yan in China. Gu Bin (Wolfgang Kubin), a German sinologist, is another critic who voices his elitist standpoint and aesthetic stance (see Wolfgang, <<http://book.sina.com.cn/news/c/2014-09-22/1323668912.shtml>>).

As for the third group of criticisms, they agree that criticism of Mo Yan from perspectives of both national and world literature, can be made by explicitly drawing on modern Western theories like post-colonial theory, or implicitly following their logic. Sharing the conceptualization of literature as a reflection of reality, these critics, though sometimes touching on formal matters of literature, most frequently tend to ask a same question: why does Mo Yan always present a vulgar, repulsive, intolerable, and absurd fictional world? From their perspective, Mo Yan has apparently distorted the Chinese history and reality—what is his underlying intention? The way in which such questions are put forward already implies its answer: Mo Yan's exaggerated, absurd, and repulsive way of representing history and reality aims to satisfy the Western audience, the former colonists hungry for exoticism and (in Said's words) still cherishing an "Orientalism," with a selfish purpose of increasing his own reputation in world literature. This is of course the harshest criticism, which not only questions Mo Yan's literary achievements, but also cast doubt on his national awareness and cultural stance. This criticism may also lead to a moralistic critique of his utilitarianism, which, to a certain degree, amounts to an interrogation of Mo Yan's political stand in the context of China. A milder form of this kind of criticism may not try to conjecture the "hidden" political motives of Mo Yan but will criticize the potentially dangerous effects of his works: though not intentionally bowing to Orientalism, Mo Yan has in effect confirmed the Occidental imagination of a backward and filthy East. In fact, when the critics, employing a traditional aesthetic theory, cannot satisfactorily explain Mo Yan's wild and exaggerating literary discourse, inevitably they tend to arrive at such conclusions.

This article will mainly focus on the last kind of criticism presented above, but before that, I think it helps briefly address the other two. Criticism of the first kind questions the reality status of Mo Yan's fictional worlds and characters. For literature, a sharp contrast between fiction and reality is nothing but commonplace, and all kinds of exaggeration, transformation, and fictionalization belongs to a writer's legitimate freedom of creation. One reason that these critics choose to approach Mo Yan's novels is because the notion of literature as reflection of reality still has a wide market among ordinary readers. The second kind of criticism of Mo Yan's works seems somewhat more pertinent, pointing out some problems in his writing, such as the unrefined prose, fancy phrases piled up, lack of temperance in expression, negligence over important details, and even inconsistency in narration. However, what is usually ignored by such a criticism is that it is the very elitist literary stance rooted in the established convention that Mo Yan is trying to break free from.

The post-colonial criticism of Mo Yan's works is directly related to the dissemination and reception of western postcolonial theories in China. They were introduced into China at the end of the 1980s but did not attract the attention of Chinese intellectuals and trigger off large-scale discussion until the year of 1993. The 1990s was a critical era when Chinese mainstream ideology witnessed a shift from fierce anti-traditionalism and radical pro-westernization rooted in a "modernity anxiety" in the 1980s, to promotion of traditional critique of westernization. In this new era, a conservatism was reestablished and connected to the postcolonial theories opposing Euro-centrism and western cultural hegemony, the effect of which was felt everywhere in the Chinese intellectual circle. This trend, of course, would also manifest itself in criticisms of Mo Yan, though its full impact had to wait several more years to be felt. Upon the publishing of *The Wine Country* in 1993, many critics still tend to relate this novel to Lu Xun's (another avant-garde writer at the beginning of the twentieth century) *A Madman's Diary* or the modernist writer Kafka's *The Castle*.

However, the post-colonial criticism of Mo Yan has become the loudest voice among the negative views since the beginning of the new century. It starts with Li's criticism of *Sandalwood Death* (*On Shan* 12-29) and gains its momentum after Mo Yan's winning of the Nobel Prize in 2012. Li criticizes Mo Yan's works for a similar reason and in a consistent manner. His typical comment in *Frank Views on Mo Yan and His Winning of Nobel Prize* says:

Mo Yan, with techniques familiar to Westerners, writes about Chinese experience to fulfill the expectation of the Westerners...his characters show no respect for manners... peeing into the wine jar, wildly jolting the sedan on the way to the wedding ceremony, sleeping in the sorghum field...In Westerners' imagination, these are exactly what Chinese culture and life should be like; Chinese people have nothing to do with the sublime or poetic, nor do they have noble or pure emotions. Mo Yan, through his simplifying and bantering narratives, presents Chinese people as if they are insane, cruel and childish, sickly obsessed with violence, sex, breasts and other perversities. (*Straight Critique*, 24-36, all quotations are my translations if not otherwise noted).

Besides this, some other critics believe that Mo Yan, with his orientalist psychology, is indulged in a "demonization" of Chinese images (Ye, *From Orientalism* 128), which embodies his "novelty seeking and biased cognition of the East under the influence Orientalism" (Wang, *Orientalistic* 86-92). From a likewise position, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* is judged to be a pompous fiction failing to reflect social reality; its filthy scenes, animalized human characters, and their moral depravity are viewed as "strategical adjustments made to cater to the fantasies of its foreign readers, which is the fatal flaw in this so-called national epic" (Jiang, *The Orientalistic* 84). Moreover, some other critics overtly criticizes Mo Yan for "catering to the vulgar taste of the Swedes, by depicting one swede as Chinese people's saviors in this novel, which obviously amounts to a self-colonizing move by the writer" (Ouyang, *Observation* 26-37).

I certainly disagree with such viewpoints. However, to uncover their underlying logic and expose their ultimate cause besides apparent aesthetic preference, it is necessary to place them back into the wider context of world literature. Likewise, I will argue that it is only by revealing the relevant cultural

background and discourse environment faced by Mo Yan, can we arrive at a precise evaluation of his artistic achievements.

To begin with, why is Mo Yan's winning of the Nobel Prize such an important event for criticism of his works? As the first Chinese citizen ever to receive this honor, Mo Yan fulfilled a longtime Chinese dream: to win the Nobel Prize in literature, the most influential literary award in the world, which can introduce Chinese writers to the arena of world literature. For China, the global vision of world literature and the construction of national literature can be traced back to the beginning of the twentieth century. The early period of the 1980s witnessed a revival of a modernist movement completely opening up to western modern literature. With the translation of writers like William Faulkner, Gabriel García Márquez, and Milan Kundera (especially Márquez, who won the Nobel Prize in 1982 and also comes from a developing country), Chinese writers and critics were greatly inspired to reflect on the strategy of constructing a Chinese national literature in the context of world literature. A landmark event is the publication of an influential volume of articles on Chinese contemporary writers entitled *Going to World Literature* by the critic Zeng Xiaoyi. The articles included there are all written by then influential scholars who focused their discussion on analyzing the relationship between Chinese literature and the outside world.

The strategical reflections there point to the necessity for Chinese literature to go beyond a mimicry of Western literary forms and techniques, leading those scholars to realize that world of literature is "not a fair arena" (Casanova). In this multicultural arena, there are central and periphery positions, whose constant interaction provides a space for various national literatures and their writers to communicate and compete with each other. Because China's modernization was belated, Chinese literature's position in this unfair space has not been a favorable one ever since the middle of nineteenth century.

Placing Chinese literature in the realm of world literature helps writers realize that, in addition to artistic innovation, they have to take two contexts into consideration: those of national and global literature. For developing countries and culturally marginalized nations, these two contexts are often not in harmony with each other. Subjects of literary activity (writers and critics) have to deal with the disparity or contradiction of these two contexts. In other words, Chinese writers, coming late into the "world republic of letters," have to accomplish a special creative act in order to be genuinely acknowledged: they have to find and practice a literary discourse that addresses both the domestic and global contexts, and speak to different readerships situated therein. In Casanova's words, for writers coming from impoverished rural areas in China like Mo Yan, they have to find their own way to make a cultural journey from Northeast Gaomi Township to Beijing, and then from there, to Paris, New York, London, or Stockholm.

The sustained efforts of contemporary Chinese writers to enter into world literature in the last thirty years, or even the past century, have been acknowledged with Gao Xingjian and especially Mo Yan's winning of the Nobel Prize. It means that contemporary Chinese writers have discovered their distinctive mode of discourse in the global literary arena. Accordingly, interpretation of their works should also be placed in a context of world literature. In this sense, the upsurge of negative criticisms of Mo Yan after

his Nobel Prize winning may only reveal an incompatibility between their practitioners' outdated mindset with this world literature context.

It is certainly beyond the scope of this article to present a thorough review of Mo Yan's reception in his home country, but a brief note is necessary in order to rectify a false impression that negative comments on Mo Yan always outweigh affirmative ones in Chinese literary circle. Quite on the contrary, positive reception of Mo Yan has persisted ever since the publishing his novel *The Red Sorghum*, which can be demonstrated by the critical collection *On Mo Yan* compiled by Lin Jianfa, the editor-in-chief of *Contemporary Writes Review*. This collection consists of 80 important critical articles published over thirty years, whose contributors include renowned critics and writers like Chen Sihe, Wang Anyi, Wu Jun, Sun Yu, Zhang Qinghua, Wang Yao, etc. Admittedly, there is no shortage of dissatisfaction with Mo Yan's writing even in this collection, but it is quite different in both extent and logic from those negative comments mentioned above.

As the most affirmative Chinese critic of Mo Yan, as well as the one who recommended him to the Swedish Academy of Literature, Chen Sihe's commentary on Mo Yan is quite representative and can be read side by side with Wästberg's award ceremony speech. Chen holds that Mo Yan successfully "writes for the Chinese peasants, by absorbing from and revitalizing the Chinese folk traditions, by inheriting and carrying forward the splendid Rabelaisian tradition of world literature, and by artfully creating a series of diversified and inclusive literary texts. His works address universal human concerns by drawing on uniquely local cultural experiences, as a result of which they are recognized globally and truly belongs to world literature" (Chen, *Implications* B02). I would like to add a further elaboration: through his fictional world of Northeastern Gaomi Township, Mo Yan both refracts and transcends contemporary Chinese social-historical reality with his unique technique of exaggeration. Not devoid of characters, scenes, and details marked with vulgarity, ugliness, and atrocity, his works are actually interwoven with compassion and redemption. With an ingenious rhetoric, he conveys a penetrating criticism interwoven with a self-deprecating sharpness. Most importantly, the striking contrast of Mo Yan's discourse within and without his texts exhibits Mo Yan's sensitiveness towards local and global contexts. This is important because it may answer most of the doubts and misunderstandings directed at him, including those by critics like Li.

Mo Yan's writing style may be problematic or ambivalent for both realist and elitist critics, but it should be viewed as a strategic choice of the writer when he has to simultaneously confront and address the distinctive cultural contexts of China and the outside world. Nursed by a profound but receding classic tradition while caught in the middle of a modern literary tradition with a short history of less than one hundred years (not influential in world literature but not completely ignorable), Chinese writers like Mo Yan have no choice but to write in modern Chinese, which is also demanded by the era of world literature. Writing in China and in modern Chinese, Mo Yan has to negotiate with his cultural inheritance, the mainstream ideology, and the specific readership of China. When expressing himself from his own standpoint, he has to express himself in an unconventional way to fully exploit his opportunity for speech. In this sense, his literary discourse is not only about literature but also imbedded with political considerations. In other words, his unique literary discourse is necessitated by considerations of both

artistic innovation and cultural-political pressures. Having understood this, we could compare Mo Yan with other (former) Chinese writers of international influence. Gao Xingjian (emigrated to France) and Yan Geling (emigrated to USA) continues to write in Chinese in another cultural space, while Ha Jin (emigrated to USA) switches to English. But either way, writing in a certain language means they need to address (before their works are translated) certain groups of readers and have to shoulder different cultural-political pressures. Accordingly, interpretation of their discourse modes needs be placed back into corresponding contexts.

Mo Yan, inspired by Faulkner and Márquez, employs multiple narrative perspectives in his novels while merging realist setting, historical memory, and folk voice together in a dazzling way. Take the novel of *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* for instance, in this work of Magic Realism with strong Chinese characteristics, the narrator is repeatedly reincarnated and goes through cycles of life successively as an ox, a donkey, a pig, a dog, a monkey and a man, witnessing tremendous changes undergone by Chinese villages while travelling through time and space. The Buddhist recurrent wheel, the folk imagination, and the complicated recycling of reality in combination have made this thousand years' old baby (Lan Qiansui) an immortal weirdo with powerful symbolic meanings and an unprecedented wonder in Chinese literature. Mo Yan believes that spiritual freedom firstly means freedom in literary creation, therefore seeking a new world-view and reality has to be pioneered by the pursuit of new literary forms. This could provide an explanation for the unique perspectives of "my grandpa" and "my grandma" invented by Mo Yan in his best-known novel *The Red Sorghum*: they are employed by him to bridge the gap between historical memory and modern reality. This is Mo Yan's freedom embodied in his texts and Mo Yan's innovation in terms of literary form. In the same way, our understanding of Mo Yan in real life should also take into consideration relevant contextual factors.

"Mo Yan" is a pen name that the writer gives to himself. Serving as a self-warning or self-mockery, this pen name, meaning "don't speak" in Chinese, implies Mo Yan's sensitive perception of his profession, his mission, and the cultural context around him. As Mo Yan presents different postures inside and outside his texts, the gigantic disparity and apparent contradiction between them tend to be denounced by his critics, especially the skeptics. Zhang Hong (106-09) commented on this with vivid descriptions. He borrowed Lu Xun's fable *The Wise Man and the Fool*, which was also quoted by Mo Yan himself, to analyze the differences and oppositions between Mo Yan in real life and literary creation: Mo Yan in real life is cautious and opportunistic, tending to beat around the bush when required to show his true stance; as a writer he is like a "fool" poignantly satirizing authority, furiously cursing the evil, and loudly protesting against inequality. In this way, Mo Yan presents a contradiction between his literary practice and personal life: "bloated discourse on the one hand, keeping quiet on the other hand; noisy utterance, mute silence" (107). Chen's (*Behind* 105-12) interpretation of Mo Yan's speech in Sweden (unlike other Nobel Prize winners who would openly express their opinions, "He did not preach on any theories, nor express any views on the current world, not to mention his silence over various attacks, criticisms, and disputes directed at or centering around him, ever since the announcement of his Nobel Prize winning. Everything he want to say is conveyed by his stories.") is also based on a comparison of his different postures inside and outside literature. He believes that Mo Yan, in the form

of storytelling, expresses the triple relationship among individual, society, and religion, and at the same time conveys his concerns for truth, goodness and beauty in literature. Mo Yan's stylistic choice there inevitably results from the long-term hardship and disgrace suffered by a repressed soul, and is necessitated by the wisdom of survival and profession consciousness of Chinese writers. As a writer, he integrates all kinds of miseries, protests, and inner struggles into his fictional worlds and thereby creates a symbolic mixture rich in meaning, fusing together realistic description, fantastic imagination, and his genuine concern for human nature as engrossed in the specially Chinese social-historical reality. However, once having stepped out of the world of literature, he "does not speak". This is the special choice made by Chinese writers in the specific context of China.

Despite the difference in Chen and Zhang's attitudes to Mo Yan, both of them have noticed the contrasting stances taken by Mo Yan inside and outside his texts. I tend to accept Chen's sympathetic understanding of writers' behaviors in specific contexts, but it must be noted that such apparent contrast between Mo Yan's personal and literary image does not exclude the possibility that the two may be intimately related. As a matter of fact, both can be consistently explained by paying ample attention to relevant contexts. It is the formal and cultural demands combined together that has pushed Mo Yan, equipped with a strong impulse of expression, a rich imagination, and a sensitivity to the colors/sounds around him, to breed his kind of magnificent and exaggerating "hallucinatory realism". In this sense, his irony and noisy utterance are only a special strategic choice, as well as a wisdom for survival.

Presented above is just the analysis of Mo Yan's discourse mode in the Chinese context. On the other hand, Mo Yan, as a representative member of his national literature, must transcend the "periphery" space of Chinese (modern) literature to enter into competition in the worldwide literary field. This unequal literary field of the world, always caught in the course of historical changes, forms a dynamic and pluralistic system via cross-cultural communication, influence, and dialogue. But for Mo Yan, the modern Chinese literary space he belongs to has a history of only one hundred years. From the day he was born, he had fallen into a "periphery" position in world literature, and he had to carry out dialogue and competition from this actual position. In this sense, if Mo Yan has considered Faulkner, Joyce, and Márquez as his mentors, he has learned from them inspiring discourse strategies beyond mere rhetoric or expressive techniques. Furthermore, one can't approach Mo Yan by evaluating his literary texts on basis of given standards of literariness; rather, one must analyze them in context of contemporary world literature and trans-cultural communication. In addition, one also needs to distinguish local contexts from international contexts, and only by looking into their interaction and opposition, can the significance of a writer, his work, and his literary discourse be truly understood.

Of the characters, scenes and details in Mo Yan's works that are thought to distort and blemish the Chinese image, a more reasonable analysis can be obtained from the above perspective. All of Mo Yan's readers can feel the shocking effects of the vulgar, sensual, bloody, and cruel elements as presented in his works. Understandably, their presence will annoy even more those readers holding traditional aesthetic values. However, such presentation along certainly cannot represent Mo Yan's creativity, and it must be a prejudice based on a loose logic if one thereupon arrives at a conclusion that Mo Yan, via

his presentation of the unpleasant, purposefully distorts and blemishes the Chinese image, so as to cater to the taste of westerners.

This judgement is handicapped by at least two flaws. Firstly, if they can't deny that existents and events of Mo Yan's narratives do have their reference in the real world (which also applies to works by writers from the highly-developed countries), then their complaint of the distortion and blemishing might not be induced by Mo Yan's fabrication, but simply express their wish to follow outdated literary standards, which maintains literature should only concern itself with the beautiful or pleasant. Secondly, they make conjectures about Mo Yan's real intention based on surface features of his fictional worlds and thereupon interpret his narration out of a utilitarian perspective. But this inferential operation obviously ignores some self-evident facts in the history of Chinese and world literature. For instance, in the history of Chinese literature that Li knows well, the vulgar image of Ah Q as presented in *The True Story of Ah Q*, and the mad man's cannibalism as presented in *The Diary of a Madman* are obviously exemplified from such a harsh critique; more similar examples in the history of world literature are also filtered out of their discussion. If presentation of the ugly or unpleasant should trigger these critics' suspicion of a hideous and selfish motive, then they are inconsistent in concentrating their fire on Mo Yan alone while ignoring similar offences by others.

In fact, in Casanova's terms, Mo Yan's controversial poetics is but a discourse strategy he has to resort to. This strategy is not only adopted to shake off the fetters of conventional realism in the local context, but also to break out of the periphery space in world literature so as to participate in global competition and dialogue. For Casanova, the use of this strategy could be traced back even to the second half of nineteenth Century. Whitman (1819-1892) and Mark Twin (1835-1910) of the United States, Singh of Ireland (John Millington Singh, 1871-1909), Andrade of Brazil (M. de Andrade 1893-1945), as well as modernist writers of twentieth century like Kafka, Joyce, Faulkner and Márquez, they all turned to the obscene and vulgar as their common strategy to express their desire to "break from established conventions through an act of specifically literary violence" (Casanova 293). Of course, all these writers had been harshly criticized in their respective cultural contexts before they gained international fame; but by radically transforming the definition of and limits assigned to literature (with regard not only to wordplay but also the sexual, the scatological, and the prosaic aspects of urban life in the case of Joyce; in the case of Faulkner, the destitution of rural life), they have enabled themselves and their fellow writers on the periphery, who previously were denied access to literary modernity, to take part in international competition by employing the instruments forged by them (328).

It is strange that Li and other critics do not apply their harsh critique on these famous modernist writers who are in certain respect similar to Mo Yan. I wonder if, in their opinion, the giant insect in Kafka's writing (*The Metamorphosis*), the sensuality in Joyce's writing (*Ulysses*), and the incest and the human tail in Márquez's writing (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*) are also suspected of distorting and damaging the images of the Jew, Irish or Colombian. If that is the case, then in what sense do Chinese readers still celebrate these writers' literary accomplishments?

As stated above, this kind of judgement and the logic behind it are related to the dissemination and reception of western post-colonial theories in China during the past 20 years. Li does not openly claim

that he adopts a postcolonial stance in his criticism, but his perspective and logic are obviously drawn from those post-colonial theories that have been imported to and misplaced in contemporary China. To be more precise, Li's critical stance results from a combination of post-colonialism with the current trend of nationalism. The accusation that Mo Yan distorted the Chinese image follows from a forced transplantation of western postcolonial critical theory, simplistically interpreting his creative, critical narratives as an expression of his desire to cater to a certain Occidentalism. Objectively, it has ignored social and cultural conflicts in the local context; subjectively, it emphasizes on an imagined oppression of discourse imposed on China by the westerners; taken together, it only exposes its practitioners' conscious or unconscious conformation to the dominant ideology. Paying no heed to critiques of reality in Mo Yan's works while ignoring the local context of his literary creation, it attacks Mo Yan's "self-colonizing posture" from a perspective founded on a binary opposition between the East and West. In terms of textual analysis, confined within a narrowly realist conceptualization of literature, the attempt to ignore the overall irony of Mo Yan's narrative style and draw a partial evaluation of his literary achievements is, in essence, an embodiment of nationalism. Furthermore, it is also a typical embodiment of a new, emerging post-colonial discourse, with its manipulation of past post-colonial theories into service of cultural conservatism and nationalism in contemporary Chinese context. Even if its initial motivation is to challenge the hegemony of western discourses, its actual result is counterproductive. It only reflects a felt cultural inferiority haunting the modern latecomer (nation) who attempts to maintain his national pride in vain. A highly confident person dares to publicly deprecate, ridicule himself, or even exaggerate about his unbearable character; so does a confident national culture. In fact, the image of Chinese culture and literature depends more on the interpretative choices carried out by the subjects of its reception than on its own self-description/justification. Conversely, even if a proportional, desirable Chinese image can be extracted and described by its own people, can it be guaranteed that this image will not be reshaped, deformed, or distorted in its cross-cultural transmission? Yet this point seems hardly recognized by those harsh critics of Mo Yan, therefore it is understandable why Li, in the same article, severely criticized Mo Yan by claiming that "we are still unworthy of the Nobel Prize Award with the strict measure"; "compared with important writers of other countries, writers in our age are, in reality, far lagging behind" (*Straight Critique* 36).

In short, ever since the process of modernization started in the West, all other national cultures and literatures of the world have been drawn into a dynamic realm where they co-exist and become interdependent, forming an unfair arena which Casanova termed as the World Republic of Letters. For countries like China, despite their ancient, continuously influential culture and tradition, they are in an unfair position to compete with other participants if they have failed to seize a favorable moment to enter this republic. In fact, the concept of ahistorical and autonomous "belles-lettres" is only a historical invention (whoever starts the game early or gains a say in making the rules for the game is likely to preach on this). Supposing the initiator claims that literariness is universal and perpetual only to solidify the unfair power configuration of this World Republic of Letters, if the late-comers fall for that, it would only amount to an unconscious acceptance on their part of the existing hierarchical order. As a consequence, their literatures would be forever subordinate to that of the initiator and end up as its

mimicry. This is an embodiment of neo-colonialism of literature in the age of world literature. The established, dominant criteria of literary creation and significance, regulating the orders of world literature, compels the latecomer or the weaker to identify with the stronger and fetter their own literary creation and interpretation. Constructing a strategic discourse mode with his unique endowments, Mo Yan intends to overturn or transcend such rules while articulating a voice of his own. This strategy of resistance, definitely, is enlightened by those former "marginalized" players in the founding history of "The Republic of World Literature," to whom Mo Yan acceded as Mo Yan himself.

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