

Comments on Per Wästberg's Presentation Speech for the 2012 Nobel Prize in Literature

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Received: June 30, 2016 Accepted: July 20, 2016 Online Published: August 28, 2016

doi:10.5539/ells.v6n3p21 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ells.v6n3p21>

Abstract

In Per Wästberg's presentation speech for the 2012 Nobel Prize in Literature, some information should deserve the attention of the Chinese academic circle. There is some truth in his compliments of Mo Yan, such as "he is a poet", "he is a wonderful portrayer of nature", "he knows everything and describes everything especially about a forgotten peasant world", "in his work, world literature speaks with a voice that drowns out most contemporaries". Wästberg also offers his interpretation and review of some of Mo Yan's works. However, the speech inevitably shows Westerners' misunderstanding of Mo Yan and his works and their ideological prejudice against China and the Chinese society.

Keywords: comments, Per Wästberg, presentation speech, the 2012 Nobel Prize in Literature, Mo Yan

1. Introduction

Some studies on Mo Yan have mushroomed in China ever since he won the 2012 Nobel Prize in Literature. Chinese researchers have interpreted Mo Yan and his works from various perspectives and with different methods of literary criticism. It is a pity that they did not pay due or adequate attention to the presentation speech by Per Wästberg, Chairman of the Nobel Committee. In our opinion, this 698-word speech releases important information to China's and the world's literary circle. However, it must be noted that his interpretation of and comment on Mo Yan's works and the Chinese society is far from being objective and comprehensive.

2. Wästberg's Praise of Mo Yan's Literary Achievements

In his presentation speech for the 2012 Nobel Prize in Literature, Per Wästberg highly praised Mo Yan as "a poet who tears down stereotypical propaganda posters" and "a wonderful portrayer of nature". Poetry refers to metrical verse, *ci* (rhymed verse based on five-or-seven-character lines and folk rhymes, also called long and short verse) and odes in ancient China and free verse in modern China, whereas it includes both the poetic forms and narrative works with epic elements in the West. In this sense, Wästberg justifiably called Mo Yan "a poet" in the Western context. The word "nature" means differently: it is the existence independent of society in China, especially in the current Chinese academic circle, while it includes not only the existence independent of society, but also the existing society and human heart, and furthermore, the Westerners divide nature into the primary nature (outside human heart) and secondary nature (inside human heart) (Liu, 1998). It is thus reasonable for Wästberg to describe Mo Yan "a wonderful portrayer of nature".

Rather than stop at a mere yes-or-no judgment, Wästberg made a comparison between Mo Yan and other Chinese writers and the world's literary masters: "has ever such an epic spring flood engulfed China and the rest of the world? In Mo Yan's work, world literature speaks with a voice that drowns out most contemporaries." Such words explain why the Nobel Literature Prize Committee selected none other than Mo Yan as the winner. Ever since the presentation speech, there have been some voices of confirmation and congratulation, negation and questioning in the Chinese literary community. The core question is: what made Mo Yan outstanding among the contemporary Chinese writers? In our opinion, he boldly regressed to the Chinese native, when he, like his peers, was influenced by the concepts of Western literary theories which were introduced into China. He inherited the traditional Chinese story-telling techniques so as to make his works narrative; he carried forward the Confucian culture and bandit culture in China's Shandong Province so as to make his works aggressive and masculine; he

highlighted the regional witch culture in Shandong's Gaomi County so as to make his works mysterious and magical. Such elements enabled his works to be recognized and praised by the Nobel Literature Prize Committee.

Wästberg made a comparison between Mo Yan and other contemporary Chinese writers by saying that "he knows virtually all there is to know about hunger, and the brutality of China's 20th century has probably never been described so nakedly, with heroes, lover, torturers, bandits—and especially, strong, indomitable mothers." But his judgment is overcorrect and even exaggerating. Those who are familiar with the modern Chinese literature realize that heroes, lovers, torturers, bandits and mothers were substantially depicted by renowned Chinese writers like Lu Xun (1881-1936), Guo Moruo (1892-1978), Lin Yutang (1895-1976), Mao Dun (1896-1981), Lao She (1899-1966), Shen Congwen (1902-1988), Ba Jin (1904-2005), Cao Yu (1910-1996), and so on. Yet, Mo Yan differed from them in that he kept up with the latest development of the world literature and adopted some modern and post-modern narrative strategies.

Meanwhile, Wästberg put Mo Yan in an equally important position with the world-famous writers like Rabelais, Swift and Garcia Marquez by saying that "he is more hilarious and more appalling than most in the wake of Rabelais and Swift—in our time, in the wake of Garcia Marquez." This shows the 2012 Nobel Literature Prize Committee placed Mo Yan at the height of world literature and made a wise decision.

3. Wästberg's Evaluation of Mo Yan's Novels

Wästberg's praise of Mo Yan's literary achievements is demonstrated by his evaluation of some of the writer's novels.

Mo Yan's *Jiu Guo* [*Republic of Wine*] has two distinct narrative threads: one is a standard fiction form following a detective and the other is a series of letters between "Mo Yan" and his fan (an aspiring author). The "detective" thread follows Ding Gou'er, who was sent to the Mount Luo Coal Mine, Liquorland (a fictional Chinese province) to investigate a case of cannibalism (baby boys who were cooked as gourmet dishes) but ended up being treated to a banquet with a famous dish named "Kirin Delivering a Son"—a real "meat boy". In this sense, Wästberg made the following comment: "In his novel *Republic of Wine*, the most exquisite of delicacies is a roasted three-year-old."

Wästberg went on commenting on *Wa* [*Frog*]: "Boys have become exclusive foodstuff. The girls, neglected, survive. The irony is directed at China's family policy, because of which female fetuses are aborted on an astronomic scale: girls aren't even good enough to eat. Mo Yan has written an entire novel *Frog*, about this." He even acclaimed *Feng Ru Fei Tun* [*Big Breasts and Wide Hips*] as Mo Yan's most remarkable novel: "Mo Yan describes the Great Leap Forward and the Great Famine of 1960 in stinging detail. He mocks the revolutionary pseudo-science that tried to inseminate sheep with rabbit sperm, all the while dismissing doubters as right-wing elements. The novel ends with the new capitalism of the 90's with fraudsters becoming rich on beauty products and trying to produce a Phoenix through cross-fertilization."

As it is, the above three novels are Mo Yan's masterpieces both in form and content of artistic expression. Wästberg's careful choice and positive evaluation of the novels suggested to some extent the value orientation of the Nobel Literature Prize Committee.

4. Wästberg's Summarization of Mo Yan's Artistic Styles

Based upon the praise of Mo Yan's artistic achievements, Wästberg summarized Mo's artistic styles as follows.

Firstly, peasants are the protagonists of his novels. "In Mo Yan, a forgotten peasant world arises, alive and well, before our eyes, sensually scented even in its most pungent vapors, startlingly merciless but tinged by joyful selflessness" (Wästberg, 2012). In 1955, Mo Yan was born to a peasant family in Dalan Township, Gaomi County, Shandong Province. After leaving school, he became a peasant at 11 and a textile worker at 18. At the end of "Cultural Revolution" in 1976, he enlisted in the People's Liberation Army and began writing novels. His life in the countryside for over 20 years and the stories "read" through his ears were rooted in his mind and had a profound influence on his writing career. As Mo Yan (2012a, p. 15) put it, "Later on, I embarked on the road of literature. My rural life is the very foundation of my literary creation." By telling stories of his own, his grandparents, parents, aunts and fellow villagers, he portrayed many peasantry images centering round "black boys" in the area (Mo, 2012b, p. 9). It is noteworthy that he also depicted life in a place beyond his home town, like other writers who migrated from the countryside to the city, but this kind of life was involved or transplanted into "Northeast Township of Gaomi County". For instance, Wang Wenyi, the protagonist in *Hong Gaoliang* [*Red Sorghum*], had an archetype in the real world—a distant relative of Mo Yan's. When the novel was published and/or the movie adapted from it was released, the relative complained that Mo had cursed him. Hearing this,

Mo Yan's father comforted the wretched by saying that novels are imaginary stories which should not be taken seriously.

Secondly, characters in Mo Yan's novels are full of vigor. "Mo Yan's characters bubble with vitality and take even the most amoral steps and measures to fulfill their lives and burst the cages they have been confined in by fate and politics." (Wästberg, 2012) Almost all the characters in his novels, such as Yu Zhan'ao and Dai Fenglian in *Red Sorghum*, Shangguan Lushi and Sha Yueliang in *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, Wan Xin and Wang Renmei in *Frog*, Sun Bing and Sun Xiaomei in *Tanxiang Xing [Sandalwood Death]*, have "distinctive personality like red sorghum" (Mo, 2012c, p. 38). Mo's description of human life is not merely sexual description of male and female characters, but the penetration of human birth and generation organs. Such a narrative style is undoubtedly attributed to the Freudian Theory prevailing in the Chinese literary circle in the 1980s. Furthermore, it is the outpouring of his extraordinary affection to all the females in his life and his meditation of China's family planning policy that has been implemented ever since the 1980s.

Thirdly, Mo's novels are full of imagination. "The imagination (as a productive faculty of cognition) is an extremely powerful agent for creating, as it were, a second Nature from materials supplied by the actual Nature" (Kant, 1968/2002, p. 158; English version by the present authors) Imagination is not only powerful in literary creation but is a creative faculty of cognition. Mo Yan (2012a, p.237) once said, "one's ability of telling stories lies in his imagination. Someone can tell a vivid story because he is endowed with imagination." Take *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* for example. Long Qingping fell in mad love with Shangguan Jintong but received his indifferent reaction, so she shot herself for the sake of love—the first unimaginable episode. Then he satisfied her desire while she was still a little conscious—the second unimaginable episode. Shangguan raped Long, but he couldn't explain her death, so he was doomed to be punished by law. Fortunately for him, the heavy flood stopped the police from investigating the case, thus saving him from the disaster—the third unimaginable episode. Finally, Qiao Qisha's diary revealed Shangguan's wrongdoing, which led to his imprisonment for up to fifteen years—the fourth unimaginable episode. Mo Yan's narration of the whole process is full of zigzag imagination and flashes with sparkles of wisdom, so Wästberg said with a little exaggeration, "Mo Yan's imagination soars across the entire human existence."

Fourthly, Mo's novels are laden with mysterious elements. "Mo Yan's stories have mythical and allegorical pretensions and turn all values on their heads." (Wästberg, 2012) Specifically speaking, the mystery in his works is shown in two aspects: description of ghost stories and mysterious elements contained in the narration. China is a country rooted in witch culture, which is very prevailing in Gaomi County, as Mo Yan (2012a, p. 247) put it, "my home town is permeated with ghost stories. The older generation's minds are filled with all these things." All the ghost stories he heard from the old found their way into his novels in various forms. For example, Sun Bing in *Sandalwood Death* constantly heard his mother's calls before he was executed to death, which indicates the ghost stories' revelation in the novel. Furthermore, the text structure in *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* centering on Shangguan Lushi's eight daughters is the very version of the fox stories Mo Yan heard from his elder granduncle. A typical case of mysterious elements in Mo Yan's narratives is the vivid artistic reproduction of the Chinese idiom "shi du qing shen" (literally, "a cow licking calf with deep affection" and figuratively, "very affectionate toward one's children"), in which the calf gains strength where its mother licks her lip. Such is Mo Yan's mysterious narration.

Fifthly, Mo Yan is bold and peppery in criticism. Wästberg said, "his spice blend is peppery." Bold and peppery critical narratives can be found almost everywhere in his works. For instance, in *Sandalwood Death*, Zhao Xiaojia asked his wife Sun Meiniang to get a tiger whisker with a golden tip from Qian Ding the country magistrate so that he could see with it people's true selves in their past lives: his wife was previously a white snake, his father Zhao Jia a black leopard, and the country magistrate a white tiger. "One's true self in his past life" is a legend of the human origin in the Chinese folklore. Mo Yan translated people's cognition of human to his narratives, and his exposure of human nature is more artistically profound than such philosophical propositions as "human are talking animals" and "human are political animals". For another, in *Frog*, Huang Jun, expert at bribing officials and seducing girls, later became a hospital director although he knew nothing about medicine, which disclosed the abnormal officialdom in contemporary China. Mo Yan depicted the true color of the Chinese society, as Gong (2013) put it, "Mo Yan's Chinese writing is undoubtedly superb."

5. Wästber's Misunderstanding and Bias Reflected in His Presentation Speech

Wästberg's praise of Mo Yan's artistic achievements, positive comments on some of his novels and summarization of his artistic features represent Nobel Literature Prize Committee's appreciation of his literary works and provide a research paradigm for China's academic circle. A careful reading of the speech, however,

should call our attention to his obvious misunderstanding and bias against China and the Chinese society.

Wästberg said, “the novel [*Big Breasts and Wide Hips*] ends with the new capitalism of the '90s with fraudsters becoming rich on beauty products and trying to produce a Phoenix through cross-fertilization.” As a matter of fact, the novel tells the readers that it was the bosses of Oriental Bird Center of Dalan City rather than those fraudsters selling beauty products who tried to produce a Phoenix through cross-fertilization. Mo Yan didn't narrate in detail how the bosses did this, but he just gave the readers a hint by quoting the mayor's praise words of the Center. Therefore, it is inappropriate for Wästberg to offer an in-depth interpretation of the novel by merely borrowing the character's impractical talk. The novel made a detailed description of cross-fertilization experiment in the 1960s. Qiao Qisha, a medical college graduate, resisted the experiment, and even Shangguan Pandi, the director who organized and facilitated the test, was aware of its impracticability. From biological perspective, fertilization between different species is indeed ridiculous, but there is possibility of improving crops by cross-fertilization. For example, Yuan Longping, China's world-famous rice expert, has been conducting his hybrid-rice experiments ever since the late 1980s. His success improved the output of rice (on which we human beings live), fed more poor people and thus made a great contribution to human society. In light of this, it is incorrect to denounce all hybrid experiments as “pseudoscience”.

When Wästberg criticized “the roasted three-year-old” in *Republic of Wine*, he seemed to find the evidence of “anti-human” in the Chinese society. The “roasted son” that Ding Gou'er saw was actually a baby-like shape cooked from lotus, chicken, pork and flour instead of the food made by killing a real three-year-old boy. A legend in Liquorland said there was a famous dish named “Kirin Delivering a Son”, but Ding Gou'er had never seen a real meat baby in his investigation. The conflict between family planning policy implemented by the Chinese government and traditional concept of procreation resulted in the abortion of female fetuses. However, the legend that boys were favored as delicious food and girls were able to survive because they were not qualified as food is neither the intended indicator of Mo Yan's novels nor the real Chinese situation during that period. It can be thus concluded that there is a gap between Wästberg's comment on Mo Yan's narrative and his real intention regarding China's family planning policy.

Wästberg used some critical words in his speech such as “a world without truth, common sense or compassion”, “unrestrained consumption, excess, rubbish, carnal pleasures and the indescribable desires” (the Chinese society); “hypocrisy” and “murkiest” (the Chinese politics); “reckless, helpless and absurd” (the Chinese people); and “stereotypical propaganda posters” (the Chinese literature). Such an evaluation is undoubtedly arbitrary and biased. Wästberg's incorrect or prejudiced interpretation of Mo Yan's novels is due to the deviation in the process of translation. As Mo Yan (2012b, p.41) mentioned, Howard Goldblatt translated most of his novels into English with some adaptation. “Lingual transformation is an important criterion of evaluating communication with the rest of the world. The accuracy of information dissemination is largely influenced by media workers' translation competence, language proficiency, comprehensive attainments, rigid attitude and careful treatment of cultural differences.” (Tao & Li, 2013) The deviation in the meaning from the source text inevitably results in misinterpretation. Furthermore, the major reason is the prejudice of political ideology. It is self-evident that Westerners tend to reproach China's politics, military, culture and human rights with no exception to Wästberg's in his presentation speech, which has a tendency of being overcritical of some contents in Mo Yan's novels from the viewpoint of Western centralism. Wästberg even said that China is “a realm where the clamor of donkeys and pigs drowns out the voices of the people's commissars”. This is no less than a curse and insult of China and the Chinese people rather than a criterion of literary criticism and a reason of literary awards.

Life depicted in Mo Yan's works is rich and colorful, like Northeast Township of Maomi County from the late Qing Dynasty to the current society—a century which witnessed many historical events and involved different walks of life, genders and social ranks. His writings are serious, rigid and fair, as he (2012b, p. 65) mentioned, “the real great works should be ‘the creations for the ordinary people’.” He always embarks on writing as an average Chinese, criticizes the ugliness and evil of the society and also praises its beauty and kindness from the standpoint of the ordinary people. It must be admitted that his writing attitude and principle of echoing with the people surpass those traditional ones aiming at enlightening and educating them. Wästberg's speech failed to investigate Mo Yan's works and Mo Yan phenomena comprehensively and substantially, but he tried to interpret the literary world created by Mo from isolated, insufficient and one-sided details, which is inevitably a pity for the world literature.

Acknowledgement

The research project is funded by National Social Science Fund (Ratification No.: 09BZW056).

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