

The Evolution of doppelgangers: Exploring the “Mo Yan” in Mo Yan's Novels

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Abstract. There are two main types of doppelgangers in Mo Yan's novels. The first is the use of his own personal experiences in his early works, where he takes on the persona of the main character and portrays him. The second is when Mo Yan takes the initiative to explore the techniques and structure of his novels and chooses to use the metafictional narrative technique, entering the narrative directly under his real name “Mo Yan”, exposing the fiction and confusing the real with the fake. The two doppelgangers have a sequential relationship in time and a progressive relationship in technique.

1. Introduction

“Mo Yan, always ready to deceive people with heresy, is in the habit of mixing fact and fantasy in his stories” [1], in the novel *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out*, Mo Yan, as a narrator, says this. Mo Yan's frequent creation of his own doppelgangers in the narrative of his novels has become an intriguing feature of his narrative. The doppelgangers in Mo Yan's works fall into two main categories over time. In the first category, he directly assumes the role of the protagonist, integrating his own experiences and subconscious into the work, while in the second category, he uses his real name to become a character in the work, confusing the authenticity of the author, narrator and characters, exposing the process of creating the novel, and separating the reader between the real and the fake, rich in elements of metafictional narrative. The doppelgangers in Mo Yan's works have developed and evolved over time. The evolution of Mo Yan's doppelgangers can also be found in the changes in his creative skills, his creative state, and his creative conceptions.

2. Mo Yan's Incarnations: Elegies for Childhood and Youth

The first category of Mo Yan's incarnations in his novels is found mainly in his early works, for instance *The Transparent Radish* is an elegy for Mo Yan's childhood [2], while *The White Dog and the Swing* is a celebration and an afterthought of Mo Yan's youthful encounters.

After entering the People's Liberation Army Arts College in 1984, Mo Yan's novels first appeared in the Northeastern Township of Gaomi. Mo Yan initially wrote mainly from his own experiences. In Mo Yan's lecture *Storytellers* at the Swedish Academy in 2012, he

mentioned “The early stories were narrations of my personal experience: the boy who received a whipping in ‘Dry River,’ or instance, or the boy who never spoke in *The Transparent Carrot*”. Mo Yan considers *The Transparent Radish* to be one of the most symbolic and meaningful of his works. That dark-skinned boy with the superhuman ability to suffer and a superhuman degree of sensitivity represents the soul of my entire fictional output [3]. That dark-skinned boy recreates Mo Yan's memories of hunger, of early school dropouts and severe beatings for mistakes, and also uses his strange perspective as a child entering adult society prematurely, as well as his unique sense of nature that evolved in extreme solitude [4]. Mo Yan draws on his own childhood experiences to make the dark-skinned boy a personification of his childhood Mo Yan, and as Mo Yan draws on these experiences, the dark-skinned boy becomes an image very close to Mo Yan's subconscious childhood. Mo Yan was eventually able to write his own elegy for his silent childhood as a young dark-skinned child with an extraordinary ability to endure pain and a superhuman capacity for feeling.

In incarnating the characters, in addition to his childhood, Mo Yan also incarnates his youth as the well river and warmth of *The White Dog and the Swing*. In incarnating the characters, in addition to his childhood, Mo Yan also incarnates his youth as the Jing He and Nuan of *The White Dog and the Swing*. The fate of Jing He is a reflection of the fate of the lucky young Mo Yan who managed to get out of the countryside, stay in the city and become an intellectual. However, the experience of Nuan is another fate that Mo Yan could have faced, carrying with it the anxieties, memories and traumas of his subconscious. The fate of Jing He is also shadowed by the accident with Nuan's swing, and symbolises that even if Mo Yan succeeds in leaving his hometown, there is still the fear of another fate. Nuan's desire to have talking children is also the opposite of the pen name “Mo

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Yan", which reminds her to speak less, and perhaps symbolises the opposite of this fate. In Mo Yan's initial work, his subconscious had been referencing his past self, and although Mo Yan intentionally kept his distance, claiming that he was merely moving through his past experiences, he did invest his true self into his work since he began to incarnate the protagonist character with his own personal experiences. The soul of the little black child, the fate of Inoue and Nuan, is indeed a subconscious mapping of Mo Yan's past experiences, an "elegy" written for Mo Yan before he left his hometown in "mourning".

3. Character named Mo Yan

"Once you have exhausted your own stories, you must tell the stories of others" [3] After the period of personal experience had passed, Mo Yan began to explore and experiment more with fictional techniques [2]. Mo Yan's doppelgangers changed from directly incarnating fictional characters to directly entering and leaving the novel under the name "Mo Yan". And research on Mo Yan's doppelganger in his narrative gradually moves away from the generalised pioneer consciousness of the early 21st century and towards a specific metafiction. The origins of metafiction began in Europe and mainly seeks to deconstruct the process of creating fiction, by revealing the author's true self in his work, deliberately exposing the act of narration, breaking the boundaries between truth and fiction and confusing reality with fiction and truth. In *Metafiction: the theory and practice of self-conscious fiction*, Patricia · Waugh points out that metafiction refers to fictional writing that is self-consciously and systematically concerned with the artificiality and fictionality of fictional texts, reflecting on and questioning the relationship between fiction and reality [5]. Exploring Mo Yan's second type of doppelganger, which directly entered into the narrative under Mo Yan's real name, is possible to list the metafictional narrative devices in Mo Yan's novels, using *The Republic of Wine* and *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* as examples.

To reveal traces is to expose the fictional traces of the novel by arranging for the narrator in the text to expose directly to the reader the artificial elements of the narrative. Sometimes the author reveals the truth about the plotting; sometimes the author arranges for the narrator to appear in the text to tell a theory or common sense about something, revealing his or her opinion on some issue; sometimes the author interrupts the narrative to insert a commentary [6]. Three narrative layers emerge in Mo Yan's *The Republic of Wine* [7]. The first layer is completed by the top narrator, writer Mo Yan, who tells both the story of Ding Gou'er, the story of the novel's characters Mo Yan and Li Yidou, and the story of the novel written by Li Yidou. The second layer consists of the correspondence between Mo Yan, a character in the novel, and Li Yidou, revealing that the fictional and fictional processes of the novel are a kind of diversion used by Mo Yan, the top narrator; the third layer consists of the nine novels written by Li Yidou. The metafictional

elements of *The Republic of Wine* are hidden in the second layer of the narrative. In the character Mo Yan's letter to Li Yidou, he talks several times about his difficulties in writing *The Republic of Wine*, his treatment of its characters, as a way of exposing the fictional nature of the work. For example, the following paragraph, where Mo Yan arranges for the character Mo Yan to enter the narrative and talk about theory, exposes the perceived elements of the narrative of *The Republic of Wine* to the reader.

The story of the so-called "child-eater" in the novel should be understood as a fable. In order to present this story, I have used a very clever way of expressing it: the whole "child-eating" episode is written by a person who corresponded with the author. One of the characters in *The Republic of Wine* is Li Yidou, an amateur writer of fiction, whose fiction is also my fiction within a fiction, and we can assert that this 'fiction within a fiction' is fiction. But at the same time, it is integral to the novel I have written. And Li Yidou, the author of the novel-within-a-novel, becomes a character in my novel, and I myself, in the end, become a character in the middle novel. True and false, false and real, all blended together [8]

In *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, Mo Yan also constantly reminds the reader of the fictional nature of the novel through the characters' comments about Mo Yan and the character Mo Yan himself. Mo Yan himself as a top narrator always jumped in front of the reader remind that "So it was made-up nonsense from the pen of a novelist who likes to do such things, and there wasn't an ounce of truth in it. [1]" "Mo Yan, always ready to deceive people with heresy, is in the habit of mixing fact and fantasy in his stories; you can't reject the contents out of hand, but you mustn't fall into the trap of believing everything he writes. [1]"

The second technique commonly used in metafiction, parody, also known as comic imitation, refers to the novelist's comic imitation of the plot structure and its narrative of some classic texts created by his predecessors in order to pursue a particular artistic effect of the novel [6]. Parody is one of the effective strategies used by meta-novelists to reflect on the art of the novel itself, which itself has a strong anti-traditional, anti-authoritarian and anti-conformist post-modernist cultural character. In *The Republic of Wine*, the character Mo Yan discusses Li Yidou's novel *Meat Boy* with the character Li Yidou, who states that he has intentionally followed Lu Xun's *Diary of a Madman*, "Used Lu Xun's brushwork in a more sophisticated manner, turning a pen in his hand into a sharp knife with a bull's ear, peeling away the skin of a gorgeous spiritual civilization to reveal a cruel core of moral barbarism. [9]" The parody of Lu Xun's *Diary of a Madman* in Li Yidou's *Meat Boy* is a deliberate parody of Mo Yan's novel, but although Mo Yan uses the metafictional technique of parody here, his fundamental aim is to reveal to the reader the artificiality of the novel's fiction rather than to subvert the traditional narrative conventions.

In *The Republic of Wine* and *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, Mo Yan uses two techniques of metafictional narration, direct exposure and parody, to

talk about the process of conception and narration of the novels and to evaluate the texts, entering the novels directly as “Mo Yan” and moving freely through inside and outside the texts.

4. The Evolution of Doppelgangers

There is a progressive relationship between the two kinds of Mo Yan's doppelgangers in his novels, from the direct incarnation as the protagonist character in his early works to the later direct becoming of the character Mo Yan. The two main manifestations are, firstly, the demonstration of more reflection on the form of the novel, and secondly, the move from writing from personal experience to a more professional writing that explores more techniques.

After the end of the Cultural Revolution, root-seeking literature was born in the literary world in the 1980s as a part of reflection. The vanguard literature followed, and Mo Yan entered the literature department of the People's Liberation Army at a time when vanguard literature was in its heyday in China. In the nineties, various trends and theories entered China more frequently, and the works of more writers were influenced by the theories and circumstances of this period, such as Ma Yuan and Su Tong. The evolution of Mo Yan's doppelganger also took place between the 1980s and 1990s, when the trend of thought in Chinese literature was changing dramatically.

One of the progressions is that in the 1990s, the doppelgangers produced through the metafictional narrative in Mo Yan's work, showed more reflection on the form and structure of the novel than the doppelganger of the 1980s. Through Mo Yan's important creative memories, it is possible to restore the state of Mo Yan's creative work from 1985 to 1992. In his creative talk, he concludes that his works prior to *Red Sorghum* (1986) are, at their core, reminiscences of his childhood, and that the little black boy is a tomb built for his grey childhood [2]. Influenced by Marquez and Yasunari Kawabata, he gradually found his literary territory, Northeast Gaomi Township village [2], in the period of *The White Dog and the Swing* (1985). The youthful Jing He and Nuan also become symbols of the two very different fates of Mo Yan's intellectuals who are similar to himself. And since *Red Sorghum*, it has gradually begun to build another grave - the hometown. From his own story, he began to tell the story of his hometown [2]. “I was disappointed in my exploration of fictional technique - I was disappointed that I had ever undertaken the exploration of fictional technique. [2]”, in 1987, after *Red Sorghum* and before *Thirteen Steps* and *The Republic of Wine*, Mo Yan gradually began to explore his fictional techniques, and during this five-year period, Mo Yan eventually settled on the structure of his novels for exploration and experimentation with innovation. “I feel that the first and most difficult thing to tackle in a long novel is structure. I made three different attempts in my long novels *The Garlic Ballads*, *Thirteen Steps* and *The Republic of Wine*. [10]” Firstly, Mo Yan experimented with polyphonic narratives in both *Thirteen Steps* and *The Garlic Ballads*, and in *The Republic of Wine* he goes even further by interspersing the techniques of metafictional narrative

with polyphonic narratives. And Mo Yan uses the technique of metafictional narrative not in its entirety, but in the story's strand, the correspondence between writer Mo Yan and amateur writer Li Yidou. The character Mo Yan also makes minimal appearances in *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* and has no impact on the main plot, only occasionally popping up with some character commentary on the character Mo Yan, or a brief mention of Mo Yan as if he were an unrelated villager. In contrast to *The Transparent Radish* and *The White Dog and the Swing*, Mo Yan intersperses the polyphonic narratives of *The Republic of Wine* and *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* with techniques of metafictional narrative, interrupts the narrative constantly with the occasional character, Mo Yan, to expose the narrative in a traditionally realistic narrative. Mo Yan's 1990s diversions demonstrate a more thoughtful approach to the novel form, consciously exploring the combination of Chinese folk traditions and Western narrative art in a novel form that is integrated into his own personal style.

The second point of the progression of doppelgangers in Mo Yan's novels lies in showing that Mo Yan's writing between the 1980s and 1990s was a transition from writing from personal experience to experimenting with more techniques and attempting to create more professionally. In the 1980s, Mo Yan's first type of doppelgangers, direct incarnation as a protagonist character. He uses his personal experience to incarnate himself into his work, and in Mo Yan's work its strength is that it gives the work a deep experience, unique content and genuine emotion, and is what gives it its special character. But on the other hand, it is universal in that it is a universal relationship between writers and creation. After *Red Sorghum*, Mo Yan entered a stage where he was “not for my own experience writing”. In the process of exploring his techniques, he seeks to “Makes it impossible to categorise and makes it feel lacking in any way [10]”, and both *The Republic of Wine* and *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* cannot be fully classified as realist literature because of the pioneering elements of metafictional narratives interspersed with realist narratives or vanguard literature.

However, despite the use of metafictional techniques in Mo Yan's novel, it cannot be identified as a novel in the form of a metafictional narrative. The reason for this is not that the metafictional techniques are not used throughout the novel, but that the purpose of the interspersed use of metafictional techniques is contradictory to the fundamental purpose of metafictional theory. Meta-novels think about what fictional creation is, about whether artistic fiction can represent life and reflect the truth. While metafiction contemplates the relationship between art and life, memory, experience, and truth, Mo Yan's use of metafictional techniques in his novels does not aim to do so. Having concluded that “structure is politics”, Mo Yan uses the particular structure of the interspersed metafiction in *The Republic of Wine* to constantly remind readers of the fictional nature of the novel. In Chapter two, Mo Yan makes a point of emphasising this when he talks about the *Meat Boy*: “I'm glad it's fiction. There'd be big trouble if you'd written a journalistic essay with the same contents.

[9]”. This deliberate avoidance of truth and emphasis on fiction is a structural arrangement by Mo Yan to avoid the novel being mistaken for bourgeois liberalism and essentially to avoid being misinterpreted. In addition to the different theories of essential purpose used in the metafictional technique, the overall purpose of Mo Yan's fiction is also significantly different from that of the metafiction. Whereas *The Republic of Wine* was written to attack China's wine culture, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* runs through the 1930s to the founding of the People's Republic of China to the Cultural Revolution and finally to reform and opening up, presenting historical writing and reflection with an epic feel. Mo Yan once said bluntly, “With the new literature that began in the 1980s, many young writers are ashamed to talk about politics and proud to keep their works away from it, an idea that is actually not true. I think social life and political issues are always major issues that a responsible writer cannot help but be concerned about. Political, historical and social issues are also always the main subject matter that a writer has to portray. [11]” Both novels are clearly not keyed to the technical form of writing and do not exist to deconstruct the real, but remain focused on plot, character, history and connotation itself, and are literary works with a strong sense of displaying motivation and social responsibility. Therefore, although Mo Yan's diversion is born out of the use of a unique narrative strategy of interspersed metafictional narratives, Mo Yan's diversion is not sufficient to make the whole novel a metafiction. Although Mo Yan is a writer who uses the technique consciously, he remains unconscious for the purpose of creating metafiction.

5. Conclusion

By integrating and analyzing Mo Yan's two doppelgangers in his works, it can be found that there is a sequential order in time and a progressive relationship in technique between the incarnation of Mo Yan and the character Mo Yan who enters the work directly. Starting from the process, the sequence in which Mo Yan's two doppelgangers appear demonstrates the gradual maturation of Mo Yan's creative skills and concepts. From the beginning of his fame in the mid-1980s, when he focused on writing about his personal experiences, to the post-1990s, when he wrote not for the sake of writing about his own experiences, but for the sake of writing more about the experiences of others. Compared to the 1980s, Mo Yan's work after the 1990s was more professional and self-conscious. From the result, Mo Yan's self-conscious exploration of the novel's structure and narrative techniques allows him to use the narrative techniques of metafiction consciously and become a character directly, but because he is not self-conscious of the fundamental purpose of metafictional theory, it does not constitute actual metafiction. The evolution of Mo Yan's doppelganger can be seen in the way he embraces theory without being trapped in it, making techniques work for him while bringing innovative ways of using the techniques of metafiction.

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