

A Comparative Study of Ecological Holism in the Works of Alai and Hardy

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Abstract: This paper aims to conduct a comparative study of ecological holism in the works of the Chinese writer Alai and the British writer Thomas Hardy. It explores how the two writers demonstrate their profound concern for nature and their philosophical thinking on the relationship between humans and nature in their literary creations. By analyzing Alai's works such as *The Mushroom Circle* and *Remembering Death in a Floating Life* and Hardy's works such as *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* in detail. This paper reveals the similarities and differences in the ecological holism of the two writers and further discusses the significance of ecological holism in the context of increasingly severe environmental problems.

Keywords: Alai; Hardy; Ecological Holism; Nature; Relationship between Humans and Nature

1. Introduction

The concept of ecological holism can be traced back to ancient Greece, but as a systematic theory, it was formed in the 20th century, with Leopold and Rolston as its main representatives. Leopold proposed the three principles of "harmony, stability, and beauty", and Rolston systematically demonstrated ecological holism and added the two principles of "integrity" and "dynamic balance". The core idea of ecological holism is to regard the overall interests of the ecosystem as the highest value, rather than the interests of humans as the highest value, to regard whether it is conducive to maintaining and protecting the integrity, harmony, stability, balance, and sustainable existence of the ecosystem as the fundamental criterion for measuring all things and the ultimate standard for evaluating human lifestyles, technological progress, economic growth, and social development. The most

significant feature of ecological holism is its emphasis on wholeness, which is manifested in three aspects: emphasizing the internal connections among the various parts within the whole, emphasizing the hierarchy, organization, and orderliness of the ecosystem; and emphasizing the dynamics of the ecosystem. With the increasingly prominent global environmental problems, ecological holism has also been widely reflected in the field of literature. This paper selects the writer Alai and Thomas Hardy as the research objects and explores their similarities and differences in ecological holism through a comparative analysis of their works.

2. The Ecological Holism Thought in Alai's Works

2.1 Alai's Creative Background and Ecological View

Alai was born in 1959 in a small village in Maerkang County, Aba Prefecture, Sichuan Province. The Chinese name of the village is Matang, or Kar Valley. Alai means newly sprouted wheat seedlings in local ancient culture, which is simple and full of vigorous vitality. He grew up in a multicultural background, and his family is also a multi-ethnic combination. His mother is Zang People, and his father is Hui People. This so-called "united family" also illustrates the situation of multi-ethnic integration in the Jiarong Area. The region where Alai lives and the family he was born into have given him an innate temperament, that is, a sensitivity to ethnic identity. The Jiarong area where he lives is a multi-ethnic community where Zang, Han, Qiang, Hui, Sala, and other ethnic groups live together in harmony, but they abide by their respective traditions in customs. He once said: "It is precisely through constantly traveling between the two languages that I have cultivated my initial literary sensitivity and made me a writer writing in Chinese" [1].

Alai's works often present profound ideological connotations and distinct critical consciousness, especially his concerns about the borderland society in the process of modernization and his profound attention to nature. Alai's ecological view is reflected in his philosophical thinking on the relationship between humans and nature. He believes that humans should respect nature and live in harmony with it. The most prominent feature is his strong ecological awareness. This ecological awareness is different from traditional Western ecological literature. It originates from the natural ecological view in Alai's growth memory and the local natural ecological concept. In Alai's creations, mountains, rivers, and all things have their own spirituality. He believes that compared with the evolution of the earth, the existence of humans is negligible in time. Like other organisms, humans are just "parasites" that have emerged hastily on the earth. For example, in his prose *Traveling with a Book of Poems as a Guide*, he wrote that nature represented by the sea embodies eternity, while human life itself and many human creations cannot be eternal. In the novel *Red Poppies*, Alai described in detail the disintegration of the last chieftain family on the snowy plateau through the perspective of a fool, which also contains ecological awareness. For example, the fool has a perception and cognitive ability beyond ordinary people. When people are dominated and devoured by desires, he can rationally examine the surroundings and get out of crises again and again. There are many examples in *Red Poppies* in which plants are used as metaphors. "The English title of this novel shows the significance of plants"[2], which implies that human activities cannot escape nature.

2.2 The Ecological Significance in Alai's Works

"I have lived in the area of Aba, Sichuan for 30 years and have a profound cultural, religious, natural, and social experience of local villages. I write about these villages, but it is not about a single ethnic group. It is to express a broader scene and is an overall consideration of the relationship between humans and nature, politics and culture, and social harmony and progress" [3]. The 'Mountain Delicacies Trilogy', including

Three Pieces of Cordyceps, *The Mushroom Circle*, and *The Shadow of Cypress on the River*, takes the natural resources in the area as the background and tells the conflict and integration between people and the natural environment in the process of pursuing economic interests. Alai reveals the impact and destruction of human activities on the natural environment by depicting the preciousness and scarcity of natural resources such as cordyceps and mushrooms. At the same time, through the characters and storylines in his works, he conveys the importance of protecting the ecological environment and realizing the harmonious coexistence of humans and nature. In *The Mushroom Circle*, Alai shows the thought of ecological holism through the story of the protagonist Ama Sijiong protecting the mushroom circle. Ama Sijiong regards herself as an ordinary creature in nature and regards the small matsutake mushrooms as her children and protects them, hoping to leave something for future generations. This "something" is the natural interest that transcends the interests of all mankind and is the stability, integrity, and sustainable existence of the ecosystem. *Remembering Death in a Floating Life* is a work written by Alai to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the Wenchuan earthquake. In this work, Alai created a unique and characteristic priest Aba, and looked at the Yunzhong Village after the earthquake from Aba's perspective. The novel describes that after the disaster, not only some people disappeared, but the village also faced disappearance due to landslides. Aba returned to Yunzhong Village alone, first sacrificed all the dead souls, and also prepared food for the small animals in the mountains. This respect and love for nature reflect the concept of respecting and protecting nature in Alai's ecological holism thought. *Red Poppies* takes the rise and fall of the chieftain family as a clue and deeply reveals the historical changes in the area in the early 20th century and the intertwining and collision of fate and humanity. In the novel, Alai shows the harmonious coexistence of humans and nature by depicting the natural scenery and cultural landscape in the area. At the same time, through the rise and fall of the chieftain family, he implies the impact of human activities on the natural environment and how humans and the natural

environment interact and influence each other in historical changes. The novel *Empty Mountain* shows the changes and conflicts in the area in the process of modernization and the struggles and pursuits in people's hearts through the stories of multiple characters. Alai deeply explores the impact of the modernization process on the natural environment and how people balance the relationship with nature in the process of pursuing economic development. Through his delicate brushstrokes, he makes readers feel the mystery and power of nature and the insignificance and powerlessness of humans in the face of nature. *Dust Flying* is the sequel to *Red Poppies* and continues to tell the story of the chieftain family and their fate and choices in historical changes. In this work, Alai further explores the relationship between humans and nature and how humans and nature interact and influence each other in historical changes. The novel *King Gesar* is based on the heroic epic *King Gesar* and tells the legendary story of King Gesar's life. In the novel, Alai shows the local people's respect and awe for nature through depicting the interaction and relationship between King Gesar and nature. Through the image and deeds of King Gesar, he conveys the concept that humans should respect nature, protect the ecology, and the importance of the harmonious coexistence of humans and nature. The ecological whole is internally diverse and symbiotic, not dominated by one element, nor is it a binary opposition [4].

3. The Ecological Holism Thought in Hardy's Works

3.1 Hardy's Creative Background and Ecological View

Thomas Hardy, the greatest realist writer in the last 30 years of the 19th century, was born in 1840 in the rural Dorsetshire in the southwest of England. This idyllic countryside, which was hardly affected by modern industry, later became the main background for Hardy's creations. Hardy's main literary achievement is a series of novels set in his hometown of Dorsetshire and its vicinity, which are called "novels of character and environment". Almost all the plots of these novels are unfold in the same place, that is, within the various counties in the southwest of England, the

countryside where the writer was born and lived. In his works, this area is given an assumed name – "Wessex". Therefore, Hardy's works are also called "Wessex novels". With the industrial revolution sweeping across England in the 19th century, many peasants and handicraftsmen faced great difficulties. Many of them lost their houses, jobs, and the way of life that had been passed down from generation to generation. The industrialization process had an even greater impact on nature, and many original rural villages were replaced by railways and towns. Hardy, as an eyewitness and witness of these social changes, incorporated the impact and changes brought about by the industrial revolution into his works. In Hardy's novels, the description of the environment and nature occupies a large proportion. Hardy wrote in a letter: "My works are in line with the ideas of Darwin, Huxley, Spencer, Comte, Hume, Mill, etc. I have read the works of these people more than those of Schopenhauer", "He transplanted the principles of survival of the fittest and natural selection into social theory. The process of social evolution is the same as that of biological evolution, that is, the survival of the fittest" [5].

3.2 The Ecological Significance in Hardy's Works

In the novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, nature is an organic whole with its constituent parts, each of which has its unique life and personality. The natural environment described by Hardy is an entity independent of human will, and the independence and important position of nature reflect his positive ecological awareness. In this novel, an important theme is the conflict between nature and the development of civilization. During the Victorian period (1837-1901), Britain developed very rapidly in the fields of economy, industry, art, and politics. Hardy saw not only the superficial prosperity but also strongly felt the negative effects brought about by social development. The most obvious point is that with the emergence of modern machines, humans were forced to separate from nature and the land. Before that, people farmed in a primitive and ancient way, which made them closer to the land. Through hard work, they obtained the necessary means of survival from natural forces, and humans and

nature maintained a balanced and harmonious relationship.

The description of the threshing machine in the novel illustrates this point well. It is called the big-bellied devil that is never satisfied and makes people enter a drowsy and trance-like state, with both hands out of the control of consciousness, just working mechanically. In addition to depriving the laborers of the joy of labor, modern machines also ignore human dignity and make people become slaves to work. The description of the driver can make readers realize how serious the harm of machine production is to people: His unique air and color are like a creature from Tophet, accidentally straying into this area with only yellow wheat, white soil, clear air. He has nothing in common with this place and only surprises and frightens the local country people. Obviously, machine farming has turned the laborers into simple and boring production tools. The driver here has lost his identity as a human being and has completely become a slave to the engine. He is like a mummy without life, showing no thought and vitality. From this character, readers can understand the harm caused to people by the development of modern civilization. In addition, the driver is covered with soot, which also indirectly reveals the threat of machines to people's health and the pollution of the environment. For Hardy, the swallowing up of traditional farming by industrialization indicates the death of a production and way of life. This production and way of life is not based on exploitation and utilization but on the harmonious coexistence and close connection between humans and nature. For most of Hardy's contemporaries, they saw prosperity, high efficiency, and rapid accumulation of wealth from industrialization, while Hardy saw the neglect of human nature.

Hardy's ecological awareness is reflected in his concern for animals. Since childhood, Hardy has shown a love for animals. In the novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Hardy also expressed sympathy for animals and described the tragic situation faced by animals many times. The panic of animals caused by the harvester at work illustrates this point well: big rats, small rats, big hares, small hares, and snakes all retreated as if into a castle, not understanding that their refuge was also short-lived and that destruction awaited them.

By the afternoon, their hiding places would shrink to an increasingly terrifying extent. Then they would huddle together regardless of friend or foe until the last few yards of standing wheat also fell under the unerring teeth of the harvester, and then they would be killed one by one by the harvester's sticks and stones. These words describe the powerful destructive power of the harvester, one of the products of industrialization. First of all, readers can feel Hardy's sympathy and concern for these helpless little animals. They originally lived in the natural environment, but this peace was broken by modern tools. From this, readers can see how social progress disturbs and even threatens the harmony of nature.

"The animal world in Hardy's novels cannot be independent of the human world in them. Hardy analyzes the characters in the novels through the transfer of cognitive models and uses the survival dilemma of animals to metaphorize the tragic fate of the characters" [6]. In the poem *The "Wood-Cutters"*, Hardy described the scene of a father and son cutting down trees and strongly condemned their behavior, while expressing deep regret and helplessness for his inability to stop it. Hardy called the father and son cruel executioners and expressed strong condemnation of human destruction of nature. This poem reflects the ecological criticism in Hardy's ecological holism thought, that is, opposing anthropocentrism and advocating respect for nature and protection of the ecological environment. In the poem *"Snow in the Suburbs"*, Hardy showed readers a vivid picture of the winter snow scene and expressed his beautiful vision of the harmonious coexistence of humans and nature by depicting the scene of humans rescuing trapped animals. In the poem, we took the black cat into the house to protect it from the cold in the snow. This love for animals reflects the concept of respecting life and protecting nature in Hardy's ecological holism thought.

In general, Hardy's creative background is closely related to the era and region in which he lived, and his ecological view is reflected in his profound attention and thinking on the relationship between humans and nature in the process of industrialization. His works not only make us feel the changes and conflicts of that era but also arouse our re-examination and

thinking on the relationship between humans and nature in modern society.

4. The Similarities and Differences in the Ecological Holism Thought in the Works of Alai and Hardy

4.1 Similarities

Both Alai and Hardy show profound concern and respect for nature in their works. They both show the close connection and interdependence between humans and nature through vivid descriptions and profound thinking. At the same time, they both oppose anthropocentrism, and advocate respect for nature, protection of the ecological environment, and the construction of a harmonious relationship between humans and nature. In their novel creations, they both show a profound insight and concern for natural ecology, social ecology, and spiritual ecology, a reverence and love for nature, and a longing for maintaining social traditional order and a poetic life. In Alai's works, such as *Red Poppies* and the prose collection *Let the Rocks Tell Us*, he shows a sense of awe for nature through his delicate description of mountains, rivers, plants, and trees. The nature in his works is not only a background but also a spiritual existence closely related to human fate. Alai explores the mystery of life evolution through natural relics such as fossils, reflecting his interest in natural science and respect for natural laws. In Hardy's novels, such as *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, nature also plays an important role. Hardy expresses his love for the beauty of nature by depicting the unspoiled rural scenery such as the *Blackmoor Vale* and implies his concern about the destruction of nature by industrialization. "In Hardy's bird imagery, we can see his Wordsworthian romantic hope and his modernist pain in the face of social contradictions" [7]. Alai is good at combining the inner world of characters with the natural landscape. For example, in *Red Poppies*, the fool gains insights through natural scenes, reflecting the spiritual connection between humans and nature. In Hardy's novels, the changes in nature are often related to the development of the characters' fate, and nature and characters blend together.

4.2 Differences

The characters in Alai's works often have distinct ethnic and regional characteristics. He criticizes the impact and destruction of traditional culture and the neglect of the ecological environment in the process of modernization through the fate and choices of the characters. Alai's works are deeply rooted in the area where he lives. His novels are full of descriptions of the natural scenery of the Qinghai-Xizang Plateau and the unique ecological culture of his nationality.

Emphasizing the integrity of the ecosystem and the responsibility of human beings as a part of it, the nature presented in his works is not only the natural scenery of the Tibetan area, but also the cultural criticism of Alai under the ecological concept, ecological consciousness and ecological responsibility. In Alai's novels, the interaction between nature and characters is close. The characters in his works are often integrated with nature, and they perceive life and think about life through nature. For example, the second young master, a fool in *"Red Poppies"*, obtains a unique understanding of the world through his contact with nature. *"The Trilogy of Mountain Treasures"* and so on all reflect the choices and dilemmas between economic development and ecological protection in the Tibetan area. Alai's works contain profound ecological ethical thoughts, full of reverence and respect for life, and a profound insight into the spiritual world of human beings. Alai's works often contain profound thinking about fate, and through the fate trajectory of the characters, they discuss the insignificance and powerlessness of human beings in the face of nature and society and how to find the meaning and value of life in adversity.

Hardy, on the other hand, criticizes the social injustice and moral degeneration brought about by industrialization more by creating tragic characters. The characters in his works are often on the edge of society, suffering from the teasing of fate and social exclusion, with the British countryside as the background, such as *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *The Return of the Native*. The nature in his works is full of the poetic flavor of the English countryside, but it also contains the erosion and destruction of the countryside by the industrialization process. Through the description of the natural scenery, Hardy expresses his concern about the environmental

problems brought about by industrialization and his nostalgia for the traditional rural life. In Hardy's novels, although nature is also an important background for the activities of the characters; more often it is a symbol or hint of the fate of the characters. For example, in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, the changes of the natural scenery often predict the ups and downs of Tess's fate, which reflects the differences in traditional beliefs and philosophical views between the East and the West, to reveal social problems such as the bankruptcy of farmers and population migration in the process of industrialization, the spiritual crisis and moral degeneration, the emptiness and confusion of the human spirit and the cruelty and injustice of society in the process of industrialization. His works often have a fatalistic color that the fate of the characters is determined by society and the environment and that individuals cannot resist.

5. The Significance of the Comparison of the Ecological Holism in the Works of Alai and Hardy

5.1 Academic Value

Ecological literature, as an important field of literary research, aims to explore the ecological crisis and its ideological and cultural roots in literary works, and at the same time to explore the ecological aesthetics and artistic expressions of literature. As literary giants from different cultural backgrounds, both Alai and Hardy have rich ecological thoughts in their works. By comparing their ecological thoughts, we can deepen the research on ecological literature and further reveal the uniqueness and universality of ecological literature in different cultural contexts. Alai's works are deeply influenced by the local culture. He emphasizes the harmonious coexistence of man and nature, believing that all things have life and that human beings should respect and protect nature. Hardy, in his works, shows the close connection between man and nature through vivid natural descriptions and criticizes the destruction of the natural environment by the industrialization process. This comparison helps us understand the ecological thoughts in different cultural backgrounds and can also promote the enrichment and development of ecological literary theory, to promote

exchanges and dialogues between different cultures, and to enhance the understanding of ecological concepts in different cultural backgrounds. "By combing and analyzing the research process and development trend of Hardy in China and the West, we can not only deepen our understanding of the complex interaction between Western literature, criticism and social culture and ideological trends, but also contribute to the long-term development of Chinese foreign literature criticism" [8].

5.2 Practical Significance

Environmental problems have become the focus of global attention. Alai emphasizes the ecological ethical concepts in local culture in his works, such as the equality of all living beings and the animism of all things, which have the same effect as the ecological ideas reflected in Hardy's works. By comparing their ecological ideas, we can more clearly recognize the seriousness and urgency of environmental problems and thus inspire us to take positive actions to protect the environment. In works such as *Red Poppies*, Alai reveals the destruction of the ecological environment by human activities, such as overgrazing and deforestation, which lead to serious consequences such as land desertification and soil erosion. Hardy, in his works, warns us that modernization development cannot be achieved at the expense of the environment by depicting the destruction of the natural environment. This comparison not only helps us recognize the seriousness of environmental problems but also inspires us to take positive measures to deal with them. It can raise the public's ecological awareness, promote the formation of a green, low-carbon and sustainable development concept in society, and improve the transformation of our economic development mode, to achieve sustainable economic development.

Comparing the ecological ideas in the novels of Alai and Hardy not only has profound academic value but also important practical significance. With the increasingly severe global environmental problems, the idea of ecological holism has important practical significance at present. It reminds us that human beings are not the masters of nature but a part of nature. We should respect nature,

protect the ecological environment and build a harmonious relationship between man and nature [9]. Whether it is the Confucian concepts of “harmony between nature and man” and “all things as equal”, the Taoist ideas of “imitating nature” and “all things as one”, or the Buddhist beliefs of “equality of all living beings” and “endless causation”, they all talk about the “ecological system” between heaven and man [10].

6. Conclusion

Through the comparative study of the ecological holism in the works of Alai and Hardy, we can find that both writers show deep concern and respect for nature in their literary creations. They both oppose anthropocentrism and advocate respecting nature, protecting the ecological environment and building a harmonious relationship between man and nature. Although there are some differences in expressing the idea of ecological holism, the common point is that they both emphasize the overall interests of the ecosystem and the harmonious coexistence of man and nature. In the context of the increasingly severe environmental problems at present, the idea of ecological holism has important practical significance and value. We should understand and solve environmental problems as a whole, respect nature, protect the ecological environment and build a harmonious relationship between man and nature.

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