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A Study on the Representation of Child Violence in Avant-Garde Novels

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Abstract: *After the "Cultural Revolution," many Chinese writers began to depict children not as traditionally innocent and carefree figures, but as individuals with neglected and repressed inner traits. Avant-garde novels explored children's inner anxieties, fears, admiration for violence, aggressive behaviors, and themes of death and hunger, creating a traumatic narrative of childhood. This unconventional portrayal, often set against the backdrop of the "Cultural Revolution" and its ideological liberation, examines how children's images shifted to that of perpetrators and witnesses of violence during significant historical changes. This study critically analyzes this literary phenomenon through major representative cases, highlighting the traumatic childhood narratives in post-"Cultural Revolution" avant-garde novels. It aims to uncover the socio-historical critical consciousness and the value of enlightenment reflected in the depiction of children's violence.*

Keywords: *Avant-garde fiction; children's image; violent narrative; aesthetic connotations*

1. Introduction

In the 1980s, following historical shifts and ideological liberation in China, modern consciousness began to emerge among the populace. Individualism and the advocacy for freedom permeated literature, marking a transition from its role as a political tool to a more diversified means of expression. Concurrently, China's opening introduced various Western literary trends, including Heidegger's existential views on time and space, Márquez's integration of everyday life with magical realism, Heller's tragicomic black humor, Pynchon's multi-layered collages, Sartre's social responsibility theory, Proust's nuanced stream of consciousness, Borges' metafiction that blurs reality and fiction, and Kafka's allegorical writings. These influences expanded the literary horizons of Chinese readers and writers, leading to the emergence of avant-garde novels characterized by narrative experimentation, stylistic innovation, and existential inquiry.

The core of avant-garde novels lies in exploring existence, critiquing human nature and society, and establishing unique narrative modes. Within this domain, "violence" is fragmented, "death" is analyzed frame-by-frame, and themes such as "absurdity," "fiction," and "cold detachment" serve as embellishments. The tone is often tragic, with protagonists typically drawn from ordinary people, whose identities are commonly deconstructed into categories like intellectuals, the mentally challenged, women, and other marginalized groups.

However, research on "children" as both perpetrators and victims of violence remains limited. This paper seeks to address this gap through textual analysis of violence in avant-garde novels. By examining selected works, it aims to identify typical characters and explore the underrepresented aspects of "children" who have not yet integrated into societal structures, particularly against the backdrop of the Cultural Revolution. This approach aspires to provide a comprehensive understanding of the modernity of avant-garde aesthetics while establishing a framework for value discovery: investigating the meaning of the world, the value of life, human nature issues, and the significance of social and historical critique through tragedy[1-2].

2. The Evolution of "Children" in Avant-garde Literature

Children represent an early stage of human development, marked by underdeveloped physiological mechanisms, an inability to meet social norms, and incapacity to assume social roles. Due to their immature minds, they are often viewed as blank slates with significant potential for shaping and

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embodying endless possibilities.

The concept of children in literature carries significant tension. On one hand, children are portrayed as naturally innocent and lively, embodying the playful and adorable nature of youth. On the other hand, their boundless imagination and curiosity about the world around them enable them to find joy in the monotonous routine of social life that adults cannot comprehend. Children, as part of a socially vulnerable group, are sensitive and fragile; any external turbulence can be devastating to them. As such, they are often the focus of special attention and sympathy in literary works. For creators, children are objects of special attention and compassion.

Such depictions of children are abundant in the annals of literature. In Hu Lingneng's "The Child Fishing," we see the innocent child, "with disheveled hair learning to fish, sitting sideways with moss and weeds reflecting his shadow. When a passerby inquires, he waves from afar, fearing the fish will be startled and not respond." Xin Qiji's "Qing Ping Le - Village Life"portrays children with a delightful naughtiness, "What I love most are those naughty children, lying on the bank, peeling lotus pods." Moving to the Qing Dynasty, children's portrayals became even more nuanced. Jia Baoyu in "Dream of the Red Mansions" embodies the most pristine childlike innocence, innocent and defiant of social conventions, his interactions with the other girls in the novel diverge starkly from conventional societal values. Even in mythological works like "The Investiture of the Gods," Nezha displays both innocence and a black-and-white morality, coupled with mystical powers and bravery, blending fantasy with justice and rebellion.

With the advocacy of anti-tradition, anti-feudalism, and the emphasis on individual and human development during the May Fourth New Culture Movement, the portrayal of children in Chinese literature underwent a transformation, assuming more significant roles under the pens of writers. Children began to emerge as independent individuals, with a heightened focus on their growth experiences and inner worlds. For instance, in Lu Xun's "The True Story of Ah-Q," Little D, and in "Hometown," Runtu, serve as distinct entities navigating their growth within a "special" societal environment. Concurrently, children's images shifted from being symbolic and idealized towards a more realistic portrayal, as writers delved into children's daily lives, psychological states, and growth dilemmas. Bing Xin's "Stars and Spring Water," for example, expresses through numerous poems her admiration for children's pure hearts and concern for their education.

The portrayal of children evolved, embracing adult-like experiences, transcending familial stereotypes and idealizations. Recognized as complex beings with distinct personalities and inner lives, writers' focus on children mirrored profound reflections on society and humanity. Amidst these examinations, an optimistic undertone persisted, implying the redeemability and resolvability of the issues raised.

In avant-garde novels, the traditional image of innocent and carefree children is almost dismantled. Their ignorance and fearlessness extend beyond mere "mischief" or "naughtiness" to include an inability to comprehend the lightness with which life can be destroyed, the weight of violence, and its repercussions. Some children even press the buttons that trigger violence out of sheer curiosity, remaining oblivious to the fear that should accompany irreversible consequences, sometimes even feeling a chilling sense of pleasure.

Avant-garde writers delve into artistic extremes, incorporating brutality into children's lives via "zero-degree narratives," stripping emotions and fostering unfettered growth devoid of empathy. Tragedies unfold swiftly and relentlessly, juxtaposing childish innocence with impending disasters. This fusion of tragic endings and child protagonists accentuates the avant-garde style, eliciting profound reader reflections.

3. Manifestations and Symbolism of Childhood Violence

It is imperative to clarify that violence, in the context of minors, refers to any form of aggressive behavior that may inflict physical, psychological, or behavioral harm, abuse, deprivation, or alienation upon children.

Pioneer novels not only depict violence enacted by children but also emphasize its persistence and intensity. Notably, due to their limited cognitive experience, children may not necessarily harbor emotions like revenge, anger, or guilt. Consequently, pioneer writers often refrain from delineating moral boundaries around violence.

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(1) Physical Violence

Among pioneer writers, Yu Hua exerts a particular effort in exploring humanity's darker side, where the innate violence within human consciousness is unleashed.

"Crying in the Rain" explores the phenomenon of family-centered violence, depicting the distorted environments that Sun Guanglin faces in both his biological and adoptive families. In his original family, grandfather Sun Youyuan appears to be submissive but occasionally displays "betrayal" behavior, gradually undermining the positive image his grandchildren have of him. This leads Sun Guanglin to transition from the loss of childhood memories to a harsh awakening of reality. His father, consumed by desire, ultimately suffers the fate of having his ear cut off by his son. Children who witness violence unconsciously imitate it, making it easy for them to become perpetrators in an oppressive social environment, perpetuating the predatory relationships of the adult world. Confronted by the dominance of the Wang brothers, Sun Guangping and Sun Guangming choose to retaliate with kitchen knives. Violence becomes the solution they learn in an oppressive environment; their innocence and precocity intertwine with a longing for glory and heroic dreams, rendering them cold, repressed, and pitiable individuals.

If "Crying in the Rain" portrays rational childhood violence, "The Reality of Being Number One" illustrates irrationality. While it might be seen as an innocent mistake for a four-year-old like Pipi to accidentally kill his cousin, his subsequent acts of twisting faces, slapping, and choking infants are blatant violence. "Violence becomes a means of asserting self-power," as Pipi, starved for attention from his parents, resorts to bullying the weak for self-validation and pleasure. Fear, trembling, empathy, and compassion pale in the face of humanity's inherent evil.

In Ye Zhaoyan's "The Greenhouse Without Glass," the violent tendencies of adolescents are widely portrayed. During the Cultural Revolution era, societal conditions that emphasized the supremacy of the mainstream, centralized power, and neglected individuality fueled violence. A group of primary school students became perpetrators, systematically and publicly attacking adults. They secretly formed a "Red Kids" combat squad at school, leading Zhang Xiaoyan in criticizing and fighting against Ms. Tang from the neighborhood committee, under the pretext that Ms. Tang was always fond of nagging. The children imitated the adults' ways to humiliate and beat her, ultimately leading to her suicide. During the investigation, Zhang Xiaoyan instructed other children to blame the innocent little Mumu. This group of children ruthlessly beat and scolded their teachers, plotted against their peers, demonstrating the all-pervasive influence of violence on them[3].

Tie Ning's "The Gate of the Rose" also contains similar depictions, where the "Revolutionary Successors" formed by a group of girls forced their life teacher to wear colorful underwear and a lantern-shaped vest while standing on the podium and holding her urine, all for the sake of "a moment when no one wants to leave." In Ma Yuan's "Old Death," Haiyun's misdeeds began early in school: smoking, stealing, and spying on women bathing. As he reached his youth, his behavior became even more outrageous, to the point of raping his older sister at home and threatening to kill his entire family while in detention.

Pioneer writers portray children surviving amidst social disorder, lost self-identity, indifferent family relationships, and inadequate formal education. They consciously or unconsciously become "executioners," unaware of their roles. Through depicting the consequences of violence—death, disability, ugliness—writers uncover another facet of humanity, showcasing the depths of evil when perpetrators inflict irreparable harm, thereby fostering reflection and criticism on human nature.

(2) Psychological Violence

Psychological violence, a more subtle form of aggression, inflicts harm on the psyche of an individual rather than through overt external means. Compared to direct physical violence, its consequences are often more devastating, long-lasting, and pervasive.

Can Xue subtly portrays institutional violence through rumors, surveillance, voyeurism, and abuse in dim settings. "Yellow Mud Street" features grim imagery: flies buzzing, rats scurrying, feces strewn, decaying bodies, and festering sores. Children's innocence blurs with adults', forced into a harsh world. They develop distorted perceptions from witnessing violence, feeling curious yet fearful of the unknown, yearning for heroes amidst confusion. "A child runs by, digging dirt from his nose, saying, 'Two cancer patients died over there.'"

Yu Hua's "1986" confronts the Cultural Revolution more directly. The daughter's fear, strangeness, and dislike stem from her father, a history teacher fascinated by ancient punishments. He returns from

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Red Guard captivity as a self-mutilating madman, shouting out archaic torture names. He becomes the spectacle of his own horror, ending his life in gruesome torment. His ex-wife and daughter feel relief, escaping the nightmare to resume a peaceful life. This exposes the humanity's distortion and devastation under historical violence, vividly portraying indifference, numbness, and selfishness.

(3) Institutional Violence

From a realistic lens, avant-garde literature's fictionalized portrayals of violence, sins, suffering, and death are rooted in historical realities, notably the Cultural Revolution and War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, which deeply scarred the avant-garde writers' generation. Yu Hua emphasizes this inseparable link between childhood memories and creative output, likening subsequent imaginative developments to software upgrades on a computer's unchanging foundation.

The authors do not directly portray the impact of institutional violence on children but obliquely convey the chronic, obscure, and irreparable trauma inflicted upon them during a specific historical era through the depiction of social environments and children's growth experiences.

Can Xue's portrayal of institutional violence is subtle yet pervasive, with the novel rife with terms such as rumors, surveillance, peeping, and abuse, set against a dim and gloomy backdrop. "Yellow Mud Street"abounds in grotesque imagery: swirling flies, scurrying rats, ubiquitous excrement, decomposing corpses, festering sores, and abscesses. The boundaries between children and adults blur, forcing the former to prematurely enter the complex and brutal world of adulthood, where distorted perceptions are shaped through observing violence. Children are torn between curiosity and fear, yearning for heroes yet lost in the realities of their situation. "A child ran towards me, picking dirt out of his nose as he told me, 'Two cancer patients died over there.'" (Yellow Mud Street)

Yu Hua's "1986" offers a more direct portrayal of the memories of the Cultural Revolution. The daughter's feelings of "fear," "strangeness," and "dislike" towards her biological father stem from his past as a history teacher with a keen interest in ancient punishments. During the Cultural Revolution, he was taken away by the Red Guards and, upon returning after the historical darkness dissipated, he had transformed into a self-mutilating madman. He would scream out the names of ancient tortures such as "nose-cutting" "amputation of feet", and "castration" using his own body as a grotesque display of these atrocities. As he subjected himself to repeated brutal self-inflicted punishments, his life came to an end. Upon hearing this news, his ex-wife and daughter felt more a sense of relief. They were finally able to escape from the terrifying shadow and resume a peaceful life, revealing the distortion and devastation of human nature caused by the historical violence during the Cultural Revolution, where indifference, numbness, and selfishness were brought to the fore.

Avant-garde writers reflect historical traumas through violence depictions, unconsciously revealing ingrained violent memories. The bizarre experiences of children and various characters in their novels are, in essence, metaphorical representations of the suffering endured by the nation during its initial attempts at transformation and development, standing at the mercy of the ruthless blade of time[4].

4. The Value and Significance of Depicting Child Violence in Avant-garde Novels

Avant-garde novels' predilection for violence arises from literary evolution and Western modernist influence, embodying entrenched and emerging Chinese issues (marital, family, crime, women's) as crucibles of violence. Consequently, the radical stance of avant-garde writers in portraying violence finds its roots in historical and real-life contexts.

Exploring the representation of child violence in avant-garde novels enriches the dimensionality of literary expression. Utilizing children's experiences with violence as a unique perspective, avant-garde novels reflect humanity's complexity. Their attitudes towards violence encapsulate adult world dynamics, facilitating a profound exploration of human nature's darker aspects.

Furthermore, these works fill a void in Chinese literature concerning thematic and subject matter. Violence in literature often serves poetic venting, yet avant-garde novels in the late 1980s introduced Western values (existentialism, humanity) through violence depictions. Integrating tradition with postmodern metaphysics, these novels fostered a unique trend, enriching Chinese literature's philosophical depth and thematic diversity.

Avant-garde novels' depiction of children engaging in violence provides a new creative paradigm and value discovery mechanism for subsequent writers. Chinese literature often portrays violence positively, intertwined with tragic emotions and happy endings. However, avant-garde writers use violence as a

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medium to express worldviews and humanity, de-emphasizing character development. Child narrators, like the infant in Yu Hua's "Ancestors" or the grandson in Mo Yan's "Red Sorghum," highlight environmental impacts on their naive, uninformed perspectives[5-6].

Children's innocence and unintentional actions amplify the allegorical nature and inevitability of fate in avant-garde fiction. In "To Live," Fu Gui's fate shifts due to a child's prank, leading to a series of tragic events. This "third kind of tragedy" underscores personal helplessness in turmoil, provoking profound reflections on destiny's machinations.

5. Conclusion

By analyzing avant-garde novels from the 1980s, we discern numerous depictions of children as perpetrators of violence. As socially vulnerable groups deserving protection, they become hardened and numb due to institutional violence during specific historical periods. Driven by the creative impulse of "poverty breeds art," avant-garde writers project their childhood traumas onto textual children, conveying their understanding and insights after prolonged contemplation and reflection. Through fictional narratives, fragmented forms, and aesthetically challenging language, these works reveal how traditionally innocent children, under distorted social value judgments, transform from victims of violence into its perpetrators.

We must recognize the significance of this theme in exploring existential meanings, human complexity, and the value of literary themes.

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