

Nature, Spirit, and Civilization: A Study of Ecological Narrative in Dust Settles

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Abstract. The long novel *Dust Settles* by Tibetan writer Alai narrates the collapse of the chieftain system. The story, told from the first-person perspective of the Idiot Young Master, chronicles the power struggles, territorial expansion, tribal conflicts, and the journey into modernity of a powerful chieftain family, ultimately concluding with the complete disintegration of the chieftain system. The narrative, rich in Tibetan characteristics, reflects the natural ecology, spiritual ecology, civilizational ecology, and political ecology of the Tibetan region during a specific era. It elucidates the intersubjectivity between nature and spirit within ecological narrative, thoroughly deconstructing the political and social ecological inertia of Tibetan human civilization over millennia.

Keywords: Ecological Narrative, *Dust Settles*, Natural Ecology, Spiritual Ecology, Holism

1. Introduction

Ecological narrative contains the ecological ideal of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, and embodies the situation of human history, politics, and civilizational ecology. The natural earth is the origin of human life, and there exists a subtle blood connection between individual life and natural life; human society and natural ecology complement each other, and human civilizational ecology also contains a rich sense of life and dialectical laws. Writer Alai, who lives in the "Four Tusi" Tibetan area of northwestern Sichuan, focuses his ecological narrative gaze on the institutional changes and political ecology of the Tibetan region. His long novel *Dust Settles* narrates the demise of the chieftain system, describing the state of natural ecology, spiritual ecology, and civilizational ecology in the Tibetan region during the era of change. With an epic writing style, it constructs a sacred castle under the unique ecology of the Tibetan region, while simultaneously using rational and dialectical critical thinking to deconstruct and render extinct the political and civilizational ecology set against the backdrop of the chieftain system.

2. Natural ecology: the value of life in landscape narrative

In literary works that present the symbiotic state of humans and the earth, the description of landscapes and the narrative developed with this as an important component are important research objects. In this part, the author spontaneously integrates personal emotions into nature, and the description of natural landscapes unconsciously reflects human emotions. The scenery and features

in the work reflect the author's thoughts and also convey the realm that the literary work intends to express. Without directly expressing or venting a certain emotion or thought, it clearly expresses the author's life, environment, thoughts, and feelings through the objective description of natural scenery [1]. From the perspective of ecological literature, the emotions involved in the grand "big literature" concerning the survival of the ecological whole are more concentratedly directed towards the "collective aspect" [2], which is a subjective conclusion drawn from the perspective of observing ethnic groups and regional ecology. Modern Western scholars argue that landscape has multiple signifying functions, serving as both a carrier of culture and thought, and a medium for humans to understand the objective world [3]. The landscape descriptions in literary works are rich in connotation, and their role in narrative has multi-layered significance.

In the landscape narrative of *Dust Settles*, natural beings carry the author's nostalgia and regional memory. Such ecological landscape narration, on the one hand, realistically reflects the local natural features and ecological characteristics, and on the other hand, fills the text with deep affection, mutually supporting the construction of a spiritual homeland. From the description of the war game chasing wild pheasants at the beginning of the novel to the phenological narration that reflects seasonal changes and drives the plot forward, it is everywhere a reflection of the unique scenery of the Tibetan region, with the ecological characteristics and unique spiritual connotation of the western region flowing between the lines. "The mountains began to rise gradually, right where the sun was setting. A river surged out of the mountains, the water flowing eastward, and the valley became increasingly open in this torrent. There is a proverb: The Han emperor is under the morning sun, the Dalai Lama is under the afternoon sun." [4] Rivers, mountains, valleys, the sun, and Tibetan Buddhism, the unique natural scenery and spiritual beliefs are integrated into one. Religion, under the unique environment, becomes part of the ecology, becoming a spiritual support that the Tibetan people are accustomed to and trust.

From the anthropocentric standpoint, nature becomes an object of conquest and utilization by ethnic groups. The pursuit of economic value deprives plants and animals of their subject status in the ecology. From the perspective of ecological literature, nature and society are in a close interactive relationship, and revealing the life value of nature is an important significance of ecological writing. The two main plant species mentioned in *Dust Settles*, wheat and poppy, are precisely the embodiment of human groups obeying and rebelling against the laws of nature. Poppy flowers first appeared on the land of the Maqie Chieftain in summer and autumn. A vigorous, abnormal lust erupted in the surging poppy fields. "The poppies surged under the sky like lust." [4] The life value of animals is also reflected here. Snakes lurking in caves crawled out, dogs climbed trees, and insects from underground crawled to the surface. Unlike other ecological literature that restores plants and animals to valuable subjects, *Dust Settles* uses a satirical and critical technique to write the abnormal actions of animals as the consequence of actions that violate ecology and satisfy greed. This consequence continued to spread, eventually leading to the self-destruction of life and ecology in the natural world. An earthquake occurred. The novel uses special events as omens to threaten the Maqie territory, which has long maintained ecological harmony and a peaceful life, and to strike individual lives, constituting an implicit critique, and clarifying the final disintegration outcome before the narrative reaches its end.

3. Spiritual ecology: the spiritual ecological orientation of the holy fool

Some researchers divide Alai's novel works into three stages based on the transformation of character images: the early stage (1984-1997), the middle stage (1998-2007), and the later stage (2008 to present) [5]. The turning point in 1998 is marked by the publication of *Dust Settles* that

year, which is the first appearance of the Holy Fool image in Alai's works. The term "Holy Fool" originates from Old Slavonic. Religious studies believe that the Holy Fool has considerable positive significance, hiding a mysterious power under the surface of madness, being closer to the gods than ordinary people [6]. Scholars in the literary field affirm that the Holy Fool image in works possesses prophetic abilities different from ordinary people, and focus on the motivation of the creator in constructing this image and its expressive effect. The Holy Fool represents the transcendence of the physical ecological world, achieving a perspective of the individual reflecting on the group, the individual introspecting the group, and the individual foreseeing the group. Against the background of the social ecology and political ecology in *Dust Settles*, the emergence of the Holy Fool image is a rational attempt with modernity.

The image of the Holy Fool in the book is the second young master of the Maqie Chieftain. At the beginning of the first chapter, it is explained in the first person that "I" am an idiot, but his advanced behavior that transcends class and era cognition also reveals his status as a prophet. The entire book is narrated from the first-person perspective of the Idiot Young Master. The idiot is both the narrator of the text and the protagonist of the family story. This dual identity brings great convenience to the narrative of the story. In the narrative, the Holy Fool possesses an omniscient vision and thinking. For example, in Chapter 2, the scene describing the Maqie Chieftain and Yangzong having sex: "Everyone's gaze turned again to the surging poppies all over the mountains outside the window. There, the Maqie Chieftain held his beloved woman tightly and entered his beloved woman." [4] The idiot's "transgressive" perspective leads the reader beyond the scope of ordinary people's vision, tracking the behavior of everyone inside and outside the family, filling in the gaps in the narrative, and providing infinite extensibility and visibility of vision.

The image of the Holy Fool in *Dust Settles* is not the traditional Holy Fool image in religion. The Idiot Young Master does not avoid worldly desires, but completes the pursuit of desire and emotion through induced and led feelings. The love between the Idiot Young Master and the maid Sangji Zhuoma "originates from the awakening of a vague gender consciousness and the initial physiological impulse." [7] After tasting the initial beauty, the Idiot Young Master's deep self-awareness gradually sprouts and awakens, which foreshadows the Idiot Young Master's growth and transformation from an idiot to a Holy Fool. Later, when experiencing Zhuoma and Tana, the Idiot Young Master's emotional experience is both shallow and vulgar. He compares the objects of his interaction to animals such as "horses," "little cows," and "mares," saying that they "emit the smell of animals all over their bodies" [4]. These vulgar but vital sexual impulses are the manifestation of the visualization of the world of thought and emotion. Later, Tana, the daughter of the Ronggong Chieftain, was given by her mother as a commodity to the Idiot Young Master in exchange for the Maqie Chieftain's family's wheat. The young and beautiful Tana was extremely repulsed by the Idiot Young Master and committed adultery twice. Despite this, the Idiot Young Master still chose to forgive and accept her. The Idiot Young Master "is always on the road to love, but can never reach it. Just like Sisyphus pushing the boulder up the mountain in Greek mythology, the idiot uses instinct and desire to find the destination of love, which is doomed to fail" [8]. From beginning to end, the Idiot Young Master's pursuit of love relies on instinct and desire, which is related to the loneliness, confusion, and ignorance caused by the particularity of his identity, and also connected to the instinctive desires of his individual life. The pursuit of love is a microcosm of the idiot's spiritual world and subjective consciousness.

As the situation changes, the Idiot Young Master fully reveals his talent as a prophet in all aspects. From the initial prophecy of the missionary's visit, to exposing the conspiracy of the Chieftain's wife, and finally to establishing the border market and planting wheat, the Idiot Young

Master's inner self-awareness gradually awakens, and he develops a desire for self-awareness and power identity. Until the end of the story, the Idiot Young Master does not inherit the chieftain position. However, in this process, the Idiot Young Master's control over his self-awareness and confirmation of his identity clearly demonstrate his understanding and pursuit of existential value. However, in the grand field of history, no individual or nation can escape the fate of decline, and relying on one's own strength cannot reverse the overall situation of history [9]. In the end, the idiot saw the answer, "I know that I am not an idiot, nor a smart person, but I have come to this strange land to walk around when the chieftain system is about to end." [4] The work skillfully combines the individual's spiritual world with the overall trend of history. Whether prophet or fool, high-ranking or idle, the torrent of history will sweep through every individual life living in the era, and the spiritual ecology of individuals is often extremely similar in the vast scope of time and space.

4. Civilizational ecology: demise, destruction, and civilizational disintegration

Life and death are an eternal and profound grand proposition. When the story ends, like traditional Chinese tragic works, most of the people in the Maqie Chieftain family die. Along with them, the Maqie Chieftain's official residence and the old society's chieftain system also pass away. The main task completed by the author in *Dust Settles* is to "reproduce and deconstruct the historical inertia of the chieftain system over millennia, and to carry out a thorough disintegration of it" [10], thereby expressing the social ideal of an ethnic writer. Therefore, the demise of life representing the old system and the collapse of the old civilization are the destiny of history. Behind death and disintegration is the formation and establishment of the civilized, peaceful, free, and healthy political civilization form and social ideal pursued and desired by Tibetan writers and even the Tibetan people [3], which is based on rational cognition and analysis. Even so, poetic contemplation runs through the narrative from beginning to end. When elaborating on death and disintegration, the author also fully touches upon the fragmentation of ecology.

The eldest young master of the Maqie Chieftain family died at the hands of the avenger Duoji Luobu. The wronged souls who had died unjustly under the executioner's knife in the past attached themselves to the purple clothes worn by the killer. "Two strands of hatred for the Maqie family converged in one person." [4] The purple clothes were discarded after being worn by the Idiot Young Master, and the hatred will of the purple clothes was injected into the Idiot Young Master's id at this point. As the second heir with self-awareness, the Idiot Young Master's subconscious wanted to kill the eldest young master and inherit the chieftain position; as the "prophet" Holy Fool, the prophet's will required the killing of a powerful successor with sufficient intelligence and ambition, thereby achieving the peak and demise of the chieftain. Therefore, the eldest young master died a few days after being assassinated, and the fate of the Maqie Chieftain family, and even the chieftain as a historical existence, was marked at this time and irreversibly moved towards collapse.

The civilization created by the chieftain system was stable and self-consistent during the hundreds of years it was maintained, like an organism breathing according to an ancient rhythm. But this stability was fragile. The old rules represented by the eldest young master, which were suitable for the old civilization system, were ultimately killed by the unconventional new civilization represented by the Idiot Young Master. The "Red Han people" attacked the Maqie Chieftain's official residence with irresistible artillery fire, and the once prosperous chieftain's official residence became a ruin. In the part where the novel's narrative is about to end, the disintegration of the civilizational ecology echoes the natural ecology: "Tears welled up in my eyes. A small whirlwind rose from the pile of stones, lifting up a lot of dust, spinning over the ruins. Today, I believe that was the souls of the Maqie Chieftain and his wife ascending to heaven." [4] All the once prosperous

civilization ended as historical dust. The swirling and settling of the dust described the state after the disintegration of the civilizational ecology, depicting a silent, diffuse, divine, and peaceful nothingness.

5. Political ecology: the symbiosis of heaven and humanity from the perspective of holism

The idea of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature has been a consensus in human society since ancient times. Thoughts such as "The Tao models itself after nature," "All things are one," and "Interaction between Heaven and Mankind" all regard humans and all things in heaven and earth as an organic whole, which is the embryonic form of the "Holism" ecological view. The holistic ecological concept points out the complex ethical relationship of interdependence and struggle between humans and nature, which is the primary stage of the development of ecological consciousness. *Dust Settles* exposes how the primitive production mode under the chieftain system disregards ecological balance and abandons ethics, and in the process of the inevitable collapse and disintegration of the chieftain system, it more profoundly criticizes the pathological social system.

Under the chieftain system, the disorderly mode of production and unrestrained desires broke the long-standing production order that had been sustained on this land. The entire system, from top to bottom, was filled with a state of existence characterized by the loss of ideals, the loss of spirituality, and the imbalance of human nature [10]. The Maqie Chieftain compromised under the coercion of the White Han people and planted poppies for a year. The poppy flowers caused desires on the Maqie territory to expand morbidly, and the resulting fruits brought them a large amount of silver. As a result, the trend of poppy planting swept through all areas covered by the chieftain system, leading to friction and war among the chieftains. The output of poppies rose rapidly, and the price plummeted. On the territories of the chieftains who abandoned the traditional crop planting model, a large number of people starved to death. As the natural ecology was viciously destroyed, the stability and balance of society no longer existed. Even within the wealthy territory of the Maqie Chieftain, after the establishment of the advanced border market, the introduction of brothels led to the spread of syphilis. The superficial prosperity and liveliness could hardly conceal the morbid and rotten reality. The prophetic thoughts of the Holy Fool could not save the system that was bound to collapse in a state of spiritual loss and ecological fragmentation.

With the development of ecological awareness, in ecological narrative, writers use changes in the natural world to reflect changes in the spiritual world of characters and the ecology of social civilization, reconstruct the blood ties between humans and nature, and attempt to reflect on the fate of history from the perspective of the natural world. At the end of the book, the author, from the perspective of the Idiot Young Master, once again looks back at the chieftain's official residence where he spent half his life when crossing the mountain pass and leaving this place: "There, except for the disappearance of the tall official residence, not many traces of the battle could be seen. Spring was dyeing the orchards and large wheat fields green. In the middle of that green, the chieftain's official residence had turned into a large pile of stones. The lower part was the shadow cast by itself, and the upper part reflected the sunlight, shimmering with a metallic luster." [4] The tall official residence has disappeared, representing that the backward and decadent system has disappeared; the green of spring has sprouted, and a healthy and sound new system is growing on this land.

6. Conclusion

Dust Settles narrates the collective destruction of the chieftains and their system. The living conditions of political civilization and human ecology in the past historical period are not constructed in the book, but are gradually collapsed, disintegrated, perished, and destroyed. This literary work is a dialectical literary interpretation of the law of ecological decline during the transformation of the social form in the Tibetan region brought about by the collapse of the chieftain system. From the perspective of ecological narrative, such literature is precisely an in-depth statement, objective critique, and confrontation and interrogation of the imbalance of natural ecology, the confusion of spiritual ecology, the critique of political ecology, and the disintegration of civilizational ecology. The ecological narrative embodied in Alai's works not only deeply enters literary writing from the perspectives of nature, spirit, civilization, and politics, but also constructs a grand ecological view of heaven, man, ancient and modern times from the perspective of holism. It is of great significance for the restorative recording of Tibetan history and also sets an example for the discussion of the natural view, ecological view, and worldview of ethnic groups and society in minority border literature in the new century.

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