

An Analysis of the Physiological Metaphors in Mo Yan's *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*



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Abstract: Mo Yan's *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* employs visually striking physiological imagery as the core narrative vehicle, deeply linking bodily physiological symbols such as breasts, hips, childbirth, and breastfeeding with the vicissitudes of China's modern and contemporary history over the past century. The work breaks through the traditional narrative boundaries, constructing a dialogue field between life instincts and historical violence, maternal nature and human alienation, individual survival and national spirit through physiological metaphors. This article conducts the analysis from three dimensions: the metaphorical connotation of core physiological imagery, the historical narrative function of physiological metaphors, and the human nature and cultural reflection behind physiological metaphors, exploring how Mo Yan, through the physiological writing of the body, reshapes maternity, deconstructs history from a folk perspective, and ultimately questions the essence of life.

Keywords: Mo Yan; *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*; Physiological Metaphors; Body Writing; Historical Narrative

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1 Introduction

Big Breasts and Wide Hips is the most controversial and epic novel in Mo Yan's literary career [2]. Since its publication in 1995, its bold depiction of bodily physiology, its grand historical narrative perspective, and its complex analysis of human nature have consistently been the focus of literary studies. Set against the geographical backdrop of Northeast Gaomi Township, Shandong Province, the novel uses the lifelong experiences of birth and child-rearing of Shangguan Lu-shi (Mother) as its main narrative thread, weaving major historical events such as the War of Resistance against Japan, the Chinese Civil War, the Great Famine, and the Reform and Opening-up period into the fate of the Shangguan family [4]. Mo Yan discards the grand discourse system of traditional historical narratives, instead employing physiological imagery as metaphorical vehicles [5]. Bodily and physiological experiences such as

breasts, buttocks, childbirth, breastfeeding, and hunger become keys to interpreting history, explicating human nature, and eulogizing life. These physiological symbols are no longer mere descriptions of the body; they are endowed with rich cultural connotations and historical significance, becoming vital links connecting the individual body with national collective memory, and life's instincts with social reality [12]. From a cognitive linguistics perspective, the physiological metaphors in the work are an essential way for Mo Yan to cognize the world and express his thoughts. By mapping the source domain of physiological experience onto the target domains of history, human nature, and national spirit, abstract historical changes and the complexities of human nature become tangible and palpable [9]. Through a close reading of the core physiological metaphors in the novel, this paper explores their underlying nar-

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rative logic and ideological content, revealing Mo Yan's literary pursuit of deconstructing grand history, reshaping the myth of motherhood, and interrogating the essence of life through bodily and physiological writing [6].

2 The Metaphorical Connotations of Core Physiological Imagery in *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*

2.1 Breasts and Buttocks: Dual Symbols of Maternal Essence and the Source of Life

Breasts and buttocks are the core physiological images in *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* and the direct carriers of the novel's title. Their metaphorical connotations run throughout the entire work. Mo Yan's creative inspiration stemmed from an exaggeratedly shaped female stone statue, its facial features blurred, emphasizing only its large breasts and ample buttocks [1]. This image became the prototype for Shangguan Lu-shi and established the metaphorical foundation of breasts and buttocks as the source of life. In the novel, the breast is the carrier of lactation, the lifelong spiritual sustenance of Shangguan Jintong, and a symbol of the continuation of life during times of hardship [3]. During the eras of war and famine, the milk from Shangguan Lu-shi and a mother goat became Shangguan Jintong's sole means of survival. The existence of the breast is directly linked to the continuation of life, its metaphorical significance transcending the body itself to become a concrete expression of life's instincts.

From an evolutionary psychology perspective, full breasts and buttocks are themselves physiological symbols of female fertility. Mo Yan takes this physical characteristic to an extreme, endowing it with the metaphorical connotation of maternal essence. Shangguan Lu-shi goes through nine childbirths in her life. Within the patriarchal society that values sons over daughters, she endures her husband's beatings, her mother-in-law's harsh treatment, and societal scorn in her desperate quest to bear a son, even resorting to "borrowing seed." Her full breasts and buttocks are not only a physiological manifestation of her fertility but also an external symbol of her resilient, inclusive, and unyielding maternal character [16]. The "fullness" of the

breasts and the "width" of the hips are no longer purely aesthetic bodily attributes; they become concrete symbols of motherhood [7]. They bear the hardship of raising eight daughters and one son, encompass the individual tragic fates of her children, and endure the suffering inflicted upon the individual by a century of historical violence. In Mo Yan's writing, breasts and buttocks become the embodiment of the "Earth Mother." Like the land of Northeast Gaomi Township, they nurture life and bear suffering with broad and tolerant acceptance, becoming a symbol of the tenacious vitality of the Chinese nation.

2.2 Childbirth and Breastfeeding: Confrontation Between Life's Resilience and Historical Violence

Childbirth and breastfeeding are physiological experiences unique to women. In *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, these two physiological acts are endowed with strong confrontational metaphorical connotations, becoming carriers for the contest between life's resilience and historical violence. Shangguan Lu-shi's experiences of childbirth are consistently accompanied by historical violence: she gives birth to the twins Shangguan Jintong and Shangguan Yunü amidst the artillery fire of a Japanese mop-up operation, during which her husband and father-in-law are killed by Japanese soldiers, and her mother-in-law loses her sanity from the shock. Her numerous childbirths all occur amidst destitution, hunger, and displacement; the physiological pain of childbirth intertwines with the pain of survival brought by history. Mo Yan describes the physiological process of childbirth with intense pain and force. Shangguan Lu-shi gives birth alone, without assistance, using primitive physiological instinct to resist the devastation of historical violence. This process becomes the ultimate expression of life's resilience—even in the most brutal historical circumstances, the reproduction of life never ceases. The physiological instinct to bear life becomes the most primitive and powerful force against historical nihilism and violence.

Breastfeeding, as a continuation of childbirth, carries similar metaphorical connotations pointing to the confrontation between life and history. Shangguan Jintong's extreme attachment to the breast becomes his way of escaping historical violence and seeking spiritual refuge, while the breastfeeding acts of his mother and the mother goat be-

come the guarantee of life's continuation in times of hardship. During the Great Famine, food scarcity becomes the most direct survival crisis; the "sensation of hunger, [1]" Mo Yan's most profound childhood memory, also becomes a significant physiological experience in the work. The act of breastfeeding counters the threat of hunger with the provision of milk, dissolving the fear of death brought by historical violence with the nourishment of life, becoming a metaphorical expression of life's instinct transcending historical predicaments. Furthermore, Shangguan Lu-shi's breastfeeding and nurturing of her children is not merely physiological nourishment but also spiritual protection [9]. She shields her children from the storm with her frail body, and accepts all their choices with maternal inclusiveness. The physiological acts of childbirth and breastfeeding ultimately sublimates into a gentle confrontation of motherhood against the fate of her children, and of life against history.

2.3 Lactophilia and Frailty: Metaphors for Male Alienation and the Collapse of the Patriarchal System

Shangguan Jintong's lactophilia is a highly controversial physiological image in the novel and a crucial vehicle for Mo Yan's portrayal of masculinity and reflection on the patriarchal system [8]. As the only male heir of the Shangguan family, Shangguan Jintong is excessively pampered by his mother and sisters from childhood, developing a pathological dependence on the female breast. This physiological and psychological alienation follows him throughout his life. He becomes cowardly, childish, and evasive of reality due to his lactophilia; he becomes disconnected from society and ultimately achieves nothing, relying on his elderly mother's scavenging to survive. Shangguan Jintong's lactophilia is not merely a psychological disorder; it carries profound metaphorical significance: it is both a concrete expression of male alienation and a symbol of the collapse of the patriarchal system [10].

In a traditional patriarchal society, men are supposed to be the pillars of family and society, bearing the responsibilities of protecting the family and continuing the lineage. Shangguan Jintong, as the "successor" of the patriarchal system, loses his masculine subjectivity due to the absence of paternal love and the excessive coddling of his mother, becoming a weak and incompetent "adult baby." His lactophilia is essentially an excessive dependence on the maternal, an escape from male responsibilities and social reality.

This state of physiological and psychological alienation metaphorically represents the gradual collapse of the traditional patriarchal system under the impact of historical violence. Amidst a series of historical events like war, famine, and political movements, the traditional male authority is eroded; the "masculine strength" championed by the patriarchal system proves fragile in the face of historical predicaments, ultimately leading to alienation and collapse. Furthermore, Shangguan Jintong's lactophilia also reflects the spiritual plight of men in modern society [13]. Through this extreme physiological image, Mo Yan reflects on the alienation of human nature by modernity and the identity anxiety and spiritual loss faced by men during social transformation.

3 Physiological Metaphors Serving to Deconstruct and Reconstruct History from a Folk Perspective

3.1 Physiological Experience Dissolving the Grandeur of History, Returning to the Life of the Individual

The narrative of modern Chinese history has long been dominated by grand political discourse, often focusing on major events and heroic figures, while obscuring the life experiences and survival states of individuals. In *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, Mo Yan uses physiological metaphors as narrative tools, transforming grand historical changes into individual physiological experiences, thereby deconstructing the traditional historical narrative system from a folk perspective. In the novel, historical events such as the War of Resistance, the Civil War, and the Great Famine are no longer abstract political concepts but become physiological experiences directly impacting individual bodies: war brings physical injury and the fear of death; famine brings the pain of hunger and the struggle for survival; political movements bring the distortion of human nature and the alienation of the body [6].

Mo Yan translates historical violence into the physiological pain of the body, using physiological experiences such as the nourishment of breasts, the burden-bearing of buttocks, the pain of childbirth, and the torment of hunger to outline the survival landscape of the common people over a century of history. This historical narrative centered on

physiological experience returns history to the lived reality of the individual, allowing readers to feel the temperature and cruelty of history from a bodily perspective. For example, in the historical scene of a Japanese mop-up operation, Mo Yan does not focus on the course or outcome of the battle but on the physiological pain of Shangguan Lu-shi giving birth amidst artillery fire and the physical tragedy of her husband and father-in-law being killed [1]. Historical violence is ultimately transformed into individual bodily trauma and physiological experience. Through the use of physiological metaphors, Mo Yan dissolves the grandeur and sanctity of history, making history a tangible, palpable life experience for the common people, thereby accomplishing a folk deconstruction of traditional grand historical narratives.

3.2 Instincts Connecting the Individual and the Nation, Constructing a Collective Life Memory

Physiological metaphors are not only tools for deconstructing grand history but also bonds for constructing a nation's collective life memory. Mo Yan believes that the instincts of life transcend history and politics. Physiological experiences such as breasts, childbirth, breastfeeding, and hunger are common human life sensations and important bridges connecting the individual and the nation. In *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, Shangguan Lu-shi's body becomes a vessel carrying the nation's collective memory. Her physiological experiences of childbirth and child-rearing reflect the suffering and resilience endured by the Chinese nation over a century of history; her breasts and buttocks, symbolizing the source of life, become a symbol of the Chinese nation's unceasing vitality; her process of confronting historical violence with physiological instincts becomes a collective memory of the Chinese nation's tenacious survival amidst adversity [12].

As the archetype of the "Earth Mother," the physiological experiences of Shangguan Lu-shi's body are no longer merely individual experiences but are elevated to become the collective life experiences of the nation. Her pain in childbirth is the suffering endured by the Chinese nation through historical changes; her hardship in nurturing is the resilience with which the Chinese nation protects life in adversity; her tenacity of life is the vital force of the Chinese nation's continuous regeneration [9]. Through the use of physiological metaphors, Mo Yan deeply intertwines the

bodily physiological experiences of the individual with the collective life memory of the nation, making the individual's life story a microcosm of national history, and making folk life experiences an essential component of the national collective memory. This historical narrative centered on physiological instincts constructs a vision of modern Chinese history from a folk perspective, making historical writing more diverse and authentic.

4 Reflections on Humanity and Culture Behind the Physiological Metaphors

4.1 The Complex Interpretation of Maternal Essence: The Interweaving of Greatness and Selfishness

Through the use of physiological metaphors, Mo Yan reshapes the image of the mother in Chinese literature, breaking the idealized portrayal of traditional maternal figures and endowing maternal essence with the dual connotations of greatness and selfishness. As the central maternal figure in the work, Shangguan Lu-shi, with her full breasts and wide hips, carries the greatness of motherhood [15]. She endures hardship to raise eight daughters and one son, shelters her children from the storm amidst historical suffering, and guards their survival with the nourishment of life. Her maternal resilience, inclusiveness, and perseverance become a symbol of the maternal character of the Chinese nation. This greatness of motherhood is made concrete through physiological images like breastfeeding, burden-bearing, and perseverance in childbirth, becoming the most touching spiritual core of the work [14].

Simultaneously, Mo Yan does not shy away from the selfishness and prejudice within motherhood. Instead, through physiological and psychological portrayal, he reveals the complexity of maternal essence. Deeply influenced by the patriarchal culture that values sons over daughters, Shangguan Lu-shi endures societal scorn and physical pain in her desperate quest to bear a son, even "borrowing seed." She excessively spoils her only son, Shangguan Jintong, turning him into a cowardly and incompetent "adult baby," while being relatively indifferent to her daughters, allowing them to walk into their respective tragic fates. This preference for sons over daughters is

a manifestation of maternal selfishness and prejudice, as well as the alienation of women by patriarchal culture. Through the complex depiction of Shangguan Lu-shi's motherhood, Mo Yan shatters the perfect myth of the traditional maternal image, returning motherhood to the level of real human nature [6]. Motherhood contains both great tolerance and devotion, as well as ordinary selfishness and prejudice. This complexity makes the character of Shangguan Lu-shi as a mother more three-dimensional and authentic, and the work's interpretation of maternal essence more profound.

4.2 Reflection on Modernity: The Alienation of Humanity and the Loss of Life's Authenticity

Big Breasts and Wide Hips was written during the critical period of China's Reform and Opening-up. The influx of Western modernist thought impacted traditional Chinese moral concepts and value systems, and the excessive pursuit of money led to a loss of humanity and alienation. Through physiological metaphors in the work, Mo Yan reflects on the impact of modernity on human nature and the loss of life's authenticity in modern society. Shangguan Jintong's lactophilia, as a form of physiological and psychological alienation, is essentially a symbol of the loss of humanity in the context of modernity. He loses the ability to integrate into society due to his excessive dependence on the maternal, becomes incompatible with modern society due to his persistent pursuit of life's authenticity, and ultimately becomes a "marginal man" in modern society.

Furthermore, Shangguan Jintong's experiences after the Reform and Opening-up period in the novel are a concentrated reflection of Mo Yan's critique of modernity. With an investment from Sima Liang, Shangguan Jintong opens a bra shop, designing bras based on his unique understanding of breasts, and enjoys temporary success. The bra, as an adornment of the female body, is a product of modernity. Shangguan Jintong transforms his pathological attachment to breasts into a commercial venture, turning the physiological image of life's authenticity into a tool for pursuing profit. This process metaphorically represents the alienation of life's authenticity by modernity. In modern society, the instincts and authenticity of life are obscured by commercial interests, and human nature gradually loses itself in the pursuit of money. Through this plot, Mo Yan criticizes the alienation of human nature under modernist thought,

calling for a return to the authenticity of life and a renewed reverence for life, motherhood, and nature.

4.3 The Ultimate Questioning of Life's Essence: A Belief in Life Where Instinct Transcends All

Through extensive physiological metaphors in *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, Mo Yan constructs a belief in life where instinct transcends all, conducting an ultimate inquiry into the essence of life. In the novel, all external forces—historical violence, political movements, 世俗观念—ultimately cannot transcend the instincts of life. Shangguan Lu-shi uses the instinct of childbirth to confront historical violence, the instinct of breastfeeding to safeguard the continuation of life, and the instinct of survival to resist the threat of famine. Shangguan Jintong uses the instinct of lactophilia to escape social reality and the instinct of life to cling to his dependence on the maternal. The instincts of life become an existence that transcends all external forces, the foundation for the continuation of life and the preservation of humanity.

Mo Yan's questioning of the essence of life ultimately culminates in the praise of life itself. Using physiological images such as breasts, buttocks, childbirth, and breastfeeding as vehicles, he celebrates the resilience, greatness, and beauty of life, emphasizing the invincibility of life's instincts [12]. Amidst the vicissitudes of a century of history, individual destinies fluctuate, and societal value systems constantly fracture, but the instincts of life remain unchanged; the cycle of birth and nurturing continues. This is precisely the embodiment of life's essence. Through the use of physiological metaphors, Mo Yan allows readers to feel the primitive power of life and experience the greatness of life's instincts transcending all, ultimately accomplishing the ultimate inquiry and praise of life's essence.

5 Conclusion

The physiological metaphors in *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* are the essence of Mo Yan's literary creation and a key reason for the work's enduring artistic appeal. Using core physiological images such as breasts, buttocks, childbirth, breastfeeding, and lactophilia as vehicles, Mo Yan deeply integrates physiological experiences with historical narrative, analysis of human nature, and cultural reflection, con-

structing a literary world centered on the body. These physiological metaphors not only deconstruct traditional grand historical narratives, returning history to the lived reality of the individual, but also reshape the essence of motherhood, returning the mother figure from a perfect myth to real human nature [15]. They simultaneously reflect on the alienation of human nature by modernity and question the essence and meaning of life.

In Mo Yan's writing, physiological images are no longer mere bodily descriptions; they are endowed with rich cultural connotations and historical significance [11]. They are symbols of the source of life, concrete manifestations of maternal essence, confrontations with historical violence, reflections of human alienation, and ultimate expressions of life's essence. Through the use of physiological metaphors, Mo Yan makes the body an important link connecting the individual and the nation, life and history, authenticity and modernity. He allows readers to feel the vicissitudes of a century of modern Chinese history from a bodily perspective, to appreciate the survival wisdom and life resilience of the common people, and ultimately to provoke deep thought on human nature, history, and the essence of life. The physiological metaphorical writing in *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* not only provides a new paradigm for body narratives in contemporary Chinese literature but also allows Mo Yan's literary creation to reach a dual height of thought and art in its praise and questioning of life.

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