



Journal of Arts & Humanities

Volume 07, Issue 07, 2018: 41-46

Article Received: 15-05-2018

Accepted: 19-06-2018

Available Online: 04-08-2018

ISSN: 2167-9045 (Print), 2167-9053 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18533/journal.v7i7.1410>

Eco-criticism Reading of San Mao's *The Story in the Sahara*

Xin Li¹, Xin Liang²

ABSTRACT

San Mao is a Taiwanese female writer, often recognized as one with the most legendary and charismatic charm in the eyes of readers in mainland China since the 1980s. She is also a travel writer. Her well-known book, *The Story in the Sahara*, is a collection of excellent prose on the background of the Sahara Desert in northern Africa. The book is full of the desolate, unpretentious landscape of the Sahara Desert, the strange exoticism of the Arab region, the rich and varied customs of the Saharawi, and the romantic and simple life and deep love between San Mao and Jose. This article intends to analyze this book with a new perspective—Eco-criticism. Through the Eco-criticism analysis of San Mao's *The Story in the Sahara*, the study focuses on San Mao's pursuit of spiritual freedom and the romantic life. Hopefully, the elaborate analysis can inspire readers' understanding of the importance of the balance and harmony between nature, society and spiritual ecology, as well as the importance of building a harmonious society and maintaining a healthy spiritual ecology among humans.

Keywords: Eco-criticism, San Mao, *The Story in the Sahara*.

This is an open access article under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License.

1. Introduction

At the mention of San Mao, many people will think of the word “vagrancy”. With the widespread acceptance of San Mao's works, this has motivated the development of “vagrancy” themes into “vagrancy literature” and gradually developed into a cultural phenomenon. People not only studies on San Mao and her literary works, but also studies on San Mao's death in the 1990s. In short, people have studied different aspects of San Mao.

The Story in the Sahara is a masterpiece of San Mao. It mainly describes the stories that San Mao and Jose have seen and heard when they live in the Sahara Desert. This book is a combination of dozens of exciting and moving prose, and it is often considered by critical community as one of her best sellers. *The Story in the Sahara* enables the readers to know a different kind of San Mao, one with passionate love to nature and life. It is impossible to imagine that she has experienced darkness as a rebellious and indifferent child. Through her whole adulthood, she has made great attempt to build a

¹ North China Electric Power University, E-mail: 1241471345@qq.com

² North China Electric Power University, China. E-mail: 291100270@qq.com

harmony between her inner world and the so-called outside hostility, although her struggle is ended by her sad suicide.

Eco-criticism, also known as “Research between Literature and Environment”, is a fresh trend of criticism that has emerged in Western academic circles. The study of literary theory started in the United Kingdom and the United States in the 1920s and 1980s. It developed in the 1990s, and it has brought new touches and influences to the literary research field in many countries. Cheryll Clotfelty of the United States thinks: “Eco-criticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical setting, just as female criticism is to examine speech and literature from the perspective of gender consciousness. Reading the text, Marxist criticism gives people the same cognitive understanding of the mode of production and the economic hierarchy. Eco-criticism is based on the method of the earth center to conduct literary research.”³

This paper analyzes San Mao’s *The Story in the Sahara* based on the Eco-criticism, and from the three-level theory of Eco-criticism. Firstly, it is the natural ecology concept, that is, the relationship between human and nature. Secondly, it is the social ecology concept, which is the relationship between human and society. The last part is the spiritual ecology concept, which means the human internal nature.

2. Read the story in the Sahara from the three-level theory of eco-criticism

As Chinese scholar Lu Shuyuan puts it: “Ecology can generally be divided into three parts: ‘Natural ecology’ with relatively independent nature as its research object, ‘Social ecology’ with human society’s political and economic life as its research object, and ‘Spiritual ecology’ with human’s inner emotional life as its research object”⁴ Natural ecology, social ecology and spiritual ecology are the three levels of Eco-criticism theory, that is, they are independent and interact with each other.

2.1 Natural ecology concept--human and nature

The emergence of Eco-criticism stems from people’s thinking about the relationship between human and nature. It is a kind of critical theory that comes with the worsening of environmental problems and the adverse impact of environmental deterioration on human survival. Eco-criticism believes that the existence of anthropomorphism is the root cause of the increasingly deteriorating contradiction between human and nature. Human beings belong to nature, and all other organisms in the natural world are equal to human beings. There is no distinction between superiority and inferiority. Therefore, human beings do not have the right to destroy other organisms in the natural world. Human beings should treat nature with a reasonable and tolerant attitude. Human and nature should coexist in harmony. This is also what San Mao insists on.

San Mao is a writer with romantic dreams. In the writing her life is full of romance. Her and Jose’s living environment is full of romance too. She loves nature and respects all kinds of natural elements. From the name of this book--*The Story in the Saharan* readers can basically know where the story happens: in the Sahara Desert, the world’s largest and most spectacular desert. San Mao has settled herself in the world’s largest desert, and she uses her pen to show the landscape of the Sahara Desert, which is the background of her writing. In addition, readers can also feel a broad, alien and lonely atmosphere from the subject. But the Sahara Desert presented to the readers by San Mao is not what they imagined in their brains: drought, loneliness, lack of vitality, and not suitable for survival. Instead, it is fresh, interesting, colorful, and interesting. The reason why San Mao can find the beauty of the Sahara Desert is just because her infinite love to nature and the Sahara Desert.

She describes the wonderful scene of the desert in the story named “the Hitchhiker”: “早晨的沙漠，像被水洗过似的干净，天空是碧蓝的，没有一丝云彩，温柔的沙丘不断的铺展到视线所能及的极限……”⁵ (“The desert in the morning is as clean as water, the sky is blue, there is no cloud, and the gentle sand dunes continue to spread to the limit of sight...”) From the description of San Mao, readers can find that she has treated the Sahara Desert as a friend of her own. She has a great passion

³ Cheryll Clotfelty. (1996) Harold Fromm. *The Eco-criticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press.

⁴ Lu Shuyuan. (2001) *Ecological Criticism Space*. Shanghai: East China Normal University Press.

⁵ San Mao. (2013) *The Story in the Sahara* (P191). Beijing: October Literature and Art Publishing House.

to nature and the Sahara Desert so she is not willing to put it away in her own memory. She likes it and expresses it realistically, showing her love of it, which is quite touching to the readers. It is difficult for the people who do not love nature to imagine that a blue-green color is in places where water is scarce, and what the washed desert is looked like. However, from the portrayals it is possible for the readers to enjoy a fresh and diminished picture, and it is possible to feel San Mao's true love of the nature.

Another example is the expression as: “四周的世界, 经过她魔术似的手一举好似突然涨满了诗意的叹息, 一丝丝的钻进了我全部的心怀意念里去。世界上没有第二个撒哈拉了, 也只有对爱它的人, 它才能向你呈现出它的美丽和温柔, 将你的爱情, 用它亘古不变的大地和天空……”⁶ (“Because of her magic hands, the world around her seems suddenly fills with poetic, and drifts into all my heart and mind. There is only one Sahara Desert in the world. Only the one loves it can enjoy its beauty and gentleness. It uses its sky and earth to accept your love...”) (“The Weeping Camel”) As she depicts, the Sahara Desert is now a literary and poetic magician. The Sahara Desert only displays its own beauty and gentleness toward those who love and understand it. San Mao seems to be a confidant of the Sahara Desert and understands Sahara's thoughts. It seems that she and the Sahara Desert have consensus and share the same soul.

In “Seizing the Ghost”, San Mao says that when she first enters the real desert with a car, she takes a camera in her hand to take every picture of the amazing scene. The Sahara Desert in her writing is like a dream at the same time a ghost. The smooth and gentle sand dune likes a woman's body. Such as the expressions: “这一次直渡撒哈拉, 我们双双坠入它的情网, 再也离不开这片没有花朵的荒原了。” (“This time, when we go straight to the Sahara Desert, we both fall into its net of love and can not leave this flowerless desert.”) and “我看沙漠真妩媚呀”⁸ (“The desert is so charming”). (“From the very Beginning”) From San Mao's writing, readers can enjoy a dreamy desert, a cracked desert, a smooth and gentle desert, and a charming desert... If there is no love for nature, San Mao cannot write such beautiful desert wonders. Formally it is the true love of the Sahara Desert and nature that makes San Mao's Sahara to have an imaginary beauty.

San Mao uses her superb descriptive skills, all kinds of rhetorical methods and easy-to-understand language, expressively shows readers a unique Sahara Desert with a fresh charm. In the eyes of San Mao, the Sahara Desert is beautiful and varied, with thousands of gestures to watch and love. From San Mao's infinite love of this desert, readers can also see her attitude toward nature—she loves nature and respects nature. Therefore, she does not think that human beings are nature's dominators. In her heart, humans and nature are friends, and they are equal. What people need to do is to face the nature spectacles, rather than trying to conquer nature and become the nature's master. This is also the correct ecological concept advocated by us.

2.2 Social ecology concept—human and society

In the face of complex social changes, it is not enough for Eco-criticism theory to stay at the level of the natural environment. First of all, people exist in a pluralistic society. Under the background of increasingly prominent natural environment problems, natural crisis will certainly have an important impact on human society because people rely on nature to exist. Second, people are connected and interacted with each other. Therefore, when there is a conflict of interest among people, it will inevitably lead to the instability in the social environment. The relationship between such conflicts among humans involves the issue of “social ecology”. The social ecology theory believes that in the face of the constraints of the social environment, humans should strive to maintain the balance and coordination of social relations. San Mao also shows us in her book *The Story in the Sahara* that how she deals with cumbersome interpersonal social relations.

In the story of “The Neighbor”, San Mao deals with the humanistic and social environment in which she and Jose have lived. In the beginning she has a description of her neighbors: “她们外表看上去都是特别肮脏而邋遢的, 衣着脏乱不堪”⁹ (“They look particularly dirty and sloppy on the outside,

⁶ San Mao. (2013) *The Story in the Sahara* (P241). Beijing: October Literature and Art Publishing House.

⁷ San Mao. (2013) *The Story in the Sahara* (P140). Beijing: October Literature and Art Publishing House.

⁸ San Mao. (2013) *The Story in the Sahara* (P144). Beijing: October Literature and Art Publishing House.

⁹ San Mao. (2013) *The Story in the Sahara* (P67). Beijing: October Literature and Art Publishing House.

and they are badly dressed”); this sentence explains the neighbors whom she needs to deal with in the days to come. Her neighbors are poor, impolite and uncivilized. The poor Saharawi people in the desert will not let go of the nails of her tent, let alone the things that San Mao has brought with them. After a few days of getting along with San Mao and Jose, the neighbors learns that Jose and San Mao are generous, so they want all the things in San Mao’s house, as a result, all the belongings except Jose, being public property. What’s more serious is if San Mao rejects them, they will say, “你拒绝了我, 你伤害了我的骄傲。”¹⁰ (“You refused me and hurt my pride.”) Some people may get angry when they hear that, while San Mao does not. She does not want to worsen their relationships, so instead of being resented, she holds an optimistic and humorous attitude, considering that due to such a group of neighbors that her days in the desert have become colorful and no longer boring. From this readers can see that San Mao is trying her best to make a harmonious society between herself and the neighbors.

San Mao mentions in “The Hitchhiker”: The people and things she encounters on the often-traveled road are just as common as everyone walking on the street. They are seemingly nobody in daily life—not worthy of documenting. On the other side, she remembers all the passengers she has picked up... In her mind, the smile of these people is the same as the flower. Therefore it is impossible for her to forget the dazed smiles and plain words. She knows that people in life come and go, and her own days still have to go day by day; but she is not willing to have an indifferent attitude toward the strangers who have had a deep impression on her. She writes such a paragraph, hoping to get the readers’ advice and provide her with solutions. Therefore, when these experiences are vividly presented on paper, she enjoys conversations with others, and the harmonious atmosphere makes her feel very happy and relax.

San Mao is such a person that uses a swift and direct way to express her true nature in the writing. The natural environment and the humanistic environment described by her combine together to form the environment in which she and Jose are living. Readers can read out the desert landscape in the environment described in *The Story in the Sahara*, and can also feel the genre paintings of the Saharawi and see how San Mao gets along with the surrounding society: She treats everyone around her with great kindness and uses love to create a comfortable social environment. Although San Mao sometimes disagrees with the local people’s customs, she still chooses to respect them. If necessary, she will introduce the practice in the civilized world. It seems that a city always has its way of survival. Although living in such a humanistic society and a natural environment, San Mao’s love for it is not reduced. It is true love. And due to this love that she can live a lonely life full of poetry sense.

2.3 Spiritual ecology concept—human internal nature

Lu Shuyuan believes that spiritual ecology is such a discipline which based on the relationship between the researcher as the main body of spiritual existence and the living environment including the natural environment, social environment, and cultural environment as components¹¹. Spiritual ecology is the relationship between human and nature and social environment. When the harmonization of nature is brought about by social contradictions, social balance is broken, or the relationship between human beings is in contradiction, the inner world of human beings will naturally be affected. This involves the issue of human “spiritual ecology”. The spiritual ecology theory believes that in the face of the secular temptation of interests or the threat of social relations and conflicts, people’s hearts should maintain an internal nature, listen to the innermost reality of the call, and return their hearts to nature with a rational attitude. In this view, San Mao also shows this opinion to readers in *The Story in the Sahara*.

San Mao is an atheist who believes in science not in superstition. While in “The Fruit of Death”, San Mao seems to be in her own world. After a life-and-death battle, she is always thinking about something horrible that make ordinary people scared: ending the life. She explains this life-and-death as her own subconscious mind that wants her to end her own life. Although she is finally rescued, she begins to suspect that her subconscious has the desire to end her life, and it is a creature of another

¹⁰ San Mao. (2013) *The Story in the Sahara* (P69). Beijing: October Literature and Art Publishing House.

¹¹ Lu Shuyuan. (2001) *Ecological Criticism Space*. Shanghai: East China Normal University Press.

world to take her away. Her soliloquize frightens her husband Jose, and her readers worry about her. It can be seen that San Mao's spiritual world has been affected, and this shock is the so-called "spiritual ecology" problem. This may possibly lead to her suicide.

From the way San Mao and Jose get along with each other, readers have read out an internal nature that both of them maintain internally—they listen to the innermost reality of the heart and use a rational attitude to rest their own heart to the natural setting. For example, as we all know, San Mao has always been individualistic, so she is extremely unwilling to lose her independence and inner freedom no matter when. Therefore, before their marriage, she emphasizes to Jose, she will still "go her own way after marriage" or she will not get married. Jose says that he wants San Mao to do her own things and not to lose her own style that belonging to her. ("The Restaurant in the Desert") From the simple and ordinary dialogue between the two, readers can feel the romantic life and the spiritual resonance. When San Mao says to Jose that she is going to the desert, Jose arrives early in the Sahara to settle everything in advance for San Mao. When San Mao arrives at the door of the Sahara, Jose hugs her from the back and says, "我们的第一个家, 我抱你进去, 从今以后你就是我太太了."¹² ("This is our first home, I will hold you in, and you will be my wife from now on.") The sentence like "从此你就是我太太" ("from now on you are my wife"), is just a simple expression, but it is quite moving, because it gives San Mao enough sense of security, and it is the best instance of their understanding between the soul mates. What is more, San Mao says that Jose has a great advantage: anything she does, which may seem crazy to others, he takes it for granted. ("Marriage Note") They should be the soul mates, and for most of people, it is the most supreme romance in love.

This is the conjunction of the spirit, perhaps this is only a condition for her own approval of Jose, but for readers it is the supreme romance of love. There are still many ordinary and romantic things that Jose does for San Mao. It is precisely because of this spiritual conjunction that readers can see the trivial small things that take place in the Sahara Desert constitute a beautiful Saharan story and constitute San Mao's romantic and happy life.

3. Conclusion

The Story in the Sahara describes what San Mao and Jose have seen and heard in the desert, and describes their varied experiences. Readers can deeply appreciate San Mao's joy, optimism and enthusiasm through reading the book. The paper has reinterpreted the language, behavior and psychological activities of characters in *The Story in the Sahara* from the perspective of Eco-criticism, revealing that natural ecology, social ecology, and human spiritual ecology are mutual influences and interactions.

From *The Story in the Sahara*, it is not difficult to find that the three levels of Eco-criticism are interrelated and affect each other. The conquest of the natural environment by mankind breaks the original state of the natural environment, and causes the imbalance of natural ecology to lead to social contradictions. From the point of view of Eco-criticism, failing to solve the human "spiritual crisis" will also lead to a vicious cycle of imbalance between nature and social ecology.

According to the three-level development process of Eco-criticism theory, to maintain the harmony of the human spiritual ecology in modern society, we should first pay attention to spiritual ecological education. Spiritual education helps rationally solve various problems brought about by social and natural ecological imbalances, helps people to move from isolation to integration, enriches the spiritual world in communication and understanding, and enriches spiritual life. By building a harmonious spiritual ecology, we can effectively alleviate the conflicts between human survival and society and the natural environment. It is self-evident that in modern society the spiritual crisis cannot be ignored. At the same time, readers can better understand the author's proposition of pursuing spiritual freedom and pursuing a romantic life, and they can also experience San Mao's romantic feelings. This not only has a positive significance nowadays, but also contributes to the construction and maintenance of today's harmonious society. In a word, this paper has an intent in the pursuit of the harmonious unity of society and natural ecology.

¹² San Mao. (2013) *The Story in the Sahara* (P126). Beijing: October Literature and Art Publishing House.

Reference

- Bai Zhenyou.(2009) On the Aesthetic Characteristics of San Mao's Prose Language. *Modern and Contemporary Literature*, 10:13-14.
- Chen Wangdao.(2008) *Verbal Rhetoric*. Shanghai: Fudan University Press.
- Cheryll Clotfelty. (1996) Harold Fromm. *The Eco-criticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press.
- Dong Xiaoyu, Liu Haitao.(2014) *Modern Writing Course*. Beijing: Beijing Higher Education Press.
- He Xiaoyi. (2014) Appreciation of the artistic charm of Sanmao's prose works. *Examination Weekly*, 08:14.
- Lu Shuyuan. (2001) *Ecological Criticism Space*. Shanghai: East China Normal University Press.
- Luo Jingjing. (2011) *The Rhetorical Analysis of San Mao's The Story of the Sahara*. Tianjin: Tianjin University.
- San Mao. (2013) *The Story in the Sahara* Beijing: October Literature and Art Publishing House. Pp. 67-69, 126, 140-144, 191.
- Sun Jin. (2009) The mundane pursuit of dreamers--interpretation of San Mao's life and creation. *Anhui Literature (the second half)*, 12: 10.
- Xiao Xia. (2007) Free and Elegant Song of the Soul: On the Characteristics of San Mao's Prose. *Journal of Liaoning Administration Institute*, 02: 197-198.
- Yang Yuxia. (2014) An Analysis of the Language Styles of San Mao's Prose Popularity and Popularity. *Language & Literary Studies*, 01:91-92.
- Yin Xiaoming. (2001) The Language Features of San Mao's Prose. *Journal of Yancheng Teachers College*, 03:13-17.
- Yumou Chang. (2000) *Ecological Philosophy*. Xi'an: Shaanxi People's Publishing House.