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A Review of Yuan Xia's *Poetic Justice: Research on Margaret Atwood's Ethical Thought*

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Abstract: *Poetic Justice: Research on Margaret Atwood's Ethical Thought* is a book on Canadian writer Margaret Atwood's works authored by Professor Yuan Xia in 2025. It explores the ethical thought in Margaret Atwood's works by applying literary ethics theory. The book elaborates on Atwood's deep thinking on ethnicity and nation, women and family, animal and human as well as science and environment respectively from the perspectives of ethics of responsibility, ethics of trust, ethics of care and ethics of survival, and argues that Atwood uses literary creation as a channel to express ethical ideas and the voice of justice.

Keywords: poetic justice; ethical thought; Margaret Atwood

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标题: 袁霞《诗性正义：玛格丽特·阿特伍德的伦理思想研究》述评

摘要: 《诗性正义：玛格丽特·阿特伍德的伦理思想研究》是袁霞教授于2025年出版的关于加拿大作家玛格丽特·阿特伍德作品的又一研究专著。该书运用文学伦理学的理论从责任伦理、信任伦理、关怀伦理和生存伦理四个方面阐述阿特伍德作品中关于民族与国家、女性与家庭、动物与人类、科技与环境的伦理思想，指出阿特伍德将文学创作作为表达伦理思想和正义之声的渠道。

关键词: 诗性正义；伦理思想；玛格丽特·阿特伍德

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As one of the leading experts in Margaret Atwood research in China, Professor Yuan Xia has published several works on Margaret Atwood, including *Margaret Atwood from the Perspective of Ecocriticism* (2010), *Women, Ecology, and Ethnicity: Canadian Literature in the Age of Globalization* (2019), and *Margaret: Canadian Literature in the Age of Globalization* (2020). Taking literary ethics as the theoretical approach, her new work *Poetic Justice: A Study of Margaret Atwood's Ethical Thought* (2025) analyzes the ethical ideas in Atwood's works from four aspects: ethics of responsibility, ethics of trust, ethics of care and ethics of survival, expounds Atwood's deep thinking on nation and state, women and family, animals and humans, science and technology and the environment, and summarizes the humanistic concept of "poetic justice" contained in Atwood's works. Professor Yuan's new monograph is a new contribution to Atwood studies.

"Poetic justice" in the title of the monograph comes from the ethicist Martha C. Nussbaum, who believes that literary imagination is "an ethical position" that readers empathize with during reading (Nussbaum, 1995, p.xvi). Readers will produce a new form of "public reasoning" through the interpretation of justice in literary works, realizing the transition of justice from fiction to reality, that is, poetic justice. Fictional literature has impacts on public life, and the literary imagination as a fair literary discourse has also become a part of democratic life.

The book uses the concept of ethics of responsibility by German socialist Max Weber to analyze the relationship between the United States and Canada, the relationship among various ethnic groups in Canada, and the influences of ethnic groups on the construction of Canadian identity, and then explores Canada's responsibility of ethics in the postcolonial context. Max Weber's concept of "ethics of responsibility" emphasizes ethical factors in politics, including concepts such as "survival struggles, racial differences, national situations, and economic policies", "which is also the basic discourse of Atwood's expression of the sense of nation-state" (Yuan, 2025, p.53). The nation-state is to some extent an "imagined community" closely related to the environment and culture, and Atwood's Canada is a dynamic concept that practices its responsibility of ethics in the process of constantly creating new narratives. Set against the backdrop of the rise of Canadian nationalism and anti-Americanism in the 1980s, her early works *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972) and *Surfacing* (1972) call for vigilance against the colonial influences of strong American culture on Canadian identity, emphasize the maintenance of cultural boundaries, vigorously promote Canada's unique national and cultural identity, express concerns about Canadian extreme-nationalism as well. This is the embodiment of her "interactive nationalism", that is, only when countries and nations are on an equal footing can there be the possibility of realizing interaction. The novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) marks a shift from "interactive nationalism" to "transnationalism" in Atwood's work (Yuan, 2025, p.73). In

the novel *The Robber Bride* (1993), Atwood uses the motif of “rootlessness” and “nomadism” to explore the issues of Canadian identity construction and ethnic integration within the context of globalization and multiculturalism. She examines how one can be a world citizen while still retaining the national identity, which can be described as “rooted cosmopolitanism” or “transnational nationalism”. The three novels *Surfacing*, *Alias Grace* (1996) and *The Robber Bride* focus on language barriers, cultural gaps, hostility between English and French Canadian immigrants, the “invisible” yet victimized Indigenous peoples, silent foreigners and immigrants, and the complex inter-ethnic relations within Canada and express concerns about potential political divisions. *Surfacing* highlights how Indigenous people trade their absence for the presence of whites, criticizes colonial history and emphasizes Canada’s responsibility of ethics to bring Indigenous peoples from absence to presence through understanding history, traditions, culture, and art. It also points out that multiculturalism is a tool Canada uses to legitimize and obscure inequalities and injustices among ethnic groups.

Taking the ethics of trust proposed by philosopher Annette C. Baier as the theoretical approach, the book studies the ethical responsibilities borne by women toward themselves, others, and their families in Atwood’s works, from the perspective of gender equality and ethical responsibilities among family members, and explores the path to realizing the female ideal. Baier’s “ethics of trust” advocates mutual encouragement and tolerance in interpersonal relationships. “Modern women need to focus more on responsibility based on ethical and moral values, strengthening their sense of mission in society” (Baier, 1985, p.7). Atwood examines the framework of equality in gender relationships and the realization of women’s ideal social value from three perspectives: lies and deception, the construction of marital life, and women’s participation in society. The novels *The Edible Woman* (1969), *Surfacing*, and *Lady Oracle* (1976) focus on the helpless deceptions and lies women commit in relationship, marriage, work, and life, which result from the powerful effects of social discipline. It holds that myths and stereotypes about femininity destroy women’s sense of self, while also exposes the unequal power dynamics in marriage, prompting readers to reflect on the socio-cultural factors behind deception and lies. Addressing women’s disadvantaged position in unequal marital relationships, Atwood advocates cooperation and “egalitarian love” in marriage. She criticizes the traditional image of the “female caregiver” and attacks the role expectations imposed on women, thereby highlighting the overlooked “compulsory responsibilities” imposed on women, emphasizing that women should shoulder responsibilities toward family members only after ensuring their personal growth and interests, because “a clear awareness of one’s own boundaries is the prerequisite for reasonable care for others” (Davey, 1984, p.114). Then it offers constructive suggestions that storytelling and listening are ways to establish interactive interpersonal communication and harmonious family relationships.

Using the ethics of care for animals proposed by ecofeminist scholars Carol Adams and Josephine Donovan, the book analyzes the tragedy of abused and discriminated animals in modern society and to explore human-animal relationship. The ethics of care regards animals as individuals with emotions and moral standing; it is an ethically compassion-based perspective, described as “a complex intellectual and emotional activity”, which evokes human empathy and motivates liberatory actions for animals in exploitative environment (Adams & Donovan, 1996, p.149). Animals on dining tables, in laboratories, and in hunting grounds are objectified, fragmented, and consumed, their subjectivity are denied. The “MaddAddam Trilogy” (2013) attacks human’s ethical disregard for nature through genetically modified animals and consumed humans, metaphorically highlighting the moral decay of monopolistic capitalism, criticizing anthropocentrism and human destruction of nature, and urging humans to live in harmony with nature. The recurring imagery of animals’ gaze indicates their subjectivity, bridging the gap between humans and animals and reflecting human anxiety about “restoring subjectivity”. Atwood further argues that humans and animals share a symbiotic and compassionate relationship in a posthuman world, where survival depends on mutual interdependence and close cooperation, therefore, humans have moral obligations toward animals.

Using the concept of the ethics of survival, the book explores the possibilities of human existence amid multiple environmental and ecological crises and examines the human-nature relationship in a technologically-developed capitalist society. Atwood’s poetry and novels are filled with narratives about hyper-objects, toxic crises, climate change, and so on. Works such as “The Lead Age” and *The Handmaid’s Tale* depict the severe consequences of toxic crises and environmental degradation, as well as the threats ecological deterioration poses to humanity, examining ethical issues such as human responsibility in the face of climate crises, and raising awareness of potential dangers from environmental crises and climate change, encouraging collective action to address the climate crisis. Atwood’s novels *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and *The Heart Goes Last* (2015) portray a technotopia society with advanced technology, monopolistic capitalism, globalization, ecological deterioration, and humanity facing threats to survival, highlighting crises caused by biotechnological and artificial intelligence-created artificial life, such as the extinction of human species and disruption of gender relations, as well as the impacts on traditional life ethics, revealing the limitations of technology and issuing a warning: humans must be vigilant about its impact on ethical systems and moral order. Atwood opposes anthropocentrism, and advocates biocentrism which holds that “all life in nature is equal” (Ramazani & Bazzegarzadeh, 2014, p.7) and emphasizes that humans and nature are not in an either-or relationship, but a “parallel and harmonious” one. Atwood seeks a way out for humanity: humans should abandon the mindset of dominating nature, but become guardians of nature, find a sense of belonging within it, thus achieving poetic dwelling. Atwood’s works not only reflect

the author's own ethical views but also prompt consideration of "ethical issues beyond our experience" (Chan, 2009, p.399).

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