

A Study of the Truth, Goodness and Beauty in Alai's Novel *Fairy Ring*

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Abstract: Truth, goodness and beauty is an eternal theme of literary creation and research. By focusing on people, literature represents the “true” times and shows the “good” spirit and values of the times through certain artistic forms of “beauty”. First, this paper introduces what truth, goodness and beauty are in literature. Then the novel *Fairy Ring* focusing on Alai's pursuit of truth, goodness and beauty is analyzed in detail. The creation of the novel is based on objective truth: the real and authentic geography, animals and plants are the real, an inexhaustible source, a prototype inspiration for literary creation, as the fictional but reasonable plot; and the people are an important source of literary and artistic creation, the exaltation of people's good nature. The creation of the novel has humanistic concern: scouring evil and promoting goodness, advocating “goodness” when it praises beautiful things with great enthusiasm or punishes ugly things, demonstrating a strong tendency towards goodness, shining with strong humanistic care. The creation of the novel is rich in artistic forms: beauty is one of the important criteria for measuring literariness, for example the destructive literary language; the highly aesthetic and infectious illustrations, to attract readers' attention into the reading context through points, lines, surfaces, colors, composition, and other means; the meaningful left blank, to give people endless imagination and create a profound artistic conception and the inner and outer harmony between literary characters and nature, to unify beauty and goodness. In a nutshell, Alai has constructed a spiritual home shared by all nationalities in the novel *Fairy Ring*.

Keywords: Alai, *Fairy Ring*, Truth, Goodness, Beauty

1. Introduction

Alai (1959-) is an influential Tibetan writer in the contemporary literary world of China. The novel *Fairy Ring* won the 2018 Lu Xun Literature Award and tells the story of the protagonist Sijiong's life situation. From a unique female perspective, it reveals the author's deep concern for the deterioration of the ecological environment on the plateau, his concern and love for the people on the plateau, his relentless pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty, and his continuous attention to the truth, kindness, and beauty of the heart. The creative foundation, plot, and character emotions of the novel are authentic; the novel's observation of good and evil is meticulous and serious; at the same time, Alai endowed the work with beautiful colors through language, illustrations, and blank spaces. He used these words full of natural temperament and charm to interpret his respect for the deity of nature in the original ecological culture and the dissolution of deity. In

these words, he was filled with anxiety about human degradation and compassion and sorrow for the relationship between humans and nature [1].

2. Truth, Goodness, and Beauty in Literature

Truth, goodness, and beauty are eternal themes in literature. The constitution of literature is true, that is, the facts in literary works. The organization of literature is beauty, which refers to the textual structure and syntactic morphology in the work. The purpose of literature is about goodness, which is the spiritual food that works bring to readers. The goodness of literary and artistic works should guide people to enhance their moral judgment and sense of moral honor, yearn for and pursue a moral, respectful, and ethical life. The beauty of literary and artistic works lies in their ideological and

organizational beauty, which is popular but not vulgar. Literary creation and art should be exquisite. Excellent literary works will inevitably bring readers the enjoyment of beauty. The essence of literature lies in reflecting reality, expressing goodwill that embodies ultimate humanistic care, and presenting beauty in the text through visual artistic language [2] (p. 139).

“Literature is a social ideology, belonging to a social phenomenon, and literature is also a spiritual phenomenon, a product of the writer’s spirit and emotions” [3] (p. 73), true and full of fantasy, good but not vulgar, beautiful but not superficial. Excellent literary works inevitably contain such qualities. Ma Shitu pointed out that “The ultimate concern for humanity is to pursue the ultimate good, the aesthetic frontier is to pursue the ultimate beauty, and the mainstream consciousness is to pursue the ultimate truth” [4] (p. 11). The key to measuring the quality of a work is to see whether it describes the struggle between truth, goodness, beauty, and falsehood, whether it promotes truth, goodness, beauty, and criticizes falsehood, ugliness, and evil; whether it has promoted human nature and criticized animal nature. Mr. Lu Xun’s “like a willing ox I serve the children” well illustrates the mission of artists and artistic works, that is, artists should have the spirit of sacrificing their lives in exchange for the spiritual improvement of humanity. The original intention of literary and artistic creation is often based on the expression of truth, goodness, and beauty, in order to save the fallen soul, as Chairman Mao said, to promote truth, goodness, and beauty, and to criticize falsehood, evil, and ugliness. In the opposition between subjectivity and others, people often encounter various false, evil, and ugly phenomena that require religious redemption. However, writers with conscience are characterized by “idealism that promotes truth, goodness, and beauty, attempting to rescue humanity from sinking and destruction” [5] (p. 13).

3. Truth, Goodness, and Beauty in *Fairy Ring*

3.1. Truth—The Objective Reality in the *Fairy Ring*

Authenticity is the foundation of literature and art. Literary theorists, artists, and aestheticians from ancient and modern times, both at home and abroad, have deeply recognized this in their literary and artistic practices, and therefore strongly advocate it. Liu Xie mentioned in *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* that “one should consider novelty without losing its authenticity, and play with elegance without ignoring reality” [6] (p. 148). The beauty of words and the uniqueness of imagination should not compromise the authenticity of literature and art. The 19th century French realist master Balzac once asserted that “the secret to achieving the immortality of world civilization lies in reality” [7] (p. 9). Chekhov said, “Literature is called art because it describes life as it is. Its task is unconditional, straightforward, and true” [7] (p. 9).

3.1.1. The Authentic Details of the Story

The geography, animals and plants in the novel are real. In the preface of the novel, Alai said that I want to write about some special products on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, such as cordyceps, matsutake, etc., “to observe the impact of these needs on the local society and the local population” [8] (p. 2). High altitude, good lighting, pollution-free, and abundant and high-quality cordyceps, matsutake, and mushrooms are important survival materials for herdsmen in plateau areas. After the 1980s, with the improvement of people’s living standards and changes in international market demand, these unique plateau mountain treasures gradually became scarce in the era of consumerism, and the production and lifestyle of herdsmen underwent significant changes. Ganzi Prefecture is one of the important producing areas of Morchella in China. According to the novel, Morchella grows in the Dadu River Basin, the upper reaches of the Minjiang and Qingyi Rivers, and is also scattered in the Hengduan Mountains and Qionglai Mountains. Morchella grows in loose black soil rich in nutrients, where the surface is mixed with dead leaves, residual branches, grass stems, and moss. This is the most authentic growth environment for Morchella. The songs of cuckoos, thrushes, and noisy cuckoos echo in the valleys of the southwestern Hengduan Mountains in May or June each year, waking up people who pull grass in the wheat fields, where Sijiong repairs fences on the pasture, and takes care of mushroom circles. “Morchella mushrooms like shade and humidity, and have a variety of soil and vegetation types. There are a variety of plant species” [9] (p. 26). In the novel, the mushroom circle is surrounded by: Shepherd’s purse, nettle seedlings, matsutake, bitter cabbage, oak seeds, polygonum viviparum seeds, fern, potentilla, ginseng fruit, water celery, deer ear leek, aniseed, tripterygium, goose egg fungus, broom fungus, coral fungus, horse ear, cow ear rhubarb, burdock, artemisia odora, cannabis, clover, fir, oak, alpine willow, fox, badger, lynx, crow and other animals and plants. Alai affirmed the material agency and narrative ability, as well as the internal interaction between humans and natural objects.

3.1.2. The Fictional and Reasonable Plot

The reality of life, an inexhaustible source, provides prototype inspiration for literary creation. However, artistic authenticity is fundamentally determined and constrained by social reality, and at the same time, it transcends the reality of life to achieve artistic authenticity. The function of literature is to help readers understand the grand view of history, have a clear understanding of the history of their own country, understand the stories of the homeland they have lived in, and answer the ultimate philosophical question: Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going? The fictional story of the Snow Mountain God Awutapi with two sons metaphorically reflects Sijiong’s nostalgia for his hometown, gratitude for his hometown, and reverence for nature when he returned to Jicun from the Ethnic Cadre School; From 1953 to 1956, the country carried out the construction of agricultural cooperatives, which gave rise to the working group entering the village to guide and assist; At the same time, Great Famine in 1961 and

1962, are real events that drive the fictional development of the storyline. When evaluating literary works, people always look for connections between the fictional world of the author and social life, and see if the fictional work itself has some similarity to the objective world. Any exaggeration or imagination of the author will allow readers to find traces of understanding in the real world. Literature aims to achieve the unity of artistic fiction and objective reality, also an important standard for measuring literary works. [2] (p. 139)

3.1.3. *The Elevation of People's Status*

The people are an important source of literary and artistic creation. Marx believed that the people are the living water of literature and art, and that "the people have always been the only judge of what kind of author is qualified and what kind of author is not qualified" [10] (p. 110). Lenin repeatedly emphasized that literature and art serve the working people. Chairman Mao's speech at the Yan'an Literature and Art Symposium pointed out that literature and art should meet the emotional demands of the people. Alai also said that I don't want to write my novels into strange fantasies. The focus of literature is on "the taste of life" [8] (p. 2), and I am willing to "maintain a warm longing for human nature" [8] (p. 2). The novel focuses on portraying a fearless, selfless, independent and strong half sky who supports the entire family—Sijiong. She is a very real, kind-hearted and simple ordinary Chinese person, and her life is discussed by the people around her. She was assigned to the village work group to help because she understands Chinese, and later joined the ethnic cadres later, pregnant with a child without a father and through the fate of her mother again. However, she was forced to return to Jicun to find her brother who became a monk; but lost the opportunity to change her fate through knowledge. She referred to everything she had encountered as "Luozhuo", and she accepted it calmly. Sijiong's mother spent her whole life guarding the endless mushroom circle. Her kindness saved Liu Yuanxuan, Danba, Monk Fahai, Manager Wu, and female team leader. It can be said that *Fairy Ring* is an excellent representative, rooted in people and life, and promoting people humanity.

3.2. *Goodness—The Humanistic Care in the Creation of Fairy Ring*

The content described in literary and artistic works is rich and colorful, and whether it is beautiful or ugly, good or evil, it can become the object of literary creation. Literary works should adhere to the protection of human kindness in the dim light, with the brightness of the light illuminating the human heart. Ye Mei said, "We should not let evil become an endless flower" [11], nor should we let goodness buried in the darkness. Writers should be good at exploring goodness, cultivating themselves and undertaking missions in literary creation practice.

3.2.1. *The Whipping of Evil*

A work can only play its role of advocating "goodness" when it praises beautiful things with great enthusiasm or

punishes ugly things. The humanistic care behind the text becomes the conscious value pursuit and sacred social responsibility of writers. After the working group entered the village, people began to adhere to the new concept of "making the most of everything" [8] (p. 9), advocating new means advanced, and old means backward. The working group advocates the establishment of a cannery to develop local mushrooms, canned wild fruits that originally belonged to the mountain sparrow, such as blueberries and seabuckthorn fruits. In order to build a socialist forestry bureau, the mountain was cut down and mushrooms were cooked with canned pork. One summer, "fresh mushrooms cooked with milk twenty times were eaten" [8] (p. 11), but people in Jicun do not understand this "food pleasure" [8] (p. 10). After relocating to Jicun, the working group proposed to increase fertilizer and double the grain yield that year. After using up cow and pig manure, it will shift to the humus soil in the forest. The working group led by Liu Yuanxuan advocated for a large amount of fertilizer to be applied to crops, causing them to less ripen and leading to a major famine. Alai satirized this so-called "civilization" which, to some extent, destroyed the ecological environment of the local mushroom ring. Moreover, Sijiong's brother, due to poverty and lack of money to support his master, ended up working as a handyman in a temple. After shopkeeper Wu was caught eating sheep and committed suicide, his body floated on the water surface without anyone caring, revealing the evil of human nature everywhere. Alai implicitly criticized human greed and sin.

3.2.2. *Promotion of Goodness*

Literary creation also needs to address the issue of goodness. Excellent literary and artistic works always carry forward the warm humanistic spirit. Throughout the history of Chinese and foreign literature, from Aeschylus—the father of tragedy, Aristophane—the father of comedy, to Dante and Cervantes, all writers have a strong tendency towards goodness, shining with strong humanistic care everywhere. The humanistic care of the novel *Fairy Ring* is mainly reflected in the protagonist Sijiong's reflection on the establishment of harmonious relationships between women and nature, between women and men. Ecological feminism believes that there are similarities between the oppression of nature and animals and the oppression of women, that is, the serious damage to the Earth's environment is directly related to the oppression of women, and the ultimate liberation of women is closely related to the liberation of all races, genders, ecology, and others.

What is a mushroom ring? Mushroom rings are actually many mushrooms that grow densely together. Once picked, they grow again and again, and the entire mushroom season continues to thrive like this. When Jicun experienced a rare drought and famine, she still bent over and watered her mushroom ring. "In those years, people's hearts had deteriorated, and they always made fun of people who were even more helpless than themselves" [8] (p. 83). Sijiong's behavior was mocked by the whole village, and some villagers even wanted the working group to catch this "witch", which

further highlighted the simple kindness of Sijiong, a Tibetan girl. Sijiong's kindness towards the mushroom ring and her perseverance towards the endless mushroom ring demonstrate women's deep concern for themselves and their natural destiny. During the famine in the 1960s, the goat bearded shopkeeper Wu returned to the "barbarian" land of Jicun. Sijiong generously wrapped salt in old newspapers and sent it to him. Perhaps only Sijiong was willing to help him in the village. Shopkeeper Wu said "Kind Sijiong" [8] (p. 45), you don't need to come over to see me anymore. Shopkeeper Wu stole two sheep from the cooperative and hid them on the hillside to light a fire and roast them at night. The work team discovered an open fire in the mountains at midnight and organized a militia to search the mountain. Just when a few militia members accidentally discovered Sijiong's mushroom ring, he shouted to attract the attention of the work team and saved Sijiong's mushroom ring. Before being caught by the working group and committing suicide by jumping into the river, Shopkeeper Wu kindly reminded Sijiong to carefully check her mushroom ring. Finally, Sijiong found that Shopkeeper Wu had left almost an entire sheep in the mushroom ring to repay Sijiong's previous kindness. Sijiong is a kind person who sings spring songs and red songs to the fox. She hopes that when spring comes, there will be blue, red, and golden flowers everywhere on the grassland, without hunger or death, "like heaven" [8] (p. 98). The promotion of goodness is always permeated in the narration of truth and beauty. She let go of her hatred towards the female team leader, Miss Liu and others. While the men in Jicun were poaching and the women were busy digging wild vegetables, Sijiong always guarded her mushroom ring, watering it, and listening to the thrush singing on the branches.

3.3. *Beauty—The Artistic Form of Creation in Fairy Ring*

The beauty of literary creation forms is diverse. Abrams talked about the theory of the four elements of literature in *Mirror and Lamp—Romantic Literary Theory and Criticism Tradition*. The unfamiliar language of literary works itself, or the rhetorical nature of literary language, illustrations, blank spaces, and homology, are all important components of literary beauty.

3.3.1. *A Destructive Literary Language*

The representation of life is beautiful. Literature and art not only reflect life in general, but also reflect life through artistic images. The vivid reflection of the characteristics of life constitutes the special quality of literature and art. It determines that when we evaluate literary and artistic works, we not only need to examine whether this reflection is true, but also whether its image is beautiful. Beauty is one of the important criteria for measuring literariness. The formalist school, represented by Shklovsky, emphasizes literariness as the salience of literary language, the criticality of traditional paradigms, and the innovation of the materials used in the text [12] (p. 124), that is, the vivid, touching, refined and accurate language, image, structure, and other aspects of literature. In his *Art as a Technique*, Shklovsky mentioned that literary

language is "a painful and distorted discourse" [13] (p. 103). The scientific trend of language is to gradually stabilize language and break away from external interference. Literary language has a destructive nature, different from ordinary language, and its charm lies in the mutual modification and reference of words, thereby "destroying each other's dictionary meanings" [13] (p. 107). Literary language is changed through phonetic changes, the combination of words and the connection of sentences, to achieve their aesthetic function. The working group of Jicun said, "Lost in the east corner, gained in the mulberry tree". but the locals couldn't understand. What is not obtained when the sun rises will be obtained when the sun sets, which is the final translation for the village to understand. The use of conceptual metaphors in storytelling enhances the appearance of the text and greatly enhances its language expression.

Alai artistically treated the characteristics and origin of the name of *Morchella esculenta*; *Morchella esculenta* usually stands under the shade of a tree, like an unopened umbrella. The top half is a small black spire, and the bottom half is a thumb thick stalk resembling an umbrella handle. The top half of *Morchella esculenta* is a honeycomb-like pit, especially like the surface of an overturned *Morchella esculenta* according to biomimetic methods, silent and fragrant mushrooms with round bodies under the shade of trees. This sudden expression enhances the aesthetic value of literature. After the tragic death of Manager Wu, his real name was exposed as Wu Zhipu, which means the legendary place where the Immortal Family cultivates Lingzhi (*Ganoderma lucidum*). This is a huge irony. The language of science is stable, but the language of literature is constantly changing, constantly destroying the meaning of dictionaries. The special language symbols used by writers in their creations become a "chain of expression" [13] (p. 3), and such literary discourse is often the most expressive.

3.3.2. *Highly Aesthetically Appealing Illustrations*

The Pythagorean school of ancient Greece believed that "beauty is harmony" [14] (p. 32). Illustration is a special art of painting. Illustrations in literature attract readers' attention into the reading context through points, lines, surfaces, colors, composition, and other means. Often, "one frame of image is better than a thousand words" [15] (p. 72), which is very suitable for expressing the spatial domain and visual impact of narrative. It is a highly condensed version of literary text, and illustrations and text are important organic components of novels. The illustrations in novels often have a certain degree of intertextuality or interactive relationship with the text, known as the "language image intertextuality phenomenon" [15] (p. 70). The illustrations and text often appear in a juxtaposed state, allowing readers to compare and contrast. The ultimate goal of readers appreciating illustrations is to return to the text and achieve deep integration and mutual support. The intense collision between illustrations and text, such as suggestion, perspective conversion, and image juxtaposition, narrative segmentation can stimulate readers' aesthetic imagination. There are four illustrations in the novel:



Figure 1. The overall view of Jicun.



Figure 2. An eye shedding tears.



Figure 3. Si Jiong squatting in a mushroom ring.



Figure 4. The courtyard of Mother Sijiong.

The first picture shows the overall view of Jicun. The author adopts a nearly top-down perspective or an omniscient and omnipotent God's perspective to capture the entire picture of Jicun from the shade of a tree: leisurely white clouds, soaring cuckoo birds, towering mountains, silent Tibetan villages, and other scenes juxtaposed to form a complete narrative. The picture has a strong sense of hierarchy and inclusiveness, echoing the excellent ecological environment of Jicun mushroom ring in the text, while expanding the space and time of the text narrative. The overflow and omission of minor details in the illustrations further strengthen the reader's aesthetic experience and add endless artistic interest to the work. Excellent illustrated books perfectly combine graphic art with language art to pursue truth, goodness, and beauty together.

The second picture shows an eye shedding tears. By using the technique of image juxtaposition, elements such as Sijiong's brother Fahai, the scattered flocks of sheep, the emaciated shopkeeper Wu, and the raging flames, such effect is achieved: separating and intersecting narrative plots of different time and space, enriching the expressive power of the illustrations, further attracting readers' attention, and making the theme of the novel more vivid and intuitive. The suggestive nature of this illustration is very obvious. The entire picture is centered around a tearful eye, which depicts the scene of shopkeeper Wu grilling lamb on a hillside. Tears suggest the tragedy of shopkeeper Wu jumping into the river to commit suicide and the sympathy and sadness expressed in Sijiong's heart. This breaks through the visual limitations that readers cannot see with their eyes and adds wings to their imagination. While reading the text, readers can also gain full impact from their perspective. This is the illustrator's understanding of the unique personality of the text, expressing their personalized aesthetic feelings.

The third picture shows Sijiong squatting in a mushroom ring. Illustrations are the recreation of words and can further enhance the artistic quality of literary works. Mr. Lu Xun said, "The original intention of book illustrations is to decorate books and increase readers' interest, but that power can supplement the power of words, so they are also a type of propaganda picture" [17] (p. 80). The interactive relationship between the image and text in this picture is very strong. When Sijiong squats in the mushroom ring, it coincides with the famine in Jicun, where there is a serious shortage of food, clothing, and food. People are fighting and slandering each other in order to survive. The novel only describes Sijiong carrying water to take care of the mushroom ring every day. The entire novel does not provide a detailed description of Sijiong's appearance. But in the illustration, Sijiong is dressed in Tibetan clothing, with a Tibetan hairstyle on his head and a charming smile on his mouth, which is very beautiful and touching. Together with the thrush birds on the tree and the morel mushrooms on the ground, he creates a beautiful scene of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, fully demonstrating the Tibetan people's rooted love for natural ecology.

The fourth picture shows the courtyard of Sijiong.

Morchella mushrooms are stacked on wood and in baskets. The neatly stacked wood is the wood fire that Danba chopped for his mother in the morning, and the mushrooms covered in soil and moss on the pile are collected by Sijiong's mother for Director Liu. The picturesque, coordinated, and typical nature of illustrations is one of the important ways to achieve beauty in literary works. Materials and mushrooms provide readers with a concrete and perceptible image. The Pythagorean school emphasizes the harmony of opposites, namely balance and stillness [14] (p. 35). The success of artistic imagery lies in providing readers with a concrete and perceptible image, as Sushi once said, "There is a painting in the poem; there is a poem in the painting"^①. Poetry and painting have similarities, and Wang Guowei believes that the beauty of poetry lies in being "indistinguishable", the highest level of aesthetics, aiming to illustrate the importance of imagery in literary works. [2] (p. 140)

3.3.3. Expressive Blank Space

Blank left in novel is also known as blank or surplus jade. Chapter 11 of the *Tao Te Ching* discusses the relationship between existence and nothingness. Laozi said, "Thirty spokes share a hub, and when they are not, they serve as a vehicle. The heart is like a vessel; when they are not, they serve as a vessel. The windows and doors are like a chamber; when they are not, they serve as a chamber. Therefore, if there is something, it is beneficial, and if there is nothing, it is useful" [18] (p. 27). At this moment, silence is better than sound. Leaving blank is to give people endless imagination and create a profound artistic conception. By using the realm of emptiness and concealment, transforming space and narrating images, "wherever there is no painting, everything becomes a wonderful realm" [19] (p. 62). There is a large amount of blank space in the novel, leaving readers with huge room for speculation, which is difficult to ponder. The past of Director Liu and Sijiong has not been mentioned much, but their relationship is one of the main themes of the novel. Such people leave readers with room to think, and also indirectly reflect the difficulty and greatness of Sijiong.

3.3.4. Internal and External Harmony That Correspond in Unison

Socrates said that beauty and goodness are mutually unified. As mentioned earlier, Sijiong is kind and therefore beautiful. She allowed the birds to peck at the mushroom ring and said, "My dear bird! Eat! Eat! [8] (p. 91). We cannot imagine a woman showing such kindness in such a famine era. Ecological feminists believe that women are natural mothers, and Gambo praises the earth as Goddess and mother. All things on the earth are the products of the powerful fertility goddess Gaia. Griffin believes that women are born closer to nature than men. From this, it can be seen that Sijiong's kindness is naturally close to nature, the spokesperson for nature—mushroom ring or Tibetan ecosystems. Her inner beauty and outer beauty are harmonious and unified, as Alai

said i want to write about the warmth of human nature that life retains after experiencing various hardships. It is precisely because Alai's heart is so beautiful that his portal of Sijiong also shines out into the sky.

4. Conclusion

Fairy Ring is a very important novella in Alai's Trilogy novels of mountain treasures. Around Sijiong and her mushroom ring, themes and images such as love, revolution, hardship, hunger, era, and nature are slowly presented to readers. Alai is committed to writing about real highland life. Matsutake, cordyceps, and Minjiang cypress are all precious wild plants in the highland area and along the Dadu River. Multi-ethnic cultures meet here, and the construction, reform, and progress of New China intersect here. This magical land has witnessed many touching stories, permeated with the warmth of human nature. Alai's novels closely follow the development of the times, showcase the atmosphere of the times, integrate with the people, and complement the times with words. They comprehensively use various artistic techniques to present readers with an excellent work worthy of the times.

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^① Su Shi praised Wang Wei's poetic artistic conception in Dongpo Zhilin.

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