

Ethical Literary Criticism: Critical Reception and Theoretical Impact

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Abstract: Nie Zhenzhao's "Ethical Approach to Literary Studies: A New Perspective" (2004) marked the establishment of ethical literary criticism as a critical theory in Chinese academia. In 2014, Nie published his *An Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*, which stood out as a milestone for the construction and practice of literary critical system. In the book, Nie made systematically a comprehensive and deep exploration of ethical literary criticism. This book traced literary criticism to its source, profoundly rethought the ideas and made detailed inquiries of traditional literary concepts, advancing entirely different academic views and ideas with considerable confidence.

Key words: ethical literary criticism; moral enlightenment; theoretical kernel; influence

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标题：文学伦理学批评：理论之魅与世界影响

内容摘要：2004年，聂珍钊发表了题为《文学伦理学批评方法新探索》的论文，标志着文学伦理学批评作为一种批评理论在中国学术界的诞生。十年后，聂珍钊力推《文学伦理学批评导论》一书，彰显了中国文学理论界在文学批评体系的建构与批评实践方面取得的重要成就。通过对文学伦理学批评进行全面、系统和深入的研究，聂珍钊力图回答文学伦理学批评理论与批评实践中的一系列基本学术问题。这部著作在文学批评理论上追根溯源，对传统的文学观念进行反思和追问，大胆提出迥然不同的学术观念和学术思想。这部著作是中国文学批评理论界取得的一项标志性成果，它将给文学批评界带来新观念、新思想，并将为文学批评理论带来一场革命。

关键词：文学伦理学批评；道德启蒙；理论内核；影响

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Ethical issues have been central to scholarly concern throughout the history of literary criticism. Since the ethical turn in the 1980s, critics have paid increasing attention to ethics in literature. The newly emerged tendency is thus parallel to critics' efforts to approach literature from an ethical perspective. Regrettably, both in the West or in China, there has been a tendency of "theory for theory's sake" in which attention to the literary text itself has reached low ebb and that literary theories ignoring literary texts have been an inhibiting factor for the development of literary studies. Particularly, in China, the introduction of Western literary theories has undergone a change from the concern for the structure and form of literary works to ideological analysis.

In the National Conference on English and American Literature held in Nanchang in 2004, Nie Zhenzhao presented a talk on "Ethical Approach to Literary Studies: A New Perspective," which was later published in *Foreign Literature Studies*. This article laid the bedrock for and marked the establishment of ethical literary criticism as a new critical theory in China. Chinese scholars have rapidly employed the new approach and have been active in promoting ethical literary criticism. In the intervening ten years, scholarly discussions on ethical literary criticism have continued all over the world. In particular, the theoretical approach was given a significant boost by the establishment of the International Association for Ethical Literary Criticism in 2012.

In 2014, Nie Zhenzhao published *An Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*, which marked a significant move in ethical literary criticism. In this work, Nie tries to interrogate a set of fundamental questions concerned with its theoretical and practical issues. Nie proposes his conceptual system to read, to analyze, to interpret and to evaluate literary works from an ethical perspective so as to comprehend its basic function of moral enlightenment. In doing so, critics would unpack the moral values in literature.

The whole book is mainly composed of three parts: the theoretical exploration of ethical literary criticism, the applications of ethical literary criticism, and its conceptual system. In the first part, Nie introduces such terms as Sphinx factor and ethical selection, arguing that literature is an art of ethics. To better illustrate his theory, Nie in the second section of the work, analyzes such works as *Oedipus the King*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, and the poetry of the May Fourth Movement such as "Butterfly". Compli-

mentary to the first two sections, the last part of the work provides a glossary of 53 terms, which include instinct, natural instinct, impulse, morality, moral teaching, moral emotion, irrationality, rationality, rational will, ethics, ethical paradox, ethical chaos, ethical confusion, ethical predicament, ethical knots, ethical line, ethical structure, ethical deconstruction, ethical identity, ethical context, Sphinx factor, natural will, free will and so on. That said, it is not difficult to find that *An Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism* has laid a solid foundation for ethical literary criticism as a theoretical school.

Traditional moral criticism is significant in some ways, but it inevitably loses or partially lose its historical objectivity because of its subjectiveness, while ethical literary criticism proposed Nie “stresses the importance of returning to the historical ethical context, to read and interpret literary works from the standpoint of the ethical norms of the given time and to make moral evaluations historically of the events, characters and literary issues in a work. To achieve this, the critic is suggested to look for the ethical causes of literary texts” (Nie, “Ethical Literary Criticism: Its Fundamentals and Terms” 14). In other words, traditional moral criticism attaches importance to “the vantage point of at the present” while ethical literary criticism proposed by Nie stresses “the vantage point of the given time” of the work under discussion. In this way, ethical literary criticism enables critics to avoid subjectiveness when they place emphasis on the historical context of literary works.

As a rejoinder to Darwin’s evolutionary theory, Nie holds that man’s first selection to evolve from apes is a natural selection, which accounts for man’s physical forms. This is merely a biological selection. After biological selection, man has to undertake the second selection: ethical selection. Nie argues that only through ethical selection can man truly differentiate himself from animals. The two kinds of selections have gone through the whole process of human civilisation. Nie argues that “In the modern civilised society, human beings are still in the process of natural selection and ethical selection (Nie, *An Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism* 6). Nie has resourcefully coined the concept of “Sphinx factor” to illustrate the two-fold nature of human beings. Human beings are just like the Sphinx in Greek mythology, sharing both human factors and animal factors, both of which form an organic combination, the human factor being superior and controlling the other.

Nie also draws a distinction between rationality and emotion, the latter of which is closely related to human being’s desire and instinct. The acts of adultery in works such as *Madame Bovary*, *Anna Karenina* and *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* are considered examples of this desire and instinct. Therefore, the motif of such works

is that the pursuit of desire will lead to tragedy. In addition, Nie also pays attention to such concepts of natural will, free will and the rational will. He argues that specific ethical environments form human nature and as such, it is only improved by moral teaching. A rational will is the true nature of human beings, which challenges the opinions of such philosophers as Adorno, Derrida, and Agamben.

Ethical literary criticism is unique in its view of the primary function of literature. For a long time, a large number of scholars have held the view that aesthetics is the basic function of literature. However, in Nie's view, it is not aesthetics but ethics that plays the basic function of literature. In literature, moral education is the premise of the aesthetics. Therefore, if a literary work were divorced from ethics, it would lose its real value. To use Nie's words, "The core value of literature does not lie in providing entertainment for readers but in giving readers moral teachings in the form of entertainment. That boils down to five points, namely, to provide all kinds of knowledge for readers to properly understand life and society, to provide life experience for readers' self-perfection, to provide life models for readers to know about society and life from the ethical perspective, to provide moral enlightenment for human's material and spiritual life and to provide guidelines for the progression of human civilization"(Nie, "Ethical Literary Criticism: On Fundamental Function and Core Value of Literature" 9). Only when a literary work has achieved its ethical values can its aesthetic value be realised and meanwhile the realisation of the ethical values is achieved through moral teaching.

Since 2004, Chinese academia organised many conferences on ethical literary criticism. For example, "Ethical Literary Criticism: a New Approach to Literary Studies" (Wuhan, 2005) and in the Conference of Contemporary Foreign Literature (Shijiazhuang, 2013) Ethical literary criticism has not only attracted widespread attention within China but has also made its impact abroad.

In "The Second International Conference of Ethical Literary Criticism" (Yichang, 2012), The International Association for Ethical Literary Criticism was founded. It offers a platform for all critics interested in ethical literary criticism to exchange their views. In Nie's words, "The establishment of the International Association for Ethical literary criticism is the mark for ethical literary criticism going internationally" (Nie, *An Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism* 168). So far, there have been several conventions of the International Association for Ethical Literary Criticism held in Ningbo, Shanghai, Seoul, Tartu, and London. Apart from international conferences, ethical literary criticism has also been tremendously promoted by journal issues. For instance,

In 2015, *Forum for World Literature Studies* brought out a special issue on

ethical literary criticism. In 2015, *Monthly Review of Philosophy and Culture* in Taiwan produced a special issue on ethical literary criticism. In 2015, *arcadia: International Journal of Literary Culture* published a special issue on ethical literary criticism entitled “Ethical Literary Criticism: East and West.” In 2016, *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* brought out a special issue with the title “Ethics and Fiction in the 21st Century.” In July 2015, *The Times Literary Supplement* (TLS), the most influential and widely-read journal of literature, founded at the beginning of the 19th century, published a commentary on ethical literary criticism co-authored by William Baker and Shang Biwu.

Similarly, Inseop Shin of Konkuk University comments that “ethical literary criticism has become an independent school and has established a social trend of thought. When reviewing the development of ethical literary criticism of China, I cannot help feeling excited for these Eastern scholars. Ethical literary criticism helps Eastern scholars to regain their confidence, and enables them to join the club of literary criticism and theories dominated by the West” (Shin 4).

Youngmin Kim remarks that “what is happening in China in the field of critical theory as well as in an economic and cultural sea change anticipates the future anterior of the critical exchange in Korea as well as in Asia at large. I would like to conclude that Prof. Nie’s book, *An Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism* (2014) is the trailblazing piece for the future of Asian literary critical discourse” (Kim 400).

John Nebauer, in a preface to the special issue of *Arcadia*, writes that:

The editors of *Arcadia* are pleased and honoured to print in this issue a set of papers associated with Professor Nie Zhenzhao’s theory of ethical literary criticism. Both because of the topic and because of the unique effort to bring together Chinese and Western scholars, we regard the occasion so special that we shall depart from our usual reluctance to write an introduction to a special issue, and preface this collection with a few introductory reflections of our own. We want to underline the value of the theory and to indicate how, in our view, it could be broadened to bolster its persuasiveness. (Nebauer 1-3)

In the last decade, ethical literary criticism has attracted considerable attention worldwide. Beyond all doubt, ethical literary criticism has a delicate and unique structure as well as a fully-fledged content. It is one of the most dynamic, productive and influential critical theories in China. We have good reason to believe that this Eastern pearl shining in the ocean of world academia is just like “a star over

the ocean” that will display a dazzling brilliance in the future.

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