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A New Historicist Analysis of Gendered History in Mo Yan's *Soaring*

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ABSTRACT

Mo Yan critically examines Chinese history and culture, focusing on the experiences of ordinary people within specific historical moments. His work provides a more personable and relatable perspective on history. Through the lens of new historicism, this paper will examine how literature and history intertwine in Mo Yan's short story Soaring. By applying Louise Montrose's concepts of historicity of texts and textuality of history, the paper will explore how historical narratives are not neutral but rather constructed and contested within literary texts. Additionally, by employing De Beauvoir's concept of the Other, this paper investigates how Mo Yan's female characters navigate the historical and patriarchal forces shaping their agency. Mo Yan's portrayal of female characters in the story reflects the cultural tensions of 1980s, China. By integrating New Historicist and feminist perspectives, this study provides a deeper understanding of Mo Yan's engagement with history and gender, contributing to broader discussions on the role of literature in reconstructing marginalised voices within historical discourse.

Keywords: Mo Yan; History; Gender; New Historicism; Soaring

INTRODUCTION

Mo Yan is one of the contemporary Chinese writers who critically engages with 20th-century Chinese history, particularly focusing on how socio-political transformations affect gender roles and individual agency. His works reflect the tensions between tradition and modernity, often portraying ordinary individuals caught within historical upheavals such as the Cultural Revolution and post-Mao reforms. Among his works, the short story *Soaring* (1991) offers a compelling exploration of gendered history, using magical realism to depict a woman's struggle against patriarchal oppression in rural China. Set in a village still bound by traditional marriage customs, the story reflects the enduring influence of historical narratives on gender roles, even as China was undergoing modernisation. Through the lens of new historicism, the paper examines how *Soaring* deconstructs dominant historical discourses by presenting the female protagonist, Yanyan, whose defiance challenges both familial and societal expectations.

Soaring follows the fate of Yanyan, a young woman forced into an arranged marriage in a rural village. On her wedding day, she rebels against this imposed fate by flying into the sky, revealing a supernatural ability that defies both societal norms and patriarchal authority. The villagers, led by her husband Hong Xi and the township head Iron Mountain, attempt to capture and subdue her, viewing her defiance as a disruption to social order. Within Mo Yan's literary

corpus, *Soaring* exemplifies his critical engagement with history, particularly his focus on how women navigate historical oppression and shifting socio-political landscapes. The story encapsulates themes central to Mo Yan's works, such as the endurance of patriarchal structures, the conflict between individual agency and collective expectations, and the role of myth in shaping historical narratives.

Mo Yan contributes to Chinese literature through his reinterpretation of historical narratives, and his works blend rational and irrational elements, historical reality and personal imagination, tragedy and absurdity. His attention to history shows strong humanism and relevance to modern times, influencing the direction of contemporary literature (Q. Zhang, 2005). Mo Yan creates narratives where small, seemingly insignificant characters take centre stage. These characters are often marginalised or forgotten by mainstream history. His portrayal of female characters plays a key role in his historical narratives. Just like Wang Xiqiang comments, in all the characters Mo Yan creates, the women stand out more vividly, especially those who endure hardship and oppression. They are often strong, bold, resilient, and unafraid to love or hate fiercely (2018, p. 81). Mo Yan connects women to history by showing how they endure and resist oppression in both traditional and modern China. In his stories, women are shaped by deep-rooted patriarchal values but also face new challenges during modernisation. During the time Mo Yan lived in rural areas (1955-1976), while China's countryside was undergoing various "idealised" reforms of the new society, it was still under the practical control of old morals, old culture, and old ideas (X. Wang, 2018, p. 82). Even when society claims to support gender equality, women still suffer from unequal expectations, which harm them physically and emotionally. Mo Yan's female characters are strong survivors who represent the struggles of women throughout Chinese history. They endure hardship, challenge oppressive systems, and embody the tension between old traditions and modern ideas. Rural women, in particular, are central to Mo Yan's representation of the intersection of gender and history. With his perspective rooted in the common people and years of rural life experience, Mo Yan has gained a deep, nuanced understanding of the survival conditions of Chinese rural women. Through the vivid life force of the countryside and his attachment to life, Mo Yan profoundly grasps the unique consciousness of Chinese women. This view of women serves as a key source of inspiration for the female characters in his novels and is the driving force behind his continued exploration of women's fates (H. Li & Li, 2014, p. 140). Through these female characters, Mo Yan highlights the long struggle for gender equality and the complex intersection of personal identity with broader historical events.

This study explores the relationship between fiction and history during China's collectivisation period and its aftermath, focusing on how Mo Yan's short story *Soaring* constructs gendered history and its impact on readers' perceptions of Chinese history. In this context, gendered history is understood not only as the historical experiences of women but also as a critical approach to interpreting history through a gendered perspective. It highlights both individual lived experiences and the broader socio-political landscape, with a central focus on power dynamics—examining how gender intersects with political authority, ideology, and social hierarchies in shaping historical narratives. Montrose's theory of new historicism emphasises the reciprocal relationship between literature and history, asserting that literary texts do not merely reflect historical realities but actively contribute to shaping them (Montrose, 1986). This perspective highlights how historical narratives are textually mediated and ideologically constructed, reinforcing the idea that literature plays a crucial role in shaping social norms and cultural identities, particularly in relation to gender. Beauvoir's concept of "Otherness" examines how women are positioned as the "Other" within patriarchal societies. Mo Yan's portrayal of women serves as a

lens to reinterpret historical narratives and critique contemporary societal issues. Through this approach, he illustrates how gender operates both as a structural force and a narrative device, influencing the ways history is constructed, remembered, and contested.

Previous studies on Mo Yan's works, particularly his short stories, have paid limited attention to gendered history. While some researchers have examined female characters in his works, their analyses primarily focus on individual experiences rather than a broader historical framework. They recognise the role of gender in the shaping of women's lives, but have not sufficiently addressed how Mo Yan's narratives reconstruct history through gendered perspectives. This gap calls for further examination of how Mo Yan's portrayal of women intersects with specific historical moments to either reinforce or subvert dominant historical ideologies. To address this gap, this paper will analyse gendered history shaped in Mo Yan's short story *Soaring* through the lenses of Montrose's new historicism and Beauvoir's concept of "Otherness". Through the analysis of Yanyan's symbolic flight as both an act of resistance and a metaphor for the broader intellectual and cultural shifts of the 1980s, this paper highlights how Mo Yan reimagines women's roles in history, particularly in the wake of China's political and ideological transitions. By situating *Soaring* within Mo Yan's broader literary project, this study contributes to broader discussions on gender, historical discourse, and literary representation in Chinese literature, highlighting how Mo Yan reconfigures traditional historical narratives through female agency and resistance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mo Yan's female characters have attracted some attention from critics and researchers. Some researchers focus on the historical significance of Mo Yan's female images, such as Lanlan Du (2014), who explores the theme of abortion in *The Wild Palms* and *Frog*, emphasising how Faulkner and Mo Yan depict reproductive rights in different sociopolitical contexts. Du contrasts Faulkner's focus on abortion as a personal tragedy linked to romantic idealism and economic constraints with Mo Yan's portrayal of abortion as a consequence of state-imposed biopolitics. While both novels depict abortion as a contested space of female autonomy, *The Wild Palms* emphasises individual agency within patriarchal constraints, whereas *Frog* critiques state intervention as a historical force that subjugates women in the name of national progress. Du's analysis underscores how literature reflects and critiques the historical construction of gendered oppression, showing how personal choices are shaped—and often constrained—by larger historical narratives. Song Xiaoying (2015) discusses the misinterpretations of Mo Yan's female characters in English and American literary criticism. Song emphasises that the cultural specificity of Chinese society—especially rural traditions, family structures, and the historical background of hardship and survival—forms the core of Mo Yan's female characters. The characters' resistance is often framed by a struggle for survival and preservation of lineage, rather than a purely personal pursuit of freedom. Song also points out how Western criticism sometimes falls into the trap of Orientalism, where Chinese characters are viewed through exoticised and oversimplified lenses.

X. Wang (2018) discusses Mo Yan's exploration of novel forms and his portrayal of female characters, focusing on how these two aspects intersect to create a unique aesthetic in his works. Wang argues that Mo Yan integrates historical and cultural criticism into his portrayal of female characters. By reconstructing historical narratives, Mo Yan reflects on the struggles of women within the socio-political landscape of China. His use of female characters to subvert traditional narratives allows his novels to explore deeper themes of oppression, resistance, and liberation.

As for rewriting history, Mei-hwa Sung's article, *Allegorising History: Realism and Fantasy in Mo Yan's Fictional China* (2021), explores how Mo Yan intertwines historical reality with fantasy through the techniques of magical realism, using allegory to reconstruct China's history. Through exaggeration, satire, and allegory, Mo Yan blurs the boundaries between reality and fantasy, reexamining Chinese history from the perspective of ordinary people and developing a mode of "deinstitutionalised history" in his writing. Sung further argues that Mo Yan's novels go beyond history and politics to explore gender and social power dynamics, particularly in *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, where the female body serves as a metaphor for oppression and survival struggles throughout Chinese history. At the same time, his works employ absurd humour and allegorical fantasy to critique the contradictions of modern Chinese society.

Y. Zhang (2022) analyses how Mo Yan reinterprets the traditional story of Jing Ke's assassination attempt on the King of Qin in his play *Our Jing Ke*, linking it to contemporary Chinese social realities. Drawing on Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory, Zhang argues that Mo Yan deconstructs the conventional hero narrative, portraying Jing Ke's assassination attempt as an absurd yet inevitable act driven by a desire for fame. The play also employs modern linguistic styles and satirical humour to make historical narratives more relatable to contemporary audiences. Zhang concludes that *Our Jing Ke* is not just a historical adaptation but also a reflection on morality, ambition, and the construction of cultural memory in modern China.

In the application of Montrose's new historicism, H. Wang (2023) employs Montrose's framework to analyse *Southwest Border*, a novel by Feng Liang that explores the historical and cultural transformations of the Yi ethnic group in Liangshan, China. Wang utilises Montrose's concepts of the historicity of texts and the textuality of history, arguing that the novel does not merely reflect historical events but actively reconstructs and reinterprets them through a literary lens. Wang examines intertextuality and cultural hybridity, showing how *the Southwest Border* negotiates between Han Chinese and Yi cultural traditions.

These studies all emphasise the importance of reimagining history through literature, where fiction reconstructs and reinterprets dominant historical narratives, challenging traditional perspectives and offering alternative viewpoints. By giving voice to marginalised groups, literature not only reflects history but actively participates in its reconstruction.

MONTROSE: HISTORICITY AND TEXTUALITY

Montrose argues that literary texts are shaped by their historical contexts and that history itself is a form of discourse. He introduces two concepts: "the historicity of texts" and "the textuality of history". Montrose explains, "By the historicity of texts, I mean to suggest the cultural specificity, the social embedment, of all modes of writing—not only the texts that critics study but also the texts in which we study them" (1989, p. 20). This suggests that literature is a product of its time, intertwined with its historical and cultural context. Thus, texts are influenced by the ideologies, social norms, political structures, and economic conditions of their time. This approach invites readers to examine how a literary work reflects, engages with, and even challenges the prevailing ideologies of its historical moment. The concept of the "textuality of history" suggests that history is not a straightforward or objective account of past events. Instead, it is constructed through narratives and textual practices. This view means that our understanding of the past is mediated by surviving texts—such as historical documents, chronicles, letters, and other records—which are influenced by the same ideological forces that shape literary works. Montrose explains, "By the

textuality of history, I mean to suggest, firstly, that we can have no access to a full and authentic past, a lived material existence, unmediated by the surviving textual traces of the society in question" (1989, p. 20). He emphasises that our knowledge of history comes through these texts—whether official records, literary works, or personal accounts—rather than direct, unfiltered access to the past as it actually occurred. Since these records are shaped by the ideologies, biases, and constraints of their creators, history itself is a kind of narrative, always influenced by the perspectives of those who documented it. Thus, both literature and historical records are products of their specific contexts, making history a constructed narrative shaped by its narrators.

Montrose's concepts of the "historicity of texts" and the "textuality of history" are central to his analysis of the interconnectedness between literature and history. These ideas challenge traditional views in literary and historical studies by asserting that literature is not distinct from history and that history itself is shaped through textual practices. Montrose uses these concepts to dismantle the binary between literature as a mere reflection of historical reality and history as an objective record of facts. Instead, he argues that literature and history are mutually constitutive. Hayden White adds that Montrose shifts the focus of literary and historical studies toward the synchronic relationships between literary texts and their cultural systems, asserting that both literature and history should be understood as components of a broader cultural system, or "texts" (1989, pp. 293-294). This perspective encourages analysing how literature operates within a specific cultural context rather than merely tracing its historical evolution, viewing all cultural products as embedded within language and discourse.

For instance, in his study of Shakespeare's plays, Montrose shows that they were created during the politically unstable and religiously divided Elizabethan era. The plays reflect the anxieties, conflicts, and complexities of this period, using fictional narratives to engage with historical events and societal issues of the time. Similarly, Montrose's ideas can be applied to Mo Yan's *Soaring,* which is deeply connected to the cultural and social structures of rural Chinese society during the collective period, especially in its depiction of family obligations, marriage arrangements, and gender roles. Through the lens of "textuality of history", we can analyse how *Soaring* serves as a narrative that constructs its own version of history. Yanyan's escape, where she literally and figuratively "soars" above the community's constraints, could be interpreted as an expression of resistance against the patriarchal system, a move challenging the limitations imposed on women in her society. Montrose's concept of "historicity" also helps analyse how *Soaring* critiques the socio-political changes of the 1980s, a period marked by shifting ideologies from collectivism to individualism. The story's engagement with restrictive marriage norms and gendered expectations reflects broader historical transitions, making its portrayal of gender historically contingent and shaped by the author's contemporary cultural context.

BEAUVOIR: OTHERNESS

Beauvoir (1949) discusses the concept of "The Other" in her book *The Second Sex*. This concept explores women's situation as the "Other" in relation to men, often marginalised and constrained by male norms and experiences: "She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute--she is the Other" (1949/1956, p. 16). Sonia Kruks (1992) argues that Beauvoir develops the concept of situated subjectivity in her analysis of women's experience of otherness. Kruks notes, "In the work of Beauvoir, I want to argue, we find a nuanced conception

of the subject that cannot be characterised as either Enlightenment or postmodern: rather, it is a conception of the subject as situated" (1992, p. 92). This means that while individuals exercise agency, their identities are also profoundly shaped by cultural expectations and historical conditions. Beauvoir further asserts that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (De Beauvoir, 1949/1956, p. 273), highlighting that gender is socially and historically constructed rather than biologically determined. Julie K. Ward expands on this by defining "situation" as "the specific historical and cultural contexts in which women find themselves to be Other, that is, relegated to a subordinate status relative to men" (1995, p. 231). Beauvoir views subjectivity as deeply intertwined with social and cultural contexts, emphasising that it is not a static essence but a dynamic process of creation and negotiation. Meanwhile, Beauvoir explores the relationship between a woman's situation and her body, stating, "[...] if the body is not a thing, it is a situation, [...] it is the instrument of our grasp upon the world, a limiting factor for our projects" (Beauvoir, 1949/1989, p. 61). She "distinguishes between two conceptions of 'body': in one sense, it may signify the body as inert matter or 'a thing'; [...] in another, it signifies how the physical body is experienced, given social and economic conditions—her term here is situation" (Ward, 1995, p. 231). Women's bodily experience, then, is never purely natural but deeply shaped by complex social constructs.

Beauvoir's concept of "Otherness" can be applied to analyse Yanyan's role as a woman in a patriarchal rural society. She is positioned as the "Other" in her marriage, with her value tied to family exchanges rather than personal agency. Beauvoir's idea of the body as a "situation" applies here as well: Yanyan's body is constrained by societal expectations, yet her literal and symbolic flight attempts to reclaim agency over her life and body. The response of the male villagers and Hong Xi to Yanyan's escape, perceiving it as abnormal or supernatural, mirrors Beauvoir's idea that women who seek autonomy are often alienated. Yanyan's flight symbolises an act of rebellion against the gendered expectations that define her as a subordinate figure within marriage and society. Both Montrose and Beauvoir argue that gender is historically constructed, providing a critical framework for analysing how *Soaring* reimagines Chinese history. By integrating female narratives, often sidelined in official history, the story inscribes women's experiences into national and cultural memory through fiction. In this way, *Soaring* not only reflects but actively reshapes historical consciousness, demonstrating how literature functions as a site for contesting and rewriting dominant historical ideologies. Therefore, *Soaring* is framed not just as a literary text about gender, but as a counter-historical narrative that reshapes historical imagination. Through exploring gendered history as a constructed discourse, this paper extends the existing studies of Mo Yan.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper employs new historicism and Beauvoir's Otherness as the primary analytical frameworks to examine *Soaring*. The research aims to explore how the short story constructs gendered history and challenges dominant historical narratives through literary representation. This study applies Montrose's historicity of texts to examine how *Soaring* reflects rural China of the collectivist period, and engages with the cultural and political conditions of 1980s China, particularly in relation to gender and societal expectations. The textuality of history is used to analyse how the story constructs its own version of history, challenging official historical narratives about women's roles and marriage customs in rural China. By examining how historical discourse is embedded within the text, this study highlights the ways in which fiction not only represents history but actively reshapes it. Beauvoir's otherness is employed to explore how

Yanyan is positioned as the "Other" within the patriarchal village society, reflecting broader gendered structures. The analysis focuses on how Yanyan's body is socially constructed and controlled—both as a commodity in the arranged marriage system and as a disruptive force when she defies expectations. Her supernatural flight is interpreted as both an act of defiance and a metaphor for resisting patriarchal oppression, aligning with Beauvoir's argument that women's subjectivity is shaped but not entirely determined by historical forces.

This study conducts a close textual analysis of *Soaring*, examining specific aspects of the narrative that illustrate gendered history and historical contestation. First, the character analysis examines Yanyan as a resistant female figure, exploring how her defiance challenges patriarchal norms. It also considers Hong Xi and Iron Mountain, who enforce traditional gender roles at the local level, and the policeman, who represents state control and the institutional reinforcement of patriarchal structures. Second, the thematic exploration delves into the role of arranged marriage and familial exchange as historical practices that marginalise women, showing how Yanyan's fate is dictated by these patriarchal structures. Additionally, the study analyses the intersection of gender, superstition, and social order, particularly how Yanyan's flight is framed as unnatural or even demonic by her community. The presence of state power, embodied by the policeman, highlights how gender oppression is not only enforced through social customs but also legitimised through legal and ideological mechanisms. Finally, this study explores the interplay between literature and history, investigating how *Soaring* engages with historical discourse, particularly the intellectual climate of the 1980s and critiques of Confucian patriarchy. It also examines Mo Yan's use of magical realism as a narrative strategy to challenge dominant historical narratives and provide an alternative perspective on women's agency. Through these analytical approaches, this study demonstrates how *Soaring* functions as a counter-history, repositioning women's experiences within the broader socio-political landscape and reshaping historical memory through fiction.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS: GENDERED HISTORY

This section examines how *Soaring* constructs a gendered historical narrative through the interwoven themes of gender oppression, historical continuity, mythology, state control, and modernisation. The story presents a rural patriarchal society where marriage functions as a tool of female subjugation, and any resistance—such as Yanyan's flight—is met with both communal and institutional suppression. Using Beauvoir's concept of otherness, this analysis explores how Yanyan is defined in relation to male authority and how her supernatural abilities challenge gendered constraints. Montrose's theories of historicity and textuality further illuminate how the story critiques both traditional customs and the state's role in reinforcing patriarchal norms. Furthermore, the paper will analyse how Mo Yan touches on the theme of modernisation within the framework of historicity. The following discussion is structured around five key aspects: (1) the patriarchal enforcement of marriage and gender roles, (2) the use of historical continuity to justify gender hierarchies, (3) the mythologization of female defiance as a means of erasing agency, (4) the role of the state in controlling women's autonomy, and (5) engaging with the historical discourse of the 1980s.

Soaring is a short story that explores the intersection of gender, history, and power through the arranged marriage of Hong Xi and Yanyan. Hong Xi, a middle-aged man, marries Yanyan, arranged through a familial exchange where his sister, Yanghua, marries Yanyan's mute brother. On their wedding day, Yanyan, horrified by Hong Xi's pockmarked face, flees the wedding: "But

when she spotted Hong Xi's face, she stopped in her tracks and, after a long quiet moment, let out a screech and took off running" (Mo Yan, 2012, p. 84). Yanyan's immediate reaction upon seeing Hong Xi epitomises the gendered oppression inherent in arranged marriages. This scene highlights the lack of female agency in marital decisions, where a woman is expected to submit to familial arrangements regardless of her own desires. Beauvoir's concept of "Other" provides a critical lens to analyse how Yanyan, as a young bride, is objectified within this arranged marriage system. Yanyan's horror at Hong Xi's appearance is not simply a rejection of his physical traits but a symbolic refusal of the patriarchal order that dictates her fate. Her role is defined not by her own agency but in relation to male expectations--first as a wife and then as a transgressor. The story revolves around the tension of the pursuit, as the village attempts to bring her down and restore patriarchal order, while Yanyan displays a mystical and defiant form of autonomy.

Montrose's concept of the historicity of texts argues that literature is deeply embedded within its historical context, reflecting and participating in the construction of cultural narratives. In *Soaring*, marriage functions as a key institution through which patriarchal hierarchies are preserved and legitimised over time, demonstrating how deeply ingrained traditions regulate gender roles. Yanyan's arranged marriage is not merely a personal or familial arrangement but a historically entrenched system of control. The exchange system of marriage, where women are treated as commodities in marital transactions, reflects traditional rural customs that were prevalent in pre-modern and early 20th-century rural China but still persisted in some rural areas during the mid-20th century.

In her analysis of women's struggles and transformations during the collective era, Cui Yingling (2011) argues that rural women's agency and autonomy are deeply affected by traditional and societal pressures, particularly in patriarchal rural settings. Cui analyses the experiences of three women in Shuanglong Village, En'shi, Hubei Province, and reveals that women's social status was historically constrained by patriarchal customs, notably arranged marriages, which were pervasive despite state policies supporting marriage freedom (2011, p.25). Marriages in such rural settings often served as tools for family advancement rather than personal choice. In the collective era, as Cui discusses, even with state policies encouraging gender equality, the actual practice of freedom within marriage was restricted by local family dynamics and cultural expectations. Yanyan's arranged marriage represents this historical enforcement of gender roles in rural China. Hence, her rejection of marriage is perceived as a disruption of the established order, not as a personal choice. When she flees, she is no longer just a bride but a threat to the patriarchal system, and the village must collectively act to restore balance.

According to Montrose's historicity, the rural setting of Northeast Gaomi Township provides a specific historical-cultural backdrop where deeply entrenched traditions and beliefs shape the actions and expectations of the community. Rural China, especially in areas like Northeast Gaomi Township, retained traditional social structures long after China's urban centres began modernising. As Yanyan takes flight, her act of defiance immediately becomes a scandal that demands a response from the entire village. The villagers view her rebellion not only as a personal affront to her husband, Hong Xi, but as a disgrace to the community: "A bride fleeing from her wedding disgraced all of Northeast Gaomi Township. So the village men took up the chase with a vengeance, coming at her from all sides. The dogs, too, which leapt and bounded in the waves of green" (Mo Yan, 2012, p. 85). Yanyan's action symbolises a betrayal of the traditional role expected of women, who are supposed to be obedient and subservient. The men in the village, spurred by this perceived dishonour, take up the chase to "restore" their collective honour. This reaction emphasises the role of the community in upholding rigid gender norms and the lengths to

which they will go to police and suppress nonconformity. The villagers' pursuit of Yanyan is not just about recapturing a runaway bride but about reinforcing patriarchal control over women's bodies and choices.

Beauvoir's otherness further illuminates this dynamic: women who reject their prescribed roles are cast as disruptive "Others", excluded from the dominant social narrative and stripped of their autonomy. Hong Xi, whose authority as a husband is undermined by Yanyan's escape, perceives her resistance as an affront to his masculinity and power: "As anger gripped his heart, all Hong Xi could think about was the beating he'd give her once she was in his grasp" (Mo Yan, 2012, p. 85). As the pursuit intensifies, Hong Xi becomes not just a rejected groom but an enforcer of patriarchal discipline, leading the village in reasserting male dominance. The villagers' chase is a collective reaffirmation of the patriarchal system, where defiance is met with ritualistic discipline. This demonstrates how deeply entrenched gender hierarchies are defended under the guise of maintaining social and historical continuity.

In *Soaring*, history is not merely a record of the past but a constructed discourse that reinforces patriarchal power, shaping how women's roles are defined and maintained over time. Montrose's textuality of history suggests that history is narratively mediated, rather than objectively recorded, and *Soaring* illustrates this through the village's response to Yanyan's escape. Her rebellion does not just challenge her own arranged marriage but threatens the historical continuity of patriarchal authority, which has been naturalised through communal traditions and historical narratives. Iron Mountain, the head of the village, serves as an enforcer of these inherited gendered traditions, reinforcing the idea that marriage is not an individual choice but a social obligation rooted in historical precedent. His authority is not just rooted in present social norms but in the village's longstanding patriarchal traditions. Iron Mountain reinforces this historical rigidity when he declares, "We have to find a way to get her down, demon or not. This has to come to an end, like everything else" (Mo Yan, 2012, p. 87). His statement reflects the idea that women's resistance must be suppressed not just for the sake of the present order but to maintain historical continuity. The phrase "like everything else" suggests that challenges to patriarchal norms have always existed but have been systematically subdued, reinforcing Montrose's idea that history is an ideological construct shaped by those in power. Through this portrayal, Mo Yan demonstrates that oppression is not an incidental occurrence but a structural and narrative force, legitimised by history itself.

This textual construction of history is further reinforced through familial complicity in enforcing patriarchal norms. Yanyan's mother and brother are also pressured to join the efforts to bring her back, demonstrating that families, too, participate in the reproduction of gendered hierarchies. Yanyan's mother, whose bound feet symbolise generations of female subjugation, pleads with her daughter using textualised narratives of duty, honour, and sacrifice rather than direct force, saying, "Yanyan, be a good girl and listen to your mother. Please come down. ... I know you feel you've been treated badly, but that can't be helped. If you don't come down, we won't be able to keep Yanghua, and if that happens, the family's finished..." (Mo Yan, 2012, pp. 93-94). Submission is framed not as oppression but as a moral imperative, showing how patriarchal ideologies are sustained through generational storytelling. Yanyan's resistance is not only an act of physical defiance but a rupture in the historical discourse that has constructed female obedience as natural and necessary.

Thus, Mo Yan engages with Montrose's textuality of history by illustrating how gendered oppression is perpetuated through cultural narratives rather than merely through explicit force. The village's reaction to Yanyan's flight, Iron Mountain's assertion of patriarchal continuity, and the mother's emotional coercion all function as textual reinforcements of patriarchal dominance.

Montrose's textuality emphasises that history is a constructed narrative designed to preserve dominant power structures. In *Soaring*, Mo Yan's use of magical realism in depicting Yanyan's flight is more than a stylistic choice. Instead, it serves as a method of rewriting history, challenging patriarchal narratives that have long dictated the roles and limitations of women: "...her hands flapping in the air, her legs held together like a gorgeous butterfly, as she rose gracefully out of the encirclement. ... She was only six or seven meters above their heads, but, oh, so graceful, so lovely. Just about every oddity you could think of had occurred in Northeast Gaomi Township, but this was the first time a woman had taken to the sky" (Mo Yan, 2012, pp. 85-86). Yanyan's flight offers an alternative narrative where women transcend societal constraints rather than being confined by them. Moreover, the flight is not framed as monstrous or unnatural within the narration itself; instead, Mo Yan aestheticises her rebellion, describing her as "so graceful, so lovely". The butterfly imagery evokes themes of transformation and rebirth, symbolising the rewriting of historical narratives where women are no longer passive figures but active agents of change. The villagers' shock at witnessing Yanyan's ascent—"this was the first time a woman had taken to the sky"—highlights how her act does not simply defy present social norms but ruptures the entire historical narrative that has governed women's roles. Through Yanyan's supernatural ascent, Mo Yan inserts female agency into a traditionally male-dominated historical framework, offering a counter-history where women are no longer confined to submission and silence.

However, within the patriarchal order, such an act of defiance cannot be accepted as legitimate. Through Beauvoir's otherness, Yanyan's supernatural ascent becomes an act that positions her outside the accepted norms of society, transforming her from a mere runaway bride into something incomprehensible, even monstrous. The villagers, unable to reconcile her defiance with their historically conditioned worldview, respond with fear and ritualistic violence. Hong Xi's mother screams, "Demon, she's a demon!" (Mo Yan, 2012, p. 87). The immediate labelling of Yanyan as a demon reflects the textualisation of history as a mechanism of Othering--women who defy patriarchal norms are not simply disobedient but dehumanised and mythologised as unnatural beings.

At the same time, Yanyan's tears fall at a critical moment when her mother and Yanghua plead for her submission. Yanghua says, "Sister-in-law, please come down. You and I are both sufferers in this world. My brother's ugly, but at least he can talk. But your brother ... please come down ... it's our fate..." (Mo Yan, 2012, p. 94). Yanghua does not challenge the injustice of their circumstances but instead normalises it, aligning with patriarchal historical narratives that condition women to see submission as survival. At this moment, as Yanyan hovers above the crowd, the narration describes: "Yanyan glided into the air again and circled the sky above the people. Chilled dewdrops fell to the ground — maybe they were her tears" (Mo Yan, 2012, p. 94). Her flight, once an act of defiance, now carries a deep emotional burden. While she physically transcends patriarchal constraints, her sorrow underscores the weight of familial and social expectations. The dewdrops as tears symbolise the pain of otherness, showing that even in resistance, there is alienation and grief. Yanyan's narrative illustrates how women's subjectivity is constrained within a patriarchal context.

To restore patriarchal order, the village enacts ritualistic purification, as seen when Iron Mountain throws a bucket of dog's blood over Yanyan's body. Dog's blood, a traditional symbol

used to purge evil forces, reveals how superstition is weaponised to suppress female resistance, transforming an act of self-liberation into something that must be exorcized, a typical "Othering" process. This represents how society often mythologises women's resistance, distancing it from the historical reality of oppression, by intertwining Montrose's textuality with Beauvoir's otherness. Mo Yan critiques the deeply embedded social constructs that justify and perpetuate gender hierarchies.

A significant clue about the historical context in *Soaring* comes from the presence of a local policeman who gets involved in the pursuit of Yanyan. His involvement reflects the historicity of texts, demonstrating how *Soaring* is embedded within a historical reality where state power played a crucial role in regulating gender norms and enforcing patriarchal structures. The policeman represents state authority, highlighting how the story's setting corresponds to a time when local governance and law enforcement intervened in private and community matters, particularly during or after the Maoist period (1949–1976). This period saw the state's influence extended deeply into the daily lives of villagers, with its bureaucratic reach penetrating even the smallest administrative units. As Li Jinzheng argues, cadres were appointed to lead within villages, making the presence of state power directly felt by every peasant (J. Li, 2011, p. 14). Villages transitioned from semi-autonomous communities into integral parts of the broader state structure. This is reflected in Iron Mountain's assertion: "We'll report this to the local government. Since she and Hong Xi are man and wife, the government will surely step in to uphold the marriage laws" (Mo Yan, 2012, p. 88). The references to local government involvement and the mention of "upholding the marriage laws" reflect the pervasive reach of the state into private lives, illustrating how individual agency and personal relationships are subordinated to the ideological and legal mandates of the state.

In *Soaring*, the policeman's role in Yanyan's execution illustrates how state power violently suppresses female autonomy. His command—"Come down here!"—is both a demand for submission and a symbolic act of erasing defiance: "The policeman fitted another arrow to the bow, took aim at Yanyan, who was sprawled atop the short pine, and shouted, "Come down here!" The second arrow flew before his shout had died out; there was a cry of pain, and Yanyan tumbled headlong to the ground" (Mo Yan, 2012, p. 76). The swiftness of the policeman's action highlights the uncompromising nature of state power. There is no negotiation, no attempt at understanding, only immediate and absolute force. Yanyan's fall signifies more than personal defeat; it represents the forced reintegration of women into patriarchal history, reinforcing Montrose's argument that history is shaped by those in power to maintain existing hierarchies.

This moment also exposes the contradiction in socialist discourse on women's liberation, where women were promised equality under socialism but were still subject to rigid gender expectations that prioritised collective stability over individual rights. Just like Guo Yuhua comments on the Communist Party's narrative of "emancipation of women": "The feeling of being emancipated while there was no actual fulfilment of emancipation originated in their acceptance of the dominant ideology that revolution equals emancipation. They got an ecstatic feeling of emancipation in the course of being turned into an instrument..." (2003, p. 58). Women were told they were contributing to socialist progress, yet they remained bound by deeply entrenched patriarchal norms. Yanyan's fate illustrates that even in a state that claimed to promote gender equality, women who deviated from their assigned roles were punished rather than protected. Mo Yan, through this portrayal, critiques how history has continuously shaped and reinforced gendered oppression through state intervention, making female autonomy not just a social defiance but a political impossibility.

Mo Yan situates *Soaring* within the 1980s intellectual awakening, a period when Chinese intellectuals critiqued both Confucian patriarchy and the authoritarianism of the Cultural Revolution. The 1980s marked a shift from revolutionary socialism to modernisation, influenced by the May Fourth Movement's legacy of cultural enlightenment and rejection of feudal traditions (He Guimei, 2010, p. 2). He Guimei notes that the May Fourth enlightenment ideals seemed to make a full comeback in the 1980s, which is why the cultural movement of the mid-1980s was called "New Enlightenment" (2010, p. 17). Scholars and intellectuals began framing China's contemporary culture as an extension of the May Fourth Movement's goals, emphasising individualism, rational thought, and resistance to ideological conformity. In this context, Mo Yan's *Soaring* reflects the tension between tradition and modernity. The marriage exchange between Yanyan and Hong Xi mirrors the entrenched patriarchal structures that were being critiqued in the intellectual movements of the 1980s. Yanyan's flight embodies the era's emerging discourse on personal autonomy and resistance to historical constraints, aligning with the 1980s discourse on human rights and individualism. However, Mo Yan's inclusion of a state policeman who shoots Yanyan down can be seen as a reflection on how state power continues to suppress individual freedom, even as intellectuals and reformers tried to push for greater openness and freedom. Montrose's historicity suggests that literature both reflects and shapes its historical moment. Mo Yan's *Soaring* actively engages with the historical discourse of the 1980s regarding modernity, tradition, and gender roles.

CONCLUSION

In *Soaring*, Mo Yan deconstructs history as a constructed narrative that marginalises women, revealing how patriarchal ideologies shape cultural memory and social order. Through the use of communal action, family involvement, superstition, and state control, Mo Yan reveals how history is a living, oppressive force that rationalises female subjugation as a timeless cultural necessity. Through Montrose's historicity and textuality, the story demonstrates that historical discourse is not neutral but actively reinforces gender hierarchies, positioning women's resistance as threats to societal stability. Beauvoir's otherness further illuminates Yanyan's struggle, revealing how female autonomy is constrained within patriarchal structures and punished through cultural and institutional mechanisms. Particularly, Yanyan's supernatural flight exemplifies how literature actively participates in historical narratives rather than merely reflecting them. In other words, "the relationship between individual identity and society is mutually constitutive (they create each other) and is dynamically unstable. By deconstructing narratives, one can reveal hidden subtexts, the explicit or implicit agenda in the discourse" (Yusof, 2009, p. 129). Yanyan's defiance against patriarchal constraints, symbolised by her ability to soar beyond societal control, challenges dominant historical discourses that marginalise women's agency.

By situating *Soaring* within the intellectual and ideological shifts of the 1980s, we see how Mo Yan's narrative engages with contemporary debates on modernity, state control, and gender. The contradictions of this era—caught between the promises of reform and the persistence of authoritarian structures—are mirrored in the story's magical realist elements, which blur the line between fantasy and reality, much like the 1980s' ideological struggle to define China's future. In doing so, *Soaring* functions as a counter-historical text, offering an alternative lens through which to understand both literary representation and historical discourse in modern China. Through the frameworks of Montrose's new historicism and Beauvoir's Otherness, this analysis provides new

insights into Mo Yan's engagement with history, gender, and power. The study contributes to broader discussions on literature's role in shaping cultural memory and historical discourse, reinforcing the significance of fiction as a space for contesting and rewriting history.

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