

INTERPRETATION OF MILAN KUNDERA'S *THE FAREWELL WALTZ* FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ETHICAL LITERARY CRITICISM

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- **ABSTRACT:** Nie Zhenzhao, a distinguished Chinese scholar, has constructed the theory of literary ethics based on the study of Chinese and Western ethics. Nie's theory provides a new perspective for literary research. In *The Farewell Waltz*, there are many kinds of ethical imbalance, such as the distortion of love ethics, the deformity of life ethics, the decline of family ethics and the loss of professional ethics. Taking Nie's theory of ethical literary criticism as the perspective, we can analyze these phenomena of ethical imbalance in the novel. This is very beneficial for us to explore Kundera's ethical tendency.
- **KEYWORDS:** Milan Kundera; *The Farewell Waltz*; Nie Zhenzhao; ethical literary criticism; ethical imbalance.

Introduction

Originally written in Czech in Bohemia, *The Farewell Waltz* was one of the early novels written by Milan Kundera. Although not a famous one among Kundera's novel series, it was the most favorable one for the author himself. Kundera has once confessed that "writing it (*The Farewell Waltz*) was more fun than writing other novels" (Kundera, 2019, p.116) Based on the structural form of Viennese waltzes, Kundera has used the narrative techniques of juxtaposition and polyphonic in creating *The Farewell Waltz*. Through these efforts, Kundera has connected different events happening to multiple characters together organically. Structurally, *The Farewell waltz* is different from Kundera's other novels during the Czech period. In the novel, Kundera changed the structure of the previous seven paragraphs and divided the chapters into five parts in chronological order. This attempt reflected Kundera's continuous innovation in his novel creation. As an important perspective of literature research, ethics has forged an inextricable bond with literature since ancient times. After years of continuous research, Chinese scholar Nie Zhenzhao created the theory of literary ethics. In *The Farewell Waltz*, there are many kinds of ethical imbalance, such as the distortion of love ethics, the deformity of life ethics, the decline of family ethics and the loss of professional ethics. Taking Nie's literary theory as

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the perspective, we can analyze the phenomenon of ethical imbalance in the novel. The study is very beneficial since it can pry out Kundera's ethical tendency.

A brief overview of Nie Zhenzhao's theory of ethical literary criticism

As an important perspective of literature research, ethics has forged an inextricable bond with literature since ancient times. Ancient Greek philosophers Socrates, Plato and Aristotle has used literary forms to express their ethical thinking about life. By the 1970s, literary ethics, as a new critical perspective, became popular in the European and American academic circles. It mainly focused on the relationship between literature and ethics with the purpose of exploring the ethical meaning in literary works. In 1999, the well-known *PLMA-Publications of the Modern Language Association* has established a new column of called "Ethics and Literature Research", which was intended to conduct in-depth investigation of the relationship between literature and ethics. After entering the 21st century, the literary ethics research in European and American countries has entered a new stage. A group of scholars led by Marshall Gregory became the backbone of the development of disciplines. According to Gregory, literary narrative "sets a model through people's behavior and attitude, and influences people's spirit and temperament by guiding us how to get rid of various dilemma of life and summarize the ethical judgments of various behaviors" (Gregory, 2004, p.284). His view has been unanimously recognized by the academic community. Today, after decades of development, Western literature theory has matured, becoming an important perspective of literary criticism.

Being a distinguished professor at the School of Foreign Languages of Zhejiang University, Nie Zhenzhao is the editor-in-chief of *Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature* and *Forum for World Literature Studies*. Nie's outstanding contribution is that he has established the theory of "Ethical Literary Criticism". As early as 2004, literary ethics was identified as a method of literary criticism by the Chinese academic circle. Nie's "Literary Ethical Criticism: A New Exploration of Literary Criticism Methods" (Nie, 2004) was regarded as a sign of the rise of Chinese ethical literary criticism because it has put forward the methodology of ethical literary criticism in China for the first time, and has discussed the theoretical basis, object and content of ethical literary criticism. Being the earliest journal included by A&HCI in China, *Foreign Literature Studies* is a prestigious journal of foreign literature studies. Nie has taken the opportunity of serving as the chief editor of the journal to open the column of "Literary Ethics Criticism Research". This effort has encouraged Chinese scholars to engage in literary ethics research. Under Nie's advocacy, the research on literary ethics in China has been flourishing. Nie's theory of literary ethics has also had a great influence in western countries as well. Claude Rawson, a lecture professor at Yale University and one of the Academicians of American Academy of Arts and Sciences, has praised Nie as "father of ethical literary criticism". Many famous academic journals in the field of literature research have successively launched special issues or publishing review articles to comment and study Nie's ethical literary criticism, including *Times Literary Supplement*, *Arcadia*, *Style*, *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and*

Culture, etc. In short, Nie's theory of literary ethics provides a new perspective for literary research.

Literature review of Kundera's *The Farewell Waltz*

As a famous contemporary novelist, Milan Kundera has attracted the attention of many literary critics. Throughout the previous research achievements, researchers mainly focused on the perspectives of writing skills, thematic analysis, philosophical thought and symbolic metaphor. They "have conducted comprehensive research on Kundera's novels and the research perspectives have experienced a process of gradually transforming from a single political ideological criticism to a pluralistic one" (Zhao, 2023, p.137). As one of Kundera's early novels, *The Farewell Waltz* embodies the main characteristics of Kundera's novel creation. Unfortunately, researchers have paid less attention to this novel. Only a few related papers have been published. Throughout the relevant research results, the perspective mainly focuses on the ethical analysis of the characters' behaviors. In the novel, Dr. Skreta has attracted the attention of researchers. Some scholars have made an ethical analysis of his behavior as a doctor from the perspective of ethics. In "Individuals, humanity, and reproductive medicine: A bioethical reading of Milan Kundera's *Farewell Waltz*", Bacchini analyzed the causes of Dr. Skreta's unethical behaviors. In Bacchini's viewpoint, Skreta "projects his moral concerns onto the wrong ontological level, paying no attention to single individuals but to an abstraction called 'humanity'" (Bacchini, 2012, p.101). In "Knowledge and morality in Kundera's novel *The Farewell Waltz*", Gluchman made an ethical analysis of Dr. Skreta in *The Farewell Waltz*. According to the author, "Dr. Skreta waged a latent personal "moral war" against the totalitarian regime. This was also reflected in his opposition to the preferred morality of socialist health care professionals" (Gluchman, 2021, p.391). He made a different conclusion by saying that Dr. Skreta has contributed to the future of the country. Of all the female characters in the novel, Mrs. Klima is the one most worth studying. Using the theory of the gaze, Liu analyzed the image of Mrs. Klima in *The Farewell Waltz*. According to Liu, "Milan Kundera deeply described the sleeping and awaking process of female's self-consciousness under the oppression of patriarchy" (Liu, 2017, p.95). In the previous studies, no researchers have analyzed the ethical imbalance in *The Farewell Waltz* from the perspective of ethical literary criticism. Therefore, the topic of this paper is innovative.

Ethical imbalances in *The Farewell Waltz*

The distortion of love ethics

Complex emotional entanglements are an important narrative theme in *The Farewell Waltz*. The love ethics of almost all characters in the novel is distorted, which serves as the internal cause of their respective love tragedies. Klima went to a spa town to perform,

during which he had a one-night love affair with Ruzena. After the romance, he tried every means to separate himself from his lover. He refused to respond to Ruzena's letters and avoided to meet her when she went to the theater. In fact, Ruzena did not have much impression of Klima. She only had a vague memory of their one-night love affair. However, Ruzena was a girl with a strong material desire. Therefore, she was unwilling to give up this opportunity to achieve success. Her unexpected pregnancy undoubtedly gave her a perfect chance. She spread the news to Klima in the first place, forcing him to come to her immediately. After meeting with Lucina, Klima tried to suppress his inner disgust. He used all kinds of sweet words to compliment her and lied that he had been longing for her for two months. After being repeatedly rejected for an abortion, Klima's mental state nearly collapsed. In fact, Ruzena's baby wasn't Klima's. To gain wealth and status, she hid this fact intentionally. Later, Ruzena met Bertlef. Despite his old appearance, she was deeply attracted by his financial resources. During the middle of the concert, she was taken to the suite and willingly had sex with the rich American. The incident has changed Ruzena's mind completely. She volunteered to inform Klima that she agreed to have an abortion because she had found a richer man to rely on and no longer needed to use the baby as a bargaining chip for her future. From the above analysis, we can make a reasonable conclusion that Ruzena's attitude toward love is full of hypocrisy and calculation. Her love ethic is extremely distorted and mutated.

Similarly, Klima and Kamila's marriage was surrounded by lies. Klima has always stressed his love for his wife. However, he used every opportunity to seduce young women. What's more, he sought a justification for his cheating and infidelity, proclaiming that "every new infidelity makes me love her (Kamila) more than ever" (Kundera, 2013, p.35). Because of Klima's deformed love ethic, Kamila lived in anxiety. Her mind was filled with suspicion and jealousy all day long, and her mental state became sensitive and abnormal. She paid close attention to every word and deed by Klima with an inquisitive eye, which led her to secretly go to the spa town to investigate his affair. It is precisely because of Klima's uninhibited love ethic that caused Kamila's tragedy.

Compared with other characters, Franzichek was a persistent pursuer of love. Although he was much younger than Ruzena, he regarded her as the only one in his love world. After discovering Ruzena's relationship with Klima, he chose to follow and monitor. At the end of the story, when he learned that his girlfriend was pregnant, he was willing to accept responsibility. Unfortunately, Ruzena was a materialistic egoist. As a poor electrical repairman, he was never chosen. He begged his girlfriend not to kill the baby. After being rejected, he hysterically ran to the hot spring center and made a scene, which eventually led to Ruzena's death by taking poison.

Through the above analysis, we can find a serious distortion in people's love ethics. It is precisely because of the lack of a correct guidance of love ethics that people mistakenly associate love with material, fame and wealth, selfish desires and other factors, resulting in a deformed view of love. As a literary master who paid attention to real life, Kundera was obviously aware of all kinds of evil consequences brought about by the imbalance of love ethics. Therefore, he used the novel as a medium to present this problem. Through those negative love tragedies in *The Farewell Waltz*, Kundera inspired readers to re-examine the

value of love to find a rational love ethics. Unfortunately, Kundera could not put forward a paradigm of love for reference, which was also a deficiency in his love narrative. The ideal state of love is the long-last companionship of each other. True love should not be tainted with money and other worldly things. Of course, a lasting relationship requires both parties to work together, and only one party's persistence is not enough. The love tragedy of some characters in the novel originates from their blind insistence on love. Only by giving up a love that does not belong to you, can you get your own true love.

The deformity of life ethics

According to Schweitzer: "Good is to preserve life, to promote life, to make developable life realize its highest value. Evil is to destroy life, harm life and suppress the development of life. This is a necessary, universal and absolute ethical principle" (Schweizer, 1996, p.9). Under the influence of this idea, he put forward the ethical philosophy of "reverence for life". In *The Farewell Waltz*, people show indifference and disregard for the value of life, which is completely contrary to Schweitzer's life ethics. After learning that Ruzena was pregnant, Klima was very frightened. So, he consulted his friends for advice. The guitarist suggested staging a car accident to kill Ruzena. Fearing the consequences, Klima rejected the advice. However, he pictured Ruzena being killed in his mind and felt a thrill of ecstasy. The lives of Ruzena and the unborn baby were worth nothing to Klima, who cared only about himself. Jakub's life changed when he was arrested and imprisoned during a political event. He was lost in grief and despondent about his future. During the most difficult period of his life, Jakub had suicidal thoughts. Therefore, he asked Skreta for a poison to end his life when he could not bear the pain. According to common sense, Skreta would have refused to give him poison and advised him not to commit suicide. But to the consternation of us readers, Skreta did not hesitate to agree to his request. On the surface, this was a favor to Jakub, but it was in essence an extreme disregard for the value of his life. If the guitarist, Klima, and Skreta's attitude toward life was only reflected in the level of consciousness, then Jakub's behavior was to put this idea into practice. Because of a quarrel with Ruzena, Jakub subconsciously paid attention to her. Later, Jakub noticed a bottle of calming potion she had left on the table. Intrigued, Jakub opened the bottle and found a pale blue pill with a shape and color similar to the poison he had kept. For some unknown reason, he put the poison in his pocket into the bottle. Later, Ruzena returned to the restaurant to pick up the bottle. Although Jakub did try to stop her, he eventually let her take the bottle. At the time of the incident, Jakub also had a struggle in his mind. He wanted to tell Lucina the truth. But at this critical moment of life and death, he was thinking of his own interests, and therefore missed the opportunity to save her life. Later, Jakub's conscience and evil thoughts struggled constantly. This was not due to his respect for the value of life, but simply to find an excuse to face his own conscience. However, when Jakub met Ruzena, who was sitting in the same row at the concert, he failed to explain the situation and lost the last chance to save her life. In this way, Jakub, who boasted of his high morals, pulled

off a masterful murder. To the shock of the readers, he did not feel guilty for his actions of killing two innocent lives. Instead, he left the country that displeased him with a happy and relaxed mood. Jakub murdered a stranger who had no deep hatred with him, and took the murder as an experiment to test human nature. This kind of anti-human behavior was extremely hateful. After Ruzena's death, a detective from the police department came to investigate. The case was suspicious. However, the detective determined to end the case as soon as possible. Olga, the only one who knew the truth, did not come out to clarify things because of her close relationship with Jakub. In a sense, they were all accomplices in the murder of Ruzena's life. In the novel, Bertlef was the only one who doubted about Ruzena's death. However, under the siege of a group of people who ignored the value of life ethics, he appeared powerless and had to compromise with the inspector. Throughout the ages, there have been numerous cases in which human lives have been disregarded. Kundera bitterly pointed out that "if it were possible for anyone to kill people secretly and from a distance, the human race would be extinct in a few minutes" (Kundera, 2013, p.300). For everyone, life is short but beautiful. Only with a heart that reveres life can we feel the nobility of life.

The decline of family ethics

In *The Farewell Waltz*, people's concept of family ethics is very indifferent. Ruzena's father came to visit his daughter. Under normal circumstances, a daughter is a father's sweet little cotton-padded jacket. However, Ruzena was disgusted by her father's visit. When her father talked to her, she always dealt with it absent-mindedly, concentrating on her grooming. Ruzena's indifference to her father essentially reflected her disdain and negation of traditional filial piety. The chaos of ethical relations is also a reflection of the decline of family ethics. To obtain an American passport, Skreta deliberately tried to identify Bertleff, who was only a few years older than him, as his stepfather. Ironically, he was fifteen years older than Mrs. Bertlef. What's more, Bertlef's newborn son (John) was created by Skreta using his own sperm and Mrs. Bertlef's egg. From a physiological point of view, Skreta was John's real father. However, he regarded John as his brother for profit, regardless of normal family ethics. This kind of chaotic ethical relationship makes readers feel sad for the loss of family morality. In the novel, the emotional incest between Olga and her adoptive father Jakub was also an example of the variation of family ethics. Olga, who lacked father's love since childhood, had a strange feeling for her adoptive father. For years, she had repressed her unnatural fantasies. When Jakub came to visit her, Olga's pent-up emotions suddenly burst out. She seduced her adoptive father and gave up her virginity. Olga's outrageous behavior may be caused by years of inner emotional repression. While Jakub, who has always advertised family ethics, did not show a hint of refusal when his adopted daughter volunteered to give her virginity. Thus, Jakub was a false moral defender. He was more hateful than those who openly oppose family ethics. In *The Farewell Waltz*, Kundera presented the ethical problems of family to readers through vivid characters, which aroused people's thinking about their own moral dilemma. Taking

the novel as a mirror, we should be strict in self-discipline to maintain a harmonious relationship with our families. Besides, we should prevent incest from happening, and contribute to the stability of our families.

The loss of professional ethics

In *The Farewell Waltz*, there are a group of characters who have lost their professional ethics, and Dr. Skreta is one of the most typical representatives. He led a slow lifestyle and had no sense of time conception. For example, he was once two hours late for work because he argued with people on the street about some unimportant topics. When Bertlef came with Klima to ask for help, he immediately left the waiting line of patients in the clinic and went upstairs to talk with them in his suite. Skreta's disregard for his patients' time is an abhorrent violation of medical ethics. After knowing Klima's requirements, he used his power for personal needs. In chapter three, Jakub visited unexpectedly. Skreta was so busy that he let his friend dress up as a doctor and enter the gynecological examination room with him. In doing so, he violated the privacy of female patients and was another example of his professional ethics. In addition, when a good-looking woman came in for examination, Skreta took advantage of being a doctor to touch her body. His behavior was very flirtatious, no different from a gangster. What's more, when treating infertility for female patients, Skreta secretly packed his semen in a syringe and injected it into the abdomen of female patients by means of a gynecology examination, resulting in many of them becoming pregnant with his children. "Indifferent, breaching confidentiality, a manipulator, in no way empathetic, he is not interested in the patients' choices but instead devoted to calling in personal favors" (Bacchini, 2012, p.103). His immoral behavior deceived many patients, and laid the root for the breakdown of many families in the future. At the end of the novel, to distance himself from Ruzena's death, Skreta once again defied the doctor's professional ethics by refusing to identify the source of the poison. Such a person with no sense of responsibility and shame had become a respected famous doctor, which was ridiculous. In the novel, Klima is also a person with a weak sense of professional ethics. To get Ruzena to have an abortion, he falsely touted Skreta, who chaired the committee responsible for abortion. Knowing that the doctor was interested in music, Klima offered to hold a concert with him. In fact, Skreta was only a musical art amateur, Klima's behavior was not only a betrayal of the art, but also a manifestation of his lack of professional ethics. The loss of professional ethics has destroyed the stability of society and caused a huge negative impact on society.

In addition to the above ethical imbalance, the novel also involved the category of public ethics and gender ethics. For example, the documentary director broke into the women's hot spring room without the permission of the parties and took photos of a group of naked guests. Except for Olga, who showed strong disgust, the other middle-aged women were fearless, even shameless, in taunting and attacking their companions. The insults and disregard for women's bodies have also reached an eye-popping level.

Conclusion

Each era has its own characteristic ethical values. Therefore, the development of ethical literary criticism is also in a dynamic process of change. The criticism of the old ethical concepts is the internal motivation to promote its development. In literary creation, there are two ways for writers to express ethical ideas. One is to mold some heroic models in the works that follow the mainstream ethics, and guide the readers to establish ethical values that adapt to the development of The Times. The other is to deepen readers' cognition of ethics through questioning the abnormal ethics in society to realize the educational function of literature from the opposite side. Of these two categories of writers, Kundera belongs to the latter. Since he has experienced many obstacles in life, he is used to the fickleness of the world. Rich life experience has cultivated his keen insight and the ability of reverse thinking, which also doomed him to be unable to obey the traditional ethics blindly.

Nie believes that there is a pair of contradictory Sphinx factor in everyone's consciousness, namely "human factor" and "animal factor". In essence, human factor is mainly derived from the rational thinking. It is subject to the normal ethics and is an important symbol of human beings. The animal factor is driven by people's will to be free. It "belongs to the category of physiological activities. It is a desire for instinct for survival and enjoyment" (Nie, 2011, p.9). The human factor and animal factor are always in the state of confrontation. When the human factor is at the peak, the human consciousness is within the scope of ethical control. Conversely, people would become the existence of beast-like. In *The Farewell Waltz*, Kundera has questioned some abnormal ethics existing in modern society, which has triggered our thinking about many ethical propositions. Those ethical imbalances mainly stemmed from the fact that the animal factors suppress the human factors in the thinking of the parties. The experience of the characters in the novel reminds us to control the animal factors in our mind and to look at the world with a rational attitude. Of course, Kundera's cognition of some ethical propositions was limited to a certain extent. For example, he was too pessimistic in his attitude towards love and bioethics. For him, everything in the world was meaningless. Therefore, pure love and valuable life was not accessible. Despite this, Kundera's ethical thought was instructive from the perspective of a panoramic view. After experiencing various aspects of the world, he criticized the old ethical thoughts from a dialectical perspective, which objectively promoted the optimization and development of ethical thoughts. Literary works often convey the social responsibility of writers. Kundera integrated his ethical perception of life into the creation of the novel, which fully reflected his sense of ethical responsibility. The ethical thoughts in Kundera's novels give us a lot of valuable enlightenment. It helps us to make rational choices when facing ethical choices.

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- **RESUMO:** *Nie Zhenzhao, um ilustre estudioso chinês, construiu a teoria da ética literária com base no estudo da ética chinesa e ocidental. A teoria de Nie oferece uma nova perspectiva para a pesquisa literária. Em A Valsa dos Adeuses existem muitos tipos de desequilíbrio ético, como a distorção da ética do amor, a deformidade da ética da vida, o declínio da ética familiar e a perda da ética profissional. Tomando como perspectiva a teoria da crítica literária ética de Nie, podemos analisar esses fenômenos de desequilíbrio ético no romance. Isto é muito benéfico para explorarmos a tendência ética de Kundera.*
- **PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Milan Kundera; A Valsa dos Adeuses; Nie Zhenzhao; crítica literária ética; desequilíbrio ético.*

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