

A Literature Review on the Artistic Features of Mo Yan's Novel Sandalwood Death (2004–2023)

Aiwei He, Jingjing Zheng, Xinyan Weng

Fuzhou University of International Studies and Trade, Fuzhou, Fujian, China

Abstract: Sandalwood Death represents Mo Yan's "conscious and significant retreat" and holds profound literary value. Researchers focusing on the novel's artistic expression primarily explore its cultural connotations and the ambiguity and complexity of its characters. This paper aims to analyze the novel from four main perspectives: character portrayal, structural characteristics, narrative features, and linguistic style. These aspects serve as the primary research directions for the artistic features of Sandalwood Death. By reviewing and summarizing various scholars' discussions on this topic, this study outlines the current state of research on Sandalwood Death and provides a brief evaluation.

Keywords: Sandalwood Death; character portrayal; structural characteristics; narrative features; linguistic style

1. Introduction

Sandalwood Death is one of Mo Yan's most renowned works, attracting widespread attention and discussion since its publication. I have selected journal articles published between 2004 and 2023 that focus on this novel. After organizing and analyzing these studies, I found that over a hundred journal articles have been published during this period, primarily exploring the novel's artistic features, including character portrayal, structural characteristics, narrative features, and linguistic style. These studies examine the novel from multiple perspectives and dimensions. From these, I have chosen 14 representative journal articles to review, analyze, and evaluate, aiming to further explore the artistic features of Sandalwood Death.

2. A Review of Research on the Artistic Features of Sandalwood Death

2.1 Character Portrayal

Sandalwood Death presents a diverse array of vividly depicted characters, each carrying profound symbolic meaning. Zou Lin, in *Methods of Characterizing Beauty and Ugliness in Sandalwood Death*, analyzes the characters from the perspective of beauty and ugliness. She argues that the novel employs a "circular contrast structure of beauty and ugliness" to highlight the opposition between good and evil, using ugliness to accentuate beauty and to satirize the darkness of society[1]. Similarly, Wang Nan's *Analysis of Character Images in Mo Yan's Sandalwood Death* emphasizes the coexistence of beauty and ugliness, pointing out the complexity and multidimensionality of characters such as Sun Meiniang, Sun Bing, Zhao Jia, Qian Ding, and Zhao Xiaojia. Through their grotesque appearances, the novel underscores the value of kindness[2].

Zhao Yunjie, in *A Study on the Artistic Features of Mo Yan's Novel Sandalwood Death*, argues that the novel breaks away from the traditional binary opposition in character construction, making the characters more three-dimensional[3]. For example, Sun Bing, though reckless and comical, embodies heroic spirit, choosing to sacrifice himself to protect his fellow villagers. Meanwhile, Qian Ding, caught in the dilemmas of feudal autocracy, ultimately awakens to resistance after witnessing brutal massacres. By portraying characters with layered personalities, Mo Yan enhances their depth and complexity.

Among these perspectives, the first two scholars focus on the aesthetic analysis of character portrayal, examining the themes of beauty and ugliness in the novel to reveal deeper character implications and convey the novel's profound meaning. The third scholar, however, approaches character portrayal from the perspective of diversity, highlighting Sandalwood Death's distinctive approach to shaping its characters.

2.2 Structural Characteristics

The narrative structure of Sandalwood Death is a significant highlight, drawing the attention of numerous scholars. Feng Yuan, in *Retreat and Advance—A Discussion on the Narrative Art and Meaning of Sandalwood Death*, points out that the novel adopts a "phoenix head—pig belly—leopard tail" structure, which features a captivating beginning, a substantial middle section, and a swift, impactful ending. This structure ensures that the narrative remains both compact and dynamic.

Zhao Yunjie, in *A Study on the Artistic Features of Mo Yan's Novel Sandalwood Death*, agrees with this structural analysis and further argues that the novel exhibits a polyphonic structure, where the local Maoqiang opera is interwoven

throughout, enhancing the tension of the narrative. In another study, *Formless as an Elephant, Skillful as Simplicity — On the Artistic Structure of Sandalwood Death*, Zhao Yunjie further asserts that Mo Yan blends traditional Eastern structural techniques with Western stream-of-consciousness methods, using characters' inner monologues to propel the plot forward, thereby breaking away from conventional narrative models.

Zhang Yingpei, in *New Breakthroughs in the Language, Content Structure, and Ideological Depth of Contemporary Novels—A Review of Mo Yan's Sandalwood Death*, highlights that the novel begins with characters recounting events, creating a naturally cohesive structure with an innovative approach. Additionally, he observes that the novel seamlessly integrates historical and modern historical facts, enhancing the realism of its narration[4].

Overall, scholarly research on the structural characteristics of *Sandalwood Death* largely focuses on its tripartite structure—"phoenix head, pig belly, leopard tail." Many scholars share similar views on this aspect. However, Zhao Yunjie's emphasis on Mo Yan's application of "Western stream-of-consciousness techniques" introduces a fresh perspective, marking a significant advancement and innovation in the study of the novel's structure.

2.3 Narrative Features

The unique narrative techniques of *Sandalwood Death*, particularly its constantly shifting narrative perspectives, contribute to its strong narrative tension. Zhao Yunjie, in *Formless as an Elephant, Skillful as Simplicity—On the Artistic Structure of Sandalwood Death*, highlights that the novel employs multiple narrative perspectives, creating an overlapping and interwoven narrative sequence[5]. This broadens the scope of storytelling and enhances its artistic tension.

Mei Xinyin, in *A Study on the Narrative Logic and Life Forms in Sandalwood Death*, explores the novel's fundamental narrative sequences, embedded sequences, and dual-sided narrative sequences, emphasizing its internal logic[6]. Mei's research presents a fresh and distinctive analytical perspective.

Regarding narrative perspectives, Yang Zhe points out that different sections of the novel adopt first-person, third-person omniscient, and limited perspectives, which drive the plot toward its climax. Zhou Boya further analyzes the novel's use of limited, omniscient, and fluid perspectives[7]. Zhou also introduces the concept of the child's perspective as an innovative narrative technique, arguing that it employs innocence to reflect the novel's darker realities.

Overall, scholars focusing on the narrative features of *Sandalwood Death* predominantly analyze its shifting narrative perspectives. Zhou Boya's introduction of the child's perspective represents a significant research advancement, while Zhao Yunjie and Mei Xinyin's studies on narrative sequencing bring forth novel insights[8]. The latter's emphasis on the novel's internal narrative logic is particularly profound and innovative, expanding the breadth of scholarly research on the narrative features of *Sandalwood Death*.

2.4 Linguistic Features

The language style of *Sandalwood Death* is distinctive, rich in auditory beauty, rhetorical beauty, and colloquial aesthetics. Sun Jinfang argues that the novel enhances its narrative tone through the structured arrangement of words and rhythmic phrasing[9].

Regarding rhetorical techniques, Zhang Haifen highlights the innovative use of exaggeration, which intensifies emotional expression and realism in the novel[10]. Sun Qi and Wang Jiaojiao analyze variations in metaphor, which create a sense of linguistic defamiliarization, enhancing character portrayal and emotional depth[11]. Cao Dongqin explores the innovative use of descriptive rhetoric, including phonetic, color, shape, and taste imitations, making the language more vivid and expressive[12]. Additionally, Ji Xinyang focus on the extensive use of idioms, dialects, proverbs, and folk sayings, which reinforce the novel's local flavor and give its language a strong folkloric quality[13].

In contrast to these affirmative assessments, Li Jianjun criticizes the language of *Sandalwood Death*, arguing that its text is convoluted and rough, its wording arbitrary, its imagery vulgar, and that it suffers from excessive and redundant descriptions, ultimately deeming its linguistic style a failure[14].

3. Research Review and Limitations

Chinese scholars have explored the artistic features of *Sandalwood Death* from multiple perspectives, primarily focusing on character portrayal, structural characteristics, narrative features, and linguistic style. Among these, the structure and language of the novel have been the most frequently studied topics. Scholars such as Feng Yuan, Zhao Yunjie, and Zhang Yingpei have all emphasized the novel's "phoenix head—pig belly—leopard tail" structure. Language studies, on the other hand, have focused on the use of idioms, dialects, and proverbs, highlighting the novel's strong folk characteristics. In terms of character portrayal, research has mainly revolved around the ambiguity of characters and the contrast between beauty and ugliness.

Studies on narrative features are particularly concentrated on narrative perspectives. Scholars such as Zhao Yunjie, Yang Zhe, and Zhou Boya have analyzed the novel's shifting narrative perspectives, with Zhou Boya's concept of the "fluid perspective" being particularly innovative. Additionally, research has also addressed narrative sequencing and internal narrative logic, as seen in Mei Xinyin's analysis, which expands the depth of study in this area.

However, certain limitations remain in the research. Most studies focus on narrative perspectives but have not delved deeply into narrative strategies, especially regarding narrative time and rhythm. Additionally, research on narrative imagery is relatively scarce—while many scholars examine thematic metaphors, they often overlook the narrative function of imagery in the novel.

In conclusion, future research could further explore narrative strategies, narrative time, and narrative imagery to enrich the theoretical study of *Sandalwood Death* and provide a more comprehensive analysis of its narrative art. This would not only deepen the understanding of Mo Yan's novels but also contribute positively to the broader field of modern narrative studies.

4. Research Prospects

In summary, there is still room for further exploration in the study of the narrative features of *Sandalwood Death*, particularly in the areas of narrative perspective, narrative strategies, and narrative imagery. Research on the "fluid perspective" remains limited and has potential for further expansion. In terms of narrative strategies, studies on narrative time, rhythm, and characters' inner monologues are relatively scarce, and further analysis could shed light on their impact on plot development. Additionally, the selection and combination of narrative imagery, as well as its social and folkloric significance, require deeper investigation. Therefore, I will conduct a more systematic study on the narrative artistry of *Sandalwood Death* to supplement existing academic research and broaden the scope of analysis.

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