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**Unveiling the Marginals: A Study Of The Danmei Novel “*Mo Dao Zu Shi* “ As An Outlier In Literature**

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**Abstract:**

Marxists believed that Literature follow ideologies propagated by dominant groups and this gave birth to outcasts in literature. This paper focuses on bringing out the thematic elements in a genre named “Danmei”, which originated in Chinese Web Literature. There is a general notion of public about Danmei literature that they only focus on homoerotic scenes and this paper attempts to rectify this notion by instilling the abundant convictions laid down by this genre in the light of a Danmei novel ‘*Mo Dao Zu Shi*’ written by Mo Xian Tong Xiu. It portrays the story of two protagonists, Lan Wang Ji and Wei Wu Xian who unknowingly falls in love with each other. By scrutinizing the novel, one could imbibe the fact that the author has not ostracized other concepts except ‘love’ but has incorporated binaries, colour imageries and other concepts which shatter the moulds of stereotypes in literature. The paper aims to display the significance of Danmei literature by pointing out the concerns raised by them and tries to prove that they are not worthy to be considered as an outlier in the world of literature.

**Keywords:** Chinese Danmei Literature, Ideological State Apparatus and Repressive State Apparatus

Literature is the slice of life, as a whole it grows and changes from generation to generation. Louis Althusser believed that Literature follow ideologies propagated by dominant groups and this could be the reason for outcasts in literature. Though we have many canons in the world of literature, this paper focuses on bringing out the elements of ISA and RSA in a minor genre named “Danmei” translated as ‘indulgence in beauty’ in English, which originated in Chinese Web Literature. It romanticizes the relationship between two men from a female perspective and is basically penned down by female authors which are targeted towards heterosexual female audiences. There is a general notion of public about Danmei literature that they only focus on homoerotic scenes and this paper attempts to rectify this notion by displaying the presence of Althusser’s concept in the light

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of a Danmei novel ‘*Mo Dao Zu Shi*’ written by Mo Xian Tong Xiu.

**Mo Xiang Ting Xiu and *Mo Dao Zu Shi*:**

Mo Xiang Tong Xiu is an anonymous Chinese author who writes Danmei novels enriched with beautiful metaphors, imageries and lengthy plots. Her style is catchy, simple yet elegant and often tells the story in first person narrative. Despite China’s media censorship for same-sex relationships her three novels *Ren Zha Fanpai Zijiu Xitong*, *Tian Guan Ci Fu* and *Mo Dao Zu Shi* are wildly popular in the country. Each story in her novels takes place in a “cultivation” world, typically with cultivators who possess supernatural abilities and magical entities as the main protagonists. Cultivators are individuals who practice martial and mystical arts through years of routine to develop Qi energy, striving to possess divine power to attain immortality. Usually, Xianxia novels feature pure fantasy elements including the presence of ghosts, demons, beasts and old Chinese architecture acts as a setting for these events.

The novel *Mo Dao Zu Shi* was originally published on Chinese web novel site JJWXC from October 31, 2015- March, 2016 and has gained various adaptations like manhua, audio drama, animation and a web series. It portrays the story of two protagonists, Lan Wang Ji and Wei Wu

Xian in a Xianxia world who unknowingly falls in love with each other and is made to seek for truth under certain circumstances. Wei Wu Xian deviated from the conventional path to Xian, created a Mo Dao (the Demonic path) and was feared by the world for following the steps of unorthodox path. The people described him as selfish, evil and called him ‘Yiling Patriarch’. His decision to stick on to diabolic practices results in the death of his sister and fall of his clan. Though Lan Wangji tried to make him abandon his demonic path, he failed and in the end he was backstabbed by his dearest brother and killed by powerful clans. Years later, he incarnated into the body of a lunatic who was abandoned by clan and is later taken away by Lan Wangji. As the two travel together, they started investigating a series of murders and mysteries which eventually leads back to Wei Wuxian’s past life encounters. The novel has a non linear story line, in which the past timeline follows Wei Wuxian’s life before death, his journey to becoming the Yiling Patriarch and the present chapters follow him after his resurrection, Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian trying to uncover the identity of a murderer. The novel is complex, woven with many subplots, angst, and dark and instills surprise in the reader.

**Louis Althusser:**

Louis Althusser was a French philosopher of political engagement and the

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founder of Marxian structuralism. *For Marx* (1969), *Elements of self criticism* (1974), *Reading capital* (with Etienne Balibar) (1965), and *Lenin and philosophy and other essays* (1971) includes his major works. He attempted to redefine the nature of Ideology and reformulated the base and superstructure through his essay 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' (1971) which was written soon after the revolutionary events of Paris in 1968. For him ideology is not simply a distorted representation of reality in which the subjected classes are being exploited by the ruling class. Instead it plays an active constitutive role in social formation by affecting the material conditions of the society. Ideological components are spread throughout in every field and not all of them are beneficial or productive for the society. In Marxist theory, the state apparatus contains the government, the police, the army, the prison, the court etc. For Althusser, these state apparatus are named as Repressive State Apparatus which maintains the state power. In his book '*Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*' which was initially published in French in 1970 and was translated by Ben Brewster into English, he divides social institutions into categories in relation with the way they operate; as Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) and Repressive State Apparatus (RSA). He quoted Ideological State Apparatuses as "a certain number of realities which present themselves to the

immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions."(marxists.org)

He regarded ISAs as a category which holds the power of the state in a subtle way as it seems to secure the internal consents of its citizens. The ISAs includes the institutions like Education, Religion, Family, Law, Trade Union, Media and Culture. These institutions are formally outside the control of the state, but they serve to transmit the values of the state to interrupt the individuals who are affected by them, to maintain order in a society. Above all, they function in this manner to attain their ultimate aim to reproduce the relations of productions. ISA operates by the means of ideological persuasion which he termed as 'soft power' as they tend to influence the individuals by asserting economic and cultural aspects.

Every society has certain devices, political institutions, to govern the individuals to maintain peace and harmony in the society and political institutions satisfy these needs. These various political agencies like state, government, political parties, law, election has power and they exercise it by force, by influence or by authority. Althusser termed those institutions which assert their power through cohesion on individuals as Repressive State Apparatus (RSA).The power of the state is maintained by these institutions which operate through external

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force. Army, Police and Prisons constitutes the Repressive State Apparatuses. “This is the fact that the (Repressive) State Apparatus functions massively and predominantly by repression (including physical repression), while functioning secondarily by ideology.” (marxists.org) RSA functions collectively as a separate entity to control the behavior of the people in the society both mentally and physically. Unlike ISA, this apparatus displays both the ideology and violence in their functioning. People behave according to the demands made by the state as they are forced or threatened due to the punishments. The role of RSA is to secure the political condition for the action of the ISA using force.

**How ISA and RSA steps into the incidents in novel:**

Danmei literature is probably looked down by many people as it contains plots with homosexuality and Utopian love. Rather than attempting to change the attitudes to homosexuality, Danmei literature uses rich descriptions, extended metaphors and explores a variety of themes like non conformity to traditional gender roles, Death, Family, Politics, Hierarchy, Power, Destabilizing the binaries, Belief and Justice, Folklore etc. There are various concerns raised by Danmei novels and here in this paper I am attempting to trace the elements of ISA and RSA to refute the general notion of people considering Danmei as overly erotic by using the events

in the novel *Mo Dao Zu Shi*. Each character in the novel shows the signs of ISA and RSA but here we are only focusing on the two protagonists.

Wei Wu Xian was left alone in the streets, begging and scraping for food when his Parents died at his young age until he was adopted by Jiang clan. Family plays a crucial role in one’s upbringing and being an orphan Wei Wuxian was unable to receive love and care from both his biological parents and the adopted parents. Despite receiving mistreatment from his adoptive mother Madam Yu, he grew up as a prodigy along with his Jiang siblings, Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli. According to Althusser, family always inscribed certain norms and beliefs to the children as they are grown up. Wei Wuxian was always blamed by Jiang Cheng’s mother for surpassing him in everything through her words “One day, he’ll definitely get our sect into some big trouble!”(226) and in the end Wei Wuxian believed that it was his own fault which led to the downfall of his clan. Instead of giving him recognition and love, she gifts him with a lot of pain and scars and made him doubt about his own actions. Lan Wangji also grew up as an orphan he embodied the virtues of his own clan as he was nurtured and loved by his uncle. Because he has a reputed clan and someone to take care of him, he was able to follow the footsteps of his ancestors by becoming a powerful cultivator.

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In the case of Education, both Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji were extremely brilliant in Daoist principles. According to Daoism, most characters cultivate by using Sword path, which is the conventional and righteous method prescribed by the clans. In the novel, Wei Wuxian decided to give his golden core (an internal alchemy often made through cultivation which helps to attain immortality) to Jiang Cheng due to his gratitude towards the Jiang clan as Jiang Cheng lost his golden core while saving Wei Wuxian. Thus he was forced to give up the regular sword path instead founding the demonic cultivation or dark path in order to survive the extreme environment of the Burial Mounds and acquire enough power to get revenge on the Wen Clan. For Althusser, education system always demands a certain set of rules and regulations to be followed by the students in behalf of the ruling class. He quotes;

“Education system takes kids away during formative years, for 11+ years, 8 hours a day, days a week: and spits them out at different times, have learned different roles according to their function in society: blue collar (exploited), white collar (those who exploit), leaders /elite (create ideologies, agents of repression). School is thought to be natural, neutral, beneficial and indispensable. Education “steeps” them in ideology.”(Marxists.org)

The social class system of adult society is brought into schools where students are judged in their own groups in various categories. The protagonist himself is a victim of such practices when he is blamed and feared by everyone for cultivating in the demonic path. Even at his death people rejoiced and yelled “Good riddance indeed! We finally eliminated this scourge” (5).

Lan Wangji was also unable to stand with Wei Wuxian before his death because his clan forbids the people who cultivate demonic practices. His responsibility to abide his clan rules obstruct him from diving into the truth behind Wei Wuxian’s transformation. Here, Lan Wangji was reluctant to shatter both his education received from his clan and hence could not follow his desire to protect Wei Wuxian. Althusser believed that religion gives a sense of identity to an individual and helps people to adapt to the kinds of social change. Beliefs, Rituals, Emotions and Symbols constitute the elements of religion. Althusser argued that religious values are seen as maintaining the conduct required of the citizens in a democratic state and here, the actions of both protagonists are affected by the religious beliefs existing in the novel. Both use different methods to cultivate immortality; one was hailed and the other was feared. The irony was that while the clans hailed their sword path as “the one right path”, they were using it to

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control each other, instead of using it to do for the well being of the people.

Though Police and Army are not involved in the historical setting of the novel, we could find the old models of these apparatuses which were used to control the behavior of the people. Laws were made by each clan to monitor the conduct of clan members. Lan Wangji's clan had around 4000 rules and he was punished with 33 whip lashes and three year seclusion for standing against his clan and helping Wei Wuxian in the war. Because of his punishment, he could only hear that Wei Wuxian has died in the war which made him to lag his investigation about Wei Wuxian's death. It was only three years later that he went to the place where they fought to search for Wei Wuxian's remains. Wei Wuxian was also kicked out from his Jiang clan as per the law of the clan for betraying them by choosing the demonic path. Wei Wuxian was also declared as a an archenemy of all the clans for using demonic practices, though he used his crafts to help the weak and the poor, as all the clans adhered to the law of cultivation through right path. He even earned a title 'Yiling Patriarch' and the people believed he "had the power to move mountains and empty seas." (6)

**Conclusion:**

Althusser said, an individual passing through different stages in life will be

inculcated in values, beliefs and feelings of the society which ultimately fulfills the demands made by the state. If they ever hadn't experienced any influence from ISA and RSA things would've been different. Wei Wuxian might have encountered a good life if he had lived with his biological parents. He would've never doubted himself if Jiang Cheng's mother never blamed him. If Lan Wangji was in the same situation of Wei Wuxian, he too would've met a different fate. Branding Demonic cultivation as evil both by Daoism and its educational principles changed the life of Wei WuXian and Lan Wangji. Wei Wuxian became a scapegoat for the sins which he never committed as his genuine reason to stick into demonic cultivation was unknown by the public. Lan Wangji being a teenager was not confident enough to break the barriers made by his clans. If practicing Demonic cultivation for societal well being rather than doing evil things was legal in that period, both of them might be able to tackle their issues easily. Also Lan Wangji could help Wei Wuxian in the battle to bring out the true identity of the one who committed all the sins and branded him as a scapegoat. In this way by scrutinizing the novel, one could imbibe the fact that the author has not ostracized other concepts except 'love'. The novel demonstrates situations where ISA and RSA have influenced the actions of the characters which in turn failed to give them an individual autonomy. However, due to the

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impact from these factors (ISA and RSA) their life got tangled up and they were mechanized to move along their life with the ideologies demanded by the dominant people.

Obviously we can observe that all the decisions taken by them and all the actions carried out by them are resultants of the influence from external bodies like Family, Religion, Education and Law. As the novel is abundant with the ideological elements, one can conclude that *Mo Dao Zu Shi* is not worthy to be considered as an outlier in the world of literature.

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