**Male Authors Exalting Mothers Surviving Trauma as a Vehicle for Peace Advocacy: A Comparative Reading of *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* and *To the End of the Land***

Gao Xiu, Danielle Gurevitch

**Abstract:** In describing the greatness of mothers, Mo Yan’s *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* (2001) and David Grossman’s *To the End of the Land* (2008) have much in common: both are written by male authors; both create an image of mothers associated with fortitude, courage, and resolution; both present characters in the context of war; and both narrate national-state history through personal and family narratives. Drawing on Ruddick’s thinking on the connection between women and non-violence and between men and violence, we conclude that the veneration of the mother does not directly involve the authors in political writing but is an effective expression of their wish for peace and social stability. The narratives of selfless mothers enduring traumatic experiences is designed to foster readers’ empathy and, by implication, to advocate harmony among nations, while the land, like maternal love, is depicted as providing an effective way to avoid violence.

**Keywords:** comparative reading, male narration, veneration of mother, peace advocacy

1. **Introduction**

Mo Yan’s novel *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* was first published in Chinese in 1995 and in English translation in 2004. Conservative elements in Chinese society strongly denounced the book (Huang, 2010), and some critics, such as Beibei and Yihong (1996) found it provocative. It was also accused of having “contaminated society, poisoned the mind, and harmed the reader with vulgar, obscene, dirty, and ugly contents” (Chan, 2000: 499) and condemned for presenting an image of mothers inconsistent with traditional ideals. Mo Yan soon became the most controversial writer in China. However, he is an internationally renowned writer who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2012 and he has offered a reasonable justification for the title of the work. In light of this, most critics have reacted relatively cautiously to the novel and a diversity range of views have emerged.

Israeli author David Grossman’s *To the End of the Land* — originally published in 2008 in Hebrew as *Isha Borachat Mi-Bsora* (“A Woman Fleeing from News”) — has much in common with Mo Yan’s novel, although it is from another culture, a relatively remote one at that. As a literary work dealing with political conservatism, it has attracted both admiration (e.g., Barmea, 2006; Melamed, 2008) and criticism (e.g., Gluzman, 2008; Milner, 2013). Olment argues that the “novel’s most politically charged aspect concerns the way it constitutes the drama of Israeli motherhood and how Israeli mothers function as active agents of the gendered national order” (2016: 368). Grossman places considerable emphasis on Israeli society and politics and touches upon sensitive contemporary issues in Israel, such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the occupied territories, and Holocaust survivors.

Both novels are works of realist fictions based on historical realities, shedding shed light on issues of rampant violence, religious fanaticism, and an impending sense of disaster. These narratives are blended with folk beliefs and imaginations, about which few in their respective readerships were aware at the time they were published. In his incisive writing, Mo Yan principally attacks feudal patriarchal ideology and empathizes with ordinary people’s sufferings caused by wars between Chinese political parties. Consequently, Mo Yan has been viewed as “the bane of China’s official establishment” (Yan, 2011: vii) and the sale of more than one of his works has been blocked in China. Grossman, a left-wing political activist, attacks the prevailing belief in the Israel of the time that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would resolve itself over time and warns that neither the government nor the people can ignore the endless conflict over land and authority. Grossman, like Yo Man, experienced considerable criticism from Israeli authorities and mainstream media. However, both Mo Yan and Grossman have won much appreciation outside of their own countries and praise for their courageous social critiques.

Both works inherit the literary tradition of the grand historical narration of war but also break with the stereotyped narrative frameworks of such novels. War in these two works is presented not as an assembly of historical events and numbers, but as a textual reconstruction of an individual’s subjective emotions and experiences. The individual is no longer the hero commonly seen in the war literature of the past, but an ordinary person. The key theme common to both novels is the veneration of women, especially mothers, through the narration of their traumatic experiences.

This comparative analysis of these works revolves around the following issues: how the male authors write about mothers – that is, how those mothers relate to each other, given the temporal and spatial differences between them; and the role the depiction of the mothers plays in protesting against war and violence.

1. **Activism in Writing: Women Writing About Family, Men Writing About War**

Nobel literature laureate V.S. Naipaul once said that “woman write about the domestic and men write about the universal” (Lee, 2000), a view later discussed by Piper and So in their 2016 article “Woman write about family, men write about war,” noting that although the number of women writers is rising, the stereotypes about their writing in literary reviews still exist, based on analysis of *New York Times* book reviews since 2000. The authors argue that their findings do not mean that women write more about domestic literature and matters of the heart while men write about “serious” universal issues such as politics and war, but simply reflect the reviews that appear in the newspaper they examined. What surprised them was to find that the data from the latter review period they examined (2010–2015) were not much different. It emerges that the division between masculine and feminine and the private and the public has not really changed since the nineteenth century: women are still defined as writers on “emotional” and “maternal” issues and men are defined as writers on science and issues related to the state of the nation (Piper and So, 2016).[[1]](#footnote-1) Since woman are pigeonholed through gender, their actual artistic merits are denigrated and “titles by female authors [are] being sold at less than half the price of those by their male counterparts, despite most readers of fiction actually being woman” (Lee, 2000).

Mo Yan and Grossman are men who are both politically involved activists. Mo Yan’s *Red Sorghum* (1987) gained renown through its 1988 Chinese film adaptation directed by Zhang Yimou that reaped critical and box office rewards in the West. Critics said that the work “changed the literary landscape…[i]n the process of probing China’s myths, official and popular, and some of the darker corners of Chinese society” (Mo Yan, 2011: vii).

Similarly, David Grossman’s politically confrontational 1983 novel *Hiyuch Ha-Gedi* (“The Smile of the Lamb”) was turned into a movie by Shimon Dotan in 1986. Both it and 1987’s *Ha-Zman Ha-Tzahov* (“The Yellow Wind”) were adapted into plays directed by Ilan Ronen in 2019. *Ha-Zman Ha-Tzahov* is Grossman’s emotional document of a journey he took in the West Bank during the spring of 1987, on the eve of Independence Day and marking the twentieth anniversary of the Six-Day War. It was originally published in 14 installments of chapters in the *Koteret Rashit* newspaper in 1987 and the book was published in June of the same year, with five chapters added prior to the outbreak of the First Intifada in December 1987 and lasted until 1993.

The sufferings of the mother in *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* begin “[d]uring the period of Republic of China, the society was ruled in the darkness, natural disasters occurred frequently and, most importantly, the Japanese aggressors invaded” (Huang, 2010: 153). Mo’s novel spans many significant historical events in China, most notably the horrors of the Japanese invasion, the bitter civil war between Mao and Chiang’s forces, the subsequent land reform process, the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, and the Reform and Opening-Up eras. The narration addresses the vicissitudes of the Shangguan family that resemble those of all Chinese people in this historical tumult.

The narrative opens amidst the backdrop of the Japanese invasion and mass slaughter. Sima Ting, steward of the town’s leading gentry family, fires warning shots accompanied by constant shouts that “the Japs are coming,” while Sha Yueliang, leader of the Donkey Musket Band during the War of Resistance (but who later becomes a traitor) and his group of bandits prepare to ambush the Japanese army by the river.

The opening events in Grossman’s novel place the adolescent Ora, through no fault of her own, at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. After 47 pages of dialogue between Ora, Ilan, and Avaram, the latter hospitalized just as the 1967 Arab-Israeli War breaks out, ill and worried that Israel will be destroyed, much of the novel is devoted to an extended hike that Ora and Avram, her younger son Ofer’s biological father, go on. During this trek, Ora and Avaram’s conversation traces the successive wars Israelis have endured and the traumas those wars have produced.

Hoffmann argues that “[i]n this sense, the novel can be read as an extended present of the moment of speech that allows for recall and even mastery of traumatic histories” (2012: 48). Meanwhile, through the descriptions of the changes observed in Sami, the Arab taxi driver who has been a loyal and patient friend to Ora’s family for many years, and his attitude toward Ora when driving her son, Ofer, to the latter’s military assembly point, Grossman reveals the personal plights of Arab and Jewish Israelis as both friends and foes. A combination of political awareness, sensitivity to and sense of responsibility toward human rights issues drives the writer to fashion his invective against violence and atrocities.

The nature of this feminist style of protest and the voicing of these frustrations prompts the question why these two world-renowned and distinguished novelists, who have earned reputations for gifted storytelling and mastery of clear and incisive language, decided to portray these conflicts through two mother-figure protagonists. They speak “from the womb” in voices expressing not rationality but emotion and empathy. It is a perspective mostly associated with the feminine realm, but one not to be taken lightly since, as Hudson et al. point out, “what happens to women affects the security, stability, prosperity, bellicosity, corruption, health, regime type, and (yes) the power of the state. The days when one could claim that the situation of women had nothing to do with matters of national or international security are, frankly, over” (2012: 1).

Simone de Beauvoir’s 1949 monumental *Le Deuxième Sexe*, considered a seminal work of the modern feminist revolution, claims that the definition of feminine roles has been determined throughout history by men, who have established their authority and control over women and made them solely responsible for domestic work (1949: 82). De Beauvoir questions how a woman can become whole and free when she is the “eternal other.” Her otherness is fundamentally different from any other sort since it is both due to the superiority that man exerts over her, and her biological weakness, dependence, and passivity as the negative, other object to men’s “real” human subjectivity (1949: 53).

From a young age, girls continually receive messaging preparing them to be women in a world of men. The physiological differences between the genders mark the cultural and social roles assigned to women. By the virtue of these attitudes, the five-year-old Shangguan Lu, who becomes the mother-protagonist in Mo’s novel, can bear the sufferings caused by her feet being bound to cater for male preferences, with the warning that “girls who don’t bind their feet grow up to be big-footed spinsters that nobody wants” (Mo, 2011: 66). Women have accepted being men’s subordinates and choosing to contort themselves to please men. Women thus internalize their “otherness” as a law of nature that has bound them to men as a necessity for their existence (De Beauvoir, 1949: 16).

Both authors consistently situate their mother-protagonists within the context of family life interwoven with violence and war, retaining the convention of concern with public affairs while locating female characters in a familial context. This kind of interaction enables the authors to avoid any kind of extremism or cliché “in the sense of resisting the linear narrative of the political record and the determinism of personal histories” (Hoffman, 2012: 44). Drawing on Ruddick’s view that “maternal peace politics begins in a myth: mothers are peacemakers without power. War is men’s business; mothers are outsiders or victims; their business is life” (1989: 219), we further propose that the combination of male authors and female protagonists is significant in conveying the authors’ political aims of non-violence and peace. Ruddick’s argument is that women, who give birth to new life, naturally oppose war and violence and that maternalism is a natural resource for peace politics. The mothers in these two novels are defined as peacemakers in support of the male authors’ advocacy of social harmony in the national context, in Mo Yan’s case, and harmony in the international context in Grossman’s. The suffering of mothers presented in both novels attracts readers’ sympathies and renders their peace and non-violence advocacy more effective.

1. **Women’s Traumatic Experiences as Sources of “Narrative Magic”**

Wan and Biti draw our attention to “the ordinary experience of trauma connected with the numb everyday life of innumerous humans” (2018: 5) on a small scale far removed from traditional studies of trauma that focus on extraordinary historical incidents and associate them with Freudian or Lacanian psychoanalysis. In this, trauma theory finds a new field of study in the “everyday experience of pain, which is not so sublime but nonetheless, annihilates human lives” (Wan and Biti, 2018: 5). Wan and Biti’s approach to “neo-liberally neutralized forms of trauma experiences” posits that one cannot learn from a traumatic experience until it is verbalized and argues, without denying the traumatic experience, that the focus of trauma studies should shift to verbalization and discourse as analytical points of departure (Wan and Biti, 2018: 6–7). In this sense, it is those that endure these experiences that matter. Wan and Biti also suggest finding expressions of trauma “in literature and art more than in the so-called official discourses” (Wan and Biti, 2018: 6). It is the mothers in our two novels who bear the traumatic experiences, but the two male authors act as narrators of these traumas through their characters’ words; thus, “traumatic experience becomes a source of narrative magic” (Hoffman, 2012: 46).

Both Mo Yan and Grossman interweave national-historical events, especially wars, with these mothers’ lived experiences, making them in the process represent whole social communities enduring trauma. The veneration expressed for these mothers makes the trauma narrated through them more convincing, acknowledgeable, and recognizable as pinpointing serious social issues. As Ruddick writes, “by virtue of her mothering, [the mother] is meant to be an initiator of peace and a witness against war. She represents a practice whose aims and strategies contradict those of war, which, like mothering, is also an organized human activity with moral pretensions” (1989: 221).

In his speech at the 2012 Nobel award ceremony in Stockholm, Mo Yan mentions that his mother was illiterate, valuing education but too poor to access any (Nobelprize.org, 2012). It became his duty as a son gifted with the ability to tell stories and be heard to give her the voice she could find herself. In a November 22, 1995 article in the *Guangming Daily*, he had already written that the novel “was about a mother, hoping she could represent all mothers, and a work praising a mother, attempting to praise all mothers.”

Grossman, in contrast, stated in an interview that he was struggling with the identity of the narrator of the novel, but that it was as if Ora forced herself into existence through him: “She spoke through me. Requested to be released and heard. Demanding to take the lead” (“Kan” documentary, 13.10.2021). He added that at first, he felt “stuck” with Ora’s character, who “refused to move from the center of the plot.” He felt so desperate that he wrote her a note asking: “Why are you like this? Why are you not giving up?” It was then he realized that he had to dedicate himself to her and what she represents within him.

As men giving voice to women characters, the authors portray the traumas these mothers suffer on an ordinary human scale, as Wan and Biti describe it. In these novels, women suffer due to their gender and mothering duties and experience identity crises prompted by ideologies and behaviors shaped by both gender differences and pain directly caused by wars. The task of mothering is perpetually threatened by violence and it is women who always suffer in war. As Ruddick says, “[i]t is this potentially painful and lively contradiction between war and mothering as human activities that might motivate individual mothers to resist” (1989: 221). Yet the mother remains faithful to peaceful methods and rejects violence.

The novel *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* revolves around the lifelong sufferings and hardships of the mother, Shanggun Lu’s life. She suffers due to the feudal thinking that sees her feet bound from a very young age, suffering physical torture to satisfy men’s perverse aesthetics. After marrying into a patriarchal family, her husband and his family maltreat her for not producing a male baby, even though her husband is himself infertile. To escape her misery, she endures degrading affairs with other men and even humiliating gang rape, desperate to have a son to satisfy her husband and his family’s expectations. Shangguan Lu conceals the fact that all of her nine children are by men other than her husband to escape any excuse for suffering domestic violence. As Ruddick explains: “there are many voices of maternal nonviolence, with different mothers and cultures of mothers pursuing nonviolence in their own flawed and imperfect ways” (1989: 163).

Even after her husband’s death, neither the mother nor any of the Shangguan family’s female members are released from patriarchy, living with the only male heir at the family’s center. As Huang observes: “She assumed the household of Shangguan in addition to paying heavy cost for this: hunger, drifting, bitterly losing a beloved daughter, even being raped and molested” (Huang, 2010: 155). She sacrifices herself to her children, indulging her son’s endless craving for breastmilk even when he can eat solids. Motherhood becomes oppressive in this scenario, as Ruddick describes: “Maternal work as a consuming identity requiring sacrifices of health, pleasure, and ambitions unnecessary for the well-being of children” (1989: 29).

The birth of Jintong, the only boy, brings his mother a sense of fulfillment in having performed her allotted traditional duty to produce sons to perpetuate the family. However, Jintong, the only male in the family, ironically neither develops a properly mature relationship with a woman nor produces an heir himself. In fact, his mother never stops sacrificing herself for her son, as he “grows up to be a man-child never fully weaned from the human nipple” (Lupke, 2005: 71). Other female members of the Shangguan family voluntarily and obediently renounce their stable lives and even place them at risk. Jintong’s twin sister never shares his mother’s breastmilk with him. She is fed with goat’s milk and laid down to be quiet, never bothering the adults. The self-sacrifice of his sisters supports Jingtong’s conduct as the only male of the family. He is the one all of the females in the family must concern themselves with the most through all of the hard times, even though they themselves suffer during them.

It is the mother, however, whose sacrifices are the greatest, not only due to the inbred patriarchal ideology, but also simply due to being a mother. Misfortune forever dogs her, although Shangguan Lu, as a widowed mother, has raised nine children and supported her insane mother-in-law throughout the years of Japanese military occupation and their aftermath. Her daughters grow up, meet men they love, and become involved in political struggles over national leadership, leaving their mother with the even greater burden of caring for the grandchildren. Whether she wishes to do so or not, her maternal identity means she cannot bear to leave them to their fates. She never imposes her desires on others, however, letting her offspring choose their own lives. She simply watches over them all and strong-mindedly bears whatever pains this brings her. Her philosophy is that “where there’s life, death is inevitable. Dying’s easy; it’s living that’s hard. The harder it gets, the stronger the will to live. And the greater the fear for death, the greater the struggle to keep on living” (Mo, 2011: 419). Such sacrifices by the mother, the one who endures the trauma, shows her to be noble and sympathetic, her spirit undaunted albeit a subordinate to men.

Ora, the mother-protagonist of *To the End of the Land* suffers from traumas induced by men, even though she is not their subordinate. Ostensibly Ora decides the fate of two men, Ilan and Avram, sending one to the frontier and taking the other as her husband, but her own destiny never escapes their decision-making. Ilan is exceptionally introverted and finds it difficult to maintain a stable life in his family. His psychology of guilt leads him to believe that he has robbed Avram of the woman he loves and a normal life. He therefore deserts Ora and their son, Adam, while making Ora feel guilty for it too. Avram is left a helpless wreck so badly wounded as to be incapable of a truly functioning life. He continues only with great difficulty, like the walking dead. Ora, being one of Avram’s best friends as well as his beloved, suffers what Avram suffered, internalizing the trauma he endures.

The narrative reminds us of the country’s turmoil in the background, and compulsory military service takes Ora’s beloved away from her again, a cruel fact she must accept. Her son Ofer also re-enlists for “one last big operation” on the day he is supposed to be released from his three years of compulsory military service without any concern for his mother’s feelings about the matter. Although a woman, Ora has to bear Ilan’s guilt, Avram’s desperation and trauma, and the fear of hearing bad news about Ofer.

In the face of the national interests, the caring of wives and mothers becomes diminished. It is always instinctive desires for personal freedom or the rights of the nation as a sacred mission that prevails. Ora, as a mother, cannot believe the numb indifference of Ofer to the incident in Hebron. She finds it incomprehensible, yet her persistent questioning of Ofer’s inner thoughts on the matter are strongly rebuffed by the men of the family. Ilan sardonically warns Ora not to become some leftist “Mother for Peace” (Grossman, 2010: 471) and characterizes her as being unreasonable and ungrateful to those soldiers who are keeping them safe. He believes that Ora has disappointed the family when Ofer needed understanding the most and a mother’s “unconditional support.”

Here the father is placed at the center of events. He is the role model that stands for the values of nationhood, no matter how perilous and destructive (Olmert, 2013: 344). However, the dissenting voice of the mother is silenced or ignored. Ora cannot understand why all of the men around her are able to “control themselves while she was falling apart;” sometimes she even suspects that “she was conducting her embarrassing, shameful collapse instead of them, and perhaps for their sake” (Grossman, 2010: 471). No one stands in the mother’s shoes. No-one can understand her innermost concerns. As a mother, the freedom and happiness of her children as individuals comes first, these being mothers’ basic and instinctive values. Matalon defines motherhood as follows:

There is a place inside me which is totally anarchic; that’s the place of motherhood. There are moments when I don’t care about the country, because these are my children and that’s all I care about. That sound, which I think is known to all mothers, is always anarchic and always clashes with notions of loyalty to one’s country. And that’s the voice the state wants to subdue(Olmert, 2013: 333).

Whether they proactively or passively participate in war, women seem perpetually unable to avoid facing its consequences and mothers especially bear the brunt of disastrous wars (Huang, 2010: 154). If mothers’ traumatic sufferings in ordinary life are long-lasting, the trauma they suffer in war is sudden and irreparable. The trauma of children’s deaths in wars and social upheavals is the most insurmountable. As we have already seen, the calamitous incidents in the background of *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* include resistance to the Japanese invasion and struggles between political powers inside the country, with the sons-in-law acting as representatives of this. That these men end up beheaded by Japanese soldiers causes no sadness to Shangguan Lu due to their cruel maltreatment of her. However, this is not the last time she has to face losing a family member. Her grown-up daughters join up with the men they love as communists, bandits, or traitors to the Japanese and finally meet their death in battle. While their mother singularly protects them as they grow up, they themselves risk their own lives. The destruction of the lives of her children ravages years of her care for them. Although she is both mentally strong and brave, the mother cannot prevent outside forces from taking her children away. Witnessing her loved ones die one after the other, the mother’s pain is unspeakable and the trauma she suffers incurable.

Facing loved ones’ deaths and death in war is also the most irreparable trauma experienced by the mother in *To the End of the Land*. The story takes place during the 2002 Second Intifada, a dramatic time when Israeli civilians experienced terror almost daily from Palestinian bomb and suicide attacks, followed by a vast Israeli military. The mother and son originally planned to hike together across the north of the country in order to both numb up the pain of parting from her husband, Ilan, after 20 years of marriage as well as to celebrate Ofer’s return to civilian life. Ora feels helpless when her son decides to rejoin the military, but chooses Avram, a longtime friend, to join her on the trail. Their journey is related as a retrospective of a lifetime’s events, both personal and national, as the storyline traverses several Israeli wars that changed the lives of Ora, Ilan, and Avram.

The three first met as teenagers in hospital during the 1967 Six-Day War. They are all serving in the army when the 1973 Yom Kippur War takes place, during which Avraham is captured by the Egyptian army, severely tortured, and returned as a physically and mentally broken person, spending his life hospitalized and supported by Ilan and Ora. Finally, the journey itself takes place in March–May 2002, during *Mivtza Homat Magen* (“Operation Defensive Shield”). During their hike up to “the northernmost region of the Galilee near the Lebanese border, Ora and Avram travel through “a landscape saturated with meaning and memory of Israeli sons and daughters that were lost in struggles with Palestinians and other Arab nations” (Zerner, 2014: 41). The trail is punctuated by memorial plaques that are icons of mothers’ traumas, reminding Ora of Ofer’s possible death in the operation, having already left her to rejoin the army and provoking her erratic behavior.

Shangguan Lu is constantly faced with the loss of her children, their spouses, and her grandchildren: “[M]embers of the Shangguan family have died off like stalks of chives” (Mo, 2011: 419). Ora is still traumatized by the loss of her best friend, Ada, during her teens, carries the burden of being a second-generation Holocaust survivor, and is kept in a state of perpetual anxiety about her sons’ safety during their military service. The fear of loss of their beloved ones brings the two mothers together in our minds.

To narrate mothers’ traumas, the two authors take the imprint of human perception of life and reveal these hidden imprints through transformative objects. In *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, Jintong the son narrates his mother Lu’s stories as the first-person narrator while mother’s life before her marriage is by third-person narration. In *To the End of the Land*, Ora shares in Avram’s mental sufferings, endures Ilan’s guilt toward Avram although she feels pain herself, all the while continuing carrying out her duties of bearing and rearing her offspring. As a woman, Ora’s duties are a double load imposed by both the nation and the family, while she herself suffers trauma as well. The narration of trauma cannot prevent violence, but the empathy it creates allows readers to share in some of the feelings involved. The “narrative magic” of these mothers’ traumatic experiences leads the readers to understand that women, in their role as mothers and caregivers, are natural peace-givers and peacemakers. As Ruddick says: “The contradiction between violence and maternal work is evident. Wherever there are wars, children are hurt, hungry, and frightened…families scattered. The daily practice and long-term aims of women’s caring labor are all threatened” (1989: 220). The advocacy of peace is a call for motherly protection and respect for mothers’ trials.

1. **Veneration of Women and Love of the Earth to Advocate Peace**

In his 2010 meeting with Grossman in Beijing during the latter’s visit to China, Mo Yan shared with him that he faced problems creating female characters, not being one and never having experienced giving birth. He thus had to take advantage of creating such characters from a man’s perspective to counterbalance these shortcomings (Zhong Zhiqing, 2010).

When asked what he thought about how Israel educates children about the Holocaust, Grossman acknowledged it to be a troubling issue and believed that children should be educated to understand the truth: “We have to choose life and teach them to love others, since bring children into the world” (Zhong Zhiqing, 2010). In the same interview, Grossman stated that one of the narrative methods of his in “See Under: Love” is an encyclopedia. Momic, the protagonist of the novel, as the descendant of a Holocaust survivor, always anticipates another Holocaust because, once you have been traumatized, you always expect it to recur. However, Grossman’s original intention in writing this work was to tell the reader when he reads an encyclopedia, he knows that life is so rich and fulfilling, full of passion and full of love (Zhong Zhiqing, 2010).

To write from men’s perspectives and to educate the next generation to love others, both writers choose to compare women, especially the mother, to the earth to venerate them for bravely enduring trauma as well as struggling to live undefeated by fate and love; most significantly, they are glorified for their universal love towards others, like the earth, rather than just their own loved ones. Explaining why he wrote the novel, Mo Yan related that his intention was “to explore the essence of humanity, to glorify the mother, and to link maternity and earth in a symbolic representation” (Rong Cai, 2004: 160). In referring to the soil in *To the End of the Land*, Grossman employed a rhetoric use of personification of “she” in reference to Ora: “She realized with horror: Maybe I’m preparing her for him, so she’ll know how to take care of him” (141). The feminization of the earth implies the combination of woman and land.

Nietzsche famously wrote in his 1889 *Twilight of the Idols*: “What does not kill me makes me stronger.” This is exactly why women, especially mothers, deserve to be revered. As long as they are not defeated by their traumatic experiences, they sustain their kindness. This is the educative principle both mothers in the novels demonstrate.

Shangguan Lu, having endured numerous unfortunate and unjust experiences in both ordinary life and during war time, still educates her son to be “a man who stands up to piss” (523). This mother’s tragic life begins when she marries into the Shangguan family. She is maltreated by her husband, is humiliatingly raped, and loses people she loves: Marlow the priest, her daughters, and her grandchildren. Despite all of this, she sustains her kind heart and love of the earth. When the village bully, Fang Shixian, who has previously accused the mother of theft and bloodied her nose when she denied his accusation, almost drowns in an ice-cold pond, the mother is the only one who helps him (494–495).

Prominent feminist Gearhart avers that “violence has been associated almost exclusively with men in our culture” (1979: 200), while Ruddick contends that “as war is associated with men, peace is associated with women and the ‘womanly’” (1989: 118). When wars occur in the novel, the mother cares about her children’s participation in them. Regardless of whose cause is just in the conflict, she hopes only that they stay alive. Huang notes about the novel that: “Though having to face frequent, incompatible conflicts between the sons-in-law, she never has hostile thoughts about different castes and parties, but only kindred” (2010: 155). The mother must accept her sons-in-law, whether they are bandits, Nationalist Party activists, or communists, to protect her daughters and others. To others, the Shangguan family are “flagpoles that cannot be cut down, boats that cannot be overturned” (324) for those sons-in-law had overrun their hometown at different times. To the mother, whoever runs the town, she has to cope with the fratricidal tragedies taking place in her family. Huang notes that various political forces “act willfully upon the land of mother and various people heartily perform on the historical stage of foul wind and rain of blood, yet all of the evil consequences are endured by the mother finally” (2010: 155). The mother, like the earth, chooses to show her kindness and love. The mother’s love extends to her grandchildren too. Although angry about it, she carries the burden of raising the grandchildren selfishly left behind by her daughter and son-in-law to pursue their own personal interests with her own emaciated body during a time of famine.

Meanwhile, Ora in Grossman’s novel cannot accept Ofer locking an old Hebron man in the meat store for 48 hours. She believes that the war has changed her son, the boy who had once refused to eat meat to protect animals and who was “the most responsible kid in the world” (473). The war has deprived him of his kindness, while as Ruddick says, “peacemaking mothers create arrangements that enable their children to live safely, develop happily, and act conscientiously; that is, they preserve, nurture, and train, exemplifying the commitments of maternal work” (1989: 176). The war endangers her soldier son both physically and psychologically; the mother seeks to preserve not only his body but also his conscience, trying to protect her son from the “bale effects of soldiering under occupation like numbed senses, questionable moral acts” (Hughes, 2014: 162). The mother hopes her son can have a fraternal heart toward the Palestinian elders, even enemies on the battlefield. She does so to save him from future guilt and to end the conflict between Jews and Palestinians: “scare them…just don’t shoot them” (458).

Mothering does not need to be seen as exclusively female: “Anyone who commits her or himself to responding to children’s demands and makes the work of response a considerable part of her or his life, is a mother” (Ruddick, 1989: xii). In this sense, Grossman, as a bereaved parent himself, having lost his son Uri in the Second Lebanon War, shares deeply and personally in the mother’s love and best wishes toward the children.

In writing about the mother of a soldier, Grossman follows in the tradition of Israeli literature since the 1990s of creating maternal characters who challenge the sending of their sons into battle and to their death and who raise doubts towards the hegemonic norms that strictly separate masculine and feminine spheres of action (Olment, 2016: 365). Mothers are like the earth; their love is universal. Having such kinds of love means believing that conflict should be avoided.

Explaining why soldiers become cruel during wars, Mo says that “firstly, war encourages the brutish nature in people, arouses desires to kill, and eliminates all mercy and pity for people. Secondly, war is also infectious. Different peoples were originally very on intimate terms, but war destroyed all of this” (Mo Yan, 2005: 35).

These two male authors are clear about men’s individual desires and understand that men may even ignore or hurt women just to satisfy their own desires. However, as men who write from female perspectives, they try to show women’s needs and how they may conflict with men’s desires, how women’s legitimate needs and desires are based on not harming others, as distinct from those of the male.

In some senses, to acquire means to lose: in order to protect the land that has been acquired, soldiers lose their lives, mothers lose their sons, wives lose their lovers, and the survivors/winners of the war lose their healthy mentality in *To the End of the Land*. Men lose their the women they love, couples involved in wars lose the joy of caring for their children, and soldiers who fight east and west lose their limbs in *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*. Under the influence of patriotism and the desire for material gain through occupation, devotion to war is a pleasure and passion. However, the trauma it causes can last lifetimes. As Herman states: “Trauma inevitably brings loss. Even those who are lucky enough to escape physically unscathed still lose the internal psychological structures of a self securely attached to others” (2015: 108).

In the end of the Chinese original of *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, Jintong simply buries the dead body of his mother in damp grassland on the edge of marshland. To let his mother to rest in peace, he refuses an official’s demand that she be exhumed and cremated (Mo, 2011: 443–444). When Jintong’s stomach suffers from hunger, he finds a bunch of sweet-smelling flowers growing behind his mother’s tomb, one of which is pale red. He crawls forward and grabs the flower and places it in his mouth (Mo Yan, 2011: 446). The novel here echoes reality: like Mo Yan’s mother after she passed away, the mother’s body in the novel finally “merges with the damp earth around it,” returning to where she belongs to nourish more life out of the earth.

Risking herself, Ora consequently accompanies a sick baby boy, an illegal Palestinian resident, in Sami’s taxi to an *ad hoc* medical facility operated illegally. Through such “civil disobedience,” Ora’s morality is determined by her inner certitude rather than accepted notions of good and evil (Alphandary, 2014: 198). A woman in the hospital breastfeeds the sick boy in a desperate attempt to save his life, though she places her own in danger. Regardless of the danger to themselves, both mothers, like the earth, devote themselves to saving the boy who has no relation to them. It thus is consistent with what Ruddick proposes: “[M]others are not identified by fixed biological or legal relationships to children,” but are “people who see children as demanding protection, nurturance…they attempt to respond to children’s demands with care and respect rather than indifference or assault” (1989: xi).

1. **Conclusion**

Through comparative reading, we can conclude that both male authors continue the tradition of “women write family, men write war,” but also challenge it by combining historical events, mostly wars, with personal family lives. Women are presented as symbolizing balance and control in times of chaos, as mother-figures that represent mental stability and physical strength in the face of hardship and suffering, being instinctively protective and self-sacrificing in times of uncertainty and danger. As men writing about women, both choose to venerate women by depicting the mothers’ bravery and fortitude in the face of trauma during war and peace, while also comparing them to the earth, sacrificing themselves and possessing a universal love as long as they are not defeated by ill-fate.

The readers do not get a direct presentation of the authors’ judgement of war through the direct depiction of fierce battle scenes. Instead, the authors express their ideas through the sufferings of mothers. Focusing on women’s role in the family and in society, both Mo Yan and David Grossman show the damaging consequences of violence and through these mothers, revealing their anti-war sentiments. To object to war means to save the mothers from the traumas caused by war and to understand why the authors venerate their mother-protagonists is a starting point for understanding their advocacy of peace. The love the two authors convey for mothers stems from their concern for them, their respect for them, and their keenness to laud women’s care for their loved ones, especially children. Glorifying this maternalism, the two authors draw attention to and sympathize with the mothers’ inner voices and the sharing of their peacemaking psychologies.

**References**

Alphandary, Idit. “The Ethics of Lévinas’s *Temimut* and Kristeva’s Abjection in *To the*

*End of the Land* by David Grossman.” *The New Centennial Review* 2014, 14(3):

183–218.

Barnea, Nahum. “Israel vs. Hezbollah.” *Foreign Policy*, 2006 (157): 22–28.

http://www.jstor.org/stable/25462101.

Beibei, Liu and Li Yihong. (“Worship of The Great Mother and the ‘Wide Hips

Complex:’ Reading Mo Yan’s *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*.” *Literary Review* 1996

(6): 55–58. In Chinese.

Chan, Shelley W. “From Fatherland to Motherland: On Mo Yan’s *Red Sorghum* and

*Big Breasts and Full Hips*.” *World Literature Today*, 2000, 74(3): 495–500.

[https://doi.org/10.2307/40155815](https://doi.org/10.2307/40155815" \t "_blank" \o "This link opens in a new window)

Gluzman, Michael. “*Im Lo Tehiyeh Yerushalayim: Al Isha Borahat Mibsora me’et*

*David Grossman*” (“Without Jerusalem: On David Grossman’s *To the End of the*

*Land*”). *Haaretz Sfarim* 2008, 7(5). In Hebrew.

Grossman, David. *To the End of the Land*. Translated from the Hebrew by Jessica

Coben. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010.

Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence: from Domestic*

*Abuse to Political Terror*. New York: Basic Books, 2015.

Hoffman, Ann Golomb. “The Body of the Child, the Body of the Land: Trauma and

*Nachträglichkeit* in David Grossman’s *To the End of the Land*.” *Narrative*, 2012,

20(1): 43–63.

Huang Chuanbo. “On Mo Yan’s War Ideas: Based on Red Sorghum, Big Breasts and

Wide Hips.” *Asian Social Science*, 2010, 6(5): 153–156.

Hudson, Valerie, Bonnie Baliff Spanvill, Mary Caprioli, and Chad F. Emmet. *Sex and*

*World Peace*. New York: Columbia UP, 2012.

Lupke, Christopher. “*Big Breasts and Wide Hips* by Mo Yan.” *Translation Review*, 2005,

70(1): 70–72.

Melamed, Ariana. “*Mehir Hashtika*” (“The Price of Silence”). *Ynet*, March 4, 2008.

www.ynet.co.il.

Milner, Iris. “Sacrifice and Redemption in *To the End of the Land*.” *Hebrew Studies*,

2013 (54): 319–334.

Mo Yan. *Big Breasts and Wide Hips: A Novel*. Translated from the Chinese by Howard

Goldblatt. New York: Arcade Publishing, 2011.

Nietzsche, Friedrich W. *Twilight of the Idols: or How to Philosophize with a Hammer*.

Translated from the German by Duncan Large, Oxford University Press, 1998.

Nobelprize.org. “Mo Yan Nobel Lecture.” Dated December 7, 2012 and last accessed June 6, 2022. www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2012/yan/lecture/.

Olment, Dana. “Mothers of Soldiers in Israeli Literature: The Return of the Politically

Repressed.” *Prooftexts*, 2013, 35(3): 333–364.

Olment, Dana. “Mothers of Soldiers in Israeli Literature: David Grossman’s *To the End*

*of the Land*.” *Journal of Middle East Woman’s Studies*, 2016, 12 (3): 363–381.

Piper, Andrew and Richard Jean So. “Woman Write about Family, Men Write about

War: Reviewing Gender Bias in Book Reviews.” *The New Republic*, April 8, 2016.

Rong Cai. *The Subject in Crisis in Contemporary Chinese Literature*. Hawaii:

University of Hawaii Press, 2004.

Ruddick, Sara. *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*. Boston: Beacon Press,

1989.

Wan Xiaomeng and Vladimir Biti. “Cosmopolitanism and Trauma Theory in Post-

Theory Context: An Interview with Vladimir Biti.” *Foreign Literature Studies*,

2018, 4: 1–10.

Zhong Zhiqing. *“Put the Fingers on the Wounded:” Reading Hebrew Literature and*

*Culture: Dialogue with Chinese Writers.* Beijing: Central Compilation and

Translation Press, 2010.

https://www.kan.org.il/podcast/item.aspx?pid=1028.

1. With thanks to Yifat Drori for bringing this article to our attention. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)