



García Márquez's Impact and Mo Yan's Magical Realism

WANG Xinyan^{[a],*}

^[a]Foreign Language Teaching Department, Inner Mongolia University for the Nationalities, Tongliao, China.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

Mo Yan is an important representative of Chinese root-searching writers. Though born in different cultural background, García Márquez's magic realism style greatly impacts Mo Yan's literary creation. In displaying various aspects of Chinese people's character and social life, Mo Yan merges folk tales, history and the contemporary, and constructs his unique magic realism with oriental characteristics.

Key words: Mo Yan; García Márquez; Magical realism

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INTRODUCTION

Mo Yan brings Nobel dream of China into truth. The Nobel Committee believes that Mo can combine "magic realism, folklore, history and contemporary social realities together." Many of his works are in active demand at home and abroad, such as the novella of *Transparent Carrot*; *Red Sorghum*, a family saga; *novels of the Garlic Ballads*, *Sandalwood Death*, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, and *Wine Country* and so on. His early works, such as *Folk Music*, belong to a traditional narrative realism. His style initially shifted in the novella *A Transparent Carrot* (1985), in which the voices of the narrator and protagonist echo each other in the work, and the protagonist, the rural boy is

blessed with extraordinary sensitivity for nature. In 1986, *People's Literature* magazine first published the Novella, *Red Sorghum*, which brought worldwide fame to the writer. With the advent of *Red Sorghum*, Mo was included among "root-seeking literature" writers, and the novel itself was considered to be a tour de force of the kind.

1. ROOT-SEEKING LITERATURE

As a literary trend starting from the May Fourth Period, realism was going towards closure in the 1950s, due to the particular political causes, which ultimately turned it a narrow ethnic literature, losing its due vigor and vitality. Literary realism "root-searching literature" is a branch of the trend of "cultural seeking-roots" arising from the late 1970s to the early 1980s in China. When the society began to reflect on the Cultural Revolution, while launching reform and opening up policies, many western cultural trends were introduced into China, so people started contemplating their own social history and cultural pursuit. To get rid of the confusing state of literary creation after the Cultural Revolution, which caused great disasters to Chinese people economically and spiritually, a group of Chinese writers initiated a movement of "cultural seeking-roots" aiming at finding out the existence groundwork for the Chinese nation in the traditional culture.

2. GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ'S IMPACT OF MAGICAL REALISM ON MO YAN

In the 1980s, China published a number of foreign works, including those of Kafka, Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel García Márquez, Joyce, Faulkner, Kawabata, Aitmatov, and Astafyev who touched China writers. Mo had admitted that

In the early 1980s, I was exposed to Western literature, by reading *The Sound and The Fury* by William Faulkner, *One*

Hundred Years of Solitude by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka, *Snow Country* by Kawabata and many other works. In a rude awakening, I could not imagine that fiction could be written in this way.

“Magic realism,” first used by Germany literary critic Franz Roh on painting, later adopted by José Ortega y Gasset, is an interesting school in modern world literature, especially in Latin American literature. The school of magical realism mostly reflects real life in mystical, magical practices, inserting magic and freak characters, plots, and supernatural phenomena into the narrative and description, making realistic political society into a modern myth, with whimsical fancy and realistic plots and scenes, mixing ghosts with human, illusion with reality. To create an integrated style of fantasy and reality, the “magic” is no less of authenticity. In essence, magic realism literature reflects reality instead of magic. “Magic” as a technique, aims at reflecting the “realities”. García Márquez’s magical realism has influenced the root-searching writers like Mo Yan from various aspects. First, the literature of this period has changed its core ideology. Magical realism enables the Chinese writers to realize that man is first of all in a cultural sense, prompting them to think more deeply about human nature. Second, in magic realistic novels, the Chinese writers have seen the overall performance of the Latin American culture, ranging from dramatic conflicts, and fusions of newly united original conflicts, which make them start thinking about how to recover links with the “lost traditional culture”. Restored “culture” under the new literary movement has freed from moral and political framework. Writers in this period intended to launch a “root-seeking” movement, based on the nation’s psychological traits and lifestyle, or an eternal value. As a result, the “root-searching literature” deviated from the realism described in the cultural campaign of the “May 4th Movement” has opened the “fantasy” doors for themselves, adding elements of fantasy, myth, folklore and traditional religions into novels. Third, like Macondo in many of Márquez’s work, Mo Yan uses his hometown, Northeast Gaomi Township in Shandong province in China as a cultural, historical and geographical reference to create this imaginary town, yet the representation of the village is not limited to this specific area. Just like Marquez, Mo Yan digs deeply into the soil of his own village, his own land, and the soul of his own people, and has ultimately achieved his worldwide reputation. Fourth, readers can almost always expect elements of black humor in both Marquez’s and Mo Yan’s writing. A major theme in Mo Yan’s works is the constancy of human greed and corruption, despite the influence of ideology. His writing is characterized by the blurring of distinctions between “past and present, dead and living, as well as good and bad”. Mo Yan appears in his novels as a semi-autobiographical character who retells and modifies the author’s other stories.

3. MAGIC REALISM OF MO YAN’S WORKS

In his works, Mo Yan blends realism and fantasy by employing ancient ethnic myths and folktales, adding magic and fictional elements with realistic and simple description. Mo’s magical realism is not an “amazing game”, but a unique reflection of reality itself. In fact, Mo challenges literature and narrative styles, by unexpectedly turning those repulsive, even disgusting things into the magic and wonders. When in trouble, he would break down the barriers, and endeavor to move on, or sometimes even get strayed, but all of these are to convey his ideas to the readers. Shocked by his swift and sometimes intricate narrative, readers unconsciously absorb and get fascinated in reading. Sometimes they would be fooled, and get strayed, by which, the writer consequently attracts the attention of readers. In the novel *Ball Lightning*, for instance, quite a few of exaggeration and fantasy convert the “reality” into “fantasy”. The main content is the memory of the “Grasshopper”, the protagonist, which has little to do on the title. The only reference to this natural phenomenon in the novel comes from the author’s comparison of cumulonimbus cloud into “a boy of suppressed urine”, and the metaphor triggers the “Grasshopper’s” memories.

Mo’s *Red Sorghum* is often classified as magical realism literature, making full use of the writing techniques of sorts. Immediately after Gabriel García Márquez’s *Macondo Town*, Mo also began to pay attention to the Northeast Gaomi Township in China in an attempt to build his unique literary world. Just like Mo kiddingly said that his stories were all pulled out from “broken sacks” in the local. He arranged the stories and plots in the works in Gaomi, featuring magical folklore, which was learned from the rural old people there. In his fable-like story, he told about wilderness and wild places with a unique aesthetic and poetic characteristics. He said he had heard many stories in his hometown by word of mouth. When working in the fields, old people often rested on a stone and began to tell all kinds of stories. It is said that when in 1937, in this place, a Japanese killed his villager, or in the contrary, a bullet pierced him, leaving a huge hole in his stomach. Next day, another old man will retain the story in a different way, so it went on continually. Every time people would add something new to the story and the story would become more attractive, more mysterious and turn into a myth. Chinese magical realist literature was born from these rich and varied oral narratives.

In terms of Realism, Magic realism refers to a writer’s attention on a certain stage of society. Mo Yan’s *Red Sorghum* is determined to look for family roots, narrating the family saga in three generations. Mo intertwines real historical events (the Anti-Japanese War) and fictional Love stories. Longing for passion of the soul, violent and sex, it is not in conformity with the accepted morality in

society. Mo restores factual nature in romantic fantasy, while building a new myth binding closely with literature and soil. Hero of the Red Sorghum, or the narrator, returns to the ancestral home in Gaomi, looking for those lost memories. After figuring out the story of his grandparents and father, he not only brings to life the history of their perspectives, but also in their position, which runs counter to the traditional morals, to defend love and passion. Of Mo's rebuilt myth, in his awareness of the past romanticism, it doesn't matter what is real or not. Instead, he focuses on interpreting human behaviors immune from modern civilization. Novelette *Flowers in Her Arms* also depicts the immoral passionate love, but fantastic plots reflect the protagonist's soul movement and her way of being in the real world, while socially accepted codes of conduct are often against her desires. Tragedy of modern life depends on this, which leads to her tragic destruction. Mo proposes a philosophical issue in his novel, opposed with civilizations, which shows the degradation of personal life against the backdrop of social progress. Magical realism features frequent use of symbolism and metaphor. Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred years of Solitude* demonstrates highly sophisticated symbolism, which has been hidden in the title, and the same superb symbolism can also be found in Mo's works. The title of *Red Sorghum* is a symbol of the whole work, or its focal image system. Sorghum grows in the northern China, in a dry climate according to the Chinese standards. Mo paints scenery of bloody Sorghum field, which symbolizes the tenacious fire of life:

In this land, my fellow citizens like sorghum, and grow it in a large amount every year. Late autumn in August, a myriad of Red Sorghum turns into a vast ocean of redness. In the field of glorious, sad sweet and passionate sorghum... teams shuttle through dark-red sorghum for several decades.

As the most important crop in the northern China, people evacuate in the sorghum field, and struggle for it in the green curtain of tall crops. "Here is the aggregation of sex and violence, life and death. Wild and vigorous vitality of red sorghum symbolise the life of Chinese peasants in the north". As the writer himself describes, "Glorious, sad sweet and passionate sorghum in Gaomi". The sentence correctly conveys the essence of the image system in *Red Sorghum*, or a symbol of the all Chinese people, as well as each uniquely Chinese individual. *Flowers with Flowers in Her Arms* also symbolize a strong vitality. Mo's distinctive and sensuous detail descriptions convey this image. "The bouquet of flowers has green leaves, fleshy flowers in purple, as dewy as just cut down from the dew." "The bouquet consists of over a dozen of branches, carrying 7 or 8 blooms in adult fist size, as well as 3 to 5 egg-sized flowers coming to bud." The bouquet appears in a choking, rainy weather, and the "tender petals, in flirtatious purple, as if not a bunch of plants but a creature." Moreover, these become the most important

part of her portrait, "as if everything would disappear without such a bunch of flowers."

The two main characters in the novel are in vivid contrast: The man is a real embodiment of Chinese society, subject to many limitations of dogmas and consciousness, as a representative of the rational and moral, while the woman stands for freedom and rebellion. She has a primitive human vitality not bound by the modern society. In many of his works, Mo's freedom-loving, strong females, are often contrasted with weak males. In *Flowers In Her Arms*, the silent and strange woman is similar to a foxglove,

she is wearing a very nice dark green gown, with a meshy white shawl. The shawl has been very dirty, with piled up tassels. Wearing a pair of brown shoes, in spite of the mud on their shoes, they still can be seen in high quality, both quaint and luxurious, like those worn by noble women in the works of Tolstoy.

However, the magic woman is taller than the man, who is not subject to any limitation of religious and social norms. Her magic also contains one of the most real, realistic and pure vitality.

CONCLUSION

Though influenced by magic realism in literature, Mo shows his own style. In his creative and unique subjective world, he displays different aspects of Chinese people's character and social life. He constructs his unique magic realism with oriental characteristics, with fanciful narrative, mysterious transcendental imagination. In terms of *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, *Sandalwood Death*, *41 Shots*, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, and *the Frog*, Mo has been continuously searching for narrative breakthroughs. His rich imagination and surging and emotional wording is always amazing. His laurel suggests the prosperity of Chinese literature, of which Chinese people are proud. Yet Mo's response was: "To forget all the award, is the noblest choice of all writers."

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