

ARTICLE

MAGICAL REALISM IN MOY YAN'S "BIG BREASTS & WIDE HIPS"

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses the works of famous modern Chinese writer Mo Yan in the context of the literature movement of magical realism. The features of magic realism are manifested in a number of works of Mo Yan [10]. It is shown that the novel "Big Breasts & Wide Hips" has not previously been studied from this perspective. The work as a whole looks like a very realistic, but also a number of fantastic episodes can be found in it. Mo Yan borrows fantastic images from Chinese and Far Eastern folklore, as well as from the works of medieval Chinese literature classic Pu Songling, placing them in the atypical setting of the twentieth century. The representation of a number of images is based on the Buddhist tradition and doctrine of reincarnation. Using fiction, the author often uses the approach of deceived expectations when a traditional order of things is broken. In most cases miracles do not surprise or shock heroes due to the fact that the characters exist within the mythological consciousness where there are no boundaries between humans and other elements of the natural world and between the living and the dead. Episodes created in the tradition of magical realism serve as a signal to the reader. They show that the normal order of things is disrupted. Heroes do not notice this fact: existing in the circumstances where violent death has become the norm of life and basic human values are devalued they cease to notice and react to the death. Thus, the magical realism represents the disharmony of the world and creates a form which can interact modern reader rethinking the dramatic events of the world history of the twentieth century.

INTRODUCTION

The general presentation

For the first time magical realism was discussed as a phenomenon of Latin America literatures, specifically in the works of Miguel Angel Asturias, Jorge Luis Borges, Pat Garro, Juan Rulfo, Romulo Gallegos, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Isabel Allende [1]. In this regard it is not surprising that in literature study magical realism was originally investigated in the case of Latin-American literature. In the 1980s the term began to be applied to the literatures of the countries of Europe, USA, India and South Africa. Czech researcher Eva Krupova writes: "magic realism as a postmodern device wants to erase the boundaries between privileged and marginalized East West. At the same time, it can also function as a sign of the otherness of non-Western society" [2]. Her words make it possible to assume that magic realism can clearly express itself in Oriental literature such as the Chinese but it was still little studied from this point of view. All the researchers basically agree on the presence of magical realism's traits in the novel "The Republic of Wine" by Mo Yan. However, in our opinion this literary trend is unlikely to be limited by the single text of this writer and we should look for signs of magical realism in other works by Mo Yan. In this study we want to refer to Mo Yan's novel "Big Breasts & Wide Hips" in order to find the traits of magical realism.

Purpose and the exact directions of the paper

Our hypothesis is the following: if the features of magical realism were discovered in one work by Mo Yan, the novel "The Republic of Wine", then most likely they can be found in other of his texts, although perhaps in a slightly different form. From this point of view, we examine the novel "Big Breasts & Wide Hips".

The research purposes are:

- to discover the sources that Mo Yan refers to creating the atmosphere of magical realism in his book.
- to identify the reasons why magical elements penetrate into real life in the novel.
- to examine the points of view of heroes and readers on the magical elements of the narrative.
- to determine the forms in which magical realism is presented in this text.

A Statement of Intent from the Writer

Fantastic elements get into the realistic text not accidentally. In the article we intend to show in what sort of episodes the reality is changed and what aims at the same time are achieved. The novel "Big Breasts & Wide Hips" can be called historical to some extent as the life in China during the whole XX century is described in it. In this regard functioning of magic images in it is especially interesting.

Mo Yan is called the author creating magic realism with the Chinese specifics. In this work we plan to define what exactly can be named Chinese specifics of magic realism in the novel "Big Breasts & Wide Hips", whether the author bases his work on images from national culture, literature, art or history.

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Also, in our opinion, it is important whether heroes or only the author and readers perceive magic surroundings. We will address the points of view of heroes on magic elements in order to define whether it differs from reader's attitude or not.

METHODS

The mytho-poetic, cultural-historical and comparative methods are applied in the research paper.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The episodes in which the fantastic component of life shows itself aren't numerous in the novel. They form only small interspersing's in the general, rather equal to realistic material of the narration.
2. Magic lines are found in reality when normal vital regularities are roughly broken. So the woman is deprived of her femininity, beauty or happiness in love because of invasion of cruel and brute forces from the outside.
3. The borders between life and death disappear when destruction and death of people become daily routine. The reality itself becomes wild and cruel so that generates fantastic forms.
4. Strange episodes serve as some kind of signs that a normal order of things is broken. However, the people existing in such situation cease to see wildness of these forms. But Mo Yan gives the readers a chance to see it.

DISCUSSION

One of the peculiarities characterizing modern literary situation is a phenomenon of magical realism. It was firstly defined by Edmond Jaloux: "The aim of magical realism is in finding of strange, lyrical and even fantastical in reality – all the elements because of which everyday life becomes available for poetic, surreal and even symbolic transformations" [3]. Sometimes in magical realism even reality itself appears to be fantastic, obtains a form of phantasmagoria and looks grotesque. For a long time, the origin of this phenomenon was traditionally associated with Latin American novel of the mid-twentieth century [4]. The creative works of Gabriel García Márquez, Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortázar were considered remarkable. Gradually the borders of this phenomenon were considerably widened both in spatial and temporal sense [5]. Today researches think that variants of magical realism exist in many literatures of the world: in Balkan, German, American. Anatoly Kudryavitskiy in his article «Mere visibility, or Magical reality in the mirror of miniatures» names a sequence of Russian writers whose creative works developed within the borders of magical realism. He claims Russian writer N.V. Gogol to be the first [3].

Speaking about magical realism in Chinese literature Nobel laureate Mo Yan and his novel "The Republic of Wine" (酒国) are usually mentioned. [4] In this creative work alcoholic delirium and reality, folk legends and socialistic life of the time of Deng Xiaoping's reforms are fancifully bound together. "The Republic of Wine" [5] was discussed repeatedly in the context of magical realism (see the works of D. S. Tsyrenova "Magical realism in the works of Mo Yan" [6], Y. Nikitenko, "Relevance of the genre of the works of Mo Yan" [7]). We want to stress that a feature common to one creative word of concrete writer anyway manifests itself in his other texts. In our opinion an interesting variant of revealing the magical realism's traits can be discovered in another novel by Mo Yan "Big Breasts & Wide Hips" 《丰乳肥臀》. It was not discussed in this way before, at least in Russian literary criticism.

At first glance this creative work looks like realistic novel with some naturalistic elements. More concrete it's genre can be determined as family chronicle telling the story about the plight of Shangguan family living in village of Dalan in Gaomi county of Shandong province. This novel has a trait typical for many ancient classic Chinese novels – a large amount of characters, connected by family ties. Dutch sinologist Robert van Gulik wrote: "the Chinese have a prodigious memory for names and a sixth sense for family relationships. An educated Chinese can reel off without the slightest effort some seventy or eighty relatives, each with his name, surname and title, and the exact grade of relationship, for which, by the way, the Chinese language possesses an amazingly rich special vocabulary" [8]. Above all the characters of the book "Big Breasts & Wide Hips" two images are drawn most detailed. The first is Swedish-Chinese half-breed Shangguan Jintong characterized by weak character and a painful addiction to the female breasts. Periodically the narrative is told either in the third person or on behalf of this character. The second image is his mother – Shangguan Lushi who brought up nine her own children and a lot of grandchildren. However, Mo Yan rather in detail tells us about the fates of eight Shangguan Jintong's sisters, about their love stories and deaths. As a result, the backbone of the novel (the life of the main character) obtains "branches". These branches often frighteningly bright let Mo Yan show the catastrophic ordeals that endured by the Chinese people during the XX-th century. The members of Shangguan family become victims of the war with Japan, are caught between two forces during civil war and then obtain the label of "right wings elements".

Nevertheless, on the background of concrete features and events of definite historical periods the novel has a number of episodes which ruins usual idea of realistic novel. These fragments of the text have

fantastic of half-fantastic nature. Let us determine for what purpose the author introduces them to the work and what coloring the entire text obtains thanks to them.

In some of such fantastic episodes a starting point is a legend common to the people. Mo Yan himself is a native of Gaomi county and grew up in the environment that is largely similar to that which surrounded his characters. In the review "The Works of Mo Yan – magical realism with Chinese characteristics" can be read: "(...) traditional folk tales also contributed to the development of the boy's imagination. 150 kilometers from Gaomi is the birthplace of Pu Songling (1607-1715) – the author of the famous collection of short stories called "Strange Tales from Liaozhai". Needless to say that a boy, who was born and grew up in a region where universally prevail tales about turnskins and evil spirits, was influenced by "strange, wonderful and amazing". Subsequently in creative works of adult Mo Yan appeared ancient folk ideas of evil spirits as well as original images created by imagination of the writer himself" [9].

One of the images as a leitmotif running through both Pu Songling's and Mo Yan's texts is a fox spirit. In the novel "Big Breasts & Wide Hips" properties of this supernatural creature at some point are inherent in one-armed Long Qingping, a head of poultry farm where Jintong works. Firstly, female workers of the poultry farm started to gossip that this heroine of civil war is a fox. The main reason was that Long Qingping by no means could shoot a male fox, which every day stole chickens from the factory. These peasant women because of being grown up in the atmosphere of legends about turnskins imagine that male fox is actually Long Qingping's lover. According to Far-eastern folk tradition fox spirit has an enormous love force and is able to draw out men's life energy in order to achieve immortality. According to these conceptions in Mo Yan's novel Long Qingping begins to turn into fox spirit in the moment when she tries to seduce Jintong. "The head procrastinated all his body, but was unable to wrest him from the clutches of terror (...). By the fierce gleam in her eyes it was obvious that she fears neither God nor devil. (...) The face began sharpen again, a tail began to extend from behind to the floor as a thick broom" [10]."

Never the less this episode ends with blowing up of reader's expectations: Long Qingping couldn't achieve reciprocity of the main character and as a result committed suicide. Before this she said: "Eh, Long Qingping, Long Qingping, you are 39 already, but you are still a virgin. Everybody think you are a heroine and don't understand that you are only a woman. And life in lived vain" [10].

Thus for the first glance we see a failure fox spirit. Why did it happen so? Most likely, the answer lies in the fact that there is no more place for femininity which was originally represented by fox spirit in a world beset by famine and devastating wars. There is a place for heroic deeds, ability to lead, but this story shows that woman doesn't need it. The fact that this heroine lost her arm shows that she was forcibly deprived of attraction. The conflict between dream and real life is manifested in collapse of fox charms and leads to suicide.

Never the less Long Qingping's spirit chases Jintong even many years later and nearly brings him to death. It is important to recollect another moment which is connected with fox spirit. V.N. Toporov writes: "(...) in Chinese mythopoetic tradition the fox spirit was considered to embody a soul of a dead person and a special attention was paid to talismans form the fox spirit" [11]. In Mo Yan's novel just on the contrary: a spirit of a rejected woman gains fox's features and starts to chase a man who offended her when she was alive. Jintong whom Long Qingping in despair begged for love and sympathy was not able to see her woman's appeal of sexuality in time. Thus the image of a fox spirit is partially transformed in the novel, but remains its component as a source of danger to the person.

The motive of werewolf in Mo Yan's book moves beyond tradition which was developed thanks to folklore and Pu Songling. In this novel reader meets not only the fox spirit but also a bird spirit (Bird Fairy). The third Jintong's sister Lingdi declares herself a Bird fairy after her beloved one, Birdman Han, was taken for work to Japan. Mo Yan writes: "In the brief history of Northeast Gaomi Township, six women have been transformed into fox, hedgehog, weasel, white snake, badger, and bat fairies, all a result of love denied or a bad marriage; each lived a life of mystery, earning the fearful respect of others" [10]. We see that cases of transformation of a woman into a turnskin are shown as something strange here, but not so rare and unnatural. B. Nevsky in his article "Illusory camouflage. Magical realism" notes: "The main features of the Euro-American magic realism are: action, as a rule, happens in our world, strange fairyism doesn't yield to laws and logic, thus without being surprising to surrounding people who most often don't even pay attention to the occurring miracles" [7]. As we can see this statement is quite applicable to Mo Yan's creative works. Jintong's sister began to behave like a bird: her speech began to resemble bird's twitter, she started to eat bird's food. At some point people from the different ends of the country started visiting Lingdi, asking for healing of illnesses, however the author doesn't give us a definite answer to a question whether applicants received what they wanted. It would be possible to regard the third sister's behavior simply as madness, however before death Lingdi really turns into a bird: "But little of what made her "Third Sister" remained; when she uttered the strange, shrill noise that sent chills up our spines, she'd transformed almost completely into the Bird Fairy: her nose had hooked into a beak, her eyes had turned yellow, her neck had retreated into her torso, her hair had changed into feathers, and her arms were now wings, which she flapped up and down as she climbed the increasingly steep hillside, shrieking as if alone in the world and heading straight for the precipice" [10].

The turnskin here looks like a certain literal embodiment of the connection which exists between all the forms of life. As Dalan during Lingdi's lifetime was a rural area, people lived there in a unity with the world

of nature. There can be different embodiments of what is called "nature", but all of them have mutual source. Therefore, these forms can transform to each other. In the episode of Lingdi's death it is also possible to see the appeal to Buddhist idea of repeating cycle of birth, life and death. The sister as if even in this life gains the appearance of a being which she will become in her next life.

Besides the reason by which a woman becomes a turnskin is also important. It is unfortunate love. The person burdened with this feeling can wish to stop this torture by all means, up to suicide. In this case we see an attempt of transition to other embodiment of mutual world of nature. Hedgehog, fox, bird and badger have the same trait: they aren't capable to love in human sense of this word, thus cannot feel torture of unfortunate love. Thus, an appearance of an animal-turnskin is some kind of opportunity to stop the sufferings for the unfortunate women.

One more mystical appearance which woman can take in this Mo Yan's novel is an appearance of a revived dead woman. During the civil war the members of Shangguan family are forced to evacuate because the fighting line is situated in their native village. On the way to one of the villages they find an old woman who voluntarily laid down in a coffin waiting for death. Ten days later suffering from cold and famine the Shangguans decide to come back to Dalan and again appear in the house of the old woman who has already died. At night the dead woman rises from a coffin. Then we see the regeneration similar to what Russian writer N. V. Gogol described in the story "Viy": "The dead woman sat in a coffin, and her face glowed green. But it was not furrowed with wrinkles like a walnut a face of the old woman but a face of rather young woman (...)" [10]. In Gogol's story a young witch was able to take a shape of an old ugly woman. In this chapter the author gives Jintong a chance to describe his feelings himself. The character fears greatly but meanwhile makes curious remarks: "In the shine proceeding from her vestments I could make out that graceful shins all in scars – exactly as at the female ghosts rising from a coffin because all of them are skilled workers to run (allocated by us –), and without fine-molded, strong legs you won't able to run much" [In the same place]. The irony of this description can be explained because the story-teller narrates about the event much later. More interesting is another fact: Jintong has already foreknow the features of the revived dead's behavior. He speaks about it as about the fact that is known to everybody. And he manages to whip the witch also thanks to earlier known reception: "And here I remembered a cunning by means of which the boy in a fairy tale whipped the dead man who rose from a coffin: he ran directly towards a tree and then abruptly turned. And dead men can't turn" [10]. Thus we feel that inhabitants of Dalan know about supernatural beings and also know how to win them. At the same time they don't ask a question what is the reason of emergence of these mystical substances. According to K.N. Kisilitsyn, in magic realism "writer systematically replaces his point of view of educated person and possessor of high culture by a point of view of primitive person who accept primary and hidden reality plainly as a child" [12]. It goes without saying that it is impossible to name Jintong fully primitive person, nevertheless, he is flesh of flesh of the reality within which he has to act in this part of the novel. It is significant that Jintong, having told how he could deceive the dead woman, does not recall this situation ever more. This situation doesn't make any direct impact on further development of a plot and characters. However, the readers can think of a problem which characters don't pay attention to: why the revived dead woman appears under these exact circumstances? We will remind that in general there aren't enough episodes in the novel where the reality appears in magic surroundings. The matter is that the village where the old woman lived is shown by Mo Yan as a real hell: "The whole street was covered with pieces of human bodies. Twenty more or less whole corpses lay abreast as if connected by invisible thread" [10]. Everything looks so as if life itself is desecrated there. Just in this very situation a terrible image of the revived dead woman appears as if revenging for her own death and death of others.

The mystical scene connected with dead persons is not single in the novel. For example, Mo Yan tells about the person known as the Envoy of heavens who had an ability to bring the dead on foot from places where they died to their native settlements. "A practitioner of the strange occupation of escorting the dead back to their hometowns, he had the gift of getting them back on their feet to walk home. (...) How could anyone not venerate a man who had the ability of getting a corpse to walk over as many mountains and rivers as it took to get home?" [10]. Besides this character has not much influence on the plot, remaining episodic hero. The explanation for this can be found thanks to anthropology. There is no difference between the categories of dead and alive in archaic consciousness. The dead aren't perceived as those who left this world forever, also the hitherto well-known cult of honoring the ancestors emerges from here. The elements of this type of consciousness are preserved in the world of village. Therefore, Jintong doesn't try to understand the mysterious nature of gift of Envoy of heavens but simply states the fact.

CONCLUSION

As we have noticed the novel is not too saturated with fantastic episodes. In general, we can estimate the main events from the life of heroes as realistic or probable. The parts of the novel in which the reality subjects to magic changes don't make impact on a mentality of the characters. Through these impregnations the author talks directly to the reader, encourage him to see how the endless disaster in which people live for decades, are born and die, dulls their senses and changes consciousness.

People cease to appreciate concepts which are important in any normal civilized society: beauty, happiness of surrounding people and free will. The author creates fantastic images following the traditions of the Chinese folklore and the Buddhism which have deeply taken roots in the consciousness of each Chinese. Thanks to it the unique image of Chinese magic realism is born.

In conclusion we would like to say that the traits of magical realism in the novel “Big Breasts & Wide Hips” make the story about life of heroes more emotionally painted and hence more catastrophic. Not by chance from all the main characters only Jintong remains alive at the end of the novel, but he is incapable to achieve anything and absolutely loses courage.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest.

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None

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