

The Inheritance of Loss—Tracing Hallucinatory Realism in Mo Yan's Novels

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Abstract

The root-seeking novels of Mo Yan in Mainland China are related to Magical Realism in Latin America. Thus, as Mo Yan was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature for “who with hallucinatory realism merges folk tales, history and the contemporary”, the Chinese translation of Hallucinatory Realism was exactly “Magical Realism” on press at the very beginning. This paper states Mo Yan's inheritance of Magical Realism, the inheritance of its loss of “history”, and the aesthetic value of his Hallucinatory Realism.

Keywords: Mo Yan, hallucinatory realism, Latin American literature, magical realism

1. Introduction

Mo Yan is one of the most world-renowned and productive contemporary writers in China. During his 30 years of creation, he sticks to the spirit of innovation and imagination, and creates considerable works, which contributes tremendously to the contemporary literature. Dating back to mid-1980s, Mo Yan he himself strongly held that he learnt a lot from Latin American literature, especially Magical Realism. “In 1985, I created about twenty works, which were affected by foreign works, especially Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*.” (Mo Yan, 1986, p. 35) Influenced by the Latin American Magical Realism, Mo Yan has adopted a combination of bold Latin American Magical Realism, polyphonic novel, stream of consciousness and carnival language in his brilliant writing since then. To make a demonstration, influenced by William Faulkner's and Gabriel Garcia Marquez's fictional worlds like Yoknapatawpha County and Macondo, Mo Yan considers *Red Sorghum* as “a full saga [that] is far from finishend,” with as many as three sequels still to come (Inge, 74:3, p. 502). By borrowing the western way of creation, especially Latin American Magical Realism, Mo Yan has always been exploring the fusion with traditional Chinese culture and its national spirit. After 2000, his novels have surpassed the glaring Latin American Magical Realism works, and show more of Chinese elements, Chinese style and nationalistic memories and trauma. Thus, Mo Yan, after considerable reference and selective inheritance, has eventually formed his own unique modern art style fused with traditional Chinese literature. At present, “he is frequently praised by international critics as the writer of world-class who are most likely to be ranked as a truly great writer” (Inge, 74:3, p. 501).

2. Chinese Writer's Inheritance of Magical Realism

As a literary school, Magical Realism was firstly introduced in Latin America in 1940s. The formal definition of Magical Realism is listed in the *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* Terms as “a kind of modern fiction in which fabulous and fantastical events are included in a narrative that otherwise maintains the reliable tone of objective, realistic report.” (Baldick, 2001, p. 146)

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Meanwhile, Chinese literary theorist tend to recognize Magical Realism based on a more restricted purpose: one-sidedly took the unique narrative techniques as its main feature of Latin American Magical Realism on the background of representative Latin American literatures such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude*; thus, it is defined as “people’s mysterious views on reality, which has a leading position in the plots of story and impresses readers deeply” (Liu, 1987, p. 379).

From the 20th century, Latin American Magical Realism has exerted a greater influence on many schools and thoughts of western literature through its special artistic technique and creative thought. From 1976, the innovative Chinese literary world starting from *The Literature of the Wounded* shows a new trend of innovation. The Chinese translation of Magical Realism literature in 1979 captured the focus of the Chinese literary world and the attention of critics. Many famous magazines and newspapers, such as *Foreign Literature Studies*, *Foreign Literature Review*, *Novel Criticism*, *Literary Criticism*, published a large amount of articles centring on it. According to incomplete statistics, from 1986 to 2010, there were 22 Chinese works which study Magical Realism literature. Among them, some works had a great influence like Chen Guangfu’s *Magical Realism*, Xu Yuming’s *Latin American’s Boom Literature*, Chen Zhongyi’s *South American’s Refulgence-Magical Realism*. However, the overall criticism on Magical Realism in China mostly shows incipient inclination to literary aesthetics, discussions of character and literary theory, and so on.

Since there are so many similar points of traditional culture, social environment and national geography between China and South American countries, Chinese writers were quite excited when Marquez won the Nobel Prize in Literature for his *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and they began to think how to develop Chinese literature by integrating Magical Realism as a reference. With a tendency toward greater boldness in practice, they noticed that the significance of the special creative thought and glaring artistic technique were never valued efficiently in Magical Realism’s success, so at last they began to focus on 5 main items: 1) emphasizing native resources; 2) mixing traditional Chinese legends, tales, and mythology; 3) mysteries; 4) anecdotal evidence; 5) involving family history and village history. It can be strongly emphasized that the Magical Realism in New Era China Literature is closely connected with root-seeking theme in village and city life, and national history. Among so many writers, Mo Yan is one of the few who goes for his material and insights directly to a surrealistic vision in root-seeking theme and folk-telling. Throughout his novels, it is easy to find that he involves a variety of Magical Realism artistic techniques and local history in his root-seeking novels.

Generally speaking, Latin American Magical Realism intends to explore history as a necessary procedure for revealing their nation’s identity. Due to the similarities with the natural environment, social environment and cultural traditions between China and Latin American countries, Mo Yan drew boldly from the Latin American Magical Realism in his root-seeking themes and broke up Magical Realism’s constraints on content and form. He also applied means of symbolism, absurdity, deformation, exaggeration, and stream of consciousness, thus creating the dense prose his own style.

3. The Inheritance of Loss

Debates aroused among scholars about whether Mo Yan writes a traditional form of the novel as practiced in the West, or if his works are hybrid. John Updike has proposed that, compared with the Western novel, Mo Yan’s freedom of content share very limited history with its Western cousin (Updike, 2005, p. 3). According to Mo Yan, exploring history is a necessary process for a people’s national identity; root-seeking is another way of self-identification under the integration of the old and modern times. Though Mo Yan relates to Magical Realism from the coherence of theme and artistic techniques, his contribution and creativity to Magical Realism should be given greater importance. In the following part, the writer will analyze Mo Yan’s surpass of Latin American magical realism in two aspects—the exploration of nationality in writing and the narrative strategies based on folk tales.

3.1 The Root-Seeking of Nationality in Writing

Back to 1984 in the “root-seeking Literature” held in Hangzhou, scholars and theorists came to an agreement that Latin American writers provide a new outlook, and their literature combines modernism and the local culture. China’s New Era novels may absorb nutrition from Magical Realism and frontiers on root-seeking in culture. After Latin American Magical Realism literature achieves great success in the world, that generation of young Chinese writers begin to learn from and intimate it.

However, to some degree, it is very dangerous that Chinese literature will become the copy of it, since nationality in literature is the mark of national spirit and reflection of a nation’s life style, custom and people’s characters. Under the impact of western modern literature, as a writer with patriotics, Mo Yan has deep thinking with current condition and the nationality of Chinese literature. From 1980s, he has already begun to explore

nationality in writing. He thinks that if a writer wants to achieve success, only learning from the West is not enough, because his literary sources reside in acquiring the nutrients from national culture; therefore, Mo Yan ponders how to create successful works with native culture. In this progress of practicing, Mo Yan labors away over rich and solid Chinese cultural foundation. Moreover, there are many unique magical genes and realistic skills passed from Ancient Chinese literature, which shows its glaring uniqueness in the world literature. As a result, more and more Chinese styles, Chinese elements and national features have been packed into Mo Yan's later novels. In his literary kingdom—Gaomi Northeast village, he uses special local language and Chinese traditional narrative forms to narrate his perception of social reality, which expresses his thinking of history and humanity. Gaomi Township in Shandong Province in Mo Yan's novels suggests China's direction as a country—making Gaomi Township, as Howard Goldblatt explains, “a metaphor for China's fate” (260). In fact, the progress of Mo Yan's writing is the progress of his exploration of national resources. In this progress, he provides a practical way to develop Chinese literature and enrich the national connotation of Chinese modern literature.

To give further illustration, his later novels especially reflect a profound thinking on creating history and the real humanity, which is right something beyond Latin American Magical Realism. He emphasizes root-seeking rather than Historia which Latin Magical Realism aims to reconstruct. In his works, he never puts much emphasis on historical figures or events, but treats history as a way of narration. The writing of local construction, traditional literature, ancient original myth, and family history are ways show Mo Yan's emphasis on production rather than the reception side of Magical Realism.

Mo Yan's surpass of Magical Realism lies in his effort to write in a style beyond the influence of Chinese storytelling and Magical Realism, which not only shows the inheritance of loss of history but also differs Hallucinatory Realism from Magical Realism. From Mo Yan's works, we may find that all his works have a close relationship with root-seeking theme by juxtaposing myth and realism. Mo Yan has noted that, “on the surface, *Red Sorghum* seems to be about the war against Japan. But in reality, it's about the folklore and legends told by my kin. Of course, it's also about my longing for the contentment of love and a life of freedom” (Mo, 2010, p. 226). With “love” and “freedom”, Mo Yan puts emphasis on personal and social relations by regional storytelling in civil society against a grand backdrop of national devastation. Undoubtedly, he is a representative of local literature school.

3.2 The Narrative Strategies Based on Folk Tales

In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Marquez's description of a small town makes this novel achieve much success and acknowledged by many readers of the world, which shocks Mo Yan and awakens him to realize the value of many treasures on writing lies in folk tales. So Mo Yan begins to study the form of folk literature and collects folktale resources. But since Mo Yan has too much reference to Western literature, some critics consider him as a Magical realist and think that his novels are Chinese copies of Latin American Magical Realism (Li, 2003, p. 76). What's more, they ignore the folk tendency of his novels completely. Mo Yan responds to this idea by presenting a concept in his book, “There are so many magical stories in Chinese folktales and some think that these stories in my novels are the copy of Latin American Magical Realism. Obviously, it is wrong. Indeed, Latin American Magical Realism has some help for me, but it is on other aspects, not on the aspect of magical story. In my later novels, I apply many Chinese elements.” (Mo, 2004, p. 124). What's more, Mo Yan has ever further pointed out that, “My grandfather's brother was a master storyteller, an old Chinese herbal doctor whose profession brought him into contact with people from all walks of life...and from him alone, I memorized some three hundred stories” (Mo, 2010, p. 225).

He thinks that the true folk writing is to put aside his omniscient view as a writer and applies common people thinking patterns. For example, in *Red Sorghum* (Mo, 1986), Mo Yan, from the point of view of a teenager, narrates the knowledge, experiences and memories from his grandfather whom he hardly knows. In *The Republic of Wine* (Mo, 1988), he even creates himself a character named Mo Yan in the novel, to discuss with the virtual author of the novel. By standing on the folk position, Mo Yan depicts a folktale-created world to present folk magical scenes rather than to present his ideas.

In this way, Mo Yan creates a magical literary kingdom—Gaomi Northeast village and applies many Magical Realism artistic techniques in his novels. However, after the publishing of *Sandalwood Death* (Mo, 2001), Mo Yan begins to develop his combination of western modern narrative skills with Chinese folk novel language and form into full play (Li, 2006, p. 126). From *Sandalwood Death*, he begins to consider about culture and humanity without political implication and his writing lapses back to traditional folk literature. Obviously, what he does helps him achieve highly-experimental narratives and Chinese “postmodernism”.

4. Conclusion

On the whole, as for the narrative aspect, affected by Magical Realism's narrative structure, he often uses multiple-perspective narrative. Besides, because of Marquez's influence, he begins to apply flexible narration and various narrative figures of speech in his writing, such as hyperbole, absurd, transformation, symbolism and so on. However, as a cultural conservationist, Mo Yan's particular gift of engaging with culture on many levels and special narrative features resist all attempts to tame his works into being familiar ones. Moreover, Mo Yan makes a great contribution to Chinese literature. His novels are not only the recollection of the essence of national memories, but also the awakening of national spirits. Undoubtedly, the forms, performativity, cultural functions, and spiritual implications in Mo Yan's writing are the grand perspective where we see the significance and direction of Mo Yan's work overall.

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