

The Invocation to the Hometown: The Magical Realism in Trigo Rojo

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Abstract: As a representative of Magical Realism and Chinese Root-seeking Literature, although Mo Yan uses techniques learned from the West and Latin America, such as stream of consciousness, time and space in disorder, style of Magical Realism, and more, the content, core and inspiration of his novel come from his experience rooted in his land. Therefore, this work attempts to investigate *Trigo Rojo* from the perspective of Magical Realism and elucidate how the formula of Latin American Magical Realism influenced the literary Nobel Mo Yan and therefore his generation, and what their relationship consists of.

Key words: Mo Yan, *Trigo Rojo*, magical realism, contemporary Chinese literature, Latin American literature

1. Introduction

People say that there are Latin American influences on the Chinese Nobel, but how do they influence him, in which sense is there a bond between these two? These are unresolved questions, so I have set out to examine his works, look for their similarities and differences, and document the effective influence of Magical Realism on Mo Yan and his generation. All this is fundamental both for this work and for finding the deep link between Latin American Magical Realism and Chinese Root-seeking Literature.

2. Previous Studies of Magical Realism in China

The term “Magical Realism” first appeared in Chinese in 1975, translated as 魔术现实主义(mó shù xiàn shí zhǔ yì) which literally means “illusionist realism”, in the first issue of the journal *Foreign Literature Studies* appeared in that year. Four years later, it was translated as 魔幻现实主义 (mó huàn xiàn shí zhǔ yì) in issue 8 of 1979 in the journal *Foreign literature's recent developments*. That term is still used. In that country there are also researchers such as Chen Guangfu (陈光孚), Deng Shizhong (邓时忠), Wu Jiarong (吴家荣), Wang Fengxian (王凤仙), who study themes such as “the influence and reception of Magical Realism in China” since the eighties of the last century. In only thirty years, Magical Realism has received a lot of attention in China, and its adventure in this ancient eastern country has been part of the history of Contemporary Literature in China.

3. The Formula “Magical Realism” in Mo Yan’s Novel

The effective influence of Faulkner, Kafka and Latin American writers, such as Miguel Ángel Asturias, García Márquez and Carpentier, on Mo Yan and his colleagues originates to the eighties of the last century, the initial period

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of the Reform and Opening-up in China. Thanks to the implementation of this policy from 1978, China came out of its isolation and began to make cultural exchanges with the rest of the world. In 1984, chapters of *Cien años de soledad* were first published in China. Later, other writers related to Magical Realism also began to speak Chinese: works by Juan Rulfo (1980), stories by Borges (1983), *Hombres de maíz* by Miguel Ángel Asturias (1986), etc.

At the time, Mo Yan was in college and making his first foray into the modern literature world. In a biography of Mo written by a Chinese publisher named Kai Ye, it is narrated that “On an afternoon in December 1984, when a great snowfall was falling, Mo Yan asked a classmate for *The Noise and Fury*”¹ (Ye, 2008, p. 213). Knowing Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County, Mo Yan understood that: “A writer, not only could invent character and plot, but also geography... His county of Yoknapatawpha was a complete fiction, while my Northeast Gaomi was a real piece of land. And I decided to write about my hometown on a postage-stamp-size scale. It was like having opened the floodgate of memory and children’s life”² (Ye, 2008, p. 213). In an interview with him after receiving the Nobel Prize, Mo Yan said that “without a doubt García Márquez and Faulkner left their mark on my writing style”³. But at the same time he rejected the label that people imposed on him such as the “Chinese Kafka”, the “Chinese Faulkner”, and the like, because he believed that “At that time I already realized that I had to escape from them as quickly as possible, because it is easy to get lost if we are too close to them. García Márquez and Faulkner are like two blast furnaces. And we are melting ice next to them. It would be better to stay away. But I’m aware that they had an influence on me, without a doubt”⁴.

Faced with the influence of foreign cultures, Chinese intellectuals have reflected that it is great to assimilate the cultural essence of other ethnic groups, but we must not lose our own identity. That is why it is not surprising that in China the so-called “fever for Latin American literature” of the eighties coincided with the literary current of seeking roots. From the eighties, Latin American masters become great idols for a whole generation of Chinese writers: Mo Yan (莫言) with his series of *Trigo rojo* (红高粱), Jia Pingwa (贾平凹) with his series of *Shangzhou* (商周), Yu Hua (余华), Su Tong (苏童), Yan Lianke (阎连科), and Zhaxi Dawa (扎西达娃), among others. As the most famous and successful representative of Chinese Root-seeking Literature, Mo Yan, in order to show the meaning of *roots*, says:

“I agree with *seeking root*. Each individual has his own root, each individual has his own way of finding it, and each individual has his own understanding of the root. We take root in the modern earth on the path of searching for the roots of our past, and my *Trigo rojo* is definitely root-seeking literature.” (Mo, 1986)

That is why, when he was awarded by the Swedish Academy for his ability to “combine hallucinatory realism with folk tales, history and contemporary social issues”⁵, the Swedish Academy labeled him with “Hallucinatory

¹ It’s author’s translation and the original texts are here: “莫言是在 1984 年 12 月一个大雪纷飞的下午，从同学那里借到《喧哗与骚动》的。”

² It’s author’s translation and the original texts are here: “一个作家，不但可以虚构人物、虚构故事，而且可以虚构地理.....他的约克纳帕塔法县是完全虚构的，我的高密东北乡则是实有其地。我也下决心要写我的故乡那块邮票那样大小的地方。这简直就像打开了一道记忆的闸门，童年的生活全被激活了。”

³ It’s author’s translation and the original texts are here: “毫无疑问两位大师对我的创作风格产生了影响” Quoted from Mo Yan’s interview with Bai Yansong, and retrieved from: <http://culture.people.com.cn/n/2012/1012/c87423-19238731.html>, accessed September 2022.

⁴ It’s author’s translation and the original texts are here: “那个时候我就意识到一定要尽快地逃离他们，因为我觉得靠得太近的话容易失去自我，我说他们是两座灼热的火山，如果靠得太近的话，自己就被他们化掉了，所以要躲得远远的，离他们越远越好。但毫无疑问他们对我是有影响的，我自己也非常明白。” *loc. cit.*

⁵ Website of the Nobel prize, Swedish Academy: “Mo Yan-Facts”, available online at:

Realism”, a term coined to highlight his originality, which demonstrates his similarities and differences with Latin American Magical Realism.

4. The Reality

The elements of Mo Yan’s serial *La familia de sorgo rojo* 《红高粱家族》 come from his native soil: the mountainous, forested terrain of the northeast, a fertile land steeped in history. According to the forefathers, it was the cradle of the cultivation of red sorghum. The environment of the Northeast Gaomi is an inexhaustible source of inspiration for Mo Yan: “the impression that the hometown leaves me is the soul of my novels; all of them constitute my novels, the lands and rivers, crops and trees, birds and quadrupeds, myths and legends, monsters and ghosts of the hometown”⁶ (Mo, 2000). The massive crop of red sorghum in Mo’s hometown also reflects the grim and desperate reality of the Japanese invasion into China during the Second World War. This is the general crisis that all the characters in the novel face. In Chinese Root-seeking Literature, they aimed to create mystical and suggestive results in the setting of their work, which coincided with the formula of Latin American Magical Realism.

5. The Magic

5.1 Language

Mo Yan’s handling of language and narrative techniques in *Sorgo rojo* is astounding: the wide and varied adjectives, the striking colors that fill the space and reinforce the emotions of the characters, the presence of traditional fables and legends that also produce resonances in readers who are familiar with traditional Chinese literature. Thanks to his language, the reader can feel the combination of different languages in the novel: Mo Yan not only writes in modern Chinese, but also mixes it with some touches of ancient Chinese, with words typical of his Northeast Gaomi dialect, with the jargon of bandits, with dialectalisms and popular sayings of Shandong Province, and often with colloquial speech. To give some examples from the *Sorgo rojo*:

Una horda de cangrejos rodeóla lámpara, formando un cerco movedizo, tumultuoso. Mi padre se sentía tan impaciente que estuvo a punto de ponerse en pie de un salto, pero el tío Arhat lo sujetópor los hombros — ¡Tranquilo! **Los tragones nunca ven las gachas calientes.** (Mo, 2012, p. 5)

成群结队的螃蟹团团围上来，形成一个躁动不安的圆圈。父亲心里惶惶，跃跃欲起，被罗汉大爷按住了肩头。“别急!”大爷说，“**心急喝不得热粘粥。**”

And:

El amo Cao Segundo respondió: “**No tragues una guadaña si tu estómago no es curvo.**

¡Pensáis que ganáros esos quinientos va a ser fácil!” (Mo, 2012, p. 207)

二大爷说，**没有弯弯肚子别吞镰钩刀子**，你们以为这五百块大洋那么好挣?

In addition, a particularly striking feature of Mo Yan’s language in *Sorgo rojo* is the satirical elements. Influenced by the social irony of Lu Xun, father of contemporary Chinese literature, the Magical Realism of Gabriel García Márquez, and Western authors such as William Faulkner, Kafka, Mo Yan — the “Chinese Kafka” — has

http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2012/yan-facts.html, accessed September 2022.

⁶ It’s author’s translation and the original texts are here: “故乡留给我的印象，是我小说的魂魄，故乡的土地与河流，庄稼与树木，飞禽与走兽，神话与传说，妖魔与鬼怪，都是我小说的内容。”

cultivated a fine sense of humor, sometimes with macabre touches. All of this adds magical brushstrokes to the novel. On the other hand, sorghums are incarnated by the people of the Northeast Gaomi, the plant resembles human beings and men act as sorghums. On the other hand, men of the Northeast Gaomi eat sorghums and are made of sorghum. It is an idea similar to the one we find in *Hombres de maíz*.

5.2 Cultural Magic Factors

The magic of Mo Yan's literature is rooted in the myths, legends, folkloric stories and traditional customs of the Chinese countryside and in *Sorgo rojo* the fable and history come together to create cruel and unforgettable fiction. Mo Yan spent most of his childhood in Gaomi, a village in Shandong Province, and was deeply influenced by the tales of his rural locality. He spent a lot of time listening to the legends and fables, told by the elders of the countryside, which were transmitted by word of mouth, because these accountants, non-physical libraries, were illiterate.

In *Sorgo rojo*, the story that has the most magical aspects is the death of Grandpa's second wife, Lian'er, in the last chapter, called *Muerte Extraña*. According to the novel, the soul of the grandfather's second wife, who was about to die, was possessed by a black cat. The meows evoked the obscene and sexual, the dying woman suddenly opened her eyes and, "aunque sus pupilas no se movían, sus pestañas se agitaron como una lluvia veloz"⁷ (Mo, 2012, p. 300). The face of the second grandmother lost the human look. At the same time, the golden light of the lantern had also turned green, a color that alludes to the malicious in this novel.

Let us see how Mo Yan thinks of the "strange" death of his second grandmother: "Los aspectos demoníacos, trascendentes, de su muerte despiertan una sensación de misterio que había dormido mucho tiempo y muy hondo en las almas de los aldeanos del municipio del Gaomi Noreste. (Mo, 2012, p. 343)"⁸ So there is no doubt that the combination of history and legend make Mo Yan a splendid representative of Chinese literature called in search of roots.

6. Conclusions

Mo Yan uses the formula "Magical Realism" to recreate in his own literary molds of Chinese history, in scenarios of his childhood memories and in a rural world in which survive beautiful narrative traditions of popular character. In his early works, this influence is even more clear. But, beyond the influences that come from the new continent, Mo Yan does not stop trying to free himself from them to coin his own style. He surpasses the narrative techniques of the West and the real-magical vision of Latin America in favor of his own style of "hallucinatory realism", whose success is inseparable from his nationality, while reflecting peculiarities of the rural areas of China from which himself comes. As the Swedish Academy said when they awarded Mo Yan the Nobel Prize in Literature: "who with hallucinatory realism merges folk tales, history and the contemporary. Mo Yan's writing often uses older Chinese literature and popular oral traditions as a starting point, combining these with contemporary social issues."⁹

⁷ Translation: although her gaze was fixed, her lids fluttered.

⁸ Translation: Her eerie, supernatural death had awakened in the souls of Northeast Gaomi Township a mysterious emotion.

⁹ Website of the Nobel prize, Swedish Academy: "Mo Yan-Facts", available online at: http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2012/yan-facts.html, accessed September 2022.

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