



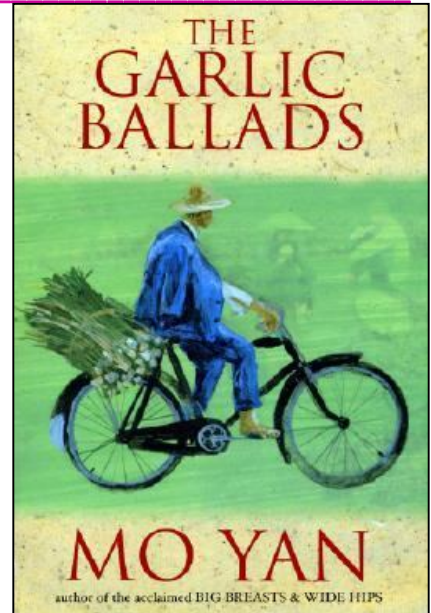
MAGIC REALISM IN MO YAN'S 'THE GARLIC BALLADS'

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ABSTRACT:

Being greatly influenced by the world famous Latin American writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the popular Chinese writer Mo Yan has employed the technique of Magic Realism in his writing to present the realities of Chinese society, culture, politics and history in an awestruck manner. The Nobel laureate of 2012, Mo Yan infused magic elements with the mundane in such a way that the magic and fantastic become the ordinary and the ordinary becomes magic or fantastic. Mo Yan has employed this technique to heighten the effect on the reader and not just for the sake of experimentation. An attempt has been made in the present paper to study the application of the technique of magic realism by Mo Yan in his novel *The Garlic Ballads* which was published in 1988 in Chinese language and translated by Howard Goldblatt in English in 1995.



KEYWORDS : magic realism, fantastic, mundane, Mo Yan.

INTRODUCTION

The Nobel laureate of 2012, the popular novelist and short story writer of China, Mo Yan wrote the novel *The Garlic Ballads* in 1988. This popular novel of China was translated in English by Howard Goldblatt in 1995. It also enjoys huge readership among English speaking people as it throws light on the realities of rural China. While writing the novel, Mo Yan employed the technique of Magic Realism as he was greatly inspired by the master of magic realism, one of the greatest writers of twentieth century, the Latin American writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Even the Swedish Academy while declaring the Nobel Prize in Literature to Mo Yan said that he "with hallucinatory realism merges folk tales, history and the contemporary" (The Nobel Prize in Literature 2012).

M. H. Abrams says that "... the present-day novels of *magic realism* achieve their effects in large part by exploiting a realistic manner in rendering events that are in themselves fantastic, absurd, or flatly impossible" (Glossary 261). He also stated that the writers of magic realism "interweave, in an ever-shifting pattern, a sharply etched realism in representing ordinary events and descriptive details together with fantastic and dreamlike

elements, as well as materials derived from myth and fairy tales" (Glossary 196). These comments of Abrams throw light on the concept of magic realism properly.

Magic Realism is a technique of writing novels that mingles the mundane with the fantastic. Elements of dream or fantasy are juxtaposed with the events of everyday life in a natural, realistic way. In a novel of magic realism the fabulous and fantastical events are rendered in the manner of objective realistic report. Fables, folk tales and myths are incorporated in the novel in the realistic way. In doing so a strong contemporary social relevance is always maintained. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines Magic Realism as "a style of writing that mixes realistic events with fantasy". The miraculous is presented with a precision that is apt in the routine of daily life.

Bruce Holland Rogers says, "... magical realism is *always* serious, never escapist, because it is trying to convey the reality of one or several worldviews that actually exist, or have existed. Magical realism is a kind of realism, but one different from the realism that most of our culture now experiences."

The main theme of the novel *The Garlic Ballads* is related with the revolt of poor peasants against the corrupt officials who ordered the peasants to plant only one crop, garlic, but refused to buy it when the crop was ready on the pretext that the warehouses are full. The crop was the lifeline of the peasants. Therefore they attacked the government building and demolished it. The police arrested many peasants. The horse-faced young man was one of them. When the horse-faced young man was seriously injured and bled severely, sitting next to him in a moving police van, "Gao Yang detected the scent of fresh raw garlic in the young man's blood" (Mo 69). Is it possible that blood can smell like garlic? Of course not, however, Mo Yan has employed this fantastic smell of blood to emphasize the fact, the reality that the issue of garlic has become the part and parcel of the very existence of the peasants of the Paradise County. It runs through their blood. It was the garlic that brought out the tragedy of all the major characters in the novel. Therefore, it is quite natural that the blood smelled the garlic. Their breathing is always garlicky. Patricia Merivale aptly comments, "Magic Realism is not only ... a way of seeing but also a way of saying: On a larger scale it is a way of telling a story; on a smaller scale, it is a way of showing 'reality' more truly with the aid of the various magics of metaphor" (Merivale12).

The most striking and powerful use of magic realism employed by Mo Yan occurs when the nine month pregnant Jinju, whose father was killed in an accident, mother was arrested by the police and the father of her unborn baby was fugitive, stricken by frustration and despair, had a dialogue with her likely to be born son. "The child in her belly pounded and kicked as if he harbored a secret grievance against her" (102). She asked her unborn son, "Do you want to come out, my child? Is that what you want?" (102). "I've never seen a baby cry with its eyes open.... Child, please don't be in such a hurry to come out.... Child you can't come out now... Don't bite me, child... let loose... don't bite..." (103). This is allegorical as well as fantastic. Here Jinju is talking to her unborn son. She is in fact suffering from labor pains.

"Child ... don't glare at me like that... don't do that ... I know you're suffocating from oppression ... not eating well, nothing good to drink ... want to come out ..." (103). This is an expression of her own dire situation. She had to suffer because she was going to marry against the wishes of her parents and brothers. She herself is suffocating from oppression. Her parents arranged her marriage against her wishes with a sick and old person so that her crippled brother could marry. She fell in love with Gao Ma and eloped with him shattering the arranged marriage of her. She and Gao Ma were captured by her brothers. They got beastly beating from the hands of Fang brothers, still they refused to part from each other. Soon she realized that she was pregnant. Finally, her father agreed to give Jinju's hand to Gao Ma on the condition that Gao Ma should give ten thousand Yuan to him. She had to suffer during this period pitilessly. She did not eat or drink well and therefore her son wanted to come out immediately. Her unborn son cursed her, "You bitch! You lousy bitch!" Jinju laments, "Child ... you bit a

hole in me ... bit a hole ... I have to crawl like a lowly dog ..." (103). Magic realism is not speculative. It tells the stories from the perspective of people who live in our world and experience a different reality from the one we call objective.

At one moment 'The fetus raised his fists and thundered, "Let me out! God damn it, let me out of here!" (135). As the child was pounding her belly with fists and feet, Jinju called for Gao Ma. But her unborn son punched her. He shouted at her "Stop shouting! Gao Ma's a fugitive criminal! How did I wind up with parents like you?" (135). It is Jinju's subconscious that reproached her in reality. She considers her and Gao Ma as bad parents.

Her son eagerly wished to come out, but she was not ready to do it. She tells her son, "Don't come out, child. Mother knows what's best for you. What do you plan to do you out here? Do you have any idea how tough life is?" (138). She further dissuade her not to come out in this cruel world where the parakeets of Zhileng as well as the garlic fields "eat meat, drink blood and suckbrains" (Mo 139). She also told her son that the flowers are poisonous. Thus thoroughly frustrated, she commits suicide. The dialogue between Jinju and her unborn son is nothing but the dilemma of her mind. She was totally disillusioned with life. The dialogue between Jinju and her unborn son is nothing but her struggle to convince herself for committing suicide. Mo Yan superbly made use of magic realism here to describe the mental agonies of Jinju. David Punter asserts that "Magic, in the case of magic realism, is not a matter of being transported to a distant and unrecognizable world; it is to do with seeing the recognizable world ... through transformed eyes" (Punter 143). It can be applied here to its true sense as the effect of this tragic episode on the minds of the reader is overwhelming.

Jinju committed suicide and on the same night the fugitive Gao Ma spotted her among mulberry trees and acacias where he hid himself to avoid the detention by the police. She told Gao Ma that she came there to say goodbye to him. He wished to touch her. "... he stuck out his arms, which began to grow, longer and longer. Just as his fingers were about to touch her face, when he could detect the chill of her body on his nails ... his arms stopped growing" (147). He told her that she could not leave him as they did not live even a single day of happiness together after which she went away. In the context of the novel this episode is quite meaningful. Gao Ma tried to convince her by saying that there would be a bumper crop and they could marry, but she knew the reality and therefore she went away forever from Gao Ma. Through magic realism, Mo Yan showed the social, cultural and economic realities of the peasants of China.

Gao Yang, the poor peasant imprisoned by the police, while sleeping in a cell of jail wondered why people shivered. Suddenly he saw his blind daughter Xinghua on the ceiling along with other girls. He pleaded her to come down lest she should fall down. "I can't get down, daddy." She began to cry. Large crystalline tears hung suspended in midair on the tips of her hair instead of falling to the floor" (163).

"A strong gust of wind swept the children away, and" (163) his dead mother appeared on the ceiling. Gao Yang informed his mother that the label of landlord has been removed from his head from the government. He has been allocated a small patch of land. He got married and had a son and a daughter. Through this episode we came to know about the political and economic history of Communist China. Mao Zedong banished the landlords and taken away their lands from them. Millions of landlords and counterrevolutionaries were murdered or treated like criminals. Gao Yang was the representative of this category of landlords. Being the son of a landlord, he had to suffer a lot throughout his life. The poor peasants and the Communist Red Guards beat his mother brutally to death. He had to secretly bury her. But the authorities came to know about it immediately. They asked to dig out the corpse of his mother. He suffered the unbearable pains of the atrocities and beating of the police but did not disclose the place where he buried his mother. This is one of the features of magic realism to describe the prevalent realities in a striking way.

“Gao Yang returned to an agonizing realm of alternating light and darkness, where Father and Mother led little demons up to torment him”(165).Gao Yang had to suffer a lot in his life chiefly due to his parents as they belonged to the class of landlords which used to be the worst crime in China during the reign of Mao. As a result of it, Gao Yang called his parents his tormentors, though he loved his mother a lot.

Fourth Aunt, Jinju’s mother, is in jail. Her husband, Fourth Uncle, who was killed in an accident, came to her and asked to clear his name and avenge his death. But Fourth Aunt replied him that she could not do it as she had become a criminal. Then Fourth Uncle informed her,

“I stashed two hundred yuan in a crack between the second row of bricks under the window. When you get out of jail, use a hundred of it to buy me a replica of National Treasury and fill it with all manner of riches. The world of darkness is the same as the world of light – to get anything done you have to find a back door somewhere, and everything takes money”(Mo 206).

This is the poignant attack on the corrupted officials of the government who suck the blood of the poor peasants. It is ironic that you have to make use of bribery even after you die to ease your existence in heaven or hell. Durix, while talking about the magic realism in *Midnight's Children* (1982), says that magical realist texts are “...closely linked with the social and political reality of the writer's homeland or region”(Durix 57). Mo Yan commented strongly on the corrupt officials who made the life of poor peasants miserable.

A tragic end can be said as a feature of most of the novels of magic realism technique. According to Conniff, “It can depict events strange enough, and oppressive enough, to make apocalypse appear not only credible but inevitable” (Conniff168). The whole atmosphere of the *Garlic Ballads* is gloomy and desperate. While going through the novel, we anticipate some kind of tragedy sooner or later. Jinju, the main female character commits suicide while her lover, the protagonist of this novel, met with the tragic end while trying to run away from the jail.

Time does not always march forward in the magical realist world view. The first paragraph may be about the present, the second one may be about the past and the third one may be about the past of past. We come across such techniques frequently in the novel *The Garlic Ballads*. The technique of flashbacks has been used in *The Garlic Ballads* so profusely that we have to wait to the last part of the novel to understand the timeline as well as the storyline of the novel fully. We can observe the same thing in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. A novel of magic realism invariably makes a comment on the prevalent political scenario in which it is set as it is quite obvious in *The Autumn of Patriarch* by Marquez. The *Garlic Ballads* made a strong statement on the corrupted local officials of the Communist China during the period of Mao who made the life of poor peasants miserable contrary to the philosophy of communism.

Magic realism features frequent use of symbolism and metaphor. The symbol of chestnut colt occurs many times in the novel. It symbolizes the life, vigor and vitality. The chestnut colt appears in the novel for the first time when Jinju went to meet Gao Ma for the first time late in the evening. The colt symbolizes the blooming of romantic love between them. The Fang brothers beat Gao Ma almost to death. Here we also found the chestnut colt as a life force when Deputy Yang administered the medicine from Yunnan to Gao Ma to save his life. The last time the colt appears in the novel when Jinju had a dialogue with her unborn son. Her son wanted to touch the colt but she dissuaded him by saying that there was no colt. It was just an apparition. And then she hanged herself. The parakeets of Zhileng are also another symbol that occurs frequently in the novel. In contrast to the chestnut colt, the parakeets symbolize the sorrows, dangers and death. They are mentioned when Gao Ma visited Fang family and was beaten by them mercilessly. Gao Ma murdered all of the parakeets when he found Jinju dead in his own house. He wanted to free from all kinds of sorrows and death.

Thus we can say that Mo Yan has employed the narrative technique of magic realism in his novel *The Garlic Ballads* with all of its intricacies with success.

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