

Reality Beneath the “Illusion” in House of Day, House of Night

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Abstract: House of Day, House of Night is a masterpiece of “magic realism” by Olga Tokarczuk who is called “a national treasure of Polish literature.” The writer uses the analogy of the house of day and the house of night to show that the world has both brightness and darkness, aiming to disclose the reality of life in a magical world. This article focuses on the magic realism used by the writer, allowing the reader to see the objective reality that she wants to disclose from personal, social and national levels.

Keywords: Objective reality; Magic realism; House of Day; House of Night; Olga Tokarczuk

Introduction

Olga Tokarczuk graduated from the Psychology Department of the University of Warsaw. Her works are full of descriptions of perceptual sensory experiences due to her professional training and experience in psychology. Specifically, she is good at using allusions from Bible, Slavic myths and Polish legends as the archetypes of the characters and plots. According to Luan Tianyu (2019), Olga Tokarczuk makes a great combination of Polish history, reality and mythology in her works, using her rich imagination to create a magical world for her readers.

The content of her stories is often mystical and symbolic, with a distinctly magical realism. House of Day, House of Night was published in 1998 and won the Nike Readers’ Prize, the Poland’s highest literary prize. This is a marvelous novel in which many genres are intermingled and many story lines are interspersed, including short stories, essays, folk tales, even recipes and notes. Each story is short but exquisite, linked together to form a masterful full-length work full of foreshadowing and echoes.

Poland was once one of the most powerful countries in Europe, but its unique geographical position led to the constant fire of war, which caused the disappearance of the country on the map of Europe for more than one hundred years. Poland was not rebuilt until the end of the First World War. The people in Poland struggled a lot to get a respite. However, the Second World War broke out and Poland was caught between the two powers, the Soviet Union and Germany, struggling to survive and devastated (Adam Zamoyski, 2019:322). Undoubtedly, the bodies and minds of the Polish were also severely traumatized.

As the translator of the book, Yi Lijun (2017) remarked in the preface of the book, “Human life is precisely composed of days and nights, and people live in the house of day and the house of night; the house of day is clear---awake, and the house of night is dazed---dream.” The house remains unchanged, but it varies during the day and night, just as the world has two sides. In daily life, “white” is a positive word for brightness, purity and so on while the night is black, and “black” is a negative word for darkness and death, but the night will eventually end, and its eventual demise will herald the coming of day.

According to Chen Guangfu (1986), magic realism focuses on fantasy, magic and surreal elements with the mundane to express this mysterious and objective reality. That is to say, magic is a tool used by the author, with the help of which she wants to show the objective existence of reality. Based on the knowledge of Polish history and the writer, this article explores the reality that she wants to present from three levels: personal, social and national.

1. Personal Level

1.1 Life Is Like a Dream

According to Li Chunxiang (2020), the novel begins with “dream,” which makes people feel unreal and ethereal. Meanwhile, things people cannot get in real life can be met in dreams. “I was dreaming, and I felt that time was moving without end. There is

no 'past' and no 'future' and I do not expect anything new because I can neither gain it nor lose it. The night never ends (Tokarczuk, 2017:2)." When people experience suffering or frustration, they feel that they are in darkness, and they feel desperate and helpless. Time slows down and lasts longer in this moment; as if it is not moving, as if there is no end to it, and people feel hopeless and without expectation. This is a true reflection of Jung's "Life is like a dream, a dream is like life," which contains the author's thought on life.

1.2 The Presence of Women with Strong Mind

In this book, Kummernis was a holy virgin with extraordinary virtue and dared to fight against the devil. She was sent to a convent when she was a child and stayed there until she grew up to be an elegant young lady (Li Chunxiang, 2020). Her father secretly decided to marry his daughter to his comrade in arms, but she had already decided to dedicate herself to the Lord. Tempted by the devil, she kept indifferent to that villainous idea and fled to a cave in the mountains to live in seclusion. The father recklessly shut her up in a windowless room, depriving her of her freedom for a period of time, in order to break down her will and convince her of married life. Kummernis prayed day and night in a windowless room, unexpectedly, her face growing a velvety beard. She said, "My Lord has saved me, and He has given me His face (Tokarczuk, 2017:86)." His father lost his mind out of anger and cursed while stabbing his daughter with a dagger. What's even scarier is that he nailed her to the square wood of the ceiling. The Virgin Kummernis was tortured and eventually martyred, but the memory of her continues, and she brought much hope for a great number of men.

Traditionally, women are generally regarded as subordinate to men and not capable of standing on their own. The author devotes several chapters of the novel to portray the image of Kummernis as a great woman with strong mind, and to illustrate how the ordinary Kummernis stood out from the crowd and became a saint, and how her story was told in later generations. On the other hand, this is in fact the author's own attempt to present herself as a woman who is recognized and approved of, and a reflection of her own quest for independence and braveness.

2. Social Level

2.1 Trust Between Husband and Wife

It seems to be a part of human nature to love the new and hate the old. Agni is a hermaphrodite, suddenly he is a young man of eighteen who becomes the lover of the woman, and suddenly a mystery woman who becomes the lover of the man. The loving couple lived a quiet and sweet life before Agni's appearance. Agni saw everything in them and always appeared to them at the right time. The husband imagined that one day his wife would die and he would elope with Agni. Meanwhile, his wife was also obsessed with the feeling that Agni brought and after coming back from the hospital she would recite Agni so many times a day. After Agni disappeared, they could no longer go back to the past. They went about their business a lot of the time and did not bother each other. Sometimes they both still snuggled up to each other, not in tenderness, but due to the cold in their house. The love between Agni and the couple rejoiced like a dream, leaving them spellbound and in great pain (Li Chunxiang, 2020).

The story unfolds but has the power to shock the heart. Agni is a fictional in the novel, but there is no shortage of such characters in real life. The writer told the trust and betrayal between couples so as to express that anything can change, even once a loved couple would have a rift in the heart over time. This is in fact a phenomenon common to today's society, and with the rapid development of the Internet, this problem has become even more serious. In a materialistic world, the trust between couples faces a huge test, it is also a test of humanity.

2.2 Human Indifference

In order to search for his roots, Peter Dutel eventually fell on the border between Poland and the Czech Republic. It was dark when the Czechic border guards found him. One soldier took out his interphone and looked at the other with a questioning gaze, and both of them looked at their watches simultaneously. The two men hesitated for a moment, they probably thought of the dinner they might be late for. Then they both united their thoughts to move the feet that Peter had placed on the Czech side to the Polish side. And as this was not enough for them, they gently moved the whole body northwards and pulled it over to the Polish side. Half an hour later, the Polish border guards spotted Peter. One of the soldiers called out "Jesus!" The other soldier instinctively grabbed his weapon and looked around. The soldiers looked at Peter's face and spoke quietly to each other. And then they took his hands and feet and carried him over to the Czech side.

The Czech and Polish border guards coincidentally moved his body again and again into each other's territory so as not to cause problems for their own work (Xian Jinhe, 2021:43). The depiction of Peter's body being moved back and forth by both Polish and Czech border guards is impressive. Human nature is mysterious and unpredictable and it is common practice to choose to pass the buck when faced with such an extra workload. There is no shortage of such scenes in daily life where people are in distress and instead of coming to their aid, they look on, take pictures and post pictures or videos to their social media. It really makes people feel chilled

and indifferent to human feelings.

3. National Level

3.1 Hometown Is Always in Your Heart

The story revolves around Nowa Ruda, a small town in Lower Silesia. A great number of Polish were forced to leave their homeland and had to rebuild their homes in Nowa Ruda, a new environment. But for both the Germans who have moved away and the Poles who have moved in, the only remaining obsession is homesickness (Ma Shuang, 2021:37). For example, Peter Dutel, an old man who was forced to leave Nowa Ruda because of the post-war territorial settlement, had an opportunity to return to his homeland, so he climbed to a high place despite his poor health and died on the boundary pillar between the two countries.

Tokarczuk (2017:170) brings Peter Dutel's homesickness to life, "Somehow he suddenly felt ridiculous. Because he has lived in the port city for so many years, built houses, fallen in love, had children, gone through the war, and then come here across half of Europe, walked such a large stretch of mountains." It seemed unbelievable that he was so old and travelled such a large stretch of mountains to get here. However, it makes sense, because as a famous Chinese saying goes, a person residing elsewhere finally returns to his native land and the homeland holds a certain weight in everyone's heart. Even if one is forced to be away from home, his hometown will always be in his heart.

Conclusion

Olga Tokarczuk used her mastery of words and her brilliant imagination to produce this excellent literary work, *House of Day*, *House of Night*, in which the narrator no longer recounted the simple daily life, but everything around Lower Silesia in the course of Polish history. The writer wanted to show the objective realities implied by the mysterious relationship between people and people, people and things as well as people and their surroundings. The main focus was on the individual's philosophical perception of "life as a dream, a dream as life" and the "affirmation of women's quest for independence and self-improvement;" "the betrayal between husband and wife" and "indifference to human feelings" on the social level; as well as on the national level "searching for roots" and the manifestation of "homesickness." All of them can help readers to have a better understanding of Tokarczuk's ideas in *House of Day*, *House of Night* and her writing style.

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