

The Narrative of Suffering and the Expression of Humanity in Chronicle of a Blood Merchant

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Abstract. The paper uses the novel by Yu Hua titled *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* as a research object where the presentation of suffering in the work is addressed by the narrative, and the condition of the characters in this mode of presentation. The book is based on the same plot of selling blood, slowly linking family demands and the state of life through the life of Xu Sanguan in various periods. A lot of things might not be considered too serious when considered in isolation but when they happen to be repetitive it makes it appear like the character is always distressed by such issues. Xu Sanguan rarely tries to change anything; most of the time, he just deals with the situation as it comes, and he does not have many choices. The analysis of the narrative structure, characterization, social background is the primary focus of the article, and how these factors unfold in the context of the text are discussed. In such reading it is possible to observe that despite the fact that the novel shows the lives of common people in it the relations between the characters and the reaction they have in case of pressure are also observed.

Keywords: Yu Hua, *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*, Suffering, Narrative Techniques, Ordinary Life

1. Introduction

In contemporary Chinese literature, Yu Hua's name is often mentioned, as many of his stories revolve around the lives of ordinary people. He does not start with the historical or social issues, as in some of his works, but rather begins with ordinary life, family, meals or work and gradually reveal the surrounding in which the characters exist. His early writings were more experimental and his subsequent writing was more connected with real life and his language was simpler. Nevertheless, despite the rather simple style of writing, the story itself has some effect. The characters largely reside in stressful circumstances, and the work is not just about the challenge that they face but also about the decisions they make in such circumstances. Writable: *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* is a novel that Yu Hua published in 1995, and is one of his most characteristic works. The novel narrates the life of an ordinary worker Xu Sanguan, who sold his blood multiple times to buy his family out and sustain himself and his family throughout several decades. This narrative starts when Xu Sanguan sells his blood first when he is still young, and carries on to his life experiences when he has grown up to the middle age. Selling blood is not just a survival method in the novel but over time, it also comes to be a significant plot line that permeates the whole novel.

Xu Sanguan decides to sell his blood once again whenever his family is facing trouble. Through this repetitive storyline, readers are able to repeatedly witness how common people can fight against all odds.

The plot of the novel is set sometime during the several decades after the establishment of the People Republic of China, including in such historical eras as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Yu Hua, however, did not directly criticize these historical events in his novels, but rather the life of common people. A lot of the historical contexts are literally unfolding, disclosed with each day of work, meals, family conflicts of the characters. The readers can obtain the overall idea of the social landscape of that time through the life of the family of Xu Sanguan.

So, this novel is not merely a tale of personal destiny, it is also a mirror of Chinese society of a certain time of history. In this paper, *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* has been used as the object of research and the way suffering is portrayed in terms of narrative techniques and the way the characters react to such situations. The analysis is a mixture of literature analysis and reading the text, and primarily, the analysis of recurring narrative patterns and character behavior. The major question discussed in this context is how recurrent daily experiences influence the organization of the narrative as well as the image of the common people.

2. Narrative of suffering in the novel

2.1. Blood selling as the main narrative thread

In the novel, selling blood was a mere compromise by Xu Sanguan whenever he had a problem but it ended up being his most frequent coping mechanism. He would think of selling his blood whenever they had troubles in his family. These kinds of plots can be repeated in various phases and people slowly become aware of the fact that he does not have so many other options. He initially went to sell his blood out of curiosity and since he heard other people say that he could make some money he tried it once. This question was also not directly connected with the family life at that time, but it altered over time. Xu Sanguan would consider selling his blood once again whenever his family faced some troubles, like a shortage of money, ill children, or heightened life strain. This repetitive plot makes the development of the story have a fairly fixed pattern. Unlike some works that rely on plot twists to drive the story, this novel is more like constantly returning to the same situation.

Some studies have pointed out that the repetitive structure in Yu Hua's works is often not for the purpose of creating drama, but rather to make readers aware of the real-world limitations the characters face [1]. This writing style makes selling blood not just an act, but gradually a way for characters to cope with life.

In such a social environment, economic conditions are always an unavoidable issue in people's lives.

The family of Xu Sanguan was not rich, and the family used to be strained by their daily spending. It makes life even harder, particularly when there is food shortage. There is a scene in the novel in which Xu Sanguan sells his blood again to buy food for his family. This scene not only shows the hardship of family life, but also reflects the tense social and economic conditions at that time. Selling blood slowly becomes a means of sustaining the family in the story and this action in itself explains how the characters live. The repetitive blood-selling scenes in the novel not only advance the plot but also relate physical conditions, poverty and survival pressure, which has also been addressed in related studies [2].

The lives of the family of Xu Sanguan will be influenced by some of the social events in the novel. As an example, Xu Yulan was once taken to a mass meeting of denunciation in the Cultural Revolution, which was a great disaster to the entire family. Yu Hua did not pay much attention to the explanations of the political background of the time when he wrote this passage, and paid more attention to the reaction of the characters and the alteration of the atmosphere in the family. Through such plots, readers can feel that everything that was happening during those times was not very distant to the lives of common people.

2.2. Repetition of suffering and narrative rhythm

Many plot points in the novel are not driven by intense conflicts, but rather by repeated returns to similar everyday situations. The recurring theme of selling blood at different stages creates a relatively fixed rhythm in the story. While reading, the characters remain in roughly the same situation. The problems change, but their state of mind does not actually change much.

The style of writing is unlike the conventional narrative styles. When it comes to writing about the early novels by Yu Hua, he has indicated that his novels tend to defy the traditional narrative framework and show the reality in a non-linear and repetitive way [3]. Even though this trait has evolved slightly in *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*, its impact can be still seen. The novel does not progress with more and more intense confrontations, but by maintaining the situations of the characters at a certain level with repeated situations. This structure is also related to the change in Yu Hua's writing style. He later tended to write stories that were inspired by his life experiences as opposed to setting out to create the structure [4].

2.3. Depiction of poverty and stress in daily life

The content of poverty in the novel is not shown on specific particularly extreme plots, but disguised in the details of daily life, not having enough to eat, not having enough in the house, not having enough money, which reoccurs at various points in the story. There are also studies that have cited that Yu Hua is more used to writing based on his own experience and not directly speaking about the history [5]. At the same time, the act of selling blood is also closely related to survival issues. Some scholars have analyzed the relationship between the body and the economy and pointed out that in similar narratives, in this situation, the human body becomes a means of exchange for living resources [2]. In the novel, Xu Sanguan barely managed to support his family by selling his blood time and time again.

2.4. Interweaving of humor and tragedy

The novel does not always have a heavy tone when portraying suffering. Other sections are quite relaxed, and can even have overt irony. This sentiment is not conveyed in an explicit manner, but gradually builds up as the storyline unfolds [1,6]. For instance, every time he finishes selling his blood, Xu Sanguan joins others to eat pork liver and drink wine. At a glance, this text appears to be rather light-hearted but, once put into a particular context, it is even somehow uneasy. It is that these little pauses of rest are really, at the sacrifice of bodily activity. Having read this, one will find it easier to understand that he has been living his life in this manner all along. It is specifically this way of writing that makes suffering and certain scenes that seem lighthearted seem simultaneously, making the characters look more realistic.

3. Character and the survival of ordinary people

3.1. Xu Sanguan's personality and choices

Xu Sanguan is no character that has definite objectives; majority of his decisions are in fact passively accounted in certain circumstances. In the novel, he seldom attempts to alter his surroundings, rather he attempts to devise methods of earning money in the prevailing circumstances. The very process of selling blood is inherently of this nature--not a decision that arises after long contemplation, but a compensation mechanism that develops slowly in the face of reality.

This tendency of acting is reiterated all through the novel and the characters are suspended in a state of being reality driven. It appears like a straightforward decision, but it represents a practical constraint: a character has a small set of resources, so it is hard to give him a greater number of opportunities. The characters in the works of Yu Hua rarely have the power to alter their destiny, and their behavior could be rather considered as the process of coming to terms with reality than opposition to it [4].

Meanwhile, the actions of Xu Sanguan are not absolutely stable. His responses are different in different situations. He might even be reluctant or even attempt to shirk, but at times of need, he will step up, again. This contradiction is what causes the characters to cease being a one-and-only kind of personality, but more like real-life people.

3.2. Responsibility and contradiction in character

The family dynamics that are portrayed in the novel are always based on the realities of reality instead of being based on idealized emotions. As their living conditions alter, the relationship between Xu Sanguan and his children and wife will change. To illustrate, when there is economic strain the conflicts in a family are more evident, however the conflicts do not have to cause a full collapse of the relationship.

Quite the contrary, there are still certain cooperative relationships which develop between family members on some pivotal moments. Neither of these alliances is based on any explicit moral principles, but instead the alliance is more akin to an interdependent relationship of a practical sort. The characters are in conflict and supportive to each other, which is repeated throughout the novel. In general, the family is not depicted in the novel as a place of stability of feelings, but a dynamic relationship is shown. It is a method that positions the family as the source and solution to conflict.

3.3. Family relationships

The social status of Xu Sanguan predetermines the extent of his actions. He was a simple laborer with few resources and no power to affect the broader social world. Thus, practical conditions tend to constrain his decisions. As an illustration, he was not able to acquire resources in some other way when he was under an economic pressure, but he could only use selling his blood to eliminate the issue.

This situation is not an isolated case, but rather appears repeatedly in the novel. The decision was made, based on the state of his character, not voluntary, but as a result of the ever-evolving environment. In his review of the works of Yu Hua, noted that these characters usually show an isolated and passive situation, a relationship with the society is not stable, and the possibility of these characters to change their circumstances is not real [7]. In *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*, this

condition is reflected in the characters that keep replicating same behaviors with given minimum conditions.

3.4. Social position of ordinary people

At a time when Yi Le became ill and needed money, Xu Sanguan proceeded to sell his blood again. He had been a little out of the way of Yi Le before this, due to her background and the two were not particularly close. However, it was now his duty to be a father. This passage is heartbreaking: although he did not fully accept Yi Le as his son, the paternal love in his heart drove Xu Sanguan to save Yi Le. In one way, he was not able to embrace the child emotionally; in the other way, he decided to assist the family to address their issues. The change is not explained explicitly in the novel, but is demonstrated through action.

This form of narrative enables the complexity of the character to be revealed slowly. In his character development, Yu Hua tends to depict the state of the character in a behavioral manner, instead of describing it directly, hence the contradictions in the character can be maintained [6]. Thus, Xu Sanguan is not a fixed character, he is changing and transforming in various situations.

4. Social context and historical experience in the novel

4.1. The social environment presented in the novel

The novel is set roughly in the decades following the founding of the People's Republic of China, a period of significant social change. However, these changes are not directly stated in the work, but are gradually reflected in the characters' daily lives. It is, for instance, very apparent to observe in the setting of activities such as work, meals and family. Indicatively, the social conditions during a given time are reflected in the work environment, food issues and family relationships to some extent. This form of writing renders the social background section of the story not an independent explanatory element but a social background part of that story. It notes that Yu Hua tends to narrate the social background not by macro-narratives, but rather by using individual experiences [4].

4.2. The impact of poverty and famine on family life

The problem of food shortage is repeated in the whole novel, having a direct influence on family life. The plot, where Xu Sanguan sells his blood to eat, eloquently explains the risky conditions under which people had to live at that time. In contrast to the works, which portray the disasters directly and explicitly, this novel expresses these pressures mainly through the prism of everyday life. To illustrate, information like the manner in which families shared food or how they were able to manage the scarcity would help readers to comprehend the living standards at that period. These facts of food scarcity and life and death survival are not merely aspects of family life, but also directly related to the social conditions of the time, as some studies of the modern Chinese society have proposed [8].

4.3. The relationship between social change and the fate of ordinary people

The social changes of the novel are not shown in macro-narrative, but slowly unveiled in personal lives. To illustrate, the social environment impacts to some degree in how family relations and neighborhood interaction change. In a more general sense, this method also connects with the theme of contemporary literature of the connection between the individual and the group. In the

contemporary Chinese context, individuals often reposition themselves within a constantly changing social structure [9]. In the novel, Xu Sanguan's life embodies this point; his choices are always influenced by his surroundings.

4.4. The work's indirect reflection of chinese social reality

The novel does not directly discuss the system or history, but gradually presents social reality through the lives of the characters. This manner of narration via personal experience renders social reality an aspect of life of the characters, as opposed to the background description of the same [4]. In literary development terms, this attention to everyday life also represents a more general trend to realism in Yu Hua's later works, which has been observed in analysis of his fiction [10].

5. Emotion, responsibility, and human temperature in the narrative of suffering

5.1. The emotional power of narratives of suffering

In the novel, there are no vigorous expressions of emotions, but a slow revelation of the same through ordinary actions. The characters seldom show their feelings but react to the reality in their behavior. This method makes the feelings more down to earth and makes it more like in the real world.

5.2. Family responsibilities and character choices

Many of Xu Sanguan's actions are related to his family. He did not make the decision because of his ideals, but due to the necessity to protect the livelihood of his family. This feeling of responsibility is not directly brought to the fore, yet, it is disclosed through certain plot points.

5.3. The warmth of humanity revealed in adversity

The manner in which the novel presents the suffering is rather unusual. Lots of things do not appear to be intensely so; they simply come out in the day to day life. They might not appear a big deal individually but when combined together, they can cause readers to feel that readers are under constant pressure. Other studies have also cited that Yu Hua reflects the relationships among characters more in these mundane details than in blown-out-of-proportion plots to fuel emotions, as discussed in [1]. These details tend to display the relationships between characters gradually, as opposed to presenting them in a single instance.

6. Conclusion

The suffering in the story of Chronicle of a Blood Merchant is very different as compared to other novels. Most things do not suddenly burst into conflict but in fact evolve over time within the placard of the daily lives. Some of the plot points may initially be overlooked as uninteresting but as the same situations arise, the characters are being pulled by these issues. This is the case with selling blood.

In the view of the character, Xu Sanguan is not such a person with a very clear and stable personality. He occasionally stammers, becomes emotional when it involves family issues and even shrinks a bit, yet, when it comes to responsibility, he still takes it on. That is why the character appears more as a real person in the life, than a full-fledged and idealized one.

Another point is that the novel basically does not directly talk about those major backgrounds, such as history or systems. Very often, these things slowly develop out of very particular things, like what to eat, how to work, what the family members are like. The other thing is that the novel in essence does not directly refer to such grand backgrounds, as history or systems. In many cases, they begin to develop slowly out of such concrete things as what to eat, how to work, and even the relations between family members.

However, this article currently focuses mainly on the text itself, and does not provide enough comparison with Yu Hua's other works, nor does it continue to discuss reader acceptance. Further research can analyse "To Live" or other novels by Yu Hua together. This might make it clearer how he handles suffering and characters in different works.

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