

The "Wasteland" Narrative of New Realistic Novels

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ABSTRACT

New realistic novels often use the imagery of "wasteland" to express the living conditions of ordinary people, mainly to present the material and spiritual "wastelands" in people's daily life. By showing the living conditions of people struggling at the bottom of society and the direct conflict between the characters' life instincts and social attributes, new realistic novels reveal the meaning of the existence of the "wasteland" and expect new sprouts to break through on the "wasteland". New realistic novels are a rebellion against the "false" life that was almost optimistic before the 1980s under the "conceptualization" of ideological discourse, and they replace the "collective imagination" of the traditional grand narrative with the legitimacy of individual existence in everyday life.

Keywords: *New realistic novels, Material wasteland, Spiritual wasteland, Rebellious wasteland.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The content of new realistic novels covers both rural and urban China, and through the writing of the survival of the ordinary people at the bottom, it expresses the mediocrity and weariness of their lives. These characters are calmly and humbly living in the chaotic "wasteland" state. The state of existence here is heavy and gloomy. In order to survive, they can only fight with their life instincts and the inherent weaknesses of human nature. However, no matter how they struggle, they are still tightly bound by life and can't breathe. Through a series of "wasteland" imagery, writers visually express their living conditions, presenting the material wasteland of extreme deprivation and the resulting spiritual wasteland of human beings. Through the display of the living state of people struggling in the bottom line of survival, writers reveal the elimination of meaning in the material and spiritual wastelands. "A wasteland is a natural presentation without context, so you can't put it into any context of the times. In other words, the socio-historical context loses its role in discerning semantics here". [1]

2. THE MATERIAL "WASTELAND" OF BARRENNESS AND DESPAIR

A kind of "wasteland" imagery often appears in new realistic novels about rural life. The imagery of the countryside in traditional realistic works is the motif of human flourishing, which is the origin of the bloodline, the utopia of the idealist, and the soul homeland of the runaway... This kind of countryside has a positive and affirmative value and emotion, and implies the spiritual yearning of the wanderers to return to their homeland. However, the peasants in new realistic novels struggle in the barren land, where the ideal spirit is all gone, revealing the despair of survival.

The barrenness of the countryside is often expressed in the material deprivation of the peasants, especially the desire for "food". Such novel texts are always filled with a strong sense of fatalism, and material deprivation is presented as a "causeless fruit". The peasants repeat the plight of poverty year after year, day after day, without beginning and ending. They don't feel indignant about their situation, nor are they able to trace the root causes of poverty, nor are they able to resist the status quo. Just like creatures pushed passively forward by life, as long as there is a breath left, they are still struggling to linger out. Due to the extreme shortage of food, the mad pursuit of "food" creates distorted and weird pictures.

Damn It Food magnifies the basic need of "food" for survival, and shows how people go crazy to stay alive. Cao Xinghua's short life revolves around "what to eat tomorrow", and her crazed possession of grain fills her daily life in Hongshuiyu. Grain means all her faith in survival, so the loss of her grain purchase certificate is undoubtedly a crushing blow to her. In the wasteland world of material deprivation, people even degenerate into simple survival animals, and the meaning of being born as a human being also disappears. Through a picture of women hand-to-hand fighting with food, Liu Heng calmly presents the survival of people on the wasteland, and reveals the sadness that the lack of "food" has weakened the life force to dust. On this barren land, Cao Xinghua's entire disregard for shame is for the sake of living, and the spiritual load brought by hunger far exceeds the value of life itself. "In Liu Heng's works, it is a very difficult thing for people to survive. People become so small and humble, so hard and pitiful in order to live, all metaphysical pursuits become luxury topics, and people scramble for food or money by any means". [2] On the hunger wasteland, moral judgments about honor and shame, and good and evil are replaced by basic questions of survival. What is striking is that this "is not just a place where meaning is lost, it is a black hole of meaning. Once all meaning is absorbed by it, it disappears without a trace and presents a dead silence". [3]

The madness for "food" is apparently due to the scarcity of food, but deep down, it is the indelible collective memory of hunger for generations. "This instinctive craving has been dominant for a long time in the process of development, and then condensed into an inherent psychological trait that has been passed on from generation to generation, becoming a 'collective unconsciousness'". [4] It hides in the human consciousness for a long time, and once it can't be satisfied, it causes people to rack their brains and do whatever they can to fill their desires. Pei Yishiwu has almost obsessive obsession with food in Transforming into Moths. Until one day, the grain in the cave transforms into gelechiid moths, like the dense smoke that swallows up everything, bringing people an overwhelming shock. The fear of hunger gnaws at the "Pei Yishiwu-s" and drives them to grab food desperately, and eventually they are "destroyed" by their obsession with grain. The ancient agricultural civilization has always left the peasants with an indelible hunger panic deep inside their hearts, leaving incurable scars on their minds.

For people who are trapped in the material wasteland, all forms of life are pale in front of "being alive". It can be seen that these peasants who survive on the wasteland of the countryside are deeply marked with the ignorance, numbness and all kinds of human ugliness that come with barrenness. People can tell that the utopia of the countryside, which has been entrusted with infinite ideals since the beginning of the new literature, has turned into a desperate wasteland here, which is obviously a merciless tearing of the romantic ideal in contemporary literature. There is no romantic poetry here, nor is there any savage hunting for novelty. Writers simply use a cold narrative to force people to face the picture of existence beyond reason. These characters struggle with the whirlpool of desire, but the almost desperate struggle makes people feel a suffocating pain. This vast wasteland, with its devastated appearance, broad and coolish gesture, pacifies a group of humble people who have lost the heat of life, and becomes the wasteland where they live and linger out.

3. THE "SPIRITUAL" WASTELAND OF BITTERNESS AND WEARINESS

New realistic writers turn their eyes to the folds of daily life, focusing on the simple "primitive state" of urban ordinary people's survival, truly presenting human feelings, and writing about the living conditions of a large number of urban ordinary people. Those sacred and lofty utopian impulses are completely disintegrated by real life, leaving the protagonist with a bitterness that can't be described.

New realistic novels keep away from flag-flying grand narratives, escape from the experience of political ideology, and reaffirm the profundity of secularized life itself. "The day after the 'revolution', the secular world will once again occupy human consciousness, and one will find that moral ideals can't revolutionize stubborn material desires and morals. One finds the revolutionary society itself increasingly bureaucratized or messed up by the turmoil of constant revolution". [5] In the 1980s, when people needed to return to a normal state of life from the burning passions, the secularized daily life and the everyday spirit embedded in daily life written by "new realism" corresponded to the inner needs of people at that time and provided them with a kind of comfort. The secularized life itself is not trivial. Life has its own logic and texture.

Secularization is more of a double-edged sword, which can not only bring people back to the real reality of life, but also cause people to become spiritually depressed, trapped, and fall into a spiritual wasteland. New realistic novelists, with a strong sense of common people, focus on the gray scenes of the lives of ordinary and mediocre people. All these characters struggle for survival in their own way, and perform their own tragedies and comedies on the stage of their own lives.

Fang Fang's *Landscape* presents the life of a poor family living in the shantytowns of Wuhan with their hardships. An ordinary worker's family of eleven people is crammed into a thirteen-square-meter "Henan shed", and life is full of endless fights between husband and wife, brother and sister, and father and son... The novel interweaves the different lines of fate of each person in the family into a real survival network of the people at the bottom of society. From the day he was born, the main character, Brother Seven, struggles to survive amidst the severe beatings and verbal abuse of his family. In fact, for Brother Seven, the poor material conditions are not the most painful, but the hostility of his family is the most indelible scar in his childhood memory. These traumatic childhood memories deprive Brother Seven of his hopes and expectations for a better life at a very young age, as if he is in an existential wasteland with no boundaries in sight. Even after many years, these painful memories still influence his life choices: he gives up pure love and climbs up by hook or by crook against his conscience, which is, on the other hand, a struggle for Brother Seven to get out of the material and spiritual wastelands. But this family environment and childhood memories make his mind forever stuck in the mire of spiritual wasteland and unable to extricate himself.

In the midst of the cold and violent family ethics, the only weak sympathy Brother Seven feels comes from his elder brother, but this sympathy is based on his brother's egoistic creed. "Sympathy is a function of the egoistic impulse of the living individual, the protective feeling, the need of natural life". [6] In such a family landscape, there is no atmosphere of joy and happiness, but only the memory of the trauma of a life as heavy as a wasteland. When the individual's awareness of survival in being prepared for danger in times of safety becomes the bond that holds human relationships together, people's interactions are strongly utilitarian, and the root of this is the helplessness of being dominated by selfish desires in the wasteland of human nature.

Liu Zhenyun's *Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers* is a novel in which he uses a stern brush to record all the trivialities of daily life. This precisely confirms what he once said: "The grimness of life is not that you have to climb a mountain of swords or plunge into a sea of flames. In fact, it's not the mountain of swords or sea of flames that are grim, it's the daily trivialities of life that are grim day after day, year after year". [7] Countless ordinary "Xiaolin" have been killed by the reality of the passion to go up, with only the insensitivity and indifference to reality. A scholar once summed up *Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers* like this: "Life is an arbitrary collection of silly things, whose endless entanglement makes every real person unable to break free and wears away all the angles of their personality with great erosion, causing them to lose their spiritual self-consciousness in a drowsy state". [8] In the enlightenment of the real life, people have formed the attitude towards life of patience, muddling through, taking things as they come, drifting along and enjoying themselves, as well as the sophistication of knowing the fickleness of the world clearly and the decadence and nihilism through the ages. As a result, the characters live in a barren spiritual world and wait for their personalities to wither. Although this depressing, stagnant, monotonous and repetitive landscape of life is artistically transformed in the writers' writing, it is still possible to glimpse the state of contemporary people in the spiritual wasteland from this emotional experience.

Liu Heng once said that young people all have ideals, but as they go forward, they will find that there is a wide range of non-ideal society and people, even they themselves are non-ideal and can't be expected, and it is even harder to trust and expect others. Therefore, *False Evidence* reveals the spiritual wasteland of life from the perspective of human emotional needs. The novel tries to speculate on why the protagonist Guo Puyun died. If Guo Puyun is said to be down and out, he is more fortunate than many others in that although he fails in the college entrance exams, he goes to a junior college; if he is said to be a failure, he is handsome, and good at poem and painting; if he is said to be lonely, he is favored by his teachers and close to his classmates; if he is said to be decadent, he is disciplined, dedicated and conscientious; if he is said to be weak, he is usually confident and tenacious, even in the face of death, he is so calm and relaxed... Therefore, Guo Puyun should have died after his ideals are shattered and falls into the

endless spiritual wasteland. He always pursues ideals and perfection but is rebuffed everywhere, and of course he has something dark inside himself, which is why he repeatedly laments "bad luck" and often blames himself for being a "clown". The more he finds imperfection, the more sensitive he becomes to it. His emotional frustrations accumulate into a deep disappointment with himself and society, and he is buried in a boundless spiritual wasteland. In the end, he doesn't know how to live in this world, and can only seek relief through death.

Dostoyevsky once said that mankind should have "something infinitely great" that mankind would worship forever, and that people would die of despair if they lost it. In the spiritual wasteland, it is difficult to communicate between people, and that "something infinitely great" is hard to find. Therefore, people who are trapped in the spiritual wasteland can't find any spiritual support, and the ubiquitous and unspeakable loneliness becomes the essence of existence. For the first time, the low state of the spiritual life of contemporary Chinese society is openly and centrally displayed, which becomes one of the significance of new realistic novels. All kinds of people are troubled by the poor material living conditions and the lack of adjustment in the social transformation; they are deeply exhausted by the entanglement of daily trivialities; their spirits, which have no escape, are entangled by the mediocre principles and daily ethics, and are deeply trapped by this spiritual wasteland. However, the wasteland is a value-neutral zone originally that never makes promises and doesn't help the wanderers to rebuild their spiritual home, but only receives the lonely wandering souls in silence.

4. THE RESISTANCE OF "BLASTING" THE WASTELAND

According to Lefebvre, "Everyday life is deeply connected to all activities and encompasses all the differences and conflicts between them. Everyday life is the meeting place, the bond and the common root of all activities. It is only in everyday life that the sum of social relations that cause the existence of human beings and each individual can be embodied in a complete form or manner". [9] New realistic novelists write about the original daily life, choosing the nonentities in real life as the objects of expression, focusing on the concrete trivialities of their lives, and presenting readers with the material wasteland and spiritual wasteland in which the

mediocre characters live, thus forming a rebellion against the almost optimistic and false life enveloped by the ideological discourse of the pre-1980s.

The writers deliberately promote the meaning of the existence of independent individuals in their lives to blast the "collective imagination" of the grand narratives of the past, in order to circumvent the suppression of ideological discourse. The writers present everything according to the facts of life as they are, and they are a group of people who hardly explore the value of life and ask about the meaning of existence from the metaphysical level. This kind of discourse, which has emptied ideology and returned to life itself, no longer pursues lofty ideals like traditional realism, nor does it penetrate into the world of human hearts for spiritual wandering and construction. Whether in the barren material wasteland or the weary spiritual wasteland, the characters are banished to the long journey of life, carrying the heavy baggage of life on their shoulders, and passively and calmly waiting for the withering and collapse of their spirits. The critic Lei Da once said, "For literature, the profundity of reason can only be achieved through the profundity of life, and not the other way around". [10] "Madame Bovary" in the writing of Flaubert lives in a small town, where the background of the times is completely invisible. She is always expecting something different from the ordinary life, but the everyday repetition tells her that nothing will happen. "In Flaubert's eyes, the essence of everyday reality is not an act or passion with strong action, but a state of continuity". [11] One senses in Madame Bovary's banal life a rebound effect on the repressed and unbearable nature of everyday life, a reflection that points precisely to the interior of everyday life.

New realistic novelists don't hesitate to withdraw the writing subject from the text, appearing as a presenter of phenomena rather than an instructor. They show the original form of life objectively and calmly, and the complex multiplicity of life itself is not artificially purified and filtered under their writing. They break away from the national discourse in a conservative but not radical way, stop telling collective stories and imaginations, and try to return literature to itself with a personalized discourse. In the meantime, they conceal their value judgments and seem to identify with such a plain and mediocre life, banishing people to this value-neutral material and spiritual wasteland. Georg Simmel once pointed out that "Even the most ordinary and insignificant

forms of life are expressions of a more ordinary social and cultural order". [12] Therefore, this truthful presentation of everyday life in new realistic novels is another way of intervening in real life adopted by writers after serious and profound reflections on reality. They want to rebel against this wasteland landscape by presenting it, and against mediocrity by faithfully depicting it. It allows the reader to experience in the aesthetic experience of reading how the spiritually atrophied wasteland is suffocating and how the spirit of resistance is needed, thus causing the reader to self-reflect and making people more aware of their own life forms, survival situations and their own history and culture.

On the surface, they seem to identify with the mediocre reality of life, but new realistic novels don't actually make the characters kneel down in the face of their predicament. The writers arm these seemingly ordinary warriors with a special fighting spirit, giving them a resilient vitality to resolve the suppression of life in the material wasteland. Even when they are mired in the quagmire of the spiritual wasteland, they still will not give up trying to find a way out. Therefore, these people living on the "wasteland" either find "something great" and live peacefully in the struggle, or choose to die in the extreme way to do the last resistance.

5. CONCLUSION

The people on the wasteland experience all kinds of hardships and are trapped in a predestined existence predicament. People have no other choice but to struggle under the manipulation of fate, experiencing the pain of being knocked back to the bottom when they clearly see hope. But the writers of new realistic novels still believe that the value and significance of the wasteland lies in a kind of transition, that it will be a transition between the old and the new, and that together they expect the sprout of the new to break through.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

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