Problems and Literary Characters in the World Prose of the 20-21st Century: I. S. Shmelev, D. Setterfield, Su Tong

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Abstract

Background/Objectives: The purpose of this literary analysis is to consider a range of problems in the life of literary characters described by Russian, English and Chinese prosaic writers. Methods/Statistical Analysis: The main provisions of literary text analysis form a methodological and theoretical basis of this research. Literary works are studied based on historical and functional principle. The comparative method helps to identify the distinctive features of the genre and stylistic creativity of I. S. Shmelev, D. Setterfield and Su Tong. Artistic merits of the analyzed works are justified by the degree of development of the concrete historical reality. Findings: The result of comparison of poetic texts published in different periods of time, which are artistically multi-leveled and evaluated differently by critics, revealed an artistic pattern of Russian, English and Chinese prose of the 20-21st centuries. The research aspect is focused primarily on the psychological identification of the characters, the writers’ creative individuality and peculiarities of constructing a system of images and the plot. The study has identified the motives of these prosaic works relating to the characters’ spiritual searches which determine the range of problems. Comparative analysis of the poetics of the studied texts reveals the traditions of national literatures and genre search by novelists based on the cultural constants, religious conceptions and family values. The House-Family archetype is interpreted by the writers as a ground for development of a harmonious personality. It is established that narrative strands are imbued with characters’ thoughts about world order, harmony between man and nature, monologues about the sense of life, dialogues of people of different nationalities about the humanistic ideas of the century. Application/Improvements: Analytical reading of Russian, English and Chinese works in the context of the discoveries of world literature, understanding of those aspects of the writer’s creative work, which demonstrate the continuity within the national literary process, enables to approach at solving the poorly-studied issues in the world prose.

Keywords: Chinese Literature, Country Studies, English Novel, Literary tradition, Poetics, Russian Prose, Shmelev, Setterfield, Su Tong

1. Introduction

The consideration of the world literary process on the basis of comparative analysis of prosaic texts is an actual problem of literary criticism in the early 21st century. The research of the works by Russian classic Ivan Shmelev, English writer Diane Setterfield and Chinese novelist Su Tong has the purpose to identify the genre and stylistic features of poetics, on the one hand, and aesthetic laws of development of the world prose, on the other.

Modern literature studies have a number of scientific papers on the creative legacy of these writers in the boundaries of variable disciplines on the history of Russian and foreign literature. This article is made in the aspect of interdisciplinary connections expanding students’ vision of Russian, English and Chinese prose of the 20-21st centuries. The analysis of the poetics of a literary text deepens literary thesaurus, adds to cross-cultural knowledge about the life, culture, religion in Russia, England and China.

The purpose of this study is to identify a range of problems discussed in Russian, English and Chinese prose.
The objectives of the research are:
- To reveal the psychology of the characters from different social strata on the basis of man’s traditional representations of the world;
- To follow the implementation of axiological ideas in the literary plot;
- To identify the problems, the main motives associated with the character’s spiritual search.

The theoretical significance of the article consists in the comparative analysis of Russian, English and Chinese prose, leading to the identification of artistic regularities common to the literature of different nations.

The practical significance of the article is in the familiarization with different national literary texts in their genre and style originality.

The literature review on the subject shows the existence of scientific monographs, dissertations on the creative work by I. S. Shmelev in the context of Russian prose in the beginning of the century. An array of literary research related to Su Tong’s prose is limited to a small number of studies on Chinese literature made by Russian researchers. The publications are of particular value in the Russian literary criticism of the literature and culture of Asia-Pacific countries.

The works under analysis in this article have different degrees of knowledge in foreign literature studies. I. S. Shmelev’s literary heritage received the attention from foreign scholars in publications devoted to studying the 20th century Russian literature. It is frequently connected with the research of expatriate writers’ works. In this connection it is stated in, “Many of them considered it their duty to combine their literary pursuits with political engagement by exposing the vices of the Soviet regime and continually drawing world attention to what they saw as its evils. Among these artistically weak, but publicistically powerful, works can be included Ivan Bunin’s Okaiannye dni [The Cursed Days] (1935), Ivan Shmelev’s Solntse mertvykh [The Sun of the Dead] (1926)…” Only a few studies are devoted to the artistic heritage of this particular author. Mentioning I. S. Shmelev in connection with the translation of the Russian author’s books is also worth noting. Jessie Chambers, the translator of I. S. Shmelev’s works, calls him a prominent contemporary Russian writer. The mention of I. S. Shmelev in an article devoted to the study of educational discourse, in particular, the teaching of literature in school, draws the attention as well. It refers to a concept named “the cultural turn” in connection with the recommendations to replace literature works of socialist realism authors included in the school curriculum with émigré and dissident literature of the twentieth century.

Characterization of I. S. Shmelev’s works is often of a general nature, for example, the researchers point out that “Shmelev” is the one of the most “Russian” writers of the XX century. He was the one who expressed the “archetypical absolutes of the Russian” in his books.

With regard to the works by the second author, Diane Setterfield, foreign scholars note peculiarities of the novel analyzed in this article – The Thirteenth Tale. The novel genre is described as a modern Gothic; the high artistic merit of the work, its “classical background, and the ease with which each sentence reads, tells” a literary critic “that the writer has labored long and hard to produce the manuscript.” The book, according to the researchers’ points of view, relates to the so-called multi-point-of-view books or in other words, multi-layered books. Explaining this, the writer Veronica Heley making a review of the text says: “When I tried to summarize the plot of this book, I found myself getting confused as layer after layer is exposed. Confusion resulted. So I think it best if I take it in order, unpeeling the strata as we come to them.”

The researchers also note the relationship of the novel with the works by Dickens and Charlotte Bronte, tracing Victorian novel’s features in it, calling it “an involving story, a modern version of a Victorian novel.” In addition, Kirkus Reviews, an American book review magazine, remarks that The Thirteenth Tale imitates du Maurier and Wilkie Collins’ works.

Perhaps a well-known Chinese writer Su Tong is the most studied of these three novelists in the foreign literary criticism. There are a number of surveys, in which Su Tong’s books are mentioned in connection with the problems and peculiarities of Chinese literature. These are the studies by and others.

There are several studies in which topics that fall within the writer’s field of view are investigated, and the classification of his works is suggested, which refer to the Chinese literary criticism. In accordance with this classification, the author’s works are divided into neo-historical stories, stories examining the lives of women, coming-of-age stories and stories about modern Chinese urbanites.

The novel Binu and the Great Wall belongs to the neo-historical stories. Characterizing the novel, the author compares it with its other novel My Life as Emperor. He believes that “both works are full of imagination, a solitary
outcast and fantasy, but Binu and the Great Wall is better developed in terms of characterization”32.

Hua Li, a researcher of Su Tong’s works, pays attention to “the incorporation of mythical characteristics in his novels; and the Great Wall and tears are used as metaphors to characterize his political and social criticism of contemporary China”32. In Hua Li’s opinion, the essence of the novel Binu and the Great Wall is expressed in the following words: “It mirrors various social and political problems in contemporary China, and transmits a cautionary message: the seemingly softest and weakest thing can beat the mightiest tyranny, just as one widow’s tears can bring about the collapse of a section of the Great Wall”32. As far as one of the main characters is concerned, “Binu undergoes a transformation from a young woman with the modest initial intention of presenting her husband with some warm winter clothing to a heroine who rebels against social injustice by using her tears to bring about the collapse of a section of the Great Wall. Her individuality, self-identity and autonomy are gradually formed during the process of witnessing various social problems and experiencing various types of mistreatment along the journey.”32

A literary review of foreign researchers’ works shows the practical absence of comparative studies of the above mentioned authors’ works. An exception is the publication comparing Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye and Su Tong’s Toon Street Series. This is explained by a known factor of impact of the world-famous works by Salinger on the young Su Tong and the reflection of this inspiration by Salinger’s novel in Su Tong’s Toon Street Series fiction.33 From this point of view the analysis of poetics of literary texts by I.S.Shmelev, Diane Setterfield and Su Tong, the peculiarities of their artistic manner, the problematics of texts is valuable to determine patterns of development of the world prose literature.

2. Methods

The methodological and theoretical basis of this research was formed by the basic provisions of the methodology of literary analysis of the text 34-36.

The targeted tasks are achieved by comparative analysis of a literary text, revealing folk life traditions, problems and characters’ personalities in the poetics of works by I. S. Shmelev, D. Setterfield and Su Tong. The comparative method helps identify the distinctive features of the genre and stylistic creativity of Russian, English and Chinese writers. Literary works are studied based on historical and functional principle. Artistic merits of the analyzed works are justified by the degree of development of the concrete historical reality.

3. Results and Discussion

Modern literature changes the vision of I.S. Shmelev as a chronicler, comprehending the role of the artist in the preservation and continuation of the high spiritual culture and humanistic tradition. This change is based on his works created in the 1920-1940-ies, filled with love for Russia. His book Solntse mertvykh [The Sun of the Dead] written in the realistic tradition opened the writer’s emigre period. It is important that the text presents the country-specific, historical information about the Crimean daily life and existence, on the one hand, and about the first tragic years of the Soviet regime, on the other. The time from August 1921 to March 1922 closes the events related to the red terror against the shot White Guardsmen. The cycle of short stories is based on documentary evidence, particular persons and the actual episodes. The reader believes that the described stories are true, among them scientific experiments of a half-mad doctor which he set up on himself, the sudden death of the young writer Boris Shishkin, an absurd decease of Academician Ivan Mikhailovich, a landowner’s wife bringing up the nanny’s children, tireless toiler Tania, whose fates have been destined in the genre interpretation of the book by the author himself. He thought that he was writing the epic of the folk life, of the righteous, God’s world in the clash with the sinful devil’s world, concentrated in the children’s vision.

The style of the novel, linking together delirium, despair, confession, and anger, is determined by the writer’s creative appeal to the mythopoetic content. Bright and colorful descriptions are often combined with publicist appeals; tense dialogue is replaced by a philosophical monologue, which is supported by the use of colloquial and everyday language, archaisms and Old Church Slavonic words. Creating artistic and real evidence of the Bolshevik binge, the writer remained true to the common people, whose faces, portraits and features he carefully recreates. Whatever worldly detail, biblical motive, a fragment of folk saga the author reproduced, he regularly returned to the image of the heavenly body.
The short novel Bogomolie [Pilgrimage] is written in the genre of memoirs and biographical literature. A worldly pathos of epigraph from the Old Testament "O ye that make mention of the Lord, keep not silence!" smoothly and strongly permeates all twelve chapters of the book, the spiritual culmination of which is the scene of blessing. St Nicholas the Wonderworker Chapel, located at the Stone Bridge, the Moskva river shimmering in the mist, the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, sparkling in the sunrays, churches, people appear in front of the boy's enchanted and enthusiastic eyes. The novelty of impressions is emphasized by a child's speech which does not correspond to the grammatical rules of the Russian language, when the little character unconsciously tries to absorb all the beauty of the world.

The character-narrator always returns to the motive of the road, pilgrimage. The description of appearance, prayer, pilgrims' pilgrimage takes a considerable place in the narrative. Next to them are other characters – a father, Sergei Ivanych, a carpenter Gorkin, a coachman Fyodor, a tavern owner, a novice – they cause the child's trust, special heartfelt feelings of fascination with natural life. Not only pilgrims are internally and externally beautiful for Vanya, in which he is pleased to note everything festive, elegant. I. Shmelev's method of transferring color, painting the outside world as always involves the idea of conciliarity, national unity of the Russian life. The thought of the father's blessing is consecrated with clean and clear colors that convey a sense of calm, concentration, composure and tranquility.

The novel Leto Gospodne [Summer of the Lord] united stories dedicated to the writer's childhood into the main parts (Prazdniki [Holidays], Radosti [Joys], Skorbi [Sorrows]), recreating the Christian canons of a person's life journey from birth to death. The work is among special masterpieces of the twentieth century, in which artistic time continuum is based on the time of the church calendar, cyclically returning it to its original one, weaving the natural and the spiritual-religious movement of the sun. The boy's heart overflows with bright joy, the essence of which he does not completely understand yet, but his whole being, genetic memory is opened to the perception of Orthodoxy as a spiritual holiday. A combination of elements of the "baby" tale and "adult" narration in religious questions and answers is important in the structure of the novel trilogy, interpreting the religious content of biblical images, organically coming into the person's spiritual memory, and explaining a lot in the new Russian history.

The novel by Diane Setterfield “The Thirteenth Tale” is one of the creative directions for rethinking traditional national life in modern English literature. The text poetics is based on references to the canonical plots and eternal images realized in the life stories of the writer Vida Winter and her biographer Margaret Lee. The artistic material of the work is filled with the intertext, which interprets the national classics, The Woman in White by W. Collins, Wuthering Heights by E. Bronte, The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes by A.C. Doyle, Hard Times by Dickens, etc., and implements the ideas of the Protestant faith in God of Jane Ayer in the eponymous novel by Charlotte Bronte. Reproducing mythopoetic material from folklore sources (the legends of Sleeping Beauty, the Mermaid, the Prince and the Beast) D. Setterfield develops a common aesthetic pattern of the world literature evolution.

The compositional structure of the novel follows the human life journey in the feelings and actions of the characters, repeats its stages in the symbolic titles of the chapters: The Rising Action, The Development of the Plot, The Final: "From tomorrow I will tell you my story in the right order: the rising action, then the development of the plot, and only at the end – the final. All the finals must be in place. No retreat"37. Such structure of the plot has something in common with the little boy's reasoning about the world order in the book by I. S. Shmelev with the difference that women intellectuals in the novel by D. Setterfield are surrounded by books, and the boys is surrounded by icons. Therefore, the devil and Count Dracula are equal characters in I. S. Shmelev and D. Setterfield's works. At the same time the English author remains faithful to the law of the Gothic novel leading the reader into the maze of family secrets, fatal circumstances and mysterious stories of a typical English family. The natural realia, against the backdrop of which a creative biography of female characters is taking place, are recognizable and resemble landscapes of W. Irving, E. Poe, A. C. Doyle. The image of the sun, characteristic of characters' Orthodox worldview in the works by I. S. Shmelev organically changes to incessant rains in Foggy Albion.

A model Western European order surrounded by the gray silence and leady twilight is a key element of the everyday environment description. Toponymical content emphasizes the painful condition of D. Setterfield's heroines, their intense inner drama. While the radiant light of the sun in the trilogy Solntse mertvykh [The Sun of the Dead] by I. S. Shmelev is reflected in the gold church vestments, icon mountings and in the boy's soul
overflowing with joy of life, happiness of spiritual unity with people. The motive of the twins' birth – Adeline and Emmeline March – dates back to the famous novel by Oscar Wilde the Picture of Dorian Gray and ends with the motive of madness. A technique of borrowing becomes the key one for the writer to draw figurative characteristics of the main heroines. Psychological identification of D. Setterfield's characters is expanded by the field of literary prototypes, unlike that of I. S. Shmelev for whom the Orthodox tradition of Russian people is self-sufficient.

In the description of the secondary characters, for example, a governess, Miss Esther Barrow, European efficiency, English practicality, emotional restraint are underlined, endowing images with typical national features. Men of the people in the works by the Russian writer are also natural in their philosophical calmness, slow contemplation of the real and the divine, lengthy feeling of common joys and troubles. For both writers the world of childhood is important, in which the mystery of the orphan's birth – Aurelius Love – reminds of the story of Oliver Twist's birth with the author's clarification of a detail (a pattern of white flowers and stars embroidered on a shirt) taken from O. Wilde's fairy tale about the Star-Child. The boy Vanya, surrounded by human kindness and compassion, as well as Aurelius Love finds home, family and human happiness.

The plot of the novel by Su Tong Binu and the Great Wall is the author's interpretation of the folk myth of the national tragedy of the construction of the Great Wall of China. The heroine of the novel is a young girl, Bina, who voluntarily follows her beloved to the galleys. The poetical of the novel realizes the archetype of an insurmountable wall, shattered by Bina's tears. The culmination of the dramatic action is presented by the acquaintance of the young people, the emperor's marriage proposal to Bina, the burial of her bridegroom's mortal remains, ended by her suicide. Confucian visions of family and marital fidelity determine the motivation of the heroine's behavior, for which the world is divided into real and surreal. In the process of his creative work on the text of the novel Su Tong interprets the canonical material, deepening the psychological implications, making the girl's character alive and understandable to the modern reader.

The author refers to the methods of “magical realism”, characteristic of the Latin American writers' prose, in particular, the novel by Gabriel Garcia Marquez One Hundred Years of Solitude. Thus, the tradition to avoid crying for the loss, to feel shy of “shameful tears” explains the personal qualities of the heroine – bravery, strength and forbearance. Prayers in Su Tong's works always correlate with the recovery from the disease and overcoming fear.

The idea of freedom, the problem of the natural person who is in harmony with cultural traditions, national customs, ethnic norms brings together the artistic world of the Chinese prose writer Su Tong and a community of Orthodox people in I. Shmelev's works. The characters of the mentioned above novels by I. Shmelev, D. Setterfield and Su Tong do not try to explain the causes and consequences of birth and death, love and separation, following the logic of the universe. According to the degree of emotional stress Bina is close to the intelligent heroines of the English female writer when she talks about the reincarnation of man in plants and animals after the death. Su Tong expands the imagery, supplementing it with the folk characters. So, the girl is accompanied by a blind frog who was an elderly woman before her death. They are united by the motive of the search for the bride and son, respectively. The cultural vector East – West is created, indicated by the Sun in the creative work of the Russian writer, by the Star – in the work of the English novelist and by the Moon – in the work of the Chinese writer. Reinterpretation of the past is necessary for a contemporary writer to understand today's reality. An appeal to the mythology, involvement of folklore traditions contributed to the deep penetration into the spiritual world of the Chinese people, into the aesthetics of their mythological consciousness, reproduced with the personal responsibility of a great artist.

### 4. Conclusions

A brief review of the scientific and critical literature on the research issue indicates a lack of its scientific development. Analytical reading of Russian, English and Chinese prosaic works in the context of the discoveries of world literature, understanding of those aspects of the writer's creative work, which demonstrate the continuity within the national literary process, enables to approach at solving the poorly-studied issues in the world prose.

The comparison of poetics of the texts, which were published at different times, artistically multi-leveled, differently assessed by critics, revealed an artistic pattern of development of Russian, English and Chinese
prose of the 20–21st centuries. The research aspect is focused primarily on the psychological identification of the characters, the writers’ creative individuality and peculiarities of constructing a system of images and the plot.

Comparative analysis of the poetics of I. S. Shmelev’s trilogy Solntse mertvykh [The Sun of the Dead], Bogomolie [Pilgrimage], Leto Gospodnye [Summer of the Lord], a novel by Diane Setterfield “The Thirteenth Tale” and Su Tong’s Binu and the Great Wall reveals the tradition of national literatures and genre search of prose writers based on the cultural constants, religious representations, and family values. The House-Family archetype is interpreted by the writers as the basis for the development of a harmonious personality. It was established that narrative strands are imbued with characters’ thoughts about the world order, harmony between man and nature, monologues about the sense of life, dialogues of people of different nationalities about the humanistic ideas of the century.

Observations on the psychology of the characters from different walks of life show their unity related to the ideas of faith and goodness in Orthodoxy and Confucianism. Family values and the human desire to know the eternal Beauty determine thematic corpus. The main motives of these prosaic works include the spiritual searches of the child (I. Shmelev), representatives of the intelligentsia Vida Winter and Margaret Lee (D. Setterfield) and Bina, a common girl, (Su Tong) which define the range of problems highlighted by the writers. The principles of describing a way of national life, peculiarities of perception of Russian, English and Chinese nature by the characters in the context of country-specific knowledge were noted.

5. References:

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