

A Study on Narrative Art of Raise the Red Lantern

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Abstract: In the history of modern and contemporary Chinese literature, Su Tong, a leading representative of avant-garde writers, is good at using creatively narrative skills to develop his stories. *Raise the Red Lantern* is one of his famous masterpieces, which ranks among the top 100 Chinese novels of the 20th century. The story began with a small sedan chair carrying Lotus, a 19-year-old college student, into Chen Family. She was going to be a fourth concubine for Chen Zuoqian, a 50-year-old master of Chen family. The books tells the unfortunate marriage and tragic fate of Lotus under the feudal system in Chen family. This paper aimed to analyze and appreciate narrative art in *Raise the Red Lantern* from three aspects: narrative contents, narrative language and narrative techniques, which will enrich the interpretation of the novella. Su Tong made use of vivid characterization, delicate environmental description, rich metaphors and symbols as well as intradiegetic narrator to represent the readers the tragedy of women in a feudal family and provoke in-dept thinking of fate of women group.

Keywords: Narratology, Narrative arts, *Raise the Red Lantern*, Symbolism.

1. Introduction to Su Tong and his novella *Raise the Red Lantern*

Su Tong is viewed as one of the pioneering avant-garde novelists in China. One of his masterpieces, *Raise the Red Lantern*, was written in 1989. In 1991, Zhang Yimou, a Chinese famous filmmaker, adapted it into a film which was nominated in the Best Foreign Language Film category at the 1992 Academy Awards. The film expanded the influence of this work, gaining more attention of readers, writers and scholars at home and abroad. In 2018, this book was selected as one of the most influential novels in celebration of the 40th anniversary of China's reform and opening-up, which secures its position in contemporary Chinese literature. Wang Dewei, Edward C. Henderson professor of Chinese literature, once commented that "Su Tong was born to be a great storyteller." [1]

Raise the Red lantern depicts the lives of wives and concubines vying for their husband Chen Zhuoqian's attention and affections in a wealthy family compound during the 1920s. It is a piece of work worth of study. "When writing *Raise the Red Lantern*, Su Tong said he suddenly had a desire to tell stories. He want to pick up stories again and reshape characters. At the same time, He need to find the materials of writing. The richest ones he had found at that time happened to be materials with traditional Chinese characteristics." [2] *Raise the Red Lantern* is a novella with traditional Chinese characteristics, which narrated the tragic story in a feudal family. "Throughout the whole novel, there was a gloomy, decadent, sad and even horrible atmosphere which fully embodies Su Tong's accurate grasp of women's psychology and his narrative skills in constructing atmosphere." [3]

This paper aimed to make a narrative analysis of *Raise the Red Lantern*, through which readers can have a better understanding of elements like characters, plot, symbols and settings in the novel and perceive the author's thoughts and ideas in a deeper way.

2. Basic concepts in Narratology

In literary theory, narratology is the most basic method and tool for analyzing and understanding literary texts. The term narratology was originally put forward in 1969 by French literary scholar Tzvetan Todorov, in *Grmmaire du Decameron*. In this book, narratology was defined as the study of narrative structure. Later, narratology became the major area of study in the schools of Russian Formalism and in American Neo-criticism. Some famous scholars, such as Todorov, Vladimir Propp, Chatman have made an effort to the development of this theory. In China, the theory of narratology has attracted many scholars' attention. According to Hu Yamin, a Chinese narratologist scholar, "narratology is a synchronically and systematically formalist study of narrative texts, which focus on narrative mode, structural mode and reading type of narrative texts. Its significance lies in providing a theoretical framework for scientific understanding of narrative texts." [4]

Specifically, narratology is the study of narrative structures and the ways that these affect human perception. In this study, *Raise the Red Lantern* will be interpreted under the theoretical framework of narratology from narrative contents, narrative language and narrative techniques.

Narrative content is "a collection of represented events, along with the participants in those events and the circumstances of those events." [5] To be more specific and accurate, narrative content include narrative plot, narrative characters and narrative environment.

Narrative language refers to the language used in narration. At language level, characteristics of words and sentences are taken into consideration.

"Narrative technique means the methods and devices writers use to tell their stories, whether in works of literature, film, theater or even oral stories or other media. Many techniques work upon specific uses of phrases, punctuation or exaggerations of description, but nearly every storyteller, regardless of genre or style employs a few foundational techniques, such as point of view, setting, symbolism and others." [6] In other words, narrative techniques in literature

are the manner in which a writer conveys what they want to say to their reader and the methods that they employ to develop a story.

3. An Analysis of *Raise the Red Lantern* from Narratology

The artistic charm of a novel is not only reflected in what kind of story it tells, but also in various artistic skills, discourse strategies and storytelling methods. The following part will be analyzed *Raise the Red Lantern* from narrative contents, narrative language and narrative techniques with the purpose of revealing its artistic charm.

3.1. On Narrative Contents

Generally speaking, there are a wide range of themes and topics for a writer to narrate. Su Tong chose an old one which represented tragic experiences of a school girl in a feudal family. To be frank, this theme is quite common in Chinese literature. However, Su Tong creatively made it different.

In the process of describing women, he constructed the novel with the rivalries and struggles between women rather than develop the story based on traditional conflict mode between men and women. All kinds of persecution and conspiracies carried out by these women are imposed on the female. It is a war in family between women instead of between men and women.

The female characters portrayed in this novella are vivid with distinct personalities. The heroine, Lotus, was a college student who was receiving higher graduation. After her father's death, she couldn't but drop out from school and escape from her original family to get rid of her stepmother's torment. She had thought she could change her life by marrying to a rich man. However, the position as concubine in a feudal family made this female college student with yearning for love finally become man's plaything and a victim of feudal system. Just like Lotus, Coral, the third wife, showed great dissatisfaction with her life in Chen family. Both of them struggled and resisted in various ways. Coral was an opera performer with low social status. However, she was a hedonist who dared to fight against male domination and power in order to pursue her own happiness. This awakening sense of rebellion grew gradually but was destroyed in the end. She tried to realize her value and form her identity as an independent woman by having an affair with a doctor who was young and full of energy. She challenged the absolute authority of the patriarchal system by betraying her husband emotionally and physically, which was regarded as the most disobedient and serious resistance to the patriarchal system. Coral's behavior was definitely unacceptable to the feudal family. She paid for what she had done and ended up her life by being abandoned in the well. Cloud, the second wife, was devious and sly. Her position in Chen family was insecure. She didn't have the high family position and enjoy the power as the first wife. Meanwhile, She was not as young and beautiful as Lotus and Coral. She could survive in the family only by ingratiating herself with her husband and Chen's other wives. Her viciousness and dark sides were concealed beneath her smiling face. She seemed to support the first wife but what she really planned was wiping Lotus and Coral out with the aid of the first wife. Her snitching on Coral directly led to Coral's tragic ending. She secured her position in Chen family by various despicable means. Under the oppression of patriarchy, Coral gradually became a woman with distorted

personalities. Joy, the first wife, was the mistress of Chen family. She was in charge of household affairs in Chen family. Old and unattractive, Joy apparently was unable to win her husband's favour with her appearance. Therefore, she could only reduce her desires and find inner peace by following the teachings of Buddha and making a gesture of disdaining to fight with others for husband's love. As a woman in power in Chen Family, to some extent, she managed to save her position by maintaining and defending the feudal system, so as to escape the suppression of male power. Whenever there were conflicts in the family, she exercised her power and authority to keep the family in superficial harmony. The four wives in the Chen family represented four different forces in front of patriarchal system. Joy represented the supporters and defenders; Cloud represented the oppressed; Coral represented resisters; Lotus was on behalf of those who had awakening consciousness. Actually, Lotus was not only the representative of herself, but also a group of female college students the same as her. They lacked the courage to escape from the feudal cage. The women who had accepted modern education still made such a choice, much less to those who never went to university. [7]

Through vivid characterization, the author portrayed the characters with distinctive personalities and subtle psychology. In addition, narration of characters revealed author's emotional evaluation of them, which achieve an artistic effect of character figuration.

3.2. On Narrative Language

The characteristics of language in this novella lie in its charm of poetic wording, manipulation of metaphors and fluent expressions. Su Tong is a master of language, who used concise expressions but created slightly spooky atmosphere and made incisive psychological portraits of his characters. In the novella, there is a description of Lotus' approach to the well.

"Lotus walked toward the well. She felt incomparably light, as though walking in a dream. The odor of decaying vegetation filled the air around the well; Lotus picked a wisteria leaf up off the ground, examined it carefully, and threw it into the well." [8]

In order to convey the mysteriousness and degeneration of the well, the author described precisely Lotus's touch sensation and olfactory sensation. "She felt incomparably light, as though walking in a dream". The well had an mysterious power to Lotus, which lured her to irresistibly approach it. When she was approaching the well, she could smell the odor caused by rotten vegetation surrounded the well.

The old well and wisteria in the novella typically convey metaphorical meaning. The jealous fighting between wives is only a superficial meaning. What the author wanted to convey is a deep reflection of readers on women's living condition. Women were unable to be independent financially and mentally in a patriarchal society, and they lost their lives quietly by being abandoned in that well. The well was used as a metaphor of patriarchal system. The author didn't use language to attack on patriarchal system directly, but implied the struggle of women under patriarchal system through presenting the persecution and fighting among them. In author's description, Chen family was full of dark and intimidating atmosphere.

Lotus could not take control of her own destiny. She kept asking herself that what that well was and what wisteria

leaves were. She couldn't understand it at the beginning, but finally she realized that the well was the brutal patriarchal society, and she was the leaf of wisteria. Women's lives were like leaves of wisteria. When the leaves of wisteria withered, they would eventually fall into the well with wind.

In the novella, Lotus' reluctant compliance, Coral's insanity, Cloud's hypocrisy, Joy's apathy are vividly presented by the author. For instance, one day, Coral invited Lotus to play mahjong, but Lotus didn't like to play and wanted to refuse.

"Lotus was so irritated that her temper began to flare up; just as she'd decided to tell her off and the curses were already boiling up onto her tongue, she swallowed them back again, bit her lip, and thought for a few seconds. Then she said, "All right then, I'll go with you." [8]

Words and expressions like irritated, flare up, curses, boil up reveals how angry Lotus was when Coral persuaded her to join them. However, as one of wives in Chen household, she had to learn how to deal with other wives whether she was willing or not. After weighting pros and cons, she decided to join them reluctantly. Verbs like swallow, bite represents how hard Lotus forbore from expressing her true feelings and concealed her emotion.

"The deep emotions behind each character in this novella can be revealed by relatively few words." [9] "In *Raise the Red Lantern*, Su Tong paid special attention to diction, which can produce unique artistic charm." [10] Concise and accurate wording with striking use of metaphors highlights its value in narrative language.

3.3. Narrative Techniques

When a writer begins to plan the framework of his literature works, he or she must select the point of view that contains the perspective of telling the story and decide the time in which the events of the story took place. These two factors, narrative time and narrative perspective, are the two common elements in narrative techniques. *Raise the Red Lantern* mainly employs intradiegetic narrator in the story. Lotus served as the narrator who plays the role of story teller. The story was developed on the basis of views and feelings of her. This third-person limited omniscient narrative point of view gives readers a sense of trustworthiness and increases their sense of substitution. From Lotus' detailed narration and delicate description of inner feelings, readers witness progressive deterioration of the Chen family and experience the terror of her.

Symbolism is another prominent narrative technique used by Su Tong. "A symbol is a thing that signifies something else." [11] Red Lanterns and courtyard are the most impressive symbols in the novella. In Chinese culture, red lanterns symbolize family reunion, happiness and prosperity, which are associated with joy and good fortune. However, in *Raise the Red lantern*, they are the symbol of power and desire. The desire fire is lit in the red lanterns. Chen zuoqian, the master of Chen family, was the only one having the right of lighting the red lanterns and deciding with whom he would spend the night with. In order to have red lanterns hung on their door, Chen's wife and concubines fought against each other with open and secret means. Chen had supreme power in the family. For him, women are just playthings and tools for procreation. The highly-hanging lanterns represented the manipulation of man's power and the endlessness of women's desire. What's more. Jiangnan ancient courtyard, in Chinese people's geographical impression, is usually associated with

praise like a place of beauty, elegance, attractiveness as well as peace and tranquility. However, Chen family courtyard was depicted as a horrible place. Every scene and object was filled with doom and gloom. In this square courtyard echoed Coral's intermittent singing of opera, Feipu's lonely melody of flute and Lotus' upset sound of excessive drinking. The courtyard with an ancient well, overgrown moss, dead branches, fallen leaves and other objects indicated a decaying trend towards Chen family. The whole story was filled with horror and gloom, showing the author's narrative skills in creating an impressive atmosphere. The described scenery in the courtyard is the externalization of the characters' mood. The images were attached to characters, constructing and developing the whole story. The old theme that reveals the desperate and helpless fate of women caused by ancient feudal families and traditional culture was creatively interpreted and expressed by Su Tong. Courtyard was a relatively enclosed space and people living in the courtyard, especially ancient women, were confined. Since Lotus stepped into Chen family courtyard, she seemed to be kept in a cage. In other word, her life was trapped in the courtyard. Coral's death, Lotus' madness and even the foreseeable tragedy of the newly-married fifth wife would made no impact on life in this closed courtyard. Life in the courtyard would soon be restored to the way it had been. It was in a desolate autumn that Lotus got married and carried to Chen courtyard in a sedan chair. In the spring of the following year, Bamboo first arrived in the courtyard as the five wife. The cycle of four seasons and change of characters implied that tragedy would indefinitely strike again and again. Life and tragedy in Chen house were like in a circle, which would never stop. In Su Tong's narration, "the tragic fate of women under the patriarchal system is inevitable and irresistible." [12] Readers could foresee that another tragedy of woman would happen again.

4. Conclusion

In *Raise the Red Lantern*, although the plot is simple and the theme is common in Chinese literature, Su Tong used creatively narrative techniques along with poetic wording to weave the story in a tactful way, making the old theme full of vitality and novelty.

The author's detailed description of courtyard and characters' inner feelings as well as employment of metaphors and symbols enrich the connotation of the novella, creating a suffocating narrative atmosphere and revealing complex psychology of every characters. The novella fully shows the author's concern of and sympathy for women. Its narrative art vividly presents a decayed and cruel feudal patriarchal family to readers and provokes readers' reflection on women's life.

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