

Is It a Betrayal or Justice?

–Critical Realism on Bosman’s Short Story “Feat of Memory”

Zhuoyu Wang¹

¹School of Foreign Languages, Hangzhou Dianzi University, Hangzhou, China.

Abstract. As a famous novelist, poet, critic and short story writer, Bosman focuses on the realistic phenomenon of South Africa. This article focuses on one of Bosman’s short story Feat of Memory, and tend to analyzes the deep thought of the short story from the perspective of critical realism. In the work, Bosman alludes to the ugly phenomena in the whole society and criticized the politics, society and humanity of South Africa.

Keywords: Herman Charles Boseman; critical realism; Feat of Memory.

1. Introduction

Herman Charles Boseman is a famous novelist, poet, critic and short story writer. As a representative figure of South African literature, he has a unique position in the history of South African literature and is praised as “the only literary genius in South Africa”. He is also praised as the “eternal artist”. Boseman’s life in South Africa and his love for South Africa have made his works full of African traditions.

As for the history of South Africa, since the Dutch entered South Africa in the Age of the Great Voyage, South Africa has been controlled by white colonists, and then the British took control of this place, and the descendants of the local Dutch, German and other colonists formed a new people. South Africa was a British self-governing territory in the early 20th century until 31 May, 1961, when South Africa withdrew from the Commonwealth and became the Republic of South Africa. The history of South Africa is deeply rooted in the blood of South Africans and their people, and is vividly reflected in Boseman’s work.

Herman Charles Bosman left London in 1932 and returned to South Africa with his wife in 1940. And Bosman’s decades in South Africa were his most productive. One of Bosman’s short stories, Feat of Memory, was taken from Bosman’s Homecoming: Voorkamer Stories By Herman Charles Boseman, which firstly published in 1950.

The works of critical realism usually reflect social customs, human feelings, national character and social contradictions in a wide and profound way, truly and vividly. At the same time, the works of critical realism deeply criticizes the spiritual fairy tale of capitalist society, and vividly reveals all suffering in the world to people. Because Herman Charles Bosman’s works not only draw on the reality of South Africa and his own real experience, but also directly address the social reality and reflect the real contradictions, thus Bosman’s works are full of criticism.

2. The Content of Feat of Memory

Feat of Memory tells a story about Jurie Steyn and his friends, and a small accident of Jurie’s fornication leads to a hot discussion about “memory”.

The accident began with Jurie’s inability to find his rubber stamp, and the fact that his job at the post office sometimes suffered because of his poor memory was not taken seriously. Gysbert van Tonder then turns the conversation to a politician he knows, who has a good memory before the election and a bad memory after the election, satirizing the hypocrisy of politicians. Then Oupa Bekker tells them astory about a man with an extraordinary memory – ‘Rooi’ Sarel who can remember everything. At the end of the story, there is also a slight twist. Oupa Bekker tells that although ‘Rooi’ Sarel has a good memory, he does not know how to repay his kindness and uses his

good memory to expose the scandal of an official who helped him about the compensation. So it takes “skill” and “art” to have a good memory.

The whole story seems to be funny dialogues, but it reflects Herman Charles Bosman’s criticism and satire of the facts of bureaucracy and corruption in the South African government, as well as his meditation on moral humanity.

3. Language Characteristic and Writing Style

Herman Charles Bosman often writes his novels quickly, with each short story written as if they are dictation, and there are almost no repetitions in Bosman’s stories. In the short story collection, Bosman creates stories around several distinct characters from different backgrounds. Each short plot may seem simple, and each story may seem unrelated to another, but when read through, each character and event is connected.

Bosman has long been known for his intelligent and witty dialogue. His works are written with unconventional humor and creative imagination, and the plots are often gripping, fascinating and exciting(Tan, 2018: 36) .

After reading *Feat of Memory*, it can be seen that Herman Charles Bosman’s work still inherits the “sense of humor” characteristic of South African literature. Unlike traditional South African literature, which focuses on realism, Bosman’s novels are more satirical, he use fictions to reveal life. And he is also good at telling a story or describing a fact through intelligent and witty dialogue between characters. But at the end of the novel, the reader is often given an unexpected twist to the ending for ironic effect. In fiction, Bosman “never directly accuses someone in his writing.”(Tan, 2018: 36)Although the characters in the novel are virtual, Bosman places them in a real South African context, such as the South African towns of “Marico” and “Pretoria”. This makes the characters and stories described in his works more real, and the readers have a further understanding of the politics, economy, culture, customs and history of South Africa while reading his works.

Bosman’s language is simple, mostly colloquial dialogue, without a lot of esoteric vocabulary, unlike Charles Dickens’s critical novels. This is related to Bosman’s education and life experience. He doesn’t view South Africa’s social culture from the perspective of a British or Dutch colonialist, but as a people who really experience it. In addition, another feature of his work is that he will introduce the sentence patterns and rhymes of Afrikaans(Boer) language into English, which has the characteristics of idiomatic Afrikaans, or the frequent appearance of some Afrikaans words, such as “voorkamer”, which means the front room. If we want to understand Bosman's novels, understanding his language is a big challenge (Tan, 2018: 37).

4. Features of Critical Realism in *Feat of Memory*

Writers of critical realism often choose to reproduce a typical character of a certain class of people in a typical environment, so that their works achieve a high degree of unity of ideology and artistry, which makes the presented works have profound cognitive value and aesthetic value.

4.1 The Shaping of Typical Critical Characters

By using the method of typification and shaping typical characters in typical environments, critical realism writers truly reproduce the social life and people’s spiritual outlook under the background of *The Times*(Luo, 2002: 124).

The stories in short story collections are interrelated, and the characters become each other’s cooperator, interactor and participants. The short story *Feat of Memory* features these typical characters, Jurie Steyn, Oupa Bekker, ‘Rooi’ Sarel, Gysbert van Tonder, and others.

The story takes ‘Rooi’ Sarel as an typical example to critic the moral degradation and human alienation. In the story, ‘Rooi’ Sarel, as he was popularly known, is a man of extraordinary memory. There was nothing he will forget. Everyone felt that a man like ‘Rooi’ Sarel, with his memory,

would be more deserving of national and social importance, and we can tell from the dialogues that whether he would be, but it was doomed to be impossible. The reason was like what Oupa Bekker, the narrator of the story, paraphrased at the end: "It was a pity they said, that with so many things that he was able to remember, he should have forgotten where his loyalty lay." (Bosman, 2005: 187)

First, about the criticism of morality. When 'Rooi' Sarel, was cornered by the mail truck accident, it was the scandalous official he had reported on, Jappy Krieger, who had made the payout and, against his own luck, had come to his rescue by feeding and clothe him and giving him enough money to get to Pretoria, where he stayed until he found work again. From a moral point of view, Japie Krige is a benefactor to 'Rooi' Sarel, or at least should not be. As an old Chinese saying goes, "receiving drips of water when in need, and I shall return the kindness with a spring." But 'Rooi' Sarel, chose to be the snake in the story of "the Farmer and the Snake". Although 'Rooi' Sarel, in the eyes of the public was a commendable memory superior, but actually he was a person without moral line, no conscience and no loyalty.

Next, about the discussion of justice. Japie Krige, as an official, was in charge of compensating farmers who had suffered losses, but it turned out that some farmers had never suffered losses, but had been compensated. Although 'Rooi' Sarel did not spend much time at Japie Krige's farm and the police offered a small reward, he did act as a reference to the scandal. In this sense, 'Rooi' Sarel seems to be exercising the supervisory power of a citizen, and such an act seems just.

4.2 A Satire of the Actual Plot

Because the traditional critical realism literary writers always stand in the position of the bourgeoisie, it is easy for them to expose the evils of the bourgeoisie not deeply enough, and maintain the working people and the working class only out of humanitarian sympathy(Luo, 2002: 124). But Herman Charles Bosman's work is genuine in its satire of life. Bosman's novels are full of concern and criticism of reality. In *Feat of Memory*, Bosman critic on three aspects bureaucratic corruption, human morality and professional ethics.

First of all, he choose to confront the corrupt government and criticizes bureaucracy and corruption. As far as the government of South Africa is concerned, it can be called one of the most corrupt countries in the world. In South Africa, the country experienced racial problems, and the black people who had been oppressed in the past became the ruler of South Africa. After seeing a larger world, the black officials in South Africa, who had suffered from hardships and oppression, had frequent political contests due to the interest struggle of officials from all sides.

The story firstly critic the hypocrisy of officialdom. The politician mentioned by Gysbert, in his pre-election speeches, seemed to make a good future leader by knowing in detail the names of every farmer he met, the ages of their children and even the terminology that each child had learned in class at the end of the term. But his good memory vanished when he was elected, unable to remember what he had promised Gysbert, and even becoming a little insolent and disrespectful. Mr. Bosman's setting pointedly points to the hypocrisy of South African government officials who use prelection rhetoric and then fail to implement it.

Next, it critic the corruption of officials. In the novel, it is said that Gabe Krieger lied to the authorities about the amount of compensation given to farmers, some of whom did not suffer damages, but also the amount of compensation. "And he could also inform you precisely how long Japie Krige got for it, afterwards, when the Government found out just how wrong the figures were that Japie Krige had filled in his compensation form."(Bosman, 2005: 184) It seems that even farmers who have not lost money receive subsidies, but it is ironic that officials use the quota of farmers to lie about the amount of compensation in order to gain profits. Boseman satirizes the depth of corruption in government.

Secondly, the short story critic professional ethics. In the novel, it is not surprising to work in a post office and make mistakes, even if these mistakes can affect the operation of the post office. Is it not surprising that mistakes can affect the operation of the post office? Mr. Jurie has long said he

has a high sense of official responsibility, but brushes off serious job lapses like forgetting to mail packages because of his forgetfulness. Boseman puts only a little light on the plot design, although only a few sentences about Mr. Jurie frivolous approach to work, but we can also feel Bosman's criticism and satire of the lack of professional ethics and behavior. In addition, it is also mentioned in the story that the world famous educator, or the author of the classic articles in the teaching textbook, is actually a person with little knowledge and only a superficial appearance. Recalling today's society is indeed like this, the phenomenon of plagiarism in literary creation is endless. The more who brag about their literary quality or ability, the more people have no real ability.

5. Summary

Literature comes from life, but it is higher than life. What Herman Charles Bosman sees, thinks, and critics is integrated into the social environment of South Africa in his novels. Through the humorous dialogue between the protagonists of the novel, the simple language has a profound impact. Although Boseman writes a novel, he alludes to the ugly phenomena in the whole society and criticized the politics, society and humanity of South Africa. Bosman's understanding of the real society in South Africa led him to be disappointed with the corruption and incompetence of the government, to explore the fate of life, and to think about the future of the nation. Therefore, when reading Bosman's works, people often firstly see is that the representation of the characters in the works, and the second they see is that the inner heart of the characters, and the third eye is the society behind the works.

In many popular British and American literary works, many writers tend to pay more attention to the arrangement of the story plot in the process of writing, while the depiction of the characters, inner description and other details are not delicate enough. Short stories, on the other hand, tend to focus on one story and one main character because of their small length. Therefore, the final plot and task will be shaped with some one-sided and non-objective factors. There may be a few writers who focus on psychological description in character development, but often lack the attention to the relevance of plot. Herman Charles Bosman, on the other hand, makes a good combination of plots and characters, focusing on the interconnections between the plots in the integration of the short story collection, as well as on the diversity of characters and the delicacy of setting. In this short story collection, there is no exaggerated plots and overpainted characters. These characters are fictional, but you can always find them on people we see in our life, like 'Rooi's Sarel in Feat of Memory. Readers can get emotional resonance from the circumstances of these characters. All of these are due to the realistic elements in Bosman's novels. We can say that it is precisely because Bosman pays attention to drawing on real life, combining novels with reality, and paying attention to readers' perception of real life, that his works become a generalization of social life in South Africa at that time. And he himself has had a significant impact on the literary scene in South Africa and even the world.

Acknowledgment

Here I would like to express my sincerely thanks to those who have supported me during my writing of this article:

First of all, I owe a great deal to my supervisor, Professor Tan Huijuan, whose lectures guided me into the field of African American literature and taught me to appreciate Bosman's works. I am really grateful for her detailed and critical comments. Secondly, I also want to thank all the teachers in my school who taught me the methods of literary criticism and appreciation. Next, I would like to thank my friends who always encourage me to study hard. Finally, I would like to my father and my mother who have always been supportive and encouraging me in studying. Without their help, I couldn't finish this.

References

- [1] Herman Charles Boseman. Homecoming: Voorkamer Stories By Herman Charles Boseman[M]. Human& Rousseau, 2005.
- [2] Liu Nna, Zhang Cheng. Realism in Charles Dickens' novels[J]. Writer Magazine, 2013, 533(14): 77-78.
- [3] Luo Ligui, Wu Li. The Realistic Significance of Critical Realism Literature[J]. Journal of Chongqing University (Social Sciences Edition), 2002(06): 124-125.
- [4] Tan Huijuan. Burial of the Earth - Translation and Appreciation of Classic South African Short Stories[M]. Hangzhou: Zhejiang University Press, 2018.