

The Redemption of Humanity in Higashino Keigo's Miracles of the Namiya General Store

Yingjie Guo

College of literature, University of Heilongjiang, Harbin, 150080, China
Corresponding Author's Email: 1411292562@qq.com

ABSTRACT

Higashino Keigo's novel *Miracles of the Namiya General Store* is a departure from the writer's usual pattern of reasoning, and is loved by readers for the warmth and healing behind the suspense. In this novel, Higashino Keigo practices his quest for "human redemption" through a correspondence structure of seeking help and solving puzzles, and what behind this quest is the writer's mapping and reflection on Japanese society over the past half century. Under the form of meticulous reasoning, the writer leads the readers to explore the warmth behind the events, reflecting the social form from the side and triggering in-depth social thinking, which also reflects the transformation and maturity of Higashino Keigo's creative concept.

Keywords: *Higashino Keigo; Human Salvation; Japanese Society; Creative Concept; Miracles of the Namiya General Store*

1. INTRODUCTION

Most of Higashino Keigo's works are concise in narration, well-constructed, and with an exciting plot, but his later book *Miracles of the Namiya General Store* is different from his usual style, with no sophisticated writing and clever deductive plots, but rather a sense of healing throughout. The heartwarming stories between the main characters of the novel show the sincere emotions between people and the development and transformation of Higashino Keigo's creative concept.

The main characters of the book *Miracles of the Namiya General Store* are: Grandpa Namiya, the owner of the grocery store, three thieves (Atsuya, Kouhei and Shota), and the consultants of the grocery store. At the beginning of the story, three thieves accidentally enter the grocery store forty years later and trigger a magical "mechanism" that allows them to communicate with people from the past, which leads to the next five stories.

At first, letters Grandpa Namiya received were just jokes or pranks from children, but he often gave each one the answer he thought was most appropriate after careful consideration. Over time, the consultant gradually went beyond children, and the questions they asked gradually changed from "how to get 100 points on

a test without studying or cheating" to serious life issues. It also brings endless fun and meaning to Grandpa Namiya's lonely widowhood and makes him feel refreshed. The three thieves, who live forty years after the consultant, are like "prophets". As in the story in Chapter 1, the three thieves had known that the 1980 Moscow Olympics would be boycotted, so they repeatedly dissuaded the female athlete Tamagotchi from giving up her Olympic dream and devoted herself to her critically ill boyfriend; and in the story in Chapter 2, the melody of the harmonica played by the fish store musician Kero in front of the grocery store was the famous song "Rebirth" by the female singer Serenity Mizuhara, from which the three thieves deduced that he was the savior of Serenity Mizuhara's brother, and wrote back to encourage him to persevere in his musical dreams until the end of his life; and the consultant Harumi in the story of Chapter 5 was also helped by the three thieves to master the future of the economy, and achieved career success, thus repaying the kindness of his adoptive parents.

Whether it was Grandpa Namiya or the three thieves, as the "worry relievers", the relationship between them and the consultant was not simply of one party raising their worries and the other party relieving them. The reason why Grandpa Namiya replies to every letter is that he knows that "whether it is harassment or prank, the people who write these letters to Namiya's grocery

store are essentially the same as ordinary help seekers. They all have a hole in their hearts through which something important is gradually losing[1]. Therefore, he tries to put himself in the shoes of the confused and think about the problems they encounter, and then to solve their problems based on his accumulated life experience. On the surface, it may seem that the help seekers have made a major choice in their lives with the help of Naniya's grocery store and have been "saved", but in fact, consultants themselves have traumas that are difficult to heal. Since the death of his wife, Grandpa Naniya has been mentally ill and lonely, as if he has been deprived of the will to live, and it is these "trouble letters" that give him the feeling of being needed and become his spiritual support to live[2]. It is easy to see that from the moment the three thieves start to reply to the letters, their identity has a transformation - in real life, they are just small people who "have no money, no education, and no access"[3], and they can even be described as socially marginalized people who are in trouble and wandering in the gray area of the law. But when they reply to the advice seekers under the name of "Naniya Grocery", for the first time, they "put aside the profit and loss and sincerely think for others"[4], and become well-intentioned "worry relievers", feeling the value and the meaning of life. Therefore, we can say that in the book *Miracles of the Namiya General Store*, the relationship between the identity of the "worry relievers" and the "help seekers" is only relative, and the letter passed inside the milk crate of the grocery store is actually a two-way "humanity salvation".

The reason why Higashino Keigo portrayed the Grocery Store in his works is that he knew that everyone has to make a big choice at different stages of their lives, just as he himself had a hard time deciding whether to give up his job and become a professional writer, or to continue working and writing as a spare time activity. Fortunately, he knew what he really wanted and therefore made the right choice. But Higashino Keigo knows that not everyone is as "lucky" as he is, many people will be disturbed by other factors and lose their true hearts, or refuse to be faced with their true hearts. Then the choice they make may become their lifelong regret, and in Higashino Keigo's writing, "the meaning of *Miracles of the Namiya General Store* is to help people who have lost their way to overcome their inherent weaknesses in human nature, to stop and listen to their inner voices, and to find their way forward again. "A brave man is not a man who has achieved fame and fortune, but a man who listens to his heart and follows his soul"[5]. *Miracles of the Namiya General Store* is the medium through which Higashino Keigo explores "human salvation".

2. MAPPING AND REFLECTIONS OF JAPANESE SOCIETY

Higashino Keigo's works have reached such depths, probably due in large part to the influence of Kiyoharu Matsumoto, the "father" of the social school of Japanese speculative fiction. In *The Last Message from Higashino Keigo*, it is mentioned that he was inspired by Seicho Matsumoto to start writing mystery novels. After reading Kiyoharu Matsumoto's works such as *High School Murder*, *Point and Line* and *Zero Focus*, Higashino Keigo began to write his first speculative novel. For Higashino Keigo in high school, "Mr. Matsumoto Kiyomasa was one of the few writers who could keep me reading" "I was able to get a glimpse of society, especially the dark side of society by reading Mr. Matsumoto Kiyomasa's books" He has created many works that depict human weaknesses that logic cannot explain"[6].

In fact, we can also see the indifference of human nature and the ills of Japanese society in such a warm novel from *Miracles of the Namiya General Store*.

Grandpa Naniya lived as a widower until he fell ill after his wife's death, because he did not want to disturb his children who had already started their own families which reflects the estrangement between two generations, and the serious problem of empty nesting of the elderly in Japan; Keno, the fish store owner, is taunted by his brother at his mother's funeral for supporting his son's musical dreams, reflecting the lack of understanding between brothers of the same generation. After becoming a representative of the company, Harumi forgets the difficult years she also spent and ignores the request of the bun store owner in order to ensure performance, reflecting the gradual numbness of capitalist's humanity and the cruel social reality. The three thieves and the distrust shown by the community towards Harumi's attempt to help the reconstruction of Marukoen, satirize the immoral conducts of most capitalists in Japanese society and the irreconcilable conflicts between capital and people.

In addition to above, the social background of Japan in different times helps us to better understand the plot. The timeline covered in the book actually extends from 1960s to 2012, but in fact the correspondence of the five stories told in the book is concentrated in 1970, 1979 and 2012, among which 2012 is accidentally connected to 1979 precisely because the three thieves visit the grocery store, making it possible for the letters between 1979 and 2012 to be transmitted to each other.

Then we may focus on Japan in the 1970s and 1980s and the beginning of the 21st century. In the 1970s and 1980s, Japan was in the late stage of the "economic miracle", and after World War II, with the support of the U.S. government, Japan's economy was rebuilt rapidly and developed unprecedentedly. However, "Japan was

'subordinate and independent' under the strategic umbrella of the United States, and the Japanese people were often disturbed by this awkward position[7]. Since the middle class is the main target of economic development, the general public in Japan often cannot share the prosperity, resulting in the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer, widening the gap between the rich and the poor; The rapid pace of urbanization also makes a lot of labor and consumer markets concentrated in the emerging prosperous cities, the countryside gradually lags behind the social development and is gradually left out, thus the gap between urban and rural areas is also gradually widened; Private enterprises have been strongly supported by Japanese government, mostly using advanced mechanized production, resulting in market prices falling. The Japanese government has been strongly supporting private enterprises, and most of them are using advanced mechanized production, which has led to a decrease in production costs and a continuous decline in market prices, while small private workshops and small business factories with human production cannot cope with market competition and face the threat of being eliminated from society. Therefore, even though Japan is still in the "economic miracle" period, more and more social problems and conflicts have been frequently exposed, coupled with the excessive dependence of Japan's economic development on the United States, which has laid the fuse for the future "bubble economy".

These problems, which were covered under the surface of the prosperity of Japanese society at that time, are also reflected in the book *Miracles of the Namiya General Store*. For example, in the second chapter, the business of the fish store is declining; in the third chapter, Midori Kawabe, as a jobless and single mother, is unable to receive social assistance and eventually dies in the sea due to chronic malnutrition; in the fourth chapter, Kosuke's father runs a "dumping" company that is seemingly prosperous, but in fact, it is an apple of sodom. Even the *Namiya grocery store*, the starting point of the story, could not escape the fate of becoming stagnancy because it was far away from the new development zone. Higashino Keigo, through his sharp eyes, saw the "carnival" which had been frequently exposed but deliberately ignored, enhanced the authenticity of his story. Perhaps it is because Higashino Keigo is standing in the perspective of the 21st century that he maintains a high degree of sobriety and sees more exactly and profoundly, and we as readers can better place the story in the context of the times.

In addition to the above social problems in the economy, Japan's rapid economic development also intensified the political conflict with the United States. "The basic pattern of Japan's trade as a whole has been unchangeable, importing huge quantities of oil, raw materials and food and exporting manufactured products,

with a successive increase in both quality and quantity. As a result, Japan has not only enjoyed a long-standing trade surplus in the capitalist world, but also a long-standing political conflict. This aspect hit the United States particularly hard"[8]. The unbalanced relationship between Japan and U.S. has forced the U.S. government to block Japanese trade through political means, which has led to a renewed wave of "anti-Americanism" in Japan, but as mentioned above, Japan actually has an invisible "subordinate relationship" with the U.S., so the weak Japanese government decided to follow the footsteps of U.S. policy even after seeing the public's discontent. Japanese government's policy of "U.S. is right about everything" is also reflected in the book *Miracles of the Namiya General Store*: In the first chapter, when the moon rabbit is about to sprint for the 1980 Moscow Olympics, Japan has to take a stand due to the pressure of the United States, but still announced a boycott of the Olympics in the face of the public's opposition. Higashino Keigo does not explicitly express his own emotions and opinions in the book, but from the words of the rabbit, "But those who have already qualified for the games are really sympathetic"[9], we can feel Higashino Keigo's dissatisfaction and mockery of the Japanese government's behavior of interfering with the development of other cultural fields because of blindly following the footsteps of the United States in politics. As a writer and not a politician, Higashino Keigo naturally cannot directly interfere with the policies or positions of the state, but from ancient times to the present, there are few writers and scholars from various countries who do not deal with politics in their works, and as Mr. Lu Xun said, "The pen is the weapon," and since a writer's works have a certain degree of influence on society and people, he should hold the corresponding social responsibility. Higashino Keigo has taken up this obligation as a writer, or perhaps exercised his right as a writer, by expressing his discomfort with Japan's ambiguous relationship with the United States from World War II to the present through the mouths of the characters in his works in *Miracles of the Namiya General Store*.

3. CHANGE OF WRITING STYLE AND MATURITY OF CONCEPT

As a late work of Higashino Keigo, *Miracles of the Namiya General Store* has developed and inherited the writing style of his previous novels. If Higashino Keigo's earlier novels focused on clever plotting, character fleshing out and treacherous deductions, his later novels have diluted the deductive model, and humanistic and social concerns have become the core of his creative concept, but what remains the same is the strong logic of his novels. Even in a heartwarming work like *Miracles of the Namiya General Store*, Higashino Keigo's underlying pattern of reasoning is hidden inside.

The five stories in this book seem to be independent, but in fact the main characters in the stories are inextricably linked. First of all, there is no doubt that they all have an inseparable relationship with Naniya grocery store. Secondly, they also have a different connection with Marukoen orphanage - the three thieves, Kosuke who grew up to become a wood carver, Harumi who became a business woman with the help of the three thieves who wrote back, and the siblings of singer Seru Mizuhara and the son of agent Midori Kawabe are all children who grew up in Marukoen orphanage, while female athlete Tamagotchi is Harumi's best friend, and Grandpa Naniya is the former director of Marukoen orphanage Kaizuki's youthful lover. All these relationships are a little too forced to say that they are coincidental. By this clever plot arrangement, Higashino Keigo found a spiritual comfort station like *Naniya Grocery Store* for the wounded souls in Marukoen Orphanage, which is perhaps what Higashino Keigo subconsciously hopes to see in the real world. In addition, throughout the five chapters of the book, Higashino Keigo switches the narrative perspective frequently, from the three thieves, Grandpa Naniya, the contributors, and many other perspectives, and the narrative jumps in time without any sense of confusion. The author deliberately "reverses" the magic formula of time by means of traversal, parallelism, flashbacks, and interruptions, giving the narrative a meaningful "inversion" of time[10], allowing us to follow this fresh narrative deeply into the core of the story.

The stories in *Miracles of the Namiya General Store* are undoubtedly like fairy tales with a light veil of illusion, but the humanistic concern and social thinking that Higashino Keigo conveys through this book are worth pondering.

"Human nature is the eternal theme", Higashino Keigo to show human nature not only in the book *Miracles of the Namiya General Store*, but also in his *Journey Under the Midnight Sun*, *Tokio*, *The Red Finger* and other works. The reason why Higashino Keigo constantly explores human nature and insinuates Japanese social reality in his works shows that his writing concept is not simply to create a thrilling story or to portray a household name, but to lead readers to explore the warmth behind the events through meticulous reasoning[11]. It is his portrayal of the good and evil of human nature that reflects the social form from the side and provokes in-depth social thinking[12]. When a reader detach himself from the fate of the redeeming and redeemed in his works, he will find out the worldliness of the real society and the lost heart, his and others. It is through this subtle methods that Higashino Keigo conveys his creative concept of appealing to goodwill and seeking the redemption of human humanity to his readers.

Perhaps one day, the world will be full of *Miracles*

of the Namiya General Store, so that people who are lost would have a place to rest and a direction to follow.

4. CONCLUSION

The reason why people are fond of Higashino's works is that he touches on the most vulnerable parts of humanity, where the interweaving of good and evil is the most true face of us. Through his works, we seem to see our inner self, but also see various problems in the society caused by human beings, thus alarm us. No matter when you read Higashino Keigo's work, it is never out of time.

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