

Reflection on the Miracles of the Namiya General Store

Mary Mee-Yin Yuen, PhD

Holy Spirit Seminar College of Theology and Philosophy, Hong Kong



Miracles of the Namiya General Store is an extraordinary novel written by the well-known Japanese mystery novel writer Keigo Higashino in 2012.¹ Different versions of the film and drama were adapted from the novel. My first contact with the story was through the screening of the Japanese film in theatre.² I was deeply impressed and touched by the story and the theme song. I felt the film was like a prayer and the main character Namiya was like an angel speaking words of wisdom and accompanying others' journey during their difficult time. Thus, I looked for the original book and read the Chinese translated version. I found much more details of the complicated relationships among various characters and events as well as the deeper view of life shown in it.

The beginning of the book and the movie is set in 2012, when three delinquent youths, Atsuya, Shota & Kohei, in order to avoid the police, took shelter in an abandoned grocery store following a burglary. A letter was slipped through the delivery box at the door – written by a young lady three decades earlier. The three young men, out of curiosity, responded and received another letter from the lady almost immediately. During that night, more letters came in seeking advice on different kinds of life's problems. Their replies affected the responses of different characters and development of various events. These characters and events in different time span seem to be unrelated to each other but they are interwoven indeed. Such strange experiences change the lives of these young men.

The core figure Mr. Yuuji Namiya, a kind old man, is the boss of the grocery store that named after him. Apart from selling daily products and snacks, he acts like a counselor through answering letters with all different kinds of problems, from kids who made jokes to serious problems relating to love, family, career and so on. As long as one wrote a letter stating troubles and put into the delivery box attached to the door at night, he/she would receive a reply in the milk box behind the store the next day.

Namiya would like to solve problems and release anxieties for people seriously but he also worries that his advice and suggestions might bring misfortune rather than happiness to others. Thus, he designed a

¹ Keigo Higashino, *The Miracles of the Namiya General Store* (Tokyo: Kadokawa Corporation, 2012).

² Trailer of the film: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_10VAhMTzSM.

method to invite those who have written letters to him to inform him about their development and whether his advice is useful or not, thus, leading to the incredible things occurred in the novel. Over the 30 years, these stories show how those moments of contact between the grocery store and the letter-writers evolve into a lifetime of redemption.

Below I offer some moral and theological reflections and highlight a few points from the film which impress me in a different way from the book.

Redemption

Generally speaking, redemption refers to an occasion when someone is saved from evil or suffering. It also refers to an act of paying back a debt or loan. In Christianity, God is the ultimate redeemer, saving us from the bondage of sin and death to the liberty of the children of God through Jesus Christ. Redemption is an act of God's grace, by which God rescues and restores his people through the sacrifice of Jesus.³ In the letter of Paul to Ephesians, he said, "In him [Jesus] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding." (Ephesians 1:7-8). As Christians, we follow Jesus' footsteps to help others from suffering and find the right path of a good life.

In the novel and the film, redemption is a theme which appears recurrently in different stories. It refers to atonement or paying off someone who sacrifices oneself or doing something for another person. It also refers to saving oneself through helping others or asking for help from others. In this sense, redemption through love is incarnated in daily lives. In fact, in a number of stories, parents sacrificed their lives for the well-being of their children or someone sacrificed for the vulnerable. Many characters use their whole life to pay back their benefactors or the kindness of Namiya.

For example, in the story between the fish store musician Matsuoka and talented singer Seri (chapter 2 & 5 of the novel), Matsuoka, who insists on the dream of being a professional musician, is troubled by the dilemma of choosing between his dream and the reality of inheriting his father's business. He wrote to the Namiya general store to seek for advice but the letter fell into the hands of the three delinquent youth at another time span. The trio discouraged him at the beginning by pointing out that fulfilling the dream could not support living. Matsuoka did not agree and rebutted again and again in the following letters, trying to prove his love for music. Luckily, he solved his problem because his father supported him and encouraged him to work hard for his dream. Eight years later, though trying to perform in different places, it seems that he is still far from being a successful professional musician. Finally, he died in the Maru Garden orphanage after a Christmas performance when saving a kid in a fire, who was the younger brother of Seri, a young girl who showed interest to his self-composed song "Reborn" without lyric and had a conversation with him.

Although Matsuoka sacrificed his life in the fire, his song "Reborn" was handed down through Seri who became a popular singer when she grew up. She pays tribute to Matsuoka through singing this song with her own lyrics in every performance. It is like a reborn of his musical dream in another way, through another person. He is constantly remembered by people with his compassionate act of saving a life as well as his song. The death of Matsuoka is a redemption for Seri's life. Not only does she use her whole life through singing to repay his kindness and sacrifice for her brother, she takes the kind but heroic

³ "Redemption," in *New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia*, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12677d.htm>;

"Redemption," in *Easton Bible Dictionary*, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/redemption/>

act as a reminder of the meanings of life and giving up for others, as well as a driving force for her existence.

In the film, director Ryuichi Hiroki expresses the emotions of Seri from grief and sorrow to acceptance as well as the meaning of living through death with song, dance, and acting, which is the effect that words cannot do. He took a big close-up of Seri's facial expression during childhood, looking at a sea of fire and crying. The next scene, when she grew up, Seri was on stage, singing "Reborn" with the added lyrics. The director arranged a dance on the beach where Seri and Matsuoka talked before. This touching scene became a charming and enchanting dirge.⁴

Discernment

Discernment is another important theme in the novel and the film. It is the ability to obtain sharp perception to make decision and judge well. In Christian moral theology, moral discernment is a process of making decision that lead to right moral action. As Christians, discernment is the process of discovering the course of action most fitting to what our fundamental relationship with God demands, that is, to be alive with love. For Christians, it requires a degree of faith and personality development that enables us to have a sufficient grasp of how God acts in our lives and of who we are.⁵

In our lives, there are some decisions that are tied to complex and confusing circumstances. These are the kinds that demand a fuller process of discernment, taking into consideration of faith, reason, emotion and intuition, with resources from the social and religious context.⁶ For all of us, we want to make a decision that can best satisfy our conscience, so that we can feel peaceful with our decisions. Sometimes, we may feel confused and would like to seek help from other people with wisdom.

In the novel, the Namiya store receives letters from people who are wrestling with various kinds of complex and confusing circumstances. They include a sportswoman with a boyfriend suffering from incurable disease, being caught in the dilemma of love and dreams; a teenager with a dad whose company collapsed and intends to flee with the whole family, drifting between his family and future; an unmarried pregnant young lady who is choosing between abortion and giving birth to the baby; a young lady is struggling to choose among jobs in order to earn more money...Namiya grocery store became one of the resources of discernment during their decision-making process.

Among these problems, one of them is from a young lady who called herself Green River (chapter 3 of the novel). She has an affair with a married man and is pregnant. Not knowing what to do, she secretly asked for advice from the boss of Namiya store. Namiya was troubled by the choice between life and death, but he could read between the lines of the letter that Green River was not willing to have an abortion. He thought that she already had an answer in mind when writing the letter, the consultation indeed was to confirm that her choice was correct, just like the case of the musician mentioned above. For Namiya, his role is just like a psychologist or counselor, helping the clients to find their will and guide them to make the best choice. He understands that feeling and decision are two different things. Green River may want to give birth to her child but knowing that her choice should be abortion. Thus, in the letter, Namiya did not tell Green exactly what to do but give her a direction to rethink and reflect. He thinks that what a troubled person needs is understanding rather than a concrete answer.

Finally, Green River gave birth to a girl. Unexpectedly, one year later, she drove to the sea and died. Namiya learned this from the news and felt deep guilty, thinking that Green River must have committed suicide out of regret of giving birth to her child. However, the fact is until the very last moment,

⁴ The musical video of the song Reborn can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=38_LYZknQ10.

⁵ Richard M. Gula, *Moral Discernment* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 47.

⁶ Gula, *Moral Discernment*, 51,

Green River tried to protect her child and save her life. Years later, after knowing the whole story, Green River's daughter who has grown up in an orphanage wrote a letter to Namiya, thanking him.

Namiya does not know how much he can help others but he still tries his best to offer help and release others' troubles and worries. He said, "the voice of those asking for counsel must not be ignored." This is very true because even the tiniest goodwill can make a difference for the consultants as they know they are not alone. Knowing that someone understands their feelings and is walking along with them on their road of discernment is extremely important. We can also be the one who share our compassion and solidarity with those in need.

Interconnection

A human person is essentially a social being. This is based on a relational subjectivity in the Christian tradition, that is, in the manner of a free and responsible being who recognizes the necessity of integrating oneself in cooperation with other human beings, and who is capable of communion with them on the level of knowledge and love. God did not create human person as a solitary being but wished him/her to establish relationships with others. Social life therefore is essential for human beings and they are interrelated with each other. One can only grow and realize his/her vocation or calling in relation with others.⁷

In the novel, there are many characters and each one of them is a protagonist. The author's multi-line story is inextricably linked to bring out the message that although our destiny is not completely in our control, we can actively influence the fate of others. For example, in the story of the three delinquents and Miss Harumi, through their interaction the theme of interconnection, awareness and conversion is highlighted. Young Harumi, in order to earn more money to repay her elderly benefactors out of gratitude, intended to resign from her job as an office girl and work in a pub or even the mistress of a client. Feeling confused and lost, Harumi wrote to Namiya grocery store, in the name of "Confused Puppy". The letter was received by the trio 30 years after who thought she was a frivolous girl and scolded her in the letter. But in subsequent letters, she described her background and the three youths changed their minds and offered useful suggestions to her.

The three young men had their own stories too. They were abandoned by their parents and grew up in the orphanage together. They were not interested in study and went astray. One of them is defensive and insisted that fate cannot be reversed easily, inclining to give up. However, through interaction with the Confused Puppy and other clients, they started thinking about the meanings of life and how to help other people through solving their problems. From the letters, they felt being trusted and respected the first time in life. Because of their own background, they did not want the Confused Puppy to work in the pub, becoming the mistress of a man or even giving birth to a child out of wedlock. Knowing the "future" economic development, they advised her how to earn money through study and investment. Their regret in the past urged them to save Harumi and lead her to the right path. Such experience also transformed the three delinquent youths. They swore not to commit such wrongdoing again, proofing that fate can be reversed after awareness and conversion, when they started taking life seriously. Their good deeds brought liberation and transformation to themselves. The affinity between people and the interconnection among various characters demonstrated that people are interrelated in society. Any small action can bring unexpected change to the individual as well as the society.

⁷ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004), no. 149.

In the novel, affinity and connection among characters came from Namiya the boss of the grocery store and Akiko the founder of the orphanage. They were lovers when they were young but were forced to separate due to belonging to different social class. Their love transforms and continues in another form across time span, through the people related to the orphanage and the grocery store. In the film, the director added a scene of conversation between young Akiko and old Namiya, which did not exist in the book. This imaginative scene shows that love can exceed time and place, life and death. Though passed away, Akiko, in heaven, keeps praying for and blessing the orphans. Such power of love can bring change to lives.

Concerning the Vulnerable

From the characters of this novel, we can also see that Keigo Higashino the author concerns about the neglected in society, such as delinquent youths, orphans, low income class, single mother, bankrupt family and many other ordinary people. This theme appears recurrently in many of his novels. These people have their difficulties but they show compassion and solidarity with others in their own ways. They are free moral agents that reflect the good side of human persons. Moreover, in the novel, many of the female characters have their independent thinking and take responsibility of their own lives. This is important in the Japanese culture in which patriarchy is still strong. In reality, not all people are so lucky, but the author believes that everyone can contribute in making the world better.

Concluding Remarks

The Miracles of the Namiya General Store is a very interesting and touching novel, with deep meanings. To fit in the length of the film of about 2 hours, the film can only focus on a few stories and cut some details of the book. I really enjoy reading the full-length letters in the book with all the details of interrelated relationship among various characters. However, the audio-visual impact of certain scenes creates another attractive effect that the book cannot express. They complement each other.

Trailer of the film: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=10VAhMTzSM>.

The musical video of the theme song: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=38_LYZknQ10.