

Tracing The Trend and Scholarship of Mo Yan:A Study of His Select Novels

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Abstract

The word “mo yan” in Chinese means “don’t speak”. But to the rest of the world, this phrase represents altogether a different avatar in the literary world. Mo Yan is the pen name of the 2012 Nobel Prize winner who was born with the name Guan Moye. This very honor anticipated the contemporary scholars to criticize the works of Mo Yan. But Mo Yan was not someone whose name the world heard for the first time. He was the center of the criticism even before receiving the award as he was notoriously well known for his brilliant narrative style. In his works, he has discussed the socio-political, cultural and economic issues. This has developed curiosity among the critics and scholars to study his works. Keeping that in mind, the paper aims to outline the present scholarship on Mo Yan’s select novels and what issues have been already discussed by the scholars and critics and what possibilities are still left undiscovered.

Keywords: Power, hegemony, totalitarianism, corruption, politics.

Introduction

Mo Yan is the first ever person from mainland China who has received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2012. As the previous Nobel awardees with Chinese background either left the

country (Gao Xingjian) or were imprisoned by the communist China (Liu Xiaobo). Mo Yan was born on 17 February 1955 in Gaomi County of Shandong in China. His birthplace is well known to all his readers as most of Mo's novels are constructed around Gaomi County. Mo Yan's assimilation of folk tales, history, and the contemporary issues presentation through hallucinatory realism is what drew the attention of the whole world. Mo Yan aims to mesmerize the world with his mind-blowing stories situated in the Chinese context.

Seminal Works

To get a brief idea of the writing style of Mo Yan, one can read his important novels which are *The Garlic Ballads*. This novel was itself suggested by Peter Englund, Permanent Secretary of Swedish Academy to the journalist Sven Hugo Persson who asked where to start with reading Mo Yan. But this paper will focus on eight of the novels of Mo Yan as discussed below.

Red Sorghum published in 1986 and translated in English in 1993, is the first novel which established Mo Yan on the international literary platform. As the movie adaptation of the novel won the Golden Bear award at the Berlin Film Festival in 1987. The novel recalls the life of a Chinese family for about three generations. The story interweaves the incidents from the past and the present simultaneously while portraying the life in heights of anarchy. Mo Yan refashions the Second Sino-Japanese war (1937-1945) and Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) (which he witnessed himself), through the images of grotesque and bloodshed.

The Garlic Ballads published in 1988 and translated in English in 1995, is about the failure of the Great Leap Forward campaign initiated by Mao Zedong in 1958. The novel presents the gruesome image of the suffering of totalitarian bureaucracy and the misery of peasants due to the agricultural. It shows the rise and fall of the peasants from hunger, torture, and brutality caused by the party. *The Republic of Wine* was published in 1992 and translated into English in 2000. The novel in the face of exploring the eating and drinking habits of the Chinese has remarked on the corrupt government of China and the loss of morality.

Big Breasts and Wide Hips was first published in 1996 and translated in 2005. The novel incorporates the huge spectrum of revolution, liberation, political struggle and economic

reformation in the 20th century of China. With this backdrop, the novel focuses on how through all the chaos and bloodshed a family and nation at large degenerates. *Sandalwood Death* was published in Chinese in 2001 and English in 2003. This polyphonic novel is set during the end of the Qing Dynasty and the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901). It highlights the political corruption in the final times of the Qing Dynasty. Each character of the novel represents the perspective of the different classes.

Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out was published in 2006 and translated into English in 2008. This historical fiction is the critique of the abrupt developmental phase that China went through during the second half of the 20th century. The suffering due to the failure of the Four-Year plan is painted through the six times reincarnation of the landowner Ximen Nao. The latest novel *Frog* (2009) is about the consequences of the one-child policy of China. The novel brings forth the struggle of parents to save their babies from compulsory abortion as implemented by the government. Exposing the draconian rule of the People's Republic of China.

Scholarship on Mo Yan

This section deals with how the critics have perceived Mo Yan as a writer and Nobel Prize winner. By examining the research done on Mo Yan chronologically so that to trace the inclination of the research done so far. The scholarship is bifurcated into four phases showing gradual progress.

Phase-1: Reshaping the History

The Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee of December 1978 transformed the economy of China by opening to the world. This initiative not only provided the Chinese economy with a new vision but also laid off all the restrictions from the Chinese writers. Michael S. Duke in a brief survey writes as

Walking Towards the World: A Turning Point in Contemporary Chinese Fiction” (1991) outlines the post-Mao literary trend which competed with the previous conservative, traditionalist, party-faction-approved triad. This new experimental fiction was the triumvirate of misty, poetry, nativist fiction

which was establishing itself in the hike of world fiction. Duke in his survey commented on the top five fiction writers of that time coming from China including Mo Yan. Saying that Mo Yan's portrayal of China "deliberately opposed to that found in ...post 1949 party-supported writers of rural fiction(Duke 390).

As Mo Yan showcased the darkest side of the Chinese countryside which was full of torment, obliviousness, poverty. In short, a nightmare with a tinge of positivity in the form of love, friendship and kindness. This research by Duke established the stage for the researchers in the academic field.

Kenny Kwok-Kwan NG in 1997 wrote a paper titled "Toward an Allegorical interpretation: Myth and Class Fantasy in Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum*" explaining how the novel provides actual conditions of peasants in China, revealing the concealed motive of this social criticism. The novel's allegorical structure is plotted around Grandpa who starts the rebellion against Japanese invaders. He brings to light the role peasants played during the Japanese invasion, which was subdued by the myth that the peasants were passive, savage and violent. Hereby, showing how during the Maoist era the history was manipulated by the political leaders (NG 359). Kenny showed how Mo Yan was not going by the book. As he broke the standards set by the Communist party of keeping the world in oblivion.

Howard Goldblatt the English translator of Mo Yan wrote a paper entitled "Forbidden Food: 'The Saturnicon' of Mo Yan" (2000) which discusses the issue of cannibalism. Goldblatt in his analysis found that Mo used cannibalism as an allegory in his novel *The Republic of Wine* to "portray the oppression of the common people by representatives of the people's government" (483). As the countryside children used for cooking in the novel alludes to the bloodshed of the peasants by the hand of urban centers of China during the revolutions of the 20th century.

Phase-II: Literary style

David Der-Wei Wang and Michael Berry in 2000 wrote a paper titled "The Literary World of Mo Yan" analyzing the fiction of Mo Yan. They examined how the author animates the past

and rearranges it with his unique narrative style and form. As Mo Yan developed the historical backdrop of his novels in the home town of Northeast Gaomi, with the help of realism based on his memories and experiences (488). Mo's novels cover all major historical events of the 20th century such as the Cultural Revolution in *Red Sorghum*; Peasant Revolt in *Garlic Ballad*; and post-Mao reformist era in *The Republic of Wine*. Wang and Berry argue that along with history and space, Mo Yan has also incorporated strong and firm characters with humane emotions which diverge from the ideal characters of Maoist writing (Wang and Berry 490). For example, Granddad from *Red Sorghum* is a murderer, and he raped the narrator's grandmother. Such characters can be found in all other novels of Mo Yan.

Yinde Zhang and Jonathan Hall in 2011 wrote a paper titled "The (Bio)political Novel: Some Reflections on 'Frogs' by Mo Yan" in which they examined how through the novel *Frogs* Mo Yan criticizes the totalitarian system of People's Republic of China in late 20th century. The backdrop of the novel presents the new demographic policy of birth control in China. Mo Yan through this epistolary novel condemns the use of bio-power, by providing detailed incidents of compulsory abortions and forceful infanticide by the government officials. Zang and Hall argue that this destructive liberalism not only brought bloodshed but also resulted in the commercialization of the body in the form of surrogacy. As Mo Yan imprints diabolic incidents on the mind of readers of mothers fighting to keep their babies alive.

Phase-III: Arguments after Nobel Award

In 2012, when Mo Yan received Nobel Prize, Anna Sun wrote an online article in December titled "The Diseased Language of Mo Yan" rebuking Mo Yan for lacking "aesthetic conviction" and showed her dissatisfaction in the language of Mo Yan(1). Sun claims that Mo Yan's writing "is broken, profane, appalling and artificial; it is shockingly banal... is diseased" (1-2). Diseased in the sense that it is not the same as the rich Chinese illustrating tradition of early 19th century and before and not as the Maoist writers. According to Sun, Mo Yan's English translations by Howard Goldblatt are more superior to original texts. Sun further goes on to say that Mo Yan's diseased writing is the result of his commitment to the totalitarian government of China.

Victoria Xiaoyang Liu in 2014 studied all the positive and negative criticism on Mo Yan in her dissertation titled "The Reception of Mo Yan in the British and North American Literary Centres" from the lens of reader-response criticism. She argues that the critics have viewed Mo Yan's works from two different perspectives - (PR) political representation by journalists and (LF) literary fiction by academicians (15). The PR is the result of western cultural hegemony, while LF seeks to deconstruct the Orientalist discourse (Liu 53).

Phase-IV: Scrutinization of Mo Yan

Angelica Duran and Yuhuan Huang in 2014, edited a book titled *Mo Yan in Context: Nobel Laureate and Global Storyteller*. The book brought together the papers which examine the works of Mo Yan from three standpoints. The first standpoint is the treatment of Mo Yan's works as a part of world literature. The issues discussed in this section are briefly discussed below:

Howard Goldblatt in his paper "A Mutually Rewarding Yet Uneasy and Sometimes Fragile Relationship between Author and Translator" defends Mo Yan's Nobel Prize by discussing literary merits of the texts. In which he discusses issues such as translation process, author's intent, respect for reader reception, from the perspective of a translator (23). While Thomas Chen through his paper "The Censorship of Mo Yan's Garlic Ballads" brings to light apprehensions that writers and translators must go through in contemporary China. By examining the various edited version of Mo Yan's, *The Garlic Ballads*, Chen inquiries if even an uncensored original text exists (37). Lanlan Du in her paper "Abortion in Faulkner's *The Wild Palms* and Mo Yan's *Frog*" examines the theme of abortion in Faulkner and Mo Yan. Du argues that both the writers intend to create awareness regarding reproductive rights, be it in social structure as illustrated by Faulkner or in-state intervention as portrayed by Mo Yan (74).

Jiaxi Wei from Leiden University in August 2016 wrote a thesis titled "Rewriting History: A Comparative Analysis of Mo Yan's *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* and Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*". In his research, Wei did a comparative study of how Garcia Marquez and Mo Yan through their narrative rewrote history. Wei argues that both the

writers have denied "the legitimation of received version of history" (52) through their historiographic metafiction. As for Wei history and fiction are both written by humans.

The summarization of all the phases of research done previously is presented in the following table 1.

	Characteristic	Period
Phase-I	Reshaping History	1976-2000
Phase-II	Literary Style	2000-2011
Phase-III	Arguments after Nobel Award	2012-2014
Phase-IV	Scrutinization	2014-2018

Table.1

The phase-I of the research established Mo Yan as a writer in the academic field. Where the critics talked about how his novels were different from the previous Chinese writers and how he broke the standards established in China. For instance, talking openly about feminism, the taboo such as cannibalism. As the suffering of the characters in Mo Yan's novels did not vary based on gender, both male and female suffered equally. But Mo female characters were stronger than most of the male counterpart. Phase-I also opened Chinese history to the world and showed how the communist rulers played with the discourse. Mo Yan in a way showed the forbidden bitter truth.

The phase-II research focuses on now established Mo Yan as a writer. Wherein his narrative style, literary techniques used, and literary features discussed were examined. The researchers answered the question of why Mo Yan used grotesque style, black humor with Chinese tradition. All these unique combinations provided him with the platform to display the unimaginable horrors in written form, under the rule of communist China.

The phase-III of researchers questioned and analyzed the credibility of Mo Yan as a Nobel Prize winner. Where an open argument took place on the world wide web which settled with the fact that the novels of Mo Yan should be judged from a literary perspective rather than mingling the analysis with political status of the writer's country.

The final phase-IV examines each possible issue regarding Mo Yan's works. Be it the issue of translation, what is the role of translator, or censorship. Moreover, other aspects such as religion, postcolonial, historical, comparative and global perspectives in the novels of Mo Yan are examined.

Conclusion

Though major broad areas have already been discussed concerning Mo Yan's novels, still this scholarship cannot be termed as an exhaustive one. As one such issue which somehow remained separated from Mo Yan's novels is the analyses from the perspective of political philosophy. As the novels clearly show a lot of political history in bits and pieces. And once one knows the whole modern history of China one cannot avoid the fictional incidents in the novels. To name a few issues which remained unnoticed by the scholars is of power, politics, corruption, resistance, totalitarianism, hegemony and various others as the novels very prominently demonstrate these issues mingled with the storyline where these incidents are the driving force of the whole plot.

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