

The Subject in Crisis: A Reading of Political Corruption and Injustice in Mo Yan's *The Garlic Ballads*

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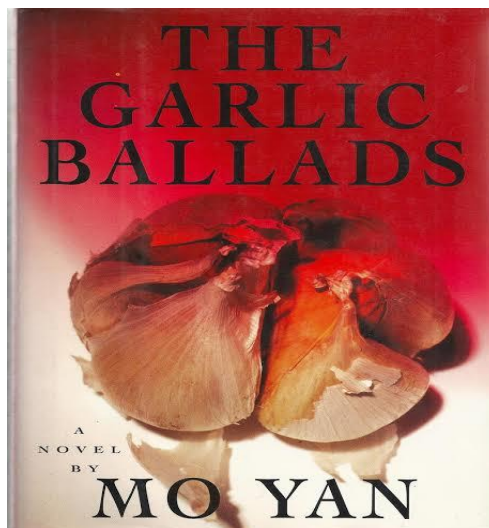
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Abstract

*Chinese literature, particularly works produced in the twentieth century deals with the traumatic experiences of political violence, the physical manifestation of it and a nostalgic longing for its lost roots. Mo yan, the modern apostle of Chinese literary tradition, is obsessed with the ideology of politics. The manifestation of the political motif is recurrent in his novels. Mo, with a sense of commitment to national awareness, artistically responds to the socio-political situation existing in the country. The paper titled "The Subject in Crisis: A Reading of Political Corruption and Injustice in Mo Yan's *The Garlic Ballads*" is a study on the trajectories of life of the Chinese farmers and their loss of subjectivity due to political corruption and violence.*

Keywords: *violence, corruption, subjectivity, seclusion, suffering*



Introduction

Twentieth century Chinese literature, especially literature of the post Mao era is predominantly urban. Chinese writers find themselves free from the shackles of ideological positioning of their works. Mo Yan's novels pose a challenge to this since many are set in Chinese villages. His novels are Chinese national allegories that chronicle class struggle, landed gentry, their corruption and the consequent weakening of peasantry. He is a partaker of the Chinese native literary tradition. He is awarded with the coveted nobel prize for literature in 2012 for his "hallucinatory realism", the technique to merge China's rich fabric of folklores, myths and social documentation. His novels reveal greater historical depth and they mirror a stagnant society and its inability to brave forward.

The Garlic Ballads is a historical novel set in the 1980s in Paradise County, a remote village in China. In the novel, Mo Yan sings of a rebellion, the collective activism of a group of Chinese farmers who were swindled by the government. Being a story teller whose childhood is deep rooted in Native Chinese Tradition, Mo Yan tells the story of Chinese farmers who were ill-treated and punished by the corrupt government which is highly notorious for the violation of law and constitutionally given human rights. The novel also shows how the observance of blind traditional values endangers both the County and the future of its inhabitants. Mo Yan tells three stories related to the bumper harvest of garlic and governmental responses to it. The farmers of the Paradise County are advised to plant garlic with the promise of its purchase by the marketing Co-Op. But when the harvest exceeds expected estimates, the government turns its back to them. As result, violence ensues, party office is picketed and burnt and the revolutionaries are taken to prison. The inhuman and ruthless violence inflicted on them in prisons and their struggles for survival spiced with a love story of Gao Ma and Jinju form the crux of the novel.

The Tale of Sorrow and Seclusion

Each chapter of *The Garlic Ballads* begins with a ballad sung by a blind minstrel Zhang Kou who represents the role of Greek chorus. He is a prophet who anticipates and foretells the deceit behind the garlic incident and weaves the various narratives together. He reports what has happened off the canvas and gives information regarding the development of the story. He instills motivation to the peasants through his rhymes. Having inspired and encouraged by his rhymes, the peasants turned revolutionaries and fight against injustice. For his part in the riot, Kou is arrested, imprisoned and physically tortured. Even after his release he is found singing. He pays heavily for his effort and his dead body is found on a street with his mouth crammed with mud. He gives vent to his anger and repressed indignation at the venal authority through his ballads.

In modern China, the discourse about the truth is not determined by facts but by political correctness. The corrupt bureaucrats attack those who are not being typical and for flouting the "truth" the party defines. In that sense Zhang Kou, the blind singer is severely tortured for his fearless articulation of the truth. Truths that are often supposed to be perceived by normal bodies are perceived by Mo Yan's blinds. Zhang Kou's ballads are comments on the present government policies. His

erhu also sings of old folktales. When Gao Yang is arrested, the law-abiding man is moved to rebellion, at least for a moment, mainly inspired by the song of Zhang Kou. Zhang Kou's presence in the novel brought a "realisation that visionary bards might still be carrying political messages" (Larrissy 45). In his analysis of Romantic Literature Larrissy writes: "Not only does romantic writing figure the capability of disability, but it makes such conditional capability the very emblem of knowledge in the modern world, and even of knowledge in general" (Larrissy 204).

The Garlic Ballad exposes the concealed political crimes, bribery, disavowed pains and unsaid feelings to historical consciousness. Women are denied of their constitutional rights to marry men of their choice. Jinju is brutally punished and confined when she protests the forced marriage system. Mo Yan portrays the injustices of penal system and the deplorable prison conditions. The prisoners are subjected to corporeal punishment using electric prods and are rationed of their food and drink. They are locked in small murky cells with grey flooring, grey walls and grey cots. Life in prison and starvation had turned the inmates' primitive who quarrel over the meager food scrapes. They are occasionally given a chance to go out of their cells and get some fresh air. There they assemble at a cage where the officers threw a few tomatoes at them. They were flocked to it and fought like mad dogs. Food is a major motif in this novel, the availability of which determines the sanity level of the prisoners. They are provided with unhygienic coarse food – "one steamed bun and a ladleful of soup" (*The Garlic Ballads* 87). They get good meal only when they are ill or are about to be executed. In the opinion of Fourth Aunt, "dogs are better off than we are. People feed them when they're hungry, and as a last resort, they can survive on human waste." (124)

The novel progresses through the parallel stories of Gao Ma and Gao Yang. They are the focal characters of the novel who represent two diverse attitudes to revolution. Their responses to rebellion differ as the one is an active participant and the other a passive follower of law. Gao Ma in his forties is vigorous in his actions and backs the rebellion in all possible ways. He, the 'horse Gao', openly defies the capricious authority when he is ill-treated in the prison. His grudge is not against the system of socialism, but against the corrupt officials in that system.

It's not socialism I hate, it's you. To you socialism is a mere signboard, but to me it's social formation – concrete, not abstract. It's embedded in public ownership of the means of production and in a system of distribution. Unfortunately, it's also embodied in a corrupt life like you" ... "I hate corrupt officials like you who, under the guise of unfurling the flag of the Communist Party, destroy its reputation. (241)

Ma's and Yang's responses to their dilemma follow the fight or flight principle. Gao Ma fights injustice that helps him to survive. On the other hand, Gao Yang willingly accepts the corporeal punishment imposed on him. Yang prefers to flee; he is a wimpy fellow who blindly abides by law. He is afraid of any authority and meekly succumbs to their torture. Not able to recognize it as a byproduct of corruption and self-chosen supremacy, Yang accepts it as natural. "When the old man up there made people, he used different materials. The good stuff went for officials, the so-so stuff went for workers, and whatever was left over for us

peasants.” (Yan 187). He is fleeced of all the grain that he has harvested in the name of government tax. His passive mourning and inertia reflected through his words “If it is government policy, then go ahead and take what you want, ... I can’t raise a hand in my own defense” (194) reflects over his family also. His awareness about injustice and his inability to interfere are symbolised through the physical deformity of his family. His wife is a cripple, born with a stunted arm; his daughter Xinghua is a blind and his son has six toes on each foot.

Mo Yan’s cripples in the novel show the stunted growth of the society. It shows the imperfections in the government. A leg’s movement usually indicates progress. But as for Fang Yijun, Jinju’s limping elder brother, his leg’s uneven movements expose his retarded humanity and selfish motives. He is selfish as he wishes to marry her away to an older man. He is promised of a young, healthy and beautiful bride in return. While Fang Yijun’s legs show the delusion of progress, the garlic crop above his legs continues its decay. The farmers are unable to reap their crop in time due to financial crisis. Moreover, the government was unable to keep their promise that they will buy the entire garlic. Both these add to the tragedy of the farmers.

In Rural China forced marriages are encouraged even after the new law illegalizes arranged marriages without the consent of participants. The official sanctioning of such forced marriages by local power wielders are subtle ways of asserting patriarchal supremacy. In the novel, Gao Ma questions the old arranged marriage system by falling in love with his young and beautiful neighbour. He is denied the hands of Jinju in marriage by her parents with the help of local bureaucrats. When the lovers are found out during their elopement Ma is brutally punished for an offence he has not committed. The marriage ritual of jinju finally goes through, but between the corpse of Jinju and her deceased fiancé (whom her parents have chosen for her). Their bodies are dug up and their remains are finally put together in a single coffin. The powerlessness of the peasants whether they fight for their love or for their given rights demonstrates the harshness of a political system that framed its standards to suit the whims and fancies of the corrupt officials.

Mo Yan is highly credited for his nature symbolism as he tries to relate the experiences of characters with that of the land. Jinju’s traumatic existence is equated with that of the Paradise County. Gao Ma’s love for Jinju reflects his love for his land. Jinju’s hopes for a better life with Gao Ma grow day after day like the garlic farms of Paradise County; yet like the rotten garlic her life also ends in disaster, leaving no heir behind. The rotting crops symbolise the local corruption. Jinju’s pregnancy, murder of her father and the imprisonment of her mother lead her to suicide. She is also a mute witness to the physical violence inflicted on Gao Ma. Gao Ma is mercilessly beaten up when he comes to her family to propose her. All these catastrophes lead her to think over the future of her unborn child. She pathetically wails over her insecurity in society. She does not want her baby to be born and share the same plight that she suffers. The conversation between the unborn and his mother prior to her death shows her indignation with the ways of the world. Jinju warns the child:

I wanted to come out and see the world when I was like you, child, but once I got here, I ate pig slops and dog food, I worked like an ox and a horse, I was beaten and kicked, I was even strung up and whipped by your grandfather. Do you still want to come out? . . . Child, your father's a fugitive from justice, and his family is so poor they can't even raise rats. Your grandfather was struck down by a car, your grandmother has been arrested, and your uncles have divided up all our property. The family no longer exists- some members are gone, others are dead, and there's no one to turn to. Do you still want to come out child? (139).

Mo Yan launches an attack on the readers' senses by delineating the pain of physical torture, love and familial demands. A description of the sensations of bodily fluids trickles throughout the novel. Descriptions of bleeding, pissing, vomiting and sweating have traumatic significance; these external physical signs represent the most intense psychological and traumatic states. Gao Yang wets himself when he is arrested by the police. Gao Ma, feels blood trickling down through his nose when he is beaten up by the police:

Something warm and wet slithered into his nasal cavities, then continued down his face. He tried but couldn't hold it back; whatever it was spurted out of his nostrils and entered his mouth. It had a salty, rank taste; and when he lowered his head, he watched the bright red liquid drip onto the pale cement steps. (30)

Gao Yang's painful memories of his mother's death also arrest the attention of the reader's senses. His mother comes to him as a ghost after eight years of her death. In his dream, when he is about to touch her, her flesh flew off in wind. Equally significant is the dreams of Fourth aunt who dreams of her dead husband approaching her blood splattered.

Conclusion

Thus, *The Garlic Ballad* is a saga of suffering of the Chinese peasants who were fleeced of their money by the corrupt government. The novel exposes the corruption and political violence in the state and also throws light on the misguidance of the blind belief systems like arranged marriage

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our special thanks to faculty members of the department of English, University College, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala for their continuous guidance and support. We record our gratitude to faculty members of Sree Ayyappa College for Women, Nagercoil, Tamilnadu who helped us in this research article.

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