


Chapter 9

Foucauldian–Feminist Reading of Mo Yan’s Select Novels

Aaradhana

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4236-5345>
Lovely Professional University, India

ABSTRACT

With his imaginative and humanistic fiction, Mo Yan has shed light on numerous social and political issues prevalent in Chinese society during the 20th century. Alongside his political narratives, he has remarkably represented women’s roles and treatment, where gender hierarchy is evident. Moreover, to satirise the patriarchal society, Mo Yan has boldly designed his female characters to overshadow their male counterparts. The present study explores the systemic subjugation of women depicted in the novels and how some female characters actively resisted them. The issue of sexual violence during the war period in China will also be examined as the selected novels portray the cultural and historical experience during the series of civil and national wars. To comprehend and examine these issues, the theoretical framework of Michael Foucault will be applied. His discourse on power relations will be used as a medium to explore the problems mentioned above.

INTRODUCTION

Mo Yan is the first person from mainland China to become the recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2012. His short stories and novel are categorised as the work of hallucinatory realism, which are an amalgamation of the past, present, and folk tales of China. Mo Yan is often compared to Charles Dickens for his narrative maintains a balance between rapid advancement of the plot and drawing back to

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enlighten the readers with his perspective (Duran and Huang 2014). Having grown up during the most turbulent period of the twentieth century, the novels of Mo Yan subtly fondle sensitive incidents in Communist China such as the fall of the Dynastic period, Second Sino-Japanese War, Cultural Revolution etc. Moreover, the name Mo Yan is the pen name of Guan Moye, which in Chinese means 'to say nothing' or 'do not speak'. Looking carefully at the period in which Mo Yan started writing, the strict censorship exercised in the country made the citizens understand the gravity of what should be spoken and what should not. These circumstances brought criticism towards Mo Yan's writing for his alliances with the state, but it also allowed his works to discreetly represent the Chinese people's unique cultural and historical experience from the inside. Therefore, making him the first author in China with the most banned books widely pirated among its readers.

With a significant readership in the home country, Mo Yan debuted in the western market in 1987, when his novel *Red Sorghum* was adapted into a film with the same title. The movie won the Golden Bear Award at Berlin Film Festival, consequently introducing Mo Yan to the world. *Red Sorghum* is a dynamic narrative that unfolds the life and struggle of three generations in Shandong province during the 1930s. The main plot of the novel centres around the brutality and violence during the second Sino-Japanese War, narrated by a young man at the end of the cultural revolution. The young man retells the account of his grandfather, the most ferocious and notorious bandit in Shandong; his Grandma's love story that starts after she was raped on the third day of her arranged marriage; and the survival journey of his father, Douguan.

Eventually, with his polemic description in his political backdrop with a fictional narrative, Mo Yan became an essential voice. Unlike G.G. Marquez's enchanting plots, his dreamlike narrative wittingly intertwines the fantasy into the framework of his plot that insinuates the Chinese history, stories, and folklore that he grew up experiencing and listening to (Duran and Huang, 2014, p.96). Such narratives of Mo Yan dangerously skirt the censorship border as he boldly gives a comprehensive and graphic description of the socio-political situation in twentieth-century China.

Another family saga novel *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* published in 1996, with a rural backdrop, scrutinises Chinese society through the ups and downs faced by the Shangguan family. Following the life of Shangguan Lu and her eight daughters and a son, Mo Yan has highlighted the Chinese social structure wherein gender roles was his target. In this microcosm, Mo Yan has represented the association of male and female through his characters and has also subverted gender roles. He brings out the barbaric instinct of his male characters in the warfare, and its reversal is represented through his main character of Jintong, the only son of Shangguan Lu. While another novel, *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out*, brings out the brutality experienced by the peasants during the second half of the twentieth century. Through this fictional narrative, Mo Yan has provided its readers with a polemic commentary

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