
Mo Yan and Chinese Pastoral Literature

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Abstract: Novel laureate in literature since 2012, the prominent Chinese novelist Mo Yan was born and raised in a village in the province of Shandong. His works are often themed on rural life. Contrary to the case in Turkey, researches on rural life in China have advanced on a continuous basis since the 20s of the 20th century in China. This can be explained with the fact that primarily Mo Yan and Jia Pingwa, as prominent novelists in China, never stopped writing on villages, villagers and inner world of peasants that endeavoured to lead the life in the city as they did back in the village. In this brief research study, we try to discuss in what way Mo Yan touched on the pastoral literature in his works.

Keywords: Mo Yan, Pastoral Literature, Red Sorghum, China

1. Introduction

In the long history of agricultural civilization, literature has always been in close connection with the rural countryside with its villages and towns. Economic and social demographics of villagers and their relationship to one another, their personal opinions on and approach to village life undoubtedly formed the basis of pastoral literature. The concept 'pastoral literature' as is used in this study means and refers to pastoral literature. Consequently what is meant by "Pastoral Literature" is way of living in rural areas as far as geographical surroundings and motifs are concerned. These stories are often loaded with longing and yearning as village represents the roots. Nostalgia is inevitable wherever village is talked of. On taking a closer look at the works of Pastoral Literature in China, it will be seen that narrations and texts related to pastoral literature are composed of author's yearning for his or her homeland in well-depicted images and in an artistic manner.¹ Source of art cannot be isolated from tangible and intangible factors in life. In the same manner, literature cannot be alienated from them, either. Of course pastoral texts and literary works have been created not by people that lead mundane lives in villages but by novelists that have an interest in pastoral life and lead their life in urban areas and by those

that were born and studied in the village.

Pastoral Literature in China has a very special place in Chinese literature. Originated from a grand history, the genre nearly has a history of a century whereas it holds a special place in the history of China and is quite in demand as far as its reverberations re concerned. Pastoral literature, as the name suggests, relies on agricultural elements in addition to the natural geographical characteristics, cultural landscapes, national traditions and social psychology it represents. Novelists that are interested in pastoral literature in and outside China create topics in the literature genre of their interest and achieve in reflecting it to the reader because they substantially master on the constituents of the village community they have been observing for a while, as well as their dialect and traditions.²

Upon the Open Door Policy of the early 80's in China, Chinese villagers that had stagnant lives for centuries recovered economically as the system that dominated all Chinese villagers got flexible and agricultural production swiftly increased. Working for peanuts until then, Chinese villagers solved the fundamental vital issue, and reached the golden phase in the history of development of villages in China. Undoubtedly, such great acquisitions in economic life were followed by social spheres of life, and eventually all

¹ Chun Rong, *Xin Shiqi de Xiangtu Wenxue (New Period Pastoral Literature)*, Liaoning University Press, Shenyang 1986, p. 3.

² Ren Xiangyun, "Xiangtu Wenxue Sanlun (An Essay on Pastoral Literature)", *Gansu Lianhe Daxue Xuebao (Gansu Lianhe Daxue Xuebao: Lianhe University Journal)*, 2004, Issue 3, p. 22.

these advancements and progress was profoundly reflected in literature, which, as a result began to examine the Chinese villages and villagers. Quite a number of authors that were born in a village and lived in cities showed, with the effect of the open door policy, more tendencies to pen stories and novels concentrating on the village life and problems of villagers, which, in turn, paved the ground for a vivid recovery in rural literature. As it will be expressed later, the most important factor encouraging village-born authors to produce pastoral literature works are their rich-content memories back in the rural area. Mo Yan is the best reference to this.³

2. About Red Sorghum

Mo Yan reflects as follows in the foreword of *Red Sorghum*, which brought him the Nobel Prize in Literature: "Red Sorghum is based on a real story in a neighbour village to where I was born. The guerrilla forces of the village laid an ambush by the bridge over the River Jiaolai, and clashed with a modest number of Japanese forces, set fire on a military vehicle, and gained a remarkable victory under then-current circumstances. Before long, the Japanese brigades came back for retaliation, killed over a hundred villagers and vandalised all the houses in the village when they found no traces of the guerrilla forces in charge."⁴

The novel, which brought the Nobel Prize in Literature to Mo Yan, is *Red Sorghum*. The novel tells the life story of a family's three generations from Shandong Province between the years of 1923 and 1976. But course of the novel does not follow a chronological order. Jumps between the pieces of epic events create a unique fluency: Chinese revolution has not yet taken place. A resistance war was starts in China where Japan occupation has been faced. Gaomi Southeast District is chosen as the place in the novel. Because the land consists of small villages apart from each other that are dispersed around River Mo is the most suitable area for a guerrilla war. The narrator of the novel is Mo Yan but events are gone through by his grand grandfather, his grandfather and his father. He starts telling while his grandfather and father are laying an ambush to the occupying Japanese Army in Gaomi Northeast District and he forms up the family history with series of stories on his grandfather; the legendary Yu Zhan, who moves up to a commander from being a bandit, how his grandfather and grandmother met, murders his grandfather committed, his grandmother's work at the distillery, his father's birth and the banditry days of his grandfather, war between gangs, Japanese Occupation and Chinese rural life in those years... As for what ties the stories together and keeps them from falling apart is the Gaomi Northeast District and the red sorghum fields of that district.

Aiming at narrating warfare and historical incidents with

literary motifs, the novelist sets the scene against the sorghum fields in the *Red Sorghum* and adds resistance against the Japan and love stories in shifts. The novelist resorts to nature for similes that go beyond the plot of the novel. The sun reaches the length of two bamboos; six sisters embrace each other tightly as if cloves of garlic. River Mo is the main motif in the *Red Sorghum* while The Flood Dragon River is the main motif in *Big Breasts & Wide Hips*. Grandmother is the main character in the *Red Sorghum* and the mother character created by Shangquan Lu comes to the fore in the *Big Breasts & Wide Hips*. In this context, both works of Mo Yan have historical qualities on the one hand and concentrate on gradually devastated rural nature and traditions, as well as on the commoditised village women that went through unfavourable effects of poverty on the other hand. Tying the feet of Chinese young women in order for receiving appreciation of men, marrying them off to leprous men in return for a mule, being humiliated and looked down on by their husband unless they give birth to a boy and threatened for being returned to family home and even having to have repeated deliveries until they eventually give birth to a boy are the shared themes in both novels. Women raped by the occupying forces pay for the warfare not only with their honour and dignity but also with interrupted integrity of their body and soul. What they go through is narrated indirectly sometimes with forced traditions or circumstances and at times with resistance.⁵

3. On Mo Yan's Approach the Pastoral Literature in China

Novels of Mo Yan, who is the most famous writer of Modern Chinese Literature, give the best examples of typical pastoral literature. In his works, he approaches a realistic style to reflect villagers. Texts that translate his narration reflect the language of the community. Reader will absolutely find a clue in his or her life in the world narrated by Mo Yan in his novels and this guarantees an enjoyable reading session. Unlike many Turkish novelists that write on rural literature, Mo Yan does not employ the dialect spoken by the villager with a view to rendering his works more interesting. What is interesting rests in the essence of narration, detailed and elaborative observations and masterful combination of traditions and historical phenomena. All heroes and heroines of his works are peasants and well-educated ones are only a few in number.

It will be beneficial to present a brief evaluation for some of the novels by Mo Yan that are commonly known to Chinese people. *The Transparent Carrot* narrates the story of a peasant figure. Historical adventures of the Chinese peasants from the early periods of Qing Dynasty until the open door policy, their sorrows, struggles in fights and feelings are expressed in a captivating style. Mo Yan's novels represent a poetical narration of the rural literature in China. Because Mo Yan comes from Shandong Province, he reveals

3 Zhang Wennuo, "Lun Mo Yan Dui 20 Shiji 80 Niandai Zhongguo Nongcun de Jiegou Yu Zaigou (On Mo Yan's Opinions On the Collapse and Reconstruction of Chinese Villages in the 80s of the 20th Century)", *Dali University Journal*, 2015 Issue 9, p. 22.

4 Mo Yan, *The Red Sorghum*, Translated from Chinese by Erdem Kurtuldu, Can Publications, Istanbul 2013, p. 11.

5 Seriyeye Sezen, "Recent Past of China", *Cumhuriyet Daily Newspaper's Book Supplement*, Issue 1299, January 2015, p. 12-13.

in his novels the feelings of people from his hometown and people that are in the culture of other rural areas of China, as well as the transition they have been through during the historical process. In his novels, there are no power holders, officials, merchants, red light districts, debauchery and educated city youth. Mo Yan only puts into words the intense feelings of farm villagers.⁶

It was specified above that Mo Yan mastered in generating historical phenomena into literature. At this point, it will be examined as to how Mo Yan approached the literature and history relationship in the *Red Sorghum*. The mid 80s in the 20th century witnesses a great advancement and progress in the Chinese literature. It is understood that such progress was triggered by certain factors. Borrowing the themes of the *Red Sorghum* from the recent history, he managed to attract attention of the literature circles to historical novels. Where, then does the *Red Sorghum* stand amongst the novels of Chinese history? It is known that historical novels have been written in China approximately for 2000 years now. San Guo Yanyi and Sui Tang Yanyi are a best example, each for classical historical novels. Until the *Red Sorghum* by Mo Yan, novels that relied on history concentrated on an emperor while narrating the history, and never focused on ordinary people.⁷ Mo Yan was the first to achieve this. He blazed the trail in the art of writing historical novels in Chinese, and set his novels against an environment in which local community was prominent and their natural environment was emphasised while building up a historical atmosphere by referring to ordinary community.

Even though it is argued that the *Red Sorghum* has been influenced by Marquez, Mo Yan dissents to it. He reflects in the foreword of the said novel as follows regarding the issue: "Some say that the story in the *Red Sorghum* is influenced by Marquez. All I can say about this is that this is nothing but mere assumption. I read Marquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in the spring of 1985, which was not translated to our language until then. The *Red Sorghum*, however, was written in 1984 and I had not begun to read Marquez' splendid work until I was finished with the *Dog Ways*, the third chapter of the *Red Sorghum*. I still repent why I could not think of such a method though. If I had begun to read Marquez before I sat for writing the *Red Sorghum*, it would be much different than it is now."⁸

Even though Mo Yan defends above that him being influenced by Marquez could merely be assumptions, some Chinese researchers express opinions contrary to this. In our opinion, Mo Yan has not been influenced but inspired from Marquez. But some Chinese researchers think that Marquez has influenced Mo Yan on two aspects: Firstly he inspired Mo Yan, and secondly he encouraged him for artistic thinking that

Mo Yan needed. It should be appreciated that encouraging, as is used here, does not mean affecting Mo Yan. On the other hand, Mo Yan should have too little funds of knowledge to be an author and he should be deprived of writing skills for being encouraged and drawing inspiration from Marquez after getting to read his novels. It is therefore seemingly not a coherent opinion to believe that Mo Yan, a man of letters, who started his writing career at a young age and relied on his family members, village community and relatives as the source of his works, was actually influenced by Marquez.

A Chinese researcher named Zhou Linwu categorises Mo Yan's works into three categories. The first category contains the works produced in 1985. The second category contains *The Transparent Carrot* completed in 1986 and the third category contains *The Red Sorghum*. Before 1985, Mo Yan's works were written in a realistic style in outlines. As it will be noticed, Zhou Linwu made a complex grouping here. Minjian Yin Yue (Folk Music), and Shoumian Dalub (A Great Way of Cotton Sale) are a good example for Mo Yan's realistic works. On taking time to examine his works back in that period, it can be noticed that he had not found his idiosyncratic traits of writing then. Needless to say, Mo Yan had his own opinions on society, human life and art back then, too, however these opinions were not separated from one another fully. Mo Yan's works substantially subject to social pressure. Mo Yan noticed that his opinion on art bear similarities with those of Marquez. Such awareness was a factor that stimulated him. In other words, Mo Yan found his own opinions' projections in Marquez's works.⁹ Needless to say, what attracts our attention most here is that childhood and youth memories and true life experiences from 21 years of time spent in the village are what lie under the profound basis of Mo Yan's works. This will be discussed in details later.

Another Chinese researcher named Gao Cuiying categorised Mo Yan's works more systematically and coherently. According to him, over 100 stories and over 10 novels written by Mo Yan can be divided into three: Years between 1981 and 1984, 1984 and 2000 and from 2000 until present time. His early novels depict military life and social incidents as perceived by the community. If attention is paid, both of the aforementioned researchers refer to the year 1981 as the beginning of Mo Yan's works. They did not mention the works written by Mo Yan before 1981. In fact Mo Yan began to produce his literary works in 1978. The researchers' not mentioning the works before 1981 can be explained with the fact that his works written before 1981 are not considered in his mastery period. Mo Yan calls his writings in the relevant period as (Jia huo) meaning "false articles".¹⁰ The cited year coincides with the military life as Mo Yan was serving in the military then. The first work written by him is Dizhi Guxiang (The Resisting Village). It relates to a military life on an island. Mo Yan

6 Xu Bingquan, Lun Mo Yan de Xiangtu Wenxue Yu Xiangtu Zhongguo-Cong Mo Yan Huo Nuobeier Wenxue Jiang Shuo Qi (On Mo Yan's Being Awarded with the Pastoral Literature and Rural China- Nobel Prize in Literature), Langfang Education University Journal, 2013, Issue 2, p. 34.

7 Chen Sihe, "Mo Yan Yu Zhongguo Dangdai Wenxue (Mo Yan and Contemporary Chinese Literature)", Huaiyin Education University, 2013 Issue 5, p. 661.

8 Mo Yan, *The Red Sorghum*, *ibid.* 12.

9 Zhou Linyu, "Cong Bai Nian Gudu Kan Mo Huan Xianshizhuyi Ji Qi Dui Mo Yan de Yingxiang (Fantastic Realism of the Work Named One Hundred Years of Solitude and Effects of This Movement on Mo Yan)", *Lanzhou Jiaotong University Journal*, 2006 Issue 2, p. 17.

10 Mo Yan, *Chaoyue Guxiang (Crossing the Village)*, Unpublished Master's Thesis at Beijing Education University, 1994, p. 9.

penned couple of more stories like *The Resisting Village*. Stories in this group narrate resistance of the community.¹¹ In the period that constitutes the second period of his writing career, Mo Yan produced works that profoundly reflected influences of the western literature. At this period of his career, the novelist concentrated on the Gaomi village where he was born, and on idiosyncratic characteristics of the rural area in the northeast. In the third and the last stage, Mo Yan turns back to memoirs, personal experience, contemporary art and literary movements reminiscent from his youth by relying on the folk literature.¹² As specified above, unlike Gao Cuiying, we believe that Mo Yan does not profoundly bear traces from the western literature.

Mo Yan has a very eligible personality and access to historical background for writing novels and stories in pastoral literature. Contrary to most intelligentsia, he frankly expresses that he is from rural area. In other words, he is proud of having rural roots. He enjoys a consolidated historical background, which is needed for becoming a prominent novelist in pastoral literature, as he spent 19 years of his life in the village. By virtue of his strong and apt observations and memory, he achieved in masterfully combining his personal background and his family's and village's history with subsisting values of the time in his stories and novels. It is known that some authors in our country temporarily move to rural areas only for making limited observations before setting out to write works on rural life. Even though these authors have strong literary knowledge when writing about the village man and the village life in their works, they fail to create a long-lasting effect and to come up with a guiding work of art simply because he is not a literary man raised in a village and it is evident that they cannot feel or otherwise perceive the village and the village man and their problems like a literary man that spent at least couple of years of his life in a village. What has been written here applies to Chinese authors that were raised in the village where they were born and that never cut ties with their village, as well as to the city-origin authors that are familiar with the pastoral literature. Consequently, it is possible, to a certain extent, to compare and contrast Mo Yan with Fakir Baykurt, one of the most prominent pastoral literary figure in our country. These authors did not forget the village they were born to, and cherished their sweet memories of their village life in their works.

4. Mo Yan's World of Literature

After quitting the village he lived for 21 years, Mo Yan employs a clear style to depict his sad, realistic, disappointed and slightly hopeful mood. When working as a farmer in Gaomi

village in the province of Shandong, he approaches the soil he ploughs with hatred. The soil has absorbed the blood and sweat of his ancestors and now it absorbs his hard labour now. From Mo Yan's perspective, the soil was not generous then because it required hard labour but offered very little in return. They suffered from the heat in summer and cold in winter as a family. With his child mind back then, he promises that he will never look back if he happens to quit these lands one day. He left his village for his military post for the first time. When other youngsters that were departing as him were in tears, he did not even turn his head to take one last look at it. He felt himself as free as a bird. In his opinion, there was nothing that he would long for in the village back then. That is why the faster the truck drove him away from the village the better he would feel himself. He even wished to go to a seaside for the best. When the military vehicle drives 150 km off the village, accompanying military personnel announces their arrival and Mo Yan feels disappointed. In 3 years of time, his opinions will change completely. He will feel a great excitement when he is to take a step in his homeland again. When his old mother all in red meets him on the red sorghum, he will not be able to keep his tears. He then feels exactly as a village man does. Land of the village gives birth to him, feeds him and even buries him when he is no more. You can love or hate it but can never get rid of it.¹³

Mo Yan's inner world is dominated by his family in the village, his land, vicinity and memories. All of the aforementioned former opinions he sued to have are as if expressed not only for his behalf but also on behalf of the entire humanity. Majority of his opinions made especially with the influence of instantaneous anger and opinions in his youth is proven wrong in the passing years. This happens to best of us.

Being awarded with the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2012, Mo Yan gave a speech at the prize giving ceremony, which succinctly describes his life story and writing career. In his speech, he strongly emphasised the two aspects of his life. Firstly, he took his leave from his village for joining the army in February of 1976 as briefly specified above. This opened a brand new era in Mo Yan's life. According to him, a novelist as him would not be able to make it but for the social transformation and progress of 30 years and the opening policy. The novelist strongly emphasises here that social developments and progresses make precious contributions for intelligentsia in that they pave the ground for globally renowned and well-qualified man power.

Another important subject matter mentioned by Mo Yan at the prize-giving ceremony was his personal approach to writing as a discipline of art. When expressing his opinions, he does not prefer abstract and complicated sentences as most intellectuals do, but a simple style to enable public and ordinary people comprehend them. He specified that the thing he needed to do was very simple and that he was to preserve and maintain his style and to tell his own story. He highlights that the style in question has been that of the cities and people that read books.

11 Tong Qingbing, "Mo Yan de (Shuoshi Lunwen Yu Gaomi Dongbei Xiang Wenxue Wangguo Mo Yan's Master's Thesis and Dongbei Pastoral Literature Kingdom in Gaomi)", *Beijing Education University Journal*, 2013 Issue 5, p. 69-70.

12 Gao Cuiying, "Mo yan Xiaoshuo Chuangzuo de Zhuanxing (Transformation in Mo Yan's Novels)", *China University of Petroleum, Zafer Institute Journal*, 2013 Issue 4, p. 42.

13 Mo Yan "Wo de Guxiang Yu Wo de Xiaoxiang (My Homeland-My Novels)," *Zhongguo Xiandai Wenxue Yanjiu (Researches on Contemporary Pastoral Literature of China)*, Edited by Wang Guangdong, Vol. 2, East Centre of Books Shanghai 2011, p. 212.

This style has furthermore been the style of narration adopted by his grandfather, grandmother and elderly in his village. He never thinks of his audience when he narrates. Members of the same family may be his audience. Or he may be his own audience. Since his story is very limited, he is obliged to narrate other people's stories, too. Hence only very limited portion of Mo Yan's narration is his own stories and the source of other narrations are the seniors in his village and his arm friends. The community mentioned here expect Mo Yan to write their stories. As a natural consequence, his grandfather grandmother, mother and father, elder brother, elder sister, aunt, uncle, wife and daughter are the characters in his stories and novels. The novelist makes characters out of his close circle.¹⁴

5. Conclusion

Mo Yan was the first to introduce contemporary Chinese literature to the world. Unlike many other Chinese authors, Mo Yan inserted colloquial language into novels that are known as art of long narration. He was widely acclaimed for inserting recent history of China and Chinese traditions into narration of his novels that run with an uninterrupted plot of emotions and imagination in his masterfully built-up novels. His novels are easy to understand, but are still witty, fluent in style and escapist as they are not loaded with pompous and complex grammatical structures of Traditional Chinese that could not be grasped by the young generation, who did not have Classical Chinese education.

Even though Mo Yan's novel rely on recent history of China for plot and story, the theme is not plotted on emperors, statesmen and important historical figures as in the case with other historical novels that have a centuries old past. Seemingly endless scene of his novels is the pastoral atmosphere that preserves its historical tissue while heroes and heroines selected are ordinary people. While reading Mo Yan's novels, the reader feels himself or herself as part of the running plot of the novel. His real life experience has often been the source of events narrated in his works. Heroes and heroines of Mo Yan's novels are sometimes animals as in fables, and he still presents traditional Chinese thinking and imagination worlds as well as the Chinese traditions to the reader, embedding them in an impressive skill of narrating.

As is expressed in his autobiography, while departing the village he was born and raised, Mo Yan, possibly just like many other people, is glad as he will presumably see a new environment though permanently. His joy is soon replaced by homesickness. What he always feels is exile as long as he lives in a foreign country. American authoress Pearl S. Buck, who lived in China for 35 years, felt the same way. Whenever Mo Yan revisits his homeland he feels inexplicably peaceful. It must be with the power derived from such pleasure and peace that he endeavours to reflect the village life in China exactly as is in his novels. Consequently, he does not attempt

to reveal the Chinese villager or the village itself different from what they really are. If we liken his novels to a film, he never takes the leading role alone, but honours his family elders, ancestors, village community by giving them leading roles. In brief, reading Mo Yan's novels makes the reader feel as if joining and living together with villagers that constitute nearly half of the entire population.

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¹⁴ Mo Yan: Jiang Gushi de Ren, Nobeier Yanjiang (Mo Yan: The Man Who Tells Stories-Nobel Award Ceremony Speech), p. 6-8.