

# TRACES OF TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES IN THE WORKS OF MOYAN

Kalpana Chatterjee  
PhD Scholar  
Auxilium College Autonomous  
Vellore

Dr. Venum Cecilia P.A.A  
Associate Professor & Head  
Research Guide & Supervisor  
Auxilium College Autonomous  
Vellore

Trauma is a psychological disorder, a response to disturbing situations and events in which the affected individual struggles to cope with the present scenario. The more traumatic the situation becomes, the more the feelings of helplessness occur in the hearts of the individual. Mo Yan's works are a splendid blend of black humour and folk tales. His works carry atrocities in Chinese history and cruel political policies. Reading in between the lines of his works can recreate the trauma experienced by the characters in the minds of the readers. This paper brings out the traumatic experiences of Mo Yan's characters are the trauma caused by war, political policies and reformation.

Trauma is not a one-time event. With every repetition of the disturbing events, the effects of trauma become stronger. The repetitive occurrence of these events in different forms and in different places triggers the traumatic experiences and psychological stress in the minds of the sufferers. In certain cases, the overwhelming trauma affords forgetfulness of the distressing events which aggravate the traumatic experiences and there occurs more emotional dislocation and emotional disconnection from this present world. The reasons for trauma and reactions to it differ from individual to individual. The shared traumatic experiences can turn the subjective traumatic memories to collective traumatic experiences. In the words of Cathy Caruth:

In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena. The experience of the soldier faced with sudden and massive death around him, for example, who suffers this sight in a numbed state, only to relive it later on in repeated nightmares, is a central and recurring image of trauma in our century. (11)

The year 1987 witnessed the publication of *Red Sorghum* as Mo Yan's first novel by compiling the previously published five volumes together. It got its film adaptation in the hands of Director Zhang Yimou and later on it was translated into English by Howard Goldblatt in 1993 under the subtitle *Red Sorghum- A Novel of China*. The plot of *Red Sorghum* which revolves around the three generations of the Shandong family stretches from 1923 to 1976. These three generations eventually go through suffering as distillery owners manufacturing Sorghum wine and also suffer in the form of fighters during the second Sino-Japanese war.

The story is narrated through the memories of its unnamed narrator who narrates the story of his grandparents and parents who fought in the Sino-Japanese war. A sense of nostalgia makes him retell the tale of his ancestors once he visits their graves in the village. His narrations take a non-chronological form as he dwells in the memories and anecdotes of his grandfather, father and mother. The story line moves back and forth in time and refreshes the old, painful and happy memories buried in the annals of time. The main characters in the novels are addressed as grandpa (Commander Yu), grandma (Dai), father (Dougaun) and mother (Beauty).

The novel commences with Commander Yu preparing his soldiers to get ready for an attack in no time on the Japanese troop. In the mean time the black clouds covered his fate with his wife Dai's death, who was shot by the Jap soldiers in the sorghum field. Then the story takes a turn into the past of the narrator's grandparents where grandma was forced against her will to marry a leprosy patient at the age of sixteen for the promise of a mule from the groom's side to her parents. Granddad held the job of the bearer of the bridal sedan and the first look cast from the corner of grandma Dai's eyes made him fall for her. Her love gives him the courage to murder her husband and father-in-law and she becomes the owner of the distillery. Their love resulted in the form of father Dougaun who became the foremost supporter and co-traveller with his father Yu during and after the Sino-Japanese war. The novel gives space for the depiction of love, robust passion, family struggle, war, cruelty, inhuman behaviour and trauma.

The novel is steeped in death with its every move within the plot of the novel. The mere mentioning about the war itself inflicts the human mind with fear which later on turns to trauma and the Sino-Japanese war is an example. During the war, both the fighters and the civilians have to go through the heart piercing pain caused by the loss of loved ones. The devastating nature of war does not spare anybody; starting from the youngest to the oldest, from the richest to the poorest, everyone comes under the wrath of war. The Shandong family lost two of their female members which leave others in the throes of trauma.

Trauma can be caused due to various reasons and these reasons are not limited only to those who go through trauma because of direct involvement in the traumatic events. The images of terrorist attacks flashing in the television screens bombard the viewers' minds with violence and later on these violent images implant the seeds of trauma in the viewer's mind. Dai embraced death in the sorghum field and Beauty had to go through the toughest time before death. Like Dai and Beauty, all other Chinese women were far away from the domain of the Sino- Japanese war, yet their lives were made miserable, especially after being deflowered by the Japanese soldiers and were left with traumatic experiences for a life time.

Trauma had been a part of Beauty's life which kept crawling in her blood and gradually made her a strong woman. As a fifteen -year old child, she was fated to see her brother die in her arms and spend her days inside a well holding the dead body of her brother in her little hands. Though both Passion and Beauty were shackled in the hands of traumatic memories, both of their responses to it were different. One becomes stronger with these memories and the other is tormented and met with a painful, heart- rendering end.

I don't know how many days I hunkered down inside that well. Your uncle died there, and his body began to sink. The toad and yellow- banded snake stared at me until I nearly died for fright. I was sure I'd die down in that well.(Red Sorghum215)

Trauma pierced its thorn deeply in the heart of Commander Yu after the unfortunate death of grandma but rather than making granddad gloomy and sad, it actually turned him into a beast who is thirsty for the Japanese blood. The wrath and sense of revenge from the Jap soldiers blinded him to the core that he was unable to realise the loss he had and the further loss he will have in his upcoming life.

Only when grandma smiled up at him as she lay dead in the sorghum field did he realise the grievous punishment life had meted out to him. He loved my father as a magpie loves the last remaining egg in the nest. But by then it was too late, for fate, cold and calculating, had sentenced him to a cruel end that was waiting for him down the road. (Red Sorghum191)

This novel projects the brutalities of war which captivates the entire novel under its influence. The fighters in this war did not fight for righteousness or for moral values, in fact, their mere identities and survival are at question, which force them to put their lives at risk and fight in the war, well aware of the consequences. The brutality shown in the novel rises to a higher level when even the dead bodies of the soldiers in battle from both the party sides are not spared from the hatred of the opposition parties.

Like *Red Sorghum*, Mo Yan's *Frog* also projects the traumatic side of a midwife, Gugu, who eventually becomes an abortionist, stubborn enough to execute the political One-Child policy to control China's population explosion. The basic concern of the writer is to showcase the brutality of the methods to achieve the goal set by the government and the tactics of the people of China to get away from the rules. This novel pictures the forceful seizing of Chinese women's rights to motherhood by the Chinese government.

A woman comes to the world to have babies...A woman who cannot give birth to a baby experiences the most painful pains; a woman who cannot give birth to a baby is not a complete woman. Moreover, if a woman doesn't give birth to a baby, she will become cold-hearted and will grow old quickly.

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The People's Republic of China introduced its one-child policy in 1979. To the surprise of the government of China, the reaction of the Chinese mass became complicated. The penalty of having a second child was severe. The initial commencement of family planning in China in 1971 proclaimed the propaganda of "one child isn't for few, two are just fine, and three are too many." With the passing years, there was a high population increase which had a huge spin in the family planning. The sudden change went too coercive to the extent of a couple having a single child, irrespective of the baby's gender. Each woman in China became an official record in which the history of that woman such as the childbearing age, past birth, contraceptive usage and the menstrual cycles were recorded in a detailed manner.

Gugu vibrantly undergoes various transformations, from a praised midwife to a stubborn and condemned abortionist who defies the brutal dictates of the government moving ahead on the path of the Cultural Revolution. The novel does not only depict the cruel and arduous behaviour of the one-child policy followers. It also mirrors the pain and agony of the mothers who suffer the loss of their babies against their will. The different facets of motherly love are well coloured by Mo Yan. *Frog* holds the professional transformation of Gugu along with her psychological transformation when she is finally married to an old clay artist to mould the clay babies as the replication of those fetuses whom she has murdered in the name of progress in the forced implementation of Chinese Government's One-Child policy. Gugu's suppressed pain is no lesser than the fully outspoken pain of the mothers who fail to save their children from the tense clutch of the government. On the whole, *Frog* is a novel moulded on a serious and overtly emotional issue of motherhood and abortion. Though she has lent her hand in the birth of thousands of children, she is also guilty, because of murdering a thousand unborn babies. After her retirement, she is haunted by the memory of those dead infants in the form of frogs. The fearless, ever bold Gugu feels scared to death

for the first time in her life, after her retirement. Gugu's hands are covered with the blood marks of the dead foetus murdered by her under the cruel One-Child policy.

The croaking of frogs is often described in terms of drumbeats. But that night it sounded to her like human cries, almost as if thousands of newborn infants were crying. That had always been one of her favourite sounds, she said. For an obstetrician, no sound in the world approaches the soul-stirring music of a newborn baby's cries. But the cries that night were infused with a sense of resentment and of grievance, as if the souls of countless souls of infants were hurling accusations. (Frog250)

Both Gugu and her assistant Little Lion sail in the same boat when it comes to bestowing their motherly love upon the clay dolls. Gugu's suffering from insomnia and Little Lion's constant mourning over her guilt leave them both with a complicated problem of infertility which can be considered as a punishment for their merciless implementation of the government's family planning policy. Little Lion assumes her infertility as a punishment for going against God's will and murdering the unborn babies.

The description of trauma in the context of Mo Yan's *Frog* seems to be incomplete without mentioning the pain and suffering of the surrogate mothers present in the novel and in the Chinese society as well. Like Gugu, Chen Mei is also a victim of physical as well as mental trauma. The fire in the factory disfigures her which leaves her with hatred for mirrors or anything which reflects her image. She is forced to use her ghastly face to save her father from a murderous attack on him. Life turns out to be cruel towards her again and she undergoes mental trauma after delivering the baby for Little Lion and Tadpole. All her pleading is unheard and all her questions are unanswered.

Mo Yan's *Life and Death are Wearing me out* demonstrates the pain in the heart of a landlord who is given six various births by Lord Yama after his unreasonable death during China's land reform policy in 1948. Ximen Nao is executed at the hands of the land reformers. The cause for his execution is not his actions but his identity. The establishment of a new society leaves the ashes of the old dead society and thus causes painful memories which lead to trauma as Li Tonglu writes;

Life and Death exemplifies the strategies through which Mo Yan transforms the violent and absurd events of recent Chinese history into personal memory of historical trauma. It focuses less, however, on those events per se than on the traumatic effects they create on the individual victims, and on the ways through which personal trauma caused by historical atrocities is addressed and healed. (237)

Life bestows experiences on everyone under the sun. A few experiences fill the hearts with happiness and a few bring tears to the eyes out of sadness. Every experience has its own flavour and its own effect on every single individual in the world. Life cannot be a bed of roses forever. The mere

acceptance of roses brings the thorns along with them. The human mind dwells on memories, be it memories of happiness or sorrow. The failure to control the gloomy memories and place them away from the present life arouses trauma, thus life becomes unbearably painful. Mo Yan's novels depict these traumatic memories and pain and present them beautifully to express the ultimate sorrowful emotions of human hearts.

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