
Understanding the Nobel Laureate ‘Mo Yan’ Through His Fiction

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DOI: 10.53032/TCL.2021.6.1.07

Abstract

One of the main characteristics of Contemporary Chinese Literature is that it has remained true to the time it represented. Although it has been used extensively to serve the political agenda of the Communist party on occasions, but it has managed to carry forward the idea of realism, which started to flourish during the May Fourth period. After the announcement of the policy of “Reform and Opening up” by Deng Xiaoping in the Post Mao period China, a brilliant story teller emerged from the rural area of Gaomi in Shandong province of China. This paper aims to understand the phenomena created by Mo Yan’s writings in contemporary period of Chinese literature. The paper initially has discussed the major trends in post-Mao period Chinese literature to provide the background for understanding the emergence of Mo Yan. The paper has tried to discuss the major trends in Mo Yan’s writings focusing on the fiction-world created by him in his novels. Then it has further analysed the characteristics of Mo Yan’s writings. Finally, through the analysis of available contents a conclusion has been drawn.

Keywords: Root Seeking, Cultural Nationalism, Magical Realism, Mo Yan

The Creative Launcher

An International, Open Access, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

Editor-in-Chief- Dr Ram Avadh Prajapati

Introduction

Chinese literature has produced so many great literary figures over the years including Qu Yuan, Li Bai, Du Fu, Lu Xun, Bai Jin, Ai Qing, Ma Dun etc. In the contemporary times the world has witnessed China's first Nobel laureate in literature Mo Yan. Mo was a teenager at the time of Cultural Revolution, who had to leave his formal studies when he was in middle school and later in 1980's during his service in the PLA, he started writing stories. Mo Yan is one of the popular writers in contemporary period who make readers revisit history with a mix of reality and fiction. As per his achievements in the field of literature it could be said that Mo Yan is one of the finest Contemporary novel writers in China. Mo Yan has written approx. twenty novels and more than eighty short stories. His major works include 《Hong Gaoliang Jiazou》, 《Jiuguo》, 《Shengsi Pilao》, 《Bian》 etc.

Mo was born in 1955 in Shandong Province Gaomi county of Shandong province in Eastern part of China. The original name of Mo Yan was Guan Moye (管谟业) ; later on when he started his writing career he adopted his pen name as Mo Yan (莫言) which literally means "don't speak" which was the common instruction Mo used to receive from his mother whenever he used to go out of his home during the turbulent times of the Cultural Revolution period. This also signifies the degree of fear people had at that time, which further states that it wasn't the time suitable for free speech and same applied for literary writings as well.

Mo has been dropped out from school and couldn't finish formal education. But he always wanted to study and was looking for opportunities. It was only when he joined PLA in 1976 his desire to study was fulfilled. His first published writing came in 1981 and after three years 《Touming de Hongluobo》 had given him the name in the literary field. After that he never looked back and continued to publish one after the other cult novels. It was the year 2011 when he received the prestigious Ma Dun Wenxue Jiang (Mao Dun Literary Award) , the highest literary award in China. Nuobeier Wenxue Jiang (Nobel prize in literature) had been a distant dream for Chinese writers living in China for years. Although the quality of literature produced by some of the Chinese writers were excellent, for some reason they

failed to attract the attention of the Nobel Committee. The wait was finally over with Mo Yan becoming the first Nobel laureate in literature from China in the 2012.

The present study has tried to understand China's first Nobel laureate in literature through his brand of literary writings. The study has tried to analyse the distinctive features of Mo Yan's writings which made him the phenomenon he had been in the context of development of fiction writing in Contemporary China. The present study has also tried to understand the background of the time when Mo Yan started his literary career and further developed it in the subsequent three decades.

The present study is based on the primary sources which are the selected novels of Mo Yan in Chinese as well as the English translation of the works. Present study has selected four representative works of Mo Yan to understand the overall characteristics of his writing and to describe the major trends in his fiction. The four novels include 《Hong GaoliangJiazhu》, 《Jiuguo》, 《ShengsiPilao》 and 《Bian》. Along with the primary sources the study has also considered secondary sources such as critical works on Mo Yan and his writings in form of journal articles and dissertations. Major databases such as J store has been searched to get the relevant data. The Chinese knowledge database CNKI was also consulted. The present study has adopted qualitative research approach. The content analysis method had been used for the analysis of data. Based on the analysis of data a conclusion had been drawn.

Chinese Literature from Ancient times to the Cultural Revolution

China is one of the oldest civilizations in the world. It has a long 'written history'. Literary tradition in China has also underwent more than two thousand years of development. The first phase of literary writings in China is known as Pre-Qin period. Where mostly mythological stories and Confucian classics of Sishu Wujing (Four Books and Five Classics) were written. The Pre-Qin period refers to the period before the 3rd century BCE when the Qin dynasty came into power. Contribution of the Qin Shihuang of Qin dynasty is enormous in Chinese history. He is not only known for building The Great Wall but he had also unified China including the unification of language. In the post-Qin period literature of China started to flourish during the time of Han dynasty. Though, it was the Tang dynasty period of 7th - 10th century CE which is known as the Golden Period of Chinese history, majorly due to the

status of art and literature of that time. Poetry was the most popular form of literature which had developed enormously in this period. Poetry of Tang poets Libai, Dufu are still considered to be classics. Apart from the Tang poetry Chinese literature is also known for the lyrical Song dynasty Ci poetry (a style of lyrical poetry), Yuan dynasty Qu (opera) and Ming and Qing dynasty Xiaoshuo (novel). It was the time when the 'Four Modern Classics' i.e. the four classics novels of modern China, 《Xiyouji》 (Journey to the West), 《HonglouMeng》 (Dream of Red Mansion), 《SanguoYanyi》 (The Romance of Three Kingdoms) and 《ShuihuZhuan》 (Water Margins) has been written.

As per Zhou Siyuan the period of Modern Chinese literature is considered to be 1917 to 1949. Which had been further divided into three phases, the phase of Literary Revolution (1917-1927), phase of Revolutionary Literature (1928-1937) and the phase of War time literature (1937-1949), which includes the period of the War Against Japan as well as the Civil War (Huáng and Sòng 1–2). The modern period in Chinese literature has broken free from the traditional literature and its affection for the classical language. With the efforts of writers like Lu Xun vernacular started to be accepted as literary language. Lu Xun was contemporary to Munshi Premchand of Hindi literature and both had followed realism in their respective writings. Though, Lu Xun's realism was more critical.

China was liberated in 1949 and in the same year Chinese literature break away from the modern period and entered into Contemporary period in the history of Chinese literature. Contemporary Chinese literature has also been further sub divided into three phases, the first one being the Seventeen Years Period (1949-1966), the period is known for communist literature as most of the writers followed the guidelines laid down by Mao Zedong in his 'Yan'an Forum talk on Literature and Art' in 1942. The period after it, is known as the Cultural Revolution period (1966-1976) in the literary history of China. There had been so many restrictions in publishing literary writings in this period, hence, it can be said that the literature produced in the period had very less artistic value and it was very much monotonous during the entire period.

Major Trends in the Post-Mao Period

Post-Mao period refers to the period after the death of China's most influential leader Mao Zedong in 1976. It was the year when 'Gang of Four', which has taken total control over

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literature and art in China during the Cultural Revolution period was dissolved and the Cultural Revolution came to an end in China. The period is formally known as “Xin Shiqi” or ‘New Period’ and literature of this period is known as New Period Literature. Chinese Literature has become univariate to multivariate in this New Period or Post-Mao period.

In the post-Mao period, literary writers got more freedom to write thus the first trend came up in this period was aimed to expose the scars received by the people during the Cultural Revolution period. Therefore, it was named as Shanghenwenxue or Scar literature. Liu Xinwu’s 《Ban Zhuren》 was the pioneer work which formally established the trend then the other writers followed on the similar pattern and expressed their grieves. After a certain time when the trend further developed it made writers to introspect which led to a new literary trend known as Fansi or Introspection. Ru Zhijuan’s 《JianzhiCuo le de Gushi》 is one of the major works which followed this trend(Zhū et al.).

With the Reform and Opening Up Gaige wenxue or Reformist Literature started trending. The works like Jiang Zilong’s 《QiaoGuang Zhang Shang Renji》 had set up the tone for this kind of literature. At the same time, there was another trend of Wenhua Xiaoshuo or Cultural Novels in fiction writing in China. Since the trend called for the cultural root seeking it is also known as Xungen (Root Seeking) literature. Mo Yan is one of the major writers in contemporary period who has followed this trend, Mo Yan’s 《Hong Gaoliang Jiazu》 is the suitable example(Liú 386–523). The other trend Mo Yan has successfully followed in his writings is Xiandai Zhuyi (Modernism). Mo Yan’s 《Tanxiang Xing》 falls into this category.

According to Mr. Liu the mid and late 1980’s has given rise to modernism and following the trend a group of writers emerged as Xianfeng Pai (Pioneer group). Liu Suo was one of the main writers who belonged to the Pioneer group. He has produced works like 《Ni Bie Wu Xuanze》 which is also a very important work of that time (Liú 386–523). The trend of modernism in the 1990’s started to vanish and replaced by Hou Xiandai Zhuyi (Post-Modernism) and there were numerous young writers from the third generation who got actively involved in literary writings of this kind.

Mo Yan’s World of Fiction

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The starting lines of Mo Yan's one of the finest creations 《Hong GaoliangJiazu》 translated as 'Red Sorghum' by Howard Goldblatt reads as:

“I respectfully invoke the heroic, aggrieved souls wandering in the boundless bright-red sorghum fields of my hometown. As your unfilial son, I am prepared to carve out my heart, marinate it in soy sauce, have it minced and placed in three bowls and lay it out as an offering in a field of sorghum. “ (Mo, Red Sorghum)

This certainly gives a glimpse of the kind of feelings Mo Yan possess for the mother land and the heroes who sacrificed their lives for it. Mo Yan had started his career in writing during the time he was in PLA. His first writing 《Chunye Yu Feifei》 published in 1981 which had gone unnoticed in the literary circles. But his breakthrough work came in 1985 in the form of 《Touming de Hongluobo》, it was a story of a transparent carrot, written in the style of magical realism. His most Popular Work undoubtedly had been 《Hong GaoliangJiazu》 translated as 'Red Sorghum' by Howard Goldblatt. It has also been converted into a motion picture by one of the finest directors in China, Zhang Yimou. The story covers a period of three generation, from the period of war against Japan in 1930's till the Cultural Revolution in 1970's. The Novels gives a heart wrenching account of the war time and invokes the feeling of nationalism among the readers. Mo Yan's other famous works is 《Jiuguo》, which is about a fictional land where cannibalism is being practiced. An investigator was appointed to check the practice of serving dishes made up of human babies in the culinary academy to the special guests but he lost his senses indulging in alcohol (Mo, *The Republic of Wine*). His other major works have been 《FengruFeitun》, 《TiantangSuantaiZhige》, 《Hong Shulin》, 《Tanxiang Xing》, 《Bian》, 《Wa》 etc.

In his article *Mo Yan and the Chinese Mind* Li Jingze has argued that Mo Yan is not the most favored of writers in China and he is not even the most detested one. He further argued that in China readers might detest Wang Shuo's writings for his over offensive attitude they might even have their full admiration for Wang Anyias she has been offering the readers a way to visualize their experience and existence. But in his views, it is highly unlikely that the same readers would treat Mo Yan with similar enthusiasm (Jiǎng and Jīn 1–10). In his work Li Jingze has even given the reason for it, “But, it is hard, for either his

protesters or his admirers to adopt a simple and consistent attitude towards him. Mo Yan's broad horizon makes any definition elusive." (Jiǎng and Jīn 1–10)

Characteristics of Mo Yan's writings:

Most of the works of Mo Yan are set in a backdrop of his hometown in North East Gaomi county of Shandong province. Although the region has remained a comparatively backward region for a long time, Mo had a love affair with the land which often appeared in his works. The unique feature of his writing has been the way he amalgamates history, reality and fiction. Extensive use of the 'First Person Narrative' is one of the other important characteristics his fiction has.

Use of analepsis in his fiction is also common to his readers. Almost every work of Mo Yan has this common feature. Mo Yan while describing something in his fiction suddenly jumps back and forth in time, sometimes in a particular context and sometimes without even a context. In the beginning of the Hindi translation of Mo Yan's work 《Bian》 the translator Pushpesh Pant has mentioned that Mo Yan is not consistent in his writing, at times he opens the flow of his feelings and gives elaborate description of something but a moment later he shortens up the descriptions of other things by using mini templates like small sentences.

Many things get started over the course of this book—a love affair, a crime investigation, a literary career, etc.—but few of them reach fruition. Whenever Mo Yan seems to be settling into his story, he is certain to surprise you a few pages later by moving on to something different. (Gioia)

There are a few of his works which has also used Epistolary as a style of writing fiction. Communication through writing letters can be seen in the novels such as “The Republic of Wine” where the character Mo Yan had an extensive communication with the other aspiring writer in the story Li Yidou in form of letters. In the story the aspiring writer in Li Yidou is sending stories to Mo Yan one after the other asking his suggestions as well as help to publish them. The character Mo Yan in his return letters provides his feedback.

WenhuaXiaoshuo (Cultural Novels) and XungenXiaoshuo (Root-Seeking Novels) have been one of the major trends in the 1980's and early 1990's. It was the time when Mo

started his writing career and even though unintentionally the trend has influenced him. The historical novels such as 《Hong GaoliangJiazu》, 《FengruFeitun》, 《ShengsiPilao》 etc. are a few of the examples.

Mo Yan's works can also be said to have the special characteristics of Magical and hallucinatory Realism. In his work "Mo Yan's Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out" Prof. Lee Gyu-il has described the novel 《ShengsiPilao》 as a historical novel with hallucinatory realism. Prof. Lee has argued that this novel is a masterpiece and it is the most appropriate work which has enabled Mo Yan to fetch the Noble prize (Lee). Some of the later novels of Mo Yan has even had the content of modernism, such as 《Wa》 and 《Bian》. Nationalism is another feeling Mo Yan has put in his writings through a series of the historical novels such as 《Hong GaoliangJiazu》 which deals with the modern and contemporary history of China. Another novel 《Wa》 also has contents of cultural nationalism as it deals with the contemporary social issue such as the 'One Child Policy'.

Conclusion

Contemporary Chinese Literature has a close connection with the times and in the Post-Mao period It has developed from Univariate or monotonous literary pattern to Pluralistic literary patterns. Out of which 'WenhuaXiaoshuo' or 'XungenXiaoshuo' has emerged as a major literary trend and one of the major contributors for these has been Mo Yan. Coming from a rural background, had to leave school in his early days, without having the proper formal education, with all these in background rise of Mo Yan from "don't speak" to an amazing storyteller is certainly remarkable. Mo Yan's fiction is a different world all together. He takes the readers to the journey which is bumpy at times, magical on the other. Mo Yan has done well in expressing the reality of the times with a mix of fiction and revisiting history in his unique way of storytelling. His unique satirical writing style also helped him to express his views in a disguised or tone down manner, which by going under the radar avoided government or party's sanctions on so many occasions. It can also be understood by the argument given by translator of Mo Yan's works in English, Howard Goldblatt who has described Mo Yan as politically explosive and even subversive. Goldblatt states that Mo Yan's success has proved the fact that creative imagination cannot be stifled by any repressive regime (Mo, *The Republic of Wine*). Mo Yan's most of the works revolves

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around his native place Gaomi in Shandong Province. As per the critics those novels delineate a literary universe in itself and it is similar Lu town of Lu Xun's works, Macondo in the works of Garcia Marquez and Yoknapatawpha county as described in William Faulkner's novels (Riemschneider). Mo Yan has made his place in the history of Chinese literature by producing works which deal with human feelings while revisiting the history. Such is the aura of this man which has been crafted by his pen that it has created a phenomenon in the literary circles not only in China but all over the world.

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