A Red Hymn of Primordial Human Nature

Yinxia Yang

The Chinese language novel "Red Sorghum" written by Nobel laureate Mo Yan was published in 1987. Born in 1956, Mo Yan, a native of Gaomi in east China’s Shandong Province, is a famous contemporary Chinese writer and an internationally acclaimed writer as well. When he was young, as the son of poor peasants, he had to leave primary school during China’s Cultural Revolution for a life working in the fields. Growing up in a farming environment with rich folk culture, Mo Yan sets his works mainly in his hometown of Gaomi. His works express complex emotions of "nostalgia" and "a resentment of hometown." As The Swedish Academy announced in 2012, the Nobel Prize in Literature had been awarded to Mo Yan “who with hallucinatory realism merges folk tales, history, and the contemporary."[[1]](#footnote-1) The announcement marked the first time in Mainland China a Chinese citizen had ever awarded a Nobel Prize in Literature.

Unlike any other piece of contemporary Chinese literature, the acclaimed novel of love and resistance presents a unique voice on the violent disorder during a war with Japan in rural China, where every moment seems to be a desperate struggle to survive. In the novel, Mo Yan tells his audience a brutal story of the Chinese fighting the Japanese as well as struggling against each other during the turbulent 1930s. Also, he elaborates on the tragedy of how the Chinese had to follow their traditional culture through a number of flashbacks. Frankly, reading the novel makes the reader feel uneasy, but admittedly life is dramatic, sweet, scary, heart-wrenching, and inspirational all at the same time, isn’t?

To put it fairly, Mo Yan’s literary creation is deeply influenced by Gabriel Garcia Márquez’s magical realism [[2]](#footnote-2) originated in Latin America (A literary genre or style that incorporates fantastic or mythical elements into otherwise realistic fiction.[[3]](#footnote-3)). As an important representative of Chinese root-seeking writers, Mo Yan mixes myth with reality. The features of magical realism are evidenced in a combination of folk tales, history, and contemporary life in China. The deeds and adventures of heroic figures are closely based on real historical events. Mo Yan also uses a series of red color images, such as the red wedding scene, red sorghum as well as the blood-red sun. While red arguably suggests war and danger, all these red elements symbolize passion, desire, and love, composing a red hymn of primordial human nature in the story.

"Red Sorghum" is a novel of family, fantasy, and memory of the Shandong family throughout three generations. Mo Yan uses a first-person narrator “I”, who is the grandson of Jiu’er, to portray a group of ordinary Chinese people like Grandma, Grandpa, Father, and Uncle, who fight for their survival in unconventional but heroic ways. He delineates the family’s struggles initially as winery owners producing sorghum liquor and subsequently as resistance fighters during the Anti-Japanese War, which reveals the violent and real world of an underdeveloped and unchanging nation. As depicted in the story, the novel plot more or less revolves around the life story of a young woman named Jiu' er, Dai Fenglian, or also known as Grandma, the daughter of a poor family, who was forced into a pre-arranged marriage with the old owner of a winery for sorghum liquor because of her father exchanging his daughter for a couple of mules. Such a pre-arranged marriage without Jiu’er’s consent denotes the likelihood of domestic violence and abuse, effectively ending Jiu’er’s rosy dream for future and hope for love.

The novel begins in a non-linear narrative as a group of villagers and bandits prepare to attack and survive the skirmish against the Japanese intruders. As the novel tells of a strange, fantastic, and tragic tale of love, passion, violence, and survival mainly around Grandma and Grandpa, the narrator’s non-chronicle storytelling quickly moves back through the red sorghum fields. The novel then details the scene of my grandma getting married. At the age of 16, Grandma married Shan Bianlang, a leper in his fifties who owned a sorghum wine workshop in the village named Shibalipo. Yu Zhan' ao (later my grandpa), a former bandit, was one of the bearers carrying the wedding sedan chair when my grandma got married. And he fell in love when he saw the beauty of “my grandmother”. While passing through the sorghum field on the way to the groom’s house, a bandit suddenly attacked and rubbered the traveling wedding party. Grandpa acted smartly and led the others to kill the bandit, thus rescuing Grandma from the bandit. The heroic deed of Grandpa left a deep impression on Grandma.

After three days of marriage, Jiu’er, Grandma, had to return to her parents’ home for a brief visit as the tradition required. On her way back to her original family, Yu Zhan’ao, the sedan chair carrier who rescued her from being raped, ambushed Grandma at the side of the path and took her to the sorghum field. She tried to get away, but after she recognized who he was, she stopped fighting. Grandma shared with Yu Zhan’ao her awful experience of how she was afraid of his leper husband. Grandma believed that she would have sinned had she shared her pillow with a leper and give birth to mishappen monster to contaminate the beautiful world. Since Grandma liked Yu Zhan’o, in the sorghum stalks, they eventually made love. Jiu’er’s rebellious act led her to a brand-new life. This episode hints that Jiu’er resisted her forced marriage and established norms to become happy and recognized. The incident also shows that Jiu’er was unafraid of punishment. She was a brave soul disobeying the then authoritative patriarchal society, daring to love Yu Zan’ao, a young sedan chair carrier, daring to stand up for her rights. In short, Grandma managed as she thought proper.

Shortly after that, Grandma’s husband Shan Bianlang was found dead. Grandpa killed Shan because Grandpa knew that he passionately loved my grandma and that my grandma was extremely sick of her leper husband and felt hopeless and desperate about the evil family. From then on, Grandma took over the winery and managed to live her life as she desired. Now she could live with the man she loved. Once again, Grandma demonstrates that she feared nothing and dared to become the boss of the wine distillery after the death of her husband. From the description in the novel, we can see that Mo Yan uses the dramatic events to highlight both Yu Zhan’ao and Jiu’er’s vibrant passion based on their primitive vitality, which in turn seems to embrace intoxication of sex and violence, possibly expressing the idea of daring to love, daring to hate evil, and living life unrestrained.

When "My Dad" (Jiu'er's son) was nine years old, with the Japanese invasion, my grandparents’ peaceful days died. The Japanese soldiers killed villagers, looting and burning the village. Grandma and the villagers began to fight against the Japanese when Uncle Luohan was cruelly skinned alive by the Japanese army. To avenge Uncle Luohan, with the encouragement of Grandma, Grandpa organized a group of villagers and bandits to ambush Japanese military vehicles when they passed by. Tragically, Grandma was shot and killed by the Japanese soldiers when she was on her way delivering lunch and sorghum liquor to requite her lover and the villagers to keep going. When Grandma Jiu’er fell down under the blood red sun, she pleaded to the heavens for her life, but it is important that she was not afraid of her eighteen levels of hell because she just did what she had to do. Through Grandma’s personal conflicts and struggles, Mo Yan convincingly demonstrates his ambivalence. The saddened blood-red sun and the sorrowful red sorghum fields seem to suggest condolences for a sudden loss of a female hero. Again, red color is identified with blood, death, and war. Undeniably, Grandma’s death was heroic because she died fighting the Japanese while taking meals to the male villagers waiting in the sorghum fields; Grandma was heroic because Grandpa listened to her like a hardworking soldier leading the villagers into battle; and Grandma was heroic because she urged Grandpa and her distillery workers to avenge the death of the villagers.

Clearly, Grandma Jiu’er is the main character whose journey the audience follows in most parts of the novel. Grandma is the life and soul of “Red Sorghum”. All the characters start responding to a range of events and dealing with emotions as the plot unfolds in a series of episodes related to Grandma. The story reaches its turning point when Grandma died while taking food to the villagers fighting the Japanese.

It is also worth mentioning that the name Jiu’er is created to emphasize Jiu’er’s role as the heroine of the novel in the following ways. Since Jiu (九) is naturally linked to the notion of 酒 (wine), the association reminds people that the name Jiu’er has a full masculine taste, according to Chinese cultural values. For example, Jiu'er was courageous enough to cohabit with Yu Zhan’ao after her husband died, which completely subverted the Chinese feudal etiquette because in old Chinese society a woman of virtue was supposed to stay as a widow after her husband's death). Secondly, the successful managing of the entire winery shows Jiu’er’s confidence, independence, and competence. Finally, when Jiu’er encouraged Yu Zhan’ao and villages to stand together to fight the Japanese, it reveals her masculinity and the spirit of resistance to the invaders. In the eyes of the villagers, Jiu’er was doing something like a real man. All this highlights Jiu'er as the leading character who has a strong sense of independence, courage, and bravery to survive and live better. For these reasons, Mo Yan has vividly painted a heroic female image for Jiu'er throughout the story, who tried to control her own destiny and manage her own life. In this sense, Jiu’er is the heroine of the novel.

Red sorghum, which is drought and flood resistant and easy to grow, here has gone beyond simple plant characteristics. As the main crop of [Shandong](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shandong) Province's Northeast Gaomi [Gaomi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gaomi" \o "Gaomi)Township where Mo Yan comes from, red sorghum sets up the whole story as a symbol of tenacity, vitality, independence, and courage representing Gaomi people. The red sorghum field is where Grandma and Grandma lived, fell in love, and fought. Therefore, the red sorghum is regarded as the family treasure. For centuries, it has survived storms, drought, and flooding, despite of all which it grows steadily to provide Gaomi people with food, wine, and shelter. As sorghum sees and feels the pain of the Gaomi people, who never yield to suffering, in a broad sense it signifies the vigorous vitality and unconquerable fighting spirit of the Chinese nation. In a word, this blood-red sorghum represents a nation, a people full of blood, with united strength and masculine energy.

The novel “Red Sorghum” creates the background of fictional heroism and primitive vitality through the exotically depicted setting of lush sorghum fields in Shandong Province. The narrator tells a brutal story that centres on Grandma Jiu’er with love and resistance as the main thread running through the novel. Mo Yan has built images for humble Gaomi peasants such as Grandma, Grandpa, and Uncle Luohan: Men are brave, and women are pretty. When they fall in love, they make love intensely in the sorghum field and fight together fearlessly when they are repressed. As delineated in the novel, war strips people of their humanity, so war is hell and brutal. While sorghum may be racked by storms, it “dies hard” and grows tenaciously. At this point, sorghum exemplifies the indomitable fighting power of the Chinese people. Like sorghum, the Chinese struggle hard and never give up. They are the backbone of the nation. In the novel, Mo Yan uses a range of strong reds to symbolize love, passion, inspiration, war, blood, and death. Along with the story, Mo Yan employs magical realism techniques by integrating fantastic components into realistic fiction. Through the above writing techniques, Mo Yan perfectly blends people, red sorghum, and strong red to create a magnificent symphony of life: Live with joy and die without fear.

Bibliography

*莫言简介----2012年诺贝尔奖*, 中国科学院[www.cas.cn/zt/sszt/2012nobelprize/literature](http://www.cas.cn/zt/sszt/2012nobelprize/literature) /laureate/201210/t20121012\_3657953.shtml.

Professor Mary Anne Cartelli’s lecture at Hunter College, Fall Semester, 2020.

The Nobel Prize in Literature 2012. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Media AB 2020. Sat. 28 Nov 2020. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2012/summary/>

1. The Nobel Prize in Literature 2012. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Media AB 2020. Sat. 28 Nov 2020. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2012/summary/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *莫言简介----2012年诺贝尔奖*, 中国科学院www.cas.cn/zt/sszt/2012nobelprize/literature/laureate/201210/t20121012\_3657953.shtml. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Professor Mary Anne Cartelli’s lecture at Hunter College, Fall Semester, 2020.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-3)