

**TRAUMA TO TRANSFORMATION: A DECONSTRUCTED  
PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY ON MO YAN'S RED SORGHUM AND FROG**

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**Abstract**

*Trauma is often highlighted in clinical studies yet, its depiction seems to be undervalued in literature. Psychiatrists consider trauma as a serious concern to be dealt with. Though it is portrayed in literature, trauma has been viewed as an unending process of life. Mo Yan's depiction of Chinese collective trauma in Red Sorghum and Frog is more than just being depressing and horrendous. Red Sorghum is a tale of love, family, war and bloodshed. Likewise, Frog creates space for the representation of motherly love and depression in the minds of Chinese women out of being deprived of cherishing motherhood. Both the novels present psychological change of the characters which take them from trauma to transformation. This paper attempts to bring out the positive elements from these two novels which create a difference in the description of trauma in one's mind and a different perception towards trauma.*

**Keywords:** *Trauma, Literature, Depiction, Motherhood, Psychological change and Transformation*

Mo Yan started his literary career with the novel *Red Sorghum* consists of five volumes titled *Red Sorghum, Sorghum Wine, Dog ways, Sorghum Funeral* and *Strange Death*. These volumes were first published separately as stories for different magazines in 1986. The year 1987 witnessed the publication of *Red Sorghum* as his first novel by compiling the previously published five volumes together. It got its film adaptation by Director Zhang Yimou which won the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival. 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* revolves around three generations of the Shandong family stretches from 1923 to 1976. These three

generations eventually go through the suffering as distillery owners to make Sorghum wine and also suffer in the form of fighters during the second Sino- Japanese war.

*It took the war to teach it, that you were as responsible for everything you saw as you were everything you did. The problem was that you didn't always know what you were seeing until later, maybe years later, that a lot of it never made it in at all, it just stayed stored there in your eyes.*  
Michael Herr, Dispatches (10) (Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experiences*)

War does not only give physical wounds but it also brings the psychological wounds which are hard to be healed. The devastating effect of war is one of the themes depicted in this novel. The story is told in flashbacks by the grandson of the hero(Douguan/Commander Yu) and heroine (Dai) who fight the Japanese in a quite different way from the earlier communist socialist novels in the 1960s and 1970s. Instead of a righteous communist fighter, the protagonist in this novel was a bandit leader who had taken over a bride and killed her husband. His riotous attitude and striking boldness were celebrated as he fought for his love, land and survival.

The narrator remains unnamed till the end of this novel hence, the story is told from the narrator's memories which carry the anecdotes of his grandparents and parents. Everything becomes nostalgic the moment he visits the tombstones of his ancestors and the past flashes back in front of his eyes which takes the form of narration, back and forth in time. Memories buried in the annals of time are re-lived and the unheard, painful stories, re-narrated to be heard. The protagonists of this novel are Grandpa (Commander Yu), Grandma (Dai), Father(Douguan), mother (Beauty)and Passion. Passion has to go through the beastly behaviour of the Japanese soldiers who deflower her in front of her daughter and later on kill Passion's daughter itself. All her attempts to save her daughter end in vein as the narrator conveys:

During her flight, little Auntie's arms froze in the air and her hair stood up like porcupine quills. The young Japanese soldier, rifle in hand, wept clear blue tears.

Second grandma screamed for all she was worth and strained to sit up but her body was dead by then. A wave of yellow flashed before her eyes, followed by a green light. Finally, she was swallowed by an inky- black tide. (Red Sorghum 342)

The traces of trauma did not find its presence only in human minds. Rather, the nature and the human belongings also became a part of trauma caused due to the horrifying holocaust of the Sino-Japanese war. The red sorghum field turned into a sea of blood and aroma of sorghum got intoxicated

with the nauseating smell of blood. The houses stood as the emblem of the devastation of war to utter the cruelty of the war that sucked human lives, but infrastructure and nature were devastated at the hands of the Japanese soldiers:

That night, after the smoke and sparks from the other houses had died out, our buildings were still burning, sending sky-ward green-tinged tongues of flame and the intoxicating aroma of strong wine, released in an instant after all those years. Blue roof tiles, deformed by intense heat, turned scarlet, then leaped into the air through a wall of flames that illuminated granddad's hair, which had turned three-quarters grey in the space of a week. (Red Sorghum 190)

The crops of sorghum receive the colour red in God's creation; if not then the bloodshed in the field of sorghum would definitely have turned its colour to red. The sorghum field eventually became the eye witness of happiness and sadness of the characters. It made a journey through the lives of the characters to their deaths. Dai and Yu Zhan'ao was connected to the sorghum field to the deepest where they cherished the best moments of their lives and they had to taste the flavour of death in the same field. Thus, the field of sorghum restored an important and unforgettable place in the story.

The novel does not only have space for the description of human emotions, it also becomes a stage for the enactment of dog's actions. The importance bestowed on the dogs can be very well viewed by the mere mention that one of the titles of the chapters goes on as "Dog Ways". The dogs present in this story inculcate the sense of cannibalism. With the passing time the dead bodies of the soldiers start to get rotten and the dogs feasted on them. The lack of energy and need of meat provoked the fighters to kill the dogs and make them their meals. Hence the dogs ate the men and in return the men fed themselves with dog's meat; "The glorious history of man is filled with legends of dogs and memories of dogs: despicable dogs, respectable dogs, fearful dogs, pitiful dogs." (Red Sorghum 177)

This novel witnesses the heroism of a woman and bravery of a bandit which takes him to the glorious position of being a commander in the war of human survival. The story is a saga of family, love, bloodshed and war. Though the devastating impact of the war paints a gloomy, cruel and heart rendering picture on the canvas of human minds, love finds its way in the novel with a soft, pleasant touch. The love between the narrator's grandpa and grandma establishes the bridge between the past and the present. The filial love of Dougaun towards his father gives birth to a strongly unbreakable relationship between them.

The deep rootedness of the author to its motherland can be well felt as he glides over his roots to unfold the cruelties of war which was experienced directly by the dwellers of North Gaomi Township. His deep understanding and attachment towards history, customs, and habits of Gaomi county instil his mind to pen down the heart breaking experiences of the people in the form of a story.

Each chapter in *Red Sorghum* progresses with flogging, murder, torture and rape and yet the fragrance of love and red wine leave their mark on the readers' minds. The narrator shows the difference between visualising and listening to an incident. Coming from the third person narrative with the past memories of his ancestors arouses mixed feelings about the authenticity of the facts, but the novel on the whole well succeeds in winning the hearts of its readers. The balance between the elements of reality and magical realism leaves the readers awestruck.

Referring to Human Rights Prof. Pramod K. Nayar opines, "Imagining our broken bodies when we see that of others', the loss of dignity – which we assume is natural and immanent – in others and even collective trauma of communities is a way of responding to the world." Mo Yan's *Frog* can be looked at through the lens of human rights which is a sensible depiction of the pain and anguish of the Chinese masses caused by China's infamous One-Child Policy. The trauma caused in the minds of mothers can be related to any mother in any corner of this world. Though this policy was a success on political grounds, it devastated many lives and many lost their lives for the sake of fruitful implementation of this policy. Mo Yan depicts the cruelty brought into the Chinese lives in the monstrous form of this political policy. The sensitive emotions related to motherhood and abortion are the major themes of this novel. *Frog* is also a pace for the picturisation of the physical as well as psychological change of a woman; a woman's journey from a midwife to a villainous abortionist. The novel narrates the story of Gugu whose diehard devotion for the Chinese government characterises her life. She plays a major role in the booming execution of One-Child policy.

The characters in *Red Sorghum* undergo the test of time in the form of war, savagery and haunted memories. A first glance at this novel would appear like any other work of literature which tends to depict the horrors of war and trauma. An in-depth perusal would inculcate the idea that Mo Yan does not leave his readers in the lap of trauma to be emotionally disturbed. Rather his writings carry a ray of hope to come out of trauma making use of the same traumatic elements which have made the characters traumatised. Though Mo Yan makes the least effort to offer a solution for the problematical issues dealt in his novels, there is always a path to channelise the disturbed emotions. This article attempts

to trace that tunnel of hope which can take the characters, hence the readers, from trauma to transformation.

Death is often seen as dark and gloomy. Likewise Dai's unfortunate death leaves Commander Yu in a traumatised state. His thirst for Japanese blood can be a part and parcel of Dai's demise as well. A close understanding of Commander Yu's psyche can provide a different perception which instils enormous courage in him to avenge his wife's death. His wrath against the Japanese soldiers is a result of patriotism and love of a man for his dead beloved. Though his wife's memories haunt him, these are the same memories which accelerate boisterous strength in him to fight the Japanese. Dai's death in the red sorghum field weakens Commander Yu, but the deep connection with this field brings out the fatherly affection in him as well. His soul receives solace where it loses his peace. He walks on the same path of redemption which took his wife away from him. Rejuvenation is attained where trauma is caused. The traumatic elements in the anecdotes of the narrator's ancestral stories in a way draw a line of transformation for him thus the narrator attempts to release himself from the constant conflict between tradition and modernity.

*Frog* also commences the journey from trauma to transformation in the lives of Gugu and Little Lion. The readers can easily witness the change in Gugu's professional and personal life but it is only after her retirement that the story of her psychological change is felt. Her hands are stained with the blood spilled from the dead bodies of thousands of fetuses and those of the helpless mothers. Gugu's faith on the government policies blinds her to the suffering of women. She is on the verge of losing the tenderness of a woman and thereafter her life takes a turn. Her innate fear is revealed on the very night of her retirement when the slithering of frogs traumatises her mind and slowly is grasped with haunted cries of the fetuses murdered in her hands.

The motherly love is rejuvenated in her heart eventually by the same jinxed memories and mixed feelings. She starts to mould clay dolls in the imprinted image of the dead fetuses. Though procrastinated, the process of realisation occurs in Gugu's life. The reawakening of her motherly sense is found with what she has left earlier. The slithering and croaking of frogs fill Gugu's mind with disgust at the first hand but in the long run she re-claims her motherhood. Trauma in her mind alters her life but just to make it more beautiful and worth living for. The loss of peace and regaining a tranquil life revolve around the same cause; babies.

In the case of Little Lion, the long suppressed guilt of being a partner in crime with Gugu for the implementation of One-Child policy is finally being

realised from Little Lion's side. Little Lion could never hold a peaceful and fulfilled married life which lacks the presence of a kid. Eventually she considers her infertility resulted by curse of the dead mothers and a punishment given by God. Her decision to have a surrogated baby gives her a chance to re-live. Both Gugu and Little Lion fetch the path to redemption where they have gone astray as Tadpole's mother says;

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. (Frog 173)

Though often underscored, trauma is not as gloomy as is it presented to society. Trauma is not a life-time experience that cannot be dealt with. An in-depth study of Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum* and *Frog* is suggestive of self-motivation and the desire to come out of trauma using the very elements which have caused it in one's mind at an early stage. The wish to be healed is the first in the process before clinical therapy can treat the ailment of the traumatised one. Hence, trauma can be viewed as a pathway to healthy transformation. The journey from trauma to transformation is possible and can be achieved through self-motivation and the aspiration for rejuvenation.

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