

**Realisation of Self through Resilience to Social Change: A Study of  
the select novels of Mo Yan**

Thesis submitted to Bharathiar University, Coimbatore  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the Degree of  
**Doctor of Philosophy in English**

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**PSGR Krishnammal College for Women**



UGC-certified College of Excellence • Autonomous • Affiliated to Bharathiar University • Accredited with 'A' Grade by NAAC • ISO 9001:2015 Certified • Ranked 10<sup>th</sup> in NIRF2020 by MHRD

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Coimbatore- 641 004

Tamil Nadu, India

**December 2020**

## **Chapter VI**

### **Summation**

The culminating chapter has a lot of information to prove from the socio cultural perspective. The Summation chapter acts as a catalyst to provide the research findings to the reader and also to tie those loose knots which were let down in the introductory chapter. It helps the reader to connect the gap between the core chapters and present with the idea of further projects that can be done on the author or his oeuvre taken for study.

The thesis emphasizes the importance of human resilience as being necessary to achieve social change which is beneficial for social wellness. To achieve this social wellness, every bit of the existing social component, from an individual to a group or an empire, must contribute. Albert Bandura in his Social Cognitive Theory suggests that, an individual or a group can learn about society's behaviour when they observe any social interactions and its consecutive measures which may change due to various situations (LaMorte 5).

The researcher tries to validate the thoughts or ideas addressed to society in each chapter on various concepts. The Introductory chapter gives a worthy brief on World Literature and accounts for the beginning of Chinese Literature from the ancient texts to the modern ones. The chapter also traces Mo Yan's rise from a regional Chinese writer to a Global Nobel Laureate. The chapter consists of the aims and objectives, focusing on analysing the social set up presented in the novels. To outline the effect of social causes

that lead to a change the chapter presents examples from the novels and also gives a brief outlook on following chapters dealing with the research proposition.

After the win of Nobel Prize in Literature of 2012, Mo Yan received serious backlash from his own native land for being a kind of propagandist for the government. Charles Laughlin wrote in “What Mo Yan’s Detractors Get Wrong” about Mo Yan’s style of using trauma of social events that happened as his plot, not that “because they were hilarious but they were traumatic” (Laughlin).

Mo Yan satirizes the Chinese Communist Governance with black humor, and is not a Communist. Anna Sun criticizes Mo Yan’s work to be vulgar, “coarse, and lacking in aesthetic conviction...it’s language is striking because it is diseased” (Sun). Defending the statement, the novels do give an aesthetic sense of the background setting of a Northeast Gaomi Township with mention of environmental and aesthetic elements like black river water, and crab fishing by Douguan (*Red Sorghum*) and the Shangguan sisters (*Big Breasts and Wide Hips*).

Mo Yan also artistically characterizes the background; it becomes an important part of the setting easing the tragedy in the plot or giving the protagonist a lapse of time to recover from the shock or to pause the frame of a horrid scene. For example, in *The Garlic Ballads*, when Gao Yang reacts to Fang Jinju’s death, the background becomes still but there is a continuous noise of flying parakeets. This can be read as the outer appearance is calm but there is a storm within the mind. Gao Yang then kills the parakeets in order to reduce his anger.

Vivid character portrayal in the novel keeps the plots entertaining. Mo Yan owes it to his childhood experiences of listening to the native folktales told by his grandfather. The blind episodic narrator, Zhang Kou, from *The Garlic Ballads*; the commune leader, Hong Huitye; and the intrusive narrator, Mo Yan from *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out* are few examples.

The Literature Review referred to enhance the thesis proved to be exemplary works done on the backdrop of Chinese Literature. Shelley W. Chan's, *A Subversive Voice in China-the fictional world of Mo Yan*, *Mo Yan in Context: Nobel Laureate and Global Storyteller*, edited by Angelica Duran and Yuhua Huang provided an overall view of Mo Yan and his works by defining the literary talents along with mention of socio-political scenario. Veronika Slováčková's Master Dissertation- *M. H. Kingston's The Woman Warrior and Mo Yan's Red Sorghum in the Context of the World Literature* brings a comparative analysis of strong women characters presented in the chosen novels.

This thesis has been written for various reasons so as to be able to find endurance during the hard times and to prove that an individual's actions can lead to societal change. This facet has been duly justified through the previous chapters. The thesis also addressed a chapter based on the presentation speech of Per Wätsberg for the Nobel Prize of Literature in 2012 awarded to Mo Yan for "hallucinatory realism merging with folk tales, history and the contemporary" (Wätsberg) which consists of stylistic analysis of Mo Yan's selected works and the contribution made by the translator, Howard Goldblatt.

Based on research methodology, the thesis was divided into four core chapters. The first three chapters were based on the Sociological Approach which focuses on the

values of a society and how those views are reflected in text. Under the approach, macro and micro societies were analysed using the theoretical perspective of consensus, Conflict, and Symbolic Interactionism theories applied to the chosen novels. The research line of thread was to show how individuals of society learn to interpret themselves in order to contribute to society, they realise their self worth/salience and identity during the process.

Once they move forward with their worthy living methods, the society is infested with complications, problems related to social events. The individuals have the power to stand strong, endure and progress towards working to benefit their lives through a conflicting society, which in turn leads to transformation of society. The transformation occurs eventually when the individuals learn to survive with resilience; if one manages to stand through the test of time then the whole of society learns to live by optimism.

The aim of the research was to bring out the importance of the individual's role in society; the core chapters showed the progression of individual's interaction to their resilience, their ability to withstand major social conflict portrayed in the novel. The researcher aimed to evaluate the transition observed by the society and felt by the individual while adapting to the conflicts leading to social transformation, along with an attempt to learn about how the paradigms of history, culture, people and politics work together in society

The researcher posed a hypothetical question in the introductory chapter that if the characters in the author's novels can strike balance in their life even after disastrous events happen in the society, then they can live through any given challenges by time. By showing the level of human resilience which tackles social evil from persistence to

adaptability to transformability, the thesis also shows how change is essential in a society and how each one takes it. Viewing the characters' portrayal, society learns to survive with optimism and brings change. The research also interprets the social milieu of China through its history, culture, people, and politics as portrayed in the works of Mo Yan.

This research identified the individual's role in society, their understanding of the conflicting world. The ways to evaluate the level of change in each individual and corresponding society is also discussed. The characters gave proof of their inbuilt resilience which proved necessary against the social pressure and condition not favouring them, their stern belief system changed the course of viewing conflict in the social system.

Based on Sociology oriented theories, the three basic theories of Interactionism, Conflict, and Functionalism can all be brought under the study. The use of Sociological Approach is looked into as the author's works can be found in association with them, making it a relevant study for the present. This research on sociological aspects based on works of a Chinese author is attempted in order to find out if the characters can realise their social self as they find balance in life after a terrible turn of events. Reaching the hypothesis, the research presents the characters who have identified their social responsibilities, and are resilient while facing trauma of conflict. Their perseverance, forbearance and being firm in making decisions make them stand apart from the crowd.

Through the whole course of core chapters associated with the hypothesis, the novels with prominent social events were taken for study. To account for the credibility of the events that happened in China and the plot's similarity would help the readers learn about the social situation of the people of China and would draw a fine line between the

sufferings in fact and portrayed in fiction. Also, most importantly, the thesis aims to expose the people's strength to overcome adversity and in due course undertaking the journey from facing problems to tackling them with resilience and experiencing social change at a larger base.

To summarize and reflect on research work done based on the technical side or theoretical aspect, the research mainly focused on sociological approach. The theory of Symbolic Interactionism by Max Weber, George Herbert supports the study undertaken based on the individual's role. Following the identification of individuals' responsibilities, they enter conflict zone.

The social responsibilities of characters were also discussed in the Second Chapter, "Identifying Self in Society". The individual/ characters from the novel identify their responsibility towards society. For instance, the portrayal of Commander Yu Zhan'ao and Gao Ma from the novels *Red Sorghum* and *The Garlic Ballads*. Both characters alter their social behavior in order to live a familial life. Commander Yu Zhan'ao changes from being a bandit in beginning of his youth and changes himself as situations call for, he goes on to become the Commander of Iron Troops- the 40 members of villagers to fight against the Japanese Resistance fighters.

In the case of Gao Ma, he becomes socially responsible when Fourth Uncle (Fang Jinju's father) agrees to get them married if he proves his worth to earn a sum of amount. He plants garlic crop like others but fails to sell the produce due to closing of cold storage, he then takes part in the public outrage irked by the officials' behaviour addressed to peasants' problem.

From the novel *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* and *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out*, the characters of Mother and Lan Lian take up the roles of protectors, which develops their exuberance towards the work that they did. Mother finds her salience/ identity and behavior to contribute care towards her children, grandchildren, and society to provide with whatever she could afford for them. Shangguan Lü (Mother-in-law) & Mother take up the role of protectors of the family as men don't prove worthy of it. The human behavior of Lan Lian is understood as he is the only independent farmer not wishing to surrender his land to commune, under Land Reform Movement as he takes up the role of his predecessor (Ximen Nao).

The realisation of self happens when the individual finds their identity as a socially responsible person. In the novel *Frog*, Gugu's (Wan Xin) role of becoming an obstetrician to eliminate the traditional birthing method and cruelty in the hands of midwives is foremost to enhance her identity. Due to Social Interaction, the villagers of NGT now see a difference in birthing system led by Gugu and Little Lion.

Conflict's role in society is an important one, it either resolves or creates problems. Karl Marx's social theory was initially based on *bourgeois* and *proletariats*, which focused on social class, power, subordination, exploitation, oppression, alienation, false consciousness. The social inequalities and conflict sometimes bring out individual's potential which helps in a changed perspective leading to a transformed society.

The next chapter dealt with conflict entering the social system. In the novels, one can find Mo Yan writing about Chinese propagandist ideology addressing the lower-strata of society. Characters suffer due to social events which were created as gray-zone



similar to the real social background, as in the process they get accustomed to bare and fight with issue until solution is derived upon.

During the process of transformation, the individual needs to have endurance in order to bear the complications and sufferings they might face. Using the study of resilience, the research has found a way to prove the proposed hypothesis of finding balance in a tumultuous situation in life leading to change. Social Resilience is a way towards the upliftment of society, to tackle social vulnerability also to its perspective towards global change. Markus Keck, Patrick Sakdapolrak use the three terms of resilience- to cope, adapt and transform oneself to accept change.

The conflicting part in novels is related to social events in China which are analysed based on theoretical factors; the internal war conflict is seen in almost all the novels. In *Red Sorghum* and *The Garlic Ballads*, the villagers suffer internal conflict with the puppet soldiers and the officials. But in the end they tolerate difficulties in order to make a living, they resolve matters.

In the novel *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, Mother, shown as a central character having resilience, the trauma of dislocation happens due to the impending wars made the NGT villagers destitute. The episodes of civil war, Great Leap Forward, Famine, crash in economic sector affect Shangguan family. The perspective of losing hope, then finding again and living on was her resilience to life. She sees her children and grandchildren grow, as the society changes, she keeps adapting to every adverse situation.

In *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out*, Mo Yan satirizes the Chinese Cultural Revolution through his depiction of Ximen Nao's incarnations in animal form.

Throughout the novel, the animal forms of Nao were resilient to see through the changes in village, and Lan Jiefang sees his father working independently until Cultural Revolution ends. *Frog*, shows the process of coping, adapting and transforming nicely fitted to Gugu (Wan Xin) who in the beginning is a village obstetrician, but later becomes a pregnancy terminator due to commune's rule. She repents for the sins committed by making clay dolls with the same facial features as the fetuses she terminated.

The results of the proposition of hypothesis are matched with the chapter "Societal Change" which uses Lewis A. Coser's idea of social change. Change in any form is inevitable, social structures are subjected to incessant change. Individuals may strive for stability but the social phenomenon is one of growing, renewing, and transforming.

Individual Transformation leads to mutual transformation of society. The characters chosen were those who prove resilient throughout the novel, to lead towards change. In the novel *Red Sorghum*, the narrator's (Douguan's son) revisits Second Grandma's Grave, honoring his ancestors, remembering their sacrifice. Though NGT has changed, the land still yearns for its native people and urges the younger generation not to forget the glory and freedom for which they fought.

In *The Garlic Ballads*, Gao Yang's positive nature, resilience and the trial against the corrupt government officials bring change into lives of Paradise County villagers. Some pass away before seeing it, but others live through it. Gao Yang accepts the change, Gao Ma ends his life. *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* sees Shangguan family's acceptance of

every dislocation and their willingness to live takes them to a gradual change into the modern China

*Life and Death are Wearing Me Out* presents Ximen Nao's soul transmigration from the domestic animals to Lan Qiansui and shows that the whole novel is about gradual change. His transformation from a revenge seeking person to a person who has accepted the life given, forbidding the emotions of anger, and distrust. As society progresses, the individual seeks to live a normal life. He is then born with a high memory of his previous births.

Gugu's transformation in *Frog*, from that of a life saver to a pregnancy terminator is noteworthy, as she was made a pawn of Commune to carry out the government rule of One Child Policy. Gugu then repents by making clay dolls with her husband by carving out similar faces as to the fetuses she aborted. The societal change happens alongside the individual change in Mo Yan's novels, hence proving the proposed hypothesis.

Apart from citing illustrations from the chosen novels taken for study to prove the hypothesis, the research also traces the life events of Jennifer Zeng, a Social Activist under the case study. The intent of finding a relevant case study was to find an individual who has survived the turbulent reign of the Chinese Communist governance and is living a life with optimism, inspiring others. Many of the social activists were sentenced for incited subversion against the government; some were exiled, and arrested. Jennifer Zeng authored her memoir, *Witnessing History-One Chinese Woman's fight for Freedom* (2005), based on her life experiences. It is a one of a kind write up about the severity of persecution of Falun Gong practitioners.

Jennifer Zeng's life experiences have been narrated through blogs written by her. Zeng's book is an account of life, and an in depth insight into the Chinese Communist Party's perception of Falun Gong rituals. A simple citizen is forced to stop her practice of Falun Gong, jailed, tortured during Camp. Still, she emerges stronger and follows her practice. In her blogs, she recollects the events which made an impact in life while living in Communist oriented China. Defining her state while dealing with Chinese Law, she recalls her growing up in a small city afar from home and her mother due to Cultural Revolution changing the living pattern in people's lives.

During the late 1990s, Zeng's family started practicing a healing form of meditation- Falun Gong/ Falun Dafa- which comprises of exercises of mind, body, and principles of "Truth, Compassion and Tolerance", finding the solution to all her problems. The practice of Falun Gong made absolute changes in her life, but this contentment would jeopardize Communist ideology and its practice. Hence the government prohibited the further practice of Falun Gong and warned its followers.

The research was done through a mail interview, where Jennifer answered questions posed by the researcher, to receive insights on few research related issues even faced by her. When asked about the society's acceptance of Falun Gong and her first encounter with it, she said that, the practice of Falun Gong was introduced by her family after it started in 1997. From her childhood to growing up, due to Cultural Revolution the family, lived separately which affected her siblings' and her growing years (Zeng mail).

Due to the rule to serve in different counties, she remained with her father and learnt the basics of law from him. The society reacted well in the beginning as it

produced results of their well being. Zeng's faith in Falun Dafa made her move forward. She then provides answers about her resilience when critics and media got her attention after the publication of her memoir. She explains about the legal battle and her year long struggle at the re-education centre till her attaining US citizenship (Zeng TL).

Zeng's initial fight was the judicial trail, when she was put into a detention centre only for showing her support towards the practitioners. She was later awarded a jail term for a year calling it as "Re-education through Forced Labour". The media and the public were deviated from the wellness of the practice and most of the people were put on charge of initiating mob practice against the government. Her path toward fighting became even more determined. Zeng and other practitioners were arrested and sent to re-education which was mostly visited by criminals committing pilfering, drug-addicts and prostitutes.

In her speech at a summit in New Zealand in 2007 and in her blog, "From A Prisoner to A Writer", she writes about her arrest in 2000, Beijing. The notion according to government was to award them with forced labour and modify them into 'socialist people'. Zeng explains the brutal behaviour done to her during the year in Dispatch Division which highlights her resilience and will power to bear with the difficulties like electric batons, physical torture, humiliation, hard work or punishments lasting for more than 15-16 hours. (Zeng FPR).

Jennifer Zeng had to prove her reformation in order to be released from the jail. During the prison time she finished her memoir, later published by Allen and Unwin after her new found asylum in Australia. Since then, along with other Falun Gong practitioners,

she has been petitioning against torture and legal battle of human rights to UN. She says, “The fate of humankind enters new realms through the process of continually going beyond, fate and beyond the accomplished regulations.” (Zeng TL).

When asked about the difference in her after practicing Falun Gong and how society reacted to it, she replies that society always tests you at first and when they see development in their life, they accept it. Society started accepting only very recently, after the world suffered badly from COVID-19, people finally started to see that what she had been saying for years is true. The moral development of people happens when they learn to see things in a new light or on different circumstances.

From her personal experiences and the success of the book, *Witnessing History: one woman's fight for freedom and Falun Gong*, she came across many people who have come far in life with the practice. She says thousands of fellow Falun Gong practitioners share the same plight as her and shares one of the experiences of her friend, Ma Xiaoqin, and the birth of her twin children during China's One-Child Policy rule, due to which she had to choose between either terminating the pregnancy or leaving the country. She recounts how Falun Gong practitioners were targeted even abroad. Zeng suggests that there should be more unofficial writers, sociologists, reporters, editors like her who would voice out their thoughts uncensored, unlike other 'officials' who would not care about humanity and life.

When questioned on importance of human resilience in a person's life and how it changes the outlook of the world, she answered that it is very important to undergo a phase of endurance when one is fighting to change the ways of society. Quoting from the

interview, she says: “What we choose and what we do today will shape our future. That’s why I work so hard to inform people about what I know, in a hope that people can make right choices for their own future. The choices of people will decide the future of mankind.” (Zeng mail).

The findings of the study can be stated as follows: one’s realisation of his/her identity is necessary to build society through finding their responsibility. During the process one may witness frictions and problems which in fact are necessary to polish the rough edges of a person. The individual then has to endure in this conflicting world through resilience in order to see transformation in life. Based on the research done, the readers or practitioners should consider living a life with resilience and continue to live in harmony with conflict as it is not permanent.

The recent submitted research dissertations in Chinese Literature are based on the ideas of post-socialism in China, computation of Mandarin language, the influence of internet literature, and blogs as major trends. A variety of comparative literature emerges with the advent of an author, alongside the new developments in translation for Chinese text to English is also worked upon.

To better understand the implications of these results, future studies could be done under Narratology as Mo Yan is a widely translated and read novelist; a study on strong women characters, a comparative study can also be done based on the author’s use of social issues as a major themes; a study on his entire collection of short stories which is based on rural Chinese folktales can be done. Mo Yan’s novels advocate clear understanding of the human self and its presentation in society.

The social milieu of China can be widely understood with Mo Yan's works (amalgamation of history, contemporary, satire, and people). After an in depth analysis of novels and other works, it can be rightly said that Mo Yan is a kaleidoscopic story-teller who ensnares his readers with the colors of his vivid plot, intricate patterns of style, and moveable characters, who resonate with reality.