Mo Yan (1955--)

Summary

Mo Yan (pseudonym of Guan Moye) is the recipient of the 2012 Nobel Prize for Literature. He grew up in rural China, experiencing famine and poverty. He began writing in the 1980s, producing a steady stream of long, epic novels, virtually all set in his native region. His writing is characterized by extremely elaborate storytelling and an unusual resistance to controlling or polishing his language. The constant flow of words and stories serve to undermine any claims to verisimilitude and can be seen as an extreme reaction to the certainty and simplicity of the propaganda language to which Mo Yan and his generation were exposed for the first twenty years of their lives. His most famous novel is *Red Sorghum* (1987), which was also made into a critically acclaimed movie by director Zhang Yimou. Mo Yan is one of the most translated and studied contemporary Chinese authors. His Nobel success was celebrated in China as long overdue recognition for writers living and working in that country. Dissident voices inside China, as well as some prominent western authors and critics, have expressed misgivings about the literary value of work produced in a country where freedom of expression is restricted.

Main text

Mo Yan hails from Gaomi county in China’s eastern province of Shandong. As a child he received only basic schooling. During the Cultural Revolution schools were closed and Mo Yan worked as a cow herd, reportedly reading all the books in the small village library, including the Chinese language dictionary. In the late 1970s he joined the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and when he showed a talent for literature he was allowed to enter the PLA Art Academy, where he later also taught. The PLA also sponsored his studies for an MA in Creative Writing from Beijing Normal University. He resigned from the PLA in 1997 in the wake of a ban on his novel *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*. Since then he has been associated with various universities as guest professor or writer-in-residence, while mainly living off his writing. He has also maintained a presence in the Chinese state literary bureaucracy. In 2011 he was appointed as one of the fifteen vice-chairpersons of the Chinese Writers Association. Other well-known modernist writers appointed to the Association’s chairing committee in the same year include SU TONG and WANG ANYI, who is also a vice-chair, while CHEN YINGZHEN and WANG MENG are honorary vice-chairs of the Association.

Like most contemporary Chinese modernists, Mo Yan’s career commenced in the 1980s, when state control over literature began to dwindle and writers were granted relative autonomy to create experimental and innovative work. Many writers of the period sought to break through the limitations of the paradigm of socialist realism by exploring the cultures of remote regions of China. For writers such as GAO XINGJIAN, the 2000 Nobel Laureate, whose travels to such areas inspired his great novel SOUL MOUNTAIN, this search for alternative cultural traditions is carried out from the urban intellectual’s outside perspective. Mo Yan, in contrast, sets virtually all his novels in his home county Gaomi. Mo Yan’s challenge to realism is not based on exoticization of the region, but on a celebration of its capacity for creating and transmitting stories. Central to most of his novels is the dismissal of the omniscient narrator and the unified narrative voice so typical of socialist realism. In his first and most famous novel *Red Sorghum*, Mo Yan narrates the villagers’ experience of Japanese occupation from the perspective of the main protagonist’s grandson, whose account is in turn based on stories told to him by his father. In later work he strengthens these effects by introducing story lines in different genres of writing and elaborate use of metafiction. For instance, *The Republic of Wine* (1992) includes a fictive correspondence between one of the novel’s characters, who is a writer, and the famous writer Mo Yan. His award-winning novel *Frogs* (2009), which critiques China’s one-child policy, is framed by a correspondence between a Chinese dramatist and a Japanese novelist, and even includes the entire text of a play. Another typical quality of Mo Yan’s novels is his use of very coarse, often vulgar language in dialogues, which helps overcome the romanticized depiction of the Chinese peasantry in earlier Chinese literature.

Mo Yan’s novels are typically extremely long and his unwillingness to curb his fascination with storytelling is a hallmark of his writing. Some of his novels have been adapted or shortened for English translation. The Swedish Academy described his style as “hallucinatory realism,” spurring comparisons with magical realism, partly justified by Mo Yan’s stated liking for the works of GABRIEL GARCIA MARQUEZ. However, as both Mo Yan himself and various critics have pointed out, his work is also indebted to the stories of the supernatural by the premodern Shandong author Pu Songling (1640-1715), as well as to premodern Chinese novels such as *Shuihu zhuan* (The Water Margin), which famously features a gang of coarse-mouthed male outlaws in countryside settings. Whereas elements of the fantastic and the grotesque appear in most of Mo Yan’s novels, it is possible to divide his work roughly into works with a clear socially critical edge, such as *The Garlic Ballads* (1988) and *Frogs*, and works of grotesque fantasy such as *Life and Death are Wearing me Out* (2006), which describes a protagonist’s repeated reincarnations into various animals.

After receiving the Nobel Prize, Mo Yan was criticized for his reluctance to speak out against censorship and human rights abuse in China. In fact, sharp criticism of Chinese realities is clearly evident in his writing. Yet in true modernist fashion, his work shuns oversimplification and easy answers in favour of complex perspectives.

Bibliography

(Only novels translated into English have been included. The two dates given for each entry refer to the publication dates of the Chinese original and the English translation, respectively. All English translations of Mo Yan’s novels are by Howard Goldblatt.)

*Hong gaoliang jiazu* (Red Sorghum, 1987 / 1993)

*Tiantang suantai zhi ge* (The Garlic Ballads, 1988/1995)

*Jiuguo* (The Republic of Wine, 1992/2000)

*Fengru feitun* (Big Breasts and Wide Hips, 1996/2004)

*Shengsi pilao* (Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out, 2006/2008)

*Sishiyi pao* (Pow!, 2003/2013)

*Tanxiang xing* (Sandalwood Death, 2001/2013)