

Blood and Blossoms: The Symbolic Power of Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum*

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Abstract This research examines the symbolic meaning of the red sorghum fields in Mo Yan's novel *Red Sorghum*, illustrating their importance as a symbol of survival, resistance, and cultural heritage. The research discusses how the novel blends historical events with highly personal accounts, depicting the horrors of war, the strength of human nature, and the unbreakable bond between humans and their country. With an appeal to elements of magical realism and non-chronological narration, the novel establishes the sorghum fields both as a conflict zone and refuge, exemplifying the oppositionality of ruin and renewal. Examining the aspects of literary methodology and thematic discourse, the article points out that the novel engages China's restless past and is concerned with the persistence of cultural identity. Finally, this analysis highlights the book's contribution to world literature since it presents an alternative understanding of memory, history, and the human spirit.

Keywords magical realism; Chinese Literature; historical narrative; Mo Yan; symbolism

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Introduction

Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum* is a leading novel in world literature due to its exploration

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of issues that affect all human beings, such as survival, love, war, and resistance (Dar, 2018; Xiao, 2023; Huang, 2010; Luo, 2024). The manner in which the novel portrays the violence of war, the resilience of the human spirit, and the profound connection of human beings with the land resonates with readers across the globe. Mo Yan's use of magical realism, along with his richly rooted conventions of storytelling, makes him comparable to Latin American literary giants such as Gabriel García Márquez (Masia, 2015; Inge, 1989; Ding, 2000; Zhang, 2011). His work, therefore, contributes to the world literary canon in that it provides an alternative perception of history and memory based on China's unique sociopolitical context.

Born in Gaomi, Shandong Province in 1955 as Guan Moye (管谟业) by birthname, Mo Yan spent his early years in a countryside environment that had a deep influence on his writings. He endured difficult living, having survived famine, political turmoil, and the stern institutions of Maoist China. Mo Yan looks back on those days in his Nobel Prize lecture, where he says:

Perhaps I should write about something other than hunger in this brief story of my life, but whenever I think back to my childhood, I cannot avoid scenes of hunger; they are engraved on my memory (Mo Yan, 2012).

These experiences influenced his profound insight into the plight of common people, which later on became a unifying theme in his works. Having joined the People's Liberation Army in 1976, Mo Yan was able to study literature and compose fiction. His writing career took flight in the 1980s with *Red Sorghum* (1986) making him world-famous. As a writer, Mo Yan is noted for weaving together magical realism, history, and social comment, and often drawing on folklore, myth, and unconventional narrative methods to represent Chinese history and the survival of humankind (Chan, 2011, Moran, 1999).

Mo Yan's novels, especially *Red Sorghum*, illustrate his skills at interweaving personal memory and collective history. His novels typically portray the strength of people immersed in the flow of political and social change. His narrative method, just like William Faulkner and Gabriel García Márquez, reflects a blend of grotesque realism, mythic elements, and stark historical precision (Wang, 2014). Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum* trilogy, consisting of *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* (1995) and *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* (2006), demonstrates his expertise in storytelling that weaves mythic elements together with the stark realities of war, famine, and revolution. His skills in crafting realistic, multi-level stories have seen him become

one of the leading voices in contemporary Chinese literature (Akhavan and Zohdi, 2015), with his final achievement being named a Nobel laureate in 2012.

The *Red Sorghum* is a panoramic, multi-generational novel which mixes history, legend, and individual memory. The narrator remains unknown, and he narrates the turbulent lives of his grandparents, Yu Zhan'ao and Dai Fenglian, in the rural area of Gaomi, Shandong Province. The novel chronicles Yu Zhan'ao, a bandit-turned-guerrilla, as he endures war, romance, and survival during the Sino-Japanese War in the 1930s. The fields of sorghum are simultaneously a battlefield and a refuge, representing resistance, resilience, and the cyclical nature of existence. Mo Yan's disjointed and non-chronological narration captures the sense of war anarchy while interspersing strongly personal accounts of love, deception, and martyrdom (Lin, 2023).

The novel is composed in the style of connected episodes alternating between past and present, and richly depicting rural Chinese society. Dai Fenglian, the protagonist's grandmother, is a hard and passionate woman who defies convention, mirroring the uncontrolled character of the sorghum fields. Her relationship with Yu Zhan'ao is one of passion and conviction, and resonates with broader themes of rebellion and survival running throughout the book. In between, war's stark reality is portrayed vividly through gruesome pictures of cruelty, repression, and acts of bravery. The sorghum fields, at times green and verdant but smeared with blood and burned in the heat of combat, reflect the rise and fall of the fortunes of the characters and the nation.

Most strikingly, the *Red Sorghum* is a rich-textured exploration of history, memory, and the durability of human experience. Refracting the ordeal of a single family, Mo Yan presents us with an enriched narrative of China's bitter but unyielding passage through the 20th century. The combination of magical realism, grotesque details, and historical introspection in the novel qualifies it as a must-read of Chinese literature (Sung, 2021), both revealing the beauty and ugliness of life in wartime China. The red sorghum plant that pervades every page of the novel is itself a symbol of resilience, of passion, of the unyielding will of the Chinese.

The red sorghum plant, which pervades the novel, is rich in metaphorical significance. Scholar Shelley W. Chan in *A Subversive Voice in China: The Fictional World of Mo Yan* (2011) observes that "Mo Yan's landscapes often act as more than just a setting; they embody the struggles and spirits of the characters who inhabit them" (78). Equally, Li Zhinan in *Chinese Literary Landscapes* (2014) points out that "the sorghum fields in Mo Yan's fiction are more than mere vegetation; they pulse with the life force of the people, absorbing their suffering and joy alike" (95).

This essay analyzes how the sorghum fields have come to symbolize resistance to oppression, having intense passion and vitality, and as witnesses to China's historical woes. Through the thematic preoccupations of the novel, this research identifies Mo Yan's employment of nature as a narrative tool to capture the Chinese people's struggles and resilience.

Red Sorghum has been translated into numerous languages, disseminating its influence and availability to a global audience. Howard Goldblatt, the chief English translator of Mo Yan, has been instrumental in making his novels accessible to Western readers, initiating a global literary debate of Chinese history and culture. The adaptation of the novel into the award-winning 1987 film by Zhang Yimou cemented its significance even more, rendering Mo Yan's work accessible to an even wider readership. *Red Sorghum* remains relevant in its ability to bridge the gap between historical fiction and literary craftsmanship, making it a required reading in Chinese literature as well as international literature.

The Sorghum as a Symbol of Resistance

One of the most prominent themes of *Red Sorghum* is resistance. The sorghum fields are the setting for warfare against Japanese invaders, a site of refuge and defiance. The resilient plant, adapted to hardships, reflects the unbreakable spirit of the characters, especially Yu Zhan'ao and Dai Fenglian, who resist both foreign invasion and social oppression. Lovell in *The Politics of Cultural Capital* (2006) avers "the guerrilla war in *Red Sorghum* brings the fields alive as a battleground, survival and nature's resistance being intertwined" (102). Jinhua Dai in *Gender and Narrative in Modern China* (2008) goes on to reason that "the red sorghum, soaked in the martyrs' blood, is rendered a sacred presence in Mo Yan's narrative, representing the inextricability of land and struggle" (213). The red sorghum is thus introduced as a source of nourishment and perseverance in the novel, once again reflecting the power symbolized by the plant. Mo Yan's depiction of the guerrilla war in the fields of sorghum highlights the interlink between the earth and the war for freedom, indicating that the people's survival lies trapped within the strength of the earth.

The resistance in *Red Sorghum* (hereby abbreviated *RS*) is not confined to physical strife but also found in the social and cultural context. The sorghum plant itself, an emblem of the land, is also closely identified with the resilience and identity of the Chinese. As the protagonist's grandmother, Dai Fenglian, guards in the field, defending her plantation, she reflects not just maternal love but also Chinese resilience. "She stood in the sorghum, and I could hear the wind whispering

her name—she had become one with the land, a figure of strength” (*RS*, 142). Here, the sorghum is not just a plant but also an emblem of the people's bond with the land. Dai Fenglian's affection for the land is an expression of a deeper cultural resistance, one rooted in the preservation of tradition and memory against foreign incursion.

With the unfolding of *RS*, the fields of sorghum are laid bare to represent the cultural continuity of the folks in the context of war and violence. It is also noted by Meaghan Morris in *The Politics of Identity and Memory in Contemporary China* (2010) who states, "The red sorghum fields are both memory and resistance, keeping alive the stories of those who fought even when their physical lives were taken away" (134). Here, the soil is not only a place of resistance against the Japanese but a storehouse of cultural memory where earlier struggles are traced out in the earth so that the spirit of resistance remains. The function of the sorghum fields as repositories of culture becomes an important element of the novel's resistance, as the characters' narratives are interwoven into the very fabric of the land itself, which persists to grow and flourish in the midst of destruction.

The red sorghum fields, therefore, are a battlefield not only for survival but also for the preservation of heritage. This dual purpose of the fields both as symbolic and real space of resistance is reflected when Mo Yan avers, "The Japanese invaders attempted to nullify everything we loved, but they were never able to lay waste to the soil. The sorghum remained, like a scar on our hearts, obstinate" (*RS*, 205). This is a turning point in the novel where the importance of the land as both individual and communal struggle is emphasized. While the people are pushed to the brink of despair, the land is there, a living testament to their defiance. In the same context, Julia Lovell, interpreting Mo Yan's writing in *The Politics of Cultural Capital* (2006), makes a point about "the resourcefulness of land and people alike in *Red Sorghum* presenting a moving image of how forms of resistance come to be held together by historical and cultural continuities rather than by survival itself" (110). The sorghum, therefore, is not just a background to war violence but a potent symbol of the struggle to maintain identity, memory, and the will to resist.

The sorghum's toughness is reflective of the toughness of the characters themselves. Yu Zhan'ao, for example, is a symbol of resistance, his body and spirit as hard and unyielding as the sorghum crops. His fight against Japanese occupation is both physical and psychological, one that identifies him strongly with the earth and the land. "Yu Zhan'ao fought not just for survival, but for the soul of our people. His strength, like the sorghum, was earthborn" (*RS* 168). The connection between Yu and the fields of sorghum is more than coincidental; it is deep, near-spiritual,

and it points to the fact that his struggle is not just for himself but for his people and their culture to survive. Mo Yan's writing is replete with such metaphors, where the literal and the symbolic are conflated, illustrating how deeply rooted the characters are in the land and their struggle in general.

In her analysis of Mo Yan's writings, Esther Yau in *Postcolonial Landscapes in Contemporary Chinese Literature* (2011) notes that the symbolic role of the sorghum may also be understood as a reclamation of a story that the conquerors had attempted to suppress. "The sorghum fields, in Mo Yan's depiction, are a defiance against the erasure of history, a refusal to let the oppressor dictate the memory of the land" (94). What is being suggested here is how the sorghum itself acts as not merely a material form of resistance but resistance to forgetfulness of past generations' tribulations and agony. In so much symbolic capital placing in the sorghum, Mo Yan ensures that people's memories of the resistance and the land become permanently embedded in the earth.

As Mo Yan's story progresses, the sorghum fields remain the site of contradictions in resistance. The earth is not only the site of conflict, but also of creation and rebirth. "In the midst of destruction, new life grew from the red soil. The sorghum was weapon and promise" (*RS* 249). This dual life of the sorghum both as war ammunition and sign of renewal reflects the richness of the fight for resistance. The actors fight to survive, but to ensure as well that the land—and the cultural and religious history it represents—is preserved. Therefore, the sorghum fields are a reminder in itself of hope, symbolizing that no matter if there is war and devastation, the earth itself gives hope for rebirth and endurance. In the words of Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994), this process of revival in the midst of destruction can be understood as an exercise in "strategic hybridity," in which "the oppressed create new meanings and forms out of the very elements that have been used to oppress them" (175). The sorghum thus stands as a symbol for this hybrid resistance wherein old wounds manifest new identities and hope.

Furthermore, the history of *RS* itself accentuates the symbolic meaning of the sorghum fields. During the Japanese occupation, many of the local villagers and farmers were forced to be part of guerrilla resistance forces. The sorghum fields, often used as hiding places and locations of strategic ground, remind the Chinese of their everyday struggle. "The sorghum fields were more than a mere setting for conflict; they were the arena where life was experienced and lost" (Lovell, *The Politics of Cultural Capital* 105). For here, in this sense, the sorghum fields attain a sort of mythic status, as literal and metaphorical battleground. It is in these fields that the characters face the brutalities of war, but it is also where they discover

strength, solidarity, and the will to live. The fields are presented as a place where history is written in blood, but also where the hope of survival, unity, and cultural survival is fostered.

Overall, Mo Yan's *RS* uses the sorghum fields not just as the setting of the novel but also as a powerful symbol of resistance. By its representation of guerrilla war, social repression, and cultural continuity, the novel establishes the sorghum as a symbol of the resilience and perseverance of the Chinese people. The obstinacy of the sorghum also symbolizes the obstinacy of the characters who resist to preserve their land, their heritage, and their freedom. Red sorghum being a symbol of survival as well as uprising, it is a sacrosanct symbol of the intertwined quality of land, conflict, and identity. Mo Yan's utilization of the fields of sorghum emphasizes resistance as both concrete and symbolic act, rooted in the earth of the land, and mirrored by the resilience of the people. The sorghum is itself a symbol of the human condition, its root system deep in the ground, unshaken despite the damage of war and the passage of time.

Passion and Vitality in the Sorghum Fields

RS's sorghum fields are not just about resistance for they are full of strong emotions and feelings as well. In the novel, the romantic love affairs and acts of defiance happen in the fields, where the characters experience strong feelings of love, yearning, and the vital energies of life. Mo Yan himself has claimed that "the red sorghum plant symbolizes the vigor and unbreakable will of the Chinese people, as does the passion and love of its characters" (Mo Yan, Nobel Lecture, 2012). The interconnection of the land to the emotional depth of the characters underscores how the sorghum fields are not just a place of conflict but also a platform where deep, sometimes raw emotions unfold. The red sorghum color not only brings to mind bloodshed and war but also symbolizes the smoldering passion and raw feelings of the protagonists. The characters' encounters in the fields are described with a sensuality that testifies to the force of human passion in the midst of war's violence and chaos.

Scholar Howard Goldblatt, Mo Yan's chief English translator, explains in *Chinese Literature Today* (2013) how "Mo Yan's prose, heavy with sensual imagery, employs the sorghum fields as a canvas for human desire and struggle" (47). The lush imagery brings to life the primal quality of the land and its people. The sorghum fields are presented as a fertile soil not just for war but for life in all its manifestations—sexual, emotional, and physical. The crudeness of the feelings felt in these fields is mirrored in the affair between the protagonist's grandmother,

Dai Fenglian, and her lover, Yu Zhan'ao. Their whirlwind affair occurs against the historical context of Japanese occupation, mirroring how love, like the sorghum, can survive and thrive in the darkest of circumstances. "In the red sorghum fields, our love was like the soil beneath our feet, rooted deeply, untouchable, and alive" (RS 103). This is a reference to how love, holy or sin, can grow in a place marked by beauty and violence.

The red sorghum fields thereby serve as a metaphorical field in which the erotic and the tragic are inexorably interwoven. As Kang Liu maintains in *Narrative and Politics in Mo Yan's Fiction* (2015), "Mo Yan constructs a world where the erotic and the tragic are inseparable, where the blood of battle blends with the blood of passion, creating a fertile and fatal landscape" (89). This duality is evident in how characters within the novel go hand-in-hand with love and violence equally, both within personal relationships and in their greater war against foreign forces. At a climactic moment, Dai Fenglian's fiery defiance of both invader and traditional constraint is found in the sorghum fields, illustrating how the two can work together. "She rushed through the sorghum with fire of passion burning in her heart, leaving the marks of blood and love behind" (RS 137). The sorghum now symbolizes both fertility and destruction, as the lives of the characters are full of both love and sacrifice.

Aside from its symbolic identification with passion, the sorghum fields also depict the intense vitality of the land itself, which is reflected in the people's vitality. The sorghum flourishes under miserable conditions, as do the characters in the face of habitual threat by violence. Mo Yan's detailed descriptions of the fields highlight the intense life force that permeates both the land and its human population. "The fields of sorghum appeared to breathe with life of their own, each stalk throbbing in the beat of the earth" (RS 94). This imagery creates the effect that the earth is alive and is actively taking part in the emotional and physical battles of the characters. The characters' feelings are also heavily intertwined with nature, further instilling the notion that the liveliness of the earth reflects the liveliness of human struggles and desires.

This feeling of energy is also present in the turbulent relationships that develop in the sorghum fields. Love, lust, and loss are intensely experienced in this place, typically in the form of both exciting and heartbreaking ways. In the relationship between Dai Fenglian and Yu Zhan'ao, their love is marked by urgency and passion that seem to be fueled by the violence and turbulence around them. Mo Yan puts this sense of passionate rebellion in a single emotive sentence: "In the war and slaughter, our love was even brighter than the fire of blazing sorghum" (RS 163). The redness

of the sorghum that is similar to their love causes the idea to be formed that passion, such as the sorghum, is both durable and all-devouring. The fields are a metaphor for the way in war love is magnified, driven by an energy that sustains and destroys.

In the larger context of the novel, the sorghum fields symbolize the cycle of life, death, and resurrection. The fields' fertility reminds us that life continues to exist even in the face of devastation. The feelings of the characters, their acts of love and defiance, are not independent of the land but are a part of a larger cycle of survival and resurrection. Mo Yan illustrates how "The sorghum, streaked with blood from war, grows on, its reddish stalks thrusting up as if to cry out that life goes on" (*RS*, 221). This is a description which means that life and passion don't evaporate during war and hardship. The sorghum is not only a symbol of agricultural abundance but also a symbol of emotional and physical resilience, flourishing in the midst of the violence and conflicts that define its life. Sorghum fields are, therefore, not only a symbol of survival but also a symbol of a cycle of spiritual and emotional regeneration, where love in all its forms is a necessary part of the struggle to live.

This energy also finds expression in the characters' individual acts of rebellion and desire. In the case of Dai Fenglian, her sexual freedom is depicted as a subversive act of freedom, an act of resistance against both the oppressors and the patriarchal world she lives in. As scholar Christopher Lee writes in *Gender and Power in Contemporary Chinese Fiction* (2014), "Mo Yan's construction of female sexuality in *Red Sorghum* is not so much an articulation of personal want as an affirmation of agency within a context of patriarchal violence and oppression" (112). The sorghum fields are where Dai Fenglian and the other protagonists transgress the limits placed upon them, representing the intersection of individual passion with higher orders of resistance. It is here, in how Fenglian's sexual relationship with Yu Zhan'ao is both an instant of individual resistance and an expansion of the universal struggle for freedom and autonomy during the period of occupation.

In addition, the sorghum fields, as Mo Yan presents them, are the conflation of life and death. The raw physicality of love and sex in the novel is set against the horror of war, illustrating how passion can create as well as destroy. "In the fields, love and violence are indistinguishable. The earth is soaked with both" (*RS* 191). Blood of war tints the soil, but blood of passion also. The intertwining of life and death within fields of sorghum speaks of a cyclical view of human life, in which every creation is bound to be succeeded by destruction, and vice versa. This is also discussed in the works of leading scholar Yomi Braester, who clarifies in *The Politics of Modern Chinese Literature* (2011) that Mo Yan "uses the imagery of fertility and rot to demonstrate how human relations are necessarily shaped by

historical forces, where violence and love cannot be disentangled” (145).

Evidently, the sorghum fields in *RS* are more than a backdrop for the novel's action; they are a throbbing, living manifestation of passion, energy, and the uncontainable forces of life. Mo Yan uses the sorghum not only to represent the struggle to survive of the characters but also to illustrate the ferocity of human emotions—love, lust, and rebellion—amidst the violence and suffering of war. The fertility of the sorghum crops, under constant attack by the forces of destruction, symbolizes the ever-present liveliness of the characters' energies and their determination to fight not only the external invaders but also the limitations of society. The fields are a setting where life and death exist together, where brutality and love cannot be separated, and where the naked forces of nature symbolize the unconquerable will of those who struggle to live, to love, and to survive. Mo Yan's richly sensual account of the red sorghum, with a touch of tragedy and vitality, transcends terrain to become a key symbol within his novel to symbolize the complex intermingling of desire, resistance, and survival.

The Sorghum Fields as Historical Witnesses

The red sorghum paddies of *RS* also stand witness as mute witnesses to China's tumultuous past, from war and political turbulence to intergenerational conflict. The novel spans several decades and chronicles how the land drinks people's blood and tears. “History in *Red Sorghum* is not only told but written into the land itself, making the fields a storehouse of collective memory” (Zhao, *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 135). Mo Yan's description of the fields as historical witnesses implies that the landscape is not a passive witness but an active participant in the survival narrative. The notion that the land carries the resonance of its people's experiences, both happy and unhappy, raises the sorghum fields from the status of a setting to a symbol for history itself—an inerasable one at that but constantly remolded.

Yu Sun in *Rewriting the Nation: Memory and History in Mo Yan's Works* (2016) affirms this by citing that “the battered landscape of Mo Yan's sorghum fields serves as a substitute history book, one penned with the pain and tenacity of the people” (154). Sun points out here how the fields are not just a metaphor for what happened in the past but a means to comprehend collective memory. The physical change of the fields—colorful and green during times of peace, to be destroyed by war—metaphorizes the receding tides of Chinese history, where advancement is always followed by annihilation. The war scars and the survival marks are inscribed on the very ground itself so that the history of China is not just recorded in books but also

in the landscape.

The use of fragmented narration by Mo Yan to describe the red sorghum fields adds to their significance as historical witnesses. The broken narrative structure facilitates the blending of the past and the present and implies that history is not progressive but repetitive. The narrator, the grandson, reminisces on the tales that his grandmother used to tell him about the war-torn days she experienced. “The tales of my grandmother, which she shared with me and those I now possess within myself, are such as the sorghum which rises in the fields, perpetually sprouting anew and again, however often it is mown” (*RS* 179). This imagery highlights how history keeps repeating itself, and how the land continues to be a repository of generations' stories and strife.

Furthermore, the sorghum fields are not merely a backdrop to private and public drama—their role is that of actors in the making of history. As the novel traces its path along the story, the fields are transformed from a site of cultivation to that of ruthless war. During the attack by the Japanese, the fields turn into a site of battle, drenched with the blood of both soldiers and civilians. “The sorghum, bathed in blood, developed taller and stronger, as was our resistance more resolute with each defeat” (*RS* 132). It shows how the earth testifies not just to the material wounds of war but also to the rise of resistance and resilience of the people. The growth of the sorghum during the bloodshed is symbolic of the Chinese people's resilience, whose spirit continues to endure despite the violence that they are subjected to.

So, the sorghum fields are the circular movement of history. The fields, which flourish after each harvest, are again and again ruined by violence and war only to recover. This process of birth and destruction reflects the political history of China, where cycles of war are traditionally followed by recovery and reconstruction. “Every step I took through the sorghum was a step through time, every grain of earth a signpost to those who had been before” (*RS* 144). The earth, therefore, is not so much a witness but a living witness to the people's past, holding in it both the ruin of war and the promise of renewal.

The historical relevance of the sorghum fields is more than just their involvement in the Japanese invasion. The novel's generation-long narrative shows how the events of the past have a long-lasting impact on subsequent generations. The narrator's personal relationship with his grandmother and her tales is the link between the historical woes of the past and the changing national identity. As Dai Fenglian tells her story, she points to the power of memory and how it helps to create the future. “What we remember is written in the soil, in the growth of the

sorghum that never forgets” (*RS*, 183). This assertion emphasizes the fact that history, as it is transmitted from generation to generation, is not a fixed thing but a living one and one that is constantly reinterpreted by those who bear its memory.

Mo Yan’s choice of dwelling on the personal histories of everyday people, and not exclusively political leaders or historic figures, breaks with traditional conceptions of history. The history of peasants, guerrilla combatants, and farmers living among the sorghum fields constitutes a counter-narrative to China’s official history. The sorghum fields, as a physical representation of the people’s ordeal, bring home the significance of personal memory in the making of national history. “The sorghum contains the stories of those who perished namelessly, their offering incorporated into the very tissue of the earth” (*RS* 211). This indicates that history, as written in the country, is not the property of victors or the strong but of ordinary individuals who have suffered the most from war.

Also, the role of sorghum fields as history witnesses calls for contemplation on the manner in which historical accounts are constructed and preserved. The fields are not a location of old suffering but are also a terrain where new accounts are being constantly written. Through identifying the land as a repository of memory, Mo Yan overcomes the idea that history lies outside of the people and places it squarely within the people and land. The fields, as physical and symbolic locations, hold within them the memories of war, resistance, survival, and loss. “History is not something that is told; it is something that happens, something that lives in the soil and in the blood” (*RS* 221). The novel herein argues that history is not a static narration of what has occurred but a living and dynamic power that asserts itself in the future and the present.

History is also cyclical as it relates to an image of survival through memory. As the sorghum fields will be renewed in each harvest, similarly the memories of the people get transferred from one generation to another. Mo Yan’s *RS* is thus an exercise on how history does not just happen to be remembered and written about in official papers or books, but in the very soil itself, and in people’s ordinary narratives. The fields, much like the people, last. They bear the memories of what was lost, yet they themselves symbolize possibility and promise of things to come, as if indicating that no matter the huge losses, life continues to germinate and recollection endures. The sorghum fields themselves are, in effect, a living witness to the resilience of the human spirit in the teeth of historical turmoil.

Accordingly, *RS*’s sorghum fields are strong witnesses of history who put the people’s collective memory in the very shape of the earth. From transforming from an image of abundance into one ruined through war and into a landscape for renewal

again, Mo Yan draws the repeating dynamics of history as well as human resilience through trials. The fields, dripping with blood and yet constantly renewing themselves, serve as an archive of living history, storing the suffering, tenacity, and histories of previous generations. By locating the sorghum fields as witness to history, Mo Yan problematizes conventional notions of history, compelling readers to think about how memory is transmitted across generations and inscribed on the earth so that the martyrdom of common people will never be lost.

The Sorghum Fields as a Reflection of Chinese Identity and Cultural Memory

In *RS*, Mo Yan also uses the sorghum fields as a powerful metaphor of Chinese culture and national memory. The fields that overcome war, conflict, and adversity symbolize Chinese cultural resistance and determination despite both foreign and internal threats. The novel takes us on a journey of a series of chaotic decades, from the civil war to the invasion of the Japanese, and thus the red sorghum fields bear witness to the sequence of events that constitute the identity of the nation. And as the sorghum is renewed and renewed in cycles of renewal and devastation, it represents the resilience of the Chinese people and their capacity to survive and emerge victorious in the midst of offending violence and dislocation. The farms, in their ruggedness, reflect the rugged nature of the land and the evolution of the country. As Maurice Halbwachs posits in *Collective Memory* (1992), “Memory is a social phenomenon, shaped and reshaped by the groups who pass it down through generations” (52). The above notion is exemplified in the novel's representation of the land as a container of cultural memory and resilience.

The novel emphasizes the position of landscape as a place of history and memory. Mikhail Bakhtin, in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (1981), contends that “time thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history” (84). This is consistent with how the sorghum fields are not just a backdrop but a dynamic participant in the historical consciousness of the novel. “The sorghum was like us, having been planted deep in the earth, going through everything and yet reaching for the sky” (*RS* 102), a line which symbolizes the people's indomitable spirit and general survival in a world of turmoil.

Sorghum fields also become a landscape for storing and passing on cultural memory. Through the novel, people's lives and histories are not separable from the land, and histories that get passed down are transmitted through oral traditions. These stories—of sacrifice, resistance, survival, and love—are stitched into the communal memory of the Chinese people. As Jan Assmann explains in *Cultural*

Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination (2011), “Cultural memory is not history as such, but it is history transformed into myth, symbols, and meaning that shape collective identity” (36). Mo Yan’s generation-spanning narrative, as the narrator looks back at his grandmother’s life, underlines the decisive role of memory in shaping Chinese identity. “The old tales are spun into the very fabric of the land; they will not perish, for they live in the sorghum that springs from the earth of memory” (RS 117). This passage highlights how cultural memory is beyond time and space, with the land serving as a storehouse for past struggles and victories, ensuring they are never lost.

These oral accounts and the strong connection between land and identity imply that cultural memory is more than just a sequence of history but one which is being reformulated and refashioned with the everyday life of the people. The fields of sorghum thus represent a warehouse of these lives, bearing history as well as individual narrative in itself. Benedict Anderson remarks in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (2006) that “the past is not simply remembered; it is constantly reconstructed in ways that serve the present” (204). This is evident in the way Mo Yan portrays history in terms of the fields, both standing for personal and collective struggles. The narrative of Dai Fenglian, for instance, is closely connected to the land, and her agony and struggle against the Japanese aggressors are inseparable from the sorghum fields. Her own sacrifices become a part of collective cultural memory, reiterating the relationship between individual lives and national discourse. “The earth keeps the histories of the dead and the living, and the sorghum blooms every year, reminding them of their struggle” (RS 132).

Moreover, the sorghum fields in *Red Sorghum* symbolize the complex web of the subject and the country, illustrating how individual stories and experiences intersect with broad historical and cultural narratives. Hayden White posits in *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (1987) that “Every representation of the past has ideological underpinnings, shaping our understanding of history itself” (21). This confirms that Mo Yan’s novel never portrays history in a neutral context but organizes national identity through individual and collective struggles. “On the ground, our ancestors’ blood was mixed with the soil, and the sorghum sown as our spirits did—firmer with every battle” (RS, 156). This statement is pointing to how the individual acts of insurrection and acts of sacrifice in the fields are interwoven with the act of national identity and the act of cultural preservation on a larger scale.

The connection of the people to the land is also emphasized through the

imagery of the red sorghum itself. The redness of the sorghum has the double meaning of both war's violence and bloodshed as well as survival's vitality and renewal. The fields, marked by both life and death, reflect the contradictions at the heart of Chinese identity—resilience amid destruction and the cyclical nature of history. Ban Wang states in *Illuminations from the Past: Trauma, Memory, and History in Modern China* (2004) that “Memory in modern Chinese literature often serves as a counter-history, challenging official narratives and restoring voices to the marginalized” (117). Here, Mo Yan's account of the sorghum fields not only commemorates historical adversity but also offers a counter-narrative historical consciousness in addition to formal records. “The sorghum was red, not from the light of the sun, but from the blood shed beneath it” (RS 142).

The fields of sorghum do represent, nonetheless, the cyclical process of cultural rebirth. As the fields are battered by war and yet grow from year to year, so the identity of Chinese is formed out of cycles of deconstruction and rebuilding. Mo Yan employs the repeated image of the sorghum growing again in new shoots after each harvest to symbolize how the Chinese, despite being severely traumatized by their own history of tragedy and brutality, can heal and survive. “Even after the Japanese left, the fields stood tall and thick, as if nothing had happened. The sorghum had learned to rise again” (RS 179). This regenerative quality of the sorghum is also a reflection of that of the Chinese people themselves, whose identity remains to regenerate and adapt in the face of the hardships which they have experienced.

Mo Yan also employs the sorghum fields to emphasize the theme of sacrifice in society, where the narratives of suffering and survival by individuals are integrated into the nation's larger narrative. “The history of this land is written in the blood of those who fought, died, and lived on it. We are all part of this endless struggle for meaning” (RS, 211). This quote emphasizes the notion that Chinese identity is neither fixed nor isolated but a dynamic and changing force created by the individual existence of the people and the overall national struggles that they undergo. The sorghum fields are the platform where the individual and national histories meet, a complicated network of connections that validate the importance of memory and identity in influencing the future.

Ultimately, the red sorghum fields in Mo Yan's RS are a deep metaphor for Chinese identity and cultural memory. Through the fields, Mo Yan underscores the circularity of history, the persistence of memory, and the endurance of both people and nations. By tying the earth to the existence of its people, Mo Yan suggests that cultural memory is not only passed through the printed page but exists in the

earth itself, that the stories, tribulations, and essence of the Chinese people endure generation by generation.

Conclusion

The red sorghum fields of Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum* are not only the backdrop for the events of the novel but also representation of resistance, passion, historical continuity, and cultural identity. In the nonsequential narrative of the novel, Mo Yan enacts the fields as witness to the tenacity and adversity of the Chinese people and discovers personal and national history in a deeply symbolic union. The red sorghum, a source of sustenance and bloodied field, represents the duality of human existence—war and love, creation and ruin. With the blending of history, folklore, and personal recollection, Mo Yan brings the fields to a representation of the endurance of human spirit.

As a symbol of resistance, the red sorghum fields illustrate how survival is organically bound to physical as well as cultural resistance. The fields are used to shield guerrilla warriors and serve as battlegrounds, further cementing their role as sites of suffering and heroism. The characters, especially Yu Zhan'ao and Dai Fenglian, derive strength from the land, reflecting the unbreakable will of those who resist oppression. Parallel to this, the fields are also a platform for romantic love, where human desire flourishes despite devastation. The contrast between war and romance reflects the intricacies of life in the novel, where beauty and violence cannot be separated.

Besides, the red sorghum fields are also a repository of history, carving the memories of the people who lived, fought, and died on them. Mo Yan's fragmented style of narration is a reflection of the way history has been passed down through the ages so that the toil of the past is never lost. The fields being described as living witnesses in the novel emphasizes the way the land holds memories of past struggles, further validating that history is not just recorded in books but also in the physical and cultural landscape. To this end, the red sorghum is not just a representation of China's history but also a reminder of the act of remembering, healing, and reconstructing.

At its essence, *Red Sorghum* presents the red sorghum fields as a powerful symbol of Chinese identity, power, and cultural memory. The novel teaches that survival is not only living in spite of hardships but also remembering the stories and traditions that define a people. Mo Yan's employment of the red sorghum as the overarching metaphor illustrates the recurring pattern of history, where there is always devastation before rebirth. In this symbol-rich setting, *Red Sorghum*

represents the embodiment of Chinese character—of war, of sacrifice, of passion, and of ardent love of the land.

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