



Red Sorghum

Mo Yan , Howard Goldblatt (Translator)

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The acclaimed novel of love and resistance during late 1930s China by Mo Yan, winner of the 2012 Nobel Prize in Literature

Spanning three generations, this novel of family and myth is told through a series of flashbacks that depict events of staggering horror set against a landscape of gemlike beauty, as the Chinese battle both Japanese invaders and each other in the turbulent 1930s.

A legend in China, where it won major literary awards and inspired an Oscar-nominated film directed by Zhang Yimou, Red Sorghum is a book in which fable and history collide to produce fiction that is entirely new—and unforgettable.

Red Sorghum Details

Date : Published 1993 by Viking (first published 1987)

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Author : Mo Yan , Howard Goldblatt (Translator)

Format : Paperback 359 pages

Genre : Fiction, Cultural, China, Historical, Historical Fiction, Asia, Nobel Prize

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From Reader Review Red Sorghum for online ebook

Hadrian says

Saw the movie, read the book. The film, as colorful and vivid as it is, covers only the first two chapters.

This is a multi-generational story of a family in the Shandong countryside. One might be tempted to label it 'magical realism', but this is all set during the Japanese invasion, and life, already hard due to banditry, becomes even more gruesome. For example - in the first 40 pages, one family member is skinned alive.

Mo Yan also experiments with story structure, flitting back and forth in time. He doesn't let any chronology build up, but instead lets the collection of memories make an impression upon you. The family member who had his skin ripped off comes back several times, and, dare I say, his fate hits you more.

This is also a novel of extreme contradictions, and a sort of warm irony. The transitions of events are jarring. Elaborate family funerals, rotten bodies, love stories, people's heads exploding, red sorghum wine.

There is a final metaphor here. The author/narrator returns to his home village, and the 'red sorghum' has been replaced by a green pasty substitute. The curtain has changed, and something is missing.

An impressive book, and one which gives a discerning look at the past, as ignoble and beautiful as it can be.

Whitaker says

I found *Red Sorghum* to be a scathing critique of the way the Chinese behaved during the Japanese occupation. It was particularly interesting reading this and contrasting its depiction of the Chinese peasant rebels with Xiao Hong's in ??? (*The Field of Life and Death*). Xiao Hong shows the peasant rebels as glorious, patriotic fighters. This aspect of their character is not absent from Mo Yan's depictions, but he also goes further to show that not all of the rebels were acting out of patriotism. Some were acting out of self-interest, using the war and the weapons collected to become mini-war lords and to build their own power base, often by attacking other rebel groups.

There is a magnificent chapter where Douguan and his father are trying to cull a pack of dogs that have turned to eating the corpses of their fellow villagers, too numerous to bury and lying where they were killed. Three dogs, formerly members of Douguan's household, head the pack. There is a power struggle between them, and one incites another to attack the third. When the fight ends, the instigator turns on the two weakened fighters to finish them off and take control of the pack.

In many ways, this is how the rebel groups behave. Often, they will fight each other instead of fighting the Japanese. In a later section of the novel, Mo Yan describes Douguan's father, by now the head of a powerful rebel group, holding a grand ceremonial funeral for his mother. The other rebel groups in the area take the opportunity to attack and destroy Douguan's father's group, and all sides sustain heavy casualties leaving them ultimately open to Japanese attack. Mo Yan nails down the comparison when he has a small rebel group, struggling to survive in winter, covering themselves in dog pelts to keep warm and as a form of

disguise.

The strategy of instigating one enemy to fight one's other enemy would be instantly recognisable to many Chinese. The strategy is part of one of the critical episodes during the chaos of the period of the warring kingdoms, most notably retold by the Chinese classic novel, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. From Wikipedia:

Ma Chao suspected that Cao Cao was planning to attack him, so he contacted Han Sui to form an alliance.... Cao Cao later followed Jia Xu's strategy to sow discord between Ma Chao and Han Sui and make them become suspicious of each other. Taking advantage of the hostility between Ma Chao and Han Sui, Cao Cao launched an attack on the northwestern warlords and defeated them.

Mo Yan thus imbues his story with the echoes and shadows of Chinese history and myth, slyly underlining the internal chaos as a recurrent theme of Chinese history.

However, the criticism does not stop there. Mo Yan pointedly remarks that the rebel fighters also ate the dogs they killed and by so doing engage in a kind of proxy cannibalism—the dogs having grown fat on human carrion. The use of cannibalism recalls another classic of Chinese literature, Lu Xun's short story, "The Diary of a Madman", where cannibalism is used as a symbol of Chinese society eating its own children and destroying itself. His criticism is not simply then of the rebels as a particular group but also of the rebels' behaviour continuing a self-destructive, recurrent part of China's history, society, and culture.

What I found very intriguing, but have no real answer to, is an incident in the book which takes place during the Cultural Revolution. It appeared to be odds with the rest of the narrative, except in theme. Mo Yan tells the story of a poor man trying to get some food from a party cadre in winter. The cadre is feasting on plenty, while this man, who has suffered his enmity, starves. A servant of the cadre sends him away and he dies of exposure in the snow. Other than a possible connection by theme, there seemed to be no other reason for the story to be in the novel. But, if it is connected by theme, Mo Yan seems to be linking the behaviour of the lower level party cadres (and perhaps by extension the party itself) to the kind of destructive, opportunistic gratification engaged in by the rebels whose selfish acts he describes so well in this novel.

Powerfully told, this novel deserves multiple reads, and I will definitely revisit it in future, hopefully at least once in its original language.

Larry says

This novel removes any doubt as to whether Mo Yan deserved the Nobel Prize for Literature. It is complex, bawdy, earthy, poetic, wallows in dirt and blood, and soars to magnificent poetic heights. Besides language so rich you can chew on it, and the deeply imagined characters, the greatest appeal of the novel, to me, were the many daring risks the author takes with form and structure.

If you've seen the movie, you've seen only the thin crust of the first two sections of the novel, cut apart and reassembled to tell a chronological story. The novel consists of several intertwining stories of love, resistance, violence and chaos in rural China during the Japanese invasion and occupation, and offers probably the best impression I've read of the near-incomprehensible bedlam caused by competing armies and militias across China during that time.

The narrative leaps all over the place in time, back three years, ahead twenty years, yesterday, tomorrow and today, with storylines and characters overlapping and diverging, sometimes within just a few short pages, without any obvious time markers. Often a storyline circles back, 150 pages later, to where it left off. Yet this comes across as entirely natural, the way an oral storyteller would present it.

Which is how it is told, in seldom-used first person omniscient, in which the narrator--the child and grandchild of the main characters--leaps into the thoughts of each person and even a few dogs.

Other reviewers have complained about how often the words "red sorghum" appear, almost on every page of the book, sometimes 5 or 10 times on a page. Even this I found hauntingly effective, painting an impressionistic view of the landscape. To these characters, the vast flat panorama of fields of head-high grain extending toward every horizon, are all they know, all that sustains them and buffers them from the world. Red sorghum itself is in fact a metaphor for every aspect of their lives.

I'm not a great fan of Mo Yan's later novels employing magical realism, but *Red Sorghum* is fully rooted in almost painfully descriptive realism. I also don't normally care for the translations of Howard Goldblatt, since his prolific translations of nearly every major contemporary Chinese writer tend to end up with the same narrative tone, regardless of who the author is. But *Red Sorghum* is one of his earliest translations, and he clearly sweated blood in rendering this great work into mouth-watering English.

For those new to Mo Yan, *The Garlic Ballads* is probably an easier entry point, since it's shorter and less ambitious, yet beautifully, achingly sad. *Red Sorghum* throws the reader many challenges, but in the end it is an unforgettable work.

????? ?????????? says

[illegible]

Hafeth says

[illegible]

Arwen56 says

Per il momento, Mo Yan e io non è che andiamo molto d'accordo. I giapponesi, le imboscate, i massacri, i laghi di sangue, i cadaveri, gli storpi, le nonne *superwomen*, i dementi, i malati, i muti, i muli, i cani, il fiume, il ponte, il fango, il fetore, un cavolo di nessuno che riesca a dialogare in maniera coerente: tutto questo l'avevo già trovato in **Grande seno, fianchi larghi**. E ok. Ma dove vuole andare a parare l'autore? Cosa mi sta dicendo? Ancora non l'ho capito, sinceramente. Forse che "si stava meglio quando si stava peggio"? Che quella era l'età dell'oro? E' per questo che alla fine scrive:

In quel momento una voce desolata giunge dal cuore della terra sconfinata. E' una voce familiare e al contempo sconosciuta, sembra quella chiara e forte del nonno, quella della nonna, della seconda nonna, e della terza nonna. Gli spettri della mia famiglia mi indicano la strada per uscire da questo labirinto: misero, fragile, sospettoso, ostinato ragazzo dall'animo stregato da vino avvelenato, immergiti nel fiume Moshui per tre giorni e per tre notti - ricorda, non uno di più, non uno di meno -, purifica il tuo corpo e il tuo animo, e potrai tornare nel tuo mondo. A sud del monte Baima, a nord del fiume Moshui cresce ancora un fusto di sorgo rosso puro, devi cercarlo a ogni costo. Tienilo alto quando correrai verso il tuo mondo invaso dai rovi e percorso da tigri e lupi, perché sarà il tuo talismano e anche il totem glorioso del nostro clan, il simbolo della tradizione di Gaomi!'

Ma davvero si può considerare paradisiaca tutta quella bestialità, quella brutalità, quell'aridità dell'animo, quell'incapacità di creare rapporti costruttivi? Non riesco a crederci. Evidentemente, mi sfugge qualcosa, visto che il Nobel per la letteratura gliel'avranno ben assegnato per qualche motivo. O no?

Ad ogni modo, col piffero che questa storia assomiglia a **Cent'anni di solitudine**. Ma neanche vagamente. Esattamente come il paragone non funzionava affatto neppure con **Grande seno, fianchi larghi**. Ho come l'impressione che, non sapendo esattamente cosa dire, i critici l'abbiano sparata lì tanto per scrivere qualcosa che invogli la lettura, in entrambi i casi. Che cavolo c'azzecca questo desolante paesaggio cinese con il rigoglio di Macondo? A Macondo le persone si intendono con due parole, qui neppure con un milione. A Macondo tutto è vita, anche i morti. Qui i vivi sono putrefatti prima di morire. E' davvero asfissiante l'atmosfera che l'autore ci propone in questi due romanzi. Se questo era il suo intento, ci è riuscito benissimo. Ma morire soffocata non è una delle mie principali aspirazioni.

Ho altri due libri di Mo Yan in attesa di lettura. Vedremo come andrà.

PS: Comunque, **Grande seno, fianchi larghi** è migliore rispetto a questo. Ma il lezzo che costantemente accompagna la narrazione è identico. Non per voler fare la spiritosa a tutti i costi, ma ho davvero provato l'impulso di farmi una bella doccia calda tutte le volte che finivo un capitolo qualsiasi di questi due romanzi. E' un tantino esagerata (e inquietante) l'inclinazione che ha Mo Yan di indulgere nella descrizione delle "puzze" e dei liquami di varia natura.

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Issa Deerbany says

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הנהגת הרכב בלילה

Camille Stein says

Mo Yan & The Power Of Movies - The New Yorker - <http://ow.ly/Ema7k>

Una extensión interminable de sorgo, absolutamente nivelada, tersa y quieta, un mar de rostros color rojo profundo, maduro. Era un cuerpo colectivo, unido en un único pensamiento magnánimo.

El lugar más bonito y el más repulsivo, el más extraño y el más vulgar, el más sagrado y el más corrompido, el más heroico y el más cobarde, el más bebedor y el más sensual del mundo.

De pronto se percató de que eran espíritus vivientes: sus raíces se hundían en la tierra oscura, se nutrían de la energía del sol y de la esencia de la luna; humedecidas por la lluvia y el rocío, eran capaces de comprender los caminos del cielo y la lógica de la tierra.

...

Ambientada en el municipio de Gaomi Noreste, en la provincia de Shandong (lugar de nacimiento del autor), 'Sorgo rojo' conforma un fresco vehemente y apasionado de la China rural de la primera mitad del siglo XX. Saga familiar narrada con tintes de leyenda popular, entre surcos de tierra negra y tallos y vino de sorgo, la historia nos sumerge en un paisaje abrumador y omnipresente, exuberante y teatral, donde héroes y heroínas se entrelazan como fenómenos atmosféricos poderosos y sobrenaturales. Un narrador desencantado que bucea en sus orígenes en busca de refugio y de un talismán que lo devuelva al 'pantano oceánico' perdido, al sentido extraviado: aquel paraíso terrenal ya sumergido en un tiempo remoto sobre el que merecía la pena vivir. Y morir.

Aunque los frecuentes saltos en el tiempo dificultan la fluidez de la narración, la novela en su conjunto es poderosa y envolvente. De una crueldad extrema y minuciosa (atroz y casi insoportable en ocasiones), el relato contiene pasajes verdaderamente espeluznantes descritos con precisión milimétrica. Mo Yan crea personajes inolvidables: el comandante Yu Zhan'ao, Dai Fenglian (Pequeña Nueve), Pasión, Nueve Sueños Cao, Arhat Liu..., conformando una aventura visual, gráfica, que empapa todos los sentidos, en un territorio mítico donde el omnipresente sorgo es protagonista de excepción. Los distintos episodios se suceden de forma inesperada, insólita, a veces inverosímiles: posesiones y exorcismos, combates encarnizados (la batalla de los perros es espléndida), relaciones amorosas tempestuosas... Lo épico, lo real, lo mítico, lo fantástico y lo costumbrista se unen en una crónica compleja que desde luego no deja indiferente.

Charles says

I'm aware that I ought to have liked this. Nobel prize winner, world literature, etc. But the more I read it (and I read to the very end, albeit in fits and starts for the last 50 or so pages) the less I appreciated its faux-mythologising stance, its glorification of violence, its utter lack of psychological - I won't say depth, because myth doesn't have depth, it just provides us with a terminology for depth - let's say, credibility. Oh yes, repeating words (sorghum an embarrassingly high number of times, with red and green not far behind) does not make them symbolic; it makes them irritating. To suggest that this has the slightest thing in common with the morally complex work of, say, Kundera, is absurd. I've given it two stars because the translation has a nice clunky 'foreign' feel to it, which isn't a quality I normally appreciate but that, in this case, served as a distraction from the 'rivers' of 'blood' (two other massively over-used nouns)...

And don't get me started on that patronising colonialist term 'world literature'. 'World music' was bad enough...

zumurruddu says

“L'estremo confine del genere umano e della bellezza”

Il sorgo è rosso come il sangue. Il sorgo è la natura che circonda l'uomo e gli offre nutrimento, materiali per la vita quotidiana e inebriante piacere, tramite il vino di sorgo; e il rosso è il colore del sangue, della violenza, della crudeltà, della sofferenza. Di tutto ciò è fatto questo romanzo che narra la storia di una famiglia (gli antenati della voce narrante) soprattutto durante la guerra tra Cina e Giappone.

È un mondo rurale duro e spietato, eppure intriso di un lirismo incredibilmente intenso e potente. Un mondo violento, efferato, ma epico, in cui c'erano ancora grandi eroi. Grandi eroi e grandi bastardi (“ma chi non è un eroe e al contempo un bastardo?”). C'erano le costrizioni dei piedi fasciati e dei matrimoni combinati, ma c'erano anche spiriti liberi, coraggio, amore, sacralità e senso del mistero. Colori e odori intensi.

“A volte penso che ci sia un rapporto tra il decadimento dell'umanità e la prosperità e il benessere in cui viviamo. La prosperità e il benessere sono obiettivi anche necessari che il genere umano persegue nella sua lotta per il progresso, ma generano profonde e temibili contraddizioni. Il genere umano sta infatti distruggendo con le proprie mani alcune delle qualità che possiede.”

La lettura ha comportato per me qualche difficoltà per il modo di raccontare fatto di continui salti temporali (tecnica usata anche ne “La canzon dell'aglio”, ma qui in modo più estremo). Tuttavia, non ho esitazioni nella valutazione; un romanzo potente, epico, che entra nell'anima.

“Ho vissuto dieci anni lontano dal mio villaggio. Sono tornato contaminato dall'ipocrisia dell'operosa «buona società», e il corpo che emana da ogni poro un lezzo soffocante perché immerso a lungo nelle fetide acque della sporca vita cittadina”...

Ana says

You can say I've developed a pretty healthy obsession with Mo Yan's writing. So healthy that I read his Nobel Prize acceptance speech (which was beautifully crafted - and long), I watched interviews of him with subtitles, I'm going to get the movie "Red Sorghum" and watch it, just because it's after this book right here, not because I particularly enjoy Chinese movies, I've started taking more interest in China's development (the whole of it, not just the last 150 years) because their ancestry fascinates me, and above all that, I think I'm ready to read his entire work. As in, right now. I'm currently working on the first half of *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* and loving that one too.

Plot, let's first do a little plot summary:

China. The Shandong family is a typical Chinese rural family, following tradition, living the old life and not knowing of any other way to lead their existence. Their story is told in the span of three generations, since the 1920s, with a lot happening until the 1930s, and then with some more things happening up until the 1970s. The official span is 1923 through to 1976, but I was never sure which were when, because it's extremely non-chronological (which is apparently a known trait of Mo Yan's), and you keep getting

confused as to what is what and who is who. This family owned a distillery and made a type of alcohol called "sorghum wine", out of the "sorghum", which is a fodder plant, used to feed any type of livestock that might grow around. Which, also, as you might have noticed from the title of this book, grows red in the Northeast Gaomi Township. Afterwards, during the Second Sino-Japanese War (google it: I found out its span: 1937 to 1945) they were resistance fighters, trying to block the Japs' plans in their area.

The minute you start reading it, you notice the writing. If you're like me, and this isn't your first Mo Yan book, it seems almost weirdly familiar to once again drown in it. It's tense, compact, it's his typical language, even though this is his first ever published novel and the one I read was his last. It's written in first-person, which I most commonly loathe, but once again I'm proven that *some geniuses people* can excell at this job. His narration is extremelly fluid and doesn't ever stop on the way or decide to become less entertaining - it is a constant voice that you keep listening to throughout his book and it guides you through the maze that is "Red Sorghum".

Speaking about "Red Sorghum"..in the first half, it's everywhere. On every page. At every corner. The rural background is made of it. It's the area's God. It almost seems like this book's Universe is formed of only it, and it's present wherever things happen: good things, tragedies, deaths, marriages, history - the sorghum is there to supervise the people. Rarely do you see such a natural element take an important role in the story, but then comes Mo Yan, who makes almost a character out of this fodder plant and gives it the all-knowing, all-seeing, a little menacing role. After a while, you get jaded and cloyed with it, but it nonetheless represents a powerfull image in the book.

About image - the scenery is once again flawless. Black earth, red sorghum, milky water, it all adds up to a story background that sometimes surpasses the story itself and makes it even more rich when it doesn't, as it gives soul to not only the people, but the places it talks about. I kept being mesmerized at how much of Mo Yan's work is based on his observation of the world around him and how detailed the reproduction of that world on paper is. Clearly, one of his best traits as a writer is the ability to ignite in his reader's mind the blazing image of something, of anything - his power to put his own view into his reader's eyes. He was born to be a writer, if only for that.

Once again, his writing is also able to take on a very dark shape and tear the fictional world's seams apart. Twenty-something pages in, you get a scene in which a couple of horses are killed - that's brutal. And then, as a bonus, just a few pages later, you get the skinning of Luohan, at the orderd of the Japanese soldiers. (view spoiler) Filled to the tops with this kind of visceral imagery, the book is a roller-coaster, where you never know if you should expect a hanging or a bouquet of flowers. No, seriously.

Because I read it in Romanian, I had to corelate between my version and an English version if I wanted quotes; after about three or four times I did that, I got annoyed by having to read half a page of one of them and half of the other to find out if I was looking at the same thing. My favorite, out of the ones I picked, remains - *"Surrounded by progress, I feel a nagging sense of our species regression."*

Why it got five stars? First of all, I still like "Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out" much more than this one, but they're both spectacular works and they make such a harsh introduction for the reader in the mind of someone who experienced things us whites have probably never gone through. It's bewildering, having to take all of the information in, but if you understand where Mo Yan is getting at, you are in for an awesome thrill. This book is, on a much higher level than almost everything else published between the 80s and now, everything a reader wants: it's a thriller, it's a phylosophical study, it's a romance book, it's enriched with the dance between life and death, between their meanings, it's a history book, a political essay and also a light pat on the shoulder, letting you know just how good you'll never, ever get to be.

I'll now very happily go and continue on with "Big Breasts and Wide Hips", after which I'll probably start "The Garlic Ballads". I have in no way, not even illegally, happened to get my hands on some 6 works of Mo Yan's from the mighty Internet. I can't be blamed for developing an obsession. That's my History teacher's fault.

The movie "Red Sorghum" came out in 1987, the same year as the book, and got a Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival. I'll watch it, then I'll report back. Over.

Sandra says

“Pensò al cielo, alla terra, agli uomini e al sorgo avviluppati insieme sotto la stessa volta immensa”.

Nelle campagne di Gaomi, attraversate dal fiume Moshui, si coltiva il sorgo, una immensa distesa di piante che si piegano fraterne per raccogliere come in una bara i corpi dei caduti sotto legranate lanciate dai gruppi di contadini combattenti che nel corso della guerra cino-giapponese negli anni 1939-1940 praticano una guerriglia brigantesca nei confronti degli occupanti giapponesi, si chiudono delicatamente come uno scrigno a proteggere i corpi di due amanti che si uniscono a creare una nuova vita, a simboleggiare l'unione tra la terra e l'uomo che la coltiva con amore e dedizione perché essa ne raccoglie il seme vitale, gli fornisce la sopravvivenza e lo accoglie nella morte. Con il sorgo si produce un vino il cui colore è simile a quello del sangue, e tanto sangue scorre nei campi di sorgo e nel letto del fiume Moshui, frutto di morti atroci e violente descritte in modo eccessivamente crudo, con descrizioni particolareggiate di dettagli al limite del sopportabile per il lettore. A queste scene forti e violente si alternano scene, soprattutto nel primo libro, bellissimo, di un lirismo straordinario, come la descrizione della morte della nonna, il cui ultimo respiro è fatto dell'aroma dolce del vino di sorgo e di quello amaro del sangue caldo.

Questa intima unione tra gli elementi vitali è il filo conduttore della storia di tre generazioni che viene raccontata nel romanzo: il comandante Yu, un brigante contadino passionale e vendicativo che si innamora a prima vista della bella e coraggiosa Fenglian quando sta andando sposa a un lebbroso, il loro figlio Douguan, padre del narratore, che segue le orme paterne nella lotta coraggiosa contro i “cani” giapponesi. Da ultimo si alza la triste e disperata voce del narratore, di cui non sappiamo il nome, che si allontana dal villaggio per vivere “nelle fetide acque della sporca vita cittadina”, finché, al ritorno al villaggio, si rende conto che un'epoca è finita, il sorgo rosso non esiste più, quel mondo eroico del nonno e della nonna sono definitivamente tramontati, e il sorgo dai fusti alti e morbidi, che si adeguava con mollezza alle vicende dei contadini guerrieri e poeti, è stato sostituito definitivamente da un sorgo ibrido, dai fusti bassi e tozzi, dal fogliame fitto e coperto di polvere bianca, che ha un sapore amaro ed allappante.

Questo è Mo Yan: lirismo intriso di sangue, che parla di un passato mitico ormai definitivamente tramontato, verso cui si prova una struggente nostalgia.

Praj says

“With this book I respectfully invoke the heroic, aggrieved souls wandering in the boundless bright-red sorghum fields of my hometown. As your unfilial son, I am prepared to carve out my heart, marinate it in soy sauce, have it minced and placed in three bowls, and lay it out as an offering in a field of sorghum. Partake of it in good health.”

Land is an altruistic asset. It belongs to no one; neither to its possessor nor to the ruthless capturer and not even to the industrious farmer who survives on its souvenirs; apathetic to worldly narcissism, does it shines in its benevolent vitality. If the land could speak it would spin tales of worship and treachery; if it could cry it would wail for the corpses cuddled in its core and one day, the red sorghum would desists from transforming into a fiery liquid, shying away, fearing the stark resemblance of the scarlet wine to the gory mayhem on its very land.

“Start skinning! Fuck your ancestors and skin him!” shouted the interpreter. *“The Japanese commander says to skin him. If you don’t do a good job of it, he’ll have his dog tear your heart out”*. The knife in the lonesome butcher Sun Five’s hand trembled as he begged Uncle Arhat’s forgiveness for cleaning his blood soaked body with cold water ; skinning the man alive like a cattle suspended on a hook. Sun Five breathed his last humanly air while he pierced the shining blade in Arhat’s moist dermis and somewhere between heart wrenching screams and primitiveness of exposed tissue; Sun entered sadistic chambers of hell. Killing and getting killed became a way of life to the citizens of Gaomi Township. Families slaughtered, men skinned alive, women raped, employed as sex slaves; it was a hemorrhaging mockery of the very land that took pride in its humanity. Death completes human suffering. Love and hate amalgamates into a vaporizing sensation dissolving the final string of civilization; life is overwhelmingly frightening. Was Arhat heroic for enduring horrendous tortures for being a faithful servant to his birthing land?

The elongated sorghum stalks clapped through the swirling air welcoming the young, beautiful bride with the most exquisite golden lotuses (lily-feet) as the sedan braved the bronzed sweaty shoulders of its dancing carriers. Dai Fenglian was all of sixteen when her father married her off to Shan Bianlang , a rumored leper for couple of mules. As she traveled though the black soil of the sorghum field, the Northeastern Gaomi Township waited for its mistress. A quintessentially docile daughter like many other Chinese girls; Dai endured the agonizing foot-binding ritual – a cultural norm during feudalism, primed herself for a marriageable suitor and lived a sheltered life. Dai was a fearless soul defying the authoritative patriarchal society. She dared to love Yu Zhan’ao- the young sedan carrier; took over the wine distillery after Shan’s death, tricked Spotted Neck-a local bandit from raping her and solely inspired the vengeance of Arhat’s death by pledging to the God of Wine. She gave her life a rebellious possibility charting its own consequences and eccentricities. Was she heroic after all in her succinct existence? Did her pleading to the heavens for her life make her any less a victor?

“Is this death? Will I have never again see this sky, this earth, this sorghum, this son, this lover who has led this troops into battle? My heaven you gave me riches, you gave me thirty years of life as robust as red sorghum. Heaven since you gave me all don’t take it back now. Forgive me, let me go. Have I sinned? Would it have been right to share my pillow with a leper and produce a misshapen, putrid monster to contaminate this beautiful world? What is chastity then? What is the correct path? What is goodness? What is evil? You never told me, so I had to decide on my own. I loved happiness, I loved strength, I loved beauty; it was my body, and I used it as I thought fitting. Sin doesn't frighten me, nor does punishment. I'm not afraid of your eighteen levels of hell. I did what I had to do, I managed as I thought proper. I fear nothing.”

Dai saw the sorghum grow in her fields frolicking in the sun, standing tall in the rain and yielding the fiery scarlet wine after its harvest. Were the chaste crimson sorghum stalks Gaomi’s heroes?

“The glorious history of man is filled with legends of dogs and memories of dogs; despicable dogs, fearful

dogs, pitiful dogs”.

Yu Zhan’ao was a man of many traits; a gambler, murderer, adulterer, a lover, a father and eventually a hero in the anti-Japanese revolution. A bastard that he was dearly loved Douguan’s mother and stepmother. Yu Zhan’ao was a man of integrity. He obeyed Dai like a diligent soldier in the 1939 Black River Massacre to avenge the death of many of his people. Yu was the triumphant idol now, one who lived like a pitiful dog nevertheless, fought like a ferocious animal claiming victories on his perished land. But, the nakedness of his vacant heart froze his heroic endeavors in the frosty graves of his loved ones.

Mo Yan’s metaphorical saga nostalgically maps heroic virtues through the landscape of his hometown of Northeastern Gaomi Township; a paradoxical ground that once flourished in prosperity of human grit and kindness was now a cauldron of heinous crimes howling at the ill-fated blackened cinders. Gaomi was plagued just like its former resident Shan Bianlang perishing in its own pitiful existence.

"At one time the site had been a wasteland covered with brambles, underbrush and reeds; it became a paradise for foxes and rabbits. Then a few huts appeared and it became a haven for escaped murderers, drunks, gamblers, who built home, cultivated the land and turned it into a paradise for humans driving away the foxes and wild rabbits, who set howls of protest on the eve of their departure. Now the village lay in ruins; man created it and man had destroyed it. It was now a sorrowful paradise, a monument to both grief and joy, built upon ruins."

The accentuated elegiac impression of the appalling devastation, reeks of imperialist nihilism; irony of human ambitions. We construct houses; raise our families merely to see them being annihilated by outsiders sheltering their own. Yu Zha’ao questioning the dying Japanese combatant about the existence of his family and whether he loved them, and if so why would he guiltlessly slaughter their (the Chinese populace) kin ;cites the anguish of two men – one on his death bed and the other fretting his own death; slamming bullets in his wounded chest. Mo Yan’s symbolism of life and death surpasses the familiar grounds of human hostilities delineating the sarcasm of the rising red sun flying high on the Japanese flag whilst it eclipses bleeding the Chinese frontiers. The red sorghum wine that once got its peculiar scrumptious taste from Yu’s urine, now, seeps into the ground serenading its distillers. Mo Yan bleeds his deepest sorrows through the verses blurring the lines between the past and present depicting the end of feudalism and the rise of Japanese imperialist incursion. The laudable tale chronicled by Dai Fenglian’s third generation embarks on the end of the Japanese invasion during WWII following an anti-Japanese ambush by Commander Yu. It spans from the 1929- the first year of Republic wandering all the way through the Cultural Revolution; witnessing inhumane crimes of rape, slaughter and numerous horrendous war crimes. Mo Yan underplays the political aspects of the Japanese-Sino war putting human life on a valuable didactic dais. He diligently scripts history through the eyes of his villagers and their kin; the desolation of loss and the emptiness that chases a rewarded vengeance. The veneration of the ancestors, as every descendant has a generation that endured darkness darker than hell. The idea of colonial power – act of imperialist pursuit of a nation, itself is a cowardly act. Slaughtering the fearless and ambushing agricultural lands; how can one take pride in destroying lives while trying to improvise their own? And in the end, the acquisition of land is futile if all it gives are the graves of blameless souls.

The concluding passage of the novel delineates the narrator’s resentment of importing “hybrid sorghum” into the Gaomi’s fields spoiling the authenticity- undesirable outsiders. I speculate whether the Hainan sorghum stalks was an allegory to Japanese establishing naval bases on Hainan islands in South China Sea; blocking outside communication in China necessary of arms import and related materials or was it to signify that

bastard children of Japanese descents were undesirable in China. The disdain of the vulgarity in hypocritical affection by the urban societal dogma shows the loss of harmony in acknowledging noble sacrifices.

"Heroes are born, not made. Heroic qualities flow through a person's veins like an undercurrent ready to be translated into action."

Yan's heroes are not Mao's preferred comrades but ordinary people who fight for their survival in most corrupt yet heroic ways. They are unconventional, passionate, rebellious and brave; they may not have inherited monetary affluences, but demonstrated mutinous arrogance and undying grit.

"This was a great victory..... China has 400 million people. Japan has 100 million. If 100 million of us fought them to death they'd be wiped out, but there's still 300 million of us."

Dai- who dared to love a bastard and stand up for her rights, Yu Zhan'ao- who never let his pitiful surrounding hamper his audacity, Passion- who braved the horrendous sex crime, Douguan – for being an honorable at a young age, Douguan's wife- who got her first period while hiding in a cave embracing her death brother, Uncle Arhat- for being loyal to his kin and enduring the agonizing torture, Sun Five – for sacrificing his human existence for sullied lunacy and numerous other citizens of Gaomi Townships and above all the very earth where the deep-rooted sorghum still bow to blazing sun; all of them are heroes. They rebelled against feudalism, poverty, love, abhorrence, imperialism and most of all human greed. Approximating the demeanor of the bold sorghum stalks, they stood tall and when autumn befell they sacrificed their world saluting the heroic spirit of Gaomi Township.

"....The yang of White Horse Mountain and the yin of the Black Water River, there is also a stalk of pure-red sorghum which you much sacrifice...wield it high as you re-enter a world of dense brambles and wild predators. It is your talisman, as well as you family's glorious totem and a symbol of the heroic spirit of Northeast Gaomi Township!"

Yan's characters are not judged by their individual demeanor but by their cohesive valor. Therefore, I chose to do the same. I let go of all those prejudices of several Goami's residents and recognized the obvious. The text is bounded by nameless heroes who drank their wines and never kowtowed to the Emperor in Japan's holy war.

***New wine on the ninth of ninth
Good wine from our labour, good wine!
If you drink our wine,
You'll breathe well, you won't cough.
If you drink our wine,
You'll be well, your breath won't smell.
If you drink our wine,
You'll dare go through Qingsha Kou alone.
If you drink our wine,
You won't kowtow to the emperor
On the ninth of ninth you'll go with me
Good wine, good wine, good wine!***

***** (the song taken from the namesake film by Zhang Yimou)***

Every now and then when reading a remarkable book it becomes crucial to pen copious notes; precious to be wasted on an epigrammatic appraisal, making it even harder to articulate the treasured sentiments. So, without thinking much, I decided to pour my heart out, just as Mo Yan.

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Mosca says

For about eight years (1937~1945), northeastern China was occupied by Japan. This brutal invasion occurred coincidentally within the 23 years of the Chinese Civil War (1927~1950). For someone who might not be at least superficially familiar with the appalling conditions of these two wars of attrition fought upon a countryside already devastated by poverty and organized crime, it might appear that this book contains far too much gratuitous horror.

But for someone like Mo Yan, who was born and raised in Shandong Province (completely taken over by Japan), it might constitute family memory and cultural history.

Red Sorghum is at least a work of historical fiction. But it appears much more than that.

Told as a first person narrative, this tale betrays the nationalism, racism, and sexism of that fictional narrator, permanently marked by his times and traumatic heritage. An individual of a later 20th century Chinese lifespan, this man's experience of that earlier time is found through flashbacks of family memory that play out in bits of seemingly disjointed montages. But as the book progresses these bits assemble in the readers mind into a more complete picture.

The manner in which Mo Yan organizes these bits and pieces are masterfully presented so that the reader is at first transported by a poetic lyricism that emotionally tears the heart so, that the reader is now as deeply in love with the land and the region as would be a native.

The many characters are flawed but humanly seductive such that one becomes attached to them as though they are family—despicable but endearing. We become bonded to these folks and their homeland. Mo Yan's prose is so well crafted that it is this beauty that enmesh us into this world.

We are now trapped.

We are trapped because it is this region and these people who are doomed to participate in this particularly tragic and grotesque portion of 20th century history. Mo Yan sees to it that we are complicit with them and experience with them this horror.

And his very powerful prose that so beautifully describes each flower and star and fish and drop of dew—also describes in awful detail every part of the horror these souls find themselves a part of.

These details are not easy for a reader to experience. And they last longer than many readers will want to endure. But these Chinese protagonists represent real people who were subjected to much worse for decades.

How would we react in such a time? Would we be heroes? Would we be bastards? Would we even survive? Who would we be afterwards?

As Second Grandma observes:

"You revere heroes and loathe bastards, but who among us is not the 'most heroic and most bastardly'?"

This book is lyrically beautiful and mercilessly horrific. But this story could be told in no other way.

Tanuj Solanki says

1. History obstructs the normally amoral play of human desire.
2. The magico-historico-real formula will ALWAYS work in the hands of a good writer. Red Sorghum can stand beside Tin Drum and Midnight's Children without feeling inferior.
- 2.5. Or maybe it is a little inferior. For there are some loose ends and some unworthy digressions here. Some side-stories that are forgotten. But the element that leads to these flaws is also the one that germinates the big pay-offs: namely the un-novel like feel of it all. Both Tin Drum and Midnight's Children can be called messy novels, where the circus of history tangles with personalities, producing a picaresque delight. Red Sorghum does the same, but it is beyond messy and beyond novel.
3. The Chinese suffered greatly during the Second World War. But their resistance to the Japanese, although fractured and self-immolating, was the only resistance against an occupying fascist force that survived throughout the war. And won. The Chinese people should have taught the French how to resist.
4. The writing here focuses too much on color. One grows indifferent to red sorghum, blue sky, red earth, crimson sky, etc etc. In the background of your mind, though, collectively, these phrases build an effect that make you consistently place all action in a vivid landscape.
5. Symbolically speaking, the 'Red' in 'Red Sorghum' is not much different from the 'Blood' in 'Blood Meridian.' It designates both violence and natural beauty. But it has more affirmations of life than the Cormac McCarthy work.
6. The quantity of violence in Red Sorghum is tantamount to Blood Meridian. Or even 2666 by Roberto Bolano. But violence in fiction is largely an issue of style. Because violence demands description, it allows an author to indulge himself, and the resulting glee with which authors paint violence is seldom missed on serious pages. Mo Yan strives to find comedy in violence, Cormac McCarthy tries to remove it from all moral dogma, Roberto Bolano gives it a benumbing power by presenting it in a near bullet-pointed monotony. There are many ways to kill man, literature-wise.

7. I do not much appreciate Herta Muller making the kind of fuss she made about Mo Yan's winning the prize. The controversy about Mo Yan's Noble-worthiness is due to his so-called collusion with / acceptance of the current Communist empire. Never because of literary quality. If one wants to, one can sense both here. He is careful not to offend anyone, by making his setting too rural and his timing pre-revolution. I've to read more from him to truly decide if this diligence has been maintained throughout a career. But even then, I don't find any blame in it, literature-wise.
