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CULTURAL TRAUMA AND IDENTITY: NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND SYMBOLISM IN MO YAN'S RED SORGHUM

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ABSTRACT

Mo Yan's Red Sorghum: A Novel of China, translated into English by Howard Goldblatt, presents a complex literary reconstruction of memory, violence, cultural inheritance, and identity against the turbulent historical background of twentieth-century China. The novel traces the experiences of three generations of a family in Northeast Gaomi Township through a fragmented and non-linear narrative that repeatedly moves between past and present. This study examines how the novel's distinctive narrative structure and symbolic imagery represent cultural trauma and shape individual as well as collective identity. Mo Yan's disruption of chronological order, recursive storytelling, shifting perspectives, flashbacks, folklore, and elements of magical realism transform personal memories into a broader representation of historical trauma. The study particularly focuses on the recurring symbolism of the red sorghum fields, which function simultaneously as a source of livelihood, a site of violence, a space of refuge, and a metaphor for endurance, vitality, resistance, and cultural continuity. Blood, wine, landscape, death, sexuality, and the human body further contribute to a symbolic framework through which memories of war and suffering are transmitted across generations. The fragmented narrative reflects the fractured nature of traumatic memory, while the narrator's reconstruction of family history demonstrates the struggle to recover identity from an incomplete and contested past. The study argues that Red Sorghum challenges conventional historical representation by blending personal memory, folk mythology, collective suffering, and imaginative storytelling. Ultimately, Mo Yan presents cultural identity not as fixed or homogeneous but as a continually reconstructed process shaped by trauma, resistance, memory, place, and intergenerational inheritance.

KEYWORDS: Cultural Trauma; Identity; Narrative Structure; Symbolism; Collective Memory; Red Sorghum.

1. INTRODUCTION

Mo Yan, the pen name of Guan Moye, is one of the most influential contemporary Chinese writers and the recipient of the 2012 Nobel Prize in Literature. His fiction is characterised by an unconventional combination of history, folklore, violence, sensuality, rural experience, and imaginative or magical modes of representation. *Red Sorghum: A Novel of China*, translated into English by Howard Goldblatt, is central to this literary achievement. Originally published as *Hong gaoliang jiazu* and associated with the “roots-seeking” (*xungen*) tendency in Chinese literature, the novel reconstructs the lives of several generations of a family in Gaomi Northeast Township, Shandong. Yomi Braester places *Red Sorghum* within the broader cultural movement concerned with recovering Chinese cultural identity and local experience, while Shelley W. Chan identifies Mo Yan’s fiction as a distinctive literary engagement with Chinese history, society, and cultural traditions (Braester, 2007; Chan, 2011).

The socio-historical backdrop of *Red Sorghum* is the Japanese invasion and the Second Sino-Japanese War, particularly the violence experienced by rural communities during the 1930s and 1940s. The novel does not, however, reproduce this history as a conventional military narrative centred on battles, commanders, national politics, or chronological events. Instead, Mo Yan locates historical violence within the everyday lives of peasants, families, lovers, guerrillas, and villagers. The Gaomi landscape becomes a space where war, sexuality, death, resistance, livelihood, and cultural memory intersect. Recent scholarship similarly observes that the novel reconstructs the Anti-Japanese War through non-linear narration, folk perspectives, and magical imagery, thereby challenging conventional heroic representations of revolutionary history (Hu, 2025).

The present study therefore asks: How do the narrative structure and symbolism of *Red Sorghum* represent cultural trauma and contribute to the construction and reconstruction of individual and collective identity? Its first objective is to examine the novel’s fragmented, non-linear, and multi-perspectival narrative as a literary representation of traumatic memory. Its second objective is to analyse the symbolic significance of red sorghum, blood, landscape, wine, animals, and the human body in constructing folk and cultural identity. Its third objective is to explore how war, survival, folklore, and intergenerational memory enable Mo Yan to move beyond conventional war literature. The study argues that the red sorghum fields operate

simultaneously as a site of violence, survival, cultural continuity, and remembrance. Recent scholarship particularly confirms the significance of the sorghum fields as symbols of resistance, cultural heritage, historical continuity, and identity (Salcedo, 2025). Thus, *Red Sorghum* transforms historical catastrophe into a multilayered cultural narrative in which identity is continually reconstructed through memory, place, trauma, folklore, and the struggle for survival.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW & THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Scholarship on Mo Yan and *Red Sorghum* has developed across several interconnected areas, including narrative experimentation, magical realism, historical representation, folk culture, symbolism, translation, memory, and identity. Early critical approaches generally situated Mo Yan within post-Mao Chinese literature and the “root-seeking” literary movement. Chan (2011) argues that Mo Yan’s fictional world is deeply rooted in rural memory, folk traditions, bodily experience, and the contradictions of modern Chinese history. Similarly, Braester (2007) identifies *Red Sorghum* as a significant example of the reworking of twentieth-century Chinese history through myth, memory, and local experience. Knight (2013) interprets Mo Yan’s fiction through the concept of “*realpolitik*,” emphasising individual resilience in the face of history, sexuality, instinct, and political violence. Her discussion is particularly relevant to the present study because it connects Mo Yan’s narrative strategies with the representation of traumatic historical memory.

Narrative experimentation constitutes another major strand of scholarship. Ng (1998) observes that Mo Yan challenges rigid socialist-realist conventions by incorporating unconventional plot structures, temporal shifts, magical narrative techniques, and peasant perspectives. His approach demonstrates how the “real” can be reconstructed through imaginative rather than strictly documentary representation. Gaikwad (2021), specifically examining *Red Sorghum*, similarly identifies its five-part structure, interwoven family histories, flashbacks, and movement between generations as fundamental to its representation of Chinese history. More recent research by Hu (2025) demonstrates that *Red Sorghum* combines non-linear narration, magical imagery, folk historical perspectives, and Gaomi’s local spatial identity to challenge conventional heroic narratives of the Anti-Japanese War. Huang (2025) extends this argument by examining Mo Yan’s use of unreliable narration as a

mechanism for literary reconfiguration of historical reality and cultural critique.

A related body of criticism examines Mo Yan's use of magical realism and Chinese folk narrative. Holgate argues that Mo Yan adapts magical realism through classical Chinese literature and traditional cultural resources rather than simply reproducing Latin American models. Gonchar-Khanjyan (2025) similarly conceptualises Mo Yan's "hallucinatory realism" through corporeality, sensory experience, cultural semiotics, and localized magical realism. Studies of *Red Sorghum* therefore increasingly recognise that the novel's supernatural, grotesque, and exaggerated elements should be understood as culturally embedded narrative devices rather than merely departures from realism.

Taken together, the literature reveals a significant interdisciplinary opportunity. Existing studies have extensively discussed historical representation, magical realism, folk culture, symbolism, translation, and narrative experimentation, but comparatively less attention has been given to their combined operation in producing cultural trauma and reconstructing collective identity. The present study addresses this gap by connecting narrative form with trauma theory and identity formation.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

The principal theoretical framework of this study is Jeffrey C. Alexander's Cultural Trauma Theory, supplemented by Narrative Theory. Alexander (2004) conceptualises cultural trauma not simply as the psychological suffering of individuals but as a process through which a collective interprets an event as a profound injury to its identity and memory. Cultural trauma therefore involves the construction of collective meaning: communities remember catastrophic experiences, narrate them, symbolise them, and incorporate them into understandings of who they are. This framework is particularly appropriate for *Red Sorghum*, where Japanese invasion, mass violence, death, displacement, and destruction are transformed from historical events into stories of family memory and community identity.

3. ANALYSIS

3.1. Narrative Structure & Temporal Non-Linearity

Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum: A Novel of China*, translated by Howard Goldblatt, departs from conventional chronological war narratives by presenting history through memory, family storytelling, folklore, and temporal fragmentation. The novel's narrator, an unnamed grandson,

reconstructs the lives of his grandfather Yu Zhan'ao and grandmother Dai Fenglian against the background of Japanese invasion and wartime violence. His position between the past and present enables Mo Yan to explore how historical trauma is transmitted across generations and transformed through memory.

3.2. First-Person/Grandson Narrator and Intergenerational Memory

The grandson narrator is central to the novel's reconstruction of history. Although he did not personally experience many of the events he describes, he inherits them through family stories, oral traditions, community memories, and imaginative reconstruction. Consequently, his narration represents not direct historical testimony but intergenerational memory. The past is filtered through the consciousness of a later generation that attempts to understand the experiences, choices, violence, and suffering of its ancestors.

This perspective complicates the distinction between history and memory. The narrator admires the strength and independence of his grandparents while simultaneously revealing their brutality and moral ambiguity. Thus, Yu Zhan'ao is neither simply a heroic resistance figure nor an ordinary historical character. The grandson reconstructs him through memories that contain admiration, uncertainty, exaggeration, and myth. Song's study of the novel's "double temporality" similarly demonstrates how the narrator's present consciousness continually interacts with the historical past.

The intergenerational dimension becomes particularly significant when personal memories become collective memories. The narrator inherits not merely information about his grandparents but an entire cultural history of violence and survival. As Goldblatt translates the narrator's retrospective voice: "The tales of my grandmother ... I now possess within myself." (Mo Yan, 1993, p. 179). This statement captures the process through which private memories become inherited cultural experience. The grandmother's stories become part of the grandson's identity, demonstrating how trauma can survive beyond the generation that directly experienced it.

3.3. Non-Linear Timeline and Fragmented Chronology

The novel does not follow a straightforward chronological sequence. Mo Yan repeatedly moves between different periods of the family's history, particularly the grandparents' earlier lives, the

Japanese invasion, wartime resistance, and the narrator's later perspective. Flashbacks and temporal shifts frequently interrupt the progression of events. The reader therefore encounters history as a collection of remembered episodes rather than as a continuous historical record.

This fragmented chronology has important implications for the representation of trauma. Traumatic experiences are not necessarily remembered in orderly chronological sequences; emotionally powerful images, sensations, people, and places can trigger memories of earlier events. Mo Yan reproduces this characteristic through sudden transitions between past and present. Consequently, the narrative structure itself reflects the instability of traumatic memory.

The repeated return to violence, death, sexuality, family conflict, and the sorghum landscape creates connections between events separated by time. The meaning of an earlier event can change when it is subsequently viewed through the knowledge of later violence. History therefore becomes recursive rather than linear. The past repeatedly intrudes upon the narrative present.

3.4. Folk Legends and Fragmented Historical Knowledge

Mo Yan also incorporates folk legends, rumours, oral histories, local beliefs, and family stories into the narrative. This technique challenges the authority of official historical discourse. Instead of allowing institutional records to determine the meaning of the past, the novel places official history alongside the memories and stories of ordinary rural people.

Hu (2025) argues that *Red Sorghum* employs folk narrative and fragmented storytelling to reconstruct the Anti-Japanese War from local and community perspectives. These folk narratives may contain exaggeration and myth, but their importance lies in preserving the emotional and cultural meanings attached to historical suffering.

3.5. Narrative Fragmentation as Cultural Trauma

The fragmented narrative ultimately functions as more than a stylistic technique. It becomes a formal representation of cultural trauma. The Japanese invasion, violence, death, and destruction are not presented as events that simply belong to the past. They continue to influence the identities and memories of subsequent generations. The grandson's reconstruction demonstrates that historical trauma remains active through storytelling.

Thus, *Red Sorghum* replaces conventional

historical chronology with memory chronology. Events are organised according to emotional associations, family memories, folklore, and recurring images rather than simply according to dates. The grandson's narrative becomes an act of cultural remembrance through which fragmented experiences are assembled into a meaningful, although never completely stable, version of the past. Mo Yan therefore demonstrates that trauma is transmitted not only through historical events themselves but also through the stories, memories, myths, and cultural symbols through which later generations remember them.

3.6. Symbolism, Trauma, and Folk Identity

Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum: A Novel of China*, translated by Howard Goldblatt, develops a rich symbolic system through which violence, memory, survival, and folk identity become interconnected. The sorghum fields, wine, blood, and the colour red are not merely descriptive elements; they function as cultural symbols through which the experiences of rural Chinese communities during war are remembered and interpreted. Chen (2019) observes that imagery and symbolism are central to Goldblatt's translation, particularly the recurring image of sorghum.

3.7. Red Sorghum: Vitality, Freedom, and Agrarian Identity

The red sorghum is the most important recurring symbol in the novel. It represents fertility, strength, freedom, endurance, and the agrarian identity of the people of Gaomi. The plant survives alongside human suffering and becomes a witness to generations of love, violence, death, and resistance. Mo Yan consequently makes the landscape inseparable from the community's historical memory.

The narrator introduces Gaomi through a series of contradictions, describing it as the "most beautiful and most repulsive" and the "most sacred and most corrupt" place in the world (Mo Yan, 1993, p. 4). These contradictions are also embodied in the sorghum fields. They are places of fertility and beauty but also sites of murder, concealment, and wartime destruction. Goldblatt's translation describes the fields as "shimmered like a sea of blood" (Mo Yan, 1993, p. 4), transforming the natural landscape into a symbolic representation of historical violence.

The sorghum fields also provide characters with a space beyond institutional control. Their density allows people to hide, escape, love, fight, and resist.

The fields therefore become a symbolic territory of folk freedom. Their recurring presence suggests that despite war and destruction, rural life possesses an enduring vitality. Salcedo (2025) similarly interprets the sorghum as a symbol of resistance, survival, cultural heritage, and continuity.

3.8. Red Wine and Blood: Sacrifice and Communal Resilience

Sorghum is also transformed into wine, establishing an important symbolic connection between agriculture, family, community, and cultural continuity. Sorghum wine represents livelihood and celebration but also becomes associated with sexuality, masculinity, memory, and resistance. Through wine production, the relationship between the family and the land extends across generations.

Wine and blood share the colour red, creating an important symbolic correspondence between vitality and death. Blood represents sacrifice and violence, while wine represents life, celebration, and communal continuity. Their association demonstrates how closely life and death coexist in the novel.

Blood repeatedly becomes part of the physical landscape. Violence stains the soil, rivers, and sorghum fields, transforming the natural environment into a repository of traumatic memory. The imagery suggests that those who die do not simply disappear; their deaths become part of the land and the community's collective history. In this sense, blood signifies both historical suffering and the sacrifice through which later generations survive.

3.9. The Colour Red and Moral Ambiguity

The colour red possesses contradictory meanings throughout *Red Sorghum*. It can signify happiness, marriage, fertility, vitality, and celebration, but it also evokes blood, death, violence, and war. The red wedding imagery and the red sorghum fields therefore exist alongside scenes of brutality. Mo Yan uses this contradiction to challenge simplified interpretations of history.

The narrator's description of Gaomi as "most heroic and most bastardly" (Mo Yan, 1993, p. 4) captures this moral complexity. Heroism and brutality frequently emerge from the same characters and circumstances. The novel therefore refuses to divide its characters neatly into heroes and villains.

3.10. Banditry And Folk Identity

Yu Zhan'ao embodies this moral ambiguity. He is simultaneously a lover, father, bandit, killer, and

resistance fighter. His character demonstrates how social conditions can destabilise conventional moral categories. During wartime, survival may demand actions that would normally be considered criminal or immoral.

Mo Yan does not simply glorify banditry. Instead, he examines the instincts for survival, freedom, revenge, sexuality, and self-preservation that operate beneath formal moral systems. The distinction between bandit and patriot consequently becomes unstable. A person considered an outlaw in one context may become a defender of the community in another.

This ambiguity is fundamental to folk identity. The people of Gaomi are neither idealised victims nor perfect national heroes. Their identity is shaped by contradictions—courage and cruelty, love and violence, community and individual desire. Trauma therefore becomes a formative element of cultural identity rather than merely an external historical event.

4. CONCLUSION & ACADEMIC CONTRIBUTION

Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum: A Novel of China*, translated by Howard Goldblatt, demonstrates how narrative form and symbolism can work together to transform historical violence into a powerful representation of cultural identity. Its fragmented chronology, intergenerational narration, flashbacks, folk memories, and shifting perspectives reproduce the fractured character of traumatic memory. At the same time, recurring symbols—particularly the red sorghum, blood, wine, and the colour red—connect individual suffering with collective memory, cultural continuity, resistance, and survival. Recent scholarship similarly identifies the sorghum fields as symbols of resistance, historical continuity, and cultural identity, while research on violence and trauma in Mo Yan's fiction emphasises the reconstruction of violent memories and their relationship to social memory and cultural identity.

The academic contribution of this study lies in bringing narrative theory, cultural trauma theory, symbolism, and folk identity into an integrated interpretation of *Red Sorghum*. Rather than treating the novel simply as a war narrative, the study demonstrates how Mo Yan reconstructs history through the memories and experiences of ordinary people. The non-linear narrative challenges conventional historical chronology, while the symbolic landscape of Gaomi preserves the emotional and cultural consequences of violence across generations. In this sense, the novel

transforms local memory into a broader meditation on survival and identity.

The global significance of *Red Sorghum* is also evident in its contribution to postcolonial and world literature. By presenting the Anti-Japanese War through rural Chinese voices, folk traditions, and marginalised figures, Mo Yan challenges dominant historical and heroic narratives. Research identifies the novel as a counter-historical work that recovers the contributions of people marginalised by

mainstream history. Its combination of folklore, magical realism, historical memory, and non-linear narration also enables a local Chinese experience to communicate universal concerns about war, trauma, cultural survival, and human resilience. Thus, *Red Sorghum* converts the history of Gaomi into a globally significant literary exploration of how communities remember violence and preserve identity after historical catastrophe.

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