

On the Female Characters in Mo Yan's "Frog"

Congyi Zhao^{1,a,*}

¹*School of Literature, Capital Normal University, No. 105, West Third Ring Road North, Haidian District, Beijing, China*

a. 2280615350@qq.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: "Frog" depicts a series of events triggered by childbirth in the rural area of Gaomi, Northeast China, during the implementation of the family planning policy. It presents the chaotic reproductive history of Chinese rural areas over several decades. The book centers on the portrayal of female characters, revealing the joys, sorrows, and survival challenges of rural women during the family planning period. This paper focuses on the female characters in the book and deeply analyzes three social roles of women: mother, wife, and professional woman. These roles are not only fundamental components of family and society but also key to understanding women's situations in a specific historical context. By analyzing the female characters in "Frog," this study explores the social realities and feminist ideas reflected in Mo Yan's portrayal of these women.

Keywords: "Frog", Mo Yan, female characters, feminism

1. Introduction

"Frog" revolves around the fundamental national policy of family planning. Mo Yan uses family planning as the backdrop of the story and focuses on the creation of female characters, depicting a large number of vivid female images such as Aunt, Wang Renmei, and Chen Mei. The novel expresses Chinese women's pursuit of freedom and personal liberation, as well as the life difficulties they face. It critiques the system, human nature, and society as a whole, revealing the repression and distortion of human nature under an unreasonable social system.

2. Female Characters in "Frog"

2.1. Selfless and Fearless Mothers

Motherhood is an instinct women acquire the moment they conceive. From pregnancy onward, a mother's body contributes its blood and nutrients to nurture the next generation. Once the natural connection between mother and child is established, almost all women protect their children like a mother beast.

"Frog," as a novel depicting the era of family planning, features predominantly mothers. In the strict enforcement environment of the family planning policy, nearly all mothers protect their unborn children like mother beasts. Geng Xiulian jumped into a river while pregnant to escape forced abortion, resulting in the death of both mother and child; surrogate mother Chen Mei became mentally ill due to being forcibly separated from her child; and the postmenopausal Xiao Shizi began lactating

again upon receiving a child. Mo Yan dramatically portrays the mothers of Gaomi Township resisting family planning, with their desperate attempts to have and protect children evoking deep emotions.

Throughout the book, Mo Yan extensively writes about the image of mothers, while the role of fathers is briefly mentioned, making fathers in "Frog" vague, secondary, or even absent. This subverts the traditional family concept centered on male authority.

2.2. Devoted and Responsible Wives

In "Frog," many female characters, besides being primarily mothers, also bear the identity of wives. As wives, they are devoted to their families and considerate of their husbands, embodying a spirit of dedication and responsibility. At the same time, they are independent individuals with personal awareness and thoughts, challenging the traditional notion of "husband as the head."

Mo Yan focuses on one wife's image in "Frog": Wang Renmei, the first wife of the narrator "I—Tadpole." Wang Renmei's initiative to divorce Xiao Xiaochun was rebellious, progressive, and independent for the era, surpassing most rural women of the time. Her actions subverted traditional rural marriage concepts, demonstrating the mindset of a new era's independent woman. Her decisiveness and courage far exceeded those of traditional rural women.

After marrying Tadpole, Wang Renmei felt guilty for having a girl as her first child, secretly removing her IUD and becoming pregnant again. Due to the family planning policy's restrictions, she chose to abort the child to protect Tadpole's future, ultimately losing her life in the process.

Throughout the incident, Wang Renmei played the role of decision-maker and commander, with strong personal awareness and ideas. She secretly removed her IUD before pregnancy, independently making decisions without her husband's input; after becoming pregnant, she directed her husband to mobilize the family's resources to fight against Aunt. Wang Renmei's image sharply contrasts with her weak and indecisive husband, Tadpole, fully showcasing her dissatisfaction with the status quo, her courage to pursue hope, and her willingness to fight, displaying a bright and vivid primal vitality. However, despite her advanced thoughts, Wang Renmei could not escape the patriarchal idea of "continuing the bloodline by giving birth to a boy," ultimately sacrificing her life.

2.3. Independent Professional Women

In "Frog," "Aunt" represents the image of a professional woman. She received excellent obstetric training in her youth, helping thousands of women give birth. The author tallies Aunt's life achievements: "From April 4, 1953, to December 31, 1957, Aunt delivered 1,612 times, catching 1,645 babies, with six infant deaths. Of these six, five were stillbirths, and one had a congenital disease. This record is quite remarkable, nearly perfect." [1] During childbirth, seeing Aunt reassured the expectant mothers. Aunt quickly replaced midwives, becoming the local "Goddess of Childbirth."

Aunt's image changed during the family planning period. As a public policy, family planning represented public interest centered on national interest, aiming for rapid political, economic, and cultural development. [2] During this period, Aunt's image shifted from "Goddess of Childbirth" to "Living Hades," constantly alternating: during first births, Aunt was the Bodhisattva ensuring the safety of mother and child; during over-births, Aunt became the "Living Hades" who, at any cost, would abort the child to enforce the policy.

Throughout her career, Aunt remained dutiful. Although she struggled internally during enforcement, she did not waver for the future of the country and society, even in the face of people's harsh words. Aunt was undoubtedly an excellent enforcer of national policy and a model of an outstanding professional woman of the time.

3. The Significance of Female Characters in Mo Yan's "Frog"

Mo Yan writes in "Frog," "Reproduction is both solemn and mundane, serious and absurd." [1] Reproduction is naturally an intrinsic human act, but under the influence of social and cultural factors, it has become a personal responsibility that "serves the ancestors above and continues the lineage below." As the primary agents of reproduction, women's images are inherently contradictory. In "Frog," the female characters Mo Yan creates reveal various conflicts between tradition and modernity, the individual and society, and instinct and reason. These contradictions, influenced by social and historical factors, persist in women's lives to this day.

3.1. The Conflict Between Tradition and Modernity

In the context of tradition versus modernity, the fearless and passionate modern woman Wang Renmei in "Frog" dares to divorce her outrageous first husband and courageously pursues love again. In her family life with Tadpole, she is in a leading position, with her own thoughts and decisions, not dependent on her husband, exemplifying the modern woman. However, she also feels regret because her first child is a girl, crying and apologizing to her husband Tadpole. Her actions, such as secretly removing her IUD and directing her husband to oppose Aunt, are motivated by the desire to bear a boy to preserve Tadpole's "bloodline," fulfilling her "duty" as a wife. Wang Renmei ultimately abandons her resistance to protect her husband's job, sacrificing the child she fought so hard to protect. The beginning and end of this event indicate that Wang Renmei remains trapped by the traditional image of a wife.

Wang Renmei's experiences illustrate the conflict between traditional and modern concepts, causing women to struggle painfully. Like many traditional women in Gaomi Township, the modern-minded Wang Renmei ultimately falls victim to the feudal belief that only by bearing a son can one continue the family line.

3.2. The Conflict Between the Individual and Society

The family planning policy was a major policy enacted by the Party for national development, requiring individuals or families to sacrifice some rights and freedoms to maintain the balance of population and resources. [2] In enforcing family planning, both Aunt, the enforcer, and the mothers of Gaomi Township suffer greatly. For the sake of societal development, women are forced to give up their unborn children. Aunt represents the macro-level rights of the state and society, clashing with the micro-level rights of grassroots mothers like Geng Xiulian and Wang Renmei. Ultimately, individuals submit to the collective, paying the price with their lives. The experiences of these grassroots mothers reflect the helplessness and insignificance of individual rights when confronted with the macro-level rights of the state and society, a dilemma women still face today in marriage and childbirth issues.

3.3. The Conflict Between Reason and Instinct

Regarding the conflict between reason and instinct, many female characters in "Frog" embody this, with Aunt and Chen Mei being the most prominent examples.

During the family planning process, Aunt is a cold, ruthless enforcer, aborting countless "unworthy" babies and firmly implementing the Party's policies. As a well-educated materialist, she struggles with profound guilt and remorse upon retirement, hoping to atone for her perceived sins. As a woman, Aunt's instinct fills her with guilt for the countless lost lives of mothers and children.

Chen Mei is the novel's most tragic character. Forced by economic circumstances, she becomes a surrogate mother, giving birth to the child of Tadpole and Xiao Shizi. What should have been a

straightforward transaction triggers Chen Mei's maternal instincts, leading her to desperately want her child back, resulting in her mental breakdown.

In the conflict between reason and instinct, both Aunt and Chen Mei ultimately succumb to instinct, bringing immense suffering. Even today, many women hesitate between staying home with their children and returning to work. The conflict between instinct and reason remains a contemporary dilemma for women.

Mo Yan's portrayal of these conflicts reflects the living conditions, life difficulties, and existential problems of Chinese women, exploring the future of women's existence. The mothers Mo Yan writes about are not just ordinary literary figures but represent countless women. Through his pen, Mo Yan depicts the female archetypes of a special era, an archetype that continues to reappear in our lives today, reflecting women's pain and predicaments.

4. Feminist Perspectives in Mo Yan's "Frog"

4.1. Subverting Patriarchal Narratives

"Modern Chinese male narratives often demonize proactive women, portraying female subjectivity as oppressive to male subjectivity, and refuse to empathize with proactive women's life struggles. They ridicule and mock proactive women with a comedic attitude, defaming women who attempt to transcend feudal patriarchal morals as evil wives who deceive or oppress their husbands. This betrays the modern cultural concept of spiritually liberating women and returns to feudal patriarchal morality, exposing the lack of modernity in modern Chinese literature from the perspective of gender consciousness." [5] In "Frog," Mo Yan's writing demonstrates a resolute stance in subverting traditional patriarchal values and reconstructing modern female subjectivity.

Feudal patriarchal morals demand that women relinquish independent thought and self-subjectivity, submit to men's scrutiny, selection, and use, and comply with men's arrangements, adhering to the principle of "the husband as the wife's guide." Women who boldly pursue themselves and defy their husbands' wishes are labeled as "unruly," "shrews," or "madwomen." In "Frog," Mo Yan breaks through the patriarchal mindset that denies women their agency, celebrating women with a sense of freedom, and breaking traditional moral principles, showcasing a breakthrough and progress in female gender consciousness and subjectivity.

In the novel, Mo Yan focuses on rebellious women, narrating their process of actively breaking free from familial and ideological constraints, highlighting women's life stories, and praising women with subjectivity and initiative. For instance, as a wife, Wang Renmei defies her husband and family's decisions, and Aunt focuses on her career, rejecting a traditional female life. Through Mo Yan's praise of proactive women, significant progress in gender awareness in contemporary Chinese literature is reflected, highlighting his exploration of modern feminism.

4.2. Breaking Stereotypical Female Images

Mo Yan once said, "In times of major historical events, women always show more strength than men. Men are destroyers, women are builders." [6] He has also frequently admitted to being a feminist. In "Frog," he weakens and blurs male roles, focusing on female characters, giving them space to grow and develop, subverting the male-centric literary creation tradition in Chinese literature. In this novel, dominated by women, we can see Mo Yan's feminist views.

In "Frog," Mo Yan changes the traditional aesthetic of women as delicate and frail, portraying the healthy beauty of women and emphasizing their spiritual growth. He also subverts the traditional concept of female virtue, which dictates "the husband as the wife's guide," encouraging women to pursue their own value, and creates vibrant, lively, and energetic female images.

As Nobel Prize for Literature judge and Swedish Academy member Per Wästberg said in his award

speech, "Mo Yan is a poet who strips away the formulaic propaganda posters, bringing women to the forefront from the faceless masses." [7] Aunt's dual image as both "goddess and demon" subverts the stereotypical female images of "angels" or "witches" created by traditional male writers. Men, based on their aesthetic ideals, rigidly categorize women, stripping their images of vitality and complexity, reducing them to men's appendages to satisfy patriarchal cultural expectations. Aunt's constant shifting between the "Goddess of Childbirth" and "Living Hades" images precisely subverts and rebels against such patriarchal literature, creating truly vivid and lively female images.

Mo Yan's portrayal of Aunt's independence and strength, Wang Renmei's courage and passion, Huang Qiuyuan's erudition and technical prowess, and Geng Xiulian's spirit of dedication and courage are all snapshots of modern women. They are charming, vivid, and lively, allowing readers to feel their personality and charisma through the pages. The qualities of kindness, resilience, and courage in the women of "Frog" continue to shine with the light of female self-liberation.

5. Conclusion

In "Frog," Mo Yan breaks away from the traditional literary portrayal of women, where their fates are often predetermined and defined by societal norms. Although these female characters hold conventional social roles, the novel focuses on their survival struggles, highlighting their resistance against the destinies prescribed by a patriarchal society. "Frog" depicts the individual fates and personalities of women within specific historical contexts, showcasing their development and evolution of thought during those times. It illustrates the difficulties women face in their quest for survival, offering a reference or inspiration for the liberation of modern women.

References

- [1] Mo, Y. (2020). *Frog*. Hangzhou: Zhejiang Literature and Art Publishing House.
- [2] Bao, L. P. (2009). *Evaluation of China's Family Planning Policy for 50 Years and Future Directions*. *Social Sciences*, 2009(6).
- [3] Li, L. (2002). *The Image of Evil Women in the Narratives of Modern Chinese Men*. *Literature, History and Philosophy*, (271), 2002(7).
- [4] Li, N. Q. (2010). *Dialogue with Mo Yan: Between Despair and Arrogance*. *Southern People Weekly*, 2010(2).
- [5] Mao, X. D. (2013). *Complete Collection of Nobel Prize in Literature Acceptance Speeches and Award Speeches*. Hangzhou: Zhejiang Gongshang University Press.