

Zofia Lyne R. Agama

Maximino U. Pulan, Jr.

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Paper No. 2: Mo Yan, “Frogs”

Mo Yan’s “Frogs” as a half-imagined narrative of an obstetrician-turned-abortion-doctor is a story that is paradigmatic of how far people will go to demonstrate their dedication to the Communist Party and is a critical glimpse into the ills and inhumanity of the Chinese Communist State. In “Frogs,” these issues are explored through the predicament of Aunt Gugu and the one-child policy’s doubly taxing ramifications on women. First introduced through Auntie’s background, Gugu’s supposed-to-be husband’s defecting to the Nationalists put her loyalty to question by association (Lovella). To then restore trust and prove devotion, especially as her father served the Communist party that lent her her medical education, Gugu then became an instrument to implement the party’s policy against unauthorized births.

Much of the cronyism and inadequacy of officials during this period was represented in the story through Melon Huang who, in Gugu’s words, in spite of his incompetence as hospital director, had the talent for “kissing ass,” by hosting banquets for high officials with public funds. Huang taking advantage of and impregnating Xiaomei, and instructing Gugu to terminate the fetus, was revelatory of how women were—especially in lieu of the policy—treated as a liability; even alternatively installed in villas in such cases (Yan). Xiaomei’s own initiative to abort can even be read not only in cognizance of this but also in fear of the party. This submerged yet imminent “violence” in Chinese society materializes more in the Frogs that were outrageously coming after Auntie.

In Mo Yan's "hallucinatory realist" fashion, the frogs' sinister croaks heard as infant cries, with some "as small as dates," (Yan) and their growing nails that scraped Gugu's skin, depicts Auntie's demons and psychological turmoil; spelling her deepest regret in having performed the abortions with respect to her dedication to the party. The frogs directly represented the thousands of babies aborted, and in Auntie pronouncing that her greatest fear from the ordeal was not from the violent retaliations but from "the disgusting, unbearable sensation of their cold, slimy skin brushing against hers," (Yan) she emulates a self-revulsion and guilt (i.e. in Tagalog: *pandidiri sa sarili*) that, quite literally, "sticks" with her in remembering every fetus that has died in her hands.

Her finding the sculptor held significance as it marked a time of salvation and renewal for Auntie when she could no longer run away from the frogs. The Frogs in the excerpt—or rather even, the babies—described as "mud clods" (Yan) or clay, and her coincidentally finding her saving grace in Daoshu, the sculptor, gave Auntie a semblance of hope in being able to "re-form" her life, which thus justified why she marries Daoshu by the end of the story. In Lovella's article, such pursuit is concretized as Lovella cites that, in retirement, Aunt Gugu "devoted herself to making thousands of dolls representing the fetuses she destroyed."

As a story situated in a cultural revolution that denied publication of artistic and literary forms that refused to conform to the Maoist norms extolling the heroism of revolutionary classes and peasants who readily sacrificed themselves for the communist party, Mo Yan's "Frogs" achieves great feats in revealing instead the system's underbelly in blind compliance, toxic patriotism, and invisible yet imminent violence. It is then apt to regard that its contemporary literary mode of production in China is not only subversive, but all the more revolutionary, in articulating a criticism for a turbulent time that comes from the author whose name means: "don't speak."

Works Cited

- Lovell, Julia. "Mo Yan's 'Frog.'" *The New York Times*, The New York Times Company, 6 Feb. 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/02/08/books/review/mo-yans-frog.html. Accessed 17 May 2021.
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