

The Significance of Human Life in Mo Yan's Novel Frog

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Abstract: This paper takes Mo Yan's novel *Frog* as the research object, explores the views of each character in *Frog* on the meaning of life through the psychological changes of different characters in the novel and each character in different periods, and deeply excavates the pain points of the family planning era through the novel. In the metaphor of "frog-baby-life", "frog" is the symbol, and life is the end of the metaphor; Among them, the "baby" is the most dramatic perspective point as the point of entanglement of problems in historical society. This paper focuses on the image and psychology of frogs, aunts, and Wang Renmei, and delves into the meaning of the works, and tries to present the hidden value appeal of the original text—life itself and the meaning of life—in the historical scenes and life events in the book, as well as in the changes of personnel.

Keywords: Mo Yan, *Frog*, the meaning of life

1. Introduction

Mo Yan is a renowned contemporary Chinese writer, and his novel *Frog* was awarded the eighth Mao Dun Literature Prize in 2011. This literary masterpiece, crafted over seven years and revised multiple times, showcases the author's profound expertise in language narration, novel structure, and characterization, all of which contribute to its high artistic value. Simultaneously, the novel stands as a monument in the history of Chinese literature.

Based on the 'family planning' policy, the novel chronicles the remarkable life of an aunt who has dedicated over 50 years to obstetrics and gynecology. It truly reflects the challenges encountered in implementing the family planning policy in a small village in the northeastern township of Gaomi. Behind the 'family planning' policy, countless lives are born and lost. Through people's desires for 'life' and fears of 'death,' the author and the characters express profound reflections on life. Currently, there have been some related studies on the novel *Frog*, mostly focusing on the aunt's image or feminist research. This paper analyzes the novel's deeper meaning from the perspective of life. Despite limited studies, this paper explores the different characters in the book and the conflicting oppositions to uncover the meaning of human life.

2. Two Symbols of Welcoming Life and Killing Life

2.1. Welcoming Life: *Frog*

In *Frog*, Mo Yan narrates various past events in northeast Gaomi Township in the first person from the perspective of Tadpole. When all the dust settled, Tadpole wanted to adapt it into a script, and he said: "For now, it's the 'wa' in 'qingwa (Frog),' but I can change it later to the 'wa' in 'wawa' for babies, or in 'Nvwa,' the goddess who created mankind. After she populated the earth with people, the character for frogs symbolized a profusion of children, and it has become Northeast Gaomi Township's totem. Frogs appear as creatures of veneration in our clay sculptures and our New Year's paintings" [1]. Inspired by this, this paper analyzes the worship of "frogs" in Northeast Township from the two aspects of "doll" and "Nvwa".

The word "frog" is a homophone of "doll" in Chinese pronunciation, and "doll" represents children. Frogs have a strong reproductive capacity and can lay 3,000 to 6,000 eggs at a time. In the book, the aunt believes that no more than one out of ten thousand of them would become frogs; the others would become part of the muddy riverbed. Just like a man's sperm, only about one in ten million penetrates the egg to create a child. Moreover, it is believed that the pregnant belly of a woman is similar to the round belly of a frog, so people strongly worship the frog and desire women to have as strong fertility as the frog. Therefore, the frog embodies the characteristics of fertility in the book.

Frog is also homophonic with Nvwa (a goddess in Chinese mythology). In the *Shuowen Jiezi* (discussing writing and explaining characters), the explanation of 'Wa' is an ancient female sacred being who gave birth to all things in the world. This affirms the myth that Nuwa, as the goddess of creation, formed human beings with loess. Mr. Zhao Guohua believes that the word 'Nvwa' evolved from the term 'frog,' originally a symbol of female genitalia. It later developed into a symbol of women and then evolved into a goddess of reproduction [2]. This confirms the inseparable connection between 'Nvwa' and 'frog,' with the word 'frog' carrying people's wishes for childbirth. Yi Zhongtian also states that people's worship of the image of Nvwa is essentially the worship of female reproductive ability, with the direct purpose of this pragmatic worship being to have more children [3]. This further supports the idea that the implicit meaning of the word 'Wa' is to give birth to children. Combined with the above, it can be seen that the word 'frog' also implies the meaning of giving birth. The article repeatedly mentions that the folk craft master Hao Dashou made clay dolls based on the aunt's mysterious description. These dolls were crafted according to the faces of children aborted by the aunt. This is akin to the myth of Nvwa creating human beings. Therefore, 'Frog' also exhibits characteristics of creation in the book.

The Tadpoles in the book say that the *Frog* is the totem of Northeast Gaomi Township. Mo Yan's title, *Frog*, reflects that the theme of the book is related to fertility. The worship of frogs in Northeast Township is actually the worship of Nvwa and fertility. It is also mentioned in the book that in that hungry era, even if others ate frogs, people in Tadpoles' family did not eat frogs.

2.2. Strangling Life: The Transformation of the Aunt's Character

In the 1950s and 1960s, the state adjusted its policies in a timely manner. Various localities began to promote and popularize birth control technology, marking the challenging initiation of the promotion of modern birth control technology in China [4].

The image of the aunt is divided into three stages. At the beginning, my aunt was a rural female doctor responsible for delivering babies, and as a "child delivery mother" who saved many lives, she had a very high status in Gaomi Township. In the second stage, with the implementation of family planning, in order to comply with policy changes, the aunt, a party member, became a person highly responsive to the government's policies and performed abortions without recognizing her relatives

for policy implementation. Until my aunt died of hemorrhage due to an abortion performed by someone responding to her call for abortion, she gradually felt guilty and fearful of the lives she had strangled with her own hands. In the third stage, the aunt, accompanied by the inability to have children, the siege of frogs, and the loss of her unborn life, seeks redemption for herself. In this third stage, the aunt completes the transformation from a strong woman to a person of atonement.

Family planning had a significant impact on the social situation at that time, and my aunt was often affected in the process of implementing the policy. In those days, married women who did not give birth to boys faced tremendous pressure, and aunts were torn between the notion of backwardness and national policies promoting childbirth.

Therefore, the transformation of the aunt's image alludes to the embarrassing status quo of the superbirth phenomenon in the author's era, resulting in the inevitable depiction of the aunt. It also signifies the varied consequences of the prohibition of superbirth in that era, fostering the evolution of the aunt's image and the transformation of the inner world.

3. The Contradictory Representation of the Characters' Attitudes to Life

3.1. Wang Renmei: Conflicts between the Demand of Human Ethical Humanity and the Social System of Forced Birth Control

Wang Renmei is the first wife of the protagonist Tadpole. She embodies the typical female characteristics of feudal society and serves as a true portrayal of many women in the social background. Initially, Wang Renmei, who already has a daughter, desires to have another son for Tadpole. However, as Tadpole is a military officer, if Wang Renmei gives birth again, he will face severe punishment in accordance with the family planning policy. Despite strong opposition from her aunt, husband, and the superior organization, Wang Renmei approaches her acquaintance, Yuan Sai, to remove her contraceptive ring. She insists on having the baby, even at the risk of death. As pointed out by Zuo Xiu in her book, 'People like Wang Renmei, desperate for life, are everywhere, showcasing the desire to live and fearlessness of death' [5]. However, ultimately, under intense pressure from her superiors, Wang Renmei concedes to undergo sterilization. Unfortunately, the operation fails, leading to fatal hemorrhaging.

At that time, the birth of new life meant the continuation and expansion of the family, determining the status of women and the source of motherhood. Females are often tied to "procreation." Simone de Beauvoir said of procreation: A woman fulfills her biological destiny by becoming a mother, and it is a natural 'mission' for her [6]. At that time, people thought that giving birth to new life was a unique physiological function and a basic "mission" given to women by heaven. Women must bear the obligation of giving birth, bear sons for their husbands, and continue the lineage for the family.

Behind Wang Renmei's understanding of life lies the assimilation and erosion of human thoughts by traditional conceptions of fertility, such as "inheriting the family line" and "valuing sons over daughters." Guo Aimei argues in her research on patriarchy, stating that the deep-seated prejudice against women in patriarchal culture permeates the gaps in social and ideological views. It acts like a vast network binding people's hands, feet, and brains everywhere [7]. This illustrates that the traditional view of persecution is a result of the dominant position of patriarchy, leading to stereotypical images of women. At that time, the conflict between the traditional conception of fertility and the national policy of family planning was pronounced. Wang Renmei's final compromise and concession also foreshadowed that personal rights and demands would eventually have to be conceded in the face of national political policy.

3.2. Aunt: The Contradiction between the Personality Mask of Devotion to Duty and the Individual Consciousness of Cherishing New Life

Mo Yan's works mainly reflect the background and social environment of the times through plump, three-dimensional and vivid characters, so his characters are an important entry point for understanding and analyzing Mo Yan's works [8].

"When I was young, my aunt was loyal to the instructions and policies of the state, even implementing family planning at all costs, indirectly leading to the demise of many unborn babies or pregnant women." However, in the second part of *Frog*, it seems that the old aunt still harbors pity and guilt for the newborn and even the unborn babies aborted due to excessive childbirth. So, the young aunt can be described as a person wearing a mask.

The old aunt is often immersed in guilt and love for the newborn. As she ages, her perspective changes significantly compared to when she was young. Unlike the family planning that couldn't be carried out in the end during the young age, the old aunt believes that even in the case of excessive childbirth, it represents a new life for which pregnant women have diligently conceived.

At present, in that period of history, family planning was indeed a reasonable decision. "Frog is a historical map of rural family planning development outlined by Mo Yan for the reality of contemporary Chinese society, reflecting the difficulties and challenges experienced by the Chinese nation in its survival and development" [9]. Since the peasants' education level is not high, and family planning and the traditional concept of having more children and more blessings are contrary to them, the implementation of policies and conflicts between those who implement them and those who are executed are naturally inevitable. Her aunt's conflict with the villagers and her inner entanglement during the implementation of the policy led to the conflict between her fear of frog croaking and her love for newborns in her later years.

In the triple image of the aunt, it can be seen the change in her attitude towards the newborn, from the "delivery mother" who brought the newborn into the world to an outright "abortion advocate". Additionally, her later years are marked by a fear of frogs and a lingering sense of guilt, reflecting shifts in her inner conflicts and perspectives on the meaning of life.

4. The Causes of the Conflict between Abortion and Surrogacy in *Frog*

4.1. Conflict between the Old Concept of Reproduction and the New State Policy

The narrative of the article centers on the conflict between the old conception of birth and the new national policy as the main contradiction. The story unfolds in a small village in the northeastern township of Gaomi in the 1970s, when the villagers were uneducated and still dominated by old ideas. "Carrying on the family line," "continuing the incense," and other such "principles" were still revered at that time. During peacetime, the rapid development of medical care in China led to a significant increase in the fertility rate, imposing considerable pressure on the country and society in the early days of the founding of the People's Republic of China. Consequently, the family planning policy was introduced.

The new birth concept advocates fewer and better births and the implementation of a one-child system. The emergence and popularization of the new birth concept have brought about a series of conflicts, especially in rural areas with conservative ideas. Under the leading idea of pursuing the "flourishing of the people" and "inheriting the family line," the popularization of the new birth concept is doomed to encounter a series of difficult problems. As a representative of family planning, the aunt in the book can see the acuteness of the conflict from the difficulties encountered in the policy promotion process.

With the development of social history, "procreation" cannot only be people's personal desire to extend the family but should also consider a series of problems brought by the rapid population growth to the country and society. Yan Geling once said: The history of the individual has never been purely personal, and the history of nations and nations has always been personal [10]. For the high-quality development of the country and population, the replacement of the new conception of fertility is an inevitable trend in social development.

4.2. The Spiritual and Physical Exploitation of Women by Capital

In the book, there are a total of two women, Little Lion and Chen Mei, associated with a nominal bullfrog company, which is actually a surrogacy company. Little Lion is Tadpole's right-hand person and his renewed wife, but she cannot get pregnant. Chen Mei is the second daughter of Chen Bi, a classmate of Tadpole, but she was disfigured by a toy factory fire and refuses help from Tadpole and others. Today, surrogacy is considered a violation of morality and human relations, but the two women voluntarily accepted it.

Traditionally, the most important thing for a family is to continue the family line, and the most important thing for a woman is to give birth to children, especially boys. If a woman has a child, it means that she has fulfilled the task that the family has placed on her. A woman's truly independent status derives from the birth of a child, and this independence frees her from the need to strive for any other purpose. Although she is not a complete person from the point of view of the wife, she is a complete person from the point of view of the mother. In other words, if a woman is to be a complete person, she must have children, and the children are her happiness, justifying her existence. She can use children to achieve self-realization in both sexual and social aspects [10]. Indeed, in today's eyes, such traditional thinking is undoubtedly a relic of feudal times, and the legitimacy of survival obtained by relying on children will not in any way be the basis for a woman to achieve an independent status. However, this traditional thought runs through the life of Little Lion. When she is unable to bear a son for the Tadpole, she steals the Tadpole's sperm and asks Chen Mei to bear the child for her. This act of giving birth to a child from the belly reveals the selfish, dark, and crazy image of Little Lion. In order to become a mother, Little Lion even abandoned the bottom line of morality and forced an innocent woman to fulfill her personal will. Even after the Tadpole found out about the surrogacy incident, she showed no remorse. Instead, she frantically threatened the Tadpole with divorce and his life, accusing him of not being grateful to her for finally continuing the family line. There is no doubt that the organizers and participants of the surrogacy company exploited Chen Mei's body inhumanely.

Chen Mei turned to surrogacy to cover her father's medical expenses. Initially, the surrogacy center quoted 50,000 for a boy and 30,000 for a girl. However, when she delivered a boy, the child was taken away under the pretext of a "stillbirth." Chen Mei received only \$10,000 in compensation. She was forcibly separated from her child and, rather than seeking more money, she simply wanted her baby back.

When Chen attempted to enter the police station, Wei, a recent police academy graduate, recognized the potential criminal aspect in Chen's disheveled statements. However, the police chief refused to take the case. Later, Chen unintentionally intruded on the set of the TV drama featuring Gao Mengjiu, mistaking the actor portraying Gao Mengjiu for Bao Qingtian. Seeking justice, she inadvertently involved herself in the situation. Yuan Qian, Tadpole's classmate and the village secretary's son, deceived the mentally unstable Chen Mei by bribing the TV director. This manipulation by the surrogacy company had exploited both Chen Mei's body and spirit. The article highlights the oppression faced by Chen Mei, evident in Gao Mengjiu's absurd statements, such as "We are confused about the stupid case!" and "He who lets go is the mother!".

5. Conclusion

This paper commences with an analysis of the two symbols of life and death in Gaomi Northeast Township, exploring the attitudes of its residents towards the contradictions of life and the reasons for the strong conflicts portrayed in *Frog*. It concludes that pure life is the crystallization of parental love; however, people's selfish desire to perpetuate family traditions has encumbered new life with heavy shackles. Simultaneously, due to the helplessness of the era, new life has become a tool to implement national policies. Mo Yan wrote *Frog* not only to showcase the personal will of a group of people, represented by aunts, and the challenges of the era but also to evoke the pain experienced by individuals during the implementation of family planning in the 1960s. Moreover, he reflects on this pain to convey his view of life: emphasizing the vitality of life under the drive of life's desires. Building on the study of *Frog*, this paper attempts to present a novel perspective on the meaning of life in the novel and provide a more concise summary. Although the generalization of language in this paper needs strengthening, and theoretical support is slightly lacking, future revisions will enhance the article's condensed language and incorporate a more robust scientific research basis.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally, and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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