

Documenting the Voice of the Muted Group: A study of Mai Der Vang's *Yellow Rain*

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Abstract

Yellow Rain is a work of art which ventures into the new or often unexplored genre – ‘documentary poetics’. Documents such as historical records, newspaper articles and interview recordings are combined with poetry to form a documentary poem. Such type of art is called as ‘collage poem’. Mai Der Vang uses this powerful genre to come out with the silenced history of Hmong—an ethnic minority group who suffered because of biological warfare known as ‘yellow rain’. She narrates the sad plight of Hmong in a poetic lore combined with evidences. She examines the official documents to understand the hand of oppressor in the usage of biological warfare against the Hmong. She brings forth the miserable lot of a marginalized group.

Keywords: documentary poetics, silenced history, marginalized group, biological warfare, collage poem

Mai Der Vang is a living author who was born on October 20, 1981 in California. She is the daughter of Hmong refugee family in the United States. She is a recipient of

Guggenheim and Lannan Literary Fellowship. She served as a Visiting Writer at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She also co-edited the text *How Do I Begin: A Hmong American Literary Anthology*. Her debut collection of poems—*Afterland* was long listed for the National Book Award for Poetry in 2017 and was finalized for the 2018 Kate Tufts Discovery Award. *Afterland* is a detailed account of Hmong- a marginalized community's life in Laos, their exodus to Thailand refugee camps and their life in the host land America. Her next poetry collection *Yellow Rain* also won numerous awards including the 2022 Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize, the 2022 American Book Award, and was shortlisted for multiple awards, including the 2022 Pulitzer Prize in Poetry, the 2022 PEN/Voelcker Award for Poetry Collection, and the 2021 Los Angeles Times Book Prize in Poetry. Vang has documented these poems to convey the erased history of Hmong. Her third collection of poems, *Primordial* is set to be published in 2025. She currently teaches Creative Writing in the MFA Program at California State University in Fresno.

Documentary poetry flourished in the early twentieth century. According to Julius Lobo, a writer, “poets too experiment with documentary forms, merging verse with non-traditional elements to create astonishing works of art.” Documentary poetry uses historical events or historical materials as source. It draws materials from pamphlets, newspaper articles, interview transcripts, public records and so on to prove their claims. A critic namely James Metres, defines documentary poetry as it “arises from the idea that poetry is not a museum – object to be observed from afar, but a dynamic medium that informs and is informed by the history of the moment.”

Poets such as Muriel Rukeyser and Williams Carlos documented their poetry to put an essence of reality in it. Some examples of documentary poetry are *Olio* by Tyehimba Jess, *Coal Mountain Elementary* by Mark Nowak, *Public Figures* by Jena Osman and *Blood*

Dazzler by Patricia Smith. Jill Magi in the article “Poetry in Light of Documentary” a documentary poetry should answer the question “what kind of reality and whose reality is being represented.” According to Philip Metres (qtd. in Earl) “The Documentary poem is meant to testify to the often unheard voices of people struggling to survive in the phase of unspeakable violence.”

In the poem *Yellow Rain*, Mai Der Vang combines the affidavits - articles in the newspapers, interviews, recordings in the radio broadcast with lyrical poetry to explore the new genre of Documentary poetics. Being a Hmong herself, Vang convincingly portrays the sufferings of an ethnic minority group. Hmong people lived in Southern China about four thousand years ago. In China, they were called as *Miao*. They migrated to Laos, in the nineteenth century because of land expansion by the Chinese Government. In Laos, during the Vietnam War, the Hmong joined hands with Southern regime aided by American troops in the Secret War against the Northern Communists. But the Northern Communists headed by the Pathet Lao, an organization, won the war. After the defeat of South regime, America withdrew from the war. Hmong were identified as traitors by the Pathet Lao, and eventually were forced to flee from Laos to escape genocide. Majority of the Hmong had to walk barefoot through mountains and river to escape the genocide. They reached the adjacent country Thailand and spent nearly more than ten years in Thailand refugee camps. Afterwards, they were scattered in countries like the USA, France, Canada, and Germany. According to the 2010 U.S census, about two lakh sixty thousand Hmong Americans living were accommodated in the United States.

The origin of the ‘yellow rain’ controversy dates back to the late 1970s, the aftermath of the Vietnam War. To wipe out the remaining Hmong from the Thailand refugee camp and curb further resistance from Hmong group named Chao Fa, the new communist government

used Soviet - supplied chemical weapons to threaten the Hmong. Chemical Warfare was largely reported from two refugee camps, Ban Vinai and Nong Khai. According to the US Government Embassy's interviews with Hmong refugees, the bio war occurred during daytime. These attacks were conducted by slow-flying aircraft's bombs which exploded slightly above the tree level. The bombs emitted colored smoke. Out of the smoke, a yellow liquid was formed which sounded like a rain, when it touched the surface of objects. For this reason, Hmong called the chemical substance as 'Yellow Rain'. People affected with yellow rain suffered from severe vomiting, burning creating sensation on their skin and even they died of hemorrhage. Moreover, this yellow rain had severe effects on plants and animals. However Soviet officials denied the charge. To this date, the cause of yellow rain remains a mystery.

In the very opening of chapter titled "The Fact of the Matter Is the Consequence of Ugly Deaths" Vang condemns the oppressor for not acknowledging the deaths of Hmong people. She vehemently addresses the oppressors:

You refuse our dead

As though

We were never alive.

Just say what you mean to say, that is:

Hmong,

Keep

Your Dying

To Yourself.

The blood samples of the sick people were collected for investigation by the US Embassy. But there arose many allegations of poor transportation of blood samples by retaining it for days together so that the samples credibility of the samples was lost. After this stage, the American Embassy, who was responsible for the fair investigation, declared that they lacked fund for preserving blood samples. Then there came a state when the Embassy was uncertain of the occurrence of 'yellow rain.' Vang sarcastically mimics the Embassy in the following lines:

We don't have the means to give up the absolute.

Too much drains at stake to ratify our own absurdity.

Announce our verdict of confusion we cannot

Plan the uninvited but to blend

Dichotomies of truth brain-drowsed junked out

Crude to concede

We an impressive debacle.

Here lie

the ashes

of our

sanity. (Vang, We Can't Confirm)

After this mayhem, there came a sudden twist in the investigation, when Mathew S. Meselson, a Professor of Biochemistry at Harvard University, commented that the yellow spots are the droppings of Southeast Asian honeybees. Moreover, according to Meselson, the Hmong suffered with the symptoms of food poisonings due to the consumption of moldy

food while they were in the refugee camps and not because of their exposure to yellow rain. Vang questions the investigators as to how they could invent the answers to favour the aftermath of yellow rain. One could not confirm the yellow spots as the droppings of bees. There are numerous queries in the poem addressed to Meselson's investigation report.

In the chapter "Allied with the Bees" Vang draws a similarity over the allegations upon the bees in the yellow rain controversy and the plight of Hmong in the secret war. Both the bees and the Hmong were exploited by the oppressors. When all allegations failed to prove the cause of yellow rain, the US Embassy came out with a new idea of accusing the bees as a culprit. Likewise, Hmong were used as agents in the Secret War by the US and were abandoned after the US was defeated in the war. The Pathet Lao government accused the Hmong people instead of America. Vang asserts that Hmong people are as innocent as the bees. She says, "...what happened to the bees, also happened to us" (Vang, Allied with the Bees).

Moreover, Vang also highlights another chemical warfare upon Hmong people. Hmong people produced cash crop—opium plants along with corn and rice cultivations in the late nineteenth century. But towards the beginning of twentieth century, the Lao's government launched a campaign to spray toxins, chemicals to render their land sterile in order to control the consumption of illicit drugs. Due to this preventive action, several children who were exposed to poisonous gas lost their lives. The adverse effects of the campaign are brought to limelight in the poetry. She highlights the Hmong custom of healing diseases with the help of opium. She emphasizes the healing power of opium when combined with Hmong medicine,

You do not need to crumble

You will not distort

From the shape
You've always been
All pieces of you
Together

As ever at birth
All pieces elixired with sugarcane

Gourd

Tonic of opium... (A Body Always Yours)

Therefore she suggests that opium was also used to treat the adverse effects of 'yellow rain' on human body. Throughout the entire poem, Vang speaks for the Hmong culture inherent within her blood.

Mai Der Vang, being a daughter of Hmong refugees who resettled in the United States seeks justice for the sufferings of her people. She combines evidence and poetry to recreate the history of the Hmong people. Throughout the poem, there is a logical coherence of facts combined with poetry. She has conducted in-depth research to compose the poem, *Yellow Rain*. She acknowledges the unique feature of the poem, "Research for me, when I'm writing a poem, can be as simple as looking up the name of the tree, or as complex as reading through thousands of pages of archival materials, as I did for 'Yellow Rain'" (qtd. in Beavers). By re-scripting the erased history of Hmong, Vang vindicates the honor and the bravery of the Hmong people.

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