



Socio-Cultural Representation of Chinese Society: A Gastronomic Study of the Select Novels of Mo Yan

Aaradhana

Research Scholar (Ph.D.); Department of English; Lovely Professional University

ABSTRACT

The credit for the dynamic function of representation of food in literature is long due. With the advent of modernism, this area of study gained its importance. The opening of this critical literature study, a new perspective brought into discussion a deep look into the social, cultural, and ideological aspects hidden behind various food connotations. Ronald Barthes established this new discourse by stating that the depiction of food is a system of communication. Apart from being necessary for human survival, food has its complex web of cultural, religious, political, philosophical, and economic connotations that represent a community to the rest of the world. With this multifaceted nature of food representation in literature, the present paper seeks to study the gastronomic notion present in the select novel of Mo Yan. The narratives of this Nobel Prize winner author reflect more on the Chinese culture than he intended. Therefore, the paper examines commensality and culinary custom as mentioned in the select novels to unfold the hidden aspects of Chinese society in general here. Since Mo Yan's novels are full of folktales, myths, and other cultural references, the criticism of symbolism of food will uncover other hidden characteristics of Chinese society.

Keywords: Gastronomy, Chinese culture, food symbolism, commensality.

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INTRODUCTION

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The study of food symbolism as a new area of study started under gastronomy discourse. This discourse of gastronomy was first introduced to the critical audience by a French politician and writer Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin. It was in his book titled *The Physiology of Taste* (1825) where he propagated his concept of gastronomy through his axioms such as: -“tell me what you eat, and I will tell you who you are” or the similar phrase “you are what you eat”. His discourse of gastronomy critically examines human consumption and elements associated with it. This new critical perspective provided the scholars with a new lens for studying literary texts. However, this discourse collaborated with other academic areas of sciences such as anthropology, nutrition, business studies, to name a few, and humanities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Particularly in the humanities, acritical gastronomic examination was applied to the primary literary texts in its initial stage to broaden the available scholarship, such as the works of Shakespeare and Ben Jonson. Soon, all the significant writers from the period of Shakespeare to the contemporary times received scholarly attention from a new lens. For example, the 2017 book, *A History of Food in Literature*, edited by Charlotte Boyce and Joan Fitzpatrick, provided a significant scholarship on the gastronomic study of the prominent English writers from 1300 to 2003. Fitzpatrick's book brings out a general understanding of a “complex relationship between body, subjectivity and social structures regulating consumption” as represented in the literary texts [1]. This critical analysis also highlights the socio-political conditions in which the author wrote and other cultural aspects that affected the process and the final work.

Similarly, the present paper examines the representation of food in Mo Yan's selected novels. The historico-political narratives of his novels bring out the suffering of ordinary people under the constant socio-political changes that China underwent during the twentieth century. Mo Yan has used “hallucinatory realism” to portray such experiences in his novels, highly acclaimed by the Nobel committee [2]. The present paper provides a gastronomic study of Mo Yan's three novels: *Red Sorghum*, *The Garlic Ballads*, and *The Republic of Wine*, as translated by Mo Yan's official translator Howard Goldblatt. The use of “food symbolism to exemplify the material connectedness of humans to society while exposing the cultural web of meaning attached to certain foods and certain situations” is acknowledged by many of Mo Yan's critics, one of which is Olsen [3]. Therefore, the paper examines Mo Yan's selected novels by using the conception devised by Roland Barthes on food symbolism and its communicative nature.

Food: A symbolic language

In his essay titled “Towards a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption, the renowned French semiotician and literary critic Roland Barthes (1915-1980) “Towards a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption” emphasised the symbolic meaning of food. He reasoned that food has another meaning apart from dietary function in providing stability to humans. Barthes argues that food helps study cultural and behavioural facets of a community-associated. As Barthes points out, the scholars left this new discourse on food in the dark for a long time. Furthermore, his commentary in the essay mentioned above responds to the neglect of food symbolism in critical studies. He goes further to explain what food stands for him and writes that food and eating activities are “not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usage, situations and behaviour” [4]. This comment by Barthes shows how specific types of food and eating habits represent specific occasions, customs and customs. For instance, it is common to consider coffee or juice as a morning drink in the west; while celebrating something, alcohol seems a perfect choice. The way we eat or drink gives us more information about where we come from and ourselves. Barthes reasons the argument with a comment that food gets its meaning not in relation to something, “but it is a real sign,” which is a complete “functional unit” in the communication system [4]. Food is a sign of its unique place and independent institution in the social setup. Barthes contextualised this argument in another significant work, *Elements of Semiology* [5], where he connected the study of meaning and function associated with food through semiotics. His argument established the foundation for this new discourse that talked and studied a broader picture provided by the representation of food concerning society, culture, economy, and other aspects of life.

This new lens of signs and symbols made it easier to understand different cultures and the associated behaviours. While in humanities, a new scholarship was starting to grow where the same old texts were read with new meanings altogether. Consequently, many writers deliberately or accidentally used food symbolism to introduce their culture to the readers indirectly. The same was the case with Mo Yan, whose use of food symbolism is not new to the critics as his novels provide many references to the eating and drinking symbolism. The title of his very first novel *Red Sorghum* signifies life and death. As the novel portrays the life of Chinese people during the 1930’s Japanese invasion. Throughout the novel, the characters’ lives revolve around the sorghum fields, making it a significant symbol. For instance, Commander Yu, the narrator’s Granddad, met the love of his life near the sorghum field, and then they copulated their love in the same field. Later, the sorghum wine business provided them with an excellent reputation in the village. Granddad (Yu Zhan’ao), Grandma (Dai Feng Lian), Father (Douguan) and Mother (Beauty) spent their whole life fighting the Japanese invaders and other enemies on the sorghum field. Mo Yan has used the images of sorghum crops to colour his narrative of an ambush on the Japanese premeditated by Commander Yu. The action of the novel revolves around red sorghum fields. The following is an example of how Mo Yan brought the narrative alive with the imagery, where the sorghum fields were set in motion by the exhausted troops, whose heads and necks were soaked by the settling dew... Imperceptibly tiny openings began to appear in the thick curtain of mist, and one dew-soaked ear of sorghum after another stared sadly at Father, who returned their devour gaze. It dawned on him that they were living spirits: their roots buried in the dark earth, they soaked up the energy of the sun and the essence of the moon; moistened by the rain and dew, they understood the ways of the heavens and the logic of the earth. The colour of the sorghum suggested that the sun had already turned the obscure horizon a pathetic red [6].

Here, Mo Yan refers to how the crops represent the situation of the Chinese people at the hand of the Japanese invaders. The Japanese troop massacred most of the population and buried them inside the dark earth. The horizon turning pathetic red can be a metaphor for the invasion by the Japanese, who represent themselves with a flag consisting of the symbol of a red sun. The importance of the red sorghum crops is evident from these incidents. Moreover, Mo Yan has also portrayed sorghum as a kind of shield. During the war, the giant stalks of sorghum provided characters with a place to hide and hunt their enemies. When the Japanese were looting all the ration and burning villages, the poor people ate rotting sorghum stalk to keep themselves alive.

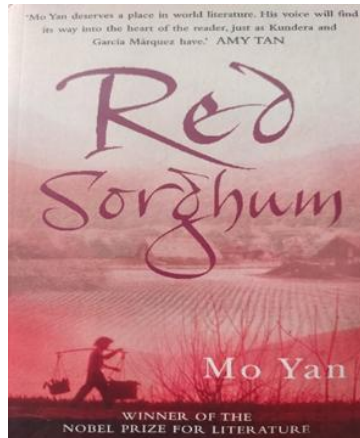


Figure 1: Red Sorghum (Self credit)

Red Sorghum, in general, is a grain crop cultivated as livestock feed and an ingredient used for making alcohol in China. This crop is highly efficient because of its tolerance to drought and surviving harsh conditions. Just like red sorghum lives through tough conditions; similarly, the characters in the novels can endure their hardship till the end. This hardship is evident in Yu Zhan'ao, the protagonist who went from being a murderer to the Leader of the Iron Society and had to witness the death of his beloved wife and the rest of the family members at the hand of the Japanese soldiers. While the colour of the red sorghum crop on the same cover page precludes to the extreme bloodshed as described throughout the novel, which is evident in the presented figure 1. The novel also comprises phrases such as bloodshed, blood bath, oozing blood, sticky blood, warm blood, dog blood, dark blood, fresh blood, blood-stained, dark dried blood, hot blood, clotted dark blood, congealed blood, etc. and the list goes on. Such phrases stimulate vivid images in the mind of the readers. Hence the title prepares the readers for what to expect from the novel. Therefore, the red sorghum crop as a symbol represents the struggle and cycle of life and death of the people of Shandong.

Similarly, Mo Yan's other two novels, *The Garlic Ballads* and *The Republic of Wine*, use spice-garlic and the beverage wine throughout the narrative. In these novels, the story revolves around the economic value of garlic and the consumption of wine alcohol, which brings out other social and political happenings in the story, which are much more than just spicing up the pallet. The spice and wine in both the respective novel is the very thing that makes the life of the characters miserable, takes them through a roller coaster ride and leave them in ruins in the end. In the novel, *The Garlic Ballads*, "everyone is happy when the garlic is sold, but their hearts boil over when it is not", shows how the interconnected relationship between the market and the livelihood and happiness of the characters [7]. The importance of garlic reflects from the above reference, where it shows how a mere spice controls the life of the people. Their fate depends upon the cooking ingredient garlic, representing the helpless situation of the characters. This whole cycle starts with the cultivation of garlic, a suggestion by the government and later sold to the government co-op market. Unfortunately, to sell it in the market during a garlic glut season only worsened the situation, leaving farmers broke with hunger, poverty, and grudge against the officials who failed them. The novel has a backdrop of a significant failure of the Economic Reform of 1985 in China that left the farmer dying from hunger because of the surplus garlic production. The government failed to administer the farming activity during the Four-year plan when bringing industrialisation in agriculture throughout China. The consequences were worse, with government storage filled to maximum capacity, leaving no market available for the farmer to sell their garlic produce. Therefore the whole country was faced with significant loss of wealth, life, starvation, and misery. While this socio-political condition equally affected the characters' lives, Mo Yan's narrative shows the grim reality through his bold turn of events.

The protagonist Gao Ma loses the love of his life Jinju twice. First, the investment money that was to come from the garlic produce all went down the drain, leaving him short on the bride price which Jinju's parents demanded. "Garlic! All because of that damn garlic" he helplessly blamed garlic for this loss [7]. Gao Ma and the rest of the villagers like Gao Yang were suffering because of the overproduction of garlic crops. Garlic was the source of income and profit that the government promised. The government stocks reached their limits, and everyone suffered a considerable loss. Gao Ma, Gao Yang, Fourth Uncle, and the rest of the peasants travelled far of counties and villages to find buyers for their crops, but all in vain. The bumper crop lost all its value and destroyed the market and many houses. While returning from the garlic market, Fourth Uncle died in an accident. The culprit was a government employee who ran away, leaving Fourth Uncle to die on the spot. These incidents fueled the villagers' anger and led them to demand answers from the county officers. When denied any solution to their problems, the furious villagers, including Fourth Aunt, Gao Ma, Gao Yang, Blind Minstrel, and others, destroyed and burned the county office and were later arrested for their actions.

Consequently, pregnant Jinju lost her father to a car accident and her mother and lover Gao Yang to imprisonment. As a result, she committed suicide by hanging herself with Gao Ma's child in her womb, as nothing was going right because of the damn garlic. When Gao Ma heard of this news in prison from Gao Yang, he was devastated as he lost her. To join her in the afterlife, he tried to escape the prison, knowing that might kill him in the process. When, in fact, his sincere behaviour in prison had already earned him early pardon, but what could this freedom give him when his love of life was no more with him. Gao Ma was shot by the prison guard when he realised his loss and leapt onto his death by running away from prison. Therefore, Garlic in this novel affected the lives of all the characters and became the driving force for Mo Yan's narrative.

In addition, in another novel titled *The Republic of Wine*, Mo Yan knits a tale this time around alcohol consumption. The protagonist of this novel loses it all with every drink he takes. Ding Gou'er goes from being a reputed investigator to losing his identity and his life by dying in the sewer in the end under the influence of alcohol. Before coming to Liquorland Ding Gou'er was a famous investigator, but as he reached Liquorland, his intoxication beyond his limits shatters all his rationality and ability to distinguish truth from lies. Ding Gou'er is tricked twice by Deputy Head Diamond Jin in all this staged confusion. First, he ends up being a cannibal himself as he eats a gourmet dish made out of a human baby when he was drunk in his first meeting with the officials of the Liquorland. The second is when Diamond Jin uses his wife, the trucker lady, to seduce Ding and creates evidence of when they made love and later accused Ding of raping his wife. These two deceits destroy Ding Gou'er to the point of death. Consequently, as discussed above, this simple spice and beverage performed like a powerful weapon used by the government to fill their pockets in *The Garlic Ballads*. At the same time, Diamond Jin used it to eradicate his threat. Therefore, both the protagonists are left frail and powerless in front of its effect.

Nostalgia

Mo Yan also used food symbolism to express the nostalgia felt by his characters. The sorghum crop in the novel *Red Sorghum* signifies the theme of nostalgia and a sense of loss, which the Chinese people experience at the end of the twentieth century as the narrator recalls the hardship his father and grandfather faced at the end of the cultural revolution. A series of wars took everyone from Commander Yu's life. He lost the love of his life, the narrator's Grandma, during the crossfire with the Japanese, while his second wife, Passion, was gang-raped by the Japanese soldier when her village was burned to ashes by them. Commander Yu's five-year-old daughter was also brutally killed by the Japanese. During the resistance war, he lost all of his men, some at the hand of Japanese soldiers, while others to the rivalry Chinese guerillas groups such as Pocky Leng's group. Through his narrative of heroism, the narrator expresses how the Chinese people lost this very essence, this character of bravery and honour, after surviving a series of revolutions and bloodshed. Being the spokesperson for Mo Yan, the narrator portrays his remorse for the loss of vitality from his people through the metaphor of hybrid sorghum as follows:

How I loathe hybrid sorghum. Hybrid sorghum never seems to ripen. Its grey-green eyes seem never to be fully opened. I stand in front of Second Grandma's grave and look out at those ugly bastards that occupy the domain of the red sorghum. They assume the name of the red sorghum, but are bereft of tall, straight stalks; they assume the name of red sorghum but are devoid of the dazzling sorghum colour... Lacking the soul and bearing of sorghum... Being surrounded by hybrid sorghum instils in me a powerful sense of loss.... I think of surpassing beautiful scenes that will never again appear: in the deep autumn of the eighth month, under a high, magnificently clear sky, the land is covered by sorghum that forms a glittering sea of blood [6].

The narrator says how his generation resembles the generation of his Granddad in physical appearance only, but they are nothing alike. The hybrid sorghum refers to the corrupted society that resulted from the hopeless, long battles and hardship experienced by the people. As the narrator says:

Surrounded by hybrid sorghum, whose snakelike leaves entwine themselves around my body, whose pervasive green poisons my thoughts, I am in shackles from which I cannot break free; I gasp and groan, and because I cannot free myself from my suffering I sink to the depth of despair [6].

The spirit of the narrator's grandparents sends him the message that red sorghum was "his talisman, as well as our family's glorious totem and a symbol of the heroic spirit of North Gaomi Township!" [6]. To survive in the world of hybrid sorghum, the narrator must find the heroic spirit of red sorghum. As Barthes argues, food can uncover various situations and emotions. "One could say that an entire 'world' (social environment) is present in and signified by food" [4]. Moreover, it also acts as a medium to describe them. Red sorghum acted as that medium in the novel through which the narrator discussed the life, resistance and struggle of his grandparents and parents. Red sorghum is a symbol of the life cycle and the heroic spirit of the characters.

Identity

Mo Yan has also provided many drinking and eating habits in his novels to show the unique Chinese culture. One example is from the novel *The Republic of Wine*, where he has demonstrated the drinking culture in China. The cultural

values are evident from a simple dining scene, where the characters emphasise the relationship between alcohol and its masculine identity. To have a higher capacity to drink alcohol without getting drunk is respected and is treated as a symbol of masculine nature. As in the novel, it is evident that the Mine Director and Party Secretary, in a way, forced Ding Gou'er to get drunk by making comments that would hurt his masculinity. Such as "drink up drink up, anybody who doesn't drink doesn't deserve to be called a man" [8]. To not embarrass himself, he gave in to their tricks. The two gentlemen's request pressured him to finish numerous drinks, as they had an ulterior motive in getting him drunk. The connection between the masculine identity and the ability to withhold larger alcohol capacity is evident in this scene.

Another such example is when higher praises were sung by the inspector for Diamond Jin when he showed his exceptional drinking capacity. "He watched Diamond Jin bring the last cup of liquor to his lips...he was transformed into a good and generous man, one who emanated an aura of sentimentality, lyrical and beautiful...There was love in his heart for this man" [8]. This incident of how Ding Gou'er overcame with respect towards Diamond Jin because of his fantastic drinking capacity shows how drinking alcohol is used as a parameter to envision the masculinity of males in Chinese society.

Moreover, as mentioned earlier, a power relation is also evident in the incident as to how Ding Gou'er drank alcohol even when he was against it. Moreover, it is also evident that communal drinking relates to power relations. This complex relationship shows how drinking together can remove the wall of strangeness and bring people closer as the Director and Secretary kept aside all the formalities and their ranking for a meal. They insisted Ding Gou'er to be relaxed and said that "we can't show the intimate relationship between officials rank if you won't drink with us, can we? Have a little, just a little, to let us save face" [8]. This simple toast signified the power of socialising experienced in the Chinese context. Therefore, making alcohol in terms of Barthes an institution because it comprises a whole custom of drinking. Such as not denying the request for a toast to show their respect to the hosts, heavy drinkers earning respect from others, etc.

Exotic cuisines

Literati have used the reference to exotic cuisines to speak up against the unjust social and political condition. To look back to Jonathan Swift's "Modest Proposal", we can consider Mo Yan's use of cannibalism in a similar fashion. The cannibalistic cuisines in *The Republic of Wine* is a satirical device used by Mo Yan to criticise the bourgeoisie and hypocrite government. During the post-Mao period, when the people were dying from hunger, the officials and bourgeoisie enjoyed the lavish lifestyle of eating a gourmet meal. Mo Yan portrays this through the meeting between Ding Gou'er and the deputy head of Liquorland Diamond Jin, which involved a lot of alcohol, a whole meal of gourmet dishes, and an exotic delicacy that consisted of a braised human baby. The "two red serving girls entered carrying the large round gilded platter in which sat a golden, incredibly fragrant little boy" [8]. Alternatively, in the story that Li Yidou wrote to the metafictional poet Mo Yan, the people of Liquorland sold their babies to the Culinary Academy in exchange for money. Mo Yan highlights the reality of China during the post-Mao period, where there is a massive difference between the lifestyle of the rich and the poor. The rich in the novel had everything in excess, while the poor struggled for a day's meal.

Mo Yan's detailed description of the dish made of a human baby is even more astonishing. "The boy sat cross-legged in the middle of the gilded platter, golden brown and oozing sweet-smelling oil, a giddy smile frozen on his face. Lovely, naïve. Around him was spread a garland of green vegetable leaves and bright red radish blossoms" [8]. China is well known for its censorship and controlling nature, and to criticise this government is a risky job. Whoever spoke against this communist party had to pay with his or her life. Mo Yan mentioned in his Noble speech that his "greatest challenge comes with writing novels that deal with social realities..., not because [hi's] afraid of being openly critical of the darker aspect of society, but because heated emotions and anger allow politics to suppress literature and transform a novel into reportage of a social event" [9]. Mo Yan used such horrifying imagery to get past the censorship of the CCP (Chinese Communist Party). Such grotesque imagery gives way to society's actual apprehensions as lying underneath this distracting cover.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Therefore, from the above analysis, it is clear how Mo Yan has used food symbolism in his novels to communicate the social nuances existing in Chinese society. This new lens opens new space for the cultural study of the novels of Mo Yan. It gives the readers a picture of the cultural and social aspects of the period that Mo Yan used in his novels. Therefore, the food symbolism discussed above proves that food is not just an expression of life; instead, it brings meaning to the whole discourse.

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