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Surreal Cultural Practices in Mo Yan's The Republic of Wine: A Postmodern Critique

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Abstract
The paper inspects the depiction of cultural oddities in Mo Yan's The Republic of Wine (2001), concentrating on how the author employs 'black humor' and 'hallucinatory realism' to critique strange and grotesque cultural practices in Chinese society. This study explores unsettling traditions, particularly the extreme eating and drinking habits portrayed in the novel, which reflect deeper societal corruption and moral decay. The analysis highlights the struggle of characters like Ding, who attempts to resist these cultural norms but ultimately fails, emphasizing the overpowering influence of systemic traditions, becoming the part of it, that forces individuals into acts of brutality, such as cannibalism. Using a qualitative research approach, this study applies Belsey's (2014) textual analysis method to interpret the primary text, supplemented by secondary sources from libraries and online databases. The findings reveal that hallucinatory realism and dark humor serve as powerful narrative tools, allowing Mo Yan to expose the absurdities and contradictions within cultural belief systems. The study concludes that blind adherence to cultural traditions, without critical reflection, can lead to grotesque and inhumane practices, underscoring the necessity of questioning and challenging deeply ingrained societal norms.

Key Words: Hallucination, Hallucinatory Realism, Humor, Black Humor, Grotesque, Oddity, Cannibalism, Satire.

Introduction

The Republic of Wine (2001) authored by Mo Yan, a Nobel laureate (2012), is a significant postmodern work of art that employs 'hallucinatory realism' and 'black humor' to critique moral decay, political corruption and grotesque in the Chinese society. By using surreal disjointed narratives, the novel blurs the borders between fantasy and reality, challenges the researcher to question the perception of culture, ethics and power. By examining depicted weirdness of bureaucracy, the grotesque indulgence in exotic delicacies and the horror consequences of unchecked authority. The novelist constructs a horrifying, humorous and profound unsettling vision of society stuck in moral and political corruption. Black Humor is utilized as an instrument to assault the bitter situation effectively. Black Humor is mainly related to the sensitivity of the absurd persons such as the heroes in fictional work have antiheroic characteristics. Characters in work of art are represented as innocent and wretched being, who have no interest in the activities

of life. Usually, round characters are portrayed, who wander in frightening domains of unpredictable events and incidents. They have no control over their life. Character's life becomes portrayal of collapse, illness and misery. Commonly, character's discussion seems odd the moment they are compared to the impossible, unusual, bizarre and shocking circumstances that inflame them. Hallucinatory realism is a literary technique that has been defined in various ways by scholars since the 1970s to describe works of art employing this approach. However, the term has often been conflated with magical realism, despite key differences between the two. While magical realism integrates supernatural elements seamlessly into reality, hallucinatory realism distorts perception, creating an illusion of reality that shifts and disorients the reader. The Republic of Wine's central themes, such as political corruption, moral ambiguity, and societal excess, establishing their relevance in contemporary discourse. By outlining the significance of black humor and hallucinatory realism in Mo Yan's storytelling, the research question is formulated like; 'how does Mo Yan represent the cultural oddities through the technique of black humor and hallucinatory realism in The Republic of Wine?'. This line of inquiry provides a foundation for the research objective. This objective then builds upon these discussions, focusing on how these narrative techniques function within the novel to expose cultural oddities, challenge ideological structures, and critique the absurdities of power. Through this approach, the study offers a deeper understanding of Mo Yan's literary artistry and the thematic complexities of the select text.

Methodologically, the study focuses on The Republic of Wine (2001) by Mo Yan as the primary text to explore the weird depiction of Chinese culture through the techniques of hallucinatory realism and black humor. By employing these techniques, the novel creates a dreamlike, grotesque world where exaggerated events reflect the underlying anxieties of modern Chinese society. Similarly, the use of black humor provides a satirical lens to critique moral corruption, excessive consumerism, and the absurdity of power structures. The study is qualitative in nature therefore, adopts Catherine Belsey's (2014) method of textual analysis, which emphasizes a close reading of literary texts to uncover the ideological structures embedded within them. This approach allows for an in-depth examination of the surreal, odd and grotesque elements in The Republic of Wine (2001) particularly how Mo Yan subverts traditional narrative realism to create an unsettling portrayal of Chinese culture. The following methodological steps are undertaken: Textual Deconstruction: thematic patterns that disrupt conventional realism. Particular attention is given to hallucinatory realism, where absurd and fantastical elements serve as metaphors for socio-political realities. Cultural critique and surreal representation: The study investigates how odd elements in the novel function as cultural critique, challenging normative perceptions of reality in Chinese society. It examines how grotesque and surreal imagery such as; the consumption of human flesh, serve as metaphors for moral decay, state control, and consumerism.

Review of Works on Hallucinatory Realism and Black Humor

The term 'hallucination' has been defined in various ways over the years. The Online Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2025) defines it as "a sensory perception (such as a visual image or a sound) that occurs in the absence of an actual external stimulus and usually arises from neurological disturbance (such as that associated with delirium tremens, schizophrenia, Parkinson's disease, or narcolepsy) or in response to drugs (such as LSD or phencyclidine)." Similarly, the Online Oxford Learner's Dictionary (2025) describes hallucination as "the fact of seeming to see or hear somebody/something that is not really there, especially because of illness or drugs." These definitions converge on a central point: hallucinations are perceptions that exist solely in the mind of the perceiver and have no external reality. Furthermore, the American Psychological Association (2025) defines hallucination as "a false sensory perception that has a compelling sense of reality despite the absence of an external stimulus." Osborne (1997), in The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Art, traces the concept of hallucinatory realism to postmodern artistic works.

Since the 1970s, the term has been used in various contexts, often in parallel with magical realism, serving as an extension or evolution of the latter (p. 529). In this regard, Wells (1975) notes that Clemens Heselhaus was the first to use hallucinatory realism in a critical appreciation of Annette von Droste-Hülshoff's poetry.Krimmer (2001) defines hallucinatory realism as a literary mode that blends reality with disfiguration and confusion, heightening the effect when real-world elements are depicted through a hallucinatory lens. This technique often overlaps with surrealist imagery, dissolving the boundaries between fiction and art. Krimmer emphasizes the visual and sensory impressions that contribute to a deeper, abstract understanding of events, transforming a story into a dream-like experience. Barker (1997) suggests that hallucinatory realism manifests in multiple sensory dimensions, including gustatory, visual, auditory, and olfactory hallucinations. Similarly, The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Art (1981) describes hallucinatory realism as "a careful and precise delineation of detail, yet a realism which does not depict an external reality since the subjects realistically depicted belong to the realm of dream or fancy" (p. 529). Lindner's (1983) work Halluzinatorischer Realismus defines hallucinatory realism as "the attempt to make the bygone present with a documentary factuality and an aesthetic enhancement of reality." This highlights the temporal aspect of the technique, where writers blend past and present seamlessly, manipulating time through narrative devices such as the stream of consciousness. Surrealist painters like Salvador Dalí have employed similar methods in visual art. Through hallucinatory realism, writers gain the creative freedom to explore and critique hidden forces behind societal cruelty, offering a distorted yet profound commentary on reality.

The Bloomsbury Dictionary of Word Origins (1990) traces the word 'humor' back to the Latin humere, meaning "to be moist." In English, its root can be linked to humid, which refers to liquid. Historically, the term was associated with bodily fluids such as blood, choler, phlegm, bile, and black bile. According to medieval physiological theories, these fluids were believed to determine an individual's temperament and overall health. The word humor entered English through Anglo-Norman influence and gradually evolved in meaning. Initially, it referred to a person's mental disposition at a given time, encompassing notions of mood, inclination, and whim. However, by the late 17th century, humor had acquired its modern connotation of funniness, signifying wit and amusement. The term 'black humor' is a postmodern literary device used to depict harsh realities through a humorous lens. Black humor is not a recent phenomenon; it first appeared in French literature in the 1930s. Later, American fiction of the late 1950s and 1960s also incorporated elements of black humor. It became a tool in 1960s comic books, effectively portraying dark and bizarre aspects of society while exposing its flaws and absurdities. André Breton (1930), a member of the French surrealist school of thought, introduced the concept of black humor, originally termed humour noir, in the early twentieth century. He developed this expression to reflect his observations of society. Black humor serves as a critique of societal norms, shedding light on social, political, and economic issues. It spares neither individuals nor ideologies; legends, taboos, religious viewpoints, and belief systems are all questioned, ridiculed, and satirized. In this regard, Alan R. Pratt (1993) defines black humor in his edited book Black Humor: Critical Essays. He argues that black humor literature parallels existentialist literature, as both begin with the same premise; that the world is absurd. Pratt also provides several alternative terms for black humor, including nihilistic humor, pathological comedy, tragic farce, apocalyptic comedy, dark comedy, and the comedy of the absurd.

Matthew's essay titled as Humor noir and Black Humor is suggestive for idea of humor. He divides the Black Humor into last two decades; one may be categorized as 'absurd black humor' and the other as 'grotesque black humor' (emphasis is on blackness). He argued that the basic motif behind the black humor is to give birth a situation, which must have satirical elements. Its objective is to target any society, department and individuals. Black humor works as a link between the comic and tragic context. Therefore, black humor focuses on the original and the ideal object, Satire and

irony cross the line dividing self-confident humor from black humor only in extremes, the grotesque is usually a form of black Humor. All the aspects of Black Humor led to the absurd. However, the first motif of humor is presenting grotesque, highlighting dark and terrifying side of the society. It also highlights bitter ridicules context, traditions and value systems of the society. In this regard, Michael Billig (2005), argues in Laughter and Ridicule Bain has made scholarly argument about the core and essence of humor with Herbert Spencer. In response to Bain, Spencer comes up with an attempt of interpretation about the problem of incongruity. He is of the view that "Laughter naturally results only when consciousness is unawares transferred from great things to small - only when there is what we may call a descending incongruity" (Billig, 2005, p. 99). The second point can be as it presents neither implicit nor explicit proposals for reforming, improving the painful realities. Use of black humor in The Republic of Wine, where the grotesque and absurd serve not as direct calls for reform but as an unwavering portrayal of societal decay. Unlike traditional satire, which often implies a need for change, Mo Yan's darkly comic and hallucinatory narrative does not offer explicit solutions; rather, it forces readers to confront the absurdities of deeply ingrained cultural practices. This sets the stage for the discussion section, where the novel's use of black humor and hallucinatory realism will be explored in detail to reveal its critique of cultural oddities and moral corruption.

Discussion

Mo Yan's Portrayal of Chinese Culture and Hallucinatory Realism as Tool of Revealing Oddities

The Republic of Wine (2001) widens its thematic range, extending from unforgettable memory through to the intensity of cruelty, from the miseries of man to the desire of luxuries in Chinese culture. Mo Yan's tale of the novel centers around cannibalism, eating human flesh and intense desire of drinking wine symbolically portraying the existing picture of the Chinese people. Mo Yan has fictionalized the select novel to show odd and strange sides of the bodies within Chinese society by presenting drunk people, who have lost sense of morality and unable to figure out between right and wrong. Beyond the mythical setting of Gaomi, Mo Yan portrays strange and unsettling aspects of Chinese culture, offering a broader commentary on human nature. His novel not merely depicts a regional narrative but also engages with global issues, reflecting on the deep conflicts facing humanity today. By anchoring his story in China's historical and geographical landscape, Mo Yan raises questions about Chinese society as it moves into the twenty-first century. Yan has used the device of 'hallucinatory realism' through his artistic talent, and remained successful in portraying surreal cultural practices. He narrated the story as if a dream is being visualized to the reader. The conventional realistic style, and stream of consciousness method seems to be deficient in presenting complete picture of the crises in the society. Therefore, he adopted hallucinatory realism technique wherein the actual world of the protagonist has been occupied by the other species and spirits of other people. The Republic of Wine depicts the tale of odd investigator Ding, who is sent to the liquor land, to inspect offences – and the rumor have been circulating among the people that in the liquor land higher official authorities eat human children. Mo Yan, uses Ding Gouer's initial encounter with the female driver seducing each other as a symbolic gateway into the world of moral decay and corruption in The Republic of Wine. Their mutual seduction serves as the first instance of indulgence, setting the stage for the larger themes of excess, debauchery, and ethical collapse that run throughout the novel. Ding, originally sent as an investigator to uncover a horrifying crime, quickly becomes entangled in the very corruption he is supposed to expose. His inability to resist temptation mirrors the broader societal failure to uphold moral integrity. The moment of seduction not only foreshadows his descent into drunkenness, hallucination, and moral ambiguity but also aligns with the novel's critique of how individuals, even those tasked with seeking justice, are easily consumed by a system of decadence

and depravity. This early moment of indulgence blurs the boundary between investigator and participant, reinforcing the novel's hallucinatory realism,where distinctions between right and wrong, reality and illusion, gradually collapse into an absurd and grotesque social landscape.

In The Republic of Wine (2001) Ding arrives at the colliery, where Jin Gangzuan, the primary suspect in his investigation and the vice chairman of the propaganda department of the Jiuguo Party Committee, works. He is invited to dinner, hosted by Jin along with other authorities. During the feast, he is pressured to consume large quantities of alcohol. Amidst the excessive drinking, a dish is presented to him, containing what appears to be a cooked yet disturbingly lifelike human infant. Overcome with horror and disbelief, Ding takes a deep breath, then, in a fit of rage, pulls out his weapon and fires, instantly shooting off the infant's head. In the aftermath of the gunfire, Jin and the other members reassure and convince Ding that the supposed infant is merely a culinary creation made from lotus roots, melon, wieners, pork, and other ingredients. Succumbing to their argument, Ding eventually gives in and takes a bite. To his astonishment, he finds himself enchanted by its taste. Soon, he fully indulges in the cannibalistic banquet, getting intoxicated in the process. As the night unfolds, a street boy sneaks in and steals Ding's belongings. Helpless in his drunken stupor, he is unable to stop what is happening. The next morning, he finds himself disoriented but soon reunites with a woman he had met earlier in the novel. He follows her once again, and in a sudden turn of events, they engage in intercourse, unaware that she is actually Jin's wife. Just as they are caught in the act, Jin appears and catches them red-handed. However, Jin releases Ding, who, along with the chauffeur, then plans a visit to Yu Yichi's wine shop to gather evidence on the horrifying crimes of child slaughter and cannibalism in Jiuguo. As the story progresses, Ding gradually realizes that the female chauffeur is not trustworthy, as she belongs to Jin's circle of special women. Enraged by her deception, he lashes out at her, and she pushes him away, leaving him to wander aimlessly through the streets. At this moment, a thought suddenly strikes him, and he rushes to visit a veteran's shop. The veteran's words, along with the wine he consumes, compel him to return hastily to the restaurant where he had previously fired his weapon and killed the chauffeur and Yu Yichi. Amid his intoxicated hallucinations, Ding envisions everyone, Jin, the chauffeur, Yu Yichi, and even himself, partaking in a gruesome feast of consuming human flesh. In a frantic attempt to escape this nightmarish reality, he flees toward a boat but ultimately stumbles and falls into a manure pit, where he drowns, lost in his hallucination. The above scene is a noteworthy instant of exposing grotesque corruption in society. The representation of cannibalism, both real and metaphorical, serves as a critique of moral decay, while Ding Gouer's transformation from an investigator to a participant reflects the insidious nature of systemic corruption. The cooked 'human child' is a horrifying image that represents the ultimate form of societal corruption, where power, greed, and excess consume the most vulnerable. Though, initially, Ding reacts with revulsion and violence, symbolizing an attempt to resist this moral atrocity. However, he is quickly manipulated and convinced that the dish is merely a culinary creation. His eventual acceptance and indulgence in eating it show how corruption erodes individual conscience over time. Mo Yan also uses alcohol as means of manipulation, Ding is forcefully intoxicated, which mirrors how individuals in positions of authority are lured into corruption through temptation and excess. His drunken state makes him susceptible to persuasion, emphasizing how loss of control leads to complicity in moral crimes. Ding's inability to stop the theft of his belongings by a child signifies his complete loss of power. This represents how individuals who attempt to fight corruption often end up disoriented, helpless, and stripped of their purpose. In The Republic of Wine, Mo Yan employs the technique of hallucinatory realism to depict the love between Yu Yichi and the female performer. In the Wine Fragrance Village, a beautiful performer arrives, appearing as ethereal as the moon goddess. Among the captivated villagers, Yu Yichi, nicknamed 'Lapdog,' becomes entranced by her beauty and surrenders himself to her allure. During the performance, the girl playfully asks who will accompany her inside a

bottle as thin as a finger. Yichi eagerly volunteers. As the girl tosses the bottle into the sky, its mouth begins to expand rapidly. Suddenly, the bottle grows to ten feet in length, taking the shape of a moon gate. Yichi and the girl step inside, only to find themselves in an entirely different realm, far removed from their village. Inside the bottle, Yichi encounters lush green pines, mythical creatures, and an intoxicatingly surreal atmosphere. Overwhelmed by the magic of the moment, he longs to perform a dance of love with the girl. However, when he reaches for her wrist, she playfully giggles and warns him that the villagers are watching. She then invites him to be her companion, but only after one year. The narrative then shifts suddenly, transporting readers into another surreal scene. The performer plants a seed in the soil and spits saliva onto it, commanding it to grow. Instantly, a bud emerges, transforming into a towering tree before the astonished villagers. The girl climbs from leaf to leaf, smiling down at Yu and reminding him not to forget his promise. Then, just as mysteriously as it had appeared, the stalk crumbles into dust, leaving the crowd speechless. Once again, the scene changes abruptly. Yu returns home but remains haunted by the experience, as though trapped in the presence of ghosts and demons. His health deteriorates, and his parents, alarmed by his condition, summon doctors, yet all treatments fail. Eventually, Yu's uncle visits and diagnoses him with lovesickness. He reminds Yu of the promise he had made to the performer. Without hesitation, Yu embarks on a journey across the Gobi Desert and rocky terrain. As he trudges through the landscape, he suddenly feels the ground shift beneath him and hears a series of thunderous claps. In an instant, he opens his eyes and finds himself face to face with the mysterious girl once more. They now stand in a surreal garden filled with rare flowers and unusual trees. Among the strange flora, they witness a peculiar fruit shaped like baby boys. At midday, a baby boy appears at the center of a platter, lifelike and eerily human. Yu, paralyzed by fear, dares not touch it. However, the girl picks up a pair of chopsticks, stabs them into the baby's penis, and tears off its arm, devouring it like a wild beast. Shocked by the grotesque sight, Yu hesitates. The girl, noticing his fear, taunts him, remarking that just moments ago he was timid like a lamb—yet now he is feasting like a tiger. The performer woman, appearing like a 'goddess of the moon' symbolizes an irresistible yet unattainable desire. Yichi's surrender to her beauty and the magical bottle performance represents how individuals are easily lured into illusions of pleasure and fantasy. Yichi's inability to escape the memory of the performer woman results in his physical deterioration, symbolizing how unfulfilled desire leads to madness. His uncle's diagnosis of 'lovesickness' transforms his condition from a psychological struggle into a mystical affliction. His journey through the Gobi Desert and rocky ground mirrors a spiritual quest, reinforcing the blurred boundaries between dreams and reality. Mo Yan creates a hallucinatory atmosphere in The Republic of Wine to symbolically depict the grotesque realities of a capitalistic system, where people metaphorically and literally consume each other. The image of the fruit-shaped baby serves as a powerful metaphor, illustrating how individuals exploit one another while justifying their actions through moral or ideological arguments. However, the protagonist's investigative journey ultimately fails, reflecting the futility of resisting a deeply corrupt system. Mo Yan in an interview state, "Literature and art ought never to be the tool of eulogizing, but to expose the dark side. A writer's mission is to follow his heart and study the destinies and emotions of all people so as to make his own judgment." (Mo Yan, Interview). Despite the surreal and elaborate style of his novels, Mo Yan's content remains deeply rooted in realism and social critique. His work explores the complexities of human nature, where morality is ambiguous, both the virtuous and the wicked possess contradictions. Mo Yan says, "In spite of their distinct Chinese characteristics, my works belong to the world. They have not only showcased the local lifestyle as well as the unique culture and charms of the country, but also described people in a broader sense, thus breaking through the territorial, racial and ethnic boundaries" (Mo Yan, Interview). He presents a vivid cultural identity while simultaneously revealing universal injustices. Zhang (2010) has asserted that "Fictional world of Mo Yan, specifically with respect to his autobiographical and mythical dimensions, he

has mixed violence, and cruelty with humor. And the variety of aspects in the work, thus his novels correspond to a web-like organization" (p. 58). The selected novel is the most incisive and trenchant social satires on modern Chinese social structure. They pack a real wallop, like the colorless liquor distilled in Mo Yan's home province. Mo Yan's works have exposed and satirized the political structure of post-Mao China, through the venomous technique of humor and wet.

Mo Yan's Use of Black Humor: Exposing Odd Chinese Cultural Practices

Through the use of black humor, Mo Yan reveals the mental representations of his characters, exposing the psychological forces that drive people to behave in odd and irrational ways. He paints a vivid and satirical picture of Chinese society using humor as a narrative device. The Republic of Wine is filled with humorous instances that highlight the bizarre behavior of various characters, employing irony and absurdity to critique societal norms. The novel opens with a particularly intriguing scene: Special Investigator Ding Gou'er of the High Procuratorate embarks on a journey to Mount Luo Coal Mine to investigate a gruesome case involving the alleged consumption of human children. On his way to his destination, he encounters a female truck driver, who happens to be driving the very vehicle he is traveling in. From the moment he steps onto the truck, Ding Gou'er is captivated by her beauty. He fixates on her fair neck, dark eyes tinged with emerald, and her luscious hair. As the truck swerves to avoid potholes, her body shifts with the motion, when she veers left, her mouth twists left; when she veers right, her mouth twists right. Beads of sweat glisten on her crinkled nose, and Ding Gou'er, unable to resist his impulses, wipes his mouth and unabashedly tells her, "I want to kiss you." (Mo Yan, 2001, p. 3). The trucker, rather than being offended, responds with equal intensity, exclaiming in a shrill voice, "I want to fucking kiss you!" She repeats the phrase again and again, savoring the words as if testing their effect. Overcome with desire, Ding Gou'er reaches for her breasts, but before he can react, she forcefully presses her lips against his. Initially, her lips feel cold and mushy, but as the sensation shifts, he suddenly perceives them as soft puffs of cotton waste. The unexpected change in texture repels him, and he pushes her away, his initial desire dissipating. However, she refuses to let him go so easily. "Like a plucky fighting cock, she sprang back at him hard, catching him off guard and making resistance all but impossible. He was forced to deal with her the same way he dealt with criminals—trying to make her behave." (Mo Yan, 2001, pp. 3-4). This scene, dripping with irony, subverts traditional power dynamics. Ding Gou'er, an investigator entrusted with upholding justice, finds himself powerless in the face of seduction. Instead of maintaining his composure and fulfilling his duty, he succumbs to temptation and becomes ensnared by desire. His inability to control himself exposes his weakness, rendering him helpless in the hands of a woman whose seductive presence overwhelms him. This passage illustrates how Mo Yan employs black humor to expose the mental schemata of characters, revealing the absurdity of their behaviors. The investigator, Ding Gou'er, who is supposed to uphold justice, is immediately distracted by the physical beauty of the female truck driver. His inability to resist his desires and his awkward, almost comical attempts to control the situation highlight the contradictions within his character. Instead of being a symbol of moral authority, he becomes a figure of ridicule, ensnared by his impulses. The exaggerated depiction of the trucker's lips and Ding Gou'er's shifting emotions, initial attraction, then sudden disgust, add a surreal, almost grotesque quality to the interaction. The moment turns into an absurd struggle, where Ding, a law enforcer, finds himself "dealing with her the same way he dealt with criminals." This inversion of roles, where the supposed protector of order becomes a helpless, lust-driven man, creates dark humor, exposing the fragility of social roles and human impulses. Through such moments, Mo Yan satirizes the failures of authority figures, showing how personal weaknesses and societal absurdities intertwine. The novel's humor is not just for amusement; it serves as a critique of power, exposing the irrational forces that shape human behavior. The novel also explores the Eastern value of hospitality, though in a satirical and exaggerated manner. When Ding

Gou'er arrives at the Party Committee's security section, he encounters a young crew-cut man in a room heated by large stoves, making the atmosphere uncomfortably warm. The man offers him a glass of liquor and insists he drink it, claiming it will help warm him up. The sincerity and warmth in his insistence make it impossible for Ding Gou'er to refuse: "The earnest look made it impossible for Ding Gou'er to refuse, so he accepted the glass and drank slowly." (Mo Yan, 2001, p. 15). However, as soon as he drinks, he starts itching all over, and streams of sweat run down his face. He finds himself caught in an uncomfortable predicament, unable to reject his host's excessive hospitality, yet unable to endure it. Crewcut continues his persistent urging:

> 'Drink up, drink up!' Touched by Crewcut's enthusiasm, Ding Gou'er leaned back and drained the glass. He no sooner set down his glass than Crewcut filled it up again. 'No more for me,' he said. 'Take me to see the Mine Director and Party Secretary.' 'What's your hurry, Boss? One more glass and we'll go. I would be guilty of dereliction of duty if you didn't. Happy events call for doubles. Go on, drink up.' (Mo Yan, 2001, p. 15).

Despite refusing further drinks, Ding Gou'er is pressured even more. Crewcut, now almost emotionally manipulative, insists that he must drink more to avoid making his host uncomfortable. Ding Gou'er protests, saying he is not an excessive drinker, but Crewcut becomes increasingly dramatic: Crewcut picked up the glass with both hands and raised it to Ding Gou'er's lips. 'I beg you,' he said tearfully. 'Drink it. You don't want me to be edgy, do you?' He took the glass and poured the liquor down his throat." (Mo Yan, 2001, p. 16). Crewcut's behavior presents hospitality as an almost absurd and coercive duty rather than a genuine act of kindness. He seems to believe that fulfilling this ritual is not only part of his duty but something he is willing to go to extreme lengths for. However, when viewed through a rational lens, the entire situation appears bizarre and even comical. In many Eastern cultures, hospitality is deeply valued; guests are considered a blessing, and hosting them is seen as an honor. However, in The Republic of Wine, Mo Yan offers a satirical twist on this tradition, depicting hospitality as an excessive and almost aggressive social expectation. The absurdity of the situation—where the host is more desperate for the guest to drink than the guest himself, creates a humorous contrast, compelling readers to burst into laughter at the sheer strangeness of it all. The excessive and almost ritualistic hospitality depicted in The Republic of Wine can be considered a surreal practice. Mo Yan employs hallucinatory realism to exaggerate social customs, making them appear absurd and dreamlike. The relentless insistence on drinking, where refusal is nearly impossible, turns hospitality into coercion, pushing it beyond realism into the realm of surrealism. Surrealism often distorts reality to highlight deeper truths, and in this case, Mo Yan exposes the performative nature of hospitality in Chinese culture. The exaggerated emotional appeals "I beg you…You don't want me to be edgy, do you?" and the host's near-desperate insistence make the scene both comical and unsettling. This transformation of a common social practice into something absurd and almost ritualistic aligns with surrealist techniques, where ordinary experiences take on nightmarish or exaggerated qualities. Thus, hospitality in the novel is not just an Eastern tradition but a surreal performance, revealing the societal pressure to conform and the loss of individual agency within rigid cultural expectations.

Odd Eating and Drinking Habits of Chinese People

In The Republic of Wine, Mo Yan uses the act of gathering swallows' nests as a powerful symbol for those who risk their lives to serve the elite. He describes how the mother-in-law's uncle and father ultimately fell to their deaths while gathering swallows' nests, their brains splattering onto the rocks. These tragic accidents instilled in her a deep fear of death, leading her to abandon the dangerous activity and leave her hometown. Eventually, she became a renowned cook in Liquorland, inventing new ways to prepare the infamous braised baby dish. Mo Yan employs satire to highlight the dehumanization and moral decay of society, particularly through Li's mother-in-

law, who represents the middle class and is portrayed as highly skilled in cooking human infants. The novel provides a chilling rationale for this grotesque practice:

> A chef should never waste emotions. Rather than being human, the babies we are about to slaughter and cook are small animals in human form that are, based upon strict, mutual agreement, produced to meet the special needs of Liquorland's developing economy and prosperity. In essence, they are no different than the platypuses swimming in the tank waiting to be slaughtered… they are not human. They are little animals in human form." (Mo Yan, 2000, p. 222)

Through this passage, Mo Yan exposes the greed and moral corruption that drive people to justify extreme forms of consumption. He critiques the human instinct to exploit other beings for pleasure and survival, without considering their right to exist. The novel starkly illustrates how cannibalism reflects a broader dynamic of power—where one class dehumanizes another, treating them as mere commodities. This echoes the notion of 'me' versus 'not me,' where the dominant group legitimizes its consumption of the oppressed. Cannibalism in the novel serves as a metaphor for economic and social exploitation, where the poor are reduced to consumable objects for the wealthy. Mo Yan makes this explicit through a chilling declaration: "I do so simply because I desire your flesh for the sake of longevity, health, or sensual satisfaction of my flesh. The act of gourmet cannibalism, then, has to be located in the body of the human animal, where the flesh is equated to meat." (Mo Yan, 2001, p. 270). Additionally, Mo Yan satirizes the eating habits and cultural justifications that normalize such grotesque practices. Li's mother-in-law, for example, attributes her strength and survival to consuming swallows' nests and baby swallows:

> By drinking swallow's nest soup and eating baby swallows, my mother-in-law grew into a strong, healthy child… My mother-in-law said that, in some respects, she was nurtured and raised by male swallows and their precious saliva, since her own mother was afraid to breast-feed her, given the presence of the four teeth with which she was born. (Mo Yan, 2001, p. 259)

This passage blends absurdity with dark humor, reinforcing the novel's critique of cultural practices that rationalize excessive and exploitative consumption. Mo Yan raises critical questions about human eating habits, satirizing Chinese society's willingness to justify extreme acts under the guise of tradition, necessity, or even economic progress. Mo Yan presents a hierarchical society in which human desires for power, wealth, and pleasure drive individuals to extremes. The Republic of Wine metaphorically reflects a world where survival depends on consumption—either one kills to live or is consumed by others. In this self-devouring structure, those of lower social and economic status become mere sustenance for the elite. Through the theme of cannibalism, the novel exposes a grotesque cultural reality in which fear of deprivation transforms into a compulsive desire to consume others. By portraying cannibalism as a refined, gourmet experience, Mo Yan employs black humor to satirize the absurd moral justifications within hierarchical societies. The depiction of Li's mother-in-law, whose survival depends on consuming delicate animal life and, eventually, human flesh, mirrors the broader reality of societal survival at the expense of others. The exaggerated depiction forces readers to confront the hidden violence embedded in everyday consumption practices, making them question the moral implications of their own desires. The chapters "Meat Boy," "Swallow's Nest," and "Cooking Lesson" center around the consumption of human flesh to satisfy individual appetites. Furthermore, Ding Gou'er's drunken hallucinations blur the boundaries between his own son and the Meat Boy, further dismantling the distinction between the heroic self and the monstrous cannibal. The novel intensifies the crisis of an indistinguishable 'self' and 'other,' culminating in a moment of existential and moral ambiguity. Ding Gou'er, Li Yidou, and 'Mo Yan' himself form a circuitous, metafictional relationship that challenges the limits of imagination and reality. This ambiguous structure fosters an unconventional awareness that embraces contradiction, uncertainty, and

multiplicity. In the context of China's post-socialist market economy, individual materialistic desires are heightened by consumerism, while the spiritual needs of human beings are systematically eroded by totalitarian structures. The novel illustrates how economic value replaces universal human values, symbolically represented through gourmet cannibalism. This crisis of morality reveals the ultimate dehumanization of individuals, while also suggesting the possibility of self-awareness and reform. In a world filled with suffering and exploitation, The Republic of Wine suggests that everyone, in one way or another, becomes a bloodsucker preying on others. Through satire, black humor, and hallucinatory realism, Mo Yan critiques a society where human relationships are reduced to transactions of power, pleasure, and survival. Jacques Derrida (2008) in The Animal That Therefore I Am, questions the constructed division between humans and animals, arguing that humans use language to justify their dominance. Mo Yan applies this concept by deconstructing the binary of 'human' and 'non-human.' The wealthy in Liquorland strip poor children of their human status, equating them to consumable objects just as they do with animals. The statement 'the flesh is equated to meat' reinforces how capitalist and survivalist logic reduces human identity to a mere commodity. This process reflects the linguistic manipulation of power, where language justifies oppression and violence

Conclusion

Mo Yan's The Republic of Wine masterfully exposes the cultural oddities of Chinese society through the interplay of hallucinatory realism, and black humor. The novel dismantles conventional notions of morality, hospitality, and human consumption, portraying a grotesque world where survival is dictated by power dynamics and excess. Through exaggerated and surreal depictions, such as the bizarre performance of Yichi and the moon-goddess-like woman, Ding Gou'er's drunken descent into absurdity, and the disturbing gourmet cannibalism, Mo Yan unveils the dark undercurrents of a society consumed by materialism, hierarchy, and self-indulgence. By satirizing deep-seated traditions, such as the overwhelming insistence on hospitality and the extreme forms of social obligation, the novel critiques the ways in which cultural customs are distorted to serve hegemonic interests. The portrayal of Liquorland, a place where fine dining involves human flesh, acts as an allegory for an exploitative system in which the powerful consume the weaker, both literally and metaphorically. The obsession with food, drink, and sensory pleasure reflects a broader societal malaise, where moral values are sacrificed for gratification. Mo Yan's novel ultimately raises critical questions about the erosion of ethics in a consumer-driven world. The blurred boundaries between human and non-human, self and other, reality and illusion, serve as a postmodern critique of a society grappling with its own contradictions. The novel does not merely depict an outlandish dystopia; rather, to confront the uncomfortable realities hidden beneath cultural traditions. By exposing the oddities and horrors lurking in everyday customs, The Republic of Wine offers a haunting reflection on the cost of unchecked desire and the grotesque transformation of human values in a rapidly changing world.

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