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English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

**Corona in Times of Consumerism: A Reading of Chinese Cannibalism and Western
Typhoid**

Seema

Abstract:

The coronavirus pandemic, apart from highlighting the unpreparedness of our healthcare system, has brought up certain key issues- Is it correct/desirable to control/limit discourse in these times of postmodern multiplicities? Is it necessary/desirable to impose culinary restrictions? This paper, in the background of the recent coronavirus pandemic and the associated socio-political situation, questions the postmodern proliferation of metanarratives while acknowledging the handicap of a grand narrative that has teleology built into its optics. It examines the postmodern consumerist fervour in light of the cannibalistic trope and situates culinary politics as an inherent part of the East-West dichotomy. The argument in the paper is contextualised through a reading of *The Republic of Wine*, a novel written by the Chinese Nobel Laureate, Mo Yan and the discourse surrounding “Typhoid Mary” in America.

Keywords: postmodern multiplicity- poststructuralist scepticism- Typhoid Mary- cannibalism- culinary politics- hyperreality.

The idea that postmodern is nebulous and against fixities is irrefutable. Postmodern philosophy is influenced by post-structuralism and provides us with the contentions and methods required to oppose the idea of grand narratives. Apart from questioning master narratives, it also promotes critical thinking in the absence of such overall authority. Postmodern ideology is anti foundational and expresses incredulity towards notions of traditional received wisdom, authority and conventional socio-cultural, political norms. It is informed by poststructuralist scepticism towards structuralist convictions of essential knowledge and methodological ways of knowing these systems of signification. It is but natural that everyone will not agree with this view about Structuralist principles. This paper, in light of the recent coronavirus pandemic and the associated socio-political situation, questions the postmodern proliferation of metanarratives while acknowledging the handicap of a grand narrative that has teleology built into its optics. The paper would endeavour to read



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this through the perspective of cannibalism in China as contextualised in Mo Yan's *The Republic of Wine* and the perspective of pandemic pandemonium in America as contextualised by the real-life incidents surrounding "Typhoid Mary". It will situate culinary politics as an inherent part of the East-West dichotomy.

The poststructuralist scepticism of metanarratives is undoubtedly justified. Poststructuralism rejects the idea of self-sufficiency of structures. Rather than finding the meaning of a system by reading its intrinsic elements, it takes cognizance of the fact that it is these elements that impute meaning to the system. Roland Barthes' interpretation of the magazine cover of an Africanblack boy in uniform saluting the French flag (in *Mythologies*) celebrates the postmodern multiplicity of significations bringing another dimension to the system of signs as hypothesized by Saussure. The difference then, between structuralism and post-structuralism, is in the manner in which each situates the visual sign: one focuses on the coded mode of discourse while the other focuses on its figural multiplicity of meaning. Structuralism does not allow the possibility of chance or imagination in its analytical method to determine outcome while poststructuralism, on the other hand, delights in contrasts and differences.

When Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* expressed his incredulity to metanarratives, he was essentially creating a new theoretical situation in which the concept can no longer pretend to control or grasp its object. His declaration that the metanarratives of the past have collapsed was paving the way for the postmodern *petit récit* which would defy/question the totalizing nature of transcendent and universal truth, supplanting it instead with localised narratives. Theories, then, that deny the surface "appearance" of things in favour of a hidden structure or essence (which then have to be unearthed) such as Marxism, Psychoanalysis and Structuralism, has come under attack by postmodernists. But how this figurality reflects in the socio-cultural domain of the postmodern era is something that needs to be analysed. Jean Baudrillard's work (though riddled with abstractions) is an important expression of this plural postmodern philosophy.

Baudrillard goes a step ahead of Lyotard and uses the term "hyperreality" to explain the new linguistic condition of society, rendering other theories that depend on rational referentiality useless. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the explosion of discourse



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

surrounding Mary Mallon infamously known as Typhoid Mary. Mary Mallon was an Irish born woman who emigrated to the USA in 1884 to better her financial situation. After working in several lowly domestic positions, Mary settled on a career as a Cook with some success. Her employment as a Cook in various households in the New York City area during 1900 to 1907 left a wake of rich residents infected with, the then life-threatening, typhoid fever. Mary was later discovered to be an asymptomatic healthy carrier of *Salmonella typhi* and became the first such documented case. The germ theory of disease was not fully accepted during the early twentieth century and the idea of an asymptomatic carrier was unheard of. Mary never suffered any physical symptoms of typhoid and was in perfect health. Mary gained notoriety in mass media and was nicknamed “Typhoid Mary”, becoming synonymous to the spread of typhoid. She was forced into quarantine on two separate occasions in the health of public interest. In what appears to be a callous disregard of Human Rights, Mary spent a total of 26 years of her life in forced quarantine at the North Brother Island, a place where people with highly contagious disease were sent. She died there on November 11, 1938 alone without friends or family at the age of 69. Mary never accepted in her lifetime that she was a carrier of the typhoid bacteria maintaining that it was a conspiracy by the government against a poor emigrant who had nobody to vouch for her or care what happened to her. The basic fact remains that Mary was a poor Irish emigrant to the US who due to her denial of being ill and refusal to give up cooking, was in forced quarantine for almost her entire lifetime in the interest of public health of the USA. Typhoid Mary, over time, has become synonymous to the dirty immigrant who carries diseases from his homeland and spreads it in the host land.

From a literary point of view, the case of Typhoid Mary, in keeping with postmodern plural retellings, has captured popular interest for the titillation it offers about a poor, immigrant, violent woman who uncaringly, willy-nilly went around infecting rich upright citizens. A google search would throw up at least ten books penned by various authors who felt persuaded to write on the topic of ‘Typhoid Mary’. At times, the writing is garbed in the form of a cautionary tale for young readers like *Terrible Typhoid Mary: A True Story of the Deadliest Cook in America* (2015) or *You Wouldn't Want to Meet Typhoid Mary!: A Deadly Cook You'd Rather not Know* (2013) an illustrated book for children; at other times, as a Whodunnit like *Fatal Fever: Tracking Down Typhoid Mary* or *Relentless: The Search for*



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Typhoid Mary (2013); while some took the form of a historical narrative like *Typhoid Mary: An Urban Historical* (2001) and some promise to be factual like *Typhoid Mary: Captive to the Public Health* (1997) and *Typhoid Mary, The Story of Mary Mallon* (2013). It is not surprising that in these corona times when ‘asymptomatic’, ‘quarantine’ and ‘comorbidity’ are no longer medical terms but has occupied the space of cultural ambit, a recent version published on May 7th 2020 carries the title, *Typhoid Mary: The Story of America’s Most Famous Asymptomatic Carrier*. There is also a tangential short-story that equates Typhoid Mary to the devil incarnate and of course *The Ballad of Typhoid Mary* (1984). Tapping into this popular trope is also Marvel Comics. Typhoid Mary, otherwise known as Bloody Mary and Mutant Zero, is a fictional supervillain appearing in the American comic books published by Marvel Comics. The character was initially depicted as an enemy of Daredevil, but has also come into conflict with Spider-Man and Deadpool. She is, not surprisingly, gravely mentally ill. The polyphonic narrations have, for better or worse, kept the discourse around Typhoid Mary active but perhaps the story of Mary Mallon is lost. The fetishization of Mary Mallon unfortunately has not played out to its exhaustion and in fact has reached eponymous proportions in the contemporary corona-fear driven society.

The discourse around Mary Mallon serves to highlight several discriminations and dilemmas which is very relevant even today. They illuminate the account of a poor, immigrant, single woman, thus triply ostracised, in a foreign world of strict class divisions prejudiced against immigrants when “Irish Need Not Apply” is said to have been a common enough statement on signs advertising housing and jobs in the US. More importantly, it throws into relief the question: To what extent are we willing to sacrifice individual liberty to protect public health at large? The Mary Mallon case underscores how ostensive medico-legal issues are tangled up with social and individual rights.

Apart from signalling the postmodern proliferation of metanarratives, Typhoid Mary’s case takes on added significance in the current socio-political climate in the US. America has seen a spate of anti-lockdown protestors (in the wake of corona pandemic) out in the streets demanding that the government reopen the country asserting that their rights are being violated. These protestors perceive the social distancing norms in place to prevent the spread of the corona as a violation of their civil liberties. President Donald Trump has added his



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

voice to this demand for “liberation” while Stephen Moore, Trump’s adviser and supporter, has hailed the anti-lockdown protestors as “Rosa Parks” who are protesting against state government’s injustice of trying to protect them against a highly contagious infection. The inane comparison equates the protestors of social distancing to Rosa Parks thus bracketing social distancing with racialism. The absurdity is further emphasized by a headline that graced the Washington Post that read, “The anti-quarantine protestors aren’t Rosa Parks. They’re more like Typhoid Mary” (Boot). The statement inadvertently, ironically and quite forcefully exposes the hypocrisy of the West.

The first comparison by Stephen Moore (who is also an American writer and television commentator on economic issues) links the protestors with Rosa Parks who though black, is after all an American who stood up to racial prejudice. The second comparison in the headline equates them to Typhoid Mary who is just an immigrant and a medical villain to boot who went around carelessly spreading the disease to hapless Americans. This seems to be an acceptable comparison to the journalist who must have thought himself quite clever to have come up with it. Neither the irony of comparing themselves to Rosa Parks nor the denouncement of Mary Mallon is lost on a non-occidental reader.

The discourse around Typhoid Mary serves to foreground another equally contentious issue, that of culinary freedom. The first outbreak of coronavirus was traced to the wet market in Wuhan which was temporarily shut down. The Chinese government had since banned the sale of wildlife for food, but the reopening of the wet markets has led to murmurs of dissatisfaction in world communities. The top medical specialist for the U.S. government, Anthony Fauci, has demanded that the wet markets be shut down “right away” while WHO has come out in support of the wet markets saying that the live animal markets are critical in providing food and livelihoods for millions of people globally and that authorities should focus on improving them rather than outlawing them. Incidentally, wet markets are not just restricted to China but are quite common in Asia while New York City too has over 80 wet markets.

Culinary freedom and anxiety then, are closely linked to the political situation of the country which in turn finds reflection in the literature review of the times. It is not surprising then that references to Typhoid Mary should reappear in the form of a book published in May



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

2020 (mentioned above). A similar trope is that of cannibalism, both in culinary gourmandism and in literary discourse. Cannibalism is considered to be a taboo and a savagery, an act unimaginable in contemporary societies. The trope of cannibalism is often employed as a satiric tool in literature, especially in Chinese literature, wherein it is seen as the most enduring symbol of imperial China's self-destructive ideology. The Chinese modernist writer Lu Xun for instance, identifies feudal China with a cannibalistic system in which every person is a consumed victim and/or a consuming cannibal. But the satiric trope of cannibalism continues to be employed even by contemporary writers, the most notable being the postmodern writer, Mo Yan. In the postmodern context, references to cannibalism reveal an anxiety with the contemporary socio-political situation. Tsai points out that it reveals people's anxiety about the rapid transformation that is causing displacements and their ensuing insecurity in neoliberal China, in which desire for mass consumption is intertwined with China's internal consumption of minorities and Chinese overseas expansion.

There are several references to cannibalism in Western literature too, spanning centuries. These range from the myth of Saturn eating his own children, the horrifying image of which was depicted by the painter Francisco Goya, to the Latin work, the *Satyricon* by Petronius, the dramas of Seneca to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Cannibalism has been used by writers for its satiric, sensational, cautionary and allegoric potential. Jonathan Swift's Juvenalian satire "A Modest Proposal" (1729) suggests substituting the poor children of Ireland by selling them as food to the rich British aristocracy which would not only satisfy the palates of the rich but also ease the economic troubles of the Irish.

Accounts of cannibalism in traditional and modern Chinese fiction, while not numerous, are nonetheless well known and often discussed. There are references to a Yi Ya, during the Warring States period, who gave his son to the Duke HuanDeqi to eat. Other facts go back to feudal times wherein filial piety required that children gave their own flesh to their parents to help them get well. There are also traces of it in fourteenth century historical novels, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *The Water Margin* but is most prominent in allegorical terms in Lu Xun's short stories.

The disintegration of the Qing dynasty, the fragmentation under warlords and the resultant instability mark the political situation of the early twentieth century in China. The May 4th



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

(1919) movement by students against imperialism and the Chinese political situation firmly established the New Cultural Movement of the 1920s in China. It was against this political and cultural background that Lu Xun wrote the “Diary of a Madman” (1918) and “Medicine” (1919). Xun, who is considered to be the Father of modern Chinese literature, equates traditional Confucian virtue and morality with cannibalism in these stories. Through the character, Madman, Xun provides a fairly blatant satire of traditional China, consistently referred to throughout the story as cannibalistic by nature. The cannibalistic allegories thus call for the need to reform and the creation of a new Chinese culture. The Madman’s cry to “save the children” is a modernist rallying cry by Xun to save the society from the cannibalistic “Other” of feudal China.

Mo Yan’s cannibalistic allegories “Abandoned Child”, “The Cure” and the novel *The Republic of Wine* were published nearly 70 years later, in the background of another student demonstration that ended in the tragedy of the Tiananmen Square on 4th June, 1989. Yan’s short stories and novel question the social issues of ethical crisis, corruption and excessive desire. The modern call to “save the children” from the cannibal “other” has transformed to a postmodern self-recognition as a cannibal feeding on consumerist fervour. In keeping with the postmodern cultural logic of late capitalism, Yan’s world of cannibalism critiques the consumerist society; a shift from criticism of feudal hierarchy by the modernist Xun to the criticism of the hierarchy of a consumerist society by the postmodern Yan.

Yan’s *The Republic of Wine* addresses desire; it specifically confronts the “Chinese trait of gluttony, an obsessive fondness for alcohol, a national discomfort with the issue of sex, and a host of human relationships, many of them quite bizarre” (Goldblatt 481). The novel subverts the idea of a benign communist government working for the welfare of its citizens. The location of the novel in the foreground of the socio-political situation in China of the 1990s is significant. It also questions the Chinese fondness of extreme gourmandise. The novel consists of two unrelated narrative threads that gradually get entangled, with characters from each figuring in the other. One thread consists of investigative fiction. Ding Gou’er is a Special Investigator of the Higher Procuratorate sent to the fictional city called Liquorland in the Republic of Wine to investigate claims of cannibalism. The other thread consists of epistolary fiction. It contains letters exchanged between Li Yidou, a resident of Liquorland



A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh

and an aspiring author, and “Mo Yan”, the author, as well as short stories that Li Yidou sends to “Mo Yan”. Every letter from Li Yidou is accompanied by a short story, each of which deals with some aspect of Liquorland and its bizarre, dark side. These stories like “Alcohol”, “Meat Boy”, “Child Prodigy”, “Donkey Avenue”, “Cooking Lesson”, “Ape Liquor” and “Liquorville” highlight Chinese gastronomical excesses, from the delicacy of swallow’s nest to donkey flesh to braised baby.

The children who wind up on the golden platters of Liquorland officials come from the countryside, a powerful reminder of the urban exploitation of the rural countryside and reminiscent of Swift’s “A Modest Proposal”. The allegorical use of cannibalism in *The Republic of Wine* by Yan is an effort to portray the oppression of the Chinese populace by its government. It also makes fun of the jaded lifestyle of the rich and powerful officials. But peasant exploitation takes a bizarre turn in Mo Yan’s world where the “peasants appear to be happily complicit in the process, thereby stretching the borders of bestiality and throwing into question the humanity of society at large” (Goldblatt 483). The consumerist thus desire does not seem to have left anything untouched and Yan through his ambiguous narration makes an incisive commentary on the political and social fabric of the contemporary society.

Baudrillard’s claim of ‘seduction’ and ‘hyperreality’ then does seem to be true in the current scenario. The manifest superficial consumerist discourse acting upon the latent unconscious, nullifying it and substituting for it the charms and traps of appearances, is a pertinent postmodern paradigm. Interpretation cannot happen because it is caught in the superficial and also because there is no latent meaning to be unearthed. Consequently, Baudrillard claims that systems no longer need to be opposed, that they can instead be ‘seduced’ and that seduction can easily replace the model of production. The postmodernist consumerist society then, be it Chinese or American, seems to be caught in this consumerist seduction and while Baudrillard’s idea of seduction is a wonderful negation of the search for the inherent single truth, it moves towards a potentially dangerous idea of non-existence of truth(s). Further, though a poststructuralist proliferation of meaning does destabilize grand narratives, there is indubitably a constant need to acknowledge the socio-political and economic motivations behind these *synonymous pluralities*. The immigrant Othering is



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

evidently such an axiomatic collateral to the Western clamour for freedom, federalism and free market.

Food borne illnesses like those caused by the Jack in the box incident of 1993, the Dole baby spinach incident of 2006, the PCA peanut butter incident of 2009, the Foster Farms chicken incident of 2013, among others in the US highlight that food contamination is not restricted to any particular country, cuisine, method of cooking or lifestyle choices. The discourse around Typhoid Mary or those around cannibalism serve to emphasize the economic and political choices complicit in any selection. Food- be it gourmandise specialities of China, bizarre foods of America or beef in India, is intricately linked with the political climate and economic situation of a nation. It remains to be seen how this consumerist fetish would play out in the light of Covid-19 pandemic in different postmodern communities of the world.



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
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