

A “Consuming Identity” in China’s Modernity: Contextualizing Cannibalism in Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature

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Abstract This article contextualizes the trope of cannibalism as it developed in modern and contemporary Chinese literature. Tracking the trajectory of this trope, so the article argues, illuminates the colonially-driven, hierarchy-induced violence demonstrating China’s modernity (re)entering into crisis even after a century of revolution and modernization. In the shadow of Western colonial invasions and domestic disorder, May Fourth intellectuals realized China’s need to modernize to survive the threat of being colonized—or consumed. This existential crisis, in turn, drove a desire to consume and colonize others; thus, modern subjectivity came to be built on consumption, becoming, in essence, a “consuming identity.” This consuming identity reflects violence in various forms of hierarchy, be it feudalistic, revolutionary, or capitalistic. May Fourth literatures of cannibalism envision the potential salvation of awakening modern subjects by portraying modern subjects’ ambiguity in, and anxieties about, cannibalism. Contemporary literatures of cannibalism, in contrast, present a doomed conception according to which consuming identities and desires for objectification and cannibalistic consumption prevail over—or consume—all.

Keywords cannibalism; modernity; hierarchy; coloniality; May Fourth

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a pathology of China's modernity—to the field of modern Chinese literature and history. Dr. Tsai's research examines the rhetoric of “enemies of the state” behind the discourse of cannibalism and demonstrates that this discourse's thematic evolution reflects China's traumatic modern experiences. *Cannibalism as Pathology* uncovers China's modernity and its dynamic relation with colonialism, nationalism, authoritarianism, and global capitalism. Dr. Tsai has published “Cannibal Labyrinth: Narrative, Intertextuality, and Politics of Cannibalism in Mo Yan's *The Republic of Wine*” and “Sinicizing Islam: Translating the Gulistan of Sa'di in Modern China.”

When the literature and discourse of cannibalism emerged on the eve of the May Fourth Movement, China was situated at a temporal and spatial intersection in which colonialism, imperialism, and nationalism met and stimulated the development of China's modernity and its crisis. This article investigates the reoccurrences of the cannibalism theme in modern and contemporary Chinese literature and their significance throughout China's socialist modernization. The trope of cannibalism in China's modernization therefore yields cross-boundary perspectives and historiographies and produces a cultural critique that problematizes modernity in China.

The discourse of cannibalism in Western anthropological studies renders criticism on how the colonial perspective views cultural differences. In the context of modern and contemporary China, however, this discourse reveals the complex power dynamics of colonialism, nationalism, capitalism, and authoritarianism in China's modernization. If Lu Xun and the May Fourth reformers predominantly use the trope of cannibalism to criticize traditional values, which were the main target of removal during the May Fourth Movement and high-socialist campaigns in revolutionary China, what does the continuation of the cannibalism trope in literature mean in post-revolutionary China? This article answers this question by introducing the literary trope of cannibalism as a pathology of China's modernity in crisis. In this study of the disease of modernity, the detrimental contributors and consequences of China's modernity are revealed to be coloniality and hierarchical violence - both are egoistic and dehumanizing.

To examine cannibalism as pathology of China's modernity, I first discuss colonialism through an exploration of the relationship between China's modernity and rhetoric of cannibalism. By providing an analysis of the contemporary literary discourse of cannibalism, especially medicinal cannibalism, this article reveals the birth of a “consuming identity” in modern China. Then, I argue that hierarchy-

induced violence is another form of modernity in crisis that the trope of cannibalism has revealed to us. The hierarchies are first feudalistic, then revolutionary, and now capitalistic. Literary works on cannibalism manifest the evolution of the forms of hierarchy-induced violence and this violence’s invariable core of egoism and dehumanization. This article uncovers China’s cannibal modernity and its dynamic relation with colonialism, nationalism, capitalism, and authoritarianism.

Western Colonial Discourse of Cannibalism

Western scholars have long discussed their observations on the practice of cannibalism. Anthropology offers various perspectives on the subject. Some anthropologists studying Aztec society have found that cannibalism was a product of the economic and ecological circumstances that utilize human flesh for consumption.¹ Others disagree with this point and consider the cannibalistic act to be a ritual of religious transference that has cultural and spiritual significance. Within this perspective, the institutionalized eating of humans is an expression of psychically primitive oral and sadistic impulses.² Yet another group of anthropologists take cannibalism as the constitution of an “other” that is nominally unrelated to a colonial “us.”³ These scholars believe that, in European colonial discourse, cannibalism is an ethnocentric impression of the non-Western world. The representations of cannibalism, as argued in Maggie Kilgour’s seminal piece, is underpinned by the binary definition of self/other. Cannibalism, as Peter Hulme puts it, evokes “the image of ferocious consumption of human flesh frequently used to mark the boundary between one community and its others” (86). In the

1 *The Ethnography of Cannibalism*, edited by Paula Brown and Donald Tuzin. Washington, D. C.: Society for Psychological Anthropology, 1983. Gzowski, Peter. *The Sacrament: A True Story of Survival*. New York: Atheneum, 1980. Michael Harner, “The Ecological Basis for Aztec Sacrifice.” *American Ethnologist* 86, no. 4, 1977, pp. 46-51. Harris, Marvin. *Cannibals and Kings: The Origins of Cultures*. New York: Random House, 1977. Eli Sagan, *Cannibalism: Human Aggression and Cultural Form*. New York: Harper and Row, 1974.

2 Marshall Sahlins, *Culture and Practical Reason*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976. Peggy Reeves Sanday, *Divine Hunger and Cannibal Monsters: Cannibalism as a Cultural System*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

3 William Arens, *The Man-eating Myth: Anthropology and Anthropophagy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979. Marvin Harris, *Cannibals and Kings: The Origins of Cultures*. New York: Random House, 1977. Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492-1797*. London: Caribbean Area, 1986. pp. 78-87. Maggie Kilgour, *From Communion to Cannibalism: An anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.

anthropological study of cannibalism, we find analyses of what cannibalism means and debates on the existence of cannibalistic practices. We also discover what cannibalism represents in Western anthropological discourses: it can be a colonialist way to perceive the (racial) other in the formation of a colonial self/subject.

Chinese Traditional Discourse of Cannibalism

Cannibalism in ancient and imperial China contains different cultural meanings; learned cannibalism has been practiced for its emotional, ethical, and medicinal benefits and can be dated back to 1122 B.C.¹ In *Cannibalism in China*, historian Key Ray Chong categorizes the practices of cannibalism in China into “survival cannibalism” and “learned cannibalism.”² Chong argues that the practices of learned cannibalism in China³ express secular ideals, such as loyalty to superiors and filial piety toward senior family members. The Chinese have understood learned cannibalism of this type in terms of love and loyalty toward family or political superiors. These non-religious, secular ideals, intertwined with medicinal and culinary discourse, have shaped Chinese thinking and behavior (Chong 171). The practice of cannibalism is deeply intertwined with feudal values, especially filial piety and loyalty, and helps to reinforce them.

The May Fourth Discourse of Cannibalism

The May Fourth intellectuals highlighted the aforementioned connection between feudal values and cannibalism, mostly in a critical way. The May Fourth Movement is a radical cultural-intellectual-literary movement that has earned its name from the student protest on May 4, 1919 that sought for maturing the modern state under the threats of Western colonialism, diplomacy failure, and domestic disorder. Challenged by Western imperialism and the crisis of national survival, the May Fourth thinkers reflected on national characteristics and reimagined the path to China’s future. This is an era marked by an intellectual climate of what Mao

1 According to Key Ray Chong, historical record shows that Chou Wang, the last ruler of Yin, whose reign ended in 1122 B. C. was accused of acts of cannibalism to show his degree of anger.

2 According to Chong, survival cannibalism in China is not distinct from survival cannibalism in the rest of the world. However, certain practices of learned cannibalism are only seen in China. These particular practices of learned cannibalism in China therefore become spotlighted in the discussion of cannibalism in Chinese history and literature.

3 In his chronological studies of cannibalism, Chong classifies learned cannibalism from the Han to Ming dynasties into acts intended as (a) punishment for disloyal and jealous persons, (b) revenge, filial piety, love and hatred, (c) brutality for mental and monetary satisfaction, or (d) medical treatment for loved ones.

Zedong called “searching for truth from the West” (Yü 184). Knowledge of Western biomedicine, in particular, played a more significant role in the health of the nation, both physically and metaphorically. In the 1910s, knowledge of medicine was considered inseparable from the future of the Chinese race.¹ The battle over cultural authority between Chinese medicine and Western biomedicine was central to the formation of a modern Chinese state and its existence under the ongoing threat of Western imperialism and cultural colonialism. Contemporaneously, the inauguration of the journal *New Youth* in 1915 and its renunciation of traditional Chinese culture preconditioned the May Fourth Movement, which swept across China in 1919. The debate over cultural authority tinted China’s modern discourse of cannibalism with a shade of cultural colonialism. In “Cannibalism and the Chinese Body Politic,” Carlos Rojas contextualizes the discourse of cannibalism in cross-cultural perception: the May Fourth reformers, including Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 (1879-1942), Hu Shi 胡適 (1891-1962), and Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881-1936), adopted a Western biomedical metaphor of remove “the” cannibalistic white blood cells to prompt their contemporaneous Chinese to “combat social cannibalism *with* cannibalism, devouring those reactionary elements of society before they can succeed in devouring us” (“Cannibalism” 39, emphasis in original). This cultural discourse deemed a cultural authority to Western and biomedical methodologies in treating China’s existential crises.

The May Fourth writings on cannibalism shared a critical view on the connection among cannibalism, China’s societal disorder, and Western cellular immunity. Chen Duxiu, in his editorial essay in *New Youth* (1-6) and a later essay (46- 69), examined national revival through a Western biomedical lens and metaphor of cellular cannibalism and regeneration. Hu Shi, in his analysis of “An Enemy of the People” in *New Youth* in 1918 (9-28), understood the health of the society and nation relies on cannibalistic battles achieved by white blood cells. Lu Xun 魯迅, whose real name is Zhou Shuren 周樹人, used cannibalism in “A Madman’s Diary” (*Kuangren riji* 狂人日記, 1918) and “Medicine” (*Yao* 藥, 1919) as a cultural critique of tradition and feudal values in China: “A Madman’s Diary” was written with the intention of awakening Lu Xun’s fellow Chinese by revealing the protagonist’s goal and failure to “saving the children” from cannibalism. “Medicine” criticized China’s backwardness by portraying a child’s cannibalistic consumption of a revolutionist for medicinal purposes. Lu Xun’s “A Madman’s Diary” inspired

1 David Luisink, “State Power, Governmentality, and the (Mis)remembrance of Chinese Medicine.” *Historical Epistemology and the Making of Modern Chinese Medicine*, edited by Howard Chiang. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015. pp. 162.

Wu Yu 吳虞 (1872-1949) to criticize literary and historical accounts of cannibalism for the sake of Confucius ideology and thereby to condemn Confucianism. In “On Cannibalism” (*Tan shiren* 談食人, 1937) and “Eating Martyrs” (*Chi lieshi* 吃烈士, 1925), Lu Xun’s younger brother, Zhou Zuoren 周作人 (1885-1967) foregrounded the linkage between survival or hatred cannibalism and sensations of human flesh consumption. His “On ‘Cutting One’s Flesh to Heal One’s Parent’” (*Guanyu gegu* 關於割股, 1935) criticized the use of human flesh as a practice of traditional Chinese medicine. The image of rotten cells that devour a nation or a national from within was realistically illustrated by the underlying economy of Wu Zuxiang 吳組緝 (1908-1994)’s “Little Lord Guanguan’s Tonic” (*Guanguan de bupin* 官官的補品, 1932), which permits “the landlords to feed, quite literally, on the blood and milk of their tenants” (Birch 15) in the prerevolutionary era in China.

Within this rich literary milieu of cannibalistic metaphors during the May Fourth period, Lu Xun’s writing of cannibalism engaged complex cultural reflections and produced the widest and most enduring readership and discussion. As the leading literary figure of the May Fourth Movement, Lu Xun established a literary convention to converse and negotiate with tradition in a time of rapid changes, including the fall of the Qing Empire, the establishment of the Republic of China, and forceful foreign involvements. Lu Xun’s cannibalistic allegories of “Diary of a Madman” and “Medicine” establish enlightened subjects who recognize classical and feudal ethics as cannibalistic and therefore call for reform. The madman in “Diary of a Madman” can be read as an enlightened subject who acknowledges that the didactic teaching of “Confucian Virtue and Morality” in the history of China illustrates the logic of “eating human.” The madman looks for the innocent who has neither eaten anyone nor been eaten and asks for help to “save the children” from becoming cannibalistic or cannibalized. Through the dual narrative Lu Xun devised in “Diary of a Madman,” readers see the failure of this reformist plea. Similarly, Xia Yu, the revolutionary martyr in “Medicine,” is another enlightened subject who, at the end of the Qing Dynasty, calls the restoration of the people’s rights and for revolutionary change. However, both characters inevitably are cannibalized—allegorically or literally. On one hand, the madman’s paranoia, expressed in questioning everyone’s intention to cannibalize, is eventually “cured”; he is back to “normal” and employed as a government official. This change implies that he is culturally cannibalized—incorporated and assimilated. On the other hand, Xia Yu 夏瑜, whose name symbolizes the jade luster of the Chinese ethnicity, is executed as an “enemy of the people” for being an anti-Qing revolutionary; he is then literally cannibalized. His blood is sold to the ignorant Hua family, who

believe that human blood cures tuberculosis, and is consumed by the tubercular son, Hua Xiaoshuan 華小栓, whose name symbolizes the clot in the lifeblood of the Chinese ethnicity. The martyr’s blood does not save the wretched body from the conservative superstitious family; the cannibal and the cannibalized both perish. Contemporarily, Hu Shi and Zhuo Zuoren also criticized the rhetoric that legitimizes the metaphorical and literal cannibalization of “an enemy of the people” in their essays, “Ibsenology” and “Eating Martyrs.”

When Lu Xun criticized traditional medicine and called on his countrymen to save those children who had not turned into cannibals or had not been cannibalized by traditional culture, he also discredited the concepts of Chinese medicine and Chinese culture and linked them to the illness and decline of the country. During the May Fourth Movement and thereafter, China’s modernity existed under the threat of imperialism and colonialism and evolved as the struggle between traditional and Western values and systems reshaped cultural authority and governmentality. The trope of cannibalism in modern China appropriated the Western biomedical metaphor of cellular cannibalism; this cultural imagination navigated China’s modernization and involved multiple dimensions of cultural colonization and cannibalization that is worth examining.

Coloniality in China’s Modernization

Modern discourse of cannibalism has become inseparable from China’s critique of tradition and its pursuit of modernization. At the fall of the Qing dynasty and during the May Fourth period, the urge to critique tradition and the desire for modernization were born out of a national crisis during a transition of political regimes and invasions of imperialist forces. Carlos Rojas argues that in response to this crisis, the May Fourth reformers adopted a Western biomedical “cannibalistic” metaphor of white blood cells in the immune system that “engulf” harmful cells and extend human longevity. The reformers therefore used a colonial discourse of cannibalism that is grounded on an action of “‘ingesting’ social-cultural ‘alterity’” and suggested the Chinese “combat social cannibalism *with* cannibalism” (“Cannibalism”). This colonial discourse of cannibalism derives from Western anthropological and biomedical perspectives and shapes the understanding and imagination of the relationship between self and sociocultural others. Yue Gang (67-100) has a similar observation about how the May Fourth cultural movement, with its motivation to modernize China, inherited a colonial legacy that separates the enlightened self and cannibalistic others and generates the need for assimilating the others through consumption.

Based on the foregoing reflections, I argue that this May Fourth cultural and literary discourse of cannibalism was developed out of a fear of being consumed by the other during the time of Western colonial and imperial expansion and rapid modernization. This fear therefore developed into a desire to consume the other and eventually created what I call a “consuming identity” that embodies colonial expansions and excessive desires for consumption in the process of China’s modern nation-building. Chinese discourse of modernization took tradition as the cannibalistic other and appropriated the Western colonialist “civilizing mission” of educating the uncivilized other. The Chinese modern discourse of cannibalism in relation to China’s modernization involves forging a “Chinese” identity around consuming the cannibalistic “others”—namely, “cannibalistic” Chinese tradition and Western colonialist powers—before being consumed by them. This identity adopted a cultural colonialist perspective and perceived Chinese traditions and values as backward and uncivilized. China’s modern discourse of cannibalism is a form of cultural colonialism and cultural cannibalism—a discourse based on a self-identity that colonizes and cannibalizes the cultural other. The consuming quality in colonialism gives birth to a “consuming identity,” which simultaneously negates and affirms cannibalism.

Therefore, China’s modern discourse of cannibalism is associated with cultural colonialism in several ways. Striving against the crisis of external colonialism, the nation seeks to “battle cannibalism with cannibalism” and appropriates a colonialist rhetoric that the “civilized” self should educate the “uncivilized” cannibalistic others. This demonstrates double layers of “civilizing mission” in cultural colonialism in the senses that Western “civilized” subjects should educate the “uncivilized” Chinese, and that Chinese “civilized” intellectuals should educate the “uncivilized” Chinese public. This concept of cultural colonialism dictates a system of subordination in which one conceptual framework or cultural identity is dominant over others. This systematic subordination is carried into China’s modern nation-building. At its contemporary transition, the discourse of cannibalism reveals a “consuming identity” that is born out of both a fear of and a desire for cannibalization: it first consumes “cannibalistic” others—Chinese tradition and Western imperialism in modern China—and then later evolves to consume “the other” of socialist China, which is the “counterrevolutionary” enemy. Moreover, moving away from the failure of the revolutions, post-socialist China embraced marketization and consumerism. A new form of consuming identity that commands the consumption of the economic Others was formed and represented in literature. Contemporary Chinese writers portray a world of cannibalism in which

people produce, sell, and consume human beings for health, pleasure, and profit. The discursive evolution of cannibalism in socialist and post-socialist China will be introduced in later sections of the article through analyses of contemporary literature.

The Violence of Hierarchy

It is important to examine the discourse of cannibalism in modern China within the colonialist framework. However, prior to its exposure to Western anthropological and biomedical perspectives, the discourse had carried rich historical, cultural, and medical contexts from China’s imperial past. Lu Xun’s stories and the May Fourth thinkers’ essays primarily use cannibalism as a critique of these historical, cultural, and medical ideologies. It is commonly understood that feudalism and Confucianism are what May Fourth reformers criticized and worked to eradicate. However, Lu Xun’s writing, instead of explicitly targeting “feudalism,” revealed a nuance and depth to his observations about power dynamics between mastery and servility: I propose that his writing elaborated the destructive and cannibalistic nature of hierarchy itself, rather than of feudalism.

In his 1925 essay, Lu Xun explicitly demonstrated China’s cannibalistic hierarchy of mastery and servility by stating that “we [the Chinese] have already prepared ourselves well in advance by having noble and common, great and small, high and low. Men may be oppressed by others, but they can oppress others themselves. They may be eaten, but they can also eat others. With such a hierarchy of repression, the people cannot stir, and indeed they do not want to.” He concluded that “[o]ur vaunted Chinese civilization is only a feast of human flesh prepared for the rich and mighty. And China is only the kitchen where these feasts are prepared.” He also explained the persistence of the hierarchy as the following:

Because the hierarchy handed down since ancient times has estranged men from each other, they cannot feel each other’s pain; and because each can hope to enslave and eat other men, he forgets that he may be enslaved and eaten himself. This since the dawn of civilization countless feasts - large and small - of human flash had been spread, and those at the feasts eat others and are eaten themselves; but the anguished cries of the weak, to say nothing of the woman and the children, are drowned in the senseless clamour of the murderers. (“Some” 138-141)

Lu Xun, in his stories and essays on cannibalism, depicted a world in which the

hierarchy of mastery and servility dominates all subjects of the Chinese civilization and that the future of the civilization relies on eradication of this hierarchy.

Regardless of whether Lu Xun was unconsciously adopting the western colonial discourse to contextualize cannibalism in modern China or was doing so strategically, he observed a hierarchical, suppressive structure that existed prior to the arrival of Western impacts. The hierarchy of mastery and servility that Lu Xun identified in his writing is the foundation of feudalism and traditional feudal values. This hierarchy, however, is not restricted to feudalism and has unfortunately been preserved through the violent history of Chinese revolutions. It can even be said that it is through violence that hierarchy has been preserved. The Zhou brothers—Lu Xun (Zhou Shuren) and his younger brother, Zhou Zuoren—both noticed this suppressive mechanism. For example, in the context of the transition to socialism in Russia, Zhou Zuoren observed that the old system had been overthrown, but what survived was the same mechanism of intellectual persecution—the suppression was from the emperor in the past and is now from the masses.¹

Similarly, some May Fourth reformers repeated the same violence and suppression: instead of recognizing that hierarchy-induced violence against the inferior is the source of brutality and the roadblock to advancing modernity and liberating humanity, the May Fourth “enlighteners” who believed in Marxism began legitimizing violence to win popularity and political authority. They were optimistically convinced by progressionist historiography and mistakenly believed that violence and revolutionary destruction were the key to liberating China. These beliefs ultimately led to intellectual persecution and ideology-driven political oppression. Although the goal was to create an egalitarian world without further oppression, these methods created “new forms of inequality” “as CCP cadres emerged as a class with special privilege” (Wasserstrom and Cunningham 12). CCP cadres had envisioned a future of equality accomplished through violence to seize power; hence, a new, revolutionary hierarchy was created in a political frenzy by the CCP cadres. In this hierarchy, the aforementioned criticized dynamics between mastery and servility continued in the form of “revolutionary” and “counterrevolutionary.” To Zhou Zuoren, this continuation of violence was inevitable, because people were not truly enlightened and didn’t understand the meaning of being human. Ironically, this May Fourth thinker, who “consistently denied the legitimacy of violence as a force for modernizing China” and who voiced concerns and critiques of such “cannibalistic” violence, was unable to escape

1 Li Tonglu, “The Sacred and the Cannibalistic: Zhou Zuoren’s Critique of Violence in Modern China.” *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 36, 2014, pp. 25–60.

from his fate of being symbolically “cannibalized” by such violence in Chinese revolution.¹

Like many of other May Fourth thinkers, Zhou Zuoren problematized how celebrated cannibalism was glorified, legitimized, and sacralized; the practices of celebrated cannibalism were historically conducted by the loyalists of imperial China in resistance to foreign invasion. However, Zhou saw in this celebrated cannibalism another layer of the problem: he criticized aestheticization of cannibalism as “a symptomatic act that marked the point of no return for the fall of humanity” (Li 30-32). I perceive Zhou’s insight into China’s embrace of violence through moral, linguistic, and culinary aestheticization of cannibalism as a reason for his belief that that “the ‘barbaric’ cultural Other” of “cannibalistic Confucianism” was “inherited by the Enlightenment thinkers and thus made the Enlightenment impossible” (Li 25). His observation of how Chinese culture aestheticizes, euphemizes, and romanticizes acts of celebrated cannibalism also demonstrates an aspect of cannibalism that was not previously revealed or discussed by the May Fourth writers, that is, the desire for cannibalism. This aspect, however, has been elaborated in contemporary Chinese literature, where the trope of cannibalism has become a nexus between violence and political, literary, culinary, and medical discourses.

Cannibalistic Hierarchies of Revolution and Capitalism in Contemporary Literature

In the study of cannibalism in contemporary Chinese literature, I examine contemporary writers’ engagement with the century-long dialectic. I investigate how they have written about cannibalism as a social criticism by exploring the ethical choices within collective actions, choices which are made in the context of political mismanagement, social hierarchy, and inequality. Chinese modernity is imagined and experienced through a progressive, revolutionary historical point of view. China’s search for modernity “was shaped in the historical context of imperialist expansion and a crisis of capitalism” and “could not avoid the multiple problems of Western capitalist modernity” (Wang 14). Mao’s socialism in its ideal form, as Wang Hui puts it, is a progressive, modernized ideology that is a critique of capitalism in the process of modernization. Chinese postmodernity in

1 Zhou Zuoren mysteriously passed away during the intellectual persecution of the Cultural Revolution. The reason of his death remains unknown to this day. See Li Tonglu, “The Sacred and the Cannibalistic: Zhou Zuoren’s Critique of Violence in Modern China.” *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 36, 2014, pp. 25-58.

post-Mao China presents an antirevolutionary thrust in a post-socialist society after experiencing modernity as revolution and socialism and their failures.¹ The resuming phenomenon of cannibalism in literature reflects China's experience and imagination of modernization in the post-revolutionary, post-socialist era. The discourse now debunks the progressionist historicity and emphasizes the dynamics between the fear of and the desire for cannibalism. I argue the trope of cannibalism helps reveal the persistence of hierarchical violence that took place throughout modern history. Furthermore, hierarchical violence is at the core of cultural critique in cannibalism, be it feudal, revolutionary, or capitalist.

In response to the “enlightenment” wave initiated during the May Fourth Movement and the subsequent torrent of revolution in China, Liu Heng 劉恆 (1954-), Jiaping wa 賈平凹 (1952-), Mo Yan 莫言 (1955-), and Yu Hua 余華 (1960-) all raise their questions about enlightenment and revolution within the framework of cannibalism. Among these writers, Liu Heng remains in critiquing tradition as the May Fourth intellectuals initiated. His *Green River Daydreams* (*Canghe bairimeng* 蒼河白日夢, 1993) is set to begin at the turn of the twentieth century—the end of the Qing dynasty and the beginning of the Republican era—and narrates a rich family's history in modern China. In this novel, Old Master Cao Ruqi's insatiable medicinal dietary behaviors, including medicinal cannibalism, are motivated by his desire for longevity. The novel ultimately depicts a hopeless end where all major characters' searches for national or individual revival fail as death descends on the household. Like the metaphorical significance of cannibalism in Lu Xun's writing, Liu Heng's depiction of medicinal cannibalism also demonstrates stifling formalities and traditions of the Cao family/China that resulted in their demise. Unlike Lu Xun's description of the naiveté of the cannibal in “Medicine” or the madman's fear of becoming a cannibal or being cannibalized in “A Madman's Diary,” Liu Heng's story of cannibalism exposes the exploitative desire to cannibalize to prolong life.

Mo Yan, Jia Pingwa, and Yu Hua, on the other hand, push their probes in enlightenment, revolution, and violence further. Mo Yan's “The Cure” (*Lingyao* 靈藥)² and Jia Pingwa's *Old Kiln Village* (*Gulu* 古爐, 2011) both directly engage

1 Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang, *Postmodernism and China*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000. Judith Farquhar, *Appetite: Food and Sex in Post-Socialist China*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002.

2 “*Lingyao* 靈藥” [The Cure] is published in a collected volume of Mo Yan's short stories written between 1990 and 2005, *Yu dashi yuehui* 與大師約會 [Meeting with the Master]. However, its English translation is published in *Chairman Mao Would Not Be Amused: Fiction from Today's China* (1995). Therefore, “The Cure” was written and published between 1990 and 1996.

with Lu Xun’s notion of the heritage of cannibalism in “Medicine” (*Yao Yao*, 1919) and explore absurdity and egoism in the Maoist revolutions and political campaigns that ultimately resulted in desolation and despair. Mo Yan’s “The Cure” portrays an ineffective practice of medical cannibalism in Mao’s revolutionary new China. The consumption of the flesh of the “class enemy” only led to the unwitting eater’s agony and death. Jia Pingwa’s *Old Kiln Village* elaboratively narrates the egoistic ambitions and desires that revolutionaries possessed during the Cultural Revolution, which generated factional clashes and fatal violence. The novel concludes with a cannibalistic incident that takes place at the public execution of the losing side of the “revolutionaries.” This ending metaphorically discloses the failure of revolution. The novel explicitly and realistically depicts the foundation of political hierarchy and struggle: during high-socialist political campaigns, hierarchical violence was stripped of its feudalist appearance and appeared to be a new revolutionary form between “revolutionary” and “counterrevolutionary.” At its core, however, the root of hierarchical violence is neither feudalism nor revolution, but egoism and dehumanization.

Yu Hua’s “Classical Love” (*Gudian aiqing* 古典愛情, 1988) problematizes, though only implicitly, physical and mental trauma in Mao’s history through an unconventional narrative of haunting and cannibalism. In the novella, a young scholar, Willow, falls in love with a beautiful maiden named Hui on his trip to take an imperial examination in hopes of winning an official rank. Willow loses track of Hui after failing the examination. The next time they meet, Willow is again on his way to retake the exam during a famine. After witnessing killings and selling of a mother and a daughter as meat, Willow eventually finds Hui in an inn; her leg has been dismembered and is being sold on the meat market. Willow purchases Hui and her leg, and then kills and buries her upon her request. He later becomes the guardian of her grave but results in ruining her resurrection because he exhumes her body to confirm the resurrection.

The novella portrays a world in which the children who were to be saved are instead doomed by human alienation and the collapse of faith in ethics that happened during and after the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution.¹ Yu Hua questions the Chinese Communist Party’s ethical negligence of their political actions during Mao’s era of high socialism; he breaks the literary conventions of the long-accepted ghost narrative and the genre of the scholar-beauty romance to create a tale of cannibalistic horror. His shift from romantic narratives of love and trust to a

1 For detailed analyses, see Tsai Yun-Chu, *You Are Whom You Eat: Cannibalism in Contemporary Chinese Fiction and Film*. PhD dissertation, University of California, Irvine, 2016.

horror narrative of betrayal and distrust symbolizes the collapse of tradition during the Cultural Revolution, which paradoxically took place without eradicating the most damaging element of Chinese traditional culture: hierarchy-induced violence. Cannibalism embodies the terror of a total cultural destruction that is espoused by the revolutionary goal of exterminating tradition to achieve modernity at the expense of human lives and humanity. The failure to eradicate hierarchy in the Cultural Revolution, however, highlights the ethical issue of authoritarian politics, in which making moral judgments about political action and voicing criticism of political leadership is prohibited. An inability to recognize the ethical problems that lie in the human agents and in the larger structures of society results in a cannibalistic world and a failure of rebirth. The eroticized narrative about “cairen 菜人” — human beings to be sold on the meat market and to be eaten as meat by other human beings— manifests the aspect of sensual desires, both sexual desire and appetite, in the trope of cannibalism for the first time in contemporary Chinese literature.

Moving away from the reflection on high socialism’s impact on human psychic, Chinese writers shift their focus to the impact of post-socialist market economy after the violent crackdown of the 1989 Democracy Movement. Mo Yan (1955-)’s *Republic of Wine* (*Jiuguo* 酒國, 1992), Lilian Lee 李碧華 (1959-)’s *Dumplings* (*Jiaozi* 餃子, 2004), Liao Yiwu 廖亦武 (1958-)’s “Chi-Fu the Gourmand of Fetus Soup” (*Ying’er tang shike chifu* 嬰兒湯食客遲福, 2013), and Yan Lianke 閻連科 (1958-)’s *The Day the Sun Died* (*Rixi* 日熄, 2015) all represent insatiable desires in post-socialist China in which consumerism and desire are upheld as the ultimate and sole value of life. Unlike May Fourth writings that treat the use of medicinal cannibalism as a regressive act of ignorance, characters in these three works actively long for the opportunity to cannibalize for health benefits. This is a paradigm shift from the portrayal of fear to that of desire. The three literary works mentioned above display a pathology of post-socialist modernity, that is, the capitalistic and consumerist hierarchy and its violence in post-socialist China. In the cannibalistic works of Mo Yan, Lilian Lee, and Liao Yiwu, an excessive desire for consumption is a prominent feature, which embodies the “consuming identity” in contemporary China. The consuming identity, remove the highlighted part, add “not only dehumanizes and consumes social others, but also marks the grotesqueness of human commodification in removed the highlighted part, add “China’s” market economy. In Mo Yan’s *The Republic of Wine*, human babies from poor families are sold and consumed as delicacies. In Liao Yiwu’s “Chi-Fu the Gourmand of Fetus Soup,” aborted fetuses become the most delicious delicacy that a gourmand can boast about. Similarly, in Lilian Lee’s novella, *Dumplings*, the aborted fetus is a

medicinal delicacy to elongate youth and beauty. All three literary works reveal dehumanization in contemporary China. The consuming identity portrayed in these works seeks to satisfy desires for consumption regardless cost, even at the price of human life. In the capitalization of human life, some lives are valued over others in the hierarchy of class and gender. The trope of cannibalism in contemporary Chinese literature provides a sketch of this consuming identity and serves as a critique of capitalistic excessive desire in post-socialist China where revolutionary ideals resign and consumerism prevails.

Yan Lianke’s *The Day the Sun Died* widens our understanding of desire and violence with the trope of cannibalism and develops this trope into an allegory in which corpse oil is commodified. This story allegorizes the spread of excessive desire as a sleepwalking epidemic within which unrestrained egoism and violence are amplified. Like Mo Yan’s *The Republic of Wine*¹, *The Day the Sun Died* presents a world of overflowing desire and violence and reveals its crisis with cannibalistic narrative and time. In this novel, Yan Lianke composes writing as a form of cannibalism by playing with the concepts of authorship, intertextuality, and censorship. He devises an incompetent narrator (a type of narrator that can also be seen in Mo Yan’s *The Republic of Wine* and Jia Pingwa’s *Old Kiln Village*) and an impotent writer (which can also be seen in Mo Yan’s *The Republic of Wine*) to demonstrate the precariousities of postmodern, post-socialist subjectivity. The character/writer Yan Lianke’s desire and inability to write, the character/narrator Li Nianian’s intellectual disability and narration, and the character Li Tianbao’s desire to be narrated all mutually affect how the story is told and what is told and complicate the relationship between character and writer and between narratee and narrator. Meanwhile, Yan’s intentional disruption of chronological continuity and sense of time brings “violence without time” under the spotlight. *The Day the Sun Died* chronologically narrates a day in the Gaotian Town, which is devastated by a sleepwalking epidemic; however, time seems to stop at the darkest hour when unrestrained-desire-incited violence permeates the world. Yan’s resolution to ruthless desire and violence takes the form of a symbolic cannibalistic redemption of burning purchased corpse oil with a human sacrifice to “waken” the sun.² Yan

1 For my analysis of cannibalistic narrative and time, see Tsai Tiffany Yun-Chu, “Cannibal Labyrinth: Narrative, Intertextuality, and Politics of Cannibalism in Mo Yan’s *The Republic of Wine*.” *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 32, no. 2, 2020, pp. 230-276.

2 In the preface to the Chinese version of *Rixi* 日熄 [The Day the Sun Died] published in Taiwan, Carlos Rojas also discusses the commodification of corpse oil, cannibalistic redemption, and the relationship between narrator and narrative in this novel.

Lianke's allegory of "violence without time" provides an unexpected turn of sacrificial redemption that is juxtaposed with writing as a form of cannibalism.¹

Conclusion

Like the findings of the Western anthropological discourse on cannibalism — *i.e.* that every colonial subject, even those who rejects cannibalism, inevitably finds a cannibalistic self in himself/herself — a modern Chinese subject ultimately finds a cannibal in the "civilized, righteous" self. The seemingly progressive view on rejuvenation of the nation through revolution, initiated with the metaphor of cannibalism during the May Fourth Movement, finds itself walking the path of cannibalizing "the other." Cannibalism in the context of modern China therefore manifests itself as pathology of China's modernity in crisis: coloniality and hierarchy. The consuming feature of colonialism generates a "consuming identity" that first consumes "cannibalistic" others—Chinese tradition and Western imperialism in the May Fourth era.

Then, the "consuming identity" evolves to consume the "revolutionary and capitalistic others" in the process of China's nation-building and modernization. Meanwhile, the hierarchical violence is another form of modernity in crisis that the trope of cannibalism has revealed to us. The hierarchies are first feudalistic, then revolutionary, and now capitalistic. The discourse of colonialism at the turn of the twentieth century, which gave birth to the discourse of cannibalism in modern China, has cultivated a "consuming identity." This identity was intended to treat China's modernity in crisis yet has developed a pathology of modernity in the twentieth-and-twenty-first-century China. Ultimately, contextualizing the trope of cannibalism in modern and contemporary Chinese literature provides an angle in conjunction with Western (cultural) colonialism and Chinese cultural politics to understand China's cannibal modernity and its dynamic relation with colonialism, nationalism, capitalism, and authoritarianism.

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1 More analyses on Yan Lianke's *The Day the Sun Died* can be found in the journal article, "Cannibalistic Paradox in Yan Lianke's *The Day the Sun Died*: The Pathology and Treatment of Modernity in Post-1989 Chinese Literature," which is currently under review with *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*.

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Identity, Borders and Liminality in *The Tobacco Keeper*

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Abstract Ali Bader's *The Tobacco Keeper* is one of the first texts which deal with Iraqi Jews. It is the story of exclusion, confiscation, deportation and physical extermination. Taking into account the socio-political, historical and cultural circumstances that Iraqi Jews experienced up to their final departure to The Promised Land, this article investigates the process of identity transformation that the protagonist undergoes. Deploying postcolonial theory and theories of identity, and a close reading of the novel, this study shows how politics problematizes and destabilizes notions of identity construction, sense of belonging and life in the third space. Further, it sheds light on the motivations of Iraqi Jews to live behind Islamic masks and cross religious boundaries, the role of host society in shaping one's identity and the active role of the subject in the process of transformation. Moreover, the article seeks to ascertain the impact of assumed conversion and forged documents on the deconstruction and reconstruction of the Iraqi Jewish identity.

Keywords Iraqi Jews, identity, borders, mask, liminality, Farhud

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Introduction

Ali Bader's *Tobacco Keeper* (2008), originally written in Arabic, was translated into English by Amira Nowaira in 2011. It is the first work of fiction in Iraq to deal with Iraqi Jews. Due its controversial theme, the novel is a groundbreaking work in

the field of Arab fiction. *The Tobacco Keeper* narrates the life story of Yousef Sami Saleh and the reader discovers that he has three names and three identities. Yousef's story begins with his childhood. He was born on November 3, 1926 in a middle-class Jewish-Iraqi Qujman family which lived on Al-Rashid Street in the Al-Torah quarter, one of Baghdad's oldest quarters which had been a home to many Jewish families. His father, Sami Saleh worked at Juri pharmacy in Al-Karradah and his mother was Huri bint Rahamin Dalal. In 1948, the State of Israel was declared and the war between Arabs and Israelis initiated. In that same year, he had become a famous violist and was awarded the King Faisal Prize for the violin. In 1950, he was forcibly expelled to Israel during Operation Ezra and Nehemiah. In 1958, to return to Iraq, he assumed a new name and managed to go back on a forged passport and a new Muslim Shia name, Haidar Salman. During the Iraqi-Iranian war in the 1980s, and due to the Iraqi Shia affiliation with Iran, he was expelled from Iraq for the second time. Again he went back to Iraq using a new forged passport and a new Muslim Sunni name, Kamal Medhat. It is within this framework that Bader introduces the problematic and ambiguous issue of identity, mask, boundaries and survival. The novel attempts to answer a number of questions: What does compel an individual to change his identity? How much one's self is tied to religious, cultural and political identity? Can one's identity be shed and exchanged like a mask? What happens to the individual behind the mask? What vestiges remain from his first identity?

Bader puts a special emphasis on anti-semitic violence as he re-narrates the anti-Semitic pogrom of the 1441, known as the Farhud, in which 179 Jews were murdered and about 2,000 wounded. Yousef identity crisis started during this horrendous event, in which his aunt was burnt alive before his eyes. The incident has a tremendous effect on Yousef and formed a turning point not only in Yousef's life but also in the history of the Jews of Iraq, jeopardizing their very existence and position within Iraq. The persecutions and the national tide against the Jews intensified after the declaration of the State of Israel in 1948; new laws were issued that barred them from their national identities and removed their citizen rights and were legislatively defined as 'others'. Hence, the Jews began to flee from Iraq in search of a safe haven. By visiting those incidents, the novel gives readers a complete portrayal of the life of Jews as a minority among the larger Muslim community sketching their fears, hopes and dreams. Changing identity, therefore, is not undertaken by Jewish individuals out of conviction but rather as a practical means of protection and survival. Being a target of Muslim violence and discrimination, these individuals attempt to hide behind the mask of Islamic religion

to avoid annihilation.

Focusing on the atrocities of 1941, the Farhud in particular, and final departure of the Iraqi Jews after 1948, the novel demonstrates how some Jews empowered by determination and hope, even in the worst possible situations, have been able to survive. They utilized various mechanisms for survival and one of these mechanisms is forging a new identity. It is suffused with shifting identities and unstable dualities as the major character leads a double, in fact a triple, life and easily slips in and out of ostensibly incompatible categorizations. According to the author, it is the story of “assumed names and blurred identities” (Bader 17).

Positioned as the ethnic other, and being a potential target for anti-Jewish violence, Yousef feels suffocated by his Jewish identity, which becomes a burden on him. He spends nearly one decade of his life—between 19401 and 1950—under the threat of annihilation just for being a Jew. He expresses his suffocation with the Jewish identity: “Yousef in those days was haunted by a single obsession, an obsession that said: ‘Do not put me in a tight corner, do not place me in a little box. When you treat me like a Jew, you suffocate me’” (Bader 105). His Jewish identity becomes a source of trouble to the point that he fears leaving his house. Yousef’s life was steeped in the identity conflicts of Iraq and the Middle East in general. Under such circumstances, Yousef “longed to dissolve and vanish into the ethereal. The weight of his identity was too heavy for him to bear. It pushed him towards the past, to vanish into forgetfulness. He wanted to get rid of his identity by fading away, by escaping or hiding. If it wasn’t possible to do that, he had to hide behind another character, a new name and a whole new life” (Bader 106). It is clear that during times of severe violence, Jewish identity was a burden and, therefore, Iraqi Jews have to devised a way of survival through altering their real identities and adapting new multiple and distinct identities or ‘masks’ which are called on depending on the need and the situation.

The article argues that *The Tobacco Keeper* not only provides insights into Yousef’s identity crisis and his invention of means of survival, but also invites readers to reflect critically upon Jewish identity dilemma in Iraq during the 1940s and 1950s. In this article, I propose that Bader critiques the discourses of Jewish identity by presenting a Jewish protagonist who successfully tries to resolve his anxieties about identity, religion and ethnicity through adaptation of multiple identities and crossing the boundary zone of religion and ethnicity. I draw on the postcolonial theory to explore the impact of political, religious, and racial forces in Iraq on Jews’ sense of self and their responses to face such powers through constructing new and multiple identities. It attempts to demonstrate that Bader’s *The*

Tobacco Keeper explores the concept of identities as masks as well as the conscious act of masking itself.

Identity

Many theorists have developed the concept of a fluid identity. Hall (1990) observes: “identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, unlike everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power” (225). Hall continues “identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within” (225). According to Hall, identities are subject to social, political and cultural surroundings. An individual’s encounter with a new political, cultural, and social ideas results in the destabilization of an individual’s previous identity and self. Hence, identity, as a process, is “constantly changing, in flux, ambiguous and fragile” (Pullen 1). It is formed and shaped by culture and historical experience. A fluid identity is one which is not rigid or fixed and is liable to change and is influenced by external dynamics. According to Schiltermandl and Toplu (2010), “identities are not unified or stable, but are fluid entities which constantly push at the boundaries of the nation-state, thereby re-defining themselves and the nation-state simultaneously” (11). Though Schiltermandl and Toplu have confined their statement to nation boundaries, it can be applied to other boundaries such as religious, ethnic and class. Anca (2012) argues that “Identities are multiple and in constant movement. They change because of the need for self-development, the desire to act in the multiple communities we all belong to, or aspire to be a part of” (xv). The fluidity of identity often raises questions regarding belonging and boundaries of difference. The struggle over membership and belonging to a certain group becomes ever more politicized during political crises. Such moments always witness the flow of people between boundaries and relocations of various types sometimes not related to migration but rather to class, religion, gender and other social categories. Political crises bring a permanent dilemma for individuals, a constant need to make decisions and choices to cross borders and avoid crisp barriers, and find where to belong.

Identity has become a remarkably contested concept in the interaction between the choice of how an individual imagines him and the global power relations which highly affect one’s social, cultural and material realities. In other words, it is impossible to assume that identity is solely based on one’s choice and overlook the social and political surroundings and their impositions on individuals. Further, it cannot be assumed that identity is purely inscribed or imposed by society on

individuals because this will overlook the self-determination and agency of the individual. In other words, identity is a blend of the intrinsic self and the contextual identity, one that individuals adapt to in reaction to the ever-changing situation and which can be referred to as the survival tactic because individuals always resort to adapting it for survival purposes. This code-switching tactic is seen as a defensive mechanism. Living during those changes—political, social or economic—requires a balance between these two identities. The challenges that one encounters can be attributed to one's failure to understand and integrate the two. It is this dialectics between the ascribed and the chosen identities which lies at the heart of Bader's novel and which the present article attempts to investigate. Furthermore, if an individual identity is too rigid and fixed, s/he might lose the ability to grow and change. In this sense, fixed identity could mean death for an individual. In contemporary world which is changing so rapidly, a stable and consistent identity, though still relatively important, is less important than a flexible and multiple identity.

In a society like the Iraqi one and during a time of political and social unrest, Jews felt unsecure. This fact of being vulnerable and the target of fanatics, forced them to reformulate their identities. In ordinary circumstances, it is possible for one's identity to be something fixed, solid, and stable. One maybe be born and die as a member of one's community, tribe or clan, with a fixed kinship system. Identity may not be subject to change and reformation and is never problematical. Such individuals never undergo any identity crises and never attempt to radically modify their identities. However, under certain circumstance, one's identity becomes problematical. In this case, they try to mask their identities and live in disguise. Here, identity becomes more multiple, mobile and subject to innovation and change.

Changing one identity is not something wrong. This has been one of the main trends in postmodern studies. Kellner (1992), for example, discusses the notion of multiple and freely chosen and easily disposed identities for numerous occasions and circumstances in postmodern era:

It appears that postmodern identity [...] tends to be more unstable and subject to change. Both modern and postmodern identity contain a level of reflexivity, an awareness that identity is chosen and constructed. In contemporary society, however, it may be more 'natural' to change identities, to switch with the changing winds of fashion. While this produces an erosion of individuality and increased social conformity, there are some positive potentials of this postmodern portrayal of identity as an artificial construct. For such a notion

of identity suggests that one can always change one's life, that identity can always be reconstructed, that one is free to change and produce oneself as one chooses. (153-4)

However, there is a remarkable difference between the identity construction of postmodern times and that of Iraqi Jews: while the former is motivated by a horror of being bound and fixed, the latter is motivated by the horror of being exterminated and annihilated. Kellner's statement and Bader's novel show that identities are never unified; they are increasingly fragmented and fractured, as well as never singular. They are constantly in the process of change and transformation. They can be shaped and reshaped according to one's needs. This, however, creates a kind of ambiguity. Though Yousef, with each personality, "develops a deeper and broader sense of identity [...] ultimately we are left with the true ambiguity of identity... Suddenly we find ourselves confronted by a game à-trois or a 3D Cubist image of a single face" (Bader 8). The three dimensional form of the à-trois or the 3D Cubist image here is very illustrative.

Crossing the Borders

Crossing borders has been always associated with diaspora, immigration and national or geographic borders. However, there may be a crossing which is associated with other borders such as religion, gender, social and class borders. When an individual moves (crosses the borders) to live in a new place, there is a potential that his original identity may be at risk; it may disappear altogether. This transformation of identity is the outcome of one's contact with foreign cultures. However, sometimes an individual has a tendency to change his identity and crosses not geographical borders but religious and social borders for political, social or some other reasons. That is, the dynamics of political, social and cultural interaction produce various paradoxes that transmute the ways identity is created and developed. Hence, borders signify more than geographical delimitations and the experience of borders "can happen whenever and wherever two or more cultures meet peacefully or violently" (Gómez-Peña 55). Here borders far "from being concrete, crisp markers of different countries, national cultures, languages, become virtual, symbolic and therefore mobile" (Coronado 113).

For Yousef, the transition from one identity to another is not something irritating or inconvenient but seems to be familiar and easy; he has no difficulty at all in his movement between the spaces or crossing of boundaries. Yousef's metamorphosis from a Jew to a Shia Muslim and then a Sunni Muslim is

sophisticatedly drawn in a simple way, just getting a passport with a new name. This simplicity indicates that the borderline between different religions are not fixed. This easiness of moving cross boundaries could be attributed to the shared language, culture and national and historical identity among Iraqi Muslims and Jews and the common values and traditions which bind all Iraqis together as one people who have lived through for millenniums.

In spite of being a Muslim, at least officially, Yousef never rejects his past or breaks off relations with his Jewish community. Until his death at the end of the novel, he continues his correspondence with his Jewish wife, Farida, and once he writes to her: "We must not forget ourselves entirely, even if we surrender to a role that we've invented, even when it is incompatible with our personalities" (Bader 162). It can be assumed that Yousef remains ethnically and religiously Jewish but officially Muslim. In other words, there should be a differentiation between ethnic identity and official identity, which adds the complexity of the situation. Yousef continues to identify himself ethnically and culturally as Jewish and continues to feel Jewish; however, he does not publically share the religious and political views of his former community. That is, Yousef's original identity does not disappear; rather, it is redefined and reconstructed. His identity becomes a "freely chosen game, a theatrical presentation of the self, in which one is able to present oneself in a variety of roles, images and activities, relatively unconcerned about shifts, transformations and dramatic changes" (Kellner 158). At the same time, he does not feel as part of the new community. Though he tries to identify himself, at least apparently, as a Muslim, he fails, because internally he cannot feel as a Muslim. He has acquired his Muslim identity not out of conviction but rather to avoid violence and annihilation. The narrator himself wonders if Yousef, after changing his religion and becomes a Muslim, believes in Islam inside him or just he embraces Islam to live a better life: "But the question that perplexed me was whether Haidar Salman became a true Muslim in his heart. Or was he just a Ricardo Reis, who believed in Greek gods despite living in Christian Europe?" (Bader 123). Bader is not concerned with demonstrating the formation or the process of identity transition of the protagonist or finding an effective way of negotiating a new identity, but rather, the focus is on the protagonist's ability to cross the boundaries, have a hybrid identity and live in a liminal space that belongs to neither of the two religions. Here a distinction between beliefs and religious practices has to be clearly stated. Yousef may practice all religious practices of the new religion but still hold on his former belief which is clearly seen in his identification, sympathy and empathy with his former community. Hence, whatever its outward expressions, Yousef's identity is

still linked to his past.

For Yousef, fake documents provide him with more than just a religiously or ethnically different name. Under the new identity, he has to acquire a cultural, religious or ethnic identity which is entirely new to him and which has never been part of his life before. Assuming a new identity requires some strategies that get him be identified easily in harmony with his new identity. In other words, he has to show the larger community that he belongs to it and that he is part of mainstream society. Hence, he has to change his usual behavior, appearance and to get rid of any exterior identifying marks that may show his affiliation with the Jews. He needs to look Muslim and to blend with the non-Jewish Iraqis around him. In his attempt to pass as a non-Jew, he has to behave just like Muslims ethnically and religiously; he simulates Muslim ways of life (imitates the appearance or the character of Muslims). His success of dissimulation depends on his ability in mimicking aspects of the Muslim identity. He visits Muslim holy places and shrines. Yousef's new identity is not only supported by the forged documents, but by adapting his behavior.

Yousef's new identity can be described as 'resistance identity' used to fight for survival against the risk of persecution and extermination by larger hostile powers. Yousef, finding himself in an alien and hostile environment, tries to find spaces which are common to communicate, in order to feel safe inside the borders of such unsafe environment. Sharing meanings with the larger hostile communities greatly helps make the process of disappearance of differences easier. Sharing others' beliefs and faiths reduces the risks of othering and alienation. The more he shares, the more he feels part of the larger community; he devices these strategies to belong, although this belonging is superficial and not genuine.

Liminality

The novel narrates Yousef's experience of constantly moving in-between religions and cultures, which makes his story an essential signifier in representing the transcultural discourses or the creation of a new person in a hybrid space. Since he is a subject of multiple influences, he struggles to form a personal identity. Motivated by uncontrollable desire to return to Iraq, he is pushed from his faith/identity. He must adapt and adjust to a new life. Hence, he creates special social settings that might help him adopt, comprehend and appreciate the new life and deals with traumas of the past in an unfamiliar environment, accepting a newly manufactured/ reconstructed identity.

Yousef's liminality is seen in his belief in all Gods. He reminds the reader of the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa, who writes: "In every corner of his soul, there

was an altar to a different God” (Bader 174). The readers are told that Yousef

felt drawn to abstractions that were, nonetheless, strongly present and palpable. This was faith, no doubt. It was a belief that reconciled the different religions inside him: Judaism, which he had absorbed as a child, Christianity, which had seeped into his soul through classical music, and Islam, which became part and parcel of his inner self after his marriage to Tahira. God was One, although He appeared in various texts. (Bader 144-5)

One day, Yousef, while talking to Ada, he informs her that “he was trying to reconcile the various strands and tonalities of the three religions” (Bader 145). Yousef represents the frontier, the hybrid, Arab Jewish-Muslim identity. The novel is preoccupied with liminality as a modernist trait, helping in an exploration of “crises of identity encapsulated in moments or interludes of transition” (Drewery 1). Yousef treads different worlds, becoming stranded in more than one place.

Yousef’s liminality is consolidated by his view of things which has always been “profound but neutral” (Bader 75). He is drawn to the in-between, irreligious space; though it can be seen as a space of necessity, it is also a space of privilege as it gives an individual the freedom not to belong and perceive things without preconceived beliefs or ideas. In other words, being unbound by the religious standards of settled spaces, this neutral space allows for transformation through its neutrality and un-belongingness, providing Yousef not only with a shelter but also with comfort. Undoubtedly, this liminal space, existing outside of the constructs of religion, and providing the subject with a free and detached outlook can help in deconstructing religious notions held to be stable.

Though equipped with false-identity documents, Yousef finds life estranged and marked by unbelonging and alienation. In other words, changing one’s identity during political unrests and conflicts—something imposed or enforced on individuals by circumstances against their will—is not an easy task. He is robbed of his name, religion, culture and people. And due to all these losses, he goes through a lot throughout his life—physically, emotionally and mentally. In other words, Yousef becomes increasingly embittered and estranged in his own homeland. It is this emotional and mental displacement/relocation that the novel tries to explore. According to Bhabha (1998), relocation disturbs personal identity causes insecurity and stress; Bhabha refers to this stress “anxiety of displacement” (34). He confirms that “the anxiety of displacement that troubles national rootedness transforms ethnicity or cultural difference into an ethical relation that serves as a subtle

corrective to valiant attempts to achieve representativeness and moral equivalence in the matter of minorities” (38). He argues that both cultural and/or ethnical difference, as well as dislocation are reasons for causing unease and stress in confirming one’s identity. Bhabha argues that discomfort constitutes a passage and a place of uneasiness and anxiety adjudicating distinction and cultural boundaries: an anxiety constructed in “a transition where strangeness and contradiction cannot be negated and must be constantly negotiated and worked through” (35). You are disconnected from your own culture yet not integrated into your host’s. Your identity is caught in between; always expected to be a participating part, however, still regarded and located on the outside of society. Yousef finds himself in a state of in-betweenness, where he is neither a Jew nor a Muslim.

Though the concepts of hybridity and in-betweenness, introduced by Homi Bhabha, have been discussed in relation to transnationalism, diasporic writings and in relation to identity formation and cultural transition, it can be deployed in discussing trans-religion as well. The trans-religious, like transnational, flow of subjects beyond delineated religious borders and religiously defined spaces will lead to the questioning of religious identity. Hybridity here results from crossing the religious and cultural boundaries. Further, there are many other borders in the novel. Throughout the novel, many different borders—geographical, social and religious—are being crossed making the question of identity entangled and layered. Yousef’s identity in this work is figured as a third space, in which the converted characters are living between their original identity and their desired one. Because of the pressure he encounters, Yousef devices various coping strategies including the constant switch between various religions and communities; he is unable to associate himself completely with one community or the other and, finally, finding a synthesis through the creation of a third space which blends the different cultures, faiths and identities. It seems that staying in between the different sides is the most sustainable and reliable solution.

This act of being in the liminal shows that Yousef has a genius for improvising to fit their surroundings. He refuses to be labelled and fixed in certain designation:

Yousef refused to wear a specific uniform or to have a specific label stuck to him. He wanted to be neither one type nor another. He wanted to become whatever circumstances required him to be. He wanted to be one individual or another, to be ‘here’ or ‘there’, at the same time. (Bader 106)

By presenting the readers with a protagonist whose identity is liminal and fluid,

the novel demonstrates the fluid boundaries of religious identity and validates that the crossing of religious borders is undertaken as a means of survival in a hostile environment.

The passport as a means for crossing geographical borders is also used for crossing religious borders. The transition from one country to another is accompanied by transition from one identity to another. The simplicity of this transition, using just a passport, is a manifestation of the fragility of identity. In addition to questioning the problematic issues of identity boundary-crossing, the novel also crosses the geographical borders of home and diaspora. Yousef, throughout the novel, is seen wondering between Iraq, Iran, Israel, Syria, Moscow etc. Yousef becomes a transnational citizen. In this sense, *The Tobacco Keeper* is a story of enforced displacement and constant dislocation.

Identity as a Mask

A classic trope that prompts critics to interrogate the complexity and intricacy of identity is the use of masks. Human beings have associated mask with the transformation of identity. Certain identity markers can be manipulated for openly engaging in desired group or community; the mask also can be used as a method for dissimulating or hiding a perceived marker in one's private self. The mask facilitates one's belonging and unbelonging. During political turmoil and conflicts people are required to change their masks and wear the appropriate one in the appropriate time. In other words, politics forces people to change their identities and wear masks and Yousef, as a Jew, is required to wear the Jewish mask and play the role of a Jew when it is safe and, at the same time, he has to wear the mask of a Muslim and play the role of a Muslim when it is safe. Like a chameleon, he has to change his mask/identity/color to survive. "Masks," the narrator assures us, "made it easy for individuals to live in society" (Bader 106). Bader's reference to masks, roles and plays draws attention to the fact that life is just a play and humans are actors on the life stage. Hence, Yousef wonders: "How can I possibly take part in this human farce?" (Bader 106). In spite of his understanding that all this is a play, or something false, he has no other option but to act: "He had the overwhelming feeling that he didn't belong to this world at all. But he had to wear a mask, because the mask made it possible for him to regain his self-confidence. It calmed his fears, expelled his demons and quelled the violent cries in the depths of his heart, the depths that told of hell" (Bader 106). Referring to life as a play and humans as actors, changing their roles according to the director's suggestions, empowers the role of mask which the author uses in this novel. Further, Bader refers to the fact that this game is beyond

Yousef's control or ability to handle: "Whose decision was it, then? The authorities decided. The director of the play decided. Life was a huge stage where form was often confused with content. Life as he knew it was made up of actors performing roles" (Bader 161). Playing a role and changing the mask according to the need seem an easy act for Yousef. His complete identification with new characters seems genius, for it shows that he is able to discover himself almost totally and completely every time he adopts a new character. And through the "constant training and continued creativity, he was no longer playing a part but had become the new persona" (Bader 128). Although Yousef has "chosen to play that role" (Bader 162), he seems to be unhappy with such a game: "I wish I could find myself another role and stop playing myself. We often imagine that we control the game, unaware that it actually controls us" (Bader 162).

Bader's association of masks and survival shows that the use of masks is "related to 'insecure' self-feelings" (Kaiser xiv). Further, his reference to masks and identity suggests that there is no single or true identity and adds ambiguity to the notion of identities, partial identities, or potential identities. What is remarkable about a mask is that it defies order, introduces ambiguity and problematizes the concept of belonging and unbelonging and suggests lack of commitment. The mask in the novel has a role; it is protective and empowering. Displaying of a Muslim identity, Yousef is masking a lack or a weakness by removing otherness. Further, placing himself as masked means giving himself a resistive position, challenging the established order along with its defined categories. The construction of multiple identities displays subversive features among the Jews who refuse to be classified. Yousef is empowered enough by the mask to overcome his sense of helplessness and weakness. In other words, masking transforms him into a fearless 'other' and provides him with freedom. He is able to move freely everywhere. Masking is used by Yousef as vehicle for expressing resistance; it is also a means of release of social and identity tensions.

Yousef proves to be a good actor; he is able to adopt new and very different identities in accordance to his needs. He is a good actor in the sense that he has an unlimited repertoire of roles to play; he plays different parts on different occasions and manages to segregate parts of his life which he does not need. In addition to changing his religious affiliation, he also succeeds in changing his speech pattern, manners and general behavior. This is not an easy task; he should have, and be able to employ, the skill and the stratagem to lead a reasonably smooth transition/transformation, persuade others and create a new self out of nothing. This is because of his vulnerability and the uncertainty in which he lives and the danger that awaits

him. The attitudes and behavior of the larger community towards him will change evidently for the worse if his real identity is disclosed.

Gergen (1972) argues that those with multiple identities are healthier and happier. He writes: “Taken together our experiments document the remarkable flexibility of the self. We are made of soft plastic, and molded by social circumstances” (65). This, Gergen argues, does not mean that we should think of ourselves as fakes, for “Once donned, mask becomes reality” (65). He advises us: “we should learn to play more roles, to adopt any role that feels enjoyable [...] the mask may not be the symbol of superficiality that we have thought it was, but the means of realizing our potential” (Gergen 65–66). Gergen in *The Saturated Self* (1991) argues that multiple identity is not only a fact but also a value and that it is normal as well as desirable for people to wear many masks. Further, Gergen observes that in postmodern era, multiple identities are more adaptive and adjustable than are fixed ones.

The Tobacco Keeper demonstrates “the possibility of exchanging identities” and that “the notion of an essential ‘identity’ is false” (Bader 9). Yousef’s story

shows that identity is a process of adaptation; no sooner has it located itself in one particular historical moment than it changes into a different moment. All these imaginary communities begin with a fabricated, invented narrative which denies that identities blend and overlap, but which at a certain point in time reveals such boundaries to be imaginary, constructed and fabricated, nothing but narrative concoctions. (Bader 9)

At this point we arrive at the game of assumed names, masks and blurred identities. Bader suggests that it is up to individuals to move from one category to another (be re-categorized) as a consequence of any personal decision. This fact causes Yousef to laugh at “the deadly struggle of identities [...] fake personalities and false masks” (Bader 9).

Yousef represents all Iraqi Jews who were characterized by flexible citizenship. They responded to the Iraqi setting and negotiated its culture and space in accordance with their political and economic needs. Aihwa Ong (1999) defines the term ‘flexible citizenship’ as “the cultural logics of capitalist accumulation, travel, and displacement that induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions” (6). Yousef has responded ‘fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions’ dictated by the political and cultural logics. In the face of severe discrimination and life-threatening contexts, Jews have concealed or dissimulated their identity for the purpose of survival.

Dissimulation has been reduced by some policy-oriented writers to its negative connotations such as faking and deception (Campbell 2006). However, some studies reveal that dissimulation is not exclusive to a particular religion and that members of various religious groups may have dissimulated in one way or another (Clark 2006; Ibrahim 2008; Nissimi 2004; Rosa-Rodriguez 2010; Ward 2004). Sözer (2014) argues that “dissimulation is the last resort for extremely marginalized communities that cannot utilize other collective tactics” (12). She adds that marginalized groups use dissimulation “in order to obscure their identity and to pretend to be members of a majority group, for the immediate survival of individuals and the long term survival of the group as well as of the group’s identity” (42).

Yousef’s tripartite identity is reflected in his sons. After a seemingly endless journey across religions and beliefs, the novel ends with the protagonist looking at his three sons—Meir, Hussein and Omar—who represent the three facets of his own identity. Meir, born of Yousef Sami Saleh, the Jew; Hussein, the offspring of Haidar Salman, the Shia Muslim; and Omar, the son of Kamal Medhat, the Sunni Muslim. They are “his three names and his three cases of impersonation. Each of their faces corresponded to one of his assumed identities [...] Through their characters he discovered the essential answer to the problem of identity” (Bader 224). Yousef “realized that each one of them was a faithful reflection of his own ego. Through their characters he discovered the essential answer to the problem of identity. Each one of them was a facet of his personality, a single entity that was split and multiple at the same time. They were a three dimensional Cubist painting of a single face” (Bader 328) The fractions of his identity can be read politically as the shattering of the oneness of Iraqi identity and its tragic shattering into many different identities, culturally, religiously and politically.

Iraqi Jews and National Identity

Unsettled and disturbed by the premonition of catastrophe embodied his fear of being annihilated, Yousef challenges the circumstances and unfair laws imposed by the new ruling power. He hides himself behind a new mask that saves his life. His catastrophe culminates in his unbearable shock of “getting lost” among forged selves in his own homeland where he was born and has been living since his birth. The struggle that Yousef undergoes throughout his life is the outcome of his being a Jew and his love for his native land. Yousef’s love for Iraq is so obsessive that it dominates his inner world. The moment he leaves Iraq for reasons beyond his reach, he starts planning how to go back. Iraqi Jews have been subjected to mounting pressures to transform, to change and to transfer what they were just

before the Farhud into new forms of relation. The novel does not only celebrate Iraqi Jews and their catastrophic exclusion by the larger society but also questions Iraq ethnic nationalism and expresses the authors' discontent with the larger issue of collective identity of Iraq. Bader's novel highlights Yousef's search for identity within religious, national and ideological contexts. From the perspective of his original religion as a Jew to his embracing of Shia and Sunni Islam and the ability to adopt to the new life, Yousef questions the bases of Iraqi identity in its numerous politicized incarnations. In this sense, it is better to understand this novel in this way and not to turn its provocative tone and thorny issue and these intricate literary expressions into a clean-cut political manifesto showing the author's sympathy with Zionism or the state of Israel. Bader, rather, expresses his dissatisfaction and displeasure in what happened to the Iraqi Jews as citizens of Iraq. In other words, in his novel *The Tobacco Keeper*, in which he depicts Baghdad as a city suffering havoc caused by political conflicts, Bader voices his anxiety over strained ethnic relations among the different religious sects and the shrinkage of political as well as cultural tolerance that plagued both the private and public spheres of Iraq during the surge of nationalism after World War I when Iraq started on the road towards independence. The novel is a melancholic and relentless critique of the deteriorating situation especially for the Jewish minority. This is clearly apparent in the case of protagonist who could survive the disastrous situation caused by the prevailing political inferno only through pretending to be an insider; that is to belong to the larger mainstream.

The novel overwhelms the reader with an omnipresent feeling of catastrophic vulnerability which portraying the misery experienced by the Jewish minority living in Iraq in the first half of the 20th century, where the surge of nationalism spares no effort exclude certain ethnic groups who are doomed to be seen as foreigners without any emotional or national bonding to their living space. The novel laments the destruction of the sectarian relationships among people of different religious and ethnic backgrounds during the Farhud. It also critiques the Iraqi national elite of the time who, instead of promoting peace and coexistence, promoted an undemocratic and racialized vision that was exclusivist. Exploring the change wrought in Iraqi Jews' life by anti-Semitic fanatics in the 1940s, Bader's novel is a plea for the world not to forget such barbarity and savagery against any minorities all over the world irrespective of their faith or race.

Conclusion

To conclude, the main argument in the novel is the construction of contraries.

Bader juxtaposes the opposites just to diminish the significance of their differences by suggesting that their differences are irrelevant. The novel's foundation of contrary identities implies that opposites or what apparently looks different may be undistinguishable, as Bader eliminates their contradictory characteristics. This irrelevance of distinguishing between various identities is seen in the character of Yousef, who is able to move between identities without any difficulties. Bader presents a single character with three names and faiths and involving three cases of assumed identity. Each one of identities, has different faiths, convictions, traits and ideas, represents a facet of Yousef's own personality. With each one, Bader develops a broader and deeper sense of identity, border-crossing and survival.

The Tobacco Keeper is a sophisticated response to many of Iraqi Jews' concerns of the time, from debates over their belonging and immigration to Israel and the on-going conflict between Arabs and Israelis. The novel approaches the experience of liminality, as a basically involuntary crossing of religious borders necessitated by outside powers beyond the concerned individuals. At the same time, Bader attempts to distinguish between voluntary and involuntary border-crossing: voluntary may result in a fixed identity while involuntary always results in fluid and liminal identity as one's roots are not entirely broken. Bader's novel employs a traditional and clear plotline in which the line between the various identities becomes increasingly blurred. While Yousef crosses actual geopolitical borders, the novel also questions the religious borders between Judaism, Sunni Islam and Shi Islam, the distinctions between being an Israel Jew or an Iraqi Jew living in motherland, and being a Jewish Muslim. The novel thus offers a thought-provoking commentaries on identity and life in the liminal space as well as the anxieties connected involuntary conversions that recalls the darkest chapters of Iraqi Jews during the 1940s and 1950s.

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