

A comparative reading on the satirical portrayals of the colonial bourgeois through Chae Mansik's *Peace under heaven* (1938) and Vũ Trọng Phụng's *Dumb luck* (1936)

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Abstract

*During the 1930s Korea and Vietnam were undergoing profound social changes at the crossroads of tradition and modernity and under the colonial rule of Japan and France respectively. In this socio-historical context literary writers like Chae Mansik and Vũ Trọng Phụng expressed their concern on the deterioration of moral values as the traditional order crumbled and was substituted by an often-superficial westernization and a dominance of money over ethics. This paper explores how two of their most prominent works used irony and satire to express the critics towards their societies and raise awareness among their readers. The comparative reading of particular aspects present in *Peace under heaven* (1938) and *Dumb luck* (1936) seeks to establish a link between both author's mode of writing that goes beyond their particular socio-historical context and emphasizes its universal value as a means to obtain a better understanding on the significance of the literary legacy that they represent. It particularly, the structure and protagonists of both novels are compared given the importance put on their characterization and their exaggerated physical and sexual dimensions analyzed as one of the characteristics used to enhance the humorous aspect in both novels.*

Keywords: Korean literature, Vietnamese literature, colonial period, humor, comparative literature

1. Introduction and contextualization

This paper aims to establish a comparative reading of two satirical novels by key authors, shedding light on 20th-century literature that critiqued the societal dynamics of the 1930s in Korea and Vietnam. From a historical perspective, both authors lived during periods when their respective societies were at a crossroads, marked by foreign occupation, the erosion of traditional values, and the embrace of "modernity," often associated with Western cultural elements. This comparative analysis of two of their most popular novels seeks to enrich our understanding of both authors as comparative literature grants the literary history of a determined nation a deeper resonance in its capacity to contrast a given tradition with others (Domínguez et al. 2015, 4). The comparative approach used here aims to illuminate how both authors employed satire to critique their times. Furthermore, it seeks to transcend the local by

situating these works within a global framework, highlighting their universality beyond the confines of national literary traditions.

Due to the specificity of the topic, not many attempts have been made to compare these two novels. Among them, the most notable was perhaps made by Luong Thi Binh in her MA thesis. However, upon examining the structure of the work, while a considerable portion of it is dedicated to contrasting the realism elements of the novel with the socio-historical background of the countries during that period, the chapter dedicated to the analysis of satire presents them in separate sections rather than directly comparing their commonalities through the similar scenes that can be found in the two works (Luong, 2022, pp. 52-58). Thereby, this paper seeks to establish a parallel reading between both first focusing on their satirical intake into the tradition-modernity bionomy and then comparing their protagonists with an emphasis on the grotesque portrayals of sexuality with the objective of establishing a clearer connection between the novels that sheds light to a better understanding of their satirical spirit outside their socio-historical contexts. For this comparison the available English translations will be used. However, as this may raise concerns among specialized readers due to the challenges of translating all the nuances of such satirical works, the original texts will be offered in the footnotes for each quotation as well.

As a writer, Chae Mansik (1902-1950) has been often categorized as a satirist. While it is true that this characteristic is not present or prevalent in all his literary works, some of his most renowned works could fall in this categorization. Among others, Chae Mansik produced 15 full and medium length novels and 70 short stories (Kong, 2022, p. 145). His novel *Taepyeong chonha* (Peace under heaven) is among his most representative works written during the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945). Divided in fifteen chapters, it was originally serialized in the *Chogwang* (朝光) magazine from the January to the September volume in 9 installments (Chae, 1987, p. 8). The title of the novel, 太平天下, refers to a Chinese proverb meaning “Peace under heaven”.

Its popularity among readers may be represented in the fact that it gave birth to other pirate versions under different titles: *Hwanggeumgwang Sidae* (The Gold Rush) by the publisher Jungang in 1949 and *Aejeongui Bom* (The Spring of Love) by Daedong in 1958. Both editions were presented following the aesthetics of *ttakjibon* (popular novels of cheap edition) and recognized Chae Mansik’s authorship in their cover, but according to Kim’s research in the first case they left blank the copyright section while in the second they seem to have changed the works title to avoid possible legal consequences (Kim, 2013, pp. 286-287). The plot follows a day and a half in the life of its protagonist, Yun Tusöp, son of “horse-face” Yun, an usurer who has built his fortune on lending money to impoverished countrymen with high interest rates.

On the other hand, Vũ Trọng Phụng (1912-1939) is regarded as a prominent author within Vietnamese twentieth century literature as well. His educational background was rather humble, and he wrote exclusively in the Romanized script because he never learnt Chinese characters (Zinoman, 2014, p. 25). In Colonial Vietnam, the colonizers established many Franco-Vietnamese schools and promoted the education in *quô’c ngu*, the Romanized version for spoken Vietnamese created by the Portuguese missionary Fransico de Pina (1585-1625). This was a strategy intended to sever the ties between the Vietnamese and the Chinese elites as the Chinese heritage could become an identifier of Vietnamese nationalist identity and there was a growing circulation of Chinese texts preaching revolutionary and nationalist ideas in Indochina (Zinoman, 2014, p. 24). Thus, it is important to point out that Vũ Trọng Phụng’s background was product of the first generation of Vietnamese who were educated in this manner. Considering this and his economically troubled background, it is not surprising to discover that some of his literary competitors used his background against him. For example, the *Self-Strength Newspaper These Days* (Ngày Nay) dismissed him as a “literary hack” whose “rudimentary education” (so’ho.c) rendered him unqualified to offer lessons about society and

morality (Zinoman, 2014, p. 26). This may be one of the very reasons for his satirical instance against those intellectuals who found themselves superior for having obtained (or attempted) French degrees through certain characters in his novels. Interestingly, his critical stance towards intellectuals is shared by Chae Mansik even though he came from an accommodated family, which allowed him to study Chinese characters during his childhood and also to spend one year studying English literature at the University of Waseda in Japan before having to come back to the peninsula in 1923 due to financial problems. (Jang, 2017, p. 43).

Vũ Trọng Phụng passed away at an early age for a writer due to the combined effects of tuberculosis and opium addiction. Despite this, during his career that spanned around ten years he produced eight novels, four books of narrative nonfiction and hundreds of stories, plays, essays and others (Zinoman, 2014, p. 2). Similarly to Chae Mansik in Korea, he has been known for his cultivation of realism together with other authors such as Vu Bang or Vu Dinh-Chi (also known as Tam Lang) (Durand & Nguyen, 1985, p. 121). In his works he depicted social issues of the time such as the prostitution industry, usury, extortion and venereal diseases as it can be seen in works such as *Ky nghe lay tay* (Marrying Frenchmen as business, 1934) or *Lục Xi* (Venereal disease clinic, 1937), which was serialized in eleven installments in the Vietnamese newspaper *Tương Lai* (Future) before being published as a book (Malarney, 2011, p. 9). The stark portrayals of sexuality in his writings led the French colonial administration to fine him in 1932 (Phong, 2024) and in an interview by Le Thanh in 1937 translated and republished by Peter Zinoman in 2005 he tried to defend against those who accused his novels of being pornographic by emphasizing that contemporary society was in a process of decay and that he depicted real situations that he had experienced (Le, 2005, p. 75).

His novel *Số Đỏ* (Dumb luck) was published first in serial form in the *Hà Nội Báo* (Hanoi Newspaper) starting on 7 October 1936. This was shortly after the Popular Front took power in France which brought about a relaxed censorship in Vietnam (Zinoman, 2002, p. 2). *Số Đỏ* is a satirical portrayal of the bourgeois of the time set up in Hanoi. It is important to note that this novel together with all the author's work became later banned from the late 1950s up to the early 1980s as they were considered counter-revolutionary (Zinoman, 2014, p. 11). However, nowadays the author has become a classic studied in schools. The plot narrates the rise of Red-Haired Xuan (*Xuân Tóc Đỏ*), an orphan ball boy who belongs to the common people (*bình dân*). Through a series of adventures this character of humble origins becomes a member of high society and the Europeanization Movement.

1.2. Methodology

Even though satire has been widely researched in different fields, its definition remains problematic and subject of academic debates. The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary terms, satire is defined as: “a mode of writing that exposes the failings of individuals, institutions or societies to ridicule and scorn. Satire is often an incidental element in literary works that may not be wholly satirical, especially in comedy. [...]” (Baldick, 2001, p. 228).

Departing from this definition it is possible to establish two essential characteristics: Firstly, satire is not considered as a literary genre itself, but rather as a mode of writing; and secondly, satire has an intentionality of social critique. The first characteristic may be more controversial, partly because of the problems inherent in quantifying the satirical elements of a novel and the difficulties in determining if satire is a dominant characteristic within a particular work. However, when it comes to the second characteristic, as pointed out by Park-Ozee, existing definitions unanimously agree that satire is a form of criticism that seeks to prompt the audience to engage in scrutiny of the satirical target (Park-Ozee, 2019, p. 4). Other authors, such as Linda Hutcheon agree defining satire as “moral, social and ameliorative in its intention” (Hutcheon,

2023, p. 16). In his prominent essays on this topic, Northrop Frye pointed out that “the chief distinction between irony and satire is that satire is militant irony: its moral norms are relative clear, and it assumes standards against which the grotesque and absurd are measured” (Frye, 1971, p. 223) Indeed, as mentioned in the introduction, Taepyeong chonha and Sô Đô include significant satirical mechanisms that serve the purpose of criticizing their colonial societies.

Satirists utilize a combination of absurdity, distortion, reversal and reduction (Park-Ozee, 2019, p. 17). As it will be argued, elements of the Bakhtinian concepts of carnivalesque and grotesque realism are also present in both cases. In his analysis of Rabelais literature, Mikhail Bakhtin established a relationship between carnival traditions and satirical literature that include reversal of hierarchies, grotesque realism and laughter as resistance to authoritarianism. Bakhtin depicts carnival as a temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order that marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 10). According to him, the humorous principle that organizes the carnival is atemporal and universal and laughter transcends the objects towards it is directed within a particular time and space. It is a collective concept directed towards the world (Lachman et al., 1988, p. 123). A related concept that derives from this is grotesque realism which focuses on the grotesque body. For Bakhtin that body is “marked by the evidence of its material origin and destiny” (Dentith, 1995, p. 65). It constitutes the literary expression of an attitude that is central to popular culture and that it expresses itself more directly in the excesses of life, the carnival banquets, idiot’s fests, games and symbolic subversions. He exemplifies quoting Don Quixote’s Sancho whose representation with a protruding belly, a big appetite and abundant defecation symbolize the utmost expression of the grotesque realism (Dentith, 1995, p. 78). The following table presents key elements that characterize satire, which will be comparatively analyzed in both novels in the next sections.

Table 1. Theoretical framework to compare satirical elements

Category	Key concepts	Analytical questions
Language and tone	Bawdy humor, colloquial speech	Do the language reflect a carnival or grotesque tone? Are there multiple competing voices or perspectives?
Carnavalesque	Suspension of hierarchies, inversion of norms, festive laughter, collective participation	How are societal hierarchies or norms subverted? Area elements of collective or festive humor present?
Satirical targets	Critique of authority, religion, social norms, morality	Who or what is being mocked or subverted? How does satire encourage laughter or reflection?
Grotesque Realism	Emphasis on the material bodily principle	How does the text depict the body/ its bodily functions as exaggerated?
Sexuality as grotesque realism	Sexual excess as generative, comic, universal	Exaggerated sexual desire Sexual humor or sex that critiques societal norms Mockery of chastity or celibacy

In the following sections, we will first delve into a comparison of the general structure, tone, and satirical targets of both novels, setting the stage for a deeper exploration. The subsequent analysis will focus on how elements of grotesque realism are woven throughout, with particular emphasis on the two central characters. Although both novels feature a broad spectrum of satirical figures, their narratives are ultimately anchored in the compelling journeys of their protagonists: Yun Tusöp and Red-haired Xuan.

2. Structure and carnivalesque tone of the novels

As mentioned above, the novels are centered in their peculiar protagonists and their relations with their families, though Yun is the patriarch of his family and Red-Haired Xuan is originally an outsider to Mrs Deputy Customs Officers family:

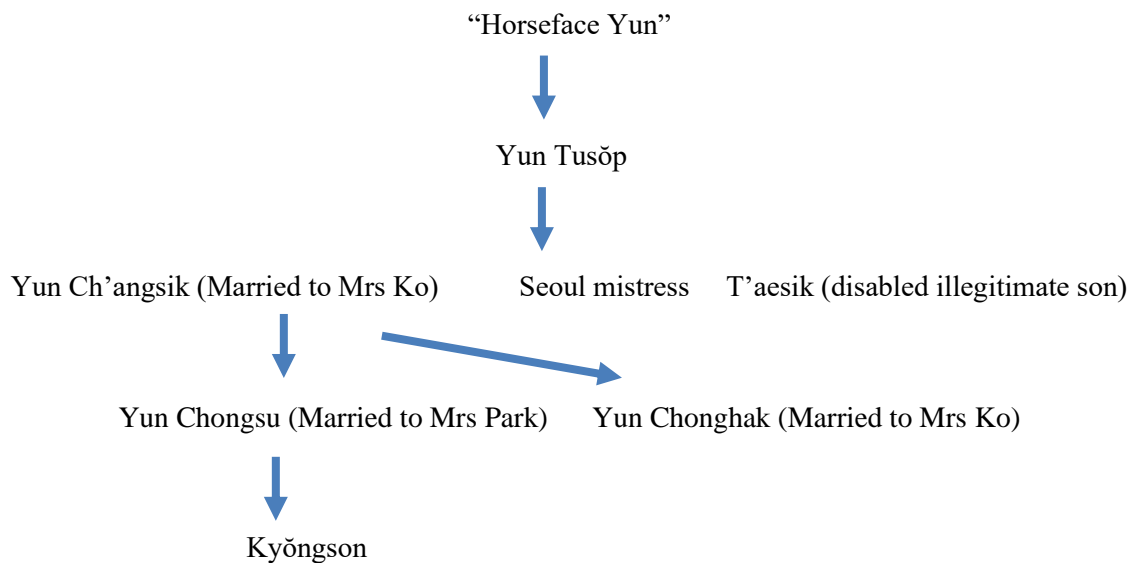


Figure 1. Yun's family structure

Figure 1 represents Yun's family. In the narrative present, Yun Tusöp is seventy-two years old and the patriarch of an extended and dysfunctional family. At his advanced age with economic prosperity and stability ensured his main goal is to raise the reputation and status of his family name through his descendants. However, despite his efforts, his son Yun Ch'angsik spends most of his time dilapidating the fortune built by his father by lending money to everyone and leading an extravagant life with different concubines. Considering that his daughter, Seoul mistress, widowed at a young age becoming confined to the house and that T'aesik is mentally disabled and an illegitimate son, the hopes of Yun Tusöp to raise his family status are placed on his grandsons, Yun Chongsu and Yun Chonghak. While most characters belong to Yun's family, there are two other important characters that are not related to the Yuns, the fifteen years old *kisaeng* Ch'unsim and Taebok, the family's accountant that had previously worked for a few years as a bookkeeping clerk.

The novel also features chapters that are centered on other characters belonging to his family or household. Besides its satirical tone, a remarkable characteristic of this novel is the presence of structures typical of the traditional *pansori* of which the author was a big admirer. Such elements can be found, for example, in the summaries that open the fifteen chapters of the novel and their repetition of character or environment descriptions that are like those used in the *pansori* scenes that alternate between tension and relaxation (*kinjang* and *iwan*) (Song, 1992, p.

21). Like Vũ Trọng Phụng’s novel, from a lexical perspective Taepyeong chonha includes foul language and insults as a tool to reinforce the comical effect at some points. For example, the protagonist continuously calls his own daughter-in-law “frigid bitch” and her teenager lover “little bitch”. The novel also includes dialectal expressions from the author’s home province Jeolla.

Due to its structure, it has been often compared to Yeom Sangseop’s Samdae (Three Generations, 1931) because of its portrayal of a multiple generational family in the same historical context. For example, Park argues that the structure in both novels is used to represent a generational conflict where the family patriarchs embody traditional obsolete values in the colonial society and their son’s modernity (Park, 2021, p. 630). However, as pointed out by Kim, it is also true that while three different generations are depicted the focus on the novel relies mostly on the perspective of Master Yun (Kim, 2004, p. 397). In the case of Yun Ch’angsik, Park argues that he represents that new generation of intellectuals who felt powerless and alienated within the colonial context and thus decided to indulge in a hedonistic way of life. The study concludes that one of the differences between the two novels is that Chae Mansik focuses more on the exploitative and oppressive economic structure of Japanese colonial capitalism (Park, 2021, p. 640) This seems coherent with other author’s major works of this period, such as for example Takryu (Turbid Rivers, 1938) that also explores money through a series of characters ranging from rice stock speculators to usurers among other themes. A fundamental difference between Samdae and Taepyeong chonha lies in the employment of irony and satirical modes by Chae Mansik, especially towards its main character Yun Tusöp, to criticize society. On the other hand, Sô Đổ presents the following structure:

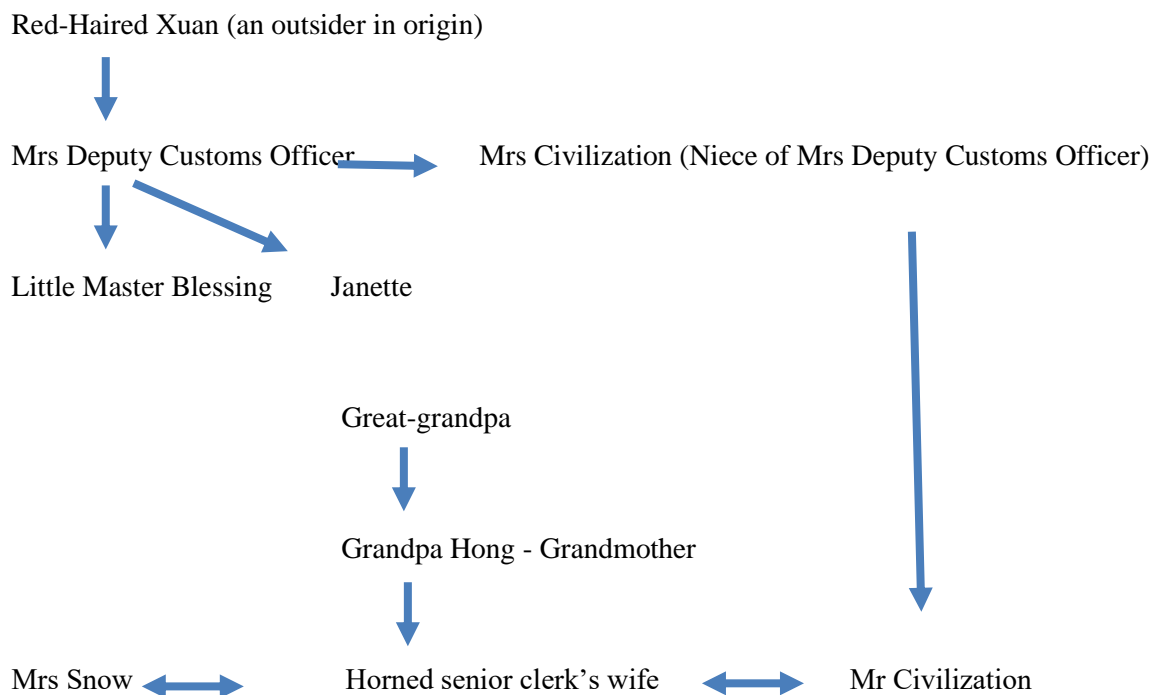


Figure 2. Mrs Deputy Customs Officer’s family.

Most of the characters in Sô Đổ belong to the same family as well, though there are other secondary characters and affiliates to the Europeanization Movement that do not share blood ties with them just like the protagonist himself. As it can be seen in Figure 2, The structure is more complex than in Taepyeong chonha and it also presents a broader range of secondary

characters that function as archetypes of the different social strata perceived by the author in the 1930s even though the focus of the satire remains directed towards the bourgeois. As described by Hoàng:

The author's laughter is a denial of the entire society, ridiculous and in disarray. The ideas in the novel have achieved a universal level: the writer criticizes all the vices that could spread through every social layer: false radicalism, self-styled populists, pseudo-intellectuals, pseudosciences, and false titles and diplomas.

(Hoàng Ngọc Hiến, quoted in Le, 2022, p. 164)

Mrs Deputy Customs Officer is together with Red Haired Xuan arguably the most satirized and important character in the story. Mrs Deputy Customs Officer was raped by a French soldier who married her when she was a teenager and later remarried a young official who also passed away. Both are said to have passed away trying to satisfy her overwhelming sexual desire to add to the satirical portrayal. When she decides to hire Red-Haired Xuan, originally a ball boy, as a player to practice on the new tennis court that she is building in her yard his fate radically changes, and he will begin to ascend in society through a series of comical adventures.

As Pham points out, in *Số Đỏ* the colonial city of Hanoi functions as a dynamic intersectional zone between these two cultural spaces, a meeting point where French residences coexist with the traditional sidewalks to which originally Red-Haired Xuan belongs (Pham, 2019, p. 55). The sidewalks were an important spatial element in the cramped old neighborhoods as they served for multiple daily life interactions. As a long-term resident of the 36 streets of Hanoi, Vũ Trọng Phụng best represents this element at the beginning of the novel when Red-haired Xuan has interactions with the future teller and the sugarcane girl. In that regard, it can be concluded that in comparison to Taepyeong chonha, *Số Đỏ*'s social critique displays a wide range of characters not exclusively limited to the bourgeois, but with a clear focus on them and the Europeanization Movement.

Just like some academics have established connections between Taepyeong chonha and *pansori*, in the case of *Số Đỏ* influences from Vietnamese traditional culture can be perceived. Specifically, critic Văn Tâm emphasized how the novel echoes many conventions of the traditional farce *chèo*. Elements such as extravagant situations and characters, nonsensical elements, slapstick, wordplay, double meanings and conversations filled with mutual misunderstanding are present in both the novel and this form of humoristic theatrical representation (Le, 2022, pp. 163-164). The structure of the novel and the ending present some similarities as well as in every chapter there is a title and an introduction of themes and characters followed by sudden unusual events, presentations of the characters and acting where they define their traits through dialogue. Once the protagonist Xuan achieves glory the conflicts are resolved, and the novel and its theatrical scenes abruptly conclude. (Le, 2022, p. 164). In terms of narrator, where these two novels display influences by the author's native traditions, it can be argued that they maintain a distance or detachment from the satirical subjects allowing the readers which Muecke considers a key element in the process of creating and enhancing irony as he comments:

The word 'comic' suggests a certain 'distance', psychologically speaking, between the amused observer and the comic object; the word 'liberation' suggests 'disengagement', 'detachment', and these in turn 'objectivity' and 'dispassion'.

(Muecke, 1970, p. 47)

In other words, both narrators function as observers allowing multiple interpretations by the readers, Phùng observes that absence of a dominant voice and the fact that the narrator accurately relates what is said by other characters may also be perceived as a development from

his report writings narrator (Phùng, 2022, p. 127). In Taepyeong chonha the narrator mocks and ridicules the situations the characters find themselves and its portrayed as omniscient, lively, and comically animated within the novel. (Kim, 2004, p. 405) In both cases the narrator's detachment serves to enhance the satirical tone of the works, and they can be defined as dramatic narrators insofar as they contribute to the mockery of the characters aligning with common sense

In addition to their structure and narrators, both novels present a tone that aligns with the concept of the carnivalesque, defined by Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) as a mode of writing that captures the spirit of the carnival and other popular festivities, reproducing its typical subversions, characteristics, parodies, and dethronements. This is perhaps most evident in the absurd humor that defines *Số Đổ*. Red-haired Xuan had originally been hired by family members as a doctor with the hope that his fake medicine would kill Great-grandpa. When he failed in this task, what ultimately killed the old man was the news of his daughter's adultery. The best example of a carnivalesque scene in the novel is found in Great-grandpa's funeral. The narrator depicts the blend of Vietnamese, Chinese, and French traditions as resembling a large festival. Although the funeral should be a solemn occasion, it devolves into a grand celebration for the family, an opportunity to publicly display their wealth.

The conversation fragments heard at the event are, in contrast to the social norms that govern funerals, frivolous to most:

To whose family does that pretty girl belong? The one next to her is even hotter! Yes, yes, that bastard is a real creep! Didn't his wife leave him?-Two husbands already!-She's not too old!-Those breasts look awfully French!-Can't you fix me up with her?-Did you say a gold mine or lead mine?-No more dates at all?-The wife is so fat, and the husband is so skinny. I see horns for him in the future!

(Phùng, 2002, p. 148)¹

In another moment of the funeral high school graduate Tân asks attendants to strike different poses next to the coffin and his friends jump on the surrounding tombs so that Tân can take their souvenir pictures. All of this can be interpreted as contributing to the mockery of the colonial bourgeois.

Scenes that evoke this kind of festive spirit can be also found in Taepyeong chonha. However, they are more centered in Master Yun and his discussions with other characters. A good example of this can be found in the quarrel happening in his household where the family norm is subverted and the patriarch receives all sorts of insults from Mrs Ko, his daughter-in-law. Mrs Ko who has spent a big deal of her youth in solitude while her husband maintained different concubines, is full of rancor and fights with all family members. Her cunning makes him lament not being able to beat her like his defunct wife did.

Another similar scene occurs fight over a seat in the festival where he is mistaken for the pansori singer Yi Tongbaek taking offense in it. On the same scene he accuses modernity of turning everything “topsy turvy” when one of the ushers instruct him to move to a cheaper seat according to the price he paid.

¹ In Vietnamese: Con bé nhà ai kháu thế? – Con bé bên cạnh đẹp hơn nữa! - Ừ, ừ, cái thằng ấy bạc tình bỏ mẹ! – Xưa kia vợ nó bỏ nó chớ? – Hai đời chồng rồi! – Còn xuânchán! - Gớm cái ngực, cái đằm quá đi mất! – Làm mối cho tớ nhé? - Mỏ vàng hay mỏ chì? – Không, không hện hò gì cả - Vợ béo thế, chồng gầy thế, thì mọc sừng mất! vân vân v.v... (Phùng, 2003, pp. 121-122)

2.1. Social criticism and the interplay of tradition and modernity

Despite their different historical backgrounds, Taepyeong chonha and Sớ Đồ exhibit a series of significant thematic and modal similarities. They were written at a time when Korea and Vietnam were undergoing a modernization process that most of the time was accompanied by calls to reject tradition. However, it can be argued that the social criticism in Sớ Đồ is more directed towards the dichotomy of tradition versus modernity even though the author identified money as an element that corrupted society as well. Regarding this matter, in the previously mentioned interview, he mentioned:

We live in an era during which those with power and money live only for sensual pleasure. Certainly, you have heard stories about members of the nouveau riche who, despite having half-dozen wives, still commit acts as indecent as those perpetrated by my character Nghi Hach. [...] A large part of our country's youth are concerned only with play and pleasure.

(Le, 2005, p. 75).

Through this answer, it is possible to confirm the author's concern with the moral corruption associated with wealth and explain its mockery throughout the novel. Regarding modernization, he declared the following:

I am very "conservative", sir, especially on the question of women. I am against the movement for Europeanization of External forms promoted over the past several years by the leaders of the Self-Strengthening Literary Group. They argue that the "progressive renovation of external forms will trigger the progressive renovation of our spirit."

(Le, 2005, p. 76)

This passage conveys the author's opinion regarding the adoption of all things French as intrinsically beneficial for modernization. In fact, in the novel there are many instances in which Vũ Trọng Phụng emphasizes the discourse contradictions of the reformers who advocate Europeanization:

"I won't shut up! You can't make me!"

"Shut up, you idiot! Don't you know that there are different kinds of women? When we campaign for the reform of women, we mean other people's wives and sisters, not our own! Don't you understand? It's one thing for other women to reform, but you're my wife. Of course, I would never permit you to become one of those modern women!"

(Phụng, 2002, p. 70)²

In this scene clothes designer Mr. ILL gets angry at his wife for pretending to dress like one of the modern women he advocates and produces, but secretly despises. Mr Ill designs modern clothes and lingerie at the Europeanization Tailor Shop owned by the Civilizations. They regard this store as an important element to modernize society and Vũ Trọng Phụng uses the names and descriptions of different clothes to introduce satirical elements ridiculing the thought that an imitation of the western appearance will bring about a reform on the mind. In scenes like this, the author emphasizes the hypocrisy by showing how modernization advocates become conservative minded when the so called "modernization" concerns their own family members. At the same time, the superficial adaptation of French customs without questioning is criticized.

² In Vietnamese: Tôi không cảm có được không? Cảm đi, đồ ngu! Khi người ta cố động đàn bà thì phải biết là cũng có năm bảy thứ đàn bà! Khi người ta nói phụ nữ... là nói vợ con chị em người khác, chứ không phải vợ con chị em của ta! Mợ đã hiểu chưa? Người khác thì được, mà mợ, mợ là vợ tôi, thì mợ không thể tân thời như người khác được! (Phụng 2003, 44)

In Taepyeong chonha, the idea that lies under this is that money can indeed buy anything in Chae Mansik's society including status. So, what is Chae Mansik's stance regarding the tradition-modernity bionomy? As pointed out by Carter J. Eckert in the introduction of the translated edition of the novel, "if Chae disparages the traditional culture, he has, if anything, even more disdain for modernity. It is modernity, in fact, that he cites as responsible for turning everything upside down" (Eckert, 1993, p. 21) Eckert goes on depicting modernity as "a displacement of humanistic, communal values by a rational calculus based entirely on self-interest and monetary profit. Thus, the world becomes a marketplace of buyers and sellers, and human beings themselves are turned into living commodities to be bought and sold." (Eckert, 1993, p. 21) Approaching such definition can help to understand where Chae Mansik stands regarding the relationship between the traditional, the modern and money. The novel puts an emphasis on Master Yun's relationship with money through the several scenes in which he tries to save it and those in which he is discussing businesses with his broker "Tadpole".

Elements related to the modern can be also found and perceived as related to status. For example, Master Yun keeps with him a radio that is precious to him but fails to understand how it works he scolds his accountant when it fails to play the music he likes.

For obvious reasons, despite the colonial background developing in both countries during this time, these two novels are characterized by an absence of relevant colonizer characters and all the main characters are Korean and Vietnamese respectively as the contrary could easily lead to censorship and repression. However, an indirect but significant critique to the colonial rule can be also interpreted from both texts.

"Don't you miss the old days, say, ten years ago?"

"Very much so! Ten years ago our people were still stupid."

"Everyone is so civilized nowadays! It's a damn shame! The streets used to be filled with depraved, uncouth men and women —people who'd spit and piss wherever they pleased, people who'd beat each other up in public. Remember the days when four people rode together on a single bicycle!? Remember when people used to curse each other in public and smack their neighbors around? Houses were filthy with toilet water; dogs ran wild in the streets. Bicycles without headlights were everywhere. Now everything has changed. Alas, the good old days of our parents are gone forever!"
"Even rickshaw coolies obey the law, nowadays! They never forget their lights! They never stop in the middle of the road! No one even curses anyone's ancestors anymore! The old order has broken down completely! Kids today don't even know how to talk dirty! They're all so prim and proper. They don't climb trees; they don't play football in the middle of the road; they don't do anything!"

(Phụng, 2002, p. 44)³

In this scene of *Số Đổ* the policemen are complaining that they barely can ticket anyone because they have become "too civilized". In a novel full of immoral characters who had just embraced superficial elements of the West this scene ironizes by establishing a comparison

³ In Vietnamese: -Thầy có tiếc cái thời buổi ngày xưa, cách đây mười năm không?- Tiếc lắm ! Mười năm trước đây, dân ta còn ngu.- Ngày nay dân ta văn minh mất rồi, rõ thâm hại ! Thầy phải biết là xưa kia, xã hội tinh những du côn và nặc nô, tinh những người bất lịch sự, chỗ nào cũng phóng uế, cũng đánh nhau. Hồi ấy có khi bốn người ngồi cùng một xe ! Họ chửi nhau hàng nửa giờ, đánh nhau võ đũa, nhà cửa của họ thì rác rưởi, nước cống, nước rãnh tung toé, ngập lụt... Chó của họ cũng chạy ra ngoài đường không nhông... Xe đi đèo, hay không đèn là nhan nhản. Bây giờ mọi sự đã thay đổi cả. Cái thời tốt đẹp của các cụ nhà ta không còn nữa ! Thật là tai hại ! Than ôi ! - Cụ tính ! Bây giờ đến cả thằng phu xe cũng biết luật ! Chả bao giờ chúng quên đèn ! Chả mấy khi chúng đứng giữa đường nghênh ngang ! Chả còn mấy người réo năm đời mười đời nhau ra như ngày xưa nữa ! Bao nhiêu nền nếp của xã hội này thế là hết nhẵn nhụi ! Ngay cả đến trẻ con chúng nó cũng không bậy bạ như xưa ! Đứa nào cũng quần áo bảnh bao đứng đần đẫn, văn minh lắm, trèo me trèo sấu, đá bóng giữa đường, những cái ấy là thôi cả. (Phụng, 2003, p. 14)

with the past when society was “uncivilized”. In the case of Taepyeong chonha the critical spirit towards the Japanese is best encapsulated in the scene that gives title to the novel:

Don't ever forget to thank your lucky stars we live in this wonderful world, where the Japanese have mobilized a huge army, hundreds of thousands of soldiers, to protect us Koreans! It's a world of peace where we can keep what is ours and live in comfort! Peace under heaven, that's what it is! Peace under heaven, you understand? And now, a rich man's son, born into a world of peace under heaven, why should he join up with a bunch of gangsters who'll bring ruin to the world? Why not just enjoy the life of a rich man in a foreign land? Why not, eh?

(Chae, 1993, p. 240)⁴

In this scene that occurs towards the end of the novel Master Yun is furious about his grandson's ties with socialism and praises the pax established by the Japanese in the Korean peninsula. However, this praise coming from a character that has been repeatedly depicted as utterly ignorant and immoral throughout the novel can only be perceived as another irony. In a few other occasions it is possible to find Master Yun praising the behavior of Japanese in the war as “splendid” or depicting it as a war “without pillage or plunder” (Chae, 1993, p. 110) which could only be perceived as another ironic critique by anyone familiar with the news that were circulating at that time about the repression of the Japanese army.

3. Grotesque realism in the portrayals of Master Yun and Red-Haired Xuan

As it has been explained, the narratives of both novels rely significantly on their protagonists. There are certain similarities and differences in the characterization of Master Yun and Red-Haired Xuan. Both are colonized subjects and depart from the lowest social strata succeeding in society through imitation and assimilation into colonial modernity. In that sense, both characters refer us to Homi K. Bhabba's concept of mimicry which represent an ironic compromise, colonial mimicry is defined as “a desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabba, 1994, p. 86). As opportunists, Master Yun and Red-Haired Xuan try to navigate the currents of modernization and fit into the colonizer's cast which causes an implicit critique of the colonizer's desires as they could never become equal to them and integrated.

Moreover, the fact that they succeed in their societies serves as an ironic critique of the supposed superiority of colonial modernity, as it reveals that virtually anyone can ascend within these corrupted systems. In the case of *Số Đổ*, this so-called modernity is closely tied to westernization, with everything introduced by the French being equated with progress. By contrast, the Korean case is unique in that it represents the first instance of colonization by a non-Western power. However, the paternalistic rhetoric employed by the Japanese in Korea closely mirrors that of Western powers, as both justified their domination through claims of modernizing their colonized subjects.

⁴ In Korean: 화적패가 있느냐야? 부랑당 같은 수령(守令)들이 있더냐.....? 재산이 있대야 도적놈의 것이요, 목숨은 파리목숨 같던 말세넌 다 지내가고오..... 자 부아라, 거리거리 순사요, 골골마다 공명헌 정사(政事), 오죽이나 좋은 세상이여..... 남은 수십만 명 동병(動兵)을 히여서, 우리 조선놈 보호히여 주니, 오죽이나 고마운 세상이여? 으응.....? 제 것 지니고 앉아서 편안하게 살 태평세상, 이걸 태평천하라구 허는 것이여, 태평천하.....! 그런데 이런 태평천하에 태어난 부자놈의 자식이, 더군다나 왜지가 땡땡거리구 편안하게 살 것이지, 어찌서지가 세상 망쳐 놀 부랑당패에 참섭을헌담 말이여, 으응? (Chae, 2014, p. 272)

Both protagonists can also be analyzed in relation to the grotesque realism proposed by Bakhtin. The initial depictions of Yun Tusöp at the beginning of the novel resonate with this concept, as he is humorously described as an extremely voluminous and heavy man. Chae Mansik vividly portrays the struggles of the rickshaw driver as he attempts to transport Yun to his house gate:

Once on the ground, Master Yun recovered his full dimensions, revealing himself to be a man of great bulk indeed. In fact, an embrace, were it attempted, would more likely than not require a good armful and a half. Moreover, he was at least six feet tall. To give you a better picture, it can be noted that the rickshaw looked like a toy beside him and the gate began to tremble and quake long before he passed beneath it.

(Chae, 1993, p. 4)⁵

Beyond the exaggerated depiction, his unexpected refusal to pay the driver's fare after all his efforts contrasts sharply with his luxurious attire. This moment introduces readers to Yun's true nature and sets the tone for the rest of the novel. Yun is depicted as a very wealthy man wearing tailor made clothes and an authentic T'ongyöng *kat*, the best money could buy. Thereby, making him refuse to pay the low rickshaw fare introduces an ironic effect as it is unexpected and at the same time let readers see Yun's egoism. His almost grotesque body and the driver's struggles add to the satire in this scene.

On the other hand, Red-Haired Xuan's physical appearance is described in the scene where he meets the fortune teller and asks for a face reading:

The fortune-teller examined Xuan's red-streaked hair, his receding forehead, his oversized jaw, his long flute of an upper lip, and his comically thick ears.

(Phụng, 2002, p. 38).⁶

Although his appearance is also caricatured, his most notable physical trait is his red hair. Since red hair is uncommon among Vietnamese people, it serves to highlight his status as an outsider. At the same time, it can symbolize modernity, underscoring the absurdity of someone like him, unqualified yet rising in society through sheer cunning. In the novel, his red hair is attributed to prolonged exposure to the sun while performing menial jobs. When it comes to physical comparisons, the grotesque image of Master Yun bears more similarities to Mrs. Deputy Customs Officer, who is also depicted as an overweight, middle-aged woman attempting to dress and behave like someone younger:

The back door opened, and out stepped a hefty woman in her mid-forties, made up like a fashionable young seductress. Her face was caked with powder and lipstick, and her newly permed jet-black hair fell in tiny ringlets from beneath an elegant and equally tiny scarf. She looked to be over seventy kilograms! She clutched a huge leather purse and a tiny umbrella in one hand, and in the other she hugged a miniature dog, as other-worldly as a unicorn.

(Phụng, 2002, p. 37)⁷

⁵ In Korean: 내려선 것을 보니, 진실로 거판진 체집입니다. 허리를 안아 본다면, 아마 모르면 몰라도 한 아름답고도 반은 실히 될까 봅니다. 그런데다가 키도 알맞게 다섯 자 아홉 치는 넉넉합니다. 얼핏 알아듣기 쉽게 빗대면, 지금 그가 타고 온 인력거가 장난감 같고, 그 큰 대문간이 들어서기도 전에 사뭇 그들먹합니다. (Chae, 2014, p. 18)

⁶ In Vietnamese: Ông thầy ngắm nghĩa cái đầu tóc đỏ, cái trán lép, cái quai hàm to, cái nhân trung dài, hai cái tai dày đặn ấy, rồi gật gù (Phụng, 2003, p. 8)

⁷ In Vietnamese: Cửa xe mở, một bà trạc ngoài tứ tuần mà y phục còn trai lơ hơn của các thiếu nữ, mặt bự ra những son và phấn, tóc đen lay láy nhưng mà quăn quăn, cả người nặng ít ra cũng bảy mươi cân, nhưng cái khăn

As can be observed, although her weight is not exaggerated or satirized to the extent of Master Yun's, similarities can be found between them, as both are portrayed as expensively dressed, extravagant, and overweight.

Besides this a shared characteristic by both protagonists is their ignorance, that can be confirmed through several humorous scenes. In addition, a shared characteristic of both protagonists is their ignorance, which is highlighted through several humorous scenes. As mentioned in the introduction, after attaining material wealth, Yun Tusöp paradoxically seeks to buy his status within a traditional framework that would otherwise have rejected him for being lowborn. This pursuit is filled with ironic twists, such as the scene in which Yun acquires the title of "Master" by making donations to a Confucian school. This scene may have been inspired by the sirhak scholar Park Jiwon's (1737–1805) satirical Tale of a Yangban, which also revolves around a wealthy commoner purchasing a noble title. The absurdity of purchasing a title is further emphasized when Yun asks the scholars whether Confucius or Mencius would win in a fistfight.

Out of the blue, he posed this question to all the scholars assembled there: "Well, if the honorable Confucius arm-wrestled the honorable Mencius, who do you think would have won?"

The literati dropped their jaws, not knowing whether to laugh or to cry. Nobody was able to satisfy Master Yun's curiosity.

(Chae, 1998, p. 48)⁸

The scene highlights his ignorance of academic matters, providing an unexpected comical twist for readers, as the protagonist is ironically presented as a "Master." It also represents a subversion of social norms, evoking the carnivalesque, as the celebration of rituals honoring ancestors is a solemn occasion within the Confucian tradition. When it comes to matters unrelated to his family's status, Yun Tusöp is miserly, hoarding every coin despite his wealth. His obsession is so extreme that he rebukes his family for not mixing rice with barley, even though he can easily afford pure rice.

In the case of *Số Đổ*, its protagonist is also depicted as an ignorant individual who climbs the social ladder by flattering the bourgeoisie. An opportunistic impostor, he exploits his limited knowledge and acting skills to fit into high society. For instance, in one scene, he attempts to compose a poem for Mrs. Snow out of jealousy. The poem, filled with terms he learned while selling medicine for venereal diseases on the streets, highlights his ignorance in a comical way, as he is mistakenly regarded as a satirical poet by his adversary.

*No matter if you're young or old, Avoid the sun, the wind, the cold.
Beware fevers, headaches, and the flu; dry skin and heat rash make you blue.
Day and night you'll rant and rave.
Your feet won't walk, your hands won't wave.
For you I have these words to say:
Buy our ointment, don't delay.*

(Phụng, 2002, p. 107)⁹

vành giầy đúng một hết sức thì lại nhỏ xíu và ngắn ngắn có một mẩu, một tay cầm một cái dù thật tí hon và một cái ví da khổng lồ, tay kia ôm một con chó bé trông kỳ dị như một con kỳ lân, bước xuống đất một cách nặng nề vát vát. (Phụng 2003, 7-8)

⁸ In Korean: 다른 게 아니라, 어느 해 여름인데 윤직원 영감이 향교엘 처억 올라오더니 마침 풍월(風月)을 하느라고 흥얼 흥얼하고 앉았는데 여러 장의와 선비들더러 밀도끝도없이, "대체 거, 공자님허구 맹자님허구 팔씨름을 히였으면 누가 이겼으꼬? 하고 물으더랍니다. 장의와 선비들은 웃어야 할지 울어야 할지분간 못 해서 입만 떠억 벌렸고, 아무도 윤직원 영감의 궁금증은 풀어 주지는 못했답니다. (Chae 2014, 68)

⁹ In Vietnamese: Dù già cả, dù ấu nhi,

Another significant theme shared by the two novels is the depiction of exaggerated sexual lust in certain characters, which contributes to the grotesque atmosphere and enhances the humorous tone. As argued by Berrong, sex and things having to do with the genital organs are an important feature of Bakhtin's material bodily lower stratum (Berrong, 1986, p. 30) An exaggerated sexual lust associated to upper class characters can also have the effect of leveling hierarchies and reducing distances by demonstrating that their bodies are subject to the same desires as everyone else's. In the case of Yun this is obvious from his morally reprovable relationship with Ch'unsim a teenager *kisaeng*. His virility is depicted by the narrator as follows:

Still, a virility of such barbarous dimensions, recklessly ignoring the limits of age—seventy-two years in Master Yun's case—cannot be written off merely as a physical predisposition. It may be argued that Master Yun was born with the constitution of Sindon, the Koryŏ dynasty monk renowned for his lechery, and that his constitution never would have reached its potential had he not been born with something extra.

(Chae, 1993, p. 142)¹⁰

Yun's virility is evident in the fact that his youngest son, T'aesik, was conceived when Yun was in his sixties and is the same age as his grandson Kyŏngson and Ch'unsim. In addition to his obsession with his family's reputation, Yun is also fixated on living a long life and maintaining his health. To achieve this, he resorts to all sorts of methods, the most extravagant of which is his routine of drinking a child's urine every morning, a practice for which he is willing to pay twenty *jeon* to a poor family. The grotesque nature of his sexual desire is revealed through his interactions with Ch'unsim, to whom he lies about his real age

Master Yun peered up at Ch'unsim with a lecherous look on his face. He didn't know it but saliva was dribbling out of his mouth, and his body kept on twisting.

"Ch'unsim?"

"Yes?"

"Well ... will you do something for me?"

"What is it?" she asked, but by the way she was smiling she seemed already to have sensed. Master Yun's confidence soared. Things are going well at last, he told himself.

"You'll do something for me, won't you?"

"Well, what is it?"

Master Yun grinned again, then furtively stretched out his arm and said,

"Come here, you little bitch!"

Sương hàn nắng gió bất kỳ - biết đâu?

Sin ra cảm, sốt, nhức đầu,

Da khô, mình nóng, âu sầu, ù ê...

Đêm ngày nói sáng, nói mê...

Chân tay mệt ói, khó bề yên vui.

Vậy xin mách bảo đôi lời:

Nhức đầu giải cảm" liệu đời dùng ngay! (Phụng, 2003, p. 80)

¹⁰ In Korean: 하지만 윤직원 영감처럼 나이 칠십여 세에, 연령의 한계를 마구 무시하는 그의 야만스러운 정력은, 부질없이 생물로서의 선천적인 운명이라고만 처분은 안 됩니다. 본시 체질을 좋게 타고났다고 주장을 하겠지요. 그러나 아무리 신돈이 같은 체질을 타고났다고 하더라도, 윤직원 영감이 윤직원 영감다운 팔자를 열려서 타고나지 못했으면 그 체질은 성명이 없고 말 것입니다. (Chae, 2014, p. 116)

He pulled her firmly by the waist, quite relaxed as he did so, for his mind was at ease. Ah, but the little bitch all at once squirmed out of his grip.

"You're disgusting!" she shrieked.

Six times! If the truth be told, Master Yun was terribly disheartened. Six rejections were enough to make an impetuous youth hang himself several times.

(Chae, 1993, p. 145)¹¹

As can be inferred from this scene, Yun had previously attempted to fulfill his sexual desires with other young kisaeng, but they rejected him upon discovering his true intentions. However, Ch'unsim accepts keeping him company, which usually involves chatting, singing for him, and massaging his legs. As demonstrated, she manages to reject him whenever he tries to push beyond these limits. She is not portrayed as a mere plaything in Yun's hands, but as a cunning girl who manipulates the situation to her advantage. This is evident in the scenes where she persuades him to buy her a ring, with the expectation of receiving sexual favors in return. Master Yun asks her to keep this pact a secret, as he would be scolded, and she would be beaten for misbehaving if anyone were to discover it. (Chae, 2014, p. 122)

From his side, it is remarkable how the orphan Red-Haired Xuan was kicked out of his uncle's house at a young age while spying on his aunt during bath time. At the beginning of the novel, he also gets fired of his ball boy job at the tennis court for spying the girls in the changing room which reinforces his image as a sort of perverted character. Conscious of the sexual tension between Mrs Deputy Customs Officer he is willing to exploit it to his advantage:

Xuan smiled to himself. He knew that Mrs. Deputy Customs Officer, although old, was even naughtier than an innocent young girl. A quick nod from him is all it would take! But she was so old ... what would be the point? Unless, of course, there was some money in it! He recalled that the talented fortune-teller had predicted that he would be lucky in love this year. He thought of the money to be made if only he were to propose some sort of monetary arrangement with Mrs. Deputy Customs Officer. But he decided to bide his time.

(Phung, 2002, p. 91)¹²

Mrs. Deputy Customs Officer is depicted as an extravagant middle aged bourgeois widow with an unusual sexual drive. On a few occasions she teases Xuan with revealing clothes and eventually after he is discovered making out with Mrs Snow at her house they maintain a sexual relation:

But at that moment our Red-Haired Xuan did not care about propriety or morality. He was determined to get some release and so pretended to be deaf. Mrs. Deputy Customs Officer moaned but in a low voice, like a faithful widow. "Oh my goodness! It's killing me! I'm being raped!" Outside

¹¹ In Korean: "춘심아?" "내애?" "너어..... 저어..... 내 말, 들을래?" "무슨 말을, 요?" 물기는 물으면서도 생글생글 웃는 게 벌써 눈치는 채 모양입니다. 윤직원 영감은, 오냐 인제야 옳게 되었느니라고 일단의 자신이 생겼습니다. "내 말, 들을 티여?" "아, 무슨 말이세요?" 윤직원 영감은 히죽 한번 더 웃고는 슬며시 팔을 꼬느면서, "요녀언! 이루 와!" 하고 덩석 허리를 안아 들입니다. 마음 터억 놓고서 그러지요, 시방..... 아, 그랬는데 웬걸, 고년이 별안간, "아이 망칙해라!" 하고 소리를 뿅 지르면서 그만 빠져 달아나질 않는다고요. 여섯 번! 윤직원 영감은 진실로 기가 막힙니다. 여섯 번이라니, 아마 성미 급한 젊은놈이었다면 그새 목이라도 몇 번 매고 늘어졌을 것입니다. (Chae, 2014, p. 118)

¹² In Vietnamese: Xuân đứng cười thầm một mình, bà Phó Đoan tuy già nhưng còn hư hơn các thiếu nữ ngây thơ nhiều, điều ấy nó biết lắm. Nó chỉ gạt đầu một cái là ăn thua ngay! Nhưng mà già như thế thì còn... nước me gì! Họa chẳng có các tiền! Nó nghĩ thế rồi càng phục ông thầy số là tài, khi ông bảo nó năm nay gặp vận đào hoa. Rồi nó mơ màng những cách làm tiền, nếu bà Phó Đoan biết cho tâm sự của nó. Thành thử vô tình, Xuân Tóc Đỏ đã thực hành một phương châm mà những nhà triết học sống đến bạc đầu mới tìm ra được: ấy là phải lên mặt với ái tình thì cuộc chinh phục mới dễ dàng hơn và bền chặt. (Phung, 2003, p. 63)

the door screams echoed out. "No way! No way!" Little Master Blessing rushed downstairs. Mrs. Deputy Customs Officer stopped moaning. "Don't worry. He's just looking for his nanny!"

(Phụng, 2002, p. 161)¹³

In this scene the grotesque is enhanced by two elements: on one hand, Mrs Customs Officer simulation of rape and on the other the fact that her eight years old Little Master Blessing discovers the two lovers, and the police is called.

The depiction of Mrs. Deputy Customs Officer's lust also echoes the portrayal of Mrs Seoul and Mrs. Ko, who is repeatedly referred to as a "frigid bitch" by her father-in-law, Master Yun. In Mrs. Seoul's case, since becoming a widow, she has been confined to the inner quarters of the house, following patriarchal tradition. Chae Mansik uses this portrayal to criticize the traditional custom of remaining loyal to a deceased husband, much like Vũ Trọng Phụng does.

Thus, for the Seoul Mistress to long for a man was the most natural and the strongest of reflexes and, in spite of herself, she couldn't help but greet the opposite sex with delight. On the other hand, her whole world was confined within the walls of the house, and in that prison-like universe Taebok was the only specimen of the male of the species. In other words, at the simple mention of Taebok's name, the Seoul Mistress had an involuntary physical response, and her body was quicker than her mind at revealing her excitement, which with the passage of time became more obvious to the eyes of the others.

(Chae, 1993, p. 122)¹⁴

Being confined in the house, Seoul Mistress has little contact with males and consequently a sexual tension develops between her and the family's accountant. Taebok is also a widow himself and comes from a humble background. However, just like Red-Haired Xuan he is only interested in the potential benefits of having a relationship with Seoul Mistress and he is aware that such a relation would not be approved by Master Yun, who is obsessed with raising the status of his family.

Taebok, by nature, was no playboy capable of falling in or out of love with just any woman. Neither did he see any value in infatuation, so there was no reason he should find the Seoul Mistress, with her no-necked freckle pot of a flat-nosed bedbug face, tempting or desirable as a woman. The focus of his great expectation was to capitalize on his status as a widower, and this led him to perceive a certain attractiveness in this widow gilded with five hundred bags of rice.

(Chae, 1993, p. 119)¹⁵

¹³ In Vietnamese: Nhưng thằng Xuân Tóc Đỏ của chúng ta thì nào có biết gì là nghĩa lý, là đạo đức nữa! Bung tai già điếc, nó cứ nhất định bắt đền. Từ đây trở đi, bà kia cứ khê kêu như một tiết phụ xứng đáng trong lúc bị xúc phạm: - Ôi giới ơi! Người ta giết tôi! Người ta cưỡng bức tôi! Bên ngoài, lúc ấy có tiếng kêu: "Em chã! Em chã!" rồi thấy hình như cậu Phước chạy huỳnh huých xuống thang. Bà Phó Đoan ngừng kêu để nói - Cậu ấy xuống tìm vú em để vùi dập chứ quái gì! (Phụng, 2003, p. 136)

¹⁴ In Korean: 그러므로 그는 극히 자연스러운, 그러나 일종 근육적인 반사작용으로써 이성을 그리워하고, 무의식한 가운데 이성을 반겨하지 않을 수가 없는 여자 서울아씨던 것이요, 그런데 일변 그의 세계란 것은 겨우 일백마흔 평이라는 이 집 울 안으로 제한이 되어 있고, 그 제한된 세계에는 오직 대복이가 남자로 존재해 있을 따름이던 것입니다. 그러니까 서울아씨는 대복이라면 그와 같이 의식보다도 체풀 근육이 반사적으로 날뛰어 몸이 먼저 반가워하고, 그것이 날이 갈수록 남의 눈에 뜨이게 차차로 현저해 가던 것입니다. (Chae, 2014, p. 101)

¹⁵ In Korean: 대복이라는 사람이 본시 계집에게 반하고 어찌고 할 활량도 아니요, 반할 필요도 없기는 하지만, 그러니 더구나 목 움츠리에, 주근깨 바탕에, 납작코에, 그런 빈대 상호의 서울아씨가 계집으로 하 그리 탐탁하다고 욕심이 날 이치는 없습니다. 다만 홀아비라는 밀천이 있으니까, 오백 석거리로 도금한 과부라는 데에 오직 친화성(親和性)이 발견될 따름이고, 그게 대망의 초점이지요. (Chae, 2014, p. 99)

Therefore, given the circumstances, this relationship is not consummated. However, another ironic twist occurs in the novel when the relationship between Ch'unsim and Master Yun's grandson is revealed. Being of the same age, they secretly date behind Yun's back and go to watch movies. Chae Mansik does not miss the opportunity to satirize this through the narrator's voice:

In all events, here was a girl shared between an old man and his great grandson, notwithstanding the age difference. It was, one might say, a very economical arrangement to deal with a shortage of women among the men of the family.

The merits and demerits of economizing aside, the fact that an oversupply of women within the family was coupled with a shortage of females without, viewed from a modern standpoint, was a lamentable predicament in which, due to a lack of regulation, there had arisen the contradiction of overproduction and scarcity, a crisis of supply and demand.

(Chae, 1993, pp. 175-176)¹⁶

Chae Mansik uses these multiple relationships to criticize the modern perceived as the incipient market economy that was becoming a substitute of the crumbling traditional values and moral in the colonial context.

However, it can be argued that overall, in the case of *Số Đò* the relationship between sexuality and the grotesque reaches a greater degree to the point of absurdity. This can be especially perceived in the depiction of Little Master Blessing's sexual lust. Little Master Blessing is characterized as a consented eight-year child that like T'aesik in Taepyeong chonha may have a mental incapacity, which within the period's context could be perceived as a choice made by the authors to reinforce the portrayal of dysfunctional families. Though the case of Little Master Blessing is not directly stated, it can be inferred by his unusual behavior and the fact that regardless of the situation he can only utter the same words "No way". Among the multiple jobs that Red-Haired Xuan carries for Mrs Deputy Customs Officer and the Civilizations is his job as advisor or teacher of Little Master Blessing. At some point of the novel, Little Master Blessing gets sick and a group of people talk about his sexuality despite his young age:

"Just take a look at him," he insisted. "Have you noticed how he pretends to suckle Nanny's breast, just to cop a quick feel. 'No way' indeed! He's just horny, like his mother. How about when he forces Nanny to play horse so that he can mount her from behind. Give me a break! Like mother, like son, if you ask me ...

"I know what the hell he's doing," the driver interjected. "I've seen lots of children in my life. Kids today become perverts much earlier than in the old days! Some even take lovers and go to brothels! Even if he doesn't know what he's doing, he's gonna have to marry someone soon if he keeps it up! How can he not be a pervert with a depraved mother like that? [...]"

(Phụng 2002, p. 127)¹⁷

¹⁶ In Korean: 아무려나 이래서 조손간에 계집애 하나를 가지고 동락을 하니 노소동락(老少同樂)일시 분명하고, 겹하여 규모 집안다운 계집 소비절약이랄 수도 있겠습니다. 그렇지만, 소비절약은 좋을지 어떨지 몰라도, 안에서는 여자의 인구가 남아 돌아가고(그래 한숨과 불평인데) 밖에서는 계집이 모자라서 소비절약을 하고(그래 칠십 노옹이 예순다섯 살로 나이를 야바위도 치고, 열다섯 살 먹은 애가 강짜도 하려고 하고) 아무래도 시체의 용어를 빌려 오면, 통체가 서지를 앓아 물자배급에 체화(滯貨)와 품부족(品不足)이라는 슬픈 정상을 나타낸 게 아니랄 수 없겠습니다. (Chae, 2014, p. 145)

¹⁷ In Vietnamese: -Đấy cứ để ý mà xem thì biết! Những lúc nó cứ "em chã" rồi vạch yếm vú em ra mà sờ vú, rồi lại giả vờ bú áy! Thế là đâm đến nơi cũng như mẹ nó chứ không thì còn là cái cóc khô gì! Nhất là những lúc nó bắt vú em công nó rồi nhong nhong cười ngứa đủ biết! Rau nào sâu áy, phương ngôn đã có câu... Người tài xé hỏi: -Tôi biết chán, vì tôi để ý đến trẻ con lắm. Trẻ con bây giờ là hư thân mất nết sớm lắm chứ không như ở thời các cụ nhà ta đâu... Ranh con nít mất ra đã có nhân tình rồi, đã rủ nhau đi sãm rồi! Cậu cả nhà này tuy chưa biết gì thật

Such depictions further satirize Mrs. Deputy Customs Officer while simultaneously reinforcing the carnivalesque atmosphere. It can be argued that portraying Master Yun and Mrs. Deputy Customs Officer in this manner (emphasizing or exaggerating aspects related to the primary functions of their bodies) serves to diminish the perceived distance between them and the upper class, reminding readers that beneath their expensive attire and extravagant appearances, they too are human.

4. Conclusions

Chae Mansik and Vũ Trọng Phụng bore witness to the profound societal changes of the 1930s and experienced the hardships of pursuing their craft under colonial rule. In the works analyzed, they employ satire and irony as literary tools to critique and challenge the discourses and behaviors of the bourgeoisie of their time. Despite their differences, *Peace Under Heaven* and *Dumb Luck* offer significant grounds for comparison. In terms of formal aspects, similarities in narrative voice, structure, and the use of vulgar language have been discussed in the initial sections of this paper. Both works are characterized by a carnivalesque tone, which underscores their satirical depictions and ultimately serves to critique colonial society.

From a thematic perspective, both novels reveal the authors' critical stance toward the erosion of values and the process of modernization. This modernization often entailed a superficial adoption of Western culture, which led the authors to perceive the so-called civilizing discourse as lacking depth. As Red-Haired Xuan laments: "How can one tell what is real these days? Everything is so artificial! Love is artificial! Modernity is artificial! Even conservatism is artificial!" (Phung, 2002, p. 94). This superficiality is later satirically celebrated when Mrs. Snow proclaims, "Long live rubber breasts!" linking them to social reform (Phung, 2002, p. 158). On the other hand, Chae Mansik was more critical of the market economy as an amoral substitute for crumbling traditional values. Although both authors focused primarily on the bourgeoisie, as previously discussed, they also used satire to critique their respective colonial systems. It can be argued that, in contexts where censorship was likely if more direct criticism were attempted, both authors chose to veil their critiques with humor. This may explain the absence of significant Japanese or French characters in the central plots of both works.

In the subsequent section, the protagonists are compared, as they are essential to understanding these novels. In particular, their physical appearances and sexual desires contribute to the carnivalesque atmosphere of the stories, enhancing their satirical effect on readers. Master Yun and Red-Haired Xuan both rise from the lowest strata of society to the top through immoral means. Master Yun achieves this by exploiting his fellow countrymen with exorbitant interest rates on loans, while Red-Haired Xuan ascends through lies and deception. However, both authors emphasize that their success is ultimately enabled by the complicity of corrupt societies. Thus, the critique is not solely directed at these main characters but also at the societal structures that allow their unethical rise to power. For instance, in Red-Haired Xuan's case, a key moment in his ascent occurs when members of Mr. Civilization's family conspire to kill Great-grandpa to inherit his wealth. They present Red-Haired Xuan as a medical student and allow him to "treat" Great-grandpa with poisonous water, showcasing their ambition and moral decay. In Master Yun's case, the narrative is set during his old age, so readers do not witness his rise directly. Instead, they experience a cathartic sense of justice when his grandson is arrested near the end of the novel for being a socialist, signaling the probable downfall of

nhưng mà cứ như thế thì đã đến lúc cần lấy vợ đây! Cứ như cái thói dâm dật của bà mẹ thì con nào mà không hư? [...] (Phung, 2003, pp. 101-102)

Master Yun's family. This difference reflects the militant spirit of satire in each work. By ridiculing their respective societies, the authors did not merely create negative or humorous portrayals of individuals; they also sought to provoke readers to reflect on societal flaws and develop a critical consciousness. Furthermore, by exposing human miseries intrinsically tied to human nature, their works achieve an atemporal quality, transcending the socio-historical contexts in which they were written and gaining enduring value.

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