

Comparative Analysis of Modern Chinese and Western Culture Based on Several Literary Works

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ABSTRACT

In Modern China, early 18th century Ireland and modern England, this paper analyzes the collision between Modern Chinese and Western literature under their distinct cultures, specifically to focus on the works of Revolutionary Chinese Modern writer, Lu Xun, *A Madman's Diary* (1918), and *What Happens after Nora Walks Out* (1923) compares with Irish Catholic leader, Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (1729), and English modern feminist writer, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929). From there, this paper compares the metaphors, literary devices, and the purposes of the works is to acquire the mutual understanding between different writers. Focusing on the similarities and differences when compared *A Madman's Diary* with *A Modest Proposal* and *What Happens after Nora Walks Out* with *A Room of One's Own*, this paper eventually analyzes the root of oppression and how society deals with oppression nowadays. The conclusion of this paper is to have an international and humanistic view of the literature produced by authors of different nationalities and cultures during times of oppression and inequality. Furthermore, to extend the argument in societal oppression to the present day nations of China, England and Ireland.

Keywords: Lu Xun, Jonathan Swift, Virginia Woolf, Cannibalism, Feminism

1. INTRODUCTION

The study between both western and eastern literatures dates back to the history of those literatures, yet the study of western and eastern literature combined has a short history compared to those studied separately. This is mainly due to factors such as globalization and internationalization. These are made possible by advanced technology and communication between the two cultures. However, studies that compare the literature from the two distinct cultures are not in trend. There is still a lot of room for researching and studying the similarities and differences of how western and eastern literature approach societal issues under a large theme of oppression. This paper will focus on the specific literary devices and analyze the historical context, author's background and purpose of the text in order to reach a conclusion of different forms of oppression present in western and eastern literature. Diving into the topic of oppression in the form of literature, this paper include the oppression by social status, society, foreign powers and gender inequality. When comparing *A Madman's Diary* with *A Modest Proposal*, this paper will analyze the occurrence of the theme "cannibalism" that

represents a form of societal oppression in both the modern Chinese and eighteenth century Irish backgrounds.

Furthermore, when comparing *What Happens after Nora Walks Out* with *A Room of One's Own*, this paper will closely examine how both writers approach the issue of gender inequality in their society during the same time period and what they have in common when pointing out the solutions for women to change their current status. The purpose of this research is to compare and contrast how authors from different cultural backgrounds respond and create when they encounter similar forms of oppression, and through these close examinations.

2. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

2.1. Metaphors Comparison between *A Madman's Diary* and *A Modest Proposal*

From Lu Xun's preface *Call to Arms*, Lu Xun recounts that there was one Chinese spy waiting to be executed by the Japanese soldiers while other Chinese "stood around him" and their facial expressions "appeared completely apathetic" and the crowd "had

come to enjoy the spectacle” [1]. The image of the crowd left a profound impact on Lu Xun’s mind as if a window was opened in his heart and that window pointed in a direction to solve the problem—literature. Lu Xun wanted to save the spirit of the Chinese, arguing that the most important cure was literature. Thus Lu Xun began to write and overcome many obstacles in publishing his works, his first essay, *A Madman’s Diary* was published in 1918 in the *New Youth Magazine* aimed at the educated society and student reformers who dedicate their time and effort to change the social status of the current situation in China in which people were oppressed and ignorant of the reality with restraints placed on them throughout generations of old traditions. The theme of cannibalism dominates the essay as a metaphor for the deep-rooted societal oppression and corrupt customs, if not corrected by this generation, there will be no hope for the future of China and its people as they faced foreign intervention and exploitation on a daily basis. It was after a long and thoughtful process that the madman endured that he came up with this reason that the people in his town were looking at him with a peculiar manner: they had a thought in their minds, and that was to eat the protagonist. With western enlightenment ideals and practices, the protagonist concluded that on every page in ancient historical books, virtue, and morality were actually to eat people. With this thought in mind, the protagonist believed that everyone around him knew that he had grasped their secrets of cannibalism, thus he thought he had the obligation to talk those people out of committing cannibalism. Although Lu Xun didn’t clearly state the examples of cannibalism and its reflection in Chinese society, the oppression within Chinese society ranges from the absolute ruling class to the powerless peasants. One example of cannibalism is specifically drafted in Lu Xun’s *Medicine* which implies from the Tang Dynasty doctor Chen Cangqi’s book *Supplement to Materia Medica* that a bun covered with human blood is able to cure infections and tuberculosis. Lu Xun wrote: “Although Hua had eaten the buns of Xia Yu’s blood, he still died” [3]. It was clear to see that the practice of oppression and ignorance was so rooted in Chinese culture, almost everyone in the family practiced it. Thus, it was impossible for a clean person to go into society not having the corruptness carried in their mindset and actions. The protagonist then poses out another prominent threat to the Chinese if they do not change their practices, “they will be wiped out by the real men, just like wolves killed by hunters” [2]. Therefore, no matter how much they multiply, they cannot defend themselves in front of the westerners with imperial powers and superior weaponry. In the end, the protagonist realizes that he might have once eaten his sister’s flesh “unwittingly” and thus he lost all hope but to surrender to societal norms and he cries out for help. Lu Xun’s end of the story implies that the once enlightened young man was seen by society as a madman and his own enlightenment brought his own degradation

as he finds out that he is no different from men eaters around him.

A Modest Proposal by Jonathan Swift also wrote on cannibalism to express his discontent with society and satirizes the oppression the rich nobility had on the poor peasants. The historical background of Ireland during the seventeenth century deeply diminished the wealth and agricultural prosperity of the land. During Interregnum, English military dictator and devout Puritan Oliver Cromwell led an army to suppress Catholicism in Ireland from 1649 to 1653, his distrust in Catholicism and hoped to decrease the population of the Irish. In the eighteenth century, wealthy landowners and nobilities “would force multiple families to live on one piece of property to charge more rent. This overcrowding resulted in hunger, as the crop yields could not sustain multiple families and still provide income for rent” [4]. Thus, stealing from a young age rose as other crime rates rose due to poverty. As a leader in the Catholic Church, Swift urged reformation in the government and the ruling class to take notice of the seriousness of Ireland’s poverty, famine and crime rates caused by oppression from the rich nobility. Swift argues that the overpopulation of Ireland can be used as a method to solve all the problems in society. His “fair, cheap, and easy method” of deploying the infants to make them “useful members of the commonwealth” was to be made as dishes for the landlords [5]. Swift uses convincing language to inform how the supply line of making babies to be eaten is beneficial to everyone in the situation ranging from the mothers, the landlords, and the broken economy. These bred children could save their parents from poverty, and prevent begging for their whole lives. Thus this solution will not only help the rest of Ireland’s economy and social status but also prevent the young generation from inheriting the skills of stealing. Swift’s scheme is constructed with seemingly moral ideals and precise calculations and estimation: out of one million and a half of children were born each year in Ireland, subtracting the ones who died before reaching the age of one due to disease and accident, the miscarries, remains around one hundred thousand newborn. Swift uses graphic depictions of the children being cooked as delicacies: “whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled” they will make “dishes of excellent nutritive meat” [5]. Thus cannibalism is demonstrated through the proposal of breeding edible children in order to solve society’s problem. The audiences were the public and the lawmakers of Ireland, they had the power to change and regulate the laws towards the poor, they had the power to either create opportunities for them to thrive and make improvements in the community, or they could totally forget and ignore the existence of poor families who were constantly oppressed by their landlords. However, Swift poses another foreign threat from England: “I could name a country [England] which would be glad to eat up our whole nation” [5]. Therefore, oppression needs to be

stopped in order to prevent another powerful neighboring country from gobbling up Ireland.

The differences between *A Madman's Diary* and *A Modest Proposal* can be understood as the different eras in history and different groups of people being oppressed. Ireland suffered poverty, famine, and economic hardship during the eighteenth century because the invasion of England from the previous century left a huge gap in its society. The poor lived in horrible conditions and the rich kept depriving them. In China's case, the factor that was depriving the people was old traditions and corrupt customs. Because of these remaining ideologies lingering in Chinese society, it made oppressing one another easy and without moral condemnation. However, there are many similarities between them. The theme of reformation and the foreign threat remains constant in them. Lu Xun's story was meant to educate and enlighten the minds of young people who were the foundation for a cultural revolution in China, and Swift's satire aimed at the ruling class who had the ultimate power to change society's operation. Moreover, the foreign threat of western imperial powers plagued Chinese society. Ireland itself also is not equipped with military strength and financial power to have a confrontation with England. Thus, the similarities between the writers do not stop at the surface of using cannibalism to stress their argument, yet the prominent similarity between them is the fight for a better life and equality for humanity.

2.2. Purpose Comparison of What Happens after Nora Walks Out and A Room of One's Own using juxtaposition and exemplification

What *Happens after Nora Walks Out*, a speech by Lu Xun at a women's college in Beijing, advocated for economic, property rights ownership, and political equality for men and women, sorting from the most important to the least important. Nora is a fictional character from Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, she embodies an independent woman with enlightenment thoughts as she leaves her home which was a symbol of breaking social norms that a woman can only stay at her home and tend to her family. Lu Xun states, "economic rights seem to be the most important factor in present-day society" [6]. To be blunt, without money to support her daily life and expenses, women will face these two options: "to fall into degradation or to return home" [6]. In order to pursue her dreams, Nora's crucial concern is money and what comes with money is the fair distribution of property and eventually an equal division in political power among the domination of men. Without money, women cannot find support in a society that views women to hold traditional roles in the family as wives and mothers. In addition to fighting for equal rights for women so that they won't starve to death or fall to degradation or return home after they are awakened, they must remember the past and liberate their children. This

is because when a mother-in-law mistreats her daughter-in-law, the daughter-in-law will then forget her mistreatment and pass on the pain and suffering to her daughter-in-law. The solvency to this issue can be purchasing a notebook and jotting it down. However, to change the majority of the issue like economic independence will be harder to achieve than just jotting down notes. The current situation is where one woman walks out and will be faced with some sort of pity and sympathy from her community. Yet sympathy will fade away if the number of Nora's increases. Furthermore, pity means a lack of freedom: "Survival thanks to others' sympathy is already a loss of freedom" [6]. Finally, with the usual pessimistic tone of Lu Xun, he concluded, "Unfortunately, it's too difficult to change China: blood will flow just by moving a table or mending a stove" [6].

A Room of One's Own by English writer Virginia Woolf was also written from her speeches at the women's University of Cambridge. From 1918 to 1928, women's suffrage was enacted by the hard work and perseverance of women's rights activists and feminists. Woolf uses juxtaposition to compare and contrast the personality, education, and marriage of Shakespeare to his imaginary sister Judith in order to demonstrate the societal backgrounds that prevent women from producing literature during Shakespeare's time. Woolf sets up her imaginary scenario of two siblings: the boy went to grammar school, yet the girl stayed at home. Shakespeare was a wild boy. Similar to Shakespeare, Judith was also adventurous. In grammar school, Shakespeare learned Latin, grammar, and logic. From an early age, Shakespeare is able to immerse himself in the study of literature by poets from ancient Rome; therefore, Shakespeare has a firm foundation in the style and laws of writing. Meanwhile, Judith, who was equally gifted, stayed home. Due to the social norms, Judith would do all the chores and she cannot be in school with her brother for women had other roles and chores that bound her to her family. The only way for Judith to learn and exercise her interest in literature is when she sneaked a few pages from her brother's books. Yet Judith figures out a way to write a few words and sentences not long before she hides them. Judith cannot receive the same forthright education as her brother did even if she had a strong passion for reading and writing, and she often needs to be cautious about practicing her passion for writing. The educational treatment towards the siblings is a vivid juxtaposition that presents unfair decisions made by their parents under social normality that prevented women at the time to create literature. Thus men had more freedom to chase their dreams at the time of literary epitome, yet women cannot escape the burden of raising children and taking care of her husband, the thought of writing as a career is almost in the skies, but there is no possible way to achieve it. Woolf also uses exemplification to address that a woman's plan to be on an equal level with men in the literature world cannot happen without the economic

capital supporting her. Upon arriving in London, Judith finds herself rejected and ridiculed by actor-managers. Without money, Judith cannot find a place to sleep or have the money to buy food. Her freedom is again put into the hands of men for she needs to survive in such a big city as there was no turning back. One manager took pity on her and gave her a place to stay. Judith falls into degradation and kills herself as she not only did not achieve her goal of breaking social norms and achieving her passions but also was pregnant with the manager's child. Through this example by Woolf, it is necessary to understand that just having inspirational dreams will lead a woman nowhere if her dreams are built on sincere enthusiasm, thereby she has no way of being at the same level with men. "Woolf sees inequality between the sexes in terms of a struggle for superiority. She believes men have a vested interest in keeping women uneducated and under men's financial control—as long as they do so, men remain superior" [8]. Woolf gives hope to her audience as she said, "genius should be above acting what is said of it [their work]" [7].

When comparing *What Happens after Nora Walks Out* and *A Room of One's Own*, there are more similarities than differences when it comes to the fight for women's rights for the more enlightened west and the less enlightened past. Even though political power was largely enforced in the West, it doesn't mean that they are fully equal when treating women as writers and as equals of society with men. Both authors stressed the importance of money, in Lu Xun's work he points out that without money, the woman will starve or fall into degradation which means going into a brothel. Woolf's work specifically exemplifies the truth that women with dreams yet without money will be met with ridicule and even if they are met with sympathy, they thus lose their freedom just as Lu Xun has mentioned.

3. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the collision of Eastern and Western literature on the same topic of societal oppression and women's rights have different historical impacts due to the geographic and cultural differences, yet the mutualism of Western and Eastern writers is that they all strive to push forward and call for reformation within their society no matter the type of literature they produce, no matter what their tone is, no matter who their audience is. As stated in the introduction, oppression is not a unique factor for a specific nation, but it is a universal language that abusers speak and act out all around the world. The fight for equality, a better life, and goodness is the mutual foundation of Eastern and Western literature. Of course, the influence of the government, religion, geographic environment, and diseases can alter the details and timeline. However, humanity as a whole with its strive for perfection and equality in society embodies the central foundation and the incentives for a

writer's work. Lu Xun's goal was to change the Chinese society towards a more western way of thinking which abandoned the old corrupt molds of society and move towards a society that is without oppression resulting from rusted ideas. In *A Madman's Diary*, it is clear that Lu Xun does not have high hopes for a complete reformation taking place in China, but he did not give up his faith and through his writing, he is able to enlighten the minds of many young educated students in China to move to the world's stage during a short period of time. Swift's devotion to the Catholic Church and its teachings composed his faith that the poor needs as much help and attention as the rich landlords who had power and wealth to squeeze the livelihood of the poor, thus a satire was the best way to catch the attention of the rich and start the reformation from the top to the bottom. *What Happens after Nora Walks Out* demonstrates the comprehensive reformation of Lu Xun as he thought to include women as a large part of the issue that needed to be solved in order for Chinese society to improve. Economic independence, property division among the family, and political rights weigh the same in order to completely defy the operation of the corrupt system in which women lived on a daily basis. Finally, Woolf's encouragement for women to write and compose as men did during the Elizabethan era, and her version of telling the cruel ways that society treated women with dreams during that period were because women did not have the economic independence from their family, husband and society in general. The mutual theme the writers display is to combat society, yet the audience needs to remember that writers themselves may seem like the least people in society to cause an uproar and revolution, yet the powerful and vivid words they impose on the massive audience has had a huge impact ever since the printing revolution. Thus the power of pen and paper should not be looked down upon. The study of Eastern and Western literature has a short history and weight in the study of specific literature, yet there are a lot more to be discovered when comparing and contrasting this literature, and there is a lot more to dive deeper into in order to find a deeper connection and understanding for both kinds of literature.

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