

On the Absurdity Theme of Tawfiq al-Hakim's Drama-*Man in the Cave*

Yifei Gao

*School of Oriental and African Studies, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies,
Guangzhou, Guangdong, 510420, China*

Abstract: *Known as the "Father of Arabic Drama", the Egyptian writer Tawfiq al-Hakim has extensive contact with western drama literature and is influenced by western literary thoughts. Among them, the philosophical drama *Man in the Cave* (1933) is his magnum opus which combines realism and symbolism. On the basis of clarifying the relevant concepts of the theme, this paper will start from the perspectives of motif and image, to take a grasp of the causes and cultural significance of the absurdity theme of the drama, and explore its spiritual value.*

Keywords: *Man in the Cave, absurdity, theme; motif; image*

1. Introduction

Known as the "Father of Arabic Drama", the Egyptian writer Tawfiq al-Hakim has extensive contact with western drama literature and is influenced by western literary thoughts. He often draws materials from classical mythology or religious classics, uses the expression techniques of modern western literature for reference, and creates many drama works that not only retain the source narrative features of Arabic drama, but also are imbued with modern western narrative tactics, such as *Man in the Cave*, *Shahrazad*, *Wise Suleiman*, etc. Among them, the philosophical drama- *Man in the Cave* (1933) is his magnum opus which combines realism and symbolism, the content of which draws materials from the ancient Roman Folktale "Ephesus' Seven Sleeping Sons" and three religious classics, Bible, Koran, and Persian Letters. In terms of narrative style, the drama inherits the obvious narrative mode of Koran, constructs a strong dramatic conflict, and combines symbolism and other creative techniques to adapt the story which has been spread for several centuries, which manifests intertextuality with the story of 7 Men and A Dog in Xinjiang and Kenzaburo Oe's novel *Water Dies*. Because of its great achievements in form and content, it has been hailed as an important milestone in the history of Arabic literature by Taha Hussein .[1] On the basis of clarifying the relevant concepts of the theme, this paper will take a grasp of the generation context of the absurdity theme of the drama, feel its temperature, and explore its spiritual value.

2. The theoretical analysis of the concept of theme

The thematic study is an important concept in the research field of comparative literature, which derives from folklore, folktale, national literature, folk literature, comparative literature, etc. The definition of the concept of "theme" emerges one after another out of the academic circles, and is often confused with such concepts as "motif" and "subject matter". Therefore, at the beginning of the paper, it is necessary to clarify the relevant concepts briefly to show the research angle and position of this paper.

According to Eugene H. Falk, the views that can be found in the special structure of the composition of the works, such as the expression of the mentality, feelings, posture of the characters and the words or the background with profound implication, can be called the theme. In his *New Discussion on Comparative Literature*, Mr. Wang Xiangyuan sums up "theme" as "abstract ideas and thoughts expressed by artistic means in works via the theme, plot, character and image"[2]. In November 2018, Higher Education Press published *An Introduction to Comparative Literature-Key Textbook of Marxism Theory Research and Construction Project*, which is the latest book in the field of comparative literature theory. In its Chapter V, "Research on Types of Literature", the concept of theme is newly elaborated and defined: "the theme involved in the research of comparative literature refers to the cognitive concept that sublimates some plots, certain characters and some kind of thoughts in the process of imaginal thinking converting to the formation of the text into various abstractions in the field of literature research, as well as an important internal factor of literary creation. These themes transcend the boundaries of culture, state or nation, language, etc., which are repeated constantly, and manifest the social complexity and survival dilemma, thinking methods and ethics of human beings from ancient times to the present. In comparison with the author's readers, the theme is subjective"[3]. It can be seen that the generation of a text theme cannot be separated from the internal elements such as subject matter, characters, plot, image, etc.; the extracted theme is the summary and sublimation of the main idea of the text, representing the author's ideological position, creative intention and aesthetic value, together with the reflection of the author's thinking on social problems; the number of themes can be one or several abstract nouns (since different readers have different acceptance of the text and different interpretation, the themes extracted are different).

The relationship among motif, subject matter and theme also needs to be sorted out and summarized. "Motif is the most basic unit of meaning, which can be repeated in literature, and is an essential element of subject matter and theme; subject matter is an organism composed of multiple motifs and a relatively complete structure; motif and subject matter can contain certain ideas, but this kind of thought is generalized, abstract and fuzzy, and the theme only re-interpreted by the author can show individual and concrete ideas, and even give birth to new ideas in a specific context. On the basis of the above analysis, taking *Man in the Cave* as an example, "man in the cave", "caveman" and "resurrected saint" can be classified into the category of motif (character motif) of the drama; "Saint revives in cave", "caveman

resurrects after sleeping for hundreds of years", etc. can be classified into the category of the research of subject matter; while "absurdity", "conflict between man and time", "refuge and resurrection", "existence and time", etc. can be classified into the category of the research of the theme of the drama.

Among the three research categories of motif, subject matter and theme, the theme is the most subjective one, which contains obvious value judgment orientation and evolves with the migration of culture and ideas. The study of the motif and subject matter is the foundation for the further interpretation of the author's individual case. Only by doing so can "the inheritance and originality of his writing be clearly distinguished, and then the factors such as the author's creative personality, the characteristics of the times, the national culture, etc. be grasped"[3]. As a consequence, the research categories of motif, subject matter and theme are different, but are not entirely different, and are organically integrated.

3. The generation of the absurdity theme of Man in the Cave

Absurdity is a concept derived from the foundation and background of existential philosophy. In Camus' view, absurdity refers to "the basic living situation that modern people generally confront: modern people are abandoned in this situation and have nowhere to run. The only thing he can do is concerned with how to face absurdity and surviving in absurdity. In Camus' view, the absurdity related to modern people's basic living situation means that God, as the source of meaning, is inevitably and incurably dying, thus leading to the meaningless or nihilism of modern people's living situation "[4]. "Delving into its essence, absurdity in reality refers to that the shattering of people's value belief, religious belief and life ideal caused by the meaningless state of the world and the specific reality of social history, leads to the generation of the sense of absurdity. If it is grasped ideologically, absurdity can be regarded as the abstract psychological depression caused by the irrational external reality and world that the rational spirit derived from human civilization cannot grasp and control "[5].

3.1 The absurdity of the motif of Man in the Cave

The drama *Man in the Cave* is a borrowing from the motif story of "man in the cave", which is created through adaptation and fabrication. The motif comes from Ephesians in the New Testament, the Cave Chapter in the Koran about the story of "the master of the cave and inscriptions", and the description of "caveman" in Persian Letters. In accordance with the textual research, the spreading picture is as follows:

Table 1 Flow chart of dynamic spread and acceptance process [6]

Spread time	Spread area	Story subject matter	Changes in content	Rheological form
Between 62 and 64 A.D	Ancient Rome	<i>Ephesians of the Seven Sleeping Sons of the New Testament</i>	There is no specific plot	The rudiment of the story
5 th century A.D	Ancient Rome	The legend of Ephesus	Seven people	Formation of motif
7 th century A.D	Arab	<i>Cave Chapter of Koran</i>	Three people and one dog	Scripture records
18 th century A.D	France in Europe	The story of "caveman" in Montesquieu's <i>Persian Letters</i>	Many people	Motif borrowing
Early 20 th century AD	Modern Egypt	<i>Man in the Cave</i> by Taufiq Hakim	Three people and one dog	Motif borrowing

The motif of "man in the cave" always contains an irrational conflict -- the conflict between man and the outside world. Due to the revival of religion, the " man in the cave " is somewhat out of tune with the present world, resulting in conflicts between the individual and the others, between the individual and society, between reason and emotion. Camus believes that the essence of absurdity is conflict. Moreover, these conflicts are metaphors of various practical problems in the social background, which make readers think about the relationship between themselves and society in the interpretation, and then make changes. For instance, in ancient Rome, the motif of "the man in the cave" is the metaphor of the brutal rule of the Roman leader Decius; in the Arabian Peninsula of the 7th century, the motif of " man in the cave" is the metaphor of the conflicts in the process of Islamization of the peninsula; in modern Egypt, Tawfiq al-Hakim, by using the ancient to satirize the present, exposes the class oppression in the puppet Egypt Dynasty under the British rule in *Man in the Cave*.

3.2 The absurdity of "cave" image in *Man in the Cave*

Cave image has the meaning of "sanctuary" and "welfare" both in the Eastern and Western cultural backgrounds.

In Greek mythology, "immortal cave" refers to religious Utopia, which is used to express the relationship between human groups and gods."Almost all religious sects believe that human society is not a perfect place, thus providing spiritual ideal home and transcending approach." [7] "This kind of spiritual destination and behavior pattern beyond nature is religious Utopia." [7]"It is Jesus who discusses and develops the religious Utopia system to the peak, which is used to satirize the dark ages of Roman tyranny, religious corruption and the masses having no means to live." [7]

In Islamic culture, the cave is the place where the Prophet Muhammad accepted the birth of Koran. Before the founding of Islam, Muhammad had been meditating for 15 years in a cave on the Hilla Mountain in the suburb of Mecca. One day he heard "the Will of Allah" from the "angel" when he was meditating. After that, whenever an angel came, he would run back home. Putting on his clothes and being wrapped in a quilt, he received the "oracle" in his recognition and conveyed it to his disciples.

In Chinese culture, the cave has the meaning of reminiscence and seclusion. "The image of the man in the cave" in the book of Mountains and Waters of Shanghai Museum is the image of Bai Yuchan, a Taoist priest of the Song Dynasty, based on the legend of Baishi Cave in Hezhou, Anhui Province, and which does not exclude the recollection of his father who died of hunger strike. " [8] "The identity images of" the man in the cave "include sages and hermits in ancient times, Taoists who have practiced into immortals, etc. Their quietness and seclusion become eternal, which is an antagonistic expression of the change of Ming and Qing Dynasties and the change of rise and fall into turbulent times." [8]

Whether in the motif story of "man in the cave" or in the drama Man in the Cave by Taufiq Hakim, the cave has the meaning of Utopia, reflecting the fantasy of freedom and happiness and dissatisfaction with reality. The three young people in the cave think that they are resurrected in a new era of political harmony, prosperity and adherence to faith. When they find that faith does not bring pure human nature, political communication does not bring freedom of will, and prosperity fails to solve the difficulties of life, they are completely disappointed. They do not continue to deeply observe and think about all aspects of this era, and go directly from the extreme fantasy of a good life to an extreme aversion to the dark reality. Almost without hesitation, they choose the Utopia of returning to the cave to escape from the world."The pursuit of freedom is an inborn instinct of human beings. This centrifugal force has been trying to separate people from group life, which makes people constantly deny the existing law, order, public opinion and other disciplinary forces, and induces people to abandon their social obligations and citizenship to enjoy the detached self-world and independent kingdom. Freedom also comes at a price - while enjoying freedom, individuals will also face loneliness, isolation, separation and even expulsion. " [9] Once people find themselves in a real predicament, they just want to live in seclusion between mountains and rivers, and always stick to unrealistic fantasies; or they are too secretive about the existing norms, do not examine the possibility of adapting to reality, and do not actively resolve the difficulties they are in, they may be in a process of constantly escaping from reality, continuously pursuing fantasies and unceasingly get disappointed, and finally, fall into the fantasy of ideal Utopia, and exile themselves passively. In the meantime, "people tend to regard the unknown field in the distance as their own Utopia, and the irreconcilable contradiction between reality and ideal as well as human nature determines that the Utopia pursued by man must be futile. The contradiction between the endless pursuit and the unrealized pain determines that people's behavior of seeking knowledge and pursuing spiritual conversion is doomed to be tragic." [10]

4. The realistic significance of the absurdity theme in Man in the Cave

Absurdity reflects the dilemma of human existence. Through the objective contradiction between existence and time, the drama *Man in the Cave* constantly constructs the individual subject contradictions of self and others, integration and observation, reason and love. There are quite a lot of works written by Taufiq Hakim, including nearly 63 dramas, novels, literary theories, essays and causeries. Each of her works has a great impact on human survival predicament. For instance, the drama *Shahrazad* reveals people's absolute thoughts, attitudes, beliefs and emotional choices. For another example, her academic works *Theory of Equilibrium* mainly discusses the relationship between human and others, and the existing problems of human beings in the universe and society, which is the core embodiment of guiding ideology and artistic view of her creation. Obviously, the core problem discussed in Hakim's creation is consistent with that of absurdity philosophy, that is, the problem of human survival predicament. Hakim believes that man should embody the meaning of existence in the ideological resistance; finally, after maintaining spiritual independence, man should maintain a balance with external forces, thus their thoughts and rationality can develop sound. Hakim's view of absurdity embodies the color of balance and mysticism.

5. Conclusion

This play is the Tawfiq al-Hakim's representative work. The author gives the Arab drama a real literary status through this play. Although it is not suitable for stage performance, it provides people with a space for reflection. Among the three research categories of motif, subject matter and theme, the theme is the most subjective one, which contains obvious value judgment orientation and evolves with the migration of culture and ideas. The study of the motif and subject matter is the foundation for the further interpretation of the author's individual case. The research categories of motif, subject matter and theme are different, but are not entirely different, and are organically integrated. The motif and "cave" image of "Man in the cave" can reflect the theme of absurdity. The motif of "man in the cave" always contains an irrational conflict -- the conflict between man and the outside world. Whether in the motif story of "man in the cave" or in the drama *Man in the Cave* by Tawfiq al-Hakim, the cave has the meaning of Utopia, reflecting the fantasy of freedom and happiness and dissatisfaction with reality. The author cares deeply about the eternal question of human destiny, which is reflected in many other works.

Acknowledgment

This work was supported by Innovative School Project in Higher Education of Guangdong, China (GWTP-FT-2015-15), and the Institute for Oriental Studies of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies.

References

- [1] Meng Zhaoyi(2006). *Integration of Oriental Culture, Impression: Narration of Oriental Drama* [M]. Kunlun Publishing House. pp. 302
- [2] Wang Xiangyuan(2002). *A New Theory of Comparative Literature* [M]. Jiangxi Education Press. pp.158
- [3] "Introduction to Comparative literature" Compilation Group (2018). *Key Textbook of Marxist Theoretical Research and Construction Project* [M]. Introduction to Comparative Literature. Higher Education Press. pp. 151.156.
- [4] Zhu Liyuan(2018). *Contemporary Western Literary Theory (Third Edition)*[M]. East China Normal University Press.pp. 98
- [5] Su Hongbin(1993). *Absurd Art in the Perspective of Reception* [J]. *Foreign Literature Review*, no. 3, 1993.pp.5
- [6] Gao Yifei(2014). *Multi-dimensional Cultural Interpretation of the Drama Man in the Cave by Taufiq Hakim*[D].Postgraduate Thesis of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies.pp.16
- [7] Zhao Yifan, Zhang Zhongzai, Li De'en(2017). *Key Words of Western Literary Theory Volume I* [M]. Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.pp. 614
- [8] Fu Yanghua(2017). *Exploring the Source of the Image of Man in the Cave in Dai Benxiao's Paintings* [J]. *Journal of Nanjing Institute of Art*, no.,pp. 75
- [9] Tang Lei (2013). *Freedom and Discipline: on Forster's Dualistic Paradox in A Room with A View* [J]. *Journal of Changshu Institute of Technology (Social Science Edition)*, no.3,pp.97
- [10] Tang Lei (2013). *Utopia in Other Places: A brief Discussion on the Script of Man in the Cave* [J]. *Journal of Linyi University*, no. 6,pp.122