

Between the Obsession of the Rhino and the Desert of the City —An Analysis of the Internal and External Dilemmas of Contemporary People's Spiritual Siege, Using Love's Rhino as an Example

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Abstract. As the pervasive influence of Western experimental theater has grown, outstanding creators have spawned a multitude of avant-garde Chinese plays that challenge traditional norms, among which “The Lover's Rhinoceros” is undoubtedly a successful work. This paper takes the avant-garde play The Lover's Rhinoceros as its primary core text, delving profoundly deep into the spiritual predicament faced by contemporary people—the internal and external pressures of the “siege” state. This paper aims to reveal that the spiritual predicament of contemporary people is fundamentally the product of dual pressures from internal obsessions and external desolation—individuals cannot find true emotional and value fulfillment in the external world, nor can they escape the self-imposed prison of their inner selves. Through the mirror of this play, this paper profoundly presents the universal spiritual siege and its underlying tragic roots that contemporary people encounter in their pursuit of the meaning of life and emotional belonging.

Keywords: Love's Rhino, avant-garde theater, spiritual predicament, emotional obsession, urban writing

1. Introduction

Chinese avant-garde theater emerged in the 1980s as a rebellion against and experimental exploration of traditional realistic drama. In the 1990s, with the deepening of the market economy, avant-garde theater faced the impact of commercialization, and some works shifted toward a more mass-appealing approach. The Lover's Rhino (1999) emerged during this transitional period. Academic circles have analyzed it in terms of female character consciousness, such as examining the less-recognized thoughts and emotions of women embodied in Mingming, stage design, such as analyzing the narrative characteristics of the stage and exploring the differences from traditional realist drama narratives; dramatic effects, such as focusing on the application of Brecht's “alienation effect” in the play; and thematic expression, such as analyzing the unique interpretation of avant-garde posture and poetic soul in “The Lover's Rhino” [1-4]. However, as an outstanding work that seamlessly blends experimental and commercial theater, The Lover's Rhinoceros has been

understudied in terms of connecting its emotional expression with the specific spiritual dilemmas of contemporary people, thereby failing to evoke genuine resonance among audiences or readers and prompt them to reflect on their own “spiritual fortress.” Therefore, this paper takes the play's deep core and rich connotations as its starting point to explore the spiritual dilemmas of contemporary people.

This paper examines the external “urban desert” that exploits contemporary individuals by analyzing the consumerist trap constructed through the inflation of material desires and the systemic lack of spiritual meaning. It further explores the blindness and fragility of contemporary individuals' spiritual self-rescue efforts by framing obsessive love as a redemptive weapon. Additionally, it delves into the universal barriers in human communication— language failure, and emotional misalignment, to illustrate the loneliness and identity anxiety of individual existence. Ultimately, all contradictions point to the brutal collision between idealism and reality. This article aims to combine a specific analysis of the play to help readers deeply understand the literary metaphors embedded in the text and correctly confront the “spiritual siege” faced by contemporary people.

2. Spiritual dilemmas in a city surrounded by material desires

The city in the drama is not a warm and cozy home, but a highly symbolic jungle of desire. The clamor of toothbrush advertisements, the fluctuations of stock indices, and the naked craving for material wealth (“Money is everything”)—all of this forms a precise and omnipresent web of material desire. The characters in the drama are deeply entangled in this web: Honghong sells illusory emotional patterns under the guise of a “love training class,” commodifying the most intimate emotional relationships; Da Xian, Hei Zi, and others seek temporary solace in money and pleasure, but their spirits gradually erode in the abundance of material wealth. Upon closer examination, one discovers that these behaviors stem from a collective loss of soul in a materialistic society: Honghong commodifies emotions, using transactional logic to fill the void of her own emotional deprivation—she may have grown up in an emotionally distant environment or experienced traumatic relationships, ultimately transforming intimate relationships into quantifiable service packages. This both avoids genuine emotional needs and replicates society's logic of pricing and selling all human experiences, leading her to become the next person trapped by emotions and lost in material desire; Daxian and others fall into the hedonistic trap, numbing their spiritual barrenness with material pleasures, much like a desert traveler guzzling saltwater to quench their thirst, reflecting the “dehydration crisis” of the soul in the consumerist era. It is not hard to see that when the meaning of life is dissolved by material desires, humanity can only sink deeper into the quicksand of desire. Ma Lu's humble job of raising rhinos in the zoo stands in stark contrast to the ever-changing landscape of desire in the city.

As the play states: “This is an era of material excess, an era of emotional excess... This is an era of excessive knowledge, this is an era of excessive information.” As social issues come to the fore, the play highlights the “problem characters” in a problematic society, using the spiritual dilemmas of characters like Ma Lu and Ming Ming to illustrate how material desires have alienated the relationship between people and objects [5]. For example, Ma Lu obsessively sacrifices a rhinoceros, removing its heart as an offering to Ming Ming's emotions; Mingming is immersed in material abundance yet spiritually hollow. The excess of material goods builds an illusory “utopia,” much like the trap of the “promise of happiness” in philosophical criticism. It not only fails to nourish the soul but instead alienates vibrant emotions into cold, hollow objects.

As director Meng Jinghui interprets the play, “From the moment of birth, a person is confined within the limitations of civilization” [6]. The “limitations of civilization” referred to by Meng

Jinghui have gradually degenerated into the shackles of material desire in a consumer society: when society ties a person's value to their consumption capacity, so-called “civilized rules” become a cage that objectifies the self. Honghong and others appear to make free choices, but under the domestication of capitalist logic, they compress emotional needs into tradable packages, equating spiritual comfort with material fulfillment—the terrifying aspect of this “constraint” lies in its internalization: characters actively imprison themselves with commodity logic, mistakenly equating consumption with growth and possession with redemption. Ultimately, material desire not only fails to transcend the limitations of survival but also causes people to lose the ability to construct a genuine spiritual world in the midst of false satisfaction, plunging them into the modern dilemma of “the more you consume, the more hollow you become.” In the process of civilization, human-made social activities and objects are imbued with special values and cultural connotations, and commodities are endowed with emotional and symbolic functions beyond their material functions. People are gradually overwhelmed by symbolized commodities. One of the greatest limitations of “civilization” is that most characters in the play blindly pursue the satisfaction recognized by the secular world under the drive of material desire, yet grow increasingly spiritually impoverished.

3. Obsessive love: extreme redemption against nothingness

Faced with the immense spiritual void and existential nihilism brought about by the materialistic siege, Ma Lu resorts to his obsessive love for Mingming as a desperate act of defiance. This love has no earthly foundation, is unrelated to material compatibility, and does not even seek an understanding response. Its intensity and purity make it the sole source of light illuminating his otherwise gloomy life. Ma Lu declares, “Loving her is the best thing I've ever done,” a statement that reflects his desperate affirmation of his own existence. His love is sacrificial; he is willing to give up “everything,” including the last symbol of hope, the rhinoceros Tula, just to anchor his existence in a meaningless world.

By focusing on the issue of love as one of society's problems, the author argues that in *The Lover's Rhino*, Ma Lu's love for Mingming and Mingming's love for Chen Fei are both obsessive and self-centered; yet it is precisely this obsessive love that serves as a sharp blade piercing through emotional consumerism. This “emotional consumerism” transforms intimate relationships into quantifiable commodities governed by transactional logic, promoting the calculation of returns on emotional investment and standardized packages, reducing individuals to savvy consumers in the emotional marketplace. Ma Lu and Ming Ming's obsessive love powerfully confronts this system: Ma Lu's “bloody gift” of sacrificing a rhinoceros's heart uses primal life force to challenge the beautifully packaged emotional commodities, exposing the deceptive nature of consumer society that hides reality behind symbolic value; Ming Ming refuses to replace Chen Fei with a “better option,” using self-destructive loyalty to satirize the theory of “relationships being replaceable”; The two resist the fast-food-style emotional matchmaking with their own obsessive and unwavering methods, highlighting the absurdity of consumerism's “fast-foodification” of emotions. This obsession is a desperate form of redemption—when society prices and sells souls, they prove through self-destruction that the logic of consumption can never subsume certain things. It is precisely this clumsy yet sincere love that mounts a fierce rebellion against numb souls.

As scholars have noted, here, “love is obsessive love, reality is a gamified reality, and art presented in a avant-garde manner satisfies the contemporary audience's longing for pure love and their compensation for an ideal life” [7]. In *The Lover's Rhinoceros*, Ma Lu and Ming Ming's love is the ultimate embodiment of “obsessive love.” Ma Lu's reckless obsession and sacrificial pursuit of Mingming (such as offering the heart of the rhinoceros Tula), as well as Mingming's hopeless yet

persistent infatuation with Chen Fei, transcend rationality, becoming an almost self-destructive, uncompromising absolute emotion, precisely as the quotation describes: “obsessive love.” The environment they inhabit—whether it be the exaggerated sales games involving toothbrushes or the absurd interactions between characters—reflects a “gamified reality,” where world rules are distorted and behavioral logic carries a performative quality. However, the extreme behaviors in this “game” are driven not merely by superficial absurdity but by deeper social and psychological factors: the desperate pursuit of spiritual purity by individuals in a materialistic, alienated urban environment (such as the marginal status of a street animal caretaker) and the affirmation of one's self-worth. Their obsession is a fierce rebellion against the mundane reality, and their tragic love story satisfies the audience's imaginative “compensation” for the rare pure passion and spiritual redemption that are scarce in reality.

This obsessive love is also marked by a strong tendency toward self-destruction. For instance, Ma Lu kidnapped the zookeeper and assassinated Tula as a sacrifice, transforming love into a bloody ritual—this can be seen as Ma Lu's self-destructive sacrifice. Mingming, meanwhile, becomes obsessed with Chen Fei's illusory fantasies, willingly becoming a sacrificial offering of unrequited love. This is also Ma Lu and Ming Ming's extreme redemptive strategy against nihilism. When both are misunderstood by their surroundings and their inner nihilism is shrouded by some obsession, they resort to these extreme behaviors to prove their existence and emotions. It is a double-edged sword: while it grants Ma Lu and Mingming a nearly tragic sense of purpose in life, it also locks them deeper into the emotional islands they have constructed for themselves, ultimately leading to the complete disillusionment of “those without the courage to find a woman to accompany them.” Like the rhinoceros Tula imprisoned in the zoo in the play, Ma Lu and Mingming are also imprisoned by their own obsessions.

4. Communication barriers: individual loneliness and identity anxiety

Though the characters in the play are close at hand, they feel as distant as mountains apart. This complete communication breakdown exacerbates the loss of self. As Claire Collier-Brooks notes in her introduction to Deleuze, “becoming” allows us to imagine life from a non-human perspective [8]. Here, “becoming” refers to the subject's constantly changing, unstable, and unfixed state, emphasizing the line of flight and the non-human perspective. In the play, this corresponds to the abnormal physiological characteristics that emerge when Ma Lu is on the brink of madness.

This physiological transformation completely destroyed the conventional basis of communication on the street: he could not understand the utilitarian logic of people like the toothbrush, denounced the technicalized emotions of dating classes, and even resorted to violent sacrifice in his communication with his only confidant, Tula. When human language failed, he could only express his existence through imitating the mournful cries of a rhinoceros and extreme physical actions—sacrificing Tula. This “creation” is not liberation but a mental prison—he uses dehumanization to resist the alienated world, yet his self becomes a trapped beast in the ruins of communication, ultimately achieving self-destructive “expression” through non-verbal sacrificial rituals.

In the play, Ma Lu's remarkable sense of smell is a key detail of his physiological mutation. He can precisely distinguish between tens of thousands of scents, a “supernatural ability” that ordinary people lack. Yet this seemingly powerful sensory ability ironically becomes an obstacle to his understanding of the world: Ma Lu's senses are overloaded compared to those of ordinary people. He remembers every scent of Mingming but cannot decipher her soul. He interprets the roar of a rhinoceros as a hymn of love, yet remains detached from the normal logic of the outside world. The cocoon of his senses gradually overwhelms Ma Lu's thought process, increasing the closed nature of

his cognition. Ultimately, he is imprisoned by his own sensitive nerves within a private kingdom constructed of scents, unable to establish genuine connections with others through universal language and logic.

Mingming's obsession with Chen Fei is equally indescribable, and her confessions to Ma Lu ultimately amount to futile cries. The banter of Da Xian, Hei Zi, and others, along with Honghong's "theory of love," is nothing more than noisy distractions masking spiritual emptiness, unable to touch the loneliness deep within the soul. The interactions between characters are filled with countless meaningless questions like "What did you say?" and "What are you talking about?" Language has become the shattered fragments of a collapsed tower. This widespread state of speechlessness and isolation makes it difficult for individuals to confirm their identity through interaction and feedback with others, leaving them trapped in the eternal confusion of "Who am I?" and "Why am I here?" The spiritual fortress thus remains impregnable.

5. The dilemma of idealism and the harsh reality

The tragedy of Ma Lu lies in the inevitable collapse of an idealist in the face of harsh reality. Liao Yimei once said that *Love in the Time of the Rhino* does not explore mundane love. It does not seek to explain whether two specific people are right for each other. Rather, it seeks to show how people pursue their dreams and maintain their dignity in the world. For Ma Lu, persevering to the end is a form of dignity [9].

As Liao Yimei has said, the core of 'The Lover's Rhinoceros' lies in exploring the theme of an individual's relentless pursuit of dreams and the defense of dignity. This precisely reveals the core of Ma Lu's character: he views persistence as a symbol of dignity. In the absurd and materialistic reality, when love becomes the only pure ideal within reach, Ma Lu's relentless, almost self-destructive obsession with Mingming transcends mere emotional entanglement, becoming a ritual of life through which he resists nihilism and affirms the value of his own existence. Even faced with Mingming's cold rejection and the relentless mockery of reality, he refuses to compromise or forget, even sacrificing the rhinoceros Tula, which symbolizes his self-reliance. This resolute stance of "persevering to the end" despite knowing it is hopeless is the last bastion of his defense of spiritual dignity—in a world of universal compromise, not giving up itself becomes the ultimate declaration of resistance against mediocrity and the preservation of individual sanctity. However, this persistence is a purely idealistic one, much like his pursuit of pure love and his almost sacred sense of responsibility toward the rhinoceros Tula. In the urban context that values practicality and fleeting trends, such ideals feel utterly out of place.

Ma Lu's love for Mingming is as clear as crystal yet as fragile as crystal, unable to withstand the harsh friction of reality. He fantasized about using the winnings from the lottery as a gift of love, a scenario rich in irony—he ultimately chose to use money, the most mundane of symbols, to achieve the most transcendent of ideals, resulting in a "double disillusionment." First, money not only failed to bridge the emotional divide but also completely tarnished the "crystal-clear" essence of love in his heart; when love becomes a tradable gift, it shatters completely in the collision with the harsh realities of life, and its unyielding nature declares the complete failure of its spiritual redemption. Second, to complete this sacrifice, he personally destroys the spiritual totem, the rhinoceros Tula. Tula is not only a mirror of his lonely soul but also a symbol of his resistance to nothingness and his commitment to purity. The slaughter of Tula signifies his deliberate destruction of the spiritual pillar of his existence, causing the faith and dignity upon which he relied to collapse. This act of sacrificing transcendent ideals through secular symbols ultimately destroys both love and self, completing the dual decline of both material and spiritual realms.

When the rhinoceros Tula, which symbolized his spiritual totem, finally died, the last bastion of idealism also collapsed. As a character abandoned by reality, Ma Lu embodies the universal existential dilemma faced by modern people: in a state of abandonment, the only thing one can do is confront the absurdity and survive within it [10]. In conclusion, Ma Lu's line, "Forgetting is the only thing ordinary people can do," is a cruel summary of the fate of idealists—either compromise with reality and forget, or, like Ma Lu, persist in one's convictions and head toward self-destruction. This dilemma reveals that, within the spiritual siege, the struggles of idealists often end in tragic solitude.

6. Conclusion

The extreme struggles of Ma Lu and Ming Ming in *The Lover's Rhinoceros* are by no means isolated cases. Rather, they are a searing microcosm of the collective spiritual crisis faced by contemporary individuals trapped within the confines of consumerism and alienated interpersonal relationships. They are lost in a city besieged by material desires, using obsessive love to combat nihilism, yet tearing themselves apart in the desert of communication, ultimately witnessing their ideals shatter against the barriers of reality. This intertwined predicament of the "inner" (spiritual confusion, collapse of values) and the "outer" (materialized environment, relational alienation) forms an inescapable siege for the modern mind. Studying their tragic struggles is not merely about dissecting the fates of dramatic characters; its deeper significance lies in revealing this pervasive state of spiritual barrenness, warning us to confront the challenges individuals face in seeking life's value and establishing authentic connections with the outside world in an era of material abundance, and to break through the spiritual barriers that bind contemporary people with even greater resolve in the future.

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