

A Comparative Analysis of Chinese and Western Social Issue Drama Writing—A Doll's House and Lifelong Matters as an Example

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Abstract. Social problem theatre refers to the use of dramatic works to analyse and critique a particular problem in society. In the long history of Western theatre development, the Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen was the earliest dramatist to create "social problem plays", producing such realistic plays as *A Doll's House* and *The Pillars of Society*. Influenced by Western theatre arts, the Chinese literary scholar Hu Shi devoted himself to promoting the modernisation of Chinese theatre and wrote *Lifelong Matters* in 1919. The intention of this paper is to compare and analyse the two works "*A Doll's House*" and "*Lifelong Matters*". Analysing the differences in plot structure from a macro perspective and the direction of the story line, and focusing on the female figure, and analysing how the playwright constructed an anti-feudal discourse through the female figure from the two levels of the spirit of resistance and the end of the destiny, the self-worth emphasised by Nala's awakening and the resolute breaking of the feudal despotism of Tian Yamei become the manifestos of resistance of the two women in different dimensions. As well as analysing the root of the conflict between the two works, it is the unavoidable contradiction between individual freedom and the social system.

Keywords: realism, Chinese and Western theatre, social issue drama, artistic influence

1. Introduction

Social problem plays originated in Europe at the end of the 19th century, when the contradictions in Western capitalist society deepened and the feminist movement was in its embryonic stage. With Henrik Ibsen as the first representative, a series of social problem plays were created, which set off a profound theatre revolution. *A Doll's House* is a sharp attack on the hypocrisy of the bourgeois family, and through the awakening of the female protagonist "Nala", it points out the injustice of the society to women and other problems. Ibsen's works caused a huge reaction. At the beginning of the 20th century, during the May Fourth Movement in China, intellectuals were eagerly pursuing cultural innovation, and the influx of Ibsen's social problem plays was respected by literary scholars such as Hu Shi and Lu Xun, who launched "Ibsen's Special Issue" in "New Youth" and created China's first vernacular drama, "*Lifelong Matters*". When the heroine of the play, Tian Yamei, is opposed by the feudal forces to her love, she also chooses to "run away" and goes with the person

she loves. Shakespeare once said, "Since the beginning of the theatre, its purpose has always been to reflect life, to show good and evil as they are, and to show its age a model of its own evolution [1]." Social problem theatre mirrors Shakespeare's famous quote. In *The Divergent Path of Drama*, published by Wen Yiduo in 1926, he put forward many constructive views on the development of social problem theatre in China [2]. In his article "On the Spirit of Modern Enlightenment in Chinese Drama", Dong Jian, a professor at Nanjing University, talked about the influence of Ibsenism on Chinese drama, arguing that it "opened the way for the flourishing of Chinese drama" [3]. This shows the value of the study of social problem theatre in China and the West. Of course, there are still some limitations to this line of research today, as there is currently less attention paid to the root causes of conflict in social problem theatres. For example, Professor Huang Jian wrote "A Comparative Study on the Theme of Women's Running Away in Chinese and Western Drama Literature", which focuses on the historical origins and comparisons of women's "running away" in Chinese and Western theatre works [4]. Professor Chen Chuanzhi's study on "Realism Derived from Ibsen's Social Problem Theatre" focuses on Chinese and Western realism as illustrated by social problem theatre, etc [5]. None of these studies have paid particular attention to the root causes of conflict in social problem theatres. In the following, the author will adopt a comparative literary research method to analyse the structural form, characterisation and other elements of the two works, to trace the cultural background of the times and to decipher the roots of the conflicts arising from different cultural motives.

2. Differences in the form of plot structure

2.1. Macro perspective

Firstly, *A Doll's House* is a three-act theatre structure, with three acts designed for Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and the following day, which builds a complete cycle of crisis change. In the first act, the seemingly sweet love between Nala and Helmo contrasts and paves the way for Helmo to reveal his ugly true colours later on, additionally laying the groundwork for the debt crisis; The second act focuses on Nala's agonising self-help and futile struggles, and Nala's manic state in the second act builds up her strength for her eventual awakening; Act Three to the climax, Nala completely awakened, realised that "first of all I am a human being", and slammed the door, these three acts in a progressive structure, the dramatic conflict from the emergence to the outbreak of the transition is natural and reasonable, to deepen the theme of the space given enough.

Looking at *Lifelong Matters*, Hu Shih uses the structural form of a one-act play, which is completed in a single scene in the living room of the Tian family from the opening to the end, opening with the results of fortune-telling such as Mrs. Tian's, with a clear-cut theme, and with the core dramatic conflict focusing on a single scene, in such a compressed mode, the core connotations of the work to be presented are extremely clear and striking a precise blow. The heroine Tian Yamei's inner changes, from begging to arguing until the final decisive departure, the inner transformation is also relatively rapid, omitting Nala in the awakening, before there are also some bitter struggles. Of course, Hu Shih's choice of such a structural form was closely related to the social background and cultural roots of the time. Hu Shih adhered to the traditional form of "literature as a way of life", magnified the absurdity of the feudal system, and used theatre as a means of reflecting the social problems, which struck a chord in the hearts of the audience and triggered a resonance.

2.2. Story line perspective

A Doll's House adopts a main line and a number of sub-lines intertwined in parallel, the main line centred on Nala and Helmut, and the sub-lines are divided into three story lines, namely, Koloksztai, Mrs. Linden, and Dr. Nguyen Khac, which play an indispensable role in laying the groundwork for the main story as well as leading to the outbreak of conflicts. For example, when Kolokstai was dismissed by Helmut, he had no choice but to take the note to blackmail Nara, this move for the final conflict outbreak buried the crisis ambush, followed by Nara in the test Helmut, Helmut to involve the honour of the illegal behaviour showed extreme hatred, which also paved the way for the eventual awakening of Nara. These story lines build a miniature ecological link to a capitalist society for the audience in a theatre production. When Helmut's crisis is over, he says to Nala "Oh, I'm fine! Nala, I forgive you." His hypocritical and despicable nature is revealed, and this is the real tragic core of the play.

On the contrary, there are no main and secondary threads in Lifelong Matters, and all the characters and events appear to serve the core conflict. Mrs and Mr Tian as representatives of feudal superstition and propriety, the fire of criticism is focused and precise, and Hu presents the audience with a bull's-eye structure of conflict, with no need for branching out to assist, and a dry stab at the clearest enemy.

In summary, the two plays, A Doll's House and Lifelong Learning, although different in structural form, are by no means a simple difference in length, but rather the culmination of the logic of two cultures in an art form. Chinese drama also evolved and matured under the influence of foreign theatre and the revelation of ideas [6].

3. Comparative study of the image of women

As typical images of women in Chinese and Western social issue dramas, both A Doll's House and Lifelong Matters end with the heroine "running away". In the following, the author will take the spirit of resistance and the end of fate as the twin axes to analyse the cultural rift and the proposition of the times behind these two women's mirrors.

3.1. The spirit of resistance

In A Doll's House, Nara's rebellion is a revolution of the soul, from "doll" to "person", representing an existential awakening. At the beginning of the episode, Nala enjoys the doll status given to her by Helmo, and calls herself "Birdie" and "Squirrel". As the debt crisis is about to be exposed, she is afraid but still has illusions about Helmo, thinking that Helmo will sacrifice himself to save her. As the debt crisis is about to be revealed, she is afraid but still has illusions about Helmo, thinking that Helmo will sacrifice himself to save her. However, this is not the case, and after witnessing Helmo's grimace after reading the letter, she is shocked to realise that she is just a tool to be objectified by her husband.

Secondly, the kernel of Nala's spirit of resistance is a philosophical enquiry into the nature of human beings. Before the curtain falls, she says to Helmo, "First of all, I am a human being, just like you." It declares that women are not subordinate to men, but independent individuals with the same dignity. Nala's departure is, on the surface, an escape from the prison of marriage, but on a deeper level, it is a reclaiming of the right to self-definition. Even though Nala herself is not sure of what lies ahead of her when she leaves this "home", she still puts her free will at the top of her priority list and expresses her questioning of the rules of the society through the questioning of "whether society

is right, or I am right? Through the question "Is society right, or am I right?", she expresses her doubts about the rules of society and emphasises the value of her own self.

Unlike Nala's progressive awakening, Tian Yamei is awakened from her debut. Tian Yamei is a newly educated young woman who opposes the feudal patriarchal system, and in her opinion, she has the right to make decisions about her life in her own hands. The source power of Tian Yamei's spirit of resistance comes from the endowment of the new culture of May 4th, which is ostensibly the resistance of free love, but in fact is a contest between the old morality and the new morality. The primary viewpoint of individual liberation pursued by the new youth of May 4th is that the individual is liberated from the family and gets equal rights of independence and freedom.

In contrast to Nala, Tian Yamei's revolt is an enlightened beginning that breaks with the old and builds on the new, relying on the revolutionary period of May 4th ideology, deconstructing the feudal rules, and running away with a clear goal of defecting to her lover, in order to reach the claim of marital autonomy. Of course, her departure did not touch the roots of the feudal system at all, and there are limitations and questions about the pursuit of the individual, such as whether Mr Chen would become her new attachment after she defected to him, and whether she would be truly independent and free. Nala's resistance, on the other hand, is the awakening of "becoming a human being", announcing that men and women are equal subjects of existence, placing the individual above the system. Although Nala's ending also leaves the audience with a permanent suspense, in essence, Nala's spirit of resistance is more elevated than Tian Yamei's, and is the expression of the significance of women's existence.

3.2. Fateful endings

In *A Doll's House* and *Lifelong Matters*, Nala's resolute departure and Tian Yamei's pursuit of marital freedom, although sharply attacking social problems and demonstrating women's breakthroughs from traditional constraints, the substance behind the endings, as well as the trajectories of individual futures, point to different dimensions of liberation.

In *A Doll's House* and *Lifetime*, Nala's resolute departure and Tian Yamei's pursuit of marital freedom, although sharply attacking social problems and demonstrating women's breakthroughs from traditional constraints, the substance behind the endings, as well as the trajectories of individual futures, point to different dimensions of liberation. From a realistic point of view, Nala's departure is not the end of emancipation but the beginning of spiritual wandering; Nala abandons her identity as a wife and mother, leaves her family and questions the social system and the law; such self-exile means that she places herself outside of all existing order.

However, the author does not explain in the play whether or not Nala is capable of earning a living and whether or not she can be financially independent in a patriarchal society by leaving her husband. Lu Xun wrote in "What Happened to Nala After She Left" that "Nala will either fall or come back". It can be said that there is great uncertainty about Nala's fate after her departure, which also forces the audience to think about whether there is a real way out for an awakened woman who is alone in a harsh society that is not yet ready to accept her.

In contrast, Tian Yamei's ending is given a relative certainty of the road, she defied the obstruction of her parents, successfully fled the country to be with Mr Chen, to achieve personal autonomy in the choice of marriage, a move that is undoubtedly a direct counterattack on the "parents' orders, matchmakers' words" of the feudal marriage system.

But looking at the social times of the time, Hu was overly idealistic in his treatment of such an ending. Tian Yamei has a certain spirit of resistance, but cannot resist. When she is initially opposed by her mother, she pins her hopes on her father's majesty, using his disapproval of fortune-telling as

a reason for her resistance; however, when her father is also opposed to the marriage, Tian Yamei falls into despair for a time, and as a result, it is Chen's note that helps Tian Yamei to make her choice; in other words, Tian Yamei's victory is dependent on Mr Chen. Therefore, Tian Yamei's life after her departure is also thought-provoking, and it becomes an open question as to whether she represents the true realisation of individual emancipation, especially women's own emancipation, rather than the end of women's emancipation when they have gained marital autonomy [7]. It's become a mystery.

It can be seen that the fate of Nala and Tian Yamei represents two different dimensions of exploration on the road to women's emancipation, as well as the corresponding limitations of each. Nala's exodus is full of tragic overtones, a breakout into a patriarchal society, and the uncertainty of its ending is itself a reflection of its profundity; whereas Tian Yamei's triumph exists in response to a specific societal vice, and such a staged success illuminates the light of hope on the path of anti-feudalism. The final choice of the two women is not only the end of their personal destiny, but also a footnote to the evolution of women's consciousness in the changing times..

4. Root causes of conflict in social problem theatre

The core appeal of social issue dramas lies in the examination of individual will in the context of a broad social structure, where the root of the conflict is not simply personal grudges, but the irreconcilable contradiction between individual freedom and a powerful social system. A Doll's House and A Matter of Life as the typical representatives of Chinese and Western social problem dramas, their conflicts are deeply rooted in the specific social soil, and analysing the root causes of their conflicts requires in-depth analysis of the social system and cultural habits behind them. The differences in social lifestyles between Western and Chinese societies have resulted in the development of Chinese and Western dramas, which have different internal causes, social needs and social structures [8].

In A Doll's House, Ibsen reveals the unequal status of women in a patriarchal society, on the surface of which is the family conflict between husband and wife, while deep down it is the deprivation and suppression of female subjectivity in the bourgeois social system. Nineteenth-century Europe is a highly institutionalised society that strictly follows the order of male authority. Helmer is not inherently evil, but represents the perfect enforcer of this system and has a vested interest in it, and the key to Nara's awakening is the realisation that her roles as a wife and a mother are essentially the roles of "dolls" given to her by the social system to serve her husband and her family. The key to Nara's awakening is her realisation that her role as wife and mother is essentially that of a "doll", given to her by the social system to serve her husband and family.

Nara's forging of signatures to save Helmut, though ostensibly illegal, is in fact an attempt to exercise her own subjective rights within the harsh patriarchal system, only to be completely crushed by the system itself and by her husband's violent reaction based on the primacy of his reputation. Therefore, Nara's departure is a strong indictment of the whole bourgeois system and the male-centred ethic, and Ibsen's declaration "First I am a man" through Nara's mouth is precisely the individual's revolt against the oppression of the system.

The conflict in Lifelong Matters, on the other hand, is based on the collision of old and new ideas during the May Fourth period in China, which was rooted in the interference of the feudal patriarchal system, as well as in the cultural derivatives of folk superstition, in the free will of young people. The focus of the conflict between Tian Yamei and her parents centres on the attribution of the right to decide on marriage, which is by no means a private matter in traditional Chinese society, as written in the Book of Rites in the chapter of Fainting Righteousness, "Fainting rites will unite the

good of two surnames, and will serve the clan and temple upwards, and succeed the generations to come downwards [9]." It can be seen that, in the traditional concept, marriage was regarded as a major clan event, and the need for the union of families with different surnames was emphasised. This is also the reason why Mr Tian objected to Tian Yamei's marriage in "Lifelong Matters" on the grounds that in ancient China, the Tian and Chen families were of the same clan and same surname.

Mr Fei Xiaotong, in "Native China", has also discussed the characteristics of the "differential order pattern" in traditional Chinese society, where individuals are tethered to the family system, where personal choices must be subordinated to the family order, and where discipline suppresses selfishness [10]. This is what creates the conflict between Tian Yamei and her parents in "Lifelong Matters". Tian Yamei does not want to follow the rules and suppress her true feelings, but chooses to resist. Tian Yamei's resistance represents a new, individual-based challenge to the old system of values and family authority, and also reflects the root cause of the conflict, the collision between the individual and the system.

Further, the reason why the conflicts in social dramas are so shockingly universal and have such a huge impact on society at the time is that power is diffused in the subtleties of everyday life, such as family intimacy, parental "care" for children, social demands and expectations of women, and so on, which seem to be "warm" events. These seemingly "warm" events are precisely the arenas where power operates. Nala's realisation that she has never been treated as a "human being" by her husband as an equal, and Tian Yamei's refusal to accept her family's arrangement, are inevitable conflicts between new ideas and old values in a time of social transformation.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, the two works, *A Doll's House* and *Lifelong Matters*, use the sharp edge of theatre to tear open the fissure of the old system, showing the sharp contradiction between the lagging nature of systemic change and the over-awakening of the individual. The difference between the two is not a matter of artistic superiority or inferiority, but rather a cultural mapping between China and the West in terms of women's self-knowledge and the path of social change. The symbolism of Nala's loud slamming of the door and Tian Yamei's back as she leaves in the car has long since transcended the stage itself and has become an eternal image of women's quest for emancipation. Therefore, the purpose of examining Nala and Tian Yamei together is not to judge the superiority of one over the other, but to gain a deeper understanding of the complexity and hierarchy of the path of women's emancipation. Today, when we look back at the figures of Nala and Tian Yamei, the systemic oppression they fought against has long since changed, but the individual's search for identity and the pursuit of freedom still resonate in contemporary society. Any true emancipation is inevitably accompanied by a profound critique of the system, as well as continuous cultural reflection, which never stops moving and drives human society forward. Their story is about the pain of awakening, but also about the eternal revelation of the future journey.

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