

Camus and Mo Yan: A Cross-Cultural Perspective from "The Stranger" to "Red Sorghum Family"

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Abstract. This paper explores the works of Albert Camus and Mo Yan from a cross-cultural perspective, focusing on their treatments of existentialism and rural literature. In works such as 'The Stranger' and 'The Plague,' Camus delves into the themes of individual isolation and alienation within an absurd world. 'Red Sorghum Family' by Mo Yan vividly captures the intricate tapestry of Chinese rural culture and its historical backdrop. A comparative analysis of Camus and Mo Yan not only uncovers the thematic, stylistic, and technical parallels and disparities but also illuminates the shared and divergent aspects of literary creation across distinct cultural milieus. This research not only has academic value but also supports mutual learning and inclusiveness among different cultures.

Keywords: Camus; Mo Yan; Existentialism; Rural Literature; Cross-Cultural Comparison; Comparative Literature.

1. Introduction

Albert Camus and Mo Yan stand as preeminent figures in 20th-century global literature, each making significant contributions to the realms of existentialism and rural narratives. In seminal works such as 'The Stranger' and 'The Plague,' Camus delves into philosophical contemplations on human existence, interrogating the notions of freedom and responsibility within an absurd universe. Conversely, Mo Yan, through the lens of magical realism in 'Red Sorghum Family,' unveils the opulence and intricacies of Chinese rural life. A comparative scrutiny of Camus and Mo Yan not only elucidates the thematic, stylistic, and technical congruencies and divergences but also lays bare the commonalities and distinctions in literary craftsmanship across disparate cultural landscapes. Such a comparative endeavor enriches our comprehension of the intercultural dialogue and offers a distinctive vantage point for cultural exchange in an increasingly globalized society. Consequently, this study holds substantial academic merit, fostering mutual understanding and cultural inclusivity among diverse traditions.

2. Organization of the Text

2.1. Theoretical Framework

2.1.1. Overview of Existentialism and Rural Literature

During the 1940s, the works of French writer Albert Camus began to be introduced in Chinese newspapers. Camus's name became familiar to Chinese readers through the translation and introduction of existentialism, although at that time there was no detailed study or introduction. It was only briefly mentioned in articles about existentialism by translators such as Luo Dagang and Sheng Chenghua. Mo Yan, born in Gaomi, Shandong, spent twenty years of his life in the countryside. His childhood experiences of hunger and loneliness became a rich source for his writing, and the land, rivers, and people of Gaomi Northeast have left a profound impression on him. As he once said, "My Gaomi Northeast is a literary republic I have created, and I am the king of this kingdom."

Existentialism, as a philosophical and literary movement, emphasizes the freedom, choices, and responsibilities of individuals in an absurd world. Its core tenet is that even in a world rife with uncertainty and meaninglessness, individuals must exercise their free will to imbue their lives with

meaning. In literary creation, existentialism often employs characters who are indifferent and isolated to explore profound thoughts on human existence. For example, in "The Stranger," the protagonist Meursault's indifference to his surroundings is not only a rebellion against social norms but also a profound reflection on the absurdity of reality. On the other hand, rural literature uses the countryside and rural life as subjects, highlighting strong regional characteristics and local culture. Mo Yan's works, such as "Red Sorghum Family," vividly depict the history and folklore of Gaomi Northeast, showcasing the unique allure and complexity of Chinese rural culture.

2.1.2. Cross-Cultural Perspectives in Literary Research

Cross-cultural research plays a crucial role in literary analysis, particularly in the context of globalization. With the ongoing deepening of cultural exchanges, a cross-cultural perspective offers effective tools for comparing human behaviors and social phenomena across various cultural backgrounds. This research methodology aims to uncover how cultural differences shape people's thinking and expression, aiding in a more comprehensive understanding of the interconnections between different cultures. In the field of literature, cross-cultural comparisons can examine the thematic, stylistic, and narrative technique similarities and differences across various cultural contexts. For example, Camus's existentialist themes and Mo Yan's rural narratives respectively reflect the human existential dilemmas and social transformations in Western and Chinese cultures.

2.2. Camus's Existentialist Traits

2.2.1. The Character of Meursault in "The Stranger"

In "The Stranger," Meursault profoundly embodies the existentialist themes of indifference and alienation from society. His behavior at his mother's funeral, where he shows no signs of grief and ignores the details of the funeral arrangements, falling asleep and smoking during the vigil, stands in stark contrast to societal expectations of filial piety. When his girlfriend Marie proposes marriage, he remains indifferent, viewing love as meaningless. His friendship with Raymond, a man of dubious reputation, highlights his detachment from societal standards.

2.2.2. Human Nature and the Complexity of Social Disasters in "The Plague"

In "The Plague," Camus delves into the complex reactions of individuals facing dire circumstances by depicting the nature of humanity during a catastrophe. Dr. Rieux courageously takes on the responsibility of treating patients, exemplifying selflessness and dedication. In contrast, journalist Rambert's attempts at escape and his selfish behavior reflect the negative attitudes people might adopt in dire straits. Moreover, the criminal Cottard benefits from the disaster, revealing greed and self-interest. The responses of ordinary citizens are more varied; they seek superiority in trivial matters and find relief in distractions, ultimately expressing their desire for survival in the jubilation following the end of the plague.

2.3. Mo Yan's Rural Narratives and Magical Realism

2.3.1. Rural Culture in Red Sorghum Family

Set against the backdrop of Gaomi Northeast, a locale that transcends mere geography to embody a rich tapestry of history and a cornucopia of familial tales, Red Sorghum Family unfolds. Mo Yan's scrupulous depiction invites readers to savor the distinctive allure of this terrain. From the expansive sorghum fields to the venerable earthen ramparts, each landscape element is suffused with a robust rural essence, mirroring the lifestyle and spiritual yearnings of its inhabitants. The love narrative between Dai Fenglian and Yu Zhan'ao stands as a pivotal motif within the work, elucidating the profound interrelation between individual fate and ancestral lineage. Within the novel, the ebb and flow of the family's fortunes and the chronicles of anti-Japanese heroes are interwoven, presenting a substantial history and the intricate tapestry of human nature.

2.3.2. Magical Realism Techniques

Mo Yan adeptly deploys first-person narration, along with narrative devices such as flashbacks and intercalary narratives, to augment the story's emotive range and profundity. Through the first-person lens, readers are granted an intimate glimpse into the protagonists' inner worlds, partaking in the emotional vicissitudes and the capricious turns of their destinies. This narrative mode imparts a verisimilitude to the tale and renders the characters more three-dimensional and vivid. Mo Yan frequently employs flashbacks and intercalary narratives to disrupt the linear progression of time, introducing suspense and enhancing the narrative's engagement. For instance, the novel initiates with a depiction of Yu Zhan'ao's harrowing experiences during the Anti-Japanese War, subsequently interspersed with intercalary narratives that unveil Dai Fenglian's love story and family history.

2.4. Cross-Cultural Comparative Analysis

2.4.1. Similarities in Themes and Imagery: Common Themes of Loneliness and Alienation

Camus and Mo Yan both probe the universal theme of loneliness and alienation experienced by individuals within the fabric of modern society. Despite their thematic congruence, they adopt divergent literary methodologies and modes of expression. In "The Stranger" and "The Plague," Camus utilizes the character of Meursault to elucidate the dichotomy between the individual and society. Meursault's solitude is a byproduct of his lucid comprehension of the world's absurdity, rendering him apathetic and rebellious towards the vacuous and hypocritical mores of society. This defiance estranges him from the societal collective, amplifying his inherent solitude. Camus's intricate depiction of Meursault's inner realm accentuates the ubiquitous sensation of loneliness, particularly in his contempt and defiance of societal conventions, which becomes an inescapable destiny.

Conversely, Mo Yan's protagonists in "Red Sorghum Family," such as Yu Zhan'ao and Dai Fenglian, grapple with loneliness amidst familial and communal surroundings. Against the tumultuous historical canvas, the exigencies of war and survival transmute their loneliness from a mere personal emotional articulation into a consequence of the clash between the collective and the forces of history, tradition, and modernity. Mo Yan deftly interlaces the depiction of individual sentiments with the collective milieu, illustrating the struggle between loneliness and the impulse to persevere in the face of extreme adversity. This solitude is engendered by both the external rigors of existence and the characters' profound yearning for freedom and affection. Thus, while Camus and Mo Yan both navigate the themes of loneliness and alienation, they do so via their distinctive narrative techniques — Camus through philosophical and rational portrayals of characters marked by detachment and Meursault's particular brand of defiance, and Mo Yan through the interplay between historical and cultural conflicts, underscoring the trials of the individual.

2.4.2. Comparison of Literary Styles: Camus's Concise and Cool Style vs. Mo Yan's Complex and Diverse Style

The literary styles of Camus and Mo Yan diverge significantly, offering a rich subject for detailed analysis. Beyond stylistic differences, their linguistic characteristics are also markedly distinct. Camus's writing is characterized by its stark simplicity and cool detachment, with language that is clear, terse, and imbued with a strong rationality. In his original French texts, this simplicity manifests not only in the economy of vocabulary but also in the succinctness and restraint of his sentence structures. For instance, in "The Stranger," Camus employs straightforward, everyday descriptions to convey Meursault's apathy and detachment from the world. His French prose is straightforward and steady, mirroring the author's profound contemplation of life's nihilism, rendering the ideas and emotions in his works direct and unadorned.

Conversely, Mo Yan's linguistic style is intricate and varied, imbued with a rich folkloric essence and creative flair. In his Chinese narratives, rhetorical devices are frequently employed, and his language is imbued with vibrant regional hues and multi-layered cultural significance. In "Red Sorghum Family," Mo Yan employs hyperbole, metaphors, and other techniques to craft a Gaomi Northeast that is both surreal and grounded in reality. His Chinese works are not only aesthetically

pleasing but also deftly blend the rustic ambiance with a profound historical gravitas. In terms of linguistic characteristics, Camus's French is marked by its conciseness and philosophical depth, whereas Mo Yan's Chinese is layered and evocative, reflecting the profound impact of their respective cultural backgrounds on the architecture of their literary works.

2.4.3. Cross-Cultural Influence and Mutual Learning: The Reception of Camus's Works in China

The reception and dissemination of Camus's works in China have been a gradual and evolving process. Beginning in the 1980s, Camus's existentialist philosophy and contemplations on the human condition began to permeate the Chinese literary landscape. The themes of loneliness and alienation present in Camus's writings have struck a chord with traditional Chinese literary explorations of human nature and destiny, prompting Chinese writers to reconsider the concepts of modernity and individual existence.

The international acclaim and Nobel Prize awarded to Mo Yan have cast a new light on the acceptance of Camus's ideas within China. Mo Yan's works, with their profound insights into rural culture, offer a unique perspective on China's social transformations and historical context, facilitating a rich dialogue between Chinese and Western literatures on a global scale. Mo Yan's narrative techniques and emotional depth have garnered a wide readership, particularly in the realms of human nature and social predicaments, echoing Camus's philosophical inquiries.

2.5. Cross-Cultural Dialogue Between Camus and Mo Yan

2.5.1. Loneliness and Alienation in Different Cultural Contexts

In Camus's writings, Meursault emerges as a paradigm of loneliness and alienation, existing on the periphery of society. His apathy towards familial bonds, romantic love, and career ambitions is pronounced. Meursault's lucid comprehension of the world's absurdity leads him to spurn societal norms, resulting in both external ostracization and an intensification of his inherent loneliness. His defiance of superficial and meaningless social conventions culminates in his isolation and marginalization.

In contrast, characters in Mo Yan's narratives, such as Yu Zhan'ao and Dai Fenglian from "Red Sorghum Family," also grapple with feelings of loneliness and alienation. Despite their integration into familial and communal networks, they often feel isolated and powerless. Yu Zhan'ao, during the Anti-Japanese War, confronts a loneliness that challenges conventional ethics, signifying a disconnection from societal norms. Dai Fenglian, as a female protagonist, exhibits resilience in her pursuit of love and personal standing, yet her sense of isolation is accentuated within a patriarchal society.

From a cross-cultural vantage point, the depiction of loneliness and alienation exhibits both commonalities and distinct differences. In Camus's corpus, loneliness is frequently accompanied by a profound critique of social evaluation systems, highlighting the struggle of individuals within an absurd world. In Mo Yan's works, loneliness and alienation are interwoven with the broader tapestry of national historical memory and rural culture, depicting a more intricate and challenging milieu for survival. For instance, Yu Zhan'ao and Dai Fenglian navigate the tensions between traditional and contemporary values, expressing a spectrum of loneliness as they seek freedom and love.

2.5.2. Cross-Cultural Interpretation of Traditional and Modern Conflicts

The global proliferation of Camus's and Mo Yan's works has had a significant impact across various cultural milieus. "The Stranger," translated into countless languages, has profoundly influenced Western readers' understanding of existentialism and absurdism. Camus's reflections on traditional morality and modern society, particularly the discord between Meursault and conventional emotional expressions, have become central themes in global philosophical and literary discourse. His body of work has left an indelible mark on European literature, especially in France, and has resonated in East Asia and Latin America, prompting discussions on the interplay between modern individuals and their societal contexts.

Mo Yan's "Red Sorghum Family" has also been translated into multiple languages and has garnered international acclaim, including the Nobel Prize in Literature. The portrayal of Chinese rural culture and societal transformation in his narratives, when transposed into diverse cultural contexts, has enhanced Western audiences' comprehension of the tensions between tradition and modernity in China, thereby situating Chinese literature within the global literary landscape. Mo Yan's unique depiction of the clash between traditional culture and contemporary thought has inspired a worldwide contemplation of the historical fabric and individual destinies within Chinese society.

2.5.3. Narrative Innovation from a Cross-Cultural Perspective

In terms of narrative technique, Camus's works are lauded for their stark simplicity and detachment. He frequently employs a linear temporal structure, focusing on the actions and inner worlds of characters, and utilizes straightforward, unembellished language to convey profound concepts. In "The Stranger," the daily endeavors and internal sentiments of Meursault are presented through plain narration, allowing readers to discern the absurdity and futility of existence in the most prosaic terms. The narrative style in "The Plague" is equally compelling, depicting the multifaceted nature of humanity during a catastrophe without superfluous embellishment, thereby underscoring Camus's profound insights into the human condition.

Conversely, Mo Yan's narrative innovation is characterized by its rich diversity and complexity. He often eschews linear narrative structures, employing techniques such as first-person narration, flashbacks, and intercalary narratives to render the story's architecture more malleable. In "Red Sorghum Family," Mo Yan interweaves history and reality through the perspective of "I," enriching the narrative's stratification. His storytelling also incorporates folk tales and mythological elements, bestowing upon his works a fantastical dimension and enhancing their cultural depth and richness.

3. Conclusion

The comparative analysis of Albert Camus's and Mo Yan's literary works reveals that, despite operating within disparate cultural milieus, both authors profoundly probe into the realms of human existence, solitude, and societal discord. Camus's existentialist philosophy underscores the agency and accountability of individuals within a world perceived as irrational, whereas Mo Yan, through his meticulous depictions of rural life, illuminates the complex interplay between individuals and historical, traditional forces. While their thematic concerns and stylistic approaches diverge, their collective corpus offers a compelling portrayal of the emotional tribulations and fortitude of individuals grappling with existential quandaries. Future scholarly endeavors could extend this comparative exploration to the works of additional Chinese and Western authors, examining cross-cultural dialogues within various cultural contexts to further enrich our comprehension of existentialist motifs in literature.

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