



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

LOVE TRAGEDIES IN ARABIC AND CHINESE LITERATURE

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FBMK 2021 45



LOVE TRAGEDIES IN ARABIC AND CHINESE LITERATURE

By

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**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia,
in Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts**

December 2020

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation work to my family and my friends. A special feeling of gratitude to my loving parents and my sweet sister whose words of encouragement and push for tenacity ring in my ears.

I also dedicate this dissertation to my friend Abdulkareem, Abudula and Lina who have supported me throughout the process. I will always appreciate all they have done.



Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts

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By

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December 2020

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Every nation has its own example of love that has attracted much attention. *Majnun Layla* and *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* are two well-known love tragedies in Arabic and Chinese literature. These two literary works share some similarities, but due to their different cultural backgrounds and different bringing-up environments, there also exist many differences. This study attempts to make a comparison between these two love tragedies. It is worth noting that these two celebrated literary works share some tragic elements but different in tragic nature. The study seeks to achieve the following objective: to summarize and distinguish the similarities and differences between the two plays in theme, character and plot. The method used in this study is textual analysis and comparative approach. The findings of this study are in the form of similarities and differences. Concerning the theme of the two plays, both plays eulogize love, praise female characters good nature and both pairs of lovers sacrificed for their love. However, the difference is the male protagonist sacrificed more than the female protagonist in *Majnun Layla*. In contrast, in *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* the female protagonist sacrificed more than the male protagonist. Concerning the character, the protagonists in *Majnun Layla* show a bit more initiative than *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* in expressing and defending love. In the aspect of plot structure, the similarity is the plot structure of the two plays share similar development of love. However, *Majnun Layla's* difference ends up with tragic denouement, while *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* ends up with reunion denouement. The significance of such a kind of comparative study is that it will enhance our understanding of tragedies from different countries and practically help improve communication between different cultures.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Master Sastera

TRAGEDI CINTA DALAM KESUSASTERAAN ARAB DAN CINA

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Setiap bangsa mempunyai contoh cinta tersendiri yang telah menarik banyak perhatian. Majnun Layla dan Liang Shanbo dan Zhu Yingtai merupakan dua tragedi cinta yang amat terkenal dalam kesusasteraan Arab dan Cina. Kedua karya sastera ini mempunyai beberapa persamaan, tetapi disebabkan latar belakang budaya mereka yang berbeza menyebabkan terdapatnya banyak perbezaan. Kajian ini cuba meneliti perbandingan antara dua tragedi cinta tersebut. Wajar diperhatikan bahawa kedua-dua karya kesusasteraan yang disanjung tersebut berkongsi elemen tragik yang sama, tetapi berbeza dari segi sifat tragik. Objektif kajian ini adalah untuk meringkaskan dan membezakan persamaan dan perbezaan antara kedua-dua tragedi tersebut dari segi tema, watak dan plot. Kaedah yang digunakan dalam kajian ini ialah analisis teks dan pendekatan perbandingan. Dapatan kajian ini adalah dalam bentuk persamaan dan perbezaan. Dalam aspek tema, kedua-dua drama tersebut melakonkan cinta puji-pujian, memuji-muji sifat kebaikan watak wanita dan kedua-dua pasangan kekasih berkorban demi cinta mereka. Namun, perbezaannya adalah protagonis lelaki lebih banyak berkorban daripada protagonis wanita dalam Majnun Layla. Walau bagaimanapun, dalam Liang Shanbo dan Zhu Yingtai protagonis wanita lebih banyak berkorban daripada protagonis lelaki. Dari segi watak, protagonis dalam Majnun Layla menunjukkan lebih sedikit inisiatif daripada Liang Shanbo dan Zhu Yingtai dalam memperlihat dan mempertahankan cinta. Dari segi struktur plot, persamaannya adalah struktur plot kedua-dua drama berkongsi perkembangan cinta yang serupa. Perbezaannya adalah Majnun Layla berakhir dengan penutup akhiran yang tragik dan Liang Shanbo dan Zhu Yingtai berakhir dengan penutup akhiran penyatuan semula. Signifikannya kajian perbandingan sedemikian adalah kajian ini akan dapat meningkatkan pemahaman kita mengenai tragedi dari pelbagai negara yang berbeza, secara praktikalnya dapat membantu memperbaiki komunikasi antara budaya yang berbeza.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to express the deepest appreciation to my supervisor Dr. Muhd Zulkifil Bin Ismail for his invaluable insight, endless patience and clever guidance. I also acknowledge my debt to Dr. Ser Wue Hiong and Dr. Syed Nurulakla Bin Syed Abdullah for being on my supervisory committee and sharing their constructive comments. Without their guidance and persistent help this dissertation would not have been possible.

Besides, I appreciate the wholehearted support, encouragement and inspiration of my family and friends.

Finally, I am grateful to all my internal and external examiners for their careful reading and accurate judgment.

This thesis was submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts. The numbers of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

As Tian (2016) states, “One Belt One Road is a highly interesting initiative proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013, aims to create the world’s largest platform for economic cooperation, including policy coordination, trade and financing collaboration, and social and cultural cooperation” (p.2). This strategy is not just about trade and investment but also about cultural exchanges, the Belt includes countries situated on the ancient Silk Road through Central Asia, West Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. More than 2000 years ago, the Silk Road put China and the Arab world in close contact. The Silk Road was a trade route, and even more a cultural exchange route, it provides the foundation and platform for cultural communications. President Xi Jinping summed up the Peace and cooperation, openness and tolerance, mutual learning, mutual benefit, and win-win situations are all examples of the Silk Road spirit. Culturally, Sino-Arab communication extremely promotes the friendship and increase the mutual understanding between two sides, and cross - cultural studies are the most important means for communication between two civilizations. In the process of building cultural bridges between the Arab world and China, the comparative studies of Arabic and Chinese literatures show its own value.

According to Karandashev (2015, p.5), “in the 1980s, scholars from various countries started to delve into the concept of love from evolutionary and cultural perspective. They interested to investigate whether romantic love is a universal emotion present in various cultures and show similar and different attitudes to love and love experience are in different cultures. Many publications shed light on the understanding of romantic love as a cultural phenomenon. Research by David Buss, Helen Fisher, Ellen Hatifiel, Susan Sprecher, Robert Levine, Robin Goodwin and their colleagues in sociology, anthropology and communication research substantially expanded our understanding of cross-cultural variation of love across the globe”.

To a large degree, the nature of a play is closely related to its culture. Certain culture produces certain play. In order to understand a work better, researchers should know more about its cultural background. In reading world literature, researchers discover interesting similarities and differences which if studied properly could lead to a deeper understanding of cultural diversity, thus leading to a better understanding of the nature of literature. One approach to dealing with such issues is to examine literary works of the same genre, allowing the content to be analyzed despite structural differences.

Love is an eternal theme of life and literary works. And tragedy is another eternal literary theme, the sense of tragedy concerning human existence is a classical topic of literature. According to Stevenson (2011), “the definition of the tragedy is tragedy is a serious play with an unhappy ending, especially one concerning the downfall of the main character” (p.1529). Aristotle in *Poetics* (Translated by Bywater, 2009) “defines tragedy as an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions” (p.96). Lu (1960, p.22), a great Chinese writer explains the nature of tragedy more directly, the tragedy is to show people how a beauty die.

1.2 Background of the Study

Love is an eternal theme in world literature. *Majnun Layla* is one of the best-known tragedies of love in the Arab world. In China, there is also a well-known love tragedy -- *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*. Though both plays share many similarities there are also many differences between them.

Majnun Layla is about a love story between Qays Al-Mullawah and Layla Al-Ameriya that took place in 7th century Arabia. The versions appear in prose, song and poetry and the story has been the subject of many works in Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Indian literature. According to Byron (2018), *Majnun Layla* also be known as “the Romeo and Juliet of the East” (p.33).

The story is told that Qays falls in love with Layla from the same tribe which they live but they are not allowed to unite. Qays publicly and unequivocally declares his obsessive love for Layla in elegiac lyrics. Qays is perceived to be mad in his obsession with Layla, so his tribe and community give him the epithet Majnun, mad man. When he asks for her hand in marriage, her father declines because it would be scandalous for Layla to marry someone who is considered mentally unbalanced. Majnun becomes a hermit after Layla is married off to someone else, devoting himself to writing verses about his profound love for Layla. Despite their attempts to meet, they both die without ever realizing they had a relationship. The story of *Majnun Layla* is an eternal and a tragic one that lived through the ages, traveled through the world, entered many cultures and influenced a lot of them.

Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai is a Chinese legend about a tragic love story between two lovers, Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, whose names come from the story's title. As Cho (2018) states that “the tragic deaths at the end have led to the tale being labeled the Chinese Romeo and Juliet” (p.2). Because of its thoughtful and artistic content, the story of *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* is considered one of the finest works of ancient Chinese folk literature. For thousands of years, the story has been very popular because it expresses eastern pure love perfectly. The story is about beautiful and moving love

between Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai whose parents are strongly against their marriage because of different family backgrounds. They would rather die than yield to the tyrannous pressures of society. The play arouses our great sympathy for the protagonists and deep hatred of the feudal social system.

Both *Majnun Layla* and *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* are the two most affecting love stories of the whole Chinese and Arabic culture, later followed by playwrights to create them as two typical love tragedies. The two stories stand out even more distinctively after they were revised into all kinds of dramas.

Drama was introduced into the Arab world from the West in about the middle of the 19th century. Badawi (1987) points out, “drama was not seen in classical Arabic literature like that of real drama is performed on a stage through dialogue by actors. classical Arab literature did not know drama as it was conceived in the west from the times of the ancient Greeks to the present, namely as an art form in which an action is imitated through dialogue spoken by human actors on a stage” (p.133).

According to Al-Rifai (2019), Ahmad Shawqi (1868-1932), “the undisputed prince of poets, was the greatest Arab poet in modern times” (p.2). *Majnun Layla* is one of his best plays. According to Mahmuda (2014, p.53), Ahmad Shawqi derives his material mainly from the well-known medieval compendium of knowledge about classical poetry, *Kitab al- Aghani* (the books of songs) by Abu al Faraj al Asfahani. This play is divided into five acts, written in 1932 and translated into English by Arberry (1933) who described Ahmad Shawqi's drama as “a contribution of unique and immortal value” (p.58).

According to Wang (1985, p.78), China Drama mainly includes Xiqu, is a popular form of drama, and drama, a Western one that introduced in the 20th century. Chinese Xiqu was honored as one of three ancient play styles together with tragicomedy in ancient Greece and the Indian opera. The story of *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* at least recorded in the Tang Dynasty, then the story spread far and widely among the people. To Yuan Dynasty and Ming Dynasty, the story has largely evolved into Chinese drama. In China, the most common edition was written by a famous Chinese modern playwright, Xu Jin. This edition was published by the Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House in 1979.

Literature has been one of the most important means for cultural communication, comparative literature is of great significance for building cultural bridges between different countries and promoting the development of cultural diversity. Through comparison, people find the difference as well as the similarity which further their understanding of their own culture and realize that there are decidedly different ways to interpret different culture. As Yun (2004) points out understanding literature from different cultures is a necessity for the creation of new cultures.

According to Zepetnek (1998), Comparative Literature first appeared in France at the turn of the nineteenth century. Comparative Literature refers to the study of more than one national language and literature, as well as the knowledge and application of other disciplines in and for the study of literature. Comparative Literature could be mainly divided into French school and American school. American Comparative Literature has a very different view than that of the comparative study of French School. Different from the French school, American school focuses on the study of the work itself. Understand the literature of different nations in a comprehensive way, and dig into the literariness, as well as the nature and the law of literature.

This comparative study is focusing on three aspects: theme, character, plot. According to Cohen (1981), "theme is the abstracted intellectual content of a play" (p.29). Love is an ever-lasting theme in world literature. It is love that makes the world full of happiness. *Majnun Layla* and *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* are these kinds of literary works, they both eulogize love. But the death of these two couples of young lovers renders much tragic atmosphere to the two plays.

The theme of praising women is revealed through portraying the female character's good nature and courageous actions. Both *Majnun Layla* and *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* show great sympathy for the women, singing high praise of them. In *Majnun Layla*, Layla also is a beautiful and chaste, intelligent woman. Just like Al-Udhari (2001) describe his admiration for Layla in his book *Classical Poems by Arab Women*: while Majnun celebrated his love for Layla in the most passionate poems in the Arab language, Layla had to bear the burning stings of love's fire silently. Layla's selfcontrol, unlike Majnun's selfpity, is indicative of the Umayyad women's intellectual and moral strength. The female characters in *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* are all positive figures. And Zhu Yingtai the beautiful, kindhearted, and intelligent heroine, is a typical one.

The protagonists in these two famous love tragedies share many similarities. They pursue free love; are faithful to each other and have the courage to die for their love. But they also have some differences. For example, the actions of the two pairs of protagonists are characterized by some different features. In *Majnun Layla*, the protagonists' actions are more decisive and courageous. Majnun did not follow the tribal rules, he publicly and unreservedly pronounces his obsessive passion for Layla, and he takes the risks to go to Layla's home just to express his feeling to her. Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai's actions are relatively appeasable and conservative. Under the great pressure of feudalism, Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai die for their unsuccessful love, but they have no courage to take drastic actions to revolt against feudal society.

A plot is an outline of the events of the story of a play. The plot structure of *Majnun Layla* and *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* share some similarities. For example, the similar development of love between the two pairs of protagonists. They both have a crush on each other. When Zhu Yingtai on her way to Huangzhou she meets with Liang Shanbo and she falls in love with him at first sight. Layla is Majnun's childhood sweetheart, they both from the same tribe of Amir. Though, the two plays share some

similarities in the plot structures they also have differences.

1.3 Statement of the Research Problem

Every nation has its own unique understanding of love and marriage, they both yearning for pure and faithful love in their heart. Every nation has their own example of love than have attracted much attention.

There are many comparative studies about *Romeo and Juliet* compare with *Majnun Layla* and *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* respectively, the findings of these studies show a lot of interesting similarities and differences between the two plays. Some of these studies also analyze the cultural influence on the plays to indicate that most of the differences are due to different cultural backgrounds between East and West. However, it is worth noting that *Majnun Layla* and *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* both come from East culture, maybe through contrast and comparison, this study could discover many similarities base on the traits of eastern culture, for example, perhaps they share the same spirit in portraying the theme of love.

Even *Majnun Layla* and *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* could share many similarities they may still have some differences due to their different cultural backgrounds and different bringing-up environment, these differences may lead us to understand the uniqueness of the nature of a play and its culture. Therefore, the differences in the depth of culture in these two tragedies are worth being explored, moreover, they are direct reflections of culture on its literary works.

1.4 Research Questions

The following research questions are attempted to be answered in this study:

1. What are the similarities and differences between the two plays in the aspect of the theme?
2. What are the similarities and differences between the two plays in the aspect of the character?
3. How are the two plays differ from each other in the aspect of plot structure?

1.5 Objectives of the Study

This study will attempt to:

1. To summarize the similarities and differences between the two plays in the aspect of the theme.
2. To distinguish the similarities and differences between the two plays in the

- aspect of the character.
3. To investigate the similarities and differences between the two plays in the aspect of the plot.

1.6 Significance of the Study

In this thesis, the researcher intends to make a cultural comparison between *Majnun Layla* and *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* from their different cultural background. It is helpful to comprehend the cultural difference between China and the Arab world with parallel studies by comparing the two works. The significance of such a comparative study is that it will facilitate the ever-increasing cultural exchange and enhance a better understanding of dramas from different countries. However, because of the cultural differences between Arab countries and China, a comparative study of the two works deserves even more attention.

1.7 Scope of the Study

Abrams (1988) states that “drama is the literary form designed for performance in the theater, in which actors take roles of the characters, perform the indicated action, and utter the written dialogue” (p.45).

According to Elam (1980), “drama is the specific mode of fiction represented in performance: a play, opera, mime, ballet, etc., performed in a theatre, or on radio or television” (p.98). A play is a dramatic work that usually consists primarily of dialogue between characters.

The legend of *Majnun Layla* and *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* are the two most affecting love stories in Arabic and Chinese culture respectively. Later on, they were recreated by playwrights into tragic plays. They are stand out even more distinctively after they were revised into plays. Out of many versions, the researcher has chosen Ahmad Shawqi’s version of *Majnun Layla* which is written in Arabic, 133 pages long, published by Hindawi company in 2011 and the Xu Jin’s version of *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*, written in Chinese, altogether is 96 pages long, published by Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House in 1979. They are both regarded as the most attractive version in their own culture.

This study's data would be divided into two categories: The first was primary data derived from the play itself, *Majnun Layla* and *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*, and the second was the secondary data that consisted of data from the study belongs to other researchers, data on *Majnun Layla* and *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*, the theory on the play, the theory on methodology and the theory on comparative literature.

According to Indah (2004), “the theme, the character and the plot as the intrinsic elements are related to each other and cannot be separated in order to make the good unity of the story” (p.5). A good creation of those elements will assist the playwright in transferring what he is going to say, revealing the issue that he wants to share, which is a central idea of the play. According to Stallknecht and Frenz (1961), “a comparative literature study does not have to be comparative on every page nor even in every chapter, but the overall intent, emphasis must be comparative” (p.14). Therefore, in order to focus on discovering the deeper idea of two plays from a relative fuller vision, allowing later comparisons and contrasts to be made, this study will be centered on these three intrinsic elements of the two plays: theme, character, plot.

1.8 Definitions of Terms

Tragedy:

Tragedy is a type of drama that is based on human suffering; it frequently depicts a conflict between the main characters and a superior force, with a sorrowful ending that arouses fear and pity.

Play:

Play is a work of drama, a literary form of writing for theatre which can be seen at a stage or on television, usually consisting mostly of dialogue between characters. The playwrights present their emotions, feelings, and ideas through their characters and make them speak.

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