

INTERPRETATION OF “MOSES ON THE PLAIN” FROM AN EXISTENTIALIST PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This article conducts an in - depth analysis of Shuang Xuetao's novel “Moses on the Plain” from an existentialist perspective. Through a metaphorical exploration of the self - redemption of the protagonist Fu Dongxin, an examination of the interweaving of personal crises and social reflections embodied by Li Shoulian, and a depiction of the generational differences and conflicts between the fathers' and sons' generations, it reveals the multi - faceted nature of humanity, the fateful choices, and the path of self - redemption of the characters in the absurd world within the work. It offers a new perspective for understanding this work and prompts in - depth reflection on the characters' fates and living conditions during the era of change.

Keywords: "Moses on the Plain"; Existentialism; Self-redemption; Alienation of human nature; Intergenerational Relationship.

1. INTRODUCTION

As one of Shuang Xuetao's representative works, “Moses on the Plain” has garnered extensive attention and acclaim since its publication, thanks to its unique narrative style, profound social insight, and rich literary connotations. By delving into personal memories, the novel takes us back to the scene of people's lives during China's social system transformation in the 1990s. Employing suspenseful storytelling as a means, it explores multiple themes, including individual existence, moral choices, social responsibility, and historical memory.

Existentialism, a philosophical movement that focuses on the essence and meaning of individual existence, offers a distinctive and perceptive lens through which to interpret literary works. It emphasizes that individuals create meaning through free choices and actions in a seemingly meaningless world. At the same time, it exposes the predicaments such as anxiety, loneliness, and alienation that individuals encounter in an absurd world. This article aims to conduct an in-depth interpretation of “Moses on the Plain” from an existentialist perspective, hoping to reveal the unique charm of the work in terms of philosophical implications and contemporary characteristics.

2. MOSES: A METAPHOR FOR SELF-REDEMPTION

According to the accounts in the Bible, Moses, the greatest prophet and leader of the Israelite nation, has a glorious and sacred image. In the classic books of the Old Testament, such as Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, Moses followed God's guidance, leading the Israelites to break free from the yoke of Egyptian slavery and head towards the "land flowing with milk and honey". Empowered by God, he performed miracles, promulgated laws to regulate the people's conduct, patiently taught and sternly admonished the Israelites, and waged wars against foreign nations, demonstrating extraordinary leadership skills and unwavering faith. [] Therefore, in the

Christian perception, Moses is an exemplary model of piety, obedience, humility, and kindness. He is a faithful servant of God, coming into the world as a savior to rescue the Israelite nation from great distress.

Although Shuang Xuetao's "Moses on the Plain" doesn't directly adopt the story prototype of "Exodus", the title of the novel has sparked a great deal of speculation among readers and the academic community, plunging everyone into in - depth thinking and lively discussions about "Who is Moses?" Many characters, such as Li Fei, Zhuang Shu, Li Shoulian, and Fu Dongxin, have been evaluated against the Moses reference. However, from the perspective of the savior, Fu Dongxin fits the image of Moses more closely. In the novel, Fu Dongxin influences the people around her in a unique way. Her guidance and inspiration for Li Fei convey faith and courage. Just as Moses led the Israelites in search of hope, she gives Li Fei spiritual strength, demonstrating certain qualities of a savior. In the novel, Fu Dongxin finds herself in a difficult situation and is struggling. While saving Li Fei, isn't she also saving herself ?

Existentialism emphasizes the absurdity of the world and the individual's free choice and sense of responsibility within it. In the world created in "Moses on the Plain", Fu Dongxin's experiences profoundly embody this existential situation. She grew up in an intellectual family. During that particular era, the education and cultural influence she received gave her a unique temperament and set of values. She was fond of reading and painting and had a deep - seated interest in art and knowledge. This cultural refinement created a certain spiritual gap between her and the surrounding environment. While working in the factory, she stood out among the workers and often secluded herself in the shadows of a factory corner, lost in her own literary and artistic realm. Her breakfast is toast with jam, and she even makes her own coffee. These little details of her daily life reflect her petit - bourgeois charm, which is a silent way for her to uphold her self - identity.

Fu Dongxin's marriage was a significant turning point in her life. Her union with Zhuang Dezeng was highly dramatic. She entrusted her lifelong happiness to Zhuang Dezeng because of a fable in "A Hunter's Sketches". Zhuang Dezeng was a man with great differences from her in temperament and values. He was crude, worldly, and practical. In the novel, after getting married, Fu Dongxin found out that Zhuang Dezeng was the one who had harmed her father's friend during the turbulent times. This truth was like a thunderbolt, throwing her into inner turmoil and pain. She struggled in the rift between the past and the present. Unable to break free from the shackles of her real - life marriage and hard to let go of the historical wounds, this sense of helplessness filled her heart with contradictions and agony.

In family life, Fu Dongxin's absence has become the norm. Although she is physically in the family, she seems to be spiritually detached from it. She lacks active involvement in the growth of her son, Zhuang Shu. This absence stems not only from her resistance to Zhuang Dezeng but also from the stagnation of her sense of history. She has never been able to get over the historical upheavals of the 1970s. The past traumas hang over her like a shadow, making it hard for her to fully immerse herself in the current family life. Her resistance and rejection of the external environment are a way to protect her self - identity and spiritual world. She tries to hold on to the pure land in her heart in the chaotic reality.[]

In the midst of pain and struggle, Fu Dongxin never gave up her pursuit of the spiritual world. She shared her understanding of art and beauty with Li Fei. By recounting the story of Moses from "Exodus", she imparted the power of faith and courage to Li Fei. The tale of Moses leading his people out of adversity became the beacon of hope in their hearts. Fu Dongxin told Li Fei that as

long as one's faith remains steadfast, one can overcome difficulties. This sharing of faith is also a means of self - redemption for her. In her interactions with Li Fei, she was not only guiding Li Fei but also seeking her own inner strength. She expressed her innermost emotions through artistic creation. For instance, the design she painted on the "Plain" cigarette case revealed her profound longing for a better life. Although life is full of hardships, she has found solace in the spiritual realm. This unwavering commitment to spiritual pursuits allows her to constantly explore the path of self - redemption in difficult circumstances.

Fu Dongxin's image demonstrates an individual's commitment to self-identity and pursuit of the spiritual world amidst historical traumas and real-life dilemmas. Her inner turmoil, pain, and efforts for self-redemption render her a character of profound depth and rich connotation. Her experiences mirror the impact of the era's transformation on individuals and the arduous journey of individuals in search of self-worth and meaning in adversity. From an existentialist viewpoint, Fu Dongxin's story exposes the survival condition of people in an absurd world. Her choices and actions reflect the contemplation of freedom and responsibility. When confronted with the weight of history and the helplessness of reality, she refuses to yield. Instead, through her spiritual steadfastness and influence on others, she endeavors to achieve self-redemption. This process is fraught with challenges and hardships, and it also showcases the resilience and splendor of human nature.

3. THE COMPLEXITY OF HUMAN NATURE: SOCIAL REFLECTIONS ON PERSONAL CRISES

Existentialism holds that existence precedes essence. Sartre once pointed out, "There is no universal moral code to tell you what you should do." []The character of Li Shoulian demonstrates the complexity of human nature. In "Moses on the Plain", Li Shoulian serves as a mirror, reflecting the complex and multi - faceted nature of laid - off workers during the social transformation period and the severe personal crises they encounter. His life path profoundly reveals the significant impact of social factors on individuals, along with the struggle, transformation, and helplessness of human nature in difficult circumstances. Existentialism emphasizes an individual's free will and choices, as well as the corresponding responsibilities. As Sartre put it, "Man is free, but freedom has its limits." In the pursuit of self - realization, Li Shoulian inevitably experiences loneliness and alienation, which precisely represents the conflict between the individual and society, and the individual and themselves in existentialism.

Li Shoulian was once a highly respected fitter in the factory. His excellent craftsmanship and dedicated attitude were clear indicators of his self - worth. However, the tide of the times swept in mercilessly. The factory's restructuring was like a sudden storm that instantly knocked him off his stable job and threw him into the abyss at the bottom of society. This rapid social change was nothing short of a catastrophic disaster for him. His social status and economic situation took a nosedive. He went from being a skilled and respected technical expert to a low - level worker struggling to make ends meet. This huge disparity in his identity plunged him into an unprecedented predicament. The burden of survival was like an invisible mountain, weighing so heavily on him that he could hardly breathe.

Li Shoulian's criminal acts were not impulsive and accidental but gradually developed under the influence of a series of social injustice events. His daughter, Li Fei, was involved in a serious car accident due to the misjudgment of police officer Jiang Bufan. This incident became the fuse that led him down the path of crime. Driven by his deep love for his daughter and intense anger at the

injustice, he attacked Jiang Bufan with a brick in the grip of his emotions. This act was a concentrated outburst of his instinctive desire for justice and his urge to protect his family. Later, he also killed two urban management officers because of their violent law - enforcement actions. Against the backdrop of the society at that time, laid - off workers were troubled by numerous social problems. The intensification of social stratification and the huge economic gap gave them a strong sense of "relative deprivation". As one of them, Li Shoulian deeply felt the unfair treatment from society. To some extent, his criminal act was an extreme form of resistance against this unfairness and a desperate attempt for him to seek justice and dignity in difficult circumstances.

From his conversations with Zhuang Dezeng around the turn of the millennium, we can get a glimpse into the turmoil deep in his heart and his profound discontent with society. His words are rife with criticism of the money - worshiping concept and his resentment over his low social status. Phrases such as "Oh, money is your real father" and "I'm a taxi driver, not your lackey" are like sharp daggers, cutting straight to the flaws of social reality. He likens himself to a dolphin cornered, vividly portraying his desperate state of mind as he battles to stay afloat in dire straits. He holds the view that the social reform has resulted in a severe imbalance in resource allocation and that his interests have been callously stripped away. This discontent, like a raging undercurrent, has been steadily building up in his heart, ultimately propelling him down the irreversible road to crime.

Apart from the murder motive stemming from the uneven distribution of social resources, the psychological transformation of Li Shoulian during the criminal process is also thought-provoking. From a crime of passion to a premeditated one, from seeking revenge to self - preservation, this change profoundly reflects that he gradually lost confidence in life and hope for the future when in difficulties. His third criminal attempt, which involved giving his daughter Li Fei a gun and hinting that she should take action against Zhuang Shu when absolutely necessary, was not carried out. However, the mere thought of it was enough to show that he had fallen into the quagmire of extreme individualism and egoism. He attempted to protect his daughter in such an extreme way, completely disregarding the constraints of morality and law. This transformation is a manifestation of the serious distortion of his humanity under social pressure. He gradually degenerated from an originally kind and honest laborer into a man full of hatred and despair. This process is fraught with helplessness and sorrow.

Li Shoulian's image is a microcosm of the fate of laid-off workers during the period of social transformation. His experiences profoundly reflect the dilemmas and challenges this group faces. The wave of lay-offs was like a raging flood that mercilessly washed away their once-stable lives, plunging them into a double whirlpool of economic hardship and psychological crisis. In the drastic restructuring of the social fabric, they became a vulnerable group, and the pressure of survival and the loss of dignity became the norm in their lives. Facing this harsh reality, some people chose to endure in silence, while Li Shoulian expressed his dissatisfaction and resistance in an extreme way. Although his actions are not advisable, they prompt us to reflect deeply on social fairness and justice, as well as to think thoroughly about how individuals can uphold human dignity and moral bottom lines during social transformation.

From an existentialist perspective, Li Shoulian's actions reflect an individual's longing for freedom and confusion about responsibility in difficult situations. Under the dual pressure of social constraints and life hardships, he chose to commit crimes as a coping mechanism, which represents an extreme pursuit of freedom on his part. Nevertheless, he must also bear the corresponding

consequences for his actions. His story reveals the complexity and variability of human nature in extreme circumstances, encompassing both a steadfast pursuit of justice and a sense of revenge against society.

4. GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES: THE SILENCE OF THE PARENTAL GENERATION AND THE BEWILDERMENT OF THE YOUNGER GENERATION

Existentialism emphasizes the unique experiences and choices of individuals within specific historical and social contexts. Generational differences are precisely the concrete manifestations of such experiences and choices in different historical settings. In "Moses on the Plain," the fathers' generation and the sons' generation grew up in vastly different social environments. This has led them to develop distinct values and behavioral patterns when dealing with the world, which in turn has given rise to a generational gap. The fathers' generation went through the relative stability of the planned - economy era and was influenced by collectivism, whereas the sons' generation grew up in a period of a booming market economy and social diversification. This significant difference in the historical backdrop has shaped their diverse perceptions of the world and determined their different responses when confronted with life's challenges, reflecting the diversity of individuals' ways of existence in different historical situations.

4.1. The Silence of the Father Generation: Helplessness and Escape under the Burden of History

The representative figures of the previous generation, Zhuang Dezeng, Li Shoulian, and Fu Dongxin, are as silent as a bottomless lake, with complex and profound emotions hidden beneath the surface. Zhuang Dezeng underwent a significant transformation in his identity during the wave of social change. He went from being the head of the supply and marketing department of a state-owned factory to becoming the director of a privately contracted enterprise. This transformation seemingly made him a lucky one in the era, but deep down, he was filled with confusion and doubt about his success. He was well aware that he might have exploited some unfair phenomena during the period of social change while accumulating wealth. This inner conflict led him to choose silence when facing his past and his children. He was like a lamb lost in the darkness, not knowing how to explain all this to the next generation. He was afraid of the moral condemnation his past actions might incur and even more worried that his success would set a bad example for his children. Thus, he could only keep the secrets to himself.

Fu Dongxin grew up in an intellectual family, with a rich and unique spiritual world. However, her marriage to Zhuang Dezeng landed her in a living environment that went against her values. At home, she failed to find spiritual resonance with Zhuang Dezeng. Moreover, the historical feud between Zhuang Dezeng and her family plunged her into pain and struggle. She couldn't fit into the real - life marriage and couldn't get over the past traumas. This contradiction led her to isolate herself in her spiritual world, appearing spiritually detached in the family. Her neglect of her son Zhuang Shu's growth doesn't result from a lack of maternal love, but from her being trapped in a spiritual quagmire. She is lost in the conflict between the past and the present. The shadows of the past haunt her, making it hard for her to fully immerse herself in the current family life. Her silence serves as a means of self - protection against inner pain and a helpless evasion from the unchangeable reality. Amid the wave of the era's transformation, she is carried along by the historical current. Owing to her personal experiences, she slips into silence. This also mirrors her passive approach when confronted with life's hardships and the pressure of historical changes, and

reflects the confusion and helplessness of an individual in the face of the absurd world in existentialism.

Li Shoulian's silence is a profound manifestation of loss and helplessness in the context of social change. After being laid off, he is like a solitary boat adrift, struggling desperately at the bottom of society. The once-respected status of a fitter has instantly crumbled. The wave of the market economy has mercilessly cast him to the margins of life. He is extremely frustrated and desperate about his current situation. This sense of powerlessness is like an invisible rope, tightly binding his soul. When facing his daughter Li Fei, he can't offer her positive guidance and support because he himself is deeply stuck in the quagmire of life and can't get out. His silence is a silent protest against the unfairness of fate and also a helpless acceptance of social reality. He has witnessed all sorts of drawbacks in society, but he can't find an appropriate way to express his anger. He can only bury his pain and resentment deep in his heart and bear the heavy burden of life alone.

4.2. The confusion of the first-generation offspring: The loss of freedom and responsibility

In the process of growing up, Zhuang Shu and Li Fei of the first generation are like travelers wandering in the fog, facing numerous difficulties and deeply confused. Zhuang Shu's childhood was overshadowed by family disharmony. The tense relationship between his parents and his mother Fu Dongxin's emotional distance left him feeling insecure inside. As he grew older, he gradually became aware of an insurmountable gap between himself and his family as well as society. He was utterly perplexed by his father Zhuang Dezeng's actions and values and couldn't comprehend the various means his father employed in the pursuit of wealth. He yearned for his mother's love and attention, but Fu Dongxin's mental detachment made it impossible for him to find a warm refuge in the family. The influence of such a family environment led him astray on his journey of growth, much like a disoriented little bird fluttering about aimlessly. He attempted to seek the answers to life through his own endeavors, yet reality struck him with heavy blows time and again. After becoming a police officer, his tenacious pursuit of cases is not merely a quest for the truth but also a arduous exploration for him to discover his self - worth and the meaning of life in a bewildering world. When confronted with the complex and ever - changing social reality and troublesome family issues, he often feels lost and has no idea how to carve out his own niche in this intricate world.

Li Fei's confusion is closely linked to her family tragedy and personal experiences. Her father Li Shoulian's criminal acts and the subsequent family upheaval are like a ruthless blade, severing her once beautiful life. She lost a leg, which is not only a physical impairment but also a wound that is hard to heal in her heart. She has endured social discrimination and the heavy burden of life during her growth, and is filled with fear and uncertainty about her future. She has conflicting emotions towards her father's actions. On the one hand, she understands that her father resorted to crime out of love for her; on the other hand, she also knows that his actions are illegal. These conflicting emotions clash violently within her, leaving her deeply torn. Her faith in the story of Moses was the last glimmer of hope she clung to in the dark and dire situation, but the cruel reality mercilessly shattered her beliefs time and time again. When she reunited with Zhuang Shu, her heart was filled with a complex mix of emotions. There was a yearning for the innocent friendship of the past and a dread of the uncertainties of the future. She didn't know if she could truly break free from the shadows of the past and embrace life anew. Like a blind person fumbling through the darkness, she couldn't find her way forward.

4.3. The Breakdown and Impact of Intergenerational Communication

This generational gap makes the communication between parents and children seem like two parallel lines that hardly ever intersect. The silence of the parental generation keeps the younger generation from getting a glimpse into their inner world and past experiences. As they grow up, the younger generation is like a traveler groping forward alone in the dark, lacking the passing - down of experience and emotional support from their parents. They can only rely on their own inexperienced shoulders to bear the heavy burden of life and struggle to explore in confusion and bewilderment, which makes them more vulnerable and helpless when facing the challenges of life.[]Zhuang Shu's ignorance of his family history during his growth made his quest for the truth fraught with hardships and setbacks. He is like an explorer lost in a maze, trying to lift the veil on the past by himself. However, lacking his parents' guidance, he often finds himself trapped in difficult situations and unable to break free. When Li Fei faced the family upheaval, she also couldn't get effective comfort and support from her father. She could only bury her pain and sorrow deep in her heart, which further weighed on her and made her more vulnerable.

Generational differences also profoundly reflect the unique impact of historical changes on different generations. The parental generation experienced the significant transformation from a planned economy to a market economy. In this historical process, they were like ships sailing through rough waves, facing a rapid shift in identity and a strong impact on their values. Some of them lost their previous status and dignity in the wave of social change, while others seized opportunities under the new economic system. Regardless of whether they succeeded or failed, they all deeply felt the immense pressure and confusion during this process. The younger generation grew up in an era when the market economy was booming. They are in a more diverse and ever - changing social environment, facing a wide variety of value choices. While enjoying more freedom and opportunities, they also face more intense competitive pressure and unpredictable uncertainties. On their journey to pursue personal dreams, they often encounter numerous obstacles from multiple sources, including family and society. This leaves them more lost and confused, like a lone boat adrift in the vast ocean, unable to find the guiding lighthouse.

From an existentialist perspective, the generational gap between the parental generation and the younger generation reflects the diversity of human survival dilemmas and free choices in different historical periods. The parental generation made their own choices in the torrent of historical change, but their choices were often severely constrained by historical and social contexts. Their silence is a helpless response to this predicament, a manifestation of being forced to accept the dictates of fate under the heavy pressure of the times.

The younger generation enjoys more freedom as they grow up, but this freedom is also a double - edged sword, bringing more responsibilities and confusions. They need to find their own way and make their own choices independently in the complex and ever - changing social environment. Their confusion reflects the inner anxiety and unease when confronted with infinite possibilities, along with the fear of freedom and the avoidance of responsibility. The presence of such generational differences makes the relationships among the characters in the work complex, like a tapestry woven with contradictions and struggles, which profoundly reflects the far - reaching impact of the era's transformation on individual fates.

It reveals how people of different generations strive and explore courageously in their respective circumstances throughout the long course of history, as well as the numerous hardships and obstacles they encounter on the journey of pursuing self - redemption and the meaning of life.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Through an existentialist perspective to interpret “Moses on the Plain”, we can clearly see that the characters' life trajectories in the work profoundly embody the core ideas of existentialism. Fu Dongxin attempts to achieve self - redemption through free choice in the face of difficulties. Her story showcases an individual's perseverance in the spiritual realm and the pursuit of meaning in an absurd world. Li Shoulian's experiences expose the alienation of human nature caused by social change and an individual's struggle and resistance in difficult circumstances, which prompts us to think deeply about social fairness and the value of individual existence. The silence and confusion in inter - generational relationships reflect the existential states and communication challenges of different generations during social change, highlighting the complex situations individuals encounter in the historical process. This work is not just a portrayal of people's lives in a specific historical context, but also a profound insight into the universal human state. It urges us to reflect on how individuals can preserve human dignity during social transformations, how to find a balance between free will and social responsibility, and how to transmit positive values across generations.

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