

Representation of Narrative, Time and Space in the Writings of Kim Thúy

Tanuja Yadav, Deepak Sharma

Article Info	Abstract
Article History Received: April 11, 2021 Accepted: November 14, 2021 Keywords : Narrative, Memory, Time, Space, Identity, Autobiographical Fiction DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.5700822	<i>The migrant writings bring forth the variety of narrative styles to interpret their experiences of immigration in the new land. The life and culture of this new land develop the creativity among the migrant writers that leads towards the dissociation of the feelings of their distorted identity and memories of the past life in order to facilitate their assimilation in the host country. This paper posits the reconstruction of the past in the present life through the memory narrative. The reconstructed past develops the confidence among the migrants to face the hardships in the host land. The third space is created due to the intermingling of the past memories in the present life. The paper explores the narrative technique used in the first novel "Ru" written by Kim Thúy, a Canadian Vietnamese writer. This autobiographical fiction has drawn a realistic view of the life of refugee and the Boat people who fled from Vietnam to save their lives from the Communist warriors. There is a deep relation between the narrative, time and space which enhances the reconstruction of the identity of the protagonist of the novel. Each space has its own significance within that particular time. The narration floats from the palatial residence in Saigon, the life at Boat and then arrival in the refugee camp in Malaysia and at the end the final destination, Quebec, Canada, all these spaces evoke the feeling for the search for oneself. The narrative structure reflects the impact of the Vietnam war on the past and present life of the narrator. The life story narrative of the Boat people portrays the remembrance of the traumatic moments of historical Vietnam War. The non-linear broken narrative decodes the flow of multiple thoughts and memories. The spatio-temporal narrative unravels each and every moment of the life of the protagonist from being the child of Vietnam to the refugee in Malaysia camp and then the migrant in Quebec. The paper analyses the support of the spatio-temporal narrative in the autobiographical fiction of Kim Thuy to unveil the reality of the sufferings of the refugee from Vietnam to refugee camp and then in Quebec, Canada.</i>

Introduction

Kim Thúy, a migrant writer of Vietnamese origin, depicted the memories of her past life in her fictions. She came to Quebec in Canada as a refugee with her family in order to escape the Communist rule. At the time of her arrival in Quebec, she was only ten years old. But the memory of the childhood: the traumatic memory of the Vietnam war was so strong that she painted minutely each and every moment of her life in Vietnam as well as with the Boat people. The portrayal of the moments spent with the Boat people traumatized the memory of Kim Thúy. The lively portrayal of the days spent with the Boat people lays the profound impact on the readers as well as it defines the past and present history of the refugees. The pictorial quality of the narration of the life of refugees on boat stems from the suffering of the narrator as she has been the witness to all that happened to the refugees on the boat. The true war narrative can only be sketched when one has lived it or one is the victim of the war. The memory binds that space and time of the trauma lived by the narrator. Memory unfolded all the experiences to the community of the host country so that the assimilation of the refugees become more convenient in the host country.

REPRESENTATION OF NARRATIVE, TIME AND SPACE IN THE NOVEL "Ru"

The spatio-temporal narrative in the novel reflects the early life experiences of the narrator, at the age of ten years, in Vietnam, the homeland and Quebec, the host land. The novel begins during the 1968 Tet Offensive when the people from South Vietnam has started fleeing from South Vietnam. Writing the novel is one of the way employed by Thúy to communicate with the people of the host country and make them understand the life of the refugees. Thúy's first autobiographical fiction "Ru" was first published in French language in 2009 and later it was translated in English by Sheila Fischman in 2012. The title "Ru" means stream or flow of money, tears, or blood but the meaning of Ru in Vietnamese is cradle. This novel is an autobiographical narrative. She

has painted her life of childhood in Saigon, their experiences in Refugee camp in Malaysia and then their arrival in Quebec. The depiction of the life of refugees at boat with the Boat people is heart-shaking. The narration of the days spent by the Boat people surviving on the biscuits soaked in motor oil highlights the sufferings of the Vietnamese on boat. The representation of suffering of the refugees in the refugee camp arouse the feeling of pity from the readers. As Thúy has lived and experienced the life with the refugees from Vietnam, her narration reflects the subjectivity through the protagonist of the novel. These remembrances of the past life are the base of the construction of the identity in the host country. Herbert Hirsch writes:

“As an individual reconstructs his or her biography through memory, that biography becomes the basis for identity”. [1]

Although the understanding and speaking the French language of the host country was the primary hindrance for the protagonist to resettle herself in a foreign space, Quebec. Thúy has used her knowledge of French language, acquired in Quebec, for writing her experiences of the war and the time spent in the refugee camp in her novels. The narrative of the precarity of the refugee camp demonstrates the helpless condition of the refugees where they do not even know about what will happen the next minute. Her memorial spaces have created a pathway to depict the mirror image of the experiences of the time spent by the boat people after their flee from Vietnam. Thúy has portrayed her own life through the protagonist of the novel: An Tinh Nguyen. The narration of the past and present life of the female protagonist reflects the place and the role of the women at different places during the Vietnam War and the migration and the resettlement in Quebec.

“We often forget about the existence of all those women who carried Vietnam on their backs while their husbands and sons carried weapons on theirs.” [38][2]

This paper posits the narrative of the novel through the time and space that emphasizes the uniqueness of the memory displayed through words the journey of protagonist from Vietnam to Quebec.

Thúy has used the fragmented phrases as well as the chapters of the novel which are hardly one page long. This demonstrates the authenticity of the representation of the memories in words. The fragmented broken phrases in the chunks of text reflect the non-linear and non-chronological functioning of the memory. The economical prose style is very effective in portraying her memories for the traumatic past and symbolize the short life of the past events which opens the new path for their future. Thúy sketches the journey of her life through the narrative in two parts : one through the memories of the past life: the childhood memories in Saigon, war memories, refugee memories and Boat people memories while the second part depicts the life of the refugees in the host country and their hope for the successful life through the American Dream.

Tim Woods and Peter Middleton states that,

“Memory is a means of overcoming the limitations of the human condition as it is understood in contemporary culture, by making the past appear once again in the present, despite its temporal, and possibly spatial distance”. [3]

The exact portrayal of the memories of war demonstrates as if Thúy is once again living the time of war. It is not only the author, but the readers also see and live the war through the lens of the narrator and develops the feeling of fear, trauma, sympathy. The narrative of the life of refugees due to the war develops the feeling of sympathy among the readers. As has been stated by Radstone and Schwarz, that memories serve

“the possibility to reconstitute the selfhood and fashion a public, political language, in which experiences of trauma and others like them can be communicated to others”. [4]

The protagonist An Tinh could not forget her belonging to the roots of her origin, her homeland, Vietnam. The distortion of the identity of the protagonist influences her to remember her past. As a result, she went back to Vietnam on an extended business trip. Her successful life in Quebec has given her the strong and healthy personality. The gap of the time and space has given her the different identity (the physical identity) that neither belongs to Vietnam nor to Quebec. Her physical traits resemble to the Vietnamese but the richer, confident and healthy look refer to the American Dream. As the waiter of the restaurant in Vietnam said to the protagonist when she came back to Vietnam,

“...that I no longer had the right to declare I was Vietnamese because I no longer had their fragility, their uncertainty, their fears”. [p.70][5]

The brief passages of the novel unfold the good and the bad moments of life from childhood to adulthood, from Saigon to Quebec. It unravels the events from the history that forces the Vietnamese to leave their country towards an unknown path. The narration of non-chronological vignettes intermingles the past and the present. The narration of the personal memory through the protagonist of the novel helps in the negotiation of the identity in the foreign land. The memory narrative of the novel reflects the reconstruction of the past and the construction of selfhood. It connects the history with its major event through war narrative in space and time. Lowenthal writes,

“Those who bring more of their past into their present thereby both confirm their own identity and enrich the present with the past’s amplified residues”. [6]

The fragmented narrative style of the narrator depicts the self-reflexivity of the past and she represented her own experience of life and history. It also demonstrates the struggle of the individual and the refugees from Vietnam

as a whole, for their existence, expression and identity. The identity of the protagonist is constructed by linking the life at two spaces in different time; one in Vietnam and the other in Quebec. Through the narrative of the space and time that does not completely belong to Thúy, she tries to take the refuge in the writing for the traumatic moments in order to fix her identity. The refugees find themselves in the liminal position due to their partial possession of the culture of the homeland and the host land. Michael Dillon states that

“the refugee is a figure of the ‘inter’- or the *in-between* of the human way of being”. [7]

CONCLUSION

The narrative of the story of ‘Ru’ encourages the readers to live the life with courage and move forward toward the happy future. It stimulates the migrants for the resettlement and progress. Thúy unfolds the history of the war in Vietnam through her spatio-temporal narrative of the autobiographical fiction. This narrative technique enables her to understand the past and accept the present life and reconstruct the identity through her memories and narrative. The relation of the time and spaces in the novel demonstrates the varied emotions and sufferings of the protagonist. The change in the space and time gives rise to the search of identity by the protagonist for being the self in the host land. The arrival of the refugees in Quebec also focuses on the realization of their own culture that differs from the culture of the foreign land. The spatio-temporal narrative emphasizes on the differences in the culture of the homeland and the host land that results into the construction of the third space for the refugees. It also helps the narrator to construct one’s own identity and the relationship with the new place. The past survives in the present through the narrative style and the present always has the impact of the past in the life of the refugees. Thúy has always tried to reconstruct the past history of her life Vietnam through her memories and narrative. She tried to bring together the two different spaces of the past and the present through the dissociation of the memories in the distinct narrative form. The inclusion of the spatial and temporal dimensions in the autobiographical narrative has given the voice to the silence of the refugees who have lived and shared the history and the life of the boat people.

References

- Middleton, Peter and Tim Woods. *Literatures of Memory*. Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 2000. Print. 2.
- Radstone, Susannah, and Bill Schwarz, eds. *Memory: History, Theories, Debates*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2010. Print.
- Dillon, Michael. “The Scandal of the Refugee: Some Reflections on the ‘Inter’ of International Relations and Continental Thought.” *Moral Spaces: Rethinking Ethics and World Politics*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. 92-124. Print.
- Hirsch, Herbert. *Genocide and The Politics of Memory*. London: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1995. Print. 133.
- Lowenthal, David. *The Past is a Foreign Country*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985. Print. 91.
- Thúy, Kim. *Ru*. Translated by Sheila Fischman. Toronto: Random House Canada, 2012. Print. 123.

Author Information

Tanuja Yadav

Associate Professor, Manipal University Jaipur,
Jaipur, India

Deepak Sharma

Research Scholar, Manipal University Jaipur, Jaipur,
India
