

Analysis of the Theme of "Escape" in *Bone* from the Perspective of Narrative Time

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Abstract. Chinese American writer Fae Myenne Ng's debut novel, *Bone*, adopts a unique narrative style to embody a Chinese American family's choice of "escape" from Chinatown in mental or physical way. This paper studies the theme of "escape" from the perspective of Genette's narrative time, and analyzes how the designed narrative structure reflects the theme of "escape". On narrative order, the author constructs the story through the inverted memory of the character Leila, creating a sense from distance to proximity that bespeaks the theme of "escape". On narrative duration, the author uses the skills of summary, scene, and pause to present different forms of "escapes" of the two generations of Chinese Americans; on narrative frequency, the author focuses on repeating the death of Ona, which is the epitome of the whole family's "escape". By organizing such narrative structure, the pain and bewilderment of Chinese American "escapes" from Chinatown are reinforced.

Keywords: *Bone*; Fae Myenne Ng; Narrative time; Escape.

1. Introduction

"Escape" is a recurring theme in Chinatown-based Chinese-American novels. The exterior pressure from the American mainstream culture and the interior pressure from the castrated and backward Chinese traditional culture mingle together, creating an enormous heaviness on Chinese Americans. Under the circumstances, Chinese descendants, oppressed by the pressure of ethnic groups and families in Chinatown, always develop a propensity to "escape from Chinatown" and to find their own "land of hope" outside Chinatown (Pu 48), which is particularly conspicuous in Chinese American writer Fae Myenne Ng's debut novel *Bone* with a unique narrative time structure.

Previous researches on the theme of "escape" in *Bone* typically focus on text analysis, whilst few can illustrate how such a theme interrelates with the narrative time structure of the novel. Therefore, this paper studies the theme of "escape" from the perspective of narrative time and dissects how the theme of "escape" in *Bone* performs in light of Genette's narrative order, narrative duration, and narrative frequency.

2. "Peeling the Onion": The Insufferable Bitterness of Memory

The narrative order can be interpreted as the relation of chronology between story and text. The former refers to the natural time sequence of the story being told, while the latter is the sequence of the narrated text designed according to the author's aesthetic intention, which usually disrupts the natural time sequence of the story purposefully, spawning multiple types of anachronies (Genette 1980: 30).

On the whole, *Bone* mainly adopts analepsis throughout the narration of the text, creating an atmosphere similar to the process of peeling an onion. In the novel, Ona's death is the center of the whole story which Leila's reminiscence and conversations hint at from time to time. For Leila, the death of Ona is destructing, undermining every aspect of her family and she wants to escape from both that pain and where that pain is rooted: "I wasn't ready to say goodbye to Ona. None of us were ready. Ona was dead before we had a chance to save her. We hadn't had time to catch up. To let go, I know we had to let our memories out" (129). Therefore, to embody Leila's "escape" from both the lacerating fact and the Chinatown that causes Ona's death, Ng elaborates the sequence of Leila's memory by arranging the narrative order mainly in analepsis. The narrated text begins from the period somewhat long after Ona's death, then gradually back to the period when Ona had just committed

suicide. By adopting such a narrative order, Ng makes the narration reach the heart of the “onion”, the death of Ona, before “peeling away” the mist of sorrow and anguish. The whole narration is just like the process of “onion peeling” that draws increasingly bitter tears as the “peeling” continues.

Hence, Leila, as the narrator who is “caught between traditional Chinese female submissiveness and middle class American individualism” (Gee 130), shows her “escape” through the inverted order of her narration about Ona’s death, where she “observes Chinatown with a distant and repellent eye, acting as an outsider and making moral judgments on Chinatown” (Wang and Zheng 115). The shunning and elusion of Ona’s death deep down within Leila’s mind are displayed structurally, which is an emblem of Leila’s “escape” from Chinatown in consciousness. Under the guidance of Leila, readers move back and forth between the past, present and future, “gradually experiencing the painful memories the characters experience” (Dong 43).

But clearly, Ona’s death is not the appropriate way to escape from all the worldly matters. It only leaves a trail of painful memories for her family, among whom Leila struggles the most. On the one hand, she is trapped in the suffering: “I didn't want to throw anything of Ona's away; I wasn't ready to go through it. Even looking at Ona's handwriting upset me. I didn't want to find anything that might tell me why she jumped” (126). On the other hand, she has to soothe and help her parents recover from the disaster “while makes up her mind to escape from Chinatown with her husband to start a new life in a wider world” (Lu 48). Such dilemma of “escape” also reveals itself in Leila’s avoidance and reluctance of directly describing Ona’s death and embodies in the peeling-onion-like narration order. Although she can’t totally accept the reality and believes “someone stole Ona. Ona hadn't wanted to go”(121), she has to find a way out of these clouds of sadness.

Although Leila is unwilling to “peel the onion”, she has to face up to the harsh reality, just as the reversed narration will eventually get to the very point, Ona’s death. Therefore, the elaborated order of narration also hints at the truth that new generation of Chinese Americans can physically escape from Chinatown, but can never find their “land of hope” outside Chinatown due to “racial prejudice and discriminatory discourse that capture the young generation, making them the victim of American racism”(Pu and Rao 26). The reversed order can not change the fact of Ona’s death, just as Leila’s escape can not change her part of Chinese identity. Flowing in Leila’s blood is the memory of Chinese elements from which she can never escape, and Leila admits it straightforwardly:

Mason's right. I never forget. I'm the stepdaughter of a paper son and I've inherited this whole suitcase of lies. All of it is mine. All I have are. those memories, and I want to remember them all.(61)

3. Different Choices, Same Adversity: The Unbearable Lightness of Being

Duration refers to the relations between the time the events are supposed to have taken to occur and the amount of the text devoted to their narration in the novel (Genette 1980: 30). In *Bone*, summary, scene, and pause are adopted to detail the different “escapes” of Leila’s family.

To begin with, “escapes” belong not only to the second generation of Chinese Americans. Mother Dulcie and Father Leon also have their own way to escape from the oppressive Chinatown. For Chinese Americans, Chinatown is not only the Elysium where they live and grow, but also the Hell where they are stricken by pressure inside and outside. Under the circumstances, escaping from the numbness of everyday life in Chinatown becomes the suffering of minds, becomes “the unbearable lightness of being” (Pu 51), and leads to the family’s different types of escapes physically or mentally.

In mentioning Nina, who is a total escaper from Chinatown, Ng adopts a diametrically opposite way to indicate her escape: summary. Summary is a “narration in a few paragraphs or a few pages of several days, months, or years of existence, without details of action”(Genette 1980: 95-96). In *Bone*, Ng devotes limited paragraphs to describing Nina, which stands in stark contrast to her aggressive attitude toward everything in Chinatown. Nina determinedly casts off the Chinese identity on herself, but such change is described only through a few paragraphs. In doing this, Ng means to create the gap in Nina’s change to highlight the suddenness of Nina’s change, indicating her overwhelming desire to get rid of the shadow of Chinatown and her Chinese identity.

In the novel, Nina's escape is summarized and condensed into a few typical paragraphs:

"Nina blamed us, this family. Everybody. Everything. Salmon Alley. The whole place. That's why she's in New York now. Getting pregnant didn't have to be a problem—I told her to keep the abortion a secret. It was her business. Nobody had to know. Telling was her way out. For a long time she didn't call me, and even now she only half tells me what she does, who she sees. I hear it from other people. My own sister. The way I see it, she's afraid to let us know too much. I used to think she was ashamed of us: the way Leon has turned into an old-man bum, and how bitter Mah is now." (51).

Nina thoroughly cuts herself apart from her family. Her life experience is always directed toward a single goal: to leave Chinatown and overcome all the pain associated with it. However, although she does not want to mention her parents, and indeed her physical being runs away from Chinatown, "her heart has never left Chinatown"(Pu 51; Cao 49). All these are painstakingly boiled down to limited lines by Ng's skill of summary, serving as a foil to the complicated and perplexed inner world of Nina.

In detailing Leila's escape from Chinatown, Ng switches to employ the skills of pause and scene. In a scene, story time and narrative time are conventionally considered identical. In this situation, an event is described in detail, almost in extension. In a pause, some segment of the text corresponds to zero story time while the narrative time can infinitely go on. These skills provide a way to make Leila's mental process of escape and her indecisive attitude toward "escape" complete and full.

In addition, the novel is written from the first-person perspective of Leila, which also makes it simple and straightforward to add in Leila's personal thoughts and contemplation. For this reason, Leila's thoughts of escape from her parents, from her home, and from Chinatown can be depicted minutely and comprehensively. Her thought of getting rid of the transparent cage is revealed in her well-demonstrated disgust at being her parents' translator and helping them shop:

Thinking about all this overwhelmed me. I hadn't had a minute to myself since coming home; I needed time. I didn't want to rummage through a smelly secondhand store; I didn't want to walk over passed-out drunks. Goodwill was the last place I wanted to go; good will was the last thing I felt. So I dropped my problem parent off. "Just look," I told him. "Don't buy."(18)

In the paragraph, a single process of helping parents bargain and translate becomes torturing for Leila. Rooted in her words is her denial of her Chinese identity and her desire to escape from any Chinese label, not just the small confines of her home and parents, but also the whole Chinatown at large.

Besides the second generation of Chinese Americans who, under the impact of outer mainstream culture and inter outdated traditional culture, are predisposed to run away from Chinatown, the first generation of Chinese Americans, namely Leon and Dulcie, also have the desire to escape from Chinatown temporarily. The most striking representative instances are Leon's frequent disappearances, which Ng adopt the skill of scene to describe at the beginning chapter: "Without Leon, the room looked dingier. I stepped back, a little scared. 'Whatsarnattah?' he barked again, this time letting his mouth hang open. 'Leon lost, too?' I said, 'He's not in his room'"(5). "Dingier" is not only the situation of the room, but also the situation of Leon's mind. Leon's disappearance symbolizes his mind's escape from Chinatown, and the skill of scene continues to push forward Leon's escape: "At Uncle's Cafe, every single table is an old-man table. Old men telling jokes and laughing, but no old Leon. The register lady shook her head at me. No Leon, she said"(7).

Ng detailedly depicts the process of Leila's finding Leon, frequently mentions that Leon is lost, and uses the physical disappearance of Leon to suggest his spiritual escape. Leon is lost, lost in his heavy obligation and loyalty to Chinatown, but also lost in the lingering discrimination, exclusion, and hostility outside Chinatown toward colored races.

4. Haunted by Agony: The Tormenting Weight of Losing the Beloved

Narrative frequency refers to the relations of frequency between the narrative and the diegesis (Genette, 1980:113). Here in *Bone*, repetition is the most commonly used skill of frequency. By direct and indirect repetitions of Ona's death, Ng aims to reflect that the family wants to escape yet they would never gain true freedom and liberation just like Ona.

Ona's suicide is the mainline throughout the whole story and the significant repetition that holds the story together. The whole narration is constructed revolving around that heartbroken fact of Leila's family. In the beginning, Leila mentions the impact of Ona's death:

Mah and Leon are still married, but after Ona jumped off the Nam, Leon moved out. It was a bad time. Too much happened on Salmon Alley. We don't talk about it: Even the sewing ladies leave it alone. Anyway, it works out better that Mah and Leon don't live in the same place. (1)

Such references to Ona's death continuously repeats throughout the narration, reminding readers of the family's pain. More importantly, Ona's death is, in essence, her attempt to escape from Chinatown. And the frequent mentioning of Ona's death in fact symbolizes the family's desires to escape, but at the same time repeatedly torments the whole family:

I sipped again: a long bitter taste. And it was Ona. That's the thing that was in my head. Everything went back to Ona. And beyond Ona there was the bad luck that Leon kept talking about. What made Ona do it. Like she had no choice. (50)

The pain haunts the family, just as the failure of escape haunts the family. They are faced with Ona's death every day of their lives, just as they are faced with the unbearable weight of escaping outside every day of their lives. Ona's death is more a reluctant and helpless action than a successful escape from Chinatown, which reflects that even death can not take the family out of Chinatown where they are deeply rooted. Death is merely a physical escape under the pressure of exterior dominant racism. There is no way to authentically leave Chinatown and get into the so-called "melting pot" for they can never grub themselves up from Chinatown, the familiar while strange home as well as the only home. For Leila's family, the place they live is neither a distant version of China nor the Chinatown they love and hate, but a space where two cultures mix, flow, and open to each other, an undeniable home that can not be escaped from for Chinese Americans (Lu 42).

5. Conclusion

From narrative order, to narrative duration, then to narrative frequency, Ng painstakingly designs the narrative time structure to reflect the theme of escape of Chinese Americans living in Chinatown. Leila's unwillingness in recalling and reaching fact of Ona's death, the family members' different options and ways to find their "Paradise" outside Chinatown, and the disturbing yet repeated recollection of Ona's death, all these elements link the story up with the agony and perplexity of Chinese American "escapes", revealing that the exterior American racist discrimination against Chinese Americans and interior castrated Chinese traditional culture and ideology are the roots of the misfortune of Chinese Americans. And such dual pressures can not be escaped. Through such narrative time structure, fluctuations are created in the narration of the story, which on the one hand enhances the aesthetic effect of the novel, and on the other hand reinforces Chinese Americans' pain and struggle of escaping from Chinatown.

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