



THE SENSE OF PLACE IN SHIN-LI KOW'S "THE SUM OF OUR FOLLIES"

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the sense of place in Shin-Li Kow's *The Sum of Our Follies*. The sense of place is appropriated through the regional and special dimensions in the novels. The fictional places depicted in the novel undergo radical changes throughout the fictional events due to globalization and technological advancement. The core conceptual argumentation of the regional places involves the change of place in terms of economic and cultural necessities. The focus of this article, therefore, highlights the sense of place as "thriller"; whereby the place changes according to certain economic or cultural thriller. This thriller is brought about tourism in all its aspects which change Malaysia's regional demography. Tourism will be scrutinized as a major thriller contributing to the disappearance of Malaysian regional archetype. The sense of place is further elaborated via its portrayal in the novel, especially the special setting which is highly detailed in an imaginary representation. Moreover, the study aims to reveal the perception by which the regional change is conveyed. Accordingly, the protagonist, Auyong, is studied as the means of narrative perspective. Auyong feels all the regional changes occurring around; while others do not. For a theoretical analysis, the protagonist's perception is accentuated by using the concept of focalization which emphasizes the narrative perspective where the main events are perceived from one fictional stance. This stance is the protagonist's feeling of Malaysian changing places. Thus, the disappearance of Malaysian native, or authentic, sense of place will be analyzed by applying Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of polyphony.

KEY WORDS: Dialogism, Focalization, Globalization, Polyphony

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Sum of Our Follies (2014) is a recent Malaysian fictional work written by Shih-Li Kow. It is a "regional" piece addressing the most conspicuous "thrillers" of place's meaning and literary imagination. The story hinges upon several episodes in a small town called Lubok Sayong and other replaces. Furthermore, the plot includes a

number of perennial actions which perpetuate the token of "proximity" shared by the lives of Lubok Sayong's inhabitants who reciprocate their visions in an agnate perspective on life. It is an inherent call for the common sense of human individuality in a collective "place" uniting different "ways of life." These people are the authentic human phenomenon in a fictional setting. In fact, the story depicts real

life images, such as contemporary Malaysian peripheries; and challenged once again by socio-cultural apathy, the specter of the story's fictional "pluralism" and the affectionate buoyancy of Shih-Li Kow who "seems particularly instructive" (Cross, 2006: 49).

The novel tells the story of a middle-aged man called Auyong, or the narrator, and an orphan girl Mary Anne. Auyong leaves his city and job as a supermarket manager in order to work in the town's lychee canning factory. This circulates his destitution as a human being seeking perfection amidst anarchy. Mary Anne, on the other hand, is an orphan caught by her adoptive parents as she survives a road accident. The story of these characters is a hilarious account of heartfelt tendencies of Lubok Sayong and Kuala Lumpur ordinary life. The contiguous human intimacy, moreover, unravels the tremendous human responsibility among each other. Such responsibility manifests in terms of the spatio-temporal fictional aspect of *The Sum of Our Follies*.

The novel forges an all-encompassing concentration on the narrative fabric regarding the setting. The setting focalizes in a comprehensive manner which pertains to the universal nuances of the "sense of place." Such sense comprises a firm grip of the constitutional fabrication of surprise as a relative feature of the novel. It parades the tiny foibles of human indignant incorporation of weary human relations and vital needs. In a striking presentation, there is an idiosyncratic appropriation of the duality of human being and spatial ambivalence. As such, the human element formulates the core conceptual infringement of *The Sum of Our Follies* through a consigned dedication to the native place.

Accordingly, the aim of this essay focuses on the sense of place in *The Sum of Our Follies*. The sense of place is the subject of analysis from different dimensional perspectives. Therefore, this study tries to achieve three related objectives. First, the notion of the sense of place goes along with "ecumenical augmentation" of the sense of place.

The ecumenical augmentation of the sense of place involves the disappearance of the regional or native place due to the advent of globalization. The traditional confines among regional places fade

away and the human boundary demarcation substitutes each other in successive waves. This demarcation comes out of the memento of departure of the enormous technological advancement sweeping through any civilization. More specifically, this essay examines the ambulatory, or mobile, populations, cyber-culture and technological advancement. This is because *The Sum of Our Follies* is a riveting story "which pulls the reader into a world which is at once particular and universal" (Leon, 2014: 226).

The second objective circulates the authorial forgery of the fictional events; these events draw the reader's attention to the meticulous details of *The Sum of Our Follies*. The plot abounds with concomitant reflections calling for proper and mere comprehension of the story. The author, Shih-Li Kow, is conscious about creating the effects of the novel's structural configuration; whereby the whole conceptual intention of the story projects in the fictional actions. The actions, in turn, lead the reader to the irrevocable impulsion through which the designed authorial propagation "suggests a representational singular delights of living in a small town and the importance of keeping alive" (Leon 227).

The indispensable suggestion of "delights of living" incarnates the author's instinctive insights of historical, terrains, population, typography, traditional customs of community, and the way people perceive the new advent of technological advance. The author calls for an inclusive provision of the Malaysian community which dissolves in a multicultural commonality including different cultural experiences. Being so, the author provides a deliberate conceptualization of community in all its aspects; and Shih-Li Kow "is aware of differences in race and culture which rigidly categorise people but she [Shih-Li Kow] chooses to portray her characters with sympathy and humour" (Leon 227-228). These senses (sympathy and humour), formulate the author's stylistic manner; and the "distinctive features of writing from home and abroad, are intrigued with historical happenings" (228).

Therefore, the authorial intention is the target of the socio-cultural elements in *The Sum of Our Follies*. This is the foundational premise of this

essay's third objective. The focus on the sense of place will be the target of this objective which accentuates the legitimate peculiarities of the novel's inclusion of dimensional, and at the same time, strategic, procreation (construction) of a sense of place in the light of a stylistic and cultural theory where globalization textual examination as an effect of technology. As such, this study applies Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of polyphony to analyze the fictional insinuation of the sense of place into the authorial "implicit" voice in *The Sum of Our Follies*.

In sum, Bakhtin's notion of polyphonic novel includes both the dialogic and the monologic fictional voices. The monologic mode is the authorial or abstract voice, projected in the novel. On the other hand, the dialogic voice is the fictional characters' voice which embodies the author's abstract intention. In this essay, I will analyze the monologic voice as an authorial voice drawing the reader's attention to different insights; chief among them are the historical, terrain, population, typography, traditional customs of community, and the way people perceive the new advent of technological advance. These hypothetical insights examine the characters' voices which are saturated by the authorial intention. As such, the characters' voices are the real embodiment of the authorial implicit or dialogic, voice in *The Sum of Our Follies*.

2. The Disappearance of Native Place

The Sum of Our Follies represents a national perception of a native place known as Lubok Sayong. At the onset of the novel, there is a detailed description of the importance of this place for the native people. Such importance lies in Lubok Sayong's strength to prevent destructive floods destroying the surrounding circumferences. This is because "Lubok Sayong has a problem with water; there's simply too much of it. Our town sits in a saucer-shaped depression, sunk into a valley with the Perak River on one side and a tributary of the Sayong on another" (6). In addition, Lubok Sayong has an extraordinary relevance to the geographical configuration of the whole area; whereby "some people say that the cause of our floods lies with the trio of lakes in Lubok Sayong-two crescent shaped gouges in the land and a circular one between the two. The silvers of land that keep them apart seem

like mistakes, remnants of erroneous geography" (6-7).

Here, Lubok Sayong, from the very beginning, lavishes with geographical stability with threatening sorts of dangerous natural advent. In essence, the comprehensive postulation of the sense of place begins with the geographical aspect. In "What is Sense of Place?" (2001), Jennifer Cross defines a sense of place as "the affective bond between people and place or setting. Such ties vary in intensity, subtlety, and mode of expression. Responses to the environment may be aesthetic, tactile, or emotional" (2). Here, Cross asserts that the sense of place corresponds to the "geographical subtlety" as "mode of expression." This mode achieves the author's "multi-voicedness" in fictional writings (Bakhtin, 1981: 279). Bakhtin's emphasis on the roles of fictional voices highlights the texts' meanings as "a new theory of authorial point of view" (Holquist, 1990: 3). While this "point of view" is abstract, the text is the actual exemplification of such authorial meaning within a "novel in which a variety of conflicting ideological positions are given a voice and set in play both between and within individual speaking subjects, without being placed and judged by an authoritative authorial voice" (Lodge, 1990: 86).

In *The Sum of Our Follies*, the authorial point of view embodies the narrator's voice. As an example of the sense of place, the mountains and lakes are the original and true native places which the narrator laments. The narrator contemplates Lubok Sayong in the past and how it had changed. This change does not come all of sudden. Instead, it comes out of the new changes happened in the geographical boundaries. Some regions of Lubok Sayong had become attractive tourism sites where many people come to visit from different world countries. Notwithstanding this, the narrator bemoans Lubok Sayong in terms of "legend." This place used to be great. Yet, forefathers did not leave any evidence of its true authenticity. Therefore, the sense of place comes out "with lakes and mountains in attendance, a local legend is almost prerequisite. Had the forefathers of Lubok Sayong been prescient enough to leave behind some physical evidence to support our legend, even if romanticised with half-

truths and superstitions" (7). Accordingly, the new advent of globalization effects, such as tourism, does imprint the regional sites, like Lubok Sayon with new civilized terrains. In the past, for example, people of Lubok Sayong led a good and rusty life. Their life had been genuine and native to the cultural traits of Malaysian society.

However, by the advent of tourism, the place has drastically changed. Even the language has been influenced. Global tourism required a new kind of language to cope with tourists as an example of place change. Additionally, the native regions had also changes according to the new civilized situations. In the following quotation, the narrator describes the disappearance of the "rice fields" which had been eradicated for the purpose of constructing tourist sites. As a result, the native cultural manners were gradually disappearing: "unfortunately, there are no fields of charred rice or dubious tombs of fallen warriors in Lubok Sayong as in the more tourism savvy island of Langkawi. In our town, we serve up our legend like *nasi lemak bungkus*- lukewarm and thinly garnished, in portions that fall just short of satisfying the appetite and the imagination (italics in original)" (7).

The negotiation of the sense of place is an admissible demonstration of regional change. The author's fictional style, accordingly, plays a fundamental role in discerning the intended idea regarding the sense of place. The idea of the sense of place is tackled within a dialogic discourse peculiarity projected by the author in the text. This dialogic peculiarity is, in turn, affected by the context in which they are positioned, i.e. by the political or social powers affecting them. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984), Bakhtin contends that the conceptualization of meaning gained from literary texts acquiesces firmly to the author's "monologic" voice imparted in the text:

It is constructed not as the whole of a single consciousness, absorbing other consciousnesses as objects into itself, but as a whole formed by the interaction of several consciousnesses, none of which entirely becomes an object for the other; this interaction provides no support for the viewer who would objectify an entire event

according to some ordinary monologic category (thematically, lyrically or cognitive1y) - and this consequently makes the viewer also a participant. (18)

The deterioration of the native lands proceeds as long as tourism spreads out. The seasonal "downpour" is the result of tourism expansion; and the narrator continues recounting the effects of this cultural phenomena on Lubok Sayong where "the seasons had been unpredictable in recent years, but that could not account for the suddenness of this downpour" (10). By the same token, the narrator tells the story of Mami Beevi, who "dated the worst Lubok Sayong flood in twenty years" (8). The narrator goes on telling the story; and associates it with the current state of Lubok Sayong. He also ponders the mythical history of the place and how it changed: "by the second day, the lower reaches of our valley flooded, and the waters rose to the top of the stilts in Beevi's house by the third. The prince of Fourth Wife Lake and her handmaidens reunited to start their journey home to china, or Aceh, escaping our small town" (10).

The manifestation of Beevi's story is the symbolical comparison between the effects of destructive floods upon Lubok Sayong. Equivalently, this comparison could be deduced by matching the similarity of tourism destruction of the native characteristics of Lubok Sayong. The comparison between flood and tourism is made by the narrator's abstract and monologic meditation of the place. Any monologic eccentricity is a slant of the author's monologic voice. Jonathan Culler, in *The Pursuit of Signs-Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (1981), discusses the "semiotic" relevance to the textual explication of the monologic voice. Culler asserts that "what happens in literary semiotics is but one version of a general situation which is gradually coming to be recognized as an inescapable feature of our ways of thinking about texts and signification" (39). Consequently, the monologic voice crops up the authorial voice embedded in the text by dint of a "novel in which a variety of conflicting ideological positions are given a voice and set in play both between and within individual speaking subjects,

without being placed and judged by an authoritative authorial voice" (Lodge, 1990: 86).

In line with this, monologic "authoritative authorial voice" is a product of narrative insights in the text. In *The Sum of Our Follies*, for example, the narrator feels "relieved" as he observes some volunteers living in Lubok Sayong. This is because peace and tranquil milieus have come again to dominate the place. The narrator expresses this feeling in a monologic narration: "most of us in Lubok Sayong were relieved when the droves of volunteers packed up to return to their day jobs in the city. Although they had brought welcome necessities like food and other supplies, their intense energy during the few days of their volunteering was most unwelcome. We were tired. 'Tired to the bone,' someone said'" (16).

Monologic narration codifies the sense of place exposed in the novel. The sense of place is pontificated through the author's implied voice. The excerpt below illuminates the expression "recon a mission" which indicates the author's discontent with the new "negative" advancement in Lubok Sayong. In addition, the authorial discontent is executed in the narrator's predilection to make traditional "boats" to refuse any kind of foreign changes and, at the same time, to keep dedicated to his indigenous commitment to Lubok Sayong per se; where "the two men came back in my makeshift boat after, what they called, a 'recon mission'. I had built the boat from plastic chemical drums sawn in half lengthwise, and three halves tied together with nylon rope from Beev's clothesline" (17).

3. The Author's Historical, Traditional, and Cultural Perspective

The Sum of Our Follies abounds with historical references. These references entail the author's amalgamation of the traditional ongoing status quo. In the same manner, the author consciously depicts the implication of human traditions in mythical allusions. The Story of Beevi is a fine example of how myth plays a crucial role in the presence of historical dimension in *The Sum of Our Follies*. When the narrator wakes up one day, for example, he finds a congregation of people gathered in Lubok Sayong. The gathering is a symbol of the traditional local crowds which people used to

do before tourism expansion in the area. The sense of place, here, is supported with a more inclusive reference to history in the novel: "I woke up to the sound of people talking, conversations bubbling, like in school during break. My mouth was dry and my tongue felt furry with gunk. When I peeled my gummy eyelids apart, I saw people crowding the space" (45). Later in the story, people's gathering is amplified through the mythical story of Beevi. Beevi represents the benign person taking care of people, especially children, to soothe those people's agonies: "Beevi's people filled the Big House like a flock of birds, flightless raucous birds. They moved in waves, these people. They pecked and fussed like chickens, squawked like crows and watched each other like hawks" (50). Moreover, Beevi stands as the collective conceptualization of goodness attending children: "Beevi stayed away from them. She was on autopilot, her grief pushed deep inside while she buzzed around on energy reserves. She had little use for me now and I thought of going to the hospital to check on the child" (51-52).

The match between myth and social good traditions is detailed through the author's implicit voice. The author impels intentional meanings in the text to be grasped by the reader. In line with this, Tim Beasley-Murray; in *Mikhail Bakhtin and Walter Benjamin: Experience and Form* (2007), alleges that the authorial voice and the fictional dialogues are adapted by means of the totality of fragmented textual voices. Beasley-Murray is ambient to a cognate acquaintance throughout the author-character intersection. The textual dialogic fragments consecutively align to recognize "superaddressee." Therefore, the "orientation towards the superaddressee is an orientation towards a totality by the standards of which the partial and unfinished fragments of dialogue are always implicitly judged" (122).

The reader is considered a "superaddressee" who perceives the textual meaning and decodes its inherent connotation. The adjoining of historical and cultural perspectives in *The Sum of Our Follies* begins with the mythical insinuation of Beevi's story. But as the story goes on, the mythical dimension disappears and the social aspects come out. For example, the narrator talks about his job and how

he employs other people: "some of my work did seem to be a more youthful touch and a mind closer to the ages of those I employed" (182). This is the traditional aspect of social change on *The Sum of Our Follies*. The case of Miss Boonsidik is another example. She transforms from a domestic women to an academican: "Miss Boonsidik was enraged. He enlisted Fatimah and started going to the school as her kitchen assistant, dishing out rice, fish, vegetables, two *pisang emas* apiece (italics in original)" (192).

These examples reflect the author's style to draw the reader's attention to the persistent change in social traditions. Being so, the author reveals "the very triad by which the monological forms of writing are demarcated, putting in the place where the epic 'should' be the discourse type most closely identified with the novel" (Gardiner, 2002: 108). The discourse is the most conspicuous means by which the author uncovers his monologic voice. In this regard, the author connects his story's fictional nuances which "would place the referential transparency of 'one's own' speech over the referential opacity of 'somebody else's', an omniscient metalanguage over an oblivious object language" (Gardiner 108). Furthermore, the author's monologic voice originates in the story's dialogic utterances because dialogism "is a reality of discourse precariously suspended between twin impossibilities: an experience of one as two which, if realized, would bring us back to one again by reducing two to a mechanical sum of two units" (Gardiner 111).

The Sum of Our Follies, accordingly, carries out the author's monologic voice through political hints. The social and traditional changes also resulted in political changes. The narrator meditates the way Said Hameed's burying of a boy: "although I often imagined the scene of Said Hameed digging a hole in the ground and burying a dead body in it, the black boy in our garden was someone I had learned to ignore" (213). This burying is a kind political influence on Lubok Sayong's ways of life, the thing which had not been normal in the social traditions of Lubok Sayong before: "pestilence seemed to herald events of significance in Lubok Sayong. An infestation accompanied the general election

companies, and made the visit of YB Datuk Seri Minister unforgettable" (220). The minster election is, therefore, the cause of changes in Lubok Sayong: "this YB was the same minister who had offended her previously doting fans in Lubok Sayong all those years ago by failing to turn up for the christening of our roundabout" (220-21). Thus, the new political changes are the representational effects of globalization on social traditions in *The Sum of Our Follies*.

4. Technological Advancement

In *The Sum of Our Follies*, technological advancement is exemplified in the new factories in Lubok Sayong, as the narrator comments: "we have a few girls in our lychee factory crew. Normally, women did not work nights. There was something in the Employment Act that made it either illegal or cumbersome and, Lubok Sayong was far from enforcement officers" (182). This new technology brought about new life styles: "my [the narrator] old habit of doing things by the book was hard to abandon. I did not ask any of the girls to pull a night shift, except once" (182).

The technological advancement is tackled by the author's monologic voice. In *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (1984), Patricia Waugh discusses the nature of self-reflexive metafictional device. Waugh specifically describes self-reflexivity in terms of "fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (2).

The narrator incarnates the authorial self-reflexivity in *The sum of Our Follies*: "there was also a chance of national holiday if we won" (183). Wong Kam, for example, is one of the technological advancements in Lubok Sayong: "Wong Kam had the biggest television set in town, with a fifty-inch screen that he usually played Chinese serials on. He needed that size because he spent all this time at the counter in the front collecting money, while the television hung on a wall at the back of the shop" (183).

The author's self-reflexivity is an example of metafictional elements. Waugh places a significant role of the author in mimetic metafictional devices.

She argues that the author is the perceiver of events in fictional plots. Accordingly, fictional events are initiated in the light of the author who knows all the narrative actions through "the conflict of languages and voices" (6).

To argue this last point, Wong Kam's interest in technological advancement is an embodiment of the interplay between the author and the reader: "a long mirror in front of the counter reflected the television so he could watch everything, albeit in mirror image" (183). In addition, technology had caused changes in people's interests and favorite preferences like sport: "I [the narrator] anticipated a good evening ahead. This was the best chance we had ever had of an Olympic gold" (183).

Another characteristic of mimetic metafiction is the author's revelation of his/her "identity" as the creator of the work. In the course of events, the author appears on the narrative level. The author appearance is manifested in the discourse initiated by fictional characters the author creates. In addition, the author uses his own words implicitly through the characters' discourse and interlocutions. In this way, the mimetic device reveals the authorial identity as the writer of the story where "the author attempts desperately to hang on to his or her 'real' identity as creator of the text we are reading. What happens, however, when he or she enters it is that his or her own reality is also called into question. The 'author' discovers that the language of the text produces him or her as much as he or she produces the language of the text" (Waugh 133).

In line with this, the author (Shih-Li Kow) projects the consequences of technology in *The Sum of Our Follies* through the narrator's comments on his factory work: "I half expected to see my workers here again soon, laying cement on this patch. There was a familiarity in this now, how Beevi drove her demons out by destroying the evidence and sealing the site, as though to silence the past"; and "the violence worked; the caterpillars never came back. Sarimah's house faded away. Maybe one day the Big House too would succumb" (220). This work did not happen to dominate Lubok Sayong before, and this is the core essence of the sense of place which had

changed drastically in the novel. Such change is explicated by the authorial monologic voice.

In *Speech Genres and other Late Essays* (1986), Bakhtin argues that the author's voice can be inferred within the text's frames. The technique of transference is used as "transcription" in dealing with the "interrelation" between the characters' discourse and the authorial voice; Bakhtin comments: The transcription of thinking in the human sciences is always the transcription of a special kind of dialogue: the complex interrelations between the *text* (the object of study and reflection) and the created, framing *context* (questioning, refuting, and so forth) in which the scholar's cognizing and evaluating thought takes place (italics in original)" (106).

5. Conclusion

This essay has studied the effect of globalization in Shih-Li Kow's *The Sum of Our Follies*. The study objectives focused on the way in which Kow projects the influence of globalization on the sense of place in the novel. Thus, the historical, cultural, technological, and traditional aspects have been discussed to examine the sense of place and its radical transformation in *The Sum of Our Follies*.

The sense of place has been discussed in the light of Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of monologic and dialogic voices. These voices identify the author's abstract which is projected in the text's dialogic discourse. In so doing, Shih-Li Kow expresses her point of view regarding the spatial places in the Malaysian society and its ever changing state. Such change is brought about the effects of globalization characterized by new advances, such as tourism and technology-driven careers. Thus, Shih-Li Kow, as an author, puts the reader where she intends him/her to be given insightful conceptualization of history, terrain, people, community customs and the like.

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