

On the First-Person Narrative of “The Ruins of Hami”

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Abstract: Chen Qian's novel “The ruins of Hami” is told from the first-person narrative perspective, i.e., the story between “I” and Hami and Hami's family is told in the voice of “I”, mainly presenting a tragedy that happened between three generations of an overseas Chinese family in the 1970s. The use of the first-person narrative perspective plays an important role that cannot be ignored in the narrative effect of the novel. This paper will take the first-person perspective as an entry point, analyze the specific performance and effect of the first-person in the ruins of Hami and explore the effect of the first-person in expressing the author's thoughts.

1. Introduction

The novel *The ruins of Hami* by overseas Chinese writer Chen Qian presents a tragedy that occurred between three generations of an overseas Chinese family in the 1970s from the first-person narrative perspective, and reflected the author's reflections on the issue such as the “shackles of the family of origin”. The author does not tell the reader the whole truth of the tragedy at the beginning of the novel, but covers the “truth” with layers of “veil”, gives the reader a vague impression of the events and allows the reader to keep guessing, and then as the plot progresses, layers and layers of “veil” are slowly lifted, until the “truth” is completely revealed on the surface finally, which is thought-provoking. The choice and use of the first-person narrative perspective plays an important role in the novel's ability to achieve this effect naturally. This paper will explore the related performance and effect of first-person narration in *The ruins of Hami* and its role in expressing the author's thoughts from the use of first-person narrative perspective.

2. Concrete Manifestation of the First-person Narrative Perspective in *The ruins of Hami*

Persona is a Latin word that originally referred to the masks worn by actors in ancient theaters. In recent literary discussions, “first-person” is often used to refer to the first-person narrator of a story in a narrative poem or a novel, or the speaker in a lyric poem. [1] *The ruins of Hami* take the first-person as the narrative perspective of the novel, i.e., uses “I” as the narrator of the story. But at the same time, “I” is also a participant in the story rather than a complete observer. The main story in the novel includes the story between “I” and Hami and her family and the tragedy of Hami's family itself, which are not directly related to “I”, the latter of which is more important for reflecting the author's thoughts and revealing the novel's theme. The novel plot, such as “I” attend the funeral of Hami's father and “I” meet and interact with Hami at University of Idaho, are all manifestations of “I”

participating in the main story; the novel's stories told through the mouths of Hami or Hami's mother, such as marriage of Hami's father and mother, and Hami's mother's harsh and dark education to Hami etc., are the natural tragedy carried by Hami and her family, while "I" is only a spectator of these events.

Visual limitations (or non-omniscience) and progressiveness are characteristics often exhibited by the first-person perspective. The "I" in the novel needs to follow the development of the plot and keep exploring in order to gradually get the whole picture of the story. In *The Ruins of Hami*, this narrative perspective is also evident in the author's writing in several ways. Firstly, in the description of the environment, the order of appearance of the scenes is influenced by "my" changing vision. For example, in the plot in which "I" visit Hami's home after Hami's father's funeral, from "under the white blossoming oleander" to "the bare ground with different shades of spots" and then to "the pond with the construction waste and discarded electrical appliances and sundries", [2] the scenes are shown orderly and intermittently in a mode of trading the scenery with moving step, without a centralized description, which reflects the progressiveness of the first-person. Secondly, many of the secrets behind Hami's broken family are not clearly explained in a large part of the novel, there are only a few clues emerge as the plot advances, such as Hami's mother's Southeast Asian accent and her practice of brainwashing Hami with the notion that "the world is full of perverts"[2], which reflects the non-omniscience of the first person.

Although the first-person narrative perspective of the story adds a certain degree of realism to the reader's experience, the "core nature of literature"-- fictionality, cannot be ignored [3]. Fictionality is often concealed beneath the verisimilitude that fiction strongly seeks in order to convince readers of the narrative content of the novel. Henry James emphasizes, "Where would verisimilitude be without intensity? Without verisimilitude, where would be the work that can be taken?" [4] Therefore, in principle, a novel should not deliberately emphasize the fiction of its narrative content but should strengthen its intensity and verisimilitude. However, *The Ruins of Hami* is not entirely narrated in the first-person, but superimposed a part of "third-person narrative" passively on the premise that "I" do not know all the "truth" --i.e. the narrative of characters other than "I" in the novel, such as Hami and Hardin. With the participation of the third-person in the narration of the main story, the verisimilitude of the novel is reduced, and its fictionality will naturally emerge from its hidden state, which will affect the readers' conviction of the novel's plot.

3. Expressive Effect of the First-person Perspective in *The Ruins of Hami*

The above article illustrates the specific manifestations of the first-person in the novel *The Ruins of Hami* based on several characteristics of the first-person narrative perspective. As can be seen from these manifestations, the characteristics of the novel's use of the first-person largely overlap with those of first-person narration in general, but there is also a new feature that arises from the needs of storytelling--the overlapping use of the first-person narration and the third-person narration. The effects embodied in the novel's narrative perspective will be analyzed below.

The novel is centered on the tragedy of three generations of Hami's family, and Hami is the central character of the novel, so the characterization of "I" also has a tendency to cater to Hami's persona. Both "I" and Hami are overseas Chinese; Hami is naturally introverted and unsociable, so "I" is given a sincere, cheerful and optimistic character so that the encounter and interaction between Hami and "I" happen more naturally and thus promote the development of the novel's plot. The information about the persona of "I" as the first-person narrator is mostly reflected in "I" 's words and inner confessions. This information includes "my" emotional experiences, "my" parents' education and opinions about "me", and so on. The information of "my" persona expressed in this way not only introduces the characteristics of "my" character, but also supports the plot of becoming friends or

having conflicts between Hami and "I". It also naturally brings out the contrast between "I" and Hami - the former is married and has children, and the latter is destined to end up alone. In addition, the reduction of direct descriptions of "I" also helps to keep the focus of the novel on the story of Hami's family from shifting.

The non-omniscient and progressive use of the first-person narrative perspective makes the novel *The ruins of Hami* more immersive for the receiver. Whether it is when "I" and Hami meet at University of Idaho or when "I" attend the funeral of Hami's father years later, "I" know nothing about the truth that caused this family tragedy. This reflects the visual limitations of the first-person, but this limitation gives the author a lot of room to play. The author captures the natural curiosity of most readers and gives "I" the desire and motivation of finding out the truth behind the events, which is consistent with this psychological trait, so that readers can comfortably put themselves in the shoes of "I" in the text and follow the plot to find clues and answers to the truth. These answers do not all come out at once, but only suddenly emerge after the "veil" of mystery is lifted. Under the multiple layers of padding and foreshadowing, with clues and hints such as "Hami's mother has a Southern Asian accent and a mysterious exotic flavor", "Hami's mother has been too strict with Hami since she was a child, resulting in her being too introverted" and the divorce of Hami's father mother [2], readers will continue to speculate, and the novel also unknowingly moves toward the so-called "truth". The author's progressive treatment for the narrative content from the first-person narrative perspective fleshes out the novel's plot; the progression of the plot enhances the logic and continuous readability of the novel.

There may be some room for discussion about the appropriateness of the overlap between the first-person and third-person narratives in presenting the "truth" of the novel. "I am a partial rather than full participant in the main story of the novel, and the need to present the "truth" through the mouths of third-person narrators such as Hami is inevitable. However, compared to the narrative which Hami acts as the first-person narrator to narrate the tragedy in her own family directly, using "I" as the first-person narrator allows for a more objective complement and judgment for the tragedy, which enhances the sense of "truth" to the reader and the tragedy becomes less cruel and cold from the perspective of a bystander. More importantly, the episode of relationship between Hami and "I" is already the result of the tragedy. The status of "I" in the novel is only the narrator of interaction between Hami and "I" and Hami's family tragedy, but not participate in the "truth" of the tragedy. Even though Hami tells the "truth" as the first-person narrator, most of the "truth" comes from the mouths of the characters directly related to the truth-Hami's father and mother. Moreover, the story takes place in the 1970s, when ideas were still in the process of liberation, is one person "seduced" the other or is it a "free love" relationship between Hami's father and mother? Whose opinion is the truth, Hami's father or mother? The author - or Hami's father and mother - only gives an account of "death without proof". The overlapping use of the first-person and the third-person narrative perspectives brings fictionality, which was originally hidden behind its realism, to the surface. As literary critic Wayne Clayton Booth explains the limitations of the first-person - "If the 'I' is not competent to access the necessary information, then it may lead to the author's untrustworthiness" [5]. The surfacing of fictionality may, in part, make the novel contradict the pursuit of convincing the reader.

From another perspective, the extensive overlap of the first-person and the third-person narrative perspectives in dealing with the important content of the novel may be the author's ulterior motive. If the use of the first-person can enhance the reader's sense of immersion in the reading process, then the overlapping of the third-person is a manifestation of the distance between the reader and the work. The artistic charm of the novel *The ruins of Hami* partly comes from its unrelenting extreme expressions - "The world is full of perverts", " spit out rust-colored blood, and eat again, and spit again " and "My mother would have been very unhappy if she had seen him die so fast at the end"

[2]. The cruelty and cold-bloodedness of these languages are mostly out of the reader's Erwartungshorizont [6]. Therefore, through the way of overlapping the two narrative perspectives, the author is able to strengthen the novel's artistry on the one hand, and on the other hand, this way can slow down the impact of the sense of immersion on the reader, distract the reader from the pressure of the tragedy, and allow the reader to step away from the sense of immersion and think: Is the "truth" getting further and further away while it is seemingly getting closer to the "truth"?

4. First-person Perspective and the Author's Idea of "Redemption" in *The Ruins of Hami*

When the novel is read to the end, it doesn't seem to matter what the truth looks like. Because the cruelty and sorrow seen in it often has really happened in a corner of the world.

In *A Few Words about Hami and Her Ruins*, author Chen Qian says, "I let the story take place in the frozen land of Idaho, the first land I landed in America ... where I did meet a girl like Hami and a mother like Hami's mother. Their families were mysterious and weird. I spent the long years to search for the truth, and Hami's father was just drawn in to push the limits of my ability to turn fiction into reality along the way." [7] The real "Hami", as the author knew her, did live in the shadow of the warnings of "full of perverts" and eventually went into serious mental illness. The difference is that the real "Hami" is numb, while the fictional Hami is still self-imposed isolation, but is not completely subjected to the warnings, instead, she remains painfully awake and seeks a new liberation by means of "revenge" (in the novel, Hami sees her real father as "the last pervert") [2]. The reason for the transformation of the realistic image of "Hami" in the novel is inseparable from the author's purpose of creating the novel - "to understand how it all happened" [7]. This requires a sober "Hami" to provide "me" with enough information to solve the mystery. The first-person narrator of the novel, "I" is integrated into the author's mind and is committed to pursuing the truth behind Hami's family tragedy, which forms an interaction with the third-person narrator, Hami, i.e., the interaction of "question" and "answer". In other words, Hami in the novel is guided by "I" - or by the author - to seek (mostly passively, but also actively) the causes of her mother's and her own life situation and spiritual condition, to realize the buried desire to break through the spiritual dilemma and start a new life.

The use of the first-person narration in *The ruins of Hami* not only reveals the information of the author's acquaintance with the fictional character in reality, but also implies the author's desire to "redeem" Hami in fiction. The "I" in the novel keeps saying "I don't need to know and I don't want to know" the secrets of Hami's family [2], but keeps participating in the mystery of Hami's family either actively or passively. This is the contradiction between compassion and avoidance within "I", and also the conflict between the author's powerlessness and desire for redemption as a spectator in reality. The author says: "What I have to try to forget is the phone calls from 'Hami' that I have been afraid to answer all these years since I left that pool" [7]. Even so, she tells the story of the "beautiful destruction" she witnessed in the form of a novel, and hopes that "Hami" will leave the ruins of her mind one day and set out on the road to the "bright garden" [7]. Faced with the fierce vines of her original family, the author knows that these are feeble expectations. However, this expectation is the deepest temperature of this novel.

5. Conclusion

Telling a story in the first-person is a subtle and influential method. The novel *The ruins of Hami* is based on a family tragedy of overseas Chinese, and is typical of the real-life events in which the consequences of family tragedies are borne by future generations. The novel is narrated from the first-person narrative perspective, which strengthens the realism of the novel's plot and fictional characters while superimposing the use of third-person narration, this slows down the powerful impact of tragic

emotions on the reader's heart and satisfies the integration and expression of the author's thoughts. The cleverness and particularity of the first-person narration in *The ruins of Hami* may have a high referential significance for other first-person novel writing.

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