

# Refugee Narratives in *Ru*

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**Abstract:** *Ru* is an autobiography written by Canadian Vietnamese writer Kim Thuy. In this novel, Kim depicts her family's experiences as Vietnamese refugees, as well as how they settle down in Canada. This paper focuses on refugee narratives in the novel from three aspects: war narrative, the experience of refugees and their identity construction. The paper comes to the conclusion that refugee narratives depict the cruelty of war, reveal the harsh condition of refugees, and explore refugees' identity construction. So refugee narratives embody the humanistic concern of literature.

## 1. Introduction

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Canada in 1970, the number of Chinese immigrants from Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China has dramatically increased, also a large number of Southeast Asians of Chinese origin people have immigrated to Canada, including many Vietnamese of Chinese origin. Southeast Asian Chinese have been good at doing business and have accumulated a great deal of wealth with intelligence and diligence, which makes them vulnerable to political persecution and torture of war. One of the historical and political roots of Southeast Asian immigration was wars in Southeast Asia, the most famous of which was the Vietnam War. People who flee to a foreign country to escape war are refugees.

Refugee narrative is a kind of political and historical writing which is a continuation of the realistic literary tradition in Western literature, reflecting the political and historical picture of wars which is a reflection of western hegemony in the world. Moreover, refugee narratives make a realistic writing of the refugee tide like in Southeast Asia. Thus, it is of great value to explore the hegemonism in the world and the division and civil wars caused by the interference in the internal affairs of western countries.

In modern Canadian literature, refugee narratives reflect the change of the global political power caused by the neo-colonialism in the western power after the World War II, as well as turbulence of the political situation in the third world, the economic chaos and the frequent occurrence of the civil war. Behind civil wars in many countries are the traces of western power manipulation, so-called "Military assistance".

*Ru*, an autobiographical novel, is written by Kim Thuy, tells the legendary experience of the author's family members who make hazardous journeys to Canada after the Vietnam War, striving to take root in Canada, and finally realizing the American Dream. Although the author gives a full account of her ambition to make her fortunes in Canada, she uses the word "American Dream". This shows that Canada is the representative of western powers, reflecting the same ideological and political and social context as the United States. Although Canada did not directly participate in the Vietnam War, it provided a large number of weapons and materials to America. *Ru* reflects characteristics of refugee narratives from three aspects: war narrative, the experience of refugees and their identity construction.

## 2. Refugee Narratives

### 2.1. War Narrative

During the Vietnam War, the social structure of South Vietnam was destroyed. Original rural economic system collapsed; the simple and harmonious lifestyle disappeared. The countryside was

urbanized and the original tranquil life of the peasants was destroyed. American consumerism invaded South Vietnam and depraved young people. Bars spread all over the streets; deteriorated women appeared everywhere. Many American soldiers contracted a liaison with South Vietnamese women and gave birth to illegitimate children. The degraded South Vietnam condition was due to destruction of the war. In *Ru*, Kim depicts the North Vietnamese soldiers directly, and elaborates how they escape the dangers of the war; also she portrays the invisible Vietnamese women who suffered from the war, as well as the tragedy of the illegitimate and half blood children who were produced by the American soldiers and Vietnamese women. "In times of war the image of the child has been adopted, particularly in journalistic media, as a symbol of vulnerability." [1] The author condemns the cruelty of the war, indicating that both sides of the civilians in the war are victims, including North Vietnamese soldiers, the South Vietnamese people and the half blood children of United States and the Vietnamese, even the American soldiers who draft the war are victims. Therefore, what should be criticized is American imperialism which interferes with the Vietnamese National Liberation Movement. Western countries, led by the United States as an example, carried out neocolonialism on Southeast Asian countries after World War II, resulting in extremely devastating results. "The violence that had supposedly ended erupted once more in the refugee community, caused by those traumatized by the war or by those who had no other opportunities because of the war." [2] Nowadays, the problem of refugees is the focus of international attention. The paper focuses on refugee narratives in *Ru*, coming into the conclusion that colonialism and hegemonism result in disasters. Besides, refugees must experience a long and harsh process of identity construction.

## 2.2. The Experience of Refugees

Kim narrates how her family risk insecurity at sea and refugee camp in Malaysia, and how they struggle for life after emigration to Canada. These experiences are in common for all refugees and so can represent all refugee experiences. For instance, when they received a physical examination by the Canadian delegation, the doctor was very rude to the Vietnamese refugees. The literal meaning of the word *Ru* means drifting, flowing and being exiled, which is the theme of the novel. The Kim's youngest son, Henri, is autistic. Similarly, Kim is like her son, also going through the condition of deaf and silence in her initial survival experience in Canada. So autism is a figurative use, indicating that refugees must go through cultural shock in an adopted country. "I was like my son Henri: unable to talk or to listen, even though I was neither deaf nor mute. I now had no points of reference, no tools to allow me to dream, to project myself into the future, to be able to experience the present, in the present." [3] (Thuy,8) After the Vietnam War and the hell life in the Malaysian camp, Kim's family has determine to cast away the past and took root in Canada.

The protagonist's mother was born in a prominent family. While in Canada she lived a harsh life. However, she was very strong; she never succumbed to misfortunes. The mother often cited a word that the "Life is a struggle in which sorrow leads to defeat." [3] (Thuy,12) They had gone through the Vietnam War and spent the miserable life in the Malaysian refugee camp. After immigration to Canada, Kim's mother abandons the past, starting from the most humble work and taking root in Canada. "She went to work for the first time at the age of thirty-four, first as a cleaning lady, then at jobs in plants, factories, restaurants. "Before, in the life that she had lost, she was the eldest daughter of her prefect father. All she did was settle arguments between the French-food chef and the Vietnamese-food chef in the family courtyard." [3] (Thuy,13) Her mother is constantly full of anticipation for the future, the pursuit of a dream, and even she started an English class in the refugee camp. The mother was very strict with her daughter, forcing her daughter to speak English and French in order to integrate into the Canadian society. One time she forced her out to buy a sugar, and she had not bought it, and was rejected by her mother. Later, she realized the mother's pain. "I also understood later that my mother certainly had dreams for me, but above all she'd given me tools so that I could put down roots, so that I could dream." [3] (Thuy,22) Kim's mother is the model for her, so the relationship between Kim and the mother have no intergenerational conflicts.

### 2.3. Identity Construction

Identity is an individual's choice in a certain social and historical context. "The domain of identity is a more subjective construct that refers to one's identification with both the ethnic culture and the host culture" [4]. In *Ru*, the protagonist's embrace to the American Dream and her gratitude to Canada show that she inclines to assimilate with the West. She chose to forget and abandon the past. Gradually she alienated from her home country, Vietnam. The assimilation of the protagonist with the West is also determined by her background of growth. In Vietnam, the protagonist's family is in the upper class, her mother is the eldest daughter of the governor. All of her family members are prominent in that society. Some of them are rich Chinese businessmen, while others are Vietnamese politicians, artists and scientists. Before emigration to Canada, the protagonist had been in deep contact with the cultural customs and values of western society. Her parents often went to dances, ate French food and wore French imported clothes. In other words, the protagonist already had cross-cultural awareness before emigration, which also shaped her Canadian identity after immigration. Also, language is an important aspect of cross-cultural adaptation. Kim's mother takes the initiative to ask her children to learn the language of the mainstream society in Quebec, Canada, which embodies the cross-cultural consciousness of the mother. Her mother has already had a wealth of cross-cultural awareness and cross-cultural knowledge before emigrating to Canada. As a member of the upper class of South Vietnam, she is very familiar with the clothing, diet, etiquette and language of western society.

The protagonist is deeply grateful to Canada and has a forgotten attitude towards the past to a certain extent. "For a whole year, Granby represented heaven on earth." [3] (Thuy 25) The protagonist mentioned her childhood friend Joana after she arrived in Canada. Joana established friendship with her, like an angel, regardless of whether she was a Vietnamese refugee or her poverty. The protagonist also writes about Canadian volunteers who help Vietnamese refugees, as well as Canadian government assistance to refugees. "...with our three-hundred dollar government allowance meant to furnish our first home in Quebec." [3] (Thuy 24) Indeed, Canada once provided shelters for refugees. "The integration of refugees into Canadian society is promoted as a source of pride and nation-building, adding to the richness and diversity of the Canadian population. [5]" The protagonist's father also has no nostalgia for the past. Her father was an important official in South Vietnam when he was in Vietnam. After immigrating to Canada, he needed to do jobs like cleaning the stairs in order to survive, but no matter what kind of life he lived, wherever he was, his father always maintained a sincere, happy and positive attitude.

However, despite the protagonist's embrace of the American Dream, her relationship with Vietnam cannot be separated because many of her relatives remain in Vietnam. After her family of three immigrated to Canada, her mother still helped Vietnamese relatives, such as her second uncle, to immigrate to Canada. The protagonist also returned to Vietnam due to her work. The protagonist's big family formed a complex immigration network across Canada and Vietnam, so that her memories and feelings shuttled through Vietnam and Canada, which made her unable to fully assimilating to the West; she remains the memory of Vietnam and the war. Also, her identity remains traces of her home country, Vietnam.

### 3. Conclusion

Literature has its special function of unfolding the darkness and sin under the cover of history from the perspective of microscope. History is a kind of grand narration, which permeates ideology everywhere; while literature is a powerful weapon to question or even subvert the grand historical narrative. From a micro perspective, *Ru* examines the destruction of a country caused by war, presents the tragic life of the people slaughtered by the war, and also celebrates the wisdom, determination and courage of individuals, especially women, who struggle with fate and environment.

Kim Thuy is very concerned about refugee narratives in novels. She broadens her vision to the

whole world, especially pays attention to geopolitics, and the trauma caused by the world war. In a modern society with complicated international circumstances, the fate of human being has been tied up by the conflicts of international political forces, and no one can escape from misfortunes if the country is overwhelmed by wars. Kim Thuy, with a strong sense of humanitarianism, uses literary works as weapons to denounce the disasters brought to all mankind by Western imperialist hegemony, in order to arouse people's vigilance and attention.

Previous history records the history of great men and great men, and previous statements also believe that history is determined by great men. Now the view of history has changed from grand narration to post-modern history. Kim's novel is a typical representative. Kim's novel does not directly present the cruel scene at battlefields, but puts the perspective on ordinary people and their life. With the help of the narration in daily life, the novel indirectly reflects the cruelty of war. Also, refugee narratives in *Ru* demonstrate how difficult it is for refugees to survive the host country and construct their new identities. So with its humanistic concern, refugee narratives play a certain literal role in terms of reflecting the social reality and accomplishing a humanitarian mission.

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