



Writing as Construction and Reconstruction: Metafictional Features in *Where Reasons End* by Li Yiyun

Haoya Zhu^(✉)

English Department, School of Foreign Languages and Literature, Shandong University, No. 5,
Hongjialou, Jinan 250100, Shandong, People's Republic of China
azhy@mail.sdu.edu.cn

Abstract. Adopting the theories of metafiction, this article extracts three metafictional features and gives an analysis of *Where Reasons End*, Li Yiyun's 2019 new release. By revealing the fictionality, inserting comments into dialogue as well as in its unique, culture-characterized language patterns, the book attempts to cure the writer's wound, while demonstrates clearly how Chinese and American cultures affect the immigrant writer and her life. Through this book, the two voices are marching onto convergence, which indicates a certain reconciliation of virtuality and reality, life and death, and different cultures achieved by the author.

Keywords: Chinese American literature · Li Yiyun · *Where Reasons End*;
metafiction · language function · mother culture

1 Introduction

Li Yiyun is one of the latest generations of Chinese American writers. Born in Beijing, she received her education in China and served in the army before coming to the United States for a doctor's degree in immunology. Having attended a writing workshop for leisure, she finally decided to divert to writing, followed by obtaining master's degrees in both fictional and non-fictional writing from the University of Iowa. Her 2019 release, *Where Reasons End*, was compiled during her breakdown: depression suicide of her 16-year-old son Vincent. Amid great grief, she spent only months in finishing this book, composed of dialogue between the mother, an anonymous Chinese American novelist, and the son Nikolai, who has recently taken the life of himself. The conversation is interspersed sometimes with poetry (including literal translated ancient Chinese poetry), lyrics and memory clips.

This article analyzes three metafictional features of the novel: the revealed and emphasized fictionality, the criticism-combined narration and the characteristics of its language with different cultural background, combined with practices from PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) in psychology and Kymlicka's study of minority groups in multi-culture. Based on the above aspects, in order to better understand that culturally diverse community and focus on helping improve their right of discourse and solve their dilemmas, this paper aims to:

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B. Majoul et al. (Eds.): ICLAHD 2022, ASSEHR 726, pp. 1341–1349, 2023.

https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-494069-97-8_171

1. Observe the (re)construction process of a son-lost parent utilizing the power of speech and writing;
2. Understand how immigrant writers are influenced by their original and local cultures in their works and their real life.

2 Methodology

Metafiction, coined by William H. Gass in *Philosophy and the Form of Fiction* in the 1960s, is the outcome of the development of literary self-consciousness. In the traditional novel production, the author disguises the behaviour of narrative to avoid the exposure of the fictional essence of the work. Therefore, the writing activity itself does not appear; nor does the author display the solving process in the text when faced with any doubts [1], as to achieve the “reality imitation”.

Metafiction breaks the traditional pseudo-truth by revealing its narrative behaviour and involves the function of self-reflection, a kind of fiction that David Lodge defines as what draws the readers’ attention to its fictional identity and its own production, a process of self-disclosure from the author [2]. Author of metafiction does not deny the fictional nature; what metafiction exposes is the ontological differences between the real and the fictional world as well as the literary tradition of hiding [3] 32, as Patricia Waugh puts it. On the basis of that, the author interrupts the structure in the text by directly commenting on the narrative. By mixing both discourse, metafiction guides its readers to the generation of novel, during which, due to the author’s thinking and questioning, the novel has the opportunity to constantly reflect on and adjust itself, leading to a strong self-consciousness for the whole narrative [4].

Besides the revealed fictionality and the author’s criticism, another unique feature of metafiction in *Where Reasons End* can be analyzed from the language tactics adopted by its author. Rumination of words indicates difficulties endured by the immigrant group, whom is affected by bi- or even multi-culture powers.

3 Fictionality: Breaking the Illusion of Reality

Compared with Li’s previous works, *Where Reasons End* cancels all the plots or specific social scenes, as the review comments “There is little story, as such: its 16 chapters—one for each year of the son’s life—are conversations only [5].” The whole book is consisted of imaginary dialogue between the narrator and Nikolai, depending purely on the advance of dialogue, memories and even refutation with a scattered structure. That runs counter to the tradition and dispels the logical integrity and space-time continuity, basis of “storytelling”, leading the attention to its own language form [6]. The casualness of dialogue reflects the restrained pain and uncontrollable thoughts under the calm and concise strokes of the mother.

From beginning to end, the narrator does not hide but repeatedly, deliberately reminds people of the fictionality of the dialogue. With a call of “Mother dear [7]1” and “fancy seeing you here [7]1”, Nikolai appears for no reason. “The liberty I had taken to get myself here [7]1.” On the other hand, the rationality of the dialogue comes from that the author dispels “time” to create a world of words. The “irrelevant [7]1” time grants the

virtual dialogue, and further implies the narrator's anticipation of eternity in novel, so strong after the death of her child that the novel writing becomes an inevitable.

The two parties of the dialogue do not appear to be more real in the novel because of the realistic dialogue behaviour, but reveal their fictionality without prompting. In weighing *somebody* and *nobody*, it is obvious that literally "any person with a solid physical form could not avoid having some body [7]26," when the son quickly admits "I'm nobody [7]26", and the negation of "a solid physical form [7]26" exposes the virtuality of the dialoguers. Throughout the book, the narrator does not preserve any authenticity for Nikolai but even doubts whether this dialogue is sustainable: "Any less way would only make him vanish again [7]14." "*Again*" shows the narrator's strong awareness of Nikolai's death—the virtuality of the interlocutor is clear. The series of activities indicates the extreme pain of the narrator, afraid of Nikolai's disappearance even in the virtual world.

The remind of the fictionality awakens the readers who are about to enter the novel's fictional state while the dialogue marches on. The emergence of the author and her real life experience, e.g. "We bought a little tree yesterday [7]56" "The snow, the first of the season, had begun in the morning [7]51" "I made a cake for Christmas Eve [7]67", exposes the meta-narrative layer that the narrator in the text is not exactly equal to the real author. For the characters in metafiction, they usually get to know their own situation from their relationship with the author [3]120. The narrator, with a clear self-consciousness parallel to the author, knows well "about the embarrassing situation he or she is in, and that he or she is written into this fictional world [8]133". In that case, the authenticity illusion is broken, distanced, and the reading expectation is betrayed, which makes the reader's rational vision maintained, yet making them inevitably fall into the author's narration. Only in the real fictionality can the dialogue between the narrator and Nikolai have a fairly reasonable way to exist, so the reader enters a text world created for the author as well as for the reader.

Here, fictionality is mixed with reality in the above paradoxical way. The challenge therein need not to be raised by the readers, when the narrator in the novel asks herself: "Yet some day, I thought, people would question these conversations between him and me [7]81." To that, obviously, the narrator within the book is not able to answer. But to another, the direction and continuity of the dialogue, an answer may be found by the author, who borrows Nikolai's mouth at the end in saying: "You write fiction. Then you can make up whatever you want [7]83." Fictionality relies only on the narrator's trust in herself.

The exposure of virtuality breaks the illusion of false reality, and shows the author's reflection on the essence of the dialogue, through which the novel integrates in strong self-awareness, and further questions the ultimatum of life.

4 Narration and Criticism: Reflexivity Towards Its Extreme

One of the effects of metafiction is its function of connection between writing and criticism [1]8, which Scholes believes that metafiction absorbs perspectives of literary criticism into itself [9]; likewise, David Lodge regards the effect as a "short circuit" between the text and the world [10]. That approach, from the perspective of literature,

allows metafiction to “go beyond the limitation that novel only involves the story but not itself [11]93”; from criticism, to break through “the limit of logical discourse of criticism [11]93”.

The combination is conspicuous throughout the dialogue, in which criticism and narration are at times distributed respectively to the two narrators. In response to his mother’s speech or question, Nikolai is often critical or even replies rather in questioning the language form. Where the mother recalls all the unspeakable words of her child that are compared with a wound forever open [7]42, Nikolai comments on the metaphor as “a mediocre self-help book [7]42”. Then, their focus turns to *self-help book* and its literal extensions, *non-self-help book*, *non-selves*, *self-helpy* and so on: a helpable self must be “being”, since a non-self can’t get any help, just like the virtual Nikolai—the dialogue has shifted from the discussion of trauma to what is “a mindful way to *be* [7]42–43” now. The coexistence of language and meta-language inserts a meta-perspective in the book, and the deviation from semantics to form makes the dialogue advance in a unique zigzag way.

Nikolai also maintains a meta-perspective on the narrator’s recalling life stories. On the story of an old acquaintance Rosie, Nikolai did not stroll down the memory lane with his mom but pointed out that “Rosie represents the quintessential never-lastingness of good old time [7]77.” The introspection in these comments on narration deconstructs the literal form of language. Whether it is the manipulation of word formation, splicing word components, the comparison of various literal forms, or the meta-criticism, they are the author’s attempts to explore the essence of language and life.

Furthermore, the narrator herself has her own critical perspective. Rumination on the said words emerges occasionally. When it comes to the behaviour of eavesdropping or steel-listening (literal translated *Tou’ting*), the narrator agrees that Nikolai “can do that even better now [7]80”, for Nikolai now lives in the narrator’s own imagination and becomes a thief of thought at an advantage. The ubiquitous narration-comments brings the reflexivity towards the extreme. The novel not only uses the narration to construct, but also uses the criticism to deconstruct to achieve a broken integration, as Chen Houliang comments on metafiction, “The author is not only excited about the unlimited power in creating the world in the novel, but also shows a kind of worry from time to time for doubting its authenticity [8]130.”

In fact, whether it is the son’s constant refutation, which is in line with the temperament of an adolescent boy, or the narrator’s obsessional rumination, it is no more than the author’s interrogation of herself from seemingly different angles, a continuous reappearance in the post-traumatic period which Freud depicted as trauma latency and delay, and which Kathy Karus believes that the traumatic event can only be represented in its delayed continuous and invasive return [12]. With the constant self-examination, the author tries to use the commentative narration to explore the boundary of speech—where reasons end extends the inexplicable emotion; only Sisyphusian exploration can help clarify and reach the boundary. In terms of form, the speaking-questioning-reflection mode indicates the author’s internal contradiction after trauma. The debate between the narrators is similar to the long-lasting debate of literary creation and literary criticism, while the metafictional mode enables the reconciliation as the dialogue moves on. In other words, the author tries to mediate a settlement over time and gain the strength to

reach a ultimate convergence (*Sometimes you sound like me, very un-Mommy-like* [7]76) of harmony.

5 Language (as Acquired) and Culture: (Re)construction of Life and Self

Language is the first hurdle for immigrant writers, who, after arriving at the destination, bring along their language and historical narrative, which, however, have to be put aside with a set of connected institutionalized practices as well [13]113, because they know that their own and their children's success depend on integrating with the new society [13]138, the foundation, to acquire the mainstream language of the society [13]20. Li is concerned about word use and word formation. That extreme language sensitivity can be often found in immigrant writers, for whom the survival issues are closely connected with those of language ("In addition to survival, there is still a struggle in language [14].").

Li, as a favourite of mainstream writing awards, it is safe to say that she has successfully overcome the language difficulties. However, facing extreme situation, the common emotional response nullifies the language. The recurrence of language rumination, i.e., the reconsideration of the language and especially the words spoken, is a distinctive feature of this book. The rumination falls into two categories: one concerning with utterability and the other with accuracy. The former challenges whether language can help express freely in extreme cases such as the loss of a child. It examines the boundary of language and speech. Once beyond the scope, difficulties or even aphasia may then attend on the speaking, as interpreted by "we grownups are at a loss for words in an unfamiliar or unwanted situation [7]49". Settle, emptiness, unclutteredness, clutter, clatter, clot, cluster, a series of thoughts brings out a string of alliterated cl- words, an experiment of "settling down" at the language field. It failed, though. None could release the narrator from "the void left by him [7]36". Even for those simple and clear concepts, language is still not strong enough to achieve satisfactory accuracy. The extreme grief brings unspeakable pain, and it further stimulates people's psychological defense mechanism of "overprotectiveness [15]", increases their alertness [16], which exacerbates the author's original language sensitivity and produces a stress-induced language sensation, causing "loss, grief, sorrow, bereavement, trauma—never seen to be able to speak precisely of what was plaguing me [7]46". The setback of utterability and accuracy is actually a severe damage of the construction ability of language, as what speech calls for is reason.

Exhaustion for word meaning is a common experience for immigrants, who are required by the unfamiliar language to constantly clarify the meaning, justifiably unimaginable for Nikolai. At the same time, the search for meaning functions as a means of constructing self-discourse. The more accurately the word is utilized, the more equally the discourse power they share with the native speakers and the dominant culture. The topic deviation to the plural form of *octopus* fully demonstrates the natural disadvantage on the sensitivity of language for a second language speaker. Even if *octopus* and *octopi* are etymologically equally right, the son stresses that *octopi* appears more like Latin (even if it does not originate from Latin), which is in effect more "erudite [7]74".

Naturally, it is more difficult for the EFL learners to reach the sensitivity as the mother-tongue when it comes to the cultural implication, an unspeakable knowledge, as John Edwards points out, of historical and cultural associations linked with language. The reason is that only people who grow up in the certain society are able to fully participate in this expanded communication and interaction [13]127, as is why the narrator lamented enviously that what Nikolai acquired is “a dictionary’s worth of knowledge [7]10”. That raises the possibility of aphasia when the narrator argues with her son.

Interestingly, no matter it is aphasia or the mother-child disputes, their root cause or solution can probably be found in the author’s mother culture which displays strong vitality in her works. Its influence has gone beyond simple comprehension or application such as literal translation of idioms, allusions or description of poems and stories, but goes deep into the construction of the author’s ideological values reflected in the synthesis and evaluation of culture [17]. Li, who spent her youth in Chinese Mainland, can be found a deep influence in the construction of her ideas in which Chinese culture has participated. The influence may be more or less suppressed when writing in English, but once at the critical edge of aphasia, it will be brought out as an instinctive reaction like Huang Rong’s “orchid touch kung fu [18]” confronted with a critical moment. In the face of the unspeakable pain, the chain of verbal relief is almost broken. However, the author finally finds an appropriate expression of extreme sorrow and thick pain in the ancient Chinese poet Xin Qiji’s (1140–1207) *Ci of Chou Nu Er*. In traditional Chinese poetry, emotions are preferably expressed in “not using direct description (*Bu Shi Zhibi* 不使直笔)”. Especially, when encountered with great pain, the emotion is expressed by integrating emotions into the broad scenery and all kinds of matters and persons and sensed in perceiving unspeakable sadness [19]. With the reader’s own perception and resonance with the intermediary, emotions are conveyed in implications, “without a word writ down, all wit may be attained (*Bu Zhuo Yizi, Jin De Fengliu* 不着一字, 尽得风流)[20].” The power of the two cultures affects the narrator’s cognitive structure and emotional expression simultaneously, and the transferred culture between different languages can realize the achievement of uttering emotion to a certain extent.

Chinese culture has influenced further than Li’s behavior into the parenting style and the daily mother-child communication. Her thoughts naturally reveal traces of Chinese culture, whose characteristics such as unhurriedness, prudence, stress of contemplation, tactful and polite way of speaking, form a visible conflict with Nikolai’s directness and overtness from the western culture. The mother and son once debate over in which way people should behave. The mother deliberately appears stupid and slow, keeping herself low in the crowd, while the son liked being “sharp and bright [7]20” but nothing of the “dumb version [7]20” of his mother, calling his mother “a hypocrite [7]19”. The mother is also the practical version of the ancient Chinese saying “Shoot the bird which takes the lead (Common fame is seldom to blame).”

Such cultural contact and conflict is almost inevitable in any works of immigrant writers. Even if the author’s work has shifted from what *The Guardian* called “realism” to a more personalized, autobiographical writing, the in-depth cultural edification whether in public narration or in private narration reveals its strong influence. On smoothing the cultural contact, Fei Xiaotong proposed that we should recognize and study the essence of our own culture, and, we should understand the culture of other nations, so to inherit

and develop our own culture as well as make contribution to the future of all mankind [21]. But for individuals, as the narrator (un)consciously demonstrates the influence of Chinese culture and uses it as the code to educate her son, she herself is also judged and influenced by the mainstream American culture represented by Nikolai. There are disputes in this contact, even stereotypes and unfair judgments on cultural vulnerable groups (“*My mom is an immigrant so she speaks English with an accent [7]6.*”) However, it is observable that cultural conflicts could be reconciled. The convergence of common answers to the topics of human gradually occupies the dominant place, while the cultural harmony destroyed by the death of Nikolai is also rebuilt in the exchange of words.

In *Where Reasons End*, the rumination in language is brought into full play in strenuous questioning. All kinds of attempts in language, including the almost obsessive-compulsive exploration of accuracy in language, reflect the meta-function of language in construction. Series of discussions may not solve the specific linguistic problems, but the exploration needs in metaphysical level—how language constructs itself and our lives—have been satisfied. The (re)construction function of language is also reflected in some commonality between author and God, a certain omnipotent creativity. The dialogue, carried out with the writer’s pen, is a metaphor for the process of parents’ producing life—“this time by words [7]33”. Between lines of words, Nikolai, which once existed and disappeared, is reconstructed.

For the author, there is even boarder significance. Structuralism brings the trend of self-reflection in metafiction. In this book, the construction function of language is challenged in full spectrum. The unspeakable and unappeasable pain is reflected in the author’s plainly shown writing difficulties. In the long dialogue of 80 pages, 16 chapters, the writing difficulties are clearly displayed. But the (re)construction of language help the author gain the privilege of leaving the pain, “poems and stories are trying to speak what can’t be spoken... Sometimes their shadows can reach the unspeakable [7]83.” It helps untangle the incidents and get comfort in the real world, the failing reason re-operating through writing, the real emotion placed, and the purpose of reconstruction is achieved to a certain extent.

6 Conclusion

Where Reasons End is not a book for pleasure, nor is it to be a cutting-edge metafiction experiment. As Maria Papadima who closely studies suicidal adolescents commented, it is an “attempt by the author to find words to capture what is surely one of the most unbearable experiences a parent can go through: the suicide of their adolescent child [22]”. It is an self-built ark sailing to the future from the broken life.

The novel never covers up its fictionality. Through the exploration of the essence of writing, the author exposes the process of writing and ponders over the form and significance of speech. In the book, Li constantly explores the utterability and the accuracy of speech through etymology, comparison of similar words and rumination. Though the trial may go beyond normal limit and appear extreme, the writer explores the function of language like a warrior, and further shows the dilemma of the immigrant writer. Li finally overcomes the obstacle and even actively use it to integrate the advantages of Chinese culture in emotional expression, so as to achieve multicultural characterizations.

For the writer, the writing process undoubtedly shows the writing difficulty after experiencing the pain of losing a child. Though enduring great pain, writing is also a dialogue with her own rationality and emotion. Even if it is met with boundary, it is known that there is still control outside the boundary. Despite the virtuality of the writing itself, it helps maintain the son's life, and acquire the true relief and healing of pain. "In the unusual cross between fiction and autobiography she writes in, there is the potential for freedom and escape from a death [23]." In a sense, with demonstration of some dilemmas faced by the immigrant group, the book helps the mainstream public better understand the cultural minority groups and focus on helping improve their right of discourse and improve the harmony in a culturally-diverse society.

At the end of the novel, the two voices' convergence indicates a certain self-reconciliation achieved by the author. The rational discussion of life and death on the edge of fiction and non-fiction sublimates personal pain and turns such a harrowing book into human artistic wealth.

This article attempts in extracting and analyzing three metafictional characteristics of *Where Reasons End* combined with the analysis from the cultural and psychological perspectives. Owing to the complexity of immigrant issue, some of the analysis was not thorough and left to be further discussed. Also, it is worth exploring the recovery effect of writing, which, as an interdisciplinary field of literature and psychology, is possible to be applied as a means of psychological cure.

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