
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Spatial and Narrative Escape in Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*

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ABSTRACT

Bone is the impressive first novel written by Fae Myenne Ng, a first-generation Chinese American woman writer. Under the guidance of Gaston Bachelard's and M. M. Bakhtin's theories of space and Gérard Genette's theories of narrative discourse, this paper probes into the narrative space and time in Ng's *Bone*, trying to detect the protagonist's escape consciousness revealed in the form of spatial and narrative escape. Leila's individual escape, which derives from the family tragedy under the exploitation and expulsion of racial minorities in America, is, in fact, the epitome of every anxious Chinese American's impulse to run away.

KEYWORDS

Bone; Fae Myenne Ng; space; narratology; escape

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1. Introduction

Bone is the impressive first novel written by Fae Myenne Ng, a first-generation Chinese American woman writer. The story, set in the San Francisco Chinatown, talks about the break-up of a Chinese-American family. Leila, the narrator and the eldest daughter tries to fathom the source of her family's bad luck. The answer may be Grandpa Leong's restless bones, Mah's affair with Tommie Hom, Ong and Leong Laundry fraud, Ona's suicide, or everything about Chinatown.

Many researchers have discussed how Leila locates herself between different cultures and how she constructs her identity. Most of them agree that Leila finally strikes a balance. Phillipa Kafka (1997) regards the "need of balance" or "syncretism" as the major element of *Bone* and reckons that Leila embodies the syncretic solution, which ends the text (53). Carol P. Christ comments in *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest* (1995) that Leila overcomes the opposition with wholeness. Moreover, many critics hold the view that Leila finally chooses to settle down in a highly hybrid "third space".

However, this paper sees Leila as a struggling character who fails to strike a balance or find any solution to her messy life. This paper takes Leila's strong desire for escape and self-redemption, which can be detected from her spatial displacement and narration, as proof of her desperate plight and tries to trace the origin of the escape consciousness ingrained in the ethnic minorities who suffer from poverty and racism in America.

2. No Escape: Restless Spatial Displacement

Before discussing Leila's spatial displacement, which is rather passive, this paper would first introduce the other family members' active spatial displacement as a way of escape. As mentioned in Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*: "In a passionate escape, there must be not only a place from which to flee but a place to which to flee" (as cited in Bluefarb, 1967, p. ii). In the face of the suffocating bad fortune, all the members of this unhappy family seek for places to escape to.

First and foremost, Ona's suicide represents a fatal escapism, an escape "from daily reality" (Bluefarb, 1967) to the world of the dead, which leaves her broken bones and broken family behind. Mah's nostalgic visit to Hong Kong is also an act of escaping. Entering a space full of memories of the past, she seeks "for solace and comfort" (Ng, 1994). Despite the fact that "Mah looked great, a good ten years younger" after the ten-day trip, it is destined to be a short escape since "the sorrow about Ona's death would come on like jet lag" (Ng, 1994). What's more, Leon's shipping and Nina's flying point to the same type of escape, which is both temporal and spatial. They escape to another time zone, getting far away from the land with which they are familiar, in expectation of getting rid of the mess, the trauma and the melancholy hovering over this place. Specifically, Leon exiles himself in an isolated space over the water for some "time away" (Ng, 1994), while Nina constantly enters new spaces for freedom and relief. Leon seems to have the freest choice of routes and the openest mind when exposed to the vast open sea, but he is actually "confined on the ship, from which there is no escape" (Foucault, 1965). Michel Foucault (1965) commented on the "Narrenschiff" in the first chapter of his *Madness and Civilization*, pointing out that "to hand a madman over to sailors was to be permanently sure he would not be prowling beneath the city walls; it made sure that he would go far away; it made him a prisoner of his own departure". Leon's embarkation and departure are not only his voluntary disappearance and escape but also a despairing metaphor for the expulsion of Chinese immigrants from mainstream American culture. To top it all, when one disembarks, he is considered as one from the other world; thus, his homeland becomes vague, lying between two countries, neither of which belongs to him (Foucault, 1965). In this sense, the navigation turns out to be the mirror of Chinese American's embarrassment of being neither Chinese nor American. As for Nina, while it is easy to reckon that the third daughter succeeds in going her own way by moving far away from her family and Chinatown, a closer look reveals that her "flight" is not that carefree. The theme of flight has close ties with that of escape. Seemingly, Nina embraces the freedom of flight, getting time away from every single moment of earthly affairs and the fright of Ona's death (Ng, 1994). But the fact is just the opposite. As Leila discovers on her trip to New York, Nina "still suffered" (Ng, 1994). Working as a frequent flyer, Nina distances herself from "the great safeguards of earth" (Bachelard, 1994), which has roots in the Mother-Earth archetype. Although Nina finally quits the job as a flight attendant when finding it "so out of it" (Ng, 1994), like Leon's shipping, her newfound job, taking tours to China, still has the whiff of flight and escape from one land to another. She remains a rootless person with both her feet and life up in the air. The regular shift in location by plane confines Nina to a movable prison and makes her "the prisoner of the passage" (Foucault, 1965), like Leon. Such incessant spatial displacement brings only a false sense of freedom; worse still, it reduces the possibility of building a permanent and warm house of one's own. As Bachelard (1994) states, "We feel calmer and more confident when in the old home...than we do in the houses on streets where we have only live as transients". The impossibility of settling down has Nina afflicted by a stronger sense of insecurity and instability.

When it comes to Leila's spatial displacement, it is more of a passive movement than an active adjustment, like Ona's departure for relief, Mah's for solace, Leon's for peace or Nina's for freedom. Leila's restless spatial displacement symbolizes the act of escaping. She is actually forced to engage in the endless spatial movement. As a relations specialist both for her school and family, Leila is always on her way to visit students' home, find Leon, stay with Mah and accompany Mason. Without regard to her job, Leila is dragged toward three poles represented by Leon, Mah and Mason in turn. Jin Huang (2015) deduces that Leila is "pulled about by her mother and Mason and trapped in Leon's loneliness and her mother's grief". Leila has to act as a go-between for Mah and Leon after they have a quarrel. At the same time, Mah asks for Leila's company after Ona's suicide, while Mason wants his wife to live with him rather than merely visit him. Although the pull of Mason, one of the three poles, seems to be milder than the others, the husband's caring and waiting still stifles Leila, just as the sympathy for Mah's being alone and worries over Leon do. Under such circumstances, Leila gets a sense of heebie-jeebies, which is externalized as acute back pains for months. She is indeed sliding into a nervous breakdown. The author writes on behalf of Leila that all she wants is a ritual to forget the blame and the pressing fear (Ng, 1994). It shows that she is in urgent need of escape. To be frank, Leila did try to escape spatially at least three times. She leaves the Salmon Alley and chooses to live with Mason before the bad fortune starts, while *Bone's* reverse chronology informs the readers in advance of the failure of this attempt. The moment Leila was notified of Ona's suicide, she conducted her second escape to the restroom, just like Ona used to do. Hiding in a girl's bathroom downstairs and locking herself in a stall, Leila temporarily escapes to a small and faraway space where the grief might be compressed and time might freeze. Another time, with the advice of Nina, Leila resorted to American restaurants and abandoned the familiar Chinatown places so as to forget about the "bare issues" (Ng, 1994) and unpleasant memories housed by the space of her first house.

Karmann Ghia, a car that enables Leila's spatial displacement, symbolically stands for Leila's space in *Bone*. In literature, it is common to take moving vehicles as representations of the space of road. The space of a car or train can be extended to that of road or journey. M. M. Bakhtin (1981) put forward the concept of "chronotope of the road" in his essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel". In Kazuo Ishiguro's masterpiece, *The Remains of the Day*, the butler Stevens's Ford constructs an "open and private transitional space" (Ma, 2020) as a concrete embodiment of "chronotope of the road". So does Leila's Karmann Ghia. On the one hand, this vehicle, which serves as a tool for shuttling back and forth between different exterior spaces, bears the mark of openness. Bakhtin (1981) likens the choice of "a real itinerary" to the choice of "the path of life". He points out that "in folklore, a road is almost never merely a road, but always suggests the whole, or portion of, 'a path of life'" (Bakhtin, 1981). In this sense,

Leila's choice of the way to Salmon Alley or to the Mission implies her uncertainty about opting for Mah or Mason, family or self. On the other hand, the interior space of a car bestows Leila a rare solitude and privacy. Bachelard (1994) reckons that those places "in which we were alone furnished the framework for an interminable dream". The solitary space in Karmann Ghia creates a short-lived dream for Leila to have a small taste of freedom and comfort. The hum of cars can soothe her (Ng, 1994). In the space of car, she feels good.

What is more, the narrow "house" built by the space of a car indicates the narrowness of Leila's mental space and the necessity of breaking the cage and fleeing. As driving becomes a metaphor for escaping, Leila feels safe when the car picks up speed. She is extremely sensitive about the speed of vehicles and mentions it many times in her narration; for instance, "I felt the car going, picking up speed" and "being on the road, moving fast in a nice car, I relaxed" (Ng, 1994). When Leila hears about Ona's death, the car's "slow vibration" and the "red light [which] drops two spots and turns green" (Ng, 1994) suggest the load on her mind. Later on, she resorts to speeding up the car so as to escape from the earthshaking change in her life and every piece of information about Ona, which comes too late for her to know. As she narrates: "I didn't want to hear about the last time he saw Ona. 'See you,' I said and pulled my door shut and, put the car in gear and gunned out of the parking lot. I drove as fast as Mason out of the parking lot and then onto the freeway" (Ng, 1994). The usage of "gun out" and three consecutive "and" in her narration implies her haste to escape. Leila also avoids making choices between Mason and Mah when the former asks her to marry him by huddling in the small space of an accelerating car and keeping her mouth shut.

3. Self-Redemption: Leila as Narrator

It can be deduced from not only Leila's restless spatial displacement mentioned above but also her emotional instability, betrayed by her behaviors and narration, that Leila, instead of striking a balance between family and self, is stuck in melancholy and anxiety. She gets irritated easily. She goes into a sudden hysterics when Leon doesn't do as he is told. Even she herself notices her moodiness: "I hate it when I get bitchy like that, but once I'm in the mood, I can't stop." (Ng, 1994) What is more, her psychological status is also revealed in the way she narrates *Bone's* stories. Sometimes, Leila's introspective first-person narrative gets scrappy, especially when she narrates her emotional reactions to sister Ona's death in Chapter 11. A series of pressing questions—"What happened? What time? Why would she jump? Are you sure somebody didn't push her? Did somebody give her drugs?" (Ng, 1994)—unveil the image of an elder sister on the brink of breakdown. In her narration, Leila always asks herself questions like this, striving to figure out how "all the bad luck started" (Ng, 1994).

The confusion and anxieties serve as a catalyst for her impulse to trace back her family history and narrate it so as to find out the truth. Her narration can be seen as a narrative escape from her messy life. First, the act of narrating is naturally a kind of escape. The minute of narrating is "a minute freed from the order of [T]ime." (as cited in Genette, 1983, p. 223). Through narration, the narrator escapes from the time of reality to that of narrating. Genette (1983) mentions Tristram's comic aporia of spending one year telling only the first day of his life: "he observes that he has gotten 364 days behind, that he has therefore moved backwards rather than forward, and that, living 364 times faster than he writes". The more he narrates, the more the time of narrating lags behind real time. A typical example of using narration as a means to escape from reality is the Chinese writer Xiaobin Xu. In the most difficult years of her life, she could only "redeem herself by imagination", which refers to novel creation; She "looks into the inner world for so long that her memory of the outer world becomes fragmented, like [she has] 'never lived'. This is: escape." (Xu, 1996) Leila's narration, similar to Xu's, is also an obsessive focus on the inner world and the past. She escapes from the real time to the narrative time through narrating, in this way managing to blank the pains in real life out. Secondly, the way Leila narrates is also about escape. Leila's recollection of the past is revealed in reverse chronological order, slowly moving back to the core event—Ona's suicide—and then to the early life in America when all these stories started. This narrative order is a subversion of and an escape from the traditional chronological order, which defamiliarizes the experiences. At the same time, readers are likely to take the order in which Leila chooses to narrate the events as the order in which the events actually happened, under the illusion that things are getting better. In this sense, this narrative method Leila applies can also be seen as a kind of self deception, which is specially picked to escape from confronting the trauma.

Leila's attempts to find the cause and solutions fail. She offers various possibilities about the bad luck but doesn't come to a conclusion: Leon thinks the bad luck begins because Grandpa Leong's bones remain restless; Mah blames her affair with Tommie Hom; Nina blames everything and every body in Salmon Alley (Ng, 1994). Till the end of her narration, there is no clue of any practical solution to fix up the shattered family. But luckily, it can be detected from the ambiguous ending of Leila's narration that she finally finds the strength to keep going. "The last event narrated in this novel is Leila's departure from Salmon Alley. From the perspective of narrative structure, it echoes the beginning of the novel and gives readers a feeling that this is about Leila's departure after her marriage. But in fact, from the perspective of narrative time, the event at the end occurs before Leila's marriage. This arrangement gives the whole narrative a circular structure with the end followed by the beginning, resulting in an open ending to the novel." (Dong, 2019) The departure full of hope and tender feelings in the past not only forms a sharp contrast with the

subsequent gloom and doom but also brings a glimmer of hope from the past to the current adversity. Through looking back, Leila does find the original hope and confidence which empower her to be reborn in the completeness of this circle.

4. Escape Motif: Epitome of Racism

The escape motif can be traced back to Greek and Hebrew origins: in Greek mythology, Oedipus escaped twice from the prophecy of killing his father and marrying his mother, geographically from Thebes to Corinth and then from Corinth to Thebes; in the Bible, Moses led the exodus of the Israelites out of Egypt, and Noah had a narrow escape from the world-engulfing flood. The act of escape can be categorized into either positive or negative one: the positive one stems from the pursuit of individualism and freedom; the negative one, as Charles Stevens Ellis (2014) puts it, derives from the attempts to free oneself from the traditional roles demanded by others, the social rules and restrictions, and to escape from reality or the absurdity of existence.

Leila's attempts to escape belong to the latter negative group, which involves a multi-directional escape among three poles and a spiritual escape from reality. Leila's escape consciousness originates from her shattered family. Although the escape is not the direct outcome of her ethnic identity, it inevitably has its origin in Chinese Americans' low socioeconomic status, which ruins her family. In the daughters' eyes, Mah and Leon's marriage is "a marriage of toil—of toiling together" (Ng, 1994). Mah devotes her life to Tommie Hom's sweatshop, sewing "with the dinner rice still in her mouth" and working after the kids go to bed and long before any of them awake (Ng, 1994). Leon secretly stores his low-paid employment history in his brick-colored suitcase—doing laundry, sharpening knives, and making beds (Ng, 1994)... Quarrels over money, "[m]oney to eat with, to buy clothes with, to pass this life with" (Ng, 1994), continue to break out in this family. Juliana Chang's (2005) portrait of the typical domesticity of Chinese Americans—"split household, small producer, and dual-wage earner"—in her "Melancholic Remains: Domestic and National Secrets in Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*" accurately pictures Leung's family. According to Chang,

The split-household arrangement ensured the low cost of maintaining a cheap, exploitable labor force, while the exclusion of Chinese women alleviated racial fears of an alien population settling in the United States. The unpaid family labor of the Chinese American small-producer household enabled maximum production at minimum cost and provided the appearance of a national openness to racial difference as well as transnational trade. Workers in the dual-wage earner household fill the otherwise undesired low-wage jobs of the national economy. (Chang, 2005)

Such a suffocating domesticity is not rare in Chinatown: San Fran serves as a dusty and crowded corner where the marginalized old Chinese bachelors are abandoned and forgotten, sharing the common lobby, toilet and bath (Ng, 1994); most of the families of Leila's students have enough worries inside their cramped apartments, always talking about money at dinnertime (Ng, 1994). These Chinese immigrants' failure to get a decent job is not due to the lack of skills but the racial segmentation and stratification in the workplace. As Chang (2005) states, "racial segmentation of the labor market ensures a population with little alternative but to participate in low-wage labor". In such a hypocritical and hostile country where a minority group is both exploited and disavowed, a Chinese-American family is doomed to be tragic. Leila's individual escape is, in fact, the epitome of every anxious Chinese American's impulse to run away, which discloses the pains and tortures suffered by the Asian-American community by portraying the people's everyday struggle. In this sense, Leila's narration of her family's history turns out to be the narration of that of her people's.

Such a narration is also what Ng provides through creating Leila's story. Like Leila, Ng herself grows up in an immigrant family in which the father is a laborer, and the mother is a seamstress and witnesses the discrimination she wrote about in her novel. E. M. Forster (1927) reckons that "the novelist...makes up a number of word-masses roughly describing himself...These word-masses are his characters...Their nature is conditioned by what he guesses about other people and about himself." Leila's escape appears in the form of domestic escape in *Bone*; even so, the creation of this forever-fleeing character has much to do with Ng's own understanding of ethnic escape. The author, as the instance of writing, reveals in *Bone* her consciousness of escape rooted in her ethnic experience through writing about the motif of escape.

5. Conclusion

Through the dissection of space and narrative in *Bone*, Leila's strong consciousness of escape is explored. As a struggling character who fails to keep her balance or find a way out of her messy life, Leila is just like the bone, which signifies both combination and rip. She is like a creaky skeleton which laboriously supports her decrepit "family body"; however, the bone itself teeters on the brink of falling apart under the strain of different body parts. Stressed out, Leila manages to save herself by attempting spatial and narrative escape. Spatially, she is forced to engage in an endless spatial displacement while at the same time searching for a way to escape. Narratively, she uses reverse chronological order and an open-ended circular ending to create a glimmer of hope for her seemingly hopeless escape. Her escape consciousness is fundamentally caused by her Chinese-American identity and her low socio-economic status. Moreover, her struggles actually epitomize the livings of Chinese immigrants in America. Although, as an

individual, she finds neither the cause of the bad luck nor solutions to end it, she finally regains her original hope by combing through the past, which becomes the power supporting her to face her ongoing life.

This paper provides reference and certain insights for analyzing the Escape Motif from spatial and narrative perspectives. However, it still has some limitations. For example, it fails to explore in detail the author Fae Myenne Ng's own narrative motives, narrative techniques, and the background of the creation of *Bone* to support the discussion on escape consciousness. Further studies are expected in this respect.

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