



وقائع المؤتمر العلمي السنوي الثالث لكلية التربية الأساسية
في مجال العلوم الانسانية والتربوية والنفسية والموسوم:
(مؤتمر كلية التربية الأساسية في مجال العلوم الإنسانية والتربوية والنفسية)
وتحت شعار (نحو رؤية إنسانية وتربوية رائدة لبناء مجتمع معرفي متكامل)
يومي الاحد و الاثنين 14-15/6/2026

Transforming Place through Spatial Setting in Shih- Li Kow's *The Sum of Our Follies*

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Abstract

This research tries to explore the role spatial setting in Shih-Li Kow's *The Sum of Our Follies*. It primarily concentrates on the way through which Kow uses her regional places to provide the reader with Malaysian local color attributes. It will identify the novel's spatial setting as a manifestation of Kow's profound concern with radical transformation of the original places into new ones due to the social and cultural changes in Malaysia. As for research gap, it lies in the discovery of the place as the symbolic transformation of the Malaysian society into new burgeoning social, cultural, and intellectual prosperity. Therefore, the research tackles the unprecedented transformation of the traditional place which is scarcely tackled in previous studies. It explores the layers of meaning that the symbols of place communicate and highlights how these symbols embody the Malaysian regional openness to other cultures and traditions. In this respect, it follows a qualitative approach to analyze the novel's characters and setting. On the one hand, the characters will be interpreted as examples of Malaysian people who co-exist with new cultures. On the other hand, the novel's setting will be discussed as the fictional replicas of Malaysian places that had undergone drastic socio-cultural changes in most recent decades.

Keywords: characters, diversity, Kow, multiculturalism, Spatial Setting, symbolic transformation .



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1. Introduction

Shih-Li Kow is a Malaysian writer. She depicts the Malaysian panoramic social and cultural issues. In her fiction, there is a sense of national belonging. She deals with the most critical issues of Malaysian life. One of her obvious fictional concerns is the treatment of the sense of place. She provides the reader with the insightful representation of the regional peculiarities. Her fictional settings are characterized by the Malaysian landscapes and the related places. Accordingly, the issue of the sense of place is deemed one of the integral elements of her writing style. This style carries out the symbolical embodiment of Malaysia at change. This change comprises several aspects of changes (Filipova, 2022).

The changes include the socio-cultural changes. These changes are caused by the mixture of the Malaysian people and other foreign cultures. Malaysia, which has become one of the most distinguished multicultural nations, welcomes social diversity. People from different parts of the world come to Malaysia for the sake of work, economic boom, education and so forth. Consequently, there has been cultural diversity. This diversity is considered the foundational premise for the slight change in the Malaysian society. This is because Malaysian people interact with foreign cultures that cause new social changes (Rieh, 2020). Therefore, the Malaysian cultural traditions transform as they intermingle with the traditions of the newly arrived people of diverse cultural backgrounds.

Furthermore, Shih-Li Kow deals with the sense of location by tackling the technological advancement. The technological progress in the world, as well as in Malaysia, results in new social fragmentation. Such fragmentation yields in the disintegration of the society and its people. As such, people tend to construct their communities in the light of their needs. People need to improve their life's needs by the technological advancement (Bone, 2005). Yet, this advancement makes changes in the regional terrains of these communities. People, consequently, look for prosperous life through technology regardless their original terrains. Therefore, the original place changes gradually. This change is negotiated through conceptualizing the sense of location per se. Hence, the research aims to explore the sense of

location in Kow's *The Sum of Our Follies*. Moreover, it examines how the sense of location is affected by technological and socio-cultural changes as depicted in the novel.

2. The Sense of Location in *The Sum of our Follies*

The Sum of our Follies hinges on Auyong who is seemingly the story's narrator. Mary Anne, an orphan girl, is another main character. The narrator leaves his town in order to work as a lychee producer in a company. In so doing, he seeks life perfection through good labor. Mary Anne is adopted by non-relative parents after a fatal accident. The story's events take place in Kuala Lumpur and Lubok Sayong. Both Auyong and Mary Anne undergo special experience in these places. In this sense, location plays a crucial role in identifying the national attributes of the fictional setting depicted by the narrative point of view. The regional setting is often described as the spatial setting as it heavily relies on the portrayal of regions in the fictional plot.

The sense of location refers to the presence of regional aspects in literary works through "meticulous and purposeful narrative descriptive details" (Sasa and Abu Jweid, 2022, p.329). It includes the representational meanings of place and its significance to the implied meanings of literary works. It also has implicative dimensions regarding the contextual semantic importance of the literary themes (Cross, 2001, p.10). It encompasses a wide range of cultural issues that are pertinent to the way by which the author presents his/her text to the reader. Therefore, the reader serves as the target subject of the authorial literary artifice. In this regard, the text involves both the author's vision projected in his/her text and the reader's ability to grasp that meaning. They have reciprocal understanding of the text that deals with the place depicted in the literary work. On the one hand, the author has an implicit voice uttered in the text (p.11). On the other hand, the reader has several ways to infer these meanings according to the fictional implications of the sense of place. In *The Sum of our Follies*, the author's voice is directed towards Lubok Sayong: "Lubok Sayong has a problem with water; there's simply too much of it" (p.6). This place is the foundational premise of the sense of place in the novel.

The literary peculiarities of the spatial setting is ascribed to the author's profound interest in conveying realistic impressions about the genuine places in reality. The spatial setting incarnates the authorial perception of national terrains which are approached by meticulous narrative descriptions in the course of main text. (Cross, 2001, p.12). The spatial setting, moreover, includes the economic factors that imprint the entire national and cultural issues. For this reason, the use of specific narrative words are vital for dealing with this regional reality due to the fact that literary descriptions are appropriate vehicles for delivering the authorial look at reality outside the text. In *The Sum of Our Follies*, the appearance of civilization is embodied in the economic factories. These factors are the core of the spatial setting since they are created by the authorial conceptualization of the influence of places upon people: "we have a few girls in our lychee factory crew. Normally, women did not work nights" (p.182). In this sense, girls and women are only restricted to work at factories during the day. This means that the factories are the essence of the spatial setting that is described by the author's treatment of specific places and regions where they are allowed to live or move in limited spaces.

The issue of mobile population is intensively tackled in the discussion of the sense of location. The mass population of certain place may change according to several reasons (Bondar, 2003, p.25). One of these reasons is the national need to change the residential place. Some people aspire to change their places for the sake of economic boom and social welfare. They need to lead a better life. Accordingly, they leave their places for other places to find better life opportunities. The sense of place, in this way, changes since people gradually lose their sense of belonging to the original place. They no longer attend to their original residential place (p.26). The mobile population, in *The Sum of Our Follies*, is represented by the narrator who aspires to leaves his city for another one for the sake of economic prosperity. He leaves his original place, and consequently loses the sense of belonging to it.

The mobile population is also associated with the sense of location because of migration, which is considered as one of the several reasons that are

contiguous to the sense of location. Migration brings about the arrival of people from different and discrepant places. People move from one place to another under the pressure of a number of needs. They need to be in prosperous places in order to cope with the requirements of life. Therefore, they need to saturate the basic needs of their lives (Brulle, 2000, p.19). They depend on themselves in order to avoid the complexities of life. In search of places of opportunities, they leave their original places (p.20). In *The Sum of Our Follies*, it is revealed that the cause behind the narrator's migratory experience is to work in a factory.

Mass population exemplifies the mobile population in relation to the sense of location. Thus, the author depicts the sense of location and its authentic change in terms of the mobile population. People change according to the mobile movement when they decide to leave their place for another (Cataldi and William, 2007, p.103). Accordingly, the sense of location involves the original people's need to be in other good places and their nostalgic desires for the original places. This is the contradictory peculiarity of the sense of location. Being so, the sense of location describes the state of people after their mobility and its influence over their inherited socio-cultural life (p.104). Kow's approaches this kind of population in *The Sum of our Follies*. The narrator lives in another place, together with other workers who come from different places to find suitable work: "I half expected to see my workers here again soon, laying cement on this patch" (p.220).

Technology has a close affinity with the sense of location (Curry, 2011, p.92). That is, technology paves the way for making new changes in particular regions. The narrative descriptions of these places connote the true sense of belonging desired by the author who aims at providing alternative solutions for saving the regional environment around them. Consequently, the real regions might be in peril; and author offers viable solutions for sustaining their regional vigor and importance for people. Technology is one decisive factor in creating this change that is not completely desired by people. In *The Sum of our Follies*, Wong Kam, represents the technological progress in Lubok Sayong: "Wong Kam had the biggest television set in town, with a fifty-inch screen that he usually played Chinese serials on"

(p.183). Hence, Kow's depiction of technology relates to the way by which literary works could participate in offering solutions to the technological threat which engulfs the national regions.

Consequently, technology exemplifies the threat behind the deterioration of regions needed for people's safety. In essence, technology would result in a massive destruction of the environmental regions because they are mutually resided by people (Curry, 2011, p.95). The number of career decreases according to the new invented technology. As previously argued, Womg Kam represents the technological progress that has a contiguous relationship with people of the same regional spaces: "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" (p.183). Therefore, Womg Kam is used by the author to comment on the reality of national places. Being so, the regional places are the target of the narrative point of view initiated by the author to provide the reader with a blatant picture of the position of national places endangered by the contemporary technological boom.

The sense of location has another issue, namely, the historical background of nations. When nations are visited by foreigners, they become intermingled with the new nations. They may lose the close relationship with their historical background. This is due to globalization and the mobility of people of different cultural backgrounds to settle in a new place. People find themselves interacting with new people (Curry, 2011, p.98). Consequently, they forget about their historical roots in the long run. History signifies the vital point of people's original presence on their lands. Accordingly, when they face new migratory nations, they find new cultural backgrounds that they are utterly different from their historical origins (p.98). In *The Sum of our Follies*, the different nations come from in the form of workers. They migrate from their original places and settle in new ones. They work in companies in Lubok Sayong: "pestilence seemed to herald events of significance in Lubok Sayong. An infestation accompanied the general election companies" (p.220).



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The historical aspect is considered as one of the most vital aspect of the sense of location because it relates to the original of people (Forsyth, 2003, p.74). People do not find themselves as they had been before. The new cultural diversity puts limits for the historical conceptualization of a certain country. People recognize that they are no longer in need of their national belonging. As such, the sense of location could be utilized interchangeably with the concept of the sense of belonging. The sense of belonging refers to the people's remembrance of their lands before the settlement of other people in their lands (p.75). Here, history plays a significant role. It is distinguished by the historical moment in which the country is resided by other foreign settlers (p.75). This historical aspect is manifested in the "fade" of some regional places in *The Sum of our Follies*. The new interest in some regional sites changes the long inherited familiarity with national places: "There was a familiarity in this now, how Beevi drove her demons out by destroying the evidence and sealing the site" (p.220).

Hence, the sense of location changes according to the change of the historical roots (Forsyth, 2003, p.78). The historical background of a nation becomes changeable i.e., the historical periods are interrupted by the new cultures. Moreover, technology is another important factor which determines one's sense of location. Technology makes people feel that they are not attached to their homeland as they used to be. Technology changes the apparent peculiarities of nation (p.78). Consequently, the historical time progress mitigates the usual and inherited conceptualization of homeland. Changes take place when technology advances and brings about new challenge (p.78). In *The Sum of our Follies*, the technological boom is incarnated in the new treatment of companies' work act: "there was something in the Employment Act that made it either illegal or cumbersome and, Lubok Sayong was far from enforcement officers" (p.182). This act is another embodiment of historical change in the companies' labor agendas.

The historical issue is always associated with the issue of terrain in the critical argumentation of the sense of location (Gold, 2012, p.38). Terrain simply refers to the place or setting where the sense of location becomes tangible. Terrain involves the places that are characterized by the changes

that are caused by the sense of location and its changes. The sense of location changes and transforms according to the changes of terrain and its peripheries (p.38). Terrain is underscored because it holds the regional premise of the sense of location. When a terrain changes, the sense of location accordingly changes. Being so, there is a contiguous relationship between the sense of place and terrain. In essence, terrain is the geographical representation of a country or nation. As this geography is filled with diverse ethnical or cultural groups, it changes drastically (p.38). People of that terrain lose their sense of belonging. They do not appreciate the historical visualization of their regional features (p.38). The reason behind this change lies in its gradual change. Terrain undergoes changes in *The Sum of our Follies*. Lubok Sayong changes radically when people's needs become larger. In Lubok Sayong, the sites change when people install places for election: "pestilence seemed to herald events of significance in Lubok Sayong" (p.220).

Terrain is occupied by new civilization advancement such as technological progress. This advancement undermine people's hope to regain their previous sense of belonging to that terrain (Gold, 2012, p.40). Technology put forth some limits in the way of the original place. Places are replaced by the socio-cultural and technological advancement that is the core of the regional sense of location. So, people are inseparable element of the change of the sense of location. Moreover, people's customs are also definitive features of the sense of location. When the place changes, people's customs change (p.41). The new cultural backgrounds are responsible for this change. Community, which is the social milieu of people, becomes changeable. Therefore, the arrival of other cultural backgrounds and the technological advancement make people implicitly obliged to accept and interact with the new changes (p.42). In *The Sum of our Follies*, the sense of location change when the company election takes place. This election didn't use to happen in Lubok Sayong, but it happens when the new technology arrives in, and it is exemplified in the appearance of companies: "An infestation accompanied the general election companies, and made the visit of YB Datuk Seri Minister unforgettable" (p.220).

3. Conclusion

This research has focused on the sense of location in Kow's *The Sum of Our Follies*. One of these issues, which are relevant to the sense of location, has been globalization. This research has highlighted the impact of globalization on Malaysian society. In the novel, both Kuala Lumpur and Lubok Sayong are two different regions that formulate the regional aspect of globalization. Globalization has also been shaped by technological progress, which plays a crucial role in driving development in many nations. In this context, the research presents Malaysia as a country that embraces multiculturalism and modernization. Furthermore, the settings depicted in the novel are closely connected to the theme of terrain. In the novel, the regional representation of the places contribute to construct the 'terrain' within the plot. Thus, the research explores the location and its transformation within the Malaysian context. Moreover, it focuses on how the novel draws on real locations and reshapes them into vivid fictional descriptions informed by regional characteristics.

The significance of the research lies in its analysis of the sense of location which is hardly tackled in previous studies. The analysis of the sense of location would leads scholars to further explore new themes in the novel. Additionally, it enables them to deal with the novel's literary techniques as important and crucial elements for representing the author's authentic view of reality. In this sense, the significance of the research is thematic and technical at the same time. On the one hand, the thematic attributes of the novel are limited to the interpretation of the sense of location which might provide future studies with deep subjective critical appreciation of the novel. On the other hand, the technical analysis of the novel would result in addressing objections with regard to the novel's formalistic elements. Both the thematic and technical peculiarities are the nexus of the literary significance of the research which might be developed in future scholarships.



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تحول المكان من خلال الفضاء المكاني في رواية مجموع حماقاتنا لشيء لي كو

م.م. زينته محمد طاهر

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مستخلص البحث:

يسعى هذا البحث إلى استكشاف دور الفضاء المكاني في رواية "مجموع حماقاتنا" للكاتبة شيه لي كاو. ويركز البحث أساساً على الكيفية التي تستخدم بها كو الأماكن الإقليمية لتزويد القارئ بملامح الطابع المحلي الماليزي. كما يسعى إلى تحديد الفضاء المكاني في الرواية بوصفه تجسيداً لأنشغال الكاتبة العميق بالتحول الجذري للأماكن الأصلية إلى أماكن جديدة نتيجة التغيرات الاجتماعية والثقافية في ماليزيا. وتكمن الفجوة الرئيسة في هذا البحث في الكشف عن المكان بوصفه تحولاً رمزياً للمجتمع الماليزي نحو ازدهار اجتماعي وثقافي وفكري جديد ومتنامٍ. لذلك، يتناول البحث التحول غير المسبوق للمكان التقليدي، وهو موضوع لم يُتناول إلا نادراً في الدراسات السابقة. كما يستكشف المعاني الخفية للرموز المكانية و يسلط الضوء على إمكانية تلك الرموز في تجسيد إنفتاح الأقاليم الماليزية على ثقافات وتقاليد أخرى. في هذا السياق، يتبع البحث منهجاً نوعياً في تحليل شخصيات الرواية وفضائها المكاني. فمن جهة، سيتم تفسير الشخصيات بوصفها نماذج تمثل الشعب الماليزي الذي يتعايش مع ثقافات جديدة. ومن جهة أخرى، سيتم مناقشة فضاء الرواية بوصفه نماذج تخيلية لأماكن ماليزية شهدت تغيرات اجتماعية وثقافية جذرية خلال العقود الأخيرة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الشخصيات، التنوع، كاو، التعددية الثقافية، الفضاء المكاني، تحول رمزي