

Chun Sue

### Writing the Not-Self

"There are people who have the capacity to imagine themselves as someone else, there are people who have no such capacity (when the lack is extreme, we call them psychopaths), and there are people who have the capacity but choose not to exercise it."

- J.M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*

Writing the non-self has been on my mind in recent years. Initially, my writing was based on the experiences of myself and my friends. We are the same types of people. My first few novels were about precisely this kind of people living in the big cities of China, mainly the capital city of Beijing. They like rock music and anti-mainstream culture. They are poets, rock musicians, university teachers, and so on. Inevitably, there are other people in my novels, ordinary people. I usually portrayed them negatively - uninteresting, conservative, and even obnoxious; they typically exist to set up the main characters.

For example, the ordinary people, or "second-handers" in *Atlas Shrugged* by Ayn Rand, did nothing but delay the protagonist's ambitions and make a living out of his genius. Ayn Rand divides the world into two kinds of people, those who are geniuses, dedicated to making the world an idealized place, and those who are annoyingly mortal. My previous novels were similar, with mostly three kinds of people in them: first, myself and congeners recognized by me; second, those who sympathize and understand us but still live by the rules; third, those who loathe and trouble us. I remember a long-time reader and friend of mine with a non-mainstream aesthetic telling me that I'm not only good at depicting protagonists but also have tiny supporting characters that are vivid. That is because they are based on people in real life. The light in their eyes, a smile, sometimes a word they said, can represent who and what they are. I like observing people and finding details that would fit someone's character or aesthetic. Nothing is ordinary when you look closely at the details. Sometimes, I love reading spy novels - they have a lot of details. Although observing details make me nervous and jumpy sometimes, they are a crucial side aspect of writing.

After twenty years of writing fiction, both my readers and I feel that I am always writing about the same kind of people. It's hard for me to write about a poor boy who is an apprentice, like the great writer Chekhov, or a woman who cheats on her husband, like in *Madame Bovary*. But maybe I, as a woman, can try to put more ink and sympathy into other people, which would make them more enjoyable as well. It was unimaginable before, and now I find that it is possible. I've started to experiment carefully in my short stories; I fictionalized a bus driver because I was riding a bus one day, and the driver was Asian. I don't know why I rarely see Asian bus drivers in Berlin. We made eye contact for less than two seconds, and those two short seconds sent me into an instant fantasy: maybe this man was here for me. Okay, I know it's just imagination, but it did make me start to frame a story in my mind. I focused on him - what was his identity, why was he in Berlin? What if he was coming for me, and for what reason? What story would happen between us? In my novel, I envisaged him as a Chinese man whose parents had been merchants in Vietnam and then fled Vietnam to Germany because of the war between North and South Vietnam when he was three years old... Stories like that. I visited Oslo several months ago and inadvertently encountered several monks and *bhikkhunis* of Vietnamese origin who had left the country during the North-South Vietnam War.

The ability to create something out of nothing, to imagine someone else's life, is so unique that sometimes I am even a little afraid of it. So far, in my novels, I'm still afraid of describing concrete injuries and pain of the flesh, specifically, details or the process of being injured, because it makes it hard for me to write and because I have physical discomfort. And I did think about it, as J.M. Coetzee said about Elizabeth Costello, "she is not sure that writers who venture into the darker territories of the soul always return unscathed."

Perhaps even in fictional works, even fictional characters, there is a moral constraint. I felt so uncomfortable when I read Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* that I even threw the book in a trashcan on the road. I thought that in his writing, the clones finally understood the atrocities and horrible acts of destruction humans had done to them – which was unacceptably cruel to me. If it were me, I wouldn't have written that, or at least I would have written about the anger inside the clones. This is the difference between my values and his. Writing about the Others, indeed, shows the author's values.

I don't know if I'll be writing more about the Other in the future. I hope I'll be able to write as emotionally as I write my own stories. Writing with emotion is the most important thing to me. Characters cannot be puppets, and I take Kant's phrase as a principle for writing fiction: "see people as ends and not as means." In other words, I want to write about each character's full range and contradictions – without treating them as pawns on a chessboard.

*Translated from Chinese by Ding Xu.*