

Construction of Place in the Land of “The Handsomest Drowned Man in The World”

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Abstract: “The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World” by Gabriel Garcia Márquez is a short story that tells the story of a remote village somewhere on earth and the transformation of the villagers after the arrival of the dead body of a drowned man. The story is short, but important in the sense that the transformation of the villagers fundamentally changes the spatiality of the village. The belief of the humanistic geography in the way how people and land make each other is depicted in the story. This paper attempts to see how change in certain factors such as human life experiences, perceptions, feelings, social relations, and meanings life contribute to the construction of the place they inhabit.

Introduction:

Robert T. Tally Jr. observes that both in literary and cultural studies space has gained renewed status with the emergence of postmodern and postcolonial theories that the quote, stated below, perfectly captures, “in recent literary and cultural studies, notably with the advent of postmodernism and postcolonial theory, but also in other interdisciplinary approaches to literature, space has reemerged as a principal concern” (2). Along with this, globalization also contributes to spatialize culture and politics of today’s world (Agnew and Duncan 3). However, in discussions about space, specifying space and place theoretically always gets problematized (Hubbard and Kitchin 4). Keeping this debate apart, the study is more interested in the presence of place in human life. Place, to define sensibly, designates ‘any geographical site (of any size, scale and type)’ and it is again ‘meaningful to someone, for whatever reason’ (Prieto 13). The combination of geography and meaning is what makes a place. In accordance with this definition, place is again considered to be “a reality” that people give “meaning” to (Tuan 387). Therefore, what a place needs to have are people, geography and meaning. Here geography is a natural attribute and people give meaning to it; therefore, people actively participate in the construction of a meaningful geography. In light of this proposition, the study has anatomized the short story “The Handsomest Drowned Man in The World” by Gabriel Garcia Márquez in Gregory Rabassa’s translation.

The story is set in a land far from modern civilization and is stretched between the cliff and the sea. A small number of people reside in the village land to whom the sea is the only resource for economic survival. The villagers live a mundane life in a sense that there is no mention of any kind of celebrations in their life. Such routine-boundness of life gets a spatial expression through the infrastructure and aesthetics of the village space. However, after the arrival of the drowned man everything changes, and the villagers urge for a new life through the reconstruction of the

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village's spatiality. The study here is interested to see which factors contribute to the spatial reconstruction of the village. For this, the study has mainly based its theoretical understanding on the humanistic geography tradition. How the village in the story spatially changes due to the change of certain realizations of the people living in it is the question to which the study has attempted to give an answer.

Genealogy of place in context:

Different disciplines across humanities and social sciences are attentive to the study of place out of which consequentially develops the stream of thought, that is, humanistic geography. Place, in this field, is more focused on the issues of "subjectivity" and "experience" (Cresswell 19-20). Theorists belonging to this line of thought attempt to connect place to humankind from myriad perspectives. Yi-fu Tuan reflects while differentiating between space and place that the transformation of space into place occurs when "we get to know it better and endow it with value" (6). In Tuan's words, experience and meaning gradually give identity to a place. Doreen Massey, on the other hand, believes that spatiality, in its "very material sense," needs to address "an analysis of the economy and society" (22). Here connecting space with material sense refers to the physicality of it; therefore, to understand it properly, in the language of Massey, it is essential to discuss the social and economic factors embedded in it. Setha Low, meanwhile, while quoting Cresswell, Sen and Silverman, asserts that to become a place, it is needed to be "inhabited and appropriated through the attribution of personal group meaning, feeling, sensory perceptions and understanding" (32). Considering all the definitions of place stated above, it can be summarized that a place becomes a space for human life embracing the attributes such as experience, meaning, society, feeling and sensory perceptions. It, therefore, can be discerned that change in one of these attributes will contribute to the change in the spatiality of any community.

Spatial Analysis of "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World:"

The title of the story invokes thoughts as Marquez addresses the drowned man as the handsomest in "the world." Whose world is it? Is it everyone's world or is it the confined world of the people residing in isolation? Does the storyteller imagine the whole world in the microcosm of the village or he wants to suggest the inability of the villagers to go beyond their little village world? The story does not provide any geographical knowledge that can determine the location of the village or assume any connection to the real world, except the mere identification of the place as "Esteban's village" where "the wind is so peaceful" and "the sun's so bright" at the end of the story (Marquez 319). The village is a barren land beside sea without specific geographical information, but after the arrival of the drowned man the village will now let others know about its existence through "smell" (319), peaceful wind, and the bright sun. It can be inferred how a village, bereft of geographical location, ventures into a journey that aims at attaining a recognizable geographical identity as "Esteban's village" (319).

The story can chronologically be divided into two parts: before the arrival and after the arrival of the drowned man. The study here investigates how experience, feeling, perception, meaning and society of the villagers undergo two different phases during these two periods of time.

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The spatiality of the village before the arrival of the drowned man comprises “only twenty-odd wooden houses” and “so little land” beside “the sea” (314). It is accompanied with an unaesthetic nature of the village, that is, “the stone courtyards with no flowers,” “desert like cape” (314), “the desolation of their streets, the dryness of their courtyards” (318). It is noticeable that before the arrival of the drowned man, the writer uses select words to describe the village that refer to some sort of inadequacy, insecurity and artlessness, such as “odd” for “houses,” “little” for “land,” “stone” and “no flowers” for “courtyards” and “fear” for “cliffs” (314-315). On the other hand, after the arrival of the drowned man, the villagers are now committed to redecorate their houses with “wider doors, higher ceilings, and stronger floors,” “springs among the stones,” and “planting flowers on the cliffs” (319). Therefore, the village is about to experience a change in its physicality. Yet, this change is not sudden or unbiased; instead, the spatial change of the village is preceded by the change the villagers confront in their everyday experience, meaning, feeling, perception and society due to the arrival of the drowned man. Consequently, it gets reinstated how the spatial life and the human life correspond to each other.

Experiential transformation resulting in spatial reconfiguration: The villagers are accustomed to a living limited by the little land and the sea. They live a collective average life as they fail to accommodate the dead body of the drowned man in any bed as these are not “large enough” or any table as these are not “solid enough” (315). Such vulnerability and inadequacy of their life get spatial reflection in the story as they feel determined to build houses after the funeral of the drowned man with “wider doors, higher ceiling and stronger floors” (319). Before the arrival of the drowned man, they experience an unaesthetic, measured, dehumanized life which their streets, courtyards, house witness to. However, after the arrival of the drowned man they experience an inexplicable kinship, empathy and humanity out of which they are resolute enough to change the spatial structure of the land as well as to enhance the beauty of it. Change in the villagers’ experience plays a crucial role to restructure the spatiality of the village.

Change in perception and reconstruction of place: In accordance with experience which comes eventually is the matter of perception of the villagers. Experiencing the dead body of the drowned man, they come to discover a world beyond their knowledge and understanding. Due to their short-sighted perception of the world, the spatiality of the land conforms to only necessities of human life. It becomes “no flowers” land with no spacious “door sideways” and “crossbeams” (314-315). The construction of the land, up until the arrival of the dead body, corresponds to the shortsightedness of the villagers which the infrastructure of the village portrays in abundance. However, after the arrival of the drowned man the villagers perceive a new world where it requires new measurement, beautification to reflect a state of new realization.

Shift in feelings reflected through the remaking of place: The story delineates life as a process as it is confined to “work at sea” (315) and maintain a family. The feelings of the women are much more customary than being deeply immersed in any passionate bond. The women dismiss their husbands as “the weakest, meanest and most useless creatures on earth” (316), comparing them with the drowned man. They imagine that if the drowned man lived in their village, his house would have “the widest doors, the highest ceiling and the strongest floor,” “his bedstead...from a midship frame,” and his authority over the land would be so strong that there would be “springs...among the rocks” and “flowers on the cliffs” (315). The women in the story

cannot find strength and valor in their husbands that they dream of; therefore, this absence finds a way of expression in the spatiality of the village. The men, on the other hand, feel “mistrust in their livers” at the beginning as the women are spending time doing “main-altar decorations for a stranger” (317). It appears that the lack of trust and feeling in relationships is responsible for “the desolation of their streets, the dryness of their courtyards” (318). However, at the end of the story, “the splendor and beauty of their drowned man” enchant both men and women so deeply that to keep the hope of the return of the drowned man alive, they will give their best in “digging for springs among the stones and planting flowers on the cliffs” (318-319).

Change in social relations and accordingly in place: It is noticeable from the beginning of the story that the social atmosphere of the village is driven by necessity. The villagers work at the sea for survival. Once the life ends, they throw the dead body “off the cliffs” (315). This cycle of life and death that meets nothing beyond what is necessary gets a spatial reflection in the architecture of the village and the aesthetics of the land. However, the whole scenario changes after the arrival of the drowned man. From the moment the drowned man is “carried...to the nearest house” (314) to the moment “they let him go without an anchor” (318), all the events happening in the village tell about an unacknowledged life of the villagers. In this period of time whatever they perform is not necessity driven; instead, it is the manifestation of their untold mind. Most importantly, they partake in these rituals collectively that results in a change in the societal psychology of the village. That is why, at the end of the story, the villagers come to understand that “everything would be different from then on” (319). The reflection of such transformation will again be spatial through the inclusion of “wider doors, higher ceilings, and stronger floors,” “gay colors” “to paint their house fronts,” “springs” and “flowers” (319).

New realization of meaning of life and reconstruction of place: Understandably, the meaning of life changes after the arrival of the drowned man in the village. Before the arrival of the drowned man, life means nothing beyond survival to the villagers. The spatial structure of the village keeps no space for anything beyond the necessity for survival. However, the same place opens new meanings to their life after the arrival of the drowned man. The spatiality of the village is also going to change in accordance with the new meanings of life.

The correspondence between human and place in the story: In the theoretical part of the study, it has been mentioned that there are certain deciding matters, to be specific, experience, perception, feeling, society, meaning in the humanistic geography tradition responsible for the spatialization of the human life. In the story, “The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World” by Marquez these factors contribute to make and change place in a village situated between the cliffs and the sea, and almost unaware of the world outside this territory.

The people in this village witness a life of emotional barrenness before the arrival of the drowned man at the land. Such desolation gets depicted in the spatial reality of the villagers. Their houses are measured with no room for any outsider, and their streets are lonely, their courtyards flowerless, their rocks without springs. All these instances, even in the short periphery of the narrative, resemble a land where survival outweighs feelings, emotions. Due to the villagers’ experience of a social life with little perception, lack of feelings, the meaning of their life gets

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restricted to necessity and survival. The spatial structure, therefore, accordingly reflects the philosophy of their life with dryness and narrowness.

After the arrival of the drowned man, therefore, everything changes. They come to discover a world beyond necessity and survival where the whole village feels drawn toward a stranger's dead body. The women and men endear the drowned man to their heart and hope for his reemergence even at his funeral. Out of such strength of their emotion toward a stranger, they think of restructuring their old village with wider doors, ceiling, floor, with flowers and spring, with color at the house front.

How the villagers get suddenly transformed is thought-provoking, but for this study, how their emotional change makes a difference in the spatial character of the village, is more important.

It, therefore, can be concluded that human beings make place in accordance with their beliefs, and change in it brings visible alterations in the spatiality they inhabit.

Conclusion:

The story revolves around the drowned man whose appearance changes everything in the village. Such change gets a spatial expression through the beautification, extension and reconstruction of the village land. It refers to a connection between human life and spatiality as these are not isolated phenomena; instead change in one of them substantially alters the other. The study here has tried to establish, based on the short story, that human experience, feeling, perception, meaning, society all these things together determine how the spatial structure of their inhabited land will be.

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