The Global Circular Diaspora With Time as the Center in Modiano's *In the Café of Lost Youth**

WANG Gang

Shanghai University of Engineering Science, Shanghai, China

The 2014 Nobel Prize winner in literature, Patrick Modiano, in his masterpiece, *In the Café of Lost Youth*, describes the story of Louki, a young mysterious lady who has been making time-travelling diaspora in all her life. This thesis makes deep analysis by making use of temporal relationship—the fragmentation of the past, the hopeless pursuit from the present to the future, and the confusion of time, revealing that the essence of life is the intertwining of reality and illusion, the confusion of pain and happiness, the ambiguity of survival and death. Furthermore, it also argues that, the story of the heroine Louki, who, like most other human beings, is living like “drifting duckweed and floating clouds” within the global circular diaspora with time as the center.

Keywords: Patrick Modiano, *In the Café of Lost Youth*, global circular diaspora, time

In the Café of Lost Youth is Patrick Modiano's masterpiece, describing the story of Louki, a young mysterious lady who has been making time-travelling diaspora in all her life. The daughter of a single mother who works in the Moulin Rouge, Louki grows up in poverty in Montmartre. She diasporas on through life, into a cocaine habit, and begins frequenting the Café Condé, whose regulars call her “Louki”. In all her life, she drifts into marriage and different jobs, only to find herself more aimless, rootless, and diasporic in the world. None of the four narrators, a student from a café, a private detective hired by an aggrieved husband, the heroine herself, and one of her lovers, could construct a portrait of Jacqueline Delanque, otherwise known as Louki clearly as to what she did in the past, what is in her inner mind at present, and what she will be doing in the future. Louki is a typical representative of global circular diaspora.

Diaspora, Circular Diaspora and Global Circular Diaspora

One thing should be made clear that both the concepts “Circular Diaspora” and “Global Circular Diaspora” are put forward by Pro. WANG gang for the first time, before we analyze the origin and development of diaspora, circular Diaspora and global circular diaspora.

* This is a phased outcome of the author's National Social Sciences Fund Project, “Study on the Global Circular Diasporic Characteristics of the Nobel Prize Winners of the 21st Century” (18BWW070) and also a phased outcome of the University's Talent Introduction Research Start-Up Project “Study on the Classic Works of Nobel Prize Winners in the Dimension of Community of Common Destiny for all Mankind” (SUES's Start-Up 2018-71).

WANG Gang, Ph. D., professor, dean of the School of Foreign Languages, Shanghai University of Engineering Science, Shanghai, China.

In general, the word diaspora was originally derogatory in English, specifically referring to the Jewish immigration and diaspora, and later it was gradually used to refer to all immigrant groups. Diasporas lost their base of existence, and became homeless spiritual prodigal sons. According to Rushdie,

Traditionally, a full-fledged immigrant has to suffer a triple division: he loses his place, and enters a strange language, finding himself in a crowd that differ from himself in social behavior and criterion different from his own and that even hurts himself. (Rushdie, 1998, p. 286)

Therefore, diasporas felt lost in the community, resulting in self-identity crisis: Who am I? Where am I from? Where will I go? Diasporas without a sense of belonging are like a kite with a broken line in a state of weightlessness, difficult to drift to the ground.

In the author's opinion, first of all, literary diaspora is a double reaction between the individual and the collective, from reality and illusion, and from one place to another. The place here not only can refer to multiple countries, but also can refer to different regions of a country and inevitably cause changes in time and space. The diaspora must have the following four elements: forgetting the time of the occurrence, losing the exclusive space, drifting to the culturally different people, and encountering the difficulties of language. Therefore, the diasporas began to pursue from the following four aspects: the memories of the past and exploration of the future, the journey of root-seeking, the recovery of self-identity, and adaptation to the language and culture of other countries. However, just like "drawing knife to cut off water and flow more", the diasporas lose the sense of belonging, like a broken kite, and they are in a state of weightlessness that is difficult to land without roots.

Secondly, however hard the figures in the book struggle, they can't escape from their invisible circle. As far as the causes are concerned, sometimes it is out of helplessness, and sometimes it is out of their own will. As far as the routes are concerned, sometimes they go deep into the earth, and sometimes they float without roots. Every time there is a divergence, there is a tumultuous and painful change between the old and the new. This literary divergence route is both linear and circular, the later being the main one, and each diaspora has his/her own diasporic center, which the author calls a circular diaspora.

Thirdly, with today's increasingly development of science and technology, the wave of globalization is surging, and the significance of the traditional home country and homeland is also undergoing subversive changes, geographically and psychologically. In a sense, the earth has become a "global village", and everyone on the earth is diasporic. The constant home we thought is no longer there, and everything has become a phantom. Going home becomes an illusion that we can't achieve. For everyone in the world, their home is in the imagination, and everyone, regardless of his/her nationality, ethnicity, gender, age, occupation, love, psychology, memory, and etc., is on the way home. Such a circular diaspora has transcended the era, the region, language, and culture. To some extent, it even covers life and death. In this case, the circular diaspora becomes a global circular diaspora.

Global circular diaspora is mainly reflected through the following literary research methods that best reflect human global problems: time and space relationships, reality and illusion, stream of consciousness, Limbo state, images, polyphony principle, iceberg principle, music and literature relationship, and so on.

Time relationship plays a very important role in global circular diaspora.

The Role Time Plays in Global Circular Diaspora

Time is an abstract term in philosophy, which reflects the chronological order from birth to death. The intention of time is relentlessly going forward, while the extension is the measurement of the length and order of anything in the world. “Relentless” means there is no end nor start, and “going forward” points to the fact that the increment of time is positive in sign.

In everyday life, humans tend to divide time into three parts, with the distinction of past, present, and future, which are linear, continuous, and indispensable for human beings. In most cases, humans tend to remember the past, and look up to the future, standing on the present, and filling up with the passion of pursuing and expecting a better life.

However, time relationship is likely to be disrupted in literature occasionally. To some extent, it is likely that not only the events in the past and future are placed ahead of present ones, but also the relationship among the three terms are tangled, which creates a sense of diaspora that reality is confused with illusion, and that human beings and things are drifting constantly.

Global circular diaspora is closely linked to time, which wanders among the past, the present, and the future, “Use one occasion at present to design a picture in the future in the form of the past” (Freud, 1983, p. 143). Literature, in terms of global circular diaspora, constantly reveals that the writer’s own fantasies always correspond to the past, the present, and the future. That is to say, the intense inner emotion at present makes the writer’s experience in the past visible vividly. Such memories evoke fantasies about the future, and constant fantasy has prompted writers to write it in their works, which is just like what Sigmund Freud says: “A piece of work, like a daydream, is a continuation of the game that young children did, and a substitute for it” (Freud, 1983, p. 189).

In *In the Café of Lost Youth* written by the 2014 Nobel Prize Winner in Literature Patrick Modiano, the past is separated away and humans are living rootlessly, therefore, they merely live at present, with no hope for the future. Time is a mess with no distinction in their minds and their lives are exposed to turbulent diaspora with no settlement.

Separating the Past, Living With no Root

For the vast majority of people in *In the Café of Lost Youth*, they all try to break up with the past or some of them even do not have their past.

First of all, the heroine Louki had a miserable past and therefore she was deeply attached to this past memory. Louki never talked about her past, which left a mysterious impression on the other people around her. Louki thereby struggled relentlessly to forget the past, and tried by all means to break up with the past. Louki came to Condé Café in October, because “she has been broken up entirely with her past and wanted a rebirth” (Modiano, 2014, p. 14).

Throughout Louki’s short life, she had been trying her best to get rid of anything in the past. Anyone, even the detective Galaxy, and her lover Roland, knew little about her past, the others knowing nothing about it. Louki was extremely mysterious in people’s eyes. Meanwhile, because of Louki’s complete abandoning of the past, she longed for the present and the future more than the others—parental love, reading, studying, and romance, which were rather difficult to obtain. At last, therefore, Louki struggled relentlessly to break up with

the past life, only to draw water with a bamboo basket—achieving nothing. Since all her pursuits were broken into pieces and illusion, Louki chose to break up with her past once again, but this time in a thorough way, by committing suicide and jumping off from a tall building.

Secondly, the past was also illusory and disappeared quietly for the rest. As far as Louki's lover Roland was concerned, he loved Louki very much, taking walks and going to Condé and attending lectures in bookstore with Louki. However, since there was no true love in her deep heart for him, it was impossible to resonate with the soul. Roland, by no means, could walk into the depths of Lucy's heart. At first, Roland was fairly clear-headed, while during the period of the love affair with Louki, he was heavily influenced by her, consciously or unconsciously. As a result, the past was also disappearing with the wind in his mind, "But I did not recognize it at all. The past has gone since the time of John De Weier" (Modiano, 2014, p. 95). While for most young people in Condé, they were unexperienced and simple-minded, only living in the sparkling wine at present, "We are so young. There's nothing in the past to reveal. We just live at the present" (Modiano, 2014, p. 11). Even for such a thoughtful and sober person like Detective Galaxy, the past was sometimes unreal and fictitious, "when you are talking about some sort of the imaginary life, there are huge plumes of fresh air blowing from a block where you feel oppressed" (Modiano, 2014, pp. 22-23).

The state of separation with the past has led them to live with no roots and settlement, both physically and psychologically.

Living at the Moment, the Future Being Hopeless

Firstly, for Louki, who has been separated from the past, her life is the best portrayal of "living at the moment and the future is hopeless".

Louki's life background is worth noting. She was born during World War II and brought up by her mother, having no idea who her father was throughout her life. However, Louki's mother took care of Louki discontinuously, and she was neither considerate nor thoughtful. More importantly, Louki's mother was a prostitute working at night in Moulin Rouge, a famous erotic place. So Louki stayed at home alone at night, suffering loneliness and fear by herself. Moreover, young Louki was explicitly told in the book to experience the same embarrassing suffering as her mother had done. People knew little about Louki, and even Louki was not her real name.

Such a past was like a nightmare, and therefore, it was well-reasoned for Louki to be determined to break up with it. She always deliberately got rid of the fetters in the past, trying to drive it away, "But I did not think about these things, and I have been living at the moment, not asking why" (Modiano, 2014, p. 59). Louki lived at the moment, pursuing romance and happiness by quaffing in Café Condé, attending lectures in the bookstore and so on. However, in the end, Louki was left with nothing whatsoever. She hasn't enjoyed the paternal love nor the maternal love. Her mother was underpaid, overworking, and not having time to take care of her. What counted most is that Louki's mother was hopeless about Louki's future, thinking that Louki was just a copy of her, which also made Louki have no expectation for the future and even doubted whether she really existed on earth or not. Being gloomy and doomy, one day, Louki "used the ballpoint pen to draw her own name, 'the nonexistent Jacqueline' on the cover of 'the Nonexistent Louise' borrowed from someone" (Modiano, 2014, p. 83). It was only when she was escaping that she could find her true being and was truly happy. All the pursuits

were not as happy and fulfilling as when she was escaping.

Secondly, the state of others was almost the same as that of Louki's. Nonetheless, their determination of breaking up with the past was not as strong as Louki and the pursuit of the present and the future was not so urgent and sensitive as hers. They were never settled, behaving like a bohemian and had nothing to do in the day time. At night, Condé was the best place for them to gather and complain with anger, "surely, Condé might make people illusionary during the leisure moment in the afternoon, however, as the night screen falls down, it became a meeting place which a sentimental philosopher calls 'the younger generation squandering youth'" (Modiano, 2014, p. 6).

Louki entered Condé, with a painful and precarious life and her mood of "living at the moment and the future being hopeless" collided with other people's in Café. Louki found a temporary inn and put away her mind there. She had a short break with the past and had some vision for the future, but later she ran back and forth, getting frustrated again. However, Louki's esoteric manner and enigmatic figure deeply attracted and deeply influenced other customers in Condé. Indeed, Louki's specialty made the customers in Condé prominent, and set the tone and atmosphere in Condé, which made it become a very special place. Louki's attitude towards the past, the present, and the future also subtly infected the customers. Just as the first narrator in the novel, a college student, said, "as time flies by, quite often I can't help asking myself, is it just because her existence that made Condé and people there so abnormal and distinguishable, as if they were permeated by her own fragrance?" (Modiano, 2014, pp. 1-2).

Time Being Confusing and Leading to Eternity

Although most people in the novel cut themselves off from the past, enjoyed the present, and longed for the future, while in a deeper sense, the boundaries among the past, the present, and the future were not clearly identified in the novel. The three ones twisted, tangled with each other, and were sometimes vaguely interconnected without either a start or an end, leading to eternity.

First of all, throughout the painful, suffering, and hopeless short life of Louki, she was constantly in a chaotic state of confusing about time. Due to her extreme fear of the past, she desired for the present and the future, whereas each time she was trapped in extreme depress after countless pursuits of dreams, "he often mentioned 'eternal recurrence'. He might understand it. Yes! Everything of mine has started again!" (Modiano, 2014, p. 57). Having struggled as hard as she could, Louki still failed in seeking happiness. Louki was absolutely desperate, so she committed suicide by jumping off the building, which not only ended her life, but also gave her own illustration of the melting of the past, the present, and the future. In her deep heart, although Louki ended her life in the desperate past, present, and future in the real world, in the imaginary world, she set out by defining the fresh time relationship which might bring hope for her.

Secondly, for the other figures in the novel, time is also vague and leads to eternity for the rest people. The Detective Galaxy, who was wiser and cooler than ordinary people, could determine things more objectively in most cases. Nevertheless, time made him confused, too, and he was unable to distinguish between the past and the present. The things at present were based on the knowledge of the past, "we are still young. As time goes by, people and events in the life would be absurd and insignificant at last, at which you would see with your childish eyes" (Modiano, 2014, p. 24). This was particularly true for Roland, Louki's lover. In their romance,

he was trapped, devoted to Louki, and persistent in love, confusing days and nights. On the very day of their saying good-bye, Roland not only lost the concept of time, but also had illusions. When Roland was walking in the street, he often heard Louki whispering his name and he often dreamed of her in his dream. Frankly speaking, Louki was incapable of distinguishing time and was tangled and controlled by time. As for Roland, Louki was rooted in his soul, and his thought and consciousness had been completely controlled and penetrated by Louki, although he was alive physically. What is more, the control was not temporary, but everlasting,

no matter when it is—in the evening, at leisure time, in the summer evening when you have no idea of what time it is, it still happens. Everything will take recurrence as before. At the same day, or at the same night, or at the same place, they will encounter as before. The recurrence is eternal. (Modiano, 2014, p. 93)

Conclusion

Global circular diaspora reminds us of *Constant Compass* about the description of the mandala structure,

the main shape is a circle, or the multi-layered circle of the same center, surrounded by square, with four doors accessible. The center of the mandala points to the universe. It is surrounded by a circle of lotuses, which symbolizes the highest wisdom. (Sri, 1985, p. 103)

Here, the mandala not only is a concrete circular object, but also has a profound symbolic meaning, and exists in mind. Moreover, as far as time is concerned, which is just like the thesis has been arguing, the whole process of diasporic motion is moving to the time center, which means that all kinds of contradictions can be alleviated, reconciled, and solved at the center.

In *In the Café of Lost Youth*, although people's opinions were diverged, quite explicit, and sometimes confusing about the past, the present, and the future, for all of them, time can be condensed into one point, combining the past, the present, and the future together to the center point, which constitutes a circle of diaspora: "We stayed there, together, at the same place, and got into eternity. Our promenade through Ottawa has been experiencing thousands of other people's lives. There is no need to watch my watch. I know it is noon now" (Sri, 1985, p. 129).

In *In the Café of Lost Youth*, people waste time casually, combining present, past, and future with each other. In this way, they have been squandering around, tasting life with boredom, and getting confused lonely and finally disappear in the raucously piteous long streets with weariness, which is typical global circular diaspora caused by time.

References

- Chen, Y. X. (2006). Supernatural force: Phantom crisis in western tragedy. *Journal of Longyan Teachers College*, 22(5), 81-83.
- Freud, S. (1983). *Modern western literary theory*. Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House.
- Hoffert, B. (Jan. 2016). Young once. *Library Journal*, 141, 10-11.
- Modiano, P. (2014). *In the café of lost youth*. (L. G. Jin, Trans.). Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House.
- Rushdie, S. (1998). *Günter Grass*. (C. R. Huang, Trans.). Beijing: World Literature, No. 2.
- Sri, P. S. (1985). *T. S. Eliot: Vedanta and Buddhism*. Vancouver: Vancouver University Press.
- Wang, G. (2011). *Circular diaspora*. Beijing: Economic Science Press.
- Yan, M. (2012). *Life and death are wearing me out*. Beijing: Writers Publishing House.