

## THE ART OF JAPANESE ZEN GARDENS AS REFLECTED ON IN A METAFICTIONAL NOVEL

Etsuko Tanaka-Karlic

### JAPANESE ZEN GARDENS

Considering the garden as an art of expression with intention and design, the structure of a garden can be compared with the structure of verbal art. Elements of design such as stones, streams and plants are parallel to words in the text and the system of arrangement is equivalent to the narrative devices. Through this visual narrative structure one central focus and theme can be developed in a garden.

Most Western-style gardens are characterised by their careful geometry and the precision of their design. That is, there is an overt artificiality. On the other hand, the Japanese Zen garden represents nature on a microcosmic scale. People therefore tend to think of the Zen garden as if it is reality. By using in a structure, patterns are developed and linked to create concise natural form. Asymmetrical designs are favoured in order to suggest the naturalness of nature.<sup>1</sup> However, in this paper I will demonstrate that the Zen garden is established in such a way as to disguise its artificiality. I shall argue that the Zen garden is a form of art whose latent nature is self-reflexive, and the intricate and deep structure in the Zen garden questions the nature of representation itself. Like the metafictional novel, the Zen garden talks about its own structure and the process of construction.

The metafictional form in which the novel talks about novels is thought of as a characteristic feature of contemporary experimental texts. Metafiction reflects its own process of composition.<sup>2</sup> This self-critical contemporary tendency leads to an increased fluidity between genres and a breaking down of conventional boundaries in Japanese literature. In this sense the novel comes close to the essay which consists of commentaries on various issues such as art, religion and even literary criticism. It is noteworthy that these subjects are not reflected in the characters or events in the novel, but are incorporated into the structure of the work. It can be viewed that the new style of writing subverts conventional forms of representation in which the events and characters reflect the extra-textual reality.

## METAFICTIONAL NATURE OF THE CONTEMPORARY NOVEL

One of the characteristics inherent in some of contemporary novels is its metafictional nature. According to Linda Hutcheon, metafiction is fiction about fiction, that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity.<sup>3</sup>

Metafiction is based on the belief that the novel does not have to reflect the extra-textual world as a mirror of reality and on its recognition that the novel is a linguistic and narrative construct. In other words, metafiction contains self-referential elements ranging from the literary language used in a text to its own narrative structure. This self-referential nature is termed reflexivity. Ommundsen defines reflexivity as the kind of function which takes fiction-writing as its subject matter. Metafiction is the text in which reflexivity is a dominant function, that is to say, metafiction reflects on its own methods or logic of construction and examines the fundamental structures of narrative.

In the last twenty years literary studies have started to focus on reflexivity. This self-reflecting function allows the novel to assert its separation from reality and draws attention to formal features of the novel. Reflexivity is one of the characteristic features of a postmodern literary work.

Metafiction attempts to explicate its own artificiality. Fictional discourses construct an artificial world, which even if it resembles reality does not reflect the real thing. Although on the surface, the reality (the real world) depicted in the conventional novel and that in the metafiction look pretty much the same, the difference between the two is that metafiction is aware of the artificiality of the world depicted in the novel no matter how closely it resembles the extra-textual reality, whereas the conventional novel is a simple reflection of the reality.

The central issue for metafiction is to analyse its own literary process and the process by which the reader reads the fictional world as text. In order to achieve this goal, metafiction uses the reality and various textual strategies such as metaphor and other linguistic devices, characters and events, to transform it into the textual construct. Due to this metafictional nature, the novel inevitably becomes criticism of literature, art and other issues. Now I shall analyse a particular extract from a Japanese contemporary text which comments on the art of the Japanese Zen garden.

## THE LOGIC OF CONSTRUCTING THE ARTIFICIAL WORLD

*Kurai Tabi* is a contemporary novel written by Kurahashi Yumiko. This novel contains experimental features and can be categorised as a postmodern novel. This is a story about a woman who is searching for her missing fiancé. The setting is in Kamakura (the capital during 1192 to 1333, the era of Kamakura Shogunate), on a train travelling from Tokyo to Kyoto and in Kyoto (the old capital in Japan). The motive for the disappearance of the protagonist's fiancé and the cause of the failure of their relationship is technically pursued by using the protagonist's consciousness and her reminiscences of the past. By such an approach, the author creates an enigma and a lack of resolution in the story. The protagonist's consciousness is wandering between the past and the present. The novel is full of indeterminacies, syntactically and thematically discursive. Conventional narrative procedures and assumptions in which elements are linked to one another as cause and effect are rejected in its structure. Causality and linearity are negated. These are the features which characterise the postmodern novel.<sup>4</sup> As a result, what emerges is an uncertainty about the world described within this text.

A prominent technical aspect of the narrative in this text is the adoption of the second person narrative, which is rarely seen in Japanese literature. In narrative the protagonist is called *anata* which means you in Japanese and her fiancé is called *kare* which means he. Another experimental feature is its metafictional form. Under the guise of the protagonist's thoughts and opinions, and conversations between the protagonist and other characters, this novel is full of criticism of cultural and social phenomena such as art, literature, jazz, religion and political movements. These opinions and criticisms are independent of the story line, and the protagonist is the vehicle which carries these opinions and criticism to the reader. From this criticism we can also see the theoretical basis on which the novel is constructed.

In the scene in this extract, the protagonist comes to Kyoto, searching for her missing fiancé without having any clue as to his whereabouts. She visits Daisen-in which is a section of Daitokuji; a famous Zen temple in Kyoto. She is reading a brochure about the temple garden. This is one of the good examples of metafictional nature recognised in this novel. This fragmentary passage does not show a strong connection to the story line, but rather it becomes a metaphor for the construction process of the novel. The nature of the construction of a Zen garden is considered to be parallel to the artificiality of the making of the fiction.

You start laughing like a teacher, who having been handed a student's text, is forced to read an incoherent translation. Although it is definitely a concisely presented interpretation, it isn't written in one particular style... If you turn it over, it even includes the English translation. Of course, it doesn't matter to you what each stone represents... Because you don't see nature copied in this garden, but see an artificiality which has been constructed in a concrete style... However, this garden makes people misunderstand, people find nature compressed in this garden, because it comes in a form of something more naturalistic than nature, but not nature itself, more realistic than reality but not reality. In other words, you are just looking at out-and-out imitation- a form which doesn't exist anywhere... Therefore, nothing is more uncanny than this garden where stones are lined up dimly in the dusk. You feel a demon squatting down here against Andre Malraux's words... The will to abstract is scary. It cannot be said that Occidental abstraction is scary but that Oriental abstraction is subtle. Probably there is just a difference between them...<sup>5</sup>

A concept of verisimilitude as a mask of a system for rhetorical methods is seen in this passage.<sup>6</sup> If we look at the text more closely and substitute some key points, we can see the verisimilitude of the novel itself. One can replace the word 'nature' with 'reality', 'garden' with 'text' and change that part of the passage as follows:

Because you don't see reality copied in this text, but you see an artificiality which has been constructed in a concrete style... However, this text makes people misunderstand, people find reality compressed in this text, because it comes in a form of something more realistic than reality but not reality itself.

What is proclaimed here is a procedure in which an artificial verbal space is constructed in the novel and an artificial visual space is created in a Zen garden. What appeared at first sight as a straightforward realistic description is in fact an artificial reconstruction of reality.

The term self-referentiality is used broadly in current criticism, and is applied to works that foreground style so as to clarify their own artificiality. Gaggi claims that self-referentiality is central to postmodernism.<sup>7</sup> This text has clearly shown this self-referential nature. As has been seen in this extract, one of the devices employed to foreground style is the inclusion of one work inside another. This type of dual structure includes plays within plays, narrations inside narrations, paintings inside paintings. In this kind of self-referential work, form and style call attention to itself rather than to its content, and reminds the reader that what he is experiencing is artifice. The extract from this metafictional text openly declares its artifice. By using this dual device; narrations inside narrations, and the visual art inside the verbal art, the text makes the reader realise the artificial world constructed by the language, which imitates reality in high verisimilitude.

This passage also points out an abstract dimension of the concrete style of art. The natural materials in Zen garden or the real existing city as a setting and the massive use of proper nouns in this novel are the source materials for creating an abstract space, and thus, confuse the realms of art and reality.

Within this novel and in the Zen garden, reality is used as a medium for forming an abstract space. In the text Kyoto superficially seems to be depicted exactly as people would have perceived it in the real world. However, it is in fact abstracted in the same way in which a Zen garden is abstracted through the imitation of nature. Each element of the real world has passed through a filtering process of abstraction and stylisation. This is the most deceptive device through which an abstract space emerges as a real-seeming scene. According to this passage, the reader is reading an out-and-out imitation. Although the scene is portrayed realistically, it has nothing to do with a reality outside the artistic space.

#### QUESTIONS OF REPRESENTATION

From the analysis above, we can see the concern of the Zen garden with the nature of reflection and representation which is of interest to contemporary artists and writers. As is observed in the metafictional novel, this traditional Japanese art, the Zen garden calls the relationship between reality and conceptions or representations of reality into question.

In Japan, straightforward representations such as realistic paintings or sculpture (realism in this paper means art which aims to reproduce reality exactly) had not been developed until the end of the 19th century when Japan encountered Western culture and started to be affected by it significantly. Before this cultural encounter, Japanese art had been highly formalised and stylised. The abstract quality is apparent in the spirit of Zen Buddhism, which stresses simplicity and values the provocative. What is important here is, however, that abstraction is not achieved through straight lines or perfect geometric shapes which are rarely used in the Zen garden except for the lines of a surrounding square or the decorative pattern created by the sand. Garden elements which provide symbolic functions substitute for the real nature in some of the Zen gardens. As has been mentioned, the elements are made of natural objects such as trees, rocks, stones and so on. From this point of view, the Zen garden has the same quality as Western illusionistic paintings, which attempt to faithfully imitate the reality outside. In the text from *Kurai Tabi* the use of proper nouns and the existing city as a setting have the same effect. At a first glance the novel does not look different from the conventional realist

novel. However, the postmodern element recognised in the Zen garden depicted in the metafictional text is that they provoke the audience into questioning their habitual mode of perceiving and interpreting reality, and attempt to subvert the conventional idea of representation through its conventional mode. In both, a confusion of the level of reality is created; and both raise questions regarding the nature of art and the relationship between reality and representations of reality, by setting up the self-reflexive mode and using an illusionism of a traditional kind (this term means art aiming at creating the impression that the work is a window onto a real world). Utilising the illusionistic devices, they turn illusionism against itself, creating illusions inside illusions, confusing the distinction between art and reality by their ambiguous structures.

## CONCLUSION

The essential nature of a Zen garden is self-referentiality, which is a central issue to postmodern, contemporary art. I have analysed the metafictional function and self-referentiality of a contemporary experimental novel through commenting on the stone garden. The text's reflection reveals the underlying quality of a Zen garden, which also contains a metatheatrical structure. The analysis shows that this traditional art questions the relationship between reality and representations of reality within a conventional representational manner. It should be emphasised that abstraction is carried out within the concrete form and this postmodern phenomena seen in the contemporary verbal art has been already recognised in the traditional Zen garden.

---

## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Daisetz Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism and Its Influence On Japanese Culture* (Taipei: Southern Material Centre Inc., 1979).
- <sup>2</sup> Wenche Ommundsen, *Metafiction: Reflexivity in Contemporary Texts* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1993).
- <sup>3</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: Metafictional Paradox* (London and New York: Methuen, 1984)
- <sup>4</sup> Edmund J. Smyth, ed., *Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction* (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd, 1991).
- <sup>5</sup> Yumiko Kurahashi, *Kurai Tabi* (Dark Journey) (trans. by Etsuko Tanaka-Karlic), p. 141.
- <sup>6</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1977).
- <sup>7</sup> Sivio Gaggi, *Modern/Postmodern: A Study in Twentieth-Century Arts and Ideas* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989).