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A cultural studies approach to the function of "place" element in urban fiction Case study: the function of "Tehran" in the novels of eighties and nineties

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Abstract

Location is an indelible element in any narrative text, because every action or description in the story and every development in the plot takes place in a real or imaginary place, whether you like it or not. The place element in the story is sometimes just a silent background and context for events to take place; But sometimes it also plays a role as a living and dynamic element in the formation of events. In this study, Persian urban novels of the seventies to nineties, the events of which took place in Tehran, have been studied with the approach of cultural studies. The results of this research show that the place in these novels is sometimes an objective place (such as highways, streets, passages, etc.) that show the manifestations of progress and civilization of the capital; But due to the heterogeneity with the culture and emotions of the citizens, it does not create a discourse continuum. The result of living in these places is boredom for the native citizens and cowardice, sadness and confusion for the immigrant (city) citizens. Sometimes space dominates the citizens and the descriptions of the place are influenced by the wishes, nostalgia, fears, or ideals of the character. These spaces are generally out of reach, present in the memories or wishes of the characters and create a sense of nostalgia for them.

Keywords: *Location in an Urban Story, Tehran, The seventies and the eighties and the nineties, Cultural Studies and New Novel.*

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Extended Abstract

1- Introduction

"Place" is an indispensable element of any narrative text in that any description of characters and actions and any progress in the plot must inevitably take place in a real or imaginary "space". Even completely fantasy-based fictions cannot occur in vacuity. Accordingly, "place" constitutes an integral part of every fiction, irrespective of its type.

In recent classifications, the "place" element, besides being construed as an environment in which events take place, is considered as a space for the formation of fiction's events. Climate, rural, and pastoral fictions are classified based on this conception of place.

Another perspective in place-based categorization of stories is their classification into "urban stories" and "rural stories" (pastoral literature).

2. Literature Review

Urban fiction (or urban literature) is defined as a literary text originating from urban spaces and perspectives. The tone of urban fictions is usually dark, attempting to focus on the underside of city living. However, in a more general perspective, in urban fictions, the city is not considered as a place, rather, it is construed as a life style or as human relations. Accordingly, in urban fictions, the city, instead of being a place in which the events occur, is a place affecting human relations, their behaviors, and their thoughts.

Accordingly, the present study aims at investigating the function of "place" element (which is "Tehran" in this study) in the 80s and 90s fictions to answer the following question: "what is the function of urban space (Tehran) in the above fictions?" In fact, we attempt to investigate whether urban scene settings in these fictions follow specific cultural signs and whether "place" has a dynamic function during the narration or it merely acts as a silent background?

To achieve this aim, some of the outstanding fictions of this period whose events have taken place in Tehran were scrutinized. These fictions include: Ismaeel Fasih (return to Darkhoongah), qazale alizade (the nights of Tehran), moniro ravanipour (Gypsy by the fire), Hassan sanapour (The missing half), Amir Hossein Cheheltan (Tehran, city without sky), Goli Taraghi (Between two worlds), Fariba Vafi (My bird), Zoya Pirzad (We will get used to it), and Sina Dadkhah (Yusefabad, street 33)

3. Methodology

“Cultural studies” is a recent and interdisciplinary major investigating “everything” in its domain. The field of cultural studies, due to its interdisciplinary nature, functions as a “bridge” and, accordingly, does not entail any specific methodology and research plan. In fact, the interdisciplinary nature of cultural studies leads to its close relationship with other fields such as literature and art. Hence, cultural studies and literary criticism not only have a close relationship but also are deficit without using each other in their studies in that a text cannot be fully understood without paying attention to the cultural features and its social functions.

Accordingly, in the present study, place (Tehran) is construed as a locus reflecting cultural issues in cultural texts (novels) and facilitating the understanding of texts’ implicit and underlying meanings. This study, with its theoretical framework, on the one hand, shows how the city, in these novels, has affected its residents’ actions and life style and, on the other hand, how residents affect the formation and the structure of the city.

4. Results

The present study reveals that “place” is an indispensable part of every narration. In traditional fictions, place merely served a container function and included the events. However, in more recent approaches, especially in urban fictions, although the fictions occur in cities, they do not focus on place as a concrete place. Rather, they focus on life relationships and interactions that exist between citizens and, consequently, make a certain way of life. In this approach, place is either concrete and under subject’s control or it is a space containing subjects with all their wishes, feelings, needs, and contrasts. In the most outstanding Persian urban fictions published in the 80s and 90s, Tehran is represented both as a “place” and “space”. In these novels, concrete Tehran (Tehran as a place), with all its modernity and progress manifestations, has a declining movement full of congestion, anxiety and turmoil. However, in abstract representations of Tehran (Tehran as a space), residents have a nostalgic feeling towards the past of Tehran which no longer exists and this leads to considering all manifestations of traditional life in old Tehran as being unrealistically nice and to depicting all manifestations of modernity in new Tehran as dark and horrifying.

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