Out of the Basement-An Analysis of Willa’s Spatial Practice in Linden Hills

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Abstract. In Gloria Naylor’s allusive novel Linden Hills, the basement with a morgue is a dominant image as “the space of representation” to discipline the wives of the Nedeeds. As a representative, Willa, the last wife, manages to go upstairs and out of the basement to burn the house. Based on Lefebvre’s theory of “spatial triad”, this paper aims at the discussion of Willa’s “spatial practice”, with a special focus on Willa’s three steps to challenge and transcend the sexual “representation of space”.

Introduction

With the great change in “the Spatial Turn” in humanistic and social science, the studying of the space has become a hot topic in literary criticism. Henry Lefebvre’s “spatial triad” is one of the most important theories applied to explore the political context of the space in modern literary criticism. Lefebvre suggests that every experience is comprised of three interrelated aspects of space: representation of space, spatial practice, and space of representation. The “space of representation” is the specific space of inhabitant, controlled by the users. And the “representation of space” is a conceptualized space constructed out of symbols, codifications and abstract representations, which is formulated by the dominant social group to discipline the “spatial practice” of social members. The final aspect, the “spatial practice”, based on the specific “space of representation”, acts in accordance with the requirements of the “representation of space” but is also open to the transcending practice. [1]

Gloria Naylor, a famous American black woman writer, manages to construct spatial systems of the isolated black women in all her novels. In her second novel Linden Hills, Naylor narrates the stories of the Luther Nedeeds in five generations. Linton Hills is the richest region for the black upper-middle class. It takes five generations of the Nedeeds to build the black community of Linden Hills. The house of the Nedeeds is the result of the sacrifice of the first Nedeed’s wife. The great success makes all his offspring produce exact replicas of the first Luther Nedeed as a generic term and marry an octroon woman. Nevertheless, the fifth Nedeed changes the routine of his forefathers and marries a brown-skinned woman who bears a white son. Due to the failure to replicate the same Nedeed, he accuses his wife, Willa, of adultery and imprisons her and their son into the basement with a morgue to “give her a lesson”. Awakened by the remains of the past women of the Nedeeds, Willa manages to go out of the basement.

Based on Lefebvre’s “spatial triad”, this paper attempts to probe the spatial politics of racism and sexism in Naylor’s Linden Hills from the perspective of spatial formation. Besides, it also focuses on the exploration of the way how the protagonist, Willa, challenges the regulation of “representation of space” and carries out her subjective “spatial practice” and manages to transcend the patriarchal “representation of space”.

The Nedeeds’ House: the Place of Representation

Lefebvre suggests that any lived place is the presentation of its politic space of the powerful group.
In Naylor’s Linden Hills, as the “place of representation”, Nedeed’s big white clapboard house with a basement represents the evil place of racism and sexism.

The Nedeeds has been living in the house at the bottom of the Linden Hills and near the graveyard. There is “no sign of life in or around it”. Naylor’s physical description of Linden Hills is deliberately similar to Dante’s Inferno so as to create a Gothic atmosphere of death and depression. [2] Linden Hills is a suburban residence place for the rich black upper-middle class. This isolated region for the blacks symbolizes the racial separation of the black from the white. Even the Nedeeds, the richest black and the owner of the Linden Hills, can’t get rid of the limitation of political space let alone other poor blacks. Internalized by the superiority and dignity of the white, the Nedeeds has been struggling to discard the status of the blackness and accept the whiteness. Their whiteness-orientation reflects not only in the choice of their octoroon wives, but also in the color and decoration of their big white house. Thus, both the Nedeeds’ white clapboard house and the four octoroon wives obviously manifest their inner pursuit of integration of the white society.

Moreover, Lefebvre’s “spatial triad” suggests that symbols can be used to construct conceptualized space. Therefore, to examine the symbols in the novel is to probe the “representation of space” of the powerful social groups. Nedeeds’ large white clapboard house with a morgue basement is the dominant image full of symbols. All the Nedeeds’ wives, as the machine of procreation, are confined to the house and live a lonely life in isolation. The house is a clear symbol of the hell for women.

The morgue basement in the Nedeeds’ house is like the center of the hell. The fifth Nedeed turns it into the disciplining place for his wife Willa by setting metal shelving, iron belt, intercom, two small cots and twelve concrete steps. The basement, as the “presentation of space”, represents the space of sexism. The metal shelving and the iron belt, aimed at avoiding the escape of Willa, symbolize that the male exerts absolute physical control on his strong-willed wife. “The intercom that kept clicking on and off with insane messages about adultery, the complexion of the child, and lesson to be learned.”[3] The quoted sentence clearly shows Nedeed’s motive to imprison Willa. Neglecting the blood of octoroon wives of four generation, Nedeed incriminates his wife for their white son and the fabricated infidelity, Nedeed wants to discipline Willa by controlling her daily necessities of food, water and light. Therefore, like Foucault’s prison, the basement serves as Nedeed’s “representation of space”, which is constructed to exert enormous pressure on his wife both physically and mentally. Thus, the physical space of the basement is full of politic connotation.

Transcending the Basement: Willa’s Practice of Space

According to Lefebvre, the influence of the “representation of space” may result in two opposite kinds of “spatial practice” for the inhabitants of the “space of representation”. One is the disciplined “spatial practice”, based on the users’ obedience and adoption to the social rules of the strong social groups. The other is the challenged one, based on the users’ deviation from the social protocol. In Linden Hills, all the Nedeeds’ wives have been internalized by “spatial representation” of the sexism.

As the procreative tool, the meaning of their existence is to replicate the endless Nedeed men with grotesque shape and evil spirit. After the replicas of the Nedeeds are produced, all of the Nedeed wives become “invisible” in the household. In the eyes of the Nedeeds, “breaking in a wife is like breaking in a pair of slippers”. All of the Nedeeds follow the mechanic pattern of “releasing their seed at the normal equinox so the child would come during the sign of Goat when the winter’s light was the weakest”. Their genealogy is constituted of a series of perverted reincarnation: the same and enters the same body. [4] that is how the continuum of the horrendous patriarchy work started by the first Nedeed.

Internalized by the sexism of the Nedeeds, the Nedeeds’ women in four generations become silent and obedient. Different from the other four Nedeeds’ wives, the “spatial practice” of Willa is full of change and rebellion. Even she was imprisoned in the basement; she hasn’t taken the same disciplined and passive practice as her four predecessors. Instead, Willa takes rebellion to challenge the “spatial representation” of sexism. Her spatial practice is mainly shown in her epiphany and rebellious actions, especially her transcending the basement and burning the house.
Willa’s first practice starts with her making voice. In the early days of her imprisonment, Willa, unlike other silent women of the Nedeeds, takes the measures of shouting and screaming to make her husband to realize and recognize her innocence and his unjust treatment. The death of her child almost results in her likely desperation. Nedeed’s refusal to answer her makes her understand the voidness of scream and her mind gets filled with a deep sense of anguish. The death of the child makes Willa totally fall into hopeless crash both in her body and soul. Her failure to be “a good mother” and “a good wife” make her so desperate. Her desire for death is her initial step to challenge the patriarchal order prescribed by the will of her husband. Her rebellious nature starts to devise means to follow her own will, rather than the one assigned by her husband. [5] Thus, Nedeed’s voice fails to create the result he desired and even Nedeed’s declaration of shutting off the water to the basement brings no change.

Willa’s second “spatial practice” stems from her consciousness of revolting awakened by the journals, cookbooks and photograph albums of previous Nedeed wives.[6] The remains of the three women of the Nedeeds records their miserable life in the hell-like Nedeed house. After her son’s being weaned, Luwana Nedeed is deprived of the right for owing her son, due to her uselessness in the eyes of her husband. What’s more, the gradual loss of her son, her garden and even herself makes her alienated to a “voiceless” woman. She buries her anguish of her losses in her journals and “carves the 666 lines of her utterance time on her stomach and chest”. Luwana’s buried memories make Willa find “anchor of validity to the inner flow of her life” The Nedeeds’ women are victimized and brutalized by their African husbands and sons. The clandestine records of the previous Nedeed women, Luwana Nedeed, Evelyn Nedeed and Priscilla McGuire Nedeed communicate their deprived passion and passive anger.

Naylor suggests in her novels that “History is a written photography”. In the cold dark morgue basement, Willa flips through a photography album, beginning with the wedding of a vibrant girl named Priscilla to antecedent Luther Nedeed. As the picture progress the shadow of Priscilla’s son, another Luther Nedeed, grows ominously until it covers her completely. Soon all traces of her once lively face appear to have been deliberately burned away from the photos.

Staring at the “gaping hole” that was once Priscilla, Willa feels “a bizarre temper tantrum against fate”. She suddenly realizes the “smeared photo album marked me”. Therefore, she determines “to return with a new shape in her fingers before the image vanished”. The above description shows that Willa’s rebellious consciousness is awakened by the ancient records of the former silent women in the Nedeeds.

On the Christmas Eve, like other emerging life, Willa’s brain, heart, hands, and feet are being programmed to a purpose of transcending the basement and gaining the rebirth. After gaining the strength and sense of power, she straightens her back to enter into the hall. The Christmas Eve, as the representation of rebirth, symbolizes the real beginning of Willa’s “spatial practice” to transcend the confinement of sexism.

Clearly, from the basement to the kitchen, from the den to the bedrooms, she bids farewell to the suppressed past and moves like “a wildness of queen” of the army ants. Every step she steps out of the basement is the complete farewell to the submissive past. She abandons the identity of Mrs. Nedeed that she has worked hard to achieve, and climbs up the steps with a high mind nurturing a hopeful purpose to shatter the mental and physical constraints. The climbing of the steps from the basement symbolically represents her recuperated self. She is on the way into spiritual, emotional or physical journey. Ultimately, she burns the Nedeeds’ large house. Willa’s immolation in the fire destroys not only her, but also her husband and his mansion, discipline the female. [7] Willa’s “spatial practice” of going out of the morgue basement and burning the house not only represents her rebirth, but also symbolizes the complete destruction of the sexism.
Conclusion

In summary, as an outstanding black American woman writer, Gloria Naylor shows her great concern of racism and sexism. With her spatial consciousness, Naylor narrates the stories of the doomed fate and destruction of Luther Nedeeds. For all the Nedeeds’ women in five generation, “marriage promises paradise but delivers hell”.

The paper tries to give a brief spatial analysis of Naylor’s novel Linden Hills. The Nedeeds’ house with a morgue basement is considered as the “space of representation” for the Linden women to disclose the sexual “representation of space” of the Nedeeds’ men. It also traces three steps of the protagonist, Willa, who breaks the convention of subjugation of male-domination and gains rebirth at the end. From submissiveness to self-actualization, from repression to assertion, from diffidence to confidence, Willa’s spatial practice is not only the tremendous accomplishment of a single African American woman, but also the spectacular success of the community of all women.

References