

Unheard Voice and Resistance - Depiction of Space in Sula

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Abstract: *Sula* vividly recreates the life of black people at the bottom, reflecting their survival dilemmas and their struggles. Because the growth experience of Sula and Nel is the main line of the story and the wonderful spatial description interspersed with it is ignored, this paper is based on bell hooks' theory, analyzing the subjective transformation and the idea of speaking for black people reflected in the spatial description. Through analysis, it can be found that the novel's spatial depiction visualizes abstract concepts, both physical space with boundaries and natural and social space without boundaries, showing the anti-white supremacy and the transformation of the narrative subject from the side. There are many metaphors in the spatial depiction of the article. Analyzing the metaphors in black literature combined with spatial depiction may provide reference for more minority literary writing and direct public attention to the plight faced by minorities.

Keywords: *Sula*, bell hooks, space narrative, subject change, blackness.

1. Introduction

Sula is written by Toni Morrison. It was first published in 1973, and it straddles the time period from around the end of World War I to the mid-1960s. This novel is based on the friendship between the heroine Sula and Nell and Sula's growing up experience, and describes life in a legendary black community called "Bottom" in Medallion. However, there are many impressive depictions of the environment in *Sula* to some extent suggest the characters independent voice and different narrative subjects. bell hooks, a prominent black feminist theorist, has worked on racial and gender liberation, this paper will apply the theory from her book: *yearning race, gender, and cultural politics*. Her theory focuses on breaking through the hierarchy, and the principles of white supremacy, to make voices heard that have previously been buried. She advocates blacks and Asians that they should have their own discourse system in writing, and the narrative subject should be changed to focus on the previously unnoticed people. [1]

Most of the analyses using bell hooks' theories are based on the sisterhood of Sula and Nel or the feminism embodied in the novel from the perspective of the whole text, while some analyze the spatial narrative in Morrison's novel from the perspective of space. There are few articles that analyze the author's spatial portrayal of Sula in conjunction with bell hooks theory to analyze the author's idea of subject transformation and anti-white supremacy as a voice for black people. In many places of *Sula*, there are descriptions of the environment in which blacks are regarded as the Other and excluded from the mainstream, which corresponds to hooks theoretical concept of the "Otherness". Therefore, this essay will apply bell hooks theory to argue the space depictions in *Sula* reflect blacks are in a state of inarticulate, awakening of their sense of subjectivity.

This essay will use bell hooks' theory in two parts, the first part is the analysis of the natural and social space depiction, which are often grouped together and try to explore the state of dissonance and resistance faced by black people in these spaces without apparent boundaries. The second part is the analysis of the physical space, which will be specific to the voices of the black people and the idea of the transformation of the subject in the three spaces with obvious boundaries: the city road, the train carriage and the house, and this part will talk more about the unheard voice from black women in train carriage and house.

2. Natural Space and Social Space in *Sula*

The descriptions of the natural space and the social space appear in the book in a complementary way, and the narrative subject transforms in these descriptions while allowing the black people who have been in oppression to make their voices heard, which is also the point that bell hooks theory is most concerned with.

2.1. Marginalized Black Communities in Natural Space

In the opening part, Morrison gives a delicate description of the natural environment of Medallion, depicting it as a very beautiful place with a wonderful natural environment, but then describes the social environment of the people living there as a kind of chaos and decadence, and this strange contrast may be the message Morrison wants to convey to us.

"It is called the suburbs now, but when black people lived there it was called the Bottom.... Generous funds have been allotted to level the stripped and faded buildings that clutter the road from Medallion up to the golf course" [2].

Morrison use "suburb" and "Bottom", "generous funds" to show white people arrogance. Though those words, the depiction of the environment from the pronounced overlooking white perspective to the black community and show the oppression. People living in the Bottom gather to gamble or doze off everywhere with a decadent feeling, Morrison uses this way to truly show the daily life of the black people at the bottom. But their homes will be faded by white people. Morrison uses this way to show her anti-white supremacy minds.

There are also many descriptions of the natural space of Medallion in the text, and the comparative analysis of the words described in the environment reflect the change of the narrative subject. People living in "Bottom" are used to suffer the bad weather here, they succumb to the misfortunes that these weathers bring to them, and the valley where white people live is much better despite the cold weather because: "The hills protected it." But later the whites encroached on the summit because "they had changed their minds and instead of keeping the valley floor to themselves, now they wanted a hilltop house with a river view and a ring of elms" [2]. Lefebvre pointed out that sociality is the essence of space, and space is not a static container or platform for the evolution of social relations, but is the product of social relations.[3] They deceive the Negroes when they think the land on the hilltop is barren and uninhabitable, but when they do get the land", "The nigger got the hilly land, where planting was backbreaking, where the soil slid down and washed away the seeds, and where the wind lingered all through the winter"[2], but when Medallion became "hot and dusty" they thought Bottom at the top of the hill was "the bottom of heaven" [2] through those descriptions white people have the means of production and are in the dominant position in social relations, while black people are originally subordinate to white people and are part of the white people's production resources, even if they have obtained personal freedom. In social relations, it is still in the role of being moved and attached.

2.2. The Awakening of Black Subject Consciousness in Social Space

On the way Sula and Nel went to buy ice cream, Morrison used an anthropomorphic way to describe the wind "A hill wind was blowing dust and empty Camels wrappers about their ankles. It pushed their dresses into the creases of their behinds, then lifted the hems to peek at their cotton underwear" [2]. This description is uncomfortable at first, with dust and cigarette boxes (The cigarette case has a masculine color, which in some ways may allude to the male gaze) surrounding the little girl's ankles, and more nakedly later, suggesting a male gaze in which the female becomes the Other, and setting the stage for the later descriptions of the Medallion entertainment district.

Morrison has made a detailed description of the entertainment area at the bottom, she not only describes the layout of the bottom, but also describes the life scenes of the people at the bottom. The entertainment area at the bottom is full of decadence and depression. The men are leaning against the door of the shop, likes to judge everything. Those men especially like to look at women whenever a woman passes by the older men will look at women through the brim of the hat, the younger men are more bolded to make some of the actions with hints, regardless of their age in their eyes the woman is the existence of the gaze. Women became the objects of the male gaze, they were free to flirt, Morrison wrote about the black male gaze from a black perspective, where Otherness became a black female, as bell hooks said: "Since much of this theory has been constructed in reaction to and against high modernism, there is seldom any mention of black experience or writings by black people in this work, specifically black women"[1]. From this perspective, the subject transformation is further refined from black men to black women. The existence of black women in Medallion is exposed nakedly, and the voices of African-American women living at the bottom of society that people have not noticed are heard.

After Sula's death, the people of Medallion seem to have lost the object of their discontent because the demise of Sula, a new and different individual, has left them without an object to blame or compare with, and the social space has changed. When the government, which had cheated them once, decided to recruit blacks as workers, they felt a sense of relief because they did not need to spend a lot of energy to find a job, but a hard winter made people seem to fall into despair again. Their sense of subjectivity suddenly awakened, so on National Suicide Day, people poured into the streets and the whole community started to boil, they took to the streets and started marching, wanting to "open further this slit in the veil"[2].

"Their hooded eyes swept over the place where their hope had lain since 1927. There was the promise: leaf-dead. The teeth unrepaired, the coal credit cut off, the chest pains unattended, the school shoes unbought, the rush-stuffed mattresses, the broken toilets, the leaning porches, the slurred remarks..." [2].

From bell hooks' perspective when focusing on race, and minorities problem "must consider the plight of under-class people of color, a vast majority of whom are black"[1]. The description of this part reflects the awakening of the consciousness of the black subject at the bottom. It can be found that in this paragraph description of the setting is obviously from the black perspective Morrison uses powerful parallelism to describe the current situation of the people at the bottom, and through the descriptions of these scenes allowing them to express they try to change the environment, they used to live in. The marginalized black people were cheated by the whites again and again, and their dissatisfaction with the status quo accumulated into their motivation for violent rebellion and their voices out independently. The transformation of the subject is thus visible. Although they use a violent way, but show their intent to resist the oppression obviously.

In the last chapter of the article, the black people living on the top of the mountain and the white people living in the valley change their minds, and the white people in the valley start to move closer

to the top of the mountain, while the black people try to move closer to the valley by all means, and there is a new depiction of the social environment for Medallion.

“You could go downtown and see colored people working in the dime store behind the counters, even handling money with cash-register keys around their necks. And a colored man taught mathematics at the junior high school” [2]. This description shows that the living conditions of the blacks seem to have improved, they can become salesmen and teachers in schools, but the blacks who lived on the hillside could not wait to leave, and the whole Bottom community collapsed under the influence of the whites, only left “the poor, the old, the stubborn—and the rich white folks” [2]. The original black community has changed from neighbors who often walk around to “just separate houses with separate televisions and separate telephones and less and less dropping by” [2]. From this description reflects that in the eyes of whites, they still have the right to control the lives of blacks. When they want to build golf courses and villas in places where black people have always lived, they can dismantle this community. By comparing the social space descriptions of Medallion in the two periods, which embody the anti-white supremacy ideas that Morrison wants to convey. At the same time, these space narratives are all told from the perspective of black people, and white people have become the objects to be narrated. Maybe their minds are influenced by white people, but the final decision is made by themselves. It can be said that Toni Morrison kept his word in *Sula* that: “white gaze is not dominant gaze in any of my books” [4].

3. Physical Space in *Sula*

This paper establishes the physical space within the actual one, the city, the train, and the house, which have obvious boundaries, and how does Morrison present the subject's transformed thoughts, the unheard voices and the unnoticed people in these physical spaces with obvious boundaries?

3.1. Confusion Caused by Urban Construction

In the city dimension, Shadrack's narrative of the urban road shows the “otherness” of this space. The opening part of the novel does not specify Shadrack's black identity, he was discharged from the hospital, walking aimlessly in the city for the disappearance of the warning signs, the direction of the road is clear, the look of different passers-by and confused. He is afraid to look up his head when he was walking and the result of walking is in the opposite direction of the road he wants to go. This all reflects the othering of Shadrack as a black man in the city.

In the first chapter of *Sula* is called 1919 in this opening chapter Morrison was not directly write about *Sula*, the main character's appearance was delayed. After two world wars, few authors would begin with the main character living in a stable and ideal environment, and Shadrack “as a black soldier who returned shocked and paralyzed from the European front.”[5] finally returned to the city. The description of the city's roads shows us Shadrack's confusion as a black soldier who has just experienced war and suffers from stress disorder. The roads are clean and tidy, there are no fences that he is familiar with, people seem to know where they are going, while he does not know where these roads will lead him to, which makes him feel afraid. He is excluded from the city and has no sense of belonging. In this passage, Shadrack becomes the “other” as suggested by bell hooks, he is excluded from the city and has no sense of belonging. In the eyes of the blacks, the discomfort they feel from the city's roads and the perspective of the narrative subject has changed, through this the description of the character Morrison tries to draw people's attention to the minorities.

3.2. Black Women Lost Their Voices in the Carriage

“Spatial division and spatial separation both of these show the permeation of the mechanism of power operation”[6]. The division of the carriage and the special toilet for black people are the objective

embodiment of the oppressed and marginalized black people in the space. Foucault used to write in his book that space is the basis of any form of public life; space is the basis of any exercise of power.[7] The special carriage in this novel is a particular space in order to show the white privilege.

“As they opened the door marked “COLORED ONLY”, they saw a white conductor coming toward them. It was a chilly day but a light skim of sweat glistened on the woman’s face as she and the little girl struggled to hold the door open, hang on to their luggage and enter all at once ”[2]. Nel and her mother Helene accidentally entered the wrong carriage when they were trying to cross the carriage to open the door of the “COLORED ONLY” carriage when the conductor found them. When she hears the conductor call her a "gal", Morrison describes Helene's psychological description like this: "old fears of being somehow flawed gathered in her stomach and made her hands tremble" There is a kind of stiffness. The carriage as a closed space intensifies this sense of oppression and suffocation, because Nel and Helene have no place to hide, they are forced to face this insult from white supremacy. From the offensive words of the "gal", we can experience the double oppression of black women from race and gender. This scene could have taken place anywhere in that period, and this historical and universal portrayal highlights the idea of subject transformation, clearly depicting the plight of black women from their perspective. Even though it is a very small depiction of space, it is enough to make one feel their unease and constant oppression.

3.3. Breaking Out of the Bounded Housing Space

The main descriptions of the houses mentioned in the novel are actually Nel's home and Sula's home, two houses with very different styles, one large and lively, one so neat and tidy as to be breathtaking, and their two mistresses with opposite images. Sula's home belonged to her grandmother Eva, and there are many local rumors about her that she used insurance fraud to crush her leg under a train in order to get \$10,000 to build this house bigger and bigger, but no one really knows where the money came from.

Nel's self-awareness also awakened to some extent after returning from her grandmother's house with her mother, and she looked in the mirror and said “I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me” [2]. After becoming friends with Sula, from the views of Nel the house which Sula lived is the symbol of liberty, because in this house does not have many rules things can be disorder. It is clear that Nel also aspires to a casual home, wanting to get rid of her mother's tidy and suffocating home. “Space itself is both a product, shaped by social processes and human interventions at different scales, and a force that, in turn, influences, guides and defines the possibilities of human behavior and ways of being in the world” [8]. These two house’s spaces also influence the personalities of Nel and Sula, one following the long-established female trajectory of getting married, having children and taking care of the family, while Sula rebels against the conventional path of women and goes in search of liberation.

“House is the stage on which gender politics and class struggle are staged” [9]. In this house, Eva is the owner, “There were rooms that had three doors, others that opened out on the porch only and were inaccessible from any other part of the house” [2]. This interconnected structure of this house, to a certain extent, breaks the shackles on black women Eva can control the whole house not just the kitchen or other space used to be thought only belong to women, and reflects a kind of fluidity, but she still partisan to men, blaming new wife for not taking on the chore of cooking and ironing. In this house, Eva killed her drug-addicted son, and her daughter Hannah was burned to death here because of an accident. In this space Sula experienced her childhood, witnessed her mother's affair with someone else, witnessed her mother's death, her own love, her own death. Sula's rebellion by burning herself is her attempt to break out of the patriarchal bondage and the rules that have always been imposed on women, but until Sula dies in the bed where her grandmother slept and when she looking at the wood-panelled window, which was broken by Eva in order to save her daughter Hannah, she

and her rebellion are sealed inside the house. The depiction of the physical space of the house also reflects the shift of the subject to the more vulnerable African-American women, allowing us to see the plight of African-American women from the side, to hear their voices, their resistance.

4. Conclusions

The spatial narrative in *Sula*'s novel is brilliant, and Morrison uses her literary skills to show the lives of people living in the black community of Medallion, with each spatial scene accurately reflecting the contradictions and ideas Morrison wants to convey. This book tells the story of the under-class minorities, and throughout the story Morrison weakens the presence of white people, who are only present in a very few places. Whether in natural space, social space, or physical space, Morrison restrains the presence of white people, as if they are the margins of the story, which truly reflects the transforming the subject of the narrative.

Black people's own stories deserve to be written, and they should not be limited to their color and race; they have their own ideas, and their own voices need to be heard by the world. In this continuous process of experimenting and breaking the traditional narrative subject, perhaps not only black literature but also Asians and Indians can be benefited, and their voices, minds, and cultures deserve to be heard and preserved.

The spatial description in literary works can reflect Morrison's thoughts more deeply from the side, and this paper also fills the gap in the application of bell hooks theory in the analysis of the spatial description in *Sula* to a certain extent, and also makes everyone pay attention to the importance of spatial description and the dilemma of black people(include men and women), but the current research still has certain deficiencies, there are many descriptions of space in the text, and Morrison uses metaphorical techniques when describing this article does not pay attention to. Future research can have a more detailed analysis of this aspect.

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