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An Interpretation of "The Embassy of Cambodia" from the Perspective of Spatial Criticism

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Abstract: *Black British writer Zadie Smith's short story "The Embassy of Cambodia" focuses attention on hardships of a young African immigrant woman Fatou in London. By employing Lefebvre's Space theory, this paper conducts an investigation into various predicaments confronting the protagonist Fatou in different spaces and her countermeasures against them. In physical space, the multicultural Willesden characterized by inherent disconnectedness and ambivalent attitude toward new immigrants, brings Fatou a sense of isolation and loneliness. In social space, being exploited as a modern-day slave by employers, Fatou has to endure racial discrimination such as microaggression, subtle sexist conducts such as mansplaining and manterrupting. The mental space not only witnesses Fatou's trauma but also her resistance to predicaments.*

Keywords: *The Embassy of Cambodia; Spatial criticism; Zadie Smith; Fatou; African immigrant woman*

1. Introduction

Black British writer Zadie Smith's short story "The Embassy of Cambodia" focuses its attention on hardships of a young African immigrant Fatou in multicultural London where she is marginalized as the Other. Previous studies explored this short novel from different perspectives including post-colonism, multidirectional memory, neocolonial injustice, affective labor etc. "Space" is an influential term in western culture. With a close reading of "The Embassy of Cambodia", it is not difficult to notice the influence of different spaces on Fatou's life in London. In this sense, this paper attempts to explore multiple predicaments Fatou is confronted with in London and her countermeasures against these hardships on the basis of Lefebvre's space theory.

It is unwise to ignore Lefebvre and his *The Production of Space* while discussing space. In *The Production of Space*, he classifies the fields or spaces into three dimensions, namely, the physical of nature or the Cosmos, the mental of logical and formal abstractions and the social.[1] Thus, the layout of this paper is closely related to these three spaces.

2. Physical Space: Pervasive Disconnectedness

Physical space normally is connected to the place where people or characters in literature reside. Physical space is "the foundation of spatial subjects' existence"; any social existence failing to produce its own space without physical space, it would disappear or perish. [1] In literary works, the physical space can be considered to be the setting of the story, including county, village, house, park, buildings streets or other material space. Lefebvre argues that "space is never empty: it always embodies a meaning… Every group of places and objects has a center, and this is therefore true of the houses, the city or the whole world". [1] In this regard, metaphorical meanings, social and cultural implications reflected by physical spaces deserve to be carefully and thoroughly examined. In "The Embassy of Cambodia", physical spaces assume a role in Fatou's predicaments.

One of the most important and influential physical spaces in "The Embassy of Cambodia" is Willesden, a North London suburb. It is a multicultural society. The ethnicity of clientele to a swimming pool at the health center next to the embassy of Cambodia demonstrates the multicultural nature of Willesden on the condition that except native white Britons, people from South Asia, Middle East and Africa are also members of it.

That being said, the multicultural Willesden contains elements hostile to new immigrants. Detrimental factors including Disconnectedness, fragmentation and isolation result in the lack of

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meaningful and constructive interaction between different communities, which is evidenced and disclosed by the use of heterodiegetic narrator. The contention between collective first-person plural narrator "we" and first-person singular narrator "I" displays the so-called "parallel lives" or new form of "separate but equal" between different communities. The former "we"-the people of Willesden, incorporates white natives and other assimilated or established immigrants; the latter can be interpretated as a British-born retiree who is a chosen speaker for the Old and New People (agrarian peasants and city dwellers) of Willesden. "I" takes his/her right to represent people in Willesden for granted because he/she, born at the crossroads of Willesden, Kilburn and Queen's Park, is granted British citizenship. But "we" harshly criticizes "I"'s foolish and pointless claim provided that "many people were born right there; it doesn't mean anything at all. We are not one people and no one can speak for us. It's all a lot of nonsense." [2] "We" people of different ethnic communities negates the British-born citizen's right to represent them due to their different ethnicity, which is an indication to the lack of a political community with cohesiveness in Willesden. British multiculturalism lays an equal emphasis on the uniqueness of each ethic communities, thus, to a great degree, different communities' adherence to their ethnicity denies compromise to forge a new community. Therefore, isolation or disconnectedness are pervasive there.

This disconnectedness or isolation is also mirrored by the collective first-person plural narrator's attitude toward little countries. "The fact is if we followed the history of every little country in this world-in its dramatic as well as its quiet times-we would have no space left in which to live our own lives or to apply ourselves to our necessary tasks, never mind indulge in occasional pleasures, like swimming. Surely there is something to be said for drawing a circle around our attention and remaining within that circle." [2] The narrator develops a sense of apprehension that if they- people of Willesden exert great energies to comprehend details of the culture and history of little countries in the planet, their time and space left for their own lives, their necessary tasks and their occasional pleasures would be deprived of. In this respect, they show a tendency to draw a circle between themselves and others and adhere to their own ethnicity. Willesden is characterized by its people's unwillingness to establish a meaningful connection with each ethnic communities, not to mention to show interest in and display kindness to different cultures, in this sense, "we" are unconversant with the national flag of Cambodia; the appearance of the Embassy of Cambodia can only remind "us" of "genocide" of Khmer Rouge in Cambodia.

Fatou's integration predicament is a direct consequence of the role of the disconnectedness and isolation between different ethnic communities in hindering her to establish constructive interaction with native whites and assimilated immigrants. This is demonstrated by the relationship between Fatou and the heterodiegetic narrator who is never a participant in her unpleasant and lonely life in Willesden. From beginning to end, the narrator, people of Willesden, never initiates a conversation with Fatou. They keep a maintained distance from Fatou despite of their consciousness of Fatou's plight or unpleasant experience. After Fatou is made redundant by her employers unreasonably, she sits down next to her possessions on the pavement to wait for Andrew. People of Willesden discover Fatou's wet hair and weary limb, they still remain a maintained distance away her. "Many of us walked past her that afternoon, or spotted her as we rode the bus, or through the windscreens of our cars, or from our balconies. Naturally, we worried for her. We tend to assume the worst, here in Willesden. We watched her watching the shuttlecock." [2] "We" observe her every behavior distantly, conjecture about her recent experience and develop a sense of apprehension over her, but none of people in Willesden from different communities approach her and enquire about her need. In this regard, no constructive interaction between Fatou and people in Willesden can facilitate her belongingness to and integration into Britain.

3. Social Space: Exploitation and Sexism

In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre also breaks the binary classification of space into mental and physical dimensions, he considers social space as a significant element of space. For him, "social space contains a great diversity of objects which are not only things but also relations".[1] Social networks and social relations are often explored in literature, such as race relations, social hierarchy, gender relations and so on. In "The Embassy of Cambodia", Fatou's social networks mainly reflected by her relationship with the Derawals who is her employers and Andrew Okonkwo who are the only friend with whom she can establish deep-discussion.

3.1. Fatou: A Modern-day Slave

Fatou's experience as a domestic servant of the Derawals reflects her endurance of grave exploitation

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and racial discrimination which are interrelated. According to United Nations Protocol, modern slavery encompasses sexual exploitation, force labor, child slaver, forced criminality, domestic servitude, forced marriage, organ harvesting and human trafficking. Victims of modern slavery are usually the most vulnerable in society who can be utilized as commodities to make profit. Modern-day slaves are forced to complete required tasks against their own will in different places and sites, such as farms, brothels or private homes. Domestic servitude is a form of modern slavery which is one of the most invisible forms because it usually occurs in private houses and is undetectable. According to British Modern Slavery Handbook, possible indicators of domestic servitude include a foreign national living with a family possibly as domestic worker or nanny, a person scarcely allowed out of house, poor sleeping arrangements, a person not interacting much with their host family, working excessively long hours over long periods, with no days off, poor diet, receiving little or no payment, no access to their passport, no knowledge of their rights in the UK. In this story, Fatou's experience in the Derawals beyond doubt indicates her suffering from domestic servitude. Working as a domestic nanny for the Derawals, Fatou endures poor sleeping arrangements, the room where Fatou lives in the house is characterized by tininess on the condition that when Mrs. Derawal stands in the doorway of Fatou's room, "there was not really enough space in there for two people to stand without one of them being practically on the bed." [2] Fatou is also scarcely allowed to leave their house. Except running errands for her employers, the secret swimming on Monday morning and Sunday mornings' church visiting with a short-time coffee drinking at the Tunisian café with her only friend Andrew Okonkwo, Fatou seldom leaves the Derawals' house. Fatou also works excessively long hours over long periods. The narrator depicts that after Fatou's church visiting and coffee drinking on Sunday, she needs to complete required tasks assigned by her employers. Normally, Sunday is the day for rest in western society. Fatou's excessive working on Sunday is strong evidence for her maltreatment in the house. Upon her arrival at the house of the Derawals, her passport is withheld by her employers without her permission. Her wages are retained by her employers to subsidize her accommodation expenses in the house. In these respects, Fatou is an embodiment of modern-day slaves.

The Derawals never treat Fatou as an equal. The two older children speak to Fatou in a fashion of no respect and gratitude. Mrs. Derawal scolds Fatou frequently like a master. Mr. Derawal, the only person who expresses his gratitude to Fatou also never considers Fatou as an equal. When he expresses his gratitude to Fatou for saving the life of his youngest child, he "stiffly" turns to her and looks at "a point somewhere between her elbow and the sunburst mirror behind her head". [2] The narrator points out Mr. Derawal's stiffly turning around and expressing gratitude without eye contact with Fatou to illustrate the unwillingness and insincerity of Mr. Derawal.

Fatou's maltreatment is also closely associative with racial discrimination. Apart from handling household chores, such as cloth-cleaning, food shopping, Fatou has to endure physical and spiritual violence from her employers. Due to Africans' slavery history, for a long time, black people are considered as second-class citizen or a racial Other in western society. Fatou's employers not only take the service of Fatou for granted, but also use verbal violence against her. "You're as black as Fatou" or "You're as stupid as Fatou". [2] Being black is equated with being stupid because blackness is associative with stupidity, barbarianism or other insulting terms in colonial discourses. This is what scholars called microaggressions or everyday racism which can be described as "brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group." [3] The Derawals' sending denigrating messages to Fatou and exploiting Fatou gravely are the consequence of the Fatou's membership to black community and the legacy of western colonization and expansion. The assimilated immigrants represented by the Derawals internalize the concept of inferiority of blackness. Similar to white planters or white colonizers who consider themselves as the master of the Black slaves, the Derawals also have the self-confidence of masters. When the master-slave relationship between the Derawlas and Fatou is challenged by Fatou's saving their youngest child and her change of identity to the benefactor of this family, the Derawals is in great panic, which is evidenced by Mrs. Derawal's sacking Fatou with unsustainable excuse.

3.2. Fatou: A Woman Who is Less Knowledgeable

Fatou's another social relationship with the Nigerian Catholic Andrew who demonstrates male-centric habit of mansplaining and manterrupting reflects Fatou's suffering of traditional gender inequalities which is an epitome of the subtle sexist conduct haunting women in British society. Mansplaining, coupled with manterrupting occupies an important role in 21st-century feminist thought. Mansplaining is the combination of the word "man" and the informal form of explaining "splaining". It is used to describe "of a man to comment on or explain something to a woman in a condescending,

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overconfident and other inaccurate or oversimplified manner" or "What occurs when a man talks condescendingly to someone (especially a woman) about something he has incomplete knowledge of, with the mistaken assumption that he knows more about it than the person he is talking to does."[4] Manterrupting, i.e., men interrupting women to take control of a conversation, claiming superior knowledge, or discrediting women's arguments. Mansplaining and manterrupting are an instrument for men to silence and sideline women.

In this story, Andrew's mansplaining to Fatou is never an unusual. When Fatou proposes her argument that Rwanda holocaust is neglected even though it claimed more lives, Andre quickly takes control of their conversation by drifting Fatou's argument to the bureaucratic Nigerian government which he is familiar with. Andrew immersed himself in flaunting his epistemic superiority by mansplaining his invention of the term "demonology" to replace "numerology", regardless of the already existence of "demonology". Fatou is forced to be voiceless and silenced.

Fatou drifts the topic back by further contending that Africans who are born to suffer endure more than other races. What Andrew's reaction is to answer something irrelevant to Fatou's question. He thinks the most important thing ignored by Fatou is that only Africans cry for Africans and one race cries for his race's suffering and ignores other races. He maintains that even within the African community, there are different divisions. If Nigeria beats the Ivory Coast into the ground in competition, he would be celebrating and laughing. Even after Fatou suggests him stopping talking and jiggling in a playful manner, he continues to require Fatou to believe what he says is a natural law and to ponder over it. What Andrew attempts to persuade Fatou to follow his thought is a reflection of his epistemic authority or superiority.

When he realizes that Fatou is still not convinced by his knowledge, he continues to lay knowledge upon her. He brings forward Hiroshima to safeguard and display his superior knowledge to Fatou. When Fatou misrecognizes Hiroshima as a big wave, what Andrew does is laugh mightily and shake his head at her. Fatou's inability to answer his question ascertains his superior authority because in traditional gender myths, men are associative with rationality, while women are related to irrationality. He then mansplains the Hiroshima issue in a patronizing way. "No, man! Big bomb. Biggest bomb in the world, made by the USA, of course. They killed five million people in one second. Can you imagine that? You think just because your eyes are like this, you're always protected? Think again. This bomb, even if it didn't blow you up, a week later it melted the skin off your bones." [2] From the description of his words, it can be found that he cannot distinguish Chinese and Japanese. He is mansplaining Hiroshima issue to Fatou.

When Fatou maintains her argument that Africans suffer more, Andrew interrupts her speech and takes control of their conversation. "Here is a point. Let me ask you, Fatou, seriously, think about this. I'm sorry to interrupt you, but I have thought a lot about this and I want to pass it on to you, because I know you care about things seriously, not like these people. you're not like the other girls I know, just thinking about the club and their hair. You're a person who thinks. I told you before, anything you want to know about, ask me—I'll look it up, I'll do the research. I have access. Then I'll bring it to you." [2] Conversation analysts develop a term "epistemic primacy" which describes who has the right to provide information to whom.[5] Andrew's "thinking a lot about this" and "passing it on to you" and "asking me" reflects he takes it for granted that he has the epistemic primacy and that he is granted the preserve to provide information to Fatou in consequences of their gender differences. For Andrew, Fatou is less knowledge and deserves him to embark on a lecture to her. In these regards, Fatou is degraded as an inferior and subordinate in respect to knowledge and has to endure subtle sexism.

4. Mental Space: Trauma and Resistance

Mental space can be explained as people's consciousness affected by physical and social relations. According to Lefebvre, "the inner world of characters imagines various new meaning and possibilities for spatial practice. The external and objective material world influences and stimulates the inner spiritual world of the characters, resulting in mental space." [1] The mental space also witnesses Fatou's trauma and resistance.

4.1. Phycological Trauma of Sexual Violence

Cathy Caruth defines trauma as a very overwhelming and unusual experience of some people for a sudden or catastrophic event.[6] Violence, torture and the loss of important ones may cause trauma. In this story, Fatou experiences trauma of sexual violence. A month before Fatou's leaving Accra, she is

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raped by a Russian tourist when she, a hotel maid, enters a bedroom to do a cleaning. Being sexual assaulted, she suffers from serious trauma. Fatou considers herself sinful due to the tourist's rape. What makes it worse is that the legacy of British colonization in Nigeria and the collaboration of hotel with the tourist reduce the employees' inability to pursue justice. In this story, it can be found that Fatou shows strong desires for water. With different guest passes of her employers, Fatou only steals the guest pass to the health center where she has an access to swimming pool for her need to saturate in the water and to wipe her sinfulness and shamefulness. From the narrator's revealing reasons for Fatou's converting to Catholicism, one is able to locate Fatou's great trauma of rape because "When you're baptized in our church, all sin is wiped, you start again." [2]

4.2. Fatou's Female Consciousness Awakening

Traditional gender myths degenerate women to an inferior gender. Although Fatou exhibits her awakening female consciousness. Fatou is conscious of her ability. In the swimming pool, when Fatou "spots these big men, padding frantically like babies, struggling simply to stay afloat," she prides herself on her own abilities because she teaches herself to swim when she was a teenager at the Carib Beach Resort in Accra which is completely different from the swimming pool in the health center which is as tranquil as a bath.[2] Besides, Fatou is also conscious of the fact that legacy of patricidal society—endowing men with epistemic primary and resists against this traditional custom. When hearing Andrew's conceding that he is ignorant of whether people in countryside are simpler, Fatou develops a sense of happiness because she is able to brings back her discourse power. Fatou proposes that "people are less sinful in the country" and expresses her understanding about this topic, which facilitates to change her state of being silenced and sidelined. When Andrew is mansplaining, Fatou resists to be silenced by interrupting Andrew in a playful manner and points out his mansplaining. When Andrew immerses himself in showing off his partial and limited understanding over the Khmer Rouge because he once again invents a term that is used in political science, Fatou points out Andrew's mansplaining by saying "I never met a man who didn't want to tell everybody how to think and what to do." [2] Thus, Fatou displays her resistance against gender myths and subtle sexism.

4.3. Toward her own Ethnicity

Fatou's diasporic presence in Britain as a marginalized Other gradually propels her to moving away from identification with British culture toward her own ethnicity, her Africanity. Except the native British whites who consider new immigrants as the second-class citizen, the established immigrants also accept the logic of the mainstream society. Given the maltreatment of her employers, she frequently dwells on whether she is a slave or not. The direct consequence of these unpleasant experience in London such as the perceived inequality between herself and other natives is her inability to integrate into the mainstream society and her failure of establishing identification with Britian. In order to reestablish a psychological and cultural bailment, she rejects attempts to pursue British citizenship or assimilate into Britian and are being increasingly race-conscious. This can be illustrated by her discussion and communication with Andrew. Fatou' s questioning why Africans are born to suffer and endurance more sufferance than other races and her affirmation that simple Old People (agrarians like Fatou in her own continent) have less sins. Africanity or African culture becomes the spiritual bailment for Fatou.

5. Conclusions

Through "The Embassy of Cambodia", Zadie Smith reveals hardships of an African female immigrant Fatou who endures predicaments in physical space, social space and mental space. What should be underlined is that the unpleasant experience of Fatou in London not only is an epitome of African (women) immigrants' predicament in Britain but also presents the problems and challenges of multiculturalism in Britain, which forces British society to ponder over these pressing issues.

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