

Literary Cartographic Analysis of Spatial Anxiety in *Song of Solomon*

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Abstract: *Song of Solomon*, a novel written by the renowned author Toni Morrison, who won the Nobel Prize in 1993. This novel shows Milkman's ultimate liberation, from an isolated black community to a utopian black community built by Morrison. It is his journey to find his root and a means to realize his cultural belief. This paper delves into the spatial anxiety in *Song of Solomon* from the perspective of literary cartography. Literary cartography will make us understand Toni Morrison's mapping skills to help the protagonist in *Song of Solomon* away from anxiety of disorientation, finally find identity and finish self-construction. This essay will provide new ideas about related research on Toni Morrison and her works.

Keywords: *Song of Solomon*; Toni Morrison; Literary Cartography; Robert Tally.

1. Introduction

Toni Morrison (1931-2019), a contemporary prominent writer, is the first African-American woman to win the Nobel Prize in literature in 1993. Toni Morrison was born in Lorain, Ohio, 1931. Due to the southern racism, her parents moved to northern state of Ohio, and often told African-American folktales to their children, which exerted huge influence on Morrison. Therefore, Morrison has a strong sense of heritage and is very proud of the African-American culture. Most of Morrison's novels are about ordinary African Americans.

Song of Solomon vividly portrays Milkman Dead lives an unsatisfied life in a black middle-class family in a town of Michigan. In spite of financial security, he feels anxious, bewildered, being entangled in choosing his life road: assimilation of the white culture like his father Macon Dead or pursuit of African traditional culture as his aunt. Milkman decides to go to the south to find the gold. Milkman arrived in Danville, Pennsylvania, Unfortunately, he can't find the gold. However, Circe helps him to uncover his family's name and history. Actually, his pursuit of gold has been unconsciously transformed into the pursuit of himself.

Song of Solomon sparked heated discussions at home and abroad upon its release. Foreign scholars' research on *Song of Solomon* mainly focuses on identity, race, gender, and the spatial narrative theory. For example, many scholars believe that through Milkman's quest in search of his ancestors, Morrison recovers forgotten stories of many lives that have been buried, forgotten, and lost during the long years of slavery; Some study also believe black's rightful sense of belonging in American South and argues that Morrison establishes a new South by reconstructing the old South. Domestic scholars mainly focus on race and identity, feminism, and narrative art in their research on the book. For example, many scholars have explored the various challenges and dilemmas black people face; Also, some scholars explore the narrative techniques and styles through close reading of the text; Some scholars have also explored the profound impact of racial oppression and gender discrimination on black people.

Although rich achievements have been made in the study of *Song of Solomon*, there are still some shortcomings. Research has mostly focused on literary and cultural aspects,

with relatively less exploration of its spatial narrative study. Although some scholars have studied from the perspective of spatial narrative, they adopt Henry Lefebvre's spatial narrative theory, and generally explored the influence of space on the characters from the aspects of physical space, social space, psychological space and textual space, and how spatial narrative promoted the development of the story. Therefore, this article will take the perspective of literary cartography, a novel spatial narrative theory, as the starting point to explore the function of space and how Morrison help the protagonist in *Song of Solomon* away from anxiety of disorientation, finally find identity and finish self-construction.

2. Literary Cartography

The "spatial turn" in the field of humanities and social sciences has promoted the spatial study of literary works. In the past few decades, "spatiality" has become the key word of literary and cultural research. Tally, a professor at Texas State University, put forward the concept of literary cartography, which greatly promoted the development of spatial research in the field of literature. The establishment of literary drawing theory refers to Jameson's cognitive mapping theory, Lynch's theory of the image of the city, Althusser's theory of ideology and so on. Tally believes that "literary works serve a cartographic function by creating a figurative or allegorical representation of a social space, broadly understood. This I refer to as literary cartography." To put it simply, literary drawing refers to literary writing by making map, and writing itself is regarded as a cartographic activity: "Like the mapmaker, the writer must survey territory, determining which features of a given landscape to include, to emphasize, or to diminish; for example, some shadings may need to be darker than others, some lines bolder, and so on. The writer must establish the scale and the shape, no less of the narrative than of the places in it."

Tally discussed the connection between writing and drawing in *Melville, Mapping and Globalization*. He believed that "And that is precisely what the novel becomes, a cartographic practice in which the writer produces a figurative or allegorical image of the world and one's place in it. The novel is a form that gives form to the world. It is a form of

literary cartography.” Not only the mapmaker, the author, the protagonist of the mapmaker's novel, but also the reader who participates in drawing. The author navigates the world by narrative, that is, projecting another world in narrative, which constitutes an alternative imagination of the world where the subject is located. The protagonist in the novel feels sense of lost and disorientation, which urges him to set out to various spaces to find the meaning of existence. By reading the descriptions and reference points of places in the book, readers can enter some imaginary space, and then get familiar with and understand the world they live in.

3. Macon Dead's House: An Indifferent Place without African Tradition

The house of the Macon was located in Not Doctor Street. Compared with the residential condition of the poor black people living in the South, Macon's house was obviously much bigger, more comfortable and more luxurious. However, there was not a warm and happy family living in this magnificent house. On the contrary, the atmosphere of the family was quite indifferent. As a newly emerging middle class, Macon only cared about his wealth, he didn't care about anything apart from money, not to mention his family and children. The reason why did Macon worship materialism so much was that he was deeply influenced by his father's death. His father used to be an excellent farmer and owned one of the best farms in Montour County. It's obvious that life was increasingly getting better and happier than before. But due to the jealous of the success of this black man, white people killed Macon Dead the first and destroyed his farm, which was an important turning point for Macon Dead who lost his father sorrowfully.

As a witness to all this, Macon knew the importance of possessing wealth. He not only earned money by squeezing his black compatriots, but also built his marriage on a material basis and obtained this mansion. “He paid homage to his father's life and death by loving what that father had loved: property, good solid property, the bountifulness of life. He loved these things to excess because he loved his father to excess.”

It's natural to know that both Macon and this father were rich and successful from the perspective of money, but there were different meanings inside their achievements. The reason why Macon wanted to be a wealthy man was that as a black people, he didn't suffer any pains from the white people. He was not able to change his skin color. What he only could do was to become a rich man so that he could be away from the black community and make himself isolated from the black group. However, his father's property was associated closely with the black community.

What's more, Macon held the opinion that family is only an approach to get money to be wealthy rather than a harmonious and happy group consisted of his families. This showed that Macon's house was just a symbol of wealth. People would regard him as a wealthy man because of his big and luxurious house. But in fact it just was a building instead of a house filled with love among families and African tradition. “To lift the lion's paw knocker, to entertain thoughts of marrying the doctor's daughter was possible because each key represented a house which he owned at the time. Without those keys he would have floated away at the doctor's first word: “Yes?”

Living in the physical space in the north, Macon had been

completely assimilated. He believed that the realization of capital possession could complete the transformation from “black” to “white”, and he had no pity for his black compatriots, even for the three women in his family, he was very indifferent. “His hatred of his wife glittered and sparked in every word he spoke to her. The disappointment he felt in his daughters sifted down on them like ash, dulling their buttery complexions and choking the lilt out of what should have been girlish voices.”

This indifferent space had influenced the growth of Milkman. Although Macon Dead was an African American, he was assimilated by the white culture. He hated the white because of the death of his father. But what he learnt from this event was that he must become a wealthy man and dominate other poor African Americans. And he was not a responsible husband and father. The environment of this family was not harmonious. As the only male heir in the family, Milkman had enjoyed superior material conditions since childhood. In the process of children's growth, a good family atmosphere was the basic condition and living background to ensure their healthy physical and mental growth. Parents should be the best teachers, but living in this family space, Milkman didn't feel the love from parents, the unity and respect among black groups. To Milkman, “it was simply a burden”. Sitting between his parents, he feels bothered and doesn't want to get involved into any of the problems of his parents. In the home space of Milkman, every family member is totally estranged from each other and the house they live is “more prison than palace.” He felt that he was out of place with the surrounding living environment and wanted to escape, but there was nowhere to escape. In such a loveless and black family space, Milkman couldn't identify with her own national culture, let alone find the root of culture. Therefore, Milkman felt “not at home”, lost his identity and felt anxious in this place.

By mapping this indifferent space, Morrison displays that black people is assimilating by the white and the protagonist, Milkman, is living in an indifferent family. Due to the mixed factors above, Milkman was puzzled and finally leads to the loss of identity. When he was lost, his friend Guitar took him to his aunt's house.

4. Pilate's House: An Enclosed Space Filled with Joy

Pilate, Milkman's aunt, lived in poor district of this city with her daughter Raba and granddaughter Hagar. They lived in a narrow bungalow eighty feet away from the sidewalk. It was small and plain and surrounded by tall pine trees and far from the street, which is like a small kingdom set up by Pilate. Morrison described Pilate's house in this way: “She opened the door and they followed her into a large sunny room that looked both barren and cluttered. A moss-green sack hung from the ceiling. Candles were stuck in bottles everywhere; newspaper articles and magazine pictures were nailed to the walls. But other than a rocking chair, two straight-backed chairs, a large table, a sink and a stove, there was no furniture. Pervading everything was the odor of pine and fermenting fruit.” She cared nothing about money and spent all the money she could make. She liked singing pastoral songs and would lead a chorus joined in by Reba and Hagar. Her home, though cluttered and barren, was full of songs, laughter and love. Pilate had strong sense of self and didn't care about the whites' standard of beauty. She dressed whatever she liked and in whatever way she wanted, though it may seem “foolish”

and “sickening”. Ignoring the law, which was made by the white authority, she sold illegal wine to support her family.

The isolation of geographical space had created a completely different way of life from the blacks in the North District. Three generations of women in the family lived together and lived a natural and simple life. There were no modern facilities such as electricity and gas, and only homemade candles and kerosene lamps were used for night lighting. However, Pilate’s home was full of vitality, and the intoxicating “fragrance of pine trees and alcohol” was always echoed with harmonious songs and laughter. Unlike Macon’s gloomy mansion, this bungalow had windows on three walls for sunlight to enter the room unimpeded. Pilate ignored material wealth, but paid attention to the spiritual world, comparing it with love, respect, righteousness, generosity and sympathy.

Although the bungalow in Pilate was not gorgeous, it was always full of songs and laughter between three generations, and it was also the favorite place for Milkman. This humble residence made him feel the warmth and love that he had never felt before. Pilate was a pilot to Milkman in his resistance to the discipline of the social power. The house of Pilate gave Milkman the chance to feel what it was like to live a life almost free of white dominance. In Pilate’s house, “it was the first time in his life that he remembered being completely happy...he was in love”. It was with Pilate that Milkman learned more about black culture, and it was under the leadership of Pilate that Milkman learned about the family history and finally embarked on a journey of returning to black culture. For Milkman, this bungalow was a place where he knew about black culture. When he walked into this bungalow, he walked into a new world belonging to black groups.

As Tally said, “In the anxiety that causes one to feel disoriented or lost, one has the freedom to project a kind of schematic representation of the world and one’s place in it that becomes a way of making sense of things.” By mapping this small but filled with love bungalow, Morrison helps Milkman gradually be exposed to black traditional culture, which lays a foundation for him to find the root.

5. Danville and Shalimar in Virginia: A Natural Place Filled with Warmth and Love

In order to find the gold left in the cave smoothly, Milkman first came to Danville, Pennsylvania. His fashionable clothes were incompatible with the simple folk customs around him. In the eyes of local blacks, he was a “white” and pretentious northerner. Nevertheless, the environment in Danville gave him a free breath.

During the search for gold, Milkman had frequent contact with local blacks and collected detailed history about ancient family legends. He overheard the children humming the complete song of Solomon during the game, and his heart was suddenly enlightened. Through the content of this song, he solved the mystery of his life experience, learned about his grandparents’ life experience, found his real surname, and retrieved his ancestral memory and family history. This ballad also awakened his childhood memories of getting along with his aunt Pilate. Whenever he came to his aunt’s house, she would kindly tell him about the past of his ancestors in the south. Under the guidance of her spirit, Milkman further contacted the southern culture and found her ancestral

memory.

This treasure land in the south made Milkman open her heart actively. He never took the initiative to communicate with people in the north, let alone talk about his father. However, in Danville, the change of living environment and the difference of ethnic relations made him see a new world of black life. He followed the old people to recall the past of the Dead family and the stories they had in the past.

Hunting was a representative collective activity in the south, and it was also a key action for Milkman to change from an assimilated black to a real black. In traditional African culture, hunting was a way for men to show their courage and boldness, and it was also an important part of black culture. For Milkman, who lived in the northern society, he didn’t understand the significance of hunting to the southern black group, but this hunting made him completely abandon the vanity and pride brought by the north and began to really understand the southern black group. Walking in this magical forest, he recovered his almost extinct national consciousness and rebuilt his friendship with his black compatriots in the south.

During the conversation with Pastor Cullen, He felt his anger when they talked about his grandfather’s death, which he didn’t have when his father told him. His attitudes about Macon also began to change, “he loved the boy they described and loved that boy’s father”. He began to understand what his father tried to tell him when Macon talked about his childhood, “that he loved his father; had an intimate relationship with him”. For the first time in his life, he realizes the importance of the past. Past means links and connection, without which one can’t understand totally. Then the journey to Circe helps him find out the real names of his grandparents and the cave where the gold may be hidden. The admiration of his people made him truly feel the glory of “Lincoln’s Heaven”.

Failing to find the gold in Danville, he went to Shalimar, where he got his sense of belonging. The hunting was a test of Milkman’s endurance and also a chance of self-examination. In the process of hunting, Milkman understood the blacks’ link to land and nature. In the natural world, he began to examine himself and realized his selfishness and irresponsibility towards his family. While in the past he said that he didn’t deserve this or that, “Maybe all he was really saying was: I am not responsible for your pain; share your happiness with me but not your unhappiness”. He understood Guitar and his father. They all had something that “maimed” and “scarred” them. Their past and their experience was part of them and in order to know them better, one had to know about their past. He began to be interested in his own people, and felt connected to the blacks in the South. This feeling of connectedness gave him a sense of belonging. He understood both his parents and began to love them. “Hating his parents and his sisters seems silly now”. The song about Solomon finally helped him find out the mystery of his family.

He became “as eager and happy as he had ever been in his life”. He realized that the names, as part of space, had meaning. The landscape that was so boring and uneventful in the past became so interesting and attractive to him. Milkman began to realize that people work on the landscapes, and thus these landscapes became part of them through the link of names. “Pilate had taken a rock from every state she had lived in-because she had lived there. And having lived there, it was hers-and his, and his father’s, his grandfather’s”. The names of his ancestors helped him to know who he was. He was no longer the indifferent and rootless man but a man with

connections. In the South, by knowing about the black traditions and historical past, Milkman came to understand his family and all the African Americans around him. The traditions in the South helped him identify himself both as one of the Dead family and the black community. He was no longer frustrated about where he was going or indifferent towards what his own people were experiencing. Rather, he became enthusiastic about inheriting his cultural tradition and found his root and sense of belonging in the black tradition. With the help of his cultural traditions, Milkman reconstructed a representational space of his own.

Both Pilate's house and Danville and Shalimar in Virginia were indispensable places for Milkman. At first he felt the warmth of family in Pilate's bungalow. It was the beginning for Milkman to find his identity and spiritual homeland. His aunt, Pilate, was like a pilot for him. By gradual instructions, Milkman bravely went to Danville and Shalimar in Virginia to find gold. As a matter of fact, it was natural to know what he found ---spiritual root was more invaluable than gold.

By mapping these harmonious places, Morrison helps Milkman to find the spiritual root and real home for him, namely, Milkman finishes to reconstruct his identity in these harmonious places.

6. Conclusion

Tally believes that Literary Cartography could achieve the goal of helping individual position and alleviate disoriented anxiety with clear narrative features. Literary cartography can help the subject locate himself in a complex and difficult-to-represent society and think about the relationship between himself and social space, thus establishing a meaningful reference framework for the subject and coping with existing

difficulties.

In this novel, Morrison's Literary Cartography is an innovative practice that fits Tally's reference. Toni Morrison tries to locate Milkman in the complex social space and relieve his existential anxiety by depicting Milkman's journey to the south. She gives full play to her subjectivity on the basis of representing reality, which signifies that the character's anxiety of spatial disorientation is aggravated through the descriptions. This kind of cartographic practice arouses readers' thinking and clears away the fog for those individuals who have lost their identities and finally reconstruct their identities and find their spiritual home.

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