

Home-Space and Politics of Gender in *Housekeeping*

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Abstract—Focusing on female characters of Foster family, Marilynne Robinson’s debut novel *Housekeeping* presents a tension between stability and mobility within the home-space, and in terms of a fixed, bounded gender identity ascribed by domesticity and social convention with a fluid, non-essential one. Drawing on critical theories of Judith Butler, Henri Lefebvre, Michel Foucault, Tim Cresswell, etc., this paper attempts to analyze how the protagonist Sylvie successfully subverts normative politics of gender by redefining the spatial order of home-space and conducting spatial practices.

Index Terms—Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping*, home, space, gender

I. INTRODUCTION

Housekeeping, contemporary American novelist Marilynne Robinson’s first novel, is highly acclaimed as a classic female bildungsroman. The story is set in the mountain community of Fingerbone, Idaho and revolves around two orphaned sisters, Ruthie and Lucille Stone. As the first narrator of the novel, Ruthie gives a brief introduction of her family at the outset of the novel. “My name is Ruth. I grew up with my younger sister, Lucille, under the care of my grandmother, Mrs. Sylvia Foster, and when she died, of her sisters in law, Misses Lily and Nona Foster, and when they fled, of her daughter, Mrs. Sylvie Fisher” (Robinson, 1981, p.1). This matrilinear genealogy indicates at the very beginning that *Housekeeping* describes an almost exclusively female community. Apart from the first two chapters, main body of the novel centers on daily life of Sylvie Fisher and her two nieces, Ruthie and Lucille. Before returning to Fingerbone to take care her nieces, Sylvie led a life of transient for decades, and her unconventional way of housekeeping and queer temperament eventually caused Lucille to move in with her home economics teacher, Miss Royce. While for Ruthie, an emotional bond was gradually developed between her and Sylvie. However, people in the town grew increasingly worried about Ruthie’s welfare and ultimately, they called for a custody. Fearing separation, Sylvie and Ruthie decided to burn down their home and embarked on a wandering journey. In Ruthie’s words, “Now we truly cast out to wander, and there was an end to housekeeping” (Robinson, 1981, p.209).

In *Housekeeping*, the competing force between home and escape, stability and mobility can be clearly precepted through different choices made by the women of Foster family. As scholar William M. Burke aptly points out, “the novel traces a family in which two strong tendencies compete: one is the tendency towards transience and the shifting margin of experiences, the other toward housekeeping within the confines of conventional marriage, family and social rootedness” (Burke, 1991, p.717). In the novel, Sylvie and Ruthie exemplified the former tendency, while Grandmother Sylvia Foster and Lucille the latter one. Embodying the spirit of conventional housekeeping, Grandmother Sylvia and Lucille carved out a rooted and circumscribed life within space of home and social boundaries. On the contrary, Sylvie and Ruthie preferred mobility to stability. They radically burned down their home in the end and chose to lead a life of transience for the rest of their lives. The transient and deviant Sylvie deliberately blurred and broke down the clear boundary between inside and outside, public and private sphere of home by her unconventional way of housekeeping, and in this sense challenged the established domestic order and normative gender norms that were highly proposed by Grandmother Sylvia.

The novel thus presents a tension between stability and mobility within the space of home, and in terms of fixed, bounded gender identity ascribed by domesticity and social convention with a fluid, non-essential one. On one hand, traditional notion of home is widely associated with femaleness and indicates a claim to gender identity. On the other hand, the deliberately chosen homelessness of Sylvie and Ruthie suggests that this gender identity is not inherently spatialized or determined by the ideology of home. Therefore, by demonstrating how the protagonist Sylvie challenges an essentialized gender identity by transgressing boundaries both literally and metaphorically, this paper argues that the deterritorialization of home space and rebellious spatial practices are symbolic of destabilization of gender identity ideologically naturalized in the traditional notion of home.

II. GENDERED SPACE OF HOME

The concepts of space and gender are inseparable and intersected, influencing each other in profound and multifarious ways. For one thing, space is differentiated by gender historically. It has long been known that the dualism between public sphere and private arena constructs a gendered difference between male and female. When women have

been confined to the private and domestic space, men inhabit and rule the public and masculine sphere. Accordingly, masculinity is often featured with movement, mobility and progress, while stasis, passivity and stability have been regarded as feminine characteristics. For another, space, in turn, contributes to the production and reproduction gender as well as gender relations, from the perspectives of practice, movement, and meaning. Men and women consciously use their spatial practice to subvert the social constraints imposed on them.

Such dialectics between space and gender discussed above is also exemplified in the figure of home. For example, Cynthia Enloe proposes that “historically in many societies being feminine has been defined as sticking close to home—masculinity, by contrast, has been the passport for travel...A principal difference between women and men in countless societies has been the license to travel away from a place thought of as ‘home’” (Enloe, 1989, p.21). In this sense, the tradition of the mutual identification between men and travel, women and home has been well-established. In *Housekeeping*, the gender distinction between male and female is best illustrated by different access to home by Grandfather Edmund Foster and other elder female characters.

First of all, the novel begins with Ruth’s narration of his grandfather Edmund Foster’s life experience and his westward journey. As a youth, Edmund grew up in the Middle West and the house he lived was “a mere mound, no more a human stronghold than a grave” (Robinson, 1981, p.1). Against such overwhelming emptiness and flatness, young Edmund began to dream of travel away from home and thus one spring he walked to the railroad and took a train west. Then he ended up in Fingerbone, Idaho. Like the heroic characters in western literature who lighted out for territories, Grandfather Edmund was an epitome of western American pioneers who longed for breathtaking adventures and unlimited mobility among boundless space. Though he built the family home with his own hands, Edmund was seldom satisfied with the confinement and isolation of home, he roamed around the unknown land, exploring and cataloguing wild animals and flowers with great curiosity. For a long time, males are highly mobile in public sphere while the domain of ideal women is domestic space where they are considered as the static object. Compared with Grandfather’s predilection towards outside world and mobility, female characters were much confined to the isolated, private sphere of home. In the novel, female characters like Grandmother Sylvia, as well as Lily and Nona were portrayed in such a caricatured and flat way. While staying in Fingerbone and taking care of Ruthie and Lucielle, Lily and Nona led an enclosed life that they eschewed any social activities and contact with other people. They even showed great uneasiness and anxiety when Ruth and Lucille came home from outside late. Both Lily and Nona conformed to the convention that women should stay inside the protective walls of home, and such conformation in turn reinforced their gender identity imposed by social conventions.

Judith Butler analyzes the way in which constructed gender categories are naturalized through repeated performance. As Butler points out, “gender is not a noun, but neither it is a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by regulatory practices of gender coherence” (Butler, 1990, p.34). In Butler’s context, gender identity is actually constituted and constructed through ritualized repetition. Through the ritualized and repetitive housework practices, women in fact perform their gender identity that situate within hegemonic conventions, norms or discourses. In *Housekeeping*, Grandma Sylvia Foster was unconsciously engaged with the normative gender convention and discourse. After Edmund died, she led a more isolated and intensely domestic life. Tethered and immobilized by the work within domestic space, women became fixtures in the home. For raising her three daughters and two granddaughters, Sylvia strictly adhered to traditional approach of housekeeping in a fixed and rigid way, “performing the rituals of ordinary as an act of faith” (Robinson, 1981, p.16). When Sylvia’s three daughters were still at home, they had to observe the rules stipulated by their mother. “Her girls were quiet, she must have thought, because the customs and habits of their lives have almost relieved them of the need for speech” (Robinson, 1981, p.15). Though quiet and peaceful, their domestic life was monotonous and repetitive at the same time. The most conspicuous example of ritualized performance was demonstrated in the way Grandmother Sylvia taking care of her granddaughters. For instance, as Ruthie described, “she whited shoes and braided hair and fried chicken and turned back bedclothes, and then suddenly feared and remembered that the children had somehow disappeared, everyone. How had it happened? How might she have known? And she whited shoes and braided hair and turned back bedclothes” (Robinson, 1981, p.25). By performing an exemplary role of wife and mother, Grandmother Sylvia also wanted her daughters and granddaughters to conform to domestic and social conventions. Such repetitive and ritualized housework practices performed by Grandmother Sylvia Foster in fact reinforced the gender identity ascribed to her by patriarchal values and social conventions.

However, this process of employing the space of home to connote a securely bounded gender identity was gradually deconstructed by Grandmother Sylvia’s three daughters, especially by Sylvie. Instead of succeeding to the traditional gender identity that their mother and aunts had previously played, the three daughters Molly, Helen and Sylvie variously attempted to escape from the oppressive confinement of their private and isolated home. Within six months Molly had arranged to go to China working for a missionary society, Helen eloped with Reginald Stone, Ruth and Lucille’s father to Seattle, while Sylvie left home for sixteen years and led a life of transience for decades. As Leed proposes, “departure may serve the need for detachment, purification, liberty, individuality, escape and self-definition” (Leed, 1991, p.22). Departure and escape exert a force of rebellion and change on the fixity of gender norms within the confinement of home and make distinction to cultivate the conscious individuality. The protagonist Sylvie’s radical and rebellious ways of challenging the ingrained notion of gender in order to pursue freedom and individuality will be

discussed in the next two sections.

III. SPATIAL ORDER AND DETERRITORIALIZATION OF HOME-SPACE

In *Place/ Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression*, Tim Cresswell clearly points out the important role of place and space in the construction and maintenance of ideology concerning order, propriety, and normality, he also puts much emphasis on the potentiality of transgression and resistance in challenging and disrupting those ideological, established conventions and norms. In other words, space and place play important roles in both exerting power and fighting for resistance. In *Housekeeping*, Sylvie's unorthodox housekeeping, serving as way of transgression called by Cresswell, altered and recomposed the highly specialized and regulated space of home established by Grandmother Sylvia, thus gradually dissolved and disrupted the normative politics of gender grounded on it. Under Sylvie's management, the limited and enclosed home space with clear demarcation of boundaries was transformed into an indeterminate and liminal one where gender identity cannot be easily defined.

According to Dara Downey, liminal space is "far from the closed space of delimited territory, but is itself an in-between space of potentiality" (Downey et al, 1992, p.13). In other words, unlike the closed space or place defined by limits and boundaries, liminal space is open, unfolding or becoming. In the novel, the home space under Grandmother Sylvia's care was a typical non-liminal one, which was enclosed and demarcated with clear boundaries and therefore presented as a symbol of hegemonic force. Comparatively, the unorthodox ways of housekeeping by Sylvie dissolved the boundaries between inside and outside, public and private and thus transformed the limited home-space into an open, fluid, liminal space, which generated new meanings and functions.

Henri Lefebvre in *Production of Space* highlights the duality of buildings such as houses. "Either it is stable and immovable with stark, cold and rigid outlines (as a 'particle'). It is the epitome of immovability, possessing clear and unambiguous boundaries...Alternatively the house can be thought of as a 'wave', as 'permeated from every direction by streams of energy which run in and out of it by every imaginable route'" (Lefebvre, 1991, p.92-3). By emphasizing the "wave" and "route", Lefebvre considers the space of house as stable and immovable as well as mobile and fluid, whose meanings are indeterminate and alterable. In the novel, the fingerbone town has been harassed by violent flood yearly. One spring, "water poured over the thresholds and covered the floor to the depth of four inches...If we open or close a door, a wave swept through the house, and chairs tottered, and bottles and pots clinked and clunked in the bottoms of the kitchen cabinets" (Robinson, 1981, p.61-62). After the house was flooded, Sylvie made no effort at repair. Instead of preventing the flood pouring into the house, Sylvie, however, deliberately ushered the water into the house, thus dissolving the physical barriers between inside and outside. The waters permeated the seemingly invulnerable home upon the hills with its overwhelming and destructive power of mobility. Under Sylvie's management, the illusion of permanence and stability embodied by the traditional notion of home was disrupted and finally collapsed. This particular way empowered Sylvie to subvert the conventional notion of home-space by appropriating and engendering a more open and fluid space for herself.

The passages which depict the liminal and fluid attributes of house or home can be noticed in several chapters. For instance, after the flood, "the house flowed around us" (Robinson, 1981, p.64). In addition, Ruthie described the watery houses and barns in the Fingerbone town as "spilled and foundered arks" (Robinson, 1981, p.61). The home was therefore transformed from a grounded and stable site into a porous and liminal one. The images of "floated house" "moored ship" "foundered arks" made linkage to Mitchell Foucault's key concept of heterotopia. The term "heterotopia" was firstly put forward by Foucault in his 1976 lecture essay "Of Other Space". According to Foucault, the space where people lived was not homogeneous and empty, it was heterogeneous. Foucault cited the example of the boat or ship as a floating piece of space connecting all other places and regarded it as "heterotopia par excellence" (Foucault, 1986, p.22). In this sense, alternative ways of ordering conducted by Sylvie in *Housekeeping* transformed the static and limited space of home into a fluid and floating heterotopia which was featured with radical openness and freedom.

Besides, the image of window in the novel is another symbol of liminality of home. The role of window achieves the effect of reversing the inside and outside and further facilitates the conversation between indoors and outdoors. Under Grandmother Sylvia's care, the window was used only in daylight and clearly demarcated the line between inside and outside, day and night. Conversely, when Sylvie ruled the home, the window was also used at night. They usually ate evening meal in the darkness with the kitchen lights off because Sylvie disliked "the disequilibrium of counterposing a roomful of light against a roomful of darkness" (Robinson, 1981, p.99). In this position, they occupied a middle and liminal ground, they were neither deceived by the images of seeing themselves in the window nor were they in the darkness looked into the lighted room. They escaped from the framed structure of window by creating a fusion of light and darkness.

Unorthodox habits of housekeeping by Sylvie also contribute to the deterritorialization of home space. Traditionally, housekeeping emphasizes keeping the house tidy and clean by demarcating a clear boundary between inside and outside, in this sense, this concept actually highlights order and normality. In the novel, Grandmother Sylvia exerted every effort to keep the house they lived clean, tidy and orderly. However, Sylvie's unorthodox ways of housekeeping stood in stark contrast with that of Grandmother Sylvia, thus posing a serious threat to the order and normality established within the house. Sylvie's unorthodox way of housekeeping was characterized by deliberately inviting the outdoor things in doors.

As Ruthie narrated, Sylvie herself in a house was “more or less like a mermaid in a ship’s cabin, she preferred it sunk in the very element it was meant to exclude. We had crickets in the pantry, squirrels in the eaves, sparrows in the attic” (Robinson, 1981, p.99). Such displacement suggests that Sylvie attempted to disrupt the established conventions and norms through deliberate act of making house haphazard and disordered.

Apart from her deliberate neglect of housekeeping, Sylvie remained to keep her habit as a drifter even though she was confined to the domestic space. For example, “Sylvie kept her clothes and even her hair brush and toothpowder in a cardboard box under the bed. She slept on top of the covers, with a quilt over her, which during the daytime she pushed under the bed also” (Robinson, 1981, p.103). Actually, Sylvie’s habits of transients are considered as inappropriate and transgressive actions which Cresswell termed as practices “out of place”. The occurrence of “out of place” phenomena lead people to question behaviors and define what is and is not appropriate for a particular setting. More often than not, within a domestic space, women are supposed to behave like “the Angel in the House”, they should commit to a series of chores such as sweeping the floor, washing the clothes, cooking meals, making up the beds, etc. Instead of observing the traditional routine of housekeeping, Sylvie disrupted the regularity and normality within domestic space established by her mother by her transient and rebellious habits.

The novel thus sets up an opposition between the home-space which is defined by clear boundaries of inside and outside, private and public, featured with enclosure and homogeneity and an open, fluid one. By fluidifying the home space, mobility of water blurs the boundaries between inside and outside, domestic and natural, empowering Sylvie to break free from home’s confinement and defying the hegemonic gender norms ascribed to her. Unorthodox ways of housekeeping therefore redefine the spatial order and negotiate the meaning of space. Home-space becomes a liminal one where gender identity is in flux. In addition to redefining the spatial order, Sylvie also employs spatial practices to further deconstruct the ingrained gender identity.

IV. SPATIAL PRACTICE AND DESTABLIZATION OF GENDER IDENTITY

Apart from the unorthodox ways of housekeeping which contributes to the deterritorialization of home-space, another tactic employed by Sylvie to destabilize the ingrained gender norms is to take participate in spatial practice by making best use of her mobility. In Tim Cresswell’s words, “central to the practices of transgression and resistance, mobility is the key both physically and metaphorically” (Cresswell, 2006, p.46). In terms of mobility, the movement and behavior of the body play a decisive role in challenging the boundary and striation of space and therefore empowering the protagonist with freedom and agency.

First of all, Sylvie’s body exhibited a strong tendency towards mobility and outside world at the very beginning of the novel. As Ruth described, “we thought we sometimes heard her leave the house, and once when we got out of the bed, we found her playing solitaire in the kitchen, and once we found her sitting on the back porch steps, and once we found her standing in the orchard” (Robinson, 1981, p.83). The body shifting from kitchen to porch then to orchard clearly indicated an outward progression. Cherishing a desire for the outside world was never enough for Sylvie. Instead of confining herself to the private, isolated domestic space, she usually wandered around the town in order to transgress boundary physically and metaphorically that imposed on by isolated space and social convention. The French cultural critic Michel De Certeau foregrounds “the forms of mobility including walking as potentially subversive spatial practices to contest against an overarching ideological construction of spatial meaning” (De Certeau, 1984, xx). Sylvie’s mobility took her outside of the bounds of home and town. More often than not, Ruth and Lucille found Sylvie walking or wandering around train station, park, or the shore of Fingerbone Lake. For instance, Ruthie and Lucille once saw her walking directly into the railway station, standing by the stove, with her arms folded, studying the chalked list of arrivals and departures. For another time, they found Sylvie lying on a bench in a little park, her ankles and arms crossed and a newspaper tented over her face. In addition, Sylvie usually strolled at the shore and conversed freely with anonymous homeless men under the bridge. The spaces of railway station, park and shore, out of liminality, bridges stasis and interiority with movement and exteriority. The diffusiveness of these spaces enables transitional contact between parties, with regards to genders, social stations and ages. The boundary between them becomes porous, so that women can easily make transgression to the terrace where they are prohibited to go. Rather than the enclosed space of home where women are forced to conform the hegemonic gender norm, these liminal and open space accommodates marginality, provides more opportunity to women and enhances the self-awareness of them. Sylvie’s mobility blurred boundaries between outside and inside, public and private sphere, thus challenged the binary opposition of male and female. She tried every means to prove her ability rather than vulnerability, which was an excuse to keep women with the wall of home. She made full use of her mobility to escape from the confinement of home, therefore to shed off the normative gender norms imposed on her. For Sylvie, mobility empowered her to fight against the norms of discipline and pursues female freedom and agency.

Apart from thematic mobility, textual mobility is another way for Sylvie to disrupt social gender norms and relocate herself in a fluid space. The textual mobility here refers to the oral stories Sylvie told to Ruthie and Lucille. As Ruth noted, “every story that she told had to do with a train or a bus station” (Robinson, 1981, p.68). Whether it be the old woman named Edith who came to her rest crossing the mountains in a boxcar, or the women Sylvie met on the bus who talked about everything under the sun, they all exhibited drastic difference from the images of fixed and homebound housewives. In the previous times, undoubtedly, there are discrepancies between male and female modes of mobility.

Gendered nature of travel suggests that women have never had the same access to road as men. Heroic and adventurous travels are usually allowed for man while women are impeded from such travels. However, in *Housekeeping*, instead of staying within the limited circle of home and performing the daily rituals as a good housewife, these homeless women in Sylvie's stories escaped the confinement and fixed notion of gender imposed on them and pursued mobility and freedom in the same way like their male counterparts. By dictating these adventurous stories, Sylvie herself also gained power and courage to fight against social norms and engaged in her wandering journey.

The final scene of "burning down the house" in the novel marks the most radical spatial practice conducted by Sylvie. Some scholars stress the symbolic significance of burning down the house. Joan Kirby, for example, explains the rejection of the house as a "rejection of patriarchal housebuilding and housekeeping as conceived in American literature" and "a rejection of a specific social vision of the female, the housed women, the housed wife" (Kirby, 1986, p.106). In essence, burning down of the house is considered as an act of release and transfiguration. Like the soul of house escaped, Sylvie and Ruthie eventually escaped the enclosure and confinement of home and successfully deconstructed the ingrained gender norms embodied by it.

V. CONCLUSION

By examining the interplay between space and politics of gender in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*, this paper has elaborated on the crucial role of space in exploring the changing conception of gender. In the novel, Grandmother Sylvia tries to secure the space of home and to reinforce an established gender identity ascribed by domesticity and social convention. However, through the deterritorialization of home space and conduction of spatial practices, Sylvie Foster gradually dissolves the binary oppositions between outside and inside, public and private, male and female, and therefore subverts ingrained and normative gender norms embedded in such ideology. Through her particular perceptiveness of the regulating force of home space and its impact on politics of gender, Robinson attempts to redefine the traditional notion of home and problematize the fixed, essentialized notion of gender.

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