

Reimagining Space Through Queer Intimacies In Sarah Water's Novel, Fingersmith

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Abstract

Henri Lefebvre states that every society produces its own space. However, this space is often claimed by the society to administer and superimpose its hegemony. This paper looks into Sarah Water's novel, *The Fingersmith* and the portrayal individual or collective queer accounts of the act of existing and also of creating 'spaces' of their own. For Kant, space resides in the consciousness of the subject. This paper will center around the treatment of such a 'space' that the novel deals with, which is the library. We see how a lesbian character who claims her uncle's library establishes queer connections with the obscene books from her uncle's personal space, which being the most patriarchal terrain, she discovers it into to be a space more accepting of a queer subject. To Foucault, knowledge is a space where the subject takes up a position and speaks of the objects which he deals in his discourse. In the novel we see how queer spaces are extended to the act of going away and of finding oneself in a place far from one's own. This novel also distributes these spaces in terms of designation pertaining to class and societal hierarchies. Drawing on a queer theoretical framework, this paper focuses on the attribution of space and the demarcation between 'space' and 'place', in correspondence to queer identity and on the hegemony that operates within changing circumstances across class differences and of time and place.

Keywords: Sexuality, Gender, Homosexuality, Space, Place, Victorian, Queer.

Introduction

In the Victorian society homosexuality was a rigid affair. *Fingersmith* explores this time and age and looks into one such relationship. Two lovers, Maud and Susan, has the most complicated and thrilling development of character. Susan, who was brought up by thieves finds herself engaging with the conniving character, 'Richard', simply known as the 'Gentleman'. The original plan was to take Susan into a large mansion that is situated in the countryside in a remote corner as a maid to Maud, who was the heiress to the large fortune. Susan had a guardian who was a mother figure

to her, who saw through the plan, which was to make Maud fall in love with the Gentleman as he inherits her fortunes through matrimony. These fortunes in turn would be divided between Susan and Richard. The plan however, also included disposing off Maud in an asylum. While Maud, who was under the guardianship of her vile scholar uncle, who dealt with old pornographic texts, which she was made to read out to the visitors who specially concerned themselves with these texts and she also helped maintain the library.

The events however unfolded in a different manner as the two ladies engaged in sexual intercourse and over time they started to feel something akin to love for one another. As the day arrived, Susan decided to go through the plan anyway and help Maud escape the mansion to get married to Richard in London.

The next phase of the plan was in action as they were heading toward the mad house according to the plan as things took a surprising turn. Upon arriving at the 'mad-house', the guards approached Susan who they took to be Maud and apprehended her. She was utterly confused but as it turns out she was double-crossed by both Maud and the Gentleman. The mistress was equally involved in a plan of her own. She had a pact with Richard where they actually planned to dispose Susan as Maud, as the real Maud herself would borrow Susan's identity and escape the scene. She did so to flee from her uncle's authority over her and to remove herself from the briar, which she began to abhor. She hoped that for a change, this nameless identity would suit her better as she would settle down somewhere away from everyone she knew and have a new start in life with her inheritance.

Myriads of things happen to both of these characters as they situate themselves in their new territories and explore new spaces. Things get more complicated as it is revealed that Susan is actually of high birth herself. She is the natural child of Maud's mother. Maud's mother, the previous lady of the house, escaped the house in a similar fashion and came to Mrs. Shuksby, who was Susan's guardian and made a contract with her where they exchanged their babies. Mrs. Shuksby was in fact the mastermind behind the double-crossing, as the babies were exchanged, her own baby went with Maud's mother to the briar where they were later placed in the asylum. In fact their names that they had at birth were of each other's. Maud was Susan, Susan was Maud. The novel is peculiar as interchangeability is used as a device, from identities to the concept of spaces and of the margins of class and fortune, everything interchanges. The treatment of space in the text in particular is very intriguing, regarding how the characters are situated and their reactions to these spaces and the narratives constituting these spaces and of how the concept of space and the concept of place differ.

In one of her novels, *The Little Stranger*, a post war Gothic, the concept of space is very prominent. In a grand house where most of the rooms are abandoned and have fallen into ruins, there are supernatural forces at work. Towards the end of the novel, we see these evil presences of the house manifest into someone or something which is revealed to the lady of the house only to murder her. It is in the essence of the house along with the response of another character's connection that he builds with the house as a yearning of sorts, something supernatural awakens. The concept of

abandoned places of and the atmospheric tumult is central to the setting of the novel where to an extent, these elements take shape to form a character in its own regard.

In *Fingersmith*, we see somewhat of a similar construct regarding space and the interpretation of the characters and their response of being exposed to the spaces in a society where they were not allowed to be themselves. These constructions can act as a symbolic manifestation to the claustrophobia of a queer subject in their closet. The intimate relationship between the lady and her maid sees a multiple layers of transformation when they respond to the spatial constructions that restrict them. They feel a need to re-interpret and re-spatialise these constructions at their own interests for their own survival. As Yi-Fu Tuan distinguishes between place and space, place is security while space is freedom.

For Maud, she was born in a madhouse as she was bought into the property by her uncle who would impose his tyrannical authority over her. Later in the novel, we see these spaces repeat themselves in form of constructs and patterns in the life of Susan as their lives are so curiously interlinked from the very beginning.

Henri Lefebvre in "The Production of Space" states that, "every society...produces a space, its own space" (31). He adds, "Social space thus remains the space of society, of social life. Man does not live by words alone; all subjects are situated in a space in which they must either recognize themselves or lose themselves, a space which they may both enjoy and modify. (35) This paper focuses on one such individual modification of space over the domestic and patriarchal space which is the library in the novel, where Maud first comes to discover her sexuality. She was made to follow a routine where she assisted her uncle to maintain and recite these 'obscene' books, where she first read about women who had relationships with other women.

She was already informed unlike Susan on such matters. The space that the library provides to this one lesbian woman, is both a safe haven and a hell. Later in the novel, we see how madness in women is equated to being overexposed to literature. Women of the age had limited exposure to books in particular and few were privileged enough to you have access to a library. The marginalized women of the likes of Susan could hardly read. Dignified women would hardly come across books that might have contained information of the queer subject, for they were 'obscene' materials. However, these books existed and were made available to Maud. They were old texts and we see how the societal construct censored these texts and inserted the label of the 'obscene' in them. The library is more to Susan than being the nucleus of her uncle's household. She has never seen the outside world, all that she knew, she learnt through the lens of the obscene.

As the French feminist Helene Cixous advocates about women writing themselves or *Le'écriture féminine*, Maud's life and experiences constituted the 'un-writable'. She was surrounded by all these stories, as her story came to be one of them. She cannot express her own experiences. Her story is categorized amidst the literature of the obscene. In life, she was conditioned to understand that she belonged to the category of the unnatural and unspeakable. She too was an outcast like

these books in the corner of England, in this secret library. Towards the end of this novel we see how as the lovers meet in the Great House which is all but abandoned, Susan finds Maud there alone in the dark in this library as she now takes upon the occupation of writing and selling 'obscene stories' herself. As she herself declares there is little money in it and she is good at.

The books mentioned in the novel, like *The Lustful Turk* are real books and are mostly Pre-Victorian English texts. They stood as antithesis to the cultured heteronormativity that prevailed in all class structures of the Victorian age. The space of the library allowed Maud to discover herself and come to terms with her sexual identity. It was one place in the world where the so-called grotesque knowledge systems that could create turbulence in the society of the age was stored and nurtured. Maud had read all these stories and was now this lady of the Victorian age, who belonged to the upper class but also was equipped with these wisdoms. The true essence of the library was utilized by Maud, although in the novel it was a place for exploitation and illegal proceedings.

The library however was not open to Susan. There was an image of a hand spread across the floor and Susan was restricted to cross this line. This shows how even in a queer life, the politics of privilege comes into play. Michel Foucault in his book *Discipline and Punish* states that "power produces knowledge...and power and knowledge directly imply each other" (*Discipline and Punish*, 27). In this regard we see the differences between Maud's position and Susan's position. Maud was sure of herself but Susan was not. All that she experienced with Maud was 'abnormal' to her. She would never be invited into this room of wisdom. Maud constructed her own space inside the library which was in structure the center of her uncle world, i.e., the focal point of the patriarchal figure's ruling position. She under the nose of this patriarchal authority, created a space of her own that silently defied and questioned this authority and all the restrictions it stood for. The final blow that Maud inflicted on this authority, came with the harm inflicted on her own space. As she fled the mansion, she destroyed the first books that she was made to read from the library. These books were invaluable to her uncle and it was an action that would send him to his deathbed. It is evident how these 'queer spaces' exist and nurture the individual and can also intersect with the territory of patriarchy which is often under constant surveillance and embodies the voice of the society and its heteronormative agenda. These spaces speak differently to Maud. She cultivated this space for herself and for Self-discovery. A blow to her own construction resulted in a blow to the uncle's construction his patriarchal space. The only thing that separates them and makes them territories that oppose and contradict each other is the meaning and interpretations bestowed upon them. These meanings transcend boundaries and restrictions of physical places and even of mental structures of space that depends solely on the individuals and the spaces they interact with, exposed to, or are made available to.

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Webology (ISSN: 1735-188X)
Volume 18, Number 5, 2021

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