

Lost, Exile and Return—An Analysis of Sheona’s Identity Reconstruction in “Sisters” from the Perspective of Spatial Theory

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“Sisters” is the first novel in Irish-American author Colum McCann’s short story collection—*Fishing the Sloe-Black River*, which tells the story of Sheona’s search for her identity between Ireland and the United States. Colum McCann is skilled in writing about the spiritual dilemmas and identity search of ethnic minorities living in a foreign land. Employing the space theory and Sheona’s perspective, this paper examines her identity loss in Ireland’s patriarchal system, her migration to the US for identity pursuit, and her subsequent transnational journey between the two nations to reconstruct her identity amidst physical and mental trauma.

Keywords: Colum McCann, sisters, identity reconstruction, spatial theory

Introduction

Born in 1965, Colum McCann is a prominent Irish writer. He grew up in the countryside of Dublin, and later traveled around North America, Europe and Asia, and now resides in New York. Due to his immigrant experiences, alienation, identity, and loss have long been McCann’s favourite themes. Up to now, he has won many awards such as the 2011 National Book Award, the 2010 Wei Shan Lake Award.

Fishing the Sloe-Black River, as his first book, was published in 1994 and translated into Chinese in 2013. It consists of 12 short stories and reveals the hardship and sufferings of immigrants. Its first story “Sisters” exposes the Irish trauma post-famine and riot, the challenges faced by Irish women under patriarchal and Catholic oppression. The story chronicles the divergent life paths of Sheona and Brigid, symbolizing opposing aspects of Irish womanhood, while emphasizing Sheona’s quest for identity amidst the cultural divide between Ireland and the United States.

In 1974, Henri Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space* initiated the notable “Space Turn” in cultural studies, emphasizing space’s formation through human behaviors and social processes, which reciprocally shapes societal behaviors. Lefebvre identifies three attributes of space: natural, spiritual, and social, differentiating them as physical, spiritual, and social spaces. He argues that these spaces are interdependent and presuppose each other (Zhao Yifan, 2006). Space’s essence encompasses material existence, influencing living and production modes, while its spiritual dimension expresses symbolic functions and social values.

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Utilizing spatial theory, this paper examines the intricate relationship between the physical space depicted in the narrative and the identity reconstruction of Sheona.

Sheona's Identity Reconstruction from the Perspective of Spatial Theory

The narrative of "Sisters" comprises three tiers: Sheona's loss of identity in Ireland's patriarchal society, her quest for self in the US amidst familial detachment and societal oppression, and her eventual self-discovery and identity formation upon revisiting Ireland, including a pivotal encounter with her sister Brigid.

Lost in Bogland: Identity Confusion

In Ireland, immature personal spiritual space, alienated family space and repressed social space caused Sheona's identity confusion. Sheona's teenage years are set during the 1960s and 1970s in Ireland, a country that has historically suffered from famine and riots.

For the existence of the individual, body is the space of the self, relating to the identification and determination of one's identity, therefore, the change of the body space is always projected on the consciousness of the self, and built the foundation of the self (Zhao Yifan, 2006). When Sheona was fifteen, she lost her virginity before she was a mature girl, and her body was constantly invaded. The breakdown of her personal space led to her mental crisis, "Between a statue of Our Lady and a Celtic cross commemorating the dead of Ireland, my hand made out the shape of a question mark" (McCann, 1993, p. 1). When got along with men, Sheona "would hold my hands out beyond their shoulders and shape or carve something out of my fingers, something with eyes and a face" (McCann, 1993, p. 1). The little man is the embodiment of her spirit, she tried to find a shelter for her spirit among men, but been with men would only let her body hurt, her faith collapse and her spirit confused. After two decades, she recreated "A bouquet of boys shimmy in from the bogs in brown tweed hats and pants tucked in with silver bicycle clips" in her dream (McCann, 1993, p. 14). The experiences of her youth left her with indelible pains.

Family is one of the most important aspect of space. The family space can be regarded not only as a personal space, but also as an outward social space (Sun Quansheng, 2017). The indifference of the family members didn't bring Sheona a kind of belonging. Sheona's mother died in famine. However, the father failed to offer care for his children. Not only did he pay no attention to Brigid's anorexia and atotomy, but he also remained silent when strangers called Sheona "a wee whore". When Sheona came home late, he just waited in silence, never asking where she had gone. Sheona's silent father could not give her the love she deserved, and her anorexic sister addicted to a life of martyrdom and could not give Sheona the sisterhood she desired. As a result, the love of the family was completely missing, and Sheona had become an orphan psychologically, suffering from the dislocation and loss of family identity.

The sisters grew up in Mayo, a Catholic region in the west of Ireland, one of the poorest and most religious parts of the country at the time. The turbulent social environment left indelible psychological scars on Sheona and her sister. The guns made Sheona terrified. If social unrest was a threat to the safety of life, then the ubiquitous male gaze of society had traumatized Sheona's spirit. "Later it was men in granite-gray suits who would lean into me, heads cocked sideways like hawks" (McCann, 1993, p. 1). In Sheona's eyes, men were as aggressive and possessive as hawks, and even if they close their eyes, it is impossible to ignore their power. The bruises on her inner thigh were clearly exposed that men were in the dominant position during sex, while Sheona and her body

were in the passive position. Traumatized both physically and mentally, Sheona was tired of this society and she finally chose to run away from home.

The loss of physical autonomy, estrangement between family members, social unrest and patriarchal repression caused Sheona physical and emotional suffering. In order to get rid of this painful history, with escape as a struggle, she decided to exile to a new country—the United States, to find her identity.

Exile to the City of Cain: Identity Search

Despite fleeing to a new country, Sheona's quest for self-sufficiency had not been successfully realized. The conflicts between Irish culture and American mainstream culture have greatly hindered her pursuit. Sheona, tried to find a sense of cultural identity from Michael, an Indian who was also rejected by American society. But as a marginal figure, Michael was fail to provide Sheona with physical and mental security, and Sheona was eventually forced to leave the United States.

First of all, from the perspective of the contradiction between herself and the society, Sheona came to the United States alone, and no one could help her. On the other hand, as a minor girl, she did not have any job experience, so it was hard to survive in the United States. She and Micheal participated in the drug trade, "all the others had gone with a truckload of dope" (McCann, 1993, p. 6). She worked as a singing waitress. Due to her financial embarrassment, she only bought second-hand clothes.

Sheona met Michael on a Greyhound bus in the early seventies. She was attracted by Michael and the necklace of lion teeth that hung on his chest. "His face was aquiline, acned. His wrists were thick. He wore a leather waistcoat, jeans, boots" (McCann, 1993, p. 4). Michael's rugged appearance gave Sheona a sense of security. Michael was the embodiment of tradition, "The only thing I know about the stars is that they come out at night" and his grandfather sometimes compared them to his grandmother's teeth (McCann, 1993, p. 7). The innocence in Michael was incompatible with modern society, but Sheona found her identity in it. She liked Michael because "he still believes in simpler, more honest things" (McCann, 1993, p. 10). But Michael was a marginalized figure, he could only provide Sheona with temporary security.

In the history of American immigration, Irish people moved to the United States mainly to get rid of poverty and famine, but most of them lacked the skills to make a living in American cities. In addition, they believed in Catholicism, so they were discriminated and excluded by the American society dominated by Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture for a long time (Gan Wenping & Gao Yin, 2012). In this hostile environment of hatred, rejection and hostility, Sheona, who came from a Catholic family in Ireland, barely fitted into mainstream American culture. When the "raid" occurred, Michael not only failed to protect Sheona, but he also became a victim. "They forced Michael to bend over and shoved a tree branch up his anus" (McCann, 1993, p. 7) and "Blood running down the backs of his thighs" (McCann, 1993, p. 14). Finally, Sheona didn't escape a tragic rape, "Four in a row" (McCann, 1993, p. 7). Ironically, as a victim, Sheona was not only unprotected by the law, but deported for "not having a green card". And Michael was sent to the prison for six years. In her nightmare "Four red-beaked hawks in badges grunting down from the thermals by a gentle creek in sequoia sunlight", "My wrists pinned to pine needles", she couldn't escape and even thought of dying like her mother (McCann, 1993, p. 14).

Sheona came to the United States with the dream of pursuing herself. But in the United States, she was not only had difficulties in making a living, but her human rights were not protected by law. As an immigrant, Sheona was mentally and physically suffered more severely than she had been in Ireland.

Return to Ireland and America: Identity Reconstruction

After the events of 1978, Sheona's consciousness of female subjectivity was awakened. And she began to rethink the meaning of female body, especially her sister's, from a new perspective, which was manifested in Sheona's self-isolation, illegal smuggling, and contempt for religion.

Sheona lived alone in Ireland. She "bought saucepans, cooked beautiful food, wrote poems", she "didn't miss the men", and she worked as "secretarial job in a glass tower" (McCann, 1993, p. 10). She began to have her own room, cook for herself and write to heal her wounds, and consciously isolate herself from men. Self-isolation is a kind of separation between herself and men, building an invisible but insurmountable wall between the two sexes and showing the cutting and rejection of women and the male-dominated society. Through these she constructed an independent female space, both materially and spiritually.

Besides, Sheona began to reflect on her relationship with her family. She decided to go back to her hometown to see her died father and the "old bungalow". She heard the couple who bought the bungalow talked about her father. They met her father "in an oxygen tent, he asked for a nip of Bushmill's and a smoke. The doctors had told him that he would explode" but he didn't care (McCann, 1993, p. 12). As she described her dream, "My father lights a carton of cigarettes and burns in a plastic tent", this scene became a part of her nightmares (McCann, 1993, p. 14).

After heard the turmoil in Central America, Sheona knew her sister was sick. She was sick "because she saw things that she thought belonged only in Irish history" and "there was no such thing as a miracle to be found" (McCann, 1993, p. 11). Violence, famine, what had happened in Ireland were repeated in Central America. Brigid was furious about the turmoil and famine that plagued humanity at that time. She expressed her anger by taking a further anorexic approach, using her body as a weapon to represent the defiance of a marginalized figure. Sheona discovered a deep Irish complex in her sister. After communicating with the nuns, Sheona slowly knew Brigid's world and understood more about her sister, who was full of love and adventure. When Brigid learned how to dance and wore some strange colored socks, Sheona seemed to understand that her sister had the national identity.

Smuggling is an active act of resistance, a challenge by women to the laws that safeguard male rights. It breaks the geographical cage that fetters women's bodies in the patriarchal society and confounds the boundary between the powerful and the powerless (Gan Wenping & Gao Yin, 2012). Sheona asked Michael to help her smuggle across the Canadian border to America to visit her sick sister. She felt angry when Brigid's "eyes are open, but she's not there inside them. Her hair is netted and gray", and she "take down the picture of the Sacred Heart" (McCann, 1993, p. 18). She was angry about religion. The contempt for religion is the subversion of the foundation of male power, and is the only way for women to gain a new life and reconstruct themselves (Gan Wenping & Gao Yin, 2012). Besides, Sheona began to protect her body's subjectivity. When the man told her Brigid's information, "He stole a furtive kiss on my cheek. I wiped it off in disgust" (McCann, 1993, p. 12), and

the policeman "lifted my skirt I knocked his glasses off" (McCann, 1993, p. 10). She learned how to resist a man's aggression.

Sheona constructed her female identity through self-exploration, reflecting on her relationship with her family, and rebelling against the patriarchal society. After meeting her sister, she found a sense of belonging there, which implied the successful end of her self-search journey.

Conclusion

Colum McCann's work deeply reflects his Irish complex and the identity confusion of living in a new country. McCann's identity anxiety is reflected in his portrayal of Sheona. As a woman, Sheona's loss of identity in Ireland epitomized the living state of Irish women as a whole in the 1960s and 1970s. Sheona's unfair treatment in the US exemplifies the distressing plight of immigrant women, excluded from American mainstream and oppressed by white men. Sheona ultimately found herself by embracing the Irish history and accepting the differences of American culture.

In the context of globalization, women's identity, immigration, ethnic minorities and other issues have attracted increasing attention. In the era of advocating human community, every country is faced with the difficult problem of how to treat cultural differences, how to deal with the relationships between history, present and future, and how to truly pay attention to women and respect the culture differences of ethnic minorities. Colleen McCann gives his answer in "Sisters" that is to accept the painful history and embrace the future. And he supports a sense of community, which requires everyone to bear corresponding ethical responsibilities for others (Zeng Guie, Wang Fengyun, 2021). By depicting the cruelty of certain historical circumstances and the ethical dilemmas of daily life, McCann seeks to emphasize ethical responsibility in modern society.

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