

An Analysis of Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang from the Perspective of Foucault's Heterotopias Theory

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Abstract: Oates has regarded the United States as the spaces of intense conflict among various forces in American society, which are often heterogeneous, governed by forces such as sexuality, male power, religion, hierarchy, and racial discrimination. At the same time, the heterotopias in Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang expresses the political, cultural, and social factors we have not paid attention to in routine spaces, emphasizing the problems of modern life and the issue of women's survival in society, where women are oppressed by men and are in a state of silence. Under the guidance of Foucault's Heterotopias theory, this article intends to analyze the survival predicament and the revolt of women through heterotopias space by representing the oppression of power in heterotopia spaces and the revolt through heterotopias of compensation.

Keywords: Foxfire; Confessions of a Girl Gang; Heterotopias; Oates

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1. Introduction:

Joyce Carol Oates (1938—) is a well-known contemporary American author who has published 61 full-length novels, 13 middle-grade novels and 46 collections of short stories, and has won the National Book Award, the Pulitzer Prize, etc. Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang is Oates' 22nd novel, which is set in the United States in the 1960s when male discourse was dominant and women were collectively silenced. As a socially responsible woman writer, Oates therefore encourages women to take the initiative to claim their voice as far as social norms allow. Set on the above background, this novel tells a band of adolescent girls that get together under the leadership of Legs Sadovsky to set up the girl gang called FOXFIRE. They fight against social oppression, protect women from violence, as well as assist women escape their violent husband and homes. As they increase in numbers, Legs purchase a run-down old house in the outskirts of Hammond as an all-women's commune. However, as tensions and conflicts grow among members, FOXFIRE ultimately disbands following a failed kidnapping. The novel reveals Oates "tragic vision" of women's tragic existence under patriarchal violence (Grant, 1978: 117). Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang reflects the issue of women's survival in society where women are in a state of silence and oppression by males, breaking away from the biological sex determinism. Under the guidance of Foucault's Heterotopias theory, this article intends to start from the following dimensions: the oppression of power in heterotopia spaces, revolt through heterotopias of compensation to analyze the survival dilemma and the revolt of women through heterotopias space.

2. Under the Oppression of Power in Heterotopia Spaces

In Foucault's view, we are currently living in an era of simultaneousness and juxtaposition. One of the typical spaces in the modern world is "heterotopias", which is not the homogeneous and empty space of the medieval hierarchy system or the "emplacement space" of Galileo which is a space was infinite, and infinitely open. Thus, according to Foucault, space is also the representation of some culture and power where people's identification and roles are disciplined in the spatial power, taking it "as a social construction prone to power practices" (Boedeltje, 2012: 6).

“The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space” (Foucault, 1984: 3). School is the heterotopias in *Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang* where professors should teach knowledge. However, Rita is sexually assaulted by her math teacher Mr. Buttinger who disciplines Rita after school for many days in the name of helping her improve her study. “If Rita shrank from him, he might advance upon her nudging against her even sometimes drawing his thick beefy hands against her breasts quickly and seemingly accidentally so she didn’t know what was happening or how she might be to blame for it happening if it was” (Oates, 1993: 29). Rita dares not resist Mr. Buttinger’s harassment, partly for the closed classroom is the place where teachers show their power. On one hand, the classroom becomes the confined house where Rita is physically imprisoned and gazed by her teacher; on the other hand, classroom is the place where Mr. Buttinger exerts his power. Heterotopia is not only a reflection of conventional space, but also an upside-down and protest against conventional space. It can observe the operation of power in conventional space from an absence perspective.

On the basis of the first principle, Foucault puts forward the heterotopias of deviation and crisis heterotopias. Heterotopias of deviation usually refers to “those in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed” (ibid 5). Individuals are subjectively judged by the outside world to have deviant behavior and pose a threat to others, thus forming a distorted space relative to the mainstream reality. Red Prison is one of the typical cases of heterotopias where one group wields power and authority while the other is oppressed and under surveillance. Space is a place of power order. According to Foucault, from the period of absolute monarchy to modern society, space has evolved as a place of punishment to a place of discipline and the “round prison” is the most perfect spatial image of the new power mechanism model in modern society. “Here in The Room measuring nine foot-lengths by eight foot-lengths, in ‘isolation’” (Oates, 1993: 128). Legs is deprived freedom and under watched whenever she is awake, works even takes a bath. If Legs conducts inappropriate behaviors or violation of rules, she would get punishments like isolation or “gripping her by the shoulder, sometimes slapping her in the face” (ibid 140).

Prison also guarantees surveillance over people and punishes people, which exerts powers over bodies help train docile and submissive resident. After being kept in 48 hours in a room, Legs turns from trouble-maker to model prisoner. She helps teach other prisoners to read and write, helps to organize activities and when “there is an emergency, she’s there” (ibid 176). Under Panoptical inspection, Legs ultimately lead to her reformation and behaves herself whenever she knows that she is being watched, which is at the core of the panoptical principle. Foucault mentions “disciplinary power turns human body more useful as well as more obedient” (Foucault, 1979: 18).

3. Revolt through Heterotopias of Space

First of all, the FOXFIRE resists through deviant heterotopias. In *Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang*, the girls initially rebel against power and authority by establishing a girl gang called Foxfire, which “grants no authority to school nor any allegiance to a power higher than FOXFIRE” (Oates, 1993: 45). They devote themselves to pursuing power and fairness in the United States, whether for their own happiness or for the state of women. However, there is no doubt that they are sure to be excluded by the society for their deviant acts. Since its formation, the FOXFIRE firstly wants to give a voice to an oppressed and marginalised group of women by taking revenge on men who are keen to sexually harass them. Mr. Buttinger is a teacher who has made it his “job” to harass women. In order to prevent more women from becoming victims of Mr. Buttinger, the FOXFIRE paints his car with red paint with the words. This action not only succeeds in getting Mr. Buttinger to say goodbye to his teaching career, but also in making the whole of Hammond aware of the existence of FOXFIRE. Within the heterotopias of compensation of the FOXFIRE, the girls’ actions are presented in a violent manner, but they are all aimed at protecting marginalized groups from the persecution of power and authority. The girls’ actions and violence sever the link between discourse and power, making men voiceless and powerless. In American, the girls’ behavior, which they devote themselves in fighting against the evils and sins in the society in the 1960s, is regards as “anomaly” or “deviance”.

Moreover, they resist through the heterotopias of compensation. According to Foucault, the last trait of heterotopias is that they have a function in relation to all the space that remains. One is the heterotopias of illusion and the other is the heterotopias of compensation. The FOXFIRE HOMESTEAD that they rent is the typical case of the space with compensatory function, “their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled” (Foucault, 1984: 8). In addition, the is also a heterotopia of compensation. It is an old wood-frame farmhouse on the Oldwick Road. In contrast to traditional women who have depend on men, the Foxfire girls know that the only way to gain power or protect themselves is that all women must be united and bravely speak out for themselves. It is the ideal home for young girls where they could protect themselves

and many more women from harassment and persecution. Driven by such thoughts, they rent a house where they live together, where they could be the master of the house and even themselves. However, as the group numbers increases, they soon find that financial problems dominate their daily life and they have to think about food, clothing and rent all the time. But as the normal ways fail to earn enough money for their needs, they gradually start to stray from their original intention and take a wrong path.

In the background of patriarchal society, the FOXFIRE and the FOXFIRE HOMESTEAD are established to fight against the discrimination and oppression of women in American society, and within these heterotopias, the girls achieved compensation for the reality: "The oppressed of the Earth, rising, make their own law" (ibid 83). But the girls gradually lose their ability to think independently in their struggle, and take the path of revenge and self-destruction, leading to the failure of the revolt.

4. Conclusion:

From the beginning of her writing, Oates has regarded the United States as the spaces of intense conflict among various forces in American society, which are often heterogeneous, governed by forces such as sexuality, male power, religion, hierarchy, and racial discrimination. *Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang* is a novel that reflects Oates' idea of creation. The heterotopias such as school and the Red Prison in this novel express the political, cultural, and social factors we have not paid attention to in routine spaces, emphasizing the survival predicaments of women and the problems of modern life.

Facing with the oppression, the girls set out to resist power and authority by creating deviant heterotopias (the actions of FOXFIRE) and heterotopias of compensation, the FOXFIRE HOMESTEAD. But in the heterotopias of compensation, their attempts only triumph briefly but ultimately come to nothing, because the revolt is gradually drifting off course. It reflects Oates' own thinking on social issues: on the one hand, Oates encourages the use of social norms to gain power, affirming the importance of upholding social norms to gain power; on the other hand, the act of upholding social norms and the act of using them has boundaries, both of which cannot exceed the limits of social norms. Otherwise, it comes to nothing and eventually lose power.

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