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# Race, space and post- -colonial landscape in Bernard Malamud's *The Tenants*

**Abstract.** The following article presents strategies for decolonizing complex ethno-racial and social relationships between Jewish and black characters within a restricted, multifaceted area of a decaying tenement in Bernard Malamud's *The Tenants*. This interpretation is concerned with finding features of post-colonial discourse such as the representation of the characters in dichotomous terms: the colonized/colonizer, the observed/the observer, superior/inferior. It focuses on the analysis of the main characters' different methods of dominating the 'space or subjectivity' of each other through surveillance, mimicry and appropriation.

**Keywords:** stereotype, power, space, colonized, colonizer, writing, Jews, African-Americans.

Bernard Malamud's *The Tenants* is one of the most recognizable and insightful literary cross-studies of relationships between Jews and African-Americans. The novel unveils a competitive nature of the relationships between the representatives of those groups and presents the nomadic lifestyle of the characters in a hostile dilapidated tenement. The decayed house inhabited by two writers: Harry Lesser and Willie Spearment, Jewish and African-American respectively, is not only a contested space challenging the idea of multiculturalism in America, but as this article is going to demonstrate, the tenement becomes a post-colonial space. The aim of the article is to suggest an alternate reading which intends to find the features of post-colonial discourse in *The Tenants* by pointing at the representation of the characters in dichotomous terms: the colonized/colonizer, the observed/ the observer, superior/inferior. In what follows, I will present the writers' tenement as the space of encounter between the colonized and the colonizer, and subsequently depict their relationships in terms of "spatialized" quality with regard to the social and racial order. For the purpose of this analysis, I will borrow John Kenneth Noyes's term of "spatializing practices" which may be attributed to the characters' attitudes. The notion is based on de Certeau's belief that every "space is a practiced place" (qtd in Noyes 1992: 11). In *Colonial Space: Spatiality in the Discourse of German Southwest-Africa 1884-1915*, Noyes investigates the significance of space in establishing and maintaining imperialist order as well as the relevance of territory as the building block in

the colonization process of Africa. He claims that his research is not so much concerned with the socio-historical aspect of this territory. In terms of content, his work can be treated as a continuation of Frantz Fanon's and Edward Said's studies.

In this article, I would like to argue that the mindscapes of both writers seem to be externalized through various forms of post-colonial stereotyping, such as discriminatory spoken and written language as well as socially construed racial practices. Not only will Willie's manuscript be interpreted as Bhabha's colonial symbol of desire and hatred at the same time, but Lesser's attempt at improving Willie's manuscript is, in my interpretation, perceived by Willie as an attempt at colonizing his mind/writing. This reading explores the strategies for decolonizing complex ethno-racial and social relationships between Jewish and black characters within a restricted, multifaceted area of a decaying tenement in *The Tenants*. The article focuses on the analysis of the main characters' different strategies of dominating the 'space or subjectivity' of each other through surveillance, mimicry and appropriation. I will support my point of view with Homi Bhabha's concepts.

At first, Lesser comes upon Willie after being lured by the sound of Willie's typing machine in one of the derelict flats in the tenement where Lesser rents an apartment from another Jew, Levenspiel. Lesser approaches Willie from behind:

In Holzheimer's flat former kitchen, facing the wintry windows, sat a black man at a wooden kitchen table, typing, his back to Lesser. (...)

The man, head bowed in concentration, oblivious of Lesser, typed energetically with two thick fingers. Harry though impatient to be at his work, waited, experiencing at least two emotions: embarrassment for intruding; anger at the black intruder. (...) The black must have known someone was standing there because the open door created a draught and once Lesser sneezed; but he did not turn to look at him or whoever. He typed in serious concentration, each word slowly thought out, then hacked on to paper with piston-like jabs of his stubby, big-knuckled fingers. The room shook with his noise. This endured for five full minutes as Lesser fumed. When the typist turned his head, a goateed man, darkly black-skinned, there seemed in his large liquid eyes poised in suspension as he stared at the writer a detachment so pure it menaced; at the same time a suggestion of fright Lesser felt reflected Lesser's. (Malamud 1972: 26- 27)

In the foregoing scene, the narrator makes a clear distinction between the observed, Willie, who is "oblivious of Lesser," and Lesser, who is the angry observer of the "black intruder." Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin note that:

[o]ne of the most powerful strategies of imperial dominance is that of surveillance, or observation, because it implies a viewer with an elevated vantage point, it suggests the power to process and understand that which is seen, and it objectifies and interpellates the colonized subject in a way that it fixes its identity in relation to the surveyor.

(..) For the observer, sight confers power; for the observed, visibility is powerlessness. (2007: 207)

The fact that Lesser is depicted as the observer during the first encounter with Willie imposes the assumption that Lesser is the one who "confers power." Willie metamorphoses into the object of Lesser's colonial surveillance, and his writing, observed by Lesser, becomes enviable. From this

time on, Willie, “the black intruder” is subjected to the “competitive envy” as Lesser admits that he is also a fellow writer struggling to finish his third novel (Malamud 1972: 26). What is more, through a further condescending statement “I am an expert of writing” Lesser also imposes authority over the fellow novice black writer (Malamud 1972: 33). Steve Martinot points out that “race begins with power and never stops making reference back to the power” (2007: 6). Lesser’s statement of being an “expert of writing” is one of many manifestations of Lesser’s position of power and dominance which one may see throughout the novel. Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge rightly observe that since “writing is power” in colonial discourse, then “the pen, metonymically, is the displaced colonial phallus seeking a fulfillment of desire in its relationship with the absent Other” (1994: 283). In *The Tenants* the imperialist dominance seems to be displaced into the competition in writing between Lesser and Willie. Lesser “wants his pen to turn stone into sunlight, a language into fire” (Malamud 1972: 141). The pen is a means by which Lesser seeks to fight and maintain the racial and social order of the world he lives in. Willie contests Lesser’s ambition of dominance in the field of writing to the same extent to which he calls into question social or racial order in the novel. Willie’s act of crossing over Lesser’s direct space of living is a similar act of usurping power.

When Lesser examines Willie’s identity and his surroundings during their first encounter, he is quick to notice Willie’s “soiled manuscript” which gave “an unpleasant odour” (Malamud 1972: 28). Lesser also wonders whether “the sulphurous smell came from the manuscript or the feet on the floor” (28). He morally codifies Willie’s manuscript and Willie himself as evil-like. The scent of sulphur is apparently Biblical as one can read about the devil which was thrown into “the lake of burning sulfur” in the Book of Revelation (20: 10). According to George Yancy, “seeing” is “knowing” what one really is (Yancy 2005:13). In this case “smelling” Willie means getting to know him, ascribing evil to him. The first encounter between Willie and Lesser is indicative of their mutual distrust. Lesser’s disappointment at the fact that Willie does not extend his hand to greet Lesser for the first time is summed up by the third-person limited-omniscient narrator’s remark: “That wasn’t in the Fourteenth Amendment” (Malamud 1972: 30). It suggests that Lesser racializes Willie’s behavior inwardly just as much as Willie racializes Lesser outwardly. Neither of them can escape their mutually inclusive racialization.

### **1. Noyes’s “spatialized practices” of *The Tenants***

The main characters, Willie and Lesser are literally space-oriented: Lesser occupies the apartment on the fifth floor of the tenement whereas Willie, who is looking for a space to explore his imagination through writing, at first finds a table in the cellar, but then decides to move upstairs due to the lack of light in the cellar. The decayed tenement can metaphorically be interpreted as a microcosm for America in the 1960s with “an almost white” Jewish representative who is significantly higher in the racial hierarchy than his African American friend; and a black representative at the bottom trying to advance in this hierarchy. Lesser describes himself as an only “legal paying tenant” as opposed to Willie who is a squatter in an old building (Malamud 1972: 152).

Foucault states that “space is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power” (qtd. in Noyes 1992: 15). The main characters of *The Tenants* may be attributed so called “spatializing practices” which “produce a field of subjectivity as a totalization of diverse positions within a social domain” (Noyes 1992: 20) as both characters in the novel occupy significantly different positions in terms of social and racial order. Willie and Lesser project a certain meaningful model of “spatiality” which allows their “subjectivity to be understood as a socially activated representation” (Noyes 1992: 11). The “socially activated representation” of a black Willie vis á vis a white Jew takes various forms. They range from a black militant activist showing openly his disdain for white Jews, and expressing his anger at whites to the views of a past drug-addict. Willie insults Lesser and his Jewish landlord Levenspiel using various invectives such as “Fartn Jew Slumlord” or “Bloodsucking Jew NiggerHater” (Malamud 1972: 36, 173). The “socially activated representation” of a white Jew, Lesser, in interaction with a black character, is that of a successful writer, mentor, preacher and advisor to Willie. The representation of the two characters is highly stereotypical and one-dimensional. The way in which Willie’s and Lesser’s subjectivity is narrated/seen adheres to Bhabha’s claim that the stereotype is “the primary point of subjectification in colonial discourse, (...) it’s the scene of a similar fantasy and defence” (2004: 107). Bhabha goes further arguing that “the stereotype is not a simplification, because it is a false representation of a given reality” (2004: 107). This false representation turns Willie into the above described degenerate, misfit, an aggressive rebel. Willie’s negative attitudes fulfill the colonialist conditions of Bhabha’s claim that “the stereotype requires, for its successful signification, a continual and repetitive chain of other stereotypes” (Bhabha 2004:110). Willie’s representation as a primitive, abusive, hyper-sexual black writer perpetuates a myth around “black problem” or black “inferiority,” and it becomes Yancy’s “dialectics of mis-recognition” of Blackness by whites (Yancy 2005: 36). However, whiteness itself also undergoes the same process of “mis-recognition” or mis-representation. The depiction of Lesser as a mentor and advisor, “man of habit, order, steady disciplined work” is consciously schematized and ennobled (Malamud 1972:140). It is worth mentioning that one of the black characters, Jacob 32, who is present at the party organized by Willie announces to Lesser that “you see us wrong and you see yourself wrong” (Malamud 1972: 101). He accuses Lesser of using the matrix of clichés through which he sees whiteness and blackness. Willie and Lesser incarnate into George Yancy’s “prisoners” of historically determined myths and fantasies around blacks and whites – they become the prisoners of “historically inherited imaginary” (Yancy 2005: 20). Lesser’s anchoring in “historically inherited imaginary” is corroborated by his continuous remarks about the Jewish past and the references to the glory days of the Israeli people. Lesser compares himself to “King David with his six-string” (Malamud 1972: 42).

## **2. Post-colonial matrix of clichés**

Although the tenants try to maintain an amicable relationship with each other, they tend to push the boundaries of decent behavior every time they spend some time together. In a dream-like

situation, Willie and Lesser sit in the kitchen smoking hashish. The hashish serves as a medium to reveal the subconscious of both writers, who enter into a provocative conversation. In this talk, Willie directly accuses Lesser of trying to steal his “manhood.” Willie states that “I know you are trying to steal my manhood. I don’t go for that circumcise schmuck stuff. The Jews got to keep us bloods stayin weak so you can take everything for yourself” (Malamud 1972: 43). While Willie’s fetishistic sexuality may be enviable to Lesser, his humanity is reduced only to his sexuality. Lesser retaliates through stating that “If you are an artist you can’t be a nigger, Willie” (Malamud 1972: 44). Lesser ostentatiously devalues Willie’s artistic potency and thereby deprives him of the right to mediate his black artistic soul. Lesser’s preconceptions of black people are rooted in Fanon’s “negating activity” in *White Skins, Black Masks*. What Lesser sees in Willie is his blackness and according to Fanon “Wherever he goes, the Negro becomes a Negro” (Fanon 1986: 173). Lesser believes that a black person *cannot be* anyone more than a mere black person. This process of Lesser’s negation of Willie’s black artistic soul as well as Willies’ identification of his fetishistic “manhood” are a part of more ambivalent dramatized colonial scenario. In this scenario “stereotyping is not the setting up of a false image which becomes the scapegoat of discriminatory practices. It is a much more ambivalent text of projection and introjection, metaphoric and metonymic strategies, displacement, over-determination, guilt, aggressivity; the masking and splitting of ‘official’ and phantasmatic knowledges to construct the positionalities and oppositionalities of racist discourse” (Bhabha 2004: 117).

The phantasmagoric representations of the characters’ positionalities in *The Tenants* is best achieved through the use of the abovementioned strategies of projections, “displacement” as well as “metaphoric and metonymic strategies.” In the described scene, Willie feels displaced into the symbol of phallus whereas Lesser is accused of masking his slyness and predatory intentions, trying to castrate Willie. Willie, being a kind of the Black Arts Movement supporter, projects his own open aggressivity on Lesser.

### 3. Post-colonial discourse

This game of out-insulting each other not only lays bare the truth about the essence of their relationship but it also stresses the importance of communication and language itself. Noyes observes that “language preserves traces of space which has been elided in the establishment of the colonial territory. Language preserves these traces so effectively because it not only describes, but actually participates in the physical acts of colonization” (Noyes 1992: 12). Willie and Lesser try to exert their power through various strategies of control such as surveillance, discriminatory language or competition in writing. When Willie asks Lesser to read his manuscript, Lesser unwillingly agrees thinking however that “[w]riters helped writers. Up to a point. *His* writing came first” (Malamud 1972: 46 ). After having read the manuscript, Lesser advises Willie to concentrate more on the technique and the form of writing as he claims that: “there has to be more emphasis on technique, form, though I know it’s not stylish to say that. You’ve got to build more carefully” (Malamud



1972: 59). He also suggests that Willie's falling short of "effective form" results in a fact that "there is no order or maybe no meaning" in Willie's writing (Malamud 1972: 61).

Willie replies as follows: "No ofay motherfucker can put himself in *my* place. This is a *black* book we talkin about that you don't understand at all. White fiction ain't the same as *black*. It can't be. (...) It ain't universal if that's what you are hintin up to" (Malamud 1972: 60). Lesser regards Willie's writing as imaginative but very self-focused, anti-normative and non-narrative. For if Willie's writing is chaotic and "universal" in Lesser's view, it is liberating and consciously different from "white writing" in Willie's view. Willie opposes the idea of universalizing art as well as he does not fully comprehend Lesser's obsession with the "form." Willie perceives it as a means of homogenizing art, colonizing the art. He interprets it as a violent act of colonizing himself because he states "You want to know what's really art? Willie Spearmint, *black* man. My form is *myself*" (Malamud 1992: 61). Willie identifies Lesser's attempt at changing the form of his writing as an attempt at manipulating his own subjectivity, an attempt at killing his individuality and uniqueness. Willie tries to polish his writing through improving grammar and memorizing some sophisticated phrases from the dictionary however he discovers that "it killed the life out of language and [he] never referred to it again" (Malamud 1972: 69).

### 3.1 Appropriation

Willie's writing first undergoes the process of appropriation which can be defined as taking over "those aspects of the imperial culture – language, forms of writing (...), even modes of thought and argument such as rationalism, logic and analysis – that may be of use to them [post-colonial societies] in articulating their own social and cultural identities" (Ashcroft et al 2007: 15). However, he quickly decides to reject the standards of correctness and his rejection of "Standard English" is referred to by a post-colonial term of "abrogation." Although Lesser's tips on Willie's writing style are rejected, Lesser presents them as a prevailing norm. Standard English embodies the normative and totalizing power of "the colonizer" in relation to "the colonized" – Willie and his marginalized lingo. Yancy claims that the main feature of whiteness is the "self constructed centrality" (Yancy 2005: 16). Standard English functions as a metonymic expression for whiteness itself. Willie delegitimizes this centrality of Standard English, thus the centrality of whiteness. Alfred Arteaga observes that "The marginal Other autocolonizes himself and herself each time the hegemonic discourse is articulated. The utterance of English (...) reinforces daily the colonizer's presence in the heart of the colonized" (1997: 76). In *The Tenants* the use of Standard English reinforces Lesser's position of power – his being in the position of the colonizer.

### 3.2 Homogeneity and Mimicry

Furthermore, Willie negates the universal merit of his fiction as it reflects his fear of making it featureless and homogeneous. Noyes observes that "colonial discourse must construct a boundless, featureless, homogeneous space which may serve as the stage upon which colonial desire may produce fantasies. Because of this, the even stronger necessity of establishing a rigid spatial or-

der within the colony gives rise to a conflict within the representational mode” (1992: 182). Since Lesser insists on this rigid unchangeable way of discourse, this produces what Bhabha calls “the regime of truth,” Lesser’s white regime of truth (Bhabha 2004: 101). Lesser encourages Willie to mimic white standards of writing. Willie opposes a regime that has a homogenous predictable way of discourse. Bhabha describes an imperialist regime as “*non-dialogic*, its enunciation *unitary*, unmarked by the trace of difference” (2004: 165). What characterizes Willie’s writing, according to Lesser, is just the converse of a unitary style of discourse: Willie’s writing bears the traces of a “shifting” narrative (Malamud 1972: 58). Lesser’s “regime of truth” is extended beyond the English language and the writers’ manuscripts. Eric Sundquist (2005: 406) points out that “Lesser’s identity is subsumed tautologically into the role of author – “Lesser writes his book and his book writes Lesser” –even to the point of haunting personification wherein the author evaporates and the house of fiction itself assumes authorial consciousness: “There’s his abandoned book on his desk being read by the room.””(Malamud 1972: 151). In this way, Lesser’s white authorial consciousness leaks out, being absorbed by the room and then it is amalgamated into the structure of the decayed tenement. As Lesser’s consciousness of the colonizer is equated with the consciousness of the house, the decaying house encompasses Lesser’s authoritarian and haunting racist system of values. The house traps both Lesser and Willie within its stereotypical framework.

After having received negative comments from Lesser, Willie starts a new novel in which he remakes fictional characters from his previous literary works of art. In his new novel, he decides to use the literary technique of the stream of consciousness disrupting traditional linear narrative and conventional patterns of storytelling. Thereby he decolonizes his writing not only through the use of lingo and experimental stream of consciousness, but mainly through his constant act of re-invention of his exaggerated fictional characters as well as through a seemingly nonsensical “shifting” plot which is full of repetitions. His writing may be treated as a kind of counter-discourse to white Western ways of narration. Likewise his fictional characters, in real life Willie “changes his birthplace every time he talks about it” (Malamud 1972: 91). Willie’s continual creative re-making of himself is a conscious act of performing identity, exercising his agency, it is a symbol of his empowerment. It is a means of re-claiming the position of power. Bhabha, drawing on Fanon, observes that the most important colonial “space of intervention” is the “re-creation of the self in the world of travel” (2004: 12). Similarly, Willie’s act of celebrating his nakedness as he works on the manuscript being completely nude is interpreted by Lesser as a mysterious act of “asserting the power of his blackness” (1972: 127).

On the other hand, Lesser who has been struggling to finish his third novel and perfecting its possible endings for many years, seems to be preoccupied with the sterility and safety of the manuscript which is kept in the box:

Each week, for years, he had placed a copy of the week’s work in a safety-deposit box in a bank on Second Avenue. The box also contained a copy of the first draft of the novel Lesser had been rewriting with unutterably high expectations. Nearing the end of his last draft he had removed the carbon of it from the

box to have on hand when he wrote the last word and was ready to note final corrections on both copies, one for the publishers, one for himself. (Malamud 1972: 136)

In a post-colonial context, Lesser's obsession with keeping his draft sterile, pure and safe in the box may evoke the laws of preserving racial purity in the Jim Crow Era. Samira Kawash aptly observes that "whiteness sustains its own boundedness and exclusiveness by insisting on its own purity and projecting all impurity on blackness" (1997: 151). However, as Lesser's manuscript of the novel is later burned to ashes by Willie in revenge for Lesser's secret affair with Willie's girlfriend, Irene, it may be assumed that the destruction of Jewish manuscript has a broader agenda. Budick comments on this excerpt that "Jewish American achievement may have programmed itself for disappearance" (1998: 16). I would suggest that it is as if whiteness itself through its separatist attitude of not sharing its power and privileges with other ethnic minorities programs itself for annihilation.

This hallucinatory world of misrepresentations and fantasies is best illustrated through the metaphor of a maddening wallpaper in Holzheimer's flat depicting enormous trees as well as "dense ferny underbrush, grasses sharp as razor blades" (Malamud 1972: 15). The description of Holzheimer's "deadly jungle" on the wallpaper foreshadows the final scene in which the two characters take part in a symbolic deadly battle amidst "a grassy clearing in the bush" (Malamud 1972: 173). The surrealistic clash of the characters in the final scene is a result of the continual rift within the colonial frame, within the space of colonial representation of Willie and Lesser, "the representation of the subject[s] in the differentiating order of otherness" (Bhabha 2004: 64).

## Conclusion

Although most critics regard the ending of the novel as doomed, leaving no hope for reconciliation between African-Americans and Jews, an unexpected appearance of Levenspiel shouting "mercy" in the final scene can tip the balance towards less radical interpretation of the novel's ending (Malamud 1972: 173). The ending of *The Tenants* attempts at invalidating all those colonialist myths iterated throughout the novel in a way that it does not give a consent to authorize the stereotypical representation of African-Americans and Jews. In fact, the novel turns out to have an anti-colonial overtone despite its seemingly colonial representation of the characters. The brutal duel with axes sinking through Willie's "bone and brain" and Lesser's "balls" symbolizes the violation of post-colonial representational order of social relationships and the subsequent way of stereotyping (Malamud 1972: 173). The axes come in-between the linguistic encapsulations of post-colonial stereotyping: "Bloodsuckin Jew Niggerhater" versus "Anti-Semitic Ape" (Malamud 1972:173). The ending symbolizes getting to the core of the tensions of identity politics. Interestingly enough, it is a white Jewish character Levenspiel who calls for "mercy" at the end of the novel.

"Spatialized practices" of Harry Lesser and Willie, which are symptomatic of a post-colonial microcosm in *The Tenants*, are the driving force towards the dramatic climax in the novel. They effectively reflect Malamud's hidden agenda with regard to the highly racialized representation



of the characters' mindscapes and the novel's landscape. They are suggestive of deeply ingrained stereotyping in the colonization processes. They also uncover other subtleties of the post-colonial mechanisms of surveillance, mimicry and appropriation. However, taking into consideration the ending of the *Tenants* as well as the hints dropped throughout the novel (a repeated statement: "the end") it may be assumed that the whole dynamics of the narrative reverberates with a strong anti-colonial and counter-stereotypic message (Malamud 1972: 23).

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