

Space and Power—An Interpretation of “The Grass is Singing” from the Perspective of Spatial Criticism Theory

LIU Xue-ru

Wuhan University of Technology, Wuhan, China

Nobel Prize winner Doris Lessing is a renowned writer in the contemporary British literary scene. Her debut novel *The Grass is Singing* is based on a case in which a black manservant kills a white mistress who is poor and mentally unbalanced. Doris Lessing arranges a tangible form of perception for the expression of the colonial discourse in the work by seeking the relationship between spatial structure and the writer's value. This paper focuses on the spatial writing in *The Grass is Singing* and analyses it in depth with reference to the spatial critical theories of Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault. The oppressed and enslaved characters in the novel are analysed from three perspectives: physical space, social space and mental space respectively to explore how power oppression is made visible through space and the writer's critique of colonial relations and racial discrimination as well as unequal gender relations.

Keywords: *The Grass is Singing*, Doris Lessing, space, power, spatial criticism, colonial discourse

I Introduction

Doris Lessing is a highly creative woman writer, and it was the land of Southern Africa that first nurtured her and gave her the richness of life and inspiration to write. In the 1930s, a tragedy occurred in the southern grasslands of South Africa, which was under the rule of the British colonialists: Mary, a native white woman, was killed by Moses, a black manservant. Doris Lessing centres her novel around the tragic events and set the novel in Southern Rhodesia, where she has lived personally. In the novel *The Grass is Singing*, Doris Lessing recreates the plight and struggles of the marginalized between different races living in the real space of South Africa. Since the end of the twentieth century, the “spatial turn” has profoundly affected the field of humanities and social sciences, including the study of literature, and has demonstrated great influence. The concern for “space” in the field of literary studies began with the philosophical and sociological attributes of space, and gradually transitioned to the specific theories, perspectives and methods of textual studies. *The Grass is Singing* takes the reader on a journey of the main characters, Mary, Dick and Moses, through some visible spaces such as the city, the farm, the shop, the house and other invisible spaces such as the poor white, the plight of the colonizer and the colonized, the gender dichotomy, the taboo relationships and so on. These confrontations between the visible and the invisible spaces lead to the tragic ending of the novel.

LIU Xue-ru, postgraduate, School of Foreign Languages, Wuhan University of Technology.

II Racial Discrimination and Colonial Oppression in Physical Space

In literary works, physical space is an indispensable element and can be presented to the reader in the form of buildings, places and settings. In 1980, Lessing acknowledged to an interviewer that buildings were a running motif in her work (Rose, 1983). She described different physical spaces in *The Grass is Singing* which can be regarded as the symbol and expression of the characters' situation and mental changes.

The shifting geographic space of the novel has a huge impact on the fate of the characters, as confirmed by Mary's tragic life in the novel. According to Lessing's description, the store which was a distinctive feature of southern Africa at the time was also a source of sustenance for the white South African colonists. Apart from that, the abundance of goods, the magazines and the letters from overseas in the store were a source of confirmation of their white identities. Therefore, the shop became the bond between them and their homeland England and more importantly, those stores became the epitome of colonial life. Mary was brought up by her mother to categorize people into noble whites and inferior blacks, implanting in her the power hierarchy of colonial South Africa. More and more white farmers are opening such shops in Southern Africa to control and direct black consumption, exploiting blacks a second time. The continued penetration of stores into farming areas meant that more and more black people were subjected to severe exploitation and oppression, further intensifying the racial issues. These stores had long been marked by racial discrimination, so when Dick offered to open one, Mary felt that the ugly menacing store of her childhood should follow her here, even to her home (Lessing, 1961), and that her own physical space had been violated. She was so disgusted with the black products and those black people. So when she had to stand behind the counter, she did not act as a shopkeeper, but a “noble white woman” who had grown up under apartheid system, impatiently responding to the black women.

The farm is another typical representation of physical space. In the eyes of the colonizers, the inferior blacks did not deserve to own land at all, and so more and more colonizers invaded Southern Africa to become farm owners. On this land, white colonists, represented by Slatter, cultivate crops such as tobacco, which seriously damage the fertility of the land, for economic benefits, and the natural environment is mercilessly destroyed by the colonizers. The natives, who were supposed to dominate the black land, were enslaved like dogs by the white colonists and lived a miserable life. On the farms, the black community is treated inhumanely, with the white farmers able to whip the natives and buy their lives for a small amount of cash. Foucault believes that “supervision has a specific meaning, namely the power of discipline. The right of supervision exists in every area of society” (Foucault, 1997). Charlie Slatter and Dick Turner both believe supervision is a good way to control natives. However, this kind of supervision greatly restricts the freedom of black people and even deprives them of their right to live, which directly leads to the serious survival plight of black people.

III Power Oppression in Social Space

According to Foucault (1997), space, knowledge and power are intimately linked, and it is through spatial visibility that knowledge evolves and power is realized. In the colonial society of South Africa in the 20th century, racial discrimination and colonialist ideology has already become an object knowledge. The notion that white which was formed under the norms of apartheid system, is deeply rooted in the ideology of colonial white people. In the murder case at the beginning of the novel, the strangest thing is that no one wants to talk about the Turners' case openly, as if talking about it has become a taboo. Because such kind of relationship can not be brought into

the open which would destroy the status quo of the civilization that these whites have so carefully established. Besides, these notion constrain not only the behaviour of the colonized but also the colonizers. The tragedy of the Turners is a vivid illustration of this view. In the twentieth century, this white culture encroached on the entire South African society, poor whites and blacks were subjected to different forms of oppression and human nature became distorted.

In addition to the racial discrimination of colonial rule, the oppression of women's power by a patriarchal society appears to be particularly prominent in the social space created by Doris Lessing. The British Empire was a man's world, and the masculinity of the empire in many ways determined the nature of colonial activity. It also had a direct impact on Southern Rhodesia. Social space can be divided into dominant masculine space and subordinate feminine space. Patriarchal society expects the role of women of a certain age to be that of a good wife and mother in the private space of the home—"the angel of the family". Mary is a typical representative of poor white woman who lives under the oppression of patriarchal system. Unmarried Mary lives a carefree life in a small town, yet this goes against the expectations of a patriarchal society. Society has already pre-determined the roles of women in marriage, family and gender relations. The normative conditioning of women by the patriarchal society has caused Mary's fragile self-confidence to collapse instantly in the face of the powerful social forces; therefore, under the social conditioning, Mary succumbs to the role of the male social space and marries Dick in haste. Dick's reason for proposing to Mary clearly expresses the ideas of the patriarchal society: "It was to an apparently calm, maternal Mary that he proposed" (Lessing, 1961). After marriage, the home becomes a metaphor for women's social space. Mary succumbs to this power oppression, and eventually the home morphs into a prison that torments her physically and mentally.

IV Oppression in Mental Space

Mental space is the space occupied by human thought activities, which is closely related to people's living environment and life experience. In *The Grass is Singing*, the mental space in the text mainly embodies the split and distortion of Mary's mental space.

An alcoholic father and a miserable mother planted in the young Mary's mind a resistance to marriage. The sexual references in the text imply that Mary may have been violated by her father and further exacerbate Mary's aversion to male intimacy. As a result, Mary developed false values about men and marriage. Mary's extreme resistance to physical intimacy is partially explained by moments at which she dreams of being sexually abused by her father. When Mary dreams that Dick has died, the figure of Moses comforting her transforms into Mary's father, "menacing and horrible, who touched her with desire" (Lessing, 1961, p. 498). This moment suggests that, due to being abused as a child, Mary cannot differentiate between affection and violation. She thus comes to hate anyone who comes into intimate contact with her, and even hates witnessing moments of intimacy between other people. Due to the social constraints, Mary marries Dick hastily, at which time Mary's mental space is invaded by the patriarchal ideology in the social space. She flees to the countryside to escape from the patriarchal society, but her marriage does not give her the happiness and hope she has expected. After her marriage, Mary's physical space is confined to a cottage without a tin roof, and her incompetent husband, the poverty and emptiness of her life, the suffocating heat wave, and so on drive the collapse of Mary's mental world. But what pushes Mary's twisted and divided mental space to the extreme is her direct confrontation and participation in this war between

colonizer and colonized, white and black. Mary's doom lies, finally, in her inability to adapt her sexuality to the role apartheid prescribes for her (Lynne, 1991). As a woman, Mary is unconsciously attracted to Moses and gradually becomes dependent on him. However, as a white colonizer, in southern Africa, where colonial rule and racial discrimination were prevalent, it was socially unacceptable for a white woman to have an affair with a native. The two conflicting ideas cause her to become psychotic and lose her dominance in her own mental space.

V Conclusion

Doris Lessing's shaping of social space, physical space and spiritual space in *The Grass is Singing* is a process of endowing space with meaning. By showing the power relations in the space with colonial nature, racial discrimination, patriarchal oppression and other aspects, it criticizes the oppression of the subject of power on the object in the dual space. She presents the spatial injustices such as ideological oppression and cultural encroachment of the British colonizers on Southern Africa, the existential dilemma of women in the patriarchal society, etc., and visually describes in the novel the damage that this invasion brings to the spiritual world of both the colonizers and the colonized, and leads to the deformed and pathological development of the society. This reflects the fact that space is no longer an irrelevant backdrop in literature, but a commodity with relations of social production and reproduction and is imbued with political implications.

References

- Foucault, M. (1997). *Discipline and punish: The birth of prison* (A. Sheridan, Tans.). New York: Vintage.
- Hanley, L. (1991). Writing across the color bar: Apartheid and desire. *The Massachusetts Review*, 32(04), 495-506.
- Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Lessing, D. (1961). *The grass is singing*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Rose, E. C. (1983). Doris Lessing's "Citta Felice." *The Massachusetts Review*, 24(02), 369-386.
- 高静. (2023). 多丽丝·莱辛《野草在歌唱》中的殖民流散表征. *外国语文*, 39(03), 29-35.
- 姜仁凤. (2017). 《野草在歌唱》中的房子与自我. *外国文学研究*, 39(03), 71-77.
- 赵晶辉. (2009). 殖民话语的隐性书写——多丽丝·莱辛作品中的“空间”释读. *当代外国文学*, 30(03), 31-37.
- 郑佰青. (2016). 西方文论关键词: 空间. *外国文学*, (01), 89-97.
- 周新. (2022). 福柯话语理论视域下的文学批评路径研究 (华中师范大学).