

**From “Place” to “Space”:  
Women’s Growth in Doris Lessing’s Works**

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**Abstract**

Lessing was born in Persia of British descendants in 1919, moved to Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) at five with her family and grew up there since. In Rhodesia, Lessing married twice—divorced twice and moved to London in 1949 with her son Peter Lessing from the second marriage. They lived in a house on Charrington Street, London until she passed away in 2013.

Lessing is a writer of versatility who has engaged with various ideologies and social movements. She demonstrated her opposition to the racial apartheid in South Africa in her works; though one cannot help wondering where she acquired this sense of justice as she was technically part of the colonizer community. She joined the Communist Party but left it in 1956 out of a growing disappointment with the ideology. Sufism is another example of intellectual exploration (though more philosophical) that Lessing had dabbled in. It is said that Lessing also had close relations with the London’s radical psychiatrist R. D. Laing and the American radical writer Clancy Sigal. They used one another as characters in their works and played on the others’ titles and characters’

names. Jungian Psychology researchers also pointed out that Lessing adopted Jungian psychology visions such as “Confrontation with the Unconscious” and “Near Death Experience” (NDE) in her writings. Lessing has also become involved with the nuclear non-proliferation movement and wrote some science fiction works related to it.

Even so, Lessing had refused “group thinking” and “labels” though her entire adult life, though she has been revered as “the spokeswoman of feminism”. Her non-fictional work *Prisons We Choose to Live Inside* was written to indict several conventional types group thought. She showed that she herself had never consciously written from a feminist perspective, and feminist ideas were over-simplistic. However, Lessing’s versatility, unpredictability and the courage to refuse to conform to any collective ideology are modes of expression that bring us closer to her true ideological perspective.

Two things in Lessing’s works are of specific interest to this research: her utilization of the element space and her emphasis on women and the African experience. Regarding the latter: though Lessing has written works of various social subjects and themes, the correlations to the African experience and her concern with women are two social themes found consistently in her writings. She regularly writes about the plights of women, their struggles, their own limitations, as well as their growth and breakthrough, all the while dexterously utilizing space to reflect more on the depth of the subject matter. It is proposed in this dissertation that Lessing makes use of the human-space relation dexterously in her writings to reflect on women’s living condition and their growth.

There is a need to distinguish Space from Place. As Coetzee’s word “Wordsworthian”

transmits, the immense African space is part of Lessing's romantic attachment. First and foremost, the space is the settlement for Lessing's spirit. As she recalls her childhood as a passing wanderer: "An old prospector who shouted angrily: 'Man needs an empty space somewhere for his spirit to rest'" (Sage, 17). People like Lessing's parents "[yearn] for space" so strongly that it is almost "peculiarly an English neurosis" (Sage 17). They arrived as foreign settlers, but behind the yearning for space was their ambition and aspiration to make a departure from the mundane life they might have had in their home country e.g., an office clerk and a bored housewife. The hope they held, the disillusion they experienced and the influence they exerted on the land for better or for worse all become the base subjects in Lessing's works.

Comparatively speaking, 'space' is a broader concept associated with freedom while 'place' implies security, but space and place require each other for definition. "Visual perception, touch, movement, and thought combine to give us our characteristic sense of space" (Gale and Olsson 390). On the other hand, place is the space which people construct, define and perceive that "provides cues for our behavior [and] varies with the individual and cultural group" (Gale and Olsson 389). Anthropological studies have pointed out that people's conception of, and behavior in, space differs widely. When people construct place, they project their perceptions onto it. "Because landscapes are partly natural, their signs are frequently long lasting, and because landscapes are the homes of women and men, they are particularly suited to the ideological task of framing the social imaginary" (Mitchell 119). In this aspect, for the settlers, the African space is not only their romantic attachment, it is also the field they

need to conquer. The colonial enterprise is concerned with conquering space and turning it into place for the settlers' economic benefits. In this process, the settlers claim ownership to certain parts of the land, house their women and enslave the indigenous people.

The analysis of this paper includes four works of Lessing. First, I include her African novels *The Grass Is Singing* and *This Was the Old Chief's Country* recording the daily life of the settlers, the "native" people, the natural sceneries as well as the aspirations and the unfulfillment of people living in the colonized land. An analysis of these elements constructs a theoretical framework and presents practical examples. After these two chapters, one conclusion shall be reached. The impediment for the fulfillment in these women settlers' lives is not only socially rooted but also personally accountable. The internalization of the social ideologies, the submission to one's social regulations and the passive protest when things do not go in one's own way are all responsible for their tragedies. The first book of Lessing's *Children of Violence* series will be discussed in Chapter 3, which depicts more directly the impediments for a settler girl's growth and solutions to them in a more direct way. In Chapter 4, an analysis of the speculative novel *The Memoirs of a Survivor* shall reveal Lessing's opinions on women's social roles.

The first chapter centering on *The Grass Is Singing* starts from the analysis of the protagonist Mary's tragedy in the story and goes into the analysis about the root cause of the women settlers' plight—the colonizer's hegemonic masculinist thinking—thus laying a theoretical foundation for the following chapters. It will involve a comparison

between the Western nature vs. civilization dichotomy and the native African people's more harmonious human/nature relations. Considering that the hinge of African stories is the 'space' invasion and the making of 'place' in the colonization enterprise, the colonizer/space relations will be the pivot point for the discussion of gender and racial relations. Nationalism and class relations in the colonized land could be better understood through the space and place there. Starting from the analysis of the usurpation of African space, Chapter One explores other forms of usurpation—depriving the women of outdoor space and active social roles, and depriving the indigenous men of their masculinity. These processes are found to be rooted in the Western hegemonic masculinity. Only after such an analysis can Mary's tragedy be inspected thoroughly.

The second chapter, with the analysis of *This Was the Old Chief's Country*, offers more instances to illustrate the plights and the impediments of the women settlers—not only the colonial environment but also in their personal perspectives. Chapter Two will present in details two types of plight for women settlers in those days, thus offering more exemplifications for the previous discussion. On the landscape representation in colonial works, Mitchell in *Cultural Geography* proposes that “it is not just nationalism or class relations that are propped up through landscape representation. So too are relations of gender, sexuality, and race represented, reinforced, euphemized, and naturalized in the landscape” (Mitchell 125). The second chapter, through an analysis of the domestic places the women settlers stay, probes into their struggles and plights due to the living conditions and their confinement. The women settlers have been

imbued with a sense of fear to refrain from venture into the African land by the members of their own community. They mainly stay inside where most of their complications are staged. These places include the temporary houses they live in during the early period, the living room, the garden and the veranda.

In Chapter Three, the novel series *Children of Violence* which Lessing claimed to be autobiographical is discussed. Lessing depicts more directly the impediments for a female settler's growth and solutions to them in a more explicit way. For example, the settler girl Martha feels urged to get away from the farm in the hope that she will discover a different way of life outside of her country living experience. However, she is hoping to rely on others to make life choices for her. She blames the environment of colonization for her incapability to succeed, yet is not making enough effort to pursue her own career and personal development. Only when diagnosing her own limitations as a settler girl can Martha commence the exploration for real growth.

An analysis of the speculative novel *The Memoirs of a Survivor* in Chapter Four reveals Lessing's opinions on women's social roles. The whole story takes the form of the narrator witnessing a character named Emily growing up, which reflects the author Lessing's own opinions on the subject. The childhood experiences seen in the fourth-dimensional world beyond the kitchen wall and the growth Emily realizes through her spatial shift are the space elements included in the discussion. After such an analysis, it is understood that Lessing's opinions on women's growth is to strike a balance between the conventional role and that of the social role but not to contrast them.

