

Spatial Narratives and Feminine Themes in A Woman on a Roof

Wang Qin

Inner Mongolia University, Hohhot, 010010, China

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Abstract: A Woman on a Roof is a short story written by British female writer Doris Lessing. Known for her portrayal of strong, independent female characters and her depiction of complex relationships and social dynamics, Lessing has been hailed as the greatest female writer since Virginia Woolf and was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2007. A Woman on a Roof, setting during a June heatwave in 1960s London and adopting a third-person omniscient point of view, tells the story of three underclass male maintenance workers and an unnamed noble woman on a roof over the course of seven days. This novel provokes popular thinking about gender roles and the objectification of women in society by critiquing patriarchal attitudes and power relations. With the help of spatial narrative theory, this thesis analyzes topographical space, social space, textual space, and mental space in A Woman on a Roof so as to show the oppression of woman on different levels and her fight for freedom. In topographical space, the novel reveals a huge gap between the upper class and the lower class. Besides, the scope of activity of the unnamed woman is confined to the roof while the male workers are involved in spatial transitions. In social space, although gender and class seem to form a “balance”, woman is confined to men’s observation and evaluation, and is unable to truly express herself. In textual space, the novel highlights the reality of woman’s marginalization through the contrast between round and flat characters and the linear narrative structure. In mental space, the novel constructs both male mental space and female mental space. The naked woman serves as a driving force for male workers to improve themselves and achieve the construction of their mental space. The woman’s nudity and silence embody her pursuit of a free mental space. Through the above analysis, the thesis aims to give a better understanding of gender relations and power dynamics, and makes a call for the importance of gender equality and female autonomy.

1. Introduction

1.1. Introduction of Author and Her Work

Doris Lessing, born in Iran in 1919, was a distinguished British female novelist, poet, and playwright. Her family then moved to Zimbabwe, and finally settled in England. She was a prolific writer and her novels include *The Grass Is Singing*, *The Golden Notebook*, *The Good Terrorist*, and so on. Lessing had also published several short story collections such as *Five Short Novels*, *A Man and Two Women*, *African Stories*.

Her writing career spanned over six decades, during which she explored a wide range of themes and genres such as politics, race, feminism, and human psychology. She was known for her strong and independent female characters and her ability to depict complex relationships and societal dynamics. Her writing style is unique, embodying both realism and the courage to challenge conventional modes of thinking. It was such talent and achievement that she won the 2007 Nobel Prize in Literature. The Swedish Academy described her as “that epicist of the female experience, who with scepticism, fire and visionary power has subjected a divided civilisation to scrutiny”[1]. Besides, in 2008 *The Times* ranked her fifth on a list of “The 50 greatest British writers since 1945”.

Set in June over the course of a seven-day heat wave in 1960s London, *A Woman on a Roof* tells the story of a woman sunbathing herself on the roof of a building that is being renovated by three construction workers. When the men notice the nude woman, whistling and yelling to draw her attention, she resists their advances and silently ignores them. When the youngest man approaches the lady, his advances are suddenly rejected due to the change in weather. Thematically, the story explores feminism, the male gaze, romantic fantasy, sexual desire, and resisting intimidation.

1.2. Literature Review

Numerous scholars, both domestically and internationally, have been conducting research on the story from various perspectives such as literary criticism, thematic analysis, and ways of expressions.

First, most papers analyze *A Woman on a Roof* from the perspective of literature criticism such as Feminism and woman’s resistance, Foucault’s power discourse theory, structuralism, narratology, and psychoanalysis. For example, Sun’s paper mainly focuses on the woman’s silence as a special resistance in a male dominated society[2]. Through Foucault’s power discourse theory, Yuan analyzed the opposition between male and female under the patriarchal society[3]. Mi Haiyan and Ou Deliang interpret diverse oppositions in the context of Binary Opposition, a concept affiliated with structuralism[4]. Huang He and Lin Yupeng classify Tom as id, Stanley as ego, and Harry as superego[5].

In addition, there are also some thesis analyze the novel from the perspective of thematic such as conflicts between men and women. For example, Feng Zhengbin recognizes the significance of gaze and holds the belief that the woman’s choice to sunbathe on the roof could be interpreted as a reaction against male gazes[6].

What’s more, from the perspective of ways of expressions, Liu Xiaojuan characterizes Lessing’s writing style in terms of Anger Literature[7]. Barbara pointed out that the reference to heat in Lessing’s story represents both the actual temperature and the intensifying passions of the male characters[8].

Regarding the topics mentioned, current research on *A Woman on a Roof* primarily focuses on perspectives of literary criticism, thematic analysis, ways of expressions and so on. Among these perspectives, literature criticism takes a significant position in the mainstream. Despite drawing considerable interest from many researchers, the story has rarely been analyzed from the perspective of spatial narratology. In view of this, the thesis interprets the story from the perspective of spacial narratology so as to show the restriction of women at different levels and the deep thinking of women’s oppression in Lessing’s works.

1.3. Theoretical Framework

The theory of space begins with the *Production of Space* by Henri Lefebvre, who proposed the concept of “social space”. He mainly divided space into three parts: physical space, social space, and mental space. Later, Michel Foucault brought up the “power of space”.

The spacial narrative theory began with Joseph Frank’s essay “Spacial Form in Modern Literature”

in 1945. Since the late 20th century, with the spatial turn of critical theory, the spatial narrative theory has also developed. Seymour Chatman mentioned “story-space and discourse-space”. Ann Daghistany and J. J. Johnson came up with “open space and closed space”.

Gabriel Zoran’s work *Towards a Theory of Space in Narrative* gives a broad mode for the structuring of space within the narrative text. Zoran first regarded narrative space as a whole and the space of the reconstructed world can be perceived from both horizontal and vertical viewpoints. When a vertical view is taken, there are three levels of space in the reconstructed world: “the topographical level”, “the chronotopic level” and “the textual level”[9].

This thesis will mainly adopt Gabriel Zoran’s and Henri Lefebvre’s spacial narrative theory to analyze the spatial narrative art of *A Woman on a Roof* and the oppression and restriction of women in different spatial levels from four aspects: topographical space, social space, textual space, and mental space.

2. Topographical space in *A Woman on a Roof*

For the topographical space, Gabriel Zoran said “this is space at its highest level of reconstruction perceived as self-existent and independent of the temporal structure of the world and sequential arrangement of the text. The text can express topographical structure by means of direct descriptions, e.g., as in Balzac’s well-known openings, but in fact every unit of the text, whether narrative, dialogic, or even essayistic, may contribute to the reconstruction of the topographical structure.”[9] In *A Woman on a Roof*, Lessing expresses the structure of topographical space primarily through description and narration. She employs the technique of juxtaposing and contrasting topographical spaces to show the disparity and symbolism of topographical spaces. She highlights the differences in the environments in which the characters are situated and the social space disparity implied by the topographical differences.

In the novel, Lessing chooses the roof, an unconventional place, as setting of the story. The rapid economic growth of London in the twentieth century led to a boom in the development of the local real estate industry, and a large number of renovation workers came into being as part of the city’s construction force. Therefore, there are three male maintenance workers at the beginning of the novel working in the heatwave and noticing a naked woman sunbathing on the roof across the street. The three workers, together with the surrounding environment and the woman on the roof, form a complete space. Meanwhile, the hard-working male workers and the casual lady are also in stark contrast to each other.

“Her roof belonged to a different system of roofs, separated from theirs at one point by about twenty feet. It meant a scrambling climb from one level to another, edging along parapets, clinging to chimneys, while their big boots slipped and slithered.”[10] The different roofs of the two sides symbolize two different social classes: the lower class represented by the maintenance workers and the upper class represented by the women on the roof. The 20-foot distance between the roofs symbolizes the insurmountable gap between the two classes, which the lower working class has to cross by “scrambling”, but “their big boots slipped and slithered”, so if they are not careful, they will fall. The attitude of the woman towards the workers also shows the contempt and disdain of the upper class towards the lower class. The poor working environment and the pressure of life make the lower class already have hatred towards the upper class. Once they feel the contempt and hostility from this class, they will be even angrier and the conflict will be even more inevitable.

In contrast to the normal situation, the unusual topographical space setting both captures the reader’s interest and serves to intensify the conflict. The place where the woman sunbathes in the novel is in the small, confined space of the roof, and she either appears on the roof or disappears. The male workers, on the other hand, appear throughout the time and are involved in spatial transitions.

The novel mentions a scene where they are working in the basement due to the hot weather. For example, “Next day was cloudless, and they decided to finish the work in the basement.”[10]

In short, through the depiction of the topographical space, the novel reveals the social status quo and the living standards of people from different classes in 20th century England, and expresses the author’s sympathy for the working people at the bottom of the society. In addition, the single space in which women live, and the transformation of the space in which male characters live are also contrasted, reflecting the disadvantaged position of women.

3. Social Space in *A Woman on a Roof*

In his *Production of Space*, Lefebvre mentioned many kinds of space, such as architectural space, absolute space, abstract space, differential space, natural (physical) space and so on. He divided all these spaces into three classes: “physical space—nature, the Cosmos; mental space, which includes logical and formal abstractions; and, thirdly, the social space.”[11] He has further categorized social space into three distinct classifications: spatial practice, representation of space, and space of representation. The spatial practice is observed space, referring to the daily activities of people in social space. The representation of space is conceived space, conceived by planners, architects and government officials, which directly involves and intervenes in the production of space. The space of representation is the space of life, the space of symbols and imagery, often associated with the creations of artists and writers. At the same time, the three elements are inseparable and presuppose each other. In the context of social space, this thesis only deals with the spatial practice and the space of representation.

3.1. Leisure Activity VS. Hard Work

Roof is a small space that exists in big city and serve not only a residential function but also a social one. For the unnamed woman, the roof is nothing more than her recreational space. Lessing portrays in detail the change in skin color of the woman on the roof: “Yesterday she was a scarlet-and-white woman, today she was a brown woman.”[10] Lessing also presents the daily lives of other upper class people: “Some married couples sat side by side in deck chairs, the women’s legs stockingless and scarlet, the men in vests with reddening shoulders.”[10] Such a leisurely and comfortable lifestyle contrasts sharply with the heavy workload of the three maintenance workers.

For three workers, the roof is a terrible working environment which represents their hard-working space. For example, “They were all a bit dizzy, not used to the heat”; “the hot leads stinging their fingers”[10]. Although repairing houses is tiring, the income from repairing roofs is the main source of livelihood for their families. Therefore, in face of such a harsh environment and hot weather, the three workers only complained, and none of them dared to go to the foreman to complain.

These two types of people represent two opposite classes. The three workers are representatives of the lowest working class in Britain, and from them we can see the figure of the working people at the bottom of the society at that time struggling for survival. While the woman on the roof is the representative of the upper class, and through her we can see the life of the upper class, and their indifference and contempt for the lower class. The huge difference in status triggers a different mindset towards the social reality in people’s minds.

3.2. Gaze VS. Being Gazed at

The protagonist of the novel, a sunbathing woman lying on the roof, becomes an object of observation and covetousness. Through this detail, Lessing reveals the phenomenon of women becoming objects of male gaze in modern society. Harry, who is over 40 years old, Stanley, who is

newly married, and Tom, who is only 17 years old, are in three different age groups of men, which makes them, to a certain extent, the representatives of men. Their gaze on the woman reflects the typical attitudes and prejudices of men towards women in a male-dominated society. Women are expected to be submissive to men and never to do anything indecent. When they talk about the woman lying nearly naked on the roof for all to see, Harry says: “If she’s married, her old man wouldn’t like that.” and Stanley says: “if my wife lay about like that, for everyone to see, I’d soon stop her.”[10] In addition, the three workers persistently harassed the woman on the roof by whistling, shouting, abusing and denigrating her, which reflects their disrespect for women, taking for granted their absolute superiority in terms of gender.

On the other hand, in *A Woman on a Roof*, woman is object of gaze. In a patriarchal society, men are the subjects and women are the objects, and women become the “second sex” and the “other”. Through the male point of view, the novel reveals the psychological burden of woman’s objectification and gaze. In the face of the constant harassment by the three male maintenance workers, Lessing chooses to keep the female protagonist silent throughout the whole time and she expresses her dissatisfaction only through her gestures and movements. In contrast to the multifaceted portrayal of the male protagonist, the unnamed woman is reduced to a speechless “other” in the novel.

4. Textual Space in *A Woman on a Roof*

The textual space is represented by the verbal text, “The structure under discussion is not that of the text itself as a verbal medium, not that of its linguistic materials, but rather an organization of the reconstructed world.”[9]

The textual space is influenced by three crucial aspects. Firstly, the selectivity of language, as language is incapable of fully capturing all the information of space, often results in a vague and non-specific portrayal of space. The narrative’s details and the selective use of language determine the effectiveness of spatial reproduction within the narrative. Secondly, the linearity of the text, wherein the sequential order of language and the information it conveys during the narrative process shapes the direction and trajectory of spatial movement. Lastly, the perspective structure, where the textual perspective impacts the reconstruction of space in the narrative, creating varying focal points between the “there” beyond the fictional textual space and the “here” confined within it. This thesis only deals with the selectivity of language and the linearity of text in terms of textual space.

4.1. Round Characters VS. Flat Characters

As Wang mentioned In the case of storytelling, for example, the types of characters (round, flat, etc.), the structure of the plot (linear, spiral, chain, etc.), and the relationship between the arrangement of the scene and the characters’ point of view are all worthy of exploration from a spatial perspective[12]. A round character is a character image made up of a combination of character elements. Character of multi-faceted, multi-level, dynamic changes, these are the main characteristics of round characters. Flat characters have two characteristics: a single character personality, or tend to be typecast; and artistic portrayal of the exaggerated, or tend to caricature.

In *A Woman on a Roof*, it contains both round characters and flat characters. In particular, the round characters are all male and the flat characters are female. In the novel, the male characters are portrayed in their entirety. For example, each of the three male characters have their own names and background information. They are all maintenance workers: “Harry, the oldest, a man of about forty-five”; “Young Tom, seventeen”; “Stanley was newly married, about three months.”[10] Besides, Lessing provides a thorough characterization of the three male characters, such as their personalities, language, actions, and psychological descriptions. Stanley is arrogant, irritable, vulgar, and has no respect for women. Harry is relatively gentle, caring, and more respectful of women. Tom is

imaginative and vigorous.

However, on the contrast, the novel depicts female characters in a fragmented way. For instance, the woman on the roof has no name. In the novel, the woman on the roof has no voice, and there are only action descriptions and external appearance descriptions for her, without detailed psychological portrayal. What's more, the description of the woman is narrated through the males' point of view. The males' gaze is a pair of sharp and cold scissors, dismembering the nude woman's body into countless pieces. Her breasts, bikini pants, pink legs, and buttocks are depicted many times in the novel, while the depiction of the woman as a whole does not exist.

4.2. Linearity Structure

In exploring the narrative sequence of a text, Zoran says that some authors arrange the plot according to the "chronotopic level", which means writing the novel is according to the character's movement[9].

In *A Woman on a Roof*, Lessing utilizes the traditional linear narrative. The flow of time is shown through words such as "the first day" and "next day", which also advances the storyline. God created the world in seven days, working on the first six, resting on the seventh, and beginning a new cycle on the eighth. Lessing keeps the story going for a full week. Each of the first six days the heat continues and the conflict between the genders continues and intensifies day after day. Until the seventh day, when the heat is ended by a rain that prevents the women from sunbathing and allows the men to concentrate on their work.

In addition, the passage of time can also be seen in women's attitudes toward the harassment of the three workers. The woman goes through the process of sunbathing on her back from the first day; ignoring the men's stare and teasing on the second day; avoiding the men and being frightened on the third day; disappearing from the men's sights on the fourth day; avoiding the men on the fifth day; rejecting Tom's affection on the sixth day; and disappearing into the rain again on the seventh day. A rain temporarily extinguishes the conflict, while Lessing suggests that the conflict is only temporarily over, and that the conflict between the two genders will move on to the next cycle.

5. Mental Space in *A Woman on a Roof*

Human spatiality originates from our interaction with the environment and our activities. Lu Yang mentions that space is not only perceived as a specific material form that can be marked, analyzed, and interpreted, but also a spiritual construction, representing the conceptual form of space and its significance in life[13]. Therefore, spatial theory not only focuses on the material dimension but also delves into its spiritual dimension. In literary works, especially modern and postmodern literature, they often reveal the inner world and subconscious activities of individuals, making mental space one of the significant areas of study in spatial theory. In *A Woman on a Roof*, mental space mainly includes the construction of male and female mental space.

5.1. The Construction of Male Mental Space

In the novel, Tom symbolizes id, Stanley symbolizes ego, and Harry symbolizes superego. From the very beginning, Tom follows the pleasure-principle and is dominated by blind instincts and desires in order to satisfy his innate needs. When the workers see the nearly naked woman sunbathing, Tom "said nothing, but he was excited and grinning", "craning his head all ways to see more" and even "his mind was full of the nearly naked woman"[10]. Stanley always pays attention to the actual conditions of the real world and regards them as the criteria for his activities. He uses common sense and logic to judge and evaluate everything. When faced with a nearly naked woman sunbathing,

Stanley's first reaction is to angrily criticize the woman from a rational perspective, saying that "She's stark naked" and "Someone'll report her if she doesn't watch out"[10]. Harry plays the role of a moral supervisor in the novel, which can be seen as a manifestation of the superego. When Stanley and Tom repeatedly climb over the roof to spy on the nude woman, Harry will angrily call them back. When Stanley whistles at the woman, he says, "Small things amuse small minds" [10].

The weather is unbearably hot, and three men are forced to work on the scorching roof. The appearance of the naked woman provides them with the pleasure of peeking and the amusement of conversation. While they appear angry and dissatisfied with her on the surface, they are deeply attracted to her from the bottom of their hearts. This becomes even more apparent on the second, third, and fourth days, when the first thing they do after climbing onto the roof is to look for the naked woman. The male protagonists verbally and physically attack the beautiful woman on the roof, considering her behavior as lewd and vulgar, and fill with mockery and derision. However, in reality, the nakedness subconsciously becomes their motivation and desire to overcome the harsh conditions and complete their hard tasks.

Tom experiences a process from childish fantasies to maturity, and then to disillusion. The naked woman is a catalyst for Tom's growth and transformation, enabling him to see the complex relationship between men and women, and finally return from fantasy to reality. Stanley is always resentful of the naked woman. However, within seven days, he ultimately suppresses his narrow-mindedness and selfishness, completing the task without any intense conflict with the naked woman. This was also a self-training and test for him, despite his character flaws. As for Harry, he has always been calm and able to resist external temptations. He consistently adheres to his principles, never crosses the line, and maintains a relatively harmonious psychological state. The appearance of the naked woman presents him with an opportunity to surpass and test himself. In this sense, the naked woman provides them with an opportunity for growth and training, serving as a driving force for them to improve themselves and achieve the construction of their mental space.

5.2. The Construction of Female Mental Space

A Woman on a Roof was written in the 1960s, during the second wave of the Western feminist movement. Women's status in the West had improved, and they gained certain rights and freedoms, but women still had not achieved complete independence and equality in many aspects. Therefore, the novel also implicitly contains the thematic significance of women fighting for freedom. The unconventional behavior of the naked woman on the roof and her indifference to harassment reflect Lessing's pursuit of women's independence and freedom as well as the construction of women's mental space.

On the one hand, the woman's behavior of naked sunbathing deviates from the social norms of behavior. Her nudity serves as a protest against the male-dominated social structure and order, and it is a breakthrough for women to freely express their individual existence experiences. Under the sun, the naked woman smokes, reads, and tans. She is no longer an angel imprisoned in the kitchen or a tool confined to the bedroom for male pleasure. She knows how to find her own life. Moreover, her reading reflects her own ideological views and cultural value judgments, as reading is a typical symbol of civilization. In addition, exposing her body in the public implies that women want to reveal their truly repressed selves through their own actions and strength. She treats the flirting and gaze from the male workers with indifference, which provokes anger and hatred from the male world. Her body is no longer a tamed one. It has shifted from passive to active, using an active body to confront the patriarchal society.

On the other hand, the male workers try various ways to attract the attention of the woman on the roof, but she remains indifferent all the time. Although the unnamed woman presents an image of a

voiceless “other”, her silence is a powerful response to male harassment. Her reactions to the flirting and gaze of the three workers are expressed through a series of body movements. For example, in the novel, “She sat smoking, and did not look up when Stanley let out a wolf whistle”; “She looked straight at them, angry”; “She raised her head, set her chin on two small fists”[10]. Besides, at the end of the novel, when Tom summoned the courage to approach the woman on the roof, he is greeted with cold indifference, even disgust and anger from her. For the woman on the roof, her entertainment space has been violated, causing her to feel uneasy and annoyed. The roof was her private territory to express her mental world, and she firmly rejects anyone else’s entry.

In conclusion, the woman on the roof initiates a protest against the patriarchal society through her nudity and refuses to give in to the harassment and gaze of men, embodying her pursuit of a free mental space.

6. Conclusion

Based on Gabriel Zoran’s and Henri Lefebvre’s spacial narrative theory, this thesis analyses topographical space, social space, textual space, and mental space in *A Woman on a Roof*, revealing the oppression suffered by the woman at different levels and her struggle for liberation. It is found that topographical space highlights the great divide between the upper and lower classes, with women’s range of movement restricted to the roof, while men are free to move through different spaces. Although the social space seems to be “balanced” in terms of gender and class, woman is actually under the gaze and evaluation of men, making it difficult for her to express herself. The textual space emphasizes the reality of women’s marginalization through the contrast between round and flat characters and the linear narrative structure. At the level of mental space, female nudity becomes the driving force for male self-improvement and psychological construction, while female nudity and silence reflect her pursuit of free psychological space.

In conclusion, this thesis not only deepens the understanding of Lessing’s gender relations and power dynamics, but also emphasizes the importance of gender equality and female autonomy. It is hoped that this study will contribute to the realization of true freedom and equality for women.

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