



## Transformation of Private Space into Social Space in Doris Lessing’s “Getting off the Altitude”<sup>1</sup>

Doris Lessing’in “Getting off the Altitude” Adlı Öyküsünde Özel Alanın Sosyal Mekâna Dönüşümü

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### Abstract

Doris Lessing’s two collections of African Stories – *This Was the Old Chief’s Country* (1952) and *The Sun Between Their Feet* (1973) – exemplify the theme of colonialism displaying the hegemony of the whites over the blacks. The stories in the former collection are mainly about colonial issues, while the ones in the latter cover a variety of subjects such as racial and gender conflicts, power of nature and effects of the Second World War. Since geographical features of Africa have a significant role in shaping social and cultural values, the interconnectedness between space and gender is also a fundamental issue in these stories. “Getting off the Altitude” from her collection, *The Sun Between Their Feet*, recounts the story of how white settler community in Central Africa deals with the problem of alienation due to physical characteristics of the area. The spatially enclosed structure of the society on one hand, preserves the social norms and values but at the same time leads to non-conformist relationships between the genders. The impact of the altitude in the district is also observed in the way the society is structured and gender relations are performed. With respect to this, the story shows not only how space is perceived as a physical reality where everyday life takes place but also how it is conceived as a space of thoughts which defines relations and confines people into certain places. What differentiates “Getting off the Altitude” from the other stories in the collection is related to the multiplicity of male and female characters and their lived experiences, which pave the way for new modes of thinking about space. This study, through its portrayal of spatial practices and everyday experiences of various characters, discusses to what extent they are able to appropriate and configure spaces they occupy in different ways and how they transform the private sphere of a house from its restrictive conceptualisation to alternative ones within the framework of Henri Lefebvre’s and Edward Soja’s space theories.

**Keywords:** Doris Lessing, Henri Lefebvre, Edward Soja, Gender, Private Space, Social Space.

### Öz

Doris Lessing’in Africa öykülerinin bulunduğu *This Was the Old Chief’s Country* (1952) ve *The Sun Between Their Feet* (1973) başlıklı kitapları, sömürgecilik temasını örneklediren öykülerden oluşmaktadır. Birinci kitaptaki öyküler daha çok sömürgecilik konusunu tartışırken diğer kitaptaki öyküler ise ırk ve cinsiyet çatışmaları, doğanın gücü ve ikinci Dünya Savaşının etkileri gibi çeşitli konuları ele alır. Coğrafi özelliklerin sosyal ve kültürel değerlerin

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şekillenmesinde önemli bir rolü olduğu için, bu öykülerdeki mekân ve cinsiyet ilişkisi incelenmeye değer bir diğer önemli konudur. *The Sun Between Their Feet* başlıklı kısa öykü kitabından alınan “Getting off the Altitude” adlı öykü beyaz yerleşkecilerin Orta Afrika’da coğrafi özelliklerden kaynaklanan yabancılaşma sorunu ile nasıl baş ettiklerini anlatmaktadır. Mekânsal (coğrafi) olarak kapalı toplum yapısı, bir yandan sosyal norm ve değerleri muhafaza ederken, diğer yandan toplum kurallarına aykırı cinsiyetler arası ilişkilere yol açmaktadır. Toplum yapısını ve cinsiyetler arası ilişkileri bu denli etkileyen bir diğer coğrafi unsur ise bölgedeki rakımın etkisidir. Buna ilişkin olarak, incelenen öykü Orta Afrika’nın ve bu bölgedeki evlerin, nasıl günlük yaşamın sürdürdüğü fiziksel bir mekân olarak algılandığını göstermekle kalmaz, aynı zamanda bu mekânların ilişkileri nasıl tanımladığını ve insanların yaşam alanlarını nasıl kısıtladığını gösterir. “Getting off the Altitude” adlı öyküyü koleksiyondaki diğer öykülerden ayıran özellik, birçok kadın ve erkek karakterin yaşadıkları alanlara yeni bakış açısı sunmuş olmalarıdır. Bu çalışma, birçok karakterin yaşam alanlarında günlük deneyimlerinin betimlenmesi yoluyla, mekâna hangi ölçüde ve nasıl yeni anlamlar kattığını ve ev gibi özel bir alanın nasıl kısıtlayıcı mekân anlayışından alternatif mekâna dönüştürüldüğünü, Henri Lefebvre ve Edward Soja’nın mekân kuramları kapsamında tartışır.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Doris Lessing, Henri Lefebvre, Edward Soja, Toplumsal Cinsiyet, Özel Alan, Sosyal Mekân.

Lessing’s story “Getting off the Altitude” recounts the story of three white settler families in Central Africa – the Slatters, the Pritts and the Farquars – living in the same district through the narration of the Farquars’s daughter. The story predominantly focuses on gender relations in an enclosed society which determines the lifestyle of people ranging from adolescents to adults. It is an initiation story about the narrator’s own observation of social relations in the district and her specific experience with the Slatters, while she undergoes a process of transformation, which culminates in a moment of self-realization in the mirror. The story deals with how both genders transform the private house of the Slatters into a social space of interaction and contestation as well as how the two female characters – Mrs Slatter and the narrator – make use of Mrs Slatter’s bedroom as a space of their own. The multiplicity of characters in the story engaging with interconnected levels of experience with one another and spaces<sup>2</sup> occupied recalls Henri Lefebvre’s and Edward Soja’s spatial trialectics where there is always interaction and alliance or contradiction and conflict between the perceived, the conceived and the lived dimensions of dwellings and their inhabitants. Therefore, this study will make use of these theories of space and gender performativity to discuss how the characters appropriate and reconfigure their environment and how they are shaped by in return.

Few studies were undertaken concerning the (re)conceptualization of space before the 1950s and the concept was simply understood as a measurable and mappable container<sup>3</sup> in which things happen. Space meant the spatial dimensions reduced to its physical qualities. Until the 1970s, the definition of space was restricted to mental conceptions based on representations of ideologies, values, norms and beliefs. From that time onwards, theorists have attempted to free the concept of space from its reductionist and essentialist understanding and attributed a relational and productive feature to it. Space is not merely a fixed and stable presence defined by physical parameters and abstract conceptualizations, rather it is conceived as a dynamic entity produced and configured through social relations and spatial practices.

For Lefebvre space itself is active and is constituted by the activities of its inhabitants. As such, he regards space as a production in process and emphasises the “shift from *things in space* to the actual *production of space* . . .” (1991, p. 37). According to Lefebvre’s view, space has been not only created, produced, appropriated and used in alternative ways but also commodified and colonised throughout history. Lefebvre claims that the previous conception of space based on the Cartesian division between the physical

<sup>2</sup> The images of space ranging from the smallest units such as a room, a flat, a house to their outward extensions like a garden, a street, natural environment and a city recur frequently in Lessing’s works, yet among the studies that engage in an analysis of space, there are readings of her short stories in terms of a racialized and gendered division of space based on dichotomies like the coloniser/the colonised, the civilised/the uncivilized, the public/the private and the open/the enclosed. For more information, see “Domestic Spaces: Huts and Houses in Doris Lessing’s *African Stories*,” (2010) “Inside and Outside Colonial Spaces: Border Crossings in Doris Lessing’s *African Stories*” (2009) and “Landscape and the Anti-Pastoral Critique in Doris Lessing’s *African Stories*,” (2010) Pat Louw.

<sup>3</sup> The notion of space as a container dates back to the philosophical studies of Euclid, Leibniz and Newton. For more information, see *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Time and Space*, Bas C. van Fraassen, 2013.

(body) space and the mental (mind) space fails to explain the social, historical and economic relations of people living in particular surroundings at particular times. Thus, he introduces the third dimension: the social space through which the human relations, historical developments, and productive processes are revealed. Lefebvre takes these three spatial aspects into consideration "[...] in interaction, in conflict or in alliance with each other. Thus, the three terms or moments assume equal importance, and each takes up a similar position in relation to the others" (Schmid, 2008, p. 33). He underlines the production of space through the use of his conceptual triad in order to attain a more interactive concept. The interaction of the three dialectically interconnected dimensions – the physical, the mental and the social – provide a relational understanding of space.

For Lefebvre the first part of this spatial triad, the "spatial practice," occurs in the physical environment. Spatial practices give information about the social relations, cultural interactions, political issues and everyday life of individuals and communities, and such space is perceived through the senses. In a similar vein, Merrifield notes, "People's perceptions condition their daily reality with respect to the usage of space: for example, their routes, networks, patterns of interaction that link spaces set aside for work, play and leisure. . . . Spatial practices structure daily life and a broader urban reality" (1993, p. 524). Hence, analysing everyday life of people, perception of their surrounding and social relations give information about how they experience the physical space. The second item in his triad is the "representations of space" which refers to a "conceptualised space, the space of scientists, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers . . . all of whom identify what is lived and what is perceived with what is conceived. This is the dominant space in any society" (Lefebvre, p. 38-39). According to Lefebvre, this is conceived space embedded with ideological norms and values as well as implications of power and knowledge. This order is structured through the implication of abstract knowledge which includes descriptions and definitions at the level of discourse. Maps, signs, plans of space, for instance, represent the dominant ideology and serve for the maintenance and control of hegemony, and does not welcome the diversities among people, confining them into well-defined spaces in terms of their social identities such as race, class, gender, ethnicity etc. Despite being abstract notions, representations of space are important in the formation of social relations and social roles under the hegemony of patriarchy. The third dimension is defined by Lefebvre as "representational space" which is "directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of 'inhabitants' and 'users'" (1991, p. 39). On the one hand, the symbolic dimension of space is interpreted by individuals from their personal viewpoints and appropriated by their imagination. Such space is constituted out of meanings attributed to it as well as the experience of everyday life; on the other hand, it refers to ideology, knowledge and power which intervenes in the construction of meaning related to social relations, norms and values. With respect to the interpretation of symbols and images by individuals, lived space can be altered and reconfigured as an alternative space. Considering these three dimensions, Lefebvre demonstrates the impact of the abstract constructions of space or its representations extending into the private and domestic space of home and family and into the social space in the form of restrictions and confinements. He suggests social space as a potential arena to question the established notions of space which restrict people's thoughts and actions and to reappropriate it through social relations and lived experience.

In a similar vein, Soja draws attention to the dialectical relationship between the spatial and the social aspects of human life. In his book *Postmodern Geographies* (1989), he writes a case study about the impact of space in social life in Los Angeles to illustrate the socio-spatial dialectics. However, Soja's main contribution to the discussion of space has been to interpret and rewrite Lefebvre's conceptualisation of space by using a new terminology. His analysis of space relies on the social, geographical and political aspects of spatiality. He indicates that so far the relationship between space and people has been interpreted with reference to the "historicality and sociality" (1996, p. 2) of life that has remained insufficient in explaining the complexities of contemporary life. The twentieth-century which is characterised by the advancements in urbanism and its impact on human and societal developments foreground the significance of spatiality and geography. Therefore, Soja underlines "the inherent *spatiality of human life*" (1996, p. 1) by underlining the potential of people to construct their social space. As in the case of "Getting off the Altitude" spatiality of settler community gains importance when diverse characters, living in an enclosed

African district, transform the Slatters' house into a social space where they can escape to. Soja adds the spatial dimension to the traditional dual understanding of historical and social life, and in this way shows the ontological existence of human beings as having historical, social and spatial practices. He names Lefebvre's physical space as firstspace which deals with the "real material world" and Lefebvre's mental space as secondspace "that interprets this reality through 'imagined' representations of spatiality" (1996, p. 6). The firstspace refers to the physical and spatial locations, sites, regions and territories in spaces where the organisation and design of buildings, houses, towns, cities shape the social life of individuals. The relations between people and their firstspace including the built-environment and nature show not only the materiality of space but also the sociality of human life. As Soja puts it, "human spatiality continues to be defined primarily by and in its material configurations, but explanation shifts away from these surface plottings themselves to an inquiry into how they are socially produced" (1996, p. 76-77). This change shows the mutually complementary relationship between human beings and their surrounding, and how they appropriate the physical space through social relations.

As a response to the analysis of firstspace, which is defined by its physical features and organised by urban planners, engineers, scientists, Soja introduces the secondspace in order to reveal the fact that "spatial knowledge is primarily produced through discursively devised representations of space, through the spatial workings of the mind" (1996, p. 79) rather than the perceived materiality of things in space. The perception of firstspace with its materiality and the different ways of experiencing it are actually connected to each other. It means that space is socially produced and formalised by the imposition of power, knowledge and ideology. Like Lefebvre, Soja accepts the fact that space is a product of social relations. Thus, he renames Lefebvre's representational space as thirdspace where all binarisms or oppositions confront with another/other alternative(s), what he calls "a critical strategy of *thirthing-as-Othering*" (1996, p. 60). He writes "Othering" with a capital letter to highlight the inadequacy of traditional notions of space relying on the physical (firstspace) and the mental (secondspace), out of which the latter is privileged over the former. Unlike these restrictive dimensions of space, thirdspace is, for him:

an efficient invitation to enter a space of extraordinary openness, a place of critical exchange where the geographical imagination can be expanded to encompass a multiplicity of perspectives ... It is a space where issues of race, class, and gender can be addressed simultaneously without privileging one over the other; where one can be Marxist and post-Marxist, materialist and idealist, structuralist and humanist, disciplined and transdisciplinary at the same time (1996, p. 5).

In addition to Lefebvre's idea of the production of social space through social relations, Soja adds a new dimension encompassing views of multiple social identities. Soja's thirdspace is all-inclusive in the sense of confrontation and contestation between opposites to comprehend the multifaceted meanings of spatiality. Human beings generate their own space through their personal experiences and interpretations that are also under the influence of the representations of space constituting knowledge. In other words, physical space with its material objects and their various interpretations by individuals from different social backgrounds as well as cultural and political views about that space are all comprehended as social constructions and are simultaneously reconstructed. The understanding of social space or thirdspace enables people to experience life in various ways without being confined by traditional norms and values, and by extension provide an all-embracing space to live in. What these two theoreticians have in common is the analysis of creative uses and alternative configurations of space for human practices. Lefebvre's social space and Soja's thirdspace invite a reinterpretation of all three aspects of space – the perceived, mental and lived space. Since their concept of space is characterised by human relations and social struggle that lead to liberation of individual experiences, using Lefebvre's and Soja's categories of space provide an analysis of the relationship between characters and spaces they occupy in Lessing's "Getting off the Altitude" due to the forced togetherness of white settlers in an enclosed African district.

Building upon her childhood and youth experiences in Southern Rhodesia, Lessing writes two collections of African stories in which she portrays the relationships between men and women, white and

black, children and adults, mothers and daughters, and so on. "Getting off the Altitude," like "Old John's Place" in the first volume and "Lucy Grange" in the second, shows the complicated relationship between space and gender. There are similarities between the stories in the sense that private space is configured in an alternative way beyond their physical and socially conceived characteristics. Similar to Lucy's opening up her bedroom to a stranger and finding solace with him in "Lucy Grange," for instance, in "Getting off the Altitude," both Mrs Slatter and the narrator make use of Mrs Slatter's bedroom as an alternative space where they can escape to. Like the braavleis organised in one of the farmer's land in "The Words He Said," in the second volume, the Slatters' house is used as a space of parties where people come together, dance and drink in "Getting off the Altitude". Both stories display the transformation of a private space into a social sphere. "Getting off the Altitude" additionally presents a detailed description of several families (adults and adolescents) sharing a forced togetherness due to geographical conditions and show the complicated relationship between space and gender in multiple ways.

In the analysis of "Getting off the Altitude," my purpose will be to reveal how a white settler community in Central Africa deals with the problems of alienation. The geographical feature of the district eventually shapes the behaviours and the mood of the characters. The two rivers, for instance, separate the farms and the houses and function as a border between them. The Slatters' house is "twelve miles off" (Lessing, p. 126) from the Pritts' and is located "across the miles of country" (Lessing, p. 121). The frequent rain in the district causes the rivers to rise and they become "impassable for hours," (Lessing, p. 126) which does not allow people to leave their houses. Thus, the enclosed structure of the society on one hand, preserves the social norms and values but at the same time leads to new and alternative relationships between the genders as well as adults and children. The impact of the altitude is also observed in the way the society is structured and gender relations are performed. Like all the other stories in the second volume, this one also shows how space is perceived as a physical reality where everyday life takes place and how it is conceived as a space of thoughts which defines relations and confines people into certain places. What makes "Getting off the Altitude" different from the other ones is related to the multiplicity of male and female characters and their lived experiences, which pave the way for different modes of thinking about space and its transformation from restrictive conceptualisation to alternative ones.

The title of the story reveals the relationship between the characters and their environment. The primary meaning of "get off" refers to "an escape from potentially unpleasant consequences" and "leave," (vocabulary.com)<sup>4</sup> and "altitude" indicates "the height of an object or point in relation to sea level or ground level" (OED).<sup>5</sup> The change in altitude affects people: "As altitude rises, air pressure drops. In other words, if the indicated altitude is high, the air pressure is low. . . . Decreased air pressure means that less oxygen is available for breathing" (nationalgeographic.org). It means that high altitude causes serious symptoms of altitude sickness such as headache, dizziness and lung damage. The combination of the two words, "get off" and "altitude," in the title, then, might show how the characters of the story are affected by the geographical features of their dwelling. Despite its geographically enclosed structure with patriarchal values as the white settler farmer being the head of the family, high altitude, low air pressure and the rivers impeding travelling from one house to another lead to the constitution of an alternative lifestyle with married couples having extra marital affairs.

There are approximately forty families on the farm living together "over a hundred square miles or so," therefore, "nothing happen[s] privately" (Lessing, p. 124). The nature of an enclosed district due to the geographical features of Central Africa brings about a forced close interaction between these family members in the form of parties, as they do not have an alternative life outside the place. In Lefebvre's terms, the physical parameters of the district shape the spatial practices of the settlers like their daily routines. A hierarchically structured family is observed in the story with the father ruling over the household, and the relations between the two genders are of primary importance. The Farquars, for instance, are "conventional and religious people" (Lessing, p. 124). Mr Farquar is a farmer doing business with the other farmers in the

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<sup>4</sup> All vocabulary.com references are taken from site <https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/> accessed on 29 April, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> All OED references are taken from site <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com> accessed on 29 April, 2020.

district and a domestic husband who spends time with his family, while Mrs Farquar is a stereotypical housewife who deals with household chores. From the focalisation of their daughter, they sometimes “disagreed and perhaps raised their voices and then afterwards laughed and kissed each other” (Lessing, p. 127). For the narrator, they are one of the role models for “married people” who “quarell but that doesn’t mean they aren’t happy together” (Lessing, p. 127). The Pritts have a distanced husband-and-wife relationship, unlike the Farquars. Mrs Pritt keeps company with another man from the district, Mr Slatter, and her husband is an insignificant character with no existence in the story. The Slatters, on the other hand, with whom the narrator spends time staying in their house, play an effective role in her initiation into adulthood, because the narrator as an observer of the neighbours becomes a witness to Mr Slatter’s oppression of his wife, Mrs Slatter’s submission to her husband and conversion of their four boys into “tough and indifferent” (Lessing, p. 124) male figures like their father.

Apart from these families, the assistants from different farms as well as the children and adolescents are a part of this enclosed society, which is governed by social norms. As Butler argues in “The Question of Social Transformation,” norms are necessary in order to live well and “to know in what direction to transform our social world” (2004, p.203) but also norms constrain our lives for the purpose of social justice which “brings about opposition and resistance” (2004, p. 203). The depiction of different family structures with distinct individual gender relations from the perspective of a young female in Lessing’s story demonstrates how social structures are produced and reproduced through the practice of multiple masculinities and femininities, which problematises the patriarchal order. In Soja’s terms, by showing their resistance to the dominant social order and transgressing their limits by means of having flexible relations, for instance, characters like the Slatters and the Pritts reappropriate spaces they occupy through their personal experiences and interpretations, and by doing so, provide multifaceted meanings of spatiality.

The power relations between men and women in the district reflect the multifarious gender practices, which in one way or another, give insight into how their society is socially, culturally and spatially shaped. The attitudes of male characters such as Mr Slatter, Mr Pritt, Mr Farquar and Mrs Slatter’s lover, Mr Andrews, towards women – despite differences in personality, occupation and social relations – might represent the social structure of the society. For Raewyn Connell, “the construction of masculinity in everyday life, the importance of economic and institutional structures, the significance of differences among masculinities and the contradictory and dynamic character of gender” (2005, p. 35) suggest that gender is not fixed, but constantly evolving through interaction and conflict in everyday life, which is obvious in spaces they occupy. According to Connell, the contradictory and complicated nature of gender can be explained in relation to “three-fold model of the structure of gender, distinguishing relations of (a) power, (b) production and (c) cathexis (emotional attachment)” (2005, p. 73-74). The power relations impose the dominance of men and subordination of women in patriarchy. Accordingly, male and female characters in the story, as in the case of the Slatters and the Farquars, perform their gender roles within the borders of their physical space defined and shaped by patriarchal impositions<sup>6</sup>. At the beginning, for instance, Mrs Slatter is depicted in the veranda sitting, knitting and taking care of her children, which is a part of the domestic space allocated for women. Similarly, Mrs Farquar represents the stereotypical mother and wife dealing with household chores within the borders of her house. However, their male counterparts, particularly Mr Slatter, a physically powerful man, deals with the natives, which requires an outdoor space for his spatial practices. Like the connection between power relations and spaces occupied by both genders, the production relations (agrarian in this story) show how the economic system is controlled by men rather than women. Mr Slatter’s success in farming business illustrates not only his dominant role in production

<sup>6</sup> Linda McDowell and Joanne Sharp, in *A Feminist Glossary of Human Geography* point out the fact that Western thought is based on an inherent spatiality; “in which the distinction of the mind from the body, reason from emotion, the public sphere from the private arena placed men on one side and relegated ‘woman’ as Other, to the other side. Thus, all that was ‘naturally’ female and feminine was located inside, in private, at the smallest spatial scale and so taken for granted and untheorized. (114) This hierarchical spatial organisation has been socially constructed to produce a homogeneous space and to show unequal social relations. For more discussion on the gendered division of space and how it is transgressed, see Doreen Massey and Gillian Rose.

but also his association with the public space. Finally, cathexis indicates heterosexuality as a naturally accepted gender order, which can also be observed in the characters' physical surrounding. Among the male characters, Mr Pritt is the one who has no other social, spatial or emotional presence in the story. Although there are no implications of homosexuality, Mr Pritt about whom none of the other characters know much, might evoke an indirect feeling of subordination in terms of occupation and physical characteristics. As the narrator explains, Mr Pritt is "an ordinary man, not like a farmer . . . who could do anything; he might have been anybody, or an office person" (Lessing, p. 128). Unlike Mr Slatter's physical strength and dominating personality, he seems to be an insignificant character suggested with the repetition of "ordinary," "anything" and "anybody." Despite his inferior position compared to Mr Slatter, Mr Pritt is also free in public spaces since he spends most of his time outside his farm, sometimes "at neighbouring farms doing their accounts," sometimes "at the station, or at gymkhanas" (Lessing, p. 128). As is seen in the examples above, the connection between space and gender is important to comprehend the socio-spatial structure of the society. Notwithstanding the differences between the male characters, they all have a flexible relationship with their surrounding moving from one place to another and are depicted sometimes in the open space doing business sometimes in the public space socializing unlike their female counterparts situated in the private sphere of the house. This gendered division of space can be explained in Lefebvre's terms, as the impact of the "representations of space" embedded with norms, values and power relations shaping individual actions. How this socio-spatial order in the district shapes the spatial practices and social relations of characters and how it is problematised through individual gender practices can be traced in utilization of the Slatter's house in the district.

The Slatter's house displays how social and gender relations are revealed, because it becomes the center of the district due to its large spatial structure and serves as a place for dance, wedding and Christmas parties. Hence, it is more than a simple private sphere of the Slatter family and is imbued with multiple layers of meaning and function in accordance with the lived experience of the other people. From the focalisation of the narrator, the Slatters's house

was a big house, rooms sprawling everywhere. The boys had two rooms and a playroom off at one end of long stone passage. Dairies and larders and kitchen opened off the passage. Then a dining-room and some offices and a study. Then the living-room. And another passage off at an angle, with the room where I slept and beside it Mrs Slatter's big bedroom with the double bed and after that a room they called the workroom, but it was an ordinary room and Mr Slatter's things were in it, with a bed (Lessing, p. 126-27).

This physical representation of the house, with the organisation of rooms and the kitchen, constitutes the perceived space or firstspace which is, in Soja's terms, "directly sensible and open, within limits, to accurate measurement and description" (1996, p. 66). There are two corridors in the house: one is a "long stone passage" like a straight line on which the boys's rooms, their playroom and the spaces for storage of food and drinks, namely dairies, larders and the kitchen open to. The dining-room, the living-room, offices and the study-room also open to the long stone corridor, because they are used as the common areas of the house.

The other corridor which is "at an angle" evokes an isolated space opening to the private rooms of the house. Room, as Juan Eduardo Cirlot notes, "is a symbol of individuality – of private thoughts," (1962, p. 262) and thus, the corridor and its connection to private rooms might have various connotations other than their seclusion, and give clues about the relations in the house. The fact that Mrs Slatter has a big bedroom with a double bed, and Mr Slatter has an ordinary workroom with a bed and his stuff, for instance, might evoke separate world of their own. The use of the adverb "off" to describe the location of corridors and rooms might also signify the distance between the parents's bedrooms and the rest of the house and its grandeur. Corridors are in-between spaces which might be perceived as boundaries that both connect and separate. In a way, they suggest the connection between the separated parts of the house. In addition to its variety of rooms, the house has a veranda where Mrs Slatter, the narrator and the boys spend time together.

This house becomes a socially lived space during the parties in Lefebvre's terms because it is the only house in the district that is open to all people, including different age groups like the children, the young

and the adults as well as different classes like that of the farm owners and assistants. As Lefebvre argues there is a mutual relationship between bodies and spaces they occupy because each body has the capacity to develop social relations in space and so produces that space. In that respect, the Slatters's house is not only produced by people in multiple ways but also each individual is affected by the socio-spatial aspect of the house. As an example, while for the children the house is nothing more than a playground, it offers a possibility for the adolescents to show themselves to the opposite sex by producing themselves as bodies in the social dimension of the house and attributing meaning to that space. For the adults (married and single), on the other hand, the meaning of the house varies in relation to their gender, class, age, sexual preference or lifestyle. Like Lefebvre's social space, the house includes and depends on the spatial trialectics, which cannot successfully be comprehended in isolation. For instance, the material conditions of the house (the placement of the rooms and their usage) and how it is conceived as the domestic/private space of the Slatter family is combined with its social function and lived experience of all people. Unlike the reductionist conceptualisation of the house as perceived and conceived (Lefebvre's terms) or firstspace and secondspace (Soja's terms), the Slatter's house as a social center provides a different way of thinking about space because only then it is possible to understand the complexity of social relations, gender identities and individual experiences. Configuring space is both related to what is or is not appropriate to do and to how it is reproduced in new and alternative contexts as in the example of the Slatters's house. The everyday activities and the behaviours of the Slatter family in the house can be considered as part of the spatial practices observed within the dimension of physical space; however, the act of joining together in the parties enable people to show their potential to constitute a new social space and transform them from being passive recipients to active producers in space in relation to their lived experiences.

In addition to being a social space, the Slatter's house can also be regarded as thirdspace not only because of its social openness but also of being a liminal space between the oppositions like the private and the public. By building upon Lefebvre's criticism of dualistic relationship in thinking about space, Soja suggests thirdspace perspective, which emphasises the importance of differences and embraces a combination of oppositions in new contexts. In that respect, the Slatters's house creates alternative zones to enable mutual interaction among men and women, boys and girls, adults and adolescents or owners and assistants rather than forming a sharp distinction between them. The fact that spaces in the house like the rooms, passages, the living-room, the dining-room or the veranda may be defined as both public and private makes the house embedded with new meanings. On the one hand, the Slatters' house, which is expected to be private physically and functionally, becomes a public space by alternative forms of use. The living-room and the veranda, for example, used for everyday spatial practices by the Slatter family members are now produced as a social space where people drink, dance and have fun together. It is the Slatters's house that is produced and reproduced regularly by a variety of people and their lived experiences in that particular space, which differentiates it from the other houses of the district.

When the narrator is fifteen years old, at a transition age, getting ready to move into adulthood, she describes the dance party as follows: "the married people sat in the living-room and danced in it, and we were on the verandas" (Lessing, p. 129-30). After a year at Christmas party, the narrator, in her first long dress and having her first dance, gives a more detailed description of the living-room from which "came the sound of singing, a noise like howling, because people were drunk, or part-drunk, and it had the melancholy savage sound of people singing when they are drunk. An awful sound, like animals, howling" (Lessing, p. 133). This reminds the narrator "when dogs howl at the full moon" (Lessing, p. 120). When it is full moon, there is light at night, which enables the dogs, like wolves, to communicate with each other and hunt their preys easily. In relation to the comparison of people to the dogs and their singing to howling, the flirtatious and playful tendencies between men and women could be interpreted as hunter and prey relationship. As it is obvious, the living-room is transformed from being a part of the domestic sphere to a public and social one where meaning is produced constantly through the relations between both genders. As another example, Mrs Slatter and Mr Andrews have sex in the corridors and turn them into alternative spaces. From the viewpoint of the narrator, after having sex, the way they appear from the two ends of the corridors like performing artists also evoke some kind of a play on stage. Their making use of corridors for such a purpose causes a restriction for the narrator for a while, because she cannot go out of the room she hides in and



watches them. Actually, the passages can no longer be classified as public and private sites due to their temporary and changing function. Because of its multiple uses, in the Slatter's house, giving fixed understanding of space is not possible and the distinctions between the public and the private are blurred because the house becomes an alternative space.

Although the Slatters' house is depicted on the surface as a space for social interaction that may cause relaxation and entertainment, it is actually a space of contradiction and contestation because of differences between people and their lived experiences. The Slatters' house is a location for liberation from the repression of social norms as well as control through social criticism, or it is both at the same time. Viewed from the perspective of the narrator, for instance, the veranda of the house where children dance becomes a space of self-expression and readiness for her first kiss. Now a grown-up girl of sixteen or seventeen, in her first long dress, she wants the assistant whom she loves to reflect his desire for her as a sexually attractive woman because heretofore, "he had never seen [her] at all" (Lessing, p. 133) at the station or gymkhanas. Thus, the long dress which can only be worn at a party like the one at the Slatters' house enables the narrator to show her bodily presence in a socially produced space. However, when the assistant kisses her, she slaps on the face. Because he was drunk like so many people in the party, "the way he kissed [her] was not at all what [she] had been thinking" (Lessing, p. 133). Considering the distinct responses of the two to their first intimacy might also reveal the differences between the genders because while the assistant takes it something as usual and ordinary, the narrator assigns meanings to that experience. Her disappointing experience with the kiss causes the narrator to reconstitute the veranda as a space of confrontation with the opposite sex.

The living-room also turns into a space of social pressure felt through the critical gaze of the others when "Mr Slatter was dancing with Emmy Pritt, and sometimes with another woman, and Mrs Slatter was busy being hostess and dancing with George Andrews" (Lessing, p. 130). Since they are married people and having intimate connections with others, they become the focus of attention and are exposed to social criticism in this room. The Slatters' house with its various aspects provides not only the production of social space and social relations but also acts of confrontation. Soja's thirdspace, as is reflected in the Slatters' house, is a flexible concept that welcomes "a multiplicity of perspectives" (1996, p. 5) and change in terms of identities, relations and spaces, and thus, is a dynamic and open location for the people who attempt to enhance social interactions and perform transgressive practices. The Slatters' house as an alternative space embracing a network of relations and people's lived experiences unsettles the private/public dichotomy and thus, lays bare for gender performativity.

Unlike the rest of the house, the only private space is Mrs Slatter's bedroom, which is according to Lefebvre's second dimension of space, is conceived to be a personal room of the husband and the wife, yet Mrs Slatter allows neither her husband nor her lover to enter into her space without her consent. As an example, for Mr Slatter, his wife has "bloody pride," (Lessing, p. 132) never gives up withstanding the repression of men in her own way, which she demonstrates through her "bloody locked door" (Lessing, p. 132) and stabilises both men outside the alternative space of her own. On one occasion, the bedroom becomes a place of violence, when Mr Slatter has to stay at home one day because of the impassable rivers. The narrator in the next room overhears Mrs Slatter's pleading voice, because her husband forces her into sexual intercourse without her consent. Although Mrs Slatter cannot avoid it, she does not allow him to have a fulfillment of mutual satisfaction and a feeling of possession of his wife, because she insists on her resistance to her husband's sexual violence by making use of it as a threshold of resistance like Soja's thirdspace where conflicts are revealed. The narrator also notices how Mrs Slatter and Mr Andrews manage to have sex secretly without being noticed by the children and the husband in the same house but never in her bedroom, except for once. Mrs Slatter's having an affair with a young man in the corridors and in different rooms as well as her exclusion of both – Mr Andrews and Mr Slatter – from her own locked bedroom shows her determination to keep a space of her own, which can be interpreted as a socio-spatial reaction against the male oppression. By all means, Mrs Slatter becomes a threat against male dominance of women by problematising gender relations and social conventions.

Although Mrs Slatter keeps her bedroom door locked and assumes it to be her own space, the narrator also configures the room as an alternative space of privacy, unbeknown to Mrs Slatter. The bedroom is more

than a private space of the husband and the wife because it is not shared by the married couple and extends beyond that usual meaning and function, and becomes a lived space for the narrator. Different from the noisy and crowded atmosphere of the living room, this bedroom is “quiet” (Lessing, p. 133) and twilit. The low lamp light and the silence in the bedroom provides a gloomy atmosphere and a sense of isolation for the two women who escape from the other people in the party and hide in the bedroom with the thought of being alone. In that respect, the thirdspace perspective created in the bedroom shows how it can be, in Soja’s terms, enlarged to involve different perspectives, as is seen in both women’s appropriation and configuration of the bedroom. The narrator makes use of the room as a hidden space of refuge where she can be on her own.

Since the whole story is narrated through the lens of the Farquar’s daughter, her initiation from childhood to adolescence displays the social dynamics of the society on gender. Throughout the story, she functions not only as the narrator of the story reflecting her own views and letting the characters speak for themselves but also as observer of the events and relations among the characters. Meanwhile, she changes from an innocent girl who sees Mrs Slatter as a role model into a young adult with critical views on both genders. As a child, she describes Mrs Slatter as a nice and dignified woman who tolerates her husband’s and four boys’s insensitive remarks; however, when she grows older and witnesses Mrs Slatter’s affair with Mr Andrews, her views start to change. At first, she thinks that Mrs Slatter is to have a feeling of shame because of this affair as she is a woman “who called men Mister” and “blushed when [her husband] used bad language” (Lessing, p. 131). Her view of sexual relations influenced by her father, Mr Farquar, alters after Mr Andrews’s disdainful attitude towards Mrs Slatter when their affair is over. He calls her “old girl” and leaves the place thanking “for the nice interlude” (Lessing, p. 133) meaning “a temporary amusement or diversion that contrasts with what goes before or after” (OED). The narrator develops empathy towards Mrs Slatter at last and “could feel what he said hurting [her]” (Lessing, p. 133) because of his objectification of Mrs Slatter and underestimation of their experience. Upon eavesdropping the dry talk between them, the narrator overhears Mrs Slatter’s voice crying, “Oh God, make me old soon, make me old. I can’t stand this, I can’t stand this any longer,” (Lessing, p. 134) which might show her reproach against both her husband and lover because of their maltreatment of her. Thus, the narrator perceives how Mrs Slatter cannot realize her hopes and expectations of love and how her husband and lover manipulate Mrs Slatter, and make her feel insignificant.

The narrator’s attempt to understand multiple gender practices and her search for the other, which she particularly associates with Mrs Slatter, finally culminates in the mirror with no reflection of her own image. The notion of the other or Mrs Slatter as the other and the mirror in the bedroom can be regarded as parts of her transformation and processual identity formation. After her experience of the conflicts between the two genders and acceptance of her changing attitudes towards gender relations, the narrator tries to reconstitute her sense of self as an independent subject. Her discovery of self is possible not within the boundaries of her own house, embedded with patriarchal norms and conceived as a traditional place of a family but within the liberating atmosphere of Mrs Slatter’s bedroom which exceeds beyond its restrictive conceptualisation and provides a ground for the narrator to contemplate gender relations. When she looks in the mirror and sees nothing, saying “My face, that night in the mirror, dusted yellow from the lamplight, with the dark watery spaces of the glass behind, was smooth and enquiring, with the pert flattered look of a girl in her first long dress and dancing with the young people for the first time. There was nothing in it, a girl’s face, empty” (Lessing, p. 120). She depicts her face with nothing written on it because she has not adapted the images the masculine hegemony assigns to her and she cannot identify with Mrs Slatter any longer. Mrs Slatter’s presence enables the narrator to question not only the prescribed gender roles but also deviant behaviours because Mrs Slatter is the role model she has identified with throughout her transformation. However, Mrs Slatter can be the false projection of the narrator and this is why she cannot see anything on her face, which is also reinforced by the use of words such as “dusted” and “yellow” to describe her face connoting fragmentation rather than wholeness. The former word refers to “consisting of tiny particles” and the latter is an intermediate colour between green and orange which also means “a subtractive colour complementary to blue” (OED). Her unstable understanding of gender relations and unclearly described face might imply her nomadic potential because of “a multilayered consciousness of complexity” (Braidotti, 1994, p. 38).

She appears to exemplify a fragmented self which unsettles the established notion of gender but is held together by compliance with the social norms.

Starting from the politics of the personal, as Chris Weedon puts it, in most feminisms “women’s subjectivities and experiences of everyday life become the site of the redefinition of patriarchal meanings and values and of resistance to them, feminism generates new theoretical perspectives from which the dominant can be criticised and new possibilities envisaged” (1987, p. 6). Therefore, Braidotti’s politically projected configuration of nomadic subject helps to problematise and subvert the conventional representations of women. The narrator takes a step further in becoming a nomadic subject because she stops playing the roles that substitute for gender identity and her empty face in the mirror can be interpreted as a “nomadic intervention” (Braidotti, 1994, p. 9) which disrupts the established understanding of the imaginary reflection of the self. Thus, her identity formation seems to be not connected to “an oppositional mode of negation” (Braidotti, 1994, p. 13) like Braidotti’s nomadic subjectivity. Instead of producing a representative other for herself, her reflection or image in the mirror is just a blank sheet, which discloses her unsettled identity. As Braidotti argues, differences between men and women, among women and within each woman cannot be conceptualised “in a Hegelian framework of dialectical opposition and mutual consumption of self and other” (1994, p. 17) but can be engaged in interconnections with multiple becomings. The narrator’s transformation from childhood to adolescence in which she passes through an identification process with other women, particularly with Mrs Slatter, does not end in an exploration of false image of the self. Rather, she is involved in connections with other children, young girls and boys and her parents, and in her small trips between her house and the Slatters’ she experiences nomadic moves which leave her with an empty face in the mirror. Considering the spaces the narrator occupies throughout the story – her house, the social space of the Slatters’ house including its veranda, living room and corridors as well as Mrs Slatter’s bedroom – all of which can be defined in relation to Lefebvre’s and Soja’s spatial trialectics because they constitute not only the physical space where the narrator interacts with people surrounding her, the mental space where she observes the female role models like her mother and Mrs Slatter within the borders of their house but also the lived space where she appears to be in confrontation with the opposite sex, in conflict with extramarital relationships and in search for identity. Since she is in the process of becoming, the empty face can imply a journey of discovering gender identity and sexuality which is not determined by male hegemony. Besides, it reflects a subject who is unable to notice a fixed identity for her. In front of the mirror, the narrator discovers her instability, which is, as Braidotti puts it in an interview with Butler, “fractured, and constituted over intersecting levels of experience. This multiple identity is relational, in that it requires a bond to the ‘Other’; it is retrospective, in that it rests on a set of imaginary identifications, that is to say unconscious internalized images” (1994, p. 42). The narrator still has a hold onto the social norms but also welcomes her nomadic shifts in order to protect herself from the hierarchically structured and fixed notions of gender identities.

The analysis of the interdependent relationship between the characters and their surrounding such as their houses and the natural environment provides an understanding of how gender and space are two closely connected concepts and how space is constructed within the physical and mental spheres, which results in the socio-spatial segregation of characters. Although the way male and female characters perform gender acts and experience everyday life have common points, there are considerable differences between them in terms of the way they configure their surrounding. While the male characters like Mr Slatter, Mr Farquar and Mr Pritt remain within the limits of gendered divisions of space because they are on the privileged side moving freely in the public and open sphere, the female characters have multifarious connections to their surrounding either in compliance or in contradiction with imposed spatial segregation. Moreover, the physical constitution of the district through a focus on its enclosed structure, geographical features like the rivers and the mountains, and the altitude, as its title suggests, has a direct impact on the way its inhabitants practice everyday activities. Because of these physical qualities, there appears a conflict between how the social codes, norms and values are reflected in the spaces occupied by the characters and how they are practiced in line with personal preferences. Hence, reading “Getting off the Altitude” based on Lefebvre’s and Soja’s spatial trialectics broadens not only this binary understanding of space in two dimensions – the perceived (firstspace) and the conceived (secondspace) – but also clarifies the social and gender relations by

disclosing the lived experience of these characters. There are forty families living in this place, but it is the Slatter's house, which demonstrates how social and gender relations are revealed, because it becomes the center of interaction. The daily routines of the Slatter family refer to the spatial practices observed in the firstspace dimension of the house, yet when it serves as a place for social interaction such as dance, wedding and Christmas parties, it is imbued with multiple layers of meaning due to individual appropriation and interpretation of the house. For instance, while the house offers a possibility for the adolescents to show themselves to the opposite sex, for the adults (married and single), its meaning changes in relation to their gender, class, age, sexual preference or lifestyle. The interaction between people and their various experiences disorder the private/public distinction, and lays bare for gender performativity as well. Like the use of the Slatter's house as a social space in the district, both Mrs Slatter and the narrator make use of Mrs Slatter's bedroom as an alternative space where they can escape to. Mrs Slatter does not allow her husband and her lover to enter into her bedroom and keeps it as a private space and the narrator also hides in the same room in order to think and question gender relations. Hence, the bedroom becomes more than a private space of the husband and the wife because it is not shared by the married couple, but extends beyond that usual meaning and function, and becomes a lived space for both women. The house and its particular rooms display the transformation of a closed and private space of a family into a social sphere (an alternative space) for every individual in the district.

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