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Configuration of Transient Shelters as Alternative Spaces through Nomadic Acts in Doris Lessing's *"An Old Woman and Her Cat"*

Doris Lessing'in *"An Old Woman and Her Cat"* Adlı Öyküsünde Geçici Barınakların Göçebe Eylemler Yoluyla Alternatif Mekânlar Olarak Yaratılması

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Abstract

Doris Lessing's short story *"An Old Woman and Her Cat"* from her collection, *The Temptation of Jack Orkney*, revolves around the nomadic experiences of an old and homeless woman in various places and her survival under poor living circumstances with her cat. The places occupied by the old woman in this story such as the Council flats, the room in the slum and the ruined flat in a wealthy neighbourhood cannot be considered as proper homes where people have a sense of belonging; rather, they are just material places she tries to appropriate as shelters temporarily on the way without a feeling of warmth and attachment to them. Focusing on the woman and the cat's relationship with their surrounding provides a discussion on space and nomadism within the framework of Henri Lefebvre's spatial tripartite - the perceived, the conceived and the lived - which is related to Rosi Braidotti's theory on nomadism. It also reveals the social norms and values, which disregard an old woman and her cat's struggle for life in a metropolis. Therefore, this article

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aims to discuss not only the material qualities of transient places in London and their conceived perspective which segregates the poor and the homeless from the wealthy but also the old woman's configuration of alternative spaces for herself out of the ruins without a sense of home.

Keywords: *Doris Lessing, Henri Lefebvre, Rosi Braidotti, alternative space, nomadic female*

Öz

Doris Lessing'in *The Temptation of Jack Orkney* başlıklı kısa öykü kitabından alınan "An Old Woman and Her Cat" adlı öykü, yaşlı ve evsiz bir kadının çeşitli mekânlardaki gezgin deneyimlerini ve kedisiyle birlikte kötü hayat koşullarında verdiği yaşam mücadelesini anlatmaktadır. Bu kadın kahramanın geçici olarak kaldığı sosyal konutlar, gecekondu mahallesinde bir oda ve zengin muhitte harap olmuş bir daire gibi mekânlar, insanların kendilerini ait hissettikleri evlerden değildir. Aksine bu mekanlar yaşlı kadının herhangi bir sıcaklık hissi ve bağlılık duygusu olmaksızın kısa süreliğine kişiselleştirdiği sığınaklardır. Kadın kahramanın ve kedisinin çevreleriyle olan ilişkilerine odaklanmak, mekân ve gezgin kavramlarını Henri Lefebvre'in algılanan, tasarlanan ve yaşanan mekân üçlemesi ve Rosi Bradiotti'nin gezgin kuramı bakımından incelemeyi mümkün kılmaktadır. Bu yaklaşım diğer bir yandan, büyük bir şehirde yaşlı bir kadın ve kedisinin yaşam savaşını görmezden gelen sosyal kaideler ve değerleri açığa çıkarır. Bundan dolayı bu çalışmanın amacı, sadece Londra'daki geçici yerlerin fiziksel özellikleri ile yoksul ve evsizleri zenginden ayıran mekân anlayışını değil, aynı zamanda bu yaşlı kadının kendisi için çevresindeki harabe yerleri yaşanan alternatif mekânlara dönüştürdüğünü tartışmaktır.

Anahtar sözcükler: *Doris Lessing, Henri Lefebvre, Rosi Braidotti, alternatif mekân, gezgin kadın*

Introduction

The interconnection between space and human beings is a fundamental issue in Doris Lessing's short fiction.¹ In her five collections of short stories,² the representations 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 display how male and female characters experience everyday life in spaces they occupy. Lessing's second volume of European stories, *The Temptation of Jack Orkney* covers a variety of subjects, ranging from a challenge of social norms and marriage to political, class and gender issues. Among the narratives in this collection which foreground the significance of space in relation to human beings, animals and plants, "An Old Woman and Her Cat," as its title suggests, revolves around an old woman and her cat's survival under poor living circumstances, and reflects a criticism of social norms and values through their experiences in various parts of London. The primary focus of this study is to discuss to what extent she appropriates several places ranging from the streets, the

Council flat to a room in the slum and a ruined house in a wealthy neighbourhood, and turns them into alternative spaces for the cat and herself until her death, within the framework of Henri Lefebvre's social/lived space. Because Hetty, the old woman, feels no attachment to any place as her home and does not fix her identity to a permanent place, her family, gender roles and social environment, Rosi Bradiotti's theory on nomadism will also be referred to. Although space is not explicitly articulated by Braidotti, her fluid gender identity and nomadism which blurs boundaries and subverts stable definitions play a significant role in materialising Hetty's acts within the boundaries of space. Therefore, whether she is able to configure alternative spaces for herself and the cat through nomadic acts is also under investigation in the analysis of this story.

Theoretical framework and methodology

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of discussions concerning the concepts of space and place, which have initiated an interest in the theory of space in the fields of architecture, urban studies, social sciences and geography. The focus on the theory of space has become one of the primary concerns for theorists and scholars including geographers Edward Relph, Yi-Fu Tuan, Tim Cresswell, Nigel Thrift, Derek Gregory and Edward Soja to name just a few. This interest in spatial thinking is not only related to geographical research but also to French social theory, particularly to the works of Michel Foucault and Henri Lefebvre. Since then the theoretical claims about space have been grounded on common points. The heterogeneous nature of the physical environment constituted by diverse human practices is the focal point of these critics. As Foucault claims, space is no longer treated "as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile" (1980: 70) but it is acknowledged as a product of social relations, experiences and transformations embracing diversity.

Before the "spatial turn" in the history of Western civilisation, the conception of space was based on the Cartesian dichotomy between the mind and the body. In Dialogue III of his book *Discourse on Method*, René Descartes foregrounds the thinking ability of the subject and highlights the importance of the mind over the body, with his premise *cogito, ergo sum*. The Cartesian space was developed "on the basis of extension, thought in terms of coordinates, lines and planes, as Euclidean geometry" (Elden, 2004: 186-7). Thus, it was regarded as a measurable and static place like a container waiting to be filled in not only by things but also by social events and actions. Space was comprehended as an essential, natural and given entity. This reductionist approach brings about the separation of the physical space from the mental one. Such oppositions in the discussion of space allows the penetration of oppressive and dominating patriarchal ideology into social relations in societies where the mind is privileged over the body.

Some geographers like Tuan contributes to the development of geographical studies by offering a more experiential and relational explanation in spatial thinking to avoid essentialist formulations of Cartesian space. He emphasizes the twofold connection between space and place in the context of diverse societies, cultures and inhabitants though these concepts appear to have opposite meanings in distinct locations and across cultures. Tuan, in *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* claims that

[w]hat begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value. . . the ideas “space” and “place” require each other for definition. From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa. Furthermore, if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place (1977: 6).

He relates the concept of place with stability and security because of its reference to everyday dwellings, locations and individual experience and that of space with freedom of movement. In his view, “[h]uman lives are a dialectical movement between shelter and venture, attachment and freedom” (1977: 54). The presence or absence of movement and the feeling of security and independence in human beings’ relation to environment defines the difference between space and place, for Tuan. He focuses on how space is transformed into place through human experience, how individuals perceive their surrounding through senses and how they attribute meanings to their habitats. The two concepts not only complement each other in understanding the relationship between human beings and their surroundings but also highlight the significance of nature and human-made environment. However, such understanding of space and place based on human perception and experience might lead to a dualistic relationship in contrast with each other and cannot completely shed light on the construction of space, social processes and everyday life.

Since Cartesian thinking is restrictive in every sense and is solely defined in terms of oppositions, new conceptualisations of space have been acknowledged by philosophers from various disciplines. Paul Cloke and Ron Johnston, for instance, in *Spaces of Geographical Thought: Deconstructing Human Geography’s Binaries*, claim that through the use of third terms as in the example of third space, the understanding of space transcends what is produced by binary processes... Third spaces thus combine the material and the symbolic to elude the politics of polarized binaries and to enable the emergence of radical new allegiances by which old structures of authority can be challenged by new ways of thinking and new emancipatory practices (2005: 15).

Through the problematisation of dualistic thinking and introduction of a third alternative, scholars reconfigure a new concept of space which foregrounds difference rather than the fixed position of concepts and structures in the process of developing heterogeneous spaces.

In addition to Tuan’s experiential focus on twofold space-place relationship, Lefebvre’s theory of space based on its production through the intertwining of three elements contributes to the discussion from a materialist perspective. He makes a critique of the absolute conception of space that is conceived as a geometrically measured exact and precise entity, and like Tuan, he foregrounds the significance of human experience and the impact of socio-cultural issues on human interaction with the environment. What differentiates Lefebvre from Tuan is the fact that he not only supplants the twofold discussion – space and place – by his spatial triad but also focuses on the production of space. In order to have a coherent and unitary discussion on the theory of space, this study makes use of a single concept throughout, that is space.

Drawing on the theories of production in economic relations and class struggles introduced by Marx and Engels, Lefebvre emphasises the producible nature of social space in which "... each living body is space and has its space: it produces itself in space and it also produces that space" (1991: 170). Like the Marxist theory according to which each society with its mode of production creates its own space, Lefebvre displays how space is produced through cultural and political relations and social interactions. For him, space itself is active and is constituted by the activities of its inhabitants. Thus, Lefebvre introduces his conceptual triad which includes three dialectically interconnected dimensions – the physical, the mental and the social/the lived. The first part of his spatial triad, the "spatial practice," (1991: 33) occurs in a material environment. As Merrifield puts it, 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: 524).

Similar to Tuan's emphasis on human perception and sense of place, which require a close contact with the environment, such space is perceived through the senses. Spatial practices give information about the social relations, cultural interactions, political issues and everyday life of individuals and communities. The second item in his triad is the "representations of space" (1991: 33) which refers to a conceived space embedded with ideological norms and values as well as implications of power and knowledge. It 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 patriarchy. This order in space 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. Unlike Tuan who solely focuses on the impact of cultural values on the human perception of the environment, Lefebvre foregrounds how representations of space are important in the formation of social relations and social roles under male dominance, despite being abstract notions. 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' . . . This is the dominated - and hence passively experienced - space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate" (1991: 39). On the one hand, the symbolic dimension of space is constituted out of 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 reproduction, into the home and family (social space) in the form of restrictions and confinements. He encourages people to question the established notions of space which restrict their thoughts and actions. By doing so, people can free themselves from the oppression of the conceived representations of space and configure alternative ones.

In Lefebvre's theory of space there are no references to specifically gender and nomadic issues. Because this study aims to explore how transient places are transformed into alternative

ones through the old woman's nomadic acts, Braidotti's nomadic subjectivity will also be discussed to relate gender issues to space theory. Braidotti proposes a nomadic theory of the subject,³ foregrounding the steps the subject passes through as a response to the question of what it means to be in the process of becoming. Building on Deleuzian and Guattarian concept of "becoming" and Luce Irigaray's theory of "sexual difference," she rethinks female subjectivity in terms of nomadism. As Braidotti claims, it is "the kind of critical consciousness that resists settling into socially coded modes of thought and behaviour," (2011: 26) which helps to constitute alternative becomings. Hence, like Deleuze's departure from the Cartesian dualistic thinking by drawing attention to "rhizomatic mode of the subject as nonphallogocentric," (1987: 277) she emphasises the interconnectedness of relations in the process of becoming. As opposed to the traditional notion of the subject that is socially constructed, her nomadic subject is "a dynamic and changing entity," (2002: 2) free from the fixed and permanent definitions of identity. The rejection of a unitary sense of self and focus on multiple becomings is a foundational notion in explaining nomadic subjectivity because as Braidotti puts it, "[p]rocesses of becoming . . . are not predicated on a stable, centralized Self who supervises their unfolding. They rest rather on a non-unitary, multi-layered, dynamic subject" (2002: 118). The acts of becoming do not fit into certain categories such as subject/object, man/woman or self/other, etc., rather, flow in a web of relations and interact with various subject positions. That is why becoming is connected to "movement between points, marked as a border-line or an in-between zone of contact between possible worlds" (1987: 293). It provides possibilities for nomadic consciousness and opens the way for women to reclaim a female subjectivity by revealing their desires and experiences.

Hetty, the nomad

In a similar vein, Hetty is a nomadic figure displaying many characteristics of a female subject in the process of becoming. Her social activities and experiences in the spaces she occupies can be configured as a challenge to social norms, generating nomadism other than structured gendered roles. She constantly deploys ways to survive in the city by strolling around various neighbourhoods, trading second-hand clothes, and changing places to sleep. From the standpoint of her children and neighbours, she is considered a disrespectful woman as a result of her preference of a nomadic life and rejection of being confined to a home.

Hetty is married to Fred Pennefather, a building worker, and they have lived in a Council flat provided by the officials for thirty years with four children, who have become "all respectable people, with homes and good jobs and cars" (Lessing, 160). That the Pennefathers⁴ have paid their rents regularly without falling into debt, seems to be the precondition of being respectable⁵ in the society. There is not much information about Hetty's married life, yet having raised her children and taken care of the household chores for years suggest that she has performed gender roles as a mother and wife in accordance with the society's norms and values. However, she is unconventional because of her "gipsy blood" (Lessing, 161) that she inherited from her mother. While she is "not respectable" and "a bit strange" (Lessing, 160) for her children and neighbours, for her husband, "being different from the run of the women" (Lessing, 161) is the reason why he married Hetty.

Hetty is also an autonomous woman making her own decisions regardless of what other people think. Marrying Fred and leaving her gipsy people is a case in point. She has no contact with her children except for one daughter who sends her Christmas cards, yet she does not seem to care about their aloofness. She cannot be defined only in relation to her family, gender roles and social environment, hence, recalls Braidotti's nomadic figure belonging to nobody and nowhere as well as everybody and everywhere. Being nomadic, in Braidotti's terms, "points to the decline of unitary subjects," (2011: 10) who act in accordance with the socially constructed gender roles, and the importance of diversified ones, who appear "in complex and internally contradictory webs of social relations" (2011: 10). Hetty is a mother, a widow (after her husband's death), a homeless, a trader, an independent person, a friend, an outsider, a mad woman, and so on. Such multiple subject positions are an integral part of nomadic becoming because they cannot be explained through dichotomous thinking.

Wearing second-hand clothes like "a scarlet wool suit," "a black knitted tea-cosy on her head, and black buttoned Edwardian boots too big for her" (Lessing, 165) displays not only her poverty but also her disregard for appearance. Because of her "mad clothes," (Lessing, 169) Hetty is exposed to curious looks and critical remarks of the people surrounding her, yet she is comfortable with her rags. Such clothes can be seen as an element in her constitution of a nomadic figure whose characteristics do not fit into a unitary subject. According to Braidotti, "being homeless, migrant, an exile . . . are no metaphors," (2011: 10-11) but figurations able to "express different socioeconomic and symbolic locations" (2011: 11). Nomads are not characterised by homelessness,⁶ yet their capacity to produce homes everywhere without permanence is significant. In this respect, Hetty with her gipsy background, carefree life and her connection to various spaces might illustrate Braidotti's nomadic figuration in terms of levels of experience. Though not a necessity, her potential for leading a nomadic life is also related to moving from one place to another, none of which can be considered as "a properly heated place . . . a really warm home," (Lessing, 170) including the Council flats⁷ and the other derelict places. Hetty is a nomad not only because she dismantles fixed and unitary definitions of the subject, but also because she disregards her family and neighbours, makes friends with other traders and pet owners in the streets⁸ and tries to produce a space of her own.

Spaces occupied by Hetty, the nomad

Through tracing the Lefebvrian triad, I would also argue that the interrelatedness between the three dimensions of space – the perceived, the conceived and the lived – in this story foregrounds how characters become a part of social space. Since space manifests itself in social life, everyday routine, knowledge and power systems and lived experience of characters, I will analyse the spaces Hetty occupies respectively. As Christian Schmid puts it, central to Lefebvre's theory of space "are human beings in their corporeality and sensuousness, with their sensitivity and imagination, their thinking and their ideologies; human beings who enter into relationships with each other through their activity and practice" (2008: 29). Because the relationship between space and human beings is reciprocal, Hetty's nomadic life enables her to appropriate various spaces in her own way, and the way she lives and behaves is affected by the

interdependence of these three dimensions. Analysing the spaces Hetty lives in under the light of triadic space reveals an understanding of the process of urbanisation and a gradual change in the social structure of London with respect to the places occupied by the poor and the rich.

Because of its crowded and compact structure of flats adjoining one another, the first Council flat provides a forced intimacy among the dwellers. The building which is “like an estuary, with tides of people flooding in and out” (Lessing, 160) suggests a fluidity of life with the comparison of the building to an estuary, the tidal mouth of a river and people’s comings and goings to a tide. There is a measurable aspect of the building with reference to a number of staircases, lifts and flats as well as an everyday life of people based on the perceived perspective. Not only this building but also the others in the neighbourhood, which are “standing up grim, grey, hideous, among many acres of little houses and gardens,” (Lessing, 160) will be destroyed and “replaced by more tall grey blocks” (1979: 160). The words, “grim,” “grey” and “hideous” demonstrate the physical ugliness as well as the dismal conditions of these flats. Even the little houses and gardens, despite their green space, will be replaced by tall grey blocks, which shows the transformation of the city, and reminds of Lefebvre’s understanding of urbanisation.⁹ As Schmid notes, for Lefebvre, urbanisation is “a reshaping and colonization of rural areas by an urban fabric as well as a fundamental transformation of historic cities” (2008: 46) as a result of industrialisation. The physical description of the railway station including “the din, the smoke, the massed swirling people” (Lessing, 160) is the characteristic of an urbanised district identified through auditory, olfactory and visual imagery. What differentiates Hetty from the members of her family and her neighbours is her love of this transitory public place which resembles “a drug” (Lessing, 160) or a kind of addiction “like other people’s drinking or gambling” (Lessing, 160). For Hetty, being in such public places as the railway stations is an integral component of her everyday social life.

While living in the Council flat for long years, Hetty has always been a mobile person who enjoys watching the flow of life rather than staying indoors. Her visiting “the platforms where the locomotives drew in and ground out,” and seeing people “coming and going from all those foreign places [Scotland, Ireland, the North of England]” (Lessing, 160) illustrate her interest in movements in the streets of the city and can be a way of embracing liveliness. The streets are one of the constitutive elements of the urban city, which are in Lefebvre’s terms,

More than just a place of movement and circulation. . . The street is disorder. All the elements of urban life, which are fixed and redundant elsewhere, are free to fill the streets and through the streets flow to the centers, where they meet and interact, torn from their fixed abode. This disorder is alive. It informs. It surprises (2003: 18-19).

For Lefebvre, the disorder in the street forms the ground for possibilities, sharing and exchanging opinions, producing meanings and experiences, which can contribute to the development of urban society as well as its inhabitants. In this respect, Hetty makes use of the streets as a means of communication with other traders and pet owners, enjoyment and opportunity for making a living as street trader. Her nomadism seems to be based on two aspects: she prefers to be outside in the intermezzo of relations, and acts according to her wishes, and she does not grieve for a sense of home where she might feel safe; rather, lets

herself go with the stream of life. Hetty's nomadic acts in the city can also be explained with reference to Deleuze and Guattari's terms – smooth and striated – discussed in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. As Deleuze and Guattari put it,

In striated space, lines or trajectories tend to be subordinated to points: one goes from one point to another. In the smooth, it is the opposite: the points are subordinated to the trajectory. This was already the case among the nomads for the clothes-tent-space vector of the outside. The dwelling is subordinated to the journey; inside space conforms to outside space: tent, igloo, boat (1987: 478).

They compare a striated space to a Cartesian space because both depend on visual coordinates and geographical representations, and function as a container of human activities. Grid-like and hierarchical organization of societies exemplify striated spaces which govern and control the individuals. In contrast, a smooth space offers lines of flight from such restrictive societal organizations because it is not defined in relation to discipline, order and regulations, rather, it provides possibilities for new ways of thinking about the environment by focusing on human experience and relations. For Deleuze and Guattari, “the city is the striated space par excellence” (1987: 481) because of its spatial patterns and grid-like structures that shape the manner of its inhabitants and organise their movements in an ordered way. However, smooth spaces are also produced in the city as a result of individual movement, preference and interpretation. Hetty, for instance, moves outside the striated space of the Council flat and prefers strolling around the streets and the stations where there is continuous movement and fluidity of people.

Hetty's new life after her husband's death is characterised by “dislocation,” (Lessing, 160) a constant move from one temporary place to another. The first space she is placed in by the Council officials is “a small flat [on the fifth floor] in the same building” (Lessing, 161). Her room is a tiny one where she does not spend much time because she does not like staying at home and prefers public life. She seems to be running away from her previous subject position. Unlike her “busy and responsible part of [her life]” (Lessing, 161) as a mother and a wife, now Hetty is a lonely, middle-aged widow who has to make her own living. For a while, she works as a saleswoman, “selling food in a local store,” (Lessing, 161) which is a “respectable job” (Lessing, 161) for other people, but for her “boring” (Lessing, 161) because of its stability. When she begins “a trade in buying and selling second-hand clothes,” (Lessing, 161) she feels happier because she does not have to stay in one place; rather, she buys and begs clothes from householders, sells them to stalls and second-hand shops. Since she is always on the move as a nomad and in interaction with people, she does not even remember “her love of trains and travellers,” (Lessing, 161) which she used to be addicted to. One type of mobility is replaced by another one, enabling her to follow her “passion” (Lessing, 161) in life, that is, wandering in the lively streets and meeting new people. When it comes to the social norms and values represented by her neighbours, who regard her as “queer” (Lessing, 161) and “no longer decent,” (Lessing, 162) she gives precedence to her own feelings and continues begging and selling. Her nomadic state of mind allows Hetty not to constrict herself into socially structured categories like the respectable and the indecent. This nomadic spirit and

her vivacious personality are also observed in her room “full of bright bits of cloth . . . strips of beading, old furs, embroidery, lace” (Lessing, 161) because she trades in second-hand clothes. Decorating her private space with a variety of fabrics and colours demonstrates her creation of a lived space, an alternative life based on her individual preferences.

Hetty’s independence and her disregard for society are further highlighted when one day she takes home Tibby, “a kitten lost and trembling in a dirty corner” (Lessing, 162). Like its owner who is considered to be an outcast, Tibby is “a scarred warrior with fleas, a torn ear, and a ragged look to him” (Lessing, 162). He is “a multicoloured” (Lessing, 162) cat who is “a long way down the scale from the delicately coloured, elegantly shaped pedigree cats” (Lessing, 162). Similar to Tibby’s multicoloured fur, Hetty has “a heap of multicoloured rags,” (Lessing, 166) which she uses to appropriate her room or dress herself. Both Hetty and Tibby’s background as well as their appearance and lifestyle make them live like outsiders. For instance, according to her children, Hetty is an “old-rag trader” and a source of “embarrassment,” (Lessing, 162) and for people Tibby is an old filthy cat. They are sociable and independent nomads, taking pleasure in strolling in crowded places. Unlike those good-looking cats whose descendents are known, Tibby is a stray cat and cannot stand “the tinned cat food, or the bread and packet gravy,” (Lessing, 162) and prefers catching and eating pigeons. When one of the neighbours accidentally sees Hetty cooking the pigeon Tibby brings and sharing it with the cat, both are labeled as “savage” (Lessing, 163). Hetty’s statement that “decent cats don’t eat dirty birds. Only those old gipsies eat wild birds” (Lessing 163) is an ironic criticism of the society which disregards the problems of such old and poor people. Her song for Tibby unveils their exclusion from the society: “You nasty old beast, filthy old cat, nobody wants you, do they Tibby, no, you’re just an alley tom, just an old stealing cat, hey Tibs, Tibs, Tibs” (Lessing, 162). This song with the use of words such as “nasty,” “filthy,” “beast” and “stealing” represents people’s act of othering anyone who does not fit into the social norms. Despite the neighbours’ criticism of Hetty’s relation to Tibby and their so-called uncivilised life, she enjoys herself, which might be a means of gender performativity free from the socially constructed values as well.

The Council building is not only occupied by working-class people but also by numerous cats and dogs fighting each other. When the officials inform the tenants in the building that they should have their pets destroyed, Hetty decides to leave the Council flat and moves into the second place, which is “a room in a street that was a slum” (Lessing, 163). As Talmadge Wright puts it, “[h]omeless persons, like all persons, exist, move, thrive, and die within urban, suburban and rural spaces, acting and reacting to imposed practices that seek to regulate their bodies” (1997: 39). That the tenants cannot keep their pets in the flats is one of these regulations shaping their behaviours, and also in Lefebvre’s terms, shows the conception of a restricted life in the Council flat. Reacting against the rules, Hetty’s space shifts from a flat constructed within the provided borders of the city officials to a room in a slum where she creates an alternative space for Tibby and herself with a few of her stuff like the television set, her clothes, the pram, the bed, the mattress, the chest of drawers and the saucepans. Since she has unpaid debts and a stolen television, she cannot go to the Council to renew her pension rights and identity, and from then on, continues her life unofficially.

Hetty ekes out a living and sways from one place to another without a sense of home and belonging, but seems to be content with it. No matter how poor her living conditions are, how her room is unfit for human habitation, she is able to appropriate this place, like her previous dwellings, in her own way with a multiplicity of materials and colours such as “a cretonne curtain covered with pink and red roses” (Lessing, 166). Apart from its lively description, another aspect of the perceived space is the pervading smell coming from the lavatory, which is out of order. When the officials visit Hetty in her space, they do not want to enter into the room because of this smell. In addition, the words “greasy” and “stink” (Lessing, 166) used by the narrator to describe the furniture and the whole room displays how disgusting Hetty’s space is from the perspective of the officials. In addition to the olfactory imagery, tactile imagery related to coldness is part of this physical space. Hetty lessens “the permanent ache of cold in her bones” with Tibby’s “warm purring bundle of bones and fur” (Lessing, 170). The feeling of cold and warm plays a significant role not only in materialising the perception of the flat but also in Hetty’s life because she lacks a properly heated and permanent space of her own. Nevertheless, wherever she moves, Hetty makes arrangements according to her own outlook of life. In Deleuze and Guattari’s terms, she reterritorialises and creates smooth spaces for Tibby and herself as they depend on “continuous variation, continuous development of form” (1987: 478) according to nomad thought which provides alternatives to the rational and unitary sense of subjectivity and movements outside the “striated” spaces of state and its ideologies.

Unlike her flat on the fifth floor in the Council building, this one is “in the ground-floor back, with a window which opened on to a derelict garden” (Lessing, 164). Hetty organises this derelict place for her cat too by breaking “a back-window pane” (Lessing, 168) so that Tibby can easily move in and out of the flat. Her smashing the window in order to provide Tibby a realm of freedom and in this way, avoid being noticed by the officials suggests her attempt to create a space for herself and her cat away from the surveillance of the society. Around the flat is “a canal” consisting of “dirty city-water” (Lessing, 164) in which there are “islands” full of rats and birds, particularly fat London pigeons. The material qualities constituting the environment imply that it is a neglected place for people, yet for the cat, it means hunting opportunities. Tibby secures his position “in the hierarchies of the local cat population” (Lessing, 164) by hunting and fathering several kittens, which suggests his appropriation of the environment by leaving his traces. When Tibby brings several pigeons to Hetty in this place, she addresses him as “a clever puss,” (Lessing, 168) as her “ducky” and “lovely” (Lessing, 169) rather than “filthy old cat” (Lessing, 162). During their stay in the previous Council flat together with the other old women, she used to see herself and her cat as “not decent” from the way society sees them yet now, she starts viewing her life from her own perspective because she gradually becomes excluded from the society not only in terms of the isolated spaces she occupies but of their solitary life, and thus her perception towards Tibby changes as well.

The “disgraceful slum” which is composed of similarly structured houses next to one another becomes “a perfect symbol of the whole area,” (Lessing, 165) the area referring to a district where poor people live. This detestable evaluation of the slum by the so-called

“respectable” people of the city also evokes Lefebvre’s view of conceptualised space constituted by symbols, systematic arrangements and representations. Similar to Lefebvre’s emphasis on the production of space under the influence of dominant ideologies, Wright foregrounds the division of spaces according to social and class issues. For him,

[u]rban spaces are not ‘neutral’ backdrops to individual actions of the poor, but socially produced disciplinary spaces within which one is expected to act according to a status defined by others, a status communicated by specific appearances and locations, by the visual compartmentment of bodies (1997: 6).

Apart from the conceived space composed of regulations and impositions, the way Hetty chooses to live her life as a nomad in various spaces indicates how the distinction between binaries such as the developed parts of the city and the slums, the rich and the poor, the respectful and the disrespectful lifestyles cannot be sustained. She constitutes her life in the intermezzo of spatial divisions including the Council flat and the stations as well as the room and the streets blurring the distinction between the private and the public spheres, occupied by the rich and the poor, that is, in a typical lived space, which embodies the perceived and conceived understanding but goes beyond their parameters at the same time.

Focused on the perceived materiality of space, the city is divided into two parts: “half of it being fine, converted, tasteful houses, full of people who spent a lot of money, and half being dying houses tenanted by people like Hetty” (Lessing, 165). Not only the well-based and designed buildings of the former are juxtaposed with the ruined houses of the latter but also the wealthy people’s spending money is juxtaposed with the poor ones’ suffering. The street in the shabby part of the city will be restructured for middle-class people whose needs, tastes and desire have an impact on the construction of these streets and houses, so Hetty and her friends need to evacuate their flats for new owners in two weeks’ time. Their removal demonstrates the reshaping of the city space through the impositions of the authorities which echoes Edward Soja’s argument that urban space is constituted “around the trialectical nexus of space, knowledge, and power” (1996: 236). The narrator explains the maltreatment of poor people in London in what follows: “soon this house with its cargo of poor people would be bought for improvement” (Lessing, 165). By making use of state knowledge and power, the housing officers impose their spatial arrangement on the dwellings of Hetty and her friends, who are described as goods/products to be sold and moved to another place.

The reconstruction of the district can also be seen as “an ideological apparatus where the lived ideology of spatial separation becomes materialized through everyday practice” (Schmid, 2012: 53). Such ideologies represented by the house officials in the story generate ideas about the conceptual view of space determining the relation of poor people to their physical and social conditions of living. As Wright puts it, the city policies “disperse homeless street populations for being ‘out of place’ and simultaneously attempt to contain them in institutional settings” (1997: 8). Similarly, in the story the officials segregate the old people by offering them a new shelter far away from the lively city centre, but “among green fields” (Lessing, 166). In his book *Writing on Cities*, Lefebvre mentions suburbanisation in France and refers to the new suburban dwellers who “are still urban even though they are unaware of it and believe themselves to be close to nature, to the sun and to greenery”

(1996: 78). Like those French suburban dwellers, these women are subjected to a physical isolation and segregation in the outskirts of the city through the power of the authorities. They prefer to believe in the idea that “it will be nice to be near green fields again” for they are “not far off death” (Lessing, 166). Hetty, unlike these women, struggles for “the right to the city”¹⁰ by not conforming to the regulations of the officials. As Lefebvre puts it, this right to urban space “legitimizes the refusal to allow oneself to be removed from urban reality by a discriminatory and segregative organization” (1996: 195). For Schmid, what Lefebvre means by the right to the city, refers to “access to the resources of the city for all segments of the population, and the possibility of experimenting with and realizing alternative ways of life” (2012: 43). In the context of the story, Hetty maintains her attempts to appropriate and utilize space according to her own needs and desires as well as to live and participate in urban London by escaping from the officials who try to segregate her and her cat from social life. As a nomadic subject, she constitutes an act of resistance against the representatives of the state, which is in Braidotti’s terms is a challenge “to destabilize dogmatic, hegemonic, exclusionary power at the very heart of the identity structures of the dominant subject through nomadic interventions” (2011: 9). In fact, such homeless and old people are dispossessed of their rights to the city and left on their own until their death in the secluded parts of London. This shows the conception of such remote places from the perspective of the state ideology represented by the housing officers and their attempt to maintain the social order by keeping such people in and out of place.

Hetty’s next dwelling is a deserted house where she stays with Tibby for a while. In order not to reveal her place, she spends the day in the streets and keeps “a candle glimmering low down on the floor” (Lessing, 168) at nights. Her room becomes a shelter rather than a home. As Somerville notes, home “as shelter connotes the material form of home, in terms of a physical structure which affords protection to oneself, and which appears to others as at least a roof over one’s head” (1992: 532). Echoing this, Hetty’s shelter is perceived as a temporary place to hide from the authorities. As the narrator unfolds the story, “for the first time in her life she lived like her gipsy forebears, and did not go to bed in a room in a house like respectable people” (Lessing, 167). Since the lavatory is out of order, at nights Hetty makes use of a bucket to empty to the canal, “which in the day was full of pleasure boats and people fishing” (Lessing, 168). The difference between the canal during the day and at night including the everyday activities of people further suggests the discrepancy between the poor and the rich in London. Hetty’s use of “piles of blankets” and “the heap of clothes” (Lessing, 168) to warm herself in the cold shows the inhuman circumstances under which she tries to survive. Different from her previous appropriation of her rooms in a pattern of colourful materials, this one cannot extend beyond being “her nest” (Lessing, 168) made out of rags like the birds’ compilation of sticks in building a nest. Nonetheless, Hetty somehow maintains her creation of an alternative space for Tibby and herself.

Once she notices the builders outside about to reconstruct the building, Hetty moves to an empty house, which is “two miles away, among the homes and gardens of amiable Hampstead,” (Lessing, 169) a district where the rich and famous people live. Yet the neighbourhood is surrounded by three evacuated large houses, one of which becomes Hetty’s

third shelter. These houses are “too tumbledown and dangerous” (Lessing, 169) to stay in, even for “the armies of London’s homeless” (Lessing, 169). The use of “tumbledown” for the houses and “armies” for the homeless suggests the high number of such lonely outcasts who are left to live in awful conditions in a metropolis like London. A neighbourhood is not only constructed by urban planners and housing officers in Lefebvre’s terms; rather, it is continuously produced by its inhabitants. Hetty, through her appropriation of a deserted house in a rich neighbourhood, Hampstead in this context, contributes to the reconfiguration of the district and challenges the boundaries between the space occupied by the wealthy and the poor. The narrator describes the house with no glasses on the windows: “[t]he flooring at ground level was mostly gone, leaving small platforms and juts of planking over basements full of water. The ceilings were crumbling. The roofs were going. The houses were like bombed buildings” (Lessing, 169). The fact that there are no windows, no steady floor, and no protection from the cold because of the damaged ceiling and roof suggests that Hetty’s place is more of a wreck rather than a room. In the Council flat, as a result of financial reasons she suffered from the cold but because of her ageing and deteriorating life conditions, she cannot stand it as she used to.

Despite its ruinous structure, Hetty manages to make “her home” (Lessing, 169) in a room on the second-floor, which has a great hole¹¹ in it similar to “a well” (Lessing, 169). This evokes a gradual fall in Hetty’s life from more or less human conditions at the beginning to primitive phases of human life through the end. She appropriates this room by making use of a “polythene sheet,” “two blankets,” “mass of clothes” and “sheets of newspaper,” (Lessing, 171) and doing so, creates “another nest – her last” (Lessing, 171). Her efforts to create a space for Tibby and herself, to hide from the officials every day, to make her living by trading and to survive in the cold with not enough food and sleep underline Hetty’s spatial practices and lived experiences as part of her daily life. This echoes Lefebvre’s argument that social space is produced through the interaction of perceived, conceived and lived experiences of its inhabitants. In this sense, through Hetty’s spatial movements around the neighbourhood and appropriation of the room, the city officials can map out the environment and identify the empty houses where the poor and the old hide in. Hence, the production of space operates as a process, including all aspects of the triad dependent on and connected to each other. Without a space which is made meaningful through individual spatial practices and lived experiences, it is not possible to talk about how it is conceived. In other words, the production of knowledge about space is closely linked to constituting materiality and generating meaning.

Hetty’s last nest becomes a place for death for the homeless, as indicated by the two officials’ carrying a corpse from the house to a car:

[t]here are men in London who, between the hours of two and five in the morning, when the real citizens are asleep, who should not be disturbed by such unpleasantness as the corpses of the poor, make the rounds of all the empty, rotting houses they know about, to collect the dead, and to warn the living that they ought not to be there at all, inviting them to one of the official Homes or lodgings for the homeless (Lessing, 172).

While the rich are considered as “real citizens” sleeping in their warm homes, the poor continue to live in “rotten” and cold houses and their dead bodies pose a problem or an

“unpleasantness” to the rich. Collecting dead bodies and moving the old and poor ones to the so-called Homes is the business of the officials. Hetty observes the movements of light from their torches and the sound of their footsteps in her room, suggesting spatial and social surveillance and control by the authorities.

Unlike the concept of home, which refer to the material condition of a place as home and to the feelings attributed to that place, the spaces occupied by Hetty in this story cannot be considered as proper homes where people have a sense of belonging; rather, they are just physical places Hetty tries to appropriate temporarily on the way without a feeling of warmth and attachment to them. She does not develop an understanding of home because of her nomadic thinking. As Braiodtti puts it, “[t]he multiple differences of locations, which reflect the diversity of possible subject positions, therefore coalesce in the practice of disidentification from the familiar, estrangement from the already known” (2011: 16). The Council flat where she used to live with her family might relate to a sense of home to a certain extent as a consequence of their togetherness for thirty years, but in fact, there is no mention of such a feeling of belonging to a place. The other spaces Hetty lives in after her husband’s death are transient ones, which she makes use of as shelters rather than as homes. Her concept of home stems partially from her personal routines and preferences and partially from her poverty. In terms of the relationship between Hetty and these spaces, there is a transition from the familial to the individual, from the flat to the room, from the so-called home to the shelter and to functional concerns. The transient circumstances Hetty is in influence the way she views her last nest. After the departure of the two men taking the corpse out, for instance, she is able to look “through gaps in the fabric of the house, making out shapes and boundaries and holes and puddles and mounds of rubble” (Lessing, 172) because her eyes have become “accustomed to the dark” (Lessing, 172). Like the cats, which are inherently good at seeing in the dark, she learns to identify things at night, which might illustrate her resemblance to Tibby and the impact of space on human beings because she adapts herself to deteriorating conditions in her nest. When Hetty feels nearing death, she calls Tibby as her “poor cat” (Lessing, 173) rather than “filthy old cat,” “clever puss” or “lovely” because she worries about what will happen to him. Tibby is like an extension of Hetty in terms of the spaces they occupy, the way they live independently and come to an end in solitude.

The cold winter plays an important role in Hetty’s life because as the narrator reveals, “her life, or, rather, her death, could depend on something so arbitrary as builders starting work on a house in January rather than in April” (Lessing, 174). If the men had waited for the spring to work, Hetty would have more time to stay in her place and find the means of living. When Hetty dies in her last nest, Tibby goes into the bushes to hide from “the corpse-removers” (Lessing, 174). The rotten room with holes, rubbles, planks and so on, is now pervaded by the smell of Hetty’s dead body. In search of a new home and a friend, Tibby moves from one garden to another until he joins “a community of stray cats going wild,” (Lessing, 175) but is caught by an official and put to sleep because of being “too old, and smelly and battered” (Lessing, 176) like Hetty. All these comparisons between Hetty and Tibby, including an independent life, an indecent background in the eyes of the society, ageing, eating pigeons, seeing well in the dark, and their death foreground how they complement one another with respect to the spaces they occupy as well.

Conclusion

Tracing Hetty's nomadic life place by place – the Council flat, the desolate room in the slum and the ruined house in Hampstead – provide a physical description of these spaces where old and poor people try to survive and a conceptualised view of the state ideology allocating the homeless in defined territories away from the rich. In addition, a reading of the story based on Lefebvre's spatial trialectics broadens the binary understanding of space in two dimensions – the perceived and the conceived – by displaying Hetty's lived experiences in the spaces she occupies. Her indulgence in public life, lack of belonging to a place, and a sense of home enable her to free herself from the confines of the Council's systematic arrangements, which disregard Hetty's needs and segregate her from the society. Also her appropriation of the Council flat, the room in the slum and the house in Hampstead by turning these spaces into home or nest-like places temporarily might be interpreted as her attempts to create alternative spaces for herself out of the ruins. Her endeavour to produce or appropriate alternative spaces without a sense of home and her drive to maintain her life in line with her own desires and choices surpass gender and social restrictions, allow lines of nomadism to emerge and blur the boundaries between categories. Hetty, the other old and poor women, and the various houses and districts of London are social products, and thus, their interconnectedness contribute to the constitution of social space.

Endnotes

- 1 The stories are set in Africa and England: wild nature, cultivated settler lands and homesteads as well as a variety of closed, open and transitory spaces in the city, gain importance with respect to human intervention.
- 2 Lessing has two collections on African stories – *This Was the Old Chief's Country* and *The Sun Between Their Feet*; two collections of stories set in Europe and England – *To Room Nineteen: Collected Stories* and *The Temptation of Jack Orkney: Collected Stories*; and finally, one collection of stories and sketches *London Observed*.
- 3 For more information, see Braidotti's *Transpositions, Nomadic Theory: The Portable Rosi Braidotti* (2011) and "Comment on Feliski's 'The Doxa of Difference': Working Through Sexual Difference" (1997).
- 4 "Penne" might derive from "penny" (4) used as a general or vague word for a piece of money: hence, a sum of money in *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*. Combined with "father," the surname of the family might have a paradoxical meaning, as the father of money, because the Pennefathers eke out a living.
- 5 Among several meanings of the word, in *Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, "respectable" refers to (4) of persons: of good or fair social standing, and having the moral qualities naturally appropriate to this. Hence, in later use, honest and decent in character or conduct, without reference to social position, or in spite of being in humble circumstances.
- 6 As Peter Somerville puts it, "homelessness is distinguished by a lack of social status, invisibility or a 'problem' to others, with the homeless being seen as outcast and rejected, at the bottom of the social scale, disreputable and nichless" (1992: 534).
- 7 *Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* defines Council as (10) the local administrative body of a corporate town or city; also (since 1888) of an English 'administrative' county or district. In that sense, the officials might regard the Council flats like an apartment appropriated to the homeless and the poor.
- 8 Hetty's wandering around the streets of London for different reasons can also be explained with reference to Michel de Certeau's spatial myths like "walking in the city" discussed in *The Practice of Everyday Life* and might establish the experience of being in the city as "an immense social experience of lacking a place" (1984: 103). However, I would argue that her connection to the streets is not because of her lack of space but of her interest in social communication and interaction.

- 9 For Lefebvre, defining the city becomes more complicated as a consequence of urbanisation processes. In *The Urban Revolution*, he claims “The concept of the city no longer corresponds to a social object. . . . However, the city has a historical existence that is impossible to ignore. . . . An image or representation of the city can perpetuate itself, survive its conditions, inspire an ideology and urbanist projects. In other words, the ‘real’ sociological ‘object’ is an image and an ideology” (2003: 57). Since the production of city space is an ongoing process, produced and reproduced in relation to urbanisation, it involves many variables such as history, politics, social relations, economics and cultural issues, thus, cannot be reduced to clear and definite explanations of what space is and how it is constructed.
- 10 This term is taken from the title of a chapter “The Right to the City” in Lefebvre’s book *Writing on Cities*. In this chapter, he draws attention not to the production and use of space by people who have power and capital but by those marginalised ones in terms of social status, economic, cultural and political aspects, and highlights their rights. For him “the *right to the city* is like a cry and a demand. . . [which] can only be formulated as a transformed and renewed *right to urban life*” (1996: 158).
- 11 The hole seems to be ironic because “the word *hole* comes from the Old English *hol* meaning ‘cave’ which in prehistoric times wasn’t just a dark space to hide, it was a home” (vocabulary.com).

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