

# Doris Lessing's Farm Writing and Capitalist Colonial Space Production

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Farm is a vital image in Doris Lessing's fiction, which is also a result of colonial space production. Through a series of discriminative land policies in a colonial society, the white farmers implement labour exploitation towards natives. Meanwhile, this space also presents various contradictions among whites. Moreover, colonial space production also leads to the deconstruction of natural space. Lessing's farm writing reveals her nostalgia of the natural landscape when the farm hasn't been involved with the capitalist space production and her concern for human beings' unity.

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Doris Lessing (1919-2013) grows up on a farm, therefore, farm becomes a pervasive and profound literary image in her fiction, and it is an inevitable presence while doing research upon her work. Lessing's farm in Southern Rhodesia is not only a representation of her childhood memories, but also reflection on the problem of British colonization. Farms in Lessing's work have been largely ignored in previous studies. Xu has noticed the symbiotic change of "new orders" in economy and racial relationship on the South Rhodesian farms in *The Grass is Singing* (Xu, 2019, p. 102). In *Martha Quest* and the collection of short stories *African stories*, farm is also a significant image. As a result of the production of colonial space, it vividly shows the intricate social relations in a colonial space. Lefebvre's space theory is about "(Social) space is a (social) product" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 26). Different social relations form different social spaces. Lefebvre intends to generalize his theory of "spatial production" to apply to all societies, all periods, and all "modes of production" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 41). Guo Wei put Lefebvre's theory into an international perspective to analyze the colonization process of capitalist countries overseas, pointing out that in this process, power and knowledge are used to transform the original social space of the colonized country, and the economic model, cultural values and political and religious thinking modes that are implanted for the benefit of the home country. The living space of the native people in colonized countries is abstracted into a conceptual space controlled by the power of a capitalist country in accordance with the capitalist space principles. The colonizers could plunder and colonize the land, resources and culture of the colonized countries in the end. This whole process is defined as colonial space production (Guo, 2015, p. 30). As the ultimate goal of the colonization is the economical exploitation, and the western society is dominated by capitalist ideology, this whole process could also be defined as capitalist colonial space production. This article

will discuss how the farm is involved in the process of colonial space production and the contradictions in this space.

### Colonial Space Production of Farm

The whites' acquisition of large farms is the result of the practice of the spatial representation of racial segregation. In the early years of Southern Rhodesia, the development of the country was mainly driven by the exploitation of native labour and the plundering of their land. The early-arrived white settlers of Southern Rhodesia, especially the white farmers, intended to reinforce the gap with the native due to their gradual accumulation of wealth. Therefore, the colonial authority enacted the Land Apportionment Act in 1930. This Act divided the land into white areas where Africans could never acquire land, African purchase areas reserved for those Africans who wanted to and could afford to purchase land, and Tribal Trust Lands which were the African Reserves where land was owned in Trust on behalf of the Africans. This Act allocated 51 percent of the total land area of the country to approximately 50,000 whites and only 29.8 percent to more than 1 million Africans. This act made segregation formal by making land tenure permanently dependent on race (Mlambo, 2014, p. 6). In *The Grass Is Singing*, Dick, a white farmer on the verge of bankruptcy, manages three thousand acres of land. "For many years, between this essential group of gentle maniacs and the Quests' farm there had been hundreds of acres of empty ground, considered too poor to farm" (Lessing, 2013, p. 58). Even a large number of empty lands are abandoned; the white people are unwilling to share the land with the locals. Moreover, they attribute the reason why the land is empty to the barrenness of the soil. However, the reserved land where the native live and the area purchased by rich native are actually "barren" and "Not suitable for farming".

The natives' natural and living space has been reconstructed as some concrete notions, such as labour, production, scale, profit, etc. In Lessing's fiction, the farm is a concrete representation of the gradual transition from natural material space to social relation space in the context of spatial practice. The farm in pre-colonial period was a space of tribal society, where people got along with nature. The invasion of Southern Rhodesia by the British colonists headed by Cecil Rhodes opened the prelude to the colonial space production in Southern Rhodesia. Capitalist mode of production leads to uneven regional development, so that dominant space replaces shared space. The space Lessing depicts in "The Old Chief Mshlanga" is a typical representation of shared space. This land was Chief Mshlanga's country, "... to the north of the river; and it was our desire to ask his permission to prospect for gold in his territory" (Lessing, 2013, pp. 50-51). The phrase "ask his permission" is overwhelming for a white child who brings up under the atmosphere that all natives are considered as things to use. Capitalist space production dissolves the old chief's country, and the old chief gather people who do not work in the white areas. The geographically shrinking space is still a natural space that sustains the natives' daily lives. The old chief and his tribe build thatched cottages among the trees and plant pumpkins and corn for domestic demand. This space is not for the purpose of capital accumulation, but for the subsistence of the tribe. The tiny shared space is disappearing when the whole tribe is banished to a barren native reservation by the authorities. Southern Rhodesia is fully occupied by capitalist space. The capitalist land-labor-capital trinity is effectively combined in this space, thus forming a fragmented, separated, and discontinuous space (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 282). The natives are unwillingly being involved in the new economic system by being labour or servant for the whites. The farms become the white farmers' private property. In "the Old Chief Mshlanga", the white

farm is described as “they were good, the years of ranging the bush over her father’s farm which, like every white farm, was largely unused, broken only occasionally by small patches of cultivation” (Lessing, 2014, p. 47). The land area of white farmers is so large that it is difficult to cultivate them all. However, in the meantime, the old chief and his tribe are forced to move out of their hometown, a lush and warm valley suitable for farming. This valley has been allocated as government land, and the government will soon open it to white immigrants. They move to a “proper” reserved area two hundred miles away. The spatial representation of land segregation makes white farms occupy vast and fertile land, while local people have to move away from their homes which were suitable for farming. This is not only a physical separation, but also cultural segregation and hierarchical segregation produced by apartheid. The division of physical space leads to the formation of regionalized social relations. Due to the social practice of this spatial representation, local people are forced to join the social relations formed by the white farm areas, and new social spaces are thus constructed.

When Martha looks over the farm, “a mile or so of bush to a strip of pink ploughed land; and then the bush, dark green and sombre, climbed a ridge to another patch of exposed earth, this time a clayish yellow; and then, ridge after ridge, fold after fold, the bush stretched to a line of blue kopjes. The fields were a timid intrusion on a landscape hardly marked by man...” (Lessing, 2001, p. 5). These bush belts mark the scope of the Quests’ ownership towards the farm in the former natural space. The infringement of the farmland towards the nature implies the deconstructive effect of capitalist space production on natural space. As Lefebvre points out, when we contemplate a field of wheat or maize, we are well aware that the furrows, the pattern of sowing, and the boundaries, be they hedges or wire fences, designate relations of production and property (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 83). The farm is the location of the farmer’s dwelling, which is the contradictory interweaving space of the capitalist space and the natural space. In Lessing’s fiction, farms are a place full of various relationships, including the state’s domination towards the land, the white farmers’ exploitation towards native workers etc. These social relations have penetrated into nature. The production of capitalist space causes the disappearance of natural space. Space production not only makes all the space serve the capitalist rule, but also makes all the space full of capitalist rule (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 5). The word “farm” evokes an image of something orderly, compact, cultivated; a neat farm-house in a pattern of fields for Lessing. However, “Mr Slatter’s farm had hardly any trees left on it. It was a monument to farming malpractice, with great gullies cutting through it, and acres of good dark earth gone dead from misuse” (Lessing, 2013, p. 81). In order to make money, the white farmer abuses the land, making the soil infertile.

The compound is another concrete representation to the colonial space production. The cluster of grass huts in *Martha Quest* are the native compound, these thatched huts are shacks inhabited by black laborers who go to work in white areas. It is another direct manifestation of the spatial representation of land segregation policy. The compounds also exist in the farm in *The Grass is Singing*. The compound in Dick’s farm is half a mile from the house where they live. “The system was that a new labourer presenting himself for work was given a day without pay to build a hut for himself and his family before taking his place with the workers. So there were always new huts, and always empty old ones that slowly collapsed and fell down unless somebody thought of burning them. The huts were closely clustered over an acre or two of ground. They looked like natural growths from the ground, rather than man-made dwellings. It was as though a giant black hand had reached down from the sky, picked up handful of sticks and grass, and dropped them magically on the earth in the form of huts.

They were grass-roofed, with pole walls plastered with mud, and single low doors, but no windows" (Lessing, 2013, p. 109). The compound is the only space that natives have in the white world. The density and simplicity of the thatched huts in the shanty area reflects the harsh environment of the blacks working on white farms. The widespread collapsed thatched huts indicate the instability of the work as farm workers. In "the Old Chief Mshlanga", the white girl describes the compound as a "dirty and neglected place, a temporary home for migrants who had no roots in it" (Lessing, 2014, p. 54). The compound system provides white farmers with a flexible and cheap method of hiring and dismissing labor, which is also a result of colonial space production.

Martha spends her teenage years thinking about how she could escape the farm, but when she finally does, and moves to the city, she shows a deep attachment to the farm:

The sky was as deep and blue and fresh as a sweep of sea, and the white clouds rolled steadily in it. The veld, so thickly clothed with grass, broken with small tumbling kopjes which glittered with hot granite boulders, lifted itself unafraid to meet that sky. This naked embrace of earth and sky, the sun hard and strong overhead, pulling up the moisture from foliage, from soil, so that the swimming glisten of heat is like a caress made visible, this openness of air, everything visible for leagues, so that the circling hawk (the sun glancing off its wings) seems equipoised between sun and boulder—boulder; it is what they sicken for, no matter how hard they try to shut their minds against the memory of it (Lessing, 2001, p. 298).

Only natural and crude elements in nature are mentioned such as "veld" "sun" "sky" when she finally leaves the farm. When Martha moves into the city, which is a space fully occupied by capitalism, farm is a place where " frank embrace between the lifting breast of the land and the deep blue warmth of the sky is what exiles from Africa dream of "(Lessing, 2001, p. 298). When Martha lives in the white city, "she had been shut from it by a matter of a few weeks among the shells and surfaces of brick and concrete. She might have been in another country" (Lessing, 2001, p. 299). She's fully aware of the homogeneity and strategy of repetition launched by the capitalist space. The same "brick and concrete" are the embodiment of the homogenization of capitalist spatial form. In "Eldorado", the original aim of Alec's immigration experience is to be "free of the competition in the Old Country" (Lessing, 2014, p. 309). When he gets to the farm in the new country, he finds out "nothing new". Eric doesn't want to run the farm for profit. His neighbours advise him that if he wants to become rich in the land, he should either be a gold digger or grow tobacco. He answers, "he had not left England, he said, to worry about money and chase success" (Lessing, 2014, p. 303). Aleck would have thought that the situation that "wealth" and "success" considered as life's goals is unique to Britain, which is occupied by capitalist space. When the income of the farm could not cover the daily expenses, he realizes that this British colony is just another manifestation of the homogenization of capitalist space. Alec wishes to live in a self-sufficient agricultural society. However, farm in this colonial society is the result of colonial production; it also follows the rules of capitalist economy, aiming at capital accumulation.

### **The Contradictions in Farm Space**

The newly produced colonial space in Lessing's fiction is actually a capitalist space. The aim of this space is the accumulation of capital. The whites exploit the natives and intend to compete with other whites in order to make for profits. Therefore, the farm is full of diversified contradictions.

The production of capitalist colonial space destroys the original shared space of local people, leaving them in the divided space and at the bottom of the hierarchical space, which is the initial embodiment of the

contradiction between white and black in the capitalist space. The specificity, locality and regionality of newly produced space make it hierarchical. This space includes the humblest and the noblest, the pawns and the rulers (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 282). The farms of Southern Rhodesia, as a conspicuously stratified physical area, are the space where conflict between blacks and whites frequently breaks out. This process is accompanied by the emergence of hierarchical ideology. On the farms, natives are the source of endless exploitation by white farmers who regards themselves as rulers. The exploitation nature of capitalist space makes the contradiction between white and black inevitable. European immigrants stereotype native people as "stupid" and "lazy", and restrict them in the frame set by colonial government, so as to ensure that they can be only confined to the scope of physical labor, thus consolidating the dominance of the whites. Once white farmers sign contracts with native workers, the latter could not leave. The white farmer would inform the local police if the native workers escape. Lessing describes the process how the whites "hire" the black labor force in *The Grass is Singing*, "these had been recruited by what is the South African equivalent of the old press gang: white men who lie in wait for the migrating bands of natives on their way along the roads to look for work, gather them into large lorries, often against their will (sometimes chasing them through the bush for miles if they try to escape), lure them by fine promises of good employment and finally sell them to the white farmers at five pounds or more per head for a year's contract" (Lessing, 2013, p. 36). The word "native" implies Lessing's awareness of the natives' ownership towards the land. The meaning of contract is different from the common one. The contract originally shares the same binding force on both parties, but it only shows unilateral binding force for the natives referring to the South Rhodesian farm. Mary uses this unilateral restraint when she threatens the native employee. The contract is a license of exploitation towards the local people. In the history of modern western social and political thought, contract is derived from the concept of equality of all kinds of people. No one can arbitrarily impose others to obey certain orders. If people have to give up their natural right to freedom for some reason, it could only be realized through a voluntary agreement (Xu, 2019, p. 65). However, the emergence of racial oppression has deconstructed the preconditions for the existence of contracts. Although the black people have the right to inform the police after being whipped by the ranchers, the police are also the tools of colonial space production, which ultimately serve for the rule of capitalist space. Therefore, the police do not exist to safeguard the natives' rights. In *The Grass is Singing*, Slater beats a black farm worker to death, and he is only fined thirty pounds in the end. The White Sheriff also makes his verdict that the native servant is the murderer before he has a chance to investigate the cause of Mary's death.

The majority of European immigrants in Southern Rhodesia are British, and most of them and the earliest British colonists in Southern Rhodesia come from South Africa, where Afrikaner culture (Dutch Law and deep-rooted apartheid ideology) is mostly active and concentrated. The culture of Southern Rhodesia is deeply infiltrated by the Afrikaans. On one hand, British immigrants have to counter the growing political influence of the South African Dutch in South Africa; on the other hand, they have to be alert to the African nationalism. First, they intend to eliminate the cultural gap caused by the physical distance from the England. Mrs. Quest buys books regularly from England. The bookcases in the living room in the farm are "filled with the classics, Dickens and Scott and Thackeray and the rest, inherited from prosperous Victorian households" (Lessing, 2001, p. 36). The Quests' radios and newspapers come regularly from what they respectively considered as Home, they also order Tory newspapers from England. The curtains are originally bought in London. As James Gindin indicates, "in

many of the stories the white settler's assertion of his inherited culture is, in this new land, his means of establishing his difference from the black men all around him" (Gindin, 2003, p. 19).

Secondly, they need to avoid interaction with other groups. Black people are firstly excluded from interaction. If the little white girl in "The Old Chief Mshlanga" talks to a native worker in their farm, her mother will anxiously scold her, "Come away; you mustn't talk to natives" (Lessing, 2014, p. 49). The reason why Mary isn't willing to work on the farm is that she avoids contacting with native workers. The English immigrants even restrain themselves from social communication with other white group. Mrs. Quest does not allow Martha to interact with the Jewish owner of the native store and her Afrikaans neighbour's family. Mrs. Quest's conversation with Mr. Van Rensburg is confined to farm matters. "The prestige associated with English as the language of a master civilization, and a symbol of power, privilege, and good breeding, was therefore an aspect of the British heritage that was critical to settler identity and helped sustain a sense of being different from surrounding groups" (Bonello, 2010, p. 355). Mary does not even allow natives to answer her orders in English; she regards the use of English by the native black as the trespassing of the white superior space. The authorities in Southern Rhodesia has also been unable to approve a request by Afrikaans to make Afrikaans the second official language. The British colonists assume that as long as they keep the superior position of the English language, what happens outside would not affect the country. The British whites consistently confirm the superiority of their identity through the conflicts with other groups.

From what have been discussed above, it clearly shows the conflicts exist in this newly produced space. When settlers arrive in a new colonial country where a large number of native people live with considerable agricultural productivity, they not only need economic and political support from the home country, but also enough residents from the similar background to fully control the native people (Schutz, 1973, p. 9). Therefore, immigrants from Europe and South Africa are welcomed in Southern Rhodesia. Due to the complexity and diversity of the sources of white immigrants, white people cannot be simply generalized as a community sharing common interests. Afrikaans community is also a vital white group in Lessing's African fiction. After the First World War, the number of South African Dutch people living in Southern Rhodesia increased to 6573, accounting for 19.4% of the European population (Schutz, 1973, p. 8). In order to adapt to the spatial production of Southern Rhodesia dominated by British ideology, the Afrikaners attempt to resist the assimilation of British colonial government by displaying the cohesion of Afrikaans community. The South African Dutch farmer represented by Van Rensburg mainly read nationalist journals from the Union of South Africa, which is the spatial representation produced by the South African Dutch government. They form "a close-knit, isolated community of Dutch people (Lessing, 2001, p. 58)", which are their attempts to produce their own social space. First, they acquire physical space by purchasing land, and the agricultural production they live on with could be carried out. They "worked fifty and a hundred acres where the British used thousands, and made their farming pay" (Lessing, 2001, p. 58). Moreover, they try to produce their own social space through physical reproduction so that the proportion of Afrikaners could be increased in the white immigrants' population. The average number of children in an Afrikaans family in *Martha Quest* is about eight to ten. Lester's Southern African Dutch Assistance in *The Grass is Singing* has thirteen children. Afrikaans drives to the station/shop, the centre of the farm area, to get their parcels on the same day, build their own assembly hall and thatching churches. A range of spatial practices are used to demonstrate their presence and promote the ideology they have acquired from South



African subscriptions. Martha believes that the common characteristics of these people are not manifested by externalized symbols, such as clothing, but "in the look of dogged self-sufficiency, the look of the inveterate colonizer" (Lessing, 2001, p. 60). On one hand, they constantly define their identity in the space mainly produced by British ideology; and on the other hand, they try to cater to the spatial representation of Southern Rhodesia. On the Parcel Day, the elderly women always wear black dress in order to fit in the local customs, in which black means decent. However, the black dress she wears with is probably mass-produced in America (Lessing, 2001, p. 60). The clothing here only expresses restlessness, a movement, even uncertainty.

The white immigrants group in the capitalist space is no longer a community sharing common interests. Contradiction even exists among British whites. Louis Hartz believes a European-dominated society geographically detached from Europe as a part of Europe, this kind of society is defined as fragmentation (Hartz, 1964, p. 3). In 1921 the British population (including South African British immigrants and native British immigrants) made up 95.8% of the European population of Southern Rhodesia. A large number of them are of British descent in South Africa (Schutz, 1973, p. 9). This part of people who grow up in South Africa with British decent has lived there for a long time, being deeply influenced by the Afrikaans Dutch culture. Thus, Southern Rhodesia can be considered as a fragmented society of Britain and a fragmented society of South Africa. Charlie Slater in *The Grass is Singing*, who has lived in Africa for 20 years, is deeply influenced by the fragments of Dutch apartheid in South Africa that Southern Rhodesia tries to imitate. Tony Marston is a British who just arrives in Southern Rhodesia to learn plantation and farm management. He is one of the many who are the kind of people described by Charlie Slater as who "were usually ex-public school, very English, but extremely adaptable" (Lessing, 2013, p. 17). Most of these young men are brought up with vague ideas about equality (Lessing, 2013, p. 18). It is this vague notion of equality that makes Tony unable to fit into the spatial representation of the place. When he witnesses the unequal treatment the natives have received and the brutal way the white farmers manage the farm in Southern Rhodesia, he leaves the farm area and never works on a farm. Another contradiction in this space is the quest for economic interests among white farmers, which is due to the intrusion of capitalist space. The essence of capitalist space is the accumulation of capital. As Henri Lefebvre points out, one of contradictions in capitalist space stems from the fragmentations caused by private property. As a result of the fragmentation of space, white settlers take their own interests as superiority. Lester has been pretending to care about the situation of Dick's farm; in fact, he just wants to encroach on Dick's farm when Dick is completely bankrupt. Moreover, the financial gap between Dick's income and other white farmers' is widened. The interest orientation of capitalist space leads to Mary's nervous breakdown. Their farm, on the verge of bankruptcy, makes them living a financially struggling life. Therefore, she is both actively and passively socially marginalized in the farm area space, which also leads to her tragic end.

Living in this colonial space, Martha admits that "she could not remember a time when she had not thought of people in terms of groups, nations, or colour of skin first, and as people afterwards" (Lessing, 2001, p. 61). "Groups" "nations" "colour of skin" are the main contradictions in this space. These factors are what Lessing intends to fight with in her fiction. Lessing's ideal space is "a noble city", "there were splashing fountains, and the sound of flutes; and its citizens moved, grave and beautiful, black and white and brown together; and these groups of elders paused, and smiled with pleasure at the sight of the children—the blue-eyed, fair-skinned children of the North playing hand in hand with the bronze-skinned, dark-eyed children of the South. Yes, they smiled and

approved these many-fathered children, running and playing among the flowers and the terraces, through the white pillars and tall trees of this fabulous and ancient city" (Lessing, 2001, p. 15). The friendly interaction between older people with different skins tones and children with white skin and brown skin not only breaks the regional and ethnic limits, but also is a cultural inheritance of positive values. Lessing once mentioned in an interview, "We have to start with the education of children, to teach them how to accept themselves as complete individuals, regardless of their group or race. Only human beings who are self-assured and do not feel inferior can discuss problems and talk with each other on the same plane. That would be the first step toward reducing aggression and hatred" (Lessing, 1994, p. 112). Martha's imagined representational space reveals Lessing's realistic concern for human beings as a whole.

### Conclusion

Lessing presents the capitalist spatial production process and its contradictions in multiple dimensions through farm writing. The Southern Rhodesia government officially implemented the land segregation system in Southern Rhodesia through the Land Distribution Act of 1930. This spatial practice forced the natives to participate in the modern economic activities, and white farmers establish the dominant position of the white people in this space. Meanwhile, a lot of contradictions appear among the whites because of the intrinsic profit-seeking traits of capitalist space. The deconstruction of African natural space by capitalist space production makes Lessing nostalgic for natural landscape.

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