

# Significant Family Space in the Fifth Child

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**Abstract:** *The masterpiece----the fifth child produced by Doris Lessing is of great characteristics. The family spatial descriptions are the most prominent feature encompassing the big house with the Victorian garden, the kitchen, the spacious bedroom as well as the four rooms provided for the children. It can be seen that almost the activities of the characters are conducted in the capacious house. According to the space theory, space is the social product, the producing materials and the political instruments. It can be produced and consumed as well as permeated with all kinds of ideologies. The thesis focuses on the spatial delineations and combine the space theory to research its specific significance on the marital relationships and family members behind the static building which is closely related with power and oppression, embodying in the way that the family space exerts a potential effect on the patriarchal control over the female characters and the fetters on the children.*

**Keywords:** Family space; Significance; The fifth child; Power and oppression

## 1. Introduction

*The fifth child* is one of the masterpieces created by the prolific English writer----Doris Lessing who once was awarded with the Nobel Prize. Doris Lessing had migrated from African countries to the center of United Kingdom----London, where she spent the rest of her sixty-year life, thus changes have taken in her existential space, influencing her views towards different cultures and social and political problems. Under such a condition, her works demonstrate a multitude of spatial delineations. *The fifth child* is the fiction that focus on the David family and the big house with a Victorian garden. It seems that all the practical activities of the characters are carried out on the spacious space that can accommodate and entertainment so many relatives, guests and children when it came to Christmas festival. David fell in love with Harriet in the first sight when they took part in the firm's party and they decided to marry and planned to have children as many as possible. After the decision, under the aid of David's father, they bought a magnificent and capacious house that possessed a kitchen that extended for a larger space to accommodate books on a low wall, a main big bedroom with a smallish room opening off and four decent rooms on the first floor as well as other four rooms on the second floor, finally an attic above all the floor. As an architect, David commuted from home to London, and he was the only male who conducted the spatial motion most frequently. On the contrast, Harriet, as a typical housewife, her personal activities almost are restricted in the big house to perform her duty. The bedroom where the couple occupied is very thought-provoking owing to the fact that Harriet gives birth to the former four children on the same bedroom other than Ben. When the whole family is in a hustle and bustle and an assistance is demanded to help tackle with the housework, it is Harriet's mother rather than David's mothers to cope with the tedious work. Therefore, Dorothy, as a traditional female character who worked indomitably in the kitchen, endows the stationary kitchen with some special meaning. What is obvious is that when the new baby was born into the family, the elder baby will move into the farther room along the corridor. It can be seen that every child shares a single room rather than sharing a joint room together. At the beginning, the rooms in which the children resides is not fixed instead they will be rearranged. Until the approaching of *the fifth child*---Ben makes the family bog into a muddle and break the tranquility because Ben is an eccentric boy with an abominable appearance and violent-oriented and imprudent temperament. Ben's ferocity and brutality make the family terrified and alienated from him. After he killed the animals at his two-year old, the family including Harriet herself were abhorrent at Ben and imprisoned him at the baby's room to regulate him. Therefore, baby's room is beyond a pure residing place, which includes more connotations. Spatial criticism is a new form of criticism that serves the function to research literature which is developed gradually on the basis of post modernist theory such as cultural geography, cultural research, new spatial perceptions and spatial turn(Zhu Liyuan, 2005: 487). According to Henri Lefebvre, social space is the product of the society and it is social history itself that is constantly generated rather than a dimensional

counterpart of time. It is strengthened that social space is not a random and spontaneous process instead it demonstrates a natural, psychological and social dimension which concentrates on the concrete space, spatial presentation and spatial practice(1991: 26). What's more, social space features on politics which can be consumed as the authoritative and violent product which is decided by the upper regulators and politicians(1991: 31). Social space is not motionless, objective and passive which means that space is closely tied with human's practical activity(Zhang Xiaoyi, 2018: 40). Besides, it is permeated with all kinds of ideologies, which can also be consolidated by the erection structure(1991:30). Family space belongs to social space and embodies the family ideology and ethics, which will exert a potential influence on the internal part of the family. Therefore, in terms of the magnificent Victorian house with the garden and its layout including the kitchen, the bedroom and the smallish room, what is the significance hid behind the motionless house? This essay will delve into the issue and it will be developed on the basis of power and oppression as well as the ideological conflict.

## 2. Power and Oppression

It is well-acknowledged that houses serve a great function in the family ethics and it becomes abstract symbol evolving from a concrete family carrier and closely link to the family members encompassing the marital and parental relationships. Besides, houses, like the melting pot, have witnessed and congregated different ideologies where all the ideologies entwine and ignite the new fires, which may engender the physical and psychological barrier and conflict. The external buildings are not merely a still physical space, it is the spatial tool for the authority to achieve the politic aims, which can help the regulators wield power in a certain space. Foucault once supposed that modern society is a spatial, regulated and obedient one which should be regulated by space in which power is circulating and exerts an effect on creating and changing the individuals(2003: 46-47). For example, hospital and jail are the typical venue on which power is imposed in order that the regulator can better supervise and make them docile. When it comes to the relationship between space and individual, Foucault assumed that physical space can create a power mechanism where the hermetic spatial feature can be demonstrated, which makes the supervise and regulation possible(Wang Minan, 2006: 388). What's more, family space shapes the ethic relationship and produces the political relationships among the family members. David in *the fifth child* is an architect who is proficient in designing, constructing the building and arranging the spatial layout, which reflects on that he endeavors to construct his own personal space and measure the external size and design the internal layout of the house to constitute their felicitous family. Once the house is purchased and the family is set up, female characters and the children are reined by power flowing in the house and they are mired into the indoor world. The house serves its function in oppression when it is executed by the power body, which embodies in two aspects including the patriarchal power on the female characters and the repression on the insane Ben and other children.

### 2.1 *The patriarchal power over the female characters*

The most conspicuous significance that the enormous house endows with is that David has control on the marital relationships with Harriet, which helps build the patriarchal role and deprive Harriet of her self-identity and self-consciousness. There is no denying that women are inferior to men in the long trend of relationships between men and women. Even worse, women are not gallant to express their wills and plunged into the appendage for men. Though the second-wave feminism helped the female secure the rights in speech and society, it could not aid them extricate from the yoke of patriarchal social system. Women cannot enjoy the equality with men in thoughts, spirit and status. Harriet's family background is greatly different from David's. Before their marriage, Harriet is a picture-designer and is content with her current life. As a traditional and conservative female character, she cannot have a broad worldview and be self-independent. What's more, she is cultivated by Dorothy that family life was the basis for a happy one while David undergoes the mental misery because his parents divorced early and separately constituted their own family so he possessed two pairs of parents. However, he received a better education in public school because of his wealthy biological father. When he meets Harriet, he has been thirty and is aspiring for possessing a happy family with the espouse who has the identical life goal to erect his own status and identity in the family space so that he can compensate for the childhood's wretch. David's bedroom is large, locating at the back of the house overlooking a neglected garden and it is a shabby room, full of his boyhood as well as rather chilly in the English manner at his previous home, in Oxford, from which can be seen that David is not attached great importance to rather he is ranked on the marginal place by the family, making him feel desolate

and melancholic. Under such a situation, he has the inkling of constructing the family space with Harriet to extend and amplify the current space. Therefore, the couple purchases a large Victorian house in an overgrown garden, but it is a little overwhelmed for the middle-class couple to reimburse it. David's biological father--- James is a very affluent businessman handling the career both domestic and oversea who helps the young couple lessen the financial burden and assumes the responsibility for the mortgage. The economical advantages of James decides his and David's social status in the family, causing them possess more discourse power in the Victorian house while Dorothy and Harriet devote nothing to pay the mortgage and they have to bear the pressure mentally exerted by the male's economic power. Thus, the house is rendered the symbolic meaning of male semiotics to make the spiritual oppression on Harriet and other female characters through which males can take the advantage over the females and fetter women in the household activity. Confronted with such a spiritual burden, Dorothy and Harriet can only choose to make the due contributions to sustain the family and they have to separately play the role of baby-sister and housewife. Kitchen, the woeful place which requires the painstaking efforts, has ruined the imagined romance and poetics of the home. It seems that the family is not a whole warm residing place instead it serves the role as the curdle of producing foods and reserves the characteristics of the ancient hand-made workshops. Like a hand-made factory in the internal modern family, kitchen has encompassed the laboring processes which resembles one of the lower-class workers. What's more, kitchen not only represents the chores that the family had existed but also the subordinate status, which makes the family members overwhelming. Actually it is admitted that kitchen is the optimal place to accommodate the circulation of the patriarchal power and possesses the most profound vintage that the social structure has ingrained on the family space(Wang Minan, 2006: 619). It is admitted that Dorothy is a sincere, decent and unswerving character and she rears her three children on her own by the meager allowance. Under such a circumstance, Dorothy cannot pay a share of the house mortgage instead she immerses herself in taking care of the children and assuming the cooking activity in the kitchen and she is the female character that can be frequently seen toiling in the kitchen including cooking the meals and attending to the children and bears the oppression exerted by David and thoroughly is obedient to the males because of her lower social status. What's more, the bedroom where the couple lived is reckoned as an extensive space of David's power. The bedroom is once described as a reproductive venue in which David imposes his own ideas on Harriet that he is willing to have six children in order that he can possess a impeccable family. David is keen to occupy Harriet's body in the bedroom as soon as they purchase the Victorian house. Harriet was conquered by his vehement will and gave up her own intention. "He was making love with a deliberate, concentrated intensity, looking into her eyes, that made her accept him, his taking possession of the future in her. But his arm tightened around her, and he gripped her upper arm with a hand she had not believed could be so strong, insistent"(Doris Lessing, 1988: 10). This sentence expresses that David has taken control of Harriet and shows his powerful male power and amplifies his mental space by taking possessions of her body, making Harriet bogged into an overwhelming situation.

## ***2.2 An intangible oppression on Ben and the other four children***

When Harriet was pregnant with the fifth child, she felt something abnormal and eccentric. When Harriet was only three-month pregnant, "the little thing" had activated a lot and jolted, making David feel a jolt under his hand and a hard movement. The abnormal pregnant reaction made Harriet wretched and unbearable. Because of the strong belly tapping, Harriet could not do anything but laid on the bed to rest herself. She would always moan or whimper and her husband could not offer any comfort, therefore she resorted to Dr. Brett who gave her the sedative to appease the energetic baby. The uterus can be deemed as the private space to exert the external power on Ben by injecting the sedative dose to tame the violent baby. When the baby behaves outlandishly in the womb, which is different from the normal baby, and he wants to struggle out of the womb to catch the attention of Harriet, power will work out to regulate the vibrant baby and oppress him, which is also a harbinger that Ben is knocked in his baby's room and alienated from the outside world. The layout of the rooms distributed to their children is unequivocal. When the new baby comes to the world, the elder baby will be forced into the room beside the corridor which is far away from the big bedroom while the new baby will live into the baby room nestling the main bedroom which embodies that they occupies different place in their parents' heart. Different secrets are concealed in the couple's bedroom and the children's as well as the covert diversions and contradictions between them are strengthened. For example, Ben who lived in the baby's room makes Paul feel alienated and melancholic even show a detestable attitude towards Ben for he reckons that his parents consume more energy and time to attend to his brother instead they are oblivious towards Paul's demands. Therefore, in Paul's heart, the mental inflict on Ben has been inflamed even exacerbated, which makes Paul feel a sense of isolation. Separated by the rooms, Paul

even takes no initiative to communicate with his brothers and take care of him. Even worse, he doesn't realize that Ben plays the role as the marginalized person, which aggregates the misunderstanding between Paul and Ben. As parents, Harriet and David always pay more attention to the new baby and distribute most of love to it. Ben is a marginalized boy that his appearance is very appalling.

“He was eleven pounds and had heavy-shouldered hunched look, as if he were crouching there as he lay. His forehead sloped from his eyebrows to his crown. His hair grew in an unusual pattern from the double crown where started a wedge or triangle that came low on the forehead, the hair lying forward in a thick yellowish stubble, while the side and back hair grew downwards. His hands were thick and heavy, with pads of muscle in the palms” (Doris Lessing, 1988: 63).

Given that Ben has such an abominable look and stiff and stub body, everyone including Harriet herself cannot show any dislike to him, even his sisters and brothers are unwilling to accompany him. Ben is so roaring that he sucks the breast with a lot of energy which makes Harriet bear the pain. Ben's boisterous and destroying nature drives the family to shut Ben in the room and restrict him, throttling Ben's personal freedom and discouraging his communications with the external world. His parents and siblings' apathetic and oblivious attitudes make Ben plunge into a marginalized character. Therefore, Ben becomes more heinously and rampantly. David and Harriet mercilessly chose to send Ben to the demon-ish institution where captures Ben and treats him with the inhuman and ruthless means. The institution awakens Ben that he is the outcast of the family, thus he abandons himself and the world. It is acknowledged that Ben has meant to emerge into the family and lead a cheerful life with them. However, his family declines his request and detests him owing to its physical defects. Even worse, they lock him in a sealed space to discourage love and care from pouring into his heart, further engendering Ben's tragedy. It is the physical barrier that causes Ben's alienation from the family and bog into a self-loss.

### 3. Conclusions

Doris Lessing's delineations about the family space are not a mere description of the stationary external building and internal structure rather it is constructed to endow the marital relationship between David and Harriet as well as the family members with some extraordinary meanings and the family space is teemed with the ideological thoughts generated among the members and the family ethics. From the beginning, David makes resolutions to purchase a big house and is willing to have children as many as possible can be deemed as a manifestation and extension of his patriarchal power, which makes him rein Harriet to assume the responsibility of a good housewife to rear the family and the children as well as the family space exerts an intangible pressure on Dorothy to restrict her to work painstakingly in the kitchen and imposes the mental oppression on her to be fully obedient in the house. In the end, the separation between the big bedroom and the small room is an embodiment of the family members' status which demonstrates the parents occupy the center of the house and the children should conform to their orders. The baby's room that shuts Ben from the communication and attachment with the outside world is also a mental shackle, making him plunge into a severe predicament and live in a marginalize status. The power also circulates in the baby's room to regulate and tame him, incurring Ben finally goes astray. Through a deep analysis of the power and oppression endowed by the family space, the salience of the theme can be better mastered and sublimed.

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