

## A Study of Female's Mobility Experience and Identity in *the summer before the Dark*

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### Abstract

### Review Article

*The Summer before the Dark* is an important work of Doris Lessing, a famous British writer. The novel describes the middle-aged woman Kate, after leaving her home, while experiencing new things in the move, while searching for her lost self-identity for many years and re-examining her self-worth. Kate's summer trip is not only a physical mobile trip in reality, but also a spiritual self-salvation trip. With the help of mobility theory, this paper analyzes the relationship between Kate's mobility experience and the construction of her identity, and reveals the importance of improving mobility for women's identity.

**Keywords:** *The Summer before the Dark*, female, mobility, identity.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Doris Lessing (1919-2013), a Nobel Prize-winning British female writer, wrote the novel *The Summer before the Dark* in the middle of her writing, which is considered as Lessing's work returning to traditional realism because of its linear narrative structure. The story revolves around the experience of Kate Brown, a 45-year-old middle-class housewife, who left her family to work and travel in a summer. It focuses on the heroine's mobility experience during the journey, and finally returns to her family with a different mentality. The book is praised by the New York Times as the best novel after "One Hundred Years of Solitude". Since its publication, it has been arousing research enthusiasm in the literary criticism circle. The relevant research mainly focuses on the interpretation of feminist criticism, psychoanalysis, narrative stylistic analysis, ethical interpretation and other aspects. The study of analyzing the work from the perspective of liquidity theory is not rare. This study intends to use the mobility theory to interpret the heroine's daily mobility in the family space and the mobility experience in the journey in the novel, as well as her own psychological process of subverting the traditional social norms of women's low mobility, shaping the free female subject and constructing the female identity through unremitting self-reflection. In this paper, mobility refers to both the observable body movement and the

experience brought by movement and the meaning it represents. In *The Summer before the Dark*, mobility acts as a form of spatial mobility, which is an important factor for women to resist the unequal gender identity order and establish a freer and more liberated identity. Enhancing mobility becomes a way for women to gain self-identity.

Based on the "mobility turn" in the field of sociology in recent years, this paper defines mobility as "the movement of social production" (Cresswell 2006: 3), that is, the movement that becomes meaningful through the interaction of subject, space and social relations. These factors affect the way people move and the value and significance they are endowed with. In this framework, the importance of mobility lies not in its scale and distance, but in the social, cultural and geographical significance of its interaction. That is to say, mobility includes not only "observable physical movements" such as walking, taking a train and riding a bicycle, but also "the meaning given by physical movements, the experience of practicing these movements and the potential of carrying out these movements" (Cresswell & Uteng 2008: 2). Because mobility is socially produced, gender relations affect the production of mobility. There are differences between men and women not only in the way, experience and ability of mobility, but also in the meaning of mobility; In turn, mobility also affects the production and

reproduction of gender relations. Mobility has the potential to consolidate or subvert the gendered power hierarchy. One of the prominent features of *The Summer before the Dark* is to focus on women's mobility. The core issue of identity is self-identification, that is, reflection on "who am I". (Li Zuolin, 2012) This paper believes that in a culture that has experienced industrialization, urbanization and democratization, and in a historical context characterized by significant social changes in women's roles and gender identity, there is an important relationship between women's mobility and the construction of women's subjectivity.

The study of convection is not only interested in the transformation itself, but also in their background and significance. Any transformation or mobility "is endowed with or engraved with meaning." (Adey, 2010) Liquidity has truly become a symbol of modernity. But how this sign is experienced and displayed is far from stable. On the one hand, it is positively coded as progress, freedom or modernity itself; On the other hand, it reminds people of the problem of restricting movement, vigilance and control. Through these dimensions of freedom and control, the understanding of "mobility" provides a unified way to view the highly globalized/mobile world we live in today. Identity is not fixed, and there is not only one identity for a person, and one identity is different from another. In the most common case, identity only refers to the "self" in a certain time or space, that is, the current place. We all live in the present, and we all live in a certain place. The "identity politics" in the current situation is to solve the "identity crisis". (Chen, 2016) This article will discuss Kate's identity crisis caused by the restriction of mobility and how she can achieve self-identity by enhancing mobility.

## 2、 Women's Daily Mobility and Identity Crisis

Daily mobility includes commuting, shopping, social networking, information, news, learning, business meetings, etc. The typical feature of these movements is that they are two-way movements, often executed, and constitute the main elements of our daily life, including physical and/or virtual movements (Kellerman, 2012:20). On the other hand, non-daily flow includes two-way flow of entertainment and tourism and one-way flow of residential changes and migration, which usually involve social changes. Liu Ying proposed that, "For individuals, the mobility of the body is not only a manifestation of power, but also a means to gain social status." Kate's daily mobility makes her a good wife and mother, but it also makes her gradually lose her subjectivity as a woman, and therefore fall into anxiety and confusion. The limited mobility is a manifestation of her power being imprisoned, and also reflects that her social status seems to be inferior to her husband, which triggered her

identity crisis, and made her seriously doubt her value and significance of existence.

Professor Chen Yongguo believes that the most important link in the process of identity identification is "identity shaping". In addition to the various shaping of the subject's self-choice, "identity shaping", in terms of its political significance, is mainly reflected in the mandatory shaping or discipline of the powerful groups on the vulnerable groups (2016). The first scene in the novel *The Summer before the Dark* describes Kate waiting for the water to boil in her garden and then brewing coffee with boiling water. Then she "Put the coffee pot into a plate. The cups and plates, spoons, sugar and filters are already on the plate. She took the plate and before leaving the room, she glanced back at the table. It was full of dirty dishes for lunch and some dishes for breakfast. Can you ask Tim to regenerate the fire, boil the pot of water, and then ask her to come in to wash it when there is enough hot water? Forget it, still don't do it, he doesn't want to do anything at this time. Do it yourself later. Female Zizi walked out of the side door of the house and came to the lawn. It's time to mow the lawn "(5). The beginning of the novel shows that Kate has been used to this kind of life because her daily mobility is to take care of household chores and family. What she sees in her eyes and thinks in her heart is what she needs to do. Doreen Marcy clearly pointed out that the patriarchal society places women in a subordinate position through the control of women's mobility, and cultivates the natural relationship between women and family in ideology, making women and family become a symbol of stability, thus limiting women's free development and depriving women of their independence (Massey, 1994: 179). It can be seen from the novel that Kate was trained by the social tradition to be a "family angel" ready to serve her family at all times. This is the female identity shaped by the society for more than 20 years.

As we all know, the socio-cultural system is like a chess game or a huge web. In each specific historical and cultural context, an individual must establish an identity relationship with the world and others, and follow the cultural coding procedure to gradually determine his individual role in this socio-cultural order (Tao Jiajun, 2004). Since her marriage, Kate has always been family-centered. At the same time, she is also the center of the family. The needs of her children and husband have given her a great sense of satisfaction. However, when she quarreled with her younger son, the younger son accused her of being suffocating, which made Kate angry and shocked. She realized that her excessive maternal love would cause people to resist when facing the children who are about to grow up. She tried to get rid of the influence of her mother's position, but it was by no means easy. "Every time she receives a job, it is a simple job. She can handle it completely. Obviously, it only takes a few

days to complete it. She feels like a prisoner who has been imprisoned for a long time. She thinks that she will have to face freedom from tomorrow morning." (13) In Kate's heart, she has realized that her daily life has turned her into a prisoner, but facing freedom has become difficult, and her heart is full of panic. "Every time she sees her husband talking with colleagues, especially foreign counterparts, she feels that he has left her." (10) Liu Chuanxia believes that because the relationship between men and women is the most important relationship in many relationships, people will find themselves, witness themselves, solve the crisis of identity and answer the question of "who am I" in this intimate relationship. (Liu Chuanxia, 2010) Due to the huge difference in the mobility between Kate and her husband, her husband is busy working all day and often travels around the world. Kate finds that she and her husband are getting farther and farther away. She cannot find identity in this intimate relationship, let alone answer the question of "who am I".

Kate's first identity after leaving the family was a professional woman. This identity brought her different experiences, but it could not make her form identity. She works for the International Food Organization and feels different life changes from before: as a translator, she earns more than her husband Michael, who is a doctor; She has her own work circle, and her life is no longer family-centered; With the salary she earned, she dressed herself up again, bought new clothes and made new hairstyles, and still had the charm of a woman; Her family recognized her work very much, and after she left the family, everything was running normally. However, Kate gradually found that when she played the role of a professional woman, "she changed and began to return to her old job: becoming a nanny, nurse... and mother" (27). She unconsciously assumed the responsibility of helping company staff and participants solve some trivial problems. Due to her outstanding coordination ability, Kate has been praised by representatives from all over the world, and Charlie also promoted Kate to do the organization work of the conference. In fact, Kate's role in the family and work is highly similar. Her housekeeping ability is reflected in her work position as a strong coordination ability, and she is able to carry out organizational work with ease. Like an invisible mother, Kate gradually becomes "lubricant" and "mediator" in her work (214). In her work, Kate gradually found that as a woman, she can play a coordinating role in dealing with interpersonal relationships and trivial office affairs. In addition, she can decide very little. Liquidity shapes meaning and re-appears social order through relatively stable practices such as repetition and habituation (Cai Xiaomei *et al.*, 2020). Kate moved from the private space of her family to the public space of her work. Although she achieved economic independence and improved mobility, the mother's identity shaped by her long-term mobility

could not be easily changed. She did not achieve true self-identity in this job.

Liquidity is an ideology embedded in public political discourse. This ideology and values may control, restrict or even deprive others of their right to mobility (Cai Xiaomei *et al.*, 2020). During Kate's more than 20 years as a "family angel", mobility has bound her. During this period, mobility has become an accomplice of the patriarchal society to imprison women, making it difficult for Kate to get rid of the constraints of her mother's position. Even though her family does not need her as much as before, she still puts herself in the same position and is always ready to meet the requirements of her family. However, it is precisely because her family no longer needs her so much that she can have her own time to live her own life. Instead, she fell into a panic and could not face the self that was not needed by her family, because she could not obtain a sense of self-identity.

### 3、The Pursuit of Female Identity in the Journey

After work, Kate started a trip with an American youth. Although she didn't really want to do so, she couldn't muster the courage to return to England and find a house to be alone quietly, because she was used to her role as mother and wife, but didn't know how to do herself. She took a taxi to the airport, and then boarded the plane. A few hours later, she had arrived in Malagua, Spain, from Istanbul, Türkiye. It can be seen that modern mobile media play a vital role in enhancing women's mobility. At the end of her work at the International Food Organization, Kate met Jeffrey, a young American. Her revenge for her husband's cheating made Kate want to indulge her mind and body. She made an appointment with Jeffrey to travel to Spain. She remembered her new identity as a lover, but this was not a romantic journey, and Kate still did not get rid of the shackles of her motherhood. When she and Jeffrey sat on the beach terrace in Spain and watched young people from all over the world play guitar and dance on the beach, The two people have very different ideas: "The eyes of the men and women are undoubtedly eager: the man is eager to be with them; and the woman, while thinking of her children, observes the man and sees what he wants - look at her expression, as if as long as the man needs, he will immediately offer balm and comfort for his use." (101) Jeffrey is very eager to revel with those young people; While Kate is thinking about her children, she is ready to meet Jeffrey's needs at any time. Obviously, in their relationship, she subconsciously plays the role of mother.

In relatively conservative Spain, Kate hopes to escape the marriage problem temporarily but can't ignore the condemnation of social morality. She deliberately avoids playing the role of mother, but she has to. The status of lover did not make Kate leave her

mother's job, but was full of anxiety and suffering. The age gap between her and Jeffrey has attracted suspicions from passers-by. They are not like lovers in love. Their extramarital love behavior makes people around them sniff. The way they get along with each other also embarrasses Kate. After marriage, Kate's self-penetration of a good wife and mother has become Kate's habit of taking care of her children and caring for her husband. This intimate way of getting along naturally extends to her relationship with Jeffrey. She could not express her appeal boldly and asked Jeffrey to have sex with herself, but could only gaze at him tenderly. Surprisingly, Jeffrey was almost always in a state of illness. Kate's natural care and care made her seem to have returned to her previous role at home. The whole journey presented a chaotic sickness: lethargy, heat and turbulence, vomiting and a large number of pills, full of fatigue and frustration, all contrary to Kate's original intention.

However, Kate's trip to Spain is not just a trip, but also an exploration of her identity. This juxtaposition of geographical movement and inner exploration is also reflected in the narrative of the novel. When she and Jeffrey recalled their trip to Spain, Jeffrey could only sigh that the past time could not come back, while Kate remembered the wonderful things she had spent with her family, and her heart was full of nostalgia and yearning for her family. In addition, over the years, she has made her own schedule according to the needs of others (117), and now she finally has the opportunity to consider her own needs and ideas and think about her future life. She also recalled that the next morning after her youngest son Tim was furious, she went out with a shopping bag, and the whole street seemed to be full of young women, unmarried, and those with babies were walking around all of a sudden, so relaxed and unrestrained - yes, it was from their gait that we could see this point - confidence, which was exactly what she and Kate had lost, Because she cares too much about others' opinions and knows what consequences her actions will cause (74). Looking back on her family life for more than 20 years, she also realized that she had lost confidence and self. These thoughts about family conflicts put her in a dilemma. This summer's experience makes Kate no longer feel sorry for her lost work and romance, but Kate's confusion about the value of life has not been relieved. During this trip, Kate experienced not only the freedom and relaxation brought by mobility, but also the incomparable yearning for her family, which made her fall into a deep contradiction.

Although Kate's mobility experience during her trip to Spain was not very good, and she failed to realize the construction of identity, it provided an opportunity for her to think about life outside of her daily habits. David Simon (1980) pointed out in the practical study of mobility that mobility is composed of

a series of meaningful social behaviors. In his view, our living space and daily habits mainly include "walking, turning, reaching out" and other small actions, which even "spontaneously guide ourselves", forming a body ballet to achieve specific goals or needs. The mobility experience during this trip can help Kate break the body ballet formed by daily mobility, thus helping her break away from the shackles of her mother's identity and reconstruct her own identity.

#### 4、The Significance of Mobility -- Reshaping Female's Identity

Understanding the way mobility and gender intersect is undoubtedly complex, given that both concepts are full of meaning, power and controversial understanding. The concept of gender does not operate in the form of "duality". It will never be given, but constructed by performing repetition. This is crucial for analyzing how mobility modifies gender practices. There are many ways to generate gender in space. Perhaps the most commented is the duality of public and private, which is mapped to men and women, men and women in a clear way, and is questioned by any number of feminist theorists. Therefore, understanding mobility means understanding the observable body movements, the meaning of these movement codes, the experience of practicing these movements and the potential of performing these movements. The way people move is clearly gendered and continues to reproduce the gendered power level. The meaning given to mobility through narration, discourse and reproduction is also clearly differentiated by sex. The acquisition of mobility is usually similar to the struggle for new subjectivity.

After Kate returned to London, she stayed in a hotel because of illness. There, she met women from all over the world. They also take care of other people's daily life in the hotel, but they are not inferiority complex, but full of love for their work and recognition of their ability, which gave Kate new inspiration. Due to her illness, she accepted the meticulous care of the female staff from the hotel. "She tried to stand up, but her body shook, and the girl held her hand. The warmth and concern immediately poured into Kate's body." (109) This made her feel the value of her daily care for her family, which was also a new experience brought by her mobility out of the house. The identity of an individual depends on the value of the social group and the identification with the value of the social group. The needs and interests of any individual must be subordinate to the needs and interests of the group. (Chen Yongguo, 2016) In addition, these women from all over the world represent a new generation of free women. They dare to look for job opportunities around the world, and have clear and firm goals. Their mobility will not be limited by entering marriage. They have crossed the geographical, national and gender boundaries, and become a model of modern new

women with the mobility provided by modern transportation technology; getting along with them also gives Kate new courage to face her regained freedom. In addition, getting along with these girls also made her realize her collective identity, that is, she learned the value that women can play as a group.

Kate tried to get rid of the shackles of her family, but she also had a yearning for home in her heart. The conflict and confusion in her heart made her sick. Because his house could not be rented back home, he shared the basement with the girl Maureen. After her illness, Kate was extremely emaciated and thin. She didn't have the strength and mood to dress up. She often went out untidily and casually. Before that, she always spent a lot of time in front of the mirror. Her identity is Mrs. Brown. This woman with a good family has a good image in the eyes of outsiders, so Kate has always been very concerned about the eyes of others. After recovering from her illness, she was treated coldly and humiliated when she wore baggy clothes and went out to eat and shop in the supermarket without any decoration. When she put her hair on and put on a suitable suit, she turned back to Mrs. Brown and was greeted by other people's smiling faces. Kate couldn't figure out who Mrs. Brown was. Without her delicate hair and expensive suit, she seems to have become invisible. Even her good friends can't recognize her. Kate, who was freed from the role of wife and mother, had enough time to think about her life this summer. She finally understood that she had been living with a mask. Her exquisite hairstyle and clothing could attract others' appreciation for her, and her dignified manner and manner could attract others' respect. However, these are not her own. The real woman is the woman who lives in Maureen's apartment. Don't worry about her hair and family meals, curl up lazily in the sofa, and drink coffee casually without covering her drooping eyelids and loose muscles. This summer, Kate worked as a professional woman, experienced extramarital affairs, and tried to live a slovenly life. All these helped her to recognize her past. She had been trying to please others, but lost herself, and her real self was submerged. Now, Kate is aware of her own existence again. She realizes that she cannot always restrain herself, always obey and tolerate others, and she has the right to express her true thoughts.

A small detail of living with Maureen helped Kate reflect on her life thoroughly, get out of the spiritual dilemma and achieve self-identity. Kate received a letter from her family. Her son Tim was ill and wanted to go home three weeks in advance. Her husband also wanted to go home one week in advance. Kate immediately started to contact the tenants, the daily necessities company and the cleaning company to arrange everything for the return of her family. She changed from lazy and sick to energetic, agile and skilled, and then returned to the original Mrs. Brown.

Maureen looked at Kate angrily and said, "I would rather die than be like you. It's terrible." (197) Maureen's reaction woke Kate up. When she heard the needs of her family, she lost herself again and almost fell into the "body ballet" created by the daily mobility for many years. Then she called to cancel all appointments and sent a telegram to let her family take care of everything by herself. She would go home at the end of October as promised. She finally understood the crux of herself and her life, that is, as a woman, she has always lived in the eyes of others and the established model of society, never thought about her own inner needs, and never made her own choices (Shi Yi, 2012). This fully shows that Kate has achieved spiritual mobility freedom and can act according to her own will. Kate found herself, no longer unconditionally obedient to her family and ignoring her own feelings and needs. This time of going out allows Kate to clearly see herself at the turn of her life: life is not elsewhere, but in the core of her strong self. At the end of the summer, Kate decided to return to her family, which had been her deliberate choice. At the end of the novel, "she drapes her hair on her shoulders and walks towards home." Kate who returns home will no longer lose herself in order to please others. In the future family life, she will definitely find the value of her life. She will no longer be a vassal and victim, and will no longer feel lonely and confused. Kate returned home with a new image. This summer's journey was her self-help journey, which realized her spiritual regeneration.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Lessing's early novels focus on women's breaking the shackles of traditional concepts and family to achieve real liberation and freedom, while Kate, the heroine in the mid-term novel *The Summer before the Dark*, chose to return to her family after a series of experiences, and the ending is intriguing. At the beginning of the novel, Kate's series of daily mobility activities are carried out around the family, which makes her form an inertial "body ballet" and confines her ideology in a narrow female space, gradually making her doubt the value of her existence. After she left home by chance, her values also changed. She began to face her aging self honestly, accepted her imperfection, and found the meaning of her own existence and the way of identity.

After entering middle age, Lessing has a deeper and more detailed thinking on women's issues. The theme of returning to family reflects her deep thinking and pragmatic attitude towards women's issues in her mature state. Social reform is a long-term and far-reaching movement. It cannot be completed overnight. In Lessing's view, for most current housewives, if they want to get out of the barriers, they should first get rid of the spiritual slavery and the shackles of traditional concepts, in order to obtain spiritual liberation and spiritual freedom. It is true that

Lessing is also concerned about women's freedom. But in the discussion with Bofva, which focuses on the complaints against men, Lessing describes the battered tendency of women in the sexual relationship and realizes that they gradually realize their problems and actively get rid of this mental disorder. It can be seen that Lessing thinks that the crux of the problem lies in women themselves. Women should start from themselves if they want to seek freedom. Only by achieving spiritual independence can they have real freedom (Su Chen, 2005). It is fundamental for women to recognize themselves and seek self-identity on the way to freedom. Lessing's view reflects her pragmatic attitude towards women's issues, as Kate said in the book: "Self-discovery does not mean immediate change, but means liberation and freedom of choice." (230) Lessing constructed a free and equal female mobility order and realized women's identity by describing Kate's breaking the flow language of patriarchal society.

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