
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Study on Izzy's Existential Predicament and Growth in *Little Fires Everywhere* from the Perspective of Spatial Criticism

Zhu Wanying

College of Foreign Studies, Jinan University, Guangzhou, China

Corresponding Author: Zhu Wanying, E-mail: hazel_zwy@163.com

| ABSTRACT

Little Fires Everywhere is a novel written by contemporary writer Celeste Ng in 2017. The novel portrays a stubborn and sensitive, brave and bold little girl—Izzy. She has been living in a repressed physical space for a long time, suffering from the control and contempt of family members as well as the isolation and ostracism of teachers and classmates in the social space, which eventually led to the alienation of her psychological space. Later, in the process of communicating with her tenant, Izzy's shriveled heart is ignited. She sees different lifestyles, captures the meaning of life, and begins to defend freedom and seek her true self in an extremely rebellious way. Finally, she achieves transformation and growth in psychological space and achieves self-redemption in a rigid world. This paper employs spatial criticism theory to analyze the existential predicament Izzy confronts in various spaces and her resistance from three dimensions: the mundane physical space, the oppressive social space, and the estranged psychological space. The aim is to illuminate to readers that only through persistent rebellion can individuals shatter the constraints of space and attain true freedom in the face of repression and injustice.

| KEYWORDS

Celeste Ng; *Little Fires Everywhere*; spatial criticism; existential predicament; growth.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 25 July 2024

PUBLISHED: 04 August 2024

DOI: 10.32996/ijllt.2024.7.8.2

1. Introduction

1.1 Celeste Ng and *Little Fires Everywhere*

Celeste Ng is an American writer and novelist. She has released many short stories that have been published in a variety of literary journals. She gained great fame in 2014 with her debut *Everything I Never Told You* and won the Amazon Book of the Year award, as well as praise from critics, adding a new force to the contemporary Chinese American literary world. Ng's short story *Girls at Play* won a Pushcart Prize in 2012 and was a 2015 recipient of an Alex Award. In 2017, Her second novel, *Little Fires Everywhere*, once again swept the European and American literary scene, winning the fame of the best book of the year by over 25 publications in one fell swoop. Ng received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2020. Her most recent novel, *Our Missing Hearts*, was released on October 4, 2022.

Little Fires Everywhere mainly revolves around the lives of two families. The Richardson family's life is prosperous and stable, while Mia and her daughter have been wandering in turmoil and freedom. When the lives of the two families begin to intersect, the conflict between stability and turbulence, order and chaos, is undoubtedly revealed. In the communication and collision between two families, Richardson's youngest daughter, Izzy, gradually discovers the unique truth about life and achieves spiritual transformation and growth. The novel involves various social issues such as family education, racial conflicts, order and challenges, life and dignity, and the gap between dreams and reality, which have sparked great interest and deep reflection among readers.

In the novel, Ng organically combines the environment, characters, thoughts, and space, deeply exploring the influence of physical space, social space, and psychological space on the growth of characters. The novel portrays an image of a stubborn, sensitive, brave, and bold little girl named Izzy, revealing the various predicaments she faced in her growth process. The youngest daughter of the Richardson family, Izzy, is considered a freak and a madman in the eyes of everyone because she disagrees with the mainstream culture of Shaker Heights and is the "black sheep" of the Richardson family. She has been living in a dull and oppressive physical space for a long time, suffering from the control and contempt of family members in the social space, as well as the alienation and ostracism of teachers and classmates. As a result, her psychological space has become alienated, lonely, and numb. Consequently, she is unwilling to communicate with the outside world. But in fact, there has always been a small flame hidden deep in Izzy's heart. She dares to voice her opinions, never hides her emotions, and refuses to blindly follow the so-called order and rules. Later, after meeting her tenant, Mia, Izzy's inner flame is ignited. She sees different lifestyles, captures the meaning of life, and begins to defend freedom and search for herself in an extremely rebellious way. Finally, she fulfills transformation and growth in psychological space and achieves self-redemption in a rigid world.

1.2 Theoretical Foundation

Spatial criticism theory emerged as a literary criticism theory in the late 20th century. It is a newly emerging discipline within the humanities and social sciences, known as new cultural geography, which emphasizes that space is a multidimensional existence encompassing social, cultural, and geographical dimensions. This theory provides a theoretical foundation for studying texts from multiple perspectives and has made "space" a focal point of academic attention in recent years. The founder of spatial theory, Henri Lefebvre, argued in *The Production of Space* that space is not merely a geometric or traditional geographical concept but a process of re-configuring social relationships and reconstructing social order. He believed that space is not a passive geographical environment but the result and reproducer of social production (Wang, 2006: 102). According to Lefebvre, space plays an increasingly important role in modern society, acting as a reinforcing agent of social systems and determining social status. Lefebvre proposed the "tripartite model of space," namely, "the fields we are concerned with are, first, the physical - nature, the Cosmos; secondly, the mental, including logical and formal abstractions; and, thirdly, the social" (Lefebvre, 1991: 11). His categorization and interpretation of space have greatly contributed to the development of spatial criticism theory.

Michel Foucault further enriched and developed Lefebvre's theory of social space, analyzing the importance of space from a social and power perspective. He argued that space is a form of power constructed by individuals through power relations, and it serves as a means for power institutions to control the population. In a society governed by power, individuals live within a vast, enclosed, and complex hierarchical structure, constantly manipulated and supervised (Wu, 2007). Foucault's theory of power space emphasizes the power relations within spatial fields, constantly questioning established orders: Who produces space? And how does this spatial order act upon individuals? Through his research, he reveals the purpose of spatial construction, namely, to discipline individuals, as well as the social power relations and hierarchical orders underlying it.

The spatial theories of Lefebvre and Foucault provide a theoretical foundation for studying contemporary literature from new perspectives and offer profound insights into the criticism of literary spaces. They position space within a social context and explore the multifaceted and complex relationships between cultural, social, and historical layers underlying the construction, metaphors, and symbols of space within texts.

2. Literature Review

At present, foreign attention to Celeste Ng mostly focuses on newspaper and magazine reviews, with few academic research papers evaluating Ng's creativity in characters and plot, as well as the practical significance of the novel. For example, Cha (2017) highly praised the plot arrangement of *Little Fires Everywhere* in the *Los Angeles Times*, stating that Celeste Ng cleverly grasped the rhythm of the novel, closely connecting various characters through multiple storylines, switching between multiple perspectives, and creating multiple themes. Burling (2017) commented on the theme of family education in the novel in *San Francisco Chronicle*, stating that *Little Fires Everywhere* serves as a warning to readers about how small family problems can lead to the disintegration of the family, thus giving people a new perspective on personal and family defects. In terms of academic studies, scholars mainly concentrate on Marxism and racism. Sagita and Wahyuni (2020) published an article entitled "A Marxist Reading of *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017) by Celeste Ng", which used Marxist literary theory to reveal the different classes that existed in the novel and analyzed the commodification of Mia and alienation of Bebe in the process of Mia's surrogacy and Bebe's adoption. Ul Zia and Hashmi (2023) revealed the racial discrimination and marginalization experienced by Bebe Chow, a Chinese immigrant woman, in the novel.

Domestic scholars mainly focus on ethical issues and identity recognition in novels. For example, Wang Fang (2023) interprets the three "imperfect mother" in the novel: Bebe, a Chinese migrant worker who abandoned her baby; Mia, a surrogate mother for money; and Elena, a mother who suffered from an alienated mother-child relationship for advocating instrumental rationality. She explores the connotation of motherhood from the aspects of spiritual redemption, ethnic identity, and maternal duties, re-

examines morals and ethics, racial politics, and dominant values in American society, criticizes the instrumental rationality and racialism prevalent in American society, and advocates the return to natural maternal emotions and value rationality. Liu Min (2022) adopts literary, ethical criticism to explore the ethical environments in the specific era of the novel so as to reveal what ethical choices the protagonists make under the effect of ethical identity in the midst of ethical conflicts, namely, the pursuit of rational will, the reconciliation of mother-daughter relationship, and the pursuit for a harmonious society. Due to Ng being a new generation of Chinese American writers, specialized research on her and her works, both domestically and internationally, is still in its early stages.

Based on the former analysis, it is evident that the current academic research on *Little Fires Everywhere* rarely involves spatial interpretation. Although some scholars have done related studies, they are not adequate. For instance, Ding Xiaorui (2023) adopted Foucault's spatial theory to interpret the space in *Little Fires Everywhere*, but she mainly focused on heterotopia. Given that the various spatial relationships in the novel are like capillaries scattered throughout every corner of society, affecting the development and changes of the characters. Therefore, this paper will combine spatial criticism theory to analyze the predicament faced by Izzy in different spaces and her resistance from three aspects: repressed physical space, confined social space, and alienated psychological space. This paper will explore the interweaving and influence of different spaces in the novel, demonstrate Izzy's growth process and self-transformation, and provide some reference for modern people to bravely break the shackles of space and gain true freedom so as to achieve personal development.

3. Confinement in the Three Kinds of Space: Izzy's Existential Predicament

Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991) is a French sociologist and philosopher. His research delves into the field of spatial criticism. His masterpiece, *The Production of Space*, condenses his space thoughts, which systematically explains the concept of the combination of "spatial practice," "representations of space," and "space of representations" in his theory system of space production. As a powerful analytical tool, it is the kernel of space production. Space is no longer purely physical and spiritual but created by human labor and practice and is a process of continuous reproduction of social relations. "Space itself is both a production, shaped through a variety of social processes and human interventions, and a force that, in turn, influences, directs and delimits possibilities of action and ways of human being in the world"(Wegner, 2002: 235). Space and survival are closely related. In *Little Fires Everywhere*, various spaces overlap with each other, jointly influencing the growth and changes of the characters in the novel: physical space provides a basic activity place for human life, social space carries the complex relationships that people rely on for survival, and psychological space affects individual survival and development. In the novel, the youngest daughter of the Richardson family, Izzy, suffers from the oppression of physical and social space, leading to the alienation of her psychological space and facing a severe existential predicament.

3.1 The Repressed Physical Space

Physical space is a kind of static entity space manifested as a natural landscape form. It involves geographical landscapes with natural attributes and architectural entities with humanistic characteristics. In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre points out that "space is never empty: it always embodies a meaning" (Lefebvre, 1991: 154). It is a kind of material and tool space. It's an area filled with locations, settings, and other places with diverse social relations and diversity (Wu 2007: 381). It exerts a subtle influence on people's mental and physical behavior. In *Little Fires Everywhere*, Shaker Heights, as the main city for the plot development of the entire novel, is closely related to the growth and development of the characters. Crang (2003: 63) believes that "cities are not just places where stories take place, but descriptions of urban landscapes also express an understanding of society and life." In the novel, Shaker Heights portrays the physical space in which the characters live, depicting the social and cultural atmosphere of that time and suggesting the characters' situation. The Shaker Heights, depicted by Ng, is a small suburban town full of rules and a utopia full of order. In Shaker Heights, everything has its own rules and regulations.

Order—and regulation, the father of order—had been the Shakers' key to harmony. They had regulated everything: the proper time for rising in the morning, the proper color of window curtains, the proper length of a man's hair, the proper way to fold one's hands in prayer (right thumb over left). If they planned every detail, the Shakers had believed, they could create a patch of heaven on earth, a little refuge from the world. (Ng, 2017: 26)

Foucault argues that "discipline sometimes requires enclosure, the specification of a place heterogeneous to all others and closed in upon itself. It is the protected place of disciplinary monotony" (Foucault, 1995: 141). The Shaker Heights is such a disciplined physical space, with numerous rules in the city that people living in it must abide by. These rules invisibly control people's thoughts and behavior. As a member of this space, Izzy is naturally influenced by this spatial characteristic and is deeply constrained and oppressed.

In addition, in the novel, Izzy's main living space also includes her family space—the Richardson family. Home is the emotional home, the harbor of the soul, and the shelter of the spirit. Family space plays a crucial role in the growth of characters. The

homestead in the novel is not only a living space but also a complex and diverse space closely connected to the characters. Izzy's house has a luxurious exterior with complete furniture and a perfect layout, but in reality, it is a cold space. To outsiders, the Richardson family is perfect: "It was the greenness of the lawn, the sharp lines of white mortar between the bricks, the rustle of the maple leaves in the gentle breeze, and the very breeze itself" (Ng, 2017: 34) that make Pearl astonished. There are also various fancy furniture in the house that are arranged perfectly. "The Richardsons must have arranged themselves into a tableau for her enjoyment, for surely they could not always exist in this state of domestic perfection" (Ng, 2017: 35). However, the atmosphere of the Richardson family is actually cold. Richardson and his wife are busy with work and neglect the condition of their children, blindly providing material satisfaction for them while neglecting spiritual communication. Although Izzy has been living at home for a long time, she cannot feel the warmth of her family, so she chooses to isolate herself and develops a sense of alienation from her family members. "Izzy found the whole thing unspeakably idiotic and barricaded herself upstairs, practicing her violin" (Ng, 2017: 35). It can be inferred that Izzy seems to live in a happy family, but she is, in fact, isolated herself from her family members.

In the novel, Izzy is initially referred to as a "lunatic" by people who are out of place with the surrounding environment. "Despite her early start, she displayed a tenacity of will that even the doctors remarked upon" (Ng, 2017: 95). No one truly understands her because her personality was vastly different from the society dominated by rules at that time. Therefore, whether it is the Shaker Heights or the Richardson family, it exerts the constraint and oppression on Izzy.

Life in their beautiful, perfectly ordered, abundantly furnished house, where the grass was always cut, and the leaves were always raked, and there was never, ever any garbage in sight; in their beautiful, perfectly ordered neighborhood where every lawn had a tree and the streets curved so that no one went too fast and every house harmonized with the next; in their beautiful, perfectly ordered city, where everyone got along and everyone followed the rules and everything had to be beautiful and perfect on the outside, no matter what mess lay within. (Ng, 2017: 267).

From Izzy's inner monologue, it can be seen that she is extremely tired of the environment she is in. She sees through the decay hidden beneath the seemingly perfect exterior of the space she lives in. She is dissatisfied with the outside world, which leads to her alienation and isolation from it.

3.2 The Confined Social Space

Social space is a cardinal component of spatial criticism theory, which pays more attention to the social properties of space. In Lefebvre's opinion, space is "a brutal condensation of social relationships" (Lefebvre, 1991: 227). It indicates that social space is composed of social relations among people, which includes not only the place where people perform daily activities but also the non-material world, which is incarnated in characters in social intercourse, such as the behavior, results, ideological and cultural conflicts of characters in society. It involves a wide variety of objects, both natural and social, including social and cultural information revealed by people in the process of communication and activities. In *The Production of Space* (1991: 26), Lefebvre argues that "(Social) space is a (social) product," emphasizing the social nature of space and stating that "space is political and ideological. It is a product literally filled with ideologies" (Lefebvre, 1976: 31). He believes that space is intimately related to human creativity, thus "an approach which would analyse not things in space but space itself, with a view to uncovering the social relationships embedded in it" (Lefebvre, 1991: 89). He also argues that "social space contains the social relations of reproduction, i.e., the bio-physiological relations between the sexes and between age groups, along with the specific organization of family" (Lefebvre, 1991: 32).

In *Little Fires Everywhere*, Izzy has always been in an extremely oppressive and confined social space, mainly manifested in her relationships with her parents and other family members. The family where Izzy lives is not only an architectural space but also an important social space. Her rebellious and free-spirited nature contrasts sharply with her obedience and adherence to the rules of her family members. The clash of these two lifestyles has made Izzy's family a unique social space. Through the relationships between characters in social space, we can glimpse Izzy's social status and psychological state, as well as reveal the troubles that complicated family relationships have brought to her. Izzy is the youngest daughter of the Richardson family, who is stubborn and wild. She is regarded as the "black sheep" (Ng, 2017: 12) of the Richardson family, who has "the heart of a radical" (Ng, 2017: 267). Mrs. Richardson is Izzy's biological mother, but she has very strict demands on Izzy, always blaming her and constantly confining Izzy's behavior. She frequently warns Izzy to "sit up straight," "calm down," "behave yourself," and "why can't you listen to me" (Ng, 2017: 95-96). Mrs. Richardson doesn't allow Izzy to swim in the pool; she only allows her to sit by the pool and bask in the sun. Izzy is not allowed to ski or stay overnight at her friend's house, etc. Mrs. Richardson always dislikes her youngest daughter, and "she was usually annoyed with Izzy for some reason or another" (Ng, 2017: 93). Accordingly, Izzy is stubborn, reckless, and unwilling to obey her mother's unreasonable control. She feels that "the more closely her mother watched her and the more she chafed at the attention" (Ng, 2017: 96). The result is that the more Izzy wants to do what she really likes, the more her mother tries to restrict her. Therefore, "Izzy pushing, her mother restraining, and after a time no one could remember how the dynamic had started, only that it had existed always" (Ng, 2017: 97).

Except for her mother, the other members of the Richardson family also have an inharmonious relationship with Izzy. Her sister Lexie and brother Trip both “treat Izzy as if she were a dog that might go rabid at any minute” (Ng, 2017: 40). They don’t understand Izzy and always scoff at her. When their mother scolds Izzy, her sister Lexie doesn’t help her but laughs at her instead. “Lexie’s laugh floated up the stairwell and down the hallway, and Izzy slammed the door shut” (Ng, 2017: 117). Trip comments that “we all know she’s always been mental” (Ng, 2017: 13). In fact, due to differences in values, Izzy feels that she cannot resonate with others. She believes that Lexie and Trip and everyone like them is “so concerned about wearing the right things, saying the right things, being friends with the right people” (Ng, 2017: 70). Izzy, like a “marginalized person,” is unable to blend into her family. The harsh criticism from her mother and the mockery from her brother and sister make Izzy always lock herself in her room and refuse to communicate with the outside world. “Her life had been one of mute, futile fury” (Ng, 2017: 70). The lack of warmth and harmony in the family space causes Izzy’s loneliness and depression.

Apart from her family, Izzy’s school is also another social space that confines her. In school, Izzy is targeted and alienated by teachers and classmates. Because of her superb violin skills, Izzy is assigned the second-chair violin upon entering school, which leads to the hatred of her classmates. They join in the “snide comments, or called her ‘the freshman’” (Ng, 2017: 69). When someone holds parties, “Izzy, of course, had not been invited” (Ng, 2017: 54). In the classroom, when Izzy selects a poem that does not meet the teacher’s so-called standards, the teacher has “peremptorily told her to sit down and given her a zero” (Ng, 2017: 71). Various constraints prevent Izzy’s free spirit from being released, causing another predicament in her growth.

3.3 The Alienated Psychological Space

When it comes to psychological space, Lefebvre doesn’t give a precise definition. “It may connote logical coherence, practical consistency, self-regulation and the relations of the parts to the whole, the engendering of like by like in a set of places, the logic of container versus contents, and so on” (Lefebvre, 1991: 3). Therefore, it can be inferred that psychological space is dynamic and changeable, with extreme uncertainty. It is the place of people’s psychological activities and bears people’s personality traits and emotional desires. It is projected into the hearts of characters through living space and social practice experience, thus generating sensibility and cognition of something or someone. The psychological space often reflects the physical-social environment of characters, the power relations, and the social ideology at that time. Both the Shaker Heights and the Richardson’s house are physical spaces full of restrictions and rules, and it is obvious that Izzy is at odds with this seemingly perfect space. People all believe that Izzy “was a little lunatic, that there had always been something off about the Richardson family” (Ng, 2017: 9), and “had the heart of a radical” (Ng, 2017: 71).

Due to living in such a dull and confined world for a long time, the seed of freedom in Izzy’s heart cannot sprout, and she remains depressed and unhappy. Her psychological space gradually alienated her, leading her step by step towards loneliness and isolation. In the family, when Izzy presents a different view than the other members of the family, “a shocked silence dropped over the table like a heavy cloth.” “Across the table, Lexie and Trip exchanged wary, unsurprised glances. Moody shot Izzy a look that said shut up” (Ng, 2017: 116). It is clear that, living in the physical space, no one understands Izzy; she is a lonely person in the entire family. While visiting friends in the Richardson family’s car, Izzy sits in the back row sullenly; while celebrating Lexie’s acceptance letter and having dinner outside, Izzy also sits at the table with low interest. “All her life, she’d felt hard and angry” (Ng, 2017: 267). While other children in the Richardson family are sitting around the sofa watching TV, Izzy always practices the violin alone in her bedroom. Her interest in the violin, to some extent, fills the blank in her life as she expresses her suppressed and neglected emotions while practicing.

Therefore, it is apparent that during Izzy’s growth, whether in the depressed and oppressive physical space or the confined social space, both are filled with various constraints and limitations. Through the depiction of perfectly planned Shaker Heights, obedient family members, and stereotypical teachers and classmates, Ng demonstrates the influence of physical and social space on individual psychological space. This ubiquitous implicit or explicit suppression has hindered the development of Izzy’s psychological space. Under heavy oppression, her psychological space gradually alienated, sinking into the predicament of loneliness and isolation.

4. Exploration in the Three Kinds of Space: Izzy’s Individual Growth

Space is not only an essential means for the ruling class to exercise power but also a place for marginalized people to rebel against the ruling class. Ng portrays many different spaces in *Little Fires Everywhere*, realistically presenting the characters’ survival experiences. The rigid, dull, and oppressive physical spaces of the Shaker Heights and the Richardson house pose serious constraints on Izzy, who is naturally free and stubborn. The harsh, dogmatic, and indifferent social space of family and school brings loneliness and alienation to Izzy. In the dual confinement of these two types of spaces, Izzy’s psychological space becomes distorted and unwilling to communicate and interact with the outside world. However, despite the severe oppression, Izzy still struggles and does not stop pursuing freedom. Space is a kind of power that can influence, guide, and limit various possibilities of human behavior and ways in the world (Yan, 2006: 137). From the Richardson family’s home to Mia’s house, spatial change gives

Izzy the strength to resist. As physical and social spaces undergo significant changes, Izzy's psychological space also shifts drastically. Her self-awareness strengthens, and her pursuit of life's meaning gradually emerges, marking transformative personal growth.

4.1 Change of Physical Space

Bakhtin (1998: 314) believes that space is filled with real meaning in life, making it crucial for the protagonist and their fate. Different spaces have different features and atmospheres, and the actions of characters will also change with the changes in space, thereby affecting the development of the plot. The change of Izzy stems from the change of space. After making friends with Mia, Izzy develops admiration for her and voluntarily requests to be her assistant at Mia's house. Through this, Izzy emerges from a state of self-isolation. "Instead of sequestering herself in her bedroom with her violin, she would walk the mile and a half to the house on Winslow right after school" (Ng, 2017: 79). Mia's home is simple yet warm. There are only some daily items and not too much furniture in her home. But Mia is very attentive to its decoration. "Each room had been painted a different color—the kitchen a sunny yellow, the living room a deep cantaloupe, the bedrooms a warm peach—and the overall effect was of stepping into a box of sunlight, even on a cloudy day" (Ng, 2017: 60). The warm toned room creates a peaceful yet vibrant atmosphere, and Mia creates a cozy environment, a shelter that is warm and loving. Her side door is unlocked and always open for the children of the Richardson family. It is apparent that Mia's home is open and inclusive. It can be inferred that Mia's home is a relaxed and comfortable physical space. Izzy loves staying at Mia's home. Even when she sleeps on her own bed, she would "imagine herself in the house on Winslow" (Ng, 2017: 80). Izzy is allowed to be herself in Mia's home, and in this relaxed and comfortable environment, she imagines that Mia is actually her true mother and she is finally "reunited with her true mother." (Ng, 2017: 80). The time spent at Mia's house is Izzy's most comfortable time. From the dull and cold Richardson's house to the warm and bright rental house on Winslow Road, the change of physical space brings about a change in Izzy's heart. She is no longer depressed every day, and "everyone in the Richardson family noticed Izzy's improved demeanor" (Ng, 2017: 80). They find that Izzy is almost pleasant around Mia. She is no longer self-enclosed but instead interacts with the outside world. She learns how to frame and develop photos with Mia, and also lies on the counter to accompany Mia in cooking.

4.2 Struggle in Social Space

Social space is the embodiment of social relations, emphasizing the domination, obedience, and resistance of social relations. It is a space for the absolute obedience of the lower-ranks to the ruling class, as well as a space for them to rebel. Cotugno regards social space as "a site of struggle because individuals refuse to passively accept the social structures they encounter and inhabit. Envisioned space as the site and means for collective social resistance" (Cotugno, 2002: 2). The description of social space in *Little Fires Everywhere* portrays the growth dilemma that Izzy faces, reflecting her anxious and chaotic interpersonal communication difficulties on her growth path. But while Izzy is suppressed by social spaces such as family and school, she also engages in a series of resistance. Izzy's parents believe that her physical coordination is not good, so they force her to enroll in dance classes. But Izzy doesn't like the dance classes at all. Therefore, "every class, Izzy sat down on the floor and refused to move" (Ng, 2017: 41). In school, before the dance performance of her class, Izzy writes "NOT YOUR PUPPET" across her forehead as a protest. Izzy also tacks up Eliot's poems on all the bulletin boards, such as " I HAVE MEASURED OUT MY LIFE WITH COFFEE SPOONS and DO I DARE TO EAT A PEACH? and DO I DARE DISTURB THE UNIVERSE?" (Ng, 2017: 70), in an attempt to awaken numb and regulated students.

What's more, Izzy's true growth also comes from communication and interaction with Mia. When Izzy has her first conversation with Mia due to being suspended from class, Mia's understanding and approval makes Izzy feel "a small kindness, with no strings attached" (Ng, 2017: 67). Therefore, Izzy takes the initiative to tell Mia the real reason for her tragic suspension of class and opens her heart to Mia. Mia's response — "What are you going to do about it?" (Ng, 2017: 70) — makes Izzy feel concerned and sympathetic. Compared to the indifference of her family members — "Izzy had startled, but not surprised, her family by being suspended from school" (Ng, 2017: 66), only Mia is standing from her perspective to think for her, which also inspires Izzy's self-awareness. "The very idea that she could do something stunned her" (Ng, 2017: 71). Therefore, Izzy attempts to resist the music teacher who has racial discrimination. "Izzy had the heart of a radical, but she had the experience of a fourteen-year-old living in the suburban Midwest. Which was to say: she cast about for ideas for exacting revenge—egged windows, flaming bags of dog shit—and chose the best thing in her limited repertoire" (Ng, 2017: 71). But Mia provides her with advice and inspiration. "In those words, she heard a permission to do what she'd always been told not to: to take matters into her own hands, to make trouble" (Ng, 2017: 72). In the end, Izzy creates the "toothpick incident" that causes a sensation throughout the school, achieving her resistance against the music teacher. But the toothpicks' most lasting effect turns out to be on Izzy herself. "She saw there to delight in mischief, in breaking the rules...She recognized a kindred spirit, a similar subversive spark to the one she often felt flaring inside her. Instead of shutting herself up in her room all afternoon, she began to come down when Mia arrived" (Ng, 2017: 78). It can be seen that Izzy's social space is no longer closed. She begins to open her heart to Mia and bravely fight against the oppressive social space under Mia's encouragement, pursuing her true self.

4.3 Transformation of Psychological Space

“Psychological space is logical and formal abstractions” (Lefebvre, 1991: 11). It is an intangible spatial category that displays the inner world and personalities of a character. It can be regarded as an abstract collection of people’s ideals, beliefs, viewpoints, concepts, and so on, which may affect individual behavior and guide individual practice. In literary works, the author not only creates characters but also goes deep into the characters’ psychology, consciousness, and thinking levels. The change of Izzy’s psychological space depends on the change of physical and social space. After meeting Mia, the physical space in which Izzy lives undergoes significant change: from the cold Richardson home to Mia’s bright and warm rental house. In addition, the form of interpersonal communication in the social space has also changed from estrangement and argument to communication and exchange. Mia’s listening and understanding soothes Izzy’s shriveled soul. She tells Izzy that, “There’s so much wonderful about you” (Ng, 2017: 80). Only with Mia can Izzy be her true self freely. She thinks that “with Mia, she’d been different, in a way she hadn’t known she could be” (Ng, 2017: 267). In the interaction with Mia, the various restraints that have long constrained Izzy are finally opened, Izzy’s inner self is released, and her psychological space gains freedom—“she had felt, finally, as if she could speak without immediately bumping into the hard shell of her sheltered life, as if she suddenly saw that the solid walls penning her in were actually bars, with spaces between them wide enough to slip through” (Ng, 2017: 267). Mia’s openness and tolerance gradually awaken Izzy’s self-awareness. “She’d become curious and kind and open, as if under a magic spell” (Ng, 2017: 267). The transformation of Izzy’s psychological space symbolizes the completion of her personal growth, and she believes that she can no longer return to her once lonely and boring life. “Mia had opened a door in her that could not be shut again” (Ng, 2017: 267). It is evident that after a series of struggles, Izzy successfully blends into society, achieves growth in psychological space, frees herself from the existential predicament caused by physical and social space, and makes her own life choices. She bravely resists oppression: retaliating against the teachers with racial discrimination, burning down the house that once bound her, escaping from her controlling family, and embarking on a journey to discover the true meaning of life. Izzy boldly defends her freedom and dignity, courageously pursuing her life ideals despite various restrictions.

5. Conclusion

The diversity of the production space of literary texts and the heterogeneity of the literary text space itself bring about the multiplicity of literary reading and interpretation (Liu, 2007). As Ng creates a world with rich connotations for readers in *Little Fires Everywhere*, with multi-dimensional spatial levels expanding outward and intertwined and fused with each other, this paper mainly inquires into the oppression that Izzy suffers in different spaces and her efforts to resist and strive for freedom by adopting Lefebvre’s spatial criticism theory as the research angle. The physical space, social space, and psychological space complement each other in the text, together forming the overall art of the novel. Izzy’s confinement and struggle, isolation and openness, alienation and transformation in physical, social, and psychological spaces are vividly portrayed in the novel. The constraints imposed by various spaces in the novel have presented numerous challenges in Izzy’s growth: the meticulously designed and organized Richardson house, juxtaposed with the stifling environment of Shaker Heights and other physical settings, severely limit Izzy’s behavior, leading to her isolation and estrangement from the outside world. As for her social space, disharmonious family dynamics and strained teacher-student relationships constantly suppress Izzy, forcing her to internalize her anger and gradually succumb to loneliness and depression. The pervasive oppression of both physical and social space distorts and alienates Izzy’s psychological space, ultimately plunging her into a profound existential predicament.

Simultaneously, despite facing heavy constraints, Izzy also makes every effort to resist. As space changes and with Mia’s guidance, Izzy gradually opens her heart, changes her mindset, gets rid of the existential predicament, discovers her true self, and accomplishes a reshaping of her self-awareness. Faced with the confinement of physical space, Izzy chooses to set fire to her home and flees Shaker Heights, where she has always lived, embarking on a path to pursue her life ideals. In response to the constraints of social space, Izzy boldly protests and retaliates against teachers who have racially discriminated against her and caused her harm. In the process of resisting various spatial pressures, Izzy gradually moves towards independence and maturity, attains personal growth, accomplishes the transformation of her psychological space, and embarks on a brand new path in life.

In *Little Fires Everywhere*, Celeste Ng portrays Izzy’s growth and transformation through various spaces, examining the change of space and its relationship from the perspective of characters wandering in different spaces. She reveals that the impact of spatial changes on character growth is significant and far-reaching. Izzy’s growth experience of seeking resistance and freedom in various repressed and confined spaces inspires readers to reflect on the spatial dilemma of having nowhere to escape in modern society. It encourages people that only through unwavering rebellion can they liberate themselves from oppressive cages.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Publisher’s Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

References

- [1] Bakhtin, M. (1998). *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Bai Chunren & Xiao He, Trans.). Shi Jiazhuang: Hebei Education Press.
- [2] Burling, A. (2017, September 28). *Little Fires Everywhere* by Celeste Ng. SFGATE. <https://www.sfgate.com/books/article/Little-Fires-Everywhere-by-Celeste-Ng-12238754.php>
- [3] Cha, S. (2017, September 21). Celeste Ng's new novel *Little Fires Everywhere* sets suburbia aglow. *Los Angeles Times*. <https://www.latimes.com/books/jacketcopy/la-ca-jc-celeste-ng-20170921-story.html>
- [4] Cotugno, M. (2002). *Space and Memory in Vladimir Naboko's Fiction*. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University.
- [5] Crang, M. (2003). *Cultural Geography* (Yang Shuhua & Song Huimin, Trans.). Nanjing: Nanjing University Press.
- [6] Fang, W. (2023). Rethinking the Identity of "Mother": Maternity Writing and Social Criticism in *Little Fires Everywhere*. *Foreign Language Education*, 44(5), 106-112.
- [7] Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison*, New York: Vintage Books.
- [8] Jia, Y. (2006). *Literary Theory: An Essential Reader*. Beijing: China Renmin University Press.
- [9] Jin, L. (2007). On Spatial Criticism. *Human Geography*, 22(2), 119-122.
- [10] Lefebvre, H. (1976). Reflections on the Politics of Space. (Michael J. Enders Trans.). *Antipode*, 8(2), 30-37.
- [11] Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The Production of Space*. (Nicholson-Smith Trans.). Massachusetts: Blackwell.
- [12] Min'an W. (2006). *Body, Space, and Post-modernity*. Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Publishing House.
- [13] Min, L. (2022). *The Ethical Predicaments and Ethical Choices in Little Fires Everywhere*. [Dissertation, Northwest Normal University University].
- [14] Ng, C. (2017). *Little Fires Everywhere*. New York: Penguin Press.
- [15] Ning, W. (2007). *Critique of Everyday Life: Research on Lefebvre's Philosophical Thought*. Beijing: People's Publishing House.
- [16] Qingjun, W. (2007). A Brief Survey of the Contemporary Spatial Criticism. *The World Literature Criticism*, (2), 46-49.
- [17] Sagita, D. M., & Wahyuni, D. (2020). A Marxist Reading of *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017) By Celeste Ng. *English Language and Literature*, 9(3), 288-302.
- [18] Ul-Zia, Q., & Hashmi, F. (2023). Exploring the Racial Discrimination against Chinese American Immigrants: Analysis of Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere* in the Backdrop of Critical Race Theory. *Annals of Human and Social Sciences*, 4(2), 287-294.
- [19] Wegner, P. (2002). Space and Place in Critical Reading. In Julian Wolfreys (Eds.), *Introducing Criticism at the 21st Century* (pp. 233-258). Edinburgh University Press.
- [20] Xiaorui, D. (2023). *Into Shaker Heights: A Foucauldian Spatial Interpretation of Little Fires Everywhere*. [Dissertation, Harbin Engineering University].