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AN OVERVIEW OF DORIS LESSING'S FICTION WRITING

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ABSTRACT

Doris Lessing was admittedly the greatest fiction writer of the modern age. She was a versatile genius and a multi-dimensional personality. The scope of her fiction-writing is so wide that it astounds the critics of the English spoken world. She has touched all the issues confronting the modern world and her large out-put is characterized by a totality of vision rooted in human betterment. Human concern is her main concern. In her very first novel *'The Grass is Singing'* we see her pleading the cause of the Black Native Africans. She had joined Communism in Africa simply for the betterment of the local people, but when the Stalinist horrors showed her the dark face of Communism, she left for good. She never joined practical politics in Great Britain but she wrote against reigning powers about the deteriorating social conditions in that country. She wrote against Germany's killing of Jews. Undoubtedly, Doris Lessing was greatly a postmodernist, but certainly there are enough of modernist trends in her works. Modernism and Post-modernism are intermingled in her works and even great critics find it hard to separate these two characteristics in her fiction. While going through her works, I came to know that in all her novels, she invariably chooses a new subject which seems unique to her readers. Having discarded a traditional subject, she necessarily uses quite different narrative techniques to deal with her subject.

KEYWORDS: Fiction, Modernity, New Women, Feminism

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of *'New Women'* in her novels is quite a modern topic, even though she is not a feminist writer. Being a campaigner against nuclear arms, as well as, active opponent of apartheid, Doris Lessing was banned from South Africa and Rhodesia in 1956 for so many years. In the same year, she bade good-bye to the British Communist Party, as a consequence of Soviet Invasion of Hungary. These human principles of Doris Lessing were unchanging and a temporal and she lived long enough to see the end of the un-human segregation policy in South Africa in mid-nineties. She suffered a minor stroke, which prevented her

from active work. However, she was able to attend the theatre and opera. The thoughts of death occupied her mind in her last days and she often asked herself if she would have time to finish a new book. She breathed her last on 17 November 2013, aged 94 and is survived by her daughter Jean only, who lives in South Africa. All this shows Doris Lessing's life-long attachment with this country and even death could not sever these ties. Her life encompassed about a century and throughout her life she fearlessly put forth her well-weighed and well-thought upon ideas which were never impulsive and partial. The main charge against Doris Lessing

had been her association with communism and her anti-racist activism.

Doris Lessing received the Noble Prize in Literature in 2007 at the age of about 88 years. It is wonderful that Lessing was out shopping for groceries when the Noble Prize announcement came but it is more wonderful that she titled her Nobel Lecture, *'On Not Winning the Nobel Prize'* and used it to draw attention to global inequality of opportunity. Having become disillusioned with chaos-filled European conditions, more so, after coming to realization that Marxism was totally devoid of spirituality, then Doris Lessing turned to Sufism. The concepts of Sufism not only gave her inner satisfaction but also gave her a unique vision for the salvation and betterment of humanity as a whole. She had her own way of doing things and this hot-headedness remained with her till her virtual end. It is an accepted fact that Doris Lessing was an omnivorous reader even though a little formal knowledge at her back. As a result she has emerged as the most powerful novelist of English literature in modern world. She wrote what she saw. She got her ideas from the world surrounding her. She never claimed anything divine about her works. She never thought of fairy-tail ideas. She became what the world had made her. She never cared for anybody and never sought for any favours. She was a humanist herself and she loved and liked the novelists of the nineteenth century for their humanism. Doris Lessing of 1950's presents a writer committed with and strictly adherent to realist tradition, as she had declared her commitment in her article *'The Small Personal Voice'*. Doris Lessing published *'The Golden Notebook'* in 1962 and the novel provided an antithesis to what Doris Lessing claimed previously it was a structural play having astonishing formal experimentation and herein Doris Lessing had tried her hand more boldly regarding female experience. This is the novel which made her *"the epicist of female experience"*. Not the thematic indulgence with the female experience only but it is being a structural play too gave the shape to the novel and made it a novel written before its time. A structural play with formal experimentation, no doubt, is the main features of a postmodernist novel, but, at the same time, these

features are shared by the modernist novel too. We can say that there is enough of modernism in the *'web'* of the novel. In the preface to 1972 edition, Doris Lessing makes it clear that the essence of the book, the organization of it, everything in it, says implicitly and explicitly, that we must not divide things off, must not compartmentalize. Again in one of the *'Red Notebook'* entries, Anna Wulf, the protagonist declares;

Humanism stands for the whole person, the whole individual, striving to become as conscious and responsible as possible about everything in the universe.

In these statements, there is stress on integration, and wholeness, which are, in a way, against the experimental fiction of 1960's. Still we will have to admit that *'The Golden Notebook'* is not put in order or presents wholeness in the sense that classical realism asks for. Still Molly takes the middle way, when she says, *"The Golden Notebook is 'about coherence' while it is by realist conventions incoherent"*. This much is enough to say that such a great critic as Molly Hite sees some kind of modernism in this novel. For Danziger,

'The Golden Notebook' is ultimately a novel about our ongoing need to impose patterns upon the mess of experience-despite the ultimate falseness of these necessary patterns or paradigms.

It shows that this novel is best with modernist trends, even though, the fact is that the wave of modernism is too strong in this novel which moves forward with great strength to touch the boundaries of postmodernism. Anna Wulf is the protagonist in Doris Lessing's *'The Golden Notebook'* and she is a blocked woman writer, who spent her youth in Africa, became first an active, then a disappointed communist, was a politically committed writer, was a mother, a wife and sometimes a mistress even. Doris Lessing searches for new models to communicate these experiences of Anna, but sure it is that Anna is in no way able to describe *'The real experience'*.

Words. words. I play with words, hoping that some combination, even a chance combination, will say what I want ----- that

fact is, the real experience cannot be described.

It is true that there are whole areas of her (Anna's) made by the kind of experience women have not had before and she feels the difficulty and complexity of articulation of experience which gets harder and harder, owing to her dissatisfaction with her first novel, she searches for new models to relate her experience more truthfully she wants to impose order upon the chaos of her life she attempts to recover from the 'block' she is suffering from. Finally in the golden-colored notebook, Anna synthesizes the various experiences kept separate in the other books, so that they approximate to a kind of wholeness. Attaining this integration enables her to write again. Anna wants to impose a certain order on chaos, so far, so good, up to this ladder, we can safely claim that Anna, the protagonist of the novel, or for that matter Lessing, the creator of Anna occupies the story of modernism. Anna abandons her notebooks and records events solely in the golden notebook. From here, Lessing steps onto the next ladder-----the ladder of postmodernism. Which never means that we can challenge her modernist characteristics of her works, even though greatly intermingled with the postmodern characteristics? 'The Golden Notebook' has no real ending and neither of its narratives provides the reader with the satisfaction of its real ending. Anna, her protagonist, tries hard to overcome the problem of fragmentation and that is the lesson what the novel teaches us. In this way, 'The Golden Notebook' compels readers to look backward at modernism and forward to postmodernism. In 'The Golden Notebook' we find allusions and references to modernist novelists or their novels. Thus, Lessing's Anna Wulf, recalls the name of Virginia Woolf to our mind. The sub-names 'Wulf' and 'Woolf' give us the same sound. Lessing refers to D.H.Lawrence in her portrayal of sexuality and such other related matters, like vaginal and clitoral orgasms. One more modernist, novelist James Joyce does not lack behind in this behalf. His Anna Livia in 'The Finnegans Wake' shares her name with Lessing's Anna Wulf of 'The Golden Notebook'. In the same way, Molly, a central character in 'The Golden Notebook' shares her name with Molly Bloom in

Joyce's 'Ulysses'. Why is Lessing so attached to her great predecessors? It is so because, to a great measure, she was a modernist herself and liked their modern trends too. All of them faced the same conflicts and all of them had the same attitude to the prevailing chaos. Anna attempts to record her menstruation periodically through 'Stream of Consciousness'.

As a modernist fiction writer, Lessing's topics were always new and unique and not conventional at all and to deal with such contents, she always used proper narrative techniques. Not a feminist in real terms, she deals with the major issues that feminism has voiced all along the twentieth century, not in a propagandistic way but as a 'human concern'. Lessing has creatively chronicled women's lives for well over fifty years and these characters belong to the twentieth century. They map the dilemmas of women's lives at the personal, cultural and ideological levels. Doris Lessing always associates the problems of women with those of the 'block', as both belong to the oppressed class of the white, male-dominated English society. What is new and unique in her conception of feminism? Certainly it is her conception of the emergence of 'The New Women'. In simple terms we may define 'The New Women' as one with a strong claim to be considered as a respectable human being, one who is aware of her own identity and asks for her right to a place in society. Generally speaking, Lessing's women demur, look 'abnormal' and fall out of the live of the majority. Roberta Rubenstein uses the term "abnormal consciousness" to designate the mental experiences and states encountered by Doris Lessing's women, during their madness, as well as, their moments of inner awareness. Doris Lessing's chief female protagonists suffer from psychic fragmentation. To draw their inner-selves out, Lessing takes resort to Jung's psycho-analysis, processes and through the stream of consciousness technique gets a true picture of their mind-set. Martha Quest's development is charted out in the five novels of 'Children of Violence' sequence and finally she emerges as a 'New Women' after a great struggle and quest. Anna of 'The Golden Notebook' sought to free herself from her inner fragmentation

to achieve wholeness of self. She finally achieved this goal by her integrating her separately notebooks into a single note book. Anna became a 'New Woman' only when she achieved her spiritual awareness and wholeness of self. Lessing's "*Summer Before The Dark*" deals with the life of a house-wife, named 'Kate'. The novel shows how this conventional woman could become a 'new woman', when she overcame her inner weakness, and thus, achieved inner-awareness and wholeness of self or '*Individuation*'. No doubt, Lessing uses different narrative techniques which are commonly claimed by post modernists but many of them are definitely used by modernists too; such as, stream of consciousness technique. The content of these novels, in every case, involves a new subject and requires a new style to deal with Lessing was a versatile genius and we find the seeds of modernism even in her earlier realist novel, "*The Grass is Singing*". It tells the story of Mary Turner mainly through the omniscient narrator's point of view, but the last days of her life, her dreams and psychic fragmentation are brought forth through Mary's eyes. The final chapter of the novel is told almost entirely from the perspective of the abnormal consciousness. Lessing's novel is set in Southern Rhodesia and gives a full play of the blacks of that country. In her outer space fiction, Lessing invents an alien cosmology through which she retells much of human history and also envisions different possibilities of cosmic future throughout history different planets have been the scene of conflict among three galactic empires: Canopus stands for 'good', that is, respect for the laws governing nature and history, as well as, harmony and benevolence; 'Shammat' represents evil and corruption, and is a planet in the empire of Puttiora; and 'Sirus', a technologically advanced empire of ambitious bureaucrats who periodically invade other planets to enlarge their territory. According to this concept of Lessing's cosmology, these competing forces have, through the millennia, deeply affected the course of human civilization. Lessing provides a double narrative focus for depicting the tragedy of human civilization and history of violence and destruction. Through her space fiction, she widened her vision to touch 'heavenly heights' to show her

human concern. In terms of categorization, we will have to admit that the content of the 'Canopus' series is modern, dealt with cosmic terminology. It is not the matter of long novels only; even her short novels bear the same stamp. It is hard to imagine that some other novelist would have written such unique novels as, '*Ben*' and '*The Fifth child*' and that too in Thatcher's England (1980's). What novel ideas! And what a novel treatment! Courageous Lessing has never forgotten the African blacks. She was a harder opponent of Colonialism and Racialism. Some thread runs throughout her stories. Doris Lessing wrote in her introduction to her '*African Stories*': When the white men arrived (in South Africa), they saw themselves as civilizers. They knew nothing about the people they conquered what they knew was put to their own uses. What novel ideas! And what a novel treatment! Courageous Lessing has never forgotten the African blacks. She was a harder opponent of Colonialism and Racialism. Same thread runs throughout her shorts stories

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