

Themes of Colonialism and Feminism in Doris Lessing's The Grass Is Singing

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Abstract:

This paper sheds light on the issues of gender, race and especially feminism in the novel of Doris Lessing. The methodology will be content analysis of selected text by Doris Lessing and also the help of Wikipedia and writer's blog will be sought for this purpose. I will open this paper with introduction and then briefing about feminism, colonial impact on Africa and concluding with Doris Lessing' text. I will discuss about feminism and the reason for birth of feminist movements. The issue of gender is very sensitive because gender is very tightly attached to the word sexism. And when gender issue turns out to be issue of sexism it becomes a matter of examining nuances of human intellect. Aren't the humans intellectual dwarfs when they talk about sexism? It is the fragmented mind and soul of a human who think and talk of sexism. It is actually like a malady and a major flaw in human thought who believe that one gender is superior. What humans are trying to prove when they rank gender as strong or weak? Many female writers and feminists around the globe are engaged in subverting the rank given to male gender. Postmodernism is a high time to watch their achievements.

Keywords: Females, Feminism, Doris Lessing, Gender Trouble, Sexism, Male Chauvinism, colonialism, Postmodernism

Background

Defining Feminism, I will start with a definition of feminism by English novelist and journalist Rebecca West. She says

“ I have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is; I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat” (Rebecca West, books and writers) (Feminism: what is it?)”

Feminist critics and writers are always surprised to know about the female position in our society because they have written enough about this subject. And it is also a true fact that

recent trends haven't decreased their passion of exploration rather it has enhanced their mode of research and refined their specialization. It is due to females writing that we are able to see what males couldn't show through their writings. Female writing about females is very much appreciated in this contemporary postmodern era. This postmodern era is a time when women can raise their voices and claim for the differences they suffer in society. Women are not at the periphery and their voices are not unheard. In *A literature of their own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (1977) Elaine Showalter identifies three major stages: The Feminine (1840-80), characterized by imitation and internalization of the dominant male traditions; The Feminist (1880-1920), distinguished by protest and advocacy of women's rights; and The female (1920 onwards) characterized by courageous self-discovery. And the female phase is obviously a great phase for women. This is their time to revel not to mourn for their horror past where females were synonyms to weak, delicate, extra-sensitive and even emotional. If we peep into the early ages we find women lacking every position. Women were firmly placed at the lowest rung in comparison to their male counterparts. And the reason for all these is very well disclosed by a true heart feminist Mary Wollstonecraft. There is an example in *Genesis* when Adam says: "this is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called woman, because she was taken out of a man" (Wollstonecraft 26-27). Mary Wollstonecraft in her famous book 'A Vindication of the Rights of Women' says women are not inferior to men by nature but for their lack of education.

It becomes very important to know how and why the feminist movements came into light. Was this movement of any use for the females of the society? Have these movements achieved their desired goal. To get the answers, we must first look back in the time when in any country let's take an instance from England of the Shakespeare's time. We find Women's place within the four walls of the society. And thanks to some feminist writers like Aphra Behn, Mary Wollstonecraft's *A vindication of Rights of Women* pub in 1792 and Virginia Woolf's *A room of one's own* (pub 1929) that we are able to see more and more women dominating the literary world. They are now free to write about anything. If women write about women then this writing will definitely present real and true picture of any women.

The need for feminist movements was very much required in order to bring order out of the chaotic male dominated society. But the question seems still unsolved how far they need to go in order to establish the position of females in society. In this post modern era where women are standing in equal position with males and sexism is going out of its way, many feminists still claim that the goal has not been achieved yet. Although Doris Lessing deny the fact that her writings are basically focused on feminism but it is very soothing read for feminists as well as any ordinary woman who read her page turner texts especially *The golden notebook* and *the grass is singing*. Lessing has superbly put the troubles related to gender in her work.

Doris Lessing was born in Persia in 1919 to British parents. Her family moved to Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and in 1949 she moved to England. Her childhood was unhappy due to financial crisis of her parents. Lessing could not continue her formal studies after the age of fourteen but she continued to read extensively. And later on in her life Lessing contributed immensely to the body of contemporary English fiction. She won the Somerset Maugham Award, became the first British novelist to win the French prize.

Doris Lessing is very distinct writer who did never hesitated to pen down the cruel treatment of Blacks in the hands of whites, male domination tendency of males towards female in society. Apart from these, Doris Lessing also deals with a complex set of themes as colonialism, Marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis and Sufism. Doris Lessing had fantastic skills in recalling the bad memories of Apartheid and jotting them down on paper. When we read Lessing's work we feel as if true incident is happening before our eyes. Doris Lessing has got tremendous influences in her writings, reasons are many but it may be one of the reasons that Doris Lessing herself had lived a traumatic life. She had faced the harsh realities of apartheid and colonialism. In her early life she had to frequently move from one place after another. Her early life was full of experiences of various kinds that had helped her to bring variation in her works.

The complex novelistic world of Doris Lessing is very skilfully woven by her wherein we get vivid aspects and subjects discussed by her from colonialism to post colonialism and from male chauvinism to female phase (female phase was name given by Elaine Showalter to divide history of women's literature from 1920 onwards) or feminism.

Doris Lessing's dealing with the subject of feminism is very subtle. Doris Lessing dealings with the issues of females in her work are appreciable to the extent that it is her inner conscience that couldn't tolerate the oppressions of female and took shape in the form of words on paper. Her characters or protagonist's speech or mental dilemma may be assumed as her own voice. This I call a protest with the help of literature. Doris Lessing had an inclination towards politics but she remained confined to the genre of producing literary masterpieces. Doris Lessing never wanted to draw boundary of feminism and live within it, when asked about feminism she answers in such way that one can say that Lessing avoided calling herself feminist although her works strongly deals with issues of females and gender chauvinism.

What the feminists want of me is something they haven't examined because it comes from religion. They want me to bear witness. What they would really like me to say is, 'Ha, sisters, I stand with you side by side in your struggle toward the golden dawn where all those beastly men are no more'. Do they really want people to make oversimplified statements about men and women? In fact, they do. I've come with great regret to this conclusion.(Lessing 1982:9)

If we talk about colonialism and its impact on Africa it is a sine qua non to know that Lessing's love for Africa is very strong. And at the same time her hatred for White Colonial rules. The white colonial rules have haunted her past. In his book entitled Doris Lessing's Africa (1978) Professor Michael Thorpe argues: "It is possible that everything she has written since she left Africa, not only her African writing, is the voice of such an exile. Doris Lessing says. "It is not merely a question of preventing evil, but of strengthening a vision of a good which may defeat the evil" (Dorris Lessing, Elements of literature, 1146, Annotated Teachers Edition. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 2005).

Doris Lessing was a superb writer and she masterly influenced readers by forms as well as by choice of words for her protagonists. For Lessing "the novelist talks, as an individual to individuals, in a small personal voice" (Lessing p 4-5). The artist's responsibility is to give form to the nature of reality by letting the form organically grow from the whole of reality.

Apartheid was a dark time in the history of Africa. And the eclipse of apartheid hampered not only the prosperity of African nations but it had stirred the inner conscience of black people like hurricane. Doris Lessing was an active opponent of Apartheid. During apartheid blacks were horribly oppressed and we can see these events of oppressions in Doris Lessing's work very clearly. Lessing out rightly rejects the Apartheid system prevalent in Africa which was enforced by National Party between 1948 and 1994. And this may be the reason we see almost many of her works tell the horrible stories of apartheid, race, gender, identity loss and psychological break down .Lessing through her novels best tried to capture all the predicament of blacks and the dirty intensions of Europeans to obliterate their happy lives. Apartheid came to an end in 1994 and the history of Africa changed. Today we are in the era of post modernism followed by decolonization. The long and troublesome journey of decolonization brings what we see and enjoy today as independent states and nations. Frankly, it is Doris Lessing's work that we are able to see clearly the past pictures of colonial tribulations especially of Africans. Here, I can't stop appreciating Lessing for her fantastic vision and superb knack of spilling ink onto the papers very cleverly.

Doris Lessing's 'The Grass is Singing' is a superb piece of work that focus on the indictment of ugly racial policies, a troubled relation between a White and a Black , females positioning in male dominated society and above all the use of psychoanalysis to show the angst of oppressed females. Lessing's 'The Grass is singing' details the mental, spiritual, financial and marital disintegrations of the lives of Dick Turner and his wife Mary Turner. The novel explores the theme of apartheid on the day to day lives of individuals both Black and White. The novel explores how Mary Turner, a white woman, despises, disrespects her black servant Moses, being unhappy with her husband she relies emotionally on Moses. In other ways we can say that it was a kind of deep level of oppression which was not visible on the surface level. The novel begins with the cutting of a news paper article about Mary Turner (white woman). It says she was killed by her servant Moses for money. In the flashback, we learn that Mary develops feelings for Moses and the reason is not very clear.

May be Moses is handsome or Moses is not like Dick Turner (her poor husband). The result may be Mary's suppressed sexuality. At the end of the play murder of Mary by Moses shows lack of mutual trust between the whites and the blacks and also the position of female very weak. Mary is victim of deeper level. It is true that Mary once hit Moses with rod and this act shows that she was oppressor at a time. But her murder by Moses (man) shows that she was direct victim of patriarchy.

In her novel 'The Grass is singing' Doris Lessing has beautifully shown the parallelism of the title's connotation and the meaning it contains which is barrenness and sterility of inner conscience at length. The title of the novel which has been taken from T.S Eliot's 'The Wasteland and I think, Doris Lessing had superbly utilized an iota of the theme from the wasteland in her 'The grass is singing'. Both have one thing in common and that is the sterility of modern people and their predicament. T.S Eliot has used modern men's crisis at spiritual, moral and mental level. Whereas Doris Lessing has put the mental crisis of Whites as they destroyed the poor but happy lives of Blacks. The mental crisis of men leading to horrors of all kinds is very uniquely written in Lessingesque style. And that style is obviously writing reality and supporting protest made by any women to restore their rights and happiness. She was a writer who wrote in realist tradition so we find very true picture of dilemmas of human psyche. Doris Lessing had put in her writing a multiple aspects of men and society be it mental horror, physical horror or social maladies like Apartheid in African society and females positioning in society.

Conclusion:

Frankly, Doris Lessing was deeply interested in the complex fate of man in the modern world. Modern men who are trapped in the violent world of wars which actually destroyed their real selves and have made them live just like a hollow man without any feelings or emotions. It seems as if Doris Lessing was holding a mirror with her while writing her texts and at the end she turns this mirror towards the people of the society leaving a question mark that people are ready to change or not. I think she wrote reality of the real society with the help of imaginary characters. Doris Lessing has presented a true example of taking benefits from literature and making literature a revolutionary weapon to dig the ugly soiled maladies of the society. There is not a scintilla of doubt about Lessing that she was a master of literary world writing in pure realist tradition and her writings would be immortal in the world of literature.

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