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Female psyche in Lessing's selected fictions: A critique

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Abstract: The current literary study aims to investigate the psychological and emotional conflicts and the traumatic experiences of the strong female characters depicted in Doris Lessing's selected fictions. Unmatched in all literary genres worldwide, author Doris Lessing depicts both the societal structure of her age and the basic issues facing women. Lessing looks for fresh ways to portray the experiences of a woman writer who is stuck. She was raised in Africa, developed into an engaged but disillusioned communist, is a politically engaged writer, and occasionally she even plays the role of a mistress or wife. This qualitative study focuses on how Lessing aims to portray, via her astute and nuanced approach, the psychological struggles that women have while balancing marriage and love, motherhood and career, the injustice of double standards, the isolation that single career women experience, and the hollowness of marriage in the eyes of society and the established order. Through her feminist works, she attempts to rouse the women's community to fight against patriarchy. Lessing portrays her female characters with various societal issues and male-female perspectives.

Keywords: Female psyche, patriarchal domination, feminist notion, traumatic experience, psychological conflicts and inequalities

Introduction

A prominent figure in postwar English literature and Nobel Laureate, Doris May Lessing (1919–2013) is renowned for her bold and forthright criticism of politics and society. She was a white British-South African Zimbabwe (Rhodesia) novelist, poet, and short stories writer who was born in Iran to British parents and resided there until 1925. In both her personal and professional life, Lessing has advocated for women's rights, bringing attention to issues that affect women. Her vast body of work is a testament to her magisterial standing. In terms of literary justice, Lessing, a British novelist, dramatist, biographer, and winner of the Nobel Prize in literature portrays social issues and feminist themes to inspire her sisters, mothers, and most importantly, women everywhere to launch social campaigns and adopt social slogans. She is rightfully considered to be the world's most daring female writer, an outspoken former communist who is also an unwavering feminist. She sets herself out as one of the most renowned fiction authors of all time and a significant contributor to the growth of English literature. She was acknowledged on a global scale as having great talent and a passion for women's concerns and social topics. Doris Lessing wrote for readers of all ages, concentrating on grave societal issues brought on by women's marginalization in a society dominated by males. She has written the texts in a period of rapid social change, as it seems to us that she is concerned with women's issues very adjacently (Morgan, 1973). She is ours forever and for all of us. She demonstrates her astute awareness of women's issues, which are attested to by pleas and common dealings. Lessing was able to depict women's social standing in the bourgeois household since she was a feminist reformer. Her writings provide a thorough investigation of the psychological, racial, social, cultural, economic, political, and family struggles as well as the sexual harassment that women experience in the patriarchal system. Lessing wants to open up new possibilities for

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enforcing rights, freedom, and power for women in this era. Consequently, Lessing has not only established a solid reputation, garnered widespread recognition, and developed an international persona among readers, professionals, researchers, critics, and academics worldwide, but she has also had a highly esteemed place within the realm of English literature (Song, 1997). Her female characters become career-focused and take on responsibilities traditionally ascribed to males, reflecting both estrangement and idealized societal conditions. She also stresses the significance of asserting women's rights, authority, and independence in combining a home identity (Sparks, 1997).

Methodology

The present literary analysis is a qualitative research work. The primary sources of information are the three literary works *The Grass Is Singing*, *The Golden Notebook* and *The Cleft* by Doris Lessing. The secondary information sources are the writings, books, scholarly articles, criticism, and internet sources. The author used textual analysis as the research tool with a review of previous related studies.

Findings and Discussion

Lessing seeks to establish a picture of parenting, marriage, work, love, and relationships between men and women in a patriarchal society. Her writing reflects the conflict between men's desire to uphold the "status quo" and women's growing understanding of themselves as whole human beings. Her writings address societal issues and ethical dilemmas that impact women, such as prostitution, trial marriage, free love, sexual harassment, and double standards in the sexual arena. Lessing's female characters excel in knowledge, firmness, honesty, and merit. She has therefore portrayed strong, independent women, giving women a voice, like Mary Turner in *The Grass Is Singing* (Lessing, 1950), Clefts in *The Cleft* (Lessing, 2007), and Anna Wulf in *The Golden Notebook* (Lessing, 2007). Her women are pre-eminent in merit, intelligence, firmness, and integrity (Das, 2007). She also wants to examine the age's psychological problems, alienating attitudes, superstitious beliefs, and religious orthodoxy. This study looks at Lessing's writings through the prism of sexual harassment, oppression, marginalization, subordination, and female enslavement under patriarchy. It therefore seeks to illuminate different facets of women in the canon of literature.

Mary in *The Grass Is Singing*

In the novel, *The Grass Is Singing*, Lessing's strength is her examination of interpersonal psychological conflict and alienation. She intends to depict the bond between Mary Turner, a black servant, and her husband, a white farmer. Because Lessing presents Mary Turner from a distinct angle, her representation merits more investigation. The oppression of race, gender, and societal norms defeats and obstructs Mary. Mary is not like other characters in Lessing's works since she is the oppressed party and is never granted any freedom. Her whole existence is dominated by emotional rupture, mental and financial limits, and alienation. She experiences the laxity and meaninglessness of an ill-matched marriage after being married. She is raised in her parent's house in a loveless marriage that she is compelled by society to accept. She is oppressed by estrangement and lack of connection as a child growing up in a dysfunctional home. The waves of sexual harassment, social unease, and emptiness plague and torture her existence. When her inner psyche is demoralized by the grip of racism and patriarchy, her fight in the tumultuous wave becomes more intense (Ahmed, 2013).

Instead of releasing Mary from her limitations and her ordinary existence, marriage brings her greater loneliness, uncertainty, and sadness. After being married and relocating to his farm, Mary realizes she is incompatible with Dick; she doesn't feel like she knows him, and their gap grows over time. She also feels more alone because of Dick's self-centeredness and coldness, and she believes that she is destined to stay a housewife and live a fake, pompous, pointless, hollow, and submissive life. As a result, Mary gives up trying to find her own identity and chooses to remain in her marriage.

> "The moment a girl reaches adolescence, she is reminded of her femininity. The double standards and dichotomous attitude which continues to operate throughout a woman's life start right in her parent's home. She is prevented from developing her individuality. She is constantly reminded by her mother that a girl is destined for man and the one who gets the most masculine attention is the luckiest one. A woman in a male-dominated society is thus conditioned into the emotional and cognitive traits of subordination and dependence" (Sorot & Arora, 1991).

The underlying topic of Mary's situation of infertility and estrangement is race strife and gender prejudice. She is forced to distance herself from her family and society due to a significant chasm that is formed in her married life. Moses, Mary's black slave, and their connection illustrate a dark abyss of racial injustice. To exact revenge on the white people and the second sex, he murders Mary. Because of this, Lessing presents Mary as a victim of the patriarchal threat. Nonetheless, Mary Turner's life in this part is rich with psychological solitude, which she carries with her till the end. Mary enjoys a happy life at the start of the book, thus she doesn't have any psychiatric issues. "Until she was twenty-five nothing happened to break the smooth and comfortable life she led," the narrator states (p. 33). When she learns the truth about herself from those she believes to be close to her, she gets her first shock. Because she is attractive and youthful, and because her friends adore her, she believes that her life is going as she had hoped. The following sentences illustrate this idea: "She was a friend to half the town." Additionally, she regularly attended sundowner parties that lasted until midnight, danced, or went to the movies in the evenings (p.35). Her battle with her husband Dick, who has different perspectives from her, demonstrates the external conflict and ultimately causes her marriage to disintegrate. How Mary and her husband treat one another is one of their points of contention. Mary started probing him further about why he was required, but Dick shook his head and lightly stroked her arm.

> "Why shouldn't I ask him?" she demanded. "He's lying, isn't he?"
> "Of course, he's lying," said Dick irritably. "Of course. That is not the point. You can't keep him against his will."
> "Why should I accept a lie?" said Mary. "Why should I? Why can't he say straight out that he doesn't like working for me, instead of lying about his kraal?" (p. 67-68)

Their aspirations, futures, and lifestyles are unlike. They even have distinct opinions regarding maids and kids. This exchange between Dick and Mary clarifies their respective positions toward the servant. She was angry and in disbelief. She was standing on the terrace with her face fixed and her fists fisted when Dick came back.

> "How dare you!" she said, her voice stifled.
> "If you must do these things, then you must take the consequences," said Dick wearily. "He's a human being, isn't he? He's got to eat. Why must that bath be done all at once? It can be done over several days if it means all that to you."
> "It's my house," said Mary. "He's my boy, not yours. Don't interfere."
> "Listen to me," said Dick curtly. "I work hard enough, don't I? All day I am down on the lands with these lazy black savages, fighting them to get some work out of them (p.84).

When Mary comes to terms with the fact that she must live in a way that is acceptable to society, society begins to take on an abstract quality in her existence. "It is terrible to destroy a person's picture of himself in the interests of truth or some other abstractions," writes Doris Lessing, illustrating how she views Mary's social estrangement in her work (p.42). Her likelihood of happiness or unhappiness is largely dependent on the interaction between the person and society. If it does, one anticipates that internal psychology will be impacted by an alienating issue.

Since Mary has no intention of getting married, staying single is more essential to her than choosing clothes based on her personal preferences. Her life has been estranged due to this struggle between her desires and what society allows. Her unhappy existence is harmed by this estrangement. She leads a life that is in opposition to what she wants to achieve, which explains why. She experiences several changes during her brief marriage that have a significant impact on her life. She isn't ready to make changes in her life, which is the root of these alienations. She used to read a lot,

for example, before being married, but nowadays she doesn't even seem to want to read a book. Her transformation from an outgoing person to an introverted, conceited individual who is unwilling to interact with anybody, not even her spouse, is more proof of her metamorphosis. She represses her emotions, which undermines her psychology, as she isolates herself and is unable to communicate her sentiments to anybody. Moreover, her failed marriage and social exclusion have left her with a very negative outlook on life. She gives in to her gloomy future and gives up on the chance of returning to her previous way of living. Because she thinks nothing will change in her lonely existence, her pessimism turns into sadness, which causes her to stop communicating. Her estrangement stems from a variety of circumstances. The primary determining element is the ongoing conflict between her and her spouse. This exchange between Dick and Mary makes it clear how fatigued she is from their disagreement:

> "Dick saw that her thin, sun-crinkled hand was shaking. He said again, after a silence, his voice ugly with hostility: "I can't stand any more changing of servants. I've had enough. I'm warning you, Mary." And again she did not reply; she was weak with the tears and anger of the morning, and afraid that if she opened her mouth she might weep anew" (p.167).

When they first got married, she would constantly urge him to replace the servants with the ones she wanted, but she was unable to ask him to replace one of them before she passed away, even though Moses the servant was the main reason she was estranged from him. She experiences both internal and external isolation as a result of giving in to social pressures. Lessing has also depicted Mary's relationship with Dick as exploited sexually. Dick and Mary's dissatisfaction with their sexual experiences becomes a factor in their estrangement from one another. Dick idealizes Mary accidentally, turning her into a "sexual object," yet Mary can only accept him when he approaches her in a subservient manner. Then, expecting indignation and imposition as she submitted to him in a martyr-like manner, she was relieved to discover that she felt nothing (Rubenstein, 1979). Therefore, in Mary's case, even attention to sex does not bridge the huge gap between them, it rather makes them further.

Mary is a character in denial from the start of the book; she denies everything about her age, including her feminine attire and hairstyles. By telling him to demonstrate her power over him, she also repeatedly challenges the servant's claim to control over her life. The master-slave connection that has been brought up here reveals the master's sense of superiority and self-assertion in comparison to others, which underpins profoundly lonely views. She is against having a sexual relationship with her spouse since it may lead to emotions she would rather not feel, including love for him. "Mary, with the memory of her mother recurring more and more frequently, like an older, sardonic double of herself walking beside her, followed the course her upbringing made inevitable," she observes, realizing how similar her life is to her mother's (p. 98).

Mary has had two terrifying nightmares in which the native touches her. "He approached slowly, obscene and powerful, and it was not only him who was threatening her," the narrator states (p. 188). The dread of being touched by a black man is what led to this occurrence. Moses once touched her while assisting her in getting some rest when Dick was ill. She had a dream about him touching her after this encounter. After playing with her brothers in the dream, Mary's father appears and cradles her mother in his arms, causing her to flee. Furthermore, the dream in which she imagines Dick's passing and her separation from the servant is one of the dreams that make her fear being left alone. In her dream, she experiences happiness at his passing, but she also feels guilty for allowing herself to experience this kind of bliss. In this context, it is possible to bring up O'Neil's (2004) criticism of Lessing concerning Mary's character:

> "Lessing's characters, many of them women, are in the process of change and development. Describing the world intricately from their point of view enables the reader to understand how any change occurs in women's attitudes and opinions" (p.790).

Anna Wulf in *The Golden Notebook*

Lessing's another pioneering novel, *The Golden Notebook* is a feminist classic that explores the hostility and rage that women feel when they are denied their physical, intellectual, and emotional independence. Because it concentrates on the 20th-century perspective on male-female interactions and the fragmentation of society in the postmodern era, the novel is regarded as a fundamental feminist work and is one of the few works of its kind. It also addresses the issue of subjectivity, which is central to the idea of art. Lessing's singular vision connects this inevitable disintegration of individual consciousness with the startling picture of a bomb going off inside the mind, resulting in dissection and death (Krouse, 2006).

In the novel, *The Golden Notebook*, the psychological problems that Anna Wulf faces are a reflection of the illness of the world outside of her. Anna has a terrible collapse as a writer and mother as a result of fragmentation. Her prior experiences are the primary cause of her segmentation. Janet is the child of her physical union with Max Wulf, with whom she engaged in a neurotic but foolish relationship when she was in Africa. Psychologically and sexually, Anna and Max Wulf were incompatible. She married Max Wulf, for whom she had never had a deep romantic affinity, and the two eventually separated following Janet's birth. She brought the draft of her debut book, Frontiers of War, to London along with her toddler. She made it possible for the book to become famous after it was originally published in London. Her initial writing career did, however, prove to be a challenge to her creative abilities. She must endure the terrible sensation of being a fool and of being useless. The abrupt breakup of her physical connection with physician Michael exacerbates her depressed state of mind. After being rejected by her boyfriend, Anna can no longer distance herself from him, which makes her feel scared and psychologically ill. demoralized by a painful connection with men and disillusioned with communism. At forty years old, Anna believes herself to be a powerless and forlorn woman. Her entire existence, both personally and professionally, is tormented by conflicting senses. She chooses to write in four separate notebooks- Black, Red, Yellow, and Blue- in an attempt to get over her insane crisis and consider the graphic images of her painful past (Bentley, 2009).

Men and women in patriarchal societies have different interests and tendencies toward conflict and seclusion. Whereas males reject the role that women have trust in, women search for safety and stability. The female lead in the book *The Golden Notebook*, Anna, recognizes her differences and accepts that there will never be a solution to her problems, hence her sufferings will never be healed. Women in the postmodern era require the honesty and understanding of males. The central topic of Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* appears to be self-knowledge, which is essential for emotional and mental balance and, in the case of the female protagonist Anna, can prevent her from falling into a state of psychological and mental disarray.

Clefts in *The Cleft*

In the novel, *The Cleft*, Lessing challenges the contemporary audience and reader to picture a mythological society free from men, free from petty rivalries, free from jealousy, and free from sexual conspiracy. A senator from Rome muses about what he hopes would be his final request: to have the story of how humans originated in space told again. He tells the account of the Clefts, a group of prehistoric women who were forced to live in a mountain valley in the Edenic coastal wilderness. Clefts don't need or know about males; childbearing is preserved for them, much like the sea waves that the moon's cycles cause to lap at their feet, and their offspring are invariably female. However, the unannounced arrival of a newborn infant unintentionally puts the strife among the female group at risk. The Clefts are blindly in awe of the deformed infant, but an alarming number of strange men arise, much like the Squirts who, after being left behind and left out in the open on the neighboring hillside, are offered to the eagles—the Clefts' ignorance aside—as the genitalia of a female haven. But newborn males do exist, and they survive on the other side of the mountains with the help of wild eagles that are deployed to kill Squirts. A startling fact that forces the Clefts to accept and realign themselves to the prospect of a new world and the possible vengeance of the

erring males is not discovered until an eager young Cleft named Maire crosses the mountain's physical and emotional divide.

The Cleft by Lessing explores women's social status within the framework of feminism. Lessing is a representation of the creation tale of men and women in this work. In response to male dominance, she presents a novel kind of civilization in which women are formed long before males. Because they work with nature, women known as the Clefts can conceive without the help of males. Nevertheless, in contrast to the conventional account of creation, men are produced out of the Clefts later on as other members of nature to be the partners of the Clefts. While males label the Squirts as often seeking excitement and risk, nature-bound women are always guardians and environmentally aware. Lessing brings together the disparately natured men and women with reverence for the natural world, the necessity of every aspect of existence, and the process of life production. Here, she emphasizes the core tenets of feminism because of their importance to the survival of humanity and the planet.

The fundamental philosophy of this study is feminism, which is also one of *The Cleft*'s primary points of contention that will be thoroughly examined. Feminism is a theory, movement, and philosophy that defends nature and women against the patriarchal mindset because patriarchy is to blame for everything that has historically caused women's suffering, inferior complexity, and disengagement from "production," as well as the degradation of the natural world and ecological system. Men are "presented" as being disconnected from nature and the natural world because of their logic, insensibility, and drive for advancement, whereas women are more linked to and sensitive to the natural world. Earth's feminist and ecological challenges have an answer in feminism. It asks men and women to work together to increase public awareness of the need to restore the planet's natural balance, save it from potential harm for future generations, and ensure that all forms of life on Earth continue.

Lessing's poignant and sharp imaginative knowledge and wit allow her to invent the unknown and unthinkable mythology of ancient men and women, even though the symbolic novel *The Cleft* bears witness to the primitive and prehistoric mysterious facts of males and females that are beyond the reach of modern people. We can discern the novel's subliminal message of feminism at its heart and underlying relevance. Lessing provides the author's background and offers a fresh perspective on *The Cleft* as a feminist novel. Through point-by-point allusions, feminist elements are subtly incorporated into the text, and the books are examined in terms of feminist themes as an obvious synthesis of relevant ideas and Lessing's ideology.

Conclusion

Because they provide us with an idealized social portrait, Lessing's fiction *The Golden Notebook*, *The Grass Is Singing*, and *The Cleft* are significant contributions to English literature. Lessing's portrayal of strong female characters influences all aspects of life. This effect extends beyond literature, altering women's responsibilities from academia and to professional environments. All of the central women characters in Lessing's works of fiction seem to be representative of all ages, both in their words and deeds. Lessing in this sense is undoubtedly unique, even if her life and works have always depicted her as a feminist. Lessing dreams of a world without gender disputes in which men and women may live in harmony. There is little question that life will be wonderful in the globe if such a society is established.

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