

A Study on Oriental Influences of Doris Lessing Novels

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Abstract

Doris Lessing (1919) is one of the most powerful and significant novelists to have emerged on the international literary scene in the last four decades. As is the case with many great novelists, Mrs. Lessing's life is intimately linked with her art and her total novelistic development. Born of British parents in Persia, now Iran, in 1919, Lessing's childhood was characterized by mobility and a variety of experiences. Her family moved to what was then Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, to take up farming in a small town of Banket. Within her family, Doris was a "rebelin residence". She had a very unhappy childhood because of her parents' psychological and financial struggles. She had no formal education after the age of fourteen. As a result, her exposure to knowledge entirely consisted of independent extensive reading of books ranging from Balzac, Stendhal, Dostoevsky to Havelock Ellis. As she herself commented later.

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"I read these classics; it was my education; Formal education was replaced by her keen observations of highly charged racial, political and social situations of the South African society.

During the Second World War, Lessing became increasingly interested in Politics. She joined a small Marxist group in Salisbury where she met a half-Jewish German refugee called Gottfried Lessing, whom she married in 1945 only to get divorced in 1949. In 1949, she came to London with the manuscript of her first novel, *The Grass is Singing* which was published in 1950. Since then she has been writing novels and short stories endlessly. She has so far written nineteen novels, sixty-five short stories, five Plays, three extended autobiographical narratives and at least fifty substantial journalistic articles.

With nineteen novels published so far, it is not surprising that Doris Lessing has made a massive

contribution to the tradition of the contemporary novel. What is more significant, however, is the fact that this large output is characterized by a totality vision' rooted in a complex set of interrelated themes. An overview of this complex totality of her fiction is necessary in order to place in a proper perspective the thematic approach taken in the present dissertation. The complex novelistic world of Lessing is characterized by interrelated concerns such as colonialism, racialism, Marxism, psycho-analysis, mysticism.

DISCUSSION

(a) **Colonialism:** Lessing's views regarding colonialism could be best expressed with reference

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to Frantz Fanon's, who in his classic of anti-colonialism entitled *The Wretched of the Earth* says:

Europe has multiplied divisions and opposing groups, has fashioned classes and sometimes even racial prejudices, and has endeavored by every means to bring about and intensify the stratification of colonised society ... These differences are born of colonial history, in other words of oppression.

Lessing speaks about colonialism in her introduction to her *African Stories*:

When the white man 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. For instance, the men recruiting black labour for the mines took a look at the old custom that a girl would not marry a young man who had not proved himself in war or in hunt; and then substituted for it the idea that a young man who had not worked in the mines was a "mompara", a fool - he had not proved himself a man - (something very useful to the mine-owners).

The concept of colonialism is thus important in Lessing's fiction. It applies not only to the African settings of some of her novels but also to the very mode of her novelistic perception. For her there are two Africas: the country which has always belonged to the African; and the power the white colonial has imposed upon it. She belongs to neither in any real sense, and it is this marginality which enables her to act as an observer, and gives an additional clarity to that detachment which is an essential pre-requisite of the artist.

(b) **Racialism:** In *Going Home* the political and moral content is explicit in her analysis of apartheid, its foundation in neurosis and its reinforcement in economics. Despite efforts to convince her that Partnership and Federation are satisfactory moves towards racial integration, Lessing states categorically that what both are doing "is to give a few privileges, raising the standards of a minority of Africans above their fellows without altering the basic structure of segregation. She says, "Africa gives you the knowledge that man is a small creature, among other creatures, in a large landscape".

(c) **Marxism:** In her book entitled *Going Borne* (1957), Lessing mentions that in Rhodesia communism meant "a fight for basic human rights" The following statement is typical of her attitude:

Communism ... was a great, marvelous vision.... It was a vision of a society, where every individual was immensely important, where there was no hurting each other. Every person had a chance and the right to develop himself. This was the dream, and it's why people are socialists, why I was.

During the Second World War Lessing joined a communist group in Rhodesia which she saw as a way of fighting apartheid. What she liked about Marxism was its unifying vision. In the preface to *The Golden Notebook* she says:

Marxism looks at things as a whole and in relation to each other - or tries to ... A person who has been influenced by Marxism take sit for granted that an event in Siberia will affect one in Bostwana. I think it is possible that Marxism was the first attempt for our time, outside the formal religions, at a world-mind, a world ethic.

(d) **Psycho-analysis:** In Doris Lessing, Jungian influence can be seen in the concepts of the collective unconscious, individuation process, and mythic archetypes. Jungian theory is close to religion and mysticism in seeing the unconscious as an independent creative force through which the human being can get in touch with a transcendental reality. According to Jung the unconscious makes itself known through dreams; they are important to the individuation process as they guide the conscious ego and compensate it for its shortcomings. In a Jungian process of individuation people become one with their inner identity - what Jung calls the "self" - by a process of liberation from their social individuality, the "persona" in Jungian terms, and by coming to terms with the collective unconscious Lessing adheres to the Jungian notion about the function of dreams in the following statement:

The unconscious artist who resides in our depths is a very economical individual. With a few symbols a dream can define the whole of one's life, and warn us of the future, too.

Like Jung, she conceives of unconscious powers as a neutral energy which turns destructive through the prevalence: of a repressive, divisive, rational consciousness. Like him, Lessing sees 'Social violence as a kind of revenge on the part of the maltreated unconscious, and both of them may be said to view history as individual psychology projected into the collective.

(e) **Mysticism:** Lessing's ideas have been nourished and clarified through her interest in Sufism, the name in Western languages for Islamic mysticism. Sufi thinker Idries Shah, who lives in England, personally and through his writings, has had considerable influence on Lessing. In his book *The Sufis*, Shah says that Sufis "believe themselves to be taking part in the higher evolution of humanity". A Sufi is someone who "knows" how important the "we" attitude is. If people are to realize their potential for personal and social wholeness. The Sufi functions as -a-kind of emissary of the gods to remind individuals that they must humble themselves and accept the higher truth that all is one.

Lessing has fictionalized two such emissaries of the gods in Charles Watkins, in *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* and Johor George Sherban, in *Shikasta*. Sufism has also provided Lessing with the belief that human beings are evolving towards higher consciousness through the development of extrasensory perception, intuition, dreams, and journeys into "inner space" and thereby to transcend time and space: In *The Sufis* Shah writes:

Sufis believe that ... humanity is evolving towards a certain destiny. We are all taking part in that evolution. ... The human being's organism is producing a new complex of organs in response to such a need. In this age of transcending of time and space, the complex of organs is concerned with the transcending of time and space. What ordinary people regard as sporadic and occasional bursts of telepathic or prophetic power are seen by the Sufi as nothing less than the first stirrings of these same organs. ... So essential is this more rarefied evolution that our future depends upon it.

Lessing turned away from her former belief in rationalism to Sufism, precisely because it provided an explanation for many non-rational experiences

she has had. Lessing believes that "we all have extra-ordinary, non-rational capacities that we use to communicate in a very subtle way. Without these the world would be destroyed".

(f) **Lessing on the Art of Fiction:** We get a great deal of information regarding her views on the art of the novel through the comments she has made in her interviews given from time to time. In one of her most significant essays entitled 'The Small Personal Voice' Doris Lessing comments on the nineteenth century novel:

For me the highest point of literature was the novel of the nineteenth century, the work of Tolstoy, Stendhal, Dostoevsky, Balzac, Turgenev, Chekhov, the work of the great realists. ... they did have in common ... a climate of ethical judgement ... they were humanists.

A Novel, says Lessing, further should be read for illumination, in order to enlarge one's perception of life. She, therefore, adds further:

I was looking for the warmth, the compassion, the humanity, the literature of the nineteenth century and which makes all these old novels a statement of faith in man himself.

CONCLUSION

This magnitude of the theme, it is clear that any discussion of the problematics of survival is bound to cut across all other aspects of her work. In other words, the there of the problematics of survival provides a focal point at which a host of other contexts such as colonialism, mysticism, history, politics seek convergence. It is this point of thematic convergence which the present thesis tries to examine in terms of the problematics of survival. The approach used in this critical study is thus basically thematic one though wherever relevant aspects of form and language have been taken into account. Doris Lessing is a prolific writer expressing herself through the novel, the short story, drama and poetry as well. This study, however, defines its modest scope by concentrating on the novels published upto 1983. The year 1983 is regarded as a convenient line of demarcation because with the publication of *The Sentimental Agents*

it rounds off Doris Lessing's space-fiction saga. No statement on her poetry, plays or short stories is therefore attempted.

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