

Reviewing the Politics of Schizophrenic Alienation in Doris Lessing's Selected Novels

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ABSTRACT

In this paper an attempt is made to focus on fragmentation of consciousness originating from organic sensibility of an alienated and appalled post World War II society in Doris Lessing's selected novels. Lessing's protagonists seem absolute victims of the postmodern schizophrenic alienation and fractioned self. She has generated unprecedented characters and vivid themes related to the second half of twentieth century through her novels. Lessing's writing career, spread over six decades, covers an era marked by World Wars, Cold Wars, and an infuriating time of nuclear-arms race. She meticulously presents the gloom of the era after the World Wars in her works as she ventilates her fictional energy covering the aspect of alienation and estrangement. Lessing's novels explore the alienation of civilization as well as of the consciousness of an individual. In her novels, the struggle for self-identity transforms middle class protagonists into alienated individuals. They endeavour hard till the end of their lives to achieve fulfilment in a fragmented society. This conflict moves these protagonists towards schizophrenic isolation.

KEYWORDS

Self-identity; Fragmentation; Consciousness; Schizophrenic Isolation.

The schizophrenic level of alienation originated as the new repercussion of post-war society. Alienation is usually described as, "The sense of estrangement from society or the self, identified in philosophy, the social sciences, and literature as a central feature of modern life" (Quinn 17). Alienation has been a major theme in early twentieth century works such as in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), Thomas Stearns Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) and many others. It is a central preoccupation of postmodern culture or of late twentieth century because postmodernism has its ties with

modernism. In the postmodern era, the proliferation of science and technology has inadvertently alienated the self.

According to Faulkner and Postmodernism,

Following World War II, the continuous threat of nuclear annihilation causes alienation to transform into the paranoia of the Cold War . . . perhaps the paranoia of the second half of the twentieth century has segued into a kind of millennial schizophrenia (Duvall and Abadie viii).

Doris Lessing is unquestionably the most influential woman writer of the postmodern era. Lessing as a

postmodernist writer has captivated readers by relating humanity's shared feeling of alienation in her works. Like D. H. Lawrence, Lessing is an author whose life and works are held to be intimately in harmony to the Zeitgeist.

Lessing herself experienced a lonely childhood at her father's solitary farm in Southern Rhodesia as the neighbours lived too far. This is the reason that most of her writing is autobiographical in nature. Lessing has absorbed the misery of the First World War from her father's memories and witnessed the Second World War herself. Lessing's father, Alfred Cook Tayler was crippled during World War I and led a gloomy life on a barren African farm.

In an interview Lessing speaks about her isolated childhood,

Well, because I had this isolated childhood, I read a great deal. There was no one to talk to, so I read. What did I read? The best – the classics of European and American literature. One of the advantages of not being educated was that I didn't have to waste time on the second-best. Slowly, I read these classics. It was my education, and I think it was a very good one (Ingersoll 5).

Lessing's first novel *The Grass is Singing* explores the theme of schizophrenic alienation through the protagonist Mary Turner. Every bit of her existence is alienated. She marries Dick Turner and they are a white couple on a crumbling farm which is situated in remote part of Southern Africa. Mary is not able to cope with the obsession of her husband with the unprofitable farm and as a consequence she becomes frustrated and collapses into neurosis.

An instance from *The Grass is Singing* depicts the state of Mary Turner:

When Mary thought of "home" she remembered a wooden box shaken by passing trains; when she thought of marriage she remembered her

father coming home red-eyed and fuddled ... (Lessing 46).

In the description of Mary Turner, who is mentally ill and faces difficulty in adjusting with the external forces as she lives a fragmented life, Lessing echoes the views of R. D. Laing. Laing writes in his famous work *The Divided Self*:

The term schizoid refers to an individual the totality of whose experience is split in two main ways: in the first place, there is a rent in his relation with his world and, in the second, there is a disruption of his relation with himself. Such a person is not able to experience himself 'together with' others or 'at home in' the world, but, on the contrary, he experiences himself in despairing aloneness and isolation ... (Laing 17).

The disparity in the husband-wife relationship is clearly evident as Mary alienates herself from her husband, who is an unsuccessful farmer. She despises her servants and the natives on the basis of the colour bar. In the novel, the parched unprofitable farm under the blazing sky serves as a background to intensify the alienation effect and the bushes are the Freudian symbol of her alienation in the rough terrain. At the end of the novel, Mary loses all her strength for any kind of struggle to live a sane life as she becomes "a woman without will" (Lessing, *The Grass is Singing* 241), who would "walk out her road alone" (Lessing, *The Grass is Singing* 248).

Lessing captures the dichotomy of the postmodern society in her masterpiece *The Golden Notebook* through the schizophrenic heights of the protagonist Anna's alienation.

Anna acknowledges that she is mad and visits Mrs. Marks for psychoanalytical treatment. The treatment in essence teaches Anna to give vent to her

frustrations. The cry is a Freudian slip for a need to do away with her negative thoughts and write a single coherent novel. A thorough reading of Lessing's novels helps one to discover that she finds madness as a technique to cure a human being of his/her problems. Her female protagonists become insane to come out of their tension and conflicts regarding life and relationships. This is peculiarly evident in Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*. The reason of Anna's failure is her political disillusionment and her distrust in the ever-breaking human relationships.

An instance from *The Golden Notebook* depicts Anna's state,

This feeling of being alien to my own body caused my head to swim, until I anchored myself, clutching out for something, to the thought that what I was experiencing was not my thought at all (*The Golden Notebook* 532).

Lessing also states about Anna that,

It occurred to her that she was going-mad. This was 'the breakdown' she had foreseen; the 'cracking up'. Yet it did not seem to her that she was even slightly mad (*The Golden Notebook* 564).

In the novel *A Proper Marriage*, Lessing depicts Martha's alienation from herself as she feels suffocated and caged in her married life. After getting married to Douglas, she feels herself entrapped in an alien body. She describes her marriage as an act of insanity and seeks to find solace in divorce. Douglas is a total mismatch to Martha. Like Mary in *The Grass is Singing*, Martha finds herself confined in the trap of marriage. Lessing depicts the breach between the marital relationship of Martha and Douglas:

But already that image of a lover that a woman is offered by society, and carries with her so long, had divorced itself from Douglas, like the painted picture of a stencil

floating off paper in water (Marriage 40).

At the end of the novel, Martha feels troubled with the constant bickering of her suspicious husband and decides to leave Douglas's home. Martha in a state of neurosis alienates herself from her family and moves ahead on her quest for the 'self', leaving behind Douglas and her daughter.

Lessing deals with psychological alienation. The psychological alienation is implied through the human institution of marriage. The failed marriages serve as roots to psychological isolation and consequent alienation. In Lessing's novels, women feel entrapped in marriage and strive for freedom by escaping from the limitations of marriage. But the irony is that her women protagonists are never actually free, because the more they try to achieve independence, the more is the emotional vacuum they create for themselves. Hence, after recognizing the disillusion of their incompleteness, Lessing's female protagonists descend into an inward journey and fall prey to madness, which serves as a path for redemption.

Thus, Lessing's description takes readers through the predicaments of a postmodern society, grievously afflicted by the World Wars. The alienation in such a society is not limited to estrangement, rather, it has transmogrified into neurosis. Unable to ventilate their frustrations, the protagonists collapse into schizophrenia.

Lessing depicts the state of middle-aged alienated neurotic women in her novels when she pens:

These days, all over the world, there are people like these, mostly women: the states of mind that once only afflicted people on death beds or at moments of acute crisis are their permanent condition. Lives that appear to them meaningless, wasted, hang around their necks like decaying carcasses. They are

hypnotized into futility by self observation (*Landlocked* 255).

In reality, true liberation of women is a complex process and patriarchal system affects even the affluent modern women. The mental illness, as related to women, described in the above instance could be a result of societal pressure on women which forces them to repress their instinctive drives and reactions.

Lessing's ideas resemble the views of the psychiatrist R.D. Laing. She admits her connection with Laing in a 1973 interview with Joyce Carol Oates:

Yes. We were both exploring the phenomenon of the unclassifiable experience, the psychological 'breaking-through' that the conventional world judges as mad. I think Laing must have been very courageous, to question the basic assumptions of his profession from the inside . . . (Oates, "A Visit").

Madness serves as a path for redemption, insulating them from the forces of society. Their morose states have a Freudian wish to find a safe haven. Unable to reconcile the deviation between their consciousness and the natural world, they seek refuge in schizophrenia or madness.

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