



Engendering the Feminine Power: Identity, Prescience and Anticipation in Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* and *The Good Terrorist*

SUSCITER LE POUVOIR FEMININ: IDENTITE, PRESCIENCE ET L'ANTICIPATION DE DORIS LESSING – L'HERBE EST LE CHANT ET LE BON TERRORISTE

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Received 5 September 2011; accepted 12 November 2011

Abstract

The story of Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* and *The Good Terrorist* goes around two characters that may seem quite different at the first sight. Mary Turner and Alice Mellings come from different cultures and live in different historical contexts. Yet, both share oppression and exploitation in economic and sexual terms. While Mary has to enter a family that mirrors the prevalent oppressive relations in the society Alice enters a family-like circle in which oppressive relations are dominant and overwhelming. The former is oppressed and exploited under the patriarchal conduct of her husband while the latter has to suffer a lot being bound to an abusive boyfriend and exploitative squat. But oppression and exploitation are not the only things these two share. A strong sense of anticipation and prescience are the qualities that shape these characters' identities. Reading these two novels from a socialist feminist point of view we argue that Lessing introduces anticipation and prescience as crucial characteristics for her protagonists. Considering the emphasis that Lessing puts on anticipation and prescience we believe that she takes these qualities as subversive power in the hand of women who struggle to change and revolutionize oppressive relations in capitalist and patriarchal structures. While women are always bombarded by ideological messages that advocate their inferior position in the hierarchy of family and society, we argue that Lessing's prescient characters can be good examples of New Women who can be powerful agents trespassing false identities and ideologies of patriarchal capitalist circles and societies.

Key words: Doris Lessing; Prescience; Anticipation; Socialist Feminism

Résumé

L'histoire de Doris Lessing *The Grass Is Singing* et le terroriste Bonne tourne autour de deux personnages qui peuvent sembler très différents à première vue. Mary Turner et Mellings Alice viennent de cultures différentes et vivent dans des contextes historiques différents. Pourtant, l'oppression et l'exploitation partager à la fois en termes économique et sexuelle. Alors que Marie a entrer dans une famille qui reflète les relations d'oppression répandues dans la société Alice pénètre dans un cercle de famille-comme dans lesquelles les relations d'oppression qui sont dominants et écrasante. Le premier est opprimée et exploitée sous la conduite de son mari patriarcale tandis que le second a beaucoup souffrir étant lié à un copain violent et squat d'exploitation. Mais l'oppression et l'exploitation ne sont pas les seules choses que ces deux partagent. Un fort sentiment d'anticipation et de prescience, sont les qualités qui façonnent les identités de ces personnages. La lecture de ces deux romans d'un point de vue féministe socialiste nous soutenons que Lessing introduit l'anticipation et la prescience que les caractéristiques cruciales pour ses protagonistes. Considérant l'importance que Lessing met sur l'anticipation et la prescience que nous croyons qu'elle prend ces qualités en tant que pouvoir subversif dans la main des femmes qui luttent pour le changement et de révolutionner les relations d'oppression dans les structures capitalistes et patriarcales. Alors que les femmes sont toujours bombardés de messages idéologiques qui prônent leur position inférieure dans la hiérarchie de la famille et la société, nous soutenons que les caractères prémonitoire Lessing peuvent être de bons exemples de femmes nouvelles qui peuvent être de puissants identités des agents intrusion de fausses idéologies et des patriarcale

milieux capitalistes et des sociétés.

Mots-clés: Doris Lessing; Prescience; Anticipation; Socialiste du Féminisme

Pedram Lalbakhsh, Wan Roselezam Wan Yahya (2011). Engendering the Feminine Power: Identity, Prescience and Anticipation in Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* and *The Good Terrorist*. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 7(4), 30-35. Available from: URL: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/cc/article/view/j.ccc.1923670020110704.277> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.ccc.1923670020110704.277>

INTRODUCTION

Doris Lessing is, now, well-known as a writer many of whose novels show her genuine concern about women and their lives in oppressive systems and male-dominated societies. While she has always refused to call herself a feminist², her novels have been great means of objection and protest to the oppression that has always overwhelmed women in various ways. From the time of publishing *The Grass is Singing* in 1950 till now female characters of her novels have been representatives of women as strong and capable as men, but experiencing difficult times having to do a lot to destroy the barriers that men never experience throughout their lives. Indeed, they have to waste a lot of their energy on overcoming problems that unfavorable societies create for them. But what attracts attention is the new identity that Lessing tries to engender for her female characters. Lessing considers qualities in women that are reliable and trustworthy sources of knowledge and information. Anticipation and prescience are among these qualities that we are discussing here in this paper trying to shed light on one aspect of Lessing's female character's personality and essence.

CONCEPTUAL THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

The adopted theory for a critical study of feminine anticipation and prescience in Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* and *The Good Terrorist* is socialist feminism that considers women as sexually and economically exploited and oppressed. As Eisenstein observes, socialist feminism follows Marx in distinguishing human existence – the actual existing condition of a being's life in an alienating society – from human essence – the potential possibilities for a being in a non-alienating society (1979, pp.7-8). As such, Socialist feminism holds that women are essentially

prevented from their essence development. This happens in two essentially oppressive contexts. One is that women are always oppressed in economic terms having to do a lot but with no due payment or gain at the end. The second is that women are sexually oppressed and exploited as objects providing sexual pleasure for men. As such women are always oppressed and exploited by either capitalism or patriarchy while each of these two contexts has its own specific facets of oppression through which it imbues and enforces its respective ideology to survive. Based on their ideological assumption both patriarchy and capitalism look at women as weak, emotional beings that have to be half/unpaid or put aside from jobs associated with knowledge and skill. In this view, women are nothing more than unreasonable types who should be absolutely cut from power and decision making bodies. Based on this definition women have to be confined in their private sphere and not to be allowed to enter the public one; hence their non-existing participation in social and economic bases of the society.

But socialist feminism aims at blurring this socially constructed distinction between public and private and struggles to redefine women's identity not in the mirror of the society and its assumptions but in the mirror of women's qualities and merits. Socialist feminism maneuvers on different aspects of women's lives to disclose the way women are overwhelmed and to do this it touches on aspects of women's lives like motherhood, mothering, domestic labor and so on. By uncovering moments of private life that are assumed to be personal and not appropriate to be put in a social and political context, socialist feminism endeavors to show that personal is, in fact, social and political because the oppressive moments and relations are all shared by women and are common phenomena. This is raising a new consciousness that makes women able to share and see what they have in common; to see that their oppression is universal among all women, everywhere, any time; and to "[transcend] subjectivism (the debilitating emphasis on the individual that keeps women blaming their own individual inadequacies for what are social problems)" (Madsen, 2000, p.186).

Approaching Lessing's selected novels from a socialist feminist point of view enables us to compare and contrast her characters to excavate their moments of shared oppression and disclose qualities and merits that are intentionally presented as women's weakness and justifiable excuses to marginalize and discriminate them. Also by exposing women's genuine qualities and power

²Refusing to accept Lessing's repeated reiterations in her lectures, interviews and introductions through which she has denied being a feminist writer, Gayle Greene (1994) argues that Lessing is deeply feminist. Yet she insists that Lessing's feminism is not a simple variety, but one that, to borrow Adrienne Rich's terms, envisions a "profound transformation of world society and of human relationships". See Greene, Gayle. (1997). *Doris Lessing: The Poetics of Change* (pp. 28, 97-98). Michigan: The University of Michigan Press.

we will be able to look at Lessing's characters in a new way and understand how these characters are different and distinguishable. Applying socialist feminism to Lessing's selected novels here enables us to see Lessing's engendered feminine character in a new attire: that of knowledge and its following power. Reading Lessing through the lens of socialist feminism will also prove that she is a firm believer in the idea that "there is no private life that has not been conditioned by a larger public life" (Sukenick, 1973, p.517).

To achieve this aim an exponential approach is adopted and employed. Thus exponents and examples of moments when Lessing's female character relies on her power of anticipation and prescience will be traced and analyzed. We will make it clear how each character, when she is overwhelmed by oppressive relations, benefits from her mentioned power to see through false ideologies and appearances to nullify the effects that these ideologies or appearances are trying to create. After analyzing and scrutinizing each character individually, we will compare and contrast them to disclose a shared implicit power that they possess.

Having Lessing's characters compared and contrasted in the light of socialist feminism and in terms of their power of anticipation and prescience this paper will be a contribution to the existing literature on Lessing's art of writing trying to add something to the socialist feminists' critiques that have been less concerned about concepts scrutinized here. This paper foregrounds qualities that will further the present literature on Lessing by showing one important issue that she employs in her attempts to re-create the glorious Marti-culture she has always adored and envisioned.

DISCUSSION

Before discussing Lessing's female characters to identify their power of anticipation and prescience and the way that they use it to subvert oppressive relations it is necessary to make it clear what do we mean by anticipation and prescience in the first place. According to *Oxford English Dictionary* 6th ed. (2000, p.44) to anticipate is "to see what might happen in the future and take action to prepare for it". This is what Skynner and Cleese (1996, p.56) consider as a mechanism "to reduce the stress of some difficult challenge by anticipating what it will be like and preparing for how you are going to deal with it". They take this mechanism as a homework that makes individuals confident in dealing with the challenge. A homework that identifies a goal and directs action to, in Husserl's (1929) words, "*bring it step by step to concrete realization*" (as cited in Schutz, 1980, p.58). Prescience is also a quality very close to anticipation but slightly different because of its more reliance on unconscious awareness and prophetic association. Being prescient thus is equal to "knowing or appearing to know about things

before they happen" (OED, 6th ed. 2000, p.996).

Now that we are clear about the nature of anticipation and prescience we need to see how these two qualities are incorporated in the characters of Mary Turner and Alice Mellings. Mary, *The Grass is Singing's* protagonist, and Alice, the protagonist of *The Good Terrorist*, are of the same built when they are measured in terms of their sense of anticipation and prescience. Both have a prophetic prescience and an anticipatory sense of future that give them the ability to see through things and to have knowledge of and a plan for the events of their lives. It is by relying on these two that they can subvert the oppressive systems which overwhelm them in a cruel way.

Mary's prescience in *The Grass is Singing* becomes visible when we find her entangled in oppressive relations with her society and her incompetent husband, Dick. While this prescience is not visible at the beginning of the story when Mary falls in the trap of family and family life it gets absolutely clear to see at the end of the novel when Mary goes to her death with open arms. What we see at the beginning of the story is a naive Mary who tries to adjust herself to the codes of her respective patriarchal society. But what we see at the end is a developed character who relies on her prescience to trespass the predetermined red lines and taboos of a patriarchal system.

Being independent both emotionally and economically (in her celibate life) Mary yields to the idea that "she is not like that"; that is, she is not married. As Karl (1972, p.24) sees it, the story is a "personal story against the background of complex social and political relationships" showing an "individual amidst collective pressures" and one of these pressures is the society's criticism on her celibate life. When Mary overhears her friends talking about her this way she loses her poise and tries to adjust herself to the codes of the society; hence her hasty marriage with Dick who is a poor lonely farmer trying to find a wife that can be a companion, a sex machine and a reproducer and socializer of children. This is while we know that these two are not matching in any way. Mary is a sociable, athletic, realistic young girl in favor of city, and "so satisfied with her work ... with her friends, with her life in the club" (GS, pp.39-40) but Dick is a claustrophobic, city-hating, daydreamer who cares for his land more than anything else in the world.

Thus an upcoming discord and clash in this family can be easily predicted and foretold; clashes that are ignited by the unbearable heat under the corrugated tin roof of Dick's ramshackle hut, and are intensified by conflicts with native houseboys who Mary hates and cannot stand. To all these we should add successive failures of Dick who based on the unwritten law in patriarchy knows himself superior and a master to Mary. Ironically, all his failures are the consequences of his impulsive plans and actions. And it is here that Mary's oppression catches our eyes. Mary's prescience enables her to see what happens

right at the moment that Dick speaks of her ideas for the first time. Whenever, he says that he has a plan and speaks about it Mary knows that another failure is on the way.

Yet, despite all Mary's premonitions and warnings Dick never takes her seriously and never takes her words and ideas into account. He does not believe that a woman can have trustworthy ideas and a sound power of thinking. This gets more telling when he becomes sick and all his responsibilities fall on Mary's shoulder. Surprisingly, under Mary's supervision the farm shows promising signs of dehiscence but the oppressive relations of the society that Mary is a member of give no chance to women to have a share of power.

Mary's confinement to the veld and the oven-like hut, along with her conflicts with the native houseboys and Dick's indifference to Mary and her problems, needs and wishes takes her to the point of a break-down that put Mary in an even more miserable situation. Mary's emotional relation with the black houseboy, Moses, makes her a complete taboo and an alien in a society that never stands such transgressing of the codes. That is why after discovering Mary's transgression; Charile Slatter prescribes the six-months banishment for Turners so that he can prevent the contagious disease from being spread in the whole society. Slatter is a representative of a patriarchal society that is ruled and dominated by male-defined codes and ideologies.

But it is ironic that inside this patriarchal system even Moses knows himself as a man with a right over Mary. The prescribed exile-like holiday of Turners is not a thing to be tolerated by Moses. She wants Mary to be near him and considers her as a traitor when he discovers that Mary is leaving the farm; hence his decision to murder Mary as a due punishment. Accordingly, Mary falls a victim in the hands of Dick, Slatter and Moses who are all trying to dominate her in one way or another. Dick is the one that cuts Mary from her economic independence and confines her to the veld exploiting her through domestic labor she performs and care and companionship she provides. Slatter is the one that determines Mary's fate by trying to send her away from the veld; an act that he surely knows what consequences it may have for Mary. And Moses is the one that imposes his own version of patriarchy and its related laws and rules on Mary.

However, the scenes before Mary's murder are replete with moments when Mary can see what is going to happen to her. She knows that Moses is waiting for a chance to kill her. She knows that he is in ambush and she even knows where he is waiting and how is going to attack her. Relying on her prescience Mary stands up, goes out of house where he knows her death is awaiting her and lets Moses to stab her to death.

Accordingly, despite all oppressive pressures it is Mary that, at the end, determines her own destiny. She uses her prescience as a light to find her way out of domination and suppression. By her emotional relation with Moses and

her symbolic suicide, this character of Lessing, nullifies all the oppressive relations in a subversive way. First, she starts to make love with a black servant and subverts the hierarchical order of the society. Her emotional touch with Moses, as Frampton's argues, not only affects Mary's "identity but the identity of the entire colonial society in which she lives" (2009, p.20). Being entangled in a unit where Dick is the head Mary seeks her freedom in being bound to Moses who is an oppressed and marginalized member himself. Second, by nullifying Slatter's decree that she and Dick should be away from the veld Mary deconstructs the most established power center of the society. She disobeys the greatest patriarch of the society and decides to stay even if it is by her dead body. While we know that Mary's staying at home would give no chance to Moses to kill her she goes outside and by relying on her prescience finds the murderer and invites her death indeed.

Therefore, what we see at the end of the novel is not the naïve character at the beginning that let others decide for her. Mary, at the end, is a political agent that fights back and resists to being defined and planned in a certain way. She changes to a model character that invites women to disobey all dominating codes and standards. Lessing's engendered female character in *The Grass is Singing* proves herself a dynamic character who moves from some kind of naivety to the missionary status of a revolutionary New Woman who, resists, fights and subverts. She is, at the end, a character who, as Sukenick writes, yells "I'm not going to live according to your rules. I'm not going to conform" (1973, p.532).

The story of *The Good Terrorist* too depicts a character who is naïve enough – at the beginning – to be oppressed and exploited by her homosexual boyfriend. Jasper oppresses Alice sexually and exploits her economically. Many scenes in the novel prove that Alice is emotionally bound to Jasper. It is this emotional reliance that changes to an appropriate context of sexual and economic oppression. Jasper never touches Alice – except for the times when he translates his violence into firm grips on her hand or kicking her ankle – never kisses her and is always cautious not to have Alice close to him. His treatment of Alice is marked by humiliation and indifference showing that he does not feel anything for the girl. He never takes Alice in a serious way and is usually found sarcastic and violent towards her.

Limiting Alice in different ways Jasper prevents her to be with a man (if she likes it) and hinders her from having sex with others. While he has his own affairs with men (or women) he never considers the same possibility for Alice and this makes Alice deprived and humiliated in sexual terms. He pretends to be a lover while his pretention is more a proof that he is an exploiter who keeps close to Alice because of the money and care she provides for him.

On the other hand is Mary's economic oppression that is imposed on her in two different ways. Jasper takes

whatever he can get from her; he takes her dole bringing excuses that he needs the money for the party and political purposes. He lives on Alice's provision and lives in Alice's mother's home without any payment for the house or the food he rudely takes from their kitchen. In addition is the squatter's treatment towards Alice that is not much different from Jasper's. They, too, are economically oppressive and exploitative. They rarely contribute to the squat's expenses and are always criticizing Alice for whatever she does to save the squat from being demolished by the city council. What we understand from this squat is that it is a "mirror image of the dominant (national) culture that it purports to be opposing or a metaphor – microcosm – of the nation itself" (Yelin, 1998, p.96).

But while Jasper and the patriarchal capitalist society of the novel intend to overwhelm Alice with the pressures they impose on her Alice seems not to be overwhelmed and affected by what she experiences. Relying on her extraordinary sense of anticipation and prescience she resists and fights back tirelessly. To save the squat that is threatened by the city council – a representative of the patriarchal capitalist society – Alice does a lot. She gets Philip to do the repair work and she works like a laborer to repair, wash, paint and decorate the damaged house. She even steals money from her father to pay the expenses and Philip's wage. She manages to counter police whenever they come to find an excuse and make a scene in the house. And all this is possible because of Alice's power of prescience.

In electricity department, for instance, Alice knows which one of the employees would help her; in facing police she knows what to say and how to say it so that police's anger and determination to attack and destroy get subsided. In the city council, she knows how to behave so that she could get the permit that saves the house. She writes "the words which would – Alice was sure – save the house" (*GT*, pp.24-25). Alice is a master in using her ability to see things in advance and to act in a specific way to avoid destructive consequences. She is capable of seeing the truth and this is a God-given talent. She is a prophet-like figure with an infallible revelation: "She knew this about him; how? She did not know how she knew what she did about people. She just did" (*GT*, p.178). Alice's revelations, her knowing things just by instinct – or a sharp sense we can say – are reliable source of information. When Jim is wounded in his own room, Alice goes to his room and finds him there just because "something [takes] her to Jim's door while she is going upstairs to 'admire her newly-painted room'" (*GT*, p.181). Relying on her power of prescience she manages to change the house that is half-ruined and bad-smelling into a habitable place that neighbors could have never imagined in their dreams.

Thus, while the men in the story are all ruinous

and destructive Alice proves to be a revolutionary productive agent. While men and society's institutions are all oppressive and exploitative, Alice is highly constructive and of course subversive. Demolishing the house is a priority in the council's agenda but through her anticipation and prescience Alice is subversive enough to abort the oppressive operation and to gain the neighbor's favor and sympathy. As Whittaker points out "her creativity is expressed through her ability to turn a stinking neglected house into a comfortable home smelling of newly baked bread and fresh flowers" (1988, p.127). By changing the house to a clean and habitable place, and by keeping all the dangerous terrorists away and preventing them from using the house as locus of smuggling and criminal acts Alice shows that women's power of prescience could be a weapon in their hands to subvert the hierarchical order of the society.

In a nutshell, the engendered New Woman in *The Good Terrorist*, though betrayed and left alone in the end, is not broken and crippled. Her reliance on her prescience prevents her from being overwhelmed by the society that tries to manipulate her. That is why she does not yield to the identity she is expected to assume. She knows well that whatever she has done has been right and praiseworthy. It does not matter if others were not able or willing to recognize what she has done; the truth is what Alice knows and does. This is the reason that, at the end of the novel, we find her in "the *betrayed* house... [allowing] her mind to move from room to room in it, praising her achievements, as if someone else had accomplished all that, but the work had not been properly acknowledged..." (*GT*, p.393). At the end she feels "in command of everything again...looking like a nine-year-old who has had, perhaps, a bad dream" waiting for the time when she can "go out and meet the professionals" (*GT*, p.397).

CONCLUSION

The finding of this study shows that both Mary Turner and Alice Mellings rely on their power of anticipation and prescience to subvert the well-established oppressive and exploitative relations of the society. Knowing that Moses is waiting to stab her from behind Mary goes to the balcony to find her murderer. Both her emotional relation with Moses and her refusal to accept the banishment and her preference for death over exile are subversive actions that shake the pillars of her patriarchal society. Likewise is Alice Mellings who does not let her society and the male-dominated squat define her identity and character. Using her prescience as her weapon she attacks the prevalent patriarchy and capitalism in her society and shows that this quality can be a subversive aspect of female identity and conduct. Putting emphasis on anticipation and prescience Lessing tries to raise a new

consciousness for women that will enable them to look at things from different angles. Lessing shows that what patriarchal capitalist societies reject as unreliable source of knowledge is, in fact, a trustworthy and valuable source of knowledge and power that can be used in order to make change and revolution. These two novels, thus, can be considered as Lessing's clarion call for women's self-confidence and power. She wants women to give a second thought to the treasure they have and to doubt the falsified definitions that society presents about their identity and power.

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