



Jane's Self-Development in *The Diaries of Jane Somers*: An Analysis of Doris Lessing's Feminist Perspectives

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Abstract

Doris Lessing is one of the greatest women novelists in British literature. Though she refuses to be classified as a feminist writer and an advocator for the feminist movement, she is deeply concerned with the life of women and forms her own feminist perspectives in her novels.

This paper aims to explore Doris Lessing's feminist perspectives through the analysis of the protagonist Jane in *The Diaries of Jane Somers* who achieves her self-development after experiencing the lost of love and the search for love. Though it's not Lessing's most famous novel, it represents her deep thoughts on feminist existence and her continuous efforts to find a way out for women in the sexual relationship in a patriarchal society.

Key words: Feminist perspectives; Lack of love; Search for love; Self-achievement

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INTRODUCTION

As an extraordinary and productive novelist, Doris Lessing contributes a great number of masterpieces to the world in various styles such as *The Grass is Singing*, *The Children of Violence* series and *The Golden Notebook*

which wins the Nobel Prize in 2007. Though resenting being classified as a feminist writer, she shows her own feminist perspectives in her works as she focuses on the female experience such as their desperation and helplessness, their suffering from the society and struggle for a better life. Her works explore a way out for women and a solution to a better sexual relations with her keen insight. *The Diaries of Jane Somers* contains two parts. The first part *The Diary of a Good Neighbor* depicts the love between Jane and Maudie who is the substitute for Jane's mother and helps Jane accomplish her search for love. The second part *If the Old Could* tells an extramarital love between Jane and Richard which awakes Jane that her real love is her late husband—Freddie. During the process, Jane reexamines herself and achieves her self-achievement. It also shows Lessing's reflection on women's position in the sexual relationship. On one hand, Lessing questions the subordinated roles of women who make great sacrifice and lose their own identities. On the other hand, she advocates the traditional virtues of women in families and cooperative sexual relationship.

1. DORIS LESSING'S FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

Doris Lessing's feminist perspectives are deeply influenced by the feminist movements of the late 1960s and 1970s which aim to realize sexual liberation and economic independence and change the traditional subordinated role of women. Feminist consciousness arouses people's attention from some women writers. "Doris Lessing, Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Richardson.... all created female characters who share one characteristic: the tension resulting from the conflict between the ideal of sexual equality and the reality of sexual subordination (Kaplan, 1975). Lessing resents being classified as a feminist writer. Yet the author agrees with Gayle Greene

who argues that “Lessing is deeply feminist and her evolution intuitively a major movement within feminism.” (Greene, 1994, p.29) It is admitted that women’s issue has been an important concern in most of Lessing’s works and women’s consciousness development and their search for identity is an eternal theme of her works. Lessing’s feminism is different from the stereotypical one that lacks the sense of independence and identity that women need in the new area. Women are expected to make great self-sacrifice to the family in an inferior position according to the old norms. At the same time, she is also opposed to the other extreme: Women seek their economic and spiritual independence by fighting with men and separating themselves from the meaning of family life and traditional roles as a good mother, daughter and wife. The traditional virtues of women such as love, tenderness, nurturing and care-taking in the family are abandoned and the closeness between men and women becomes distant. Just as Bell Hooks points out “the anti-male stance was a reactionary perspective that makes feminism appear to be a movement that would enable white women to usurp white male power, replacing white male rule with white female supremacist rule.” (Hooks, 1998, p.268) Her ideal femininity is a harmonious union between men and women in which women give and love, meanwhile possessing her female identity and female aggressiveness which is a guarantee of her power and independence. Only in this way could a balanced and harmonious sexual relationship be established. Women could not accomplish her ideal life without the involvement and love from her family members. The female characters in her novels all spare no efforts to be a “new woman”, but after reexamining their individual experience, they find the true meaning of life and achieve their self-fulfillment.

2. JANE’S LACK OF LOVE

According to Simone de Beauvoir, the motherhood is the reflection of the patriarchal ideology and the femininity has taken beyond the maternal role. Doris Lessing has made mother-daughter relationship one of the main themes of her large number of productions. She is a famous female writer for her depiction of the mother-daughter bond. Actually, Doris Lessing has complicated feelings about her mother, love together with hatred. In her records, her mother is capable, yet unqualified. In her novels, the mother-daughter relationship is always intense with a powerful and dominating mom and a rebellious daughter who seek her freedom and control of her own destiny. The relationship between Jane and her mother is no exception. In the first part of the novel, Jane’s mother dies from cancer. Jane feels sorry for her, but she shows little concern to her mother’s sufferings. Being young, Jane left home for London and come to work for self-development. She does not want to follow her mother who

is a housewife and restricted by husband and family. What she wants is to achieve her self-development by working hard. Jane overemphasizes her work as a way to fulfill her dream and an escape from traditional roles of women. There is little communication or love between them. Jane is so indifferent to her mother that even her mother dies, she says to herself “I could not kiss her... I couldn’t touch her...I couldn’t think of anything to say” (p.8) Although she is a successful career woman with respectable job and fashionable appearance, she does fail to love and feel love for her mother.

Jane is not only lack of mother-daughter love, but also husband-wife love. Freddie, husband of Jane, is another important person in Jane’s life. Freddie also dies of cancer. Jane has not given a chance for Freddie to pour out his sufferings from cancer, his quests for a pair of ears, and his dread of going to die. In their marriage, they are not like a couple but the partners who live together. “Jane chose to have neither children nor an emotionally close relationship with her husband, Freddie” (Sprague, 1987, p.119). It seems that deeply influenced by feminism which advocates the equality with men and fights for women’s rights, Jane is a “new woman” and a “super woman” who is self-confident and self-competent to purchase freedom and independence as her ideal life. Therefore, the traditional role of women in the family as a subordinated existence in a patriarchal society is looked down upon in her mind. She raises her consciousness of feminism to the extremes and we could not find the traditional female virtues in her such as love, nurturance, tenderness and caring for her closest family members. There is also little communication between them, as Jane says “Yet we could not talk to each other...because when she started to try I shied away.”(p.6) Even when Freddie began to be ill, Jane’s reaction is “Unfair to me, I thought secretly. I partly knew he was dying, but went on as if he wasn’t. That was not kind. He must have been lonely. I was proud of myself because I went working through it all, ‘kept the money coming in’-well, I had to do that, with him not working. But I was thankful I was working because I had an excuse not be with him in that awfulness.” (p.5) What’s more, Jane denies the role of mother which is considered as an obstacle to her self-fulfillment and it may put her in confinement. “There was never time for children” even if “I know he wanted children.” (p.23)

Jane is a typical representative of the self-sufficient and self-appreciated women which the feminists advocate. But Lessing does not approve of this kind of women as they are so concentrated on themselves for their egotism that they neglect the care, love and closeness needed in the family and even social contact. She questions whether the absolute independence and isolation from men are what women really need and whether women could achieve the self-fulfillment without love from family. She rethinks of the female roles and sexual relationship in the family,

which could be presented in the changes of Jane's attitude towards work and life.

3. JANE'S SEARCH FOR LOVE

During the last three decades of the 20th century many female writers seemed more ready to acknowledge their debt to their mothers, so that the mother-daughter becomes a major concern of many women writers. In *The Diaries of Jane Somers*, Lessing also hopes to repair this relationship to reverse the idea that woman's value and position in the society should be obtained at the cost of mother-daughter love and she advocates that mother-daughter relationship is important in the construction of female identity. At the beginning of the novel, as a "handsome, middle-aged widow with a good job in the magazine world." (p.9) in the upper class of the society, Jane shows little concern and love to her mother. But after her mother's death, she feels a longing for emotional closeness with her mother and Maudie, a poor and lonely widow, comes into Jane's life as a substitute for the mother. From attending to Maudie, Jane reexamines herself from a female perspective and undergoes a great change, that is, she searches for the mother-daughter love to escape from her indifferent and selfish former self.

A "child daughter" called by herself, Jane does not know how to take care of people or try to keep an intimate relationship with others. At the first sight, Maudie is just an old creature to Jane. But as time goes by, Jane finds there is something different in her: "Fierce blue eyes, under grey craggy brows, but there was something wonderfully sweet in them. I liked her, for some reason, from that moment" (p.12). Maybe from Maudie, Jane has seen the strength of spirit and inspiration for life. In this process, Maudie also exerts a great influence on Jane who is deeply touched by Maudie's vitality to fight against the illness and death. Her attitude towards the oldness changes profoundly "I love sitting on a bench by some old person, for now I no longer fear the old, but wait for when they trust me enough to tell me their tales, so full of history. (p.166) Being together with Maudie and listening to her life experience, the original career-absorbed woman Jane gradually walks outside from her own world and finds her true value by taking on the responsibility of taking care of Maudie. She learns how to face up to the awful things in life. What's more, she realizes the indifference to her mother and granny. "When people die, what we regret is, not having talked to them enough." (p.62). Her full devotion to work and herself isolates her from mother while her attending to Maudie helps her find the close mother-daughter relationship and regain the ability of love to others. In Claire Sprague's words, Jane's relationship with Maudie teaches her "to feel, to give and to love." (Sprague, 1987, p.120)

The second part of the novel tells an extramarital love between Richard and Jane. The love of Richard helps Jane rethink about her relationship with her past husband Freddie and accomplish her search for wife-husband love.

Similar to Jane, Richard's wife Sylvia is also a "new woman" who only focuses on work and neglects the family. Richard and Jane fall in love at the first sight while Richard takes Jane as the original Sylvia who loves and accompanies him. Without reservation, Richard tells Jane what he suffers from his marriage life and how he longs for a wife's care and love. Jane is deeply absorbed in this romantic love as she describes "We stood facing each other, quite ablaze with love." (p.268) It seems that it's a perfect wife-husband relationship with both of them finding consolation and emotional support from each other. While dating with Richard, Jane could not help recalling Freddie as she dreams of Freddie all the night. Her dreams express her thoughts at the bottom of the heart that her love for the past husband is stronger. "What a fool I've been...For it was Freddie I was thinking of. If I could now separate them at all" (p.279). And finally Jane wakes up from her dreams in the end, "I sat there, feeling as if all the dreams I have been dreaming over the last months about Freddie had ended here, on this bench, at prosaic lunchtime, in the square." (p.469) Until then, Freddie is "alive" in Jane's eyes. Jane feels an overwhelming regret for Freddie whom she overlooks for a long time with an excuse of work and her refusal to love men. Her extreme feminist views such as independence and female rights deprive her role of a good wife and mother and it's herself who steps away the warmth and love of a family. The love with Richard, which is doomed to end, is a way to search for husband-wife love for Jane and from Richard Jane finds her love of Freddie.

Lessing points out that in the eyes of some feminists, women are the victims of the patriarchal society where men are the symbols of domination and tyranny. The roles of mother and wife are a discrimination of women and deprive them of rights and interests. Therefore, what they do in the family is a great sacrifice at the cost of their self-identity and social status. As a result, women could only find their identity and freedom by isolating themselves from men and taking back their love from men. During this process, it's misleading to overlook the traditional femininity and it's easy for the "new women" to lose the ability of love. In the novel, Lessing is advocating the love and care which must be emphasized in the construction of a female personality. On one hand, Jane shows her longing for love which is long neglected. On the other hand, she realizes the love of men is a necessity for the good of both sexes. Therefore, the search for love of Jane is a symbol of women's desire to regain their female characteristics, which are also Lessing's aspiration for women.

4. JANE'S SELF-DEVELOPMENT IN HER SEARCH FOR LOVE

Through Jane's search for love, we could find her self-growth from an indifferent individual to a mature adult full of love and care to others. The ideal femininity could find its full expression in Jane and her self-development is demonstrated in the following aspects.

4.1 Jane's Changed Attitude Towards Work

The original Jane is a very successful career woman in the fashion field. "Jane blossoms in work, loves her own efficiency, her sense of 'being in control', and acknowledges this as the greatest 'pleasure' in her life." (Greene, 1994, p.196) Work seems to be her most important part of life which could not only make sure of her economic independence, but also brings a sense of achievement and pride to her. In her mind, "My life was entirely in the office. I had no life at home. Home. What a word! It was the place I prepared myself for the office, or rested after work." (p.10) After taking care of Maudie who enlightens her, Jane realizes the true meaning of life is far beyond what work could bring to her. She is so devoted to work that she has missed so much of her past life. When taking care of Maudie, Jane spares time from her work to accompany Maudie, which is a trace of Jane's profound change. After Maudie's death, Jane takes a different attitude toward work and turns to enjoy life after work and love with others. She comes to the realization that one should not give up love in favor of work. Richard, though a substitute for Freddie in Jane's sub-consciousness, leads Jane to enjoy the happiness of sexual relationship besides work. Therefore, after experiencing the lack of love and search for love, Jane grows up to become a mature, passionate and caring woman and learns to put love before work.

4.2 Jane's Changed Attitude Towards the Oldness and Death

According to Simone de Beauvoir, society looks upon old age as a kind of shameful secret that it is unseemly to mention. Even within feminism ageism is difficult to be faced with. But Doris Lessing dwells on women's old age and death in depth in this novel and we could find her attitude through the description of Jane's self-growth. Being an old and poor creature, Maudie represents an increasing number of elderly women who depend on others for care while Jane is a middle-aged and well-dressed woman who enjoys a comfortable life and successful care. The two forms a sharp contrast. At first, Jane is reluctant to face up to Maudie as the old woman always means a process towards senility and death which is the most dreadful thing in the world, especially for such a narcissist woman. According to Jane's words: "I imagine, deliberately, all kinds of panic, of dread: I make myself visualize me, Jane, sitting up

on high pillows, very old, being destroyed from within." (p.234) Through looking after Maudie, Jane starts to take a new look to the aged people and the final death as she still feels Maudie's vitality beating for life with her strong persistence and her intelligence for life and love. The elderly women should not be ignored as they are the ones who really need care and love from others. When watching Maudie die, Jane gets a true feeling of the destined death and accepts it as an inevitable end of everybody's life.

4.3 Jane's Changed Attitude Towards Life

When Jane accomplishes her search for love, she gets back the traditional femininity and holds a totally new attitude towards life. "When I wake in the morning... I greet each day with-what a privilege, what a marvelous, precious thing, that I don't need anyone to assist me through this day." (p.167) She knows what she really wants from life which could only be gained through her innermost changes. No more a "child wife and child daughter", she learns to take on her responsibility of a daughter and a wife, take others' feelings and needs into consideration and determines to live a new life with a positive attitude. To some degree, she becomes a "new woman" according to her own definition and finds her true self. Though still as a career woman financially independent, Jane knows that love is the most valuable quality of human being and it's also the essence of life. The intimacy and care among people, especially among family members could bring more self-fulfillment to people. At the same time, Jane learns to face up to the inevitability in life such as oldness and death. Stepping out from her isolated world, she becomes involved with others' life and achieves her self-development in this process.

Through the self-development of Jane, Lessing expresses her aspiration for women to exert her female subjectivity in love and life. It's another form of feminism which puts love, care and intimacy in a very important place in the sexual relationship and the traditional femininity is also emphasized.

CONCLUSION

According to Gayle Greene,

The real structure or substance of this novel is deeply feminist: in Jane's attachment to Maudie and her work, in her pleasure working with other women and living alone. Lessing demonstrates alternatives to the closed, dead-end system wherein "that was that". (Greene, 1994, p.201)

Though Lessing refuses to be named as a feminist, she is deeply concerned with women's life and mind, which could be fully demonstrated in her novel *The Diaries of Jane Somers*. From the above analysis of the changes in Jane, we could have a clear idea of Doris Lessing's feminist perspectives. From an indifferent, selfish and work-centered woman, Jane grows up to be a mature,

caring and warm woman. And she accomplishes her self-development as she searches for her lost love and changes her attitudes towards work, other people and life. Lessing is not in support of the stereotypical feminism which overemphasizes the independence and self-identity to extremes that it overlooks the traditional virtues and roles of women and isolates women from the balanced relationship with others. To correct the faults of this feminism, Lessing points out a new way for women. While keeping the economic and spiritual independence, women should seek a more harmonious and balanced coexistence with men. Women and men are not enemies and the feminist movement is not a fight at the cost of love and life. Independence doesn't mean isolation or even hostility between both sides and women could only realize the real feminism by establishing a cooperative relationship with men. At the same time, Women should be a combination of both subjectivity in family and aggressiveness in life. The traditional femininity should

not be ignored and even discarded. Love and care are the most valuable quality of women. In a word, Doris Lessing offers a more reasonable and insightful perspective in feminism.

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