



An Interpretation of the Characters in Lessing's Fictions From a Feminist Perspective

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Abstract

Doris Lessing's attitude towards feminism and her writing about it always has a sense of ambiguity. Lessing's characters have not only obvious feminist features but also a very feminist title: Free women. One can find clear feminist features in Lessing's female protagonists from either *The Golden Notebook* or *The Summer Before the Dark*. They are all independent, anti-man and longing for freedom. They either get divorced with children (like Molly Jacobs and Anna Wulf) or stay as free as unmarried within marriage (like Kate Brown). Their independence, hostility against men and desire for freedom are the seminal features of feminism. And the self-discovery of these female characters is at the same time Lessing's own exploration into feminism itself. Besides, the male characters in Lessing's fictions have an equal importance in suggesting Lessing's feminist ideas. In Anna's words, women, especially woman writers, create their men in their fictions because it's rather impossible for them to find an ideal one but in the fictional world. Among these male characters, there is Paul Tanner, the woman-hater, and Saul Green in whom one can see understanding to feminism instead of hatred. These male characters share equal importance as female ones in revealing Lessing's exploration into the feminist theme. Therefore, the thesis is an attempt to analyze these characters from a feminist perspective so as to understand the value of Lessing's fictions as feminist texts.

Key words: Characterization; Division; Feminism; Lessing; Solution

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INTRODUCTION

Doris Lessing, born in Kermanshah, Persia (now Iran), 1919, is a very productive British woman writer, author of works like *The Grass Is Singing*, *The Golden Notebook*, *The Four-Gated City*, *The Summer Before the Dark*, and so on. The most studied and widely acknowledged themes of Lessing and her works are two: isolation and feminism. The first is widely accepted, while the late remains highly controversial.

The reason why feminist theme in Lessing's fictions is so controversial is partially due to the author's own paradoxical attitude towards feminism. On one hand, she has made clear her willingness to support women in winning back their rights; on the other, her remarks like "I am impatient with people who emphasize sexual revolution" are not rare. But Lessing's fictions are still used in the sex war regardless of her own will. Certainly this means there must be a feminist value in her fictions. Moreover, Lessing's portrait of free women and their counterparts, to some extent, is out of her instinct as a female writer, and her writing process is also her exploration into the theme of feminism. A feminist approach not only helps to tell Lessing's feminist ideas but also adds to the wholeness of understanding her fictions.

The thesis will be focused on Lessing's characterization from a feminist perspective and a further analysis of the relationship between the characters to better understand both her characterization and her exploration into feminism.

1. THE INFLUENCE OF FEMINISM UPON LESSING AND HER WORKS

Nowadays, feminism is in existence together with anti-feminism. There are many who dislike feminist ideas, maintaining that feminists are making a fuss for nothing or they are trying to start a sex war. Interestingly enough, besides these feminist haters, many woman writers, who occupy important positions in the history of feminist writing or criticism, claim that they are not feminists at all, or at least they are not writing to be feministic merely. Doris Lessing is one of them. She has for many times stated her resentment of being called a feminist. And it's obvious in her statement that she feels regretful that her fiction is understood and used in a way purely to serve a feminist broadside.

According to Lessing, surely women are demanding nothing more than nature offers them throughout the history. And in her statement she clearly claims that "the last thing I have wanted to do was to refuse to support women." Supporting women as Lessing is, why should she have so strong resentment against being called a feminist writer? The answer can be found in Lessing's introduction written in 1971 to *The Golden Notebook*, in which Lessing has made clear her attitude towards women's liberation, her own understanding of the novel and her strong dislike of critics who categorize her novel as a feminist product. In Lessing's view, critics are well trained and institutionalized for telling whether writers and their works are in accordance with social decrees and practices, and "their lives are spent in criticizing, and in criticizing each other's criticism." It's hard to imagine how she could accept the title of feminist writer granted by these critics. In Lessing's understanding, women's efforts for freedom and equality are quite natural. There's no need to name it something. Of course, Lessing does not give a damn, otherwise she'd become one of those involved enthusiastically in the sex war, with dozens of angry woman characters created in her fictions to arise women's hatred against men and desire to rule. But her characters are definitely not. Thus, the other reason that Lessing resents so much being called a feminist writer, as I view it, is that she does not want her work to be interpreted so simply in one theme and she hates the sex war some feminists initiate.

As has been mentioned, it's not likely for a woman writer not to care about the women issue. It's equally true to say that it's almost impossible for a woman to write without being influenced by feminism. Lessing is no exception. Many critics maintain that Lessing is heavily influenced by feminist writers, especially by Virginia Woolf. Like many Doris Lessing and Virginia Woolf readers, I have always imagined a deep and visible connection between Lessing and Woolf. But that connection was elusive...One such allusion is Martha Quest's recollection in *The Four-Gated City* of the birds

who sing in Greek to a mad young man (550). So we know that Lessing read Mrs. Dalloway and stored away one vivid image relating to Septimus's madness.... More resonant interconnections did not fall into place until I heard Lessing speak in New York on January 31, 1991 at the 92nd Street Y. What a surprise and a delight to hear from her for the first time a very warm, extended, and effective appreciation of Woolf and her novels. What she said started me on a new train of recovery and discovery about her relation to her formidable processor. Both the distance she deliberately keeps from the mainstream feminist criticism and the connections she has with her processors have a powerful effect on her writing, as a result of which Lessing's reference to her processors and feminist works is always elusive.

2. INTERPRETATION OF THE FEMALE CHARACTERS FROM A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

Lessing's characters, especially the female ones, are much studied in a feminist way, for they have the qualities and personalities of a free woman. The names of these characters, like Anna Wulf and Kate Brown, are no longer names only, but a symbol of feminist exploration and independence. Some critics maintain that these characters are alter egos of the author; their experience is also the process of author's exploration in the women's issue in the modern times.

Lessing presents typical 20th century females in her fictions that make her special, and her characterization must have illustrated the new features of modern women. In order to know more new features of Lessing's protagonists, three female characters are to be analyzed from a feminist perspective in the following. They are from two of Lessing's works: *The Golden Notebook* (1962) and *The Summer Before the Dark* (1973).

2.1 Anna Wulf: Independent, Anti-Man & Manly and Longing for Freedom

Anna Wulf remains the best-known female protagonist by Lessing for half a century after the publication of *The Golden Notebook*. She is passionate, professional, sensitive, and lonely. To be short, she is a totally anti-old-stereotype. One can almost find everything that a new woman has in Anna. She is a lonely searcher for freedom, for humanity and for love. Thus, one can find a lot in common between Anna and a feminist.

Independent: One of the most powerful influences that feminism has upon modern women is that more and more of them tend to stay unmarried despite their growing age, for the reason that they don't want to be subordinated to men any more. And as a natural result of being single, these women have to work. Anna is in her thirties, but she chooses not to marry again but merely

keeps sexual partnership with men. Since Anna is not remarried, she has to support her family on her own. Therefore Anna appears as a professional writer. If sex outside the lock shows her paradoxical attitude towards man/woman relationship and her desire to get rid of women's traditional role, then having a job manifests her determination to be independent.

Anti-man & manly: To some extent, feminism is against men. If there's no man to rule, there is no woman to be ruled. Those women want their natural rights back means that men have to lose their privilege. In this sense, it's little wonder that Anna is very critical about men. For many times in her talk, she makes fun of men, especially when with Molly. She even understands the friendship between her and Molly as purely based on criticism on men. In Anna's fiction *The Shadow of the Third*, her portrait of Paul as an anti-feminist is actually from her feminist instinct and subconscious. Since its anti-man nature, it's natural that feminism will incur hostility from men.

Longing for freedom: If remaining single and having paradoxical feelings for men are the symptoms of modern feminists, longing for freedom is not only a third symptom but also the reason for the first two. To be short, women's longing for freedom is the reason why feminism is generated. For the sake of freedom, Anna wants to shrug off women's traditional roles, but the fact is that she is impossible to be free of men because love between men and women is part of human's nature. And once she needs love, she needs men, which results in a necessary bound instead of freedom. For this reason, Anna really has tough experience in choosing between marriage and single life and between sex and love, because she is ever in uncertainty about what kind of life she wants to live and how much freedom she is able to sacrifice for love. She deliberately split her memories and thoughts apart to evade her real self in confusion and despair, resulting from the conflict between her dream for freedom and the truth that freedom is far out of her reach. After Anna's relationship with Saul, she is finally able to get out of the pain and madness, and starts her real exploration in freedom.

2.2 Molly Jacobs: Hating Man and Manipulative

Anyone who gets a quick look at Molly can have an overall understanding that she is a very typical feminist. Like Anna, she is independent and professional, having problem with men. But these words are far from enough to define Molly. If Anna is anti-man, Molly hates men, and if Anna's longing for freedom is a natural instinct of a human being, Molly is highly manipulative over almost everything. She very much resembles an aggressive feminist who participates passionately in the sex war, crying: down with all men.

Hating man: As has been discussed, feminism is, to some extent, against men and the masculine society.

Molly's hostility against men is much stronger than Anna. Her hatred against men has been absolute and determined for long. At the very beginning of *The Golden Notebook*, Anna and Molly talk in Molly's department. They keep discussing how men are unworthy of being loved and how selfish, inadequate and ridiculous they are. When they are waiting for Richard, her ex-husband, they talk about him continuously in a humiliating tone: His marriage fails all the time, his offer to his son is rejected, and he is able to communicate with neither his wife nor his children. Later when Richard arrives, she even insults him face to face, which makes Richard embarrassed and angry but pleases Molly very much. Successful as Richard is, he seems like a clown in their talk. However, it is Molly, rather than Anna, that takes great pleasure as well as initiative in humiliating men. For many times even Anna, Molly's feminist comrade, has to bear her friend's hostility to men, for it's so strong and beyond reason.

Manipulative: Since women are ruled, they are longing for freedom, or even for manipulation. One can find in a great number of feminists a desire to manipulate, for it brings the pleasure to "rule". Molly is very manipulative in her relationship with almost everyone: Anna, Tommy, let alone Richard. It has been discussed that criticizing and humiliating Richard is almost a habit of hers. What's more, her lust for manipulation has also hurt her friend Anna and her son Tommy. For Anna, what Molly wants from her is too compulsive and hurting. When Anna tells Molly she is not writing something, Molly is shrill with these words: "I'll never forgive you if you throw that talent away. I mean it." (Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook* 6) Molly's words sound bitter and accusing to Anna as if Anna's talent belongs not to herself, and writing is not only her career, but also a feminist business concerning all women. For Tommy it's worse. Her mother is using him against his father. Under Molly's manipulation, Richard has received nothing but rejection from his son Tommy, which satisfies Molly greatly. She thinks to herself that her manipulation over Tommy is well accepted and understood, and apparently, her revenge to men is successful, but it turns out that Molly's hatred and manipulation have driven Tommy to madness and divisions. It has been proved at the end that Molly's manipulation has done good to nobody, and she almost loses her only son.

2.3 Kate Brown: In Rage and Isolated

Kate Brown is the protagonist in *The Summer Before the Dark*. She is a successful translator, well known and highly paid. Judging from her situation, she is well sheltered from the disaster that many women suffer from. However, wherever she goes, she is shadowed by the inequality and biased definition on women. Like the two protagonists we've discussed, Kate is independent and professional, but what Kate has impressed us most is her

continuous rage against the masculine society and her strong sense of isolation.

In rage: Where there is inequality between men and women, there's rage from feminists. Kate feels angry about the inequality not only for herself but also for her female fellows wherever she goes. When she accepts Jeffrey as her company on her travel, she receives a strange look from people because this man is much younger than her. Why the society accepts old man vs. young girl pattern so well and old woman vs. young man as lovers so badly? Kate is angry that a female with a younger man should be subjected to critical looking, suggesting that their being together is against the social decrees. Again, when she sees showgirls entertaining their audience and abandoned when they are no longer young, she is outraged that girls are used and deserted like materials. Witnessing this tragedy in rage, Kate only keeps smiling to them, for there's nothing more she can do.

Isolated: No one is a born feminist. Women have to read, see and ponder on the many feminist issues, especially inequality between women and men, to understand the rightfulness and necessity of feminist movement. And once they have become one of feminists, they are very likely to be isolated from the majority of the society, receiving little understanding. After Kate's summer travel, during which she has witnessed and contemplated women's issue day after day, she becomes the new Kate who can hardly believe in her old belief or live her previous life. Certainly when the new Kate returns to the coast she will find what used to be familiar turns out strange, as a result of which she gets unbelievably isolated and lonely. As she starts to perceive the world differently, she deliberately postpones her return to the home in order to recognize the world all over again. She goes to the cinema to see a film. The fact that the audience enjoys the extremely boring film shocks her. It's like she is surrounded by a troop of animals that share no same language with her. So isolated as Kate is, she wants something familiar and consoling. She goes back to the block where her house is, in the hope that she will be recognized. To her great disappointment, no one has recognized her. The only creature that has greeted her that day is a dog of her neighbor's (too ironic). If in *The Golden Notebook*, Anna's loneliness and isolation are imaginable, the isolation here for Kate is very much exaggerated for an artistic purpose: To better present the extreme of being lonely and isolated which sometimes can be beyond imagination.

3. INTERPRETATION OF THE MALE CHARACTERS FROM A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

In Anna's words, women create men of their own, especially woman writers in their novels, to let men fit into

their dreams. We have been focused too much on woman writers and their female characters, but it seldom occurs to us that how women picture their counterparts, men, are equally important and persuasive in telling their feminist ideas. When woman writers portrait a male character, they pay great attention to man/woman relationship and how men perceive feminist ideas. What's more, these writers will comment on men and their attitude towards women and feminism from time to time, which in turn speaks for their own feminist understandings. We are hereby to go through two of Lessing's male characters in *The Golden Notebook* to see how these male figures are created from a feminist perspective, and what feminist ideas they bear.

3.1 Paul Tanner

Paul Tanner is Ella's lover in Anna's fiction *The Shadow of the Third*, Ella's lover. Since Anna sees Ella as herself, we might well infer that the original image of Paul might come from a man she has dated or even loved. Paul is a betrayer to love and family. Meanwhile, he is not a favorable character to feminists. A woman to Paul is what a toy to a master. He marries a woman he does not love because he needs a family, and he dates Ella because he needs a sexual partner. In Paul's understanding, men and women are born unequal: Men are superior to women. Therefore, he shows great hostility, indifference and fear for women's revolution. Generally speaking, Paul is an anti-feminist character who represents the enemy of feminists. We can see in Paul what feminists are against and what difficulties they are confronting in the masculine society.

Androcentric: Paul is very defensive of men's traditional power that men are granted to enjoy superiority in their relationship with women. Therefore, loyalty is a necessary word for women but not for men, while freedom is for men rather than for women. As a result, Paul asks Ella what comment her roommate Julia will have after Ella has brought him home to stay over. Imagine that Mr. Tanner one day brings to his apartment a girl to stay over, and is asked: What will your roommate (suppose he has one) say about this? Mr. Tanner will burst into laughter, yet that's the very question he has asked Ella, just because she is a woman. Paul Tanner, living in an androcentric world, tends to measure women's behavior strictly. For instance, Paul has two lovers at the same time, which he takes for granted. However, he is ever in bitterness talking about Ella's disloyalty to him because when they were on a break, she dated another man. In Paul's eye, that's something unforgivable. Paul sticks to his androcentric belief very much: a woman is not allowed to betray her man. To be short, as he interprets it, men and women have never and are not going to be the same: women are subjected to men.

Hating feminism: It's conceivable what great impact feminism will have on men after women have played their traditional role quietly for two thousand years. Certainly

almost every man will be interested in feminism since it's concerned with loss of their male superiority. And some of them are even likely to pose strong hostility against feminism. Paul Tanner is no exception. Having discussed feminism and women's revolution with Ella at times, Paul's unease about feminism is clear. He says to Ella that the greatest revolution in the 20th century is not the Russian Revolution, not the Chinese Revolution, but the revolution of women against men. It's clear that this man is very unhappy about women's movements, as a result of which he believes that women want all men out of the earth. He comments with bitterness that women no longer need men for pregnancy because a new scientific discovery shows the possibility of non-sex pregnancy: Place a piece of ice into ovaries to have a baby. Despite the fact that Ella insists no women want to have a baby through that terrible way instead of having sex with their lovers. Ella's right. The birth of a baby should contain care and love as it has been for thousands of years. Yet such common sense is lost in Paul when his inside is filled with too much hatred and fear against feminism. He simply interprets women's desire for freedom as claiming a sex war against men.

3.2 Saul Green: Attached to Women, Not Anti-Feminist and Equal to Women

Saul is Anna's last man in *The Golden Notebook*, and the most important one. Unlike Richard, the British gentleman, or Paul, the woman-hater, Saul is a lovely American. More importantly, what makes Saul special is that his attitude towards feminism is very favorable. Saul is a feminist and humanist supporter who is willing to understand and respect females. Feminism, or the women issue, is not likely to be solved without understanding from men. There are men like Saul in the society in whom we can see a better future for women and feminism.

Attached to women: It's natural that the two sexes are mutually dependent not only because they need love and care from each other but also because they breed their offsprings together. This close relationship is well revealed in Saul's relationship with women, especially with Anna. If what we have seen in Paul Tanner reveals men's indifference to women's sufferings, what we see in Saul Green is understanding and communication. To Saul, Anna is both a lover and a mother. A breakthrough in their relationship happens when Anna first discovers this American is "in a frightened child gesture," (Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook* 555) which has lifted Anna's primary negative impression about him. In their new and complicated relationship, Saul is very attached to Anna despite being driven to madness by her. Like Anna, Saul is suffered from dichotomies behind his attractive and bright personalities, and he depends on Anna to discover and rerecognize the divided selves in him. When he comes to realize that Anna is extremely perceptive and calm, his first reaction is to cover the real

him before her. Yet, later as their communication and understanding grow, he relinquishes his defense, sharing his inner world with her. What they have gone through is primarily madness and dichotomies later reintegration. Their mutually dependence has enabled themselves to recover from their sufferings resulting from isolation. With his frankness and irony Saul tells Anna, the little woman in the pursuit of happiness, that they are taking advantage of each other. The point of their dependence, I figure, is that men and women are born connected rather than opposite, and that Saul and Anna's self-discovery and recovery from modern symptoms (dichotomies and divisions) needs understanding and attachment rather than hatred.

Not anti-feminist: Saul is like an anti-Paul in his attitude to feminism. As has been discussed, it's natural and understandable that the majority of men will feel reluctant to acknowledge that for thousands of years women have suffered from being treated as belongings to them. But we see no such elusion in Saul Green. We can tell from the novel that really Saul is not an anti-feminist. Although he states very honestly that he and Anna are taking advantage of each other, they've done no harm to each other. There is no insult to Anna seen in their relationship even though Anna suffers from their relationship a lot. The tension between them is caused by their mental isolation and dichotomies rather than by their love conflict or difference in gender.

Equal to women: The essence of feminism is that women are equal to men. In other words, there should be equality between the two sexes. In Saul's relationship with women, equality is heavily suggested. When Saul is with Anna, they have done and shared lots of "same things". What's more, when their relationship is going to end, "She and Saul exchange first sentences for each other's novels, as hopeful catalysts to start each other writing." In many times of their "exchange" one can see equality and friendliness. For this reason, some critics maintain that Saul and Anna are interchangeable, for they are very much equal to each other.

CONCLUSION

Lessing supports women, yet she resents feminism. Her protagonists in *The Golden Notebook* begins as two free women in hatred or problem with men, but one (Molly) ends as planning to remarry, the other (Anna) ends as working for a social welfare center, giving marriage advice. All of this contains too much ambiguity that many critics think Lessing's attitude towards feminism is ambiguous, and really it seems to be. But if we have a close look at her fictions, especially her characters, we can say that Lessing has buried in her mind feminist issue always. She has presented us diversified feminist characters and their counterparts who have an equal

importance in suggesting many feminist problems and possible solutions. Through an analysis of her characters who bear feminist features and thoughts, profound feminist issues can be seen.

Lessing has once again left her novel unfolding, but it has certainly warmed us up with a possible solution, although imaginary. And her concern with women's feminist discovery and her efforts in providing possible solutions are to be appreciated and valued.

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