

Doris Lessing: "The free woman's commitment"

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Abstract

The paper aims at describing the free woman's commitment in the novels of Doris Lessing. The personal agonies, traumas, the dissolution of marriage of her women characters aims to depict man-woman relationship, which is one of the major themes in her works. Marriage is the deepest as well as the most problematic of all human relations. Doris Lessing delineates with keen perception and sensitivity, the problems and sufferings of women in marriage. Women feel entrapped, oppressed and doomed to the care of husband and home, the reaction which she shows in her novels. Some of her women characters accept their fate unhesitatingly, but most wants freedom and gradually go for separation or for divorce to live a meaningful life. After studying her novels I find that the tradition of family is very strong, and thus makes a strong plea for the preservation of it by inviting men to involve themselves in it.

Doris Lessing depicts marriage as an emotionally stifling and tyrannical institution for women. In her novel *Martha Quest*, Martha does not want to be treated like a sex-object and feels offended when Donovan Anderson, her first boy-friend in the town, displays her before his friends. Donovan feels proud of his "acquisition" and makes her cynosure at sun-downer parties or cinema houses before the group of young "wolves" or "sharks" who try to get "girls" in their grip. Donovan finds Martha "a success" as the crowd of young men greatly admires her for her fresh looks. Martha feels a threat to her individuality and freedom which is followed by a "strong resisting dislike of his pressure on her." She strongly resents the way Donovan "showed her off" among his friends and decides to sever all relations with him.

In another novel 'A Proper Marriage' ^[1], Martha finds the disgusting behaviour of her husband Douglas Knowell. Immediately after marriage, she is dragged from one party to another, where Douglas is repeatedly reminded for his good luck and "congratulated on his acquisition" by his friends. Martha does not want to be an object of "amusement" or "decoration" for her husband. She wants to be recognized as a complete individual in her own right. To attain individuality and independence, Martha rejects this "feminine mystique" which glorifies only the physical beauty and utility of women. Martha, a seeker of freedom, feels concerned for the poor blacks in Rhodesia and joins the left group to help the oppressed. Soon she realizes that she has made a "foolish mistake" in getting married.

Thus it generates from Lessing's novels, two types of women characters emerge. The first type of women are self-reliant, individual and independent like Martha, Anna, Molly, Ella who

repudiate the conventions and seek their own identity. The other kind of women, mainly belonging to her older generation, are projected as conventional, conforming to the traditional values, like Mrs. Quest, Mrs. Knowell. They strongly believe that suffering is a part of woman's life and have accepted their life in these terms.

Lessing does not repudiate the institution of marriage, but when their women find that they are being oppressed or marginalized, they rebel against the rigid taboos and parochialism of the sexist society. Some of her women characters remarry or live with men outside marriage because they seek wholeness and complete involvement in relationship. They reject fragmentation because they quest for constructive and meaningful relationship in which the individuals are genuinely and intrinsically interested in each other as people, "not as commodities". They finally emerge as "free-woman" looking for a life of self-fulfilment and self-realization.

Lessing show woman suffering in marriage and then deciding to come out of the stifling bondage by opting for divorce. Divorce is a process of giving legal recognition to the breaking up of a relationship already shattered by irreconcilable disparity in the character of two persons or by broken faith and bitter tensions. Lessing does not concern with the legal aspects of the divorce, viz, the delays in legal process or rigorous legal clauses which make divorce difficult for women, but rather concerned with the repercussions of divorce on women. She depicts her women in novels to opt for divorce rather than living a suffocating life of injustice and agony. Though divorce frees them from the agony and suffering of an unhappy or unjust relationship but it does not solve the problems and women have to continue to struggle and suffer on various levels-economic, emotional and psychological. As such writing this paper I arise some questions. Does a woman find real happiness in her new role as divorcee? Does a sexist society easily accept a woman's freedom? Does she really become free after divorce?

In her another novel "The Golden Book" Lessing's free women Anna and Molly, are able to live "free" of men and marriage ^[2]. Their discussion reveals the precariousness of their freedom. Anna and Molly develop a number of affairs after divorce in search of companionship and permanence in life but are repeatedly

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disappointed and deserted by men who come to them for their sexual gratification only. Molly finally decides to remarry, Anna feels so desperately alone that she cannot sleep without a man. The knowledge of their dependence on men makes Anna cry: "I 'm not free, said Anna----

'Marion, I'd like to be married." After remaining a free woman for long, Molly too finally decides to remarry. The reward of freedom is thus, insecurity and loneliness.

Thus Lessing has remarkably presented the theme of freedom and loneliness of free women in her works .She says that even after achieving cherished freedom in all spheres, women are not truly free and happy and have to pay a heavy price for their freedom ^[3]. A free woman feels lonelier and unprotected in a sexist society which crush her identity and individuality at every opportunity. The realization is that divorce provides one kind of freedom, i.e. freedom from

oppression and exploitation by the husband, it creates new forms of sufferings and problems. Her women characters remarry not because she is anti-feminists nor because that they are willingly ready to return to oppression within marriage, but hopes an organized whole world there.

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