

Surviving Marital Discord: A Critical Study of Doris Lessing's Select Works

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Abstract: The shattering experience of the Second World War led many prominent writers to textualize it in their novels. In this connection, Doris Lessing is no exception. However, her treatment of disintegration as a vibrant theme is somewhat different from her contemporaries. As it turns out in her novels, disintegration operates as a mode of signification in varied forms and guises. This is abundantly evident in her huge corpus of writings. Though she tries to come to terms with its disastrous effects by joining extremes, there seems to be no possibility in sight to escape its over-arching presence. Her writings contain an important element of progressive conscience, which is a kind of organic sensibility and there is a lasting impact of Sufism on her writings and as well as on her philosophy of life. Lessing does not discard life in any way in spite of conflicts and contradictions but accepts it as a gift of Divine and tries to extract meaning and harmony out of destruction and disintegration. In her novels, she always tries to infuse microcosm with macrocosm, resulting in the universal or spiritual evolution and this finally results in the victory of love not as a physical, emotional or spiritual force but something higher than these and that is a cosmic force which is quite capable of converting evil into good. Almost all her works show this cosmic love as a supreme force which can destroy or transmogrify the evil. The world of her novels is of continual change where individual consciousness interpenetrates and where human individuals formulate special senses in order to hear the planetary voices. She is a writer deeply entrenched in the social and political locale of her time, which is reflected in the thematic and narrative overtones of her huge corpus of writings. She has been famous for her prophetic vision. She starts thinking where normally all other women stop. What makes her fiction even more interesting is the fact that she is a developmental writer and thinker.

Key Words: prophetic, microcosm, transmogrify, disintegration, Sufism.

Discussion:

The paper will focus on how marital incompatibility leads to disintegration and finally into integration for the female protagonists in the select novels. The analysis is on how Lessing celebrates marital incompatibility leads to disintegration first and how disintegration acts as some kind of a positive force that helps the two female protagonists of the novels to rediscover their own lost self identity due to the imposition of different social, familial and stereotypical roles assigned to them by the hegemonic patriarchal society. They attain a kind of self knowledge and identity only after they break away with the varying imposed roles of a wife or mother. The family disintegration helps them to undertake some kind of a spiritual journey towards self-recognition and integration, but only after divorcing 'personal' for 'universal'.

Lessing's fiction is deeply rooted in her own observations and experiences of childhood, adulthood and society, at large. It is mostly these experiences that coloured her imagination and became the dominant thematic concerns of her fiction in varied guises. She has an extraordinary ability of shaping the same raw material in various remarkable and tolerant ways. There is a kind of ongoingness in her works which leads to their growth and progression. She believes that, "the aim of the novel is to comment on things in motion" (153). Her protagonists display the possibility of change and growth by shattering the artificial boundaries that the existing social strictures impose on them. Their successive progressions made them to question and dismantle the prevalent status quo. Moreover, all the traditional roles assigned to them by the patriarchal society proved insufficient. These women, often denied in home and society, finally

found refuge in their own psychic resources, which ultimately leads them to experience a growth or change in their overall lives. Lessing's female protagonists possess a psyche of a wanderer, as for them the sense of rootedness does not come easily, due to their position as a perennial outsider to every home to which they are associated with.

Being herself a victim of institution of marriage, she shows in her novels the same aperture that exists between the two individuals of different sex, which ultimately results in the successive progression of the suffering females, who are forced into this kind of association by different societal pressures. However, marriage acts only as an obstruction in their path towards progression, they feel somehow trapped and only when they detach themselves from this artificial alliance, they gain momentum and the sense of an independent "self" back. These women are highly intellectual, independent and assertive and marriage for them is only a form of domination, which they are hesitant to accept. Lessing has put these females in the leading positions where they will be seen and heard, as well. They are the active participants in the decision making. Through such portrayal, Lessing strongly opposes the patriarchal system that pushes women to subordinate positions, thus making a kind of a positional shift in order to move them from margin to centre. This attitude of her falls in line with feminist tradition.

From the very beginning of her writing career, she wrote about marriage and marital discord and launched a mocking attack on the dominant patriarchal standards of the society, mostly through her female characters for whom, this social institution appears futile and disastrous. J.F. Allen presents her themes and issues as:

Through her repetition and counterpointing of motifs, Lessing exposes the destructiveness, the dead ends, of some traditional institutions, particularly marriage, which often confines women to the collective experience of motherhood at the expense of their creative selves. And she exposes humanity's destructive weaknesses that permit human being to settle into the snug nest of the collective. Her free people are individuals who escape this destruction. (73)

Freedom is one more significant element in Lessing's writing. She claims that "human beings are responsible and they can be free: but the prerequisite for their freedom is the choice of a creative mean between alienation and the mindlessness of the collective" (74).

In her very first novel *The Grass is Singing*, Mary preferred to remain aloof from this institution due to her mother's dismal position that marriage brought for her, but she falls in the same situation by marrying Dick Turner. Mary's mother too was a victim of marriage and lived an unhappy and miserable life and this ultimately pinned her to death. Immediately, after her death Mary abandoned her father. By this she actually avenges her mother's suffering and this shows her first step towards domination. Mary's reflection on her life before marriage is far from any crisis and full of happiness, however, it is only after her marriage to Dick that she experiences a complete change in her overall personality, leading her dysfunction as a character. She lives an independent life before marriage but is "forced" by other members of the society into marriage, as per the patriarchal norms and if any female objects, she is vigorously ridiculed. Her predicament regarding marriage and spinsterhood is seen when she comments: "It was during these two hours of half consciousness that she allowed herself to dream about the beautiful lost time when she worked in an office and lived as she pleased, before people made her get married" (118). She opts for marriage not because of her own will but majorly due to the stereotypical norms of society after which she loses her life and independence, completely. Instead of working in the office and having a measure of independence, she is now expected to perform household tasks. From her husband to the farm and landscape, everything seems repulsive and she starts distancing or alienating herself from all this, especially from Dick. However, her alienation leads her to neurosis, yet, throughout this whole process she is actually progressing, by keen introspection and is slowly and gradually shedding off her racist attitude, by developing a close affinity with her black servant Moses. Throughout her life the ghost of racism keeps haunting her and ultimately at the end she relieves herself from this obsession.

Finally, it is actually her marital discord that helps her to sever all her ties with 'personal' and embrace the 'universal'. She emerges as a rebel against the social determinism. No doubt, her death at the end is

somewhat disturbing, but at the same time she is seen waiting patiently for the arrival of Moses as she thinks he is the only one who can save her. This last moment of her life shows her indifferent attitude as she passively accepts her coming death. Her positive feeling of rescue changes into helplessness as she finally realizes that nobody can save her and there is absolutely no possibility of salvation. In the beginning of the novel, she wants to save herself by marriage but now the situation is different as she possibly realizes that death is the only form of her much-desired release and refuge, as well.

In the other novel series of Lessing entitled *Children of Violence*, the marital incompatibility is the vibrant theme of the first two novels namely *Martha Quest* and *A Proper Marriage*. She has described the series as the 'Bildungsroman' and the eponymous heroine Martha, is both a critic and the representative of her age. Martha is always concerned with her liberation from the conformist patriarchal society. *A Proper Marriage* focuses on the married life of the Martha. Again, like Mary in *The Grass is Singing*, Martha's marriage is a result of different social pressures and therefore, she lacks all interest in this association from the very beginning. Finally, she marries Douglas Knowell with whom she is not satisfied in any way and in order to fulfil her repressed desires, she turns her focus to literature, dreams and politics. Due to this she soon becomes obsessed with emancipation and a quest for self identity and liberty. Martha's feelings towards her husband are always in continual flux. Sometimes she feels attracted while a moment later she feels repulsive but then she consoles herself that such feelings are natural in a post marital phase. About her marriage she confessed: "slowly she quietened, and it seemed possible that she might recover a sense of herself as a person she might, if only potentially, respect..., that this marriage was a foolish mistake" (32). These lines show Martha's disgust and contemplation with her marriage and later she despises her husband as it occurs to her that this association is only a terrible mistake. Although, the cause of her union in this relationship is primarily her social and biological demands, yet, later she realizes that there is absolutely no need to conform neither to the demands of her husband nor to the existing social conventions. This realization marks her first step towards successive progression. Martha always has a strange feeling of being caught in the claustrophobic and artificial relationship, and to liberate herself, seems only possible release from this marital confinement. Her desire of freedom is so strong that she abandons even her husband and daughter for this cause. By this act, she gives her daughter a unique gift of 'freedom' that was denied to her in her own childhood. She is unable to conform to her husband's demands as she considers herself as a woman who has the same rights as a man and has to fight for her own liberation which will ultimately lead her to succession and in overall progression. Martha realizes that she is not meant to perform the routine stereotypical roles of a wife or a mother, assigned to women by the society. She is not ready to give herself to any loveless relation and becomes aware of the fact that the role of a man and a woman in marriage is unequal, therefore, strongly rebels against it. Instead of being a homemaker, she prefers to be a part of political party and to behave like a modern, independent and active young woman. However, at the end of the novel, she manages to "free" herself and set her daughter free, as well. In contrast to Mary, she manages to escape from her marriage and thus resists the fate that Mary has gone through. At the end, she successfully asserts her domination by joining the communist party. In this way she becomes a part of "universal" but not before divorcing the "personal". It is her political involvement that gives her a new identity and shows her as a new woman independent of men for her identity as opposed to her early obsession.

In *To Room Nineteen*, one of the collected short stories in Lessing's *A Man and Two Women* she again dwells on the theme of marital discord in a different way. In this story the author is seen investigating the angst of identity and those women who have accepted their imposed traditional roles of wives and mothers. The female representative voice namely Susan Rawlings, feels locked in her various forced identities, of the understanding wife, mother and a good party partner. It is mainly, due to her husband's extra marital affair, her daily visits to room nineteen in Fred's Hotel, where she goes for an introspection that she ultimately questions herself and battles with herself only to come out of this partly self- made and partly socially imposed cocoon. Her continual stay in the room serves as a kind of healing process and enables her to break away her emotional sterility as well as in stripping off the various imposed masks. Susan turns away from the social instructions of woman and from her egoistic self and embarks on a different journey towards self-realization and self-discovery, after leaving her family and marriage.

Apparently, Susan has a good life: a successful marriage, loving children and friends, but to her they are ineffective and useless in her self-discovery and she strongly feels the pangs of bitterness towards these traditional roles.

Her incompatible marital alliance, in turn helps her to rediscover her lost identity and strength. Also, it gives her recognition as an independent being and delivers her into much desired independence and sovereignty. Her alienation is actually a process of liberation; a release from all mock labels that patriarchal society thrust on her. Like Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Susan too is not prepared for return to her husband and children and when her husband (Mathew) tries to intrude in her newly gained solitude, she prefers death over surrender to conventionality. Like Mary in *The Grass is Singing*, death appears to her, as only possible release and she willingly accepts it over compromise with the fragmented image of the ideal woman. She remains true to her recently discovered real and authentic "self" that has remained submitted throughout her married life. She moves slowly away from the conventional and social trappings that have defined her life before and moves successively into the realm of higher form of consciousness and liberation in the form of death. However, her death is not defeat in any way but only a regression back to the previous self, she has not only dismantled the existing perfect image of women by patriarchal society but has also moved ahead of her stereotypically produced sense of "self", therefore emerges as a rebel against all socially imposed roles of a woman.

All three women protagonists in the above-mentioned works can be compared with Nora Helmer of *a Doll's House*. In this play by Ibsen, Nora is seen performing the role of a committed wife and mother. She performs all her duties as per societal or stereotypical norms in the beginning but later realizes that she has reduced herself merely to a non- entity by living on others demands, particularly that of her husband. She feels trapped in this relation and at the end she becomes conscious of the fact that to break away from the artificial imposition of marriage and motherhood will be the only possible release and will ultimately end her quest for self- liberation and identity. Similarly, the female protagonists of Lessing tears away all superficial impositions or masks only to rediscover their own lost real 'selves' and for much desired self-enlightenment. Their quest for self enquiry is so dominating and over- whelming that even their financial positions become subservient to it. Their inner growth or progression is neither dependent on social position nor on financial security as they are quite capable of transcending even those impediments in their progress towards spiritual growth. It is through this spiritual awakening that they not only question the existing stereotypical impositions on women but by distancing themselves from the prevalent order, they actually transcend the male dominated boundaries. Their 'alienation' is basically a step towards self-realization. They alienate themselves from the entrenchment or entrapment only to liberate their trapped 'selves' and to connect the inner reality with the outer.

Doris Lessing's writing is actually a constructive re-writing of her social and personal experiences and observations. She proclaimed that the aim of writing is "... effective social change" and she hopes to bring this through her writings as well. The study highlights the social influences, family pressures and constraints on these female characters that make them almost dysfunctional and thus results in complete disintegration. However, this disintegration actually becomes a blessing in disguise, as the moment they break away with all unimportant tied knots, they come to terms with their own lost 'self'. Their dismal condition and deep introspection make them to question their own lived roles and thus come to terms with themselves in a much broader sense and finally divorces the 'personal' only to be a part of 'universal' consciousness. In almost all the novels of Lessing, there is a conflict between the self and society. In *The Grass is Singing*, Mary is seen as an inclusively fragmented figure, particularly after marriage that according to her is a suppressive institution in which she is forced to participate by the stereotypical social forces. Similarly, Kate Brown in *The Summer before the Dark* also experiences an intense confinement in her own family due to restrictive and repressive demands of her husband and children. Thus, she starts questioning her own individuality and therefore this realization results in the family breakdown. Lessing's women characters do not achieve self-fulfilment in the traditional roles of wife and mother. Throughout these novels, due to different social pressures the protagonists are supposed to adjust to their assigned feminine roles or stereotypes. In this way suppressive traditional institutions

force them to become a part of collective but simultaneously, it does not permit them to reveal their independent and real selves. Their marginal position in male-dominated world is limited and restricted which results in their alienation and neuroses and sometimes leads to complete mental breakdown, as is seen in Mary Turner. These women try to conform to social conventions and demands pertaining to their role as mothers and wives. However, their inner self does not identify with these forcibly assigned patriarchal roles. These contradictory and conflicting forces thus contribute to their multiple selves or split personality, which involve social, political or female aspects. In these novels, women are constrained to marry by the hegemonic dictates of the society, in which they are supposed to adjust, anyhow. However, their quest for liberation is so strong that they sever ties with all imposed social confinements. It is also worth pointing out that both women heroines represent traditional female roles but at the same time rebel against social norms and stereotypes. They are forced to adjust to these norms and they are expected to fulfil social expectations. Besides, they need to conform to the traditional hierarchical social system implying that they should accept submissive roles in their attitude towards men. It is mainly due to the fact that the primary area of their responsibility in society remains to be the family and child rearing. Consequently, the role of a mother and wife ought to be their fundamental interest. As a result of this, both Mary and Martha are in fact forced to get married against their will in order to fulfil social expectations concerning gender stereotypes. Unfortunately, their married life is, far from what they had previously expected it to be. Nevertheless, their marriage is, without any doubt, considered "proper" by society.

Conclusion:

The paper critically analysed the different aspects of marital incompatibility, its causes and reveals its influences on the female protagonists and shows how it helps them in awakening their consciousness that has been suppressed by the various stereotypical pressures, imposed on them by the society. Doris Lessing believes that only an enlarged consciousness and unity of reason with knowledge will prove helpful in excavating out the giant and horrifying concept of violence and disintegration and this is revealed through the critical analysis of the selected novels. In these novels, the female protagonists, after breakdown and fragmentation set themselves free from all restrictions and enlarge their consciousness by uniting knowledge with reason and finally emerge all powerful and victorious in their respective journeys of self discovery, identity and liberation. Thus, reiterating the Lessing's notion of disintegration as some kind of a positive force which opens up the possibility of the creation of something new and what is new for them is the retrieval or repossession of their lost and much desired self-independence. In all these novels the female protagonists are seen in constant struggle in order to search for their lost identity in the male dominated world. They possess a divided identity and their divided selves are an outcome of personal conflict, which is provided by the repressive stereotypical norms of the society. These females are strongly crippled by the social norms, thus are unable to bring their inward selves into recognition. They are in the quest for identity and self recognition but the repressive social institutions like marriage and motherhood act as obstacles in their path towards any progress. These traditional roles assigned to them by the society are insufficient for the growth of their spirit. No doubt, these women perform the traditional roles but at the same time they rebel against them, only to have their individual self recognition and to be a part of a larger whole. Nevertheless, their marriage is considered 'proper' by the society but it becomes only a stumbling block in their overall psychological development. Only after marital breakdown, they abandon all traditionally stultifying enclosures, restrictions and throws away different social garments that had been imposed on them, due to which they experience their own growth and progression and identify their lost "selves". As Kate Millet has said: "it is essential to alter the socialization process of temperament and role differentiation and to reshape the most intolerable areas of basic attitudes, values and emotions, in order to change the formal superstructure" (177-178). Lessing, too, like a visionary dismantles the stereotypical notion about women and moves towards the demarcation of new women subjects which appeals to our freedom that, "we should become what we are capable of being" (17).

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