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## Doris Lessing and Commitment to Writing: Reflection of Societies and Life in 20<sup>th</sup> C

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### Abstract

Doris Lessing, is a British author, who was born Persia, raised in Southern Rhodesia and lived in London. Her writings reflect the society she lived in and the experiences she had in her personal life. The paper through her autobiography and her major work studies how for Lessing the purpose of literature went beyond joy of writing towards projecting the times of her age; the good, the bad, the mistakes, the possibilities and the hopes. Her works aims to motivates individuals and society, seeks reflections, and encourages inner growth in the times that saw the impact of WWI, WWII, gender inequality and injustice.

**Keywords:** Literature, Society, Reflections, Autobiography, 20<sup>th</sup> Century

Literature has been the reflection of society. It projects the times of the age speaking of the major events happening around the society, the effect on the people, the lifestyle, tradition, mindset, the values, and the flaws it embraces. The stories are written with the purpose of pleasure while sometimes, they are written with a strong message to convey. The social, political, religious, or scientific events

when are written with absolute honesty the author gets known for writing the zeitgeist of the times. The idea of imitation of art, art being a reflection of society is as old as Plato. Milton Albrecht in his essay *The Relationship of Literature and Society* quotes the essential function of reflection theory as to, "explain" in social and historical rather than individual terms the quality and greatness of literature, as well and its content, style, and form. In effect it emphasized social and cultural determinism instead of personal inspiration, and it became the broad orientation of innumerable world dealing with the arts. To be sure, other phrases were often used, such as "expression of society" or "mirror of life," but their meaning is practically identical with "reflection." These phrases were applied to nearly everything social and cultural as well as biological and geographical. At one time or another literature has been thought to reflect economics, family relationships, climate, and landscapes and attitudes, and morals, races, social classes, political events, wars, religion, and many other detailed aspects of environment and social life.

Literature though as well is a combination of artistic value of language, form and structure than merely a social document of events. Habib in his book *Modern Literary Criticism and Theory, A History* quotes F. R. Leavis ideas on Literature while mentioning on what separates him from the New Critics.

What separated him from the New Critics, however, was an equally forceful counter-insistence that literary study cannot be confined to isolated works of art nor to a realm of purely literary values. He advocated a broad study of literature which went well beyond looking at "word on the page" : the study of literature, he said, is "an intimate study of the complexities, potentialities and essential conditions of human nature." (Habib 33)

While speaking of the vast scope of literature the above would provide, Habib once

again quotes F. R. Leavis from his essay *Sociology and Literature* giving us limitless perspective of literature, "a real literary interest is an interest in man, society and civilization, and its boundaries cannot be drawn (Habib 33)." In 20<sup>th</sup> Century around with the post effect of WWI and the emergence of the WWII in 1930s there came a wave of Marxist and Left- Wing Criticism in Literature who projected the life of people and society. "until the collapse in 1991 of the communism systems of the USSR and Eastern Europe, one third of the world's population had been living under political administration claiming descent from Marx's ideas (Habib 36)." The novels and works focused on change and were full of sharp realities, beliefs and passion. "All write out of a passionate, active commitment to change, and a belief, in the power of artistic imagination to bring it about. Above none is remotely 'orthodox'. (Davies)"

In beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century the first wave of feminism marked the suffragette movement which happened between 1830-1920 and focused on women's legal right in politics and property and the second wave that emerged in early 1960s highlighted women's liberation movement, that expanded the scope of equality to intellectual and cultural aspects. The movement that began with the realization of the basic right for women to vote, language discrimination, in nineteenth century expanded and gave a new direction to the inequality associated with women as a race. Fiona Tolan, calls third wave as "post- feminism, where the issue of gender difference falls away to the deconstruction of gender itself. (Tolan 323)" The ideology of third wave of feminism focused on consciously being aware of ones right that have been established in the first two waves, it was also driven deep into 'micro-politics' and aims to speculate the paradigm from the previous wave which would make it more good for the race in incorporating the women irrespective of

class, color, gender and sexuality, third wave that was also majorly voiced by young women who went beyond theory and lived it as lifestyle, it talked of gender and sexuality and lead it towards post-structuralist approach. Habib speaks of in the early twentieth century feminist criticism extended its canvas of concerns which included Marxism as well, Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century feminist criticism has grown to encompass of a series of concerns : a rewriting of literary history so as to include the contributions of women; the tracing of a female that read tradition; teddies of sexuality and sexual difference , drawing on psychoanalysis, Marxism, and the social Sciences; the representation of women in main literature ; the role of gender in both literary creation and literary criticism (Habib 43)

Doris Lessing's works have seen to incorporate these times of the age. She was born on 1919 in Persia to British Parents who have been victim of the WWI and faced poverty and lived on false of hope of the government. Her father had moved to Southern Rhodesia with the hope that African farm would yield some wealth. Being raised in a colonial country to white parents she had witnessed close the impacts of inequality and suppression around her. She has not only believed in the injustice that was happening to the black people, but she also speaks of the helpless conditions of the whites in a colonized country. Lessing's first novel *The Grass is Singing* is a story of a white woman who after being married moves to the farm that her husband owns. She faces loneliness, observes discrimination and the conditions of the black. She is also shown as a woman from a feminist perspective where she feels her identity being lost in the marriage. She explains it as below in her autobiography

*The Grass is Singing*, which is now a tidy little book on a shelf. It began three times the length it is now, and was a satire. The central character was an idealistic young Englishman

of the kind who so often arrived in the Colony, only to be appalled at what he found. Since most were escaping the Slump and extreme poverty in Britain, to leave again was impossible, and they adapted themselves to the local mores (Lessing 325).

She also mentions oh how the book has been inspired from the society she lived in, Dick Turner, the failing farmer, was a figure I had seen all my life. Only a minority of the white farmers were successful; most failed. Some struggled on, failing, for years. Some hated the country. Some loved it, like Dick Turner. Some were idealistic – like my father, who, if he were farming now, would be disdainful of fertilizers, pesticides, crops that rob the soil, would be cherishing animals and birds. Mary Turner I took from a woman I had known for years, one of the Sports Club girls....I watched her....I ran through the names of the poor farmers in my head, and saw the shallow brick verandahs, the corrugated-iron roofs, which expanded and contracted and cracked in the heat and the cold, the dust, the yelling of the cicadas ... and then I had it, I had her, I had Mary Turner, the woman who loathed the bush and the natives and hated all natural processes, hated sex, liked to be neat and clean, her dress ironed afresh every time she put it on, her little girl's hair tied with a ribbon at parties. (Lessing, *Walking in the Shade* 14)

Lessing projected the life, people, situations the often-observed feelings of struggle of whites on black farms and the hardship of blacks under whites. In *The Grass is Singing* she not only shows the financial struggle of Dick Turner, mental struggle of Mary but as well describes the way blacks were treated. She describes how her mother hated her for writing *The Grass is Singing*,

*The Grass is Singing*, which had caused her mother anguish and shame, because it was so hated by the whites? And those extremely unfair short stories about *The District*? Well, she

– the girl's mother – would explain to everyone that no one outside the country could really understand the whites' problems and ... But the author had been brought up in the country? Her views were wrong, and in time she would come to see that ... (Lessing, *Walking in the Shade* 33)

Lessing in her short stories in *The District* and *The Old Chief's Country* as well talks about the white communities and the way they look at the black community. Their fears and their treatment. Lessing's interest in communism as well was the by-product of the injustice and inequality she saw around her. Her other protagonists like Mary have also been shown to be the victim of marriage. Where the mere outlook with which her heroines are seen was of a housewife. At the same time these women are shown to have potential but lack the courage and knowledge to drive themselves out of the situations. Lessing always in her novels has focused on women's voice to be self-discovered to come out of the situations they are placed into. Susan in *The Room Nineteen* tries to find her way out for peace by moving away from the family for a while. Kate in *Summer before the Dark* as well takes the bold step taking a step back from the family responsibilities to realize her what bothers her and what she wants and what she can do. Where as there is an evolution in the characters of Lessing's fiction. While still incorporating relationship and marriage problems, Lessing in *The Golden Notebook*, in her *Children of Violence Series*, in *The Briefing of Descent into Hell*, *Memoirs of Survivor*, Lessing puts women into situations that are beyond the problem of color and gender.

Lessing's women are highly intelligent and political human beings, for whom the battle for equal rights has already been won. In fact, according to her forces of race, class and color are perceived as far more oppressive in their discriminatory potential than sex. Despite such a point of view, there are serious conflictual

tensions that plague her women characters. (Kumar 23)

Lessing herself has been married twice and both of her marriages has resulted in failure. Nevertheless she didn't let identity be limited to that and believed in knowing herself more. Her journey of questions, and the answers to her experiences and thoughts found a home in Sufism. Which as well reflects in her later novels. Lessing has been humanist and boldly wrote the time of her age. For which she had also been banned from entering Africa where she spend her life growing up. Often in her interviews she was considered to be blunt and called the awards as "Royal Flush". She is describes as a writer, "who possess a unique sensitivity, writing out her own intense experience, her own subjectivity, but at the same time writing out the spirit of the time. (Kumar 1)" Lessing herself describes her commitment to literature as Once a writer has a feeling of responsibility, as a human being, for the other human beings he influences, it seems to me he must become a humanist, and must feel himself as an instrument of change for good or for bad. Logically he should be content to sing to his image in the mirror. The act of getting a story or a novel published is an act of communication, an attempt to impose one's personality and beliefs on other people. If a writer accepts this responsibility, he must see himself, to use the socialist phrase, as an architect of the soul, and it is a phrase which none of the old nineteenth-century novelists would have shied away from. But if one is going to be an architect, one must have a vision to build towards, and that vision must spring from the nature of the world we live in. (Lessing, A Small Personal Voice 6-7)

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