

Doris Lessing's Attitude towards Feminism

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Abstract – This paper outlines the movement and ideas of Feminism in which a prominent and Nobel Prize winner Doris Lessing has treated the idea of feminism in her works. The paper is divided broadly into three parts, the introduction, the main body and the concluding part. The introduction highlighted the idea of Feminism and how women search for their equal rights in a society and also how they are treated in a male dominated society. The works of women writers focus on the sufferings of women in the family as well as in the society which leads to the realization of women to fight for their rights. The second part which is the main body focus on how Doris Lessing put her views against the idea of extreme feminists who only care for the rights of women status and not think of humanity as a whole which results in bringing about feelings of suppression in many women readers. The concluding part brings about the message from Doris Lessing which needs to be considered by her readers regarding the sex- war and social revolution.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Feminist ideas became very strong during the nineteenth century. It was believed that a woman's duty is to be a devoted wife and mother, where men were like Kings in the family as well as in the society. There was a profound belief in sexual difference, according to which men were seen as naturally dominant, active and strong, while women were naturally subordinate, passive and weak. The term 'Feminism' gave rise to a serious literary and sociological studies from the early 1960s onwards. The main objective is to lift up the position of women in society, their right to decide their own lives, their equal status in the family and any social endeavour. The Feminist movement was especially strong in Great Britain and in the United States. The interest in women's literature in America grew out from Kate Millet's Sexual Politics (1969) where attention had been focus on the images of women in mainstream literature. In Great Britain it had a much more social nature, and the writings of the English women shows more clearly the socio-political meaning of women's movement.

Feminist literatures mainly focus on the struggle of women to achieve and maintain equality with the opposite gender. It is often associated with the nature of society. Feminist Literature deals with the search for identity, the search for women's rights, and responsibility in the family and especially in a male-dominated society. Women's literature is also associated with equality and fairness in the society and the world. Women's writings generally reflect women's experiences in certain places and times. Women's writing is competing with that of men's in the literary world, generating a feeling of insecurity in the male literary establishments, domestic and emotional

affections. Many women's writings are seen as incapable of producing the universal truth in which male writers are successful.

Women writers feel that they had been misjudge by men and the society about their being human, equal to men and also a members of a society. They are not satisfied with how they had been treated only as objects and instruments to be used by men.

2. DORIS LESSING'S IDEA ON FEMINIST MOVEMENT :

It is quite a difficult task to examine Doris Lessing's works as she had started her carrier as a feminist writer but soon move away from the feminist tradition and follow her own concept of feminism. She rarely behaved the way others would have expected her to be especially in her literary carrier. This is the reason that feminist writers attacked her. Lessing's novels, short stories and essays mainly focus on the wide range of twentieth- century concerns and political issues and gender issues which lead her to adopt the feminist movement, the role of family and individual in the society. She even explored the idea of Marxism in her works and her disillusioned with the idea of communism. She is firmly identified with the feminist movement in her novel 'The Golden Notebook'.

Doris Lessing would not be confined to only one side of feminist controversy, rather she would respond to the debate springing from several considerations. She is primarily concerned with the social change and the social constraints on men and women according to their gender roles rather than with specific explorations of women in terms of a wholly sexual difference from the opposite gender. Lessing's concept of feminisms

differs from those of the extreme feminists. She would like to re-organize various perspectives in the entire world, the life and writings of human beings, different classes in society which would probably help in viewing women as the equals of men and not mere objects and instrument to be used by men. Her idea of feminism seems to be the right way of looking at every movement as it is based on the classless theory of Marxism, though she herself left communism. Nevertheless she supported the Marxism idea of equality which should be granted to all men and women and to every race in the world. Lessing's seems to have a clearer perspective than any other women writers, and she uses the feminist theory according to what she thinks will bring the best results to her readers.

Doris Lessing's exhort mankind to transform the idea of many women who believe that through feminism it will be possible for women to stand on their own and without the support of men, because such an idea and the desire to be independent will not bring about any change and so the purpose of fulfilling such an idea should be totally rejected. There are still many feminist critics who rebel against Lessing's idea as they think that she has gone away from the feminist theme. Although she has been grouped among the feminists she has often been looked upon as betraying them. However she would remain strong and indifferent to all controversial opinions about her. Lessing tries to make her readers realize how important it is to live together in the society and not rebel against one another.

To show the falsity of the myth of women's passivity, the feminists seized upon the idea of women's remarkable influence and pushed it to the point of absurdity, affirming women's superiority, and advocating abhorrence for sex as a means of emancipation from male-dominated society. George Eliot's novels influenced Lessing and Drabble to a much greater extent. They are both regarded as Eliot's disciples and the modern George Eliot's as they both support Eliot's idea that the feminist theory should not be cut down to improve women's status alone rather it should concentrate more on reforming the nature of men and women, to enjoy equal rights so that there should not be a class distinction in the society and all members in the society, men or women, high or low class may possess equal importance in the social life. During her communist phase between 1944 to 1956 she wrote radically about social issues, a theme to which she continue in *The Good Terrorist*. Her sequence of writing are not very popular with many mainstream literary critics. Lessing was an ardent communist and a campaigner against racism. She rejected the label attached to her as a feminist Icon applied to her novel *The Golden Notebook*. She claims that there is nothing feminist about *The Golden Notebook*. In her preface Lessing shows her supports to the feminist movement that women are treated as secondary citizens and inferior to men in every society of the world. However she is not concerned with women's movement alone, in

fact, through the idea of Feminism she hopes to bring social equality to both the genders. She firmly point out that women's liberation and feminism does not seem to bring much progress or change in the society. Lessing sees that in many societies women are too demanding and their expectations move beyond what nature offers them. Many women writers are not happy and satisfied with Lessing's idea of feminism. They strongly protest against *The Golden Notebook*, but what Lessing tries to say is what she has learnt from the nature of many women she witnessed. She does not have any idea about how her readers would make response to her book nor does she care about how critics would make their conclusions. She simply writes about events, incidents and characters which she came across.

Doris Lessing works covers a wide range of ideas and experiences. She is always engaged with the present world and she is constantly testing fresh ways of communicating with her readers. In the early 1950s she confronted racism in *The Grass is Singing*. In the 1960s she explored gender issues in *The Golden Notebook*. In the 1970s she deals with the importance of coming to terms with inner space in *Briefing for a Descent in to Hell* and in *The Memoirs of a Survivor*. In the 1980s she presented about the two faces of terrorism in *The Good Terrorist*. In almost all her novels she explored the themes of madness, painful solitude, unhappy domestic life, loss of identity in its most varied way. She studies women's position in the society to its greatest depth, and for this purpose she disassociated herself from the feminist movement though she also concerns with the sexual freedom but she points out that the struggle for sexual freedom should not be substituted for the struggle of social equality.

In all her novels Lessing's cultivated a social, economic, biological and political perspective through her characters, and made it individual and collective interdependent. Everything seems so personal, in fact, that they would be controlled by outside pressures like the society or the public, pressing on the life of an individual, especially a sensible woman. Not only this, Lessing obviously knew that every human being is twisted by fear and feeling of insecurity and forced to compromise on thinking made inevitable by want and fear. However, Lessing declare that we are nearer to a brighter tomorrow, a day which will bring a new generation which will not be twisted by drudgery and whose strength, power and courage will not be overcast by the values of the mystique of suffering. She dreams that a new generation will be able to carry out its responsibilities and bring a great change to the suppressed society.

Feminism according to Doris Lessing is a movement which is in need of a revolution but not in the form of a protest against the male gender. However she knows it very clearly that the concept of feminism is like a rigid constitution which can never be changed and

she does not have much to offer to change the way in which many women writers want to bring about changes. She knows that in spite of her message and counseling to her readers and to the world there will not be much progress. As feminist movement has become very strong and powerful with all the writings of women encouraging this movement it will be much more fruitful if it is not limited to certain self-interested ideas. Therefore now is the time to look into this movement more clearly than ever before and to view it from different angles so that greater things may be achieved.

It is mainly because of the inferiority complex which women possessed during the last decade of the eighteenth century for regarding their works as inferior to male writers that feminist's idea began to flourish in the beginning of the nineteenth century. Feminism thus became very strong and it influenced many writers, not only women writers but also some of the male writers though they would not claim themselves to be a feminists. Just as the Angry Young Men's views which during the post war period, had a great deal of impact upon women writers and younger generation, feminism too had an impact upon women writers who strongly protested against society and concentrated on the sufferings of women in the society and in the family. The writings of such women bring out the feelings of hatred in women readers because they are made to realize their present status in the society and in the family that they almost fall into a mood of despondency. Thus Feminism has moved beyond its limits. Society and the world are repeatedly attacked in women's writings and men are looked upon as the greatest enemies who are responsible for their sufferings. It seems that such views are intended to create a separate world for women and to make women independent of the existing society.

3. CONCLUSION:

Doris Lessing gives much importance to the future, the future of a human being especially the youth and the new generation, including those who are born into this world and who are not yet born. She reads a large volume of science fiction and she thinks that the writers of science control the culture sense of the future of human beings. Lessing believes that the future of the younger generation will not prove to be prosperous; it will not be progressive especially in the fields of culture and society if there is no reformation in the social life as a whole. There are many good things to be achieved and they can be achieved only in a classless society where everyone concentrates on lifting up the interest and ideals of the society in which they live and without conflict and attack on the other members. The extreme feminists try to pull society away from its standpoint so as to lower the status of men and to lift up women's position. Society has been corrupted, political conflict prevails everywhere, men think that they are the leaders in every aspect of life. Sex war has been fought for years and nothing is achieved. According to Lessing, if

the world goes on as it is now then the future will be disastrous. Hence, it is obvious that the extremists in any movement or in any walk of life would not change this world into a better place. It is necessary for everyone to know that reconstruction and revolution in our own life is the primary step we should take for a better tomorrow.

In *The Children of Violence* Lessing writes about people like herself, of her age and who were born out of wars and have lived through them and faced miseries and conflict in the society and the world. She presents what it is like to be a human being in a time that witnessed devastating wars, when human beings are possessed of a feeling of hatred to their fellow human beings. Lessing was brought up in central Africa, and so, she knew exactly how the blacks were treated like beasts. They were isolated and deprived of the privileges of the whites. Lessing believes that this kind of ill-treatment was too unfair while a large number of men are rich and led a luxurious life. Lessing's gave much importance to the responsibilities of mankind. She raised a question of why we are in this world and who we really are; a question that seems to reflect on her own childhood experience which was painful and horrified. She lived at a time which was dangerous, a time of evil, horror and pain. Violence and explosives are the most appropriate words to address her youthful years. With many pains and sufferings she had survived through the war.

Doris Lessing's visualized the need of reformation in society, in every individual's life and in every aspect of life. *The Golden Notebook* is attacked from all sides, But Lessing would not bother to change her attitude and intention to write the book in such a way as would be acceptable to her critics. It has been strongly attacked by the feminists, but she defends her own ideas and she thinks it is time to move away from the sexual liberation and March forward to carry out more important tasks. While there are more important things to investigate and explore there is no time to think about isolating one gender from another as both the genders need to go on together, work together and fall back on each other as long as we are living in the same world. She not only concerns with the rights of women in society but she dreams of mortals more alive and responsible regarding their respective roles as males and females in the society and not to look upon each other as rivals. She wants to bring a close connection between the rich and the poor that the real meaning of humanity will flourish in the world and for the new generation to come.

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