



LESSING'S THE SUMMER BEFORE THE DARK : A STUDY IN FEMINIST OUTLOOK

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ABSTRACT

Doris Lessing's feminist sympathetic, though she has denied them from time to time are too well known to need describing. Indeed her name been regarded as being synonymous with Feminism, particularly with feminism of the Third Wave. She herself has of late been strenuously denying belonging to any group. But whatever she might say now, quite early in her long career she had become associated with Feminism. For example, the widely accepted authoritative book on modern criticism, The Readers Guide by Selden and Widdowson, quite firmly places her with in this movement. But it is an undeniable fact of life that people changes as time passes and one cannot blame Lessing for having grown out of Feminism just as she has grown beyond communism or science-fiction or Sufism. A novel like The Summer Before the Dark puts her beyond the restricted pale of Feminism into a wider literary world.

Keywords 1)feminist, 2) feminism, 3)communism, 4) Sufism

INTRODUCTION

The Second Wave Feminism, to which she most emphatically belongs, needs a little explanation. It is known for being a continuation of the First Wave of early twentieth century. It is taken to have started early in the sixties and is associated with the Women's Liberation movement. Estelle B. Freedman, one of the pioneers of the group compares it with the first and says that while the First Wave focused on such things as voting rights the second is largely concerned with other aspects of equality such as discrimination. She categorized five kinds of this discrimination:

(a) biological- women have always been are still being, discriminated on the score of their physical difference from men.

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(b) experience- This is a far more subtle discrimination as it concerns the variety of experience gained by men as contrasted with men.

(c) Discourse- This too is a subtle discrimination since men, as well as women, adopt a discriminating discourse when talking of women.

(d) The unconscious- This discrimination is most difficult to detect since it is in the very attitude of men as well as women. It is unconsciously there and needs to be eradicated.

(e) The socio-economic conditions- This is the most obvious and tangible of all five. The socio economic conditions can be supposed to alter for the better the more affluent a family is. But actually it is not so. The women of a middle class family might eat better food than of a lower class one, but oppression is there all the same.

These were the most important issues of the Second Wave, and they are to be met with, in one form or another, in the works Lessing wrote during this period. The feminists of this time want to contribute and if necessary initiate and proliferate social changes. In their personal attitude they want to become strong human beings and to come out into the wide world in a totally uninhibited manner. They are all the time looking for new worlds to conquer. One of the important writers of this group, Helene Cixous voices mentality of this group to perfection. It is she who has coined the term “the other bisexuality”. This is an unconventional attitude that does not negate the difference between men and women but becomes conscious of it in another way. Here, an attempt has been made to find it in the novel under discussion.

Selden and Widdowson have given three main characteristics of Second Wave Feminism. They have given them in the same order as listed below:

(a) The omnipresence of patriarchy.

(b) The inadequacy for women of existing political organizations.

(c) The celebration of women’s difference from men as central to the cultural politics of liberty.

Essays of this period and books as well repeat and re-echo these ideas. Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (1970) is a famous example. This book has had trans-atlantic influences since it has given rise to the work of Elaine Showalter and her concept of “gynocriticism”.



She has given credence and validity to a completely feminist critique that is concerned with women readers, and gynocriticism concerned with women writers. This is entirely a Second Wave element. She and her followers hold that there is a profound difference between women writings and those men that the entire tradition of women writers have been neglected by male critics. She has brought these neglected women writers to the fore. One of her sentences, quoted by Selden and Widdowson runs thus:

. . . the lost continent of female tradition has risen like the Atlantis from the sea of English Literature. (Selden, 210)

She has divided this tradition into three periods, the “feminine” (1840-80), the “feminist” (1880-1920) and the female (1920 onwards). Lessing belongs to the third group. There is a difference between the early novelists of the third phase and the later. After Virginia Woolf there came a generation of women who were educated in their universities and did not feel the need for writing about the oppression and deprivation of women. After them in the ‘70s there was a shift in the viewpoint - a more aggressive stance was taken and Lessing is one of the important writers of this group.

The above account helps us to understand and the Second Wave of feminism and it is necessary to understand it because much of Lessing’s Writing is the product of this. But it is the contention of this essay that in *The Summer Before the Dark* Lessing had gone into a real where concepts like feminism etc do not apply. Let us now have a look at the text.

It is much shorter than the other novels of Lessing, being less than half the size of *The Golden Notebook*, but if it is lacking in bulk that is no loss , for it has made up for it by neatness of form and maturity of attitude. In every way it is a very fine book, whether in characterization or in truth to life as well as in language. In this novel as in many others Lessing lays stress upon self recognition and through it, on self liberation, There is no pre-occupation with mysticism as in *The Four Gated City*. This is a much more near to ordinary life. There is no fantasy here. On the other hand there is open-eyed recognition of the reality around us and the reality of our nature.

The one central figure around whom the novel is built up is Mrs. Michael Brown or Kate. These rest are shadowy incidental figures. Some are strongly portrayed but they are minor ones. This Kate Brown is no half-demented creature as Lessing’s heroines so often are. She is a completely same, well balanced housewife of the middle and the book concerns her and the process of her psychological development. Only a few months of her life are portrayed- but one season only. It is the summer season, as the title proclaims, that is given in the novel. As She is forty five years of old, the title implies that it is the lost summer of her youth after



which will come the darkness of old age. The time span of the book covers about four months from May to September or October of Kate Brown's forty five year- an extremely event full time of her.

The author had called her earlier novel *The Four Gated City* a *bildungsroman* but that epithet can be applied to this novel with more justification. It can be said that in this novel with more justification. It can be said that in this novel we do not have the portrayal of the growth of a youth in to manhood but that of the middle-aged person into self-recognition. It is therefore a modified version of a *bildungsroman* - the story of the mental development of a middle aged woman into a riper and more mature personality. She sees herself, in the last part of it as a renovated, a stronger person:

Her experience of the last months, her discoveries herself, definitions, what she hoped were now strengths, were concentrated here. (Lessing, 269)

In the beginning of the book Kate has arrived at a turning- point in her life and she is apprehensive of the future. She had been a devoted mother and wife. But now she starts have misgivings about her competence and the authorial comment tells us that this has, of late, become a tendency with her- a pre-occupation. This self- critical mood lasts throughout the novel. Along with this tendency there also is the dualism between what she said and what she really felt, between her outer and inner self. The two aspects run side by side and are extremely difficult to separate. It is difficult to know whether to class this technique as narrative strategy or not. The maturity of Kate's attitude can be seen this early in the book:

The truth was, she was becoming more and more uncomfortably conscious not only that things she had said, and a good many of the things she thought had been taken down off a rack and put on, but that what she really felt was something else again. (Lessing, 4)

This kind of authorial comment also afford us a glimpse into the author own maturity of attitude because in her own works the heroines even when they are thought ful, are not shown having thoughts like these. The kind of thought that come of Kate are not the typical thoughts of middle age but of an older person- a person who has undergone much suffering in life. She thinks:

*We are what we learn,
It often takes a long and painful time. Unfortunately there was no doubt too
that a lot of time, a lot of pain, went into learning very little . . . She was really
feeling that?
Yes, she was (Lessing, 7)*



To this person comes the offer of a job at an international conference for the summer months. As it is during the coming month she will be at a loose end, alone at home. She takes the job. The environment is one of easy going affluence, of casual acceptance of power-something that she is not at all accustomed to. She is good at her job and outside it as well.

It is in the second chapter of the book that she was a dream about a seal. This dream recurs, with modifications, throughout the novel, down to the last chapter. It occurs no less than thirteen times in the book, it is a highly positive dream highlighting all the nobler qualities in men-kindness, helpfulness, compassion etc. Her characters often have dreams, usually dreams that are intimately related to their personal life. Moreover, often the dreamer is a schizophrenic, half-demented person which Kate is not. This is dream of an eminently same women.

The day before the conference ends she is offered another job at another conference and she accepts. She realizes that she is getting slowly transformed. She has now started to resent many things that she had taken for granted. This has to be treated in a feministic manner-the consciousness that not only as a woman but also as an individual she was being deprived all these days. This is all that feministic ask for-that women should be conscious of the fact that they are being oppressed, being refused and denied their rights. In Kate's case however there is no oppression, no domestic tyranny. While in her loving family she never felt oppressed. Her own sense of responsibility and her own sense of morality prevented her. It is only now that, leading a completely different kind of life that she realizes she has missed something.

Injustice, the pain of it, had been waiting for her all these last years. But she had not at all-owed herself to feel it, or not for long. (Lessing, 59)

Along with this sense of grievance, she also has a sense of independence. She is a successful. Here, after the conference is over, she gets a lover, Jeffrey, who is younger than her. She goes to Spain with him. There he falls ill. When he is better they go to another village where he again falls ill. There is a convent nearby where the runs take care of sick people. Jeffrey is sent there.

Now, sitting alone in the hotel, Kate thinks and thinks she realizes that she has arrived at a turning-point in her life. She decides to go away, leaving Jeffrey in the convent:

While up to this minute it held seemed impossible to leave Jeffrey alone, . . . now she was saying to herself that he was after all a man of thirty, that he



would continue to live and probably prosper if she were not waiting at the hotel to sit with him once or twice a day for an hour. (Lessing, 146).

So she goes away, to London. She herself is ill, so she stays at a hotel where they look after her. When she gets well she goes to have a look at her house which had been let for the summers. She is thin and unkempt that even her neighbour does not recognize her. Then she goes and rents a room in a flat owned by a girl named Maureen. Here a completely and behaves smartly people come to her.

Things move on to a conclusion. First of all her dream comes to a triumphant conclusion and secondly Maureen tells her that she has decided to marry one of her suitors. She means to throw a party to celebrate the occasion. As the party goes on full swing Kate slips out to go home.

From the point of view of the theme the book has extremely strong feministic leanings in the beginning. The heroines of the other novels, in the process of developing themselves, recognizing their own selves, also help their male partners towards a like self-realization. This is a definite and also valuable contribution of very Lessing. But it is most significant that nothing like that happens here. Kate's character most emphatically lacks this quality of improving those of others. This is specially true of Jeffrey and Maureen. The former is ill ninety- nine percent of the time and there is some excuse for him. Maureen is a young girl, younger than tim who is Kate's son, and very friendly with Kate. It is only natural that she would be influenced by her, but this does not happen. The reason is not far to seek.

It is as though in this book Lessing wants to convey the message of non-interference. She tells us again and again how Kate refrains from advice Maureen. Time & again does Maureen ask for her advice but Kate refuses every time. She wants Maureen to take a decision herself.

She herself, Kate brown, has to grow gradually into middle age. This process of growth is shown from the very beginning. Her mind undergoes many changes and all of them are carefully depicted. What is important in this respect is that she has to make many choices and these choices contribute not only to the development of the theme but to the action-development as well. The first such choice is joining global food and she joins. She discovers that she has an inner aptitude for the work and shifts to the organizational side. Here we have a significant growth in her personality-she has organizational capacity.

The next important choice is the taking Jeffrey as a lover she has many hours of thought and self-analysis before she decides to take such a step, because of her innate sense of morality. She goes off on a pleasure trip with him that is spoilt by his illness. Then she leaves him



there. This shows that she has learnt that she cannot be responsible for everyone. She comes across, it is not possible.

When she comes into contact with Maureen she learns the lesson of non-interference. Her dreams, thirteen of them, come to a conclusion while she is staying with Maureen. They indicate the innate nobility of her nature. The dream is about a seal. When has taken in to the sea she is fulfilled and free.

This continuous growth in her is what makes the novel a *bildungs-roman*. The theme of the novel is the growth in Kate's character, and therefore this is what determines the genre of the novel. The traditional theory about this kind of novel is that (a) there should be a perceptible growth in the hero (b) the hero should face alternatives and make choices and thus the growth in him should come. This novel thus is a modified form of the *bildungs-roman*. Here instead of a young boy's growth into manhood we have a mature women's mental growth into enlightened maturity. She too takes decisions and makes choices: (a) choice to join global food (b) choice to go on a pleasure trip with Jeffrey as her lover. Besides these there are minor ones: (a) decision to continue working as an organizer (b) decision to leave Jeffrey in the convent, (c) decision to rent Maureen's flat, and many others. It is definitely a modified *bildungs-roman*.

In developing Kate brown's character (which is the main theme of the novel) Lessing has gone beyond feminism. For there is, not exactly equality, but mutuality in later feminism. Women is not only equal to man, but there is mutual help and development between them. This we find in the other novel of Lessing. In *The Golden Notebook*, for example, Anna's character helps her partner's to develop. In this novel however Kate gradually grows beyond all dependence. First of all she realizes that she had been dependent on her family, but working in global food she is cured of this dependence:

What was the sense of loving, hating, wanting, resenting, needing, rejecting . . . when she was here, by herself, free. (Lessing, 39)

Then, before taking Jeffrey as a lover, she has long hours of thought. Here the question of marital dependence comes in. She knows that her husband has, time and again, been unfaithful to her. So she is independent here too:

That loss had occurred years ago. But perhaps this is where she should being . . . that because of Michael she felt like a doll whose sawdust was slowly trickling away. (Lessing, 73)



Her next attempt at independence comes when Jeffrey is ill and she leaves him in the convent, in safe hands. She realizes that he had come to need her, and, what was more, she needed this need. Besides there is also the question of presenting an appearance-what will people think of her if she leaves him? So she decides to be independent of all this and decides to leave him:

While up to this minute it had seemed impossible to leave Jeffrey here alone, an act of coldness or of irresponsibility, now she was saying to herself that he was after all a man of thirty, that he would continue to live and probably even prosper if she were not waiting at the hotel to sit with him once or twice a day for an hour . . . She might leave him. (Lessing, 146)

Her next move towards independence comes when she refuses to advise Maureen. This girl has come to take her as a mother-figure, which is quite natural. She has two suitors and cannot decide which of them to marry. She asks Kate's advice. Kate now realizes that this is also something she needs-the approbation of the younger generation and decides to be free of this also. She carefully refrains from advising Maureen about whom to marry.

So Kate tears herself free of all kind of dependences, marital, familial & ties of pure unrelated affection of strangers. This goes far beyond feminism, beyond man-women relationship. It emerges into a larger world.

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