

Cultural Interpretation of Doris Lessing's Novels

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Abstract: In the 20th-century literary world, Doris Lessing is a prolific, multi-issue, multi-form novelist, and few people can match her. Lessing's creative issues spanned those of apartheid and colonialism, the Cold War and left-wing politics between the United States and the Soviet Union, environmental pollution and ecological criticism, feminism and gender struggle, the fantasy of the society and the crisis of civilization, and youth education and violence. Lessing was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature at the age of 86 and was highly recognized by the literary world. From the perspective of feminism and realistic criticism, this paper analyzes the disclosure and criticism of the irrational system of human society in Lessing's works, and interprets Lessing's criticism of human attempts to conquer nature and deliberately destroy the natural environment, and call on women to be aware of their own social roles. It also helps reveal that people should be friendly and grateful and that men and women should live in harmony with sound personality.

1. Introduction

1.1 Literature Review

The story background of Lessing's novels moved from Africa to the UK as the author's place of residence changed. The focus of her work throughout her creative career has also begun from the anti-colonialism in Africa. She had explored women's self-liberation, feminism, social oppression, environmentalism, ecological change, human development direction and descriptions of the painful life of low-level people in society. Through the deconstruction of the concept of feminism, Lessing's works examine the relationship between the two sexes and the corresponding time and historical concepts from the perspective of the changing trend of the new era, expressing her different cognition and questioning about the gender relations in the general sense of feminism (Hu, 2017). After absorbing new cultural forms, Lessing boldly tried to use fables, sci-fi artistic expression techniques, and then metaphored the status quo and prospects of human beings from the background of sci-fi novels. Often through the fictional harsh climate of the work, her tenacious struggles still pursued the descriptions of various future creatures, expressed the "human-centered" critique in the process of civilization, and used the mouth of the characters in the book to express the closeness to life and to the beautiful nature which they longed for (Chen, 2008). Doris Lessing's works ask questions from the outside world through the storyline, and discuss the issues of society, race, development, etc. in the form of literature, focusing on the contradictions of real conflicts and tapping the inner world of people. Lessing's works involve almost all the major issues and ideas of the 20th century, referred to as "Little Flying Elephant" and "Old Grandmother", setting a dazzling example for later generations to explore literary innovation.

1.2 Purpose of Research

Doris Lessing was one of the most famous female writers in contemporary Britain. She had more than 60 novels' creation experience in her whole life and underwent many style changes. She was able to maintain a strong creative power and she was known as the "evergreen tree in the literary world" (Gui, 2018). This perseverance, finally in 2007, helped Lessing create the record of the oldest winner since the Nobel Prize for Literature. Lessing tried almost all writing styles, which also had a certain relationship with her natural doubts and courage to try. She had a rich imagination and

creatively explored the genres of literary works with a variety of unique literary perspectives. Through the analysis of Lessing's personal growth process, this paper summarizes the reasons why her styles of works were changeable and she was brave enough to explore new forms. Through the study of her works, this paper analyzes the expressions of feminism and eco-environment, the metaphors and warnings of real-world criticism, summed up by Lessing herself, as well as her influence on the literary world and the descendants. Lessing's works also bring people enlightenment for pursuing a better life and persisting in seeking fairness and justice.

2. Lessing's Personal Experience

Doris Lessing's original name was Taylor. She was born on October 22, 1919, into a military family in Iran. When she was 5 years old, her father retired due to his injury. When the whole family took the boat to Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), they responded to the call for land reclamation and contracted a wasteland to cultivate farmland and lived a life of poor farmers (Shu, 2008). In Lessing's childhood, as her mother didn't like girls, she was more painful than happy. She started working at the age of 16 and worked as a telephone operator, babysitter, stenographer, and so on. In the early years of farm life and heavy work in Africa, Lessing was exposed to the ideas of masters such as Dickens and Tolstoy, and gained strength from classic masterpieces, supporting her own weight-bearing growth, establishing rebellion, and seeking newness. The spiritual world of inquiry has inspired her to embark on a literary career. In her youth, she was enthusiastic and brave, actively tried new things, and was keen on political trends and joined the Communist Party. She experienced two failed marriage setbacks and was rejected by Africa because of the critique of her works. She had to travel across the sea to return to London. She published the novel debut *The Grass is Singing* in the previous personal experience, refining a unique literary perspective and starting a long career in writing.

Doris Lessing was good at describing the struggles of autonomous women. Adapted from the life experience of her family in Africa, she criticized colonialism and embodied women's emancipation. Her masterpieces, *The Golden Notebook* and the five-part series *Children of Violence Series* are regarded as classic works of modern Western novels. Lessing was only limited to the constraints of the present and the past. She combined the creative techniques of modernism and postmodernism, paid attention to the influence of modern science and technology on society, and had a wider field of vision and radiation. In order to keep up with the trend of popular culture in the era, Lessing created a group of social soft science fiction novels, which were unique among science fiction novels. she continued to follow the creative ideas in the science fiction world and created the "realism fantasy style". In 2007, the Nobel Prize in Literature was granted to her recommended as "examined a divided civilization with her skepticism, passion, and imagination" in recognition of her masterpiece *The Golden Notebook*.

3. The Characteristics of the Stage Changes of Doris Lessing's Works

Lessing's works are rich in content, while the emotions are detailed and imaginative. Over the years, Lessing had been devoted to the creation of novels and published various literary types such as poetry, prose, and script. She was an experimental writer who was prolific and dared to challenge her own blind spots. Through the analysis of her works, it is found that Lessing's novel creation process can be summarized into three stages.

3.1 In the First Stage (the 1950s)

Lessing mainly published the book *The Grass is Singing*. The strict racist hierarchy between the white and the black characters in the book, from the beginning, predicts the irresistible ethnic oppression and exploitation in the colonial environment, which helps the novel become the first one to directly represent the apartheid in southern Africa. It makes readers globally realize the injustice of the policy of ethnic division and the profound suffering brought to the mankind (Collins,1983).

Since then, she had published a popular five-part *Children of Violence Series*, which was known as an important part of African literature.

3.2 The Second Period (from the 1960s to the Early 1970s)

The most representative of Lessing's works was the *The Golden Notebook* (Li, 2015). With Lessing's proven ideas and writing skills, the heroine in the book is set to record different aspects of emotional life in five different color notebooks. Boldly adopting complex narrative techniques, Lessing circulated in seemingly random interspersed descriptions. In fact, multiple levels reflect the intertwined conflicts between the politics and emotions in the real world. The novel describes a variety of female thinking, feelings, and experiences, etc.. The novel narrates the story of a young women experiencing love and motherhood and is also a philosophical summary of the author's own life. The book was later seen as a great work by the radical proponents of the feminist movement, but Lessing herself disagreed with this view, saying that she only described this particular historical phenomena and presented its original characteristics.

3.3 The Third Period (after the 1970s)

During this period, Lessing was deeply influenced by the Islamic mysticism, and all writers unexpectedly turned the writing field to science fiction, with fables and fantasies. The fusion of history, science, politics, and mythology had created a five-part space of the universe, which gave birth to a series of soft science fiction novels named the *Old Stars in the South Seat: Archives*. That made a group of readers express that they could not understand. The content of the story explores the field beyond rationality and oneself. It expresses the thinking about the human history and worries of their future destiny. The critical in-depth irony of reality is an important attempt of Lessing's creative style.

4. The Feminist Ideas in Lessing's Works

Lessing had always been regarded as a pioneer and idol of feminism, but Lessing herself repeatedly refuted and criticized feminism, arguing that the foundation of the movement was too ideological. Lessing herself is a broad-minded female writer. Her works portray the current pictures on the surface, but they have the theme of linking the past and the future and pursue the world. Feminism only refers to the critique of gender inequality in society and safeguards women's rights and interests. This had been included in the content of race, environment, philosophy, ecology, and social universe that Lessing explored.

The Golden Notebook (1962) is the most successful and controversial work of Lessing's. The character of the novel is also a female writer with the author's own shadow. Lessing described the sadness of women's lack of independent consciousness by describing the life of the protagonist Anna.

An Analysis of the feminist color in *The Golden Notebook* can be started in the following three aspects.

4.1 Political Fanaticism of Female Liberation is Destined to Be in Vain

In the novel, the heroine Anna is a typical image of pursuing individual liberation and self-realization. In the era of novel stories, she has the ability to survive by relying on her own writing, the desire to accept new ideas to pursue freedom, and the concerns about the time. She discusses political hotspot topics and hopes to enrich her spiritual life. It is obviously not very realistic for a person to use five notebooks to classify and record their own life. Here we do not explore the rationality of this design but focus on switching from different notebook contents in a montage manner, surpassing a female individual. Identity comes from her feelings about the outside world. The relationship between men and women, women's liberation, traditional ideas, and political ideas are enshrouded in her life. On the surface, typical of feminism is insomnia, fear, and pain. The life of the woman in the book is not good at all, and she is not able to coordinate the balance of politics, rights, and sexual consciousness, leading to her own mental breakdown and

obstacles in her work. This just proves that the concept of female liberation does not apply to the majority of grassroots women. Wishes are destined to be an empty joy that cannot truly meet the needs of women in the era (Dagmar,1977).

4.2 Women's Liberation of Sexual Freedom is Only a Pale Form

Lessing had repeatedly emphasized in many works that it was especially important to correctly understand the development of feminism. In the early days, following the female liberation, most of the followers who were determined to maintain the sacred status of feminism were confronted by verbal propaganda, revolutionary and other bloody words poked in pain, and immediately committed to various iconic actions to prove their loyalty. However, they forgot the most important core idea was: the liberation of women means they should first break the original bondage from the mind and then use the emancipation of women to guide their new life. Through Anna's suffering from spiritual torture, it is expressed that in the feminist movement, women should pursue spiritual satisfaction and sound personality, but formal sexual freedom is meaningless.

4.3 The Harmonious Relationship between Men and Women is the Ultimate Liberation

The protagonist Anna has always followed the requirements of the so-called female freedom. After experiencing the various forms of women's emancipation, Anna realizes that a good medicine that ultimately changes the inaction and spiritual emptiness is not against men. Instead, it is the pursuit of men in order to enter a marriage life. The author, through the book's protagonist Anna, expressed to people that after a hundred and thousands of love entanglements between men and women, they will finally pursue the peace of mind and establish a harmonious relationship. Looking back, it is only after enriching the spiritual world and satisfying the conditions of a sound personality, the true long-term and stable self-liberation can be achieved.

5. Critical Realism Style in LESSING's Space Science Fiction

The science fiction novel published from Lessing's final transformation is undoubtedly an important window for people to fully understand the creation of Lessing's literature. From the written content, Lessing's "space novel" seems to be a broad-spectrum picture, describing the relationship between distant planets, but in essence, Lessing's metaphors still happen today on the earth. Various scenes conflict, exposing and criticizing social reality is always an inseparable theme in Lessing's works. In her "space novel", Lessing transformed the scene of the story, and on a broader level, explored and attacked colonialism, war, monopoly, unfairness, and so on. Therefore, Lessing's "space novel" still reflects the strong realism of critical significance. Lessing used the expressions of science fiction to metaphorize the joy and pain of modern people, achievements, and failures, worrying about the future development of the space. Lessing was good at sketching the end of the world in her science fiction novels, showing the human weakness and insignificance in the extreme living environment, giving the current human society a consideration for environmental consumption. Reasonable development has sounded the alarm. Lessing's science fiction novels incorporate the various social crises into a strange imagination. These are undoubtedly fantasy styles, but they use unique criticism to analyze the dilemmas and problems of the contemporary world. In these fantasy works, the writer's realistic and believable strokes depict the fantasy scenes, and the colorful fantasy ideology of presenting a flawed reality combines the original fantasy and real consciousness into a unity of opposites, reflecting the Lessing-style "realistic fantasy style".

6. Conclusion

Lessing's novels cover a wide range of contradictory issues in the contemporary world. By describing the bizarre and absurd social scenes, it is revealed that people should be friendly and that men and women should live in harmony. By setting a broad, sad, and gloomy view of the future world, Lessing warned that human beings, as a part of the various ecosystems such as society, the

earth, and nature, should not be arrogant, and must be awe-inspiring and grateful, which reflects the general humanistic care of the writer as an old grandmother.

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