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## Resurgence of the Female Self

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She was not a feminist. She operated within a religious tradition that believed an exceptional person from any level of society might receive a divine calling.

She was .... Joan of Arc.

### A Dame Who Denied Dame-hood: Doris Lessing

Doris Lessing was born in Iran, then known as Persia, on 22 October 1919, to Captain Alfred Tayler and Emily Maude Tayler, who were both English and of British nationality.<sup>[1]</sup>

Lessing was educated at the Dominican Convent High School, a Roman Catholic convent all-girls school in Salisbury (now Harare).<sup>[4]</sup> She left school at the age of 14, and was self-educated from there on; she left home at 15 and worked as a nursemaid. She started reading material that her employer gave her, on politics and sociology<sup>[8]</sup> and began writing around this time. In 1937, Lessing moved to Salisbury to work as a telephone operator, and she soon married her first husband, Frank Wisdom, with whom she had two children (John and Jean), before the marriage ended in 1943.<sup>[2]</sup>

Following her first divorce, Lessing's interest was drawn to the popular community of the Left Book Club, a communist book club which she had joined the year before.<sup>[3][5]</sup> It was here that she met her future second husband, Gottfried Lessing. They were married shortly after she joined the group, and had a child together (Peter), before the marriage failed and ended in divorce in 1949. After these two failed marriages, she has not been married since.

When she fled to London to pursue her writing career and communist beliefs, she left two toddlers with their father in South Africa (another, from her second marriage, went with her). She later said that at the time she thought she had no choice: "For a long time I felt I had done a very brave thing. There is nothing more boring for an intelligent woman than to spend endless amounts of time with small children. I felt I wasn't the best person to bring them up. I would have ended up an alcoholic or a frustrated intellectual like my mother."<sup>[6]</sup>

These very lines from her make us understand the backdrop of her various great works which she would write during rest of her life. We will discuss some of her masterpieces and also throw some light on how she advocated for radical feminism through her writings.

### Feminism – May be from here it began

Feminism is a collection of movements and ideologies aimed at defining, establishing, and defending equal political, economic, and social rights for women.<sup>[7][8]</sup> In addition, feminism seeks to establish equal opportunities for women in education and employment. A feminist is "an advocate or supporter of the rights and equality of women".<sup>[9]</sup>

Several movements of feminist ideology have developed over the years. They vary in goals, strategies, and affiliations. They often overlap, and some feminists identify themselves with several branches of feminist thought.

One of such branches is the Second-wave feminism : a feminist movement beginning in the early 1960s <sup>[11]</sup> and continuing to the present; as such, it coexists with third-wave feminism. Second wave feminism is largely concerned with issues of equality other than suffrage, such as ending discrimination.<sup>[10]</sup>

Second-wave feminists see women's cultural and political inequalities as inextricably linked and encourage women to understand aspects of their personal lives as deeply politicized and as reflecting sexist power structures. The feminist activist and author Carol Hanisch coined the slogan "The Personal is Political", which became synonymous with the second wave.

Post-war feminism sprang from two sources. One of those was the dissatisfactions of privileged white women, during a time of burgeoning economic opportunity, with male-prescribed roles. The other, the awakening anti-capitalist, anti-racist, and anti-imperialist consciousness of the 1960s.

From this source, came the generally reformist "equal-rights" movement, which is the only feminism with public visibility today. This version of feminism, sometimes called "liberal" or "bourgeois" feminism, made limited demands of the body politic: an end to legal and quasi-legal barriers to women's advancement, increased control for women over their reproductive functions, and a greater sensitivity to the cultural messages that shaped society's conceptions of what women were and of what they could become.

During the 1960s and 1970s, feminists catapulted the idea of women's liberation into the media and the public consciousness. As with any groundswell, the message of second-wave feminism spread widely and was sometimes diluted or distorted. Feminist beliefs also differed from city to city, group to group and even woman to woman.

## **Is Doris Lessing a Feminist?**

The recipient of the 2007 Nobel Prize in Literature, Doris Lessing was described by the award committee as "that epicist of the female experience, who with scepticism, fire and visionary power has subjected a divided civilization to scrutiny."

Her 1962 novel *The Golden Notebook* is regarded as one of the twentieth century's pivotal works of fiction. And for many feminists coming of age in the 1960s and 1970s, it felt as if Lessing was speaking for them.

But is Doris Lessing a feminist?

Lessing does not like the idea of being pigeonholed as a feminist author. When asked why, she explained: What the feminists want of me is something they haven't examined because it comes from religion. They want me to bear witness. What they would really like me to say is, 'Ha, sisters, I stand with you side by side in your struggle toward the golden dawn where all those beastly men are no more.' Do they really want people to make oversimplified statements about men and women? In fact, they do. I've come with great regret to this conclusion.

She's a woman who dislikes labels and revels in not being easily categorized. Although second wave feminists would like to claim her as one of their own, a similar claim could be made by communists, Sufis, and science fiction fans; Lessing has dabbled in those areas and explored many more, both personally and through her writing.

John Mullan, Professor of English at University College London, writing for the *Guardian Unlimited* says, "She may have been part of the feminist movement, but she did not give a damn whether her views were feminist or not."

However, Lessing's fame rests heavily on *The Golden Notebook*, a book that broke ground in expressing women's dissatisfaction with the gender roles of the time.

Unlike many women writers who preceded her, those views did not sentimentalize the interactions between men and women. In her work, Lessing does not shy away from harsh evaluations of her characters' physical and emotional relationships. *The Golden Notebook* made many men feel guilty about their gender at the same time it seemed to advocate for women. Yet in Lessing's world, women are often to blame for their circumstances.

Although reluctant to be categorized as a feminist, Lessing revisited the idea of the repressed/emancipated woman in many of her novels, among them the five-book *Children of Violence* series (1952-1969), *The Summer Before the Dark* (1973) and *The Fifth Child* (1988).

Her short stories also quite significant in this discussion. Throughout Lessing's works, she has shown that relationships with men can influence her heroines' identities considerably. Usually men are not welcomed by those heroines who want to form or regain their own identities.

Women try to preserve their identities by having or not having sex .In "A Woman On A Roof "the naked woman preserves her independence by ignoring men .In "One Off The Short List", Barbara regains her autonomy and her sleeping time by having pseudo -sex with Graham .The male characters that appear in both " A Woman On A Roof" and " One Off The Short List" attempt to control the female characters sexually but in vain .In the former story the men are simply rejected by the woman and in the latter story the man is sexually controlled by the woman .In "Our Friend Judith" , Judith chooses to be a single woman and a mistress so as to remain "her own person".

In "A Man and Two Women" Stella preserves her identity with her husband and her friendship with the Bradfords by not making love with Jack. It is ironic that Barbara (in One Off The Short List) almost has intercourse with a man she hates, whereas Stella does not have intercourse with a man whom she likes .It reflects the reality that women's reactions are varied in preserving their own identities .Throughout these short stories, Lessing portrays well the ambiguities of women's feelings towards matters such as heterosexual love, maternal love, close friendship and one's self respect.

### **Some of her notable works**

#### **The Colonization of the Colonized: *The Grass Is Singing***

*The Grass Is Singing* is the first novel, published in 1950. It takes place in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), in southern Africa, during the 1940s and deals with the racial politics between whites and blacks in that country which was then a British Colony.

Even though Mary Turner had led a somewhat limited life in her sleepy South African town, she was happy until she overheard some friends say that she would never marry. At those words, her delicately balanced little world overturned, and she suddenly realized that it was desirable to have a husband, to be like the rest of her circle. Unconsciously she began to look for a man to marry, and she found one. He was a farmer - a hard-working sensitive man with an intense love of his land, a stubborn pride - but with a fatal weakness.

When Dick took her to his farm in the veldt, Mary stepped into a life completely different from anything she had ever imagined. She hated the stuffy little house; she hated the natives; she hated Dick at times and most of all she hated the burning heat and the loneliness. After one attempt to return to her life in town, she stayed on the farm, listening to the strident din of the cicadas and fighting against the realization that the security and happiness which she and Dick needed so desperately might never come.

Little by little the years worked their slow poison. And then finally one heat-laden afternoon, without even realizing what she had done, Mary Turner lit the fuse that led to a shattering explosion of violence and tragedy.

It is a personal and psychological portrayal of its female protagonist, Mary Turner, from her childhood to death, and as a political exposure of the futility and fragility of the patriarchal and colonial society. This novel is Mary's failure of individuation in the confrontation of her psychological and cultural parts, shaped by colonial experience. Lessing, by depicting her protagonist in a particular British colonial setting, artistically reveals that her identity is negotiated and constructed by the social and behavioral expectations, developed through her racial role as a white woman colonizer and her gender role as a woman colonized in a patriarchal narrative of the same setting.

'*The Grass Is Singing*' blends Lessing's imaginative vision with her own vividly remembered early childhood to recreate the quiet horror of a woman's struggle against a ruthless fate.

*The Grass Is Singing* is a bleak analysis of a failed marriage, the neurosis of white sexuality, and the fear of black power that Lessing saw as underlying the white colonial experience of Africa. The novel's treatment of the tragic decline of Mary and Dick Turner's fortunes becomes a metaphor for the whole white presence in Africa. The novel is honest about the fault-lines in the white psyche.

### **The Personal is Political: *The Golden Notebook***

Attacked as unfeminine at its publication, *The Golden Notebook* was identified as a foundational feminist literary work by the Swedish academy, which said that "it belongs to the handful of books that informed the 20th-century view of the male-female relationship".

Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* was published in 1962. Over the next several years, feminism became a significant movement in the United States, the United Kingdom, and



much of the world. *The Golden Notebook* was seen by many feminists of the 1960s as an influential work that revealed the experience of women in society.

*The Golden Notebook* tells the story of Anna Wulf and her four notebooks of different colours that narrate aspects of her life. The notebook of the title is a fifth, gold-colored notebook in which Anna's sanity is questioned as she weaves together the other four notebooks. Anna's dreams and diary entries appear throughout the novel.

*The Golden Notebook* has autobiographical layers: the character Anna reflects elements of author Doris Lessing's own life, while Anna writes an autobiographical novel about her imagined Ella, who writes autobiographical stories. The structure of *The Golden Notebook* also intertwines the political conflicts and emotional conflicts in the characters' lives.

Feminism and feminist theory often rejected traditional form and structure in art and literature. The Feminist Art Movement considered rigid form to be a representation of patriarchal society, a male-dominated hierarchy. Feminism and postmodernism often overlap; both theoretical viewpoints can be seen in analysis of *The Golden Notebook*.

Feminists also responded to the consciousness-raising aspect of *The Golden Notebook*. Each of Anna's four notebooks reflects a different area of her life, and her experiences lead to a larger statement about flawed society as a whole.

The idea behind consciousness-raising is that the personal experiences of women should not be separated from the political movement of feminism. In fact, the personal experiences of women reflect the political state of society.

*The Golden Notebook* was both groundbreaking and controversial. It dealt with women's sexuality and questioned assumptions about their relationships with men. Doris Lessing has often stated that the thoughts expressed in *The Golden Notebook* should not have come as a surprise to anyone. Women had obviously been saying these things, she said, but had anyone been listening?

Although *The Golden Notebook* is often hailed by feminists as an important consciousness-raising novel, Doris Lessing has notably downplayed a feminist interpretation of her work. While she may not have set out to write a political novel, her work does illustrate ideas that were relevant to the feminist movement, particularly in the sense that the personal is political.

Several years after *The Golden Notebook* was published, Doris Lessing said that she was a feminist because women were second-class citizens. Her rejection of a feminist reading of *The Golden Notebook* is not the same as rejecting feminism. She also expressed surprise that while women had long been saying these things, it made all the difference in the world that someone wrote them down.

### **Face to Face With Self: *The Summer Before the Dark***

As in *The Golden Notebook*, Mrs. Lessing is concerned with the situation of present-day women. But her treatment of the emotional gulf that opens up before a forty-five-year-old woman no longer needed as a wife and mother is a starting point for much more - a confrontation with the threat of annihilation, the terrors of old age and death.

Kate Brown is faced for the first time in twenty years with the prospect of being alone. Her children are grown; her husband, a successful neurologist, is going to work for some months in an American hospital. Urged by him to take a job, she finds herself acting as interpreter for an international conference on food, becoming substitute mother to all the delegates, flying off to Turkey for another conference, to Spain for an affair with a younger man - all the traditional outlets... But none of this turns out as she might have expected, and this summer of exploration, freedom and self-discovery, during which she rejects the stereotypes of femininity - that, like her conventional clothes, do not fit her any longer - becomes more than a private stocktaking; what Kate discovers in this time of crisis enrages and appalls her as it brings her face to face with herself.

At the beginning of the novel, Kate Brown is a fashionable and competent woman in a suburban garden; before it ends, she is stripped of everything she believes she is. *The Summer Before the Dark* is told in direct narrative, simply; but through dreams, through archetype and myth, the woman is related to the dark impersonal forces that underlie all our lives.

In an interview with Josephine Hendin, 1972, from *Putting the Questions Differently* Doris Lessing said "I think a good deal of the depression and the mental breakdown of the middle-aged women are due to the fact they suddenly find they're not able to command attention they way they've always been able to command it... A whole dimension of life suddenly slides away, and you realize that what, in fact, you've been using to get attention, or command attention, has been what you look like, sex appeal or something like that. Once again it's something that belongs to the condition of being a young woman. It's a biological thing, yet for half of your life or more, you've been imagining that this attention has been attracted by yourself. It hasn't."

### **It Was Always There : *To Room Nineteen***

"To Room Nineteen," one of the collected stories in Doris Lessing's *A Man and Two Women* (1963), has been singled out as one of her best stories. It centers on a middle-aged English woman, whose world in a mid-twentieth century London suburb revolves around her husband, her four children, and her home. Everyone thinks Susan and her husband Matthew are the perfect couple, who have made all the right choices in life. When Susan packs her youngest children off to school, however, she begins to question the "intelligent" decisions she has made. When she discovers that her husband has been having extramarital affairs, she embarks on a journey of self-discovery that ultimately becomes a descent into madness.

This well-crafted story explores the warring impulses of intellect and instinct, mind and heart, against the backdrop of early 1960s London, when women were caught in the social conservatism of the past and unable to see the promise of a future that would encourage choice, fulfillment, and personal freedom. Lessing's tragic story illuminates the restrictions placed on women of this era and the devastating consequences of those restrictions. "To Room Nineteen" cemented Lessing's reputation as one of the century's finest short story writers.

Certainly it is possible to read "To Room Nineteen" as a work with feminist concerns or, at least, a work of concern to feminists. In setting out a woman's experience of marriage and motherhood, the expectations, pressures, and burdens placed on her by husband and children, the inability to regain herself as an individual, an essential self, having entered into these institutions, "To Room Nineteen" partakes of an important tradition in literature, asserting the

need for female self-expression. The story makes all too clear the destructive results of patriarchy, its definitions and standards, and the consequences of being denied the room to find and nourish the fundamental self.

Another powerful theme in Lessing's work is identity, the conceptions we hold of ourselves and the illusions and bitter truths we consider dear. Much of "To Room Nineteen" focuses on Susan Rawlings's attempt to identify herself, to understand "the essential Susan." She is unable to do so. Why not? What limits are placed on her ability to see and properly identify herself? What do such limitations have to do with Susan's suicide, her choice of self-annihilation?

Much of Lessing's work is concerned with what Michiko Kakutani has identified as "certain persistent themes: the relationship between the individual and society; the tension between domesticity and freedom, responsibility and independence; and the tug of war between human will and the imperatives of love, betrayal and ideological faith" ("Tracing the Internal Tug of War at the Heart of Human Life"). Identity—the struggle to establish it, to define it, to defend it, to conform it and reshape it and refine it—is perhaps the unifying thread of Lessing's oeuvre, the constant that remains across shifting ideologies, concerns, and interests.

### **A few words from an ordinary woman – Me**

Her face launched a million dreams, yet ageless Cleopatra had to bow down to patriarchy .Hardy's immortal Eustacia Vye is devoured by the Egdon Heath .Her fault being her passion .Nature's passion engulfs defiant Eustacia's passion...she succumbs .Bertha Rochester's helpless pleas still echo in our ears .They have multiplied .Even Shakespeare doesn't spare Cordelia as she refused to acquiesce with patriarchy's demand.

Years ran into decades, decades turned into centuries .Time rolled on .But what could it change? Could it set free crores of enchained Berthas ?Can Eustacia even today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century give vent to her heart's darkest desires ?Till date it is the same law for women across the world , whether educated or uneducated , rich or poor ,urban or rural... submit or perish .A woman has a role assigned to her ,predestined ,and she has to grow to fit the mask .A docile daughter ,a duty bound homemaker ,a dedicated wife and a caring mother.

Bearing a child changes it all... it really does .It did for me .And for millions of women worldwide, it's the same. Being shorn of a father's shadow at two, and witnessing a saga of a single woman with two infants, fighting for survival at every step, the burning desire to do something worthwhile in life and to be self independent was in every breath that I inhaled .Higher education and a neatly chalked career being the two natural prerogatives . But perhaps social construction had planned it out somewhat differently. Marriage and motherhood came in quick succession .Cleaning soiled nappies, washing feeding bottles, changing diapers, singing endless lullabies and a whole night service of tending to a wailing baby, faded the certificates, and pursuing a career anymore became utopian. From being an academician I was a wife, a mother ...a what? Twinkle Twinkle Little Star and Baa Baa Black Sheep overpowered easily Milton and Shakespeare. The woman in the mirror was strange, so different from the one in the university album .A gradual disintegration of life force, an annihilation of all dreams, ambitions, rendering a complete void .The unbeaten experience of motherhood was perhaps losing its halo at times.



But for millions of me there is one Doris Lessing and her relentless tirade to set free innumerable Berthas. Eustacia is now learning to assert her sexual preferences .Sacrificing Cordelias are rising from the ashes.

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