



About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Quest for Autonomous ‘Self’: A Study of *The Summer before the Dark*

Naadiya Yaqoob Mir

Research Scholar

Dept of English

University of Kashmir

Doris Lessing is a prolific writer. Living in the era of change and innovations, Lessing reflected the same fortitude and temper of modernists both in style and themes. She is highly imaginative and incorporates her ideas smoothly and skilfully in her works. Her fiction is a quest for recognition and identity. Lessing’s female protagonists are all very interesting because they transcend the material world that tries to cripple them and then pursue a quest for independent ‘self’. The aim of the study is to highlight the causes that lead the protagonist of this novel to embark on a journey towards self liberation and autonomous ‘self’. Besides this the present study explores the several modes of Kate’s life. Finally she becomes successful in her quest for self identity against all odds.

Discussion

The novel, *The Summer before the Dark* is an optimistic novel of Doris Lessing as it traces the protagonist’s (Kate Brown) journey from darkness to light. Kate Brown is an extremely talented, intelligent woman who rebels against the stereotypical standards set by the suppressive society on women. Every journey that she undertakes is shown as a stepping stone to find her real ‘self’. She attempts to search her identity through dreams and languages. Her family has always enjoyed her services as mother and wife for the last twenty five summers. This summer, while her family shall be visiting different parts of the world to spend their summer holidays, she is left alone and finally takes a job as a translator as is mentioned in the text that, “She was good at languages. Her knowledge of French and Italian was good; her Portuguese was perfect, for on one side she was Portuguese” (Lessing 1973: 16). In this connection a critic St. Anders comments, “as with all Lessing’s protagonists, new knowledge begins with an examination of language” (Anders 1986: 113). Due to her excellent performance and service, she is promoted to more superior post as executive for Global Foods, with definitely a handsome salary, which she accepts without any hesitation. Due to this she moves to Istanbul, and here she works as “a group mother” for many people from different countries who are attending the conference. She believes that she is away from family and the demands of the family members, while she is actually doing the same i.e. taking care of others. In her quest to achieve self-knowledge, Kate goes to Spain with her newly found boy friend Jeffrey, who is younger than her. During her stay in Spain she is continuously haunted by the dark memories of the past, of her husband and children and realizes that she is deserted by her husband and children. She recalls a humiliating episode when her younger son told her daughter that their mother is in a state of menopause and therefore completely useless now, which is not true. After this Kate begins to question her identity as a mother and wife. She goes, on for a deep introspection and starts analysing her past and present in order to know her inner deep, dark and hidden ‘self’. As Margaret Moan Rowe writes:

The tension throughout the novel is between Kate’s exploration of inner space and the literal journey she makes from England, to Turkey with her company, to Spain with a young lover, back to London where she shares a flat with a younger woman, and then to home. (Rowe 1994: 68)

Thus, with every physical journey, Kate undergoes an inner exploration of her ‘self’.

The first phase of her journey stops in Istanbul while second starts by going to Spain with Jeffrey, where they are recognized differently by different people as:

They could not be mother and son-no, impossible. Brother and sister? No one could believe that a single womb has produced two such dissimilar human types. They were an incongruous marriage? No, their being together lacked the congruence of mood and movement by which one recognises the married-and then, there were the documents, at the desk. There was nothing else, they must be lovers. (Lessing 1973: 75)

In Spain Jeffrey falls ill and Kate acts more like a mother than a lover. She is amused to see that Jeffrey is actually looking for a mother-woman in her. Throughout her journey, she has a recurring Seal dream, which keeps her haunting throughout the whole summer. The dream continues progressively and her actions during day time further feed her dream. Throughout the day she remains busy in helping others and in thinking about her past. Due to this, she remains alert most of the time. Her only escape becomes this Seal dream which forces her to think the inherent meaning and message of this dream, as well as, her life and fragmented 'self'. The dream starts as she starts working and then it continues till she sees herself as an independent individual rather than mother and wife. This dream begins and ends in the dark cold north, "because it had appeared twice, it was announcing its importance to her" (Lessing 1973: 48). The dream is actually a journey to knowledge with awareness for her, the dark and cold can be viewed as apt metaphors for ageing and exile. The landscape in the dream is rocky, slippery and dark which symbolizes her fear of ageing and loneliness as is proved by this passage, "She fell asleep and at once on a rocky hillside. Yes, there was her poor Seal, painfully, moving itself towards the invisible ocean. She gathered the creature up in her arms-oh she ought not to have left it there" (Lessing 1973: 99). This shows Kate's inner psychological turmoil and the Seal acts as an alter ego to her. This dream despite all the difficulties helps her to fight with emotions that make her weaker from inside. She completes her journey towards independent survival at the same time with the journey of Seal, by putting the Seal back to the sea northwards to its safe zone. This dream journey can be compared with her own physical journey. Kate leaves England and her family; she travels to turkey as an executive for Global Foods, then accompanies Jeffrey to Spain and at the same time helps him during his illness. However, when she returns back, she becomes ill herself. After sometime she recovers from illness and at the same time completes her Seal dream as well, in the "cave-like" room in Maureen's flat. It is this dream of Seal that helps her in her enlightenment. This dream drags her from the deep dark slumber to light and experience that she will utilise during rest of her life. She connects her inner 'self' with the outer, and gets back her lost identity which she has lost due to social and family pressures. At the end, Seal returns back to sea and Kate to her home. Kate realizes that now her journey is complete. She saves Seal and herself as well, now it is a rebirth of both.

Another important element that helps Kate to know her real identity is her temporary mental breakdown or dementia, on her return to England. During the process of healing she visits theatre to see Natalia Petronova's play, "A Month in the Country". There she understands the real and true essence of human nature and comments:

What those women had in common with Natalia Petrovna was that she was supposed to be twenty-nine, or so Turgenev said, but she was behaving and thinking like-was being acted by a woman of fifty. A woman who thought of

herself as getting old, grabbing at youth. Obviously, the nineteenth century, like the lives of poor people, aged woman fast. (Lessing 1973: 149)

These lines vindicate Kate's deep introspective gaze that gives her the realization of the impact of the play upon the human life. Though Natalia is hardly twenty nine, but she seems more like a fifty year old woman. Here Kate understands her real inherent and genuine identity as she comments:

Those actors were absolutely right. They didn't allow themselves to be shut inside one set of features. One arrangement of hair, one manner of walking or talking, no, they changed about, were never the same. But she Kate Brown, Michael's wife had allowed herself to be roundly slim red head with sympathetic brown eyes for thirty years. (Lessing 1973: 155-156)

Throughout these years Kate was trying to impress others and her own family by behaving and dressing as per their demands. She experiences a complete change in herself after this play and by understanding the essence of the particular show, she feels enlightened. She decides to live outside this "cocoon" of social pressures and social safety. However, in order to save her life, Kate moves to deep and dark psyche to know what is in store for her. As a critic St. Anders writes:

To save her life, she must move through the dark which represents on the one hand the known: her emotional conflict as a wife and as a mother. On the other hand, the dark suggests her long isolation from not only herself but her husband since darkness often symbolizes, in Lessing's novels, a communication barrier between individuals. (Anders 1986: 127)

Kate's disintegrated inner dark 'self' is caught up in dichotomies and integrating it will ultimately help her to conquer the fear of loneliness. Further, she realizes that she can live independently and can survive without necessarily being with her family. Her stay with Maureen, further helps and adds to her knowledge of 'self' and she remembers her happy days with her husband and children, laughing and enjoying every moment of their stay with one another. By remembering those happy moments, she sheds the painful ones and understands the desperate need to start a new phase of her life. Due to these shared happy moments of her life, she is able to complete the Seal dream which runs parallel to her actual or real life. One important word that she learns to say to her family, is 'no', "Terribly sorry, very busy, will let you know before I arrive" (Lessing 1973:211). This shows her progression, growth and also her determined will to complete the dream of her lost 'self'. With the change in her inner 'self', she changes her outer look as well. She changes her hair style and clothes. Shopkeepers, who greet her, are unable to recognize her. Now, nobody notices her:

But while her body heaved and manufactured tears, she was thinking, quite coolly, that coming here, coming to the hired room where no one knew her, was the first time in her life that she had been alone and outside a cocoon of comfort and protection, the support of other people's recognition of what she had chosen to present. But no one expected anything, knew anything about her supports, her cocoon. (Lessing 1973: 165)

Kate's alienation and loneliness help her in her 'self' recognition and she start believing that she can live independently; without any external support and even without that "cocoon" that

she has made for herself in the form of family protection and support. Kate in *The Summer before the Dark*, analyses herself through exile and introspection. During this phase, she suffers from an intense spiritual crisis and dementia which disturb her appearance as well. Her dress sense, hair colour, and make up, everything changes, as now she hardly cares about it. She finally accepts her real appearance and also confronts the fear of ageing. She realizes that the physical appearance is only a façade and doesn't reveal the true identity of a real 'self'. She goes through a number of troublesome phases in search of her real, hidden identity as a woman besides being a mother and wife; she realizes her actual role in the society as an individual complete in itself. She becomes aware of the fact that it is not the visible physical appearance that defines the woman; it is the inner growth and experiences that justify her. In the beginning of the novel, Kate is seen 'waiting' passively but at the end of it, she is actually acting. From passive she becomes an active participant in the course of her life and catches hold of her lost life, back.

Further, Kate's divided self is the outcome of her adoption of different imposed roles by which she defines or understands her life. As an unmarried woman in Portugal she tries to play the role of an innocent female. Later, she plays the role of a liberated woman, in an open relationship before the birth of her children. And after that, she assumes the role of a dutiful wife and a mother simultaneously. But, when her husband and children leave the house and the wife or the mother is no longer needed, she starts questioning her existence and the validity of all these imposed or acquired roles and this marks her first step towards self-liberation and awakening conscience. However, this realization disrupts her earlier formed rapport with her family and friends, which now appears to her as unimportant. Her artificial and so called unified 'self', disintegrates and in this mental turmoil, she leaves her home and starts her journey towards much desired self-liberation. Kate, through the process of deep introspection becomes conscious of the fact that her life so far is a network of restrictions, responsibilities and prohibitions, as is seen in the given passage:

Looking back over nearly a quarter of a century, she saw that, that had been the characteristic of her life, passivity, adaptability to others. Her own identity had been obliterated by the demands of her husband and children... Love and duty, and being in love and not being in love, and loving, and behaving well, and you should and you shouldn't and you ought and oughtn't. It's a disease. (Lessing 1973: 218)

Now, Kate realizes her painful situation and particularly her life. She understands that throughout her life till now, she lives only to gratify others and this leads to the loss of her individuality and identity and therefore, embarks on her journey towards exploration and self-discovery. This apprehension is so strong that now Mary Finchley's amorality becomes tolerable to her. She realizes that she has sacrificed a beautiful portion of her life only for the sake of social admiration or approval.

Besides, her keen introspection from within, there are some external forces that help her in her path towards self-discovery and therefore act as mirror images for Kate. These are: Mary Finchley, Kate's neighbourhood friend and Maureen, a young girl from whom she rents a room. Although, both are economically dependent on men, yet both live independent lives. She compares her opinions and ways of life with these two; also she allows herself to voice the silent thoughts or ideas unfamiliar to her. The third person that plays an important role in her progress is Jeffrey Merton, her young and short time lover. His situation

resembles that of her's, and she observes silently his struggle and fragmentation before starting her own journey towards the same goal.

Kate analyses as well as deconstructs those social oppressive norms which make her a 'good' wife and mother. She realizes that these roles are only impositions; the real and much desired is the role of an individual, independent of such restrictions. This further strengthens her ideal of liberation which is possible once she allows herself to disrupt the earlier rapport with those who unnecessarily harbingers her path towards real growth. She understands that it is difficult to retain a sense of 'self' and independence while one is acting according to the imposed roles of a mother and wife. She visualises her de-centred position, out of focus. However, she adopts these roles only because she is not aware of the fact that perhaps adaptability and passivity are the only two options left for her as a woman as is seen in these lines:

With three small children, and then four, she had had to fight for qualities that had not been even in her vocabulary. Patience, Self-discipline, Self-control, Self-abnegation, chastity. This always, [...] but virtues? Really? Really virtues? If so, they had turned on her, had become enemies. Looking back from the condition of being an almost middle-aged wife and mother to her condition as a girl when she lived with Michael, it seemed to her that she had acquired not virtues but a form of dementia. (Lessing 1973: 90- 91)

These lines confirm Kate's realization that even those things that she considers virtues are only social obstructions in which she is caught up and results in her disrupted rapport with her family and friends. She divorces the 'personal' only to cuddle the 'Universal'. Kate completely shifts her focus now, as she confesses, "Looking back over nearly a quarter of century, she saw that, that had been the characteristic of her life- passivity, adaptability to others" (Lessing 1973: 21).

In this novel *The Summer before the Dark* like Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*, there is a power shift. When the novel begins Kate is seen as a passive being waiting passively but as novel commences forward, she realizes that her passivity is not something she actually relies on and finally takes back actively, the charge of her life back, independent of any social or familial support. She realizes that the external gaze, the other people's suggestions and points of view had become part of her life and she was dependent on others for her definition even about her 'self', but now, the time has come for the renewal of her lost 'self' and coming to the terms with her own forgotten and fragmented 'self'.

Therefore, in order to retrieve her autonomous 'self', she deconstructs her earlier identity and finally reconstructs it by narrating her past to Maureen and remembering some of the parts of it into new identity, as:

Kate began telling things out of her past. She could not remember how they had begun on this, but soon it was how they were spending their days. Her memories were not the kind of thing that had struck her before as important or even interesting: now she was assessing them before Maureen's reactions. It almost seemed as if the things she remembered were because of Maureen's interest- Maureen's need? It was Maureen who was doing the choosing? (Lessing 1973: 212)

Kate borrows Maureen's freedom from all impositions and conventions to visualise her life in a new direction and in this way, she reconstructs her new identity and rapport quite different from the earlier fragmented one and this time with new people other than her

family. Furthermore, Kate's present identity is constructed entirely to suite her present state and it enables her to see things in a much honest form. When she recalls her earlier behaviour in the family, she considers it as insane or the behaviour of a lunatic.

In addition to all these factors, the continuous Seal dream also helps her in her journey towards an autonomous 'self' and also acts as a kind of impetus to integrate her new independent 'self' and identity, which was earlier fragmented in different stereotypical roles, as is given in the following passage:

Ever since she was small, five or six, she had been able to reach her hand into the country behind the daylight one, to touch a familiar object that lived there, or to walk through it at ease, not astonished or afraid. Nor was she surprised by a dream that developed like a fable or a myth: she accommodated several such long running dreams, and when a new stage of development of a familiar theme was presented to her, she would lie awake for as long as she could, before letting it be seen that she was awake, thinking of the ideas that were taking shape in her, and which she could not accept in the reflections like fire lit shadows on the walls of her sleep. (Lessing 1973:125)

Kate's dreams are the ways that provide her the knowledge of those levels of consciousness that normally our rationality or conditioning restricts. These actually help her in knowing the deep, dark, silent and hidden territories and to reach to the consensus with those levels of consciousness that rational or conditioned minds taught her to ignore. Dreams then act as a force of awakening the unconscious of Kate and help her to connect her inner and the outer 'selves' with each other. They are not threats but act as tools of liberation from the conventional and oppressive conditions which give rise to the feelings of despondency. This recurring Seal dream symbolizes Kate's nurturance and care of her new 'self'. With every passing day, her need for a separate individuality grows stronger and she makes efforts to nurture the Seal which acts as a kind of alter-ego. The changing condition of Seal from time to time enables her to understand her own changing position and deteriorating mental health. As the Seal enters in coma in dream, similarly, Kate also experiences some sort of madness or dementia, but her madness is in no way a nihilistic breakdown but a form of self-knowledge and a full exploration of both conscious and unconscious mind stretched to its extreme limit. Finally she sends the Seal back to sea, simultaneously, she realizes that her self-knowledge is full and she completes the journey towards understanding herself without any protection or support. As the summer ends, she prepares to go back to her home and to join her family.

Dreams always play an important part in the spiritual or real awakening of an individual. Lessing analyses dreams as a form of information about dark and hidden territories of mind and through these she is able to negotiate with different levels of consciousness that are mostly ignored by our conditioned minds. It is only when the two levels of reality of conventional and darker inner 'self' cohere with each other and then emerges the possibility of unified 'self'. Lessing believes that the exploration of unconsciousness through dreams is liberation from oppressive conditions. She observes:

Dreams have always been important to me...The Freudians describe the conscious as a small lit area, all white, and the unconscious as a great marsh full of monsters. In their view, the mouths reach up, grab you by the ankles and try to drag you down. But the unconscious can be what you make of it,

good or bad, helpful or unhelpful. Our culture has made an enemy of the unconscious... other cultures have accepted the unconscious as a helpful force, and I think we should learn to see it in that way too... With a few symbols a dream can define the whole of one's life, and warn us of the future too. (Ingersoll 1994: 14)

The above quoted lines clearly show Lessing's belief in dreams as some kind of discovery of the hidden dark 'self'. In this novel, the consistent Seal dream also turns out as some kind of exploration of Kate's hidden and most desired 'self'.

Kate Brown is an ordinary woman and through her portrayal, Lessing makes it possible for even an ordinary woman to think and utilize her inner strength in the best possible way and to progress independently towards liberation. What Kate achieves at last, is the self-possession; she moves progressively from an ordinary motherhood to independent and autonomous 'self' of an old age.

Conclusion

Kate achieves a kind of self-knowledge and 'Identity' with integration due to her disrupted rapport with all imposed institutions like marriage and motherhood, to which she remains completely committed in the beginning of the novel. Earlier she defines herself in accordance with them but now her newly acquired self- domination helps her to live and act according to her own way. Her whole life is seen as disintegrated, but once she realizes her dismal position, she embarks on an internal journey that ultimately helps her to know what is inherent in her and finally she emerges as an integrated being, complete in herself and ready to take charge of her life and responsibilities, quite independently. Hence her quest for autonomous 'self' concludes once she realises that she is liberated from all the pressures that different social institutions impose on her.

Works Cited:

- Arberry, A.J. *Sufism: An Account of the Mystics of Islam*. London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1979.
- Armitt, Lucie, ed. *Women and Science Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1991.
- Bonnie, St. Anders. *Forbidden Fruit: On the relationship between Women and Knowledge in Doris Lessing*. Ed. Selma, Chopin, Atwood. New York: The Winston Publishing Company, 1986.
- Bickman, Minda. "A Talk with Doris Lessing". *Doris Lessing Conversations*. 1980.
- Doris Lessing. *The Summer before the Dark*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1973.
- Ingersoll, Earl G. *Doris Lessing: Conversations*. Princeton: Ontario Review Press, 1994.
- Liang, R.D. *The Politics of Experience*. New York: Ballantine, 1970.