

Nation and Nationality: Africa in the Fiction of Doris Lessing

¹Dr. Tawhida Akhter

***Abstract---** The present work throws light on the mindset of the characters particularly with philosophical, psychological and social insights. This article explores the psychological elements in the Short Story collection African Stories of Doris Lessing. Lessing is a well renowned and Nobel laureate writer in English. Her short stories are remarkable for portraying the stark reality. The themes of Subjugation, Alienation and search for identity and realisation of self are present in this collection. This research work explores the psychological agony faced by the characters and how the anxieties actually bring about self-development. It also highlights that human emotions, relationships and situations are the essence of human existence. Her short stories have a positive impact on their readers and grow psychologically strong; the characters have the capacity to wrestle with the existential concerns and uplift humanity and improve their conditions.*

***Key Words---** Subjugation, Anxiety, Alienation, Psychological agony, Self-development.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Doris Lessing's writings were mostly based on her life in Africa. Her themes are haunting and had dominated her writings. The theme of oppression, racism, life in exile and their effects on the characters of her works are prominent in her writings. Lessing is the leading figure among contemporary novelists containing variety of themes such as communism, colonialism, problem of women, racism, mysticism and the aftermaths of war and their effect on the personality of a human being. Batta and Akhter in "An Existential Study of the Select Novel of Doris Lessing's 'The Grass is Singing'" has shown the various characters based on different themes as, "They struggle for their freedom and pursuit for a meaningful existence. These characters for this quest go against their society and become the victims of isolation, alienation and death". (Batta and Akhter, p. 580) This collection of African short stories expresses Lessing's lifelong desire for a better society based on equality, fraternity and justice for all of its members.

Lessing took the stand to work for the justice of these oppressed natives. So, her stories are full of this anguish and the guilt. These colonials have oppressed most of the part in the world along with Africa. They consolidated their political power in Africa in the form of establishing companies in the Dark Continent and it automatically shifted the power under British rule. The natives were so tortured that they can't speak for their rights, if they did; they have to be dragged out of their native land. Lessing has chosen Southern Rhodesia as the core of her African writings. It is the place where Lessing has experienced all the brutalities by the white settlers on black natives. Akhter and Batta in their

Assistant Professor, Department of English Literature, Shaqra University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, tawhida@su.edu.sa

paper “Autobiographical Elements in Doris Lessing’s Short Story A Home for the Highland Cattle”, has shown the oppression of Africans as, “Doris Lessing has herself observed the oppression in Africa where the White settlers treat the Blacks not as humans. They are only sewages and are for the service of Whites”. (Batta and Akhter, p. 27-28) Most of her work is autobiographical in nature. In her preface to *This Was the Old Chief’s Country* 1964, this autobiographical element is as:

Writers brought up in Africa have many advantages- being at the centre of a modern battlefield; part of a society in rapid, dramatic change. But in a long run it can also be a handicap: to wake up every morning with one’s eyes on a fresh evidence of inhumanity; to be reminded twenty times a day of injustice. (Lessing, 1964)

Lessing’s main concern was to bring out the injustice that African faced, through her literature wants the attention of the whole world. She has found this injustice by herself while living in the Africa, where she has spent most of her time. Swamy and Aruna (2015) in their research article “Fiction and Narrative: A Study of Doris Lessing’s “Memoirs of a Survivor”” has shown the autobiographical elements of Doris Lessing in her fiction as:

Lessing's fiction is deeply autobiographical, much of it emerging out of her experiences in Africa. Drawing upon her childhood memories and her serious engagement with politics and social concerns, Lessing has written about the clash of cultures, the gross injustices of racial inequality, the struggle among opposing elements within an individual’s own personality, and the conflict between the individual conscience and the collective good. (Swamy and Aruna, p.117)

In her *African Stories*, Lessing has shown the injustice of African people. She believes in the equality of human beings which is the maxim of the Marxist philosophy. Georgescu states the Lessing’s intention behind writing *African Stories* as, “In her African writings, Doris Lessing works both within and beyond the colonial experience . . . This extended vision enables her to see beyond the false colonial myth of white superiority, of the necessity that blacks and whites should never mix” (Georgescu, p. 166). Throughout her life and writing career, she has followed the Marxist philosophy either by being an active activist of the Communist Party or by her writing. E. Celine explains the Marxist view of writers as, “Every writer, writes with a sense of society and that is why literature is called "criticism of life". It is the Marxists who for the first time emphasised the role of the writer in shaping the society” (Celine, p. 231).

Lessing herself belongs to the White settlers but was against the oppression by them to the natives. She wants to have justice for all, “Truly to understand, we have to lose the arrogance that is the white man’s burden, to stop feeling superior” (Lessing, Preface *This Was the Old Chief’s Country* 9). This is the Communistic approach of Lessing which shows that all human beings are equal, no one is superior. The *African Stories* has two volumes, *This Was the Old Chief’s Country* and *The Sun Between Their Feet*. Yogesh Yadav in his research work comments on *African Stories* as: **Collected African Stories, Vol. I and II**, she bitterly criticizes the racial prejudice and the white Settlers’ myth of their superiority to the Black natives and exposes the hollowness of their claim to rule over them on the false pretext of civilizing the backward people of Africa. She also expresses her sympathy towards the communist movement in South Africa and its effort to establish social justice there. (Yadav, p. 235)

The stories in these collections reflect her life long memories about Africa and give a clear picture of White Settlers and the Black natives. Lessing has represented the discrimination and injustice by Whites to Blacks in a colonial society.

The stories reflect the discrimination between individuals on the basis of colour and class leading towards fragmentation and alienation of most of the characters. This all is because of the apartheid in Africa, where one human being did not treat others as human but like an animals. Akhter and Batta in their paper have shown that, “Lessing wants to bring a change in the society and for this purpose she chooses her protagonist by making her as her mouth piece. Marina treats her servants in a quite good manner as compared to other whites. They always warned her not to spoil them as they are only meant to work for the whites and they should not be treated like humans.” (Akhter and Batta, p.27-28) Celine in the research work praises Lessing and her writing as, “Doris Lessing is a writer of our period who has accepted this commitment. For her, commitment was the gift she received through her association with Marxism. Her Southern Rhodesian days and her involvement with the communist group in Southern Rhodesia, left an indelible mark upon her personality and attitudes” (Celine, p. 234).

White settlers in Africa believe that the Blacks natives can't breathe the same air as by the Whites. Thus they became cruel in their behaviour towards the natives. In her preface 1964 to African Stories volume 1, *This Was the Old Chief's Country*, Lessing experiences these cruelties as:

And the cruelties of the white man towards the black man are among the heaviest counts in the indictment against humanity, colour prejudice is not our original fault, but only one aspect of the atrophy of the imagination that prevents us from seeing ourselves in every creature that breathes under the sun. **(Lessing, Preface This Was the Old Chief's Country 8)**

Doris Lessing is well known writer of twentieth century as a social writer writing for the society of African people, a political writer as having communistic approach in her writings and as a psychological writer, writing about the psychology of its characters who has been the victims of the oppression on the basis of colour.

In a story titled *The Old Chief Mshlanga* has shown in clear terms the oppression of the Whites to Blacks. Lessing wants to make world aware of the oppression and injustice that people face only because one race of humans treating them superior while others as inferior. When the story *The Old Chief Mshlanga* begins, the narrator is a white girl whose father like other British's has a large unused farm. The blacks were to serve the white settlers. There was a gap between blacks and whites and even the children were taught the same injustice. The narrator states it as, “The black people on the farm were as remote as the trees and the rocks. They were an amorphous black mass, mingling and thinning and massing like tadpoles, faceless, who existed merely to serve, to say ‘Yes, Bass,’ take their money and go” (Lessing, 114). They taught their children the same thing to take the blacks for-granted. Whites believe that it is not possible to bridge the gap between blacks and whites, “The child (white) was taught to take them (blacks) for granted: the servants in the house would come running a hundred yards to pick up a book if she dropped it. She was called ‘Nkosikaas’- Chieftainess, even by the black children her own age” (Lessing 14). She represents the collective unconsciousness of all white settlers in Africa, “I went by, my gun hanging awkwardly, the dogs sniffing and growling, cheated of their favourite game of chasing natives like animals” (Lessing, p.16) and “White child, brought up to consider all natives as things to use” (Lessing, p.17). Being a communist, Lessing finds it her sole duty to bring out the

follies of a society. Akhter and Batta in their research paper have shown that, “Lessing has made her protagonist her mouth piece to bring out the true picture of her society in which she lived herself. After analysing the short story it clearly shows the autobiographical elements of Lessing personal life”. (Akhter and Batta, p. 27-28)

Lessing has perfectly tackled the burning issues of Africa of her times. She wrote for a change in the society, E. Celine writes about it in the research work entitled “Marxism in the novels of Doris Lessing” as, “Doris Lessing seems to have listened to Africa as no other writer has been able to do. Africa is a place that taught her the necessity for a change in Society and prompted her to seek an answer through the left politics” (Celine, p.5). She belongs to white settlers but her stories focused the life of poor natives. The protagonist represents the white settlers in Africa and their perception and behaviour towards natives. Jung considers society as an important factor to determine the nature of an individual. John Raphael Staude in the research paper “From Depth Psychology to Depth Sociology: Freud, Jung, and Lévi-Strauss” points out the importance of society in shaping the individuality of a person as, “Jung considered Society to be a primary human datum. The individual could only be understood when viewed in terms of his total social context and situation . . . The individual partakes of the “collective representations” by a fusion of himself with the group” (Staude, p.317). It shows the injustice to people on the basis of colour.

Natives have been compared to that of some commodities that can be used and thrown away. This fate was common to every native during that period of time and Lessing rose against it. Her communistic approach didn't allow her to bear all this injustice. Lessing has a close connection with the social and political realities which modified her whole writing career. In a research article titled Cross Cultural Interchange in Doris Lessing's The Old Chief Mshlanga and The Second Hut, Reshmi R.L. has pointed out the Communistic view of Doris Lessing as, “There is a close connection between Lessing's perceptiveness about political and economic realities, which help her to formulate the Marxist ideas, and her psychological and spiritual insights which provide a stable form to her works” (R. L., p.196).

II. CONCLUSION

The two volumes of Africa Stories reflect Lessing's personal experiences perfectly depicting the picture of white and black societies. Since the beginning of this world, literature has always remained as a medium to show the violence of the world. Lessing through her writings has brought out the violence of the most civilized people of the world. She has witnessed violence of the World Wars and the aftermaths of them, firstly through her father and secondly by herself- the biggest problems that is confronted by everyone. Akhter and Batta has pointed out it as, “At last we conclude by saying that both family and marriage have an important role to play in the positive psychological development of a personality otherwise it ruins the whole personality of a person”. (Akhter and Batta, p. 27-28) This violence cannot be ignored any more. It is through the works of Doris Lessing dared to confront with this reality of violence.

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