

Humanism in Dorris Lessing's Novels: An Overview

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Humanism is a philosophy—the central concern of which is man and his happiness. It underlies the value and dignity of man and takes him as the measure of all things. All knowledge as well as human institutions are deemed useful only when they help man realize his potentialities. Generally Western and Eastern philosophers hold that what matters for man really is this earthly existence and not the unseen other world. Therefore, man's attention should be centred on here and now as against Heaven or Hell. This also implies the rejection of supernatural and denial of a personal God. However, even those who are religious humanists firmly believe that man's ultimate concern is man himself. Humanists like Socrates, Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore have the same feeling Humanism is an ancient tradition in thought. It has its own historical development like all ancient traditions. It may be said to have begun its career with the Greek philosopher Protagoras in the fifth century B.C. His famous dictum 'man is the measure of all things' is often expressed as a terse statement of the quintessence of all humanism. In due course, various doctrines on the nature of man have come into being and corresponding to each of these doctrines, various schools of humanism have arisen. It is also associated with the new learning that blossomed over Europe in the fifteenth century Renaissance. It had its roots in the discovery and dissemination of the original texts of the Greek writers. It presented the classical writers for the first time as direct commentators on life. There is also the well-known Christian humanism of the seventeenth century. What is described as Christian humanism is best represented by Erasmus. His philosophy of Christ is essentially an attempt at turning away from scientific questions to the problems of moral life and religious imagination. He insisted on "the dignity of man" and argued that man was important through Christ's atonement and God's grace. He emphasized the necessity and importance of cultivating a life of integrity and pleaded for an understanding and practice of true Christianity.

Jean-Paul Sartre wants us to believe that his Existentialism is a brand of humanism. The only element recognizable as humanistic in his philosophy seems to be his daring rejection of the supernatural. Then there is a particular variety of humanism called the Neo-Humanism. Paul Elmer More and Irving Babbitt who sought to replace both the extremes of the religious and the romantic views of life lead this Neo-Humanism. The relationship between a humanist and a novelist is very close; or in other words the humanist and the novelist are intimate ones and the association between the two "is not accidental" (Faulkner 3).

Humanism has often found expression in the novels of D.H. Lawrence. He places the novel at the centre of humanistic culture because of its unique closeness to human experience. George Eliot also expresses similar views. She is always concerned with the problems of human personality and its relationship with forces outside itself. Henry James also makes it clear that his central concern is with human beings. Commenting on the essential relationship between novel and humanism Robert Liddel says: "the novelist ought to be a humanist. And since the novel itself is not a thing that has ever been very precisely defined it is clearly improbable that any very precise terms can with propriety be applied to the novelist"(53-54).

The novelist's function has always been to know human nature and to convey to the mankind in fictional terms the most thorough knowledge of human nature and the happiest delineation of its varieties. If a novelist has to know human nature thoroughly and to think its varieties worth delineating, then his values must be fundamentally humanist values. Thus it is the writer's duty to help man by lifting his heart by encouraging him and by making him aware of hope, honour and pride which have been the glory of human beings. But in the present day, it is difficult to make a humanistic affirmation that does not simplify itself into political rhetoric.

In modern time it is difficult for a novelist to become a humanist. The violent changes in class structure, the breakdown of traditional beliefs and the threats of war have brought many a writer to complete abandonment of humanist belief. According to Malcolm Bradbury: "In most of the Western literature the world war of 1913-45 seems to mark a watershed; and in the novel this coincides with the emergence of a new group of writers with new problems"(216). But the new novelists are generally concerned with the incoherence of the present day society and disintegration of men. However, it is our belief that some of the major Post-War novelists namely John Wain, Iris Murdoch, William Golding, Kingsley Amis, Doris Lessing and Angus Wilson, who deal with the transfiguration of the British class structure in the twentieth century, are essentially concerned with human values and in their novels the essential focus is always upon the consciousness of their characters who find themselves lonely in a hostile world. They are alive to the responsibility to enlighten humanity and fight against the modern despair and try to rebuild the broken fragments of optimistic humanism, being deeply involved in the restoration and reconstruction of the will. Humanism to us is a conception of life that makes man more prosperous and hence more free, reflecting upon the innate goodness of human beings. In outlining a society full of class changes, judgments and distinctions, these contemporary writers often exhibit and express

sympathy for the underdogs, for those not granted the automatic privileges of an inherited position with the establishment. The social and political attitudes that they express are filtered through individual emotions and reactions.

Among twentieth century English novelists, Doris Lessing is intensely committed to active persuasion to reform society. She talks of the "sense of duty"¹ that makes her join organizations and defends her own support of Communism. Her sense of social responsibility leads her to search for her values and for the literary material among the working classes in London. Her commitment to a sense of social responsibility and a pursuit of those oppressed by society also infuses her fiction about colonial Africa which makes her theme humanistic. It clearly shows that Doris Lessing is one of those novelists who are ready to 'stand with the unfortunate'. The African fiction of Doris Lessing shows her scorn for the half-hearted liberals and the aristocrats who do not really commit themselves to the downtrodden. From 1952 to 1969, Doris Lessing published the five novels to make the series entitled Children of Violence. Taking on the largest possible obligations that a novel of development might impose upon an author, she wished to dramatize the individual conscience in its relations with the collective. Her example of the individual conscience, Martha Quest has become a character whom we mentally lift from the page and incorporate into our own lives as a reference point.

Throughout Children of Violence, the picture of the four-gated city embodies harmony, reconciliation and integration. Her answer to Babel in which she speaks against a history that has alternated centrifugal desires to separate with centripetal desires to dominate. It has been her new Utopia, rooted in the body as well as in the mind, in the unconscious as well as the conscious, in forests and deserts as well as in highways and buildings, in bed as well as the symposium (Frye 48-49). It is concerned with the future toward which the individual conscience might aspire. In this series, Martha grows up amid the distrust between English men and Afrikaners, and their common hatred of blacks. The tension of which she is aware from childhood becomes the major conflict she confronts in the adult world. Already refusing her mother's self-imposed constricted role, Martha drifts toward "socialism and atheism, becomes pro-black and attempts any-thing that will lead to substantial personal values"(Karl 303). Doris Lessing has devoted a tetralogy to an African problem i.e. the relationship of black and white, ruled and ruler. Besides the colour, she is concerned with the rights of a woman in a world of man and looks to the politics of the left-wing to bring justice to women and blacks alike. Her free spirits no less than those of the Brontes or George Eliot have to love and be loved; this need creates the muddle that makes them human. No single segment abstracted from it is

the business of the novelist. Jack tells Anna Wulf in the novel *The Golden Notebook*, (307-8):

To humanism; he thinks and says: "the idea of humanism will change like everything else." I [Anna Wulf] say: then it will become something else. But humanism stands for the whole person, the whole individual, striving to become as conscious and responsible about everything in the universe. But now you sit there, quite calmly, and as a humanist you say that due to the complexity of scientific achievements the human being must never expect to be whole, he must always be fragmented.

The international crises of the second-third decades of this century have put many established ideas and values upside down. The two World Wars have left the world with huge debris and everlasting scars. Modern scientific achievements have added much fuel to the fire. It is an age of pollution and explosion. It is an age of disillusionment and frustration. It is an age of neurosis and perversion. Life is but an extension of boredom. A vicious sense of failure is lurking from above and from within. Fredrick R. Karl, referring to an interview given by Doris Lessing, makes the point sharply clear: In a May 1969 interview at Stony Brook, New York, Doris Lessing spoke of the period in which *The Golden Notebook* takes place as a time when everything is cracking up. It had been falling apart since the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. She states further, "I feel as if the Bomb has gone off inside myself and in people around me. That's what I mean by cracking up. It's as if the structure of the mind is being battered from inside. Some terrible thing is happening (292)."

It is not only Doris Lessing who has undergone such ordeal, but most of the novelists of her age have experienced such terrifying, disintegrating and killing ordeals. Durrell portrays Alexandria as a hell. Anthony Powell's novels are filled with mythical hells. Even her contemporary poets are not free from the perilous experience of life. In this chaotic and confused world it seems that there is no hope. Adam has lost his Eden, Pandora's box is open, emitting all the vile, furious and ferocious objects. Social security and personal ease are threatened by a new dragon. Nothing is left charming and lovely. Lust of life brings more complexities. Death seems the only solution facing life in this mad, strife-torn world. Sylvia Plath wants to celebrate this desire of death. Dramatists like Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter watch a bleak and gloomy picture but give a message of hope, like a silver lining in a dark cloud. Their uncompromising rejection of an easy solution or cheap illusion of comfort ultimately has a liberating effect. All these writers, more or less, have their impact on Doris Lessing, but of all, she seems to be the most perceptive, analytical and thoroughly insightful as well as far-sighted novelist. Her journey from *Martha Quest* (1952) to *The Four-*

Gated City (1969) is never a journey of Alice in Wonderland. It is a journey from hell to hell but the traveller is alert, conscious, struggling, losing, winning and crystallizing. We do not find such a vast panorama of life in any writer of her generation. She seems to attempt on cosmic writing. On the one hand there is the fading splendour of the setting sun of the Christianity and on the other hand, there is the temptation of Lawrentian sex. Between these two poles, Doris Lessing stands watching the devitalization of man and his reduction to a 'nice piece of flesh' (201) Doris Lessing, successfully and brilliantly brings out the chaos, the confusion and the psychological tension of the modern life. She is the boldest of all the contemporary fiction writers who lets her mouthpiece Anna Wulf, the central character of *The Golden Notebook*, herald an equality with man. In this connection, Bergonzi writes: "On the face of it Anna has achieved a degree of personal freedom that the new woman of Ibsen and Shaw could scarcely have dreamed of; she is as free as any man in all the major spheres of life, professional, intellectual and above all, sexual"(237).

Doris Lessing is a writer of radical opinions, but has never allowed herself to become a doctrinaire: her humanitarian sympathies embrace the whole sweep of the relation of the individual conscience to the collective. Her African books are concerned not so much with 'the colour problem' as with the human problem. In *The Golden Notebook*, Doris Lessing presents Anna Wulf, the-novelist writing a novel and keeping several notebooks revealing different layers of her life. *The Golden Notebook* is probably the most important single novel published in England since the War. Its theme is announced in the first line of the first section 'Free Women'. It is a monumental achievement of Dorris Lessing in which she deals with twentieth century women and the female tradition. She believes that the people are heading for a global catastrophe through germ warfare, or breaking down of civilization. The search for identity is the crucial point in Lessing's novels: All the characters are desperately in search for identity. Soul Green says: "My God, what we've lost, what we've lost, what we've lost, how can we ever get back to it, how can we get back to it again." (605) Anna is afflicted "by the feeling of doom, fate, inevitability," (599) Saul, shouts : "I am I, Saul Green, I am what lam, what I am" (565).

The Four-Gated City chronicles the breakdown of decorum most completely and ends with Martha's search for documentation on the discoveries she has made by experimenting with her own psyche. The connecting link among all the houses, all the gates, is Martha herself. At the opening of the novel she visits the restaurant when she arrives in Post-War London. She then seeks a job as a secretary, but accepts temporarily a post as Mark Coldridge's housekeeper. The house becomes a walled-in medieval fortress, which protects her against further action, even further thought and the job turns into a way of life. Using Mark's

house as a base of operations, Martha occasionally ventures out to have casual sex with Jack and to continue the debasement of her former intentions. Novels of Dorris Lessing specifically *The Golden Notebook* and *The Four Gated City* shows that she is a humanist who supports the cause of the downtrodden in the society. Women have been subject to suppression and suffering through ages, they were denied freedom and equal rights. Similarly the 'blacks' were also denied freedom and political as well as social rights. Doris Lessing champions the cause of women and the 'blacks' in her writings. Thus we find that the novels of Doris Lessing deal with the human problems, and they clearly reflect her fellow feeling, her optimistic outlook, and above all she raises her voice for the two downtrodden classes: women and the 'blacks.'

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