Fantasy Versus Authenticity in Doris Lessing's the Fifth Child

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The Asian Conference on Literature & Librarianship 2015
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract
Doris Lessing, the Nobel Laureate, is known as one of the most prominent British novelists. Adorned with many achievements she focuses on the identity as a major issue though here both the protagonists (Harriet and David) fail to build their own identity. The aim of this paper is to show the importance of dreams or fantasies in our practical life. In *The Fifth Child* the novelist has merged reality and imagination altogether. David and Harriet have fantasy or earlier dreams to have a big (traditional) family.

Though in the era of sixties the bulk of society had changed its mind in relation to women and the family but Harriet and David neglect the drawbacks of a big family. And they also feel good with their family until they get the fifth child, Ben, who is abnormal. Even with the pregnancy of Ben Harriet feels much trouble and unnatural. Due to this child the relation between Harriet and David becomes bitter and troublesome. They feel the reality of life that is quite different from their imagination. Ben is sent to an orphanage but Harriet takes him back to home that is more problematic. Neither of the parents can love Ben because they are afraid of him and his monstrous activities. Thus this paper relates subconscious state of mind to the consciousness through the fantasies or dreams.

Keywords- Fantasies, reality, unnatural, drawbacks, abnormal, problematic, sub consciousness, identity, consciousness.

Introduction

Doris May Lessing, the Nobel Laureate, is a British novelist, poet, playwright, librettist, biographer and short story writer. The Nobel Prize in Literature 2007 was awarded to Doris Lessing ″that epicist of the female experience, who with scepticism, fire and visionary power has subjected a divided civilization to scrutiny"[1]. Lessing was the eleventh woman and the oldest person to ever receive the Nobel Prize in Literature. Born on 22 October 1919, in Kermanshah, Iran, (then known as Persia), was the daughter of Captain Alfred Tayler and Emily Maude Tayler, who were both English and of British nationality. Adorned with 'David Cohen Prize' (2001) for a lifetime's achievement in British Literature, Lessing was ranked fifth by *The Times* (2008) on a list of "The 50 greatest British writers since 1945".[2]

Educated at the Dominican Convent High School, a Roma Catholic convent all-girls school in Salisbury, Lessing left school at the age of 14, and was self-educated from then on; she left home at 15 and worked as a nursemaid. She started reading material that her employer gave her on politics and sociology 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.

After her first divorce and many ups and downs of the life when Lessing fled to London to pursue her writing career and communist beliefs, she left two toddlers with their father in South Africa and took the another one, who was from her second marriage, with her. As a writer and as a mother she expresses her experiences: "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."[3] It is her matchless effort in writing that has made her reach to the crest of popularity and she has made a deep and permanent place in the hearts of her readers.

Aim of Writing

The aim of this paper is to show the importance of dreams and fantasies in our practical life. Obviously these qualities are considered as the state of subconscious mind but they are related to one's consciousness or practical life- directly or indirectly. Dreams or fantasies capture one's mind so effectively that his life can move in any direction, positive or negative. "With a few symbols a dream can define the whole of one's life, and warn us of the future, too."[4]

Fantasizing about another person may seem like a harmless indulgence, but in self-case it actually draws us closer to temptation and can increase the risk of being unfaithful. In the same way that dwelling on worries and possible catastrophes fuels anxiety and makes fears more vivid, immersion in fantasy can enhance, rather than quench, our longings. Dreaming provides a familiar example of how imagination has the power to cross the line and blend into real life. We all can relate to having an intense dream about someone, and finding the feelings from the dream temporarily spilling into our waking experience.

Doris Lessing is known much expert in using traditional narrative methods such as tales and fables as a creative vehicle to examine the states of consciousness of the human soul. Through the use of all these fantastic elements, she empowers several of her novels, such as *The Fifth Child* (1988), with a dreamlike atmosphere in which reality and imagination merge altogether. If dreams can define one's entire life, they also provide the clues to one's own identity, illuminating areas that the person does not have access to in conscious life. Identity is a major issue in the novels of Doris Lessing, especially those dealing with female protagonists trying to define their own selves amongst the different roles they perform in life. The subconscious, through dreams and imagination, plays an important part in this quest, since a person's identity is built up by both conscious factors and subconscious forces.

The Fifth Child- Failure of Identity

Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child* can be read as a valid representation of a failure in the construction of identity; the novel dramatizes the way in which the dreams and fantasies of the subconscious can destroy or fatally interrupt the identity-building process. *The Fifth Child*, which is described by Jones in the *New York Review of Books* as "a horror story of maternity and the nightmare of social collapse"[5], combines dreaming, imagination and a sense of female identity which is endangered and comes close to disappearing. Here in this novel both the protagonists (Harriet and David) fail to build their own identity. A closer look into *The Fifth Child* and its multi-layered treatment of identity as a form of troubled self-creation will help us to appreciate its integral role in the Lessing canon.

Although a novel that focuses on the woman's perspective does not automatically make it a feminist novel, the representation of Harriet can be related to a feminist point of view. For example, by the narrator focusing on Harriet and her development throughout the book the reader learns about her background, her goals in life and her every thought and emotion. Writing some years prior to the publication of *The Fifth Child,* Holmquist explains that there is a "new feminist movement which focuses on social and psychological pressures experienced by women in the nuclear family, rather than the legal aspect of marriage as … the old feminists did."[6] Evidently, this is exactly what the narrator does by narrating through Harriet's experiences.

She faces social pressure by wanting the traditional family and not what her friends want. And she faces psychological pressure during her pregnancy with Ben, when she is questioned by the people around her because she believes that there is something wrong with the baby. Although describing how the birth of Ben affects the family on its whole, the novel strictly focuses on how Harriet experiences it. The reader sees the downfall of the family through her eyes, and gains knowledge only of how Harriet's psyche is affected throughout the story.

Harriet, the protagonist, desires to fulfill an act of creation and the construction of narrative form; she aims to build a family with both factual and imaginary components, shaping her life according to her own perception of how she desires it to be. Harriet's creation of her identity works in two different directions: first, she willfully bears five children according to her idealized vision of traditional family life and to her dreams of motherhood. Imagination is very powerful all throughout this process since her family (and more precisely her fifth child Ben) seem to become

in reality what she has previously experienced in the form of dreams, nightmares and fantasy. Secondly, when her imagination seems to escape her control, going far beyond her will and leading her life close to chaos, Ben's dependence on her will confine her to an exclusively maternal role which will contain the darkest, most negative aspects of motherhood.

Fantasy of a big family

Harriet's supposed maternal instinct is soon fulfilled though it was their fantasy or earlier dream to have a big family and her first four pregnancies run happily. Family life becomes increasingly stressful but Harriet does not change her mind due to former fantasy. She pretends that she will not give in to the mainstream ideas of modern society and adds, “This is what everyone wants, really, but we’ve been brainwashed out of it. People want to live like this, really."(27).This opinion places her among the last survivors of the previous and more traditional ideology on motherhood, because, in an era of sixties, the bulk of society had changed its mind in relation to women and the family. As a result, both Harriet and David outstandingly try to deny the drawbacks of a big family by using fantasy again:

Often, when David and Harriet lay face to face, it seemed that doors in their breasts flew open, and what poured out was an intensity of relief, of thankfulness, that still astonished them both: patience for what seemed now such a very long time had not been easy, after all. It had been hard preserving their belief in themselves when the spirit of the times, the greedy and selfish sixties, had been so ready to condemn them, to isolate, to diminish their best selves. (21)

Harriet has fully acquired her identity as a mother. Her work for the family, gives her a solid maternal authority. Acting maternally, breastfeeding each new baby, talking about motherhood in terms of happiness, promoting family unity and calling it a miracle, allowing children into bed to cuddle and play games, Harriet performs all the positive aspects: maternity, femininity, wisdom, spirituality beyond understanding, goodness, protection, nurturance, growth, fertility and the like.

Harriet’s fifth pregnancy is not planned and she soon discovers that something is abnormal or out of the ordinary. Harriet´s self-creation reaches a dramatic moment of crisis with the unplanned arrival of Ben, the fifth child, though she has achieved the balance between dream and reality. Unlike her previous pregnancies this one makes her temperamental and irritable, and the pain from the movements of the baby causes her to believe that it is an unusual baby she is carrying.

The mother's attitude towards this fifth pregnancy is totally different as she thinks of the foetus like a monster or non-human. The only thing helping her to cope with her day without being paralyzed by the pain in her stomach are painkillers. She feels ashamed of the quantity she feels is necessary to use to sooth the foetus and does not want to tell David about it. Though they are both eager to preserve the ideal marriage, for Harriet keeping this a secret is vital because she does not want David to condemn her for not being able to handle her pregnancy when it is to be seen as a blessing contributing to their dream. Aspects of motherhood more closely related to the secret, the hidden, shadows, abyss, death or fear are brought about by her own comments like "the enemy ... this savage thing inside her… it woke with a heave and

a stretch that made her feel sick."(40-41) This time it was her bitter experience but due to her liability she had to bear. By her constant daydreaming, she imagines,
…pathetic, botched creatures, horribly real to her, the products of a Great Dane or a borzoi with a little spaniel; a lion and a dog; a great cart horse and a little donkey; a tiger and a goat. Sometimes she believed hooves were cutting her tender inside flesh, sometimes claws. (41).

Reality- adverse to fantasy

Her uneasiness due to this fifth pregnancy irritates her mentally rather than physically. It contrasts strongly with the pleasures of her previous pregnancies, which she had lived as experiences of joy and eager anticipation, as her ideals dictated. Absorbed by her own fantasy, which is at its peak at night-time, Harriet isolates herself. Thus, with Ben's birth and childhood, an important inner change is on the verge of taking place in Harriet´s process of self-construction.

Harriet's identity crisis reaches its peak when she starts wondering whether Ben recognizes her as his mother at all, since for her he has always been an outsider, even inside her own womb. From this point onwards, her own destruction follows, precisely because she had defined herself in terms of the mother category. Harriet becomes the only parent to Ben, since David avoids this responsibility and concentrates on taking care of the other children. Trapped in the role that she had chosen so many years before, she falls into a sense of non-transcendence, of lacking a real project and of feeling the impossibility of exercising her own freedom. Being an extreme case of this kind of immanence, Harriet is not even free to choose to live through her children's lives.

Changes in behavior

David’s behavior as a father and the reasons behind his actions must be considered here to know his part or his identity. In the beginning of their marriage, and after the birth of their first child, David is described as a loving and caring father and husband:

When David went off to catch his train to London in the mornings, Harriet was sitting up in bed feeding the baby, and drinking the tea David had brought her. When he bent to kiss her goodbye, and stroked Luke’s head, it was with a fierce possessiveness that Harriet liked and understood, for it was not herself being possessed, or the baby, but happiness. Hers and his. (17-18).

Although Harriet and David are traditionalists and the roles of breadwinner versus stay-at-home mother in a sense are applied by them they both want to participate in the caring of their children. David does not want to become a man who only focuses on his career and thereby neglects his family: His dream is to raise his children the best way he can, by being there for them emotionally, supporting them in life and hopefully by being able to fund their education.

Even with Harriet’s fifth pregnancy for Ben, David’s behavior changes a lot. One of the most essential aspects is that there is no real relationship between David and Ben, other than the fact that they live in the same house. An interesting fact to keep in

mind is the behavior of Harriet during her pregnancy and how this can affect David. As mentioned, she sees the baby as a monster and often speaks of her worries with David, explaining how she will not be able to endure nine months in the same condition. By transferring her concerns to him, without him being able to relate to her feelings, it is possible that he feels intimidated and does not know how to act. Previously David was so sensitive and sensible for Harriet that he was the part of her emotions and feelings but now his behavior is totally changed.

At night, David heard her moan, or whimper, but now he did not offer comfort, for it seemed that these days she did not find his arms around her any help.…He had stopped putting his hand on her stomach, in the old companionable way, for what he felt there was beyond what he could manage with.(39).

The major turning point of events concerning David's role as a father is when Harriet decides to bring back Ben from the institution he has been sent to. For David this is a tremendous betrayal, since the choice was made by Harriet without consulting him. David understands that nothing good will come from Ben's return and starts to work even more, not because to earn more money but to escape from home. So what causes this strong reaction in David? Not only is he concerned about the children's reactions and eventually their future, but considering his traditional values one possible explanation is the fact that by Harriet bringing back Ben, and not sticking to David's decision to send him away, she defies his authority. Holmquist discusses authority in the relationship between man and woman from a feminist point of view, and states that;

When the male sex role is confronted with the female in the interaction between the sexes a form of parent-child relationship is established.… This interaction which may at first sight seem complementary involves a hierarchy in that the male sex role behaviour implies control of the woman, whereas her function signifies adjustment to and support of the man. …. The man … dominates while the woman is subservient.[7]

The Artistic Creation in the novel

The Fifth Child includes the two modes of artistic creation- psychological mode and visionary mode. The former mode deals with the materials from human consciousness that constitute the conscious life of a man (lessons of life, emotional shocks, crises and the like). The later mode includes materials unfamiliar, obscure, beyond human understanding, originating in dreams, night-time fears and the darkest side of our mind. *The Fifth Child* includes both modes since there is a realistic side to it, corresponding to the factual life of the family; yet, the visionary mode seems prevalent through the arrival of the fifth child and the sense of fatalism related to him.

The central issue in *The Fifth Child* is the behavior of Ben, the fifth child and nourishment by his mother who cannot love her son because she is afraid of him. In this situation we wonder whether there is anything really wrong with the child or the woman is deluded. Several comments on the part of doctors and specialists posit that Ben is "A normal healthy fine baby" (51), and "there's obviously nothing much wrong with him" (55) or that "he's a hyperactive child" (63). This makes Harriet furious as she seeks confirmation of Ben's abnormality by the medical profession.

Contrarily, she is believed to be the one who has the problem; her belief in Ben's monstrosity is kept inside the private family circle where the question, "What was he?" (67) is constantly repeated. Only Harriet's mother gives readers a hint that the degree of Ben's unusual nature may depend, to a large extent, on the family's parameters:

"He may be normal for what he is. But he is not normal for what we are" (65). With this fact we realize that it is not only reality and fantasy that merge and blur, but also concepts of normality and abnormality. There is certainly something grotesque in Ben, but this condition springs from his mother´s early non-acceptance of him and of her subsequent fantasies. Ben may be exceptional, but Harriet enhances his faults and causes his peculiarities to be taken negatively. As a result, everybody sees him as fearful, he is called names as "the nasty little brute" (54) and treated without any love or tenderness. As we see real emotion and goodness in the character, we must conclude that his past brutal attitude and alienation were the result of his experience of the family as a hostile context of hatred and rejection, and of Harriet's failure as a mother.

In a remarkable moment towards the end of the novel, Harriet mentions the other children she had planned to have, as if her dream was still possible. Instead of this, disintegration of the family unit is what she gets: all its members are scattered as the grown-up children impose their will to go to boarding schools and stay with grandparents for the holidays and weekends. The youngest of the so-called "real" children, Paul, needs professional help as a result of his mother's absence, and he spends the majority of his time at the psychiatrist's home, in order to find company and comfort there. Meanwhile, Ben has already joined the gang that keeps him out of the house for hours. Eventually, after years of childrearing and care, Harriet begins to stay alone at home for hours at a time. Harriet and David are distant from each other and they have to rely on imagination again, simply to be able to feel how "the ghosts of young Harriet and young David entwined and kissed" (112).

Ben gives Harriet a taste of her own medicine. In the same way as she has provided the child with a monstrous identity, Ben begins to change her assumed self as “Good Mother into that of the phantom mother postulated by Jungian psychoanalysis (that is, the image of the dreaded mother who is omnipotent since she gives life and can control it). Ben will not die because his mother is determined to make him survive.”[8] Other aspects of the phantom mother are brought to light by Harriet´s other children, such as the fear of being denied the most primary needs and being abandoned, which is announced by little Jane when Ben was taken to the institution: "Are you going to send us away, too?" (p.76). Luke, Helen, Jane and Paul have to deal with their mother's absence, these children will forever long for the mother which they feel to be absent, a lost object of which they were a part long ago, in their very early childhood.

In the concluding section of the novel, Harriet feels like the destroyer of the family for having rescued Ben from death. She is trapped in an eternal sense of guilt which now works in two directions: both for having taken Ben to an institution in the first place, and for having taken him back to the family. After the destruction of her entire life's work, she believes that she has been punished for her idealistic plans and for having decided that she and her family would be happy; but this is once more a

product of her imagination, which rules her life until the end. Even when reality is at its worst, she takes refuge in fantasy. It is the worst situation in the sense to sell the house for Paul to get him admitted in a boarding school. Though David and Harriet are determined not to sell it but Molly (David's mother) says, "Surely it is time you sold this house … then my son can stop killing himself working too hard for you." (119) Harriet is reluctant to sell the big house simply because, as David puts it, "she could not finally give up her dreams of the old life coming back" (119).

Conclusion

The exploration of imagination and dreaming as factors configuring female identity is a common characteristic in Lessing's canon. Like her other novels in *The Fifth Child* we are shown how imagination actually creates an identity. The main contribution of *The Fifth Child* in Lessing's work is the merging of reality and imagination in the novel and in the subjectivity of the protagonist. By doing this, Lessing is crossing literary boundaries and achieving a literary mode that stands between two forms of fiction: "the mimetic and the marvellous. The novel successfully manages to blur the limits between the two and make a serious statement about the projection of fantasies over reality."[9]

In conclusion, *The Fifth Child* can be viewed as a representation of a collapse in the creation of identity: instead of integrating the subconscious into conscious life, the protagonist's imagination dominates, and ultimately erases, the reality around her. The novel ends with Harriet's vision of Ben's future life, as he finally takes leave of her: this is another dreamlike vision in which Harriet foresees her roles as a mere spectator following her son's comings and goings, thus condemning herself to living vicariously, through Ben's life.

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