

Woman as the Other—Interpretations of the Gender Wars in “A Woman on a Roof” from the Perspective of Existential Feminism

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Abstract

Doris Lessing is one of the Nobel Prize winners and “A Woman on a Roof” is such a famous short story of hers. In the patriarchal society, women are in the lower status, but the woman in the story struggles bravely to fight against the male power. During her fighting, the woman has doubts and hesitation, but she finally forces the three males to put off their prejudice. This paper focuses on how the woman strives for her own rights, and talks from the perspective of Existential Feminism, taking the main male and female characters in “A Woman on a Roof” as examples, so as to explore women’s self-survival in the dualistic society. Through studying her feminist thinking in the short story, the paper points out that the woman finally transforms her role from the Other to the Subject and then she is in an equal position with the three males. Though the two genders does not reconcile with each other as it seems to be with the purification of rainwater in “A Woman on a Roof”, the woman has made a big progress in the pursuit of her own transcendence.

Keywords: “A Woman on a Roof”, woman as the other, immanence and transcendence

1. Introduction

Doris Lessing (1919–2013) is one of the greatest writers who is the eleventh woman and the eldest person ever to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2007. Swedish Academy in its prize announcement to Doris Lessing claims her like this: “that epicist of the female experience, who with scepticism, fire and visionary power has subjected a divided civilisation to scrutiny”. Lessing’s contribution for literature is noncontroversial. As one of the greatest short stories of Doris Lessing’s, “A Woman on a Roof” (1963) talks about the intricate relationships between the two different genders—males and females, and the conflicts between different social classes. Lessing, one of the great novelists, has always been on the focus of literature reviewers. Many scholars both at home and abroad have done excellent researches about Lessing and her works in previous studies. Some of the scholars analyze her feminist thinking from the perspective of the themes, for example, Orphia Jane Allen’s “STRUCTURE AND MOTIF IN DORIS LESSING’S ‘A MAN AND TWO WOMEN’” (1980). And others discuss her from the angle of the main characters and the reality her stories have manifested of the then England society, like Susan Watkins’s “Remembering Home: Nation and Identity in the Recent Writing of Doris Lessing” (2007). This paper, talks about Lessing’s feminist thinking—taking “A Woman on a Roof” as an example and existential feminism as the approach, so as to offer a new perspective to the further study of Lessing’s feminist thinking.

Simone de Beauvoir is a French feminist who has been influenced deeply by existentialism especially Sartre. Sartre mentions the concept “existentialism”, and “as in his *Existentialism and Humanism* Sartre says that ‘the first principle of existentialism’ is that ‘Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself’” “De Beauvoir moves even further away from Sartre when she says that existentialism does not exalt the individual who both creates his own values and imposes them on others” (Joseph, 1997, pp. 77–82). Sartre puts human beings as the core, and Beauvoir goes further and finds the unequal relationship between the two genders, therefore she combines existentialism and feminism together, and puts forward the concept of “Woman as the Other”, which goes further than that of Sartre’s. “The Other” means submissive, subordinate, dependent and immanent. Beauvoir’s groundbreaking work, *The Second Sex*, has been an important basis for the development of following existential feminists. “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces

this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine” (Beauvoir, 1956, p. 273). Every human being involves both transcendence and immanence at the same time. But the males usually regard themselves as the Subject, while females the Object, which is not accepted by feminists. Therefore, feminists try to deny this. It is not to say that women want to be the One, but they hope to be as equal as men. As a female writer, Lessing feels more about the social status of women in the patriarchal society. Many of her works reveal her existential feminist thinking. Typical text for exploring Lessing’s feminist thoughts is “A Woman on a Roof”. Therefore, it is of great significance to talk about it.

2. The Images of the Three Male Characters

Traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive (Tyson, 2006, p. 85). For a long time, women have been in a weak position in the capitalist society, and they have been subjected to all kinds of discrimination and oppression from the male power. According to Foucault (1995), discourse is involved in power, and the body is the major target of penal repression. Power should be visible and unverifiable. In “A Woman on a Roof”, the woman is the spectacle, being looked at by the men. The male gaze from the three male characters represents their willing to control and to possess the woman’s body. The behaviors and the words of the three male characters reveal women’s lower status in the patriarchal society. Though Harry, Stanley, and Tom are of different ages, they represent the men to some extent of the male-dominated society, thus their voices and behaviors cannot be neglected by the readers. From this perspective, the three male characters in “A Woman on a Roof” are deserved to be analyzed deeply and respectively in order to find the abnormal relationship between the males and the females.

2.1 Harry—the Oldest

The place the woman stays is like a panopticon, being looked at by the subject—the males. All of the three men in the story want to watch the nearly naked woman. Harry, the oldest one of the three men, is about forty-five years old, who is traditional, mature and to some extent a man holding deep family values and great responsibilities upon family. Harry is the representative of the older men in the then society. Actually he is a rather superficial man holding the obsessiveness towards the male discourse. When the two young men feel very excited about the naked woman, he just says, “Looks like it”. For elder men like him, traditional men should be rational and lose no dignity that belongs to a man, so he does not give more responses to the naked woman. After knowing the woman does not even look up when Stanley lets out a whistle to her, Harry tries to be tolerant to the woman by saying “Small things amuse small minds” (Lessing, 2002, p. 277). Harry looks like a wise man and he tries to teach and guide the young men. But actually Harry is a typical man of phallogocentric thinking. When the woman does not give reactions to them after their many times’ whistling to her. “The small, competent man, the family man with his gray hair, who was never at a loss, sounded really off balance” (Lessing, 2002, p. 284). He is annoyed about the woman because for him, the status of men as the Subject has been challenged by the Object, that is the woman. The woman has done nothing but the reactions of the three males show women’s secondary status in the society. The male discourse does not allow women to be as equal as men.

2.2 Stanley—Newly Married

Stanley is a newly married man, who is very irritated with the woman in many times compared with Harry. In male-oriented society, women are the secondary, and they are the objects to be observed by men. Men think that women should behave as men have asked them. Stanley is such a phallogocentric man, holding that women should put the men as their focus. Therefore, When the woman does not respond to him after Stanley whistling to her, he feels his male discourse has been doubted and then he begins to belittle the woman to hide his anxiety and uneasiness so as to hold his sovereignty towards the woman. He is very angry about the woman and feels uneasy. When he thinks of his wife, he says, “if my wife lay about like that, for everyone to see, I’d soon stop her.” “I tell you, if she was my wife!” (Lessing, 2002, pp. 278–280). “Woman is her husband’s prey, his possession” (Beauvoir, 1956, p. 170). For him, his wife is his belongings so that he has rights to decide her everything. Thus, his superiority as a man is revealed. He would control his wife, and let his wife be subordinate to him. After many times’ trying to let the woman give some responses to them, a sense of failure comes to him. But when Mrs Pritchett, a married woman, teases with Stanley, he feels much better, for his superiority as a man has been satisfied. Men like Stanley are double-standard: on the one hand, they desire their wife to be secondary and be devoted to them; and on the other hand, they themselves tease with others to obtain visual pleasure by objectifying women. Women are of the lower status in the male-dominated society.

2.3 Tom—the Youngest

Tom is only seventeen years old, representing the young men in the society. He is a man of great imagination as

many detailed descriptions of his inner thoughts are given in the story. Tom is the name of the character in the legend of Lady Godiva, and peeping Tom now refers to a person who likes to watch other people secretly to obtain their own sexual satisfaction. In this story, Lessing names the third male as Tom which is full of irony. From Tom's point of view, he is different from the other two men, who are older than him. At the first glance of the nearly naked woman, he says nothing but only keeps laughing. And when the other two men ask him whether the woman is there or not, he lies to them. Some strange ideas come into his mind: to protect the woman from the other two, which is only his own fancy. In his imagination of the woman, he regards her as a poster, as an being gazed object:

"Tom thought she looked like a poster, or a magazine cover, with the blue sky behind her and her legs stretched out. Behind her a great crane at work on a new building in Oxford Street swung its black arm across the roofs in a great arc. Tom imagined himself at work on the crane, adjusting the arm to swing over and pick her up and swing her back across the sky to drop near him" (Lessing, 2002, p. 279).

In western nude paintings, women are always being at the attention of the painters. Most of the painters are males, and most of the observers are also males. "Woman as the other" is manifested completely during men's looking at women. As Berger says in his *Ways of Seeing*,

"Her body confronts us, not as an immediate sight, but as experience--the painter's experience. Why? There are superficial anecdotal reasons: her dishevelled hair, the expression of her eyes directed towards him, the tenderness with which the exaggerated susceptibility of her skin has been painted. But the profound reason is a formal one. Her appearance has been literally recast by the painter's subjectivity (Berger, 1972, p. 61).

Tom puts himself as the Subject during his observing the pleasant sight of the woman. In this process, he puts himself in the controlling side and the being-looked-at woman the passive status. When he comes to speak to the woman, he knows that he is totally wrong. Therefore, resentments towards her are flowed through his mind because his superiority as a man is nothing at all in front of the woman. But during this process, the woman has just been sitting there, done nothing. She has been objected by males. Tom's love for the woman is only his own fancy and his desire for sex. "He loves her to the extent that she is his, he fears her in so far as she remains the other; but it is as the fearsome other that he seeks to make her more profoundly his-and this is what will bring him to elevate her to the dignity of being a person and lead him to recognize in her a fellow creature" (Beauvoir, 1956, p. 186). The three males are fearful for the woman and it is their fear that transforms the woman from the other to the subject though they dare not to admit this.

3. The Hesitation of the Woman

According to Beauvoir (1956), every human existence involves transcendence and immanence at the same time. But throughout the history, women have been confined by men to be only of immanence, but their transcendence has been neglected, and therefore women become the Other. Women have to endeavor to escape from the One and emerge themselves into the light of transcendence. During the process of their rebelling, women have hesitation and doubts in front of the Subject. In "A Woman on a Roof", the woman experiences two times of hesitation in front of the One.

3.1 The First Hesitation

"One might simplify this by saying: *men act* and *women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus, she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight" (Berger, 1972, p. 47). On the first two days, the woman wears her red bikini, which is a kind of sign for sex liberation and freedom. Bikini has been on the focus of the feminists for it represents women's rights for freedom. Therefore, the woman in the story wears bikini to claim her sovereignty as a woman:

"At this point the woman, still lying prone, brought her two hands up behind her shoulders with the ends of a scarf in them, tied it behind her back, and sat up. She wore a red scarf tied around her breasts and brief red bikini pants."

"Next morning, as soon as they came up, they went to look. She was already there, face down, arms spread out, naked except for the little red pants" (Lessing, 2002, pp. 276–277).

For males, she is only a sight and men tease with her to satisfy their own desire. During the woman's trying to find her own transcendence, she suffers oppression from the males, and this brings her self-doubt. The first hesitation of the woman happens on the third day and fourth day. On the third day, the woman feels the pressure from the One after the men's whistling and teasing to her. So she doubts whether her choice to pursue her own

transcendence is right or not. She begins to wear the dressing gown, not bikini, and tries to find another place to stay to escape from the gaze of the male power:

“Then there was a flutter of white from behind a parapet, and she stood up, in a belted, white dressing gown. She had been there all day, probably, but on a different patch of roof, to hide from them” (Lessing, 2002, p. 280).

On the fourth day, the woman does not even dare to appear. She fears the strong power from the men. So she chooses not to be in the sight of the males.

3.2 *The Second Hesitation*

The second hesitation of the woman happens on the fifth day. The woman appears again after some conflicts in her mind. She wears her gown again, brings the blanket with her and stays at a hidden place to avoid being seen by the men:

“At midday they stood, silent, watching the skylight on her roof open, and then she slowly emerged in her white gown, holding a bundle of blanket. She looked at them, gravely, then went to the part of the roof where she was hidden from them” (Lessing, 2002, pp. 281–282).

Women’s successful resistance to male discourse will not be achieved overnight. Women are single and they can hardly break the imbalance between men and women. Therefore, the woman has hesitation and doubts in her own awakening, and to do a right choice for her is difficult. After the second hesitation, the woman decides not to be afraid of the male discourse. So on the sixth day, she returns to her former state again, nearly naked, to show that she does not fear the One. The process of her hesitation reveals to some extent most of the women’s hesitation and doubts in front of the male power.

4. **The Rebellion of the Woman**

Body becomes the weapon for modern women to rebel the oppression from the patriarchal society. No subject will readily volunteer to become the object, the inessential; it is not the Other who, in defining himself as the other, establishes the One. The Other is posed as much by the One in defining himself as the One (Beauvoir, 1956, p. 17). In “A Woman on a Roof”, the woman rebels the oppression from the males in two ways: namely nonverbal communication and verbal communication.

4.1 *Nonverbal Communication of the Woman*

The whole story happens within seven days. God uses six days to create the world, and then He rests on the seventh day. The woman also achieves her transcendence within seven days: after six days of rebelling against the Subject, the woman achieves her transcendence and then on the seventh day, she does not need to appear in front of the males to declare her rights as a woman. In the process of becoming an independent woman, hesitation and doubts are always there, but she still chooses to resist the Subject. And she chooses her body as the weapon to try to resist the oppression. The clothes the woman wears and the places the woman chooses to stay show her inner changes. After hesitating for fear of the male power, she decides to go back to her former state—wear her bikini and stay at the former places—to be nearly naked and to continue to be in the center of the male gaze to strive for her rights on the sixth day. And on the seventh day, she does not appear again in front of the males. On the one hand, it is because the sky is gray so the woman cannot sunbathe; and on the other hand, it is because her rights have been already obtained by her, so she does not need to stay there again to fight for her rights. On the first five days, the woman has not said anything, and it is her nonverbal communication with the men that makes the three men annoyed because the things women to do and the words women to say are all decided by men’s willing in the patriarchal society. The woman is the semiotic, being forbidden by the symbolic. The males’ whistling and teasing to the woman shows their superiority as the subject and their oppression to the other. The nonverbal communication of the woman with the three males represents on the one hand the inferior status of the woman, and on the other hand, the woman’s refusal to be in the patriarchal discourse, which is her rebellion against the unfair treatment towards women in the patriarchal society. On the seventh day, it rains a little. And rainwater here purifies the three males to force them to put off their own prejudices toward the woman. Another detail about the woman’s nonverbal communication is that every time the woman appears, she is reading. “What woman essentially lacks today for doing great things is forgetfulness of herself; but to forget oneself it is first of all necessary to be firmly assured that now and for the future one has found oneself. Newly come into the world of men, poorly seconded by them, woman is still too busily occupied to search for herself” (Beauvoir, 1956, p. 661). In front of the male gaze, the woman is addicted to her reading, not giving reactions to the males who are doing their works in contrast. The woman has found herself and she cares little about male power.

4.2 Verbal Communication of the Woman

On the first fifth days, the woman does not say anything, but on the sixth day, the woman says a few words to Tom.

“What do you want?”

“Go away”

“Listen” “If you get a kick out of seeing women in bikinis, why don’t you take a six-penny-bus ride to the Lido? You’d see dozens of them, without all this mountaineering.”

“Thanks,” she said, and dropped her face again, turned away from him (Lessing, 2002, p. 285).

Through her verbal communication with the males, she grasps her rights tightly. In former cases, she does not utter even one word, but at the end of her fighting, she tries to hold the woman discourse by speaking. In the society of patriarchy, women should not say anything like this. On the contrary, they had better behave in the ways men like. After five days of rebelling, the woman begins to say a little to continue her fight. “To be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men. The social presence of women has developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under such tutelage within such a limited space” (Berger, 1972, p. 46). Though the words women to say have been normalized, the woman of the story dares to resist the abnormal treatment towards women by uttering words men does not want to listen to. From this point, she is brave.

5. Conclusion

Lessing herself does not acclaim her as a feminist, and she considers that some of the feminists go too far away from the pursuing of women’s transcendence and even more, they want to make women’s rights over that of the men’s, which is not the core of feminism. Males and females should coexist with each other actually. Lessing is objective towards the movement of feminism, as Lessing says in the New York Times in 1982, “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”. In “A Woman on a Roof”, the men and the woman reconcile with each other with the purification of rainwater on the surface. In fact, their conflicts have not been eliminated. The struggle of women to pursue their own transcendence and their equal rights with men deserves more efforts. “Today the combat takes a different shape; instead of wishing to put man in a prison, woman endeavours to escape from one; she no longer seeks to drag him into the realms of immanence but to emerge, herself, into the light of transcendence” (Beauvoir, 1956, p. 674). The woman in the story has begun to awake for she dares to resist male discourse by nonverbal communication and verbal communication of her body. “They brilliantly demonstrate that it is not the inferiority of women that caused their historical insignificance: it is rather their historical insignificance that has doomed them to inferiority” (Joseph, 1997, p. 126). Though there exist gender problems in the process of men looking at and women being looked at, the struggle of women to pursue their own transcendence and their equal rights with men has made great progresses. One small step for the woman, one giant leap for the whole feminist career.

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