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DORIS LESSING'S *THE MEMOIRS OF A SURVIVOR* AS AN EXPERIMENTAL DYSTOPIAN NOVEL

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Abstract

Since the publication of her novel *The Golden Notebook* in 1962, Doris Lessing's works have started to evolve with the same recurrent types of crises. The protagonist of the story experiences a massive breakdown or trauma, the environmental setting where the protagonist resides exhibits signs of decay. In addition, her main characters are always very sensitive, wise, and possess a strong political, social, emotional, and critical vision. *The Memoirs of a Survivor* published in 1974, is yet another piece of art by Doris Lessing. The novel has been regarded as a great illustration of dystopia as the critics of Lessing have reported. However, it is crucial to see what literary and non-literary features of the novel have made them to call this a dystopian work. This research aims to analyse Lessing's *The Memoirs of a Survivor* through a qualitative approach with thematic analysis method in the light of critical evidences implemented on the work. Moreover, this paper also analyses the preceding and following works of Doris Lessing to estimate the extent to which this piece of fiction has deviated from her previous trends of novel writing. The detailed analysis of *The Memoirs of a Survivor* concludes that the novel has followed conventional process of crisis as explained in the previous novels of the author such as *The Golden Notebook* and *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* and has represented the decline of a community due to weird human practices till the ultimate level of absolute demolishment. The demonstration of dark visionary novel has remained a fundamental aspect of Lessing's writing which possess clear signs of "dystopia" and "apocalypse," however, her style of writing fiction has been observed as experimental which is debatable to be classified within the fictional genres.

Keywords: Doris Lessing, *The Memoirs of A Survivor*, experimental writing, dystopia.

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INTRODUCTION

The Memoirs of a Survivor has been written by internationally known author Doris Lessing in 1974 which was also adapted to cinema in 1981. Renowned Hollywood stars Julie Christie and Nigel Hawthorne starred in the film while David Gladwell directed it (Duyfhuizen, 1980, p. 150). Lessing's novel, *The Memoirs of a Survivor* following the conventional process of crisis as explained in the previous novels of the author such as *The Golden Notebook* and *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* has represented the decline of a community. The demonstration of dark visionary novel has remained a fundamental aspect of Lessing's novel which possess clear signs of dystopia and apocalypse (Sullivan, 1980, p.158). *The Memoirs of a Survivor* is yet another piece of Lessing's writings that represents a near-future setting where human beings of all ages, colour, gender, or any other background fight to survive in a world that is gradually and unnoticeably being destroyed. Referring to the existing patterns of human beings, Lessing has described the emotional acceptance and decline of human beings in a fictional manner by heightening human beings' feelings of affection. Lessing has magically tried to showcase that the existing practices of humans are soon going to degrade them to the status of living from which they have progressed over the couple of years. Hence, the process of a conventional lifecycle has been re-shaped with the lifecycle of this world as a collective creature that will eventually fall back to "Barbarism" and everyone has to struggle in order to survive. However, referring to the scenes and imagery represented in the novel, some authors while critiquing the literature have argued that it is very difficult to categorise this work. For instance, in the novel, the narrator of the fiction has been depicted as standing on the window witnessing everything falling apart in front of her with people migrating from one place to another to find a safe place. (Kuns, 1980, p. 80). Contrastingly, the narrator watches instances where tribes come together and build-up their strengths by practicing self-defence along with scenes of scarce places being filled with greenery and animal habitats. At the same time, the narrator has been watching over a girl who was left by a stranger commanding her to keep a watch on the girl. Hence, the novel has borrowed from multiple narrative techniques which is the main reason why categorising this book as "dystopic," "auto-biographical," or "apocalyptic" is a controversial. The present paper however, will evaluate the dystopic features depicted in the novel as experimental account of Doris Lessing's fiction.

***The Memoirs of a Survivor* and Experimental Features**

Referring to the controversy of the selection of a certain fictional narrative type, Lessing once mentioned that *The Memoirs of a Survivor* is an auto-biographical work that has reported the author's personal experiences of public scenes representing how the woman herself has envisioned the decline of the Western Community along with some discussion of her personal accounts. Moreover, it has been exposed that the girl Emily discussed in the novel is actually the childhood version of her mother and Gerald is actually a boy that her mother was familiar with in her childhood. Moreover, the character "Hugo" is actually an analogical transformation of a cat which Lessing once possessed in Persia. Additionally, it has also been noted that Lessing even wished to put the tagline "An Attempt at Autobiography" at the title page of the novel. Eventually revisiting Lessing's attempt to publish this novel as an Autobiography, it has been noted that she attached the label "An Attempt at Autobiography" with her novel which was removed with an unmentioned rationale by the publishing house. In an interview with Charles Tomalian, Lessing reported that the novel was precisely the product of her clear intention to write her own story and immensely shocked by the fact that no one acknowledged it (Arntsen, 2008. p. 3).

Critics have referred to the novel as a novel of change that is shifting from “realistic narrative” to “space narrative” (Draine, 1979, p. 53). It has been noted that with the response that Lessing received from her work prior to *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, she lost belief in realistic fiction and hence, in the mid-way of her writing she transitioned from realistic fiction to space fiction from 1960s to early 1970s. Lessing has remained a fan of experimentation and this is one aspect that has made her to experiment within writing with the hope that she could be able to invent new ways of reporting reality in a multi-layered fashion for a modern society. However, critics such as Alvin Sullivan and Bernard Duyhuizen have called *The Memoirs of a Survivor* a science fiction that should be called “future history” (Sullivan, 1980, p. 159; Duyfhuizen, 1980, p.150) while Guido Kuns have called this “a utopian novel” (1980, p. 4) and Rums referred to it as “post-apocalyptic fiction” (1980, p.3). These different representations by the critics or researchers of Lessing’s work clearly imply that her work is experimental and complex in a manner that it gets approached by the readers. Other authors have linked these experiments in response to Lessing’s psychological perspectives rather than the inclusion of scientific or fantasy fictions on the basis of the fact that she has received some counselling too. Lastly, few other interpretations of the story have made it to be interpreted as the future story with ghosting characteristics which create orthodoxy and complication among critics.

When conducting research on any particular literary characteristic within a story, it is important that at first the readers at least derive some ideas of what the entire story is about. Hence, it would be better if the layout of the story is discussed at least once in the hierarchical order of events. Starting from the very initial, the narrator has described an imagery of an English city slightly ahead of the actual time in which the story was written. The city has been visualised by Lessing as a place where people are fighting each other over basic utilities such as water, electricity, and so on. The situation seems like the city is falling apart and there is extreme rush and hurdle. People are ready to snatch modes of livings from others showcasing highly in-human attitudes, and the entire space is being emptied in an absurd manner in front of the narrator. Moreover, it has been noticed that people cannot be sure of whether the news they are receiving from the media is actually true or not but they are only considerate about their immortality and self-indulgence. The ideas of self-esteem, respect, and personal dignity have been completely taken over by Barbarism and people are even willing to eat human flesh for the sake of survival.

The narrator, when referring to the governments, authorities, and law enforcing agencies such as the police, conveyed that these authorities are performing the role of a demonstrative body where no one is really interested in these and their remarks are only perceptive and theoretical regarding what is happening and what should happen (Lessing, 1974, p. 19). The only purpose of police is to make sure that people do not unite on roads and the air is so contaminated that even breathing has become difficult. Moreover, in this situation, the narrator has been ceased into an apartment and possesses no-way to leave rather than staying in her apartment and watching everything decay in front of her. Hence, the narrator has described that the future of the Western society would be dystopic where there would be gangs, disorders, and pollution. The breakdown of the society has been represented in an apocalyptic version where basic needs decrease slowly over time. Moreover, Emily, the girl who has been left by a stranger to the narrator, is traumatised because of an unspecified shock throughout the novel that is unknown to the narrator and she was not even considerate towards probing at this (Lessing, 1995, p. 84).

Hugo which is typically a hybrid creature of cat and dog possesses a constant fright of being eaten as there is scarcity of resources in the area. Moreover, the narrator has been shown as possessing the ability to mediate at a specific spot in her apartment where she transfers

space and experience to her childhood once again in a way that the previous visions of her mother's childhood and cruel father has revived. Besides, Emily's sadness is also associated with her mother's childhood. Finally, at the end of the novel, a place is shown in which the lady has made a spatial transformation because she did not choose to leave the space. She crosses the wall to the space where her family life rejoins. That place is more of a world than the narrator at the time. The fading reality is much better. As Cederstorm points out, the city and the rooms behind the walls are symbols of the psyche in its totality; the movement of the protagonist between the two dimensions is a symbolic portrait of an individual who has established creative links between conscious and unconscious, the ego and the self, and who has, thereby, discovered the means of survival. (1980, p. 117).

The ultimate climax that occurred within the story was revealed by the sudden providence of a "Wall" which happened with the entry of the girl named Emily who was left in the apartment by a stranger along with her hybrid cat-dog (Lessing, 1995, p. 39). The novel includes scenes where as Emily grows into adolescence, her stages were constantly aligned with the events of the past which were seen through meditation by the lady behind the Wall. By recalling these previous events, the narrator was able to recall about the incidents of Emily's past where she learned about her childhood struggles, abuses, traumas, and her ultimate effort to retain normality and peace in her life and the world around her. At the same time, the narrator is also observing Emily in the present life by experiencing the atrocities of the decaying world. Then she goes out on the streets with her teenage ambition of joining gangs to reach the utmost independence in the end. Emily also falls in love with the gang leader Gerald who was rescuer of children and well-wisher of women and also establishes homes for urban wives (Lessing, 1995, p. 76). Gerald also befriends with another young girl called "June" who also falls in love with him (Lessing, 1995, p. 147). Gerald's home is the place where Emily worked, functioned as the central location of discipline and order. The urban children staying in Gerald's home were ridiculed by the kids that belong to underground. Afterwards, when June suddenly left the city, Emily went into a state of absolute mourning but continued to serve for Gerald so as to save kids. However, those children are abandoned again due to a police raid and the apartment building where the survivor used to live was taken over by older people who surpassed Gerald's control completely and established their monarchy on the streets under a social system with no law, order, or civic sense.

Besides the apocalyptic narrative represented by the narrator in the outer world, narrator herself also suffers from psychological and emotional changes. Being the responsible leader, the survivor when revisiting the instances of her past through the wall keeps on aligning Emily's growth with those events and hence, by doing so she was ultimately able to deduce psychic approach towards Emily's development through the Wall visions. Lessing's way of writing is generally dark and she usually refers to crises in her stories (Sullivan, 1980, p.158). For instance, the protagonists shown in *The Golden Notebook* suffered a massive breakdown which is the ultimate crisis of the story. In this manner it has been demonstrated that the personal crisis that the protagonist has felt is the response to what inputs the outer world sheds on him. Similarly, the survivor in *The Memoirs of a Survivor* has been depicted as someone who holds an opinion towards the world and also possess intelligence and audacity to examine the outer world through a critical lens. Hence, Lessing's characters are usually full of sensitivity and intellect and also possess a political and social worldview. However, these characters have always been displayed in an absurd location full of chaos, and murder. The plot of Lessing's story has been shown in a manner where the psychic, emotional, social, and political facilities of the individuals have been tested by the dark external environment. Considering the plot, characters, and the relationship between plot and characters it has been demonstrated in Lessing's stories that

she is the modern “Cassandra” who visualises the end of the world and the nearness of the doomsday. Her earlier works have addressed this end. However, as Duyfhuizen states, the later works of Lessing such as; *The Four-Gated City* (1969) and *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971) have not followed the same pattern of human decay or showcase any absolute breakdown of a mental capacity or social system (1980, p. 151). However, all four of them have represented some form of psychological conflicts of the protagonist.

As mentioned before, the *Memoirs of a Survivor* followed psychological patterns and similar forms of crisis. However, there are different remarkable patterns in the story too. This novel clearly shows what the actual trend of the crisis is in the near future, and how people who are critical of society can survive this chaotic world. The collapse represented in the society has been shown as threatening and brings a sense of social discomfort. The author has shown that extreme modernisation eventually leads to consequences of decline and end of life. For instance, the story *The Memoirs of a Survivor* represents the world of time where the Barbarians-the underground children are shown to provide time gaps where the individuals who lived in jungles used to fight for the basic rights of survival and include distress that is threatening their social lives and order. The collapse represented in the story has been shown as showcasing times of the near future where things would decline and the individuals will, out of anarchy, forget the baseline laws of living and social rule. The author reflects the “kids from the underground” as people who belong to the drastic world of inhumanity and negligence. The rhetoric of these kids have been analogised with the savagery and tribunal coherence of the work, *Lord of the Flies* which eventually provides hint at what the features of the individuals in in-human times represent the world to be like.

The Memoirs of a Survivor reveals two distinct dimensions; the dimension of the reality and the dimension of the fantasy. The story has gone from internal illumination to external radical transformation. The nature of reality in the novel is surely dystopia, but it does possess some resemblance with the present. The reality of the gangs, disorder, chaos, distress, and complex processes represented in the country is very familiar with the present times and therefore, at present, the author has shown that due to the high degree of automation of living standards and the extreme influence of the media, people need to deal with extreme chaos and dilemmas, which is creating fallacies for people living in this world. The idea is that if these melancholies are not controlled at the right time, these adversities will eventually lead to denial of the acceptance of the human world and will cause the ultimate death of the author. The problems caused with the decline of this remorseless civilisation is that it highlights retreats of civilisation that are falling back from the present situation of the Western world. The author points out that the social background represents the current chaos and decline, and as the times change, it is seen as a positive prospect that can be seen in the near future. As a result, Lessing believes that these tough times will not lead to chaos in the end with people's wishful thinking. She also tries to exhibit that this transition that is occurring due to the current practice of life is necessary for the survival and therefore, the individuals should not fear this time. However, if the initial lines of the plot are considered, the readers and researchers of Lessing's work could clearly see that the marks of the past that Lessing's work represents the times where the awake individuals open their eyes to the point where the individuals fall apart from the conventional stigmas of the world and yet continues to accept the profoundness of a critical eye that either re-enforces or invents a new idea of reality and human survival.

The awake individuals showcased in the works of Lessing are enriched with technical sophistication of the classic narrative, yet the themes and the critical nature of particular literary characteristics depicted in the novel do possess certain contrasting characteristics

conventional ones. Hence, it has been rightly provided that the themes of Lessing's idea of the reality and the immediate future as represented in *The Memoirs of a Survivor* and her other works are actually far more enriched and strong as compared to critical assessment of a society. The experimentations and the new ways of life that Lessing always includes in her works are sometimes unnoticed or even misinterpreted by the author. Rather than submitting to the fixed laws of genres and features that goes into each genre, the layering of the literary techniques observed in the Lessing's work always diverges from the conventional idea and therefore, the author's experimentation often leads to a completely wrongful representation of what the author actually intended to achieve (Rosenfeld, 2005, p.41). This fall is noticed in Lessing's *The Memoirs of a Survivor* which despite of being an attempt to serve as an autobiography was not recognised as one by the readers or even the literary critics of that time.

The representations of characters in Lessing's themes are exposed more or less like a supreme entity who possesses strong will over power and is courageous to change the melancholy and sadness of the world (Draine, 1979, p. 52). However, one aspect that is highly impeccable and critical to notice in Lessing's work is that the people, whose lives revolve around and the world in which the novel takes place, are always full of agony and extreme wickedness and in-human nature (Rosenfeld, 2005, p. 44). On the other hand, the distress of the world is represented in the beginning of the novel with no direct mention as to why these troubles have started and what particular behaviours and attitudes have caused these. Therefore, it can be argued that in Lessing's novel, the cause of the dystopic world is not the limelight of the story and neither the concern of the author but rather the individualised struggle to combat from the troubles of the world which actually forms main focus of the story. Lessing is more keen on deciding the anguish of the world as an inborn marvel of how she feels as though the world could be better similar to the world will end and how individuals of solid order and responsibility can be dominated the difficulties or issues brought about by the rot on the planet.

CONCLUSION

In short, if Lessing's work are compared to other dystopic works such as "The Fall of the House of Usher," it can be concluded that her work represents dystopia but in a justified manner of positive feelings and life that could be regained with the efforts of the ones who are sound and possess social and political knowledge about the world (Kuns, 1980, p. 80). Hence, according to Lessing, saving the world is not everyone's responsibility but to raise awareness in individuals.

Scholars of Lessing's fiction argue that despite possessing some extraordinary characteristics of fiction with strong sense of fantasy, Lessing's work also includes extracts of social realism but in a different manner. For instance, "Kids of the underground" and the reference to a time where everyone is in trouble to the world is forecasted as a feature of social realism which implies the brutality of life. In contrast to this, as Charles comments, the later imagery of an individual teleporting through a wall and the emphasis provided to dreams, madness, and the apocalypse of empirical reality have largely diverted from social realism and touched on great technique and skill of fictional representation (2003, p. 3).

All in all, it can be concluded that *Memoirs of a Survivor* as a dystopian novel is a critical work of art recounting what is wrong in the present world and the projections of future are neither too desperately fictional nor absurd. Hence, through fiction, Doris Lessing has attempted to highlight a purpose that is both essential and relevant to our present time.

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