

---

## Gender, Culture and Resistance: An Eco-feminist Reading of Doris Lessing's *Retreat to Innocence*

Dr. HEMANT VERMA

Deputy Director, Department of Higher Education, Panchkula (Haryana)

Dr. AJIT KUMAR

Assistant Professor of English, Government College, Bhuna (Haryana)

### Abstract

*Eco-feminists assert that the patriarchal values stereotype the natural capabilities of females at different levels and areas. The annihilation of both nature and female has its roots right from the ages. The literature produced by the women writers have helped to take this momentum to the next level. During the 1950s, Doris Lessing novels show that for women characters, all the political, social, economical, and above all psychological penetrations are equally important in human life. Her journey as a social activist leads her towards the natural balance of the universe which is a satisfying response of a woman writer towards the modern approach of her woman character. Her philosophy in *Retreat to Innocence* resolves around the stance of humanity and critically examines the different masculine allusions. Thus, this research paper not only examines Doris Lessing's *Retreat to Innocence* but gives a comprehensive detailed analysis of Eco-feminine substances in the context of this text.*

**Keywords:** Patriarchal, Stereotype, Annihilation, Substances, Masculinity

The views of feminists assert the Eco-feminine virtual sensations towards the disturbing phenomenon created by the male-dominated patriarchal society. Feminists underline the different issues of Eco-feminism in the socially biased group of people. Research scholars and critics examine gender discrimination, domestic violence, stereotyping

of women, and annihilation of androgynous capabilities of women. Eco-feminists Rosemarie Tong, David Bouchier and Roger Ebert assert and expose the substantive exclusion of women that takes place through the misogynistic approach of the patriarchal society. Rosemarie Tong writes, “each feminist theory or perspective attempts to describe women's oppression, to explain its causes and consequences, and to prescribe strategies for women's liberation” (1). The disobedience of natural phenomenon of justice of equality and liberty between both the sexes is a call for change in the viewpoints of the members of patriarchal society. In fact, these feminists explore the masculine violence that exists in women's lives. Their social introspection questions the virtual application of supremacy of men. Modern women writers also show how women right from birth to death become a subject of discrimination and stereotyping in a patriarchal society. The formulation has had a lot of sensual and penetrating vision of biased approach which exists in the world.

The Nobel laureate Doris Lessing has been held high for her different efforts in the field of literature in English. She has produced many masterpieces with the growth of time like, *The Grass Singing*, *The Golden Notebook*, *Children of Violence*, *Mara and Dann*, *The Good Terrorist*, *The Marriages between Zones Three, Four, and Five*, *The Memoirs of a Survivor* etc. But among them, all *Retreat to Innocence* was less popular, less explored, less read, and less analyzed. But as the title line suggests, “a bold novel of love in our time” (cover of Lessing's *Retreat to Innocence*), Lessing has dealt with the different aspects of life, primarily with the need for love in human life, a feminine substance in the patriarchal society and of course, the war of gender discrimination in the human world. Famous feminist writer and poet Adrienne Rich calls Lessing “a quasi-feminist writer”(quo. in Bulkin 182). Her treatment of different women characters in her novels makes the critics realize that their viewpoints stand firm and more Eco-feminine based. However, Lessing underscores the importance of both social and feminine substance. She always questions the intentions of social activists and reformists regarding the roles of women in the social world order. Roger Ebert rightly explores, “there are so many wars more important than the sex war” (4).

Lessing deals with psychological and fundamental values which formulate the different aspects of an individual. Human Love and materialistic desires are considered to be the integral parts of a

being whereas social, economic and political substances are subjected as the extrinsic parts of human life. The famous critic, Cengage Gale remarks, “Her (Lessing’s) works display a broad range of interests and concerns, including racism, communism, feminism, psychology, and mysticism” (14). Through her works, her understanding of social, human and cultural areas emerges to be far better than many other thinkers. Lessing’s life and social activities both in England and Africa attract the feminists to explore deep and define the natural spontaneity of her natural progress of life. All of her novels bring out the social, economical, feminine, liberal approach of women towards the different variants of patriarchal values. She shows that all of the patriarchal values are social assumptions. The wholeness of a being woman deems to be bringing a change in the masculine approach of the society. The entire series of her works embark a way of humanity that leads the world towards a better identified and managed cultural society.

Lessing discovers the different historical elements existed for the subordination of masculinity and misogynistic variation of social order. Her substance of the motherhood, womanhood, sisterhood and daughterhood emerge as a decline of patriarchal phenomenon. However, she always declines the response to be hailed as a feminist writer. The famous critic, Marion Vlastos Libby underlines the different aspects of Doris Lessing’s writing and says, “Doris Lessing is not a feminist”(106). The feminine aspects are virtually aligned by the different other economical, social and psychological aspects. Claire Sprague views, “Although often undercut, questioned, and qualified, Lessing’s feminism is nonetheless an inescapable presence in her work” (182). In all of her novels, she embarks the feminine resistance towards the inhuman concerns of the patriarchal values. She provides the central stage and position to her women characters. Among all of these, Laurel says about Doris Lessing that she “has come closer . . . than any woman writer to fully understanding what must be changed, only to retreat” (32). Her sensibilities of feminine approaches drive her towards the emblem of a new philosophy that produces a ‘new woman’. In fact, her works bring out the acts and movements of an androgynous woman. The spiritual as well as intellectual balance of a woman seems to be the formulation of an emancipated woman.

Before the novel, *Retreat to Innocence* is analyzed, it becomes important to understand the praxis of the growth of Lessing’s female protagonist, Julia Barr. Doris Lessing’s protagonist, Julia Barr always

feels like seeking love in her life. She is frustrated with her routine life. In the hallucinations of those times, she falls in the arms of Jan Broad, however, later on, she understands that Roger is true love. Lessing has delineated the different circumstances of a woman's life. This novel calls for introspection to take place in the light of human relationship and man-woman relationship. This paper is an attempt to examine the different Eco-feminine theories and highlight the virtual ideologies of feminists and critics of Doris Lessing studies in respect to *Retreat to Innocence*. This novel emerges to be the beginning of this new theory of retreating the feminine gender of humans in the form of fiction than criticism or theories. Ellen Morgan has rightly highlighted that Lessing has succeeded "in making the authentic female perspective" (63). Lessing does not go away from the stance of feminism. Her writing also invites the historical and political substances in human life. Chakravarty's words underline the identity of Lessing as a writer, "her concern with gender issues is related to a larger preoccupation with the multiple problems faced by the entire human race" (48-49). Lessing intermixes the different human needs along with the socially framed structure. She feels that the ideology of any fundamental social theory should also ensure a place for the moral, social and legal rights of women.

Jan Broad's decline to accompany her further in his life makes her realize that it has been her mistake to consider his obsession as worth for their relationship. Jan Broad's suspension of all feelings towards her is a cause of his social and patriarchal patterns that he trusts to formulate his life. Adrienne Rich's views give a true picture of such patterns, "Patriarchal man created—out of a mixture of sexual and affective frustration, blind need, physical force, ignorance, and intelligence split from its emotional grounding, a system which turned against the woman on her organic nature, the source of her awe and original powers" (126-127). Roger's lack of concern for her and Jan Broad's approach towards her, both situations ask for a sensibility towards women for her commitments to men and his world, "In a sense, female evolution was mutilated, and we have no way now of imagining what its development hitherto might have been; we can only try, at last, to take it into female hands" (Rich 126-127). The decision of feminists to bring the commands of women's life into their own hands show the disturbance they have faced in their lives.

Julia's sense of bondage and her desire for liberty takes her away from Roger. Her desire for a virtual and sensual world that has cognitive and emotive sensibilities embedded into her real liberal self. She seems to take the views of Sheila Rowbotham about the liberal and equal opportunities for one and all. Lessing also shows the clutches of patriarchal mentality towards woman, "Jan, that's a dreadful woman. That's a truly horrible woman. A bitch if there ever was one" (132). It is not about Julia or any other woman rather it is about every human being. Hence, the socialist feminists' words explain it for all human beings, "the global aggression of imperialist capitalism and the existence of national liberation struggles, women had to form alliances with other exploited and oppressed groups to free themselves and their sisters" (Gurevitch 79). Julia wants to explore a better explanation of each term that is associated with the realms of society and the existence of woman.

The assertion of Eco-feminists regarding the definition and division of the equation of heroism between men and women is observed in *Retreat to Innocence*. The relationship between Julia and Roger shows these issues. Feminists Gornick and Moran assess that "Woman is the division of the hero" (146). It is quite apt in the case of Julia Barr. Julia Barr wishes to feel free from all the social and patriarchal bonds. She exposes the entire social phenomenon which seems to be ridden in political assumptions. Betty Friedan calls all the social phenomenon "emptiness, non-existence and nothingness" (264) in the people residing in these societies. Lessing also highlights such an approach of society, "Julia's eyes were wide open again. What is this about? She wondered. Elsie is a stupid woman, said Friedl" (133). Julia Barr emerges to be a hero for all other women characters as well as formulation of other male partners of social values. Gerda Lerner calls such efforts as, "It is not always a movement, for it can be a level of consciousness, a stance, an attitude, as well as the basis for organized efforts" (237). Julia Barr seems to become a lesson for all other human beings. She is appreciated and held high by the critics and feminists for her adventurous approach to life. Cheri Register underlines, "We would challenge critics' claims of objectivity and their belief in the neutrality of literature as an aesthetic construct. We would expose the misogynistic stereotyping of women in the classics. We would rescue female writers from oblivion and get them into the canon" ( quo. in Henke 134). Such inspiration for women

writers holds a visionary substance to the less motivated writers and students.

Eco-feminists also view that it is not just the preamble of equality or liberty that a woman has to feel, rather there are other aspects like defaming the existence of woman in the impression of social taboos. Lessing tells, “Do you know what is going to happen to Roger? Some horrible woman is going to vamp him. Just like that. We can't do it, because we aren't like that” (67). Despite the committed attitude of women towards the home and other associated things of men and social constraints, she is subjugated to the stance of a defamed and neglected human being. Lessing puts light on the partial approach of the society which is always different and far from the realities of the virtuality of this universe.

Thus, Doris Lessing's protagonist Julia Barr makes justice with the views of different Eco-feminists, especially on their views of non-partiality, equality, liberty, and humanism. Discrimination against women and oppression of marginalized which was an issue for the ages among the critics to write and discuss. Lessing proves to be the spokesperson for this idea. The sensual biased approach of the patriarchal system to stereotype women to be marginalized and poor to serve men and follow the systematic obedience for the ages. Julia Barr faces the same with both Jon Broad and Roger. So, this novel underlines the virtuality of eco-feminine values of equality and liberty.

## Works Cited

- Bouchier, David. *The Feminist Challenge*. New Delhi: Palgrave Macmillan, 1983. Print
- Bulkin, Elly. “An Interview with Adrienne Rich.” *Critical Essays on Doris Lessing*. Ed. Claire Sprague and Virginia Tiger. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1986. 181-82. Print
- Chakravarty, Radha. *Feminism and Contemporary Women Writers: Rethinking Subjectivity*. London: Routledge, 2008. Print
- Ebert, Roger. “Doris Lessing: An Idol on a Mercurial Pedestal.” *Louisville Courier Journal and Times* 22 June 1969: G4. Print
- Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*, New York: Norton, 1963. Print
- Cengage, Gale. “Contemporary Literary Criticism”. Volume 170, Paperback, *Gale Group*, (2008): 1-20. Print
- Gardiner, Judith Kegan. “Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*.” *A Companion to the British and Irish Novel: 1945-2000*. Ed. Brian W. Shaffer. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005. 376-87. Print
- Gornick, Vivian and Barbara K. Moran, eds. *Women in Sexiest Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness*. New York: New American Library, Mentor Books, 1972. Print

Hemant Verma, Ajit Kumar– **Gender, Culture and Resistance: An Eco-feminist Reading of Doris Lessing's *Retreat to Innocence***

---

- Greer, Germaine. *The Female Eunuch*. St. Albans: Paladin, 1976. Print
- Gurevitch, Michael, ed. *Culture, Society, and the Media*. New York: Methuen, 1982. Print
- Henke, Suzette. "The Challenge of Teaching Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* in the Twenty-First Century." *Doris Lessing: Interrogating the Times*. Ed. Debrah Raschke, Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis, and Sandra Singer. Columbus: OH State UP, 2010. 183-201. Print
- Laurel. "Toward a Woman Vision." *Amazon Quarterly* 2.2 (1973): 18-42. Print
- Lerner, Gerda. *The Creation of Patriarchy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Lessing, Doris. *Retreat to Innocence*. London: Sphere Books Limited, 1967. Print
- Libby, Marion Vlastos. "Sex and the New Woman in *The Golden Notebook*." *Iowa Review*. 5.4 (1974): 106-20. Print
- Moi, Toril. *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*. London, New York: Routledge, 1988, c1985. Print
- Morgan, Ellen. "Alienation of the Woman Writer in *The Golden Notebook*." *Doris Lessing: Critical Studies*. Ed. Annis Pratt and L. S. Dembo. Madison: U of WI P, 1974. 54-63. Print
- Oakley, Ann. *Sex, Gender and Society*. London: U. of Wisconsin Press, 1972. Print
- Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York: Norton, 1976. Print
- Rowbotham, Sheila. *Women, Resistance and Revolution*. New York: Pantheon, 1972. Print
- Sprague, Claire. *Rereading Doris Lessing: Narrative Patterns of Doubling and Repetition*. Chapel Hill: U of NC P, 1987. Print
- Tong, Rosemarie. *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction*. Boulder: Westview, 1989. Print.