

Doris Lessing's Fight against Philistinism and the Practice of Labeling

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ABSTRACT: Being a border-crossing writer, Doris Lessing constantly complains about the following two limitations of British literature: the philistinism and the habit of labeling. Textual analysis proves that as a protest against the philistinism in British literature, Lessing makes great efforts in hybridizing her writing, in particular, by resorting to diversified subject matters. While challenging conventions and the practice of labeling, Lessing holds that it is necessary to change the habit of mind and shows her strong distrust in literary critics. For her, all kinds of definition or labeling just mean imprisonments or limitations.

KEYWORD: Doris Lessing; Philistinism; the Practice of Labeling

1 COMPLAINT ABOUT PHILISTINISM

Lessing points out in her auto-biographical and fictional writings that both the poor and the elder care the most about a roof over their heads which is a key concept stretching from the beginning to the end of her novel *The Diaries of Jane Somers*. But it is not a survival principle for Lessing, as she once explains in her autobiography: "But I had never thought like that, had moved so many times in my life I could no longer remember when or where, felt nervous at the thought of staying in one place" (Lessing 1997,131). This is the true status of Lessing's life and it is hard to say whether this kind of restlessness is decided by Lessing's inborn personality which aspires for freedom or by the environment.

What's more, what makes Lessing a willing "roofless" traveler, perhaps to some extent is her dissatisfaction with some British writers. She always complains that British literature is too provincial to cover broader subject matters and to obtain wider horizon. She argues that there is a philistinism or provincialism of British literature. That's why she has made great efforts in diversifying her own writing, including both the content and the form. In 1974, she makes the following comment on British literature in *A Small Personal Voice*:

We are not living in an exciting literary period but in a dull one. We are not producing masterpiece, but large numbers of small, quite lively, intelligent novels. Above all, current British literature is *provincial*. This is spite of the emergence of the Angry Young Men...Yet they are

extremely *provincial* and I do not mean by *provincial* that they come from or write about the provinces. I mean that their *horizons* are bounded by their immediate experience of British life and standard (Lessing 1974, 14, italics added).

Lessing blames British literature for its lack of exciting and fresh elements and regards it as "dull" and "provincial". For her, the provincialism is a result of narrow horizon and limited experience of the British writer. That's why Lessing herself always tries to go beyond the Great Britain and casts her eyes on the vast land of Africa.

In fact, this blame on British literature is not the first one made by Lessing. In a 1962 interview, Lessing comments on Woolf's limited experience: "I feel that her experience must have been too limited, because there's always a point in her novels when I think, 'Fine, but look what you've left out'" (Joyner, 204-5). Although a great admirer of Woolf, Lessing nevertheless is not afraid of criticizing Woolf for her limitation. It is interesting that in her earlier period of writing, she on the one hand shows her admiration for those great writers, on the other hand keeps complaining about the "philistinism" of British literature. She argues that British literature is far from open and classic. "Philistinism is endemic in Britain, and most particularly in London...What the British—no, the English—like best are small, circumscribed novels, preferably about the nuances of class or social behavior" (Lessing 1997,113-114).

Besides "roof", Lessing is also very sensitive to the notion of "space", "territory" or "field", in particular, their symbolic or metaphoric meaning.

She talks a lot about these concepts in her writings. Being a writer with border-crossing spirit, no wonder she cares so much about these terms and concepts. For example, there is one paragraph in her autobiography talking about these:

Along one street, turn a corner into another, then another, whose name I never looked at, for I did not care where I was, thought when I moved from one little knot of streets, or even one street, into another, it was moving from one territory to another, each with its own strong atmosphere and emanations, bestowed by me and by me need to understand this new place. Not to know its name, so that I could find it again, for I am sure I often walked along the same streets, past the same houses, but did not know it, for the capacities and understanding I brought with me were different on different nights. And besides, even in daytime a change of light or a shift of perspective will create a new view. You use a certain underground station often, you walk down the steps onto a platform you know as well as you do the street outside your house, but when you stop at the same station after your excursion, on your way home, you go up steps from a platform quite different from the one you set off from, ten paces away (Lessing 1997,165).

This paragraph talking about “territory”, “understanding”, “shift of perspective”, and “view” may be regarded as an explanation for her theory and practice in narration in a metaphoric way. For Lessing, to stay in one place is intolerable, so is her writing. There is a constant need for her to move “from one territory to another, each with its own strong atmosphere and emanations”. There is a need for her, whether it is natured or nurtured, to keep exploring new places and new things. Otherwise, she cannot use up her energy and find her expectation reached. She is restless not only in real life, like strolling along the London streets at night, but also in writing, like switching between different subject matters, trends and techniques. Apart from trying on new things or “stepping on” new territories, she is capable of getting new insights and new understanding even of the same thing and place. According to her, no matter how many times she has passed the same place, there is still something unknown to her, something new to her, “for the capacities and understanding” she brings with her are “different on different nights”. Then in the daytime, these should-be-familiar places and roads again turn out to be strange to her, because “in daytime a change of light or a shift of perspective will create a new view”. That is, a shift of one’s point of view may lead to a different or brand-new interpretation of the same or familiar thing. How to make new senses from old or commonly-adopted elements by making them a mixture, therefore a kind of ambiguity which may lead to multi-interpretation. Just as Bhabha believes that hybridity is a kind of constructive force, Lessing’s spirit of exploration

and flexibility in dealing with various kinds of narrative techniques helps her writing to get rid of dullness and simplicities quite effectively.

Lessing points out that besides her, another important British writer Maugham holds the same idea: “...Somerset Maugham felt that English writers were provincial, knew only England, and should travel” (Lessing 1997, 131). To avoid this kind of provincialism, Lessing travels a lot and writes about people of various races, colors, classes, sexes and ages. At least in terms of subject matters, she manages to go beyond the English trait of provincialism and make some breakthrough which is a great contribution not only to British literature but to that of the whole world as well. Perhaps due to her marginalized position of being both an outsider of her own country and Africa, Lessing is able to obtain an objective observation of her people and country. As for British people, Lessing mocks at their dual characters:

Self-sufficing. Solitude-loving. And yet a group of these same people, in England, seems cosy, seems insular, and, confronted by an alien, they huddle together, presenting the faces of alarmed children...There is a dinkiness, a smallness, a tameness, a deep, instinctive, perennial refusal to admit danger, or even the unfamiliar: a reluctance to understand extreme experience. Somewhere—so the foreigner suspects, and for the purposes of comparison, while writing this I am one too—somewhere deep in the psyche of Britain is an Edwardian nursery, fenced all around with sharp repelling thorns, and deep inside it is a Sleeping Beauty with a notice pinned to her: Do Not Touch (Lessing 1997, 86-87).

In an ironic way, Lessing points out that although assumed to be characterized with adventuring spirit, “self-sufficing” and “solitude-loving”, British people turn out to be weak, tame while confronting an alien or unfamiliar thing. They are afraid of danger or unwilling to understand extreme experience. This judgment can be generalized with another word: provincialism, for which Lessing dislikes England to some extent. Naturally, what she dislikes England for, she would try to overcome in her own personality and writing. She is moving forward with an adventuring spirit rather than being timid, always keeping a keen eye on the mass movement. She on the one hand steadfastly adheres to her own principle and philosophy, on the other hand, opens her heart to new things so as to cultivate herself to be an idealized Londoner with a broad mind and horizon instead of the so-called philistinism.

By resorting to such exotic issues as African matters, Lessing achieves a certain kind of “otherness” which distinguishes her from other British writers. Complaining about the narrowness in British literature in terms of subject matters, styles and genres, Lessing tries to bring some freshness and

broadness into mainstream literature and African issue is one of her coping strategies. Why African issue? Besides her own experience, Lessing's interest in African issue is ignited by a former African writer Olive Schreiner: "Schreiner's *African Farm* really had an enormous impact on me" (Gray 113). She further explains that this writer has some influence on her more in the aspect of consciousness than in the way of writing. It is from Olive Schreiner's writing that she begins to look at African issues from a new perspective. So Olive Schreiner and *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) trigger Lessing's interest in African stories, opening a new door to young Lessing apart from all those about European white stories. After reading this book, Lessing realizes that to write about Africa in a serious way is one way to get rid of provincialism, to escape from the narrowness and meaninglessness in British literature at that time.

For Lessing, to cast the eye on the remote land of Africa may add something fresh to the narrow writing scope of British white writers. But some critics do not agree upon this. They hold that the so-called African stories, as a matter of fact, are still British stories. In fact, even Lessing herself lately realizes and admits in her interview that they are stories about the white exiles. Taking the view of the marginalized white, Lessing tells about the life, struggle and destiny of the white colonials who are in the dominating position of the whole society. She tells about the story of a group of white exiles, both from England and from Africa, a group of people belonging to nowhere and therefore suffering a lot. Black or white, center or margin, these stories all belong to the narrative of travel.

2 PROTEST AGAINST LABELING

Besides this disgust for British provincialism as it has been discussed above, Lessing also constantly complains about being labeled and manages to go beyond conventions. She is unhappy about the conventional habits of mind which tends to see things in pairs and which overstate the personal experience, about literary criticism made by the academics, about people's misinterpretation or willful labeling of her and her works.

Perhaps it is partly due to her outstanding achievement in being a value demolisher that she is awarded the Nobel Prize. In his presentation speech made in 2007, Per Wästberg, the Chairman of the Nobel Committee for Literature defines Lessing's uniqueness with the following three words: resistance, categorization, and order. In other words, Lessing is awarded the prize for her resistance against categorization or labeling, against any enforcement of order or rules.

To fight against categorization or established rule, Lessing believes that it is necessary to first of all change the habit of mind. For one thing, there is always a "tendency of the human mind to see things in pairs—either/or, black/ white, I/you, we/you, good/bad, the forces of good/ the forces of evil" (Lessing 1987, 15). Lessing argues that to see things in pairs means to pay more attention to differences instead of commonness. Besides, she notices that in order to make the individual distinct, people tend to understate the group experience and overstate the personal one which is also a common practice. She wants to change this habit of mind and claims that the individual is forever closely connected with and subordinated to the group. No single experience just speaks for itself, rather, it speaks for the group it belongs to. Although the writer speaks in an individual tone, he is the spokesman of the silent majority which means the writer's individual experience is used to reflect that of the group.

Apart from the challenge to the habit of mind, Lessing constantly complains about the criticism on her made by those seemingly authoritative academics. She holds that writing is a simultaneous action depending on the will of the author and the broad social context in which it is born. The writer may take whatever form he likes, without taking into consideration the "yes" and "no" of the critics and the professors, or without caring about literary theory or method. A novel may be under the influence of various kinds of artistic forms, except the criticism and theory thing. Perhaps Lessing is a little bit extreme whenever touching upon the issue of criticism. She insists that a novel should be a self-contained thing and there is no need for a writer to bother himself with the criticism.

More than that, being a writer, Lessing is always against the action of division and labeling. From the very beginning, Lessing has been given various labels. At first she is regarded as an African writer or even Rhodesian writer because of her deep concerns for colonized issues, in particular the life in Southern Rhodesia. Then in 1950s, she turns out to be a so-called Communist writer for her passion for political issues in writing. What's more, *The Golden Notebook* labels her as a feminist writer, which she protests against strongly. In her later period, due to her interest in eastern religion and especially the Sufism, she is regarded as a Sufi writer or writer of mysticism. Finally, her shift towards science fiction makes her a space-fiction novelist.

According to Lessing, everything is flowing, including the life, the politics, people's mindset and the writing skills. Therefore, there is no need to put everything into a certain group, without taking into consideration the overlapping and complicity of different things and ideological systems. For Lessing, to find out the universality is more meaningful than talking about the divergence. One

of the valuable things the literature can do and should do is to represent the common experience of people, no matter what time it belongs to. Actually, this is one of the reasons that Lessing tries to blur the distinction between different narrative skills or "isms". Some critics believe that it is Lessing's insistence in writing freely that makes her write in such a diversified way: "Mrs. Lessing's insistence upon her own artistic integrity and the freedom to write in diametrically opposed modes, as they suit her different interests as a writer" (Ingersoll XI).

For her, all kinds of definition or labeling just mean imprisonments or limitations: "We live in a series of prisons called race, class, male and female. There are always those classifications" (Bigsby 78). No wonder what she wants to do is to escape from all these imprisonments and to breathe in the free. Ever since her childhood, a strong sense of being shut up and imprisonment makes her suffers a lot. That's why she chooses to quit school against her mother's will at the age of 14, goes to work in Salisbury as a secretary at the age of 16 so as to escape from her parents, and leaves behind her two marriages and two children and goes to London with another son Peter. That's why she quits the job and tries to become a professional writer, no matter how hard it is. Whatever she chooses to do, she just want to get rid of the bondages or imprisonments in various forms so as to get her own freedom.

In a 1980 interview, Lessing expresses her dislike of being labeled and of those arbitrary critics:

Critics tend to *compartmentalize*, to establish periods, to *fragmentize*, a tendency that university training reinforces and that seems very *harmful* to me. At first, they said that I wrote about the race problem, later about Communism, and then about women, the mystic experience, etc., etc., but in reality I am the same person who wrote about the same themes. This tendency to fragmentize, so typical of our society, drives people to *crisis*, to *despair*..." (Torrents 64, italics added)

It is true that sometimes for the convenience of study or research, people tend to divide a writer's works into several periods, according to certain standards or characteristics. Perhaps this is a common practice, especially in university education. For instance, students would learn from the book that Shakespeare's writing career is roughly divided into 3 phases and Charles Dickens's writings take a turn in terms of style and subject matters for twice. All these divisions are more for the convenience of students, to help them get a general ideal of a writer's works and features. But according to Lessing, it is ridiculous or meaningless to "fragmentize" in this way.

This refusal against being labeled or compartmented does not mean that Lessing prefers to write in the same simple way so that there is no need to do classification. But rather, she is good at

melting various kinds of writing skills into her writings so that they turn out to be a mixture or product of hybridization. What makes her uncomfortable is that some critics do not realize that being a responsible writer with a strong social-consciousness, what she cares most about is the well-being of mankind, being it black or white, male or female. Her concern for the status and future of human being never changes which can be reflected in such issue as race problem, Communism, women and the mystic experience, and which can be found almost in all of her works starting from her first novel *The Grass is Singing* until her latest novel. There is one book published in 1987 that can best support Lessing in this aspect, a book entitled *Rereading Doris Lessing, Narrative Patterns of Doubling and Repetition*.

3 CONCLUSION

All in all, Doris Lessing is a steadfast reformer and experimentalist protesting against provincialism and imprisonments. She does not limit herself to certain "ism" and knows how to make the best of these great writers. She is open enough to accept and experiment with different ways of writing, therefore, her own a hybridized one. No matter whether her experiment in this way is a successful one or a failure, it is a distinctive feature that makes her standing out of most of her contemporary writers, and partly, put her on the throne of the Nobel Prize.

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