



Politics of Feminine Abuse: Political Oppression and Masculine Obstinacy in Doris Lessing's *The Good Terrorist*

Pedram Lalbakhsh
Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia

Wan Roselezam Wan Yahya
Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia

Received: 10-07- 2012

Accepted: 25-07- 2012

Published: 31-07- 2012

doi:10.7575/ijalel.v.1n.3p.54

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/ijalel.v.1n.3p.54>

Abstract

This paper studies the male-dominated world of Doris Lessing's novel *The Good Terrorist*. Alice Mellings, the protagonist of the novel, is a political activist whose reliance on male figures in the story—the leaders of a subdivision of a political party—ends in disillusionment and frustration. Looking at this novel from a socialist feminist point of view, Alice Mellings is found to be a minor member, exploited and abused, who has to follow the orders and instructions of her inept superiors—all male. While Alice is the one who guarantees the continuation of activism (doing all kinds of jobs needed to keep the squat alive), she is never allowed to have a role in decision making. She is a member whose identity is defined by male superiors and is considered as a half-human whose services are to be enjoyed only. However, the findings of this study prove Alice as one who has her own voice at the end. The novel's closing is marked with an engendered New Woman who is aware of the political abuse and whose independent unbound identity stands much higher than the political oppression and masculine obstinacy that had imprisoned her for so long. She is a different woman at the end; one who knows her power, believes in it and decides to fight and not to surrender. And this is a new consciousness that Lessing raises: discover your feminine power, have a firm belief in it and use it to win.

Keywords: Abusive politics, female subjugation, female exploitation, New Woman, socialist

Introduction

Doris Lessing's *The Good Terrorist* presents a family-like small society in which women are abused and discriminated against like in capitalist, patriarchal societies. Ironically, here the exploiters are people that, as Maslen (1994) describes them, "are rejected by and rejecting the society" (44). People that claim they are fighting the capitalist system. The story revolves around a central character, Alice Mellings, who attempts to save a squat in London from being demolished by the city Council that has the house in its list of problem-making houses. The squatters are minor political activists who suffer from the lack of sound political understanding and an adroit leadership. Their blind activism pushes them towards terrorism bringing explosions to a crowded precinct in London. But while Alice is the only character who really cares for the house and does everything to save it from the hands of the council, she is the one that suffers from a feminine traditional role as a housewife. The house and the oppressive relations running in it appear as a reflection of the oppressive relations in the respective society. Ironically, as Lessing shows it, all oppressive relations of the world outside (macrocosm) could be traced and clearly seen inside the house (microcosm) and among the people who are residing in it. The world of this house is nothing different from the world it is a part of.

In this paper we concentrate on the central character, Alice Mellings, and the way that she is exploited, oppressed and mistreated by her boyfriend and his mate—both decision makers in the squat. This is to clarify how women are put in secondary positions and considered as responsible for nursing, housewifery, and things that are not considered worthy of praise or pay. To elaborate on this kind of practice and the way that women in general—and Alice specifically—are exploited and abused we have chosen to look at the story from a socialist feminist point of view to show how exploitation and masculine obstinacy determine the fate of the character and define her identity according to a patriarchal capitalist ideology. Socialist feminism, as Madsen (2000) maintains, "focuses upon power relationships, especially the intersection of capitalism, racism and patriarchy, and the production of a politicized personal (subjective) life" and is essentially "concerned with the roles



allocated to women that are independent of class status (mother, sister, housewife, mistress, consumer and reproducer).” As a result, “violence, pornography, working conditions, but, above all, the political dimension of private life—the family, reproduction and sexuality”—are the issues that may come under scrutiny while reading a novel from this point of view (184). The method for achieving this aim relies on close reading of the novel through which the exponents as well as causes and effects of oppression, exploitation and subjugation are identified and analyzed.

Discussion

Alice Mellings—a thirty six years old woman—joins a squat led by his boyfriend’s friend, Bert. The house is in very bad condition, the toilets are blocked by putting cement in their bowls. Taps are also blocked. Electricity is disconnected and wires are uprooted. Water is not running in the pipes and the smell of pails filled with the residents’ excrement is loathsome. So many complains from the neighbors have put the house in the council’s demolition agenda. Finding the place in this intolerable situation, Alice decides to change the house into a real one where everything is working properly and neighboring people have no excuse to be critical of it. Gradually Alice has to play the role of a housewife who does real things but is not taken seriously by the inhabitants. What we are most interested in is the way that Alice, the most active person in the squat, is politically underestimated and ignored, and the way she is exploited and humiliated.

Alice is not a real political activist to the so-called comrades in the squat. The men who are the real decision makers in the squat never take her seriously. This is while they themselves are inept politicians that, as Maslen (1994) reminds us, take “quotations from Marx and Lenin [...] out of context and without thought” (45) and enforce what their problematic mind orders them to do. Lessing’s characterization does not portray genuine politicians or political activists. They seem to us some paralyzed characters who pretend to be real activists fighting for a real and genuine cause. But we have many instances when Alice proves herself as an adroit and clever politician. Alice is always thinking and planning for the future—not her own future only but the future of the house and those who are populating it. Whatever good comes to the squat is because of Alice. She is a shrewd and careful negotiator. She is the one that prevents police from destroying the house and taking the impatient men in custody. She is the one that convinces the council to give them a second chance to save the house and remove it from the council’s list for buildings to be demolished. It is Alice that convinces the electricity department to reconnect the electricity without making the due payment and having the appropriate guarantor, and it is Alice who obtains respect from the neighbors who have been repeatedly complaining about the dirt in the house and call the residents “pigs” (Lessing 71). Again, it is Alice that makes Philip work for them without being sure of the payment he badly needs, and it is her that manages to attract activists to come and participate in their political congregation. That is why Maslen (1994) knows Alice as the only character in the novel that “succeeds for a time in uniting their very separate, self-oriented concerns into some kind of collective,” while “her motivation stems more from a deep-seated need for a stable home and family than from a genuine commitment to socialism.” (45)

To all these sincere services and contribution the male dominated squat is either silent or critical. The process of renovation and repair seems ridiculous to Bert, Jasper and even Roberta and Faye, who are discriminated women themselves but have the same reactions of men towards Alice and whatever she does in the house. Jasper never gives a compliment for Alice’s achievement unless he tries to attach her success to himself. Bert, too, is most of the time either indifferent or talking in a ridiculous way that smells of contempt and humiliation. When there is an important political decision to be made, Jasper does not say anything to Alice and she is not called to participate in decision making or, at least, have a suggestion whatsoever. This is in parallel with Wharton’s (1995) comment “that all social relations are gendered” (382). Here, too, all the social relations are overwhelmingly gendered. When Jasper and Bert decide to join the IRA and work for them as a branch, and, when Bert and Jasper decide to leave and travel to Russia, Alice is not called to give her opinion. She is informed only when Jasper needs money to spend on his trip and affairs with girls.

Accordingly, in this small political circle Alice is doomed to be ignored and neglected. While the cover the squat needs for the security and safety of the political action owes a lot to Alice, she is not a member of the decision making body. Alice is what Mossink (1984)—relying on the anthropologist Cynthia Nelson—defines as a type of woman that has “significant power and can apply sanctions and exercise control” (35). She is the most active activist in this story, but she has to follow the trace of those who really do not know anything about politics. This gets more significant while, throughout the story, we discover that whatever Alice does leads to success and betterment. She manages to change the house into a livable place



and succeeds in changing the attitude of the neighbors who are extremely hostile towards people who have some sort of connection to the house.

Another aspect of Alice's problem is the masculine obstinacy that she has to deal with being with Jasper as her companion. Jasper and Alice met in a squat some years before and from that point onward they have been together. We are informed that Jasper has lived in Dorothy's house—Alice's mother—for years, during which he has never shown a bit of respect for Dorothy or a willingness to contribute for his expenses. He has been a burden on Dorothy and her ex-husband to the point that Dorothy has had to leave her husband's house—agreed to be in her possession for living—and go to a flat to be away from Alice and her exploiting boyfriend. However, caring not about whatever he has done to these women, Jasper is only after the money that comes from Alice and is never willing to socialize with her as she desires. For Jasper, Alice is only a source of money which he secretly spends on his unclear and implied affairs with other girls. Jasper never lets Alice sleep close to him and warns her whenever she gets closer than agreed. He never changes this habit and is never seen to have some sincere regard for the poor Alice, who is attached to him out of her desire for a companion and his need for the money she provides.

Additionally, Alice is subject to curious ways of behavior that are humiliating, offensive and violent at times. Jasper insults her family repeatedly and calls them by names that are really offensive and insulting. His ideology, in this regard, is that they should be ripped of whatever they have because they are bourgeois deserving to be cheated, exploited and abused. He considers himself as a real worker toiling for the benefit of all and fighting against capitalism and its oppressive ways and strategies. Yet, we see nothing of his working and toiling. What we see is ordering food and satisfying the needs at the expense of others, especially Alice and her mother Dorothy. What he thinks and feels about Alice comes to the surface when he repeatedly gets her arm and wrist with a firm grasp whenever he needs her to do something but encounters her refusal. We have scenes in which he kicks the woman to make her do something that he likes and wants to be done.

To exacerbate the situation, Jasper is noticeably difficult to control, making all sorts of problems for him, Alice and the squat. He is wild, always attracting the attention of the guards and police whenever the squatters are picketing. He does not pay any attention to whatever may happen to the house or people living in it. The only important thing for Jasper is being in the spotlight, being seen by others while he is challenging London's police and attracting attention to his so-called political achievements that we cannot consider as having any value or benefit. When he is arrested, it is Alice who has to pay the fee asked for by authorities to free Jasper from jail. For Jasper it is Alice's responsibility to pay and there is no need to pay that money back at all.

To put it in a nutshell, Alice is a victim to this obstinate stubborn man who claims to be a socialist, but practices the capitalists' strategies in taking whatever he can from Alice. To thank all that Alice does to bring comfort to the squat, Jasper brings derision and ridicule, contempt and humiliation. And this does not change up to the end when we see that Jasper's obstinacy and his insisting on driving the car that carries explosives for a bombing in front of a hotel leads to a terrible explosion causing the death of comrade Faye. Alice knows that Jasper is not born to do what he is going to do, but Jasper lets nobody interfere. He, himself, knows that he is not a good driver, that he is not a man of critical times when tension and embarrassment overwhelms a man, but he insists on driving a real bomb that is highly dangerous and destructive. At the end of the novel we sympathize with Alice and women like her who need to be subservient to men like Jasper out of the oppressive relations that are firmly established in society by patriarchs and capitalists. We feel annoyed and disturbed after witnessing that men's erratic judgment in the story pushes Alice towards a destructive action in which she has a hand but an unwilling heart. As Greene (1994) adroitly states, "In Alice the personal [good nature] and political [the teachings she has got] are most drastically at odds in that her personal energies go to creating while her political efforts go to destroying" (213). This furthering to destroy is what men in the story impose.

Conclusion

What we see at the end is the heart broken, suffering Alice that has been a subject of political oppression and masculine obstinacy. Lessing puts Alice in the position of a typical housewife for whom family is dear and important. The members of this family are replaced by comrades who treat Alice poorly and consider her a secondary member. The squat, in fact, becomes a family in which as Eisenstein (1979) states, powerless women experience oppression for being "reproductive beings, working individuals, and socializers of children" (27). While at the end of the novel Alice is not the naïve girl of the beginning of the story we regret that her abilities and skills, her shrewdness and sound judgment and all her toiling and services have been consumed uselessly in such a family. Her position in the squat reminds us of Juliet Mitchell's (1990) assertion that describes women as



“fundamental to the human condition,” with the emphasis on the fact that in “their economic, social, and political roles they are marginal.” To her “it is precisely this combination—fundamental and marginal at one and the same time—that has been fatal to them” (43). But Alice, exploited as she is, does not appear to be a loser in her struggle to define her identity as an independent and capable human being. She is the most independent and the most supporting character in the whole story. Calling Samaritans—a group of people that come to help at critical times—and informing them about the terrorist attack is Alice’s attempt to invite help and preventive measures before the explosion takes place. This is a praiseworthy action—though late—that shows Alice’s independence and power to overthrow the abusive politics that aim at determining her fate. Alice turns the politics on its head, proving that a new world could be made where sound judgment—like hers—and practicality to the benefit of the oppressed would overturn any kind of oppression and abuse. Alice does not yield to what Whittaker calls “the criminal naivety of the extremists who believe that they are going to change the system they so deplore” (132). Alice, at the end, is a New Woman rising from its ashes to rebuild a world in which equality and happiness dominate. That is why we consider Lessing a writer raising a new consciousness among women that blossoms in what Ehrenreich (1976) calls “collectivity and collective confidence among women” (6).

References

- Ehrenreich, Barbara. (1976). “What is Socialist Feminism?” *Monthly Review*. Vol. 57, No. 3
[http://www.monthlyreview.org/0705ehrenreich\[8/29/2009 10:42:30 PM\]](http://www.monthlyreview.org/0705ehrenreich[8/29/2009 10:42:30 PM])
- Eisenstein, Zillah. (1979). “Developing a Theory of Capitalist Patriarchy and Socialist Feminism. *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*., New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Greene, Gayle. (1994). *Doris Lessing: The Poetics of Change*. The University of Michigan Press.
- Lessing, Doris. (2007). *The Good Terrorist*. London: Harper Perennial.
- Madsen, Deborah L. (2000). *Feminist Theory and Literary Practice*. London: Pluto Press.
- Maslen, Elizabeth. (1994). *Doris Lessing*. Plymouth. United Kingdom: Northcote House.
- Mitchell, Juliet. (1990). “The Longest Revolution.” *Women, Class and the Feminist Imagination: A Socialist-Feminist Reader*. Ed. Hansen V. Karen, Ilene J. Philipson. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Mossink, Marijke. (1984) “Domestic and Public.” *A Creative Tension: Key Issues of Socialist-Feminism*. Ed. Anja Meulenbelt et.al. Boston: South End Press.
- Wharton, Amy S. (1991) “Structure and Agency in Socialist-Feminist Theory” *Gender and Society*, Vol. 5. 3. (Sep.): 373-389.
- Whittaker, Ruth. (1988). *Doris Lessing*. New York: St. Martin’s Press.

Pedram Lalbakhsh

Pedram holds a B.A degree in English Literature. He obtained his M.A in English Literature from Shiraz University, Iran and is currently a PhD student in University Putra Malaysia. His main interest is in gender studies in contemporary English Literature.

Wan Roselezam Wan Yahya

Wan Roselezam is Associate Professor of English Literature at the Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia. She is involved in several researches dealing with literature & culture, psychoanalysis & literature, literature in ESL, and diasporic literature.