






Survival between Being and Doing: An Existential Reading of Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child*
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Survival between Being and Doing: An Existential Reading of Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child*

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Abstract

The study aims at exploring the existential approach that Doris Lessing has adopted in portraying the character of Harriet Lovat in *The Fifth Child*. The work presents a conflict between society and the individual that the protagonist, Harriet Lovatt has to undergo and overcome in the process of personal choice. She is given the freedom to choose between what she wants and what society wants her to do. In doing so, she demonstrates full responsibility for such choices. In this novel, the choices and the decisions that the protagonist makes follow from an existential way of thinking. Thus, the approach of the author in portraying the character of the protagonist is examined from an existential standpoint. Lessing skillfully weaved the prevailing cultural and social circumstances of Harriet's community with the question of being and survival in her quest for a meaningful existence. She refuses to be controlled by the traditional codes of sexual liberation before marriage and of having a traditional family after it. Having become a mother of an abnormal child, Harriet also goes on to make decisions that reinforce her existential status. This study presents Harriet as capable of revealing personal awareness and choice by rejecting the prevailing norms in her community as a young woman before marriage and as a wife and a mother afterwards.

Keywords: Existentialism, free, choices, decisions, rejection, responsibility, self-assertion.

Introduction

As a feminist writer, Lessing is generally interested in the position of women in society and the roles they perform in changing it. Most of her novels deal with the difficulties that a woman encounters when she attempts to live a free life. Most importantly, she focuses on the problems that the individual woman faces because of not conforming to what society requires of her to be or to do. In Lessing's world, female characters have to withstand and overcome the consequences of their nonconformity to the prevailing norms and conventions of society. Raefipour remarks in her thesis that Lessing's characters always "find themselves in the face of an alien world with unusual elements...They question the values of their society and live alone in it" (Raefipour, 2012, pp.18-19). Khalaf, (2018, pp.335-338) remarks "Lessing's work raised women's consciousness that they were not alone in their struggle to reach some kind of independence and honesty in their dealing with men."

The Fifth Child, one of the most celebrated novels by Lessing, deals with the history of a middle-class family during the sixties in the traditional English society, where Harriet, the protagonist, is in the process of defining herself according to the different roles she is performing in life as a wife

and a mother. Harriet provides a model of the existential character in her ability to coexist in a society that is riddled with social conventions which are hostile to her freedom in terms of cultural liberty as unmarried and the number of children that she should have after marriage.

Existentialism: A School of Thought

Existentialism as a school of thought stresses the importance of individual freedom at personal level to achieve fulfillment and self-assertion with responsibility and commitment. As a literary trend, Existentialism stresses the need for a new way of coexistence with what an ever-changing world might present. It stresses the individual's need for independence through making meaningful decisions and her/his need for creating personal values. Primarily, Existentialism appeared as a response to the realization of the absurdity of life, that is, meaninglessness. According to Existentialism, human beings should create a reality for themselves through charting the directions of their lives and accepting responsibilities of their choices. Therefore, one's ability at creating certain values by which he/she wishes to live implies creating a new self or existence. In a word, the very core of the existential thought is that one's personal existence is "constituted neither by nature nor by culture since to exist is to constitute such an existence" (Kelly, 2007, p.16).

Generally speaking, there are some general features that characterize Existentialism and can be seen as common principles of it as a philosophy. However, it has not yet had any specific definition among its founders. From an existential point of view, humans are nothing but what they have become.

The nothingness he begins with is thus the source of man's freedom, for at each moment it is men's will that can choose how to act. Man is or should be responsible for the consequences of his action. (Benet 1984, p.330).

As the pioneer of Existentialism, Jean Paul Sartre contends "Freedom is one aspect of human nature that we cannot escape. To commit oneself to anything is always to commit to the value of freedom" (Кожаква, Панченко, 2000, p.99). Existentialism sees human existence as determined by the way he/she sees the world around him/her. That is to say, to exist is to constitute essence of this existence.

David Lovatt and Harriet: Characters of 'The Fifth Child'

In Britain, the 1960s was a decade that was marked by of unprecedented sexual liberation. It was such a decade that witnessed a remarkable increase in liberal sexual activities among the young. As Fisher points out,

The 1960s was when the idea of liberation was herald as a break from the repression of the past. This period is popularly thought of as the period before the sexual revolution. (Pode.2010, p. 3; Brooke, 2012, p.101).

Neither of David Lovatt and Harriet believes in the prevailing conventions regarding sexual liberation before marriage or after it. To Harriet, David is exceptionally acceptable as a future husband and he can easily understand her choices and accepts them. Together they stand in

opposition to those social and cultural practices regarding premarital relationships in their society. Of course, thanks to this bond, they start to dream together and work to fulfill their dream of a happy maternal life. They choose to adhere not to the traditional values and reject that prevailing trend of premarital sexual relationships. They get married sometime after they have first met on account of their own shared belief and strong faith in achieving their own dream of having a traditional big family that consists of many children. Both have deviated from the prevailing path as two single young lovers who are guided only by their own set of values. Having become a couple, Harriet and David, again, stand different from the others in their community. As a wife, since Harriet develops a desire to have a traditional big family and wants to have as many children as she likes, she is regarded as old-fashioned and a conservative wife whose view is inconsistent with the modern norms of having a family. Harriet appears audacious enough to resist whatever criticism inflicted upon her by all those who live in the same community. In other words, Harriet makes personal choices that imply rejection of prevailing norms of the sixties and their accompanying social changes regarding maternity and family construction. Harriet's dream springs from her own belief that having a traditional big family is the greatest goal that she aspires to achieve in her life. Yet, her dream cannot be easily achieved as it is threatened by the social changes taking place in the society. She argues

This is what everyone wants, really, but we've been brainwashed. People want to live like this really. (Lessing, 1988, p.27).

Harriet emerges as a strong woman who is able to assert herself in opposition to the mainstream ideals regarding sexuality and femininity. Cervantes contends that "Harriet lives in an era of great feminist debates, the bulk of society has changed its mind in relation to women and family" (Cervantes, 2010, p. 4).

Harriet's vision is also shared by her husband. As Mikaela Kyle remarks

David and Harriet perceive the world in a way to see a reality that suits their way of life. They live in a fabricated world of their own blocking out the realities and imperfection of life in order to create happiness. (Kyle, 2011, p. 13)

Primarily, Harriet and David emerge as very caring and loving husband and wife leading a happy life. They decide to live in a world of their own disregarding their surroundings with its conventions in terms of family construction. In this due light, Hung points out "The Lovatts try to create their own micro-universe in their domestic world. Like good liberals, they believe in the possibility of separating the private from the public" (Hung, 2012, p. 226).

Harriet and David live a very happy life for few years and they are blessed with four children. These four children become the center of concern in their lives. The family as a whole is overwhelmed with happiness. Both the parents are very loving and caring towards their children. As the story tells

When he bent to kiss her goodbye, and stroked her head, it was with fierce possessiveness that Harriet liked and understood; for it was not herself being possessed or the baby, but happiness. His and hers. (Lessing, 1988, p. 24).

Both the parents show a lot of love, affection, respect and understanding towards each other as well as their children. Moreover, they display a sense of responsibility and commitment toward

their choice of having a traditional big family. Neither of the two parents shows any regret for having four children.

The British Community in the sixties and Harriet's Mindset

In the context of the British community during the sixties, Harriet is viewed as a criminal because of highlighting the grandeur of a family in a society whose conventions do not welcome the same. As Zhao puts it:

This troubled world is penetrating the Lovatts' fortress. Harriet has been referred to as a criminal who is somehow breaking the laws of the society. Her crime is attempting to have a perfect life in an imperfect world. The high expectation in this imperfect world is the background put forward by the implied author's attitude (Zhao, 2012, p. 1500).

Providing good socialization to her children is the ultimate objective of any mother. A mother is the source of kindness and warmth for her children. She is always guided more by emotion and feelings than by logic and reason in socializing her kids. That is to say she is driven by the instinct of motherhood in caring for her children and providing them with love. However, having an abnormal child in the family may result in some undesirable and unexpected changes at domestic level.

The turning point in Harriet's Life

Although Harriet's dream of having a big family has come true later it turns to be a nightmare. She has willingly and happily given birth to four children, yet, neither she nor her husband have planned for having any more children. Unintentionally, she carries a new baby. Of course, the unplanned arrival of the fifth child turns to have a very devastating impact on the two of them. Primarily, Harriet rejects the fifth child. She rejects Ben, the fifth child, even during pregnancy. As Cervantes points out "Harriet's dream of an ideal family and motherhood turns to be a nightmare with the birth of the fifth child. Her wish suddenly escapes her control through going beyond her expectation and leading her to a life of misery, disintegration and chaos" (Cervantes, 2010, p. 3). Generally, in *The Fifth Child* the coming of Ben marks the start of unexpected instability among the Lovatts. David is no longer a loving husband of Harriet the wife and the mother of his children. As the story tells "He had stopped putting his hand on her stomach in the old companionable way for what he felt there was beyond what he could imagine." (Lessing, 1988 p.49) Harriet's predicament is great as her desire of having a big family is received by a lot of contempt on part of the people around her including her close relatives. She is scapegoated by all of the Lovatts including David, the extended family as well as by the community. Consequently, she is no longer attached to her husband. As the story tells

David tries to avoid looking into Harriet's eyes. He no longer speaks to her. She was longing for him to reassure her but he only nodded and did not look at her. (Lessing, 1988 p.116)

Here, David's attempt to avoid looking at or speaking to Harriet signifies his attempt to exclude her from his life.

Initially, Ben is not welcomed by the family. He grows up and is seen as a freak by his family. He finds no other means but violence to express himself. He is unable to establish a sense of belonging to his family because he sees how he is rejected by them all. As Shu-Ming Hung remarks:

Ben is presented as an outsider because of his distinctive appearance and odd behavior; he is treated like the "Other" because of his difference from those around him. He is unable to establish a sense of belonging to the family because he sees himself in terms of "otherness" through the gaze of those around him. (Hung, 2012, p.233).

He disturbs the dream of both the parents. As Kyle remarks, "The reality that Ben presents is far from the perfection that the Lovatts have created. It is a reality full of violence, fear and failure" (Kyle, 2011, p.16). Harriet, as a mother, has to bear the burden of disruption in the family atmosphere as a result. That is to say, while the rest of the family go to distance themselves from Ben, Harriet finds herself in a dilemma. She and her husband are no longer attached as they used to be. Harriet has to struggle to keep a balance between her abnormal child and the rest of the Lovatts members. She has to adapt to a new different world. Though she is aware of losing those mutual bonds she shares with her husband, she finds it better not to share her thoughts and feelings with him anymore. David ends up giving his dream of a big happy family. Being unable to adapt themselves to the new chaotic atmosphere at home, two of the children decide to leave the house and settle in boarding school. The other two go to live with their grandma. Furthermore, members of the extended family give up paying visits to the Lovatts' house during Christmas or Easter.

Harriet as an Existential Character

Harriet's existence and self-construction are defined through her life with her family. Though her dilemma is growing greater, she has to struggle to maintain her self-assertion and achieve personal existence on her own. Harriet finds herself in a dilemma between the instinctive demand of motherhood and the demands of the rest of her family. Harriet has to choose either to keep defending her identity as an exceptionally ideal mother through caring for her abnormal child or caring for the rest of the family while defending the kind of life she has dreamt of with David. Commenting on Harriet's dilemma, Emily Clarke puts it:

She does not want her children the way a mother should; she does not refuse her child for the sake of her other children; and finally, she is ultimately held responsible for Ben's existence and indeed is categorized as "other" and "less" than human by literal associations. (Clarke, 2012, p.105).

She is condemned by her society for having a large family. Yet, she resolves to be a dedicated mother demonstrating a great sense of responsibility towards her choice. She is quite aware of the danger that Ben represents. Yet, she tries her level best to keep the stability of the family under such exceptional circumstances. Harriet emerges as an existential character capable of defending her choice and bearing responsibility for it. All the members of the Lovatts decide to get rid of Ben by sending him to an institution. We are told:

They are sending Ben away because he is not one of us. It will be all right now that Ben is not here. (Lessing, 1988, p.93)

Again, driven by the instinct of motherhood, the mother does not welcome the decision. Harriet argues "He is a little boy He is just a child" (Lessing, 1988, p. 90). She shows a lot of contempt toward the decision simply because he is her son. Of course, Harriet's objection to this decision is never appreciated by David nor by the rest of the family. Eventually, she unwillingly accepts this collective decision because she realizes that she is losing her children and husband one after another. Yet, she develops a sense of guilt as a result. "It was guilt and horror that kept her awake through the nights for not being able to find one little spark of feeling" (Lessing, 1988, p. 94). Having sent the abnormal child away, David and his other children as well as other members of the Lovatts are leading a normal life now but Harriet finds herself more and more restless with the passage of time.

Again, driven by the instinct of motherhood, Harriet decides to rescue her child from the institution regardless of any consideration. She makes up her mind and takes an individual decision that reinforces her existential status. Alone, she goes to fetch her child from the institution, where she finds Ben almost paralyzed because of giving him drugs in large amounts. He is treated like an animal. As the story tells

His pale yellow tongue protruded from his mouth. His flesh was dead while greenish. Everything –walls, the floor and Ben were smeared with excrement. A pool of dark yellow urine oozed from the pullet which was soaked. (Lessing, 1988, p. 99).

Of course, such an individual decision on the part of Harriet in the face of the collective decision made by all the members of the Lovatts, on the one hand, will increase the greatness of her dilemma, and will reinforce her existential status on the other. It is a decision that is welcomed neither by David nor by any other member of the family. They are unable to understand that she is spontaneously driven by her instinct as a mother to save her own child. In another situation Harriet remarks

I feel I have been blamed for Ben ever since he was born. I feel like a criminal. I've always been made to feel like a criminal. (Lessing, 1988, p.125).

Bringing Ben back, drives all the members of the family against her. They decide not to stay in a place where Ben lives. Furthermore, they show a lot of contempt toward their mother and think of her as responsible for helping Ben destroy the family. Of course, David never welcomes Harriet's action of getting Ben back. He considers her personal decision as an act that defies his authority as a husband. A decision that is utterly existential. As Holmquist contends that by making such an individual personal decision on her own without consulting her husband

Harriet increases her own authority by undermining him as a man and a father. This would in turn lead to David feeling as less of a man, hence making him feel emasculated" (Tymn,, 1990, p. 62).

On the whole, Lessing is so much concerned about exposing Harriet as an existential figure who is trying to achieve authentic existence on her own. She exposes her in different situations to uncover the existential aspect in her character. Generally, Harriet is condemned for deviating from the prevailing norms of the society before marriage as a beautiful young woman and after

marriage as a wife and a mother. Existentially, Harriet follows this path out of her conviction that what she has been doing is consistent with a set of values that she personally created once as an unmarried young woman and another as a wife and a mother who wants to lead an existentially responsible free life. Although, Harriet is condemned by all those around her, she is able to stand up on account of her personal convictions that entail existential responsibility. The novel *Fifth Child*, explores the perception that caring too much or too less for a child by her mother is a double bind. They at times may feel hostile towards their children but not all mothers give birth to abnormal ones. In the case of Harriet, in order to protect Ben, she must betray her family. "It is either him or us," David says. Harriet tries to fulfill her duty towards all of her children but all of her efforts seem to go down the drain as it seems next to impossible for her to be a good person and a good mother to Ben at the same time (Emily Harnett, 2019).

Conclusion

The existential vision of Doris Lessing can be seen as an invitation to the reader to adjust him/herself to the different circumstances imposed on him/her in an ever-changing world. The study helps understand the relationship between individual and his/her community. Moreover, it enlightens the reader of the philosophical dimension of Doris Lessing's writings. *The Fifth Child* is a novel that presents a story of a female's philosophical outlook of how life can be lived under certain circumstances. It is a strategy of adaptation and coexistence with what life might offer in the process of achieving fulfillment. Harriet has shown a great ability at having a full control on her life by making free and responsible choices. What Harriet Lovatt has done is a good example of how the individual can shape his/her life under any given circumstances. She has chosen a path in which she has had to struggle to assert herself. She has developed firm stance that has enabled her to gracefully accept adverse consequences of the decisions and choices without regret.

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