Emergence of New Women in Doris Lessing’s
(The Summer before The Dark)

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Abstract

The Summer Before the Dark was first published in 1973. At the time it must have been a very contemporary novel, and perhaps a little controversial, because its central theme is the role of women in society. The main character, Kate Brown, is a domestic goddess who spends one summer rediscovering herself and her place in the world after some 20 years of marriage and motherhood. It might sound like a relatively dull premise for a novel, but in Lessing’s hands the book sings with great storytelling, intellectual insight and drama. Kate Brown is no dull housewife: She’s complex woman suffering what can be best described as empty- “nest syndrome”. Her grown up children are getting on with their lives and her husband is working in America for an extended period, leaving her to her own devices for a summer.
Keywords: Domestic Goddess, Rediscovery, Nest Syndrome.

Introduction

This is a book about beginning to grow old. As death approaches, so does the need to satisfy a feeling, perhaps the deepest one we have, "Kate reflects, "that what matters most is that we learn through living."

In Summer Before the Dark, she examines it in the context of the breakdown of the feminine role at the heart of the world doomed to self-destruction. Lessing firmly believes that a thorough “stock taking” is in order if marriage, society and the individual are all to survive.

The protagonist here, is a forty-five years old middle-class housewife and mother of four children. She realizes one day that she is no longer needed by her now grown brood, nor by her debonair and unfaithful husband, Michael, nor by the household she has organized around them. Kate is beset by a “chill wind” since “this was the first time in her life that she was not wanted. She was unnecessary”. In addition to Kate’s private upheaval – the disintegration of marriage with its stereotyped roles of lover and mother, she is beset by the public turmoil and feels helpless in the face of it. Lessing stresses that everywhere Kate looks she is greeted by chaos.

Kate’s husband is about to depart for the United States for a summer lecturing commitment, her four children have made diverse travel arrangements, and Kate herself is persuaded to take on a temporary job as a simultaneous translator as a favour to one of her husband’s friends. Ironically, what has been most characteristic of her life is her “passivity, adaptability to others”.

Kate’s journey of self-discovery begins with her new job translating Portuguese into English at an international conference on coffee in London. Once again, rooms, and locations
are analogues of psychic configurations in this novel. One of Kate’s discomforts in accepting the job is her family’s casual dispatch of the house for the summer. “The point was, she was feeling dismissed – belittled, because the problem of the house was being considered so unimportant”. As the centre of its activities, Kate is most closely identified with the house and unconsciously feels it unimportance as her own. Once separated from her home and family, Kate’s awareness of her inner situation begins to surface, in the hotel room where she stays while working for the conference. Kate now realises that years of social conditioning and performance of prescribed roles have so alienated her inner self that it has slipped away entirely leaving only the empty shell of a social personality. She begins to realise this at the opening of the novel when she thinks of the fact that her children and husband are leaving her for the summer. Her quest for her real self takes a definite form during that summer when she finds herself alone and “nothing to do”. When the house has been temporarily vacated for some friends she here finds a “room of her own” in a hotel to reflect on her life.

Mary has no sexual inhibitions, and she represents an alternative way of living, instinctual and unrepressed. Married, with three children, she is ‘quite free’ in her relation with men and feels neither guilt nor shame for that. Mary enacts, as it were, the suppressed aspects of Kate’s personality, and is regarded by her with incomprehension and some envy.

Yet, Kate is not quite ‘free’. Her inner being is still ignored. Now she has escaped from the social stereotype of a housewife, only to enter into that of a working woman. On the very day she joins duty, she loses her freedom to telephone to her family about her work. She merely becomes a machine that transforms words from one language into those of another language. “She was being paid for being an exceedingly intelligent and fluent parrot.”? (SBD)

The job, however, is an opportunity for her, to try out the option she had rejected in her youth - to find out what Kate Brown would be like, if she were not a mother but a career
woman. "If she had not married - but good God, she would have been mad no. to marry, mad to whose Romance languages and literature.... What she was telling was a kind of panic... » (SBD, p.19). Afraid to find out the option, Kate rebuilds a maternal identity for herself on the job and is rewarded by her bosses with promotions and gratitude.

The novel here signifies Kate’s injured self. She has sacrificed herself for the sake of her husband, children, and social acquaintances so that she is no longer in tune with her internal self that has been scarred and injured by the long period of neglect. At first Kate fears, would like to disown her unconscious forces, which seem “cold” to her. Her dream landscape is “northern and unknown”; because here to fore inaccessible; so, she recognizes nothing. When she goes “down a hill side” in her dream, she sees a “dark” thing “lying there”, the seal which she first mistakes for a slung. The seal “lying stranded and helpless among dry rocks on a cold hill side” is moaning. When, symbolically, Kate assumes the “heavy burden” of the seal, psychologically she has accepted the burden of her own unreclaimed self, which now she must care for, protect, and nourish. Her next dream suggests her heroic efforts to survive in a hostile environment, in reality in a male oriented patriarchal society, where the roles for women and men are rigidly structured, and often, unfairly imposed as Kate’s dream has suggested. She struggles to revive the dying seal, which “was inert in her arms…. for it was in a comma, or dying”.

She must devise a way to wet the seal in a ‘frozen’ environment. By taking salt crystals from rock, she makes a ‘saline solution’ with which she bathes the seal. Thus, her travels inland with Jeffrey are both literally and symbolically taking her in the wrong direction, away from the sea, and from herself. Therefore, abandoning Jeffrey in Spain, she symbolically sheds her nurturer role and returns (north) to England to experience her own illness without distraction. Thus, Kate discovers and defines herself, gains the strength to act out of her own needs, by developing the courage to make statements of intent. By re-joining
her family, she achieves the harmonious union of the private self with the social frame work as a room has meaning only in relation to the larger structure of which it is part. The process of inner change has resulted in an essential accommodation between the realistic demands of social responsibility and the private desire of social or wholeness, leading to Kate’s survival hereafter as an independent woman and human being without depending on a machine. In The Summer Before the Dark, Lessing has given us a portrait of a lady who becomes aware of her social conditioning but chooses to return to the life she lived before her enlightenment, suggesting not that it is rejection and subversion of social convention that is the first step towards identity and self-knowledge, but simply the awareness of these civil codes and the refusal to sit so comfortably in their mold.

Conclusion

The Summer Before the Dark, the novel which deals with the life of Kate Brown, a conventional house-wife who achieves inner freedom during the course of the novel. She is a convention bound women, she does become a 'New Woman' at the end of the novel, when she achieves 'individuation' or inner freedom and integrity of self. Kate Brown thus emerges as a new woman within the limited sphere of her life as a house-wife. This paper traces the life of this woman who recognizes the pointlessness of her life as a "perfect housewife", when she realizes that this role has left her inner being neglected and ailing. During that summer when she is left alone to reflect on her life, Kate decides to take care of her inner self and save it from further destruction and death. Her struggle to protect herself takes -the symbolic form of a recurring dream of a sick seal which she saves from death. At the end she succeeds in this difficult task and emerges as a new Kate who takes care of herself even if that act creates hostility in her family and society. When Kate achieves this inner strength to defy her family and society in the interest of her inner being, she achieves inner freedom. Kate thus emerges
as a 'new woman in Lessing's sense of the term, as she experiences the 'Summer' of 'individuation' before falling into the 'darkness' of social conventions and her earlier role-playing tendency.
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