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Seal out of the Water: A Symbolic Journey of a Woman towards Liberation in Doris Lessing's *The Summer before the Dark*

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Abstract

Doris Lessing is a declared feministic, while portraying the characters of her novels. Her major works indicate her inclination of probing into the women's world and exposing some very blatant yet unspoken facts of the women's world. In the present novel, *The Summer before the Dark*, Lessing unveils a story which seems familiar but which has never been spoken of. Does a women's world end after she crosses the mature age of 40? Should she simple become an invisible shadow in the house or can she still strive to carve an identity for her? Should the neglect and 'taken for granted' attitude of the family be accepted as part and parcel of womanhood or should she make her presence felt in whichever way she can? Does she have a right to life? The questions are innumerable and the answer demands lots of courage and strength. Doris Lessing provides answer to all the questions in the novel and finally with the Seal reaching the water she liberates the protagonist.

Keywords

Doris Lessing; *The Summer before the Dark*; Feminism; Identity; self-redemption.



Doris Lessing has a profound body of literature to her credit. Her novels deal with a wide range of subjects and throws light on the versatility of the writer. Not one to mince words, Lessing touches the root of the problem and with utter sincerity pronounces the problem. A woman writer in a male-centric world, Doris Lessing created an indubitable position in the literary world. Her major novels deal with the issues related to women. These novels relate to the women's world, not presenting women as oppressed and submissive but one in search of her identity and dignity.

The Summer before the Dark is a woman-centric novel. It explores the world of a woman from a woman's perspective. Doris Lessing has won accolade of highest rank for her huge body of literature, yet some novels needs specific mention and *The Summer before the Dark* is one of them. Not simply for it being a feminist novel but more so because it deals with the problems of a woman who is matured and in an age where she simply becomes invisible to others. Having fulfilled her domestic, social and biological functions she finds herself of 'no use' to even her family members. It is when she strives to get herself together and rediscover her true self. Doris Lessing uses the symbol of a 'seal out of water', a recurring dream of the protagonist, to emphasize a woman's feelings in this stage of life. It becomes all the more imperative for the protagonist to get the seal to the water, an act of self-redemption.

In Doris Lessing's novel *The Summer before the Dark*, the protagonist confronts this problem at the age of forty-five. The middle-age in a woman's life could be the harbinger of a new era or an usher of unfathomed problems. It could be the beginning of the end or a new dawn all together. She has the choice of asserting herself; she has lived non-existent all her live, simply playing the stereotyped roles or she can become invisible and cease to exist. Following in

place and perfectly ‘fitting in’ in all the defined roles she still had a problem which she could not clearly define. The restlessness and the unease grew only to tell her that there was a problem. Betty Freidan defined this stage as a ‘problem with no name’. This problem cropped up irrespective of the age and time. Kate, at the threshold of her life stands baffled at how, suddenly, nobody needs her. A near-perfect marriage, four grown up children, a comfortable house and no financial issues, Kate realizes that her life still is not complete.

The first page of the novel is a prelude to the problem. The lonely Kate throws an introspective glance at her life which hardly ever belonged to her. In mid-forties with four grown up children who no longer need her and her self-occupied husband with his innumerable flings and affairs, Kate tries to figure out her place in the entire set-up of her family. What was she but an instrument to meet the demands of all around her? She had no identity which would make her proud. The restlessness grows in Kate and she strives to move out and experience life on her own. She had not done anything worthwhile in her life apart from bringing up the kids and tending to the household chores. “ If life had to be looked in terms of high moments, or peaks, then nothing had ‘happened’ to her for a long time; and she could look forward to nothing much but a dwindling away from full household activity into getting old” (9).

The summer was approaching and all the family members would be away doing their own things. Her husband, Michael, a successful neurologist is going for few months to work in an American hospital. The children had their plans chalked out. Only she had thought nothing. Like many summers that have passed this summer too she would do nothing.

For her, the coming months stretched ahead as they had done for many past summers. She would be a base for members of the family coming home from university, or dropping in for a day or a week on their way somewhere else; she would housekeep for them, their

friends, their friends' friends. She would be available at everyone's disposal. (13)

But this was the first time she really questioned herself. What was she exactly doing with her life? Kate decides to take the reins of her life in her hands and make things work her style. When all the family members have left the house, she sets the house right and tidy. She takes up a job as a translator for a project at Global Food. Kate does exceptionally well and so is hired for a longer duration.

A new phase begins in Kate's life. She goes in for a total change. She shops for new cloths, gets a younger look, does her hair in different style and colour and is herself astonished at the way this makes her happy.

It was disturbing, this evocation of her young self. She found herself over emotional. She wished her Michael were there to enjoy with her; then, as violently, was pleased he was far away in Boston. What were these swings of emotions, what caused them? In course of a single hour, her thoughts about Michael were contradictory enough for a madwoman. (39)

A woman at forty-five is ready to explore the world on her own. This for Kate is not just an exercise of mere time-killing or fun seeking. Moreover, it is her dire need to confront herself and earn her respect back. She even wonders whether she could get involved with some guy and have an affair. She has to leave for Istanbul for an international conference organized by Global Food.

In Istanbul she meets Jeffery and they both head for Spain for a holiday. When Kate was wondering whether her life had come to an end, suddenly she was exploring it anew, feeling very young and excited.

At any rate, it was an order for her now to face herself in so many different mirrors, and to light a flame, to set certain currents . . . Now she was doing something very different. Exactly as a young

does, suddenly conscious of her powers of generalized attraction, so now with Kate; an internal thermostat was differently set . . . (39).

This brief affair does not lead to any major developments. Jeffery gets ill and has to be admitted to a convent in a small village for treatment. Kate spends time alone. This is the period when she thinks deeply about her life. She had felt earlier that she was indispensable, when one day her son, Tim, had screamed at her, “For Christ’s sake leave me alone, you are suffocating me!” (89) It was a moment of realization for her that now was the time to move on. The children no longer wanted her in their life. She thought of Michael. Did he need her? She was not yet ready to think on this issue, or maybe she dared not. “There has to be give and take in any marriage; she was quite aware that she was disinclined to examine this area too closely.” (13). Kate leaves Jeffery at the convent and embarks on a return journey. On her return she rents a flat, shares it with a young girl Maureen. The summer is not yet over and she is in no mood to rush home.

The stay at this rented flat gives Kate enough time to retrospect. Here she realizes that minus her costly dresses, her perfect make-up and her well cared hair, she amounts to nothing. On the streets she finds herself invisible. Suddenly nobody knows her or takes notice of her. This is disturbing as well as it brings in a sense of freedom. Now she is her real self, sans make-up and sans her mask!

She, for the first time, tells Maureen about her dream of the seal. The seal which was out of water, which needed help and Kate carried the seal in her hands desperately wanting to help it reach the sea. While talking about her recurring dream, Kate realizes that the seal is nothing but her inner-self struggling to free itself. She had to free herself. All her life she had dreamt of the injured seal but was unable to link it to herself. Now when she frees herself of all her attachments one-by-one she dreams of reaching the sea. Finally by the end of the novel Kate is successful in letting the Seal in the water and watches

it go where it belonged. This is the final self-realization, discovery of the real self and the ultimate joy of freedom.

Doris Lessing's *The Summer before the Dark* journeys into the inner world of a woman. This journey leads to the final truth regarding the self. A woman's world encompasses number of relations, and in the process she moves away from herself. This creates a void in her life, a feeling of not belonging, not needed and loneliness. Either she can sulk and go on living as usual or she can assert herself no matter what her age is and at what juncture of her life she is. Doris Lessing handles the mid-life crisis in a woman's life very delicately. There is no over-the-board screaming and demanding of freedom but it is a very subtle manner in which the protagonist asserts herself and gains her identity and dignity.

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