

Divorce in Doris Lessing: Can Separation Make Women Free?

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Abstract

Unlike most of the noteworthy feminist authors, Doris Lessing has moved away from the traditional way of feminist claim against the sexist society. She is different from the other feminists as she goes deep into the crisis of women and reflects realistically on their problematic position in the society. Her idea of “free women” is itself paradoxical. Divorce can make a woman free from the torture and exploitation of unsuccessful married life; however, Lessing observes that divorce results in insecurity, isolation and sexual dissatisfaction. This article attempts to discuss Lessing’s concept of divorce and its impact on women, her idea of sisterhood and above all, the relationship between man and woman. It also aims at making a parallel between Lessing’s views of divorce with Quranic view of divorce. In conclusion it establishes that the relation between women and men is undeniable as women are dependent on men for physical satisfaction and economic security; and that women’s dependency on other women for mental support is a reality in the male dominated society.

Keywords : Islam, sisterhood, marriage, divorce, freedom.

Introduction

Doris Lessing’s view to unsuccessful marriage and divorce poles apart from the traditional feministic claims as her realistic approach to the miserable condition of women after separation is given expression in her writings. Like other feminists, she never claims that woman can be free after their divorce; rather she goes deep into their helplessness in the male-dominated society. The word ‘divorce’ is itself conflicting. On the one hand, divorce terminates their suffocating and loveless married life

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and on the other hand, it leads them to the life of financial insecurity and sexual dissatisfaction. In discussing her view regarding divorce, Quranic view and rules about divorce should be taken into consideration. Allah (swt) allows the system of divorce as the last resort of solution to misunderstanding between husband and wife. In Islam the system of divorce is applicable only when all the effort to compromise proves futile. Islamic view regarding divorce and Lessing's view are in sharp contrast as she claims that to some extent, woman can be free through divorce whereas Allah declares that divorce, the worst *halal*, is applicable only when there is no other way. According to Islam, the bond of marriage is lasting and it is essential for social, mental and physical stability. Likewise, Lessing shows that though the woman can be free for the time being after divorce, again they fall into despair resulted from sexual dissatisfaction and social anxiety.

Lessing was born in Iran, then known as Persia, on 22 October 1919, to Captain Alfred Tayler and Emily Maude Tayler, who were both English and of British nationality. Largely self-educated, she was brought up on a farm in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), and in 1949 went to England, where her first novel, *The Grass Is Singing* (1950), was published. Widely regarded as one of the major writers of the mid-20th century and an influential figure among feminists, Lessing writes on a wide variety of themes including Rhodesia, women, communism, and global catastrophe. Distinguished for its energy and intelligence, her work is principally concerned with the lives of women-their psychology, sexuality, politics, work, relationship to men and to their children, and their change of vision as they age. In her later books she has mainly focused on efforts by individuals to resist society's pressures toward marginalization and acculturation.

Throughout Lessing's work run currents of realism and fantasy, each of which dominate in some novels and mingle in others. Her fiction includes a series of five novels collectively entitled *The Children of Violence*, which concern a semiautobiographical character named Martha Quest; the series includes *Martha Quest* (1952), *Ripple from the Storm* (1958), and *The Four-Gated City* (1969). A series of five science-fiction novels is collectively entitled *Canopus in Argos: Archives*, of which *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8* (1982) is best known. One of her most influential works, *The Golden Notebook* (1962), a study of the struggles of a woman writer, served as an inspiration to the feminist

movement of the 1960s and 70s, and is now considered a classic of feminist fiction. Among Lessing's other novels are *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971); *The Summer before the Dark* (1973); *The Good Terrorist* (1985); *The Fifth Child* (1988) and its sequel, *Ben, in the World* (2000); *The Sweetest Dream* (2001), a semiautobiographical tale of the 1960s; *The Grandmothers* (2003); and *The Cleft* (2007). To dramatize the plight of unknown novelists, Lessing wrote two novels, *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* (1983) and *If the Old Could* (1984), under the pseudonym of Jane Somers; they were ignored by critics until Lessing revealed their true authorship. She is well known for her short stories and has also written essays, e.g., *Time Bites* (2005). Lessing was awarded the 2007 Nobel Prize in Literature.

Divorce in Lessing

Doris Lessing shows that women are suffering in marriage and then deciding to come out of the stifling bondage by opting for divorce. They are not concerned with the legal aspects of the divorce - the delays in legal process or rigorous legal clauses which make divorce difficult for women, but are rather concerned with the repercussions of divorce on women. Lessing depicts women deciding to go for divorce rather than live a suffocating life of injustice and agony. Martha in *A Proper Marriage*, Molly and Anna in *The Golden Notebook* all leave their husbands or break the marriage which does not allow them to be free and to live life in their own way. Lessing depicts that though divorce frees them from the agony and suffering of an unhappy or unjust relationship still it does not solve the problems and women have to continue to struggle and suffer on various levels —economic, emotional and psychological. As such the questions arise: does a sexist society easily accept a woman's freedom? Does a woman find real happiness in her new role as divorcee? Does she really become free after divorce?

Traditionally marriage was considered to be the destiny for woman regardless of the fact whether she was happily married or was fed-up due to constant oppression by man in the patriarchal net. Yet, a possibility of freedom from endless suffering in unhappy marriage appeared with divorce, separation or annulment of marriage under law. Divorce is a process of giving legal acknowledgment to the breaking up of a relationship by now "shattered by irreconcilable disparity in the character of two persons or by broken faith and bitter tensions" (Aurora 1991: 89).

For ensuring harmony in the marital relations, an acceptance and adjustment of the wishes, attitudes and sentiments of both the partners is essential. But when the needs, wishes or individuality of one of the partners is ignored then this results in friction. "Divorce," as Marilyn French says, "like marriage, is morally neutral, it is good; insofar as it ends a long-term intimacy, it is to be lamented" (French 504). But surely divorce gives freedom to women to get rid of an existence of suffering owing to male-aggression or gender tyranny.

The notion of marriage as a sacrament and an indissoluble union was pervasive in the West also for centuries, and divorce was only a male's right. Woman was seen simply in relation to man. She had no life of her own. As Gilbert and Gubar comment in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, to be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead. But the woman who refuses to be altruistic and acts on her own enterprise irritates the society and is unwelcome. In the western societies, there were no justifications for which a woman could divorce her husband until Roman women gained the right to divorce in the days of the Empire. However, Protestants took a rather more liberal position on the question of divorce. "Luther seems to have believed that only adultery and desertion were adequate grounds for divorce. . . . However, in addition to adultery and desertion, cruelty and 'refusal to conjugal duty' (which meant refusal of sexual intercourse) were also considered grounds for divorce by most Protestant churches" (Qtd in Kapur 1970: 9) John Milton wrote a series of pamphlets in support of divorce in the years between 1643 and 1645 but it was only in 1857 that judicial divorce (divorce granted by a court of law) became available in England, and it was only in 1968 that the divorce laws made more *laissez-faire*.

Divorce in Islam

However, Marriage should not be legitimized under Islamic law unless it has the purpose of creating a family and providing stability for children to grow up in a healthy environment. If unsolvable problems appear between the couple, divorce is an option but it is not to be used unless it was the last resort for it creates division in the community and instability for everyone involved. Divorce could be issued from both sides (husband or wife) if there were legitimate reasons such as abuse by either of the couple and it is to be done in a court of law with evidence provided. That is the right way to do it.

Although divorce being allowed in Islam is a sign of the lenience and practical nature of the Islamic legal system, keeping the unity of the family is considered a priority for the sake of the children. For this reason, divorce is always a last choice, after exhausting all possible means of reconciliation. For example, Allah addresses men asking them to try hard to keep the marriage, even if they dislike their wives:

... live with them on a footing of kindness and equity. If ye take a dislike to them it may be that ye dislike a thing, and God brings about through it a great deal of good. (*Al Quran* 4: 19)

Also the following verse is addressed to women asking them the same thing:

If a wife fears cruelty or desertion on her husband's part, there is no blame on them if they arrange an amicable settlement between themselves; ... (*Al Quran* 4: 128)

But, if after exhausting all methods of reconciliation, the hatred between the husband and wife is still greater than tolerance, and then divorce becomes inevitable. Here comes the genius of the Islamic law, which holds practical, rather than unrealistic approaches, towards real situations. The ultimate aims of marriage, as well as any other aspect of human life, are to achieve happiness and virtue. So, when people are denied their right to end an unhappy marriage, these two aims are seriously violated. This is, as the couple will live in suffering, which may lead them to marital infidelity. Thus divorce in this case - if weighed up to the disaster of family disintegration - will be less disastrous.

Divorce and Women Freedom

The liberalization of divorce has come as an immense help to save women from nonstop oppression, or torture in marriage. And now excepting the-usual grounds of adultery, cruelty, greed etc., divorce can be granted on the mutual-consent basis, if both the partners concur and are bent upon ultimate separation; in America this is known as “no-fault” divorce.

Divorce which is admittedly a relief from the painful life of a wrong marriage is hardly enough to re-establish the woman socially, psychologically or financially. Even after divorce, the distressed or relieved woman does not find herself in the same situation as before

marriage. Despite the wounds inflicted in the unsuccessful marriage which have to be borne for a long time, a woman has to further bear the assaults of an unsympathetic society which does not allow her to be free and happy. Divorce is the beginning of another phase of troubles.

Even after divorce or separation which a woman mainly seeks for her peace, freedom and independence, she finds herself in troubled waters again. The male jealousy and cruelty operates even after divorce. Doris Lessing uses the phrase “pattern of behaviour” in *A Proper Marriage* to point out man’s jealous reaction to wife’s decision of divorce. In the last part of this novel, when Martha overcomes her initial reluctance to leave Douglas and her decision becomes publicly known, several women of the town come to her to congratulate her on what they could not do in their own lives. They also disclose the truth of their unhappy marital relationship. But her husband gets frantic and tries everything from threats and appeals to stop her from leaving him. Lessing gives a psychologically realistic description of the behavior in which a man coddles when he learns that his wife is going to leave him:

When a woman left her husband, or threatened to leave him — that is, a woman of her type, who insisted on her rights to behave as a man would—then the husband went through certain actions like an automaton, beginning with confiscating the contraceptives, threatening to make her forcibly pregnant, accusing her of multifarious infidelities, and ending in self-abasing weeping appeals that she should change her mind and stay. . . they were involved in a pattern of behaviour which they could not alter (Lessing, *A Proper Marriage*: 368-69).

Douglas tries his best to stop Martha and threatens to impregnate her so as to break her self-sufficiency. He even indulges in physical abuse to frighten her, but nothing could revise Martha’s firm decision to break the stale, unjust, one-sided relationship. And when Martha at last leaves him, he spies on her in order to blackmail her and win public sympathy. His jealousy comes down to the level of meanness and he demands back the money she spent on her personal items like “sandals” or “sweater” when she was staying with him:

He informed her that in the year before she had left him, she had bought goods to the value of \$ 20 at the shops, and he was incurring a great deal of extra expense due to her having left

him... He produced an account like a shopkeeper's on a sheet of stiff paper: Item one pair of shoes; Item one sweater, 25s.; and so on, handing it to her with a sentimental and appealing smile (Lessing, *A Ripple from the Storm*. 30).

Even while the woman is not the one asking for divorce, she still has to bear with such parsimoniousness in her husband. In *The Golden Notebook* when Richard is contemplating a divorce from Marion to marry his young secretary, he delimits his wife's monthly expenditure and checks her accounts on a regular basis; Marion uncovers his meanness to Anna:

Would you believe it, that he could be so mean? He's as rich as hell. Do you know, we are among the one per cent of people as rich as — but he examines my accounts every month. He boasted that we were among the top one per cent, but I bought a model dress and he complained (Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*: 277).

In the opening of *The Golden Notebook*, Lessing's "Free Women," Anna and Molly, are able to live "free" of men and marriage, are engaged in a what's wrong-with-men-and-marriage session. Their discussion vibrantly reveals the shakiness of their freedom. Anna and Molly develop a number of affairs after divorce in search of companionship and permanence in life but are again and again disappointed and deserted by men who come to them for their sexual satisfaction only. Whilst Molly finally decides to remarry Anna feels so dreadfully alone that she cannot sleep without a man. Paul Schlueter fittingly remarks: "Probably more than in any other novel, *The Golden Notebook* captures the authentic quality of what it is to be a woman, especially a woman in a man's world, and even more especially a woman who frankly admits the existence of her sexuality, her neuroses, her intellect, her desperation in living, her disgust at the mediocre so feverishly sought by those of either sex who are themselves mediocre, her refusal to compromise her essential being" (Schlueter 1965: 58). Lessing's Anna and Molly are quite resilient and have the capability to "create order, to create a new way of looking at life," 80) but even they feel broken, forlorn, forsaken, "insecure" and "uprooted." (31) Anna, undoubtedly, enjoys a certain amount, of physical and financial freedom; however, she also has been "afflicted with an awful feeling of disgust of futility" (58) and insecurity.

When a sick ugly man follows her off the underground, grinning triumphantly at her retreat from his lewd urges, she again feels panic, and as if to regain her balance and to calm herself; she buys fruits at a stand, smells the tart clean smell, touches the smooth or faintly hairy skins. (382-83) Though she writes fiction and does party work as a dedicated Communist; yet there is an “emotional vacuum” in her life. As she writes in her diary, she has joined the Communist Party out of a “need for wholeness, for an end to the split, divided, unsatisfactory way we all live.” (171) She is still dependent on men for “having sex; for ‘being serviced,’ for ‘being satisfied’” (44) but she is at least free enough to have a number of short affairs.

However, even this free existence is no promise of stable happiness. When Michael after four years of togetherness leaves Anna, there is a breakdown of her being. She feels as if everything is “divided off and split up.” (273) When Michael rings Anna for the last time to inform her that he will not come, she feels as if

an awful black whirling chaos is just inside me waiting to move into me. I must go to sleep quickly, before I become that chaos, I am trembling with misery and with tiredness.. . . Tomorrow, I think—tomorrow— I ‘ll be responsible, face my future, and refuse to be miserable. Then I sleep, but before I am even asleep I can hear myself crying, the sleep-crying this time all pain, no enjoyment in it all. (360)

Following having a happy life full of love, the blow of separation becomes more severe and painful for woman. When Anna’s alter ego, Ella, is deserted by her lover Paul, she too feels cracked up, as if she is “in pieces.” (311) In fact, her whole “life was shaped around a man who would not return to her.” (305) Paul’s presence and his demanding and possessive nature had so conditioned Ella that even after Paul “had left her... everything she did, said or felt; still referred to him.” She is entirely miserable when Paul plays a fraud: “She was listless and flat. It was as if Paul had taken with him, not only all her capacity for joy, but also her will.” (305) She loses her will to enjoy the things, the places, the emotions, the happiness, which she previously shared with Paul; as she says: “the truth is that my happiness with Paul was more important to me than anything and where has that landed me? Alone, frightened to be

alone.” (312) There is a total collapse of her personality and the ‘emotional vacuum’ (313) in fact deepens. In their spanking freedom, problems still exist and disappointments in getting love prolong.

Men as well need women as women need men but they can break a relationship at will, and while they have a secure family life with wives at home, women rest their whole happiness in a man and hence, his abandonment leaves them lonelier and broken, disintegrating. Women in this world of male superiority can depend for comfort and understanding, for solace and company on other women like them.

Solidarity amongst Women

The process of women developing solidarity among themselves is defined as “sisterhood,” when women cease to be rivals of each other or stop competing for the attention of a male, and develop deep “social relationship with one another” (Mitchel and Oakley 1976: 13). Feminists urge women that they should protect, advise and boost each other’s morale to face the male-hegemony. As G. Alison Raymond also tells women, if they “do not take initiative to change conditions no one else is likely to do so” (Raymond 1965: 70). Sisterhood aims at cutting across the racial, political, class or age barriers.

Freud detected jealousy as a feminine trait, but Lessing’s women do not manifest it. On the contrary, they bolster up each other, offer solace to, and help and support each other. The chief aim of sisterhood is to help women in distress irrespective of color and class. Feminists repeatedly warn women: ‘None of us can be free until all are free.’”

In Lessing’s works, sisterhood chiefly exists among the white women. Lessing’s heroines are quite removed from the problems of black women. When sometimes they are ready to do something good for them, the black women remain distant from the developmental activities, perhaps because their men do not want them to be educated and aware. Hence, the black women suffer from twofold tyranny— from the male supremacy and from the racists. In *A Ripple from the Storm* Martha as a communist welfare worker visits the location to give a lecture on personal hygiene, viz., ‘How to Keep Your Body Clean,’ “How to Feed Your Family,” etc. To her surprise no black woman turns up in the meeting. (199) In *A Ripple from the Storm*, the camaraderie amongst the

white women is invigoratingly highlighted by Lessing. Martha is helped by the kind, benevolent comrade Jasmine, when she is in trouble financially or emotionally. Martha also helps Maisie when the latter is in the family way and effectively arranges her marriage with Andrew.

One of the best examples of sisterhood can be seen in *The Golden Notebook*. Anna and Molly, separated from their husbands, live together, provide security, support and company to each other without encroaching on each other's privacy or identity. Sisterhood is not binding on them. Anna when she likes, moves out to a separate flat without ill feeling for Molly. Men accuse women who live together of being lesbians. Ella protests against the false allegation:

Paul dislikes Ella's relationship with Julia. He sees it as a pact against him, and makes professional jokes about the lesbian aspects of this friendship. At which Ella says that in that case, his friendships with men are homosexual? (214)

Lessing's women are not separatists. They hunt for wholeness in a male world itself. Though jealousy has been alleged to be a feminine trait, there is no jealousy between Molly and Marion, Richard's second wife. Molly even instills necessary courage in Marion to assert her individuality against the rough, hostile and oppressive stance of Richard. Lessing's women help each other, confide in each other and whatever freedom is possible it comes with the help of the women friends alone. Lessing's women, more strong and Amazonian and like Nora help themselves to evade imposition of the male hegemony.

Divorce cannot undermine Lessing's women, they are "boulder-pushers" (*The Golden Notebook*, 215); they are seekers of truth and fight against cruelty, slavery, and violence to build a balanced and nobler world "fell of people who don't hate and fear and murder." (*The Golden Notebook*, 604) Her "free woman" is far from contented and happy, but she chooses an independent way of life because it is less miserable than that of conventional married woman. Even though freedom gives her some happiness and independence to be one's original self, as Marion says, to "live as you like. . . Do as you like," (275) yet the suffering persists. A free woman is exposed to dangers at every level and has to pay a serious price in terms of her exploitation and harassment. In the West, "Free Women" are usually taken as sex-hungry and men find them "much

more exciting than the dill tied women,” (*The Golden Notebook*, 441) and are eager to have sex with them especially when their wives are away, as Anna puts it:

Now we free women know that the moment the wives of our men friends go into the nursing home, dear Tom, Dick and Harry come straight over, they always want to sleep with one of their wives’ friends. God knows why, a fascinating psychological fact among so many, but it’s a fact. (47)

And as Molly Hite comments while discussing Lessing’s works, “paradoxically, a free woman is one who is available to men, whether or not she wants to play the roles of mistress, comforter, and therapist that they require of her” (Hite 1988: 495).

Fear of loneliness, insecurity, emotional vacuum, financial pressures and unjust division of responsibility make the divorcees come back to men and remarry. They return to marriage in the hope of coexistence, in the hope of a world “shared” equally by both the sexes.

The knowledge of their dependence on men makes Anna cry in *The Golden Notebook*: “I’m not free,” said Anna. . . . ‘Marion, I’d like to be married. I don’t like living like this.” (277) After remaining a free woman for long, Molly too finally decides to remarry. (636) The recompense of freedom is, thus, insecurity and loneliness. If love within marriage is not possible, it is further difficult after divorce. Like Lessing many contemporary women writers such as Anita Brookner, Eva Figs and Emma Tennant explore the theme of freedom and loneliness of free women in their works.

Lessing, the iconoclast, trenchantly brings to the surface that even after achieving cherished freedom in all spheres, women are not truly free and happy as they envision, and have to pay a serious price for their independence. A free woman feels lonelier and unprotected in a sexist society which is ready to pound her identity and eccentricity at every opportunity. The realization thus dawns on her that while divorce provides one kind of freedom, i.e. freedom from oppression and exploitation by the husband, it creates new forms of sufferings and problems as well. Most of Lessing’s women remarry not because they are anti-feminists nor because they are enthusiastic to go again to oppression within marriage; on the contrary they envisage an organized

whole world there, as Cynthia Cockburn puts it, “the good qualities deemed masculine— courage, strength and skill, for instance — and the good qualities seen as feminine— tenderness, the ability to feel and / express feelings — should be the qualities available to all” (qtd in Lynne Segal, 1987: XIV-XV).

Conclusion

Doris Lessing stands apart from the conventional feministic approaches as she sensibly reflected women’s condition in their unsuccessful married life as well as after divorce. Lessing’s paradox in relation between man and woman lies in the fact that to be free from repulsive and sterile married life they decides for divorce and again they feel the need of man for the financial security and sexual demand. According to Lessing, woman can never be free whether they are divorced or married; though divorce takes them to the life of independence, this freedom accelerated new segment of oppression comprises loneliness, sexual discontent and social diffidence. Lessing’s women find out an alternative way to compensate their suffering and loneliness by developing a feeling of commonality among the women. They believe in sisterhood and remain exceptional in the sense that they are not resentful to each other. Finally, with a view to filling the emotional vacuum, they decide to remarry and unlike traditional feminist and they revert to men.

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