

Doris May Lessing and Modernism

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Abstract

The main purpose of this paper is to analyze the modernist characteristics during the period of Doris Lessing - one of the most charming fiction writers of modern English literature. To work out the modernist trends in Doris Lessing's works is altogether a difficult task as the modern and post-modern features of her works are indistinguishably intermixed with each other. Even the great critics over the last fifty years have failed to reach to an all acceptable conclusion in this regard. Their decisions and conclusions are varied and different and often, seem to be contradictory. At the very start, a reader gets worried to find a plethora of definition of the term "modernism". And then there are as many definitions of the term as there are critics. Some call modernism a philosophical movement that, along with cultural trends and changes, arose from wide - scale and far - reaching transformations in western society in the late 19th century and early 20th century. Nevertheless, modernism was a change greatly felt in the traditional forms of art, architecture, religious beliefs, social organizations and day - to - day activities of life. All of which were deemed to have become ill - fitted in the new economic, social and political environment of an emerging fully industrialized western world.

Keywords: modernism, modernist novel, industrial development

Introduction

Some simply called "modernism" as a mood of thinking and some named it as "socially progressive trend of thought" that affirms the power of human beings to create, improve and re - shape their environment with the aid of practical experimentation, scientific knowledge and technology with this perspective, modernism encouraged the re - examination and revaluation of every aspect of human existence from commerce to philosophy. Still others focus on modernism as an aesthetic introspection. There are specific reactions about the use of technology in the first world war and we find anti - technological and nihilistic aspects of the works of such writers as Nietzsche and Samuel Beckett. In fact modernism in literature is not a chronological designation. It is a literary form with loosely defined characteristics but explicitly marked by a strong and intentional break with tradition, with a strong reaction against established religions, political organizations and social views. The movement of modernism grew out of a general sense of disillusionment with Victorian attitudes of certainty, conservatism and objective truth. Some critics believe that modernism developed out of Romanticism's revolt against the effects of Industrial Revolution. Graff asserts that "the ground motive of modernism was criticism of the nineteenth century bourgeois social order and its world view the modernists are carrying the torch of Romanticism. In the same way, the English poets and painters that constituted the pre - Raphaelite Brotherhood opposed the dominant trends of the industrial Victorian England. Art critic Clemant Greenberg called the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood as pro-modernists. Rationalism has also had opponents in the philosophers Soren Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, both of whom had significant influence on existentialism with all the technological advances of nineteenth century, from 1870's onward, the idea that history and civilization were inherently progressive and that progress was always good, came under increasing attack. It was argued that the values of the artist and those of society were not only

different but society too was anti - theatrical to progress and surely could not move forward in its present form. Then came the thinkers and scientists who shattered all traditional views boldly. Schopenhauer in his book, "The World as Will and Idea" called into question the previous optimism. Hard blows came to traditionality from the biologist Charles Darwin and political scientist Karl Marx. Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection challenged and put to doubt the religious certainty and the peculiarity of human uniqueness. His notion that human beings were driven by the same impulses as 'lower animals', proved difficult to be reconciled with the idea of an ennobling spirituality. Marx came with his new political theory stressing that there were fundamental contradictions within the capitalist system and the workers were anything but free. Influential in the early days of modernism were the theories of Sigmund Freud and Nietzsche. Freud's first major work was "Studies on Hysteria" yet central to his thinking is the idea of the primacy of the unconscious mind in mental life. According to this great psychoanalyst all subjective reality is based on the play of basic drives and instincts through which the outside world is perceived. The view involved an unconscious mind full of primal impulses. Nietzsche put forward a philosophy in which psychological drives; especially 'will to power' was of central importance. He sometime identified life itself with 'will to power', which means an instinct for growth and durability. Henry Bergson emphasized difference between scientific clock time and the direct subjective human experience of time. His theory on 'time and consciousness' had a great influence on those twentieth century novelists like Richardson, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. All those great writers used the stream of consciousness technique in their modernist fiction. No doubt, important literary processors of modernism were Dostoyevsky, Walt Whitman, Strindberg and Harry James. Dostoyevsky wrote the novels 'Crime and Punishment' and 'The Brothers Karamazov', while Walt Whitman published the poetry collection 'Leaves of Grass', Strindberg and Henry James have

also been seen as significant precursors of modernism. From the collision of ideals of Romanticism came the first wave of works during the first decade of the 20th century which broke the general public trend that artists were the interpreters and representatives of bourgeois culture and ideas. Doris Lessing is a supremely gifted diverse writer. She has written volumes of books on fiction, besides trying hand on short stories and dramas. She really deserves to be called a 'gifted' writer, as her literary output is so great that it seems humanly impossible for greater scholars even. They call her a 'diverse writer' befittingly as her range of writing field is so wide that its proper estimation baffles the critics. Her writing career spanned over about sixty years, a period of upheavals, international wars and use/misuse of atom bombs. Sure, such a sensible and sensitive mind as of Doris Lessing could have not remained unaffected under these destructive circumstances. All along her, Lessing fought on all fronts. This will suffice to say what Pathan Patelkha Yusufkha says in his doctoral thesis: "*Doris Lessing is a major force in contemporary English literature holding a unique position as iconoclastic, outspoken critic of society and politics with a sage-like, almost magisterial status*".

Whether modernism was a philosophical movement or a socially progressive trend, this much can be safely said that it was a change felt on land ---- the Western Europe and North America --- and not in space. This change had covered these countries slowly and not abruptly, in phases and stages until it became discernable and explicitly visible. It had changed the material aspects as well as, the religious beliefs and certainty of engagement thinking no doubt, there were many co - related factors that shaped modernism. But all this began with the rapid growth of science which gave rise to modern industrial societies. Industries helped and accelerated production in every field of life, which followed with rapid growth of cities. The social, economic and political environment of this fully industrialized world was so drastically changed that traditional forms of art, architecture, literature, religious faith, social organizations and even activities of daily life were thought to become ill - fitted to it. The Oxford Encyclopedia of British Literature sees modernism ending by 1939 with regard to British and American Literature or in the least "ceding its prominence to post - modernism".

However, Ezra Pound's 1934 pronouncement 'Make it New' is considered the touch-stone of the movements approach towards what it saw as 'the now absolute culture of the past'. All this shows that everyone is welcome to his/her own opinion as the dates are highly debatable. Besides, the rise of the movement of modernism was not sudden, as it arose in phases and stages. Its passage was linear and open - ended. It went on gaining momentum and gained in density and concentration. It seems feasible to agree with the majority of critics and literary historians that the first half the twentieth century witnessed the dominance of modernism. Leaving apart periodization, the problem of categorization still revolves in the minds of the critics. The critics were forced to sub - divide modernism into realism, naturalism, symbolism, futurism, Dadaism, surrealism. David Brooks opines that after all these isms comes 'High modernism'. This 'high - modernism' naturally and automatically gets indistinguishably intermingled with post - modernism. According to Brooks 'High Modernism' found its voice in the novel genre of E. M. Forester, Joseph Conrad, Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence and James Joyce. This metamorphosis of West - European culture had been well

described by Hugo Ball.

"An epoch is collapsing. A culture which has lasted for a millennium is collapsing. There are no pillars and supporters, no foundations any longer which have not been blown to smithereens---- A transvaluation of all values came about. This collapse of Western Culture had its heyday in Enlightenment period. It had lost its utility after that and now there were no scholars and philosophers like Locke and Kant who served as its 'pillars and supports'. Sheppard describes its derisive condition after its fall when he says, "European culture was experiencing the subversion of the most fundamental assumptions and conceptual models on which the liberal humanist epoch had been based"

Even in Victorian period, Thomas Hardy the poet and the novelists, Hopkins and A.E. Houseman represent a few of the major early modernists of England. The most important assumption of the liberal humanist approach was its belief in attaining the absolute truth and supported the idea that man can control the world and nature. Scientific advancements had necessarily increased man's knowledge of his surroundings and it was thought of great advantage for the liberal humanist approach. According to Peter Barry human nature is essentially unchanging as the same passions are seen again and again throughout human history. Besides, liberal humanism believed in "the transcendent subject which transcends the forces of society, experience and language". But soon the 20th century's social, political philosophical and artistic scenes destroyed this liberal humanist epoch. It was a time when certain principles of this approach were questioned. Even though the great challengers of the humanist epoch, like Marx and Darwin, had been long dead - but their ideas established institutions of modernization. However, as Peter Faulkner says the world of twentieth century was much more complex than the world as it had been known before especially more complex than the orderly world that had been presented to the reader in Victorian literature. Karl Marx with his "Capital" and "Communist Manifesto" counted the capitalist system responsible for the crisis of the European culture. Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory doubted the creation myths of the holy books, shaking faith in a divine creator. To this effect so many people began to question the religious dogmas. Sigmund Freud's announced that self was fixed and stable but evolving, discontinuous and fragmented. Finally Canoe the hard stroke of the World War I and it shattered the dreams of noble ideas like human dignity and human progress. As Nietzsche had claimed, a revaluation of all values was inevitable. All this gave rise to modernist fiction and as a consolation to us. Bradbury and McFarlane say "*Modernism is our art: it is the one art that responds to the scenario of our chaos. Modernism is then the art of modernization*"

The destruction of many institutions and assumptions like liberalism, nationality, family religion, and humanism gave rise to one of the most brilliant and elegant literary movements called as modernism, which has expressed our modern consciousness, created in its works the nature of modern experience at its fullest. Anyway most of the literary critics introduce modernism as a break away from traditional, rather nineteenth century ideas and thinking altitudes Wolfreys, Robbins and Womack simply define the term modernism by referring it to the literary, artistic and general culture of the first half of the twentieth century.

"Modernism is distinguished by its general rejection of

previous literary traditions, particularly those of the late nineteenth century and of bourgeois society”.

The term modernism is better defined in “Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms” which calls it a general term “applied retrospectively to the wide range of experimental and avant – garde trends in literature and other parts of the early 20th century”.

In the same view ‘Britina Concise Encyclopedia’ calls it a radical break with the past and concurrent search for new forms of expression. It further says that modernism fastened the period of experimentation from the late 19th to the mid 20th century, a period characterized by industrialization, rapid social change, advances in science and social sciences. In short one can say that modernism started as a reaction against the Victorian attitudes and conventions and went ahead with the passage of the century with the writing experimentation of such modernists as; Eliot, Pound, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Becket. The modernist trends in the works of these writers were directly proportional to the social, political, religions and economic changes of the early 20th century, rather we can apply the theory of ‘cause and effect’ while co-relating the modernist trends literature with the existing general environment of the concerned times. This break with tradition is highly important to define modernism and according to Astradur Eysteinnsson it “must be seen as the hall mark of modernism, the one feature that seems capable of rendering the concept a critical coherence”. Brooks also agrees that ‘High Modernist’ movement finds itself at peak in the novel genre of such novelists as; E. M. Forster, Joseph Conrad Virginia Woolf, Lawrence and James Joyce.

These novelists changed or the surrounding circumstances forced them to change the techniques of fiction writing and to accommodate their style in order to portray the chaos and confusion of the world they lived in. It was their fixed belief that there was so much wanting in the spirituality of the times and this spiritual crisis led to the disintegration and fragmentation of the society and gave rise to soul – less and psychologically distorted individuals. The writers as well as began to liberate themselves from the constraints and conventions of Victorianism and this modernism exploded onto the international scene in the aftermath of World War I. This war had surely physically devastated and psychologically disillusioned the west in an unprecedented way. The World War I continued for 1565 days and about nine million people were killed during this war, while the number of injured was about twenty two million. The total expenditure of this war was about four lakh million dollars. Modernist’s authors sought to break away from traditions and conventions through experimentation with new literary forms, devices and styles. The modern novel achieved its modernity by phases and stages. In Allen Walter’s term, there appeared a mutation in the novel, with the publication of George Eliot’s “Adam Bede” and George Meredith’s “The Ordeal of Richard Ferval” with the help of this mutation, almost all the literary trends of the Victorian period were banished from the scene ‘with this mutation the novel achieved the seriousness absent in the Victorian novel’ (Allen, 1958:218-219). After two decades this mutation became dominant and gave birth to the Modernist English fiction. This fiction described as sacred office by Henry James, began to be valued as it had never been valued till then. The modernist novel had necessarily to free itself from the Victorian sense of moral responsibility since “the world has

become too chaotic, and issue too complex, for any moral pontificating”.

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