

Doris Lessing's Cultural Trauma and Traumatic Writing

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ABSTRACT

Doris Lessing is a writer who has a multi-cultural background from the glimpse of her personal life experiences. The influential immigrations and her experiences in crossing among the different cultures bring her identity confusion or cultural trauma, which also plays a very important role in her writing career. The multi-cultural identities and her special spirits as a wanderer of the mainstream culture contribute her success in writing. Children of Violence is her representative of traumatic writing in culture. The protagonist Martha Quest as Lessing's spokesman constantly searches for cultural self in cultural confusion.

Key words: Doris Lessing, cultural trauma , traumatic writing, Children of Violence, Martha Quest

1. Introduction

The first person who mentions the term 'cultural trauma' is Jeffrey Alexander who is a professor of sociology in Yale University. He pointed out :“Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel that they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways.” (Jeffrey, 2004 .1) According to Professor Alexander's view, cultural trauma stresses the influences to a whole group of people caused by the traumatic events and experiences, and every member in the group can be influenced by the cultural traumas. Identity involves in the domain of culture. When people feel worried about their identities, that is, they feel haunted by the sense of rootless and exile, their cultural trauma occurs.

2. Lessing's Cultural Trauma

Doris Lessing was born in Iran, grew up in Rhodesia of South Africa and came back to her motherland the UK at the age of 30. In her early African novels and short stories, she pours out all her complicated feelings toward Africa. She loves the wild and beautiful landscape in Africa, but the lack of sense of belonging always makes her feel painful and sad. As a matter of fact, she is a ' third culture kid ' in her childhood.

The mobile childhood of the third culture kid makes her feel far from both the culture of motherland and the countries she immigrates to. Her parents also try to shape her identity of the original culture in the family, they keep all the social norms and living habits of the British middle class like all the other white colonizers in the colonies. But in fact the country where she lives in and physically experience in her growth is the real home for her. Doris Lessing recalls in her first autobiography, "That England they (her parents) talked about, all that green grass and spring flowers and cows as friendly as cats--what had all that to do with me?" (Doris, 1994. 82) Lessing thinks that the white colonizers occupy the land that belongs to the local black people, but they are still the outsiders rather than the masters of the land. Although the white colonizers are the masters and rulers of the colony, they are still the outsiders in spirit. So she feels that she belongs to nowhere, this feeling gives her a deep thinking about cultural traumas. She expresses her traumas as a stranger and an exile in a strange cultural atmosphere in her writing, which is also the voice of all the people who have cultural traumas like her. Doris Lessing's life and heart wander in a place far from the imperial center of culture and any other cultural influences for good.

Africa becomes a land for the white colonizers to find solace and comfort, and Doris Lessing spent much happy time in the wild land of Africa in her childhood. The strong emotional reasons drove Doris Lessing to come back

to Rhodesia in 1956, but she was told that she was a prohibited immigrant and sent back to England immediately. She felt very upset about the journey, so she wrote all her disappointment and sadness of the journey and longing for Africa in her non-fiction *Going Home*, 'home' is Africa in her mind.

Doris Lessing is also an imperial outsider. She came back to her motherland England in 1949, but her sense of homeless and exile did not disappear with the returning to the white mainstream culture. As a matter of fact she did not regard her move to England as homecoming, her aims were to escape from her family, from the place full of racial discrimination and political atmosphere at that time, and she also took her dream of being a writer to England. She recalls her feeling of strangeness to London in her first autobiography, "How London's enormous does dismay its newcomers, and I was still that, six, seven, eight years after my arrival, for I was always trying to come to terms with it, take it in." (Doris, 1997. 181) It was still very difficult for her to adapt to new life and new identity after many years of her life in London. "I was still so much on the edge of life in London, just clinging on with my fingers." (Doris, 1997. 134) She is in both the mainstream and marginal cultural position in England, she does not belong to African culture or English culture either, so she always feels divided and lost at the bottom of her heart. The experiences of crossing the borders of many cultures bring her traumas as well as shape her a different perspective and spirits in her writing. The alienation and confusion about identity caused by cultural trauma are always central to her writing.

Furthermore, the various postwar popular cultural phenomena such as hippie, punk and homosexuality penetrated into the traditional values and many other aspects in daily life of English people as well as the traditional cultures and of the society at that time. People's values and views of the world and life changed dramatically with these new cultural phenomena and tendencies. Culture became more and more industrialized and commercialized. The different new kinds of cultural forms were in the crossroad of transformation in the postwar English society. As a conscientious and insightful intellectual, Doris Lessing has also her worries about culture and the spiritual wealth of human. Lessing who witnessed and reflected the new change of culture believes that the process of changing and rebirth is inevitably painful and traumatic to the people in that special historical stage. With a long vision, she wrote the real cultural traumas of hers and her generation in her works.

3. Traumatic Writing

"Her restless imagination suggests the exile's wanderings, but finally, it is writing itself that is Doris Lessing's truest home." (Carole, 2000. 2) Doris Lessing spends her whole life in pursuit of her own identity, she also implies her pursuit by choosing the name of the female protagonist Martha Quest in her 5-volume *Children of Violence*, which includes *Martha Quest* (1952), *A Proper Marriage* (1954), *A Ripple from the Storm* (1958), *Landlock* (1965) and *The Four-Gated City* (1969). "In this department of a masterpiece, the protagonist Martha Quest flashes the author's shadow indistinctly." (Wangning, 2008. 152) "Quest" means searching and pursuit, both Martha and her creator Doris Lessing search the identity in their multi-cultural life experiences. Martha is a typical figure of the outsider in the British contemporary society in Doris Lessing's works. She is an English person living in the colony with totally different culture from her motherland, she is haunted by the atmosphere of racial discrimination in her living time and society. As a third culture kid, she never stops thinking about coming back to her motherland where is a completely strange place for her. She lives on the edge of all the cultures for her entire life, the sense of exile and homelessness follows her throughout her life. The same with the author herself, Martha also immigrates for searching her own cultural identity. Doris Lessing uses her personal experiences as a colonial intruder and imperial outsider to show the cultural traumas of Martha and the people who have the same experiences with her vividly and authentically. The exile of Doris Lessing and Martha Quest is a kind of salvation both physically and spiritually for them to relieve from the sense of homelessness.

As a young person who was born and raised in a white colonizers' family in Africa, Martha holds her different feelings and attitudes toward Africa and African people from her parents. However as a white settler who lives in a family with the atmosphere of the strong English middle class and the English education and tradition that she takes from her parents, Martha is doomed to have a complicated complex of Africa. She thinks that Africa is her home, but she is also an alien white settlers. She has the same opinion with her parents though she does not like to admit. This ambiguous attitude and marginal social position cause her cultural traumas. It is not individual trauma, but collective trauma existing in the mind of many generations continuously rooting in the society.

The sense of exile still haunts Martha with the leaving of home full of the white middle class atmosphere after her marriage. The identity of Martha and her parents make them feel the motherland is always alien to them. Africa is also alien to the people who carry their former culture to the strange place with a totally different culture. The childhood as a third culture kid brings her incredible traumas. "She asked herself if there was any moment of her childhood she would choose to live again, and she could only reply that no, there was not." (Doris, 1970. 129)

In *A Ripple from the Storm*, Doris Lessing expresses the cultural trauma of Martha as a member in a white minority group of Communists who fight for getting reasonable rights and position for the black. However in fact she and her comrades have little contact with local black African people because of the difficulties for them to cross the color bar in their mind. The fall of the empire of Britain after the two great wars and the revealing social problems afterwards make the white colonizers in the colonies doubt the former images and impressions of the motherland in their mind, so they feel more alien to England. Martha is an opponent of color bar in the circle of the white, and a white colonizer in the eyes of the black at the same time. This dilemma and complicated position sharpen her sense of exile and cause her trauma of losing the sense of belonging.

In *Landlocked*, Martha's second husband Anton Hesse, her lover Thomas and friend Jack are all the outsiders and wanderers in the country. They are locked in the small world of the postwar Rhodesia, and a small circle of the white who go against racism and colonialism there. They have many ideas and ambitions, but the identity as a white colonizer to African people stops all their actions and plans. Martha leaves the landlocked place for the UK in order to pursue her own identity and true self in the end of the novel.

Martha finally comes back to her 'home' England in the beginning of *The Four-Gated City*. She spends much time in walking on the streets of London alone aimlessly for several months when she arrives in the strange city. The sense of emptiness and strangeness invades and attacks her. She can not find the feeling of home in this city, so she chooses to wander in the city to observe and understand her little by little like a bystander. Fast pace of life and different kinds of technology inventions in the city make her breathless and repressed. In the noisy, ugly and dangerous city, Martha loses herself again, she can not find her identity and wholeness in the labyrinth-like city. She dreams a city from the central market place to the four gates, which is a golden and noble city with "stunted trees", "flower-bordered terraces", "splashing fountains and the sound of flutes" where "citizens moved, grave and beautiful, black and white and brown together" (Doris, 1952. 11) The people with different colors of skin can live peacefully and equally here. The final destruction of London in the end of *The Four-Gated City* hints Doris Lessing's desire of such a new and ideal place like what Martha dreams. Doris Lessing also gives people the hope and power to pursue Martha's dream in her writing of cultural traumas.

4. Conclusions

The complicated life experiences as a colonial intruder and imperial outsider force Doris Lessing shoulder the responsibility to write the traumatic memories of her nation and generation. She has a wandering soul between two cultures, and she can not find her root in either of them. She shows her complicated hatred toward the racism and colonialism, her deep sympathy toward the black in the African colonies and her confused identity as a white settler in her writing. The condition of an exile makes Doris Lessing become a writer who is sensitive to notice and observe the cultural traumas of the white intellectuals and rebels like Martha Quest. She sees the conflicts between political struggle and personal life, and understands the relationship between individual conscience and collective during her seeking cultural self. The series of events make the five novels all blend into one harmonious whole, which express Martha's constant pursuit from the beginning to the end. It is also the inevitable for Lessing to seek cultural self from her cultural trauma and to mature her philosophical individual. Just like Doris Lessing, Martha's life is a quest of life. Just like Martha Quest, Doris Lessing's cultural trauma is the whole exiles' trauma. "Quest" embodies the cultural spirit of human beings____ so long as we live, we will explore continuously. It is also the most prominent point of modern culture.

5. References

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