Doris Lessing’s *Our Friend Judith* as a Projection of Liberal Feminism

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Abstract  
The current study attempts to provide light on Doris Lessing’s prominence as one of the most influential English novelists of the 1960s. She is an author who is interested in the portrayal of Western women’s identities of 20th-century English society. She has presented the socio-economic status of women in the masculine society through the characters of Judith and Betty. This study would like to demonstrate Lessing’s treatment of the question of socio-economic, and cultural inequalities with regard to women of modern times as reflected in *Our Friend Judith*. Judith represents a generation of open-minded, strong, independent, and unfettered women who support liberal causes for other women with dedication and noble mission. On the other hand, Betty has matched herself with the features of a nomad because of her traditional imprisonment. So, this study aims to foster a difference between a liberal woman and a traditional woman to foster the practical picture of women’s status in the masculine society. It would like to examine Lessing’s treatment of liberal feminism through the art of characterization and plot construction.

Keywords: Doris Lessing, Feminism, Gender inequality, Liberal feminism, *Our Friend Judith*

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Introduction

Doris Lessing (1919-2013) shifted her worldview from Southern Rhodesia, where she was born and raised until her thirties, to postwar London and the mother country, where she arrived in 1949. The incredible journey of a lady determined to find meaning in her life is depicted by psychological conflicts. They have, nevertheless, had a considerable impact on her fictional writings, leading to a frequent theme of the search for true selfhood. Her primary focus, however, is on women’s yearning for self-awareness. She is widely considered as one of the world’s most courageous female writers, as well as an outspoken ex-communist and fervent feminist. She positions herself as the most promising social and feminist writer in the history of English literature. She was a strong supporter and advocate for women’s independence and equality. Women’s viewpoints, she believes, will be a significant indicator in deciding and shaping womanhood’s future destiny. To achieve gender equality, women must first think that they crave for power and freedom in the masculine law, where they struggle to get freedom from everything.

The search for self-knowledge, as well as the eventual realization of one’s place in society, seems to be significant themes throughout Lessing’s writings. Lessing has studied about women’s issues to discover their identities, power, and freedom of her times. She argues that a woman can define herself if she is already predetermined in a masculine representation paradigm; and she is entangled in a web of patriarchal ideological and discursive constructions.

The gender standards that limited and governed women’s lives in the 1960s are investigated and condemned in the story Our Friend Judith. In the story, the protagonist, Judith, represents a generation of open-minded, strong, independent, and unfettered women who support liberal causes and set an example for other females with similar interests and concerns to follow in her footsteps. The mysterious narrator and Betty, Judith’s acquaintance, appear to enjoy, if not relish, traditionalism. They still have their open-mindedness; after all, one cannot conceive of love without thinking of affection. Judith, without a doubt, is on the opposite side of the issue. She is everything Betty and the narrator are not, could not be, or will ever be. She is also a lecturer at a university and a modern woman who embraces all of modernity’s principles and values, including atheism, independence, free love, and loneliness. Judith is such a woman whose liberal attitudes label her as weird and unwittingly causes a schism in the masculine world.

Rationale of the Study

This study would like to find out a new dimension of Lessing’s Our Friend Judith through applying the theory of feminism. It would like to investigate Lessing’s treatment and outlooks regarding women and social system of modern times through the art of characterization and plot construction. Thus, it will show further new directions and findings of literary research in the comparative literature.

Significance of the Study

This study shows how Lessing’ idea of feminism through the character of Judith. It also focuses on feminism through Lessing’s powerful female character in different facets of human philosophy.
Research Question

Based on the study, the current researcher aims to formulate a central research question to be explored. Here, the research question is as follows: Why does Judith’s character signify as a radical woman in Lessing’s age?

Literature Review

According to Raina (2017), the term “feminism” is derived from the Latin word “femina,” which means “woman,” and was initially applied to issues of equality and the women’s rights movement. The *Oxford English Dictionary* highlights feminism as “the state of being feminine or womanly.” *Webster's Dictionary* (1989) defines the term “feminism” as “the concept that women should have political rights equal to men.” Furthermore, “the phrases ‘feminist’ or ‘feminism’ are political labels signifying support for the goals of the new Woman’s Movement that developed in the late 1960s” (Moi, 1985, p. 56).

Feminism is a collection of movements and philosophies focused at defining, establishing, and defending women’s political, economic, and social rights (Udhayakumar, 2012). It also aims to ensure that women have equal access to education and work. It is a supporter or champion of women’s rights and equality. As a social movement, its goal is to address societal inequities by providing women with the same rights and privileges as men, enabling them to reclaim their rightful place in society. Following the feminist reawakening in the 1970s, feminists, including Gloria Steinem, Susan Brownmiller and Kate Millett (1975) realized that equal rights alone would not be enough to free women from sexual and social oppression. Despite legislation to the contrary, intellectual deprivation, economic exploitation, physical violence, gender discrimination, and a lack of personal independence all continued to obstruct women’s lives.

Feminist critics and academics have split the movement into three stages, each of which is crucial in achieving different goals for the cause. The first wave refers to the 19th- and early-20th-century women’s suffrage campaigns in the United Kingdom and the United States, with an emphasis on women gaining the right to vote. Initially, the first wave of feminists focused on increasing equality between the sexes and property ownership, along with opposing chattel marital relationship and husbands’ ownership of married women and their children. Waters (2005) writes that a married woman’s household becomes like a prison since the husband owns everything in the house, and the wife, his breeding machine, is the most loathsome of all the fixtures.

The second wave of feminism, which emerged after World War II and aimed to establish legal and social equality for women as well as eliminate discrimination, was known as the women’s liberation movement. This period was also perceived as a continuation of the first wave of feminism; in fact, the term

first wave” was introduced after the second wave emerged. In the early 20th-century, one of the most influential feminist critics, was Simone de Beauvoir, a writer of *The Second Sex* with the well-known phrase “one does not become a woman, but rather becomes a woman” (Beauvoir, 1986, p. 35).
Beauvoir contrasts sex from gender, claiming that gender is “a gradually acquired component of identity” (p. 35). In addition to this, she maintains that gender is the cultural meaning and form that a body takes on, as well as the many forms of acculturation that body has through. While the third wave feminism, sometimes known as post-feminism, began in the early 1990s and is still going strong today.

Post feminism relates to second-wave feminism’s perceived failings, and it continues to fight for the same principles as earlier waves. However, the movement’s orientation has altered slightly, with a greater emphasis on the individual self rather than governmental processes and rules.

**Analysis of Our Friend Judith**

During Lessing’s times, women were constantly confronted with a variety of challenges at every sphere of their life. Their male counterparts oppressed and mistreated them. They were their slaves and were completely under their authority. They had no power to protest, to express themselves, or to demand their rights and freedom. They were not allowed to make their own decisions. They were subjected to several illegal actions and cruelties. They were denied education, but some of the powerful women, like Elaine Showalter and Mary Wollstonecraft in history broke the silence and demonstrated their power. Literature, by definition, is a depiction of life. It was apparent throughout the works. Feminism served as a platform for women to express their concerns, and through their works, the rest of the world learned about their problems, allowing the concept of feminism to develop.

However, in Lessing’s novels and stories, we notice that women who rely on marriage for pleasure and fulfillment end up as society’s victims. And it looks that Lessing, who is well aware of the problem, has no recourse. But how does Lessing cope with unmarried women who are facing difficulties? Some women, it appears, choose and then rely on their partners for identification, while others, like Judith in “Our Friend Judith,” choose to let their job and position dictate their social status. Some women appear to choose and then rely on their husbands to provide them with a sense of self-identity while others, like Judith in *Our Friend Judith*, prefer to let their job and position determine their social standing.

The short story *Our Friend Judith* is set in the 1960s, at the early phases of second-wave Feminism, when the modern woman became popular. Lessing is a second-wave feminist who has concentrated on issues of gender, race, class, and identity (Watkins, 2007). Judith, the female heroine, personifies modern women as envisioned by early feminists; she is a lady who physically responds to their fantasies and meets, if not beyond, their expectations. Furthermore, she is the self-assured, disinterested, self-aware intellectual poetess who stimulates liberals and is a role model for other women to emulate if they share common concerns and interests. She is completely conscious of her nonconformist status concerning the broader social mainstream and, more importantly, does not attempt to hide it. It is important noting that Lessing portrays Judith as the spokesman for the brewing generation, who would claim access to whatever was once thought to be off-limits to women. In this regard, a Lessing critic, O’ Neil (2004) argues that Lessing’s protagonists, many of them are women, are in the midst of growth and transformation.
According to O’ Neil (2004), we should pay attention to Judith’s perspective and attitude toward married and unmarried women. As indicated by her creation of Judith, Lessing is a feminist novelist who is captivated by her characters’ isolated attitudes. So, she has fostered that any character should experience loneliness and conflicts because human life is the stimulation that causes any man and woman to behave in a sociable manner.

**Our Friend Judith** presents Judith Castlewell’s carefree and independent life through the eyes of her companions, the anonymous narrator and Betty. They have been friends for a long time yet have very different lifestyles. While the narrator and Betty lead what would be considered a typical woman’s life at the period, that of housewives with children, Judith’s existence is drastically different. She is a “spinster”, a single woman in her forties who lives alone in a one-bedroom apartment.

The entire story revolves around a sequence of revelatory events about Judith’s life style and travels in England and Italy, as well as her decisions and confrontations. Her situation as an independent, detached and liberated woman is also a cardinal aspect of her character. She is a poet and a university lecturer who attended Oxford to study biology and poetry. Moreover, she is a rebel who lives a self-sufficient life as a “separated” woman. Betty, on the other hand, is a conventional housewife with three children who has dedicated her life to her family while adhering to patriarchal conventions and ideals.

Judith, unlike Betty, who has a fixed identity as a married woman, is a liberal woman whose itinerant lifestyle deviates from socially acceptable norms. Judith Kegan Gardiner states that the story “shows [Judith] as an admirable new woman” (Gardiner, 1984, p. 120). Judith lives alone “in a small two-roomed flat high over a busy West London Street” (Lessing, 2005, p. 10) and has no close friends. She does maintain a distance from her friends, spending only twenty minutes with them for coffee on occasion. “Judith did not easily come to parties,” the nameless narrator says. She would come after pressure (...)” (Lessing, 2005, p. 7). She “goes on long walking tours, by herself, in such places as Exmoor or West Scotland [the most mountainous terrains in England]” in her spare time.

As a nomadic subject, Judith, according to Braidotti, strives to avoid being influenced by others in how she behaves and acts by adhering to established standards and ideals. She is very much aware of the restrictive social boundaries and structures, but she tries to keep herself aloof from traditional law and order. Instead, she identifies “lines of flight, that is to say, a creative alternative space for becoming that would fall not between the mobile/immobile, the resident/the foreigner distinction, but within all these categories” (Braidotti, 1994, p. 7). She enjoys moving in and out of the spaces and making the most of her time by attending readings, writings, concerts, and plays, as well as travelling around the city. There is not much emphasis on Judith’s interconnectedness with her environment because she is not confined to domestic imprisonment. When her lover, a married professor, inquires about the possibility of marriage if he divorces, Judith expresses her desire for autonomy and liberty, although she believes “the role of a mistress suited her better” (Lessing, 2005, p. 14). When Betty’s husband goes on a trip, she cannot be alone, whereas Judith refuses to share her space with a man. Betty says, “While [Judith] liked intimacy and sex and...
everything, she enjoyed waking up in the morning alone and her own person” (p.14). As a result, she declines the offer, claiming that she would rather be a mistress than a wife or mother. Judith has transformed herself from a lonely life in London to a more comfortable and interactive life in Italy, from an affair with a professor in London to a new affair with an Italian barber, Luigi.

Betty intends to take a solo vacation after Judith’s trip to Florence “in order to recover her self-respect” (Lessing, 2005, p. 15). She, on the other hand, does not match the features of a nomad because she is unable to shed her identity as a traditional woman. She mopes around Milan and Venice, for instance, and finds herself “on the point of starting an affair with another lonely soul” but she acknowledges to the unnamed narrator that “once you’re really married, you’re not fit for man nor beast” (Lessing, 2005, p. 15). Betty has gained knowledge from her personal experience that a married woman should be responsible for the faithfulness of her husband. While Judith, on the other hand, takes her decisions and actions on what she wants to achieve and who she wants to become, rather than on emotional bonds or social expectations, although “intimacy and sex” may make it possible that she’ll feel the desire for some manly stimulation as a result of this. The story, as Gardiner puts it “questions dominant assumptions about gender roles” (Gardiner, 1984, p. 119). Accordingly, Judith struggles to get rid of difficulties that companionship and intimacy she wants to always avoid because she values the condition of complete independence in which she is alone and her person. Judith enjoys a more extravagant life in the Italian Riviera than she does in London, where she lives a quiet and plain existence away from the gaze of others. In this regard, the novelist writes:

“It’s so much not Judith […] all those palms and umbrellas and gaiety at all costs and ever such an ornamental blue sea, Judith is in an enormous stone room up on the hillside above the sea, with grape vines all over the place,” Betty says when she sees Judith. (Lessing, 2005, pp. 15-16).

Unlike her lonely life in London, she has a close relationship with the house’s owner, the widow Maria Rineiri, and her brother, barber Luigi. Her shabby London flat is replaced by a gleaming hotel room. She considers herself to be a free spirit and acts accordingly. She thinks of herself as beautiful and sexually appealing, dresses herself, and attracts the Italian men’s attention, who “take one look at the golden girl and melt in their own oil like ice cream” (Lessing, 2005, p. 16). Judith’s shifting from living circumstances, her movement in and out of settings, and her interactions with the people around her demonstrate her ability to become a nomad. Women can think about and travel across established categories and levels of expertise with such a nomadic mindset. Judith refuses to fit into existing social structures and fights against the fixity and unity she sees among her peers. Betty, on the other hand, tries to overcome her incapacity to stand alone but is unable to establish a sense of self-sufficiency estrange from her husband. Betty leads a traditional life, but Judith’s life demonstrates a restless spirit of resistance. It is rare to find a woman as self-assured, detached and accomplished as Judith among Lessing’s female characters. She embraces a life that others regard as “manless and uncomfortable” (Lessing, 2005, p.11). She stands out among her peers because she refuses to compromise or succumb to peer pressure. She only has relationships on her own terms, and she will not put up with any needless human intervention, “No one can interfere with me if I don’t let them” (Lessing, 2005, p. 17). She follows
her instincts, much like a cat, and avoids settings where she does not feel at ease or natural. Emotional entanglements, according to Judith, limit one’s ability to think clearly or wisely while also restricting one’s independence. Furthermore, she recognizes that her independence is complete even in the absence of love or emotional attachment, and she would rather depend on her gut instincts, she asks “if one cannot rely on what one feels what can one rely on?” (Lessing, 2005, p. 18). As a matter of fact, Judith has the potential to be a truly free woman. Love cannot weaken or dishearten her mind. Judith’s strength comes from her dedication to herself and her state as an alienated woman.

By all accounts, women are compelled to have children, and Judith appears to be no exception. Though she rejects the concept of marriage, her mind yearns for children. As a result, her current state exposes her haughty assertion that she has everything except children, pronouncing herself content with mental and physical strain. Betty’s declaration is unambiguous and unequivocal in her appeal to the narrator “I asked her if she was sorry not to have children. She said yes, but one couldn’t have everything. One can’t have everything, she said” (Lessing, 2005, p. 19). However, she believes she would make a good mother but not a good wife. This causes Betty to tell the narrator that Judith wishes to be open about having children because she believes she is qualified to raise them when she says, “Quite clearly the feeling she has everything. She said she thought it was a pity, because she would have brought up children very well” (Lessing, 2005, p. 20). Judith assumes she possesses all of the necessary ingredients to endorse whatever role she desires, a belief that borders on hubris and conceit. Her arrogance is on display when she refuses to talk about marriage with Betty without justification, “I asked about marriage, but she said on the whole the role of mistress suited her better” (Lessing, 2005, p. 20). She considers being married or not to be married to be akin to accepting or declining a role, a form of deception. Likewise, she likes to play her role as a mistress in defiance of norms and conventions.

Another idea worthy of note in this story is that Judith appears more confident than Betty. She seeks solace in anything that compensates for her lack of a maternity instinct because she is single and childless. Consequently, reading is one of the tactics she employs to lift her spirits, as she wishes to be carefree, “It does everything for me, I must admit” (Lessing, 2005, p. 22). Judith takes joy in whatever makes her happy. As a result, she believes she should dedicate her time and energy to her hobbies and interests, such as reading and writing poetry, rather than men. She, unlike Betty, does not seek attention, and she despises those who pretend they do. Why should she when she has complete access to everyone? She has earned autonomy and will not relinquish it, as her generalization at the end of her speech demonstrates. She states unequivocally that men have no place in her life, “No one can interfere with me if I don’t let them” (p. 22). She is the one who enforces the game’s rules, which men must follow if they wish to participate.

Lessing’s frequent use of the word “spinster” concerning Judith is one striking dysphemistic choice in her story. As a result, she has presented her character by using the word, conceptual connotations. This statement, which was first expressed by a Canadian woman in reference to Judith, is later adopted by the narrator, “She is, of course, one of your typical English spinsters” (Lessing, 2005, p. 21). This word is over-worded in a sequence of synonymous terms, depicting Judith’s current situation, “unmarried, living alone, given up, English spinster, manless and
uncomforted lives” (p. 21). The narrator frankly communicates Judith’s viewpoint on the matter, professing herself completely content with her single status. She even appears to be somewhat persuaded that many women want to be alone, and she cites the example of her two aunts to justify the resulting weak pity-logic. As a result, one’s pitiful admiration for women who already have managed to keep their masculinity while leading difficult lives must be adjusted.

Lessing has portrayed the character of Judith as a radical woman. Love cannot dishearten her mind. Judith’s strength comes from her dedication to herself. However, Lessing finds her withdrawal from events unsatisfactory, and she closes up completely at the end of the story, “She turned off the electric fire, and her face closed up. She smiled, friendly and distant and said, I don’t really see any point at all in discussing it” (Lessing, 2005, p. 23). The electric fire is useful since, like Judith, it does not produce true warmth and can be turned on and off whenever needed.

Judith and Betty

To enjoy the freedom of her existence, Judith, the protagonist of the story, chooses to be a single woman and a mistress. She is frequently portrayed as defying highly regarded norms without fear or regret. She is fiercely protective of her privacy and places a high value on it. Lessing has highlighted strong-willed independent women through reflecting patriarchal picture of modern times. Betty, on the other hand, is a character created by Lessing to represent the majority of women whose self-denial and sacrifice go unacknowledged and unappreciated from a solely feminist standpoint. Betty is a stay-at-home wife and mother who is devoted to the well-being and stability of her family. In the absence of her husband, she is troubled by insomnia. The abbreviated form of her name, Betty, mistakenly implies her intellectual inadequacy and lack of sophistication, giving the reader the impressions of weakness, commonality, and puerility, to name a few. She is the opposing force in the equation. Betty, who is shapeless and self-conscious about her body, pales in comparison to Judith, who is anti-marriage, charismatic, thin, and stunning. And finally, there is Judith, who had all of the necessities of a modern and intellectual life at her disposal. She also enjoys financial and, if one dares to call it that, spatial autonomy, which entitles her to a full and unrestricted existence. In that she is non-committal, autonomous, unemotional, and anti-romantic, Judith is the breath of liberty and the lady’s avant-garde who take the world by storm.

Lessing appears to be profoundly impacted by society’s traditions of life and disturbed by its habits. In the story, Judith is frequently depicted as defying highly regarded rules without fear or regret. As a consequence, her identity is mysterious in the sense that she appreciates and protects her privacy on the one hand. She, on the other hand, fiercely disputes sex and friendship with her two friends. She outstandingly has depicted a female character, like Judith, who seeks freedom and equality. She points out that the most crucial thing for women in the gender conflict is accurate and sensitive self-awareness, as well as a never-ending search for self and independence.

Conclusion

Feminism meant equal opportunity, equal pay for equal labour, and the acceptance that a woman could do as well as a man in a job. Feminism promises to not treat women as a separate group, but rather to incorporate and unify them with whatever it means to be human and so to be eligible for the same rights as human beings. The thematic and moral significance of the three
female characters in the story cannot be overlooked. On the one hand, there is the narrator, who is
given no name and, much to feminists’ chagrin, no shape. The narrator has no time to adequately
introduce herself to the reader because she is preoccupied with recounting the events of Judith's
life. It is not a wild bet to label the narrator as an average woman who once had the makings of a
Judith-like figure but who, either by choice or circumstance, fell off the wagon. She can be said to
represent the silent, passive majority who admire but are concerned and even appalled by the
daring, liberal, Judith’s attitude. Her criticism of Judith is usually objective, cold, and impersonal;
nonetheless, it occasionally crosses the line into gentle, kind chastisement.

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