

A Feminist Study of *The Summer before the Dark*

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Abstract—Lessing pays more attention to the destiny of women and she creates many female figures in her works. Lessing's *The Summer before the Dark* also focuses on the fate of women. This paper interprets the novel from the perspective of Feminism and it analyzes the women's survival situation at that time and makes a detailed analysis of Kate's degradation, retreat and return. By clarifying the Kate's awkward situation and spiritual confusion, elaborating the reasons of Kate's leaving and her exploration, this paper points out that Kate found herself and realized the self-awareness after a series of exploration and reflection and finally chose to go home with a new image.

Index Terms—feminism, exploration, return, spiritual freedom

I. INTRODUCTION

Doris Lessing is a well-known writer of modern Britain, and she won the Nobel Prize for literature. *The Summer before the Dark* is a work of Lessing which focused on the fate of the feminism once again. Lessing's many works reflect women spiritual world and living conditions with its rare depth and breadth, and foreign scholars make analysis of *The Summer before the Dark* respectively from the psychology Angle and the Angle of feminism. She believed that women's rights movement relied on too much ideology and it wasted the potential of women. She is very disdain to feminist culture.

The Summer before the Dark is a realistic work of Lessing's published in 1973. Her works involved a wide range of topics, such as, communism, racism, feminism, Marxism, psychology and some others, but she has always been focused on the women issues. For recent hundred years, she has always described different women figures of all kinds of classes in the eastern world. Many of her works widely and deeply reflected the women's spiritual world and living situation which were welcomed and admired by the feminists. Her works were regarded as the most interpretative value text.

The Summer before the Dark is a story about a middle-aged woman who has stuck to the twenty-year changeless marriage life. Suddenly she wants to break away from the convention in a summer and then she is eager to change her current living situation. At the beginning, she is employed by the Global Food as a translator because Kate has received a good education and she is good at Portugal. However, before the meeting, Kate has began facing the troubles of life which cannot bring her happiness and a sense of achievement, so she is glad to have a travel with the younger man but the journey is not be smooth, and then she returns to England because of illness, lives with an extraordinary girl whose charm encourages her belief of returning home.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Today, *The Summer before the Dark* is sold astonishingly well, passing the spirit world picture of reflection with the advantages of strong for more readers. Doris Lessing has received increasing attention from critics.

In the west, foreign scholars make an analysis of *The Summer before the Dark* respectively of the symbols and the dreams, psychology Angle and the Angle of feminism. Barbara F. Lefcowitz in the essay *Dream and Action in Lessing's The Summer before the Dark* makes a detailed study of the relationship between Kate's imaginative journey in the seal dream and her action in reality. Susan M. Klein in the article *First and Last Words: Reconsidering the Title of the Summer before the Dark* discuss that "the Summer" (Barbara F, 1975) in the title is the summer in 1948 and "the Dark" has a more specific referent—motherhood. Alison Lurie holds the view that Kate's return to her unfaithful husband and ungrateful children becomes "a puzzling unsatisfactory conclusion" (Alison, 1973). She considers the ending as a dark future for Kate Brown. Another significant point is the study of the novel from the perspective of psychology.

Domestic scholars have much academic analysis of the novel. Most of the Chinese critics are likely to probe into the symbol and the dreams of the novel. Wang Wei holds the view that the dream is regarded as an image which can be interpreted as both a paradox and a gateway of reality. As a gateway to reality, Kate's seal dream directs her searching for self and reflects her life. Ma Jin Ran in the essay *Search for Traces of Dreams and the Unconsciousness* holds the view that Lessing makes use of the seal dream that explores people's soul and hearts and shows the plight of the heroine in the domain of unconsciousness. Jiang Xiao in the article of "*Spiritual Confusion and Self-awakening*" analyses a "self-discovery" (Jiang, 2010) of the empty housewife Kate suffering from a mental confusion. She keeps her eyes on a more realistic and more general problem of women. Li Na analyzes the novel from the respective of the Kate's returning in the article of "*An analysis of Doris Lessing's The Summer Before the Dark one Female's Wander on the Road to Self-Understanding*" and focuses on the thought tendency in the tide of the second feminism wave.

III. KATE'S AWKWARD SITUATION AND SPIRITUAL CONFUSION

Lessing draws up the outline of the female spiritual crisis through depicting the Kate's experience of the runaway. Family, career, marriage and sex itself are the major causes of women's spiritual world, and also are the root of a female spiritual crisis.

A. *The Oppression from the Male-dominated Society*

Under the traditional social system, the male hegemony discourse exaggerates the biological differences between men and women, which strengthens the boundaries of gender roles and allocation, making many female restrained by the gender identity and finally leads women to be forced to accept reality that women can only bear the subordinate role. This discrimination formed the social norms and mental pressure, which becomes a stumbling block for women to seek self-development.

Traditional concept of equality between men and women is the continuation of the patriarchal logic of thinking, with reference to the remains of the patriarchal standards, which is bad for the radical change in women's status. After experiencing the war of the sex for 40 years, Lessing has no longer believed the revolution in the 60's through the observation of the modern women. She believes that the women's liberation is due to technology instead of feminism. Lessing denied carefully that she is a feminist.

We can see the oppression and discrimination of Kate's life. When Kate was young, she was popular in the family but she wasn't trusted. She was the only child in the family, but she was not loved. She gave up his study to marry her husband, but her husband was unhappy in nature, and she always felt that her husband would stay away from her. With the growth of her children, she gradually found that she was not important in the family. On vacation, her husband went to America to take part in a meeting, and her daughter traveled with her friends. She would think that his little son needs their meticulous care and comfort, but her son suddenly decided to go to travel with friends. All these things made she felt ignored.

B. *Submitting to Husband and Children*

After Kate married her husband Michael, she plays a housewife role for 25 years. Since then, she starts keeping busy all the day and she provides the most delicious food and creates a comfortable home environment for her husband and her four children. In order to satisfy her husband and children, Kate learned all these endurance, self-control, self-discipline, self-denial, mercy, and adapt to others. Therefore, she loses herself by only obeying her husband and children and she has no right to speak. When Michael was appointed as an exchange staff to work in the United States for four months, and her four children also want to go traveling. Kate suddenly becomes a redundant an abandoned women.

On her husband's persuasion, Kate promised his friend to be a Portuguese translator for the International Food in London, but it is not more than a month. The house was temporarily uninhabited, so her husband decided to rent out the house from June until the end of September. That means that there are three months homeless after Kate finished her works. Kate doesn't agree with her husband, but cannot stop him.

It is to be decided. "But the point was, she was feeling dismissed, belittled, because the problem of the house was being considered so unimportant. And when her committee was over, what would she do? It was being taken for granted she would fit herself in somewhere—how very flexible she was being, just as always, ever since the children were born" (Doris, 1973, p.23).

We can see from that Kate has no position to speak for the family, and she almost becomes the servant of the family. In the 25-year marriage, Kate has been busy. She has never thought about these questions, until her younger son Tim accused her at the dinner table which let her feel suffocated, and then Kate was suddenly wake up, starting reviewing her past life. Finally, Kate is aware of the problem, but she has no courage to change herself, instead retreating in front of her own thoughts.

C. *Economic Independence on Her Husband*

After the first wave of feminism, women won the right election and education, but in a male-dominated system society, women's liberation movement will be affected by the resistance of the patriarchal ideas, especially the theory of Freud's sex for me and the influence of functionalism, which led many woman to pursue the so-called feminine mystique and stop fighting for liberation, retreating to the narrow circle of family, and become her husband appendages.

At the same time, the lack of economic status also makes women cling to her husband more naturally and thoroughly. The most effective aspect of a male-dominated system is to take control of the women's economy. Housewife does not have its own economic income, and dominated by the patriarchal thought. Therefore housewife is merely considered as an economic and social accessory of husband, which inevitably leads women to follow her husband everywhere, and please her husband.

If you don't have economic equality, the equality between men and women of our requirement is deformed. It means that people think for their own interests, rather than stand in the perspective of justice, let alone the selection of the perspective. Women should have their own career and own economic sources, and they can escape from the trivial of family. They can enter the society, competing like men, and get economic and political status. Even without the love of moist, they also won't like a broken line kite floating in the vast wilderness. With the economic support, they can meet

the needs of the material. Moreover, Material prosperity can make women consider the spiritual demand, and then they can be free to make friends, reading books, entertaining, and enrich their life. Reading can be a sensible understanding and enrich their connotation; making Friends can make life more colorful, opening field of vision, and drive away lonely; entertainment can let a person forget everything bad, and make you happy.

IV. KATE'S LEAVING AND HER EXPLORATION

In this work, the awakening of women's spiritual world has undergone trials, contradiction and the process of choice. Lessing didn't use the strong rebellious behaviors or the enormous emotional outbreak to show a characteristic of awakening woman, but she used the language of the tender, made Kate's lonely memories as the strong basis of the choice of its reflection. This is a very rational style.

A. *The Passive State of Kate*

It is very passive that Kate participates in the international food organization because her husband promised his friend's entrust and he decides to rent out the house. Kate is abandoned by his family, and she has to get rid of the identity of the family and merges in a workplace. While she did the translation work, "she saw herself, through the reactions of Ahmed, as an efficient, high-powered, smiling woman, but spinning around and around on herself like a machine that someone should have switched off." (Doris, 1973, p.28) Although she left the family, she suddenly returned to her former work and became a nanny, or a nurse, like Charlie cooper, or a mother.

The working environment in Kate's eyes: the officials who come from different places are very hypocritical, and they are like the actors to perform themselves. The whole conference likes a market, or like an endless noisy party. Her daily work is to answer numerous phone, and check the people, places, things whether in place, by doing these that she can take a the same high salary as her husband who has professional knowledge. It makes her feel incredible.

Lessing has no positive evaluation for women participating in social work because of the chaotic work environment, too much flirtation, and the meaningless work. Apparently, Kate saw herself and other women doing the meaningless work which cannot attract her.

B. *A Special Experience in Spanish*

What Kate faced is that her marriage is not consistent with her assumptions, so she had to take the habit and continually accepted her husband's derailment to keep their marriage. She felt her heart ache steadily, and she has gradually lost its original respect to her husband. She felt her husband increasingly small and very shallow, and she was disappointed at her husband's infidelity, and she felt bored and angry for this kind of life, but she was soon convinced again, continuing to play the role of a perfect housewife.

When Kate confused with his own value of life, she met the 32-year younger man Jeffrey who is also looking for the value of life. They traveled to Spain together. When Jeffrey asked Kate for traveling with him, Kate has already realized that when she looked back in the future, she would felt tasteless. Kate, however, has already become accustomed to the pattern of life, so she can't afford to drum courage to return to the UK, only to look for a house alone quietly. At the beginning of the journey, Kate's life is still full of something unable to decide and control. When the car broke down, Kate can't decide whether they take the bus or taxi. It is Jeffrey in charge. During the whole trip, Jeffrey is full of the pride and arrogance and sometimes he is like a boy full of confusion, relying on Kate. However, Kate for a while is his free lover, and then she becomes an experienced, maternal woman. They have no goal and no map, and their travel destination with Geoffrey's mind constantly changing. They seem to never reach the place they want to go. They eventually had to stay in a small village far behind Spain because Jeffrey fallen ill.

In this small village, Jeffrey was sent to a monastery to be cared for, while Kate would also have a period of time to be alone, and she began to review and reflected on her life. Kate finally saw through the years and she ignored a very precious thing that is self. At this point, her inner self finally really appeared which she tried to seize before but didn't touch. That is the self.

C. *The Occlusive Life in the Hotel*

Kate came back to Britain because of her illness, and she received the warm concern and care in the Spanish hotel, but the warmth and the care was under the packing of the money. Even she could get concerns and comforts from material, but Kate still very cared about other people's eyes. The chill and turbulence made her feel that the room like a blatant, dark cave, while young girls can see her face for a long, slow period of time, like in the deep bottom of water. She wanted to change their pathological features, but eventually to faint. She came back to her home after recovery, while she was like a homeless wandering in the street, and her old friends also had not recognized so beautiful Kate at once. All this made very sad and very anger. People who watched the performance at the theater made her feel that everything around were hypocritical, and people tried to perform themselves without sincerity.

In the hotel, Kate had two dreams about the seal. In the first dream, Kate stood in the midst of a piece of frozen wilderness. She walked into a village, and here the kingdom chose her to dance with him. King danced with Kate warmly, and it seems that she is his spouse. However, soon the king chose the other girls for partners soon. Due to pain, Kate started to escape from the dance hall, but the villagers chased her and imprisoned her. The king rebuked her and he

thought that Kate was narrow-minded, silly and unreasonable. In this dream, Kate still played a traditional female image. She had no right to choose, only to be chosen; she had no right to resist, only to accept it. In such an environment, the seal and her ego can only be cast aside.

In the second dream, Kate's seal was in a coma, dying. Kate held it walking in the winter fog, but all the things around was frozen. Kate cracked the ice, found a little bit of water, mixed the ice with the grain of crystal in the rock watering on the seal. Finally, the seal was saved. Kate held her against the cold wind to move on. In this dream, the weather was so cold and the ground was frozen, but in Kate's efforts, the seal waked up. This is a symbol of Kate's self to survive in her effort. The north wind symbolized that Kate will usher in more cruel reality.

D. *The Slovenly Life in the Underground Apartment*

Kate spent a period of time in the hotel and found a renting house, which the house-owner was a girl named Maureen. Maureen was a young, beautiful girl who was full of youthful vitality, self-confidence and courage, which were the quality that Kate didn't possess. In Maureen's eyes, Kate had no make-up, no form-fitting clothes. This was Kate without disguise. After that, Kate was like an old woman after the disease, dressed in unsuitable clothes. No matter where she went to, no one noticed her. People have looked at her coldly, and immediately removed to find other exciting thing. She had become an invisible woman. This was unacceptable to Kate. She is frustrated and angry. Kate believed that as long as she put this mask, pulled on the suit Maureen gave her, and let herself fit such a pattern of social, she would immediately go back to the cute lovely Michael. All her changes were due to the dress. However, there was no slightest difference in her deep heart's core, and she was the same person. Everything in life was only a set of clothes. From then on, Kate didn't mind whether others didn't like her, but just a week earlier, if she encountered contempt cold she would cry. Kate no longer dyed her hair, no longer concealed her age, didn't mind his identity and other people's eyes, but began to pay attention to the true self in her heart.

In the last days, it was the main content that Kate told the past experience to Maureen for killing time. Memories of the past times and the narration about past made Kate changed her view again to her families and the past life. A few months ago in Spanish, Kate thought all her misfortune came from her family because the dull routines made her lose her. But now, Kate gradually found the objective fact that although her families took away a lot from her and to some extent she ignored herself, it also left her many good memories. She wasn't scared and started to accept her family and her former life from the heart. It was just an indelible part of her life.

V. RETURNING HOME

Kate's realized her limitations in the reflection, and she understood the dissatisfaction in the reality can't get away from her attitude. She thought why not to seek her own changes to meet the new life, so she decided to return to his home.

A. *Spiritual Freedom*

Beauvoir in the novel "*The Second Sex*" thinks that the women's liberation and the role of mother cannot coexist together and emphasizes that birth is the direct cause of enslaved women. Maybe Beauvoir's point of view is extreme to some degree, but it also sharply points out that the role of mother limits the development of themselves. Greer said: "The plight of the mother is more desperate than other women and it seems that the more children. The more things seem to be hopeless." (Doris, 1973, p. 87) However, Blessing pays more attention to the mother Kate who has four children, so it is extremely difficult for Kate to get out of the predicament, recognizes her own past, and be aware of the existence of the self, but she finally return home with a new image by her constantly retreating and adjustment.

In the fiction, although Kate was aware of the existence of the self, she had never given up everything for the sake of the self, rather than choose to follow her inner thoughts. Her husband Michael continually cheated like the king kept company with other woman dancing, but she can't envy. However, during the whole journey, she would always miss her home, her children, her husband, her friends and her neighbors. For a middle-aged woman, the desire of the family is a common part of the desire of self. Kate didn't escape from her family, and she started to give herself a choice. Kate has maintained the identity of the self, and she felt that she found the definition of the self, which these changed into power at this time all focused on the place her hair. Although Kate chose to return to the family, she decided not to do her hair, letting the hair short-tempered hard.

Kate had experienced a journey in summer, but she got the meaning of rebirth once again. She got the spiritual freedom. Spiritual freedom can guarantee the true nature of self more than family freedom, because it cannot be overwhelmed by the eyes of others, and also cannot lose the real value of the self. Kate had the right to choose freedom that someone had never made the choice of freedom.

B. *Rebirth and Return*

Although Kate came back to the family which she is familiar with and brought hurt to her, we have enough reason to believe that Kate will find her family life the meaning of existence after the travel and she is no longer alone, regretful and bored.

Many critics believe that the end of the novel is meaningless, because Kate finally returned to the beginning, and it is

not as radical as the hero of modern women in Lessing's early novel, and it breaks the traditional ideas of the society and shackles of the family to attain the real liberation, so Kate this journey of self-discovery is not incomplete.

To this question, we first need to see the limitations of the middle class housewife Kate. Although they were intelligent, but they suffered from the household chores, social isolation, economic independence on her husband completely, and they had become accustomed to the superior material life, so it is difficult for them to completely get rid of her husband and family. It is also difficult for them to start their own independent lives. Second, Kate's return also reflects Lessing's deeper and more careful thinking about the problems of women in middle age. This makes us firmly believe that the short escape and leaving is not a good solution to her female identity crisis.

VI. CONCLUSION

This analysis makes an analysis from the perspective of feminism and makes a detailed analysis of Kate's degradation, retreat and return. The important contribution is to reveal the living condition and the oppression from the male-dominated society of women and give the reasons why Kate finally chooses to return to her home after a series of explorations and reflection.

According to the above analysis and research, Kate's leaving mostly attributed to the oppression and discrimination from the male-dominated society. The women were treated unequally by the family. They lost themselves to contribute to the whole family because they must rely on their husband without the ability of the economic independence. Therefore, women have no right to speak or decide anything. The nucleus of their life is to look after well the whole family, and they spent little time on themselves. However, Kate finally returns home because she thought she still needs her family, but she realized she should balance between the family and herself.

Most of the time, women don't care about how much they pay attention, but hope to have equality. This equality is not a form of "equivalent", but meets the women's equal appeal. As a kind of appeal, the women's attention is the essence of equality, and once they find themselves in the heart of the change of exploration in the breakthrough and the reflection, and confirm that they meet these demands, and then they still want to return to the real life. Kate mulled over inequality in more than 20 years' marriage between the contradiction and hesitation, and children show an indifferent attitude to her pay, so this is the source of her runaway. In contrast with others, she realized that marriage and family give her precious wealth.

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