

Body Narrative: An Analysis of the Symbolic Meaning of Hand in the Works of Doris Lessing

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Abstract

Doris Lessing was famous for her writing about women's experience, however, her writing about body covered not only women but also men of varying age. Hand, as one of the body parts Lessing paid special attention to, was the best representation of Lessing's thinking about violence and human nature. This paper argued that Doris Lessing, though usually wrote from women's perspective, was a humanism writer instead of a prejudiced women artist since she spared much effort writing about the times and suffering people. The body narrative in the novels of Doris Lessing vividly revealed Lessing's representation of the society and her optimistic attitude toward life though in difficult times.

Key words: Hand; Symbolic meaning; Body narrative

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INTRODUCTION

There are many body narratives in the novels of Doris Lessing, among which the description of hand is one of the most prominent features. Doris Lessing was even entitled by the Nobel Prize address as "epicist of the female experience, who with skepticism, fire and visionary power has subjected a divided civilization

to scrutiny." (Jones, 2007, p.28) That is to say, female experience is the most important way for Lessing's protagonists to view the world. Doris Lessing do view the world mostly from women's point of view and bodily experience, but it's dangerous to define her as a feminist as many other researchers do since Lessing cared about other fields such as the living conditions of human beings, racism, war etc.. Till now, few scholars noticed that there was some discourse authority behind Lessing's body narratives. As one of the body organs, hand is directly related to authority in terms of its implied meaning. Many linguists paid special attention to the different vocabulary or phrases related to hands, especially the similarities and differences in English and Chinese. However, fewer scholars noticed hands' cultural connotation in literary works, and this is an important way to understand Lessing's profound intention of writing.

Hand is one of the most important ways Doris Lessing's protagonists express their feelings, showing their anxiety and identity. Meanwhile, Lessing's characters paid much attention not only to other people's hands, but also their own hands. Hand is a reflection of one's state of mind in Doris Lessing's novels. Apart from this, hand is also related to power or authority sometimes. Therefore, studying hand is the easiest way to understand Doris Lessing's thoughts and the reason why she denied being a feminist.

1. THE HAND OF LIFE

Doris Lessing described war, madness, suicide, nuclear threat etc. in her novels. Even in her space fictions, she narrated a terrible space which mimics the warring world. Doris Lessing was therefore regarded as a realist writer who wrote about the misfortunes and disasters of human kind. However, even in her pessimistic writings, she still showed her willingness to life through her writing of hand. In her novel *Landlocked*, the

conversation between Mr. Quest and the granddaughter Caroline is very prominent.

Then she heard the old man's voice: "It's my hand, it's my hand, it's my hand." It was a fierce, hungry whisper. ... a child's voice said, polite and firm: "no, granddad, it's my hand. It's mine." Martha saw the old man, not only sitting up in bed, which he had not had strength to do for weeks, but sitting up and forward away from the pillows. His shoulders slumped with weakness, but the sick, white face was clenched with purpose. The hand, bone merely, a skeleton's hand with thin folds of flesh loose on it, was gripped around the plump, fresh arm of the little girl.

...

Mr Quest had hold of the child's arm and was saying fiercely: "It's my hand, it's my hand."

"No, it isn't, grandfather, I've told you already, it's mine."

"It's my hand, it's my hand."

And he clumsily slid his hand towards him along the plump forearm of the little girl, afraid she might wrench it away from him....

"it's my hand," he muttered, "yes it is."

...

"I don't want to die, I don't want to die," he muttered. He held up that hideous object, his hand, and looks at it, his lips trembling. He let it drop with a grimace of shame and pain. "I don't want to die, I haven't lived yet, I don't want to die." (Lessing, 1965, pp.289-291)

The hand of the dying Mr. Quest and the young Caroline forms a big contrast: dying versus fresh and vigorous. Why did Lessing present such a contrasting picture in her novel? Why did she choose hand instead of other body images to represent the dying old and the fresh young? To answer these questions, hand is a key factor. Scholar Greene said that 'the scene where the slowly dying invalid claims the child Caroline's hand as his own— "the hand, bone merely...was gripped around the plump fresh arm of the little girl—is a striking dramatization of the dead hand upon the living.'" (Greene, 1994, p.60) That is to say, the contrast of the dying hand and the young hand is a dramatizing picture about death and life. But, seeing from the context, Mr. Quest's dying hand and his attempts to grasp Caroline's fresh arm and hand have the implied meaning of man's desire to life and inability to control it.

For a man like Mr. Quest, who experienced two world wars, was traumatic both in mind and body. His lost leg and his indifference to real life were largely due to the First World War. He has never fulfilled his dreams and lived at will. From Martha's perspective, her father Mr. Quest has been in his own state of mind for a long time. He never cared about things in real life since Martha's girlhood but immersed in his own imagination and personal thinking. In other words, he was disappointed at life. With such background information, the reader is easy to understand the above quotation and Mr. Quest's attempt to grasp the fresh and vigorous hand of Caroline. And his words "I don't want to die, I haven't lived yet, I don't want to die," were the best explanation of his unreasonable and repetitive claim of Caroline's hand as

his. The image of dead hand upon vigorous hand therefore can be interpreted as the dying people's wish to be young and to control one's life and fate. Hand, the human organ and the most flexible body part, is usually a metaphor of will and ability. In this way, Mr. Quest's dying hand could be explained as man's inability to challenge the times and old age. However, Lessing was not pessimistic as Mr. Quest did. She expressed her hope for life through Mr. Quest's granddaughter Caroline's young and fresh arms and hands. As the successor of Quests' family, Caroline's vigorous and healthy arms and hands implied optimistic wish of protagonist Martha or even author Doris Lessing.

From the above description of dead hand upon young hand, it's safe to conclude that Lessing, through her doomed protagonist Mr. Quest, was an optimistic artist toward life although many scholars thought that she was a pessimistic writer. The young and vigorous hand was the successor of the dying generation. And she would carry on the responsibility of the Quest's family and even human beings.

2. THE HAND OF SELF-REFLECTION

Lessing is famous for her spiritual exploration under the influence of Sufism. Many scholars noticed that she "illuminate a new kind of midlife and older woman's adventure, one that is spiritual in nature, enabling new ways of being and becoming, but open-ended and capable of great variation in practice." (Perrakis, 2007, p.1) That is to say, Lessing's spiritual exploration happened only when her characters became old. As a matter of fact, Lessing had never stopped exploring the outside society and her own inner world. Her protagonist Martha began her self-reflection when she was very young. In this part, Martha's description of changeable hand is very interesting and convincing.

But her hands were not hers. They seemed to have swelled. Her hands were enormous, and she could not control their size. At the end of her arms she could feel them, giant's hands, as if she compressed the world inside them. Everything she was had gone into her hands. She moved them, to see if she could shrink them back to size. For a moment they were her own hands again, then out they swelled, and, lying with eyes shut, she felt the tips of her fingers touch the vast balls of her thumbs as if girders had been laid across a ravine. The world lay safe inside her hands. (Lessing, 1958, p.128)

From the description of Martha's hands, we get to know that the swelled hands were a metaphoric use to show people's power or desire to protect the world or other people. Swelled hands may indicate Martha's confidence to change the warring and unjust world when she was young. Hands could be swelled out to a large size and keep the world safe in hands is the most apparent writing on young people's self-confidence to change the outside world. And the swelled hands imply people's subjective initiative to change the warring state and unfair

society. From the context we get to know that Martha was optimistic toward some social organizations, especially the left-winged community, to change the unjust world totally during this period of time. By the way, she thought that her participation in the African community party was a great step to change her own marriage difficulty and a progress to be independent. That's the source of her energy to change the world and control her own life. Hand, which is well-known as a signifier for ability and power, therefore become changeable and could swell to a large size in Lessing's novels to show Martha's optimistic attitude toward life in her process of growing.

However, the powerful hand may become a destroying factor to human beings as well in Lessing's novels. In the twentieth century, two World Wars, numerous conflicts and wars occurred frequently. As a humanist and realist writer, Doris Lessing paid much attention to the suffering people. However, she also noticed that the painstaking wars and sufferings were caused by human beings. Hands therefore were the carriers of destroying factors. Martha's self assessment of her hand is a typical example to show her thinking about human beings' hate and damage to each other.

She was Martha, looking at her hand—extraordinary; it moved by itself, not on her will, but on its own...extraordinary, extraordinary, her hand, and very ugly, with its fingers like tools or talons. (Lessing, 1965, p.183)

... Martha had again discovered her hand. She sat opening and shutting her hand. It was monstrously, unbelievably ugly, like a weapon.... Martha's hand provided fresh revelations. The shape made by her forefinger and thumb touching each other—it was like a revelation of brutality. Her hand was like a pair of pincers, the claw of a lobster, something cold and predatory. She looked at her left hand, astounded by its cruelty.... her left hand, her hand—never had there been such an extraordinary thing as that circle of bone, lightly laid with flesh, like the beak of a bird, like a mouth opening and shutting, like... (Lessing, 1965, p.187, 188)

The above description of hand from Martha's perspective vividly expressed Lessing's opinion about people's expanding desire to control and the deep reason of warring time. Hand becomes a revelation of brutality. Fingers, palm as well as the movement of hand therefore were compared with pincers, claw, something cold and cruel. From the context, we could conclude that Martha began to think about human beings' sufferings were also made by themselves. That's why Lessing described hand as an ugly weapon, beak of a bird. For a writer like Doris Lessing, who experienced the Second World War and many other nuclear wars or threat of the 20th century, she understood that violence was caused by people's expanding desire for power, wealth, privilege, etc. generally speaking, the descriptions of hand in Lessing's novels were such kind of carrier to show author's self-reflection about the nature of violence and human beings.

3. THE HAND OF POWER

Hand is also a signifier for power and desire. Elizabeth Maslen said that, "in all her writings, Doris Lessing demonstrates such a keen understanding of what Michel Foucault identifies as discourses of power." (Maslen, 1994, p.15) Hand has long been used in many languages to refer to power or authority. Many linguists did some research on comparing the use of hand between Chinese and English. But few scholars noticed that hand description was also a very crucial factor in understanding literary works, especially author's intention of writing. Doris Lessing spared much effort to write about human body as well as women's body experience. She was therefore regarded as a writer writing about women's problems. Her most famous novel *The Golden Notebook* was read as the highest achievement of her women writing. However, apart from women's problem, Lessing wrote about men as well as the society men lived in it. Comparing with women's bodily experience, hand was what male protagonists paid special attention to. Both the judge Mr. Maynard and Martha's second husband Anton Hesse noticed their hands and appreciate it. For Mr. Maynard, "he examined his fine handsome hand, back and front, for a few moments." (Lessing, 1958, p.60) despite other reasons, Mr. Maynard's fine and handsome hand revealed his social position. So did Anton Hesse. Just like Maynard, Anton was "a man absorbed in the business of washing his hands," and "examining his hands, back and front, with a calm smile." (Lessing, 1965, p.266) why did men like to appreciate their hands instead of other body parts in Lessing's novels? Did hand have any symbolic meaning for men? Take Mr. Maynard and Anton Hesse as an example, their behavior of appreciating hand was obviously a reflection of their ability to handle difficulties. Mr. Maynard's appreciation of his hand happened when Martha's marriage was in difficulty. It means that he would deal with Martha's divorce in person as judge. His fine handsome hand became a hand of control and power. So, the description of Maynard's hand was actually a metaphor of authority. It's interesting to notice that both Maynard and Anton's hand were fine and handsome. Such kind of fine hand showed that they were not people of the lower class; on the contrary, they were head of different groups or community. Maynard was the head judge in the colonial, while Anton was the head of left-winged group. Martha's divorce was controlled in their hands. Judge Maynard had the authority to divorce her and Douglas, and Anton was the decisive power in her second divorce. Their appreciation of hands happened to be on the occasion of deciding Martha's fate. Therefore could be interpreted as hand of power or control.

Apart from this, the hand of doctor's took part in the writing of authority in Lessing's novels. No matter in the colonial African or in the post-war London, doctor's hand

was what catches readers' attention easily. In the volume of "Children of Violence", Lessing described Dr. Stern's hand as hand of authority who gave her instructions to undress. She undressed and waited. Dr. Stern, whose exquisite tact had earned him the right to have his waiting room perpetually filled with women who depended on him, explored the more intimate parts of Martha's body with rubber-clothed fingers (Lessing, 1954, p.108).

According to Michael Foucault's narration of power through *Madness and Civilization*, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, etc., doctor was the one of the sources of authority in social institutions through their professional examination. Dr. Stern's rubber-clothed fingers or hand was both the authority of medical science and men, who controlled women's submission to male-dominated colonial family. Another interesting doctor appeared in the *Four-Gated City*—Dr. Lamb. He was a psychologist who treated insane patients. Despite other description of him, his body feature from Martha's perspective defined his social position and authority. "He (Dr Lamb) was a round man: round face, round head, rounding body, and the hands that go with it: sensible and confident hands." (Lessing, 1993, p.246) How could hands be sensible and confident? Martha's speculation about his hands apparently related to authority or power of some institutions. No matter Dr. Stern's hand or Dr. Lamb's hand was hand of power with professional knowledge as the convincing foundation. That's source of sensibility

and confidence went along with doctor's hand. Such hand certainly would deal with patients in an authoritative way.

To sum up, hand was a key image in Lessing's body narration. Unlike other body parts described in her works, hand was related to authority and personal ability to control. Through hand descriptions, it's easy to understand Lessing's optimistic attitude toward life and her writing about social authority that influenced and even decided people's fate.

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