

# *An Analysis of Feminist Narrative in Doris Lessing's The Story of a Non-Marrying Man*

Xinyang Yu<sup>1,a,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Beijing Normal University-Hong Kong Baptist University United International College, Zhuhai,  
519088, China

a. r130025110@uic.edu.cn

\*corresponding author

**Abstract:** British novelist Doris Lessing was born in 1919 and was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2007. She is also known as the "greatest female writer since Virginia Woolf". Her *The Story of a Non-Marrying Man* was published in 1972, and this short story was first published in *The London Magazine*. The story takes place in the second half of the last century and tells the first-person narrative of the life of a white man who adventures in South Africa and his love-hate entanglement with several local women. This short story has very different narrative characteristics from previous feminist literary works. The author criticizes the oppression of females by males and the self-restraint of women in traditional patriarchal marriages through a circular narrative method and a unique narrative voice. By analyzing Lessing's narrative methods in this short story, this paper interprets the feminist ideas she intends to express through her work. Thus, it is concluded that Lessing believed that a significant portion of women's suffering came not only from male oppression, but also from their own constraints and paralysis of themselves.

**Keywords:** Feminist & Women's Studies, English Literature, Doris Lessing

## 1. Introduction

When Doris Lessing became the Nobel Prize winner in literature in 2007, she was considered as an "epicist of the female experience, who with skepticism, fire and visionary power has subjected a divided civilization to scrutiny" [1]. As a pioneer figure in feminist literature, Lessing's novels mostly focus on the lives and psychology of women in the 20th century. In her short story *The Story of a Non-Marrying Man*, she takes the reader into the love hate struggle between several South African women and a white man from a first-person perspective, vividly portraying the inequality caused by the differences between genders, races, and cultures at that time. Lessing's works have always enjoyed a high level of discussion, and *The Story of a Non-Marrying Man*, as one of her numerous short stories, has a unique narrative structure.

Nowadays, there is not much research on Doris Lessing in related fields, and there are even fewer journal articles focusing on the short story *The Story of a Non-Marrying Man*. After studying these articles, most of them did not provide much interpretation of the close connection between the unique narrative structure of this short story and the feminist ideas it embodies. Therefore, I have decided to start from here and analyze it. In the following paper, Doris Lessing's short story *The Story of a Non-*

*Marrying Man* will be divided into several parts based on the story plot, and the narrative structure and feminist perspectives carried by each part will be discussed separately.

## 2. Analysis

Scholar Yang Jianmei pointed out in the article that the seemingly loose but closely connected structure and constantly changing narrative perspective of this short story are its main characteristics [2]. It can be roughly divided into three parts, which are independent but closely connected in a certain order. In the creation, the author presents the complete image of the male protagonist, Johnny Blakeworthy, by constantly changing the narrative perspective and borrowing the language of different characters.

### 2.1. Analysis of the First Part of the Story

The first part of the story can be summarized as the first encounter between the narrator and Johnny. Here, the author adopts a flashback technique and a first-person narrative perspective. First-person narration has perspective and can bring readers a strong sense of immersion [3,4]. Due to the immersion brought about by first-person narration, readers can intuitively construct their perception of Johnny's image. Through this narrative style, Lessing portrayed a white figure who treated black people politely and almost blended with them. In the story, Johnny eats the same rough food as the locals and usually walks on the dirt roads that locals often walk on, which reflects his long integration into the local black community. In addition, his attitude towards the indigenous people is also very friendly and polite, which is very different from other white people. In the era of racial segregation in South Africa, it was rare for white people like him to integrate into black society. Johnny's friendly attitude towards black people and the development of his similar lifestyle habits to local stem from his early exploration experiences, which lays the groundwork for the author to further explore the story of his youth in the following story.

At the end of the first part, when the narrator hears about Johnny abandoning his wife multiple times and then the narrator receives a thank-you letter from him, she feels puzzled and also reflects on the status and identity of men and women. Here, the elements of feminist awakening first appear in the story. The awakening of women's self-awareness usually stems from small sparks of thought like this, where the narrator first realizes the unequal status between the sexes in traditional marriage relationships through Johnny's experience and feels confused. This confusion triggers her further reflection on female identity and opens her way to becoming a true feminist in the future.

### 2.2. Analysis of the Second Part of the Story

The second part of the story occupies a considerable portion of the entire text. As the narrator grows up, the story enters a new stage, during which the narrator also has a deeper understanding of Johnny. By inserting the short story, *The Fragrant Black Aloe*, the author cleverly tells the story of Johnny and his three ex-wives. The three women in *The Fragrant Black Aloe* all married Johnny, but their attitudes towards marriage differed. For the first woman in the story, even if Johnny abandons his wife and children, he is still a perfect husband. The second woman's evaluation of Johnny is not as high as the former. In her opinion, Johnny does have shortcomings such as alcoholism, but he is a qualified husband. The two women in the story received a thank-you letter from Johnny after being abandoned, but in their eyes, it was natural for the woman to serve her husband gently, so they felt angry because they think it's an offense to them. These two women are under oppression without realizing it, which is a manifestation of being bound by traditional marriage concepts. As bell hooks suggests in her book, many women under oppression do not rise to resist because they are blinded by the limited rights they already have [5]. The two women in the story succumb to Johnny's handsome

and gentle demeanor, selectively ignoring his dereliction of duty and infidelity in marriage and family [6]. It can be said that these two women were a microcosm of a large proportion of women in society at that time. Even though they still can resist, the traditional patriarchal marriage concept creates a gentle illusion that they never realize they have been exploited for a long time, which becomes the source of their suffering.

The third woman's attitude towards Johnny was completely different from the first two, as she dared to boldly condemn him for how bad he was as a husband. From her language and criticism of Johnny, it is not difficult to find that she has realized that women should not only live for their husbands in marriage. Her thoughts are one of the hallmarks of feminist enlightenment. When a feminist awakens, he or she first realizes that before becoming someone else's daughter, wife, and mother, she is first and foremost herself [7,8]. The third woman in the story is able to rationally and objectively examine the relationships in marriage and dare to face the mistakes she made when she paid her heart wrong. These are necessary qualities for women's self-liberation and abilities that women still under patriarchal oppression at that time and even today lack [7-9]. The elements of feminism not only appear in the awakening of the third woman's self-awareness. In the second part, as the story develops, the three women's favoritism towards Johnny gradually decreases. This trend is a reflection of the awakening of feminist consciousness. As the intensity of self-awareness increases, women can more discover Johnny's inferiority as a representative of male images under patriarchy, until their self-awareness is fully established and they break away from traditional reactionary views on marriage [9]. The self-liberation of women is a process that goes from being unaware of oppression to becoming suspicious and then completely resisting. Only through such transformation can a feminist truly emerge.

### 2.3. Analysis of the Third Part of the Story

The third part of the story consists of two units that appear in opposite chronological order in the text. In this section, Lessing first narrates the experience of elderly Johnny spending the rest of his life in the tribe and ultimately passing away. The story of Old Johnny takes place in a local tribe in South Africa. This tribe is not only the final burial ground for Johnny, but can also be seen as a microcosm of the patriarchal society at that time. In the story, after Johnny arrives at the tribe, a widow is betrothed to him to maintain stability within the tribe. From this, it can be seen that women in the tribe are not free to choose marriage partners, further demonstrating that they do not have the personal rights that an independent human should enjoy. In the tribe, prestigious men play the role of rulers, and women have no right to intervene in management. They only need to play the role of commodities and bring generations of descendants to males. are not free to choose marriage partners, further demonstrating that they do not have the personal rights that an independent human. They are machines for childbirth, household chores, and educating children, rather than healthy and independent humans. Living under the rule of men, women can only circulate in society as their appendages and exert the value they are endowed with.

Compared to cities, life in tribes is backward, just as traditional patriarchal beliefs are reactionary compared to feminist views that place greater emphasis on equality. With the expansion of modern society and the advancement of urbanization, the conservative and backward patriarchal views are constantly shifting towards an advanced direction in the process of tribes gradually disappearing. The author intends to express this viewpoint in the second part of the third unit of the story. The second unit of the third part echoes the story of the second part, in which the author talks about Johnny's last marriage before coming to the tribe. Here, readers can gain a more comprehensive understanding of Johnny's image through Alicia's language. Alicia is a very important character in the story, although she is not one of Johnny's many ex-wives, just his stepdaughter. She pursues and enjoys her high-quality life, and can openly express Johnny's coldness and ruthlessness. Her frankness was something

that the other women in the story who had connections with Johnny did not possess. For her, it is unquestionable and natural for women to pursue the rights they should enjoy. Alicia's enlightenment symbolized the later stage of the feminist movement, where women could finally participate in social activities as independent human individuals rather than being subservient to others. The process of Alicia and her mother breaking free from Johnny's control can be seen as a microcosm of a segment of the feminist movement. The process of her and her mother discovering Johnny's shortcomings, confronting him, and ultimately separating echoes the process of women fighting against patriarchy in their struggle for rights.

### 3. Discussion

Doris Lessing's *The Story of a Non-Marrying Man* has a cyclical narrative structure, where each part of the story may not seem entirely chronological, but is logically closely connected [10,11]. When arranging Johnny's life, the author not only considers the logical order of writing to make the article echo before and after, but also implies the enlightenment and development process of feminism by referring to the order of the women's appearance related to Johnny. From obedience to Johnny to daring to confront him head-on, from mere doubt to a complete awakening of self-awareness, the women in the story experience a history of resistance against Johnny and the struggle of feminists against patriarchy. In such a complete story that forms a closed loop from beginning to end, women gradually awaken from ignorance, see the essence of male chauvinists like Johny Blackworthy, and complete the transformation into feminists.

In addition to having a unique narrative structure, this work has a unique narrative voice. In this story, although Johnny is the core character, he never personally says a word throughout. All readers' understanding of him comes from female characters who have had interactions or other connections with him. This narrative perspective is extremely helpful for a work that wants to express feminist ideas. Suppose the author grants Johnny the right to narrate his own experiences. In that case, the discourse of male chauvinists like him must be unreliable, and the discrimination and oppression he and other accomplices under the patriarchal system give to women will inevitably be omitted. Under patriarchy, due to the dominant position of men, women rarely have the opportunity to speak up for themselves and their fellow citizens. Lessing's use of such a narrative voice challenges such reactionary stereotypes. She encourages female characters to stand in front of the stage and raise their arms by silencing male characters. In real life, in a patriarchal society where men still have more initiative, the right of women to express themselves needs to be valued. When only they have the opportunity to express themselves, the enlightenment ideas can be transmitted, and more people will awaken and desire to express themselves, ultimately forming a virtuous cycle.

### 4. Conclusion

In summary, Lessing presents the life of the male protagonist, Johnny Blackworthy, to readers through a cyclical narrative structure and a female-dominated narrative voice from the perspective of a female bystander. She also exposes the oppression of women by men in patriarchal marriages and the suffering brought to them by women's self-restraint and self-paralysis to a certain extent. After research, the understanding of the short story *The Story of a Non-Marrying Man* has been deepened, and its narrative structure and the feminist ideas that the author intends to express through it can be more clearly and intuitively understood. This paper lacks sufficient theoretical support in narratology, a problem that other scholars can focus on in the future.

Lessing wants to tell more than just the life of a playboy in her *The Story of a Non-Marrying Man*, but this short story is her call. She appealed to all conservative and oppressive women, calling on them to examine themselves and their environment, awaken self-awareness, tear off the mask

imposed on them, and shout for equality and freedom. She not only criticized the persecution of women by men under patriarchy but also condemned the self-restraint of women under patriarchy. Through such urging, more women can be liberated from the root of their suffering. The innovative narrative voice used by Lessing in her writing not only subverted people's understanding of traditional feminist literature but also broke through and severely attacked the stereotypes of patriarchy. Although she has devoted her whole life to the feminist movement and devoted herself to the embrace of her heavenly father, the precious white and black legacy she has left behind will forever shine brightly, becoming a beacon in the mist, guiding generations of soldiers fighting for equality and freedom to break through the dark night.

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