

The Doomsday Heroes in Doris Lessing's Works and Her Contradictory Views on Christianity

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Abstract. Doris Lessing created some doomsday heroes in her writings. Like Jesus, these heroes aspire to save the world, but different from Jesus, they are powerless to achieve it. This reflects Lessing's ambivalent view on Christianity, which is closely related to her diaspora experiences as a descendant of British colonists in southern Africa. On the one hand, the importance of Christianity in British colonists' life, her educational experiences in the Christian Convent school and the influence of literature helped to cultivate Lessing's Christian complex. On the other hand, her dissatisfaction with the way in which some British colonialists dealt with racial relationships led her to question the fraternity spirit of Christianity.

Keywords: Doris Lessing; Doomsday Heroes; Views on Christianity.

1. Introduction

Doris Lessing (1919-2013) was a British writer who was awarded Nobel Prize for literature in 2007. In her autobiography *Walking in the Shade: Volume II* (1997), Lessing pointed out that 'In our own culture, at its heart, is the inner spiritual tradition of Christianity' [1]. However, Lessing showed a contradictory attitude towards Christianity.

On the one hand, Lessing had a strong Christian complex. In the preface to her novel *Shikasta* (1979), which is included in her space fiction series *Canopus in Argos: Archives*, Lessing stated these space novels were 'both to be experimental, as I like, and as tradition' [2], and that they are 'the most original branch of literature' because they have the same starting point, 'like many others of the genre, the Old Testament' [2]. In Lessing's view, holy literature such as the Bible shouldn't be completely abandoned as a fossil of the dead past, so she adopted the structure of the Old Testament and named some characters after Christian allusions in several of her works. On the other hand, Lessing also challenged Christian traditions. When she was a teenager, sometimes she refused to pay the tithe to the church. Lessing recalled that 'I was told I should give ten percent of my pocket money, of the money I earned for the guinea fowl I took to the store, and of the money I earned writing advertisements', but 'I didn't do it'. [1] She also mentioned that she felt very upset at the news that when her son Peter was taken away by her mother for weekends, 'he returned baptised'. [1] This implied that Lessing was not an absolute believer in Christianity when she was an adult.

Lessing's view on Christianity can be seen from her works. She mentioned that 'I can't imagine that anything will emerge that can't be deduced from reading any of my books now...we're always in our books' [3]. In other words, to some extent, works serve as a mirror to reflect the writer's main ideas. In terms of Lessing's view on Christianity, this is basically true. Lessing's attitude towards Christianity leaves footprints in her works, with the image of the doomsday heroes highlighting the contradictions in her view on Christianity.

The key plot of Christian allusions is for a hero to save the world, with the doomsday hero Jesus Christ as the core character. To a large extent, the dominance of Christianity in the western spiritual world, which has lasted for nearly 2000 years, can be partly attributed to the powerful image of the doomsday hero in the Bible. Influenced by the Bible, Lessing also created several doomsday heroes in her works. However, although these heroes are eager to save the world, they are not qualified for it because they have no adequate abilities. At the end of the world, they are as weak as Samson who has just lost his hair, and people can only find their way to salvation on their own. The contradictory

image of the doomsday heroes in Lessing's writings reflects her ambivalent attitude towards Christianity.

2. 'Unreliable Saviours': 'Doomsday Heroes' in Lessing's Works and Her Contradictory View on Christianity

If Jesus Christ can be said to be the true saviour, the doomsday heroes in Lessing's writings are just 'unreliable saviours'. Like Jesus, they also harbor the heroic complex of rescuing humans when the doomsday comes, and they also won't hesitate to sacrifice for it. But unlike Jesus, they have no abilities to do it. Compared with the true hero Jesus, these doomsday heroes are 'fake ones'. In Lessing's works, the 'fake heroes' form a sharp contrast with Jesus Christ, the true hero, which shows Lessing's contradictory view on Christianity.

2.1 Jesus Christ: The Unquestionable Saviour

On the one hand, in the Bible, Jesus Christ is the unquestionable saviour. The reason lies in the fact that Jesus has the aspiration to save mankind at the end of the world, and at the same time, he also exhibits extraordinary abilities with compelling heroic deeds. In addition, the piety of Christians also suggests that they regard Jesus as a true saviour.

2.1.1 Undertaking the Holy Mission to Save the World

Since he was born, Jesus has undertaken the holy mission to save the world, and this heroic complex gives the Bible a strong hue of heroism. It is the very heroic complex that meets people's spiritual needs and makes Christianity universally accepted in the western world. 'Those who suffer in reality need to release themselves from miseries by imaging the transcendental spiritual world constructed by Christianity, so as to realize in heaven the ideal that they will never achieve in reality'[4]. Jesus is the embodiment of Christian heroism and the Bible states his mission explicitly. 'For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life[...] the world through Him might be saved' [5]. Therefore, in the Bible, Jesus is the true saviour, whose birth is good news for all mankind.

2.1.2 Exhibiting His Power Through Holy Signs

In order to make people convinced, Jesus shows his power through holy signs and proves himself a true saviour. With the help of Jesus' divine power, the blind people can see, the deaf people can hear, the crippled people can walk normally, the leprosy patients get healed, and even the dead people are resurrected. At the same time, he also performs countless wonders, such as turning water into wine, expelling demons, and having the pigs jumping into the sea, etc. In addition, the charm of Jesus also stems from his noble morality, by which he can withstand all kinds of temptations. On witnessing the holy signs and wonders of Jesus as well as his high moral qualities, people get to know the power of him, and become more inclined to regard him as a true saviour.

2.1.3 Proving the Effectiveness of His Preaching

The statement that Jesus can be regarded as a true saviour also gets its evidence from the good effect of his preaching, which is shown in the piety of his followers, especially during the period of his crucifixion. Jesus had known in advance that he was about to be persecuted, but he did not run away, nor did he refuse to protect his followers. Instead, he chose to be crucified, so as to wash away the sins of human beings with his own blood, and to rescue the world at the cost of his own life. At the moment of Jesus' crucifixion, his followers rushed to see him off, each being flooded with tears, and the earth shaking, rocks broken. After his death, devout followers prepared balm voluntarily to anoint his body after the Sabbath, while Judas, the disciple who had betrayed Jesus, ended up in a violent death for his guilt. All these show that Jesus occupies an important position in the minds of faithful Christians and he is regarded as the true saviour by them.

2.2 Doomsday Heroes in Lessing's Writings: 'Unreliable Saviours'

On the other hand, compared with Jesus Christ, the doomsday heroes in Lessing's writings are 'unreliable saviours', with Gerald in *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974) as a typical example.

2.2.1 The Similarities Between Jesus Christ and the Doomsday Heroes in Lessing's Writings

Like Jesus, Gerald is also born in troubled times and has to undertake the mission of saving the world. According to the Bible, the end of the world is marked by chaos, and the typical signs of it are 'Human sacrifice. Dogs and cats living together. Mass hysteria'[6]. *The Memoirs of a Survivor* begins with such an apocalyptic scene. The beginning of the novel tells us that the female protagonist Emily has an ugly pet called Hugo, which is 'half cat and half dog'. 'It was the size of a bulldog, and shaped more like a dog than a cat, but its face was that of a cat[...] It had cat's eyes and whiskers'[7]. The image of the bizarre pet serves as a sign to suggest that the novel is about the end of the world. With the development of the story, social orders collapse on the whole. 'Everything is in change, movement, destruction—or reconstruction' and all the people suffer from the feeling of helplessness, 'as if one were being whirled about in a dust-devil or a centrifuge'[7].

We all believed that we were living in a peculiarly anarchistic community[...]We were still in the stage of generalized unease. Things weren't too good, they were even pretty bad. A great many things were bad, breaking down, giving up, or 'giving cause for alarm', as the newscasts might put it.[7]

With everything deteriorating, young people begin to abandon their traditional civilization. They form tribes on the pavement and plan to move away to the distance, Gerald being the leader of one of the tribes.

And like Jesus, Gerald is also full of heroic aspiration to save the world. 'He was, at any rate, the natural guardian of the younger ones, the distressed, the forlorn'[7], which makes him adored by the 'old-fashioned girl' Emily, his girl friend. Gerald notices that there suddenly appear a dozen or so forlorn children, living on the pavement where Gerald's tribe passes by. The children, nine, ten or eleven years old, are known as 'The Underground gang'[7], because most of them are born in the underground. Young as they are, they no longer have a family, living all by themselves.

Some had parents they had run away from, or whom they did see, but only occasionally. Some had no parents at all[...] Sometimes children attached themselves to other families, their own parents being unable to cope with the pressures, not knowing where to find food and supplies, or simply losing interest and throwing them out to fend for themselves as people had once done with dogs and cats that no longer gave pleasure. Some parents were dead, because of violence, or epidemics. Others had gone away out of the city and left their children behind.[7]

On seeing the homeless children, Gerald considers it his duty to take them into his tribe, so he begins to look after them like a father or elder brother. These waifs had long been ignored by their parents and the authorities so they put themselves outside society altogether, and used to live 'like moles or rats in the earth' [7]. In the eyes of Gerald, they are just poor kids who must be rescued, despite their mean nature. Gerald cannot give up the plan to save the children because 'it was deep in him, fundamental; and to give them up was to abandon—so he felt—the best part of himself'[7]. To some extent, Gerald seems to get a fever, shining with the heroic complex. However, observed carefully, one may find that the hero actually appears to be troubled, even a little forlorn and helpless. As for the reasons, apart from being overburdened, he is also troubled by the uncertainty of whether his rescue plan can work or not.

2.2.2 The Differences Between Jesus Christ and the Doomsday Heroes in Lessing's Writings

Different from Jesus who succeeds in saving the world and is worshiped by his followers, Gerald fails to save the children and has never been truly accepted by the latter. After taking over the children,

Gerald does a lot for them. In order to feed them, he tries to get food. Sometimes, he has to beg from the shops, and he even ‘took expeditions off to the country to get what supplies could still be bought or purloined’[7]. At the same time, he tries to raise the moral level of the children. He appeals to their better sense with reasonable words, but no matter how hard he ‘pleaded and reasoned and persuaded’, it simply doesn’t work. Gerald fails to guide the children as he expects; on the contrary, he has to behave according to the children’s will. Even so, the children are not grateful to him at all.

Unlike children who grow up in a stable society, these children are wild and difficult, problematical and heartbreaking. They have no habit of keeping clean, often sitting at windows throwing filth at passers-by like monkeys. ‘In every way they were worse than animals’[7]. When they find there is not enough food for them, they will scream and smash everything. Later, they learn to make wine by themselves, so they often get drunk. In order to keep the food supply, Gerald teaches them to cultivate a large garden at the back of the house. The children, however, can’t understand the meaning of it. ‘They wrecked everything, tore up the vegetables in the garden’[7], turning it into a wasteland. To some extent, the big garden can be regarded as Eden, and the waste of the garden symbolizes Gerald’s failure in his efforts to save the world.

Another difference between Gerald and Jesus is that Gerald has some severe moral deficiencies, which determines the failure of his rescue plan. For example, with the collapse of city facilities, water supply is cut off. One day, two girls come to sell water carried by a donkey cart, and people line up to buy water. Gerald, together with his tribe, grabs all the water in no time without paying for it. Later, “‘that rotten lot’ had opened up the Fleet River, and had started selling water on their own account’[7]. On the wasteland of civilization, water symbolizes the hope of rescue. At the end of the world, Gerald, the self-assumed saviour, not only fails to relieve the thirsty of people, but plunders water for himself, which in itself illustrates that he is just a ‘fake saviour’.

The end of the novel reinforces the failure of Gerald’s rescue plan. Just as Jesus who is willing to be crucified so as to atone for mankind, Gerald tries to awaken the children’s sense of morality by his self-sacrifice. One day, he walks out of the building and steps onto the pavement. ‘He was revisiting the scenes—so very recent, after all—of his triumphs, when he was lord of the pavement, chieftain of the gathering tribes’[7]. He deliberately turns to face the building where the children live and presents himself as a target. Contrary to the disciples’ grief for the crucifixion of Jesus, the children feel nothing pity for Gerald. No sooner than he gets there, a small piece of stone is thrown at him, followed by a shower of stones from the children. Gerald gets hurt, blood running down his face. The blood of Jesus washes away the sins of mankind, but Gerald’s only evokes the children’s bloodsucking instincts.

By the end of the novel, the narrator ‘I’ still entertains the hope that someone might restore the big garden. On her way to search for the garden, she finds ‘a pair of kingly lambs’[7]. Lamb usually symbolizes Jesus, as the New Testament mentions that ‘The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’[7]. However, in the novel, the presence of lamb can’t reduce the evil of the children. Just beside the lambs, the narrator finds a lovely boy and an ‘angelic little girl’[7]. They are ready to attack each other, or attack anyone else, each clenching a heavy stick in hand, with a nail-studded knob. ‘I am fortunate to escape just because on seeing the children hold close to their chests “where the handle of a knife showed’, ‘I’ ‘moved my right hand threateningly to where my—non-existent—knife was’[7].

Eventually, Gerald and the children all dissolve, while Emily and her faithful dog Hugo survive together. She and her dog are like Beauty and Beast in guise, ‘but Beauty was so close to her Beast now, wrapped in beast’s clothing, as sharp and wary as a beast, surviving as one. Yes, Beauty had been brought down, brought very low’[7]. Gerald’s holy plan fails to save the children, while Emily survives by falling to the position of a beast. The end highlights the failure of Gerald in saving the world and implies Lessing’s ambivalent view on Christianity.

3. Diaspora Experiences: Reasons for Lessing's Contradictory View on Christianity

3.1 Lessing's Faith in Christianity: Cultivated by Her Diaspora Experiences

3.1.1 The Impact of Her Life Experiences in Africa as a Descendant of British Colonizers

The formation of Lessing's contradictory view on Christianity is closely related to her diaspora experiences. On the one hand, Lessing's diaspora experiences cultivated her Christian complex. Firstly, as a descendant of British colonists, Lessing lived in southern Africa for 25 years before she left for Britain in 1949. Christianity played an important role in the lives of British colonists because it was a powerful tool for colonization. As Lessing mentioned in her book *African Laughter* (1992), "Soon after the 'Pioneer Column' of early British colonists entered southern Africa, 'came Mother Patrick and her band of Dominican nuns[...]' They at once began their work of teaching children and nursing the sick." [8]

Owing to the importance of Christianity in colonization, British colonists usually paid special attention to it when they tried to pursue wealth in colonies. 'Gold and the Cross have always been the two main engines for European colonists in the process of conquering the world'[9]. Most British colonists tended to strengthen their Christian faith and build 'Christian cultural enclave' in colonies. For example, Lessing recalled that 'My parents, who even at their poorest gave ten percent, as enjoined by the Bible, to charity'[1], which reflects the importance they attached to Christianity. Apart from this, they also clung to the dream of saving the black people with Christianity. For example, even when the British Empire was about to collapse, Lessing's parents still firmly believed that 'God had personally appointed the British nation to rule the world in His Name'[10], and still regarded themselves as God's envoys who were responsible for saving the black people. On seeing ants working busy in rotten wood, Lessing's father could not help wondering: 'I wonder how they see us, like God, I shouldn't be surprised?'[10] In fact, in the eyes of many British colonists, the black people in southern Africa were like a group of inexplicable 'ants'[11], whom the colonists were supposed to rescue with Christianity. Due to the importance of Christianity in the lives of British colonists, Lessing was likely to be influenced and formed a Christian complex.

3.1.2 The Impact of Her Education Experiences

Lessing's education experiences in the Christian Convent school also contributed to the formation of her Christian complex. Lessing was one of the many white children in southern Africa who were educated in Christian Convent schools due to the lack of adequate educational resources there. Lessing spent five years studying at the Christian Convent school, which is the only formal education she received all her life. Christian Convent school life left Lessing with little good memories. When she grew up, she still remembered vividly how the nuns walked around in their smelly robes, and the terrible pictures about Jesus' crucifixion hung in their bedroom. However, though Lessing didn't like the Christian Convent school, she couldn't be completely immune to the religious indoctrination there. Lessing recalled later that when she was studying at the Convent school, for some time, she fell into a religious fever.

I spent every spare minute in the Roman Catholic church[...], there was a statue of the Virgin, and there I knelt beseeching her for recognition of my love for her, and trying to persuade myself I saw her smile. I did make myself believe it-almost. In my blazer pocket was a medicine bottle full of holy water, and I practised crossing myself and curtsying every time I passed the Sacred Heart or any picture or statue of the Virgin. The fever of this time was like being in love, a condition I knew well, but it was heaven that swam about me.[12]

At that time, the religious passion of Lessing was so strong that it even shocked her mother. These educational experiences contributed to the formation of Lessing's Christian complex.

3.1.3 The Impact of Her Interests in Literature

Lessing's interest in literature also led to the formation of her Christian complex. When Lessing was a teenager, the descendants of British colonists in southern Africa had very few choices in education, so it was common for British girls to teach themselves at home, Lessing being one of them. After she left school, Lessing educated herself mainly by reading. 'She read wildly and eclectically, consuming classics regardless of origin' [13]. She is especially keen on literary works, so the formation of her Christian complex cannot be separated from this. Lessing was deeply influenced by Russian writer Tolstoy (1828—1910), a devout Christian. In his writing, Tolstoy persisted in exploring ways to eliminate social evils and increase human happiness through Christianity. As a 'Tolstoyan' [1], i.e., a disciple of Tolstoy, Lessing also had a strong Christian heroic complex.

3.2 Lessing's Resistance to Christianity: Cultivated by Her Diaspora Experiences

3.2.1 Racial Discrimination in Southern Africa of Her Age: Fundamental Reasons for Lessing's Resistance to Christianity

Lessing questioned Christianity now and then, and this was related to her diaspora experiences in southern Africa. As Harold Bloom pointed out that 'Lessing is very much a representative writer for our time. She has the spirit, if not the style, of the age' [14], Lessing's questioning of Christianity was triggered by the reality of racial discrimination in southern Africa of the time. The core of the New Testament is the spirit of fraternity, an important aspect of which is to extend the scope of doomsday salvation to include people of other races and other countries, rather than limit it to Israelites. Compared with the doctrines of Judaism, this is an important progress of Christianity, which explains why Christianity has been able to attract followers from various backgrounds and to dominate in the western spiritual world since the Middle Ages. However, the improper ways in which some British colonists dealt with racial relationships in southern Africa led Lessing to question the fraternity spirit of Christianity.

3.2.2 Brown Children: One of the Focal Points of Lessing's Anti-racism Concerns

Lessing, who made her literary debut with *The Grass is Singing* (1950) on racial relationships in southern Africa, was 'widely regarded as a progressive writer of anti-colonialism' [15], and racial discrimination was an important theme of her writings. At that time, one of the focal points of racial problems in southern Africa was the issue concerning brown children. Since there were few white women there, many white men kept contact with local black women. However, poisoned by racial discrimination, most white men tried to cover those relationships and refused to regard the brown children as their own descendants. In Lessing's view, though British colonists in southern Africa upheld the Christian spirit of fraternity, they refused to accept their own brown children, which exposed the hypocrisy of the Christian fraternity in southern Africa of the time. It was this phenomenon that provoked Lessing to question the fraternity spirit of Christianity, to break the holy 'rules of silence' [11] of British colonists, and to trace the origin of the brown children.

For example, in Lessing's semi-autobiographical novel *Martha Quest* (1952), Mr McFarlane, a white councillor in southern Africa, keeps sexual relationships with several black women, and a result of it is 'the compound full of his children' [10], the brown children born by the black women. Although this is widely known in the region, both Mr McFarlane himself and the white community keep silence about it. When Martha mentions this at home, her mother insincerely warns her that Mr McFarlane 'couldn't have done' this because 'He knows better, he's too nice' [10]. On hearing this, Martha can't help pointing out that British colonists are 'damed hypocrisy' [10] because on the surface, they are model Christians who behave themselves, observing racial boundaries strictly and refusing to have any personal relationships with black women, while in private, many of them have sex with black women secretly. Martha reminds her mother of the colonists' actual behavior, 'you and your Christianity, and then what you do in practice' [10], and criticizes the hypocrisy of some Christians in southern Africa who turn blind eyes to the interracial sexual relationships, 'provided all the lies and

ugliness are covered up'[10]. Martha is the incarnation of teenager Lessing, and Martha's anger reflects Lessing's indignation at Christianity.

Lessing's novel *The Antheap*(2003) also touches upon the theme of brown children in southern Africa. In the novel, the British colonist Mr Macintosh is a traditional Christian. 'He was religious, in a reminiscent sort of way, because of his parents, who had been very religious'[11]. Though he is very rich, he still works hard, saves every penny and doesn't drink at all. He becomes one of the richest men in southern Africa by brutally exploiting black people working in his gold mines. By then, his greatest pity is that he has not married so he has no children to inherit his property. In fact, he has several brown children born by the black women, Dirk being one of his brown sons. However, Mr Macintosh never regards the brown children as his descendants. Influenced by racial bias, Mr McIntosh is fond of Tommy, the son of a white employee, the only white boy living in that region. He provides tuition for Tommy to get education and spares no efforts to plan for Tommy's future. But to his brown son Dirk, his biggest favor is for Dirk to work in his gold mine, 'the pit of death'[11], as a child miner. Tommy believes in racial equality. In order to improve Dirk's life, Tommy forces Mr McIntosh to pay for Dirk, so Dirk gets the opportunity to study in a technical school. In reality, such victories are rare in southern Africa at that time, but as the title suggests, just as the ants in southern Africa can bite through the seemingly indestructible wood carvings, the combined efforts of the white and the black people will eventually overturn the colonial rule.

Lessing recognized the deficiencies of some British colonists in dealing with racial relationships in southern Africa of the time, so she was able to predict that 'white-dominated Africa cannot last very long'[11] and had the courage to challenge Christianity.

4. Conclusion

From Horsa, the human ancestor in *The Cleft*(2007) who is cast out, and 'lay helpless and like a shamed beast'[16] after failing to find the new Eden for mankind, to Canopus in *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8*(1994) who lets people down because at the end of the world, he 'does not have resources for this or that'[17], not being as powerful as people expected, and to Gerald in *The Memoirs of a Survivor* who simply 'dissolves'[7] when the end of the world comes, the doomsday heroes in Lessing's works tend to be 'unreliable saviours' who are powerless to save the world, and they are 'wounded heroes' who have encountered failure of their rescue plans.

In her autobiography, Lessing mentioned that 'I had understood my need for the wounded hero'[1]. In fact, many British colonists in southern Africa in Lessing's time were 'wounded heroes'. Many of them were former soldiers who had fought in the First World War with the hope for 'a reconstructed British society that would recognize the war's sacrifices by committing itself to a brighter, fairer future for all'[18]. However, the changes did not materialise as they expected, so they tasted 'the sense of betrayal produced by the breaking of perceived promises'[18]. After the war, some soldiers went to colonies owing to the propaganda of British government. For example, Lessing's parents made the decision to go to Africa after visiting the Empire Exhibition at Wembley in 1924, the giant posters at which said that people could get rich in just five years if they chose to grow corn in southern Africa[19]. Influenced by the propaganda, many British soldiers returning from the First World War went to Africa with the aspiration to get rich and to save the black people with Christianity. However, most of them failed to achieve these. Instead, they witnessed the fall of British colonial regime in southern Africa and the dramatic decline of British Empire. From these we can see that many colonists of the time were 'wounded heroes'. In addition, Lessing herself was a 'wounded hero', too. When she was a child, she determined to declare war on the whole world on behalf of the black children in southern Africa. With this in mind, she joined the Communist Group so as to eliminate all social injustice and realize communism in ten years, but the world turmoil in the mid-20th century shattered her heroic dream, making her amazed later at the 'insanity of her early years'.

However, as a diaspora writer, Lessing had the advantage of being 'both a participant and a spectator of a certain culture'[20]. She had a Christian complex, while at the same time, she could

jump out to recognize the deficiencies of it. Whether she criticized Christianity or not, she regarded it as a valuable part of human civilization, and what she really cared about was the mankind as a whole. Just as a scholar says that diaspora writers ‘face religious problems with an open mind, and then treat all human problems with the same attitude’[20]. It was the broad vision formed through diaspora experiences that prevented Lessing from breaking down at the failure of her early grand rescue plan, and got to know the power of literature instead. She worked hard in the garden of Muse all her life, trying to imagine the apocalyptic scene when the end of the world really comes, explore the future of mankind and seek home for all human beings in her writings.

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