

# Constructing a Terrorist Sensibility as Resilience towards Socio-Political Hegemony and Disgust in Doris Lessing's *The Good Terrorist*

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**Abstract:** Doris Lessing is a name to be reckoned with in the history of post war English fiction. Described as the most fearless woman novelist in the world, unabashed ex-communist and an uncompromising feminist, Lessing holds a unique place among twentieth century women writers for the sheer number, variety and scope of her work. Written in 1985, *The Good Terrorist* takes place in a communist squat in London during the Margaret Thatcher Era. The plot canters on securing the house as a legal squat and dealing with the ordinary day-to-day workings of the household, as well as the tensions between the different group members and their politics and what it is they are really prepared to do for 'the revolution'. They are living in the Cold War era and dealing with possible 'Russian Spies' as well as the I.R.A (Iranian Revolutionary Army). The title *The Good Terrorist* is an uncommon association of words and it can be an Oxymoron. The novel as a whole raises the question of conceiving terrorist cause or terrorist morality in positive terms.

**Keywords:** Literature of Terrorism, Identity, Hegemony, Disgust

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## Introduction

Constructing a terrorist sensibility as resilience towards Socio-political, Hegemony and disgust in Doris Lessing's *The Good Terrorist* is a study of new genre of 'Literature of Terrorism'. It discusses the way it actualizes itself in the universe of postmodern literature by analyzing the novel *The Good Terrorist*. Both terrorism and literature of terrorism have tremendous impact on the society. Even though we have a long history of terrorism and terrorists, the present nature of its application has got its momentum recently.

The action of *The Good Terrorist* is set in 1980s London, a dystopic city populated by individuals that face such issues as violence, racism, or unemployment on a daily basis. As the novel begins, we find a small group of characters taking possession of an abandoned house in the London suburbs. Alice Mellings arrives there together with Jasper, her boyfriend of fifteen years. They are accompanied by a lesbian couple, Roberta and Faye, and a heterosexual couple, Pat and Bert, and by Philippe. Later, some other individuals join the group, in such a way that it becomes clear that the house is occupied by transient characters, who have broken off from their social origin, alienated persons that in a rather strange way seem to have become the norm in that society.

*The Good Terrorist* announces from the very title itself that, it's being populated by terrorists that use violence as the only efficient method to attack capitalist society. One of the major achievements of this novel lies in the issue of terrorist's identity and how does the formation of a terrorist take shape in the society? The characterization of Alice Mellings' stands central to the above mentioned issue. "Alice is one of the most exciting

terrorists of the English literature; there are at least two reasons that may justify our assertion: first, Alice is a woman, and till the 1980s literature had recorded a small number of associations between political terrorism and female individuals. Secondly, the novelist constructs a different portrait of the terrorist who, contrary to our expectations, is conceived in positive terms” (Georgescu 23).

### **Socio-political Hegemony and disgust in *The Good Terrorist***

Terrorism is an anti-human act; using calculated, shocking and illegal violence on civilian population is the core of terrorism. Such actions started to occur as a consequence of increased social discriminations in labour distribution and the rise of social, political and economical differences between members of social community, and globally between states. The literature of terrorism ultimately deals with the works on terrorism which ranges from Joseph Conrad to Don DeLillo, we have a long list of writers and works with this specification. “Works of eminent writers like Fyodor Dostoevsky’s, *Demons*, Henry James’ *The Princess Casamassima*, G.K. Chesterton’s *The Man Who Was Thursday*, Albert Camus’ *The Just* come under this genre” (Georgescu 23). After the world trade centre attack on September 11, 2001, there is a tremendous increase in the number of books published on this subject.

In *Alchemists of Revolution: Terrorism in the Modern World*, Richard E. Rubenstein argues that, “terrorism originates in despair about language” (125). Quoting Lenin's disapproving remark that “terrorism is the violence of intellectuals” (Margaret. *Language and Terror* 183); he argues that the majority of terrorists start out attempting to relate their programs in speeches and manifestos. “Yet when their words go unheeded, they turn to actions meant to speak louder: We have lost all faith in words, said the founding father of Russian terrorism, Sergey Nechayev, in 1869” (*Language and Terror* 183).

In *The Good Terrorist*, the fictional Communist Centre Union (CCU) moves from comparatively undisruptive verbal attacks which include making hate speeches, taunting and mocking politicians, painting slogans and cynical illustrations on walls to bombing the city. Because they found no other way to communicate with the working class and create an opportunity. It is true that when Alice Mellings, the central character renovates the stinking squat in which one group has been living for months, she sets off "an explosion of order" (Lessing 49) in the lives of its inhabitants. It provides them a place where they can stay together and plot whatever they intend. But more significantly, it can be affirmed that, the CCU becomes progressively more alienated from the society and they were aware that no one listens to its propaganda, because no one understands its fine intentions. According to Doris Lessing;

“I think this interest in communism was rooted in the First World War and people’s passionate identification with what had been done to the soldiers, which crossed all the national boundaries. I think that’s where a disgust and contempt for government began; at the level we see it now. The automatic reaction of practically any young person is, at once, against authority. That, I think, began in the First World War because of the trenches, and the incompetence of the people on all fronts. I think that a terrible bitterness and anger began there, which led to communism. And now it feeds terrorism” (Garner 1).

The political and social problems that contaminated the then time England is represented in the novel by a house in London, more precisely a “squat” inhabited by an obscure left-wing sect of individuals that live in a dangerously prolonged childhood of the intellect. The spatial element is a bearer of meanings that go beyond the mere physical dimensions. The house is inhabited by individuals who have been subjected to a process of

dehumanization. Alice and Jasper, Roberta and Faye, Pat and Philippe – they all are psychological misfits for whom capitalist society is far from ideal, even if they benefit from its advantages daily. Lessing's dispossessed characters guide their actions after the line "Britain is as rotten as a bad apple, and ready for the bulldozers of history" (Lessing 10), a line that has become a co-ordinating and unifying principle and brings into question the political crisis underwent by Britain in the 1880's. From within the isolated environment of their setting, these characters plan a new kind of negotiation with the outer society, based on seemingly motivated violence.

Alice criticizes and objects to her parents' involvement and preference in what she sees as a corrupt social order: "This shitty rubbish we live in" (Lessing 406). Modern Britain is condemned by Alice and her co-conspirators as a wasteland worthy only of destruction and doom. One group member, Caroline, speaks about the rotten system and the need for a radical change in the social as well as political systems. Faye "wants to put an end to this shitty fucking filthy lying cruel hypocritical system" (Lessing 120). They are also against the dead old traditions and hypocrisy of the middle class.

Alice Mellings speaks of 'watchers' as part of the system for the surveillance and which cannot be avoided. She says that even though they seem kind and simple, they are ominous because they protect only their own benefits and interests. These people operate at top level of the system. They are imperceptible and unsuspected. They pull the strings of the system which is powerful, totalitarian and hegemonic in nature. Alice's mother warns her "This world is run by people who know how to do things. They know how things work. They are equipped...But we- we are just peasants. We don't understand what is going on, and we can't do anything" (Lessing 332).

Alice's group, the Communist Centre Union, is sometimes seen as a miniature of the divided society. In spite of its radical affectations, it replicates the social patterns of the wider society. The traditional divisions of labour between male and female are observed, as well as those between middle-class and working-class persons. While members of the group are theoretically in solidarity with the working class, they do not really further the interests of the disadvantaged or disfranchised. They are not a part of any true progressive party but instead use their political organization as a theater within which they can play out their psychological problems. Working-class members of the group, such as Jim and Philip, are seen as suffering from social, economic, and health problems. There is a politically-motivated substratum of the novel that becomes obvious from the very moment we are told that our 'perpetually adolescent' characters found the Communist Centre Union as a means of materializing their belief that only political violence can inflict change; Alice is the one who provides an explanation for the title of the sect: "Centre ... because we wanted to show we were not left deviants or revisionists; union ... a union of viewpoints" (Lessing 98). The Communist Centre Union is not a political organization, but rather a *parody* of political organizations: it is small, obscure and it has no political program articulately formulated.

A short essay called "The Languages We Speak" was published in the same year as an addition to *The Good Terrorist*. Here Lessing repeats her idea. People can be "taken over" by the language they speak (communism, Christianity, mysticism), and this will eventually lead to madness. She writes: "There is one thing that surprises me about *The Good Terrorist*. It is how people see Alice. The girl is of course quite mad. This confirms what I have said so often in this context: if a mad person is in a political setting, or a religious one, a lot of people won't even notice he or she is mad." (Stella 13)

Lessing feels that many terrorists are themselves anomalous figures. Talking about the squatters living in her street while she was writing *The Good Terrorist*, she notes how they would utter violent slogans such as: “‘Come the revolution we’ll have to kill ten million (twenty million, thirty million) of the bourgeois.’ But they were full of humanitarian busyness, rescuing cats, supporting orphans in Africa, giving money to badly treated donkeys, being kind to old people” (Lessing 12). This contradiction we also see in Alice and it accounts for the great irony of the novel: Alice’s “humanitarian busyness” – her home-making, her charity, and her concern for others - in the end leads her into terrorism.

## Conclusion

Lessing is profoundly aware of the blemishes of the society she lives in. Alice's rage at the ugliness of public architecture, at the bureaucracy's destruction of livable housing while families are crowded into welfare hotels, seems clearly to be Lessing's own. The CCLJ's activities, at the beginning, have been largely verbal and harmless, occasionally accompanied by symbolic violence like tomato throwing. While many of the group's members have been busy with various protest and demonstrations and they lived in illegal squats using and exploiting welfare system of the society and the system. But they meticulously avoided violence. There were well intentioned liberal attempts to improve social conditions and the living situations of the people. But all these efforts were actually swallowed up by the state and its corporate allies. Mary Williams, for example, takes a job with the Housing Council in order to help the homeless, only to discover that it co-operates with private developers to reduce the amount of affordable housing. Alice's own attempts to find a flat for Monica and her baby, to keep Faye alive after her suicide attempt, to make a comfortable home for a group of radicals all fail.

Lessing's fiction is deeply autobiographical; most of her work is budding out of her experiences in Africa and her serious engagement with politics and social concerns. She gives importance to the philosophical underpinnings of ‘humanization-of-terrorism’. This discussion of humanization ranges from Walter Benjamin's theory of history as a state of siege to Albert Camus's belief that revolt is an essential dimension of human existence and Julia Kristeva's postulate that only the confrontation of "an obstacle, prohibition, authority, or law . . . allows us to realize ourselves as autonomous and free" (Elaine, *The Global Phenomenon* 3 ). She believes that people in disgust revolt against any rule which they find inappropriate.

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