

Non Normative Modes of Affiliation and Dependence: A Study on Alternative Domesticities in Doris Lessing's *the Memoirs of a Survivor*

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Abstract

*The decorous heteronormative dogma of domesticity is thrown down the gauntlet by alternative domesticities such as fictive kinship, polymorphous domesticity, family by choice, polyamorous relationships, trans resident domesticities and so on. This research employs a cross disciplinary approach to analyse the plurality of identity formations, non normative forms of affiliation and dependence and heterogeneous manifestations of alternative domesticities in Doris Lessing's *The Memoirs of a Survivor*. Through this study the efficacy of ties outside the kinship, align philosophies and locus attention of communes, actualisation of gender binary communities in domestic spaces, renewal of gender roles in alternate domesticities, plurality of relationships in polyamorous kinships and the role of companion animals in polymorphous domesticities in the novel is endorsed.*

Key words: alternative domesticities, plurality, polyamorous, polymorphous, fictive kinship, communes, gender binary

Domestic space is entangled with larger notions of culture, norms, codes, pluralities, emotions, deviations, contest and transgression. Domestic is not merely pertinent to a space or a normative platform of dependence agreed upon biological, legal or social markers, instead it envelops the varied intimate experiences evolving out of kinship, emotions,

homelessness, care, friendship and all the nuanced experiences of a household. The conventional heteronormative ideology (Strauss, 1969; Schneider, 1980) of domestic space is challenged by heterogenetic spaces like radical communities (Brundell, 1983), imperfect alternatives (Wernick, 1974), non traditional family forms (Macklin, 1980), family by choice (Raimey, 1979), fictive kinship (Schneider, 1984), polymorphous domesticity (Schiesari, 2012) and other modes of alternative domesticities. The term alternative encompasses a multidimensional identity. It is not only limited to non-heterosexuals but it is inclusive of other identities such as polyamorous relationships (Murray, 2015; Johnston and Longhurst, 2010), trans residents and domesticities (Felsenthal, 2009; Halberstam, 2005) and unrelated living together (McNamara and Connel, 2007).

This research analyses the portrayals of alternative domesticities such as Fictive Kinship, Radical communities, gender binary communities, Non normative modes of affiliation and dependence, single hood, Non – biological families, polyamorous domesticity and polymorphous domesticity in the novel *The Memoirs of a Survivor* by Nobel laureate Doris Lessing. *The Memoirs of a Survivor* is a dystopian novel or “an attempt at autobiography” authored by Doris Lessing. It is a prophetic fantasy that explores psychological and social break down (encyclopedia britannica). The memoir portrays three intermingled parts : the destruction of society, “trips behind the walls” and people coming into grip with the fall of the society. the unnamed protagonist taking care of a mysterious girl after an unexplained fall of civilization serves to be the plot of the book. It portrays human nature without veils, incarnating acts of violence and acts of care and love in the simaltenously.

This research aims to

- comprehend the heteronormative ideology of home and domestic space with the aid of Doris Lessing’s *The Memoirs of a Survivor*
- establish the plurality of identity formations through the novel
- analyse the ties established through non-biological relations and fictive kinship
- understand the strategic philosophies and locus of attention of the radical communes established in the novel.
- shift the research attention towards gender binary communities at domestic spaces than at public spaces.
- Identify the non normative practices that led to a radical shift in gender roles in the work.
- Assess the emotional and egalitarian aspects of polyamorous and polymorphous domesticities across the work.

This research attempts to bring out a cross- disciplinary approach to alternative domesticities with reference to Doris Lessing's *The Memoirs of a survivor*.

Fictive Kinship

fictive kinship is an extension of family obligations and relationships outside the kinship sphere. As imaginary ties of choice, fictive kin are unrelated by either blood or marriage (Sussman 1976) and employ a standard cultural typology (i.e., likened to blood – ties, socio – legal or marriage ties, and parenthood) to describe these non- kin associations (Gubrium and Buckholdt 1982 : Rubenstein et al. 1991). Without being inside a defined criteria fictive kins mimic the existing family ties which they incarnate, but they are established by their own terms. They may have economic, social, religious and political components striving to redefine a sense of community living. Unrelated individuals become “adopted” family members who accept the affection, obligations and duties of “real” kin (Macrae 1992) They elaborate social interactions outside the boundaries of family. The ties established in a fictive kinship is voluntary unlike the true kinship attributes and they exist with the mutual consent of individuals involving in the bond.

The novel *The Memoirs of a Survivor* is a work that go into raptures about fictive kinship. The unnamed protagonist and Emily, the girl whom she was suddenly given responsibility of, shares a mother and daughter relationship even though they are not so biologically. Protagonist says that “No one has any idea until they have children, what it means. Its all I can do to keep up with the rush of things, the meals one after another, the food, let alone giving the children the attention they should have. I know that Emily is ready for more than I have time to give her, but she is such a demanding child.” (*The memoirs of a survivor*, 61)

These lines portrays the intensity of a true motherly bond which the protagonist establishes with Emily, even when she lacks real kinship ties with her. Novelist describes Emily and Gerald as “young parents” of the children in the communes. Despite of their young age, Emily and Gerald takes responsibility of the children. “Gerald had become a father or an elder brother to the children. He got food for them” (83). The novel venerates the true kinship ties established through fictive kinship by the protagonist, Emily and Gerald.

Radical communities

Communes are a group of five or more adults, plus any children, who live together by choice, indefinitely with an ideological goal (Zablocki, 1980). Communes are evolutionary (Kanter, 1917). They evolved from “naivete of utopias” (Coffman, 1979) to the “natural pattern”. Radical communities emphasize on small size (Bouvard, 1975) and promote

interdependence as the members encounter each other more often, even though they sacrifice privacy and self determination in the process (kemplar, 1976). They envision a meaningful life (Alexander, 1976) espousing egalitarian values arguing the liberation of both the sexes from limited roles. Zablocki divided the communes he studied based on

- strategic philosophy (primarily reflective / conscious raising / action oriented)
- locus of attention (focused on spirit / self/ commune / secular society)

These classification resulted in the identification of different types of commune ideologies namely

- 1) alternative family communities
- 2) coliving communities
- 3) cooperative communities
- 4) countercultural communities
- 5) egalitarian communities
- 6) political communities
- 7) psychological communities (formed on mystical or gestalt principles)
- 8) rehabilitational communes
- 9) spiritual communes
- 10) experimental communities

The novel throughout mentions about the establishment of alternate unconventional households without proper genealogies. After the fall of civilization, the hooglians hived off to find shelter with some family or households. A household with five people suddenly held twelve. Author defines the purpose of those radical communes saying

Or what can one say about the innumerable citizens' group that came into existence right up to the end, for any ethical or social purpose you could think of: to improve old age pensions, at a time when money was giving way To barter; to supply vitamin tablets to school children; to provide visiting services to household invalids; to arrange for legal adoption for abandoned children; to forbid the news of any violent unpleasant news; to reason the gangs of hooglians as they came through streets. (21)

The commune that Gerald develops for taking care of abandoned children feels like an alternate family. "There it was: warmth, caring, a family. Emily believed herself to have acquired a ready-made family" (83). The communities established in the novel are alternative family, coliving, cooperative, counter-cultural, egalitarian, rehabilitational and experimental communities. Strategic philosophies upheld by the communes are primarily reflective, conscious raising and action oriented. The locus of attention of the communes are understood to be on self, commune and secular society.

Minority sexuality and the domestic sphere

The term sexual minority refers to people whose sexual orientation is different from the presumed majority which is heterosexual. This include gay, lesbian, bisexual , pansexual, transsexual, queer and other gender binary communities. Lydia Walker-Savestan states that “the ultimate goal of our search as adults exploring alternate life styles is to find meaning in life, to know the freedom of being in love and the freedom to love others to the depths and lengths of our spiritual, mental, emotional and physical potential as human beings”. To achieve this goal individuals are experiencing a greater number of interpersonal relationships during their lifetime (Masnick and Bane, 1980).

The novel also depicts the gender binary communities through Emily and June. Protagonist says

For I had been seeing the child June adoring the ‘older woman’, as was natural and is personal in every person’s growth. I have never understood how much Emily depended on than thin sharp faced waif, who not only looked three years younger, but was in a different realm together.(122)

the protagonist suggests a lesbian relationship between Emily and June but it is found that they are bisexual as they share an equal sexual relationship with Gerald.

Non normative modes of affiliation and dependence

There are a lot of misconceptions regarding the development of gender roles. In reality, they change in the course of time. The table below demonstrates the theoretical explanation of gender roles.

Theoretical perspective	Proposed concept
sociology	Evolutionary criterion and nature formulate gender roles
Social learning	Gender role formation is either direct (rewarding and punishing / remodeling) or indirect (imitation / modeling)
Cognitive development	Developmental stages chisel the gender identities
Symbolic interaction	Gender roles vary according to interactions and situations
feminism	Specializations, patriarchy and gender scripts affects gender roles

Few people argue that instrumental and expressive roles no longer affect social interactions whereas a major part of the society still believe that stereotypical roles still exist. Utopian communities of nineteenth century marked the beginning of radical practices that transformed gender roles from normative to non- normative. Alternate domesticity argues for non normative modes of affiliation and dependence outside the defined gender roles. It propagates a plurality of identity formation destabilizing the hetero normative ideology of home and domesticity.

In *The Memoirs of a Survivor* there is a reversion of normative gender roles. Emily is “prominent in her role as an adviser, source of information” (139), Gerald was “like a boy in torn jersey and worn jeans...He looked tired, he looked anxious ; he looked as if he needed to put his head on someone’s shoulders” (146). Gerald wanted Emily to take decisions and to be in charge of his households. He was hesitant and was in a fearful conflict most of the time, but Emily was spontaneous and witty in her decisions. The novel on the whole re-establishes the hetero normative stereotypes of gender roles.

Single hood

The term “single” continues to mean the absence of marriage and therefore has meaning only when compared with marriage (Stein, 1983). The heterogeneous group of singles are divided into

- 1) Voluntary / Temporary singles
- 2) Voluntary / stable singles
- 3) Involuntary / Temporary singles
- 4) Involuntary / Temporary singles (Stein, 1983)

The unnamed protagonist of the novel is an advocate of single hood. She is found to be living alone in a block of flats before Emily’s arrival. She lacked company of a man and never was in need of helping hands. She is a voluntary / stable single who is self sufficient. She takes risks, experiments, consumes and sets trends. The novel thus appraises single hood through its protagonist.

Non – biological families

In modern times biological bondage is not the foundation of families. Biological tie is no longer considered to be essential for parenthood. A non-biological family member is someone with you are not biologically related or you don’t share a gene with. Watt Jones finds that there are two key family compositions

1. functional composition
2. biological composition

functional relationships exist between biological and non biological members whereas biological roles are based on true genetic or blood relations.

The novel throughout depicts non-biological relationships. Emily and the protagonist share a mother and daughter tie but they are no way biologically related.

‘This is the child’ He was already on way out...

I said: ‘But surely....’

‘No, there is no mistake. She is your responsibility.’

...

‘She is Emily Cartright, Look after her’. (17)

This was how Emily was introduced to the protagonist by the invisible mentor, but later on they discover functional ties. In the same way Gerald and Emily were the “young parents” for children in the household. The novel magnifies functional ties over biological ties.

Polymorphous domesticity

polymorphous domesticity is another aspect that advocates plurality of relationships. It explores how human life is re figured by the presence of animals in it (Schiesari, 2012). it celebrates the diversity of domesticity. During nineteenth century pet keeping was considered as a symbol of elitism but later on after the rise of middle class it became part of the bourgeois culture. Companion animals have become increasingly important in family life. More than eighty five percentage of pet owners regard their pets as family members (cohen, 2002). They play crucial roles in family functioning and resilience. Getrude Stein says “... there are always animals and animals can always become family.” the ideological affinity between femininity, sexuality and animality was a focus for researchers of American societies.

In the book Emily was always in amity with Hugo the yellow beast with whom her self fitted with. Protagonist says, “now I am thankful Hugo was there. He was not a difficult animal (I nearly said a person)” (47). “she was not prepared to sacrifice her Hugo...he was hers ,she loved him”(69). Emily regards Hugo as her family member. Her life and social interactions are redefined in the presence of Hugo. Doris Lessing presents many elements polymorphous domesticity in the novel.

Poly amorous domesticity

Polyamory is the practice of intimate relationships with more than one partner, with the knowledge of all partners involved (Haritaworn, 2016). The agreements vary in a poly amorous relationship according to the attitudes of individuals involved but they propose recurring values such as intimacy, love, honesty, integrity, equality, commitment and communication (klesse, 2016). They emphasize the emotional and egalitarian aspects of

plural relationships (Bergstrand, 2000). Kerista Commune used the concept of compersion in poly amorous communities in order to define the fidelity of relationships. In an article written for "The Guardian" Echlin suggests six reasons for propagandizing polyamory. They are

- A drive towards female independence and equality driven by feminism.
- Disillusionment with monogamy.
- A yearning for community.
- Honesty and respect for the relational nature of human beings.
- Human nature
- Attitude against the stereotypes of monogamy

The Memoirs of a Survivor espouses plurality of identity and relationship. Protagonist says "soon I saw that Emily was not the only girl Gerald favoured, she was by no means the only one helping him with that household ... And what was Emily feeling now? Again her emotions had not accommodated change" (85). Emily, June and Moureen were mutually of Gerald's relation with each of them but they were in complete agreement with that poly amorous relationship fostering equal love, commitment and communication.

It is found that true kinship ties established through fictive kinship are no way lesser than biological ties in terms of affection, obligation and duties as understood from the bonds shared by Emily and the protagonist and Gerald, Emily and the children in the communes. The alternative radical communes identified in the novel are based on primarily reflective, conscious raising and action oriented philosophies and the locus of attention of the communes are on self, commune and secular society. Emily and June are identified to be bisexual and Doris Lessing seems to be accepting the presence of gender binary communities in a domestic space for exploring alternate lifestyles. The hetero normative modes of affiliation and gender stereotypes are re-established through alternate lifestyles as found through characters Gerald and Emily. It is also found that the unnamed protagonist is a voluntary – stable single who takes charge of her own life. The functional ties established in non-biological families redefines community living. It is inferred that companion animals can play a crucial role in resilience and can become a part of domesticity as Hugo is for Emily. It is notable that author celebrates the egalitarian and emotional plurality of relationships through polymorphous relationships portrayed in the work. This research concentrated on a cross – disciplinary analysis of hetero normative ideology of home and space. Further studies can be conducted on conceptual and empirical aspects of alternate domesticity through the lens of nature cultures and autobiographical aspects of the novel *The Memoirs of a Survivor*.

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