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Writing and Presenting
Caregiving in Doris Lessing’s “The Diary of a Good Neighbour”

Kanae Sekino

Introduction
The problems of dependency have been one of the major and fundamental topics among feminists. Eva Feder Kittay, a scholar of feminist ethics, explains this problem in the preface of her book, _Love’s Labor_ (1999), in which she argues that it is surely understandable that a person who requires assistance must be dependent on other people, and her or his caregivers must also be in a dependent position because those who take care of dependents “must put their own interests aside to care for one who is entirely vulnerable to their actions” (v). Therefore, there is no doubt that women, who generally have a responsibility to take care of their family, must be dependent on the other members of their family, in most cases on the male breadwinner. This close relation between women and their dependency which derives from caregiving leads feminist scholars to criticize the gender division of caregiving, and feminist activists to promote public understanding and support for the work of caregiving to children and elderly people. Although these efforts and activities seem to have partially succeeded, women still continue to be the major caregivers in both the domestic and public spheres.

While the gender division in caregiving still exists as an issue for feminism, focusing only on the emancipation of women from caregiving has given rise to the consciousness of caregiving as a menial job. Kittay describes the two opposite consequences entailed by the emancipation of women from traditional role as a caregiver as follows:
Focusing on dependency, however, also allows one to see that as some women leave behind many traditional roles, other women fill those roles. The process creates greater differentiation among women. This indicates that while dependency and dependency work offer an important connection between women, they also give rise to a rift between those who do dependency work and those who have found other means to fulfil traditional responsibilities. (xi)

Although Kittay refers to the existence of an economic gap among women in this quotation, her suggestion leads us to think over the situation subsequent to the emancipation of women from traditional roles as a caregiver: the economical and psychological gap between women who continue to devote themselves to the caregiving and those who do not. We need to be aware of the risk of dismissing the caregiving itself and analyze women’s participation in caregiving more elaborately. Moreover, in the age of globalization, the commercialization of care work is entangled with the problem of class and ethnicity. Ethnic minority women tend to be hired as cheap and less-specialized caregivers to support well-paid women who are able to purchase care services due to their professional earning capacity. Sumika Yamane highlights this aspect of care work and suggests the need for close observation of the problems concerning gender, race and caregiving (3). I agree with her concern about this condition surrounding the problem of care work, and I would like to examine women’s situation as a caregiver within women’s writing. We are now required to think of what will happen to the care work and caregiving under this condition. The gender division of care work and the economic gap among women in care work is a problem which must be solved, but it ought to be done without treating caregiving only as the symbol of unliberated or
backward women.

Based on these observations on caregiving, I am going to analyze its function in Doris Lessing’s “The Diary of a Good Neighbour” (1984) as the representation of the relation of dependency and women’s situation as caregiver. This story was first published as a novel in 1983 under Lessing’s pseudonym of “Jane Somers.” In the preface of The Diaries of Jane Somers (1984),¹ a reprint of this novel, Lessing confesses that she simply wanted to “make a little experiment” to write freely without the benefits of her own name and “associations and labels” that every eminent writer acquires (v). By examining the representation of caregiving, I would like to clarify that Janna’s role as a caregiver enables her to observe and represent other women’s experience within her diary. Her diary goes beyond a personal record of exchanges between Janna and Maudie because Janna’s attempt to record her experience with her “observing eye” does not only mean that she objectively observes her own experiences with Maudie, but also that she gains a profound awareness of other women’s experiences (65). By using this observant eye she represents their experiences to “present” them in her own diary (65). Therefore, this story is about how Janna extends her knowledge and broadens her horizon through her experiences of the work generally conceived as traditional and backward in feminist emancipatory discourses.

**Janna’s Caregiving in “The Diary of a Good Neighbour”**

Janna, the narrator of this novel, is a successful editor of a women’s magazine. She loses her mother and husband to cancer, and after that she has been living alone. She happens to meet a woman in her nineties named Maudie Fowler. Maudie is a difficult but charming old woman who has been living alone for many years in a dirty basement in London. She refuses to receive any kind of social welfare service because she is proud of her ability to live by herself and thinks these services will
restrict her freedom. It is why she does not want to communicate with Janna who is first recognized as a “Good Neighbour,” who looks after old people as requested by the social welfare department. Because of this preoccupation, Maudie first treats Janna coldly, but Janna looks after Maudie until she also dies of cancer. Through Janna’s repeated visits and talks over tea, they gradually establish an intimacy.²

Janna’s willingness to communicate with and provide care for Maudie is the most distinctive feature of caregiving depicted in this novel, and it emphasizes Janna’s fundamental characteristic as a devoted caregiver. Janna, who formerly avoided looking after her ill mother and husband, is willing to communicate with the difficult old woman. On the first day they meet at a pharmacy, she goes to Maudie’s house and has a small talk with her. After that, Janna regularly visits Maudie’s house. Because of her self-confidence, Maudie demands nothing of Janna, but Janna carefully discerns what Maudie actually wants her to do. They become intimate precisely through these exchanges without clear demands.

And when I left she [Maudie] said, in her way of not looking at me, ‘I suppose I won’t be seeing you again?’ And I said, ‘Yes, if you’ll ask me.’ Then she did look at me, and there was a small smile, and I said, ‘I’ll come on Saturday afternoon for tea, if you like.’

‘Oh I would like, yes I would.’ And there was a moment between us of intimacy: that is the word. (12-13)

Janna’s care for Maudie is based on her understanding of Maudie’s unexpressed demands, and Maudie’s acceptance of Janna’s offer to support her makes them close and intimate. This feature of their exchanges can be found too when Maudie discreetly asks Janna to wipe her body when, because of her illness, Maudie fails to control herself.
and soils her underclothes.

She [Maudie] was talking, at random I thought, about when she had been in hospital. I half listened, wishing that doctors and nurses could hear how their hospitals are experienced by someone like Maudie. Prisons. Reformatories. But then I realized she was telling me about how, because she had not been well enough to be put in the bath, two nurses had washed her in her bed, and I understood.

‘I’ll put on the kettles,’ I said. ‘And you must tell me what to do.’ (50-51)

This understanding about Maudie’s demands for support, which are delivered without any express requests, is one of the features in Janna’s method of caring for Maudie. She purchases groceries, feeds Maudie’s cat and brings coal for the iron stove without being explicitly asked to do so. Each of these actions strengthens Janna’s characteristic as a devoted caregiver.

The relation between Janna and Maudie can be regarded as a relation of dependency which is constructed through mutual agreement. For Maudie, to receive Janna’s support means that she becomes dependent on Janna, and for Janna to look after Maudie means she has a dependent to take care of. Both characters accept their dependence on each other since Janna also emotionally relies on Maudie while Maudie is physically dependent on Janna. It is this interactive communication, and the acceptance of this relation, that makes their relationship satisfactory and acceptable.

**Embodiment of Stereotype**
This kind-hearted and devoted woman, Janna, occupies an uncomfortable place in feminist studies because she is engaged in the
labour embedded within a tradition that has historically demanded women to be a caregiver for their family. Betty Friedan, in her 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique*, describes how American housewives suffered from the situation in which their roles were conventionally restricted to the domestic sphere, such as childcare and housekeeping. Nancy Chodorow attempts to articulate how and why the role of mothering is assigned to women in *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978). Moreover, Carol Hanisch, writer of the eminent essay “The Personal is Political” (1969), reflects on the past in the introduction written in 2006, and says as follows:

Our demands that men share the housework and childcare were likewise deemed a personal problem between a woman and her individual man. The opposition claimed if women would just “stand up for themselves” and take more responsibility for their own lives, they wouldn’t need to have an independent movement for women’s liberation. (1)

Hence, Hanisch and her contemporaries initially undertook to gain the recognition that the problem of women’s caregiving is not a problem solved by “personal initiative” but one of the issues determined in, and by, the public sphere. In this way, feminists in both academia and activism have been undertaking the articulation of women’s participation in caregiving and the acquirement of public support for this work to share its responsibility with men and to liberate women from their traditional role, or more precisely, caregiving itself. However, Janna, a well-paid and successful editor of a woman’s magazine, willingly looks after Maudie. How do we understand and evaluate her involvement in caregiving?

What is imaginable or conceivable is to see Janna’s involvement as the embodiment of feminine qualities which have traditionally been
regarded as one of the evidences to support the women’s role as a caregiver of family. Janna’s involvement in caregiving can be seen as internalization of the beliefs and perspectives in which women are considered as the only gender which is responsible for caregiving. It is certainly true that there is deep regret when Janna reflects that her caregiving was unsatisfactory for her husband and mother, and this feeling leads her to engage in caregiving for Maudie. She thinks that she needs to learn something in order to stop being like “[c]hild-daughter” and “child-wife” (8). In this sense, Janna seems to conform to the stereotypical behaviour or traditional image of women to make up for the insufficiency of her past behaviour. However, Janna acknowledges that her participation in caregiving is negatively evaluated by the women around her. Hence, Janna’s participation in caregiving is not simply interpretable as the pursuit of a fixed image of womankind where these feminine, caring qualities are recognized and idealized. Rather, the disapproval of her peers indicates that Janna’s involvement in caring for Maudie cannot be fully interpreted as the internalization of attributes and stereotypical behaviours traditionally associated with women. Therefore, Janna’s involvement in caregiving cannot be fully interpreted as the internalization of women’s traditional attributes or stereotypical behaviours.

Moreover, her involvement in caregiving cannot be limited only to internalizing women’s roles which have long been historically structured because this involvement can change the original aims and intentions of the stereotypical behaviour. Evaluating Marilyn Strathern’s painstaking analysis of anthropological examinations, Judith Butler writes about the embodiment of stereotype in the afterword of Strathern’s *Before and After Gender* (2016) as follows:

The stereotype does not have a single meaning; it can, for instance, be inhabited in ways that enable women to express their
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desires or attain their goals. Indeed, embodiment is an animated vector for changing aims and intentions. Once a stereotype is embodied, it can be diverted from its original purpose, since embodiment can change or redirect the stereotype that is inhabited. (296)

Following this passage, Butler suggests what we need to question is not what the stereotype is like but “what purpose does it serve, or what aims does it seek to realize” (296). Therefore, if Janna’s participation in caregiving is regarded as stereotypically feminine behaviour, it does not contribute directly to anti-feminist notions or the failure of feminist goals. Rather, we need to examine the aims and purposes that Janna’s participation in caregiving seeks to realize.

Firstly, I would like to evaluate Janna’s involvement in caregiving as an effort to pose a question to the disagreements over women’s participation in caregiving. As mentioned above, women’s role as caregivers became a controversial topic among feminists by the time “The Diary of a Good Neighbour” was written and published. Their effort to share responsibility for caregiving with men has led to the socialization of caregiving and the liberation of some women from this labour. However, as Kittay suggests, this effort to encourage women to join the workforce in order to avoid being in the status of dependency results in the internal division between women who continue to devote themselves to caregiving and those who do not. Therefore, again, I would like to note that the debate over women’s participation in caregiving can cause an antagonistic relationship between women who accept to be a caregiver and those who do not.

In this novel, Jill’s negative response to Janna’s caregiving functions as the representation of this problem. Jill, who is Janna’s teenage niece, moves to her flat in order to work at the office of her fashion magazine, titled *Lilith*. Jill respects Janna for her success in the
world of fashion magazines, but when she discovers that Janna regularly visits Maudie’s house and looks after her, she expresses her disapproval to the caregiving as follows:

Suddenly her [Jill’s] passionately rejecting face, her real distress, which told me how threatened she felt.

Just as I would have done—alas, so recently—she cried out: ‘Why doesn’t her family look after her? Why doesn’t the Welfare put her into a Home? Why does she have to impose on you?’ (168)

Here, Janna understands Jill’s argument: Maudie is not Janna’s dependant, she is not a blood relation, so Janna does not have to look after her. However, on the other hand, Jill’s feelings of rejection, distress and threat from Janna’s participation in caregiving shows the negative attitude towards women who continue to be involved in caregiving. Jill, who is young but surely depicted as a future feminist, thinks that Janna’s participation is unsuitable for the successful editor of a women’s magazine. In this way, Janna’s involvement in caregiving is placed in opposition to the idealized notion of a successful, independent and career-focused woman, which means that Jill sees it as symbolic of unsuccessful and dependent, or rather, unliberated women who are captured by the conventional norms of womanhood. Although Janna partially understands why Jill disagrees with her actions, she does not cease to look after Maudie until she dies in hospital.

In this sense, it is clear that Janna understands that feminist emancipatory discourses have the possibility to cause a negative attitude towards women’s participation in caregiving and to the devotion of time and energy in caring of others. For example, the title of this novel, “The Diary of a Good Neighbour,” can be taken in two ways. Firstly, it can be understood as a diary of a good “neighbour,”
meaning simply a person who lives nearby, such as Janna. But secondly, it can also suggest a diary of a “Good Neighbour,” as pointed out previously, who comes to look after elderly people as requested by the social welfare department. Being recognized as just a “Good Neighbour” is the last thing Janna wants because she knows that she is Maudie’s friend. It is obvious from her saying: “… I am a friend (more than that, I think) of Maudie’s only because it was something I decided to do” (229). Whereas the mutuality of their friendship is depicted in this novel, the relationship is repeatedly regarded as the relation between a “Good Neighbour” and a dependent. For example, the words offered by a member of Maudie’s family after her funeral clearly express this misunderstanding and arouses Janna’s anger: “And now I suppose you’ll get yourself another little job, will you?” (261). This question shows the persistent misunderstanding of intergenerational relationships. Therefore, the ambiguity of the title ironically implies the preoccupation with caregiving and intergenerational relationships in society as a whole.

**Narrative Structure of “The Diary of a Good Neighbour”**

Next, I would like to focus on the narrative structure of this novel to further examine Janna’s embodiment of the stereotypical image of women as caregivers. In 1984, “The Diary of a Good Neighbour” was republished under the name of Doris Lessing and that book was entitled *The Diaries of Jane Somers*, which contained another story under the pseudonym of Jane Somers. In fact, Jane Somers is not only a pseudonym as I suggested above, but also Janna’s real name. Hence, as expressed in the second title, “The Diary of a Good Neighbour” can be regarded as Jane’s personal accounts of her life.⁵ A diary is its writer’s personal records of daily events and experiences in general; one can write down private thoughts and personal memories in it. When this manner of writing is adopted into literary works, it is recognized, of
course, as the records of its character’s personal thoughts and experiences. Thus, its readers feel that they are reading personal information even though it is actually fiction written by an author. This kind of contradiction surely is present in other literary styles but it becomes a significant feature in “The Diary of a Good Neighbour” because this story exactly has this literary style: in other words, Janna starts to write other women’s experiences and thoughts in a similar way to the author of this story, Doris Lessing.

First of all, for Janna writing a diary is one of her ways to consider and evaluate her communication with Maudie objectively. Reflecting on her journal entries, Janna thinks that she is keeping a diary in order to obtain “the outside eye” or the “observing eye” on her own experiences.

I’ve just had a new thought, it is this: writing is my trade, I write all the time, notes to myself, memos, articles, and everything is to present ideas, etc., if not to myself, then to others. I do not let thoughts fly away, I note them down, I present them, I postulate the outside eye. And that is what I am doing now. I see that as I write this diary, I have in mind that observing eye. (65; Italics in original)

By recording her personal thoughts and experiences with the “outside eye” or “observing eye,” Janna attempts to understand her own experiences with Maudie. Here, to put something in writing or to record something becomes equivalent to making it present. Janna adds as follows: “It’s a funny thing, this need to write things down, as if they have no existence until they are recorded. Presented. When I listen to Maudie’s talk, I have this feeling, quick, catch it, don’t let it all vanish, record it. As if it is not valid until in print” (65). Thus, to record what she acquires through her exchanges with Maudie makes Maudie’s
personal experiences present in Janna’s diary. Janna’s acquisition of an objective view is not only for the observation of her own experiences but also for the observation and record of Maudie’s personal experiences. Janna’s identification of recording what Maudie has experienced, felt and thought with making it present seems to be expressed further by her representation of Maudie’s daily life in a form of the short story, which is inserted within Janna’s diary.

In fact, Janna writes four short stories and these stories can be regarded as her continuous process that is aimed at understanding other people’s thoughts and experiences more deeply. All the stories are described as if Janna were the person who records their life. The first story is about Maudie’s daily experiences, titled “Maudie’s day” (116). Janna describes how Maudie is scared of wetting her bed when she wakes up, how she has trouble preparing her meals, and how she feels angry and frustrated when she waits for Janna. In addition, Janna objectively depicts her own life by writing the second story titled “Janna’s day” (126). Compared with “Maudie’s day,” her life is efficiently organized and without any troubles in her daily life. She remarks on this difference as follows: “What makes poor Maudie labour and groan all through her day, the drudge and drag of maintenance. I was going to say, For me it is nothing …” (131; Italics and capitalization in original). After these two stories she reflects on her writing and admits that she composes them in an effort to comprehend the differences between Maudie’s experiences and her own.

I wrote Maudie’s day because I want to understand. I do understand a lot more about her, but is it true? I can only write what I have experienced myself, heard her say, observed…. I sometimes wake with one hand quite numb…. But what else is there I cannot know about? (130; Italics in original)
Here, Janna confesses her attempt to understand more about Maudie through depicting her in “Maudie’s day.” Barbara Frey Waxman interprets Janna’s description of Maudie’s day as her way “to leave behind the coolly egocentric Jane” (332). However, Janna portrays not only a day featuring Maudie and herself, but also Eliza Bates, who is another, elderly, friend of Janna’s, and Brigid, a typical example of a female care worker, which means that Janna seeks a way to understand such women. Her efforts are focused more on the representation of these women than the abandonment of own egocentricity.

Moreover, through writing these short stories, Janna advances from recording past incidents to representing these women’s experiences. In “Maudie’s day,” Janna goes beyond her perceptions and actual knowledge to express what she believes Maudie feels and thinks when she is absent, in other words, what Janna attempts in this short story is to represent Maudie’s experiences. Janna’s doubt as to the authenticity of her story about Maudie shows her uncertainties and struggles in representing Maudie’s experiences. Here, Janna equates comprehending other women’s experiences and their representation in the same way as she identifies understanding Maudie’s experience with the act of recording and making it present in her diary. Therefore, these short stories are Janna’s effort to record and make other women’s experiences present in her diary.

After these stories, Janna advances her efforts by writing two more short stories which describe the daily life of other women. In the third story, titled “Eliza Bates’s day” (152), Janna pretends to be her other elderly friend, Eliza Bates, who lives alone but is leading a better life than Maudie. While the first three stories depict specific characters in this novel: Maudie, Janna and Eliza Bates, Janna moves forward in the fourth story and describes a generalized figure of a woman who engages herself in visiting-home care work in the story titled “A Day in the Life of a Home Help” (187). This story starts as follows:
She may be Irish, West Indian, English—any nationality, but she is unqualified and has a dependant of some kind or children, so that she needs a job she can fit in around her family. She is young, or at least not elderly, for you need strength for this work. She has bad legs/a bad back/chronic indigestion/womb trouble. (187)

The heroine of this short story, named Brigid, is described as a common care worker, an unqualified woman with health problems. She lives with her husband and four children. After she takes her children to the school, she makes a list of the things she has to purchase for her customers and visits each house with these groceries. This short story expresses how demanding such commercialized caregiving is, and how female worker does this work while she looks after her families from morning to the end of the day.

Janna’s attempt to represent these women’s experiences is an attempt to understand them. However, at the same time, she is able to undertake this fiction because she embodies the stereotypical women’s role. Janna writes these stories by using the information she acquires from the caregiving of Maudie, Eliza Bates and her daily communication with elderly people. In this sense, Janna’s involvement in caregiving, or her embodiment of a stereotype, paradoxically functions as a way for Janna to comprehend and understand other women in a different class and generation. She captures their experiences in her own experiences by recording it in her diary. In this sense, “The Diaries of a Good Neighbour” shows how one woman’s personal memory is taken from another women’s experiences.

Lastly, I would like to point out that Janna’s attempt has some features in common with the consciousness-raising mission as defined by Hanisch. In the aforementioned essay, Carol Hanisch clarifies the differences between therapy and their desire for consciousness-raising
and she explains how this session proceeds with conversations among female participants. She suggests that the therapy “assumes that someone is sick and that there is a cure, e.g., a personal solution” (3). The participants, meanwhile, “try to sum up and generalize from what’s been said and make connections” in their session (4). What they find in the session is that “personal problems are political problems,” so “[t]here are no personal solutions” at that time of the session (4). Thus, the participants do not manage to find their way to “‘alternative lifestyles’ or what it means to be a ‘liberated’ women’” (4). In the light of this circumstance, Janna’s description of her experiences and those of other women amount to her summing up and generalizing what she acquires through caregiving. It is not a simple act of documenting women’s experiences, but an act of representation; that is, putting other women’s experience in her own personal records.

**Conclusion**

To summarize, Janna’s embodiment of the stereotypical behavior of women suggests the effort to pose a question to the circumstances in which caregiving itself tends to be dismissed, and it also provides Janna with an opportunity to understand other women’s experience. Caregiving is described through the close interaction between Janna and Maudie and the disapproval to which that engagement meets. Janna’s understanding of Maudie’s unexpressed demands figures the relation of their dependency. Her involvement in caregiving is seen as the internalization of the conventional norms and values concerning women, but it can be evaluated as an effort to protest against the attitude regarding caregiving itself as something obstructing women’s emancipation. Moreover, the short stories inserted in Janna’s personal records reveal Janna’s intention to record and represent other women’s experience. This attempt is based on the information which she acquires from the participation in caregiving. Janna’s embodiment of
stereotypical behaviour is not just the pursuit of traditional or normative virtues of women, nor anti-feminist behaviour; rather, it is her effort to communicate with other women and her acquirement of broader perspective to the world. Through this embodiment, Janna is enable to think over the other person’s feeling, thoughts and past, and represent their experiences as a part of her personal records. Her attempt to record it and represent it in the form of a narrative leads to the possibility of the expansion of this action to the analysis of feminist writers who intend to do the same thing by writing fiction about women in such situations.

Notes
1. In this essay I quoted the text from this book, *The Diaries of Jane Somers*.
2. Claire Spague interprets the relationship between Janna and Maudie in her essay titled “Mothers and Daughters/ Aging and Dying” (2003). Through the interpretation of Janna’s caregiving, she discusses the existence of a mother-daughter relationship between them. In my essay, however, I would like to analyse their relationship from a broader perspective: the relationship between the carer and its charge. This is because the caregiving is not limited to the relationship between parent and child.
3. In the beginning of the introduction written in 2006, she honestly reveals that she did not title her essay, and that might have been done by the editors of *Notes from the Second Year*, that is, Shulie Firestone and Anne Koedft (1). Her essay was originally titled “Some Thoughts in Response to Dottie’s Thought on a Women’s Liberation Movement,” which was written as the reply to Dottie Zellner who was one of her colleagues in the Southern Conference Educational Fund and thought that the consciousness-raising was
“just therapy” (1).

4. Through the job at the magazine office, Jill is influenced by and establishes the cooperative relationship with Phyllis, who is explicitly described as a participator of women’s liberation (67). Janna describes this younger generation as “revolutionaries to a man” (181) and when she was blamed again by Jill for her participation in caregiving for Maudie, she writes as follows: “Jill has become a revolutionary” (239). Hence, Jill’s disagreement can be regarded as the disagreement that comes from feminist emancipatory discourses. Moreover, this description shows that this emancipatory notion tends to adopt an unfavourable attitude towards women’s participation in caregiving.

5. There is little doubt that this book would have been considered by most of readers as an autobiographical novel when it was published under the name of Jane Somers.

Works Cited


